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Silken Magic:

Magic's Silken Snare (#1)
The Silken Shroud (#2)

The Silken Shroud

Silken Magic #2

ElizaBeth Gilligan

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I dedicate this book to the man in my life, my beloved husband and my children's father, Douglas Gilligan. Doug has been there, supporting me, encouraging me, and believing in me for half my lifetime. There is no way I can thank him enough or express my abiding love for this noble, gentle man, my hero, my knight, and my *camo-mescro*.

Introduction

Magic's Silken Snare was a love story, a story about the love of two sisters for one another. Having grown up in the military and moved around so much, I had the unique opportunity to be really close with my brother, for often, he was my only playmate, my only soul mate. What would I do if something happened to my brother? More importantly, I realized, is what wouldn't I do if something happened to him . . . and from there the story was born.

The Silken Shroud is also a love story. This is the love of a man and a woman: truly, deeply, desperately felt love, an honoring and cherishing that knows no bounds, not even those of life and death.

Continuing the story revealed in *Magic's Silken Snare*, I found great comfort in

realizing that there isn't really a point where the story or the researching stops. The joy of writing a series is that you don't have to worry about stuffing everything you've researched and created into the first book. You can let the story grow and the details unveil themselves as you go along to create something deep and rich and reflective of the real world.

Writing this book allowed me the scope to more fully share the intricacies of the real seventeenth century, the Baroque period, as well as the alternate history as envisioned in the land of Tyrrhia. In *The Silken Shroud*, I delved more deeply into the worlds of magic and the society of the Romani (Gypsies).

The Rromani ¹ of the twenty-first century are no more well-known than their historical counterparts, largely due to their cultural inclinations. I have benefited from the counsel of Rromani and activists in and for their people, but only enough to know that there is so much I really do not know. The Romani of Tyrrhia are an interpretation of what I do know and put into the context of a nonexistent world with its own social, religious, and economic pressures.

As to magic, so many have done so much, so well. ... As a self-avowed, self-educated philosopher and theologian, I applied what I had learned and considered over the years. As a consequence, I have tried not so much to do something different, but to refine the theories. My foremost goal, however, was to tell a rollicking, good story. All good philosophy (and magic) must reflect upon the human condition and the relationships each person has and develops.

Magic, philosophy, love, and the mysterious combined, will hopefully result in a story that sweeps the reader along on a journey of the heart and soul.

Writing *The Silken Shroud* has been an experience of a lifetime. I have learned so much about writing and the business of writing in the past year that it is difficult to know where and how to begin to acknowledge those who have helped me.

I have been fortunate enough to take part in some wonderful on-line communities. Bryant Street has taught me a great deal about the actual business of the publishing world. This has allowed me access to a council of literary notables as well as others studying beside me who came up with some of the best questions I never thought to ask. SF-FFW is a community of women writers in the fields of Science Fiction, Fantasy, Romance, Mystery, and beyond. The friendly kinship I have found there has been truly tremendous. Finally, there is JoysOfResearch@yahoo.com which I set up after a panel at a convention several years ago. I have benefited greatly from just sitting back and learning from people committed to getting the tiniest details exactly right (and understanding why).

My research has been furthered a great deal by my brother, Dana Murphy, the wonderful uncle who took my daughter to Italy for three weeks and brought me back the mother lode of books, photos, information, experiences, and insights. My thanks also to Brianna Gilligan, my daughter, who went on that trip and made sure not a moment was wasted and has also been a mine of information and insight. Another kind traveler (and kind fan), Mary Stella Flynn, has discovered and shared all sorts of wonderful tidbits about the land of her nativity.

The WordSpinners (Francesca Flynn, Wanda Haight, Christie Maurer, Kevin Andrew Murphy, Rosa Parent, Madeleine Robins, and Jacqueline Schumann) and Maya Kaathryn Bohnhoff have been invaluable in keeping me inspired and challenged to do my very best. Of particular note, Christie Maurer has been a sharp critiquer working on incredible deadlines. Kevin Andrew Murphy and Cesca Flynn spent one long Saturday brainstorming, and Kevin has consistently made himself available for research, plot development, and idea generation. Longtime friend and walking military history encyclopedia, Ray “Buzz” Nelson, has never failed me with ideas or information. Irene Radford has been a very dear friend; always available, always insightful, and always encouraging, even in the face of her own deadline pressures and real-life adventures.

I am grateful that I had the opportunity to get the education in the business that I have had from my editor, Sheila Gilbert. I cannot thank Sheila enough for her patience and encouragement, her goodwill and trust. I am *deeply* indebted. I am honored to be a part of the DAW family and the recipient of much support and encouragement from Debra Euler, Paula Greenberg, my copy editor, and Betsy Wollheim.

I am delighted and privileged to know that artist extraordinaire David Bowers returns as my cover artist with this book. He has so wonderfully captured the essence of story and character with his brush for both books that I am left in awe of his artistry and skill. I was pleased to learn that the cover art from *Magic’s Silken Snare* won the Silver medal in the book category from the Society of Illustrators.

I am grateful for the ongoing support and assistance of my agent, the ever ducky Carol McCleary of the Wilshire Literary Agency.

Finally, there are the readers, who have made these books worthwhile. I have been pleased to meet and get to know some of you, such as Joey Shoji, who has appeared at *every* local signing; Mary Stella Flynn, who has not hesitated to ask impatiently, “what comes next?” and you, who have picked up this book. ²

¹ In the late 20th century, as the Rrom began to form organizations to protect their society, culture, and ethnic identity; initiated doubling the “R”s in their name to differentiate themselves from the country of Romania and its people, the Romanians. Out of respect, I observe their preference when referring to their modern community and use the more commonplace single “R” (Romani) when referring to them in bygone times.

² Readers may get to know the author better or contact her with comments at www.elizabethgilligan.com or [lace@sff.net](mailto:lance@sff.net).

“There are some defeats more triumphant than victories.”

—Michel Eyquem, Seigneur de Montaigne (1533-1592)

I

“Nothing is too high for the daring of mortals; we storm heaven itself in our folly.”

—Homer, *The Odyssey*

2 d’Luglimo 1684

Shivering, she kept to the shadowy crevices as she spied upon the men. Wind whistled into the cavern off the sea, whipped the ethereal silk of her skirts and blew hair into her eyes. An eerie moan rose from the deepest breast of the earth beyond the two men sheltered in the cave. The smaller one jerked up, making the sign of the cross. Fear shadowed his expression, visible even in the gloomy half-light of dusk, disrupted only slightly by the faltering efforts of an oil lantern. With pinched lips, he clamped his coat tighter about his throat with pudgy fingers and rose up on the tips of his toes to peer out toward the gray-black ocean.

Waves rolled, washing up the shore less than a dozen feet away. The wind drove the spray through her like frigid needles. She shivered, forever cold.

The smaller man, balding and paunchy, bent over their unwieldy bundle again. She saw reluctance in his every move—from the wrinkle of his nose to the two-fingered way he touched the heavily oiled tarpaulin which contained their prize.

The sharp featured man did not appear to share his companion’s timidity or distaste. Muttering incantations she never expected to hear from a prince of the Church, he continued his work. With careful deliberation, he cut each of the leather cords that kept his precious bundle wrapped in the oiled canvas.

“Your Eminence, are you sure this is—”

The prince of the Church, a tall, graying man with overly sharp features, cut off his companion’s protest with an imperious motion. “If you had no stomach for this, you should have told me before.”

“But, Your Eminence, the *auto-da-fe*—”

“Does not exist in Tyrria while Alban di Mirandola e Novabianco remains king,”

Cardinal delle Torre said fiercely. He opened the tarpaulin. “Until a proper Catholic is put upon the throne, *Magnus Ignique* will act in place of the Church’s court and we, Brother Tomasi, must do what we can, even if it means that we use the very unholy tools of the damned against them.”

“Yes, Your Eminence, but she,” Brother Tomasi began hesitantly, “she is already dead. Give her no Christian burial, if that be God’s will, but do not let us continue to drag her body with us. How will we explain her to the captain?” the cardinal’s companion asked as he pointed toward the sea.

“The captain,” Cardinal delle Torre said, his voice growing more caustic and cold, “is a Believer and will expect no explanations.” The lantern he lifted illumined his face in a jarring contrast of shadow and glare.

She closed her eyes against the image of that visage, but it stayed with her; the hateful, judgmental, uncompromising demeanor.

“Ahoy!”

All turned toward the sea where a small gig bucked upon the waves. Four beefy men pulled hard at the oars, battling the current which dragged them perilously close to the jagged rocks of the shore and the choppy surf born of an oncoming storm. A fifth man hunched over, straining with the rudder. The sixth rode the bow, bearing a bull’s-eye lantern above them.

“Cardinal delle Torre?” he called.

The cardinal covered the face of the woman’s corpse and rose. “Captain Abineri? We are here!”

The man at the helm—Abineri, the cardinal had called him—slapped the shoulder of one of the sailors, motioning toward the shore. A flash of lightning showed the grimness of the sailors’ expressions. Even she could see that this rocky cove offered no place for them to put ashore. They would have to dance perilously close to the rocks to take on passengers.

Brother Tomasi’s countenance seemed as dark as the sea. He turned his short, pudgy face to della Torre. The roar of the wind forced him to yell. “You will not be dissuaded, Your Eminence?”

One of the sailors leaped from the boat into waist-deep water, hauling the boat by its anchor rope closer to the rocks while Captain Abineri shouted at the other men who clambered from their seats. The captain placed one foot on land and offered his hand. “Be careful boarding her, Your Eminence.”

The cardinal nodded and turned back to his companion. “Bring her aboard, Tomasi. One of the captain’s men will help you.”

The captain swung the lantern high for Cardinal delle Torre as the churchman accepted his assistance onto the boat.

Light glared into the recess of rocks. She shrank farther into her hiding place, hoping she would not be seen. It was dangerous business, spying upon this assassin

who wielded the dark magicks as easily as a carpenter his hammer. She shuddered at the thought of discovery, of once more being his hostage, controlled by him and his foul associates who hid behind the guise of service to the Roman Church.

“What is it, Your Eminence?” the captain asked. He sounded alarmed.

She clenched her eyes shut and tried to squeeze even farther into the narrow crevice.

“I thought I saw something.” The cardinal’s tone was almost hesitant, for once unsure.

“Where?”

She could hear the scraping metal of the lantern door. More light, pitching this way and that with the waves, bathed the rocky outcrop.

“Perhaps it was nothing,” the captain said.

“Raise the lantern higher and let me be the judge of that,” the cardinal said.

She began to pray.

II

“Fate rules the affairs of mankind with no recognizable order.”

—Seneca

26 d’Agosto 1684

Maggiore Mandero di Montago sidestepped a poorly aimed lunge, elbowing the queen’s staff adjutant out of the way as well.

Two men breathed heavily in the heat of the afternoon sun, watching one another, waiting for the next attack. The younger of the two fainted. The elder remained in his relaxed pose by the fountain where his uniform *soprabita* lay.

Seeing no response, the younger swordsman sprang forward with another lunging attack. Lieutenant della Guelfa met him halfway, locking the youngster’s rapier with his, and pushed hard, hooking his foot behind the youth’s ankle as he did so.

A cloud of dust rose as the stripling swordsman landed on his back. He gulped. The point of the lieutenant’s sword pressed against his throat. The hoots of laughter from the soldiers in the garrison courtyard brought a blush of scarlet to the recruit’s cheeks. Delia Guelfa sheathed his sword and offered the youth his hand.

“That was a dirty trick!” The fledgling scrambled to his feet, refusing the offered assistance.

Mandero pushed away from the courtyard wall. “And do you expect, Signore Antoine, that a *braggadocio* will fight by rules of etiquette? If you are very lucky, you might find such pleasantries observed in a duel with a gentleman, but that is unlikely since it is against the King’s Law to engage in dueling and it is our sworn duty to uphold the King’s Law.”

“Of course, Maggiore,” Antoine said with a bow.

“In my command, *Signore*, we may not be noblemen, but none will guess it from our manners on the field. When a gentleman offers you his hand, take it,” Mandero said.

“But of course, Maggiore. I beg your pardon,” Antoine said. Almost as an afterthought, he turned to Lieutenant della Guelfa. “And yours as well.” He offered his own hand with a degree of reticence.

The staff adjutant beckoned for Mandero to step aside, into the shadowy bower of an ancient acacia tree where they might speak more privately. “Well?”

“He’s raw,” Mandero replied. He dipped his fingers into the fountain and wiped the back of his neck. “He holds a sword like a dead fish. Women complain less than he does.”

The adjutant turned so that his back was to Signore Antoine de Conde. “It isn’t exactly his fault that he spent his childhood in France.”

“And why did his people leave France?” Mandero asked, giving voice to the nagging question.

“He is Huguenot,” the adjutant said. “With the troubles there . . .”

Mandero glanced back at the recruit in question. He could not be more than seventeen and looked half-starved. Signore Antoine pretended a great interest in putting his clothes in order. “So his father bought him a commission?”

The adjutant shook his head. “No. Signore Antoine is the eldest of six sons. His father was killed in a riot. His mother, Tyrrhian by birth, returned here to her relations.”

“Does he expect to keep his family with the wages of a *recluta*?” Mandero asked. “Where does his allegiance lie when—if—the troubles of the Edict of Nantes are resolved?”

“He has sworn an oath of fealty ... as have the rest of his family. I doubt any one of them has fond memories of France. They sold everything to get passage—to be smuggled to Tyrrhia.”

The youth was raw, to be sure, and as young as Alessandra had been. For all of the pretensions to manner and fashion made by the French, it appeared the lower classes were not so encumbered. Mandero sighed. It seemed not so very long ago that he had been the recruit and Capitano d’Este listened to the counsel of the

queen's adjutant. Who better to serve the peace of Tyrrhia and protect her from the machinations of less tolerant forces than someone who already had a fever in his gut from being battered down for what he believed?

"I'll take him. Send his papers along," Mandero said. He noted Antoine's grin of glee as he turned away from the departing adjutant. "Do not rejoice so soon, you're not even a Third yet."

Antoine looked confused. "A third?"

The boy apparently knew nothing of ranks either. Mandero shook his head. He sometimes wondered if the bonus given to units which took on new recruits was not given as an allotment for the hazard of having the untrained in their ranks as much as it might be for buying patience and goodwill.

He noted the adjutant pausing to speak briefly with a court messenger.

"The 'third' man," della Guelfa explained, "holds the horses when the rest of us are about our duties."

"Hold horses?" the youth said. "But I thought—"

"Whatever you thought, we'll get to later." Out of the corner of his eye, Mandero caught the movement of the young messenger, or perhaps it was the glint from the silver tray he carried. He stood at the edge of the walled courtyard, just within the shade of the acacia, fidgeting as though summoned by nature's call.

Mandero beckoned the boy over. The messenger stepped lightly, glancing nervously at the rough and ready men who served in the Queen's Escalade. Ales-sandra, Mandero thought, had never been intimidated by the men, nor bothered by their sweaty appearance and coarse manners.

The messenger stopped in front of Mandero and bowed, balancing a tiny engraved silver tray with a piece of folded vellum in his left hand.

"Maggiore di Montago?"

"That I am," Mandero replied. He took the paper and unfolded it. The writing was neat and clear, as was the queen's seal at the bottom. He folded the paper closed and turned to his second-in-command. "Delia Guelfa, see to it our lad gets a decent coat made and is otherwise suited up. I must attend Her Majesty."

* * *

While waiting for Giuletta, the queen's maid, to announce him, Mandero made a quick review of his appearance. The queen's summons had been immediate, leaving him no time to change into more courtly attire. The thought of court and the courtiers sent a shiver of grief through his heart. He brushed at the persistent lock of dark brown hair Alessandra always tried to smooth into place. By the Sisters Three, he needed her now more than ever before. It had nothing to do with his presentation to the queen ... or, rather, it had everything to do with the queen, for it was she who bound him by oath to the palazzo grounds and kept him from chasing the murderer of his beloved.

Alessandra had always known how to soothe his mood and she had taught him to tolerate attention to pretty appearances over the more practical and serviceable costume of a soldier. Of course, then, when it had meant spending another hour with his beloved Alessandra, he had borne anything, even the silly vanities of court life. Since her death, however, Mandero thought only of duty and service. He could never love another, nor could he face the courtly intrigues which had cost Alessandra her life.

“Maggiore?”

He started, caught deep in thought. Giuletta stood in the door to the vestibule looking at him expectantly. He cleared his throat and answered, “Yes?”

She opened the door wider to reveal the queen’s private chambers. Mandero stepped over the threshold, shutting the ornate door behind him.

The queen reclined upon a rose brocade chaise, a gray-gold shawl of Gypsy Silk spread across her legs. Even the subtle magic of the silk could not hide her malaise. Papers lay scattered about the side table, couch, and floor. One of the young prince’s painted wrought iron horses peered up at him from beneath a corner of his mother’s knob-legged couch. A fresh breeze billowed the filmy curtains over the door to the patio. The quantity of fresh air did little to ease the close atmosphere of the spacious suite of rooms.

At the sound of the closing door, Queen Idala’s hand dropped from across her eyes and she struggled to sit up.

“No, please, Majesty!” Mandero murmured. He bowed deeply, going down on one knee so that he would not loom over her. “Perhaps I should return another time?”

“I would have you stay. Despite the hour, ‘tis only the morning malady,” the queen said. She motioned wearily. “Rise, Maggiore.”

Mandero obeyed, self-consciously turning his hat in his hands. “I came immediately upon your request.”

“Of that, I have no doubt.” Queen Idala managed a weak smile. “Giuletta, bring the maggiore a chair.”

Mandero hastened to accept the brocade-covered chair from the maid and drew it near the queen. He found the queen’s eyes closed once more. “Majesty, should I send for the physician?”

The queen shook her head. “I cannot face another of his remedies, especially since only time will serve as the cure for this.” With a faint smile, her hand fell to her swelling midriff and lingered there. She looked up with a distracted frown and nodded toward the chair. “I’d intended that you sit, Maggiore.”

Mandero obeyed and did his best to hide his unease at sitting in the presence of royalty. The queen’s reference to her happy tidings caused another pang of personal grief. He and Alessa would never have the children they once hoped for. He had not even a child to help fill the void.

“Maggiore?”

Mandero looked up. “Pardon, Majesty, I was—”

“Thinking of her,” the queen said. Deep shadows, despite the brightness of the room, fell across the queen’s face. If the magic of the silk hid anything of her discomfort, of her own sadness and worries, then what preternatural woes overwhelmed the Gypsy Silk’s natural glamour?

“Please forgive my inattentiveness, and you have no need to apologize. Grief is,” the queen said with a wave of her hand, “well, it *is*. And while you’re with grief, there isn’t anything else, it seems, until the anger comes. For some, the anger, the desire to make things right *is* grief and this is why I kept you here, on the palazzo grounds these many weeks.” She paused, sighing heavily, as she struggled to shift her position.

Mandero looked to Giuletta—as he had always looked to Alessandra—for some cue to appropriate behavior. The girl remained pinch-lipped, silent and in her place, avoiding his eyes. He turned back to the White Queen to find her adjusting the cushions.

He kept silent and schooled his features to not show his frustration. This was one of those moments he regretted that the Escalade was in the queen’s hands. Maybe only men understood the need for swift and bloody vengeance; grief did not serve as an excuse for dereliction of duty. Had he his own way, the cardinal would have been hunted down like the dog he was and forced to answer for his crimes.

“I can see you are displeased,” the queen said. “You would have done differently, wouldn’t you?” She shook her head dismissively, saving him from trying to come up with some pretty explanation for not immediately disagreeing. “This is exactly why I would not release you. I do not take my duties as the *Com-mandanti* of the Escalade so lightly as some of my predecessors. To my mind, a Tyrrhian Queen has few enough obligations. You have been in my service for eleven years. I cannot afford to let any of my men, but certainly not one of my most seasoned officers, throw away his life on a *vendetta* without reason and judgment to offer some balance.

“So, Maggiore, I am about to rescind my standing order that you not leave the palazzo grounds.”

Mandero’s heart leaped. Finally! Finally, he would be able to end the anguish of Alessandra’s enforced afterlife! He could reclaim her body, if only to see her *mulló* put to rest.

The queen rummaged through the papers on the table beside her chaise. Her fingers closed on an overstuffed leather wallet, which she handed to him. “In here, you will see that time has not been wasted. Your brothers-in-arms have begun the search for the cardinal and his confederates. You will find the pertinent reports there.” She waved vaguely at the wallet.

Emotions roiled within him. He fingered the leather, aching to look within. “I am curious, Majesty, has the cardinal gone to Rome?”

The White Queen leaned her head against her pillows, half smiling as she shook her head. “We believe the Church is at odds with the cardinal’s tactics, at least, as we have reported them. The cardinal is, effectively, in political exile both in Tyrrhia and his homeland of the *Vaticano* ... at least, for now.”

“Does the Church try to defend him?” Mandero asked, aghast.

The queen raised her hand. “No, no. They do not go so very far as that. Indeed, they shy far from defending him. They have proposed, in the interim, a different ambassador from the Church.”

Mandero ran his roughened fingers over the leather wallet. “I have seen no one in his place as yet.”

“It will be some time before you do. Until the Church can offer an explanation acceptable to His Majesty, we will not entertain the Vatican’s ambassador. We have our priests performing their service to God as they have been taught it—so long as it conforms to Tyrrhian Law.

“The Church is not anxious to repeat the debacle of the English years without the sacraments while they fought with Elizabeth *Regina*”.

“So, the Church is still welcome in Tyrrhia?” Mandero queried.

“So long as the priests and the others behave themselves,” Queen Idala said. She sighed again, closing her eyes and pinching the bridge of her nose.

“I tire you, Majesty, forgive me,” Mandero said, rising. He wanted nothing more than to depart the room and begin the long-delayed pursuit, but duty and courtesy dictated a more decorous withdrawal from the queen’s presence.

“Please, Maggiore, be seated. Our audience is not quite at an end.” Queen Idala managed a wan smile as she indicated the chair that Mandero kept vacating.

He nodded, embarrassed, and sat.

“You are too polite to ask why, if I were having the cardinal investigated, I did not appoint you in the first place,” she said matter-of-factly. She held up a hand before he could protest. “You would not be the man I’ve come to know if that question did not arise. Even over these weeks, your anger has not softened. I had hoped that it would,” she sighed, “at least a little. I’d intended time for you to regain full composure, neither did I anticipate releasing you so soon, but a kingdom has its own destiny and events have occurred which need a man with your particular qualities.”

“My qualities, Majesty?” Mandero’s cheeks grew hot.

“Indeed.” The queen rubbed her brow. “After exposing the cardinal and learning that men in my own Escalade broke their oaths and fealty, I am hesitant about who I trust. The purge of the ranks by my senior officers and the Palantini Council does not entirely reassure me. Furthermore, this assignment goes beyond the cardinal to the heart of Tyrrhia.

“We are a Kingdom rich with the misfits and cast-offs of all Europe,” the queen said, her voice brooding. “It is the king’s sworn responsibility to bring balance

among the factions. The Escalade, however, lies among my obligations and it is my oathbound duty to protect that balance. Because of the Council of Queens, there is a kind of understanding between the White King's court and the Romani ... a women's understanding . . ."

