

MICHAEL DANTE DIMARTINO

REBEL
GENIUS



Roaring Brook Press
New York

Copyright © 2016 by Michael Dante DiMartino
Published by Roaring Brook Press
Roaring Brook Press is a division of Holtzbrinck Publishing Holdings
Limited Partnership
175 Fifth Avenue, New York, New York 10010

mackids.com

All rights reserved

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: DiMartino, Michael Dante, author.

Title: Rebel genius / Michael Dante DiMartino.

Description: First edition. | New York : Roaring Brook Press, 2016. | Series: Rebel genius | Summary: "In twelve-year-old Giacomo's Renaissance-inspired world, art is powerful, dangerous, and outlawed. Every artist possesses a Genius, a birdlike creature that is the living embodiment of an artist's creative spirit.

Those caught with one face severe punishment, so when Giacomo discovers he has a Genius, he knows he's in big trouble"—Provided by publisher.

Identifiers: LCCN 2016004881 (print) | LCCN 2016031116 (ebook) |

ISBN 9781626723368 (hardback) | ISBN 9781626725393 (ebook)

Subjects: | CYAC: Creative ability—Fiction. | Magic—Fiction. | Art—Fiction. | Fantasy. | BISAC: JUVENILE FICTION / Action & Adventure / General. | JUVENILE FICTION / Fantasy & Magic. | JUVENILE FICTION / Art & Architecture.

Classification: LCC PZ7.1.D564 Re 2016 (print) | LCC PZ7.1.D564 (ebook) |

DDC [Fic]—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2016004881>

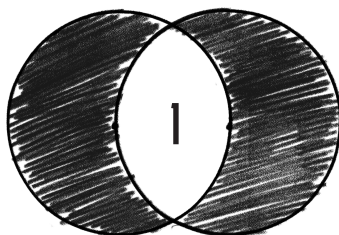
Our books may be purchased in bulk for promotional, educational, or business use. Please contact your local bookseller or the Macmillan Corporate and Premium Sales Department at (800) 221-7945 ext. 5442 or by e-mail at MacmillanSpecialMarkets@macmillan.com.

First edition, 2016

Book design by Andrew Arnold

Printed in the United States of America by LSC Communications US,
LLC (Lakeside Classic), Harrisonburg, Virginia

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2



LOST SOULS

Giacomo cradled the chunk of charcoal in his hand and lightly pressed it to the paper. Faint lines circled the dirty page, darkening into the shape of his oval head. He added a shadow, carving out his round chin, then moved on to his thick eyebrows, followed by the nostrils of his bulbous nose. Before long, his face emerged. As he drew, Giacomo glanced up and down between the shard of mirror leaning against the wall and his sketchbook. He used quick strokes to build up his hair, which fell in ratty waves to his shoulders. With a fingertip, he rubbed more charcoal under his lower lip, on the side of his nose, and under his brows to give dimension to his features. Giacomo paused and examined his latest effort. He shook his head and sighed. Over the past few years, he'd filled sketchbook after sketchbook with self-portraits, but was never satisfied with the results. The boy who stared back at him from the pages always looked like a stranger.

For the finishing touch, he surrounded his portrait with black

strokes, but he pushed down too hard and his last piece of charcoal shattered. Giacomo groaned and slammed his sketchbook shut. *Time for a supply run.*



Giacomo wiped his dust-covered hands on his tunic, which was so filthy he couldn't tell what was dirt, what was charcoal, and

what was sewer muck. They all blended together into a brownish-green grime.

The light from his lantern flickered, creating dancing shadows on the curved stone wall. As he tucked his worn sketchbook into his burlap satchel, the flame vanished and his hideout plunged into darkness.

He slung the satchel over his shoulder and grabbed the lantern's thin handle. Reaching out, he touched the edge of the low archway, then ducked, careful not to bang his head.

In the main tunnel, rats skittered and squeaked. The stench of urine burned his nostrils. As his feet splashed through shallow water, Giacomo slid his hand across the protruding stones, using them as signposts to navigate through the cramped aqueducts.

He counted a hundred paces and turned left into another passageway. Two hundred more paces. A right. He felt a familiar mossy area—his signal to head to the surface.

Climbing a spiral staircase, he came to a narrow storm drain. Moonlight streamed through and his vision began to return. Giacomo crouched and peered out, the street at eye level. As he expected, the city looked empty. But any moment, a soldier might march by, patrolling for curfew breakers. Or worse, a Lost Soul could be lurking in the shadows, waiting to lunge at an unsuspecting victim.

Giacomo gazed up at the specks of light blanketing the heavens. On nights like this, he sensed the Creator's presence. But it was like a scent of lavender in the breeze—there for a moment, then gone.

The clomp of footsteps snapped him back to earth. As he'd

feared, two soldiers headed his way, their hands on the hilts of their swords. He ducked down and waited for the men to pass. Once the rattling of their armor faded, he counted to fifty. *Can't be too careful*, he reminded himself.

Giacomo wriggled his skinny torso through the storm drain. Knowing the soldiers would loop back around in a while, he had to move fast. But for now, this area of Virenzia was his.

He inhaled a lungful of the cool, fresh air and darted down a backstreet. On either side of him, the looming houses were stacked so precariously high it looked like they could topple over and crush him.

Rounding the corner, he spotted his target—Beppe's Bakery. Above a faded red door hung a weathered sign, the image of a plump man with a bushy mustache carved into the wood. As Giacomo caught his breath, hunger kicked him in the gut.

He snuck around back, where he was met by a pair of locked shutters. He took a palette knife from his satchel and eased the blade between the two wooden panels, lifting the handle until he heard the clink of the latch coming unhooked. The shutters swung open with a slow groan. He hoisted himself through the window and pulled the shutters closed.

Prowling past fat sacks of flour, Giacomo vowed that one day he'd retire his palette knife from its life of crime and use it for what it was meant for—mixing oil paint.

Under the baker's rolling table he found a tin bucket full of burned, stale bread. When Giacomo was first living on the streets, he had discovered that Beppe the Baker had a morning ritual of strolling down to the river and feeding the previous day's discards to the ducks. Giacomo had decided if the bread was good enough for them, it was good enough for him.

He rummaged through the baker's scraps. Most were as hard and black as coal. He dug to the bottom, where he found a few squishy hunks. Giacomo stuffed one in his mouth and packed the rest in his satchel.

While the stale bread stewed in his saliva, he crept over to a vat of olive oil and dunked a ladle into it. He poured a cupful of the thick liquid into the base of his lantern, enough to give him light for a couple of nights. Lastly, he reached into the brick oven and picked out a few pieces of charcoal.

Giacomo slipped out the way he had come in, offering Beppe his silent thanks. One day, he would pay back the baker for his unwitting kindness.

By the time his feet met the cobblestones, the bread in his mouth was soft enough to swallow. He scampered into the shadows and headed to his final stop.

He emerged from a side street and hid behind a column at the edge of the city's central square—Piazza Nerezza, named for the “Supreme Creator.” He scowled. *What isn't named for her?* Over the years, Supreme Creator Nerezza had slapped her name on every major street, building, and monument in Virenzia, as if people really needed reminding that they were living in her domain.

Technically, Nerezza was the emperor of the Zizzolan Empire, like her father before her. But years of absolute power had made her delusional and she renamed herself the Supreme Creator. Giacomo fumed at her arrogance. *Who is she to put herself on a pedestal, above the true Creator of this world?*

Giacomo dashed from pillar to pillar, keeping his eyes and ears out for more soldiers. A black marble obelisk towered in the center of the square. Shapes and symbols were carved into each of

its four sides. Ten times as tall as Giacomo, it was capped with a pyramid that pointed to the heavens. He recalled his mother's soft voice describing how the Creator had placed the needle of his Compass on the spot where the monument now stood, and drew a circle, bringing the world into existence. His parents also told him stories about Zizzolan heroes who protected the weak from the powerful during a time long ago when artists and their Geniuses didn't have to hide. In the tales, the heroes' belief and trust in the Creator always got them through whatever challenges they faced, which probably explained why Nerezza had burned all the books containing the old myths. Even the memory of heroes past seemed to threaten her.

At the far end of the piazza was the Supreme Creator's palace. From its towers hung flags emblazoned with the Zizzolan Empire's symbol—a black triangle pointing down, inside of which was a white triangle pointing up. The pattern repeated itself, the shapes shrinking until there was only a white dot. Just seeing the symbol made Giacomo sick to his stomach.

The buildings next to the towers were draped with two monumental tapestries, each an identical depiction of the Supreme Creator. She stood tall and proud in her black robes, her mouth bent into a conceited smirk. Perched on the palace's triangular pediment was a stone gargoyle of her Genius—a horrifying winged creature with a long tail, a beak full of fangs, and two twisted horns that sprouted from the center of the crown on its head. *What a crime,* Giacomo thought, *that the only Genius allowed in the world is that monstrosity.*

Giacomo turned away from the palace and approached a three-story building with boarded-up windows. He wedged himself between the chained double doors and shimmied through.



Then he lit his lantern, casting a warm glow through the cavernous room, and walked past the broken tables and chairs, kicking up a plume of dust with each step. Long abandoned, the space had once housed a cultural center and artists' studios. He liked to picture himself arriving for class as eager students ran up and down the halls.

Painted across one side of the main hall was a long fresco, cracked and faded. As he did every time he visited, Giacomo blew the dust off the bronze plaque embedded in the wall next to it.

GENIUSES OF ZIZZOLA

COMMISSIONED BY EMPEROR CALLISTO,
IN HONOR OF OUR EMPIRE'S GREAT MEN,
WOMEN, AND GENIUSES WHO BROUGHT
BEAUTY TO LIGHT THROUGH THEIR ART,
MUSIC, WRITING, THEATER, AND DANCE.

Engraved underneath was the artist's name:

PIETRO VASARI

A few years ago, when Giacomo first stumbled upon this room, it was like he'd discovered a cavern of hidden treasure. He found a stash of sketchbooks and drawing supplies in a locked cabinet, long forgotten. And the fresco had become his main source of inspiration. Each scene was a chance to study the human figure in different poses, wearing a variety of clothes, at all ages, from babies to hunched old couples. Had Pietro Vasari known these people? Did they all stand in this room and model for his mural? Although the artist had died—rumor was, at the Supreme Creator's hands—studying his painting was the next best thing to being a real artist's apprentice.

He found a familiar vignette, one that always brought comfort: a young girl, probably three or four, reaching for her Genius. The

tiny creature's wings were spread as if it had just floated down from the sky to meet her. Nearby, her smiling mother and father held each other, grateful for the arrival of their daughter's Genius, which would become her muse and guardian.

Before Nerezza made it illegal for artists to have Geniuses, this kind of scene, while not common to all children, would've been celebrated. But now, if a Genius flew into a child's life, it meant a death sentence for both.

Giacomo took a few steps forward, studied the fresco up close, then began to draw the girl. After a few minutes, he paused, comparing his work to Pietro's. He rubbed his eyes, frustrated. How come his figures always looked stiff and awkward, while the ones in the painting looked like they could step right off the wall? Pietro captured lively gestures and natural expressions with only a few pigments and some wet plaster, and made it look easy.



Giacomo often wondered why the Supreme Creator had allowed this fresco to survive. After all, she'd wiped out Geniuses

and stripped the city of any works of art that weren't her own. Did she secretly admire Pietro's work? Or maybe because her father commissioned the fresco, she didn't have the heart to paint over it? *Yeah, right*, Giacomo thought. *Like the Supreme Creator has a heart.*

Giacomo was putting the finishing touches on the Genius's feathers when he was startled by the rattle of a metal chain. He dropped his charcoal and whirled around, expecting a soldier to step from the shadows. No one came.

Unnerved, Giacomo packed his materials, picked up his lantern, and made for the doors.

But the way out was blocked.

Standing in front of him was the silhouette of a hunched figure. Unmoving.

He stopped breathing and stepped back.

The silhouette lurched closer, feet dragging. It was a woman. Gray matted hair hung in wild strands, covering most of her face.

A Lost Soul.

Giacomo tried to run, but he was frozen in terror.

A thin hand, more bone than flesh, rose out of the woman's cloak and pointed at Giacomo. She crept closer, into the lantern's light. Still, he couldn't move.

Her eyes stared not so much at him as through him. Her hollow gaze looked exactly like his mother's and father's in the weeks after their Geniuses had been taken away. He was five at the time, and their haunting expressions had been seared into his memory.

The Lost Soul's mouth opened and let out a long groan that eventually formed a word.

"Foood . . ."

Trembling, Giacomo held out some bread to the woman. “Here. Take it.”

The woman snatched it from his hand and pointed to his lantern. “Fire . . .”

“No, I need it.”

“Fire!” she shrieked, her whole body vibrating.

Giacomo wasn’t about to give up his only source of light. Finally, sensation returned to his legs. Confident he could outrun the Lost Soul, he made a break for it.

He arced around the woman, but she lunged and her sharp fingernails grazed his shoulder. He pulled on the door and stuffed his head and torso through the opening. The splintered wood scraped his back. To his horror, another Lost Soul waited for him outside—a man with black greasy hair pasted against his sunken cheeks. He snarled. The few teeth he had were yellow and crooked, jutting like shards of glass from his gums.

Before Giacomo knew what was happening, the man made a grab for his lantern.

“Let go!” Giacomo yelled. Despite his bony arms, the man was strong. He yanked the lantern, dragging Giacomo the rest of the way through the doors. They stumbled into the piazza, continuing their tug-of-war. Giacomo threw his weight back and pulled with all his strength, wrenching the lantern from the man’s grip.

But before Giacomo could run, he felt the woman’s spindly arms wrap around his neck, choking him.

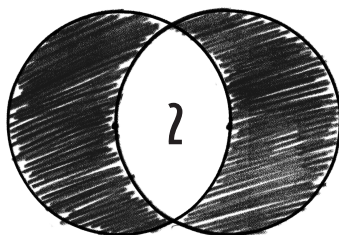
As Giacomo struggled to free himself, he saw the man reach into his tattered coat and pull out a rusty blade. He rushed forward, jabbing with the knife. An icy pain stabbed into Giacomo’s left

side, right below his ribs. The lantern dropped from his hand and clattered onto the ground.

The woman released her hold and Giacomo collapsed to his knees, clutching his side. The world began to spin.

The Lost Souls made off with the rest of the bread from his satchel and his lantern. By the time his head hit the ground, they were gone.

As blood oozed through Giacomo's fingers, he thought, *At least they didn't take my sketchbook.*



THE TULPA

The past few days were a blur. There had been a fight, Zanobius vaguely recalled. But the memory of what had happened was gone.

This wasn't the first time he'd awakened in a new place with few clues as to how he'd gotten there or what time of day it was. He felt like a rowboat caught in a squall, tossed up and down as he fought to find the shore. He'd come to dread the blackouts.

A dark gray cloak covered his arms and legs and a hood hung low over his eyes. "A precaution," he faintly remembered his master telling him. "It's better if they don't know who you are." But whether that conversation happened a few minutes ago or a few hours ago, he couldn't be sure.

Wool fibers scratched his neck, his back, his arms. He wanted to tear off the cloak and let his skin breathe. Who cared if people saw what he was? Was his master ashamed of him?

He was standing outside a thick wooden door. Torches stuck out of the packed-dirt walls, lighting the narrow passageway.

Beams lined the ceiling for support. Between the torches hung painting after painting. The beautiful, colorful works seemed out of place in a dank tunnel that threatened to crumble any moment.

The muffled yells of two men came through the door. One of the voices belonged to his master. He shouted something about sacred tools.

The Creator's Sacred Tools.

Of course. His master, Ugalino, had been searching across the Zizzolan Empire for the Compass, Straightedge, and Pencil, but for what purpose, Zanobius couldn't be sure. Maybe Ugalino had never told him. But he did know why they had come here—to meet a black market art dealer who had information about the Tools' whereabouts.

