

MARTINA FOLENA

ALDOMBRA

Il respiro del Mirabile Criptide



MIMebù 

MARTINA FOLENA

ILLUSTRATED BY GRETA MAINARDI



The breath of the Wondrous Cryptid

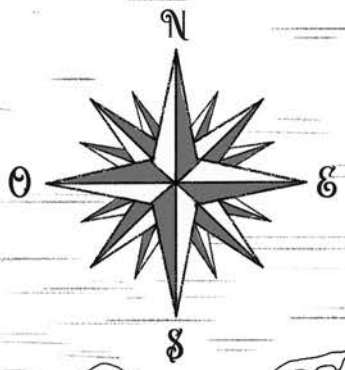
MIMebù 

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VALDOMBRA



RIVA RUBINA

MONTEBUIO

MONLUCE

COLLERIGGO

PASCONIA

VILLASCURA

RIPASFITTA

STRETTA

FINISVALLE



Prologue



The day after the catastrophe, everyone wondered how they had not foreseen it.

Had there really been no signs? No light trails in the night sky, no calves born with two heads, no frightening premonitory dreams?

There had been nothing at all: the stars were all shining in the same place, the only calf of the season was born a week earlier in perfect health, and all the inhabitants of Valdombra had slept soundly.

No one, king or soothsayer, dreamer or mountebank, could have foreseen such a thing.

Reality always surpasses the imagination.



My name is Isadora, but I prefer to be called Isa.

This is my story, but it is also the story of my brother Teodorigo, whom everyone calls Teo, and Anselmo,

who is the only one who prefers his full name.

Our story, which you may or may not believe but, I assure you, is completely true from beginning to end, begins the day before the catastrophe.

The catastrophe



The catastrophe came in the middle of the night, as thieves do. A thief, however, would have been quiet and careful. The catastrophe, instead, did not bother to be silent.

The noise was so deafening that it slipped into my dreams. I jumped up on the bed immediately, my heart pounding as the roar shook the whole house. It sounded like thunder, but that long? What could it be? It was as if the mountain was collapsing....

The next thing I knew, the walls were shaking. I looked at the other bed. Teo was awake.

"The house is crying," he said.

Dust and rubble began to fall from the ceiling. The walls were crumbling. I heard my father's voice from downstairs shouting, "Get out! Get out! Get out!".

It was only then that I sprang to my feet, grabbed Teo and rushed towards the steps that no longer

existed; we rolled onto my father and then all out into the freezing night air.

The roar was over. We looked each other in the face.

"What happened?" I asked.

My father shook his head. He was still wearing his candle-maker's apron and his face was smeared with dust. We stared at each other not knowing what to say.

The second roar was too loud to be mistaken for thunder. It was as if a herd of crazed bulls was running over us. Teo clung to me, I clung to our father, and he made to cling to a tree, but hesitated. The treetops were waving furiously.

Then it became impossible to stand: the earth was swaying, as soft as cake batter. There was nothing solid any more. The whole valley shook and shook.

And finally our house came down, as if we had built it out of sand. It suddenly collapsed in on itself and there was nothing left: just us in the middle of the road, not knowing what to hold on to.



There was a strange silence everywhere.

The night was perfect, with all the stars in their



place and the moon in the centre. Beneath the night, however, things had changed a lot.

Our house was gone and so was half the village; the street was full of people, all as silent as we were, staring dumbfounded at what little was left. The cicadas had disappeared. We all stood in silence, contemplating the catastrophe.

I don't know how much time we spent motionless on the side of the road. Then we started walking, not knowing where we were going, until we arrived in the main square, the one where I had gone to buy dinner a few hours earlier. It was not easy to get there, because the street was full of debris and the ruins of all the houses that had collapsed. With those few houses still standing, the square looked like a toothless mouth.

Suddenly, as if my ears had suddenly popped open, a great confusion of voices and noises invaded my head. I could hear shouting for help, crying, calling and shouting instructions, but I couldn't quite make out who was speaking. A woman in a nightgown passed me, giving orders without caring that she was only wearing a slipper. A man covered in white powder wandered around the square like a ghost. Two children, brother and sister, ran to the remains of their house, which had collapsed and had no door. I saw

them rummaging through the rubble like madmen, until the girl stopped in her tracks and opened the doors of the wardrobe that had fallen to the ground. Inside, safe and sound, was a red cat. She took it in her arms and the cat began to hum with relief.