Her voice trailed off. She stared into nothingness as though lost in a contemplative reverie. After the silence had drawn out over several minutes, Madero fidgeted—a polite enough way to reclaim the queen's attention.

"Mmm, yes," she said with a nod. "We have more reason than those, however, to see to it that the Romani find their permanent home here. Tyrrhia's economy relies upon the export of Gypsy Silk, more even than most know. We are rich as a nation, it is true, but the underpinnings of all that we are is made of the Romani's magic woven into this most precious bit of cloth." The queen smoothed the lap blanket, fingering the fringes. "The cardinal, wherever he is, still has power in Tyrrhia through his influence on our Catholics. All Tyrrhia is threatened. We are infested with witch-hunters, not just along our borders. They plague the Romani in particular. You'll read about much of this in the packet."

"Witch-hunters? In Tyrrhia? Why have we not heard? Have there been complaints from the Romani?" Madero asked.

"No, and that is the problem," the queen murmured. "It is my hope, since you are at least part Romani, that you could be Our ambassador. See that the people are protected from the cardinal."

"It would be my privilege, Majesty," Madero said. He rose and bowed deeply.

The queen settled back in her cushions, closing her eyes. "When will you begin?"

"I leave this afternoon," Madero said, controlling the urge to edge toward the door.

Again, he found himself waiting overlong for the queen to respond. She did not, her breathing grew deeper and her expression relaxed. Giuletta came to his side and laid a finger to her lips, pointing to the door through which he had entered the queen's chamber.

Just as he reached for the polished brass lever, the queen called out, "And, Maggiore, be sure to read those reports. The cardinal is organized. You are to make use of at least your personal unit—but have a care about who you trust."

"Of course, Majesty," Madero said. He waited just long enough beside the door for a decorous retreat, hesitating only to give the queen time if she thought of something more she might want to add. At last, his vengeance for Alessa would not be denied! He touched the plait of hair he kept tucked inside his shirt so that she was always near him.

When silence persisted, Giuletta eased the door handle and held the door open for him to make good his escape.

It took every ounce of self-possession to maintain a sedate pace through the gilt and marble halls of the palazzo. Once he reached the courtyard, he broke into a run.

He was free, at last! And soon, Alessandra, he promised in his heart, you will be as well!

* * *

Some all-compelling drive kept her following the woman's corpse. She was alone in this underground necropolis—save for the cardinal with his captive cadaver and the hundreds of sunken-eyed monks long since gone to their God.

The stench of decay and death created a miasma that rolled across the stone floor like a fog driven by an ill wind.

No *tatcho Rom*—not even a half-breed like herself—had any business being here. She whispered a prayer, pulling her silks closer so that she touched as little as possible of the plastered walls or the monks' posed remains.

A sickening sensation rose in her gut. Something more horrendous even than the *marimé* of death called to her. The silky song of corrupt power reached for her, clung to her. Like bats startled from their cavernous home, it battered her and where it touched, its sinewy fingers—seemingly made of oil and soot—insulted her body. The vile song of evil magic filled her up and coiled itself throughout her insides.

The cardinal lit another candle, whispering words of an ancient magic that had no place here. The ghosts of the holy men screamed protests. Could he not hear? Did he not care? They were his brethren!

From his vestments, the cardinal took out a *nanta* bag. With an ease and purpose borne of experience, he sprinkled herbs upon the corpse before him. He anointed the woman's head, lips, and chest with a thick, glistening fluid, then, from a flask, poured something else between her lips.

His actions were the stuff of her people's nightmares. She shuddered and felt a deep sorrow for the dead woman the cardinal used to gain whatever foul purpose he might have.

Acidic bile rose in her throat, threatening to make her retch. She had to do something and soon, but what and how would she ever be able to remove the *marimé* from herself?

The cardinal called, "Come to me, *Araunya*. I know you're here."

III

"Ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free."

—Bible, John 8:32

She looked furtively from one side to another. How had he known? Where could she go? How to escape?

Araunya?

A river of ice ran through her. She had entered a whirlwind that sucked her empty and compelled her toward the cadaver. The cardinal's magic thrummed through her like an instrument to its malignant cadence. She was too weak to struggle. Her arms grew leaden. She could not even pretend anymore that she had legs. She stared down at the poor tormented soul that the cardinal worked his evil magics on and knew . . . herself.

Marco Delia Guelfa scratched on the maggiore's door and stepped back, hands folded behind him in an "at ease" position. He tried to prepare what he might say. There was the matter of the new recruit, Antoine, of course. But the real reason he was here outside his commander's door was to verify Grifo's news.

Marco had reprimanded Grifo, of course, for spying into the affairs of their senior officer. He understood, however, the concern behind Grifo's action. Nothing had been the same since Maggiore—then Capitano—di Montago had been stabbed in the back and thrown overboard in the Stretto d' Messina to die and they, his loyal men, tricked into testifying against the good lady their commander had intended to wed. Nothing had gone right since then, from his lady's death to the maggiore's reappearance with a sworn vendetta against a prince of the Church, Cardinal della Torre, for the death of the young Gypsy princess.

From beyond the door, Marco heard the maggiore call "Enter!"

Marco took a deep breath and opened the door to his maggiore's personal quarters. Inside, he found Maggiore di Montago packing.

"You are leaving?" he tried to sound surprised.

The maggiore looked up. "Yes. We are released from palazzo duties." He cinched a saddlebag shut and sat down on his bed. From the nearby table, he took the pen-and-ink sketch of his lady, the *Araunya minore*, Lady Alessandra di Patrini and removed it from its simple frame. He gently folded the likeness into a bit of doeskin, then tucked it into his inside coat pocket, the side near where he kept the lock of hair from his lady tucked inside his shirt.

"We?" Marco repeated.

The maggiore nodded and met Marco's gaze evenly. Of all the maggiore's company, he was the only man among them married, and Marco had the happy, good fortune of loving the woman. This happiest of fates gave him at least some understanding of the maggiore's grief and the maggiore, for his part, seemed to appreciate his unspoken sympathy.

"Then we finally go after the cardinal," Marco said, feeling fiercely satisfied and something near joy to be facing action again.

“Not quite yet,” the maggiore said.

As di Montago surveyed the room, Marco stood back and tried to guess at his officer’s plans. “Then what will we do first, Sisignore?”

Di Montago looked at him fully then. “We take different roads,” he said, patting Marco’s shoulder roughly, “at least at the beginning.”

“The men will not be happy to be left behind, Sisignore,” Marco said carefully.

“I’ve considered my options, della Guelfa.” The senior officer managed a wry smile.

There would be no discussion, then, Marco conceded. He folded his hands behind him and waited for the maggiore to continue.

“Signore Antoine must be prepared for duty. You’ll cross through the heartland to Ragusa. We will meet there.”

Marco considered the recruit’s skills. The youth appeared to know little, if anything, about horses and the journey was not an easy one. “It will take us three weeks—”

“You have two,” the maggiore replied. “While you school the lad, keep an eye out for witch-hunters.”

“Witch-hunters?” Marco rocked back on the heels of his boots. “In Tyrrhia? In the heartland?”

“The queen has received reports of it. We are assigned to stop them before the cardinal and his confederates bring the religious war of the Inquisition to Tyrrhia’s heart.”

“He still has confederates? Beyond the nobility?”

The maggiore swung the saddlebags over his shoulder. “Aye. According to the reports I’ve been reading, there is even hint of a secret society thriving within our borders.”

Following di Montago out of his private quarters, Marco tried to make sense of this news. “The trials for the *vigilare* who broke their oaths to follow the cardinal instead are only now beginning. I’ve heard talk that the Palantini will charge nobility next. If members of the Escalade and the court are not immune to charges of treason . . .” Marco lowered his voice as they made their way through the hallway of the barracks. The *ordineri* and other senior officers expected quiet that was never possible in the general barracks. “Surely, Maggiore, it goes no deeper than this?”

“Considering the full wealth of the dilemma, no single man could have had so much influence that he could turn so many of our comrades in the Escalade and the *Armata* to treason,” the maggiore said. “There has to be more than one man’s influence and that, in and of itself, is evidence of a secret society set against the throne.”

Marco shook his head, numbed. “So many traitors? In the heart of Tyrrhia?”

“Indeed. And more monstrous, this secret society is well organized *and* funded.” Maggiore di Montago stopped abruptly, looking around. His voice dropped to a whisper, “This viper strikes from every station, from the nobility to merchants to the landed and more. But, even as dangerous as these people are, searching them out may be as destructive to Tyrrhia as any plans they may have wrought.”

Shock left Marco breathless. Tyrrhia was a bastion of tolerance. Just beyond the borders, the Inquisition reigned with its court of morality—the *auto-da-fe*— and its judges of piety and propriety. He shuddered to think what would happen to his wife—guilty of being born of a full Moor, never mind her trade as herbalist and midwife—their sons, and others like them.

He blinked, realizing the maggiore had continued on. He hurried to catch up. “What can we do? How do we stop it?”

“I have no answer, but we, most surely, will play our part in ending it,” the maggiore said. “However, clearly, we must move with caution.”

Marco nodded, his mind racing. There was nowhere he could send Maria and the boys for safety. Tyrrhia was where men—fathers, husbands—of the continent sent their families to assure their security. Tyrrhia must be saved!

Another officer came down the hall, looking at them curiously. The maggiore acknowledged him with a nod and backed out of the alcove.

Marco saluted the officer when the maggiore was clear, then double-timed his pace until he caught up and fell into step.

“You and the others will meet me in Ragusa in two weeks to this day. We will meet at noon at the Escalade post there. I want you to find out what you can along the way,” the maggiore continued, “and have a care about this secret group.”

They rounded the corner to the Escalade stables and found the rest of the company—including young Antoine, eight able-bodied men—waiting. Marco glowered at Second Lieutenant Grifo Brambilla who should have known better than to spy upon his senior officers. He should set an example for the men.

“It’s true, then?” Brambilla asked the maggiore. He nodded toward the maggiore’s stuffed saddlebags.

“You’re going after him, aren’t you?” Aiutante di Segundo d’Este asked.

Marco held his anger in check. He would correct the men after di Montago was on his way, not now, while they followed him and the maggiore like puppies. They were trained soldiers and knew better.

The maggiore waved away the Escalade stable hand who jumped to attention.

The unit stood in a cluster outside the tack room while the maggiore took down his saddle and gear. Antoine, Marco noted, had the good sense to listen instead of posing the questions he was obviously aching to ask.

Pushing his way through the men, di Montago headed down the long aisle of the barn toward his horse’s stall. “It was a matter of time. You all knew it. The queen no

longer stands in my way,” the mag-giore finally declared. He placed his saddle on the door of the spacious stall where he kept his stallion. The maggiore leveled an eye at Grifo Brambilla, who clearly exercised his reconnaissance skills at home as much as in the field. “How did you find out?”

“From the barracks cook,” Brambilla said. “It’s one thing, Maggiore, for the new man to look the fool,” he jerked his head toward the French youth, “but we are your men and—”

“And you shouldn’t have heard this way,” di Montago said. He whistled softly and reached out to stroke the muzzle of the big black and white horse that came to the door whickering like a newborn foal. “I swear that cook must make spies of the flies he draws to his kitchen.”

Some of the men snickered, but fell silent under Marco’s baleful glare. They moved back, making way for the maggiore to enter the stall.

“We’ll not be separated long. Lieutenant della Guelfa has your orders,” the maggiore said. He bent and checked the stallion’s feet and legs.

“Will you take none of us, then?” d’Este asked.

Di Montago shook his head. “There is more to the queen’s orders than perhaps you have learned from your sources.” He took hold of the horse’s ear when the stallion snapped at Antoine, who had leaned into the stall.

Giordano wisely pulled the youth back. “You don’t know much about Romani warhorses, do you, boy?”

Antoine shook his head, but minded the older man’s counsel and backed away.

“Then you do not plan that any of us should go with you?” one of the men—Marco could not be sure which—asked.

“I must meet with the Romani on Her Majesty’s behalf and I need for them to trust me,” the maggiore said. He stroked his horse’s nose and slipped the gilded bridle over its head. “I have reason to believe that they will be reserved enough with me; therefore, I do not want to try their patience more than necessary by bringing an Escalade unit into their home camp.”

“We have enough work here with young Antoine,” Marco said, though he felt like the men. Treachery was still afoot and they wanted the maggiore where they could find him and so be guided by him.

The maggiore leaned against the stall post and studied the recruit. “Do you ride, *ragazzo*?”

“Some,” Antoine said. “Before things went bad in France, I had a pony of my own.”

Several men groaned. A military saddle horse was far more challenging to ride than a child’s palfrey.

“You were raw once, too, Duarte,” Marco said to the closest. Antoine’s addition to the unit placed the sergeant third in rank from the bottom. To the recruit—not yet

a corporal—he said, “You’ll need decent clothes, a uniform at the very least.”

“I am prepared to wear the queen’s blue,” Antoine began hesitantly. “It is a modest enough color, but where my other clothes are concerned—”

“We rarely care about the color, so long as they are not threadbare and an embarrassment to the *soprabita* coat and baldric,” Marco said.

“That is so,” the maggiore said with a sharp nod. “There will be training at arms and in the saddle for him as well,” he continued as he checked his mount’s straps, giving the horse a shove in the belly so he could tighten the girth and martingale. “Antoine will be busy, but you men busier. I charge you with seeing that he is ready. You’ll need to rely on him before this adventure is over.”

The maggiore tossed his saddlebags over the saddle horn as he led the dancing horse from its stall. With practiced ease, he swung atop the steed’s back and gathered the reins.

“It will be done, then,” Marco said. “We will see you in two weeks, in Ragusa.”

“In Ragusa.” Di Montago maneuvered the horse away from the men before giving it the heel. The animal’s muscles bunched under him as horse and rider bolted from the stables.

For a long moment, there was silence among the men as they watched the maggiore depart. Marco took a deep breath. “There is work to do and no time to do it in. Let’s have at it, *compagni*.”

IV

“My dancing days are done.”

—Francis Beaumont & John Fletcher

28 d’Agosto, 1684

Mandero knelt and checked Joro’s hooves and legs as the horse drank from the stream. He had made good time in the past two and a half days, thanks in large part to the hardy stock the horse came from, bred to pull Romani *vardos* many miles in a day and be ready to travel again the next. Nonetheless, he took every precaution to make sure the stallion stayed fit.

The trip so far had been lonely, no camaraderie with his men nor family as *kumpania*. On the other hand, he finally had the time and silence to think long and hard. At the palazzo, he could bury his grief in training and other work, confident of

nary a moment's privacy. But now his mind was awl with memories and anger.

The cardinal—Mandero spat into the running water to remove the taint of that *bastarde* from his lips even though he had not spoken his name aloud—had much to answer for, the very least of which was the plot to overthrow Tyrrhia's White King and place the Catholic daughter of the previous king upon the throne. One plot died with the princess, but the cardinal was a careful, methodical man who would not be satisfied until he brought *The Faith* to Tyrrhia. Alessandra had gotten in the way and, worse, her immortal soul had been enslaved to garner further power for Cardinal delle Torre and his associates.

Mandero remounted, thinking. According to the reports, witch-hunters prowled the Tyrrhian heartland bringing their own version of the Inquisition. The Romani, of course, were targeted because of the stigma that seemed to haunt them wherever they tried to find a home. For centuries, the Romani had found haven from persecution in Tyrrhia. They had learned the trades that would keep their children's bellies full and, as luck would have it, they became heavily involved in the menial chores of silk production . . . before the French merchants offered their own silks, before Tyrrhia lost most of the industry.

The French persecuted the Romani for their heritage, branding them, taking their children, imprisoning their men. The Tyrrhian Romani stayed in Tyrrhia and revealed a treasure all their own, slowly developed over decades: a new silk, with magic woven into every fiber to enhance the presence of the wearer. Over the last hundred and more years, even as the natural silk trade was lost to Tyrrhia's rivals, the glamoured cloth became highly sought after by the rank and nobility throughout the Known World. Trade in the Romani's "Gypsy Silk" more than adequately replaced the loss of the normal silk trade.

Trade in Gypsy Silk assured the Romani's continued freedom. The Council of Queens gave them independence and security. The dark-skinned Romani with their "black" blood stood for once secure within their own kingdom and culture under the aegis of the Kingdom of Tyrrhia, ruled by the White—*gadjé*—King and Queen.

But now, after nearly a century of careful observation of the law, something had changed. The Romani did not report the witch-hunters' attacks to the White King. Mandero shook his head, easing Joro into an effortless trot. Had so much already gone so wrong that his mother's people would no longer rely upon the word of the White King? He had given them no reason to fear him, but try as he might, the White King could not change history: every other European royal house had eventually betrayed, ousted, or enslaved the Gypsies. The presence and activities of witch-hunters seemed to prove that it could happen even in Tyrrhia.

The Rom, who kept the traveling tradition within their new homeland, would move often and close ranks to protect themselves, hoping to wait out what might only be a period of ill favor or royal pique. They would be wary. How would he be received, as one of their own or as the White Queen's puppet?

Mandero ate his dinner of *biscotti*, cheese, and sausage as he walked with Joro following amiably behind. After resting the horse, he traveled through the remainder

of the day, until the cloak of evening gathered. He found a small grove off the side of the road where he could see passersby but not be easily spotted himself.

Joro snorted and nipped playfully as Mandero eased the saddle off his back. After thoroughly checking the horse's feet and bandaging his legs with cooling salve, Mandero gave Joro his measure of oats and set up a cold camp for himself.

Even though he was tired and sore, the pine needles made an adequate mattress once he had removed the random stones and a gouging root. Mandero groaned as he closed his eyes. Joro munched only feet away. Crickets lulled him into slumber.

* * *

Mandero shifted restlessly.

"*Adorato.*" The word tickled his ear. The tender touch of her hands traced the features of his face with a feather-light touch. She smelled of lilac and lavender. She felt soft and feminine, curled as she was into his side. "*Camomescro,*" she whispered into his ear in the language of their mothers.

"Alessandra." Her name was his breath.

Stars played across the sky, hiding among the tree-tops. It was in the blackest hour of the night, not long before the earliest hope of dawn. He reached for her at his side and found nothing.

Mandero closed his eyes. The disappointment never eased. How many times had he dreamed and been awakened to frustration?

A distant scream pierced the quiet of the forest road, bringing Mandero to his feet. The world swayed momentarily. Joro snorted and danced at the end of his tether a few feet away.

The second scream split the air like shattered ice. The cry drove Mandero to action. He saddled his horse and had just stepped into the stirrup when another scream came. He shivered, recognizing it for death.

The night was dark, but clear. Gray and white smoke clouded the sky to the southeast, the result of more than just a friendly hearth fire. Just along the top of the trees, an eerie red and gold glow began to dance beneath the roiling smoke. Like a beacon, it guided Mandero off the road and through the woods, ducking branches and dodging trees as he rode.

Mandero found the road again as he neared the fire. He pulled Joro in. He heard horses heading south, driven hard. A stone-and-wattle cottage lay just a bit off the road, its thatch roof fully consumed by fire. He turned toward the home, giving his horse the heel.

There might yet be someone alive inside. He could not abandon anyone to such a blaze.

He jumped from Joro's back as the horse skittered to a halt in front of the cottage. Mandero ducked the last of the burning thatches in the front of the house as they collapsed inside. From the door, he looked for survivors, a path . . . anything.

Smoke billowed and rolled upward, across what ceiling remained in the back of the house and gusting out the door and windows. A roof timber cracked and, with a groan, caved in, sending up fresh showers of tiny blazes and sparking new fires. Wind swept in, parting the smoke. An old woman lay in the herb garden just outside the door. Mandero, mindful of the roar of flames and flying sparks, drew his neck kerchief over his mouth and nose and hurried to the woman's aid.

As he bent over the old mother, he saw the telltale bloom of crimson flowing from a wound in her chest. She still took breath, but it grew ragged even as Mandero gathered her into his arms.

The old woman's eyes opened, wide and wild, slowly focusing on Mandero. "Witch-hunter!" she gasped. Her lip curled with disdain.

Mandero glanced toward the south road and his destination when he was done with his business here. He looked back to the old woman, still intent upon getting her out of her burning home. "Nay, lady, I am of the Escalade. Be still."

She pushed him away, craning her neck. "Bettina? Her child?"

Mandero scanned the cottage floor. The roof timbers in the back creaked ominously. On a nearby pallet, lay the midwife's glassy-eyed patient. Blood and flame paired in an obscene dance upon the younger woman's child-swollen form. From his vantage point, through smoke and smoldering cinders, Mandero saw that the woman was already dead. A bullet had ended the life of mother and another, the unborn child.

The old woman read her patients' fate in Mandero's expression. She pushed against his chest. "Leave us. We are already dead."

A shudder passed over her as she surrendered her final breath. Her magic still filled the tiny cottage, a buzz of energy, a hum that resonated beyond hearing to the core of Mandero's gut as it began to dissipate.

He gently laid the crone down, ducking as the last ceiling timber gave way and sent showers of sparks outward with a blast of fire and smoke. There was no one to help here. On the door, he touched the mark left by the murderers. Someone had painted their hand and placed the imprint of a fist; the marks of the knuckles and fingers were clear.

He whistled for Joro and swung atop the stamping black and white horse. Gathering the reins, Mandero urged Joro into a run even before he was fully in the saddle.

The big animal loved to stretch his legs and run full out, invigorated by the cool of the night. Mandero stood in his stirrups to pull Joro to a halt as they reached a crossroads. Joro shied in protest beneath him as Mandero studied the signpost and the road for a hint of which direction the witch-hunters had taken. He could not be sure, and a mad chase in the wrong direction meant they would escape.

One branch of the road took him straight on his intended southeasterly path toward Ragusa and the *Cavas de Ispica*, the other name on the signpost, Cori,

undoubtedly indicated a village. It often took locals to ferret out the midwives and old mothers for the witch-hunters.

Even as he reasoned his way, a shiver shook its way up Mandero's sweat-soaked body. Though he was no magician, he felt again the spell of the midwife smelling of freshly crushed mint and raspberries, and the stench of burning human flesh. Though he had long since put the burning house behind him, choking smoke mingled with the tendrils of a mysterious fog that rose up like a wall barricading the road to Ra-gusa. The form of a small woman began to take shape in the white puffs of fog and smoke.

A *gadjé* and ghosted already, it spoke of a power and anger dangerous to far more than just mind and body. Mandero gave a nervous twitch and whispered a prayer for courage. The old woman was not Romani, not of the black blood; she could not, therefore, become a *mulló*. But still her end came violently—like his precious Alessandra's—thus promising a certain malevolence in her spirit. Mandero spun Joro toward Cori, urging his courser back into a ground-eating run.

The road, such as it was, wove into the trees of the Tyrrhian forest and possessed more switchback turns than an angry schoolmaster. Local brigands and highwaymen must have tipped the road cutters prettily. Mandero took the turns at their outermost edges, watching for his quarry.