The door swung open and a squat-nosed guard with scruffy hair stepped out. Zanobius sized him up: he was equally as tall as Zanobius, broad through the shoulders, and his muscles pulled his tunic taut. A rapier hung from his belt, its point nearly touching the ground. A poor choice of sword for close-quarters combat. The art dealer's guard was hardly a threat.

Through the open door, Zanobius glimpsed his master's wavy black hair and short beard. A white cloak draped over his wide shoulders and he gripped an ivory staff in his right hand. He faced a man with long black hair and an unkempt beard who leaned back in a chair with his feet stacked on a thick oak table. Crowds of statues, stacks of paintings, countless colorful vases, and roll upon roll of tapestries filled the room.

"Your employer doesn't know when to shut up." The guard pulled the door shut.

“He’s my master,” Zanobius corrected.

The guard leaned against the wall. “Well, your *master* started going on about a compass and some kind of pencil, then had the nerve to tell me to leave so he could talk to my employer alone. Like that’s going to get him anywhere.” The man spat on the ground. “We get collectors like him down here from time to time. Thinks he’s doing Rocco a big favor by taking some art off his hands. But just because the high-and-mighty Supreme Creator has her art hounds sniffing around for contraband doesn’t mean Rocco’s gonna roll over and give his paintings away for a song.”

Zanobius held the guard’s gaze, watching his puffy pink lips flap, barely listening to the words coming out of his mouth. He was like most humans he’d encountered. Talked a lot, without really saying anything.

Not like his master. When Ugalino spoke, it was purposeful and direct. He didn’t waste words on complaints or small talk. Zanobius preferred it that way.

“You okay, pal?” the guard asked, peering under Zanobius’s hood. “You’re pale. You’re not going to pass out on me, are you?”

“It’s a permanent condition,” Zanobius said.

The guard took a step back, a nervous look on his face. “Not contagious, is it?”

“Not as far as I know.”

Zanobius, I need your assistance. Come in here. His master’s voice beckoned in his head.

“Excuse me, my master is calling,” Zanobius said.

The guard looked at his employer’s door, then cocked an eyebrow. “I didn’t hear anything.”

Zanobius knew his ears were working fine. He just didn’t need

them to hear Ugalino's voice. He walked past the guard and pushed the door open.

The guard grasped the handle of his rapier. "Hey, don't go in there unless Rocco gives you the go-ahead."

Zanobius ignored the warning and marched into the room. Rocco rose to his feet and drew a small dagger, pointing it at Ugalino. "You told me our guards would stay out of this." He called into the hall: "Bruno, get in here!"

Bruno rushed in, drawing his rapier. Its blade caught the edge of the door frame, causing him to stumble. "You want me to escort them out?"

Ugalino's eyes stayed fixed on the art dealer. "All I require is a name," he said calmly. "Provide it to me or I will destroy every last piece of art in here."

Rocco flung the dagger at Ugalino, while Bruno lunged at Zanobius, his sword stabbing through the air.

Four arms shot out from under Zanobius's cloak. His front two hands grabbed the blade, his back two wrapped around Bruno's neck. Bruno fought for breath, eyes wide with terror.

Ugalino dodged Rocco's flying dagger and spun his staff in one fluid motion. The fist-sized diamond on top of his staff glowed. A circle of white light shot out and hit Rocco in the chest. The force sent him crashing through a stack of canvases against the wall.

Ugalino towered over Rocco and shoved the point of his staff into his shoulder, pinning him down. Rocco winced.

"Ready to give me your collector's name now?" Ugalino dug his staff in deeper.

Rocco let out a pained yelp. "Yes, yes, it was Duke Oberto! He has a castle north of here, in Paolini."

Ugalino glowered. "I'm familiar with the duke." He drew back his staff. Rocco clutched his shoulder, sweating.

Let the guard go, Ugalino's voice commanded. Zanobius released his grip and Bruno dropped with a thud.

"What . . . what are you?" Bruno asked, rubbing his neck.

"He's a Tulpa." Rocco spat out the words like they tasted sour.

"His name is Zanobius," Ugalino proclaimed. "And he is the greatest work of art ever created."

They climbed a flight of rickety stairs and emerged on the outskirts of a small walled city. The nearly full moon hung between two jagged mountain peaks. Stars dotted the sky. Zanobius located the brightest of them all—the Guiding Star. Relieved to be above-ground again, he focused on the point of light and inhaled deeply. The fog cleared from his mind.

Ugalino whistled and an enormous, silver-feathered creature dove out of the sky. Zanobius jumped back before he remembered what this creature was—Ugalino's Genius, his companion long before Zanobius. He racked his mind, trying to recall its name.

"Ciro, to me," Ugalino hailed.

Of course. *Ciro*. He knew that.

The Genius flapped its wings and landed, kicking up dust. When it lowered its head, Zanobius noticed his reflection in its black, lifeless eyes. Ugalino gripped the edge of *Ciro's* tarnished crown and hoisted himself onto the creature's neck.

Zanobius climbed on after his master. "It happened again."

"Another blackout?"

"They seem to be occurring more often."

Ugalino twisted to face him. “But you still remember who you are?”

“Yes.”

“And who I am?”

“You’re my master. You created me.”

“And what is our mission?”

“To find the Creator’s Sacred Tools.”

Ugalino nodded and turned away, apparently satisfied that Zanobius was all right. But he didn’t feel all right.

“It’s strange,” Zanobius said. “I can remember all the important things that make me who I am, but the details of where we’ve been or who we’ve seen are completely gone.”

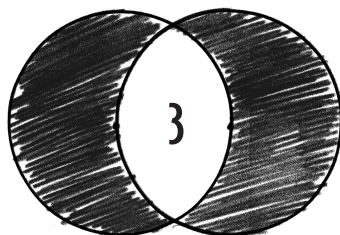
“It’s an unfortunate downside of being a Tulpa,” Ugalino explained.

“Can’t you fix it?”

“I’ve tried. But it’s something you’re going to have to live with. I’m sorry.”

Zanobius nodded. Had they talked about this before? He couldn’t recall.

Ugalino tapped the Genius’s side with his staff. Ciro heaved his massive wings and they rose into the air, the ground rushing away. Tensing, Zanobius grasped a handful of feathers and held on tightly. Of all the memories erased by the blackout, why couldn’t he ever forget his fear of flying?



THE GENIUS

Giacomo fought to stay conscious. With his remaining strength, he lifted his head and dragged himself across the ground, gathered his satchel and sketchbook, and crawled out of the piazza. Grasping the edge of a building, he pulled himself to his feet, but every step felt like another knife being plunged into his body. Doubled over, he leaned against a wall. His hands and tunic were red and wet. He shuddered. A coldness spread from beneath his ribs, up through his chest. Each breath was more punishing than the last.

He had to make it back to his hideout. But then what? Bleed out in the sewers? Was that how his short, insignificant life was going to end? He could find a soldier. He'd take him to a doctor. But once he was fixed up, they'd send him back to the orphanage. *Forget it, Giacomo thought. I'd rather die.*

In front of him, a small orb of bright white light floated down from the rooftops. It hung in the air, like the afterimage from staring at the sun. *Great. Now I'm seeing things.* He shut his eyes.

Opened them again. The orb was still there. It swelled and pulsed, growing larger and larger.

Giacomo's legs wobbled, then gave way. The hard stone street shot up and slammed into the side of his face.

With a groan, he rolled onto his back. The orb expanded around him, filling his vision until his entire universe was aglow.

Streaks of red, blue, and green cut through the light, followed by a tremendous thudding that vibrated his skin.

More colors shredded the orb, whirling into a storm of purples, greens, and yellows that whipped him with stinging strikes. Giacomo winced. He struggled to sit up, but a streak of violet slammed into him like a fierce gust of wind, knocking him flat again. The cobblestone street had vanished, replaced by roiling waves of every hue and shade.

He squinted, trying to get his bearings, but there was nothing solid to fix his eyes on. With his arms, he shielded his face as the maelstrom pelted his body like a million tiny pinpricks.

The thudding intensified, evolving into a thunderous pounding that reverberated in Giacomo's head. Fearing his eardrums might burst, he covered his ears, but his hands barely muffled the sound.

A horrid smell, a thousand times worse than sewer poop-sludge, invaded his nose. His stomach heaved and the few scraps of bread he'd eaten threatened to come back up.

Senses overloaded, Giacomo could barely form a thought. He rolled onto his side, tucking into a tight ball. The relentless pounding shook him, inside and out.

Just end it. Stop the agony. Please.

As if the Creator had heard his plea, the banging quieted, the whipping winds ceased, and the disgusting odors wafted away.

Giacomo peeled open his eyes, never so happy to see the stars. They twinkled their assurance that everything was going to be all right.

But something else floated above him too. A tiny hummingbird with orange and blue feathers cocked its head and stared at Giacomo. It darted from side to side, its wings fluttering so fast they practically disappeared.

Startled, he pushed himself up on his elbows and shuffled back. The bird dove, its long, pointed beak aimed straight at his head.

“Get away!” He swatted the bird and knocked it into a brick wall. It let out a high-pitched *skreee*. At the same moment, a hot pain shot through Giacomo’s shoulder.

The bird zigzagged through the air as it tried to recover. *Aou aou aou*, it chirped angrily in a way that matched Giacomo’s “Ow, ow, ow.”

“Sorry,” Giacomo said, “but you shouldn’t fly directly at people’s heads.”

The bird stabilized and zipped up to his face, the tip of its beak barely an inch from his eyes. Giacomo flinched.

“You don’t listen, do you?”

Now that it was practically perched on his nose, Giacomo felt foolish for mistaking it for an ordinary bird. It had ears. Pointy ones that were pierced with round earrings. A tuft of feathery hair sprouted out of a tiny gold crown on its head. And in the center of the crown sat a red oval gemstone.

“You’re a Genius,” Giacomo said in awe.

The bird chirped happily and backflipped in the air.

“But that’s impossible.” He rubbed his eyes and looked again.

Yes, that's a Genius, all right. He should know. He'd grown up around two of them.

His parents' Geniuses had been much bigger and looked more like doves, but they also wore crowns with colored gems, which was the source of their power. They had lived in his cramped house, like part of the family, always by his mother's and father's sides when they painted or sculpted. The last time he saw his parents' Geniuses, soldiers were hauling them away in cages.

What was this Genius doing here? As far as Giacomo knew, there weren't any Geniuses left in Virenzia, except for the Supreme Creator's.

"You need to get out of here. Go back to wherever you came from," he said.

The Genius landed on his shoulder and rubbed its head against his neck. Giacomo's heart skipped a beat. Maybe the reason it was there was to find him. *Could this be my Genius?*

As soon as the thought formed, he wiped it away. *Don't be crazy.*

Giacomo remembered asking his parents over and over to get him a Genius like theirs for his fourth birthday. They lovingly broke the news that he was already too old. "If the Creator had wanted you to have one, it would've already come," his mother said. Giacomo was crushed, but as he got older, he accepted his fate. In a way, it had been for the best. If he'd had a Genius, it would've been dragged away in a cage too. But if the Creator hadn't intended for him to have a Genius, why was one sitting on him now?

Giacomo rubbed his temple. *It doesn't matter. I can't keep it.*

"Don't get too comfortable," Giacomo said, scooping the Genius

off his shoulder. “You need to fly as far away as you can. It’s not safe for you here.”

The Genius chirped brightly and spun in the air.

Giacomo sighed. “I don’t think you understand the danger you’re in.” To make his point, Giacomo acted out each phrase with hand gestures. “Supreme Creator, bad. Lock you in cage. You die. I die.” He ended his bravura performance with hands wrapped around his throat and tongue dangling from his mouth. Surely the Genius would get the gist of that.

It let out a delighted *whoo, whoo, whoo*, and circled Giacomo’s head.

“Okay, I guess you didn’t get the message.” Giacomo waved his arms. “Go on, shoo!”

But the Genius refused to leave.

Giacomo got up and swung his satchel wildly, trying to drive the Genius away. “I’m serious. Get lost!” It zigged and zagged, avoiding the attack.

Giacomo hung his head in defeat and that was when he noticed the stinging in his side had been reduced to a dull cramp. He’d been so preoccupied with the Genius, he’d forgotten all about his injury. He peeled back his bloodstained tunic, surprised to see a two-inch-long pink scar had formed. It didn’t make any sense. How in the world could a knife wound heal up in only a few minutes? He looked back at the Genius.

“Did you have something to do with this?”

The Genius chirped.

“Is that a yes or a no? Sorry, I don’t speak Genius.”

A booming voice interrupted them. “Hold it right there, young man!”

Giacomo spun around. Two black-armored soldiers with pointed helmets rounded the corner, marching toward him with their swords drawn. “You’re out way past curfew,” the taller of the two said.

“Tell us what you’re up to,” the shorter, muscular one demanded. “What was that bright light? Were you playing with fireworks?”

So they saw the glowing orb too, Giacomo realized. He looked around for the Genius, but it was gone. Maybe it had finally understood the danger it was in and had flown away.

“No fireworks, I swear,” Giacomo said, trying to stall.

He heard a quiet *cheep* and felt a poke in the middle of his back. He reached behind him and touched the Genius’s soft belly with his fingers. It was either brave or clueless, Giacomo wasn’t sure which yet.

“Stay close,” he whispered. “I’m going to get you out of here.”

The soldiers closed in, the points of their swords leveled straight at him.

Giacomo bolted, but the Genius didn’t follow. Instead, it hovered higher in the air. *I’m definitely leaning toward clueless*, he thought.

The soldiers spotted it and froze. “Is that—?” the tall one said.

“A Genius,” the short one finished. His eyes narrowed. “It must belong to the boy.”

Giacomo watched as the Genius flew right between the soldiers, who swung their swords. Their blades missed and clanged against each other’s armor. They stumbled back.

“Come on!” Giacomo shouted. The Genius zipped past him

and down the street. Giacomo pumped his legs as hard as he could, but couldn't keep up. "Wait for me!"

The Genius banked and turned down an alley. Giacomo followed, assuming it knew where it was going. But then it flew up a winding staircase that led onto a balcony.

"This is the wrong way!" he yelled, taking the steps three at a time. "We need to go under the ground, not above it!"

"He's up there!" one of the soldiers hollered.

It was too late to turn back. Giacomo jumped onto a stone railing, wobbling as he ran. Reaching the end, he leaped over the alley, landing hard on an adjacent balcony, then scurried up to the top of the building. He raced across the rooftops, tiles clacking under his feet, the Genius soaring beside him.

Up ahead, a bearded soldier climbed a ladder, blocking his path.

Giacomo dropped down and slid across the tiles, crash-landing on a balcony. He scrambled back to his feet and barreled up another set of stairs, which spilled out at the top of a wall overlooking the city. He scanned the street below and spotted an opening back to the aqueducts. "Down there!" he alerted the Genius.

He sprinted toward the end of the walkway, but the two soldiers who'd first found him clambered up the stairs in front of him.

Turning back, Giacomo was met by the bearded soldier, his sword raised. With both exits blocked, Giacomo glanced from side to side. To his left was a sprawling marketplace, on his right, a street that was too wide to jump over to reach the next rooftop.

"There's nowhere to go," one of the soldiers barked. "Turn over your Genius. You're under arrest."

“It’s not mine,” Giacomo explained. “I never saw this thing before in my life.” The Genius squawked, sounding offended.

The three soldiers closed in, swords at the ready. Giacomo considered his options again. *Forward or back, I’ll be impaled. Left or right and the fall will break all my bones.*

There was one other possibility. He glanced at the red gem on the Genius’s tiny crown. If the bird really was his Genius, then he might have a chance of escape.

He pulled a hunk of charcoal from his satchel.

“Drop it!” the bearded soldier ordered.

“Get ready,” Giacomo whispered to the Genius. He sank to one knee and swiped the charcoal along the stone in quick, violent strokes.