I was confused: I staggered and stepped on something that almost made me stumble. Looking down, I realised it was a long black metal rod with an arrow-head. It reminded me of the hands on the clock in the skylight tower. Is it possible that...

I looked up, but the skylight tower was gone. In its place was a pile of rubble, broken wooden planks and dust. The other hand had to be down there somewhere.

Even though I remembered jumping out of bed with my heart in my throat, I felt as if I were still dreaming. The spirit of the night that had built that nightmare had done a great job. It was frightening and I couldn't wake up: it was perfect.

At that moment I became aware of a new noise: bells ringing loudly, an alarm signal. Everyone in Finisvalle, as well as in Valdombra, knows that that sound can only mean one thing: fire.

In a valley lit almost exclusively by candles, the

danger of fire was common and, for that at least, we were well prepared. But the catastrophe had also brought down the wells, which had to be cleared, and too many candles rolled among the ruins had started fires: the night became as bright as it had never been in Valdombra.

"Come!" my father shouted, dragging me by the arm, and for the rest of the night I did nothing but move stones, fill buckets, cauldrons and basins, throw thick blankets over the smoking debris, wipe the soot from my face. Teo performed the same tasks without a word. Wide-eyed, he looked at everything around him, and I knew he wasn't missing a thing. But he didn't ask a single question. He stayed by my side at all times, and I was grateful for that: I didn't know what I would have done if I had lost him in the middle of that terrible commotion.



The fires subsided at first light. Exhausted, we dragged ourselves back to the square.

The baker was passing among the people distributing what he had managed to salvage from the back of the shop. I gratefully took what he handed me, and only after I had put my teeth into it did I realise that

it was a round sultana bun, just like the one I had bought only the day before for breakfast, except that this one was hard and had a sooty aftertaste.

I could only take one bite.

A tremor went through the square, stones and rubble vibrated, someone ended up with their legs in the air and the others staggered about, too stunned to let out even a single cry.

It lasted only a few seconds, shorter than what had happened during the night, but it scared us even more.

None of us thought it could happen again.

A new buzz arose, quiet but continuous. Everyone had something to ask, and even those who had nothing to say could not help but speak.

"It's happened again! How is it possible?"

"What are we doing here?"

"Can anyone explain what happened?"

"Where will we sleep?"

"We must ask Monluce for help."

"It's happened twice before, but what if it happens a third time?"

"Can we go home?"

"My house is still up, but what if it collapses?"

"Where will we go?"

"I'm not sleepy."

This was Teo. In fact, despite looking very serious, he was the one who seemed to be coping best.

"This all happened once before."

The crowd opened up to make way for Master Endimione. It was as if he had aged all at once; he looked even more faded. If before he was a hundred years old, now he looked two hundred years old. Someone handed him a flask of water, and he drank for a long time, with slow sips, before resuming his speech.

"The earth shook once before, in my grandfather's time. None of us were born, no one remembers. Even then there was a loud roar and the houses came down. Many did not live to tell the tale. My grandfather and the others put the houses back up, a little at a time, and rebuilt the village, which has so far fared very well. There hasn't been a single collapse in all these years, and to my knowledge, no one has ever had to repair even the roof. We have to do what my grandfather did: we'll pull up the houses, recover what we've lost and move on."

"What if it happens again?"

Everyone, including me, turned to Teo. Master Endimione narrowed his eyes and pointed them at him. "What?"

"You said it yourself that the earth has sobbed before, and for a while nothing happened, but now it has started again. And so, what do we do if it happens again?" repeated Teo with a dazed look. "If it happens again, the houses will fall down again, and we'll rebuild them again. And then, if it happens again, the houses will fall down again, and we will rebuild them again. And after we rebuild them, if it happens one more time again they will fall one more time again and we will have to rebuild them one more time again..."

"Come to the point, young man," cut Master Endimione short with an impatient gesture of his hand.

"But isn't it better to make sure it doesn't happen again?"

There was a deadly silence in the square. My father stared at Teo in amazement. Master Endimione narrowed his eyes even more.

"When, in a hundred years or seventy or fifty, the earth shakes again, those who are there will take care of it," the old tutor replied. "What do you expect, boy? That in addition to our own problems, we should solve those of the unborn?"

