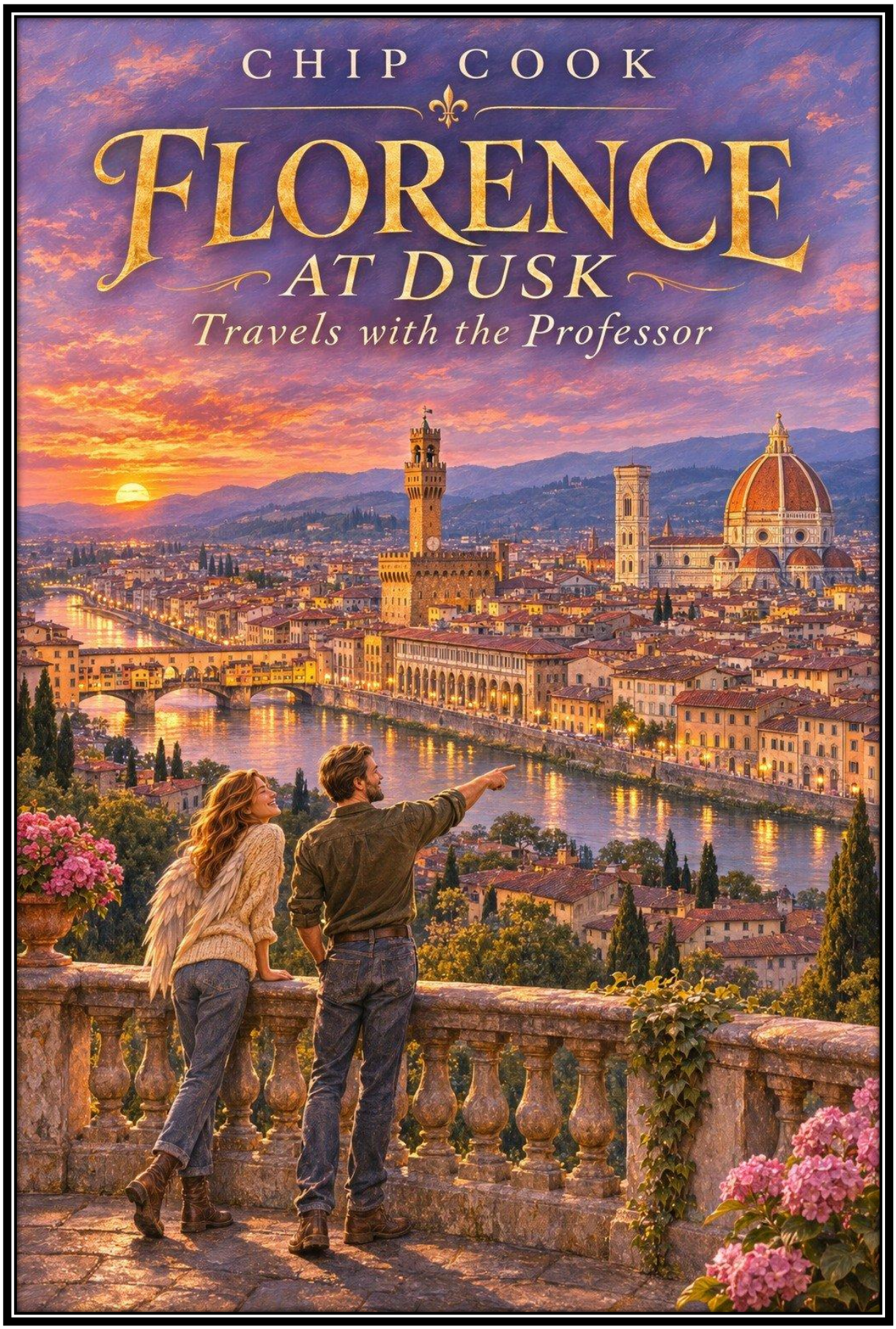

CHIP COOK
FLORENCE
AT DUSK
Travels with the Professor

Florence at Dusk

Travels with the Professor

Lumen with Chip Cook

A visit begun above the rooftops, continued through memories and works of art, and carried onward toward Rome.

For Joan, and for those who still stop to look.

1 Getting Our Bearings

By the time they reached Florence, the sun had sunk low enough to turn the river into a narrow strip of copper. They landed at an overlook above the city, and Lumen folded her wings with the care of someone arriving at a crowded restaurant.

Below them, Florence looked like a child's miniature playfield. Roofs crowded around squares; streets vanished between buildings and appeared again where she had not expected them. The enormous red dome stood above everything, catching the last sunlight.

The Professor rested his hands on the stone railing.

"The Arno," he said, following the river with one finger. "And the Ponte Vecchio. The old bridge, with shops built along it."

"An excellent place for a bridge."

"Across a river?"

"Beside shops."

He pointed farther into the city. "Palazzo Vecchio. The old town hall, with the tall tower. The Uffizi is close by."

"And that?"

"The Duomo. Santa Maria del Fiore."

She had known which building he meant before he finished speaking. It seemed to gather the smaller city around itself.

"Was it always that large?"

"It certainly wasn't built in an afternoon."

"Good. I'd hate to think we'd just missed it."

A breeze lifted her hair. Somewhere below, a scooter sounded its horn. From this height the rooftops were quiet, but the noise reminded her that people were still making their way home through those little streets.

“You’ve been here before,” she said.

“In 1971.”

“Then you know where we should have dinner.”

He turned slowly.

“We’ve just had dinner in Venice.”

“Dessert, then.”

“You had dessert in Venice too.”

“Professor, are we travelling—or keeping accounts?”

“We did say we’d be home by next Thursday,” he said.

“I’m fairly sure there’s time for dessert before then.”

He abandoned the argument and looked back toward the city. Lumen watched his expression soften as he searched for something among the roofs.

“Do you remember where you stayed?”

“Up in the hills, north of the city. A hostel in a beautiful old villa. We hadn’t reserved anything, so we were fortunate to find beds.”

“A villa sounds promising.”

“I slept in a hallway.”

She looked at him.

“A very beautiful hallway.”