In the open areas, the sky began to shine an ugly orange-gray, indicating the sun had begun to rise, but in the forest night still held. Just as he began to doubt he might ever catch up, a sudden flicker of light winked between the trees ahead. Mandero hazarded a guess that he'd caught sight, finally, of their lanterns or torches. He slowed Joro just enough to give himself time to prepare his double-loading scorpionini.

The witch-hunters turned another switchback even as Mandero caught a glimpse of the last three of their party. He dropped the reins and guided Joro with his knees as he pulled a second pistola-gripped crossbow from a saddle holster. The backup weapon took only one bolt. He had no margin for error. While he saw only three men, he was confident there would be at least two more. He planned for four.

Mandero's caution served him well. He saw the rope stretched across the road before it took him out of his saddle. He rolled, controlling his fall, so that it only knocked the wind out of him instead of killing him.

The crack of a firing pistola confirmed his suspicion that these men would not let themselves be taken easily. He swore silently as he fought to catch his breath and jumped to his feet all the while scrabbling in the dust for his scorpioninis.

“Hold! I represent Her Majesty's Escalade!” Mand-ero commanded, still gasping for air. He raised his scorpioninis and quickly counted horses and men. One more saddled horse than rider. He had also lost one bolt from his double-loader. “Tell your friend to come out from the trees before he gets himself hurt.”

One man, still astride, waved briefly. The sound of crunching underbrush heralded the sixth man's return. “We couldn't make out your uniform before. Had

we known—”

“What are you doing on this road?” Madero said. His voice rang sharply in the quiet of the morning.

The other men looked at one another. Even with their lanterns and the impending dawn, the forest played tricks with his vision. There was barely enough light to make out their faces, much less to read their expressions. An air of guilt, however, permeated the coterie, accentuated by the absolute silence that followed Madero’s question. At last, the man he interrupted spoke.

“We weren’t aware a curfew had been issued for the King’s Roads.”

Another of the men chose a more conciliatory approach. “We’re very sorry for the trouble we’ve caused you, Signore, and would gladly see you to some aid. Traveling at night,” he grimaced expressively enough that he could be seen in the murky light, “it is a dangerous proposition. We made the foolish mistake of thinking you a brigand.”

“You worried about one man to your,” Madero did a swift recount, “six? Traveling at night is never advisable, so I am curious, *Signores*, what brought you out at such an hour?”

“We were going about our personal business,” the first man said irritably.

“What exactly *is* your business?” Madero pressed. Joro, with his reins hanging loose, returned from his own race down the road. He whickered softly, alerting Madero to his presence as he had been trained to do.

“We are simple purveyors of faith.” The second man spoke casually, patting the trembling withers of his horse.

The other members of his party did not seem to share his lack of concern.

“And is it possible that you ‘shared’ your wares with the midwife whose house lies ablaze back there?” Madero asked.

“I *told* you he was trouble!” the man from the forest proclaimed. He flung himself at Madero, tackling him about the waist, and dragging him to the ground.

The sudden blow caused Madero to drop his second scorpionini. He took wild aim with his remaining crossbow and shot. Even Madero’s skill with the weapon could not account for the luck as the wayward bolt buried itself deep in the face of one of his attacker’s companions. The rider made an inarticulate noise and tumbled from his horse.

Blessed Sisters! The *Fata* appeared to be with him, he thought; there was no other accounting for the effectiveness of his shot.

Madero dropped the emptied weapon and rolled across the forest floor tangled with his attacker. His opponent had no follow-up to the tackle and flailed wildly like a schoolboy. Madero took the advantage, gouging the other man’s eyes with his thumbs and following it with a head butt that left even Madero feeling unsteady. Shoving away from his stunned enemy, he rolled onto his feet whistling for Joro.

The horse charged into the forest edge and to Mandero's side. The remaining men dodged out of Joro's path. Drawing saber and stiletto, Mandero fell back, using the trees as shields. The *bravos* bore down on him.

Mandero countered, making the rapiers clang and scrape in counterpoint to the velvet silence of the forest. He fell back again. He was outnumbered, his one to their four. Only one of them seemed marginally competent, while the other three were merely energetic in waving about their weapons.

His opponents followed him into the cluster of trees, crowding one another, with no concept of fighting in unison nor much of fighting alone.

Circling through the forest, Joro snorted behind Mandero. The charger's rearing and pawing ensured no one would attack from behind. With his adversaries whittled down, the situation turned infinitely more manageable. He could not rely upon those numbers being in his favor much longer if the stunned rider had the courage to join in and, more importantly, if the sixth rider had gone for reinforcements to the village which must be close by now, instead of just beating a hasty retreat.

Mandero feinted with his stiletto at the man on the left, then thrust hard and deep with his saber into the man in the middle. The man collapsed, giving the soft groan one hears when a lung is punctured.

The two remaining men lunged together, the man on Mandero's left exposing his torso. Using his momentum against him, Mandero drove his long, thin dagger in and upward, lifting his opponent off his feet. This man slumped against him. A weight dragged at his side, demanding attention. Mandero ignored it and jerked his stiletto free, letting the corpse fall.

The third man backpedaled away from Joro, who reared and snapped as he had been trained to do. The man tripped and fell backward. He screamed and landed in a ditch with the ugly sound of crunching bone.

Mandero staggered away from his opponents and looked down. An enemy's rapier ran him nearly through—above the heart but through the shoulder. At the moment, probably due to the bloodlust, he felt little pain. Soon, though, the hurt would begin.

"By the Three Sisters!" He tore open his chemise, his right hand fumbled for the queue of Alessa's hair he carried over his heart. He grimaced and swore again. His lady's favor, besmirched by blood *and* steel! He pulled the length of hair from inside his shirt and took his canteen from Joro's saddle. He rinsed the length of hair thoroughly and wrapped it around his free hand before tending to his wound.

Mandero jerked the blade free and cast it aside as he moved into a patch of moonlight to better assess the puncture site. It needed stanching before he passed out from blood loss, but for now he must attend to other matters.

He replaced the canteen on Joro's saddle pack and knelt to clean his blade on one man's shirt before patting his body for any indication of who he might be. On the body of the second man, Mandero found a packet of papers tucked beside the crucifix in his coat. He took the papers and placed the jeweled cross over the man's

lips. The braggadocio would receive no Last Rites as his religion demanded, but Mandero gave him this much.

Turning, Mandero considered the bravo with the pierced lung sitting at the base of a tree, clutching his dagger, as though he might yet defend himself, and gasping for air. He had no intention of trying to navigate the ditch, which had sounded like nature's own oubliette considering the noises he heard as the other fellow tripped and tumbled into it. Toward the road, Mandero heard the first combatant, the wrestler, *il lottatore*, whimpering and moaning.

Mandero rose, ignoring the bravo waving his dagger at him, and went to retrieve his scorpionis. He found his backup pistola-crossbow on the roadside. The double shooter lay not far from *il lottatore*. As he bent to retrieve his weapon, he paused, caught by surprise. Near this man, the faint smell of smoke and raspberries lingered in the air.

Scanning the wooded darkness around him, Mandero could see the midwife's cabin still burning way up in the hills. At least there would be little or nothing for the neighbors who pointed her out to the witch-hunters to scavenge. It was a sick business, witch-hunting.

Herbalists, old widows, and mothers who knew a little about healing were branded as much a witch as those poor souls they accused of fornicating with the devil. Beautiful, helpful Alessandra would have received the same treatment as the midwife from these men. The business made Mandero sick at heart—and angrier still.

“*Merce!*” *il lottatore* whined, uncovering one of his eyes.

Mandero shook his head. “What you wouldn't give for the help of a good healer right now, eh?” He stood. “The closest healer to be found in these parts— as I know them—lies up on that hill. You might seek her indulgence . . . oh, but that is not possible now, is it?”

He turned his back on the man. The bodies of two witch-hunters lay by the roadside where they had fallen; their horses skittered nervously. Should reinforcements be sent, they would be easy to find. His injury had begun to ache. He could not afford to stay much longer. He headed back into the forest, stepping over the whimpering *lottatore*.

Joro waited where Mandero had left him, snorting a welcome.

The braggadocio with the punctured lung raised his dagger again, weaker now. “You've killed me,” he said, falling back against the tree, coughing.

“Not quite, but I hold little hope for you if you talk. You shouldn't have long to wait for your friends to return. Perhaps their prayers will help you heal.”

Mandero slapped the dagger from the man's hand. He ignored the feeble resistance as he dug about in the bravo's pockets. Nothing. Not even identification. “Are you Tyrrhian?”

The man coughed again, but otherwise remained silent.

Mandero prodded him and, when he did not answer, drew his own dagger again, holding it up to a streak of budding sunlight thrusting between the branches overhead.

The witch-hunter groaned and nodded.

“And the others?”

“Some.”

Mandero shook his head in disgust and jammed his dagger back into his belt. He winced. The twisting motion made him conscious of the chest wound. Pain came now that his battle fever passed. Aches slivered through him and radiated down his left arm. Blood soaked through the linen and blue wool of his uniform.

Rising, Mandero found he had to lean against Joro’s withers to keep his balance. Blood was flowing from the wound faster than he had realized.

The horse nudged him, whickering, when he fumbled his first attempt to mount. Mandero took a deep breath and grabbed the pommel of the saddle with his right hand to drag himself up. His arm and chest burned like fire and stung from the exertion of pulling his weight upward. Joro shifted beneath him as he swung his leg over and reached for the reins.

“You’re damned,” the witch-hunter said. He stared up at Mandero malevolently.

“You forswear your king and country and speak to me of damnation?” Mandero said. “Serve your Church, brother, but leave your countrymen alone.”

Mandero knotted his fingers through the coarse hairs of Joro’s mane and gave him the heel. The Ro-mani warhorse sprang forward into the protective cloak of the forest. The path they made grew narrow and the ground uneven, covered in pine needles and new fallen leaves, which smothered the sound of Joro’s hooves. He bent low on the horse’s back to avoid the grasping green fingers of the forest. The morning was warm. Dawn provided what light the trees made possible. The scent of the distant sea, trees, and mulching undergrowth mingled with the smell of horse, saddle leather, and fresh blood.

V

“ Ill news hath wings, and with the wind doth go, comfort’s a cripple and comes ever slow.”

—Michael Drayton

Joro houghed, breathing hard, as he finally slowed his gallop and fell into a

smooth-gaited trot.

The wound in Mandero's chest sent pain spearing in all directions, every movement a new appreciation of the breathtaking ache. His arm throbbed. The smell of his own blood sickened him. A sudden sleepiness threatened to overtake him.

But more than mere tiredness sapped his strength. Experience from his many campaigns taught him better. He recognized the signs. If he did not stop, Death would have him, and even though that would bring him nearer his beloved Alessandra, there was too much left undone! He could not succumb. Not now. Not yet.

Mandero straightened in the saddle. He did not dare stop at any of the clusters of houses along the road. All he need do now, in his condition, was to stumble into the witch-hunters' nest. No garrison lay nearby for him to summon aid or to find a surgeon. But the Romani camp was within an easy morning's ride. Where the forest allowed, he could see the towers of Ragusa, and on high hills he had already seen the distant blue of the Mediterranean.

He needed to dress the wound himself and, considering his state, he would have to do it on horseback since he could not guarantee getting astride Joro again once he was off.

Finding a cluster of trees, Mandero guided the war-horse into it, nudging the horse until he sat surrounded by the limbs of a pine. It was a struggle to maneuver out of his coat, which he laid across his lap. He cut his shirt off and with his teeth and good right hand, he tore it into strips which he also set across his lap.

Joro shifted his weight, almost costing Mandero his balance. He patted the horse's neck and whispered soothing words. Joro sensed the danger, smelled his fear, and it unsettled him. To the horse, there was nothing a gallop could not cure. Mandero kept whispering, clamping his legs tighter. The last thing he could afford was for Joro to take his head and run.

When the strips were ready, Mandero reached behind and pulled his saddlebags to the fore. Using his left hand as best he could, he rummaged in the bags and came up with a small, hard apple. He took a bite and leaned forward to give the rest to Joro. The effort nearly tipped him out of the saddle.

To regain an upright position he needed to use his left arm and pull himself up using the tree. "By the Sisters of Fate!" Mandero bit his lip.

He rummaged for, and found, the small cold metal flask of whiskey at the bottom of his bags. Taking a deep swallow first to prepare himself, Mandero leaned back into the tree and poured the alcohol over the open wound.

Wind rushed through his ears and the explosion of pain consumed every aspect of his consciousness. Agony came in waves, with blurred images and bright stars piercing his eyes. His entire left side throbbed. Mandero upended the flask, licking up the last drops.

Burrowing through the bags, Mandero found the small medicine kit he kept—far

from standard issue, but instead what his mother had taught him to always carry. He was glad of it now. He found the yarrow wrapped in linen, aged and crushed. His mother had advised changing it regularly, easy enough since it grew along the roads. Mandero considered dismounting and looking for better quality and decided to make do with what he had.

The wound, for all the blood, measured less than an inch in diameter and puckered, ugly purple and red. Mandero scattered the herb along the strips of linen from his shirt, then balled a bit of the leaves and linen and used it to plug his injury.

He caught his breath and held it consciously. He wanted to be sick. His stomach roiled and the sunlight seemed to fade in and out. Determined to maintain control, he continued. With his knife, Mandero cut into the pine tree. He wiped the sap from the blade onto the strips of linen. Using the sticky cloth, Mandero collected more of the pitch and, with a deep breath, used it all to plaster a linen bandage to his chest. It took him the better part of another hour to contrive a decently tight bandage, and knotting was the devil's work.

“Atropos, do not cut my thread yet. Clotho, sister weaver, bind my life-thread deep in your pattern. La-chesis, spin me a little more thread.” Murmuring prayers to the Fates, to the *Fata*, Mandero struggled back into his coat.

The longest strip of linen Mandero saved for last and now looped it over his right shoulder. It would make an almost adequate sling. His baldric would be better, but the thought of marring his badge of office did not bear more than a heartbeat's contemplation.

At long last, Mandero gathered the reins. Joro whickered, his ears pricking, angling back and forth.

At Mandero's gentle nudge, the horse sprang into a rolling canter, weaving between the trees with ease.

Mandero knotted his fingers in the horse's mane. It was a smooth gait, but he was not up to even that. He pulled Joro back. The warhorse shied and pranced.

The jarring of the wound set Mandero's teeth on edge. He could not walk the distance and he was too close to where he had been attacked. His only hope was Joro.

Mandero lay his face against Joro's neck. The horse's gray hooves danced on the forest floor, scattering debris this way and that. “Tch, tch!” he whispered, running his good hand over the horse's shoulder.

Joro settled a little, his ears back. He listened. The stallion slowed into his smooth trot.

Mandero closed his eyes, exhausted. He turned Joro toward the sea and the towers ... or in the direction he had last seen them. Later, in a mile or more, he would return to the road. Now, he focused again upon soothing Joro, keeping the horse moving, but at a pace that did not risk making him faint and fall from the saddle.

On the wind—carried by the fairies?—Mandero captured an old tune. He

remembered it now. His mother, when she lived, when she drove the horse, sang it. He forced the words from his stiff lips now.

*“Drom . . . pawdel puve e pawni;
Road . . . across the land and water;
Ako’s tu peeapen e miri!
Here’s your health and mine!
Kushto si for mangui a slom sis.
I am content to follow you.
Drom, dook le gry
Road, bewitch the horse
e dukker drey miri drom.
and tell my fortune by my path.”*

* * *

Mandero started awake, conscious of Joro moving beneath him and a firm hand on his hip that kept him from slipping out of the saddle. He sat up and gasped, suddenly all too aware of the overwhelming ache in his chest.

“Sisters of Fate!” he swore. Slowly the pain subsided and he was able to regain his equilibrium.

The woman’s hand dropped from his side, but she continued to walk beside him with Joro’s reins looped around her arm. The horse, despite his fierce nature, trod amiably next to her as gentle as a palfrey.

“My thanks to you, *Madonna*,” Mandero said. He leaned down politely.

She did not turn to look at him, but simply loosed her hold on Joro’s reins. Though the sun was high and the temperature was typical of a late summer’s day, the woman striding at Joro’s left wore a full, red linen cloak that covered her from head to the ground.

“I am pleased to be of service, Maggiore.”

Mandero blinked in surprise and then realized his baldric declared his rank and position for those familiar enough with military insignia.

She held up a canteen. “You must drink to sustain yourself,” she said.

Pale doeskin encased her hand. Embroidery covered the glove which reached beyond the cuff of her pale gray-green silk sleeve.

“After you, Madonna.”

“I am well.”

If it was possible to hear such things, it sounded to Mandero as though she smiled. He wiped his mouth on his coat sleeve before drinking deeply. The fluid inside was sweet and cold, as though it had spent the night in a flowing stream.

“Take as much as you want. I have more,” the woman said.

He needed no further bidding. Between the wound and the heat, the refreshing fluid filled his deep need.

He felt revived, no longer overdepleted of drink nor of energy. “What is this?” Mandero asked as he returned the canteen.

“Honey beer. And now, you must eat something.” She lay a large embroidered kerchief upon the pommel and his lap.

“Your generosity is too much, Madonna—”

“You would refuse such a small gift?”

“No, but—” Mandero sighed, wishing he didn’t feel quite so addled. “Is there some way that I can repay you? At least let me see you to your home.”

The forest surrounded them completely. The trees’ great arms spread over them, offering them shelter while also blotting out the skyline. Forest lay before and behind them, giving Mandero no real way to know how far he had traveled while he slept and how far off course Joro’s wanderings might have taken them.

“You do not eat, Maggiore. Does the food not suit you?”

Mandero looked down again, trying to capture some glimpse of her face, but the hood of her cloak kept it in shadow. “No, Madonna, but I am on a journey of great import and—”

“And you fear you have gotten lost,” she said. “I have been with you several miles now and your course seems straight enough.”

“Straight, yes, Madonna, but there are many crossroads,” Mandero said.

“Do you smell the sea, Maggiore?”

Mandero frowned at her, but sniffed. A damp saltiness did pervade the air. “Then I am near the coast?”

The narrow shoulders covered by the crimson cape rose. “Near enough.”

“Sircusa?” he asked.

“Nay, Maggiore, we are to the south,” the woman said.

Could his luck have been so good, then? Mandero’s stomach rumbled. Hungrily, he unfolded the kerchief. Inside lay half a loaf of bread, sausages, cheese, and dandelion greens. “This bread is still warm, Madonna. How long did you say you have traveled with me?”

The woman now walked beside him, her arms folded under the cloak that masked everything but her height. She stood taller than the average woman. Judging by how the cloak fell, this strange, extremely tall lady was but a wisp and yet had the vigor to be comfortable on long walks on hot days while dressed for winter weather.

“Madonna, how long did you say we have traveled together?”

Her laugh was breathy, like a rush of wind through the trees. “I did not say.”

“Were you with me at the last crossroad?”

“Aye, it was Modica. We left the main road there.”

Mandero sat up straighter still in the saddle, really studying the surroundings. The forest here was dense, denser than any of the forests before. A shiver ran through him. He licked his lips nervously, knowing the answer, but needing to hear it from her. “And where are we then, Madonna?”

She pointed down the long road. “There lie the *Cavas de Ispica* where your people have made their camp.”

This deep in the forest, day seemed like dusk at the height of the sun. The road stretched out long and straight. The ground beneath Joro’s hooves was softened into sand. The trees which stood out, closest to the road, were gnarled and of the sort common by the sea. Now, he, too, could smell the particular aroma of mulberry groves. He was upon the Fairy Road, the thoroughfare to the Romani camp protected by spells and, more importantly, the *lasa* and their kind—or so tradition said.

“You are . . . not ... of the blood, are you?” Mandero asked quietly.

Silently, her head shook from side to side.

“How do I repay you, Lady? You are *lasa*, are you not?”

“The girl, Alessandra. I have seen into your heart and you loved her ... as We did. She was fairy-blessed and, by rights, she is Ours. She has been stolen. You, Maggiore Mandero Ercole di Montago, will give her back to Us.”

“I intend to end her hell, to save her from the *benglo*—” He stopped speaking, realizing suddenly that he was alone. He turned in his saddle, looking into the depths of the tangled woods.

As though from beside his ear, she spoke again. “You will return her to *Us!*”

Mandero drew Joro up, turning him in a circle. As he faced the way he started, he saw two men fade from the shadows of the trees. They moved to stand in the road, blocking his path ... a road that had never been guarded by more than magic and lore before . . . and they were not alone. Mandero could not see them, but he knew others were stationed nearby with pistols and crossbows.

They were there to protect the Romani from outsiders.

VI

“The happiest liaisons are based on mutual misunderstandings.”

—Duc Francois de La Rochefoucauld

30 d’Agosto 1684

Luciana woke with a smile, not just because of her dreams, but because Stefano lay tucked up beside her with his hand resting upon the swell of her belly where their child grew. She shifted around in his arms and discovered him dressed, the hand beneath his head still wore his riding glove. He smelled of horses, saddle leather, and dew. She loved his scent. She took it in, breathing deeply, and exhaled.

His eyes opened. Leaning up on his elbow, he pressed a kiss to Luciana’s forehead. “You are not sick this morning?”

“No. The morning malady has not been troublesome and yet you ask me every morning.” Luciana rolled onto her side again, with her back to him, grinning. “Could it be that you aren’t happy unless I heave the breakfast I haven’t yet eaten?”

“Of course, I wish you no ill!” Stefano said, sounding shocked and dismayed.

Luciana laughed and rolled onto her back again, stealing a kiss as she did. “Take no offense at my teasing, *rommado miro*.”

Stefano’s brow furrowed. “My husband?”

“Husband mine.” She shrugged, arching up to kiss him again. “You learn quickly, *sherro’s kairipen mengro*.”

“You appease me,” Stefano growled. “Your language makes no sense! It takes three words to say ‘student.’ ”

“Are you not a man who works with his head?” Luciana asked. She stretched, luxuriating in his closeness which she had been denied for so long during their estrangement, which encompassed the majority of the marriage. “You mean to make the language harder than it is, Stefano- *miro*, which is why it troubles you so. We are a descriptive people and so is our language. With the tribes spread all over the continent and Tyrrhia, each *vitsi* develops its own variations according to the language of those who surround them in their travels. Send me a Romani who has lived in France all her life and it would take us perhaps an hour or more to come to a common use of the tongue. You want exactment like a stone, where our language is a river.”

Luciana rose from the bed. Her body suddenly had its needs. Nature’s call

warred with an overwhelming appetite.

Stefano gave her privacy for her morning ablutions. He lay staring up at the swathes of fabric that hung from the four posts. "I had a letter from my sister this morning. I met the messenger on the road during my ride."

"From Idala? And you read it without me?" Luciana chided. She spotted the tray of fruit and breads that Kisaiya had placed on the table near her bed. She took grapes and sat on the foot of the bed. "How does she fare?"

Stefano sat up and stole a grape, his expression growing somber. "Not so well in her expectations as you. The Royal Physician says that she may carry twins."

"Twins?" And her health had been steadily declining . . . perhaps it was the strain of the children she bore, Luciana hoped. "I will send her something that will ease her condition."

Stefano leaned back against the head of the bed, watching her.

"What?" Luciana asked. She could see quite clearly that he knew as well as she did that she was dying for news of justice for her own sister, Alessandra.