The gem on the Genius’s crown glowed and three red beams shot out. Giacomo had intended to distract the soldiers with a bright burst of light. Instead, the beams hit the walkway in an explosion of stone and dust. A wave of energy knocked the soldiers onto their backs.

Giacomo leaped to his feet and bolted past the stunned soldiers. He bounded down the stairs, and dropped into the sewer opening, the Genius close behind. He tucked his arms in tight and slid down a pipe only slightly wider than he was. He was now covered in cold muck, but he’d never been so happy to smell the foul stench.

The pipe spat him out into a bigger tunnel. A dim red light pulsed from the Genius’s gem, bathing the aqueducts in a warm glow.

He huffed and puffed. “I wasn’t sure that would work . . . My parents used to create light shapes with their Geniuses, but I

didn't realize it would be so . . . destructive." The tiny creature chirped softly and landed on his shoulder. "Anyway, it's true! You *are* my Genius."

Elated, Giacomo scratched under the Genius's ear and it let out a contented trill.

Back at his hideout, Giacomo collapsed into the hay-covered corner he used as a bed. For the first time in hours, his heartbeat slowed and his body relaxed.

His Genius hopped around, curiously inspecting the alcove.

"This is your home now. I know it's a little smelly and dark, but no one comes down here, so you'll be safe."

It flew up and pecked at the ceiling, letting out a long string of frustrated chirrups.

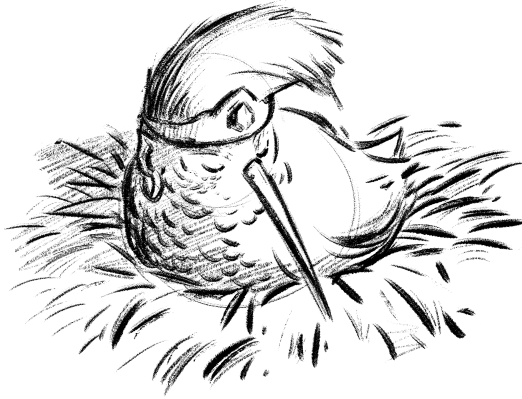
"You'll get used to living down here. It's the most free you can be in Virenzia, if you ask me. No one tells you what to do, where to go, what to draw . . ."

Apparently reassured by Giacomo's explanation, his Genius chattered and then nestled in the hay next to him. Maybe it was able to understand him when it really wanted to.

Within seconds, his Genius was asleep, its head tucked close to its body, its translucent wings wrapped around itself like a blanket. Its gem had dimmed, but still emitted enough light to see.

Giacomo rolled onto his side and tried sleeping too, but the excitement of the night hadn't worn off yet. He was thrilled the Creator had finally given him what he'd always dreamed of, but his joy was mixed with dread. He knew that if given the chance, Supreme Creator Nerezza would take his Genius and he'd become a Lost Soul, like his parents had.

Restless, he dug out his sketchbook and charcoal and began to draw.



Without a doubt, Virenzia was the worst city in the world to have a Genius in. But it was the only home Giacomo had ever known. Even if he mustered the nerve to leave, where would he go? Taking refuge in the forest or farmland outside the city wasn't a great option—he didn't have the first clue how to live off the land. Not to mention the countless wild animals stalking the countryside, hunting for easy prey. Fleeing to another state in the Zizzolan Empire wasn't any safer. They were all under the Supreme Creator's rule. Sooner or later, someone would spot his Genius and turn him in. He considered heading north to Katunga. From what his parents had told him, people there had Geniuses too, only they looked like cats instead of birds. Maybe his Genius would be welcomed there? But the Katungan Empire was over a thousand miles to the north, through forests rumored to be guarded by hairy, headless monsters who had eyes and mouths on their torsos. *Not interested*, Giacomo thought.

Sailing west to Rachana was out of the question. To hear the longshoremen at the pier tell it, those warmongers would kill any Zizzolan the second he stepped on their soil, peace treaty or not. Virenzia was bad, sure, but his chances beyond its borders were no better.

Besides, the aqueducts had been his home for almost five years, ever since he ran away from the orphanage. They had kept him safe all this time, so would he really have the courage to leave now?

After his parents died, the authorities carted Giacomo away to Augustine's Orphanage for Wayward Youth, an overcrowded, decrepit house at the farthest edge of the city. He bided his time, hopeful that a kind couple would adopt him before too long. But a couple of years passed, and no potential parents ever visited. One day, an older boy named Marco told him the truth.

"No one here ever gets adopted."

"Why not?" he asked.

"Because we belong to her," Marco said ominously.

Giacomo had to think for a moment. "You mean the Supreme Creator?"

"That's right. She's never had kids of her own, so she takes the ones no one wants and makes them hers. I have less than a year until I turn ten, then I get to start training for her army."

Giacomo began plotting his escape. Even though he was only seven at the time, he knew he never wanted to serve the Supreme Creator, especially not as a soldier. A year later, while Marco and the other boys learned to sword fight in the courtyard, Giacomo pretended to lie in bed sick, then made a break for it. He scaled the wall surrounding the orphanage and snuck away into the sewers. He never looked back.

But now he had to think about what was best for his Genius. And although he didn't know a lot about taking care of one—that had always been his parents' job—he was pretty sure it wasn't going to love living underground. But being cooped up in a one-bedroom house hadn't stopped his parents' Geniuses from inspiring them. At least the sewers had space for low flying and enough room for his Genius to stretch its wings, even when it grew bigger. It was decided, then. He'd stay put. At least for now.

At some point, Giacomo must have drifted off because the next thing he knew his Genius's beak was waking him with a *tap, tap, tap* on his forehead. He opened his eyes and stared up. The gem's red light shone brightly in his face. Giacomo shooed the Genius off and it flew around the alcove, obnoxiously chirping at him to get up.

"Let me guess, you're hungry?" He rolled out of bed and brushed off the straw stuck to his clothes. His stomach rumbled and groaned. "I am too. I'll find us something. But you have to wait here."

His Genius let out one last chirp and darted down the tunnel.

"I said wait!" Giacomo snatched up his satchel and took off after it.

It flew toward a bright area of the sewer, where a beam of sunlight shone into the tunnel through a clay drainage pipe. The city would be abuzz with activity by now and if anyone saw his Genius . . . Well, he wouldn't let that happen.

"Don't go in there!" Giacomo reached out but his Genius slipped through his hands and into the pipe.

Giacomo still had the advantage. He knew the sewers' every

stinky twist and smelly turn, and from what he'd seen last night, his Genius had no sense of direction. Giacomo headed up a narrow staircase to the surface.

He poked his head up through a drainage opening, then quickly ducked down again as a horse-drawn cart wheeled right over him. Once it passed, he popped out of the sewers and mixed into the crowd.



He weaved between men and women who trudged through the streets with vacant expressions. Armored soldiers holding spears stood on every corner, keeping an eye on the passersby. When a one-legged man on crutches hobbled to the corner and began begging for coins, a soldier immediately dragged him off. People looked the other way, as if the man didn't exist, unwilling or too afraid to help. Giacomo felt ashamed for not going to the man's aid, but like everyone else, he had his own problems to deal with.

He hurried over to a dry fountain filled with dead leaves and peered into the drain. He spotted a red glow growing brighter, and covered the hole with his open satchel. A second later, his Genius hit the satchel with a muffled squeak. Giacomo pulled the flap down, trapping the creature, which threw itself against the sides of the bag.

"Stop fighting me," Giacomo whispered. "I'm trying to protect you."

The Genius chirped loudly. A soldier across the street looked around, trying to figure out where the sound was coming from. His gaze stopped on Giacomo. Giacomo leaned against the wall, acting nonchalant, but his satchel swung wildly, yanking him back and forth. He grabbed the bag and tucked it tightly under his arm.

Giacomo waved to the soldier. "Good morning, signor! Beautiful day, isn't it?" He smiled innocently.

The soldier snarled. Giacomo hustled down the street, whispering to his Genius, "Be quiet, or it's off to the Supreme Creator's dungeon for both of us."

His Genius seemed to get the gist of that, and calmed down.

Farther up the street, Giacomo spotted an elderly man in a shabby green tunic pushing a cart full of fruit. He licked his lips. “I think I found our breakfast.”

He waited for the fruit seller to turn his back. When the man began haggling with a red-cheeked woman about the price of some moldy lemons, Giacomo sidled up to the cart and deftly lifted three apples. By the time the fruit seller finished his deal with the woman, Giacomo was gone.

Back in his hideout, Giacomo took a huge bite of an apple, which turned to mush between his teeth. But since he was starving and hadn’t paid for it, he wasn’t about to complain. He devoured his meal, then licked the remaining juice off his fingers. On the ground next to him, his Genius pecked at another apple, already riddled with holes. He kept the third apple tucked away in his bag for later.

“See? I can take care of you,” Giacomo bragged. “But don’t fly off like that again.”

Belly bulging, Giacomo’s Genius let out a satisfied chirp.

Giacomo spent the rest of the day alternating between drawing and napping. Thankfully, his Genius didn’t try to escape again. For dinner, they shared the last apple. When night arrived, Giacomo prepared to head out to Beppe’s Bakery.

But as he was about to leave, he heard footsteps splashing from down the tunnel. Giacomo froze and cocked his head. His Genius mimicked his movement and let out a tiny chirp.

“Shh. Did you hear that?” Had the soldier who spotted him earlier tracked him down here? Or was it another Lost Soul? Whatever it was, he wasn’t going to stick around to find out.

He scooped up his Genius, clamping his hand over its gem to block the light. He tiptoed out of the alcove, shifting away from the footsteps. Giacomo ducked behind an archway and glanced back the way he'd come. A lantern's yellow light filled the tunnel. He was surprised to hear children's voices.

"Let's at least go up for some air," a raspy-voiced boy said. "I'm seriously about to throw up and I'd hate for you girls to see that."

"As long as you don't get any vomit on my dress, it doesn't bother me," a girl's voice shot back.

"It won't be that much longer," a second, younger-sounding girl said. "I think we're getting close."

Giacomo relaxed a bit. At least they weren't soldiers or Lost Souls. Maybe they were other street kids like him? Still, he had to be careful. But before he could get a look at the intruders, Giacomo's Genius squirmed out of his hands and flew toward the voices. He cursed its recklessness.

Giacomo peered out from his hiding spot and helplessly watched as his Genius's red light moved closer to the yellow glow. He braced himself for the worst.

"Look," the boy said. "It's a Genius!"

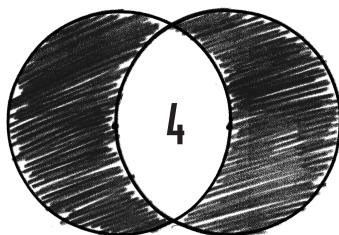
"See, I told you we'd find it!" the youngest voice proudly shouted.

They didn't sound surprised at all. Giacomo's mind spun. *How did the girl know my Genius would be down here?*

The children rounded the corner and Giacomo's breath caught in his throat. It wasn't a lantern creating the yellow light, but a circular gem in the crown of a round, purple-and-orange-plumed Genius only slightly bigger than Giacomo's. Gliding

behind it were two others, over twice the size of his Genius. One was white, with a thin, curved neck and a long beak like a crane; the other resembled a falcon, with brown and tan feathers, a hooked beak, and beady black eyes. Giacomo's Genius made a high-pitched *zbeezbeezbee* as it happily circled the others.

Giacomo watched with a probing gaze, his heart racing. *Who are these kids and how do they all have Geniuses?*



THE BLIND ARTIST

Once the shock of seeing other Geniuses wore off, Giacomo focused his attention on the three children with them. The boy wore a blue cloak so dark in hue it was nearly black, while the girls were each draped in olive. Made of wool and tailored to fit their bodies, the cloaks were similar to the outer garments of Virenzia's upper class. There was no way this trio was from the streets. But where would three kids with Geniuses be able to live without being caught?

"Where's your artist?" the youngest girl asked Giacomo's Genius, gently holding out her hand. Without hesitation, his Genius landed on her finger. Her brown skin was at least three shades darker than the skin of the other girl and boy. A thick black braid hung over each shoulder, down to her waist. The purple and orange Genius, which looked like a robin, circled her and landed on top of her head, nestling in her hair.

"Anyone down here?" The boy's voice echoed. His black hair



was cropped short, bangs cut in a hard line across his forehead. In his right hand he held a pencil. “You might as well come out now, otherwise I’ll have to drag you out.”

“Don’t be such a bully, Savino,” the girl with the braids said. “He—or she—is probably just scared.”

Savino waved his arm dismissively. “Aaminah, I got this.” He

whistled and the falcon Genius landed on his shoulder. The gem on its crown shot out a beam of blue light that glimmered across the wet stones. It only took a few seconds for Savino to spot Giacomo's hideout. "Nice work, Nero." He fed the Genius a piece of food from his pocket and marched toward the alcove. "Milena, over here. I found something."

The older girl hiked up her cloak and dress to avoid dragging them through the muck and caught up to Savino. Her smooth brown hair was pulled tightly into a bun and tied with a ribbon. A band of gold with inlaid beads crowned her head. She cradled a paintbrush in her left hand. The Genius with the curved neck glided gracefully behind and landed on her shoulder.

"I can't believe someone actually lives here," Milena said as she looked into the alcove.

Giacomo felt embarrassed, then immediately offended. *Who is she to judge how I live?*

"We know you're down here," Milena called out. "And we're here to help. We can take you and your Genius somewhere safe. But you have to stop hiding."

She sounded sincere, but Giacomo had no way of knowing whether he could believe her.

Savino emerged from the hideout with Giacomo's sketchbook. He flipped through its pages. "I've seen worse."

Giacomo clenched his hands. *Stupid!* He'd forgotten to take his belongings.

Savino held up a drawing for the girls to see. "Check out this portrait. You think it's who we're looking for? He's kinda grumpy-looking, if you ask me."

Without thinking, Giacomo ran out and hurled himself at the



boy. "That's mine, give it back!" He tried to grab the sketchbook from Savino, but he held it over his head, out of Giacomo's reach.

"Guess it *is* him. And he looks even more cranky in real life!" Savino teased.

"That's mine!" Giacomo yelled, fist shaking. His first instinct was to throw a punch, but now that he was toe to toe with the boy,

he thought better of it. Savino stood several inches taller and his broad shoulders stretched his cloak tight. Giacomo poked him in the chest instead. “What are you doing down here?”

“Better get your finger off me, sewer-boy, or we’re going to have a problem,” Savino threatened.

“Sorry to show up like this, but we had to find you,” Aaminah said, trying to smooth things over. “Is this your Genius?” Above her head, Giacomo’s Genius chirped and playfully chased Aaminah’s robin Genius.

“Depends who’s asking,” Giacomo said.

Savino tilted his head. “Just answer the question.”

“Why should I? I don’t know who you people are.”

“There are a bunch of drawings of that Genius in your sketchbook,” Savino said. “Are you telling us it’s not yours?”

Giacomo stared at the ground, avoiding Savino’s harsh gaze. “I didn’t say it was or it wasn’t.”

“One way to find out for sure.” Savino whistled rapidly three times. “Nero, attack.” Nero’s wings unfurled and he pushed off Savino’s shoulder, soaring straight toward Giacomo’s Genius. Nero’s talons slashed and nicked the Genius’s side. It let out a pained chirp.

“Ow!” Giacomo cried, clutching his forearm. Blood trickled down his arm as if Savino’s Genius had clawed at him too. How come every time his Genius got hurt, he felt it too?

Savino crossed his arms with a self-satisfied smile. “Guess you two *are* connected.”

Giacomo burned with anger. He charged Savino and shoved him toward the wall. *Bad idea.* Savino felt solid as brick.