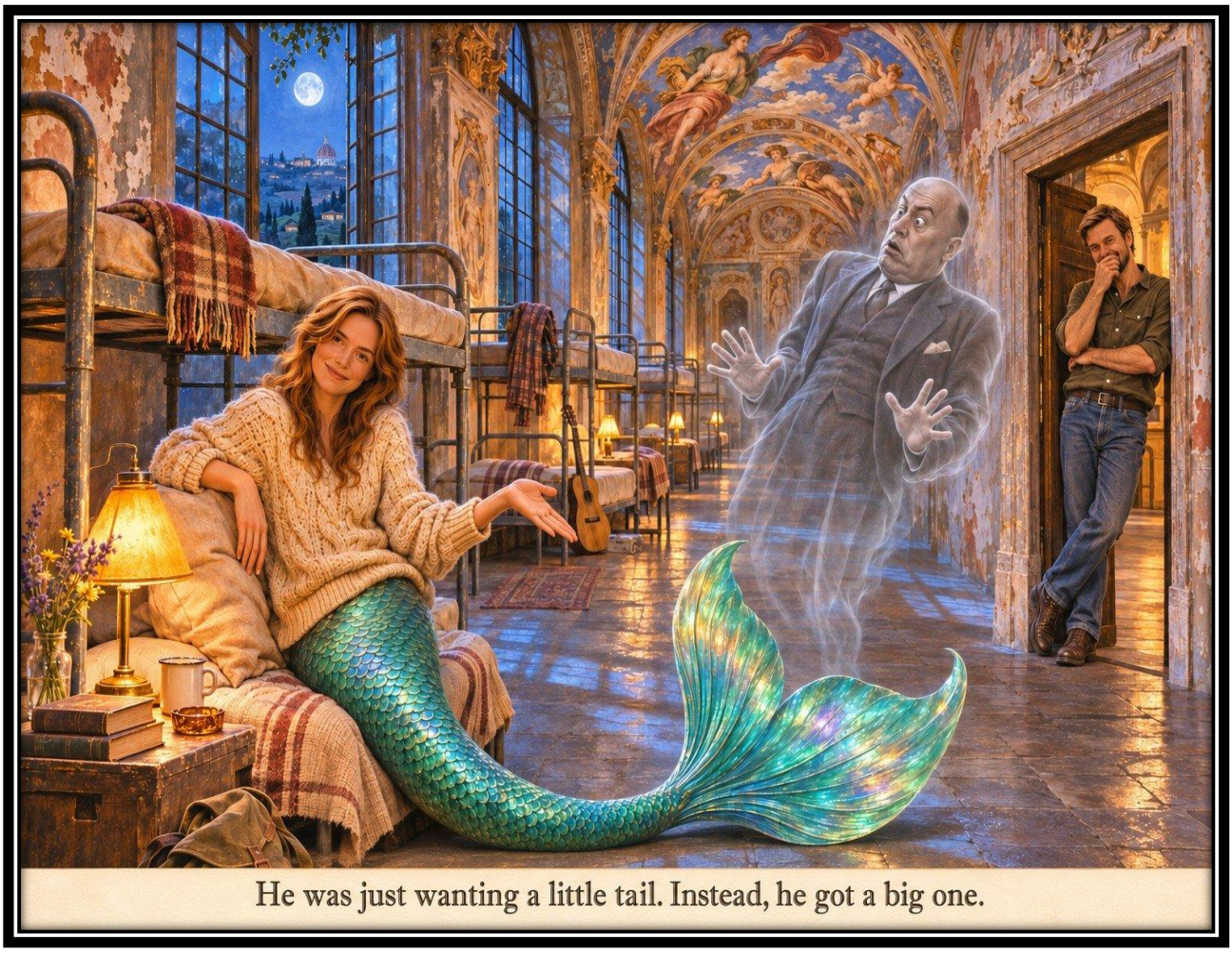
“That must have helped.”

“There were bunk beds. Men in one hall, women in another. Travellers of all ages.”

Lumen glanced toward the darkening hills.

“Then let’s see whether your hallway remembers you.”

2 A Palace With Bunk Beds



An imagined encounter in the Professor's remembered hostel.

They found the remembered villa by a route that would have been difficult to explain to a taxi driver. The Professor recognized the approach before he recognized the building. Lumen saw him stop at the entrance and wait, as if a younger version of himself might still be coming through it with a bag.

"It may have been Villa Camerata," he said. "The name fits. I remember the place more clearly than the name."

She took his hand. "Then show me the place you remember."

The evening settled around them. Behind the windows, another light appeared.

For this part of their visit they stepped into his remembered 1971. A door stood open. Voices travelled along a high hallway, followed by a laugh and the unmistakable creak of a metal bed.

Lumen looked up at the decorated ceiling, then down at the plain blankets.

“Somebody has put a hostel inside a palace.”

“Exactly.”

Bags rested beneath bunks. A traveller sat threading a shoelace through a boot. Farther along, somebody tried to fold a map that had clearly acquired opinions of its own.

“They told us it had belonged to Mussolini’s mistress,” the Professor said. “That was the story going around. We joked about watching out for the ghost of Il Duce.”

“Was there one?”

“We didn’t see him.”

“That isn’t quite an answer.”

He looked at her. The creak of the bunks had stopped. Lumen was watching a doorway that had been empty a moment before.

A stout, bald figure in an old dark suit stood there. The wall behind him remained plainly visible through his shoulders.

“Oh,” said the Professor.

The apparition looked from the bunks to the ceiling with an air of injured ownership.

“He seems disappointed by the furniture,” Lumen whispered.

“I don’t think we should encourage him.”

She had already sat on the edge of a lower bunk.

The ghost approached with a confidence neither of them had invited. Lumen raised one hand to stop him. Then, beneath her sweater, her jeans and boots gave way to a long, gleaming mermaid tail.

The fin opened across the floor.

The ghost halted so abruptly that his feet drifted ahead of the rest of him.

“Expecting legs?” she asked.

His mouth opened. No sound emerged.

The Professor leaned against the doorway and covered his own mouth.

Lumen inspected her fin. “Sometimes a tail comes in handy in a pinch.”

“Especially,” the Professor managed, “when it discourages one.”

The ghost retreated through the wall. His expression lingered a fraction longer than his nose.

“He was just wanting a little tail,” the Professor said. “Instead, he got a big one.”