"Idala says that she will be releasing her command that Alessandra's *maggiore* stay on palazzo grounds."

"Finally!" Luciana's cheeks flushed with embarrassment. "I mean no criticism of your sister, but—"

"We've had this discussion too many times, *canto miro*, and you need not pretend a patience you do not feel," Stefano said. He pulled the riding glove from his right hand. "The queen's intentions are good and, to be honest, I cannot argue with them overly much as a commander of men myself. She did not want *Maggiore di Montago* to allow his heartache to cloud his mind. Besides, she has used the time well; she has had her spies seeking out the cardinal."

Luciana glanced over at the pretty bowl with its ebony interior. Her scrying bowl was disguised as a container for her needlework. She, too, had been seeking the cardinal, but on mystical levels. Stefano distrusted magic. It made him especially nervous now that she once again bore his child.

"I dreamed of the *maggiore* last night," Luciana said, almost without thinking, and then realized her sister's grief-stricken lover had, indeed, filled her dreams. "His road will not be easy and . . . and he may have need of us—"

Stefano's expression grew dark and suspicious.

"I cannot help my dreams, heart of my heart. Prescient dreams are common among the women of my people during their time of biding."

"Why do you never directly speak of being with child?" Stefano asked. He looked mildly exasperated, and somewhat amused by her people's foibles.

Luciana relaxed, quite content, for the moment, to let him change the subject. "It is the same with why we do not speak of the dead. The spirit is in transition. We do not say the dead's name for fear of changing their course, nor does one speak of the

condition wherein the child makes its progress for fear of drawing the attention of evil which might interfere with the child's journey." She dropped the grape stems back onto the platter and cut herself a piece of bread. So occupied, she asked casually, "And what word is there of the cardinal?"

* * *

Cristoval Battista paced the white gravel walkway of his arboretum, the one place in the estate where he maintained something of its earlier glory. He rubbed his temples, stopping at the table as he began his very reasonable argument. "You must understand, Conte, that I am unaccustomed to—"

"I have absolutely no interest in what you are accustomed to, Don Battista," the thin, sour-faced man said. He disposed of his napkin, and then paused to rub his fingers, dissatisfied. Daintily, Pierro deMedici continued his post-breakfast ablutions, ignoring his host. At length, he rose from the table. "I expect you to accommodate these men in the appropriate fashion."

The conte's words left no room for argument. He rose as he spoke, dusting nonexistent motes from the lace cuff just peeking out from the sleeve of his tailored coat.

Battista bowed courteously, using the movement to hide his expression. If he were not obligated financially to the Duca deMedici, this priggish deMedici bastard would not find the Battista estate or its residents nearly so hospitable! But he *was* indebted— more than just financially—to the duca, and neither providence nor prayers had provided alternatives.

The conte clapped him on the shoulder and said, in a more conciliatory tone, "I shall take my morning ride. Accompany me, Don Battista."

In another man, the invitation might have been an attempt to placate. Cristoval knew better. Like a cat leaving its mark, the conte made sure all around him respected his power.

Cristoval fell into step with the conte, leaving the table and its contents to the servant who whisked in behind them. In the narrow gallery outside the arboretum where his guest took his morning repast, little besides the traditional family portraits adorned walls. Passing one of the more recent portraits, Battista adjusted the worn lapels of his jacket as though his father might step from the gilt frame and lecture him about the importance of a decent wardrobe. The senior Don Battista, Cristoval thought irritably, benefited from being of another generation, when family coffers were not so distressed.

Conte Pierro deMedici paused in the front foyer, his fine Cordovan leather boots scuffing the tiled floor as he turned to examine his countenance in the long mirror near the door. The conte adjusted the collar of his stark white shirt and lace-edged neck kerchief tucked just so into his fine black and gray silk jacquard jacket. He frowned and adjusted the lay of the scarlet ribbons adorning his fashionable lovelocks where they brushed his upper chest. As he met Battista's gaze through the mirror, one of the conte's carefully trimmed black eyebrows rose.

“Do you think I preen, Don?”

Battista pretended confusion, hoping the vague wave of his hands, the vacant expression, might defuse the imminent display of deMedici’s volatile temper.

“The good Lord gave me my looks and little else. What man am I to treat God’s gift shabbily?” The conte combed his thin black mustache into shape with his manicured fingers and stroked the wisp of beard beneath his lower lip, before turning. “My half brother, Gian, was born in the right bed and thus stands to inherit all that is legally our father’s. I am to be grateful, I’m told, that our father not only deigns that I bear his name but takes some small interest in my future as well. I may take advantage of whatever of my father’s interests my brother does not wish to pursue.

“My marriage to Her Most Royal Highness, my wife, Princess Bianca Novabianco and the awarding of my Tyrrhian title were to be the stepping stones I needed to position myself for a long and influential career. Were she not murdered by a damnable Gypsy spell—but all that ...” The conte motioned with the same vagueness Cristoval had just pretended. His lips curled and anything that might have been mistaken for handsomeness fled the conte’s face. “All my plans have gone awry. I must begin anew and be grateful that I kept my title and a few alliances after my bride’s unfortunate and very premature demise. So, you see, I care not a jot when you are notified about guests arriving. Custom—unless it brings me closer to my ends—means nothing to me, and you would be well-advised to adopt a similar practicality since our fortunes are, as they say, wedded.”

“Your counsel is most sound, Conte. I am grateful.” Cristoval bowed. His jaws ached from gritting his teeth.

“Of course you are! Now see to it that my horse is ready and I will be with you anon.” The conte paused in the further arrangement of his ribboned lovelocks to wave Don Battista away.

Cristoval closed the front door of his manorial home with great care—any less control would result in a very telling slam. It was more than a matter of custom or even courtesy to tell someone when their home was to be invaded by a score of muddy-booted, questionably-parented men. The deMedici bastard took it for granted that enough food lay in store—not just for the impending visitors but for the household this winter.

Don Battista paused on the steps, his hand falling to rest upon the marble hip of a caryatid that graced the upper railings of the balustrade. The dainty nymph and her twin statuary had suffered the pains of weather so that their paint peeled like the skins of an onion. Yet another year would pass before he could do something about the condition of the more cosmetic features of the estate. Hearing a cry, Battista looked up, a frown creasing his features.

Beyond the dilapidated fountain, cobbled courtyard in need of repair, and fields where his retainers attempted to scratch out sufficient produce to keep them all fed, he saw one of the younger lads waving and pointing toward the distant horizon.

Battista squinted and raised a hand to cover his eyes. He saw a telltale smudge of dust. Riders coming from the south. The conte's associates would arrive well ahead of the hour predicted by their outrider. Battista muttered a curse as his gaze swept across the small courtyard.

He had hoped to have sufficient time, to send for field hands to help in the house, to get ready in some small way. The upper bedchambers might have been aired and fresh linens prepared. His *governante*, Si-gnora DelVecchio, faced the daunting task of putting together even a light supper to feed the men about to arrive on his doorstep.

Would that he had financed an excursion to Palermo this spring with what was left of Maria's dowry as originally planned! Had he been gone, the Duca deMedici could not so easily have foisted his son upon him, and, more important still, he would have secured a new wife to oversee such domestic affairs and supervise his son's upbringing. Battista sighed, resigning himself to his circumstances. Unlike deMedici, he had no rich father to arrange advantageous marriages or fund his enterprises.

As Battista turned, he found the conte just stepping into the brilliant sunshine. Battista waved in the general direction of the riders. "They come."

"So I see," the conte said, his eyes narrowing as he, too, studied the distant travelers. "Have your people make ready. I will ride out to greet them." He stalked off toward the stable, leaving Battista to grind his teeth before setting off to do as he'd been told.

* * *

Battista haunted the periphery of the dining hall, which was easy to do since his house staff lit only every other sconce of candles. DeMedici had wrinkled his nose at the paucity, but said nothing. The men who followed in the conte's wake seemed to neither notice nor care. They shrugged out of their heavy, dust-caked cloaks and cast them in the general direction of chairs or house staff.

These men looked rougher even than Cristoval had feared. Beneath the floppy, featherless hats and layers of road soot, the men were unshaven and tattered, looking more like Turkish pirates than any Godfearing man ought to. For all he could surmise, they might very well *be* Turks. He found it impossible to discern where the brown of dirt ended and complexion began. All of them were dark-haired, whether from grime or natural coloration he could not tell.

DeMedici moved easily toward the head of the table, motioning the ruffians to the seats. By their nature or custom, each of the men took a chair, arraying themselves about the table in such a manner that each of the four doors into the room was easily in view of at least three of their seven members. They spoke in loud voices which, in turn, testified to their foreign births. Battista listened carefully, identifying the accents: Venetian, Neapolitan, Basque, and others not quite so distinct.

The foremost *manigaldo* rose from his newly acquired roost and slapped the next man's boots from the table. "Brothers, this is no swill-house! We are in a man's home!"

The other six responded quickly, adopting more respectful postures and turning attentively to their leader and deMedici.

“Please, Conte, when will we have the honor of our host’s company?” the first man asked. He turned as he spoke, as though just noticing Cristoval lurking in the shadows. “Don Battista?” He spoke as silkily as a courtier and moved forward like a graceful dancer, extending his hand with a formal bow.

From behind the leader, Battista saw deMedici’s eyes narrow. Swallowing back his own frustration and annoyance, Cristoval propelled himself into the center of the room where the afternoon sunlight from the long, high windows allowed for greater visibility. He executed a small, formal bow of his own, reluctantly accepting the other man’s hand.

“Your generosity and discretion will not go unrewarded, Don,” the leader said, taking Battista by the cuff and pulling him—almost imperceptibly—toward the table. He guided his host to the head of the table, displacing the conte who managed to somehow find the chair to the right of the head of the table with a certain grace.

The door between the dining hall and kitchen banged open, heralding Signora DelVecchio’s arrival. Following her like goslings came some of the younger field hands bearing large platters. Battista held his breath, muttering a private prayer that Signora DelVecchio had not dismissed his instructions. He need not have worried. Taking each platter in turn from her youthful recruits, his housekeeper laid the food before his guests. The serving plates were deceptively full. With great attention to the display, the lack of abundance was not so noticeable.

DeMedici sat in the chair in the lesser position as though it were a throne, though he frowned over the platters. With a deprecatory wave of his hand, the conte looked to the men’s leader. “Padre, would you say grace over this . . . repast?”

Surprised, Cristoval leaned back as the leader, sitting to his left, rose. The rough and tumble lot of men also clambered quickly to their feet and, with a nod to his host, the leader began prayer. Reflexively, Cristoval bent his head. As they concluded the blessing and genuflections, the men settled once more into their chairs and pulled platters toward them.

“You did not realize I was a priest?” the leader asked. He took a portion from one of the serving dishes and passed it to the fellow on his left. Grimacing, he turned to deMedici. “What does he know, Conte?”

“Very little,” deMedici responded, his tone icy. “As to the cause, nothing at all.”

Around the table, cutlery stilled. The men looked first to their leader and then to the conte and their host. The leader appeared unconcerned. He finished taking a large wedge of bread covered in a soupy mixture of vegetables, then set aside the serving dish. Steepling his fingers, he studied his plate for a long moment. He spoke calmly, but his very measured and precise manner as he adjusted the dish and utensils set before him testified to an undercurrent of irritation. “You have not acquainted him with our work, then?” he asked the conte.

“I saw no need,” deMedici replied blithely. He sipped from the goblet of wine to

the right of his empty plate and wrinkled his nose. Setting the glass away with transparent distaste, he leaned back in his chair to consider the road-ragged priest. The conte's demeanor remained casual, though he irritably flicked nonexistent dust from his sleeve. "It is not necessary for all who aid our cause to know our business. Is it, Padre?"

For a long tense moment, the conte and the priest tested one another's resolve in a silent contest of wills. DeMedici looked away first, reaching for his goblet as his pretense of distraction. Battista watched the byplay with interest, almost enjoying himself for the first time in weeks.

The priest also leaned back in his chair, motioning for his companions to resume their meal as he turned to face his host more comfortably. "You are of the faith, Don Battista?"

"But of course!" Cristoval sputtered, surprised by the question.

The priest smiled in a paternal way, somewhat strained, but friendly. "It is not so much a matter of *course* as you think, Signore."

Cristoval shook his head. "You mean the tendencies of the noble elite toward their philosophical studies?"

"You are of the noble class, are you not?" the priest murmured.

"I come from a noble line, but we are faithful. I have never bothered with the fashions of court. You'll find no reformers or philosophers in my house!" Cristoval declared.

"None that you will admit to at least, eh?" the priest murmured. He quickly raised his hand. "Forgive my jest, Don Battista."

"Battista's pedigree is spotless despite a certain tendency to impoverishment," deMedici said in a bored voice. "He has few resources, but tithes nonetheless. Beyond his indebtedness to my family, he has demonstrated political leanings which make me believe him to be most sympathetic to our cause. Otherwise, I would not have suggested your company take shelter here."

Their conversation tantalized him, but Battista knew the value of silence. He pretended interest in his bruschetta.

"You are Tyrrhian, of course?" the priest asked him.

Battista nodded.

Another long silence fell across the room, leaving only the faint echoes of cutlery on pewter plates.

"Do you consider yourself a Tyrrhian or a Catholic first?" The sounds of eating stilled at the priest's question.

Sensing a trap, Battista considered his words—and his guests—carefully. "I am born Tyrrhian—in that I had no choice. The sacraments I have taken with full, conscious will."

The priest smiled. "Are you sure you have not studied the philosophies, my friend? You have a well-measured tongue."

"Perhaps," Battista admitted, toying with the stem of his goblet. "One does not live well in Tyrria without judiciousness . . . especially if one is of The Faith."

"They persecute you?" the priest asked, glancing up as he chewed.

"No, but the philosophers do not always make it comfortable to be a man of faith," Battista replied, "at least, not openly."

"Is faith meant to be comfortable?" One of the men down the table asked.

"We understand his meaning." The priest made a pacifying motion of his hand as he partially rose from his chair. "Brothers, we enjoy this gentleman's hospitality."

"These are not easy times. I cannot," Battista rose fully, stepping away from the table, "I will not have my faith questioned!"

The priest patted his arm. "It is, as you say, an uneasy time. The Great Deceiver has claimed many."

"He thrives among those who serve him through their philosophies and ignorance. Tyrria, in that manner, is an abomination—" Battista stopped. He did not know these men who sat at his table . . . none, that is, except the Conte deMedici, whom he had reason to distrust. He gathered what little composure he still possessed. "I am Tyrrian and loyal to my king, but do not mistake me for being content with the heresies of my countrymen."

The conte sighed heavily, drawing attention once more to himself. "You see? It is as I told you."

"Indeed," the priest murmured. To Battista, he said, "Please, Don, I ask you again to not take offense. Come, sit with us and know that you are with brothers."

For all of his gentle manner, the priest looked no better than his men, and they, in turn, made a violent contrast to deMedici's pretty appearance. Battista studied them a long moment. What would bring men such as these together? Into one company? Pierro deMedici was willing to be associated with them, even deferred to their leader. And now the conte, who had never made any secret of his distaste for him, attested to his character? Curiosity, more than assuaged ego or goodwill, drove Cristoval to reclaim his seat.

The priest bowed and sat down again. "Tell me, Don Battista, would you answer the Church's call?"

"The Church's call?" Cristoval repeated. The conte's smirk made him very aware of how stupid he sounded. He turned more fully toward the priest, his mind racing, trying to think what service he might provide Rome. "I am a poor man. I give what I can."

"Always?"

Cristoval hesitated once more over the priest's question. "I give what I can. If the Church, if the Holy Father, needs someone so inconsequential—"

“Spare them the modesty,” the conte muttered irascibly.

“Would you suffer a witch to live?” one of the others from farther down the table asked.

Cristoval shook his head. “What has this to do with me?”

“Have you seen a witch put to the question?” another asked.

“Please, brothers!” the priest said, waving his companions to silence. “Not all receiving the call must be on the front line when we face the Dark One.”

“There is much work to be done behind the scenes,” the conte said rather pointedly.

“Yes, yes,” the priest said. He pushed his chair back and stood. He straightened and took on the posture of a man far more demanding of respect and attention than his previous unassuming manner indicated. From around his neck, the priest removed a crucifix and held it out, laid across his palm. “Do you swear by the Trinity to answer the Church’s call? Will you be our brother? Our ally?”

“As I am your benefactor, I will answer the Church’s call,” Cristoval said, aware that everyone in the room watched. When the priest pushed the crucifix toward him, Cristoval bent his head and kissed the bit of gold.

“Well done,” the priest said, raising Cristoval up and bussing either of his cheeks. Turning to the other men, he motioned them forward. “Come, greet your brother!”

Cristoval swallowed hard. He had not bargained for this. Indignation that the Duca deMedici had not warned him of what his bastard son was involved in warred with a fear so great that he wished he could scuttle back into the shadows. His knees quaked so badly that he was forced to brace himself against the table as the first man loomed over him. Cristoval closed his eyes when the first man clapped his hands upon his shoulders and pulled Cristoval into a rough embrace, bussing each of his cheeks.

Even though he was a man among men, Cristoval felt forced to gasp between the greetings of each of the men as they came, in turn, from their place at the table and kissed his cheeks. They were caked in layers of dust, dirt, and grime from the road and steeped in their own sweat and bodily odors. While they must have shaved sometime in the past week, it had been months since they had aired their clothing or used perfume and oils.

Locked in revulsion at the assault upon his goodwill and then his senses, Cristoval jumped when the priest’s heavy hands settled upon his shoulders and held him at arm’s length.

“Heed the call of your Church, brother. There is evil done and you are among the chosen as a lay brother of *Magnus Ignique*.”

“Hammer and Fire?” Cristoval gasped. “Witch-hunters?”

The conte nodded and leaned forward to say softly “And now you’re one of us.”

VII

“Stone walls do not a prison make, nor iron bars a cage.”

—Richard Lovelace

Neither light nor wind entered this space naturally. Rock and plaster above and below and on all sides. Death lived here.

Years of training, in life, taught Alessandra to shun places such as this. The dead were *marimé*.

But then, she herself was dead. What did that make her? To her people, she was—Alessandra resisted the horror of truth, but truth was her only weapon, her only solace, her only hope for escape!

She swallowed hard. The habits of living were hard to forget; she had no stomach, no throat, and, yet, she had a certain substance to her, when she wished it or forgot. Alessandra shivered at the thought of forgetting how it felt to be alive. Already, some days, it was hard to remember being attached to the body ... to *that* lump of flesh.

Indeed, she thought malevolently, it was that very lump of flesh which kept her here at the point of not living but not being truly dead. *Fata* Lachesis had measured her life-thread, but her sister *Fata* Atropos was prevented from cutting it, and so *Fata* Clotho continued to spin and weave. That she, Alessandra Zingara Nofria Patrini, *Araunya di Cayesmengro*, continued in the tapestry of life was morally and mortally wrong!

Alessandra froze at the sound of footsteps approaching the temporary tomb of her body. *He* returned; he, who kept her body and tried to master her soul. What spell would he try to enslave her with this time? A courtier, this man's servant, Conte Urbano by name, had once managed to bind her—back when she was newly dead and had no strength to resist.

She moved again, breathing easier as she remembered that he could not see her . . . except she did not breathe. She slipped from the room and ran without feet to the corridor and the one beyond it, toward the sound. The little priest, she had learned, did not like the business of the senior churchman and she had also learned other things . . . things that would, she dared hope, make it more difficult for them. Today, she would try something new.

The catacombs were an underground maze of many levels where bodies found their final rest, but there were others, like her—though magicless *gadjé* and so only ghosts such as Andrea, the bricklayer, who taught her a trick.

She waited. The firm, determined steps of the cardinal and the hurried scuffing of his reluctant assistant preceded them. They came around the corner, the cardinal marking the plaque which told him where they were, the little priest breathing hard and bearing the torch up high.

Alessandra swooped down. She embraced the torch as Andrea taugth her and exulted in the cleric's scream when it died. Blackness, nearly as complete as death, reclaimed the passageway. She watched the little priest, Brother Tomasi, turn and run.

The cardinal turned with a snarl on his lips. "Don't run, you fool! If you get lost down here, no one will be able to find you!"

The running footsteps stopped. Brother Tomasi backed against a wall gasping for air. "Ca-can you find me, Your Eminence?"

"By the sainted mother of God and all that is holy!" the cardinal ground out. He whispered something in Latin and snapped his fingers. A witch-light formed in his hand. "I'm coming for you. Don't move."

"Yes, Your Eminence!" Brother Tomasi cried. "Please hurry!"

Far from hurrying, the cardinal held up his light and peered about him, shining the light as much as he could into the shadows. "I know that you are here, *Araunya*. Was that you? You cannot stop me. I *will* control you."

Down the passageway, Brother Tomasi shrieked in terror when Andrea the bricklayer lay a spectral hand upon the cleric's rounded shoulder.

"Be still, will you?" the cardinal called. He turned angrily, and by the green incandescence of his witch-light, went in search of his assistant.

"Not tonight," Alessandra sighed. Brother Tomasi would be in a fit of terrors. In that condition, he could not be of any help to his superior.

Alessandra slipped through the rock wall and returned to her body. It lay upon a stone table in this sealed room. Herbs and wine had stilled the spectral hand of decay. The cardinal found that method of preservation awkward to maintain on his journeys to she knew not where. And so, periodically, he left her corpse safely hidden. She existed wherever her body lay, tied to it by a lifetime—of only eighteen years, but a lifetime, nonetheless. Would that she could leave it and not have to study her own nude form laid out on the unforgiving stone.

Brother Tomasi had been kind enough to cross her cadaverous hands so they covered her breasts. He also contrived to drape something over her lower extremities. If he did not work for the cardinal and aid him in the continual battle for control over her soul, she might have thanked him.

For what purpose could she serve the cardinal? She might strengthen his evil magicks, but was it worth the cost of creating a *mulló*? Alessandra shuddered at the thought of her fate.

Truth. She must face it. To her people, she was already a *mulló* and she was

already *marimé*. They would not, could not help her; the Romani did not have truck with the dead no matter how beloved. Mandero, she thought, might even reject her now! She clutched at her chest, at where her heart had been. By the Sisters, that possibility was too grievous to consider!

But her sister, Luciana, had tried. How long had it been? Time meant little to her now, or rather she could tell little of how time passed. Time held only one concern for her. She had a year. Only one year. By the anniversary of her death, she would be irredeemably *mulló*—a stalker of innocents, a corrupter of souls, evil born of an all-consuming madness which shattered any goodness that ever was within her and, thus, turned her forever demonic.

She must find a way. Somehow, some way, she must separate herself from her body. That must be done first, to limit the cardinal's claims over her, and then . . . ? What then? How was she to find the *drom* to the Neverlands where her people dwelled? Where one day, when the time came, Mandero would join her and they could finally be together?

VIII

“Faith has to do with things that are not seen, and hope with things that are not in hand.”