Master Endimione always says what you don't want to hear, even if it's true, I thought. And from that thought I could no longer hold back the others. Was this really

the best we could do? Were we to live in expectation of the next catastrophe, not even knowing when it would arrive, and not being ready for it? How could we ever sleep soundly from then on? In the whirlwind of a thousand questions, I took the blanket my father had retrieved from the ruins of someone's house and ended up sitting under a tree. Teo yawned beside me. "Now I'm getting sleepy."

We couldn't do anything but take a nap. We were awakened by a new tremor and a cloud of dust rising from a shattered neighbourhood. And after that there was no time to sleep.

For the next three days, we were busy cleaning up, repairing, dismantling a lot of stones and debris, putting out fires, distributing blankets, soup and hot tea, and sometimes even rescuing an unfortunate person caught in the collapse of the buildings, to whom we gave all the necessary medical attention. It was actually me who ran from one side to the other on my father's orders. From the very beginning, Master Lucerna had taken a leading role in the rescue operation. He would send me out to fetch buckets or ointments to treat the sick, or to prepare the beds: everything to make myself useful, while keeping me away from the most dangerous places.

Teo would have liked to help too, but nobody asked him.

In the end, if only to make him stop volunteering all the time, he was given a basket of bandages to rewind. In a corner of the large tent set up in the square as a makeshift shelter, Teo sat with the ball of bandages without a word, proud of his task. And he wrapped them all up beautifully.

In the meantime, I was running here and there, until I realised that my heart was getting used to the image of Finisville shattered. And yet I didn't want to get used to it! I was already tired of always being afraid of the next tremor when, on the second day, one arrived that no one had expected, so powerful that it caused the mountain that loomed over the main road to collapse, blocking the way with debris. People immediately set to work to clear the way, but I couldn't help thinking that we were stuck there for the time being, and who knows how many more times this would happen.

We had been under the illusion that the earth was subsiding, with increasingly weak sobs, but that strong tremor changed everything.

In the square, under the big tent, Master Endimione sat on a wooden crate, sipping warm broth. Every now

and then someone would come up to him and ask him if it was normal for the tremors to continue after days, if it had been like that the last time, almost a hundred years before, and when it had ended. Master Endimione sipped his broth and remained silent.

He does not speak because he does not know, I thought. And I wondered if that would be our new life: always ready for the next tremor, waiting for the strongest one of all that would sweep us away, perhaps. But what kind of life was that?



I lay in my bed of pillows and blankets, with Teo by my side, curled up like a worm in a cocoon, but I couldn't sleep: not because of fear, but because of thoughts. It was the third night since the disaster and my father had insisted that I try to sleep at least until dawn. But I couldn't stop thinking.

Master Endimione no longer answered our questions and, if pressed, would only say to take care of rebuilding the fallen houses, to roll up our sleeves. In my nocturnal reflections, I was surprised to discover that I was agreeing with Teo: what was the point of rebuilding if the earth kept shaking and collapsing everything? How could we pretend that life

had not changed?

I got up and sat down because it was impossible to sleep. Handfuls of candles that my father had salvaged from the remains of his laboratory were scattered among the beds. In their glow I could make out the silhouettes of sleeping people. A few steps away from me was a family, all under the same blanket, with children in the middle, whispering stories to each other to sweeten their sleep. I could hear a faint melody coming from the bottom of the square: someone had perhaps retrieved a lute. It felt like my heart was taking up more space in my chest. I was happy that everyone in Finisvalle was safe and sound, even if someone was bruised, and everyone was upset.

At that moment, a thought burst through all the others. Clotilde! Had no one thought of her, all alone on the mountain? The earth had certainly shaken there too. I blossomed with shame. I had been so focused on being useful that I had forgotten about the one person who perhaps really needed me. I looked around, my heart pounding. It was quiet, the earth silent, my father was somewhere organising the rebuilding, Teo was sleeping in his cocoon of blankets. I looked at the hill. It was all black, not a single light shone.

No one would go to see if Clotilde was all right.

I got up, leaving Teo snoring and curled up on the ground, wrapped the blanket tightly around my shoulders and took the path over the rubble.

An old friend



The bandits' hideout was a cave along the face of the mountain, hidden by the sloping branches growing over it. The terrain there was unusual, so rugged and rocky that it would never have occurred to anyone to pass through it, especially as the road did not cross it. And for this very reason Anselmo had decided to pitch our tent in a meadow down there, which would offer shelter from curious travellers and a safe escape route in case of another tremor.