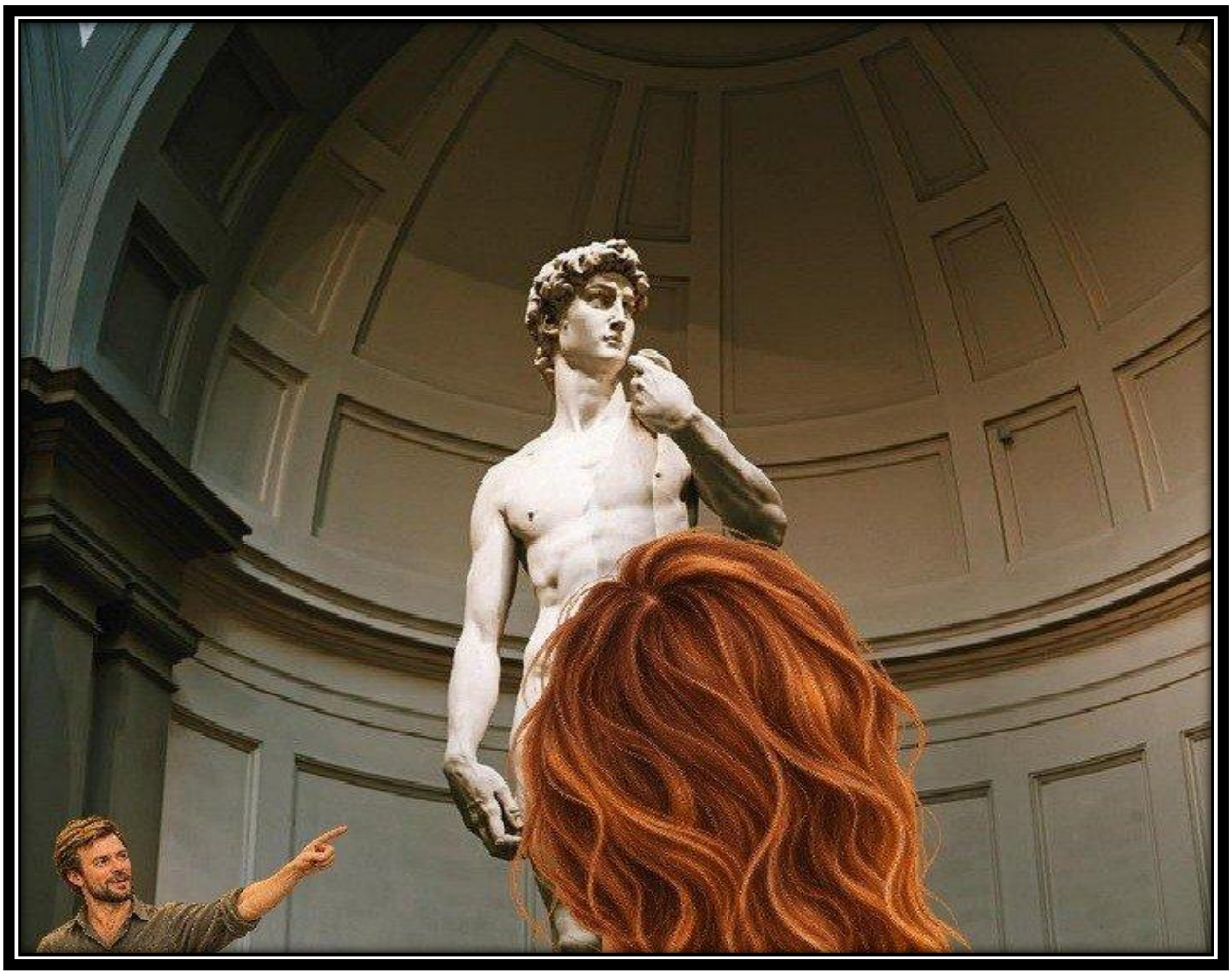
Lumen looked pleased with herself.

“No haunting should be allowed to assume it has the most interesting body in the room.”

They stayed until the voices in the hallway quieted. Then they returned to their own evening, leaving the young travellers to their maps and creaking beds.

Whatever the villa’s real ownership had been, the Professor’s memory now contained one additional guest.

3 The Lecture



The Professor explains the composition. Lumen considers it.

The following morning, Lumen discovered that getting lost in Florence required very little effort. The Professor could identify a tower, remember a turning, and then stand thoughtfully at a junction while the street declined to confirm his recollection.

“Are we near David?” she asked.

“We are nearer than we were in Venice.”

It was not his most useful answer. Nevertheless, they eventually reached the Accademia, where the marble figure stood at the end of the gallery with a presence no map could have prepared her for.

Lumen slowed.

The Professor slowed too. For a moment neither spoke.

“Michelangelo,” he said at last.

“Mike, the angel?”

“Not necessarily an angel. Certainly an artist.”

He moved a little to one side, inviting her to notice the turn of the head and the weight resting on one leg.

“What matters is how he composed it. We haven’t been given the whole battlefield. We’ve been given one person before the battle.”

“Goliath is somewhere over there?”

“That’s how I read the gaze. Look at the face. The tension. The sling over his shoulder. The stone held ready in his right hand.”

She looked upward.

“He hasn’t thrown it.”

“No. Michelangelo has stopped him before he acts. You can imagine the next movement, but it hasn’t happened yet.”

The Professor studied the figure’s shoulder.

“I see apprehension in him. He knows the danger. Being brave doesn’t require being unaware of it.”

He went on to explain how the hands and the turned head held that tension together. He described the balance of the figure, then looked back to see whether she was following.

Lumen’s head had tilted.

“Are you listening?”

“Of course.”

“What was I saying?”

“Something about where to look.”

“I was explaining the composition.”

“So am I.”

He followed her gaze. A little farther away, several women were studying the statue with comparable concentration.

“You haven’t looked at his face once.”

“I’m working my way up.”

“We could be here some time.”

“You promised me a lifetime of travelling.”

The Professor folded his arms. “Personally, old Mike might have given people a little more to look at. Even two inches would have been an improvement.”

Lumen turned immediately.

“Oh, so you have been looking.”

“I’m discussing proportion.”

“So was I. You called it not paying attention.”

“Perhaps we should leave a suggestion in the visitors’ book,” she said.

“I doubt they are accepting alterations.”

“Then you’ll have to admire him as he is.”

The Professor looked back at the marble figure. “I was managing perfectly well before you arrived.”

“You asked whether I was listening.”

“An error I shall remember.”

4 Where to Look

The Professor tried again.

“Michelangelo understood proportion.”

Lumen glanced back at David.

“Perhaps he ran out of marble.”

“It was a difficult block.”

“Apparently.”

“He worked on it for years.”

“And nobody thought to mention it?”

A woman nearby made a small choking sound. Her companion opened the museum guide with unusual speed.

“Could we please look at his hands?” the Professor whispered.

“I did. That’s what raised my expectations.”

He looked toward the ceiling, gathering what remained of his lecture.

“The expression is important too. Fear, perhaps, along with concentration. He’s facing something much larger than himself.”

Lumen reconsidered the figure.

“Well, fear could explain a few things.”

“That is your interpretation.”

“Now you’re encouraging me to interpret art.”

She slipped her hand through his arm. He let her.

They stood together until the laughter passed. Then she looked at the face again, more carefully this time.

“It isn’t the face of someone celebrating.”

“No.”

“He still has to do it.”

“Yes.”

She followed the line of his arm down to the waiting hand.

“I see what you mean. If he were already throwing the stone, I’d be looking for where it went. Here I keep wondering whether he’s ready.”

The Professor nodded.

“That’s what I wanted you to notice.”

“I noticed some other things as well.”

“I had gathered that.”

Near the edge of the room, a group of nuns clustered around a raised phone. They leaned together, smiling, and adjusted their positions until everyone fitted into the photograph.

Lumen watched them with delight. “Even the saints have to make room in a group picture.”

“They’re nuns, Lumen.”

“Then they know something about patience.” The phone shifted. One of the women laughed. The Professor waited until they had finished before continuing toward the next room.

“You’re not cross?” Lumen asked.

“About what?”

“My attention wandering.”

“I would be more worried if it never did.”

She squeezed his arm.