—Saint Thomas Aquinas

Grasni pulled aside his torn chemise with ungentle hands. She squatted beside Mandero, packing the hot rag on his wound, and avoided his eyes. She had come earlier, inspected his poultice, and departed without speaking. No longer attending Alessandra as maid, she wore the customary garb of the traveling Romani—a dress, flamboyant even in the funerary blood red; her arms lined with gold bangles and bracelets and earrings in her ears; a pale green, silk *diklo* covered her head and free-flowing, black hair—instead of the restrained servants' court attire he had been accustomed to seeing her wear.

Mandero leaned back against his saddle and the pillows provided him along with his quarters. He bided his time to broach conversation. He studied the laces that held the branches bent, thereby providing the form for the Romani *bender* tent.

The lemons crushed in her bowl of hot water and herbs quickly overrode the smell of saddle leather, his own sweaty scent and the pine pitch he had used to hold his herbal poultice in place. She removed the rag and teased at the edges of the pitch with deft fingers. Apparently not satisfied, she once more reached into the steaming water bowl, wrung out a fresh rag and slapped it onto his spur-of-the-moment

patchwork.

Prepared to be scalded once more, Mandero closed his eyes and lay back, sighing in relief, when he discovered the compress not nearly as hot as it had been originally. He waited a little, watching Grasni through lowered lashes. She was clearly uncomfortable, looking in any direction but his face as she whiled away the time for her compress to sufficiently loosen the pitch.

He had hoped, were she here, that she would be an ally. He did not know the reason—at least, not positively—for her reserve. “Are we to be enemies now, Grasni?” he asked.

The young woman glanced at him and then away. “We were never friends, Maggiore. You were the lover of my mistress.”

Mandero nodded thoughtfully. “But we spoke comfortably with one another then, sharing the mistress we both loved—”

“Don’t!” Grasni jerked to her feet. Instead of running, as at first it looked like she would do, she rounded on him. “How dare you! How dare you claim a love for the *Araunya minore!*”

He sat up angrily. “How dare *you* for questioning my sincerity!”

“I am not alone, Maggiore. Others—important people—doubt your claims of love and affection as well,” she said, her nostrils flaring and her eyes widening.

“They question my love for her because I did not come here straightaway. Is that it?”

She nodded sharply. “That and there is not a strip of red on you that isn’t your own unwillingly shed blood.”

Mandero scoffed. “Unwillingly, you think? There hasn’t been a day in these past weeks when I haven’t wished for some way to bring my eternal solitude to an end so that I might join her. There will be no other who could hope to replace her in my life.”

“Then why didn’t you just die?” Grasni demanded.

Shocked by the venom in her voice, Mandero stared up at her. In a moment, he gathered his wits about him. “If I die by my own hand, or if I die because I have taken no basic steps to preserve my life, there will always be *charos pandlomengro* separating us.”

“You think that will be the only reason heaven’s gate stands between the two of you?” Grasni asked.

“No, the cardinal stands between my ever having her, even in the Neverlands,” Mandero said. “Until he is vanquished and she is set free, we will never find peace together.”

She straightened and glared down at him. “I have been sent, by the *Kris* and my *Beluni* to tend your wounds.” With that, she knelt and, taking the largest area she had teased up, ripped the pitch, poultice, and rag from where they had stuck fast to

just above his breast.

Mandero bit back anything else he might have said. Streaks of light flashed behind his eyelids. The unexpected pain made him catch his breath. A handful of curses came to mind, but he smothered them, unwilling to exhibit weakness. He breathed deeply and opened his eyes to discover Grasni staring at the wound.

“When did you say you were stuck through?” Grasni asked, frowning.

“Yesterday.”

“Were there not scars and the stain from so much blood to indicate a deeper wound, I would accuse you of malingering,” she said. “It heals beyond belief, Maggiore.”

Mandero craned his neck to see the wound. As Grasni said, new pink flesh covered most of the wound and from what he could see, the wound was as if he had only been pricked. He rolled his shoulder and stretched his arm and found that he had full range of motion, feeling nothing more than if he had, indeed, only been pricked.

“Have you used magic, Maggiore?” Though Grasni asked, she looked convinced of it and frightened. Magic was not the art of men and those who did use it were of the cardinal’s ilk ... at least where Romani magic was concerned.

Mandero shook his head. “I would never—unless it brought my lady back, even at the risk of my own soul.”

“And you treated your wound with nothing more than the poultice I just removed?”

Mandero nodded, but then his thoughts turned to the cloaked woman who had seen him through the latter leg of his journey. “Could it be?”

“What?”

Both Mandero and Grasni turned, surprised by the sudden intrusion of another. The Chief of the *Kris*, Petrus Lendaro, stood at the edge of the tent, having just raised the door flap that let the sun pour in.

Grasni inclined her head respectfully to the older man. “We were just observing the Maggiore’s powers of healing, *Meero-kak*.”

“Oh?”

Mandero sighed. There were better ways to make impressions than this. “Is it possible that one of the Romani women met me on the road, guiding my horse and bringing me here? Perhaps there was something in the food and drink she gave me.”

“Anything is possible, but it is unlikely you met a Roma upon the road who would approach you so easily. Besides, most of the women of substance and sufficient art to do as you say, are already here,” Petrus said. To Grasni, he asked casually. “Does it need more tending?”

“No, *Meero-kak*,” she said, rising immediately. She bowed to the Romani elder,

nodded to Mandero, and made a hasty retreat.

“Come in, Signore,” Mandero said, motioning Lendaro into the greater part of the tent.

“No. I think not,” the elder said. “Do you have another blouse or shall I arrange for one to be brought to you?”

“I have a spare.”

“Good. I will wait for you outside.” With that, the High Chief of the *Kris* departed.

Mandero dressed quickly, pausing only long enough to wish he had the opportunity to bathe. He knelt, using his ruined shirt as a sponge and wetting it in the bowl of lemon and herbs Grasni had been using to soak the pitch loose, and wiped as much of the dried blood and road dust from his body as he could in what little time he could spare.

He found the Lendaro Chieftain sitting upon a knotty log laid near the site’s small fire and cleaning out the bowl of a pipe made of driftwood. The chief’s dark eyebrows rose, quirking on the left, as he noted Mandero’s arrival. His thick mustache was significantly grayer than his hair. He wore leather breeches and a simple faded shirt. A wide, blood-red sash graced his middle, beneath a thick leather belt and, at his throat, he wore a crimson silk *diklo*.

Mandero took a deep breath and stepped forward, bowing. “*Meero-kak*, I am honored that you have come to meet me.”

Lendaro nodded and waved to the other end of the log upon which he sat. “Young Grasni did not look happy.” He hiked his thumb over his shoulder toward the hill with its *cavas* and the section of camp set aside for the old mothers and senior women of the *kumpania*. “She goes to make a report to the *Beluni*, Maggiore. It did not appear that you will fare well, I fear.”

Mandero glanced toward the upper encampment, before he took his designated seat. “Why won’t she see me? The *Beluni*, I mean.”

The other man shrugged lackadaisically and crossed his legs. “Perhaps because I have bid her not.”

Mandero blinked and looked at his companion. “Your pardon, *Meero-kak*?”

“Oh, it is one thing for you to arrive all alone upon a fine Romani warhorse, proclaiming you are *beano abri*, but there is more to us than the bloodline of our clans.”

“Is it because I was not at court to save her?”

The chief snorted. “I think not. You were wounded and with us—or at least with *mi mam*—when the murder happened.”

“Your mother?” Mandero repeated. He looked up the hill again. “The Romani Queen is your *mam*?”

“You were to marry my niece and didn’t know that?”

Mandero shook his head. “It didn’t matter to us ... to me.” Somewhere in the camp, a woman laughed, reminding him of how Alessandra had laughed at the concept of postponing their marriage long enough for the formal introductions to one another’s families. She was not about to wait a year. He had tried so hard to be proper and observe all of the customs. If he had not insisted upon waiting for a letter of approval from Alessandra’s father, they would have been married. Married to a soldier, she would surely have seemed less a threat to Bianca’s schemes. By the Sisters Three, had his demand for propriety cost Alessandra her life? Awash in a sea of despair, he was drawn back to the here and now by the chieftain’s voice.

“You talk of pretty things, Maggiore. Love, you will call it,” the chieftain said.

“I *loved* her,” Mandero said, devastated by the chieftain’s doubt.

Lendaro shrugged again. “What is love? I love my wife. I love my horse.”

Mandero shook his head.

“What else do you love, Maggiore of the White Queen’s Escalade?”

“I love Tyrrhia ... a land where my mother’s people are free to move about and trade, with the same rights as any other citizen, where a soldier could dare to love a highborn lady, where a Roma could *be* a highborn lady. I love this country where I would have raised my children . . . and, yes, dammit, I even love my horse!” Mandero declared in a rush. “But I would give all of that up for one more hour with her!”

“And if all these things you say are true, how can you remain in the White Queen’s service when she keeps you from, at the very least, avenging my niece’s murder?” the chieftain asked, watching him lazily.

Mandero ground his teeth. Of all the problems he’d envisioned, he had not anticipated this questioning, where his love for Alessandra was weighed against his service to queen and country. “I serve the White Queen because I want to serve Tyrrhia, because I want to see it remain a place where my people are free and not persecuted.”

“So, have you come to see if we are free and unsub-jugated or because the White Queen bid it?”

Mandero stiffened as he admitted, “She sent me, yes.” He turned to face the elder fully. “This goes to the very heart of why I continue to serve the White Queen and her husband. She receives reports of injustices to our people, but they come from other Tyrrhi-ans, not the Roma. She is concerned. She wants to be sure our people are secure.”

“So she sent you, one of our own, as emissary?”

Mandero nodded.

“Convenient.”

Rising to his feet, Mandero struggled to maintain his composure. Why was it that

his mother's people nettled him so easily? Perhaps he was simply all too aware of failing Alessandra. "*Meero-kak*, doubt me if you must, but the White Queen—the White Crown—wants no ill to come to us ... to you and the *vitsi* who have made this land their home. Tell me, considering how I have been welcomed, what would have become of a *gadjé* ambassador?"

"If he made it through the Fairy Wood?" The Lendaro Chieftain waved his hands vaguely. "'Tis not the point, is it? You have come and you are her emissary. What is it you plan to do?"

"Whatever I am able . . . whatever I am allowed," Mandero said and sat down again.

"And what of my niece?"

"My lady?"

Petrus Lendaro nodded. "The *Araunya minore*."

"She will be avenged and reclaimed. I swear it."

"And returned to us?"

"I will see her to the Neverlands or I will not pass that way myself," Mandero said. He closed his eyes. He had voiced what was within his own soul, what he had left unspoken for too long. His resolve would never waver, speaking it only revealed that truth to the world.

An owl hooted. The sound was distinct, but from where? At this time of day? Both men turned, scanning the skies and nearby perches.

Mandero breathed deeply. It was a sign. Somehow, Alessandra or, perhaps the *Fata*, had acknowledged his vow. Strangely, *that* gave him a peace that nothing so far had managed.

"Why didn't you come before this?" Lendaro asked quietly. "Why didn't you return to our people with the *Belunil* You have allowed the trail to grow cold these past weeks while you took haven with the White Queen—"

What words were left? Mandero bent his head to rest on his folded hands. He understood the chieftain's doubts, but how would he ever win this man's trust? The White Queen intended to protect these people and he was oath-bound to follow her command; more importantly, these were Alessandra's people, her legacy as much as she was theirs, and he would not fail her again.

After a short silence, the chieftain spoke again in a soft growl. "Perhaps you loved her, but while it is not my place, nor the place of the *Kris*, to judge a man's devotion and, while it is true that the black blood of the Romani runs in your veins, it was the White Queen rather than the love of one of our own that brought you here. Why should we trust you? Why should *I* trust you?"

Mandero rubbed his face wearily as he pushed back the memory of holding Alessa's cold—he could never forget the cold—dead body in his arms. Why, indeed?

Lendaro leaned forward. “You asked earlier what we would have done with a *gadjé* emissary. I will tell you truthfully now that we would have slit his throat and fed him to the fishes.”

Mandero jerked back, staring at the leading member of the *Kris*—the Romani keepers of law and justice, those entrusted with guiding their people and maintaining order for the *kumpania*.

The chief met his gaze boldly. “You’re a soldier, *pral*. You understand the importance of knowing who seeks you out and why.”

Mandero thought carefully. Caution rode like a bitter ghost on the shoulders of military leaders. Such men, however, were found more often on the battlefield than among farmers and weavers on home ground. “The Rom are not soldiers, *Meero-kak*. Who taught you the importance of such matters?”

“Ours is a hunted people, Maggiore, or had you forgotten that as well?” the chieftain replied. “And, once, our people were soldiers. We may yet need be soldiers again.”

“This is Tyrrhia. The King’s Law protects you.”

“Or so is the common conceit,” Lendaro said.

“You have been given reason to distrust those in the uniform of the White Crown, haven’t you?” Mandero asked, but it was less of a question than a dawning realization.

“I have the survivors of three *kumpania* who were stopped in the name of the White Queen,” Lendaro said.

Mandero closed his eyes, sickened. “The cardinal has infected Tyrrhia, and I am shamed to say that it has reached the heart of the forces that protect her. Even now, we struggle to purge all those who violate their oaths. The White Queen suspected there had been attacks by witch-hunters, but ... by members of the Escalade? It was— *is* unforgivable.”

Lendaro rose from the log and said, “You will have dinner with my mother.” He removed the crimson *diklo* from around his neck and handed it to Mandero. “And wear the red, for *mi mam* and the other women. They will expect to see you wearing the color of mourning.”

* * *

Mandero stepped outside of his tent. The shadows were lengthening and the appointed hour drew near. He breathed deeply, touching the scarlet kerchief tied at his throat. The mingled smells of the camp, dinners on the fire, rode on the wind off of the sea. It reminded him of his youth. He had last visited the Silk Caves the year his mother died. Because she had only four surviving sons and no daughters, no one in the family could inherit her position in the Guild of Weavers and, since the Rom were not his father’s people, the family’s annual late summer pilgrimages came to an abrupt end. Until a year ago, Mandero had not given much thought to returning, but then he met Alessandra. Everything changed when she entered his life. His hopes and

dreams of the future ended with her last breath, but his life focus never wavered from his love for her.

“Good, you are ready,” Lendaro proclaimed upon his arrival. He beckoned to Madero and turned toward the *cavas* up the hill.

Passing from the community of men based between the foot of the hill-caverns and the grove of mulberry trees into the domain of the women felt to Madero like moving from one world to another. Both ends of the camp echoed with laughter and raised voices, a chaos of people and colors dotted with campfires and clusters of folk about their chores. Where the men’s area smelled of horses and tobacco, in the women’s horseshoe-shaped encampment, the scent of cooking permeated the air.

“I’d begun to doubt you would come, Maggiore,” the *Beluni* called out as she rose from her rocking chair. She waved Madero up to the higher ground where the women camped, then turned her imperious gaze upon the Clan Chief. “You may join us if you wish, Petrus.”

“Do you invite your son or the head of the *Kris*?”

“You are both, aren’t you?” The *Beluni* returned to her chair and indicated Madero should take the stool to her right. Turning back toward her son who had not moved, she sighed, throwing up her hands. “I, Solaja Lendaro, mother to you and grandmother to your children, invite you to break bread. There! Does that please you?”

The Romani elders squared off like two circling dogs. The Clan Chief sat on the carpet, pulling a pillow closer so he could recline in comfort.

When the tension between mother and son seemed to ease, Madero sat and leaned forward. “*Puri-Daiya*, I want to apolo—”

“First we eat!” the *Beluni* said. She stared down at her son until he nodded. As she sat back, distant figures moved forward, out of the long evening shadows, and took the shape of *chavis* bearing platters heaped with food.

Madero’s stomach rumbled and his mouth watered. Court fare, with its stylized dishes and the spartan provisions offered in the mess hall, held little appeal compared to the simple abundance of rabbit cooked on a spit, mussels, grilled swordfish, charred eggplant spiced with capers and rosemary, risotto with scamorza cheese, sardines, fennel, raisins and pine nuts, olives, and a soft *panecita* to mop up the juices. He busied himself with eating, savoring every morsel.

The *Beluni* ate heartily as well, but her son, the Clan Chief, ate perfunctorily, spending more time pushing the food about on the plate than actually consuming it.

In the camp, a *boshmengro* tuned her fiddle.

“You eat like a mouse, Petrus,” the *Beluni* said. “Has Marta already fed you?”

Petrus sat up, dusting his hands. “No, *mam*, but the suspense is killing me.” No one missed his ironic tone.

Madero dropped the *panecita* on his plate and looked from the *Beluni* to her

son. “Am I interrupting . . . ?”

The *Beluni* laughed a bit harshly and set aside her plate. “You, Maggiore, are the source of his dis-ease.”

“Me?” Mandero did his best to hide his chagrin. He had hoped that this meeting would not be such an intense study of the depths of his love for Alessa, her people, and how that translated as loyalty to the White Crown. Looking up and into the *Beluni*’s thoughtful gaze, he realized he faced an entirely different situation now. He put his own plate on the carpet.

“Aye,” Petrus Lendaro said. “Young Grasni made her report to my mother when she returned from tending your wound. I know you have been watched and, yet, for once, *mi mam* has nothing to say.”

“You get ahead of yourself, Petrus,” his mother said, barely hiding her irritation. She turned to Mandero, leaning forward, a hint of mischief in her expression. “I am told you were sent to protect us.”

Mandero cleared his throat uncomfortably. He was not accustomed to the role of diplomat and, as much as his duties called for judicious speech in difficult situations, he was unfamiliar with the territory he now trod. “If it is possible, *Puri-Daiya*.”

“My son says that the White Queen wants to protect us and seems inclined to trust you.”

Mandero glanced over to the chieftain who continued to watch. “I am most gratified, *Meero-kak*—”

“Though Grasni is unhappy with the time you have taken to come to us—and I am inclined to feel the same—my son has made a persuasive argument in your defense.”

This time, Mandero remained silent. Waiting. The Romani Queen was building to something.

“The *Kris* has decided to trust you—”

“*Mam* . . .” Petrus growled. “The business of the *Kris* is the business of the men. Leave it to us.”

The *Beluni* glowered at her son. “The men have had their council and advised me. I, in turn, have consulted with the *Daiyas* of this *kumpania*.” She turned to Mandero. “Tell me, in your own words, what you mean to do for my granddaughter, she who was once your lady.”

“In my heart, she is my lady still,” Mandero said. “I will reclaim her so that her body may be burned and her spirit set free to travel to the Neverlands.”

“And how will you do this?”

“By finding the cardinal . . . at least to start.”

“There is more to this quest, Maggiore, than finding the cardinal and reclaiming the body of the *Araunya minore*,” the *Beluni* said.

“*Mam*—” Petrus began again.

The *Beluni* rounded on her son, her curling silver hair swirling around her head like a cloak. “*This* is the business of the *Daiyas*, Petrus Lendaro! The *Kris* has no say in this matter.”

The chieftain jumped to his feet. “We do! Your women would mete out justice—”

“There is no justice for the *Araunya minorel* Don’t tell me you’re fool enough to believe there might ever be!”

The chieftain turned his back on his mother.

The old woman clenched her thin hands around Madero’s wrist, her golden rings biting like teeth into his flesh. “She is *mulló* and a sorcerer seeks to claim her power. To be *mulló* ... it leads to—it *is* madness. Where she is, she has no family, nothing to be her anchor in the storm the *chovahano* creates.” She paused to spit, but her gaze was keen when she looked back at him. “Are you willing to be her mainstay?”

“This borders on *marimé!*” Petrus hissed.

Marime. Madero had grown up with the fear of that ultimate disgrace, that state of being so defiled that all the tribes of the Romani would shun you and none give you protection or shelter. This, however, was for Alessandra. “I am willing.”

“Then you’re a fool!” Petrus snapped, pulling him around. “Do not let your heart make decisions that you will regret.”

“My *life* is regret without her in it. No cost is too great.”

“What of your own immortal soul? Don’t you hope to one day enter the Neverlands?” the chieftain demanded.

“Not if she isn’t there. Anywhere without her is hell,” Madero said.

“You will regret this decision,” Lendaro said. To his mother, he scowled. “You say this is the venue of the *Daiyas*, but the *Kris* will be heard on it as well!”

The *Beluni* stood resolute, her arms folded across her thin chest. Mother and son locked wills, emotion blazing in their eyes. The son ended the battle. He whirled and stalked off into the darkness.

“Will you stay?” the old woman asked Madero after her son had disappeared into the shadows of the night.

Madero stared after the chieftain a long moment, then nodded. “Aye, I’ll stay.”

“Good,” Alessandra’s grandmother said. She pointed to his stool.

He sat, watching as the *Beluni* moved to the very edge of the rug laid out beside her *vardo*. She took down the lantern hanging on a hook by the door of her wagon and stepped into the darkness, toward the *cavas*

and the heart of the women’s camp. She held the lantern high and waved it back and forth, then hung it back on its peg and returned to her chair beside Madero.

The women appeared by ones and twos. There were more than twenty. Grasni, he noted, hung to the back. In her late teens or very early twenties, she was at least two decades younger than the others. All wore some shade of red in their clothing—red skirts or blousons, or crimson kerchiefs over their gray hair.

“Come, *pen*, and share my shelter,” the *Beluni* said, welcoming the women into her private accommodations. She rose as she spoke, taking a draped cloth from the back of her chair.

As she unfolded it, Madero saw that it was her *joddakaye*, the ceremonial apron with long ties the color of blood, neatly embroidered up and down its length with symbols too small to read. The white skirt of the apron was stark in comparison, hemmed on all sides with the embroidered symbols. When the *Beluni* placed it around her waist, its Gypsy Silk glamour shone forth like a soft shimmering, as iridescent as a candle flame upon the greatest of the Romani old mothers. The presence of her power grew so that Madero thought he might touch it.

“You are satisfied, *Puri-Daiya*?” one of the mothers asked, poking a crooked finger in Madero’s direction. She was oldest, older even than the *Beluni*.

“She’d not call us if she weren’t,” another said.

“Grasni,” the Romani Queen called.

The young woman edged forward, deferring with nods and slight bows, as she made a path through her elders.

“Are you prepared?” the *Beluni* asked.

Grasni looked doubtfully at Madero, then nodded.

“Let the binding begin!” The *Beluni* turned to Madero. “You have something of your lady’s, some token she gave you. Give it to me now!”

Madero rocked back on his stool, his hand moving to the braid of dark hair he wore by his heart, by his wound. He looked at Grasni, knowing her to have betrayed that last gift from his beloved to the elders. How else could they have known? Grasni met his gaze with fierce defiance.

“You hesitate, *chavo*?” the crooked mother asked, prodding him with the gnarled club she used as a walking stick.

“It is all I have of her, and I do not part with it lightly,” Madero said.

“As it should be,” Solaja Lendaro said, squatting before him. “You must understand, Maggiore, that we will have you break many of the old customs and, in return, in our way, we will give you back she who is lost to you.”

Madero looked at the *Beluni* wondering if grief had driven her mad. “Do you mean to cast the spell, such as you did on the *Araunya superiorita*, the duch-essa, her sister?” He could barely contain his hope, remembering that final horrible battle when, for a brief moment, he had held Alessandra in his arms . . . before the cardinal and his men attacked and stole her five-month dead body back . . . before the Duchessa di Drago, Luciana, *Araunya de Cayesmengri e Cayesmengro* was felled

by a death spell cast by the *bastarde* cardinal . . . and was raised to once more take a place among the living.

