

The Library of Shadows

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Extract

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Luca Campelli's wish to die surrounded by his beloved books came true late one night in October.

Of course this was one of those wishes that was never formulated either in speech or thought, but people who had seen Luca in his antiquarian bookshop knew it had to be true. The little Italian moved among the stacks of books in Libri di Luca as if he were strolling in his own living room, and without hesitation he could direct his customers to precisely the stack or shelf where the book they were seeking was located. Luca's love for literature became obvious after only a brief conversation with him, and it made no difference whether it was a question of a worn paperback or one of the rare first editions. This sort of knowledge bore witness to a long life with books, and Luca's authority among the shelves made it difficult to imagine him outside the comforting atmosphere of muted devotion that suffused the antiquarian bookshop.

For that reason, this particular night was unique because, aside from the fact that it was to be Luca's last, a whole week had passed since he had set foot in the shop. Eager to see his place of business again, he took a taxi straight from the airport to the bookshop in the Vesterbro district of Copenhagen. During the ride he had a hard time sitting still, and when the cab finally came to a halt, he was in such a hurry to pay and get out that he gave the driver a more than

generous tip, simply to avoid the trouble of waiting for change. Appreciatively, the driver lifted Luca's two suitcases out of the boot and then left the elderly man standing there on the pavement.

The shop was cloaked in darkness and looked anything but hospitable, yet Luca smiled at the sight of the familiar facade with the yellow letters 'Libri di Luca' painted on the windowpanes. He lugged his suitcases the few metres from the pavement over to the front door and set them down heavily on the doorstep. The autumn wind took hold of his coat as he unbuttoned it, his coat-tails fluttering uneasily as he reached his hand inside to pull his key ring from his inner pocket.

The sound of the bells over the door welcomed him home, and he hurried to drag his suitcases inside and onto the dark red carpet so he could shut the door behind him. He straightened up and stood still with his eyes closed as he inhaled deeply through his nose, savouring the familiar smell of yellowed paper and old leather. He stood like that for several seconds as the sound of the bells faded away. Only then did he open his eyes and turn on the lamp hanging from the ceiling, even though it really wasn't necessary. After roaming these same premises for more than fifty years, he could orient himself in the dark with no problem. Even so, he flipped all the light switches on the panel behind the door so that the lights above each section of shelves and the lamps in the glass cases on the mezzanine also went on.

He went behind the counter and took off his coat. From the cabinet underneath he took out a bottle and a glass, which he filled with cognac. Glass in hand, Luca went to stand in the middle of the illuminated shop and looked around with a satisfied smile. A gulp of the golden liquid completed the moment. He nodded to himself and took a deep breath.

Carrying his glass of cognac, he slowly walked up and down the aisles, studying the rows of books. Other eyes probably wouldn't have been able to see the changes that had occurred during the past week, but Luca registered even the smallest changes at once. Books that had been sold or moved, new volumes that had been inserted among old ones, and piles of books that had been shifted

or combined. On his tour of inspection Luca pushed on the spines so that all the books were properly aligned, and he moved volumes that had been incorrectly placed. Every so often he would carefully set down his glass so that he could pull out a book that he hadn't seen before. With curiosity he would leaf through it, studying the typeface and letting his fingers feel the texture of the paper. Finally he would close his eyes and hold the book up to his nose to breathe in the particular scent of the pages, as if from a vintage wine. After studying the title page and binding one more time he would gently put the book back in place, giving it either a shrug of his shoulders or a smile of acknowledgement. There were more nods than shrugs as he made his way through the shop, so the assistant's transactions, undertaken while the owner was away, seemed to be acceptable.

The assistant's name was Iversen, and he had worked in the shop for so long that it was more a question of a partnership than an employer/employee relationship. Yet even though Iversen loved the shop as much as Luca did, there had never been any overtures to form a real partnership. The antiquarian bookshop had been passed down to Luca from his father Arman, and the intention had always been for it to remain in the hands of the Campelli family.

Very little had changed since Arman left the shop to Luca, but the balcony at the height of a mezzanine was the most noticeable. The balcony was a good metre and a half wide, and it ran along all four walls. It was an addition that the regular customers had quickly dubbed 'the Heavens' since it was there that the rarest and most valuable works were kept, protected and displayed in glass cases.

Before Luca headed up to the balcony, he went back to the counter to pour himself another cognac. After that he walked to the very back of the shop where a winding staircase rose up to the projecting balcony above. The worn steps creaked ominously as he made his way upwards; undaunted he continued his ascent and soon reached the top. There he turned to survey the shop. With a little imagination the bookshelves below him might seem like a labyrinth of well-trimmed shrubs, but he was too much at home

there to get lost, and his gaze fell on the two suitcases standing just inside the door.

A frown and a concerned expression suddenly darkened his furrowed face, and his brown eyes seemed to be looking at more distant realms than the floor below. Pensively Luca lifted his glass and sniffed at the cognac before he took a sip and moved his gaze from his suitcases, focusing instead on the shelves on the balcony.

The lights emitted a soft glow inside the glass cases, giving the volumes they protected a romantic, golden sheen. Behind the glass the books were displayed like small objets d'art. Some were open to colourful illustrations and fantastical depictions of the stories contained inside; others were closed to showcase the artistry that had been devoted to the binding or the tanned leather.

Luca walked slowly along the balcony with one hand on the railing and the other wrapped round his cognac glass, which he cautiously twirled in little circles as he let his glance slide over the contents of the display cases. Normally there was little change among the works on the second floor since few people could afford to buy them; those who could usually bought very few volumes, carefully selected for their existing collections.

New books were added almost exclusively through purchases from estates or, less often, from book auctions.