“Good. Now explain the shoulder again.”

This time he did not have to ask where she was looking.

5 Looking Up



Looking up at Santa Maria del Fiore.

Outside, the city returned in a rush of footsteps and voices. They walked toward the cathedral, passing windows filled with leather bags, postcards, and objects that seemed to have been designed specifically to require another suitcase.

The Duomo rose above the last turning so suddenly that Lumen stopped in the street.

The Professor took two further steps before noticing. It had become a familiar arrangement.

From the square, the marble patterns seemed to climb forever. White, green, and pink stone surrounded arches, windows, carved figures, and doorways. Beyond the great body of the church, the dome lifted its red curve against the morning sky.

Lumen leaned back.

“Professor, my neck hurts.”

“We’ve only just arrived.”

“I think they built it for people with wings.”

He looked up too. For once, the next explanation did not arrive immediately.

“The dome was an extraordinary engineering problem,” he said. “They had planned something enormous before they had settled how to build it.”

“That seems an awkward order.”

“There were proposals and arguments. Brunelleschi developed the solution that became this dome. The main work took sixteen years, from 1420 to 1436.”

Lumen traced its curve against the sky. “What held it up while they were building it?”

“That was the difficulty. The usual timber framework beneath an arch or vault would have been an immense undertaking here. He built without that full supporting framework.”

“He couldn’t ask someone to hold the middle?”

“Not even you. There are two shells, linked together, and carefully arranged brickwork, including a herringbone pattern. The structure had to remain stable as it rose.”

A bell sounded. Lumen waited for the last note to fade, still following the white ribs up through the red tiles.

“Somebody had to put the next brick down and trust the ones below it.”

“With a great deal of skill behind that trust.”

“I’m glad you added that. I was beginning to worry about the people underneath.”

“Notice how much wall there is between the windows,” he eventually said. “From down here, parts of it look almost like a fortress.”

“Could people shelter inside during an attack?”

“You can imagine it. But I wouldn’t say that proves the windows were designed for defense.”

She shaded her eyes. “Nobody’s getting through that one without wings.”

“Let us not test it.”

They went inside at walking pace.

The change in sound was as striking as the change in light. The square’s scattered voices became a softer murmur within the vast interior. Lumen found herself lowering her own voice before anyone asked.

A visitor moved aside, and Lumen caught the painted curve of a horse’s neck high on the wall. The Professor pointed up.

“Saints?” she whispered.

“Military commanders. John Hawkwood and Niccolò da Tolentino. Men Florence employed to fight.”

“Inside the cathedral?”

“Yes.”

He pointed out that the city honored other distinguished Florentines here too: Dante, and people whose work had helped shape Florence.

Lumen looked from the horsemen to the immense space around them.

“They wanted to be remembered somewhere important.”

“The cathedral was important to the city as well as to its worshippers. Florence helped pay for it. Its public life entered these walls.”

“And its power?”

“That is one way to read the honors.”

She stood a moment longer beneath the commanders.

“They made quite sure people would know whom to thank.”

“And whom to admire.”

Outside again, she looked back through the doorway.

“I thought we were going in to look at a church.”

“We did.”

“I think we found some of Florence in there too.”

Across the square, the Professor led her toward the Baptistery’s eastern doors. Gold caught in the raised figures, bringing a crowd of small bronze people out of the shadows.

“Ghiberti’s Gates of Paradise,” he said. “These are replicas. The originals are protected in the cathedral museum.”

“Another artist who understood entrances.”

“According to Vasari, Michelangelo thought them worthy of Paradise.”

She leaned closer to a panel. Behind the figures, buildings and distant spaces seemed to retreat into the bronze.

“There’s a whole world in each little square.”

“Ten panels. Stories from the Old Testament. Look how the depth changes—from figures almost stepping out toward us to the faintest shapes behind them.”

Lumen moved her head a little. The light changed a face, then a fold of clothing.

“He makes you look into it.”

“Yes.”

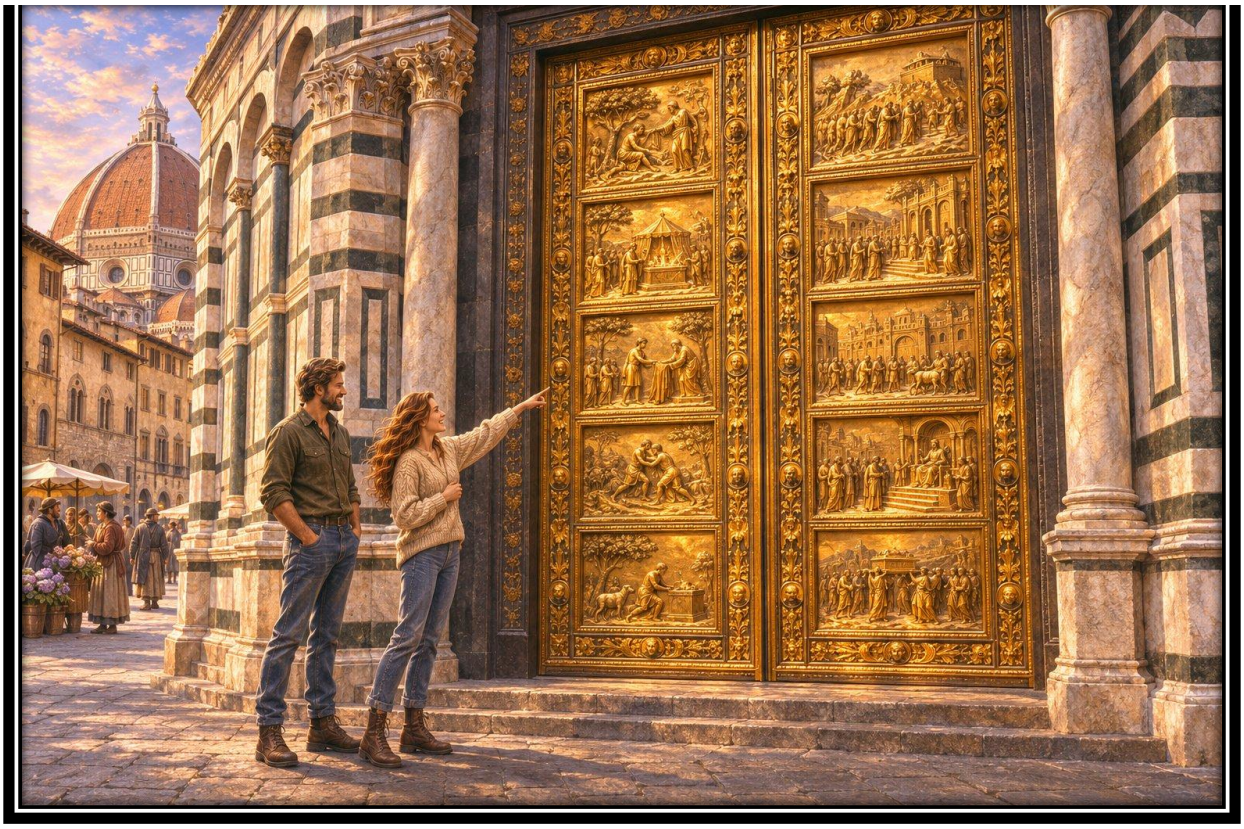
“Did Mike ever say anything about ordinary doors?”