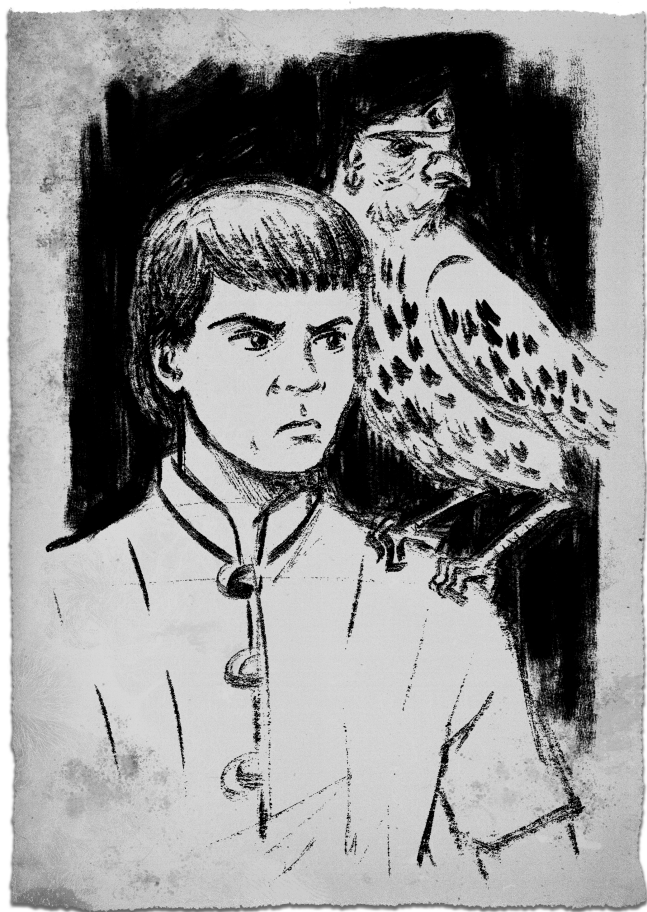
He seized the back of Giacomo’s tunic and effortlessly flung him to the ground.

Aaminah rushed to Giacomo's side. "Savino, what's wrong with you? He wasn't doing anything."

Milena shot Savino a dirty look. "Was that really necessary?"

Nero flew back onto Savino's shoulder. As a reward, Savino fed his Genius another treat. "He came at me."

"Only after your Genius attacked me first!" Giacomo snatched his sketchbook out of Savino's hand. "You're a jerk, you know that?"



“I’ve been called worse, usually by these two,” he said, nodding toward the girls.

“*Much* worse,” Milena sniped.

Aaminah knelt down and took Giacomo’s wounded arm in her small hands. “Let me see.” She inspected the cut, then reached into her cloak and pulled out a wooden flute. “Just relax.”

“I’m not really in the mood for music,” Giacomo said. The scratch stung, but wasn’t too painful. Giacomo’s Genius flew to him, its left wing torn from Nero’s talons.

“She’s going to treat the injuries,” Milena explained.

Aaminah’s Genius landed on the back of Giacomo’s hand. He flinched.

“It’s okay. Luna’s a sweetheart.” Aaminah raised the flute to her lips and gently blew across the mouthpiece. A low tone filled the tunnel. Luna’s circular gem glowed yellow. With each ascending note, waves of light pulsed from the crown, washing over Giacomo’s and his Genius’s wounds.

It felt like the music was seeping into his arm and vibrating inside it, soothing his soreness and calming his frazzled nerves. The bleeding stopped and the cut sealed up, leaving only a faint red welt. The torn flaps of his Genius’s wing mended too. Was this how his stab wound had healed last night? He didn’t remember hearing any music, just the roar of that crazy storm.

“I didn’t know Geniuses could heal like that,” Giacomo said. “Thanks.”

Aaminah studied him with a curious stare, as if he’d spoken gibberish.

“What is it?” Giacomo asked.

Aaminah shook her head. “Nothing.” She smiled sweetly. “What’s your name?”

“Giacomo.”

“I’m Aminah, this is Milena and her Genius, Gaia, and that’s Savino.”

Giacomo gave them perfunctory nods.

“What’s your Genius’s name?” Aminah asked.

Giacomo swallowed. “Uh . . . I don’t have one for it yet.”

“How have you gone through your whole life without naming your Genius?” Milena asked.

“See . . . the thing is, I only found it last night. Or it found me. I’m still trying to figure out where it came from.”

The three kids looked at one another, mouths slack.

“You’ve only had your Genius for one day?” Milena asked.

“That’s right.”

She eyed him with suspicion. “And what were you doing when it showed up?”

Last night’s chaos rushed through Giacomo’s memory—Lost Souls attacking him, his agonizing vision, his Genius appearing out of nowhere, nearly being captured by soldiers . . . Where to begin? He was better off keeping his story simple.

“I was just walking down the street, minding my own business, and it flew up to me.”

“What a steaming pile of horse manure. You’re hiding something.” Savino pointed an accusing finger.

Aminah spoke up. “All that matters is Giacomo and his Genius are connected. Who cares when he got it?”

Milena sniffed the rank air. “How about we get him back to the villa and keep talking somewhere less . . . pungent.”

“Fine by me.” Savino grabbed Giacomo’s arm and pulled him to his feet.

Giacomo yanked his arm from Savino's grip. "Why should I go with you? I've survived fine on my own this long."

Milena leaned in, looking serious. "You're more than welcome to keep trying your luck down here, but if the Supreme Creator hears even a whisper that there's a new Genius flying around, she's going to have soldiers searching every nook and cranny of Virenzia, including the aqueducts. We're offering you a chance to go somewhere safe, where the Supreme Creator can't find you."

Giacomo stared at her skeptically, unable to imagine such a refuge actually existing.

"Our teacher is amazing," Aminah added. "You'll learn so much from him."

"A teacher?" Giacomo said, intrigued.

"Assuming you're worthy of being taught," Savino piped up.

"And you'll get a hot bath and all the food you can eat," Aminah said. "Milena's right, the best way to keep your Genius safe is to come with us."

A safe place with food *and* an art teacher? It almost sounded too good to be true. Which probably meant it was.

"Thanks for the offer," Giacomo said, turning away, "but I'm going to pass. I can take care of myself. Come on, uh . . . little Genius guy." He tried to get his Genius to follow, but it ignored him and stayed cuddled next to Aminah's Genius in her nest of hair, cooing peacefully.

"You need to come with me," Giacomo said, scooping his Genius off Aminah's head.

His Genius squawked and pecked his hand.

"Ow!" Giacomo rubbed the aching spot.

His Genius flew back to the hair nest.

“He’s welcome to visit as long as he likes,” Aaminah said. “If I could have a whole Genius sanctuary in my hair, I would.”

Giacomo had no doubt he could continue to survive on his own, but apparently his Genius had other ideas. The little guy had really taken a liking to Aaminah. Maybe he should follow his Genius’s instincts. Plus, washing all this grime off him would give him a welcome break from his own stench. He found himself fantasizing about a meal that didn’t consist of stale bread.

“Fine. I’ll come,” he grumbled. “But the first sign of trouble, I’m gone.” He picked up his satchel and stuffed his sketchbook into it.

“Smart choice, sewer-boy.” Savino intentionally bumped into Giacomo’s shoulder as he marched past. Nero let out a rattly squawk. Milena, Aaminah, and their Geniuses followed.

As he trailed the others, Giacomo looked back at the dank alcove he’d called home for so long. With each step, it faded farther into the darkness.

A short time later, they emerged from a tunnel outside the city walls. Above the mountains, the faint glow of dawn rose to meet the stars, erasing them one by one.

Savino scanned the area for soldiers and signaled the all clear. The children’s Geniuses flew up ahead, staying close to the hillside. Giacomo was relieved to see his Genius following their lead. Savino led the group up a steep slope that curved back and forth, the steps nothing more than grassy indentations.

The dirt crumbled beneath Giacomo’s foot and he reeled backward. Luckily, Milena was behind him, holding out an arm to keep him steady.

“And you thought you could take care of yourself,” she said with a slight smile.

“I didn’t need your help,” Giacomo replied, pulling away. He’d been cut off from real human contact for so long her touch felt strange, but also comforting.

Milena continued on as Giacomo took a short break. He looked



down the enormous hill he'd just climbed. In all his years of living in Virenzia, he'd never seen the city from this high an angle.

By the time the sun peered over the mountains, they'd arrived at their destination, a two-story villa built on the hillside. Giacomo had often noticed the building from far below and always wondered who lived in it. Now walking in its shadow, he was overwhelmed by its size. Built from immense gray stones, the structure was as wide as an entire city block, its face lined with repeating archways and columns. Only the Supreme Creator's palace was bigger.

"You all live here?" Giacomo asked in disbelief.

Savino shushed him and ducked behind a row of hedges. Giacomo walked behind, greenery to his right and a wall to his left. He didn't see any sign of a door.

Savino ran his hand along the wall, then pressed one of the stones. A portion of the wall retracted and slid open, revealing a secret passage.

The blue gem on Savino's Genius lit up, illuminating a stairway that spiraled down. As he was about to cross the threshold, Giacomo hesitated.

"No turning back now," Milena said, then gave him a gentle nudge.

The stairs spilled out into a cavernous, shadowy cellar. Savino lit several candles. Their flames flickered, casting the children's shadows on the walls.

"Is this a joke?" Giacomo complained. "You take me from one underground hideout into another?"

"At least this one doesn't stink as bad," Savino said.

Giacomo couldn't argue, but he stayed on his guard while he took a look around.

Wooden barrels lined the wall to his right. To his left, several empty bottles of wine were tucked between the cushions on a worn bench. In the center of the room stood two easels and a long worktable. Half-finished sculptures sat on it, along with numerous brushes, pencils, pieces of chalk and charcoal, and stacks of paper. His Genius darted through the room, chirping excitedly. Giacomo's mind raced with the possibilities of the drawings he could make.

Savino opened his cloak and unbuckled a belt that held sculpting tools. He threw it on the table with a clunk.

Giacomo leaned in to get a closer look at one of the sculptures—a bust resembling Savino. He could see fingerprints where Savino had pressed holes for eye sockets and shaped the angular nose. “Self-portrait?”

Savino's frown matched the one in clay. “Obviously. What about it?”

Giacomo rolled his eyes. *I can't win with him.*

On a nearby table, Milena tidied up an arrangement of grapes in a basket and a wine bottle with a melted candle sticking out the top. “Savino, did you take the skull?” she called out.

“What skull?” he said.

“The human skull that was sitting right next to the grapes.”

Milena's painting sat on an easel in front of the still life. Other than the skull that was missing from the table, the two scenes were indistinguishable. Milena's technique was so perfect and flawless, her paint strokes were only visible up close.

“Why do you always blame me when something goes missing?” Savino said.

“Because you're usually responsible,” she jabbed back. She

caught Giacomo inspecting her painting and spun the easel away from him. "It's not done yet."

"It looks amazing," Giacomo complimented her. "I've always wanted to learn how to paint. Think you could show me some-time?"

Before she could answer, a gravelly voice spoke from the darkness. "So you found him, did you?"

Aaminah skipped across the room. "You were right, Pietro! Once we were down in the city, my Genius led us right to him."

It took Giacomo a second to process the name Aaminah spoke. His heart raced. "Did you just say his name was Pietro?"

"She did," the gravelly voice answered. Out of the shadows shuffled a hunched man carrying a wooden cane. He had a long gray beard and scraggly hair that ringed his bald-on-top, wrinkly head. "And what's your name?"

"Giacomo," he said nervously. "Giacomo Ghiberti. But you can't be the actual Pietro Vasari, can you?"

"And why in the world not?"

"Because you're . . . dead."

Pietro chuckled. "Sure, that's what Nerezza has taught you to believe. Yet here I stand before you, still drawing breath."

It felt like the old man had slapped him across the face. How was it possible that all this time, his idol was living right up the hill from him? "How . . . How are you here?"

"By the good graces of the Creator, just like you." As Pietro stepped into the candlelight, Giacomo noticed the man stared straight ahead. His pupils were covered in a foggy haze.

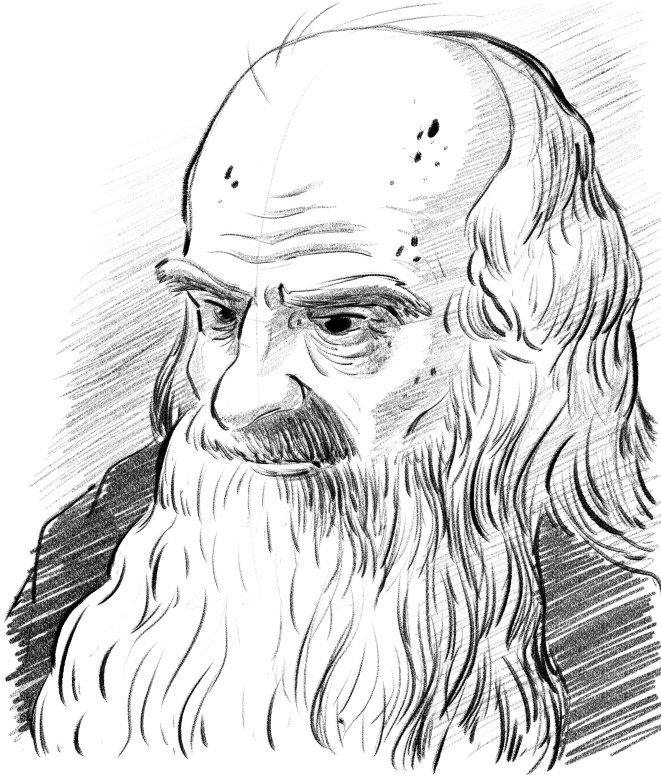
"You're blind," he realized.

Pietro touched Giacomo's face. His fingers felt like pieces of bark.

“And you’re old.” Pietro sounded dismayed.

“Old? I’m twelve.”

“And he’s only had his Genius for a day,” Savino added snidely.



Pietro stroked his long beard and furrowed his brow in concern. “I see . . .”

Giacomo’s Genius let out an intense, shrill whistle. “What’s wrong?” he called, rushing from the main room into another section of the cellar.

Giacomo stopped short as he came upon his Genius hovering before a wide arched recess in the wall. Inside, a gnarled black beak poked out from a hulking mass of blue and gray feathers. A

square orange gem glowed dimly from a crown, highlighting the creature's giant, round head; long, flowing wings; and claws as thick as tree branches.

"That's . . . that's your Genius," Giacomo whispered.

"His name's Tito," Pietro said, shuffling up to him. "And he's very friendly, just a bit wary of newcomers."

Tito stuck his head out of the alcove and let out a slow, deep-pitched hoot. Giacomo stepped back, startled. His Genius ducked behind him. Tito lifted his claw and scratched his neck, shedding dozens of feathers in the process. On his body were empty patches where his plumage had molted, resembling Pietro's bald head. And where his eyes should have been were two gaping holes. Giacomo thought back to how he had felt pain when his Genius was hurt. Had Pietro's blindness been caused by someone taking Tito's eyes? The idea sent shivers through him.



Heavy footsteps stomped down a second set of stairs. Giacomo followed Pietro back to the main room, where a pink-cheeked man with pursed lips and a brown bushy beard strolled in. He wore puffy-sleeved silk nightclothes that were cinched under his enormous round belly.

“Where have you three been?” he bellowed at Aaminah, Milena, and Savino. “And don’t pretend you’ve been down here all night. Enzo just told me he saw you coming back from the city.” The rotund man eyed Giacomo suspiciously. “And who might you be?”

“Settle down and relax.” Pietro’s cane clacked across the floor until it touched a table holding bottles of red wine. He felt for a glass and filled it. He passed it to the man, who despite the early hour took a healthy swig. “I sent them out because Tito sensed there was a new Genius in the city. He was right again. Meet Giacomo Ghiberti and . . . What is your Genius’s name?”

“He doesn’t have one yet,” Giacomo answered sheepishly.

His Genius flitted around the portly man’s head, as if it knew to put on a good show. The man’s irate expression washed away, replaced by a smile so big it threatened to burst his plump cheeks.