That was why Luca froze when his eyes fell on a particular volume. He frowned and set his glass on the railing before he leaned towards the glass pane to study the book more closely. It was bound in black leather with gold type, and the edges of the pages were also gilded. Luca opened his eyes wide when he got close enough to read the title and the name of the author. The book turned out to be a custom-bound edition of Giacomo Leopardi's *Operette morali*, in superb condition and presumably in Italian, the original language – Luca's native tongue.

Clearly moved, Luca knelt down and opened the glass case. With shaking hands he reached for his shirt pocket and fished out his reading glasses, which he set on his nose. Carefully, as if not wanting to frighten the prize away, he leaned forward and grabbed the book in both hands. Having secured the trophy, he lifted it out

of the case and with astonishment turned it this way and that. Deep furrows appeared on his brow, and with a sudden lurch he got to his feet and cast a wary glance all around, as if he sensed that someone was watching him – a hidden observer to this extraordinary find. Finding no one, he turned his attention back to the book in his hands and gingerly opened it.

On the title page he saw that it was a first edition, a circumstance that along with the date of publication, 1827, would justify its placement in the Heavens. The paper was of a sturdy texture, and with obvious delight he let his fingers slide over the surface. After that he raised the book up to his nose and sniffed. It had a slightly spicy scent from something he deduced must be bay laurel.

With a lingering, scrutinizing thoroughness he began turning the pages of the book, stopping at a copperplate etching that showed Death wearing a cowl and carrying a scythe. The illustration was exceedingly well executed, and even though Luca examined it carefully, he could find no flaws in the printing. Copperplate engraving, that rather difficult method of printing, was in widespread use during the nineteenth century, notable for its greater degree of detail and subtlety than even the best woodcuts. On the other hand, the paper had to be printed twice, since the ink settled in the grooves of the copperplate, unlike the text itself, which was typically cast in lead and raised.

Luca turned more pages, admiring with enthusiasm the rest of the copperplate engravings the book contained. At the last page he once again frowned. It was here they normally inserted a price slip the size of a business card with the name of the bookshop, but there was no card. That Iversen would have invested in such a valuable work without consulting Luca seemed odd enough, but that he would have displayed the book for sale without a price seemed counter to the man's otherwise meticulous nature.

Again Luca swept his eyes over the room, as if he expected a welcome committee to leap out suddenly and offer an explanation for the mystery, but very few people knew of his trip or his return home; those who did were fully aware that this would not be an appropriate occasion for a celebration.

He gave a shrug, opened the book to the middle and began to read aloud. All doubt swiftly disappeared from his face, replaced by the joy of reading his native language. Soon he raised his voice and let the words slip freely out over the shop's corridors of books. It had been a long time since he had read Italian, so it took a few pages before the accent came easily and he found the rhythm of the poem. But there was no doubt that he was enjoying himself; his eyes gleamed with happiness and his joyous expression offered a sharp contrast to the melancholy of the text.

It lasted only a moment. Suddenly the look on Luca's face shifted from enthusiasm to surprise, and he staggered back two paces, his body slamming into the glass case behind him. With his eyes still on the book, he continued reading as shards of glass rained over him. The surprise in his wide-open pupils changed to terror, and his knuckles turned white from the convulsive grip he had on the volume he held in his hands. With tottering, almost mechanical movements, his body toppled forward, and when it struck the railing, the jolt caused his cognac glass to tip over the edge and plummet to the floor below. The carpet muffled the sound of glass shattering.

The strength of Luca's voice continued undiminished, but the rhythm had become uneven and spasmodic. Sweat appeared on the old man's brow and his face was pink from exertion. A couple of drops of sweat trickled down his forehead, along his nose and hung from the very tip, before dripping onto the book. The thick paper absorbed the beads of sweat as if they were raindrops on a dry riverbed.

Luca's eyes were open as wide as could be, locked onto the text without blinking even once, not even when sweat ran into them. His pupils relentlessly scanned the lines on the pages, and no matter how hard he tried to turn his head away Luca could not tear his eyes from the words in the book he held in his hands. His whole body started shaking violently and his normally kind face was contorted into a horrible grimace.

In spite of all this, Luca's voice kept projecting into the room, stammering and occasionally interrupted by a pause, then followed

by a burst of words. There was no longer any rhythm to what he read; the sentences were chopped up and combined with no regard for grammatical rules, and the stress on individual syllables became more and more random as the speed picked up. Even though the words could still be distinguished as words, the enunciation and syntax were no longer comprehensible. The sentences emitted by Luca's vocal cords were devoid of recognizable content. The tempo increased significantly and the flow of words was interrupted only by panicked inhalations, as his lungs were emptied of oxygen. After each breath, which sounded more and more like a wheeze, the words and sentences would again gush out of Luca's mouth.

His body was now shaking so violently that the railing Luca was pressed up against began vibrating, making the wood audibly groan. Sweat poured out of his body, soaking through his clothing in several places. Drops of sweat had formed dark patches on the carpet all around him.

All of a sudden the stream of words ceased and the shaking stopped. Luca's eyes were still staring down at the book in his hands but the expression of panic was gone. A gentleness came into the Italian's eyes and calm settled over his face. Slowly he leaned his old body over the railing. The book slipped from his sweaty hands and, with pages fluttering, fell to the floor below. The railing groaned ominously under the weight of his body and with a snap a section of the balustrade tore away, spraying splinters of wood all over the shop. For a moment Luca's body stood motionless on the edge of the balcony until it plunged forward, lifeless, hurtling to the floor three metres below. The slack limbs flailed uncontrollably out to the sides, bringing down shelves and books in a cloud of dust.

Luca's body struck the floor with a hard thud in a narrow corridor between bookshelves and was instantly buried under a pile of books, wood and dust.