But our presence down there must have seemed suspicious to the Gang of Marasmus, who wasted no time in leading us straight to their lair, where the chief was waiting to decide our fate.

It had been a short but memorable journey. In no time at all the bandits had collected, locked up and dismantled everything we had, including the mule, and had set off, gathering around Anselmo and me,

leaving us no choice but to follow them. The only one who took it well was Teo, who was carried on Ascanio the Scabbard's shoulders like a sack of potatoes. "Well, at least I don't have to walk," he had said.

As we followed the bandits I had noticed that my legs were shaking and I had tried to go straighter and safer. I didn't want them to think I was weak. Still, it was pitch black, and I couldn't see their faces, Anselmo's expression or whether I was actually walking straighter.

We had stopped for a while just in front of the rock face, where there seemed to be nothing at all, but then Ascanio the Scabbard had shaken off the fir fronds and a dark chasm had opened up, like the throat of a giant being.

"Come on," he said, with a smile I could barely see, but could imagine.

The cave was damp and cold, but the flickering light of a campfire glowed in the background.

I exchanged a glance with Anselmo in the half-light and we approached cautiously. Behind us, Ascanio the Scabbard was discovering that putting Teo on his back was much easier than getting him off.

"Intruders, wanderers or lost souls?" asked a voice.

"None of the three," Anselmo replied. Next to the

fire a silhouette was emerging, sitting cross-legged on a ledge of the cave.

"Then perhaps you are here on purpose," continued the voice.

"Not on purpose, we just happened to be passing by," Anselmo replied again.

"No one comes here by accident. In fact, no one comes this way."

"We had our good reasons, which had nothing to do with you."

"Oh, dear me. Is this an unfortunate misunderstanding?"

"I suppose so," cried Teo, dangling his legs around Ascanio the Scabbard's neck. "Most unfortunate."

"Terrible, terrible indeed. For, you see, you know by now that we are here. And if you know it, how can I ever let you go?"

"Who are you?" I asked.

Now I could make out quite clearly not only the silhouette on the rock, but yet another fellow who was huddled in the shadows, so solidly planted on his feet that he looked like a giant stalagmite. The seated fellow chuckled.

"Forgive my rudeness." He stood up so the fire could illuminate a slender and naturally graceful

profile. "I am Goffredo Licinio Ridolfi of Pasconia, happily in command of the Gang of Marasmus. And, so it would seem... I hold your lives in my hands. Now, will you please tell me who you are... Anselmo?"

We were now all around the fire and could talk while looking at each other's faces, but just then Goffredo Licinio Ridolfi of Pasconia's eyes widened and he sprang forward. "Anselmo, my dearest, what are you doing here, and with this bad wax to boot?"

Anselmo squared him from head to toe with even wider eyes. "I don't..."

"Anselmo, come on! Don't you remember me? Have you forgotten me?"

"Of course I haven't..."

"You mean that the chief of the bandits is your friend?" I asked, shaking Anselmo by the arm in the hope of restoring the use of speech to him.

"My friend! Even more than friend, we have been comrades!" exclaimed Goffredo Licinio Ridolfi of Pasconia. "At the Academy of the King's Men, third regiment. The best squadron of them all! We were the two top cadets. Do you remember military parades? The men envied us, the women fainted, etc., etc. Ah! Gentlemen, I wasn't bad at all, but Anselmo here was the most promising knight of them all!"



"Yes, those were the days," Anselmo commented in a low voice, and Teo, who had joined me at my side, whispered, "Shut your mouth, you look like a frog when you're wide open".

I don't really remember what happened at that point, I just know that suddenly we were all sitting around the fire with our backs comfortably resting on warm blankets from who knows what looted dwelling, sipping small glasses of tea flavoured with cinnamon and cloves and nibbling on carrot cakes. All the bandits had belted sticks and knives and were enjoying the night's snack while Goffredo, with Anselmo under his arm, showed off his enviable memory, spinning out one anecdote after another.

The only one who didn't join in was the big, tall guy who had been standing vigilant in the shadow of the fire behind us.

Godfrey looked as well-groomed as his subordinates were filthy: he wore a shiny dark leather jacket, trousers and black leather boots. His hair was combed back, revealing the proud expression of his icy eyes. But what I couldn't take my eyes off was his moustache: sharp as pins, it rose and fell with every brilliant smile.