“Another Genius in our midst? How wonderful!” The man clapped Giacomo hard on the back. “Welcome, young man. I am Signor Baldassare Barrolo, proud patron of the arts and owner of this villa. Whatever you need will be provided. My home is your home.”

“Thank you,” Giacomo said.

“There is a slight problem,” Pietro said. “Concerning Giacomo’s age? He only recently connected with his Genius. I’m not sure what I’ll be able to do with him.”

Giacomo was annoyed that Pietro had brought up his age again. So what if he had just gotten his Genius? He'd work hard to catch up to the others.

Baldassare noticed the frown on Giacomo's face. "Being a late bloomer is hardly something to worry about." He patted Giacomo's shoulder reassuringly. "We'll get you up to speed. Now, what do you say to a delicious breakfast? I imagine you must be famished."

Giacomo's stomach rumbled, responding before he could. He smiled. "You imagined right, signor."

Baldassare ushered Giacomo toward the stairs, but after getting a whiff of him, added, "First, how about a nice hot bath?"

Before they headed up, Baldassare pulled a small whistle from his pocket and blew into it, creating a flutter of high-pitched notes, similar to a birdcall. The Geniuses perked up and flocked around Baldassare, who held out a handful of dried fruit that

they ate from his palm. Giacomo's Genius dove into the throng, eagerly devouring its share.

"Looks like your Genius will be right at home," Baldassare said.

Once everyone emerged from the stairwell, Baldassare shut the door, which was actually a large painting



framed in gold. Giacomo wondered how many other secret passages Signor Barrolo was hiding in his villa's walls.

As the painting hinged closed, Supreme Creator Nerezza's giant face swung into view. Giacomo jumped back and that was when he noticed the long hall was lined with the flag of the Zizzolan Empire—the same black and white triangles that hung from the Supreme Creator's palace.

Giacomo clutched his Genius close and backed away. "I knew I shouldn't have trusted you!" he wailed at the other children, then directed his rage at Baldassare: "What is this place? Who are you really?"

"Like I told you, my name is Baldassare Barrolo." He paused. "And I'm one of the Supreme Creator's Council of Ten."

Giacomo turned and ran down the hall.

"Wait!" Milena shouted. "It's not what you think!"

Artwork after artwork depicting Zizzola's leader whizzed past: portraits, marble busts, tapestries. Any minute, he expected the real thing to appear and snatch his Genius from his arms.

"Giacomo, stop!" Pietro's voice was strong and commanding.

Against his better judgment, Giacomo did as he was told. He whirled around, still flushed with panic.

"My Genius and I have been here seventeen years and never been found," Pietro assured him.

"How do I know you're not working for the Supreme Creator too?" Giacomo said.

"Pfft," Savino huffed. "That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard."

Baldassare clapped his palms together, like he was giving thanks to the Creator. "I understand how unsettling all this

is. But you are absolutely safe here. And Pietro is on your side, I promise.”

Aaminah backed him up. “If it hadn’t been for Signor Barrolo’s protection, our Geniuses probably would have been taken away a long time ago.”

“I live in two worlds,” Baldassare explained. “When I’m not serving as Supreme Creator Nerezza’s loyal Minister of Culture, I find and collect art from the black market, protect Geniuses, and work tirelessly to foster a revolution that will one day depose Nerezza and her ilk.”

Giacomo thought Baldassare’s story sounded genuine, and the fact that the other Geniuses were alive and well seemed to back up his claim, but something still didn’t feel right.

“Then what’s with all this?” Giacomo said, gesturing to the art and flags on either side of him.

“I have to keep up appearances,” Baldassare stated. “If anyone suspected I wasn’t loyal to the Supreme Creator, she would raze this place to the ground, and destroy everyone in it.”

“After you’ve lived here awhile, you don’t really notice them anymore,” Aaminah said.

“I hope so,” Giacomo muttered, then walked sheepishly back to the group, embarrassed by his outburst. Maybe he’d overreacted. Obviously Geniuses were safe here and Baldassare’s explanation of why he had the flags made perfect sense. He opened his hands, freeing his Genius. Wings aflutter, it took to the air, gliding down the hall. Giacomo peered up at Baldassare. “Sorry I bolted like that.”

Baldassare gave him a warm smile. “It’s quite all right. I know it’s a lot to take in.”



The tour of Signor Barrolo's villa left Giacomo speechless. The place oozed luxury. He walked across marble floors as reflective as mirrors, past rooms the size of entire houses, and under stone archways carved with intricate patterns. Giacomo made sure to keep his distance from the upholstered chairs, cushioned benches, cabinets, and tables; he feared if he accidentally touched anything, one of his many layers of filth would rub off and tarnish it.

At the bottom of a wide stairway stood a tall, thin woman in an elegant purple robe. She smiled at them as Baldassare gave her a peck on the cheek.

"Good morning, dear. I want you to meet our new artist-in-residence, Giacomo. Giacomo, this is my wife, Fabiana."

"Nice to meet you, signora," Giacomo said.

"He needs a bath," Baldassare told his wife. "The hotter the better."

"Of course, dear," Fabiana replied. "Lovely to meet you, Giacomo. Right this way."

She led him to an outdoor bathhouse with a round wooden tub. Through the open ceiling, puffy clouds floated across the sky. Fabiana filled the tub with steaming water from a cauldron over the fire, then handed Giacomo a towel, along with a fresh dark

red tunic, a black leather belt, and brown pants. “My son outgrew these a while ago, but they should fit you perfectly,” she said with a kindness that reminded Giacomo of his mother.

“Thank you, signora.” His Genius looped into the air, then dove, splashing into the water.

“When you’re done, come down for breakfast.” Fabiana exited, her robe gracefully cutting a curve behind her.

Giacomo peeled off his grimy clothes and slipped into the hot water. The icy chill that had embedded in his bones over the years began to melt. With a soapy brush, he scrubbed every inch of his body, and within minutes the water became murky. Annoyed, his Genius squeaked and hopped out.

Giacomo dried himself and tried on his new clothes. He tightened the leather ties down the front of the tunic and pulled the pants over his skinny legs. A little baggy, but they’d do the trick. He dragged a brush through his long, tangled hair and looked into a full-length mirror, hardly recognizing this unsoiled version of himself.

After a few wrong turns, Giacomo found his way to the dining room, where Savino, Milena, and Aaminah sat on one side of a long table, their Geniuses perched on the backs of their chairs. Baldassare sat at the head, shoveling forkfuls of noodles into his mouth.

“Take your pick.” Baldassare gestured to the twenty empty chairs around the table.

Giacomo sat opposite the other children, who had shed their cloaks. Milena, holding herself with elegant poise, was now clad in a green velvet dress with embroidered sleeves, the bodice laced

tightly. In contrast, Aaminah slouched and appeared much more casual, wearing a loose, pale yellow shirt with a boy's pants, opting for bare feet. Savino looked ready to do battle in a black short-sleeved leather tunic covered in metal buckles and a padded white undershirt. From loops on his belt hung his various sculpting tools, resembling an armory of tiny weapons.

Giacomo gazed across the table piled with platters of thick noodles, roasted meats, and pastries. He stuffed a tart into his mouth. The cinnamon sparked his long-dormant sense of taste back to life. A warm, gooey melon-and-cheese filling erupted from the dough and dripped down his chin.

Aaminah leaned over the table and whispered, "You know what's really good? If you suck out the insides first." She jabbed a hole in a tart and made a loud sucking noise as she drained it dry. She signaled her satisfaction with a tiny burp. Giacomo laughed, accidentally snorting cheese filling from his nose, which made Aaminah giggle.

Milena shot them both disapproving looks and rolled her eyes. She probably thought he was disgusting, but Giacomo didn't care, not when his mouth was full of something so sweet and delicious.

While they ate, the sounds of stirring, pounding, and chopping spilled from the kitchen. Fabiana swept in, holding a bowl of steaming soup.

"Thith ith amathing," Giacomo told her, his mouth full of tart.

"You're so very welcome," Fabiana said, setting the bowl on the table, then gliding away to create another masterpiece.

Giacomo's Genius hopped off his shoulder and sucked a noodle from his plate like it was a long, meaty worm.

"No Geniuses on the table, please," Baldassare said firmly.

Giacomo glanced at the other three Geniuses, sitting obediently, and realized he had to get his Genius in line. He first tried shooing it off the table, and when that didn't work, he picked it up and put it in his lap. But his Genius hopped right back onto the table and kept eating off his plate. Giacomo put on his most serious face and gave it a stern *no* while pointing his finger. His Genius blissfully ignored him and continued gobbling food.

Savino looked to Baldassare. "What do you expect when he just got his Genius last night?"

"I'm so sorry, Signor Barrolo. I'm still trying to figure out how to communicate with it."

"I'll let it slide for now," Baldassare said. "At least until Pietro can give you a few pointers. For the time being, please keep a close eye on your new friend here. An untamed Genius is a recipe for disaster."

To emphasize his point, he tossed bits of food to the other Geniuses, who snatched them out of the air with their beaks.

Giacomo nodded. "Understood." He felt a pit in his stomach, and it wasn't from all the rich food. Something had been bugging him ever since the others showed up at his hideout. "There is one question maybe you could answer for me?"

"I'll do my best," Baldassare said.

"If Pietro's Genius knew where to find mine, how come the Supreme Creator hasn't raided your villa looking for all their Geniuses?" Giacomo gestured across the table to the others.

Baldassare wiped his mouth with his napkin. "Nerezza's Genius is powerful, but thankfully, it never developed the ability to sense others. In this arena, Pietro and Tito have an advantage. If not for them, I never would have found Savino, Milena, or Aaminah."

“How can Pietro’s Genius find another one miles away?”

“Geniuses are mysterious creatures, as you’ve no doubt discovered,” Baldassare said. “A rare few possess the ability to sense their own kind. It’s believed they emit some kind of vibrational signal through the air, in order to communicate. Others think it has more to do with the emotional bond between artist and Genius. But no one knows for sure.”

“Someday Aaminah’s Genius will be just as powerful,” Milena said, sounding like a proud older sister.

“Maybe,” Aaminah said doubtfully. “Right now Luna can only sense a Genius if it’s really close by. She picked up your Genius’s trail once we went into the aqueducts.”

So that’s how they found me. But as soon as that question had been answered, another popped into Giacomo’s head: “What happens if a member of the Council of Ten decides to stop by? You all hide in the cellar?”

“Our Geniuses do,” Milena said. “But we get to meet whoever visits. Signor Barrolo introduces us as his adopted children.”

“But how about you?” Baldassare said, leaning forward. “How does a boy like you end up living in the sewers beneath the city?”

“Not a fan of orphanages.” Giacomo stuffed another tart in his mouth, not wanting to get into the details.

A morose boy with curly black hair wearing a black tunic shuffled into the dining room, carrying a human skull. Milena fumed.

“See?” Savino nodded at the skull. “Told you I didn’t take it.”

Milena whistled. Her Genius took flight and extended its long neck, plucking the skull out of the boy’s hands with its beak.

“Keep that thing away from me,” the boy complained.

“Then don’t steal my stuff, Enzo,” Milena retorted. Gaia

dropped the skull in Milena's lap and returned to the back of Milena's chair.

Enzio noticed Giacomo and glared at him with eyes nearly as lifeless as the skull's. Giacomo looked at the other kids, expecting an introduction, but they stayed silent.



The boy walked over to Giacomo, sizing him up. “Great, another leech eating my food. And are those my old clothes?” He snatched a piece of bread off Giacomo’s plate.

“Hey, I was about to eat that,” Giacomo said.

“Enzio. Respect our guest,” Baldassare scolded.

“Dad. Leave me alone.” Enzio stuffed the bread in his mouth and left.

“That’s my boy. A true blessing from the Creator, isn’t he?” Baldassare said, with a joking smile.

“Does he have a Genius?” Giacomo asked.

“No,” Aaminah said. “And he hates the fact we all do.”

Giacomo made a mental note to stay clear of Enzio.

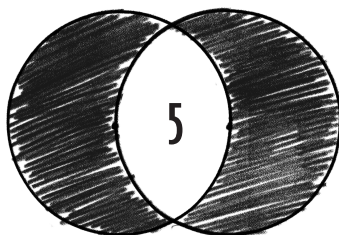
Giacomo spent the rest of the day exploring the villa and the lush gardens. Then, after another unbelievable feast of mouthwatering and stomach-filling pastas and cakes, he and his yet-to-be-named Genius headed up to their room, where he sketched from memory everyone he’d met since his arrival.

His first day in Baldassare’s villa had been one of the most exciting and exhausting of his life. After finishing a particularly gloomy portrait of Enzio, he tossed his sketchbook on the bedside table. He fell back onto the soft mattress and buried himself under a mountain of blankets.

Although he was safe for the moment, Giacomo felt uneasy. He didn’t deserve this. Any of it. A Genius, the never-ending piles of food, the cozy bed. Not when there were one-legged beggars on Zizzola’s streets struggling to survive. What made him so special?

He tossed and turned, jealous of his Genius, who was nestled into the pillow next to him, sound asleep.

Finally, he flung off the blankets and curled up on the floor next to the bed. The hard, cold stones offered a familiar comfort. Within seconds, his eyes felt heavy and his thoughts drifted off, making way for sleep.



SACRED GEOMETRY

That night in his dreams, Giacomo was lost, walking down one of the many halls in Villa Barrolo. Every turn brought him back to the exact same place. His heart raced. Then, to his surprise and relief, his mother and father stepped out of a doorway and waved to him.

“It’s so good to see you,” his father said in his baritone voice.

His mother hugged him and told him how much she missed him. Giacomo burst into tears. She wiped them away and told him not to cry. “We’re here now.”

“Has your Genius arrived?” his father asked.

“You know about that?” Giacomo said.

“Make sure you keep him safe,” his mother said.

They kissed Giacomo on the head and walked back down the hall and through the doorway.

Giacomo rushed after them. “Wait! Don’t go!”

He bolted into the room, but they had already vanished.

Suddenly, he was back at his sewer hideout. The ceiling cracked. Chunks of stone broke off and smashed down onto his head. Then the entire structure ruptured and the tunnel flooded. When he opened his mouth to scream, his lungs filled with water.

Giacomo woke, gasping for air, a bright light assaulting him. The sun blazed through an opening in the curtains, shining right into his eyes. He ducked under the covers, trying to hold on to the reunion with his parents. But the moment was gone.

He peeled back the blankets, letting his eyes adjust. He didn't remember getting into the bed. He must've done it in the middle of the night. Giacomo looked at the other pillow, but his Genius wasn't there. He jumped up and searched the room.

"Hey, little guy, you here?" *Little guy?* Giacomo sighed. *I really have to come up with a name. As soon as I find him.*

He pulled on his pants and tunic, then checked behind the wardrobe, under the piles of blankets, and behind the furniture. No luck.

He headed down the hall toward the kitchen. Maybe his Genius had gotten hungry and left to find breakfast. Through a large hallway window, he noticed that the sun was already high in the sky. Everyone was probably already up. Why hadn't anyone woken him?

He descended the stairs, struck by the villa's eerie quiet. The kitchen and dining room were deserted, as were the library, the sitting area, and ten other rooms that may or may not have had a specific purpose. Where were the servants, the cooks, the maids? A place this size seemed like it would need a small army to keep it running, but so far the only person he'd seen doing any cooking or cleaning had been Baldassare's wife. He guessed

that to keep the Geniuses a secret, Baldassare couldn't employ any outside help. In Virenzia, you never knew who you could trust.

"Hello? Anyone here?" Giacomo's voice echoed through the villa.

At the end of a hall, he spotted a familiar face passing by.

"Enzio!" Giacomo called out, waving to him.

The boy shot him an annoyed look and kept going.

"Hold on, I want to ask you something!" Giacomo caught up to Enzio and stopped in front of him.

Enzio tapped his foot impatiently. "Yeah? What?"