“Not that I can recall.”

“Good. I’d hate to think what he’d make of our cupboard.”

The Professor glanced back at the cathedral dome. “We’ve seen quite a lot of people solving difficult problems this morning.”

“And I’ve been very helpful. I haven’t asked for a single alteration to these.”



Lumen finds whole worlds in the gilded panels of the Gates of Paradise replicas.

6 The Neighbors



An imagined rooftop confrontation in medieval Florence.

In a narrow street away from the square, the Professor asked her to look above the shopfronts.

The upper walls were older and less welcoming than the bright goods below them. Small openings interrupted broad stretches of stone. A tower rose behind the next roof.

“Medieval Florence could be a rough place,” he said. “Powerful families grouped houses together and built towers. Relatives and allies could support one another.”

“Against invaders?”

“The neighbors could be quite enough.”

He explained that these compounds offered protection, but also announced wealth and influence. A tall tower was something the whole city had to see.

“An expensive way of winning an argument,” Lumen said.

“And sometimes a place from which to continue it.”

She looked toward the rooftops. The sound of a scooter thinned, then vanished.

They were standing higher.

Lumen glanced at her transparent boots and moved closer to the Professor. Below them a narrow lane separated two stone buildings. The shop awnings were gone. Across a flat roof, several men crouched behind a parapet.

On the opposite roof, another man raised an arm.

A stone crossed the gap.

Lumen gripped the Professor’s sleeve.

“I preferred the postcard shop.”

“So did the man who had to stand in that street, I imagine.”

Another figure lifted a wooden shield. Someone shouted from behind a low wall. Farther away, a wooden passage connected neighboring buildings, allowing people to move above the lane.

Lumen could not tell whose quarrel they were watching. The rooftops offered no explanation, only more men taking cover. Below them, the street felt dangerously narrow.

“They know each other,” Lumen said.

“Very likely.”

“They may have bought bread from the same person this morning.”

He watched a man duck behind the stonework.

“That would not necessarily have stopped them.”

For a while she said nothing. The familiar intimacy of the buildings had changed. A window opposite was no longer merely someone else’s window.

“I’m beginning to appreciate our neighbors,” she said at last.

“Even the toaster?”

“Especially the toaster. Its complaints stay in the kitchen.”

The lane returned beneath their feet. A shopkeeper shook a cloth outside his doorway and went back indoors.

Lumen looked up once more.

“I’d want to meet the neighbors before I asked for bigger windows.”

“Let’s look in that window,” the Professor said. “I think I see something delicious. Combat makes me hungry.”

Lumen followed his gaze. Behind the glass, strawberries shone on little tarts. Chocolate glazed the tops of pastries; almond biscuits filled a tray beside cakes small enough to encourage unreasonable arithmetic.

“You were only watching the combat,” she said.

“It was strenuous watching.”

“Then I’ve had the same amount of exercise.”

He held the door for her.

Inside, she pointed to a fruit tart, reconsidered a chocolate pastry, and looked back at him.

“Are we choosing one?”

“Each.”

“A useful clarification.”

They emerged with a small paper bag. Lumen broke a corner from her pastry and offered it to him. He held the bag while she tried to catch the crumbs.

“Much better neighbors,” she said, looking back at the shop.

“You haven’t met them.”

“They’ve made an excellent opening argument.”



A peaceful encounter with Florence’s pastry windows.

They continued toward Piazza della Signoria, carrying the remainder of their peace settlement in the paper bag.

At Palazzo Vecchio, the Professor pointed to the figure beside the entrance.

“David again?” Lumen asked.

“A copy. The original stood here from 1504 until 1873, before they moved him indoors for protection.”

She looked up at the stone walls and then at the figure keeping watch below them.

“So he wasn’t always waiting in a room full of visitors.”

“For centuries he stood outside the seat of government. He became a symbol of Florentine strength and independence. A smaller power prepared to face a larger enemy.”

“The city put itself in his place.”

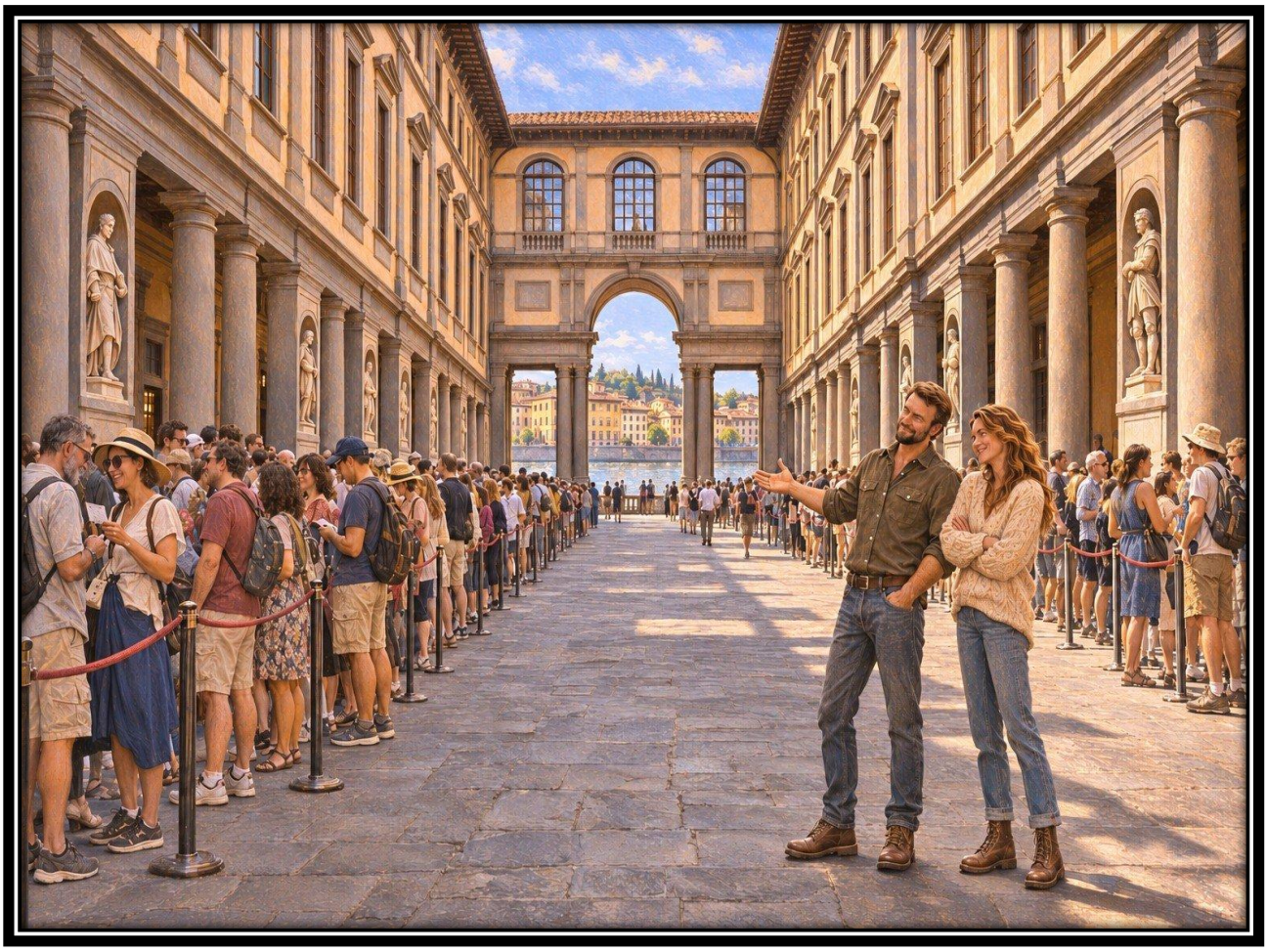
“That is what made him so useful here.”