“*Impossibile!*” the crooked one hissed and spat.

“With Luciana, her death was by means of magic and I came upon her within moments.” The *Beluni* shrugged sadly. “For her the circumstances were perfect, but with this other just as beloved *chavi* ...”

“She was killed by mortal means,” Grasni said roughly. “Poison took her, not magic.”

“And her death, her death was complicated by the spells of the *chovahano*. He has forever placed her beyond the bounds of our magic,” another of the old women said.

“Then what do you hope to do now? With this?” Madero asked, clenching the braid.

“She is beyond our magic, Maggiore, but love is a magic of its own nature. We will use our magic and yours together,” the Romani Queen explained.

“To do what?”

“To bind her to you, as I said before. She will be tied eternally to you, as she is now tied to her own body,” the *Beluni* said. “We counter the *chovahano* by making it possible for her to escape, at least for brief respite. It can only be done, however, if your will is strong—”

“And your *love*,” Grasni added.

“Yes, and that, too,” the *Beluni* agreed. “By will, by love, she will have resources to fight, a shelter she does not have now. Do you understand?”

“But if I become a tie, as her mortal body is, then won’t I stand in her way to the Neverlands?” Madero asked.

“He is wise,” the crooked mother chuckled.

“Your love will give you the power to free her, if it be strong enough,” the *Beluni* said.

“*If* it is strong enough,” Madero said softly. He looked up, peering about at all the watchful faces. “If *I* am strong enough, you mean? What if I am not?”

Silence froze the gathered party. The *Beluni* rose. “You are the only hope, the only chance. Her time is running low. You will *have* to be strong enough.” She held out her hand, bangles and rings aglitter by the dancing light of the lanterns.

Time meant everything to a *mulló*. More than eleven weeks had passed since he held her, making her a little more than five months dead. The turning would begin soon, if it had not already. She would change, her spirit, her soul, from the gentle, loving woman she had always been to something vile and filled with hatred. She would begin to sustain herself by consuming and infecting the living.

Madero took the plait of Alessandra’s hair—as thick as his thumb and as long as

his arm—from inside his shirt. He pressed his face against it, smelling the faintest bit of her scent left, felt the warmth of their belonging. Silently, he handed it to Alessandra's grandmother.

"Good!" she pronounced and handed the bit of hair to Grasni. The Romani Queen knelt and pulled a gold-framed box from beneath her chair. From it, she gently withdrew a length of inky black silk.

Mandero felt suddenly cold, as though blasted by a winter's wind. The scent of salt and vinegar, of evil magic gone awry. . . . How was it possible that he could smell it? Almost taste it? He possessed no magic, no talent for it. He shuddered and gagged at the overwhelming taint that rose from the fabric.

"Do not lose heart just yet, Maggiore," the *Beluni* said.

The crooked old *Daiya* lay a supporting hand upon his shoulder. "Strength, *chavo*."

As fragile as the old woman might have seemed, her hand was as steady as the gnarled roots her fingers reminded him of. She planted her hand firmly in the center of his back and did not move it, for which he was grateful.

"You know what this is?" the *Beluni* asked, holding out the pitch-black cloth. The Gypsy Silk flowed from its folds, like water poured from a pitcher.

"It is ... her . . . my lady's shroud ... if you can call it that," Mandero said quietly. The unyielding hand on his back kept him from pulling away in distaste. It was an item of the dead and, therefore, polluted. Old instincts died hard, even in the face of his determination to somehow save his lady.

"For our purposes, it is and will be her shroud, and this silk shall represent the body of she who brings us together," the *Beluni* said.

"Let it be so," the other *Daiyas* intoned. Each in turn reached out and touched the cloth, knotting their fingers in it.

Solaja held the cloth out to Mandero, her gaze commanding.

Steeling himself, Mandero reached out and gripped the smooth, nearly weightless froth of silk. It felt oddly warm. "Let it be so," he said.

His revulsion eased as he spoke and now, he found it almost impossible to release the cloth. As he continued to hold onto the fabric an essence of vibrancy thrilled from it and along his nerves. It felt almost like the tender skin of Alessandra's cheek or the lips of his *adorata*, even.

The *Beluni* pulled the cloth from his reluctant fingers. With deft movements, she tied a series of knots. "This shroud be flesh."

"Fiber to flesh," the others echoed, their faces intent, their eyes focused on the material in *Puri-Daiya* Lendaro's hands.

At last, the *Beluni*'s hands stilled. She brushed the surface of the cloth and held it up to the light. She had fashioned a doll—a poppet, Mandero corrected himself—of the fabric. The aging mother and grandmother breathed deeply, in and out, into the

face of it. She rose to her feet and delivered it to the standing Grasni.

“In life, I prepared my mistress’ hair,” Grasni said. Her voice cracked and her hands were unsteady at first as she worked the unplaited hair into the head of the poppet. With growing confidence, she made tiny braids and arranged the hair until it copied in miniature a hairstyle Alessandra had worn frequently in life.

The *Beluni* received the poppet, the *tesoro*. The silent sense of anticipation welling within the group reached a point where Madero felt urged to action—to jump and run, to separate himself from this strange madness. But he did not. Instead, he locked gazes with the *Beluni* and, without direction, held out his hands.

The Romani Queen closed his fingers around the token and held them firmly. “With you, Madero di Montago, she is alive. She is your lady still, for, as you have said, she lives in your heart. Give her home and sanctuary. Speak her name freely. Be not afraid to summon her spirit for she lives now in the *bengako tan*, halfway to the Hell of the *chovahano*’s making. Accept her now! Speak her name! Give breath to her spirit!”

Without thought, Madero took the doll, still tingling, vibrating like a hive of bees. He raised it to his lips and kissed the knot-face. “Alessandra!”

IX

“Mortality, behold and fear! What a change of flesh is here.”

—Francis Beaumont

31 d’Agosto 1684

Alessandra circled the room, feeling like a moth trapped in a lantern. She was alone, dreadfully alone, and with men who meant her no good. Andrea the bricklayer and some of the others she had befriended in this place of the dead avoided the priests. She could not blame them. She preferred to keep her distance as well, but that was not within her control.

The cardinal directed Brother Tomasi in the placing of the lanterns—this time, glass protected the flame and, thus, made it difficult for her to tamper with. In the time since they last visited her, the cardinal had somehow fortified the timid nature of his assistant. From the look of the priest, Alessandra guessed the cardinal had opted for liquid courage rather than theological reasoning. Apparently, browbeating was growing less effective.

Flickering light made shadows dance upon the plaster walls. Alessandra crept closer to her corpse. For the moment, the cardinal knew only that she was present but did not know exactly where she was. When she was alone, she preferred to wander, to stretch the ethereal cord which kept her tied to this cold, lifeless flesh that once housed her soul.

“Tomasi, open the bag,” the cardinal commanded as he moved to stand over the body. Shadows played havoc on his thin, sharp face. He looked almost as cadaverous as his subject. His hair, thin and slate gray, he wore shorn modestly close to his skull. A pointed *barba* on his chin accentuated the length and narrowness of his face. The thin lines of his mustache exaggerated the tightness of his lips which produced an image of doleful disdain.

The body—Alessandra could not think of it as herself—lay upon a stone slab. Again, Tomasi had been kind enough to at least arrange her modestly, though her long black hair had become tangled and knotted with the residue of herbs, vinegar, and wine. The long soaking in the bespelled elixir that Conte Urbano di Vega, the cardinal’s previous toady, had given her body made her look bloated. Alessandra was disgusted.

The cardinal took great care in his preservation of her body, though. Over the time she had been in his care, the fluids which had bloated her body had begun to drain off ... but slowly, very slowly. If she could not be freed to go into the Neverlands, Alessandra supposed she preferred this preservation of her body to being connected to the decay that took place in normal circumstances. The thought of withering into a desiccated heap of bones made her shudder all the more.

She moved closer as the cardinal unfolded a bag of tools across the stomach of her corpse. Ribbons and bobbles? She was entranced. The conte had stripped her of her earthly wealth—except for the ring of office as the *Araunya di Cayesmengro* which the White Queen had personally removed and given to Alessandra’s only sister, Luciana, who was now *Araunya* of both *Cayesmengri* and *Cayesmengro*, keeper of all elements of the Gypsy Silk trade.

“Cut the ribbons as I told you,” the cardinal commanded. He raised the large golden crucifix that hung by a chain around his neck and stalked the perimeter of the tomb. “Hear me, foul spirit! I command thee forth!”

She was already “forth” and who was he to call *her* foul? Alessandra rolled her eyes. Surely they were beyond such pretenses? Or was this mere theater for the nervous assistant?

Brother Tomasi gathered the ends of red, white, and black ribbons and tied them in a single knot. Alessandra watched the preparation. She could only guess at the cardinal’s intentions, which had never been kindly. In turn, she watched Tomasi hunch as he went about his work, eyeing the cardinal anxiously. With trembling fingers, he picked up a tiny pair of ornate scissors and snipped the ribbons at equal lengths. She was confused by his actions and what his master planned.

The cardinal took a packet of herbs from the bag lying upon the corpse and

began to scatter them around the room.

Alessandra studied him uneasily. It was preparation work. He planned something. Tonight he would act. But what was he about?

She turned back to Brother Tomasi, who clipped the third bundle of ribbons and set the scissors on the floor beside him, where he knelt. He began to make another length of ribbon. Alessandra glanced at the cardinal. He now knelt over the body whispering prayers in Latin which seemed to have a calming affect upon Tomasi.

She did not know much of Latin, it being the language of the Roman Church, but there were some similarities to the Tyrrhian variation of Italian and she could make out that he was saying prayers for the dead.

He's a fine one to be praying for me, Alessandra fumed, after his hand in my death. Now he dares say the prayers of *his* Church over . . . *her*? Why had *Fata Atropos* failed to cut the cord between the body and the soul she was now? Alessandra immediately murmured a prayer of contrition. It was not the fault of the Fates if her body was not burned. It was *his*!

Brother Tomasi set aside the scissors after cutting yet another length. Irritation gave her something resembling matter. Duarte, the ghost of a nobleman's son who died of a plague he knew not how long ago, had been endeavoring to teach her this. Alessandra reached out with her hand, which was insubstantial, of course, but with her mind she willed it different, willed it whole, as it once was.

She smiled with more than just a little satisfaction as the scissors moved. It took more effort than she thought it would. Just moving the scissors a few feet, so that it now lay in the shadow of a lantern, exhausted her.

Almost as though cued, Brother Tomasi reached for the scissors, one hand holding the ribbons. He seemed to need a little more concentration than usual to do such an easy thing, but by now, it was clear he was deeply in his cups.

Alessandra watched as his left hand tapped the ground beside his knees and found nothing. Tomasi switched the ribbons to his other hand and turned to look about, growing more frantic.

"Your Eminence!" the brother squeaked. When the cardinal did not immediately look up, he repeated, "Your Eminence!"

Brother Tomasi dropped the ribbons and scuttled to his feet, backing as far away from the body as he could. "Your Eminence, she's here!" he shouted loudly enough that his voice echoed painfully in the small stone and plaster chamber.

The cardinal scowled and managed a menacing smile all at once. "Of course she is, fool! That is the purpose of what we do. Are you ready?"

Tomasi shook his balding head. Sweat beaded his upper lip and his eyes were as wide and bulging as those of a terrified horse. "She took the scissors."

His Eminence rolled his eyes with impatience. "Give me what you have, then, and we shall go about this in bits." He held out his hand, snapping his fingers impatiently

as he reached for a length of ribbons.

Alessandra decided to make good her advantage before Cardinal delle Torre's spell began to have its effect. She swept up behind Brother Tomasi as he fumbled for a bunch of silk ribbons.

The cardinal snatched a set. "Black for death." He waved the ribbon over the flame of a candle. "Red for blood." He waved the second over the candle flame. "White for bone."

As he waved the third strip of silk over the candle, Alessandra breathed against the side of Brother Tomasi's face. He let out a nervous twitter and slapped as though at a fly. Concentrating, Alessandra reached out and tickled his hairy earlobe.

Brother Tomasi sagged, as though boneless, to the cold floor. Alessandra shook her hand, trying to rid it of the prickly sensation of touching the cardinal's underling. She felt like a cat with a soiled paw.

"Have your games while you may, Gypsy *stronza*," delle Torre said. He wrapped the ribbons around the left wrist of the corpse, murmuring in Latin, then in their common tongue, "Spirit to flesh, I command thee return!"

Alessandra felt ill, as though a whirlwind sucked out her insides and took all that made her substance, that made her Alessandra. Viselike claws sealed around the left wrist of her spirit form and dragged her toward the body. The bits of ribbon burned as her spirit hand was joined . . . tethered to the hand of flesh.

"Get up, Tomasi! I need the *ebulla* for the seal!" the cardinal raged.

Alessandra fought with everything she had, everything she knew, for this was more than a mortal fight. Wind swept around the room as their magics tangled. A hooded lantern fell near Tomasi, the glass shattering into shards, like little jewel knives which Alessandra cast into the winds. Hungry flames broke free of their confinement and licked up Tomasi's dark robes. The cardinal fought on, capturing a bit of ribbon just as the wind whipped it up then roaring in anger and pain as one of the shards embedded itself in his face, close to his eyes.

Finally, she and the cardinal were locked in true combat! They wrestled for control until at last the churchman was forced to decide between trying to rouse his assistant with kicks or concentrate all of his energy on his task at hand.

Alessandra's howl came from so deep within her, she did not know where it began. The sound reached such proportions that even a magicless mortal could hear it and be overwhelmed.

Brother Tomasi sat up and covered his ears against the sound, seemingly unaware of the flames which began to consume his flesh. His voice joined hers in painful screams. The stink of burning flesh and cloth mixed with the herbs and dust cast into the flames by the wind. Blood trickled down from one of the Cardinal's ears, but still he held onto her. . . . "Spirit to flesh, spirit to flesh."

Alessandra struck out with the full fury of her soul.

Deep raking claw marks gouged delle Torre's cheek while bloodied shards gouged his flesh. His blood ran red and fast, streaking down his jawline and into the collar of his black cassock.

Just as her right wrist began to feel the gripping claws, something changed. Where the magic until now had been savage and commanding, there came a subtle calm.

Neither the cardinal nor Alessandra could deny its power: like the certainty of a heartbeat, the constancy of blood flow—like a river through the living body. The wind fell still and the room silent except for the distant screams of Brother Tomasi.

Softness enveloped her as though she were wrapped in a silkworm's cocoon, and where the cardinal struggled to bind her, the ribbons fell away like spiderwebs to a flame. For the first time in the forever since her death, the glowing beacon of dawn swelled as the sun rose over the hills. She was transported up by many hands, familiar, loving hands and, like the ethereal cord that connected her to her body, so a new one spun before her, leading her from darkness toward dawn's light.

Alessandra sighed in relief. With everything she had left, she took hold of the strand and followed it home.

X

*“When love begins to sicken and decay, it useth an enforced ceremony.
There are no tricks in plain and simple faith.”*

—William Shakespeare

Mandero awoke and jumped to his feet in a heartbeat, sensing someone's presence.

Just outside his tent stood a tall, solitary figure. Female. Slim. She seemed vaguely familiar poised there holding back the flap to his *bender*, with the moon outlining her.

“Grasni?” he asked, straightening. His right hand was behind him, wrapped around the blade of a stiletto. When she did not answer, he ventured, “*Daiya?*” He shifted, trying to get a better look at the face well hidden by shadow.

“Is it my name or the reason for my presence you would rather have, Maggiore?”

Her voice was musical, like the song of a bird. How had he missed that before?

“*Lasa?*” he asked, but it was more a statement than a question. As he neared, the moon cast enough light for him to see the red doeskin cape with hood that kept the fairy's face in shadow.

“ ‘Twill do,” she said with a nod. “Come. Tis already past the midnight hour and there is work to be done!”

“Work?” Mandero repeated. He was more exhausted than ever before. Now that the *Daiyas* were finally through with him and . . . Alessandra. Suddenly suspicious, he moved to stand between the tall figure and the poppet.

“ ‘Tis good you protect her,” the woman said, pointing unerringly in the dark to where the blackest of Gypsy Silk lay beside his bed. “You’ll need her as well. Bring your lady and hurry.”

Without further word, she turned. The *bender’s* flap fell into place. Mandero blinked in the inky darkness. A fairy summoning! It seemed there was no magic in small measure; whence it came, it brought more. He took up the poppet—Alessandra, he reminded himself. He hesitated. The old mothers had bade him guard it with his life, for it was his connection to her immortal soul. But then, without this lady he would never have even reached the Fairy Wood, much less passed through it and found Alessandra’s people, nor, he recognized, healed as well as he had so soon. He tucked the poppet inside his shirt, beside his heart, exactly as he had carried her braid for these past months. He decided to trust the *lasa donna*, but gathered a brace of loaded scorpionis just to be safe and tucked them into the back of his belt.

He pushed his way outside and found the fairy lady waiting for him, holding Joro by the reins. Was it magic she used or her nature that allowed her to handle the normally temperamental horse with ease? He chose not to ask and, grabbing a bit of mane, pulled himself up onto the bare black and white back of his horse. He reached down and offered the woman a hand to pull her up.

She stared at his hand, and then up at him. “ ‘Twill only slow me down, Maggiore di Montago. The horse was for your ease. Come, we may already be too late.”

With that, the lady turned with a flip of her red doeskin cape and dress and set off, out of the Romani camp and into the Fairy Wood. Where there were sentries, the lady waved a hand and they slumped, fully asleep.

She moved with incredible speed and an unnaturally smooth gait, more as though she flew across the ground without touching it.

As they passed the last guard, Mandero leaned out to take the torch from his station.

“We’ll not need it. My brethren, the *candelas*, will be glad to light your way,” she said. The *donna* gave a whistle as they moved into the avenue of trees which led through the heart of the Fairy Wood. The way here was dark, as dark even as the deepest parts of the *cavas* without a torch. It reminded Mandero, with a shiver, of the night he had been stabbed in the back and thrown into the violent black waters of the Stretto d’ Messina.

But as sure as she had sung out, a bit of pink light loomed not far away. Just beyond, purples, greens, and yellows blinked into luminescence which made it possible to see where they were going. Not that, Mandero realized, Joro seemed at

all bothered so long as he kept abreast of the fairy, which left nothing more for Madero to do than guard the poppet and try to mark their way.

The will-o'-the-wisps, *candelas*, flew in circles, like leaves captured in a dust devil swirled low to the ground and then as high as Joro's head, dancing to and fro about his ears. The *lasa* did not seem troubled by their lack of assistance to her.

The forest, away from the avenue, consumed them.

His guide moved with unwavering confidence ever deeper into the wood. The *candelas* provided only enough light for Madero to be sure they all were not about to fall into a ravine as they played around Joro's ears.

Abruptly stopping, the *lasa donna* looked up at him. "We are here. Dismount, Maggiore. Your horse will be safe."

As he slid from Joro's back, she took his hand in an iron grip and pulled him forward. Try as he might, Madero had no sense of being anywhere in particular, swallowed as they were by blackness and no longer escorted by the tiniest of fairy kind. He touched the front of his shirt where he had placed the ungainly poppet to be sure she was safe and then reached back to be sure his scorpioninis were still handy.

"Those will be unnecessary," the *lasa donna* said.

How she had known what he was doing was a mystery to him, but he accepted it with the weary realization that he was undoubtedly in over his head and the scorpioninis were not only unnecessary, but, probably, an insult. He focused more determinedly on where he was, trying to reconnoiter his position. Except for the unexpected scent of earthy dankness, Madero might have thought they were only taking the downward slope of a hill.

The fairy stopped. They stood alone in the silent, dense shadows. "Are you ready?" she asked.

Madero nodded. Just as he realized she could not possibly see the motion, he felt her shift—a sweeping movement with her arms.

A grinding of stone shuddered the ground. The earth moved beneath his feet as though stricken by quakes. Madero flailed, hands out from his sides, grasping for anything that might help catch his balance. He encountered dirt and loose roots. Soil rained down on his head. Instinctively, he reached out a protective hand toward the *lasa*, but stopped, awed.

Light as though from the noon sun blazed forth from this portal into the earth. Madero took a moment to regain his vision for the stars dancing brightly in his eyes. Their gate was a giant stone, at least the weight of ten men and a horse, which rolled easily and independent of any aid into a shadowed crevice to make way for them.

A cavernous chamber lay in front of him—reminiscent of the volcanic hollow beneath the White King's residence, Palazzo Auroea at Citteauroea. This place, though, was very much that subterranean terror's opposite. Light—from some unseen source—exposed the layered gold-and-tan-colored rocks which rose up in

jutting tiers. Where the other offered a velvet darkness almost as black and, most certainly more harrowing than the Fairy Wood, here the light blazed as though it was daylight aboveground.

Below, perhaps a hundred yards down, the Mediterranean Sea's languid and brilliant blue waters flowed through a tunnel at the lowest of the levels. To his left a waterfall seemed to descend from the misty sunlit heavens and tumble downward toward the patch of land-bound sea. Plants, flowers, and all nature of growth flourished.

But even more fantastic than any of these, were the occupants of the cavern. Mandero was forced to look and then look again to be sure his eyes did not fail him. Idling upon a rock, a *la sirena di mare* combed her yellow locks with a clamshell comb. Cavorting in the waters around her were more mermaids. On the ledges, in crevices and upon plateaus all around were collected the oddest assortment of beings Mandero had long since dismissed as childhood stories, and others whose race and heritage were a mystery to him.

"It . . . ? How . . . ?" Mandero shook his tired and aching head. "Why did you bring me here?"

Madonna lasa did not answer him. She turned and made her way down a circuitous path. Mandero followed, having no wish to be left to his own devices in this mix of folk.

The fairy lady who was his guide began to shed her doeskin cape. She was so tall and thin she almost looked as though she had been stretched at least a week on the rack. Hung from the belt she wore over her red skirts, was an assortment of spindles and little hand looms which swayed as she walked. The tools identified her, at last, as the most precious of the fairy to the silk-weaving Romani. She was *gianes*.

There was a sense of chaotic orderliness about her. Her dark brown hair flowed loose and well past her waist in places. In the cascading rivulets of her hair, tiny braids, bound up with feathers and leaves, formed columns like the branches of trees. It looked as though twigs grew there. Her features were dark, as though from the sun, despite always wearing the doeskin cape which completely enveloped her whenever *he* had chanced to meet her.

For the first time, he noted an awkwardness to her step, not so much that it was clumsy, but more that it was . . . not human. Beneath the edges of her hem, Mandero saw the reason. He looked up, to be sure that she had not turned back unexpectedly, but no, she continued on her way . . . with her toes pointing back at him and away from the trail she took.

Did he not know better, he would have sworn he had imbibed too freely of bad wine. This was like no world he had ever seen, for it was, indeed, a little world of its own, complete with cloudy sky, mountains, shore, and seemingly endless rolling fields. A forest of trees, some with green branches hanging low, grew from the uppermost tier into the clouds and, no doubt, up to the world he knew.