"I was wondering if you know where Aaminah or Milena or Savino are?"

"You check Pietro's studio?" Enzio shoved Giacomo aside.

"The cellar. Of course!" He should've looked there first and saved himself the awkward interaction with Enzio.

Walking away, Enzio muttered, "You have your own Genius and you couldn't figure that out? Pathetic." He rounded the corner and vanished.

Giacomo didn't know who he liked less—Savino or Enzio. But he was sure they were two of the most disagreeable people he'd ever met.

He found the gold-framed painting of the Supreme Creator and swung it open, revealing the passageway he'd come through yesterday.

When he reached the bottom of the stairs, he came upon Milena and Savino standing in the center of the room, Gaia and Nero perched on their shoulders. Pietro sat on a chair in the corner, a glass of red wine cradled in his hand. Giacomo was relieved

to see his own Genius sitting with Aaminah and Luna at the table. When Aaminah spotted him, she gave him a friendly grin and waved. Giacomo smiled back.

“Brushes up,” Pietro instructed.

Milena and Savino raised their paintbrushes in front of them as if they were about to lay the first strokes on a canvas, except they weren’t standing in front of easels.

“Picture a hexagon,” Pietro continued. “Visualize each of its six sides. Can you see it?”

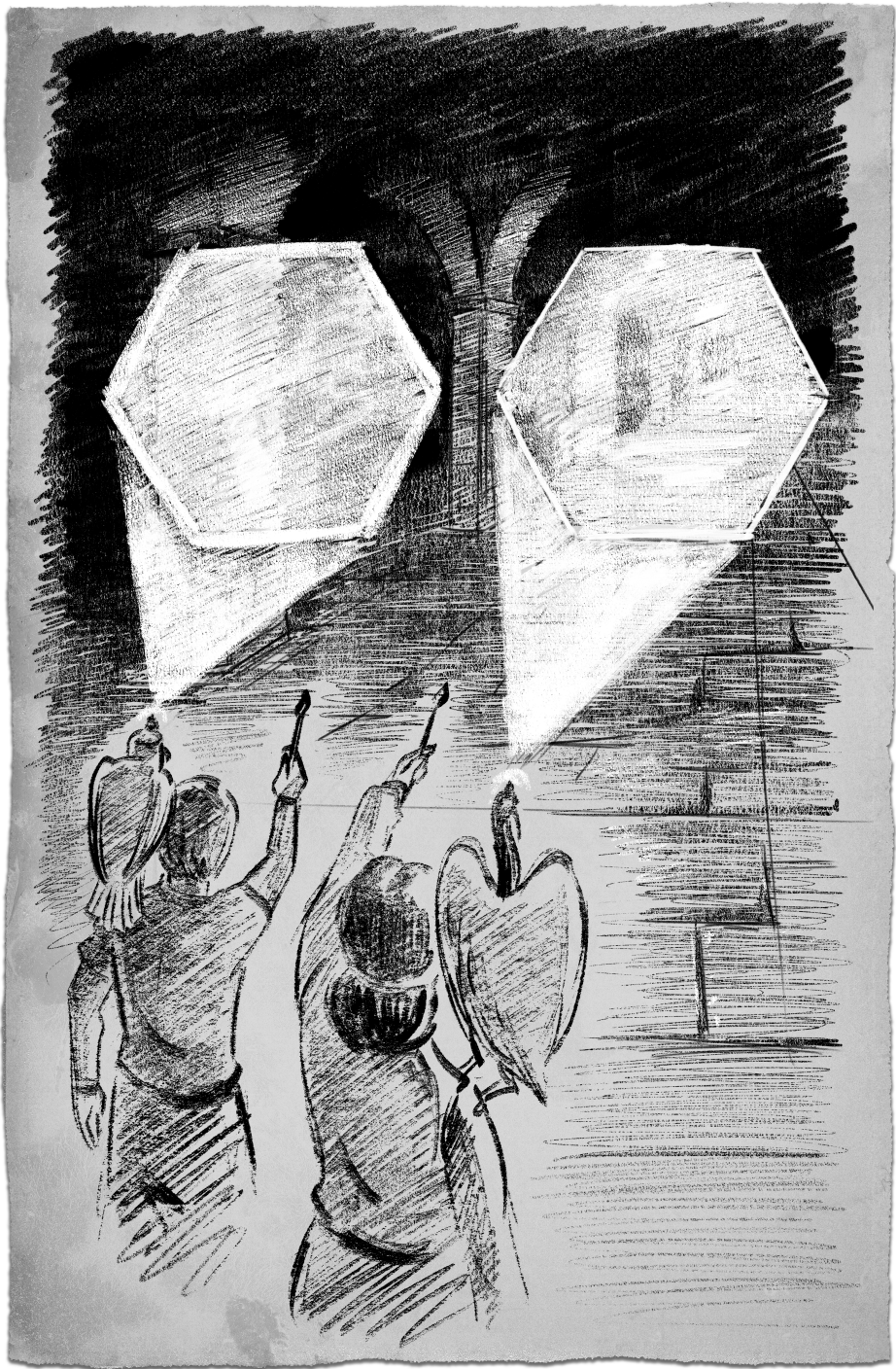
“Yes,” Milena said.

“Got it,” Savino quickly followed.

“Now, bring it to light.”

Savino and Milena both brushed six short strokes in the air, signaling their Geniuses to illuminate their gems. A brilliant blue light shot out of Nero’s crown and projected Savino’s hexagon into the center of the room. At least five feet tall, the hexagon’s bold, rough lines hung in the air as if cast against a wall. At the same time, Gaia projected a green light, forming an equally large hexagon, but with a thin, delicate outline. Both colorful shapes hummed with energy, their edges vibrating; their centers were translucent, like a section of a stained glass window.

When Giacomo was very young, his parents had used their Geniuses to create similar glowing shapes. When he lay restlessly in bed, his mother would draw little stars in the air and her Genius would project them on the ceiling and walls. Floating among the stars always calmed him down and helped him fall asleep. Now that he had his own Genius, he couldn’t wait for Pietro to teach him how to master the technique.



Giacomo stepped into the room, catching Milena's attention. She glanced at him and immediately her hexagon's precise form wavered; its gentle, low hum became a high-pitched buzz.

"Milena. Focus," Pietro said brusquely.

She gripped her brush tighter, trying to bring her hexagon under control, but it shifted sideways and collided with Savino's. A wave of heat and light surged through the studio, knocking Savino and Milena off their feet. Their Geniuses squawked and scattered.

Savino picked himself off the floor. "Quit messing up my work, Milena."

"I got distracted," Milena complained. She dusted off her dress and gave Giacomo a look. "Thanks a lot."

"What did I do? I was just watching," Giacomo said, offended that she was blaming him.

Giacomo's Genius flew over and landed on his shoulder, greeting him with a buoyant chirp. "Good morning to you too," Giacomo said. "You should've let me know you were coming down here."

"Is this how you wanted to begin your first day of lessons?" Pietro said gruffly. "By being late and disruptive?"

Giacomo's cheeks burned. "Signor Barrolo didn't tell me what time to come down and no one woke me up, so—"

"Your excuses don't interest me. Are you serious about mastering your Genius?"

"Of course I am."

"You're not acting like it."

"I want to learn," Giacomo said firmly. "That's why I came here."

Pietro pulled a long piece of black silk off the table and dangled it from his fingers. “Savino, would you blindfold Giacomo?”

Savino smiled. “Absolutely.” He snatched the blindfold from Pietro.

“Hold on a second—” Giacomo started, but Savino ignored his protest and wrapped the fabric around his eyes. His vision plunged into darkness. “I can’t see anything.”

“That’s the point, idiot.” Savino cinched the blindfold extra tight, yanking back Giacomo’s head.

“We’ll start with the basics,” Pietro began. “You’re going to draw a circle.”

“A circle?” Giacomo chortled. “I don’t need a Genius to do that.”

“Then please, demonstrate your inspiring circle-drawing abilities for us.” Pietro’s voice was tinged with sarcasm.

“I’d love to, but I can’t draw anything with this stupid blindfold on.” Giacomo tugged at the knot, unable to loosen it.

“Leave it,” Pietro commanded. “To form a deeper connection with your Genius and unlock its true potential, you need to change your perception of reality.”

Giacomo dropped his hands to his sides and groaned. “Fine. So how do I do that exactly?”

“There’s a piece of charcoal lying on the edge of the worktable. Pick it up, take it to the paper on the easel, and draw a circle with it.”

Giacomo remembered the table with the art supplies was about twenty paces to his left and the easel stood just beyond. If he could find his way through Virenzia’s aqueducts without a

light, this should be easy. He took a couple of tentative steps forward, feeling the area in front of him. His arm knocked into someone.

“Watch it!” Savino shoved him. Giacomo spun around and caught his balance. But now he had no idea which way he was facing.

“Try using your Genius as a guide,” Aaminah offered.

“Don’t help him,” Savino said.

“I can do this.” Giacomo stumbled around the room, grasping at nothing. He imagined Milena and the others shaking their heads at his foolishness.

“You’re doing an amazing job so far,” Savino said, adding to Giacomo’s already growing insecurity.

He swallowed his pride and took Aaminah’s advice, calling out to his Genius. “Help me find the charcoal, little guy.”

“You really need a name for him,” Milena commented.

“I know, I know . . .”

His Genius emitted a slow, steady chirp.

Chi . . . chi . . . chi . . .

Giacomo moved to his right, following the sound. The staccato notes got faster. He turned left, and the noises slowed again. It was a game of hot and cold. The closer he got to his goal, the faster his Genius chirruped.

Chi-chi-chi—

He reached his arm out and touched the edge of the table.

Chichichichichichi—

He dragged his palm across the rough wood surface, wincing as a splinter pierced his skin.

Chiiiiiiiiiiii—

The shrill note told him he was right on top of the charcoal. *Why can't I feel it?* He patted the table for what felt like an eternity, until his fingers grazed the stick of charcoal.

"Found it!" Giacomo announced triumphantly.

"Not bad," Pietro said. "But try to make it to the easel a little faster."

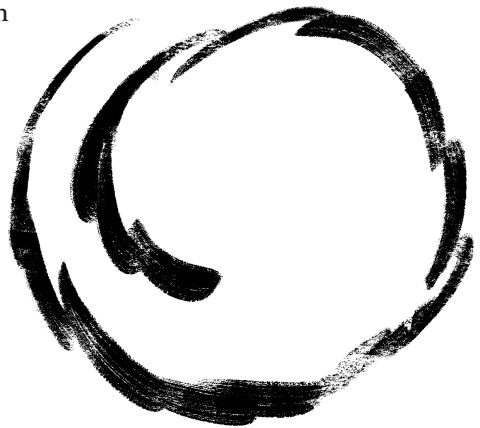
Giacomo's Genius started the game again, beginning with slow, even chirps. Charcoal in hand, Giacomo felt his way around the corner of the table. The chirps sped up. He held his arm straight out in front of him until it contacted the edge of the wooden easel. Clipped to a board were sheets of rough-edged paper. Giacomo carefully sketched the outline of a circle, but without being able to see what he was drawing, he kept losing his place on the page. Somewhere behind him, Savino snickered. Giacomo guessed his circle wasn't looking so good.

His arm finished its loop. "All done. Can I take the blindfold off and see how it looks?"

Savino didn't even try to hold back his laughter. "Don't bother. It looks terrible."

Giacomo lifted the bottom edge of the black silk and his heart sank. The start and end points of his line didn't come close to meeting. His circle looked like a long, hairy worm that curled in on itself.

Pietro's cane clacked against the easel's leg. He ran his fingers



across the paper, leaving behind smudged trails of charcoal. “Keep the blindfold on,” Pietro ordered. He tore down Giacomo’s first attempt, revealing a fresh piece of paper. “Try again.”

Giacomo lowered the blindfold and raised the charcoal. He was about to start drawing, when Pietro grabbed his wrist. “To draw a circle, you must first center yourself. Relax.”

“I can’t when everyone’s watching me,” Giacomo said.

“Don’t concern yourself with what others think. This is between you, your Genius, and that piece of paper.” Pietro let go of his wrist. “All circles begin with a single point. Visualize that point on the paper.”

Giacomo concentrated, imagining a single shining star. “I see it.”

“Good. That point is going to become the center of your circle. Use it as your anchor. And this time, I want you to draw the shape with a continuous stroke.”

Giacomo held the imaginary point of light in his mind and put his hand directly above it. He moved the charcoal in one long loop. As he drew, he began to see a bright red line cut through the darkness, forming the circumference of a circle.

“Giacomo, look at your Genius!” Aaminah said with awe.

He peeled up the blindfold. His Genius hovered over his right shoulder, shining a red beam from its crown. It projected a glowing ring on the paper, matching his charcoal circle exactly.

“How did I . . . ? How did my Genius . . . ?”

The light from his Genius’s gem dimmed and the red circle faded away.

“What was different for you that time?” Pietro asked.

“I could see the circle as I was drawing it.”

“Good. It means you’re getting better at picturing a shape.”

“No, I mean I could *actually* see it,” Giacomo said. “It was like I was looking through the blindfold.”

“Fascinating . . .” Pietro murmured.

“I thought you said you only got your Genius the other night?” Milena said accusingly.

“I did.”

“Then how did he help you create a sacred geometry shape already?”

“Sacred geometry?” Giacomo replied, puzzled.

“It was probably just a fluke.” Savino crossed his arms and challenged Giacomo. “Bet you can’t do it again.”

Even though Giacomo had triggered his Genius’s power the other night to escape the soldiers, and again to draw the circle, he had no idea how he had done it or whether he could repeat it. But his desire to prove Savino wrong outweighed his self-doubt. “Bet you I can.”

He ripped the paper away and began fresh. With the blindfold covering his eyes, he visualized the pinpoint of light, then put charcoal to paper, moving his hand with a bold confidence. His Genius chirped in his right ear, then he heard the faint hum of energy. The same red light appeared in the blindfold’s blackness, matching the movement of his hand.

“Unbelievable,” Milena said softly.

“You’re a natural!” Aaminah burst out.

Excited, Giacomo pulled down his blindfold, letting it hang around his neck. He’d drawn a perfect circle.

Savino scowled. “You’re such a liar. How long have you really had your Genius?”

“I told you, he showed up the night before you guys found me.”

“He’s telling the truth,” Pietro said. “Otherwise, Tito would have sensed his Genius sooner.”

The glowing circle faded away and Giacomo’s Genius flew to his shoulder. Milena and Savino glared at him as if he’d just pick-pocketed them. At least Pietro believed his story.

“Giacomo, usually an artist has to work for many years with a Genius to be able to use sacred geometry like you did.” Pietro showed no emotion, but Giacomo sensed a hint of surprise in his voice. “Clearly, I was wrong about your age being a problem.”

“But how am I using sacred geometry when I don’t even know what it is?”

Pietro felt for the wine bottle and refilled his glass. “Can you count to ten?”

Giacomo rolled his eyes. “Yes, of course.”

“And you’re familiar with different shapes—the circle, the triangle, the square, and so forth?”

“Yes.”

“Then you already have a basic understanding of what sacred geometry is. Different numbers correspond to different shapes. It’s like a language the Creator invented to tell us about the underlying patterns that make up all existence.”

Giacomo stared at the circle he’d drawn. “So that red circle my Genius projected . . . That’s the Creator talking to me?”

“In a manner of speaking.”

“So what’s he saying?”

“That’s between you and the Creator.”

Frustrated, Giacomo threw down his charcoal. “You’re really not helping.”

“Maybe I can.” Milena stepped to Giacomo’s side. “Shapes are like numbers you can see. Sort of how the written word makes speech visible. You can’t see the words I’m saying unless you write them down. And you can’t see numbers until you draw them as shapes.”

Pietro smiled proudly. “Couldn’t have made it any clearer myself. Giacomo, the circle you drew is a symbol of the number one, also known as the monad. It represents creation, unity, and perfection.”