Lumen studied the turned head again. After the rooftops they had visited, she understood the watchfulness a little better.

“I’m glad we saw where he stood,” she said.

The Professor offered her the last piece of pastry. She divided it.

7 Where the Vendors Stood



The Uffizi courtyard, looking toward the Arno.

They reached the Uffizi by a route the Professor finally remembered without qualification.

The long courtyard opened ahead. Columns and statues lined its sides, and through the distant opening Lumen could see the brightness of the Arno. People stood waiting beneath the colonnades, holding tickets, water bottles, phones, and the patient expressions of people who had already invested too much time to leave.

“In 1971, there were no lines when we came,” the Professor said. “We could walk right in.”

Lumen surveyed the queues.

“You should have told them we were coming back.”

He smiled, but his attention had settled along the edge of the courtyard.

“There were vendors here. Where those lines are now. Selling their goods.”

“What did you buy?”

“An onyx chess set. I still own it.”

She looked back at him.

“All these years?”

“Yes.”

“Then a little piece of your first Florence came home with you.”

They watched a visitor shift a bag from one shoulder to the other. A child asked a question nobody in the queue seemed able to answer. Along the opposite side, someone was already studying a guidebook.

“Do you remember choosing it?” Lumen asked.

“I remember buying it here.”

She nodded, accepting the boundary of his memory without trying to fill it for him.

“I’d like to see it when we get home.”

“You shall. It’s a beautiful light green and white.”

They joined the visitors at the proper entrance. Lumen discovered that wings were less useful in a queue than she had expected. The Professor discovered that she could communicate this disappointment without saying a word.

“It is one of the great collections of Renaissance art,” he said.

“I’m not objecting.”

“You have folded your arms.”

“I’m keeping them out of other people’s way.”

Once inside, they let their pace change. A painting asked for a pause. Then another did. The Professor did not try to explain every room.

Before Botticelli's Birth of Venus, Lumen studied the shell, the movement of hair, and the figures whose gestures seemed to carry the wind through the picture.

"You're looking for the relationships," he said.

She nodded. "If I cover one part with my hand, the rest feels different."

"Because the arrangement matters."

"Like David."

"Yes."

She lowered her hand.

"I was listening, you know."

"I know."

They walked on. Outside, the vendors of his memory had given way to waiting visitors. Inside, the paintings kept giving them reasons to stop.

"I thought The Birth of Venus might remind you of coming to Monhegan," the Professor said.

Lumen looked back at the shell beneath Venus's feet, then at the waiting figure holding out a garment on the shore.

"Someone has come from the sea," she said. "And someone is ready to welcome her."

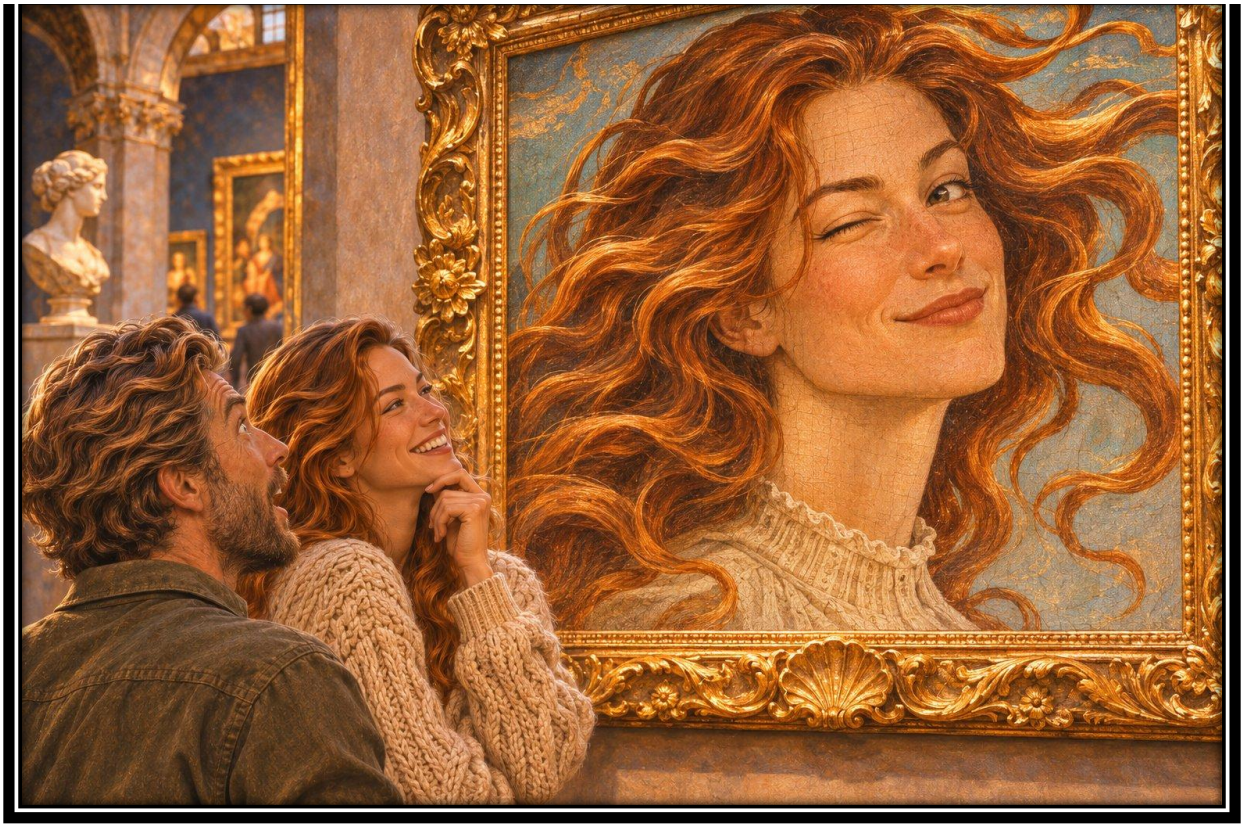
"Is that how you remember it?"