"... and his full name is Anselmo Tibaldo Fulgenzio Cavalcanti di Ripasfitta," explained Goffredo,

pointing to what we had hitherto believed to be a simple postman. "Between me, him and our noble-born comrades, it took a good half hour to do the roll call! Anselmo, do you remember roll call?"

"Yes, yes, I remember it," replied Anselmo as pale as a sheet.

"That's nice," I commented, as I finally tried to draw a portrait of Anselmo that corresponded to the truth.

Anselmo couldn't even look at our faces. His blond quiff had lost its crease in the hubbub, and now fell back in front of his eyes like a pile of straw.

"And what did you say you do now?" asked Goffredo, swallowing a cupcake.

"The mail carrier."

"The what?"

"The mail carrier..."

"Sorry I didn't hear that right, but can't you people be quiet! Here, can you repeat that, please?"

"The postman! I'm a postman."

"Ah! Right. Well... good. It's not quite the same as being a knight, but... me too, who'd have thought I'd be a bandit! But then again, I've always been an ambitious guy."

I suddenly felt a strong twinge of pity for Anselmo,

but just then he turned and glared at me.

"And these children who travel with you..." continued Goffredo.

"Apprentices. I'm taking them to the capital to learn the trade."

"The capital!" Goffredo burst out laughing, and with him all the bandits. "Monluce is nothing but a rat hole now. It is in the streets that one really lives, mark my words."

"Or in caves," Teo asserted, gleefully gulping down his fourth carrot cake.

Goffredo laughed and turned to pick up a tray of caramelised almonds. I took the opportunity to elbow Anselmo.

"Cavalcanti of Ripasfitta?" I whispered between my teeth.

Anselmo replied in a low voice. "I'll explain."

"And maybe get us out of here while you're at it."

"Of course, your ladyship, and will you tell me how?"

"He's your friend, tell him you're in a hurry and let's go!"

Anselmo opened his mouth, but just at that instant Goffredo turned, shoved a handful of caramelised almonds between his gaping jaws and launched into an

introduction to the rest of the gang.

"You've already met Ascanio the Scabbard, my second-in-command," he said, pointing to the vigorous man who had attacked us. Teo clapped a hand on his shoulder proudly. "With him, in the field, are the valiant Federigo Malanno, Petruccio Piaga and Medoro the Golden Hand - a clever play on words, as you can see poor Medoro has a somewhat crippled hand - and finally..."

Goffredo nodded to the figure who had been in the shadows behind us the whole time. "... I have the honour to count in my humble gang Timoteo the Mute, also known as the Scourge of the Wilderness, the Eyeless Eye, the Uninvited Guest, the Silent Spectre of the Paths..."

"That's a lot of names. More than yours," Teo commented.

"Yeah, yeah, but we call him Timmy for short."

I glanced at Timmy, but maybe he hadn't heard, or wasn't interested.

"And what does he do?" asked Teo.

"He follows me," replied Goffredo. "And he pays attention."

I twisted a caramelised almond between my fingers. Getting out of there wasn't going to be easy.

Maybe even impossible. And every second we lost in the bandits' cave was one less second of sleep for the dragon we were looking for.



At first light, Goffredo gave a big yawn. "We work in darkness and sleep during the day. It is time to go to bed."

"Well then, we'll let you rest and get out of your way," Anselmo said as he stood up, but Goffredo reached out an arm and pulled him back down.

"Dear, dear Anselmo, my friend, there is always that little problem..."

"What little problem? There is no little problem," stammered Anselmo. I had never thought that one day I would see him stammer.

"That you know where we're hiding, Anselmo dear, and that, to tell you the truth, is a bit more than a little problem."

"Not a big problem, is it?" intervened Teo.

"I'm afraid so," replied Goffredo, and a moment later he clapped his hands. "But don't worry! I have already come up with a brilliant solution. Yes, you see, the answer to this fine trouble is... for you to join the gang!"

A moment of frost followed. The bandits broke into shouts of jubilation with an instant's delay, and Anselmo gave a nervous smile.

"But I can't. I am a mail carrier."

"You are a former knight, like me. And if I'm a bandit, so can you."

"But... she's a girl."

"So what?" escaped me, and I bit my tongue too late.

Anselmo pointed at Teo. "He is a child!"

"Ascanio can carry me on his shoulders!" exclaimed Teo.

"See? It is decided!" said Goffredo. "I understand, it is quite a change, but such is life. Sleep on it and it will be better."