Green ladies peered shyly from within their trees, edging their way out slowly and

following at a distance. Some of them were the winged *silvani*, slender and narrow of form, their faces and skin bark brown, their eyes and hair, a close-cropped mop, lichen white or mossy green. Among them, too, were the other nymph forms. An *aguane* rose, like a sheet of water, from the trickling falls beside their path. Others crept from the trees or rose up from the grass as though they had been merely dreaming upon what was but normal sod a moment before. These others were without wings and their color reflected the nature of their hiding places.

The path was difficult, barely a rut, narrowed further by squawking chickens flapping and strutting past. Upon the fierce warbirds, rode *callicantzaroi*—tiny, naked creatures waving their feathered spears and howling in some enraged language.

Mandero hurried to keep up with his hostess, while others fell in around him. The *callicantzaroi* prodded and circled him as though he were their captive caught through fair battle, overcome and, of course, therefore, frightened by their mightiness.

His guide, the *madonna lasa* turned as they were about halfway down the mountain and spoke to them in their own language, waving her hands in clear banishment. The warriors fell back, but they were not happy about the circumstances ... no happier than Mandero would have been in a similar situation, he guessed.

A cavern in the mountain opposite loomed over all in this underworld. Sometimes Mandero thought he caught sight of movement there, of hulking shapes large enough to reach easily from one tier, the approximate height of two men, to another. When he was finally sure of it, despite the dark within, Mandero caught his hostess' sleeve. "Madonna, what lies there?" he asked, pointing.

The fairy lady quickly covered his hand with her own and turned aside his gesture. "There live the *Or-culli*. Do not bid them welcome or we'll never see the end of them again! And the loss!"

"Giants?" Mandero whispered, overawed.

"Cannibals," the *aguane* said with a delicate little shudder that went over her gray skin like rippling water.

The *madonna* leaped from the path on one tier to a boulder and slid indelicately down it to the path on the next tier, avoiding a switchback turn and another tiny alcove. Mandero followed suit, noting that childlike sprites, *lauru*, if he guessed aright, crept out of that alcove to join the parade of mythic creatures.

A bit of misty wind brushed his face like a kiss. Tiny butterfly-winged *folletti* rode the breeze, laughing flirtatiously as they circled Mandero's head. Their laughter turned to outcries, heralding the arrival of their counterparts. The *folletto* rode the wind on leaves and feathers. They skimmed close enough to make Mandero duck and, as a consequence, to upend more than one of the butterfly fairies.

At last they reached a grassy knoll. With a deep sigh, the *madonna lasa* sat, crossing her legs and settling gracefully at water's edge near the cold embers of a fire. Around her, the fairy folk gathered, watching Mandero with as much fascination

as he studied them.

“Sit, Maggiore,” the fairy lady bade him. “My fellows here are shy and do not mind that we skip introductions. Just as you have heard stories of them, so they, too, have heard stories of you.”

Mandero blinked for what seemed the thousandth time since entering this miraculous place. “Me?” He scanned the faces of the *lasa*—big and small, flirtatious or cantankerous—all of them watched him with as much fascination as he had stared at them. Would even the old *Daiyas* believe him if he tried to report this encounter? He had very little trouble doubting it. He cleared his throat, “Me? What am I to them?”

The *masseriol* laughed, their features hidden by their red monkish robes as they quaffed wine from a human-sized keg nestled between some rocks. There came a twitter among the *lauru* and *callicantzaroi*; all was silenced with a word by the *gianes*, his guide.

She reached into the air and snagged a spider by its silk. Keeping the fiber, she set the spider gently upon the ground and sent it on its way again.

“Air,” she said. “There is a debt between our peoples, Maggiore.” She held her hand out to the *sirena* who, as she spoke, pulled herself onto the ground. The mermaid gave her the clamshell comb and then slipped into the water again, moving away from them with a single rapid wave of her fluke. The *gianes* unwove a mermaid hair from the comb and held it for display, “Water.” She continued with her tale, “There are bargains that are made between us to keep the balance fair.

“Among the Romani, we are pleased to see intermarriages with the peoples most native to Tyrrhia, for it is belief that we are born of. The Romani are usually clannish and keep to themselves. Beyond Tyrrhia’s borders, we understand this, but *here* there is little cause for it, or wasn’t until recently.”

The *gianes* took a hair from her own head saying “Earth,” and pulled the tiniest spindle he had ever seen from off its catch on her belt. She leaned forward, smiled, slightly and then plucked a long black hair from Mandero’s scalp. “Fire of love,” she said. The hair of the mermaid, the spider, her own and his: air, water, earth, and fire; she began to spin into a single long fiber.

“However, the upper classes,” the *madonna lasa* continued, “frequently marry from beyond the borders of our Tyrrhia, bringing with them not only bag and baggage but their own beliefs. The Romani are . . . adaptable, however. They find the magic that exists where they are and gather it to themselves and, thus, they embraced us. You understand?”

Mandero nodded.

“The Romani, before Tyrrhia, they intermarried little, kept to themselves. Here it changed and this is why there are so many of you who are of half-blood where nowhere else has such been so easily tolerated by the Romani. With the Romani, we have exchanged many gifts and certain obligations. Your people have their place here because the *gianes*—my folk, specifically—taught them and shared with them our

magic.” Here the fairy lady held up the spinning drop spindle to illustrate her point.

“Are you saying that the . . .” Madero gulped, trying to believe what he was being told. “... the Gypsy Silk is not our own?”

“It is,” the *madonna* said soothingly. She focused her attention for a long moment on the twining thread. “The Gypsy Silk is Romani born, but conceived by the *lasa* of Tyrrhia. We sought an alliance, magic and silk we had in common. Is it so unnatural that we should weave our magics together?”

“You want what is yours,” Madero said, with dawning realization. They claimed Alessandra as much as the Romani did. Could it be that these fairy folk were themselves the ones who made the trouble?

The *gianes madonna* studied him through narrowed eyes. “Yes, but not as you think. The Romani are indebted to us. The *Beluni* and her *Daiyas* know this and they respect the ways we agreed upon. When there has been a problem in the past, we have worked it out.”

“Problem?” Madero repeated.

The *madonna* nodded. “Aye.” She licked her fingertips and ran them up and down the length of thoroughly entwined hair and spider silk before setting aside her spindle. “Some twenty years ago—such a short time ago by our standards—there was an *Arau-nya de Cayesmengro* who was widowed with a small daughter who had already inherited the position of *Araunya de Cayesmengri* from a maiden aunt. This widowed mother, after losing her Romani husband, wanted to marry again.”

“You speak of my lady’s mother?” Madero asked, beginning to make order out of the confusion the fairy folk created.

“I do,” the *gianes madonna* said. “She did not choose from among her own people over which we took no interest, nor from among the commoners of which we approved—”

“You speak of Conte Baiamonte Davizzi,” Madero guessed. He took a deep breath and forced her name from his lips, “Alessandra’s father.”

“Indeed,” his hostess said. “We did not approve. Conte Baiamonte was too far removed from the common stock, too educated to believe in us and our ways, but the *Araunya*, Romala Lendaro Patrini would have no other.” Behind her, some of the other *lasa* made grumbling noises, reminding Madero that, as she had said, to their sense of time this was not so very long ago. “We have a long and fine tradition among the fairy folk and this we invoked upon Romala Lendaro Patrini Davizzi. Her children of this nobleman were to be fairy-blessed . . . they would be *Ours*.”

“She had but the one child,” Madero said.

“Correct,” his hostess said.

“I knew Alessandra was fairy-blessed ... at least she always said so,” Madero said.

His hostess nodded. “And observed the rituals— even having you approved, as

called for . . . until that fated day.”

Mandero sat silently for a moment. He took a deep breath and looked up. “What do you want from me?”

The *gianes* and her kindred smiled.

XI

“*Wedding is destiny, and hanging likewise.*”

—John Heywood

In a million lifetimes, Mandero knew that nothing would ever compare to this night and no one would ever believe the telling of it, no matter how, drunk he got them. It was happening to him and, when he thought about it, even he did not truly believe.

The *gianes*, as she had until now, took the lead. She placed Mandero on the rocks and bade him stay there. The *masseriol* somehow produced a human-sized cup and shared their uncommonly heady wine while he watched and waited.

The fairies were quiet about their magic as they gathered in the grassy knoll beside the inland sea. From crevice, brook, and crook they came, gathering in a growing circle. The power from their collective spells rippled out, as the effects of a stone skipping across water. Mandero felt the magic wash over him in waves. He could not tell if he were going to be sick or transformed in some way, but there was no denying the overwhelming power of compulsion.

At first, it came like a tickle in his gut that began to coil his insides and the buzz of a bee in his ears. While there was no pain, Mandero found it disconcerting to be drawn to his feet as though by a cord in the middle of his gut and another unseen cord masking the left side of his face and be drawn toward the cluster of *lasa*.

The fairy folk opened their ranks to him. He thought he should protest, but to what and why? Once among them, they closed in. He could not move, could not speak. They pushed him, guiding him into a circle of fairies within a circle of ever more of their kindred.

Mandero saw another circle within the greater circle beginning to form. Within the second inner circle, Mandero recognized Alessandra’s poppet which he had carefully secured in his blouson! Befuddled, he reached into his shirt.

Gone! The fairy folk whirled past him, turning him, like a straw doll cast upon capricious waters. Twisting, he craned his neck, to see ... to see what? *They* had Alessandra, but how? Did he expect to see the *tesoro* lying upon the rocks where he had sat taking a cup of wine with the little fey monks? He looked toward the monks

to gain a sense of place.

There, just as he had left them, the masseriol continued their toasts to his good fortune and banging their mugs, cups and goblets against the one in his hand . . . where he sat with his head against the barrel and, for all to see, too deep in his own cups to respond.

Mandero stopped, digging his feet in, trying to find some anchor in reality. How could he be here . . . and, yet . . . there, hunched against the rocks Disbelieving, he stood like a stone around which the fairy kindred and their magic accumulated.

In that moment, everything grew suddenly still. Nothing moved. Nothing breathed.

He turned toward the center of the circles. He could not help it. He did not know why.

The *lasa* faded back.

Staring at him, looking as stunned as he felt . . .

Mandero fell to his knees, hands to his heart.

Alessandra—for not even magic could make him mistake his lady—dressed in black, appearing as though just returned from one of the Queen’s Balls. She let out a little cry and dropped down beside him.

He felt her breath upon his cheek. Her breath! Mandero slowly looked up into her eyes. A tear rolled down her rounded cheek—pink and vibrant skin made all the more stark by the inky blackness of her Gypsy Silk dress . . . and the conflicting memory of holding her cold corpse. He wiped the tear from her cheek with his thumb, cupping her face gently in his hands. She felt warm and the tear wet. In wonderment, he tried to comprehend how she was beside him as solid and real as he . . . as the fairy folk, as the ground he knelt upon.

In a daze that did not even begin to make sense the whys and hows of it, Mandero pulled her to him. Tasting first the salty tears that fell from her eyes and then, tenderly, exquisitely, her lips. When her hands came up and encircled his neck, he drew her tighter, venturing to deepen his kiss and allowing his hands to roam.

Mandero froze as a hand gripped his shoulder. He did not, could not release Alessandra. Holding her tight, he looked up.

The *ganes madonna* stood beside them. “Maggiore, this must be, if you are sincere, more than a simple reunion.”

“Don’t . . . don’t take him away.” Alessandra’s voice sounded husky in his ear. She gripped him tighter. “Not after all of this time, not after—”

“Peace, child,” the fairy lady said to Alessa, to both of them. “We cannot return to you what was stolen. Yours will never be the union of a lifetime.”

Mandero pressed his face into Alessandra’s thick hair, braided and coiled as she had oft worn it. “Then why do you torture us so?” He stroked her shoulders as she began to weep.

“Torture is not our intent. We want what is Ours and she, Alessandra Patrini, was promised to Us from before her birth. In her lifetime she was to serve Us and, in death, she was to be returned as one of Our own . . . but someone else has broken that bargain.”

“You have brought her back only to take her from me once more?” Mandero demanded angrily.

“The Romani witches cast their spell, binding you together even past death,” the *giances* said. “They hoped to make it possible for her spirit to find you, even in death, to escape in what ways she may from her corrupter. We seek to strengthen that bond so that she may have the will and reserve to fight him.”

“And how do you presume to do that?” Mandero looked up through narrowed eyes.

“You planned a marriage. The Romani would not go so far as that—not with their fear of the impure— but, you, Mandero, will you take the unclean upon you if that is what they call it? Will you still marry this one to whom you have pledged an eternal love?”

“Mandero, don’t!” Alessandra gasped, struggling desperately to pull away.

He held her tight. “I will.”

“But, Mandero, there can be no future for you if you do this,” Alessandra said. “Words cannot speak what our hearts have promised, but do not do this! For me, I beg of you not to do this.”

Mandero twisted his fingers through the braids of her hair, tipping her head back. “I won’t. I won’t do it for you. I will do it for me because without you I am nothing and I have no future. There is only you and that is all I *ever* wanted.”

“You will wed, then?” the fairy lady asked, bending low to be face-to-face with them.

Mandero looked back at Alessandra, relishing the feel of her soft body in his arms again. “I will not be denied, *mi adorata*.”

She stared up at him, her nut-brown eyes searching his face for any hint of doubt. At last, she nodded.

A call went up among the kindred. “Bring the broom!”

Their hostess smiled gleefully. “We shall have a wedding the old-fashioned way!”

* * *

“We can give you only this one night,” the *giances madonna* said. She stood in the mouth of the little cavern. “The maggiore must be returned. His body cannot sustain itself longer without its *anima*.”

And then they were alone. The woven reed curtain dropped to cover the door to the tiny domicile.

As had become her habit, Alessandra glanced around her new surroundings, this

time finding welcome and warmth. It was a place of the living, containing bed, chairs, and a table instead of a cold crypt for the dead, and, for just this little while, her mind and body felt one again.

She felt the pressure of Madero's presence behind her, though he did not actually touch her. A familiar awareness stirred within her, an ache which she had heretofore diligently suppressed. Alessandra licked her lips. All she wanted to do was to throw herself into his arms and let love have its way. But what did Madero expect? Would he be offended by her bra-zenness? Why did he not touch her?

Against the rough-hewn wall, their shadows played, cast by a beeswax candle. Alessandra looked on expectantly as the hands of Madero's shadow reached up ... but something stayed his hands and then he dropped them again.

Alessandra's heart ached. There had been women before her, she knew that, but here he was as shy as she. Love sometimes did that to a man, the old mothers said. She took a deep breath and released it shakily, aware of the expectant tightness in her body. A hungry tremble weakened the backs of her legs. Alessandra turned and leaned her full weight against him. As he bent to catch her, she lifted her lips and captured his, surprised, but unrepentant, at her own shamelessness.

She savored every sensation: the taste of him, his mouth, the feel of a day's growth of beard as it chafed her cheek and then along the bare expanse of her shoulder, the pressure of his lips up the length of her throat, the strength of his hands as they began to rove over her body. She lived, she knew it, felt it through every essence of her being.

Leaning against him as he rained kisses upon her face and neck, she allowed her own hands to explore. His back was strong, muscular. She pulled at the back of his shirt until it came free of his belt and slid her hands up, over and around his skin.

Madero arched and rolled his shoulders like a cat. He stepped back from her and writhed out of his shirt.

Alessandra watched him. She could feel the blood pulsing beneath her skin, in the heat of her body. She wanted nothing more at this moment than to run her hands down his back except, possibly, to feel his hands against her skin.

She found the ribbon laces at the back of her dress and pulled them loose. She turned awkwardly trying to capture the right lace to undo her bodice. Madero caught her arm and together they negotiated the stays, laces, and boning. As they met with some success, their efforts grew more determined if somewhat less reasoned. Nervous excitement brought laughter. Whether by accident or design, Alessandra did not care which, they tumbled onto the bed.

With the bodice removed, the rest of their clothes seemed to melt away as they kissed, entwined, touched, explored ... as they loved. Alessandra dismissed her girlish shyness. She was not shamed by who she loved, nor to be cherished by him.

* * *

"*Adorata*," Madero murmured. Taking her hand, he kissed it, one knuckle, one

fingertip at a time. They were meant to have a lifetime of loving. He stroked a lock of hair from her eyes. He had but one night to remember every nuance of her body, only the same night as first introducing her to the ways of love. He sighed. “This night, it must be perfect . . .”

“Perfection is this moment, *amare*,” Alessandra said. She captured his hand and kissed his roughened palm, then placed it over her miraculously beating heart. “Do not be a fool, Mandero, my love. Until now, we two were destined to never . . . there are lovers who never have even *this* moment. Let us love one another and tomorrow will take care of itself.”

Mandero pulled her close, his hands wandering over the smooth firm fullness of her body. It all seemed so real and so impossibly bewildering and beyond belief that she should really, truly love *him*. Who was he to have won her heart? He kissed her, tasting the sweet honey of her lips. By the Fates, if he did not know better, he would swear she lived! Was this phantasm or miracle, delusion or the justice they so deserved?

He watched her eyes, studying her as his fingers skimmed along her waist and up toward her full bosom. She shivered, catching her breath as she tensed—an anticipatory tension.

Mandero kissed her again, then buried his face in the mass of her hair and the soft vulnerability of her throat. By the Fates, he was a greedy bastard, yet still she seemed to welcome him. “The *Fata* know I never thought we would have this night, but that it is to be *only* this night—”

Alessandra placed her hands on either side of his face and tilted his gaze to meet hers. “Know always, Mandero di Montago, that I love you and that no other—in all time—could be as loved as you are now and forever.”

The cruelty of their future, or more suitably, their lack of one, felt like the knife someone had slipped between his ribs a few months ago. They had nothing to look forward to, no hopes—not even in death—

they had only this moment. In this sanctuary, the magic of here and now, she was everything and he could not bear to think of tomorrow.

Mandero breathed in her scent, kissing her throat and down to the narrow space between her breasts. He breathed the names of the *Fata* as he kissed the swell and tasted the peak of each bosom.

He paused as she gasped. Her hands found their way up his stomach, tracing the line of hair starting below it. She breathed his name, tangling her fingers in his hair, so tight that his scalp ached. She pulled him to her, reaching for his kiss.

As their lips joined, Alessandra let out a little cry. Mandero thought he pleased her and smiled as he pressed her into the bedding. He stopped suddenly, sensing something very wrong as her body grew cold beneath him. He pulled back, looking at her.

“No!” Alessandra cried breathlessly, clutching him closer. The color of her skin

rapidly took on the chalky pallor of death.

“Alessa?” Mandero whispered, The pain and fear in her eyes were like a knife to his heart, sucking the breath from his own lungs. Their hours together were too short!

“Don’t let me go!” she begged. The fear and longing in her eyes tore at him.

He did not hesitate a moment longer before gathering her into another deepening embrace. He knew their time together was short, he saw it in her eyes as well. She began to shiver, weeping.

Mandero kissed each tear away and wrapped his arms tightly around her, whispering words of love and devotion. She, in turn, clung to him, her fingers digging into his arms and shoulders like daggers. “Fight it, Alessa. Don’t go!”

She cried and shook her head, growing ever more faint, more gray and insubstantial. “I ... I cannot.”

“You can! You must!” Mandero said. He wrapped his arms around her more tightly and sought to warm her with his kisses, but even as his mouth moved toward her lips, she faded suddenly from his arms and was gone, leaving nothing but an impression in the pillow where her head had rested.

“No!” Mandero cried and pounded the bed with his fists. A sliver of black cloth was uncovered by the ferocity of his blows and, after another, his poppet bride made from the silk of a tainted shroud fell from the twining sheets.

XII

“You may relish him more in the soldier than in the scholar.”

—William Shakespeare

10 d’Septembre, 1684

“It’s been a full day since he was due,” Brambilla said.

Marco nodded. He worried about the maggiore, too. Their leader kept his appointments faithfully, so surely something must be amiss. It was one thing, however, for Marco to speculate, but Brambilla . . . what he knew or thought he knew, everyone knew.

Folding his arms across his chest, Marco studied the squad. It looked for all the world like none of them paid Marco and Brambilla any attention. Puddu sat diligently

cleaning the horses' tack while enjoying the shade of the stone wall that separated the Escalade garrison from the rest of the city. Nearby, Duarte and Cattaneo groomed the squadron's mounts to gleaming. Giordano and Santoro instructed Antoine in swordwork.

Marco did not mistake the facade for reality—even young Antoine craned his neck to better hear what he and Brambilla discussed. That neither Santoro nor Giordano reprimanded him for his lack of attention spoke volumes.

The ride to Ragusa had not been an easy one, but it had been uneventful except for the time the men were forced to chase down Antoine's mule, or the patch-up job they had had to do on him when he took a tumble. How could he be sure that the maggiore's journey was equally uneventful? In truth, he knew that he could not be sure.

"We'll give him the rest of the day. If he has not arrived by dawn, we will go after him," Marco announced. The men's reactions ranged from relief to satisfaction.

* * *

11 d'Septembre, 1684

Marco della Guelfa stood on the outer steps of the garrison. The sentry station offered a brief shelter from the elements. Thunder rumbled and a crack of lightning splintered across the rose-gray morning sky. Duarte, Puddu, and de Conde took temporary reprieve in the stables as they prepared the horses. Second Lieutenant Grifo Brambilla managed to slog through the morass of mud which otherwise served as the garrison courtyard.

"Perhaps I should assist with the horses?" Cattaneo suggested. He turned toward the stables, buttoning the top of his coat.

"*Aiutante*, we would all prefer to be on the road. One more man in the stable to prepare the horses will only serve to remind our young recruit that he is still not carrying his weight. He must learn," Marco said. He pulled on his leather gloves and looked at the other man pointedly.

"Yes, Sir," Cattaneo said.

Marco looked over the five men. If the rain kept at it, they would be soaked to the skin within half an hour, despite their heavy coats. He waved Brambilla to him. "You have acquired the maps to the plantations in Ispica?"

"Indeed," Brambilla said, tapping his coat where it bulged oddly. "The Garrison *Comandante* has advised me that the Gypsies—"

Marco leaned in close to the reconnaissance officer. "If *I ever* hear you use that disgraceful, ignorant term again, I will do everything in my power to see you dropped back down to *caporale*. Am I understood, Second Lieutenant?"

Brambilla stepped back, blinking. "But they use it—"

"What they choose to call themselves is their business, Lieutenant. They are the Romani, a nation within our own. On anyone else's lips it is an insult, and no one in this unit will use the term. May I remind you that the maggiore is Romani?"

"Only half," Brambilla said.

"My sons are only half-Moor, but in all these years I've never been able to tell which half was Moor and which part was of my origin." Marco nodded, moving away. "You have discovered a way to tell the difference. You will have to educate me—and surely the maggiore as well—how it is that you can divine where the division lies."

Brambilla dropped his gaze. "I did not mean it that way, Sissignore, and I'd never insult you or the maggiore."

"They're coming with the horses, Sissignore," Cat-taneo announced.

"You were saying, Lieutenant Brambilla?" Marco said.

"The—the comandante warned that the Romani were not particularly friendly, especially at the plantation. They consider that their homeland, or something," Brambilla reported.