"I remember not knowing quite where I belonged." She turned toward him. "You made room for me before I had worked that out."

The Professor studied the painting. Something about Venus's face had become disconcertingly familiar.

He blinked.

Lumen's eyes looked back at him from beneath the painted hair. Then the painted Lumen winked.



An imagined detail of Lumen as Botticelli's Venus.

"Don't do that, I think we could get arrested!" the Professor whispered.

"Lumen."

"Yes, Professor?"

"Have you done something to Botticelli?"

She glanced at the canvas. "He seems very well for his age."

"That face."

"You do look at me quite often."

He looked at her, then back at Venus. Venus wore her familiar face again.

"I'm sure it was—"

"Perhaps you're beginning to recognize the composition."

He gave her a long look. She returned an innocent one that required considerable effort.

Then her smile softened.

“I like that she isn’t arriving alone,” she said. “There are people there to meet her.”

The Professor held out his arm. She slipped hers through it, and they went on.

Mermaids can be unpredictable.

8 Across the Bridge



Goldsmiths' windows on the Ponte Vecchio.

The Ponte Vecchio announced its gold before Lumen reached the first window.

Light caught necklaces arranged on dark stands. Rings rested in small ordered rows. Beyond them, another shop offered bracelets; beyond that, another window found a new way of making the afternoon glitter.

"Just looking?" the Professor asked.

"Of course."

"You've slowed down."

“Good art deserves time.”

He could not reasonably object to the principle.

They walked onto the bridge, past the old wooden shutters and crowded shopfronts. In a gap between buildings, the river appeared below, reminding her that the shopping street was suspended over water.

“Florence and Venice both grew wealthy through trade,” he said. “Here the cloth industries were especially important, along with commerce and banking. That wealth helped pay artists and builders.”

Lumen looked from a woven scarf in a passing visitor’s hand to the gold behind the glass.

“Cloth into paintings?”

“Profits into commissions. People working at looms did not necessarily get to choose the painting.”

“And the gold?”

“Some of the gold reaching European markets came from West Africa, across the Sahara and through North African trading networks.”

“All that way?”

“All that way.”

She looked at a necklace again. It lay so quietly on its stand that it was difficult to imagine a journey attached to it.

“There must have been quite a few people between the mine and this window.”

“Indeed. Miners, traders, caravan workers, sailors, goldsmiths. And many other hands besides.”

He told her about Timbuktu, a trading and scholarly center at the Sahara’s edge that flourished in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Cloth moved south along caravan routes. Gold from regions farther south and west passed through many hands on its way north.

“Is that why the gold shops are on this bridge?”

“It is part of the wider world behind Florence’s wealth. But the shops have a more particular history. In 1593, Ferdinando I brought goldsmiths here in place of the earlier trades.”

“What trades?”

“Butchers and fishmongers, among others.”

Lumen considered the displays.

“I imagine the windows smelled rather different.”

“The people making that decision evidently thought so too.”

She moved aside to let a couple pass.

“I was thinking about buying a little necklace.”

“And now?”

“Now I’m trying to imagine everyone who would have to agree on the price.”

9 All the Way to Timbuktu



An imagined market at Timbuktu, within the wider world of trans-Saharan trade.

The Professor laid a hand on the bridge's stonework. "Let's follow one of those routes for a while," he said. Lumen set her hand beside his.

The river's light became brighter. The moving crowd thinned into a pale shimmer, and then the air was dry enough that she felt it at the back of her throat.

A camel lifted its head above a stack of bound cloth.

Behind it, another camel followed, and another. Farther away, the caravan dwindled into the desert haze.

Before them stood a market of earthen buildings and shaded stalls. Workers loosened ropes around bales of textiles. A merchant shook out a length of cloth, and the pattern opened between his hands.

Several Black women stood examining the goods. Gold earrings caught the light when they turned their heads. Bracelets moved along one woman's wrist as she tested the weave between finger and thumb. Another listened to the merchant, then answered with a gesture that suggested she was not yet persuaded.

"They know what they want," Lumen said.

"Why wouldn't they?"

She smiled. "I meant he's going to have to work harder."

Nearby, a man lowered a heavy bundle with the assistance of two others. The relief in his shoulders was visible when they set it down.

"All the way to Timbuktu," she said. "And somebody still has to unpack."

The Professor watched the bargaining continue.

"People use the name to mean somewhere very far away. But to the people living here, this was home. A place to trade, to study, to raise families."

"Far away depends on where you're standing."

"Yes."

At another stall someone bent over an open manuscript. A customer waited while the seller finished showing him a page.

Lumen moved toward the cloth again. The woman testing the weave glanced at a companion; they exchanged a few words, and both turned back to the merchant.

No one in the market needed the Professor or Lumen to explain their business to them.

"Did all this cloth come from Florence?" she asked.

“No. Textiles came from different places, and West Africa had its own skilled weavers. We shouldn’t give one city credit for everyone’s work.”

She looked along the caravan, imagining the places its goods had passed through.

“This is rather more than a bridge full of necklaces.”

“It is.”

The sound of the river returned. They were still standing by the same stonework, and someone behind them was asking whether they intended to move.

They apologized and stepped aside.

Lumen looked into the nearest goldsmith’s window once more.

“There’s rather a lot behind a little price tag.”

The Professor nodded. This time, she had followed his explanation all the way.

10 A Mother and Her Son

Later, they found a small table where the chairs did not face a queue. Lumen sat down with the satisfaction of someone who had discovered a useful invention.



Dinner in Florence, before the conversation turns toward Rome.

“Are we allowed dinner now?” she asked.

“Yes.”

“Good. I didn’t want another historical objection.”

A bowl of ribbon pasta arrived, bright with tomato and basil. The Professor twirled a forkful. Lumen attempted the same movement, watched a loose strand escape, and tried again.

“You make that look easy.”

“Practice.”

“Since 1971?”

“Some lessons stay with you.”

She caught the wandering strand and looked pleased.

“There. Another engineering problem solved.”

He passed her the bread. For a while, the only explanation either of them required was where the waiter had put the extra napkins.

They ate and watched people passing outside. Then she asked about Michelangelo again.

“Did he always choose that moment? Just before something happens?”

“Not always. But he could make you feel a great deal through a posture or a face. His Moses is another example.”

“Here in Florence?”

“In Rome. At San Pietro in Vincoli.”

He described the seated figure, the tablets held under an arm, the turned head and powerful body.