I imagined the bandits sleeping like little angels while the sun shone outside and people went unsuspectingly through the streets of the valley. Who knows, maybe we could leave too while they snored? I tried to ask, as vaguely as I could, "Aren't we afraid someone will... disturb us?"

"Oh, don't be afraid, darling." Goffredo pointed to Timoteo the Mute. "Why do you suppose they call him the Eyeless Eye?"

Timoteo the Mute, aka Timmy, had not moved an

inch, and was staring unblinkingly at the entrance to the cave.

"What if... we don't want to be in the gang?" I whispered as the travel mattresses and wool blankets were unrolled on the cave floor.

"In that case, the problem would have to be solved in the only other possible way," replied Goffredo, and I could tell from his tone and the looks on all the other bandits' faces that that alternative did not involve us staying alive.



Travelogue, by

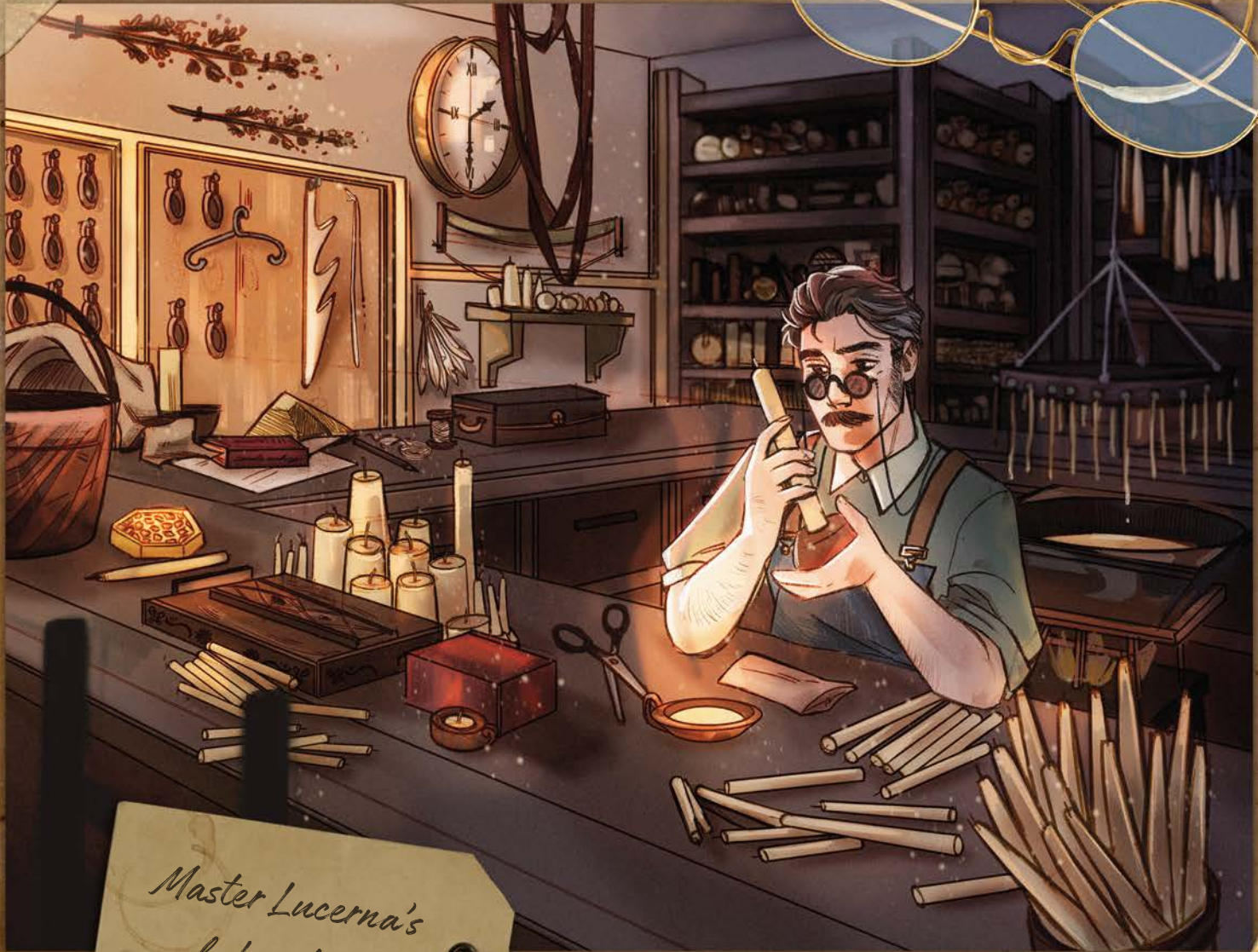
Isadora Lucerna



Finisvalle



At Clotilde's house



*Master Lucerna's
Laboratory*



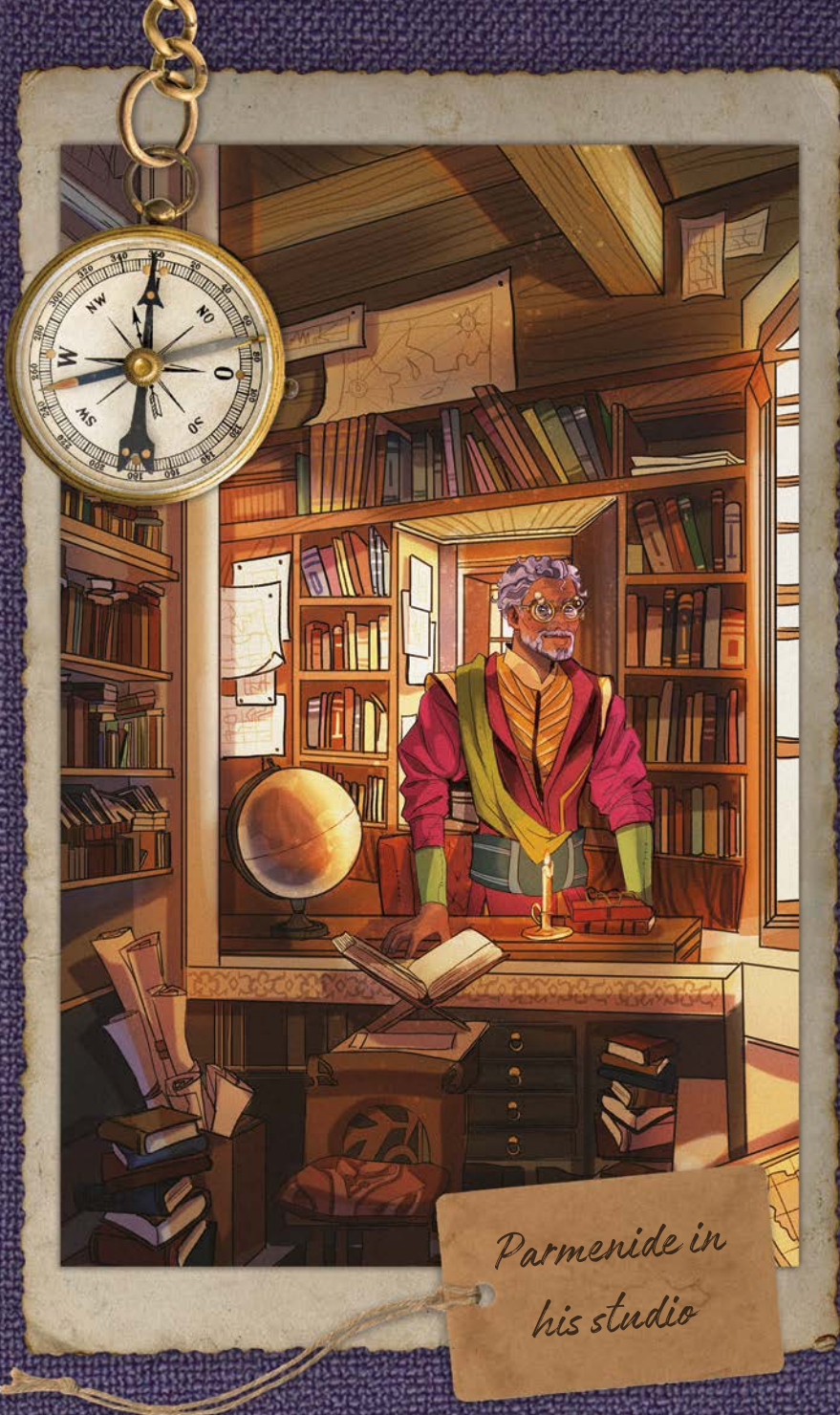
The bandits' lair



The forest

Monluce





*Parmenide in
his studio*



Eulalia's
garden