Milena nodded knowingly. “The numbers one to ten and their corresponding shapes are the original patterns for everything that exists. Sort of like an architect’s model for a building.”

“Precisely,” Pietro said. “Sacred geometry can be found in mathematics, art, and music. Anyone can recognize the patterns, but only an artist or a musician with a Genius can transform those patterns into energy.”

“Is that why Savino and Milena got knocked down when their hexagons smashed into each other?” Giacomo asked.

“For the record, hers ran into mine,” Savino interjected. “But yes, sacred geometry can cause some serious damage if you’re not careful.”

Like when I shot the light at the soldiers and the stones exploded, Giacomo recalled.

He turned to Aaminah. “But it seems like it can repair damage too, like when you fixed that cut on my arm.” It might also explain how his knife wound had healed so quickly.

“That’s right,” Aaminah said. “It’s taken me a lot of practice, but I’ve figured out how to use music to release healing energy. It all depends on what notes I play, and in what order.”

“Sacred geometry can be used to create *or* destroy,” Pietro said. “It rests on the artist’s intentions.”

Everything was starting to make some sense. Sacred geometry must be the blueprint the Creator had used to build the universe. Now, with the help of his Genius, Giacomo had the key to that blueprint—and to the energy that could affect the world around him.

“But how come Milena and Savino were able to draw their shapes in the air, and I had to use paper?” Giacomo asked.

“Because we’ve been down here studying for years,” Savino said bitterly.

“You have to learn to crawl before you’re ready to walk. So for the time being, you will need the aid of drawing on paper,” Pietro explained. “But over time, you’ll get better at picturing sacred geometry in your mind. And once its shapes become second nature, you won’t need the paper anymore.”

“Is that why you blindfolded me?”

Pietro nodded. “Sometimes our eyes deceive us. The blindfold removes distractions so you can focus on visualizing the shape. I want you to learn to trust your own inner vision. Learning sacred geometry is a way to tap into your deepest nature and unlock the knowledge within.”

Giacomo stayed in Pietro’s studio all day, drawing circle after circle until his hand felt permanently stuck in a clawlike grip and every piece of charcoal was worn to a nub. He even skipped dinner, which his Genius wasn’t too happy about. But if he wanted to catch up to Milena’s and Savino’s level, some sacrifices had to be made; Fabiana’s mouthwatering fennel and ricotta lasagna was one of them.

At some point, Giacomo realized he had lost all track of time. Pietro was snoring on the bench and Giacomo could barely keep his eyes open, so he guessed it must have been long past dark. Calling it quits, he trudged up the stairs, his tired Genius swaying behind him.

He passed through the kitchen and took a plump pear from a basket on the counter, devouring it on the way to his room. From down the hall came the soothing sounds of harp music.

He followed the melody to a parlor, where Aaminah sat holding a tall golden harp between her knees, her eyes closed. Each time she plucked a string with her tiny fingers, a luminous yellow circle sprang from her Genius's crown. The circle wiggled and vibrated in the air. Each dancing shape floated up, then faded away as the next note took its place. Giacomo's Genius perked up and flitted around his head, delighted. As the notes washed over Giacomo, the cramp in his hand eased and his grip relaxed.

"You play beautifully," he said. Aaminah's eyes snapped open and she stopped. The wiggly circles of light popped like soap bubbles. "Sorry, I didn't mean to interrupt." He backed out of the room.

"It's okay. Stay." Aaminah waved him over. "I didn't hear you come in. Sometimes I get lost in the music and it's like the world around me disappears."

Giacomo nodded. He knew what that was like. Sometimes he became so absorbed in drawing that hours felt like minutes.

He plopped down on a long cushioned bench across from Aaminah, not expecting to slide down the silky fabric. He caught himself before falling on the floor. Aaminah giggled.

“What’s the point of a seat you can’t sit on?” Giacomo complained.

“I know. I grew up in a tiny farmhouse in the countryside, playing in mud and running through fields. I’ve been here three years and I’m still not used to all the fanciness.”

A silence filled the room. Aaminah looked at Giacomo expectantly. He sat on his hands and stared at the floor, suddenly uncomfortable with talking.

“Don’t get me wrong,” Aaminah continued. “I’m so grateful to Signor Barrolo for taking me in, but sometimes I wish I could go into the city and play for people on the streets and let my Genius fly free. You ever feel like that?”

“Uh-huh,” Giacomo answered, then fell silent. In the sewers, the only conversations he had were with his own reflection. Giacomo looked at his Genius, hoping it would inspire him with something smart to say. But it was busy cleaning its feathers. Aaminah picked up on his awkwardness and tried another question.

“Did you figure out a name for your Genius?”

Giacomo forced himself to open his mouth. “No. Not yet.”

“Maybe I can help. I’m really good at naming things. I used to have a doll I named Serafina Santorini, the Mermaid Princess of Acquarone.”

“That’s an impressive title for a doll.”

“She was a princess, but also a mermaid who fought pirates,” Aaminah said proudly. “So what’s your favorite thing about your Genius?”

Giacomo looked at his Genius, curled up on a pillow with his eyes closed. “He’s really cute when he sleeps.”

“Sleepy!” Aaminah burst out. “No, that’s a terrible name, sorry.”

Giacomo laughed. “I thought you said you were good at this?”

“I need to work through the bad names to find gold. Don’t make fun of my process.” Aaminah squinted in concentration and tapped her finger to her pursed lips. “What’s your Genius’s personality like?”

“Hmmm . . . He’s annoying, loud, never listens to what I tell him, and always wants to eat.”

“Buzzer? No. Munchie? Aw, forget it.” Aaminah shot down the names before Giacomo had a chance to respond.

“He’s loyal too. I feel like he’s always going to have my back, so I want his name to sound respectable.” Giacomo scratched the tuft of hair on his Genius’s head, then raised his finger, proclaiming, “I’ve got it! Signor Ludovico Aurelius Francesco the Third!”

Aaminah stared at him flatly. “It’s a bit of a mouthful.”

“Well, Serafina Santorini, the Mermaid Princess of Acqua-whatever doesn’t exactly roll off the tongue.”

Aaminah shrugged. “I’m just giving you my opinion.”

Giacomo let his arm drop. He slumped back into the cushion. “You’re right. This is hard.”

“Keep thinking about it. It’ll come to you.”

While Giacomo mulled over other possible names, Aaminah put aside the harp and picked up a viol and a bow. She propped the long-necked instrument between her legs and gently ran the bow across one of its six strings, creating a low, mellow note that resonated through the room.

“How many instruments can you play?” Giacomo asked.

“Let’s see . . . harp, flute, bass viol, treble viol, harpsichord, dulcimer, the drum, lute, and recorder.”

“That’s all?” Giacomo teased. “Seriously, who taught you to play all those?”

“No one. I taught myself. I only had a flute growing up, but once Signor Barrolo took me in, he gave me every instrument I could imagine, and some I’d never seen. You ever hear anyone play the bladder pipe?”

“No. What does it sound like?”

They walked to the back of the room, where Aaminah picked up a long, wooden instrument with a translucent bag attached to it. She blew on a pipe sticking out of the top. A horrid sound escaped and her Genius projected erratic waves of light that bounced around the room, then coursed through Giacomo. It felt like his eyeballs were vibrating and he was overcome by dizziness.

“All right, enough!” he shouted, bracing himself against the wall.

Mercifully, Aaminah stopped. Giacomo’s Genius poked out from under a pillow, squawking its disapproval.

“It sounded like a sheep and a cow yelling at each other,” Giacomo complained. “My vision was all blurry. I thought I was going to pass out.”

“Whoops,” Aaminah said. “Certain harmonics have that effect. Sorry.”

Giacomo and his Genius weren’t the only ones put off by the bladder pipe’s cry. Enzo glared at Aaminah from the doorway, hands covering his ears. “I’m going to bed. Music time’s over.”

“If you have a problem with it, talk to your father,” Aaminah said. “He told me I could practice whenever I want.”

Enzio pulled the doors shut with a slam. Giacomo flinched, as did his Genius. “What’s his deal? He seems to hate everyone.”

“I’ve tried to be nice to him, but after a while, I gave up. He’s not interested in making friends.”

Aaminah seemed so nice and caring. If she couldn’t find a way to get along with Enzio, Giacomo didn’t stand a chance.

“Well, it is late,” Aaminah said. “I guess it’s time for—”

“Mico!” he declared out of nowhere.

She jumped back. “What do you mean, ‘time for Mico’?”

“No, the name. For my Genius. You were right, it just sort of came to me.”

Aaminah said the name slowly. “Mee-coh. I love it!”

Mico chirruped and hopped onto Giacomo’s lap. Giacomo smiled. “He seems to like it too.”

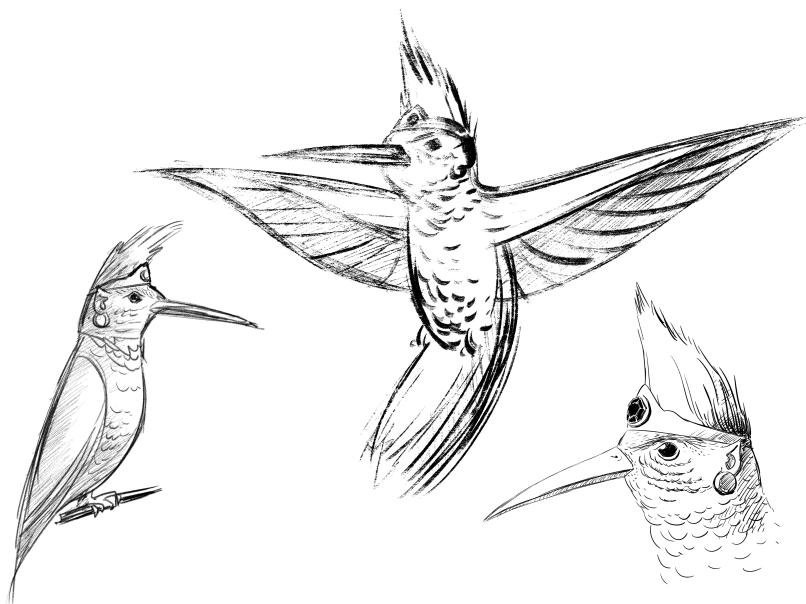


The next morning, Giacomo rose before the sun. Sketchbook in hand, he hurried down to Pietro’s studio, itching to try out all the new art supplies and get in some extra drawing time before the day’s lesson. As Pietro’s snoring echoed from somewhere in the back of the cellar, Giacomo lit the candles and stared in wonder at all

the different drawing tools lying on the table. Living in the aqueducts, he had been limited to whatever rough chunks of charcoal he could scrounge up. They were imprecise and smudged with the slightest touch. But now he had his pick of graphite pencils and powder; sticks of red, white, and black chalk; quill pens and bottles of ink; and jars of colored pigments. Plus countless pieces of paper and sheets of canvas. It was an artist's paradise and Giacomo and Mico had the run of the place.

He tested each material, getting a feel for it on the paper. The pencil was a revelation to him. He'd never been able to control his lines so easily. The chalk had a nice smooth feel, and the pens would be perfect for detailed work.

Mico was hardly the perfect model. He was always twitching his head from side to side and hopping around. But Giacomo got a few sketches he was happy with.



“Good morning,” Pietro said from the shadows.

Startled, Giacomo jumped, dropping the pen. “I was just trying out all your amazing supplies,” he said, picking up the pen.

Pietro shuffled toward him, his cane sliding on the floor in front of him. “Experimentation. That’s good. But remember, it’s your vision, not your tools, that will make you a great artist.”

“Where’d you get so much wisdom?”

Pietro wearily rubbed the bridge of his nose and took a seat on the bench. “I’ve been at this a long time.” His cloudy eyes stared straight at Giacomo, though Giacomo knew he couldn’t see him.

What would it be like to be able to draw and paint anything you can see and then have that sense taken away? He hoped he’d never have to find out.

“Do you know you’ve already been my teacher for a while?” Giacomo said.

“And how’s that?”

“I spent a lot of time in the old cultural center, copying parts of your fresco.”

“It’s still there?” Pietro said, sounding surprised. “Baldassare never told me . . . I always assumed Nerezza had destroyed it.”

“You must’ve been pretty young if Emperor Callisto hired you to paint it.”

“I was twenty when he held a competition for it,” Pietro said. “The best design would get the commission. Guess who I had to compete against to win it?”

Giacomo had no idea. “Who?”

“Nerezza.”

That was the last name Giacomo had expected to hear. “Emperor Callisto picked you over his own daughter?”

“He had a habit of not giving her what she thought she deserved.”

“So . . . you knew her?”

“Painted next to her in the same classes growing up. Our Geniuses were inseparable.” His voice got quieter. “For a while . . .”

Giacomo had a hard time imagining Tito hanging out with the Supreme Creator’s grotesque Genius. “Was Nerezza always as awful as she is now?”

“No, not always . . .” Pietro stroked his beard, lost in thought.

“Can I ask . . . When did you lose your sight?”

Pietro sat silently for a moment before answering. “About fifteen years ago.”

“How did it happen?”

Pietro let out a long, heavy exhale when he was interrupted by the soft patter of footsteps coming down the stairs. He leaned against his cane and pushed himself up. “Sounds like Fabiana is here with breakfast.”

“But you were just about to tell me—”

“That’s enough about my past for now,” he said, abruptly ending the discussion.

As Pietro had predicted, Fabiana arrived with a platter piled with breads, fruit, and meat. “Good morning!” she sang warmly. “Sustenance for your morning lessons!”

“Thank you, signora,” Giacomo said, impressed by her cheerfulness. Being the only one keeping the villa running must have been exhausting, but she didn’t show it.

“It is my pleasure.” She placed the food on the table and headed back upstairs.

Pietro took a heaping handful of meat and tossed it into the darkness, where it landed with a squish. An orange beam lit up and scanned around, finding the food. Tito’s head emerged from

an alcove and scooped up the meal with his gnarled beak, swallowing it all at once. Then he tucked his head under his wing and went back to sleep.

Giacomo and Mico ate their fill, while Pietro gnawed on a piece of bread. It wasn't long before Savino and Milena made their way downstairs.

"Today we'll be studying the dyad," Pietro informed them. "It is the second sacred geometry shape and embodies the idea of twoness."

Savino groaned. "This is simple stuff, Pietro. Can't you go over it with Giacomo when we're not around?"

"It never hurts to refine your basics," Milena said.

Savino groaned again. "I'll be over here if you need me." He grabbed a hunk of clay and began forming it into a human figure, his Genius watching intently.

Giacomo waited impatiently as Pietro uncorked a bottle of wine. After the headway he'd made yesterday, Giacomo was eager to discover what incredible new skill he'd unlock after his next sacred geometry lesson.

The wine glugged as Pietro filled his glass. "The circle is the most important shape, for out of it, all other shapes are created. But with the dyad, things start to get interesting. Tell me, Giacomo, if the circle represents the number one, what shape represents the number two?"

Pietro's inquiry hung in the air. Giacomo glanced at Milena, hoping she would enlighten him with the answer, but she stayed silent.

"It's a real question," Pietro said, growing impatient.

Giacomo's hands started to sweat. Why couldn't Pietro have asked him about the number three? That one was easy. A triangle.

Four? A square. Five? A pentagon. All the other numbers had shapes with the same number of sides. He racked his brain, trying to imagine a two-sided shape. He drew a blank. He glanced at Mico, hoping his Genius would give him a clue, but it was preoccupied with sucking a grape dry.

“It’s a line,” Savino called out without looking up from his sculpture. “Obviously.”

“A line?” Giacomo repeated. “A line’s not a shape, Master Pietro. That was a trick question.”

“You think I’m trying to deceive you?” Pietro sounded offended.

Giacomo sheepishly scratched the back of his head. “No . . . I just . . . Never mind.”

He thought the questioning was over, but then Pietro asked, “So how do we construct a line from a circle?”