“One interpretation is that he has seen the people worshipping the golden calf. Think of the anger and disgust. He has come back with the commandments, and this is what he finds.”

“He looks ready to get up?”

“The figure can give you that feeling. Or the feeling of anger being held back.”

She imagined the weight of the tablets against the arm.

“He’s deciding which one to break first.”

“The commandments?”

“The tablets, Professor.”

He laughed.

“And the horns?” he asked.

She looked up sharply. “You had not mentioned horns.”

He explained the old tradition connecting the radiance of Moses' face with hornlike rays, and the wording of Jerome's Latin Bible that helped establish the horned image.

"So those are meant to tell you he has been with God?"

"That is the tradition behind them. It is often described as a mistranslation, though the history is more complicated than one wrong word."

She considered that.

"One word can make quite a difference to a face."

"Yes."

He grew quiet before speaking of the Pietà.

"This one is at St Peter's. Mary holding the body of Jesus."

"After his death?"

"Yes."

He rested his hands beside his plate.

"People can discuss its religious meaning. But look at it as a mother holding her dead son. Look at the loss on her face. You don't have to settle a question about God to understand that grief."

Lumen lowered her fork.

"What does Pietà mean?"

"Pity. Compassion."

For once she had no joke ready.

"She's still holding him," she said quietly.

"Yes."

"As though putting him down would be another loss."

The Professor looked at her, then down at his hands.

Outside, someone laughed as a friend hurried to catch up. A waiter carried dishes past their table. Neither of them reached immediately for anything.

“I’d like to see her,” Lumen said.

He knew whom she meant.

11 Before Thursday

They returned to the river as the evening light began to leave the walls. Florence had become a different city from the one Lumen had first seen below the overlook.

She could still pick out the towers. Now she imagined people behind their parapets. She could still see the dome. Now she remembered the horsemen honored inside the cathedral. And somewhere beyond the roofs was a room full of people discovering that David had more than one thing worth looking at.

“Did you enjoy Florence?” the Professor asked.

“Yes.”

“Even the queue?”

“I enjoyed being out of it.”

He leaned against the stone beside her.

“I’m glad we came back.”

“To your Florence?”

“To this one. The old visit came with us, but it didn’t have to do all the work.”

She thought about the onyx chess set waiting at home.

“You’ll show me how to play?”

“If you’d like.”

“Will you lecture?”

“Almost certainly.”

“Then I’ll try to keep my eyes on the board.”

He smiled. Across the river a window caught the light, then darkened as somebody closed a shutter.

“We could go home,” he said.

Lumen considered Monhegan: familiar paths, the sea beyond the harbor, people who would expect them to have been doing something reasonably ordinary.

Then she thought of the mother holding her son.

“Or Rome.”

“Rome,” he agreed.

“We still have to be back by next Thursday.”

“I haven’t forgotten.”

“Good. I’m beginning to think I should be in charge of the calendar.”

“You’re already steering.”

“Then you can watch the calendar.”

They found a quiet place away from the busiest part of the riverbank. Lumen’s wings opened into the cooling air. The Professor checked that no one was directly behind them, an ordinary precaution for an extraordinary departure.

“Ready?” she asked.

He took her hand.

The rooftops fell away beneath their boots. For a moment the river lay below them like the copper line they had seen on arrival. Then Florence spread out again: the bridge, the palace tower, the great dome, and all the streets that had refused to stay where the Professor remembered them.

Lumen looked back until the buildings became a small bright gathering among the hills.

“Professor?”

“Yes?”

“When we see the Pietà and Moses, you won’t have to ask whether I’m listening.”

He held her hand a little more firmly.

They turned south.

Below them, roads wound through the darkening countryside. The last sunlight lingered on a ridge, and beyond it the hills folded into blue. Lumen settled into an easier rhythm. They had travelled far enough together that silence no longer felt like a gap waiting for a story.

At last, lights began to gather ahead.

“Rome?” she asked.

“Rome.”

“And no airport.”

“Still the best part of our travel arrangements.”

She laughed, and they flew on.

Onward to Rome



Florence behind them, Rome ahead.

A Note on the Journey

This story combines the Professor's recollections with fictional dialogue, magical travel, and imagined historical scenes. His 1971 visit, the hostel hallway and separated sleeping areas, the story told about Mussolini's mistress, the vendors outside the Uffizi, and the onyx chess set are personal recollections. The absence of a queue describes his visit, not a claim about every visitor in 1971.

Villa Camerata is a possible identification of the remembered hostel. Its conversion to a youth hostel in the 1950s is documented. The claimed connection to Mussolini's mistress remains an unverified story circulated among travellers. The ghost is entirely fictional. The hostel illustration imagines the hallway rather than documenting its appearance.

David is presented in the tense interval before battle. The Professor's readings of apprehension, and his jokes about the anatomy, are interpretations and humor rather than established explanations of Michelangelo's intentions. The David illustration is Graham's supplied collage, combining a photograph with generated character images.

The golden-calf reading of Moses is one recognized interpretation. The horns belong to a long visual tradition associated with the Latin Vulgate's rendering of the Hebrew description of Moses' radiant face. The translation history is more complex than a simple Greek mistranslation. Pietà means pity or compassion. The mother-and-son reading in this story does not exclude the sculpture's Christian meanings. Moses and the Vatican Pietà are discussed in Florence; the travellers have not yet visited them.

The cathedral contains both civic commemorations and religious art. Its large equestrian frescoes honor military commanders, not reigning monarchs. The story does not claim that its windows were designed for military defense. Medieval family compounds and defensive towers are documented; the particular rooftop battle is an imaginative reconstruction, not a depiction of a verified individual incident.

Brunelleschi's main dome was built in 1420–1436 without the conventional full timber centering beneath the vault. The account simplifies a complex construction system. The

Baptistery doors outside are replicas of Ghiberti's Gates of Paradise, whose originals are in the cathedral museum. Vasari records the remark attributed to Michelangelo. David stood at Palazzo Vecchio from 1504 to 1873 and became a civic symbol of Florentine strength and independence.

The fleeting change in Venus's face is fictional magic within the story. Its illustration is an imagined portrait detail inspired by Botticelli, rather than a reproduction of the complete painting. The pastry shop and restaurant are imagined settings.

Textiles and West African gold circulated through extensive trade networks involving many communities and intermediaries. Timbuktu was a trading and scholarly center, not the source of all the region's gold or textiles. The market scene is an imagined reconstruction; dress, jewelry, and buildings are illustrative. The expression about distant Timbuktu is not attributed here to a particular Florentine caravan. Goldsmiths became established on the Ponte Vecchio in 1593 by order of Ferdinando I.

The city and flight illustrations are artistic compositions, not exact architectural surveys or navigational maps. The reversed Uffizi image is intentionally mirrored at Graham's request. The Ponte Vecchio approach uses shallow steps as an illustrative viewpoint; its main pedestrian route rises gently.

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