Savino said, “First you draw a—”

Pietro cut him off. “Let Giacomo answer.”

Giacomo shrugged. “I don’t know.” He drew a circle in his sketchbook, but couldn’t figure out how to make a straight line from a curved one.

“Look at it another way,” Pietro said. “If you wanted to make a copy of yourself, how would you do that?”

Giacomo thought about it for a second, then flipped the pages until he found one of his self-portraits. That was a copy of himself, wasn’t it? And how had he drawn it? “With a mirror!” he blurted out.

Pietro smiled. “Very good. Milena and Savino, why don’t you demonstrate.”

They walked into the center of the room and stood several feet

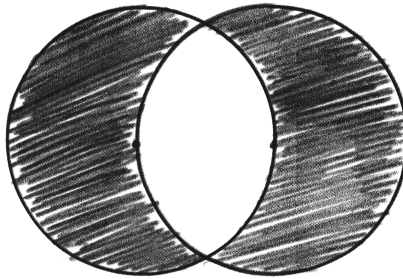
apart, their Geniuses on their shoulders. Using her brush, Milena traced the shape of a circle in space. The gem on Gaia's crown lit up, then projected a large, green, shimmering disc into the center of the room, its outline thin and smooth.

"To make a line from a circle, we must first create its mirror image," Pietro said. Savino waved his brush and his Genius projected a blue circle into the air. Like Savino's sculpture, the style of his lines was thick and rough. "Now what?" Pietro asked Giacomo.

"Connect their center points?" Giacomo said, unsure.

"Yes," Pietro confirmed. "But you're getting ahead of yourself. First, the circles must overlap."

Savino and Milena dragged their brushes through the air; their Geniuses mimicked their movements. As the circles came together, the differing styles clashed, erupting in sparks of energy. When the edge of each circle touched the other's center point, Milena's and Savino's styles unified. Giacomo sketched their overlapping circles, which created an almond shape in the middle.



"Meet the mandorla," Pietro said. "It is the medium of creation, from which the line, and all geometric forms, are born. Believe it or not, this shape is the basic building block for the entire universe."

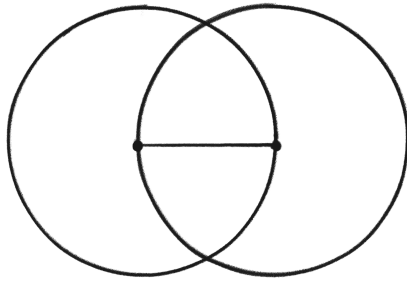
Giacomo had a hard time wrapping his head around what Pietro was telling him. “So that eye-shaped thing in the middle can make a ten-sided shape or a twenty-sided shape?” he asked.

“The possibilities are infinite.” Pietro took a sip of wine.

“Okay, but how?”

“One shape at a time,” Pietro cautioned. “First, we need to create a line.”

Milena took Pietro’s cue and waved her brush. A shining green horizontal line connected the center point of her circle with Savino’s.



“The line symbolizes energy, force, and tension,” Pietro said. “Tension is at the root of all creation. You can’t have black without white or a creature without a creator. How is it possible to know light, without darkness? For any being to grow, it must confront its opposite.”

“Is that why Milena’s and Savino’s different styles evened out when they came together?” Giacomo asked.

“Yes. The mandorla symbolizes a merger of opposing forces. It shows us it’s possible to create harmony out of conflict, to overcome differences, and to find oneness.” Pietro nodded to Milena and Savino. They waved their brushes, separating their two circles.

Once apart, the glowing shapes returned to their original styles before fading away.

Pietro raised his wineglass as if giving a toast. “Master the mandorla and you are on your way to mastering your Genius.” He swallowed the rest of the wine in one gulp.

Creation out of conflict? It was an interesting idea, but Giacomo wasn’t entirely sure what it meant. He was more excited to try creating his first mandorla.

“Milena, why don’t you help Giacomo practice,” Pietro said. “Savino, you’re with me.”

“Have fun with sewer-boy.” Savino snickered, elbowing Milena. He followed Pietro into another section of the studio.

“You like that nickname?” Milena asked.

“No, of course not.”

“Then why do you let him keep calling you that?”

Giacomo walked to the worktable. “I don’t know. I’d rather not start something with him.”

Milena shrugged. “If that works for you.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It sounds like you’d rather let Savino walk all over you than stand up to him.”

Giacomo took a piece of charcoal, then dragged the easel into the center of the room. “I’m not afraid of Savino.”

“Then don’t act like you are. He likes to pretend he’s tough, but deep down, he’s actually pretty nice.”

“Yeah? *How* deep down?”

Milena cracked a smile. “Let’s get to work.”

Giacomo stood in front of the easel, to Milena’s left. “Don’t be too hard on me. A lot of what Pietro said kind of went over my head.”

“I’m not cutting you any slack, Signor I-just-got-my-Genius-and-I-can-already-do-sacred-geometry. You’ll figure it out.”

Giacomo stared at the blank page. “If you were trying to help me feel confident, you failed.” He ran his hand down the paper, smoothing it out. “Okay, ready.”

Milena crossed her arms and tapped her toe. “Who’s failing now?” she muttered.

“What? I have charcoal, I have paper, I’m ready.”

“So you don’t need your Genius? Wow, you’re more gifted than I thought.”

Mico! Of course! Giacomo wanted to slap himself for being so foolish. Mico was right where he’d been all morning, gorging himself from the breakfast platter. Giacomo whistled. Mico raised his head, stared at Giacomo, then went back to eating.

“Oh come on, don’t do this to me.” Giacomo stomped over, picked up Mico, and placed him atop the easel. “Sit.”

“Geniuses don’t like to be ordered around, it’s much better if you—”

“Can we just start?” Giacomo said, embarrassed by his inability to control his Genius.

“Fine. I’ll go first.” Milena raised her brush. She swung her arm in a graceful loop and Gaia projected a green circle in the air. “Now you.”

Giacomo pictured the circle in his mind like Pietro had taught him, then drew it on the paper. Mico’s gem glowed, projecting a wobbly red line that eventually took the shape of a translucent circle. If Giacomo had to describe his style, he would say it reminded him of a wet, floppy noodle. Which was really no style at all.

As Giacomo dragged his hand to the right, Mico turned his head and the red circle stabilized, moving closer to Milena's green ring.

"Brace yourself," Milena cautioned.

Giacomo tensed. "Why? What's going to happen?"

As the two circles intersected, their energies clashed and strands of white light sparked. Milena's circle grew larger, but Giacomo's shrank. It vibrated, then shattered into a million specks of light.

"Why'd you do that?" Giacomo demanded.

"I didn't *do* anything. You were holding back. Draw like you mean it."

"So you're the teacher now?"

Milena pointed her brush at him. "Pietro wanted me to help you. That's what I'm trying to do."

Giacomo sighed. "Sorry. I know. Let's try again."

On his second attempt, Giacomo's circle stayed together for longer, but Milena's still overpowered his. He drew circle after circle, while Mico projected them over and over. But no matter what he tried, his energy shape broke apart every time Milena's circle came in contact with it. And every time, Giacomo groaned in frustration.

Finally, Milena said, "You're too tense. Try to relax."

"I am relaxed!" he yelled, throwing his piece of charcoal onto the floor. It broke into shards.

Milena shook her head, turning away. "If you're not going to take this seriously, I'm not going to help you."

Giacomo took a breath and unclenched his hand, which had been balled into a tight fist. "No, wait. I know what to do." He grabbed a new piece of charcoal off the worktable. "One more time."

Milena returned and raised her brush. As Gaia projected her circle, Giacomo closed his eyes. The blindfold trick had helped him yesterday. There was no reason it couldn't work again.

Without looking, he drew the circle on the paper as he pictured it in his mind's eye.

"Good, much better," Milena said.

He kept his eyes closed. As Milena's circle moved closer to his, the low hum grew louder. The sound spiked into a high-pitched buzz, then dropped into a hum again.

"You got it!" Milena sounded impressed.

He opened his eyes. His red circle and Milena's green one overlapped, creating the mandorla. With a flick of her brush, Milena connected the two center points with a glowing green line. Mico chirped with excitement.

But Giacomo's breakthrough was short-lived. First came an ear-splitting screech. Then the almond shape in the mandorla glowed bright white.

Milena took a step back, looking uneasy. "Uh . . . I've never seen that happen before."

Inside the glimmering mandorla, a storm of color brewed and sounds wailed. Wind like tiny needles shot out and lashed Giacomo's face. Milena cried out, feeling it too.

Giacomo flung the charcoal across the room, but his circle didn't vanish. "Mico, make it disappear!"

His Genius's wings fluttered frantically as it tried to fly away, but its ray of light was stuck to the mandorla, like clothing caught on a nail.

A tremendous boom rocked the room. Stones dislodged from the wall. The floor cracked and split.

The sensations felt familiar: swirling colors, deafening sounds,

freezing cold air, foul scents that burned his nostrils. *It's just like the other night!*

If that was true, maybe he could stop it the same way. He closed his eyes and called on the Creator.

Please, make it stop. I didn't mean for this to happen.

He opened his eyes, but the storm still raged. Through the swirling haze, Giacomo spotted something in the eye of the mandorla. It looked like an upside-down V. Its golden outline smeared and blended into the swirling colors around it.

"Do you see that?" he shouted.

"See what?" Milena hollered back.

Pietro and Savino ran in, shielding their faces. "Sever the link!" Pietro yelled.

"Our circles won't come apart!" Milena frantically waved her brush while her Genius squawked in distress.

It only took a second for the room to turn from numbingly cold to blazing hot. It was like they'd been thrown into a blacksmith's forge.

When Giacomo looked back at the mandorla, the mysterious shape had transformed into a whip of fiery golden light. It lashed out, straight for him. He dove and the yellow flames arced over his head, singeing his hair. As the whip retracted, it swung back toward Milena. Giacomo watched in horror as the blaze engulfed her left arm. She screamed. Her brush incinerated.

Savino dashed over and pulled her away.

Giacomo wiped the sweat from his eyes. His insides boiled. *What have I done?*

Pietro hollered, "Tito, to me!" and his massive Genius lumbered into the room. Running his hand across the table, Pietro

found a brush, then waved it toward the mandorla. Tito opened his beak, releasing a piercing screech. A beam of orange light shot out of his crown's square gem and into the heart of the mandorla.

To Giacomo's relief, the almond shape narrowed. The whipping winds gradually died down, the deafening sounds silenced, and the temperature dropped to normal.

The mandorla sealed shut, like a wound closing. Milena's and Giacomo's circles split apart, then exploded, the force of the blast hurling everyone to the ground.

Giacomo dragged himself to his feet and held a hand to his head. He put his other hand against the wall to steady himself, trying not to faint.

Savino knelt next to Milena. She leaned against him, cradling her injured arm. Tears streamed down her cheeks.

Giacomo staggered over. "Milena, are you all right?"

"Of course she's not!" Savino's face burned with anger. "You could've killed her!"

"I didn't mean—"

"Savino, take her upstairs to Aaminah," Pietro urged. "Now!"

"I'm . . . I'm fine," Milena said as Savino helped her up. Giacomo caught a glimpse of her injury. Deep slashes ran the length of her forearm. Her skin blistered purple.

What did I do to her? Giacomo thought in a panic.

Savino hurried Milena up the stairs, their Geniuses close behind. Giacomo kept his gaze on the floor, which was scarred with fissures and littered with broken stones. He waited for the well-deserved lecture Pietro was about to give him.

Once the cellar door slammed shut, Pietro asked, "Do you realize what you just did?"

A lump welled in his throat. Giacomo's voice trembled. "I didn't mean to hurt her. It was an accident. What's wrong with me? Why does this keep happening?"

"What do you mean? Giacomo, have you experienced something like that before?"

He dreaded to speak about the other night, but maybe if he told Pietro, the master could shed some light on what was going on.

Pietro must have sensed Giacomo's hesitation. He placed a comforting hand on his back. "It's important you tell me."

Giacomo took a deep breath. "The night before I came here, I had a run-in with a Lost Soul. Two, actually. When I tried to get away, one of them stabbed me. I didn't think I was going to survive. But then I was swallowed up by some kind of storm, like the one that just came out of the mandorla. At first, I thought I was hallucinating. But the pain was definitely real. It was so bad, I wanted to die. And then suddenly the storm passed. I woke up back on the street, and my wound was mysteriously healed. That's when my Genius showed up." Once he had finished, the lump in his throat dissolved and he felt more at ease.

Pietro stroked his long beard, considering Giacomo's explanation. "I don't understand how, but I believe you've accessed the Wellspring."

"What's that?"

"A dimension of sensation. Every color, sound, smell, flavor, and texture originates in the Wellspring. It is the universe's source of creative energy."

"You make it sound like a good thing, but it feels horrible. Savino was right, I could've killed Milena, or collapsed the villa on top of all of us."

“Creative energy is wild and untamed.”

“Obviously! And I have no idea how to control it!”

“With practice, you can learn.”

“So *you’ve* mastered the Wellspring?” Giacomo asked hopefully.

Pietro shook his head. “I wish I could tell you I had. But even the most talented artists only harness its power every now and then, in moments of pure focus. That’s when ideas and creativity flow effortlessly and masterpieces are created.” Pietro scratched his bald spot. “However, that’s strictly a *mental* experience, you understand. What’s puzzling is how you’ve been able to tap into the Wellspring on a *physical* level.”

“I’d rather not tap into it again on *any* level.” Giacomo searched for Mico and found him hiding in the space between two casks of wine.

“You’re scared,” Pietro said. “I understand. But don’t let that fear stop you from exploring your creative power.”

“Even if it might kill me, or someone else in the process?” Giacomo snapped. He took his Genius in his hands and pulled it out. “Come on, Mico. We’re leaving.”

“Wait—”

But Giacomo was already halfway up the stairs.

“Step into the fear!” Pietro called after him. “Or someday, you might regret not taking that journey.”

Giacomo raced along the main hall, Pietro’s words still lingering in his head. Aaminah’s healing viol music streamed through the villa. Part of him wanted to check on Milena, but he was too ashamed to face her right now.

He careened out the front door and stumbled into the courtyard, the breeze cooling his sweaty skin. Mico jumped from his

hands and flew loops, chirping happily. After being confined in the cellar, the open air was a relief to them both.

Giacomo had his hand on the front gate when Aaminah caught up to him.

“Where are you going?” she asked, a concerned look on her face.

“I don’t know,” Giacomo said. “Back to the sewers, I guess.”

“Why?”

“Because of what I did.”

“Milena’s going to be fine, I promise.”

But Giacomo wasn’t so sure. He slumped against the gate. “She’s never going to forgive me.”

“Of course she will.”

“Even if she does . . . I think coming here was a mistake.”

Aaminah twirled her braid with her finger. “You know . . . when I first got to the villa, I felt the same. Like I didn’t belong. For days, all I could think about was running away, back to the countryside.”

“What stopped you?”

“Luna did. She loved being here. And when she met Milena’s and Savino’s Geniuses, it was like she’d been reunited with long-lost relatives. I realized she needed other Geniuses to thrive. And I needed other people.”

“If I left, everyone would eventually forget I was ever here,” Giacomo said. “Savino and Milena would never miss me.”

“I would.” As soon as Aaminah said it, her eyes darted away. “It wouldn’t be the same without you.”

Giacomo softened. She seemed to have the skill of knowing the perfect thing to say.

Aaminah's gaze followed Luna and Mico as they wove through the air, playfully chasing each other. She smiled, exposing her crooked front tooth. "Plus, our Geniuses seem to be hitting it off. You can't tear them apart now."

Giacomo gave a halfhearted nod. "Okay . . ."

Aaminah held out her hand. "Come on." He took it and let her lead him back inside.

"But I'm taking a break from all this sacred geometry stuff," Giacomo said. "I'm sticking with charcoal and paper. It's a lot safer."