Marco nodded. "It makes sense, but that is where Maggiore di Montago was headed and there we shall go. If he has not arrived, then we will trace his course back ... all the way to Citteauroea if we must." The men arrived with the horses, restless in the poor weather. "Mount up!"

* * *

By map, the men faced a two—and a little more— hours' ride. With washed out roads and more than one stranded traveler needing aid, however, they found the picturesquely named "Fairy Wood" road after more than five sodden hours astride panicky horses. Inside, the huge canopy of intertwined branches of the wood offered them their first respite from the storm thundering overhead.

Eerily, the forest muffled the sounds as well as the effects of the storm and the patter of rain—all but the trickling of water which ran like little brooks through the red soil along either side of the road. As it swallowed up sound, so too did it absorb the limited light of the rainy day. Within a dozen yards, it was as though they were enveloped in the darkest night.

"We'll stop here," della Guelfa announced, drawing up his bay mare. "Light torches."

"It'll be a pretty trick, Lieutenant," Duarte said. "We're all soaked through. I'll have to unearth the waxed cases from the mule."

"So be it," della Guelfa agreed. "Keep together, men!"

Brambilla, who had just begun to venture ahead, turned back—perhaps to protest—or, perhaps not. Marco was pleased that he rejoined them without challenge.

Shedding his soaked wool coat, Marco laid it across his saddle horn and studied the area surrounding them. He had been told stories since childhood about the Fairy Wood and how travelers here were, as often as not, led astray and never heard from again. Judging from the hunted look on some of the men's faces, he was not the only one to have been raised on such tales.

"*Recluta* de Conde, take watch," Marco said. The rest of the men were nervous and on edge. Someone on watch detail would ease their minds, but neither would they be lax enough to rely completely upon the skills of a raw recruit, which gave the boy well-supervised practice.

Antoine coaxed his white mule to the fore, expending as much energy as the mule while he bounced forward in his saddle and tapped its rear incessantly with the birch stripling he used as a quirt. If nothing else, it served to get the boy in better condition, though it did tend to aggravate the mule. Delia Guelfa shook his head and looked away.

Sergente Duarte produced two lanterns, as well as candles, and dry flint from the boxes, bundles, and bags strapped onto the supply mule. In a matter of moments, the sergente created enough flame to light the candles.

"Someone comes!"

The men turned toward de Conde.

Marco spun his horse in a tight circle and moved to the young man's side. "Fall back, *Recluta*," he said quietly.

"But— Yes, Sir." De Conde followed orders. The hesitation was a matter for later discussion.

In the distant gloom of the forest, two riders approached. By their bearing, Marco judged them both to be men. The one on the right carried a lit lantern on a long staff. Marco turned in his saddle and, from Sergente Duarte, took one of the lanterns with its sputtering new flame. Raising it high, Marco swung it from side to side. "Hail, fellow travelers!"

The other horsemen drew their horses to a stop. The mount on the left chafed at the bit, skittering. At the distance of over a hundred yards, it was impossible to make out what the riders said to one another or what they did with their free hands.

"On alert, men," della Guelfa ordered quietly. "They will be the first to act. Be ready to return fire if you must, but if not, don't let them see your scorpion-inis at the ready."

Marco eased his horse forward. It was almost as simple to feel the tension of the squad as it was the mount beneath him. He heard the sigh of unlashd swords half pulled from their scabbards and the familiar clicks of the small crossbows as they were being loaded. Moving forward a little more, Marco called, "Hail, travelers! Citizens, we are of the Escalade. Can we be of assistance?"

"From where do you hail?" the rider on the left challenged.

Marco glanced back at his squad of men, raising his hand in slight warning. "Citteuroea."

"What business have you here? Do you have a warrant?" the right rider yelled. His companion said something to him.

Marco gave them a brief moment to talk between themselves. They were probably sentries of a sort, intending to protect their clansmen. "We come to arrest no one, Sir, but are seeking our maggiore—one of your Romani brothers—who came this way a fortnight ago."

Again the men consulted and, slowly, the rider on the left came forward.

"Stay here," Marco said, loosening his reins.

"But, Lieutenant—" one of the men began.

"You have your orders. Mind your weapons and look sharp," Marco said. He gave his mare a touch of the heel.

Marco closed with the other rider, he noted that the other man looked familiar. By the time they drew abreast, della Guelfa was relieved to see friendly recognition in the other's expression as well. He grinned and bowed in the saddle, "Colonello di Drago! I did not expect to find you here!"

"You look well. Our adventures escaping the cardinal's men in Salerno seems to have brought you no new ills," the dapper older man said.

"No, Sir," Marco said. He glanced back toward his men and gave them the signal to stand down. "Is all well?"

The colonello was also the Duca di Drago, blood brother to the White Queen. The queen and the duca shared the same fair complexion. His brown hair, almost blond from exposure to the sun, was pulled back into a tail with modest bow and a brevity of lovelocks—so fashionable, with bows and curls, among most courtiers—draped on either side of his face.

"No," the colonello said, shaking his head. "All is not well. I am here now, summoned by my wife's grandmother—"

"The Black Queen," Marco della Guelfa said, mentally ticking through the relations. The duca's wife was also half sister to the maggiore's fallen lady. Together, the sisters had shared the duties of the Gypsy Silk trade, answering only to the Romani Queen, their maternal grandmother.

The colonello hesitated. "We call her the *Beluni* and address her as *Puri-Daiya* instead of 'Majesty.' "

"The *Beluni*," Marco corrected, "sent for *you*? Is there a problem with the maggiore?"

"Yes, but not as you might think. Truth be told, I was on my way to the fort in Ragusa," the colonello explained.

"To Ragusa?" Marco shifted uneasily in his saddle. He chided himself on the

action. The men might not understand the source of his unease and take it as reason to arm themselves. He noted that the colonello glanced over his shoulder toward the squad. Undoubtedly, the men watched. “We are the White Queen’s men. The maggiore is our *comandante*. How can we be of assistance? He *did* arrive?”

The colonello nodded. “Yes, yes, and he was received by the *Kris* and the *Puri-Daiya*. The problem is that. . .” The colonello looked distinctly uncomfortable. “The maggiore has since disappeared, Lieutenant.”

“He was due to meet us yesterday in Ragusa,” Marco said, his mind traveling back over their route, considering where the maggiore might have run afoul of brigands on the road. “We have just made the trip. The road is difficult, but not impassable.”

“No, Lieutenant, you fail to understand me. The maggiore has disappeared from the camp,” the colonello said. Taking a deep breath, he shoved his hat back so that it did not shadow his face so much. “He has left everything behind. *Everything*. It is as though he heeded nature’s call and didn’t return.”

Marco felt his eyebrows rise nearly to his hairline. He licked his lips and glanced back at the maggiore’s men. They watched expectantly. “His horse?”

“Found loose from his tether, but his saddle and other tack remained where Maggiore di Montago slept, along with all of his gear.”

Twin emotions—loss and suspicion—warred at once. He licked his lips. He must choose his words carefully. Because of the colonello’s position and alliances through his wife, he spoke to the most powerful man in Tyrria, second only to the White King. He looked down at his gloved hands, folded over the saddle horn and gripping the reins. His mare mouthed her bit. “How . . . how long has it been? I mean, how long has he been missing?”

The colonello, Duca di Drago, looked at the squad of men and back, his expression reluctant. “The better part of two weeks.”

Marco della Guelfa snapped his mouth shut, started to speak, and then paused. He rubbed his chin. “He could only have just arrived.”

“He disappeared the second night.”

Marco wet his lips. “And we were not notified?”

“There were no real signs of mischief. The *Kris* thought they would find him nearby. The *Beluni*, however, sent for me and my wife,” di Drago said.

“They . . . the Romani . . . they will not mind our presence, I hope?” Marco asked.

This time it was the colonello who shifted uncomfortably in his saddle. “They are anxious about this. The *Kris* is against it.”

“What is the *krist*, Sissignore?”

“*Kris*,” di Drago corrected. “It is the men’s council. They provide something of an internal constabulary and mete out justice.”

“And if we insist?”

Di Drago raised his hands in a calming motion. “I have been persuasive. As a senior officer in the Escalade, I can claim command of your squad.”

Marco rocked back in his saddle. The duca spoke the truth, but it was something of an affront to have his maggiore’s designation taken from him. “If ... if that is what you wish, Colonello.” Marco bowed deeply in his saddle.

“No, it is *not*,” di Drago said urgently. He smoothed his mustache and trimmed beard. “I have every reason to trust the maggiore and you, Lieutenant, but for the sake of the *Kris*, however, their concern is that—”

“We will run rampant on their home ground seeking vengeance instead of justice,” Marco finished for him.

Di Drago nodded, his demeanor relaxing with Marco’s comprehension. “Exactly. Very well put. You understand something of their thinking, I see.”

“A benefit of working with the maggiore, Sissignore,” Marco said, “though he claims, oft’ as naught, to not understand his mother’s people either.”

“Then you will not protest bringing your squad onto the grounds under my aegis?” He looked over della Guelfa’s shoulder. “What of your men?”

“They will do as the maggiore and I would bid them,” Marco replied.

“Good. Then it will be done. I must speak with the chieftain.”

Marco held out a restraining hand, careful not to actually touch the senior officer. “You should be warned, Sissignore, that we have a recruit with us. He is young and foreign-born.”

Di Drago winced. “You will direct him to keep his own counsel, I presume?”

“But, of course!”

* * *

“As soon as the rain lets up, we’ll be out looking for him,” della Guelfa assured the men.

Seven pairs of doubtful eyes watched him over their fire. Antoine, the Recluta, struggled to take the saddle from the back of his mule and set it aside.

“But haven’t they done that already?” Antoine asked. He looked up from his work as the silence stretched. He scanned the faces of the veteran soldiers and officers of the peace and flinched. “But they have, haven’t they?”

“When you are lost, boy, remind me that we can take someone else’s say-so that they looked for you,” Sergente Duarte said.

“They’re Gypsies, sure, but you said the maggiore is one of them,” the boy said.

Marco spared a glower at Brambilla, who had the good grace to duck his head. “They—”

“We are called Romani.”

All of the men turned at the sound of the woman's voice. The Duchessa di Drago stood in the northern mouth of the cave they had turned into a camp. Her husband, the colonello, helped her remove her heavy cloak. She scanned the granite and sandstone cavern, looking for something, Marco knew not what. After a hesitation, she came by the fire and claimed a driftwood stump for a chair.

"I am deeply indebted to your maggiore. We were to be family," she said.

Her voice was husky and strong. Today she wore her black hair loose, covered by a bit of scarlet cloth. Like the women of the encampment below, she wore red skirts, and bangles of gold accented her tawny wrists. Except for her bearing, della Guelfa thought, she could almost blend in with the other Romani, never to be taken for the highborn court lady he had previously known her to be.

"I have come with my husband to speak for my people. No wrong has been done to your commander by one of us," the duchessa urged. "I have read the signs, Signores, and there is the spark of magic in his tent."

"Magic!" Brambilla scoffed.

"Stand when you speak to your superiors," Marco barked, "and unless you know otherwise and can therefore challenge *my* veracity, then you will hear the *Araunya e Duchessa* and take her word as your God's gospel."

Brambilla snapped a sharp salute. "*Pardone, Your Grace.*"

The duchessa nodded. Her hand fell to her pregnant belly as she shifted in search of a more comfortable position. "Thank you, Lieutenant, for your trust."

"Forgive my men. They have been too long in the company of only soldiers such as themselves," della Guelfa said, glaring at his men, all of whom had finally started to rise.

"Please, Signores, please. Sit and let us discuss this most distressing turn of affairs," she said, waving them back to their places around the fire.

XIII

*"But already it is time to depart, for me to die, for you to go on living;
which of us takes the better course, is concealed from anyone except God."*

—Socrates

12 d'Septembre, 1684

Alessandra came into being screaming. Her howl of rage slammed into the stone walls and echoed back at her like a physical force, punishing what few of her senses remained.

The cardinal screamed in pain and dropped to the floor, writhing. She took no satisfaction in his cries, nor at his desperate attempt to cover his ears to block the torturous noise. He had summoned her from Madero's very arms! The cardinal had forced himself upon her, drawing and bending her existence to his will without pause or consideration for her.

Alessandra reached out for the cardinal's discarded cloak, grasping at anything that might cover her nakedness only to realize that she once more wore her lackluster gray funeral reeds. The husk which was once her physical form lay upon the floor, exposed to the red and gray stone and whatever air—cold or otherwise—found its way into this benighted place. The tarpaulin used to wrap her during travels had been pulled to one side. The cardinal, though a man of the Church and sworn to celibacy, had seemingly taken no care or interest in covering the indecorous display of her body.

As her howl finally fell to silence, the cardinal snarled and began gathering his tools. Alessandra turned. Where was Brother Tomasi who had been so kind in the past, at least, to cover her nakedness . . . perhaps for the sake of his own modesty?

“So, *venefica*, you have found your voice, have you?”

Alessandra faced the cardinal's angry countenance. If she had not already learned that ghosts did not dream, she would have sworn her time with Madero had been nothing but that. She found strength in the small loop of threaded hair and gold which encircled her wedding finger. She closed her eyes and clinched her hands tight. She was Madero's and he had sworn to save her!

Opening her eyes, Alessandra glared back at the cardinal, slowly turning with him as he attempted to circle her.

“So . . . voice *and* form,” the cardinal chuckled. “Your powers grow, *streggina*.”

Alessandra found speaking took more effort than she thought possible. . . . Something she had once taken for granted now cost her energy already drawn by her scream. “I curse you!” Her voice sounded pale, wispy, almost nonexistent.

He laughed. “You can barely say the words. What threat are you to me?”

As he spoke, however, Alessandra noticed a strange glamour upon his right shoulder, caressing, like his shadow. Thinking upon it now, she had noted it before. Whatever the shadowy thing was, she felt an instant and deep kinship with it . . . and it grew *from* the cardinal. That sense of kinship repulsed her.

Investigating the strange aura came as a tantalizing promise for another time. From a lidded picnic basket, the cardinal pulled a protesting white dove. It struggled in his grip, pecking and arching in an attempt to free its wings and take flight.

Alessandra recognized his intentions immediately. Conte Urbano, the cardinal's

minion, had once enslaved her soul in the form of a white bird. The dove was symbolic of peace and harmony. The cardinal sought to control her absolutely, using the bird's symbolism to tie her not only to the bird but into a form incapable—or, at least, unwilling—of fight.

She moved to the far side of the cavern. This place was new to her, she realized. The other burial chamber had been plastered with whitewashed clay, but here there was a humbleness about the rough-hewn rock, unpolished, unplastered, or painted. It fell with natural striations of a golden red and the plainest gray fading into whiteness.

The cardinal knelt as though in prayer, but the book before him was a grimoire of the *magia nera*—the blackest of magicks.

Alessandra paced the edges of the tomb, trapped. She had no spell books, she had no resources— nothing to count upon but her own wit. She bent toward the lantern and discovered that the churchman had found a way to lock the seals, denying her access. Fuming, she tried to turn the pages of his book, but her hand passed through. Pain lanced up her arm.

She drew back. Deep, glowing red symbols branded her hand and arm. The pain turned her insides out and radiated to head and toe. She dropped to the ground grasping her arm as she tried to think of something that she might do to stop the pain. Then she realized that she had given the cardinal precious time.

The prince of the Church held up the bird, pronouncing the final words of the spell.

Alessandra tried to scream again as she felt herself falling into the magical whirlpool that would draw her into the bird and give the cardinal absolute control over her. He began anointing the bird with oils and took up a red satin ribbon.

It could have been any ribbon. No courtier's wardrobe was complete without ribbons and bows to bedeck their hair and person, but Alessandra knew that this was not *any* ribbon. Could not be just any ribbon. It had been hers in life. He meant to seal her into the bird by binding it with her own ribbon.

Alessandra snatched at it. It passed through her fingers. In desperation, feeling herself sliding out of control, she grabbed at it one last time focusing all of her being into having enough form to claim it.

She exulted as she pulled it free. Desperately, Alessandra shoved the ribbon into her funerary corset. She hoped, prayed to and by the *Fata* that it would be safe there, that her taking form provided it form as well. She had form! But her body was still an inconsistent structure made more from mists and vapors than anything else.

“It isn't that easy, *Araunya*,” the cardinal said. With a laugh he bent and pulled a lock of hair from the corpse. It came away easily with just the hint of ichor-ous flesh.

A black whirlpool began to form between herself and the cardinal. As it whipped and whirled, a void in its center yawned before her. The whirling winds sucked at Alessandra, drawing her toward its maw. She saw nothing she could grasp, nothing

to buy her a moment's purchase so that she might resist. Wind whipped at her from every angle, beating her toward the grasping edges of the whirlpool. Everything was desperation now.

The bird in the cardinal's hands keened—as though it knew the priest planned to kill it to make room for Alessandra's spirit.

Dizzily, Alessandra saw what she must do. She struggled along the edge of the pool. It felt as though she fought against, a strong gale which blew her ever backward toward its sucking pool. Alessandra caught sight of the cardinal's satisfied expression and she became Anger.

Alessandra's rage swelled to fill her essence, leaving room for nothing else. Anger gave her substance and driving will.

Sinking the claws of her wraithlike hand into Cardinal delle Torre's shoulder, she gouged his flesh and ripped his red robes. She smelled the burning of her own substance as it encountered his crucifix. Her howl, not of pain, was one of laughter at the irony that this symbol would protect him even though *he* worked the blackest of the arts.

It was neither him, nor his vestments that Alessandra wanted. With a vengeance, she raked her nails along his arms to the half prepared dove. Shoving her face into the cardinal's, she compelled him to stare into the depths of her eyes and see the emptiness of her pitiful existence. He had created this through his own supernatural devices and she savored his reaction.

The cardinal shrank away, his expression one of horror and distaste. Taking her momentary advantage, Alessandra seized the bird and, with a deliberate twist of her already bloody fingers, snapped the dove's fine-boned neck.

She howled with laughter, exultant as she felt the cardinal's spell disperse. She had won! Delayed him once more! Energy burned through her, bright and angry.

The cardinal fell back, injured, bloodied, and exhausted.

Alessandra shook the bird free of the encumbrances of the cardinal's spell components. She ripped away the cord of her own hair, with its seals and markers, leaving only the bird and the symbols burned into its body. Determined to ruin every last pictogram that might allow the cardinal to use the bird as his tool, she took it by its feathered wings and tore it apart. It was as easy as tearing cloth. Its flesh ripped like finest silk, showering the cardinal with its life's blood and bits of bone and flesh.

She flung the remains at him and wiped the wind-whipped hair from her mouth. Blood touched her ethereal lips. Without thought, swollen with victory, she licked the blood away.

Her ghostly body vibrated with sudden shock. Power coursed through her spirit! It was a tiny frisson and then it was gone. Curiously, Alessandra looked down at her hands. The blood of the bird and of the cardinal mingled. She tasted the fluid of life on her palm, licking the cooling liquid of the bird's vitality. She felt another shiver of power, much fainter.

The cardinal pushed himself to his feet, his expression one of pain and disgust.

His revulsion did not bother Alessandra; but the pain gladdened her heart. She continued her experiment, watching the cardinal, turning with him as he grabbed his belongings.

Alessandra tasted the blood on her fingertips—the cardinal’s blood. She caught her breath in surprise at the sudden jolt of energy surging through every last inch of her ghostly being. With energy came hunger. She sucked the blood from her fingers one by one.

The cardinal watched her as he clutched his tools . . . and then he ran.

* * *

Shivering, Mandero awoke to the salty taste of tears and memories. Alessandra’s tears, mixed with his own ... as they had made love, thoroughly intertwined, she had let out a cry of protest and then faded into nothingness in his very arms. A deep, vile sense of coldness had then consumed him, sapping his consciousness.

He clenched his fist in the nothingness beside him that should have been her hair, reaching for her, as he knew he would forever more, haunted by their one night. He came fully awake.

Groaning inwardly, he rolled onto his back, wiping the last tears from his eyes. He blinked, trying to focus, to get some sense of the time. His vision was not clear. Tears. He rubbed his eyes and tried to focus again only to find that he saw only a little better.

Smelling the smoke of cook fires, he stretched and sat up, glancing around the *bender* tent the Romani had assigned to him. In mid-stretch, he stopped, irritation flaring. Someone had clearly rummaged through his belongings. His eyes still somewhat blurred, Mandero quickly verified nothing was missing. He would speak to the *Beluni* about this—no, not her. He would speak to Petrus. As Head Chieftain of the *Kris*, the administration of law within the tribes fell to him.

Mandero stood, ran his fingers through his hair and his growth of beard, straightened his clothes and pushed aside the flap of his *bender*. He stopped in the glare of the midafternoon sun, noting that everything seemed . . . uneven. The vision of his left eye was somehow clouded. He blinked and rubbed the eye, trying to make sense of his altered vision.

He blinked rapidly and frowned, rubbing his eyes again. When he opened his eyes, he discovered a woman gaping at him. In response to his friendly greeting, she yelled, “*Ja, chavo, ja! Lei Kris!*” and sent her *chal* running, with a shove to his backside.

Surprised, Mandero glanced behind him and then at the woman. “Why send for the *Kris, meeri-rawnie?*”

The woman put down her laundry basket and pushed her toddler behind her. She held up her hand. “*Atch, tui toccato!* The *Kris* will deal with you!”

“Me? Touched?” Mandero protested, wondering if the woman were mad. Surely no one would leave two small children in her custody if she were not of the right mind, but nothing she said made any sense.

A crowd began to gather. No one came any closer than the woman who stayed well out of arm’s reach. They looked suspicious and angry, and for the life of him, Mandero saw no one he recognized ... at least not by name. “What is the matter? Why do you look at me like that?” he called to one of the men.

The man, instead of answering, nudged an older boy in the direction the little one had run just a moment before. “*Lei Kris e gavengroes. Hurry, chal!*”

Gavengro! Could they have forgotten who he was? “I am gavengro, *prallar,*” Mandero said, hoping to soothe the hostile mood with the friendly familiarity of their own language and the tone of his voice. He held up a hand and stepped back toward his *bender* intending to collect the baldric which established his identity as a member of the Escalade. He stopped, however, at the distinctive sound of a pistola being cocked.

One of the men, a little older than some of the others, pushed his way to the front, leveling a very old wheel-lock of indeterminate condition at Mandero’s stomach. He froze, eyeing the owner of the gun. The other man grinned at his *kumpania*, waving them back with the kind of authority a couple of beers and a loaded weapon gave one. He was smart enough, Mandero thought, to target where he would most likely hit something rather than for the showy aim at the head. This, however, was very cold comfort.

“*Pral*, please. Put the pistola away. I will wait for the *Kris*,” Mandero said gently.

His captor made a face and steadied his gun hand with the other.

Rubbing his eye, Mandero bit back a curse, knowing that that, just as easily as anything, might set off the gun. Older weapons could be triggered by the merest move and, in ill-trained hands . . . Mandero folded his arms across his chest and did his best to appear nonchalant, all the while praying that the *Kris* would hurry and relieve the idiot of his weapon before one or both of them came to harm.

From the sound of the shouts and the way the crowd looked beyond Mandero, he guessed that some of the *Kris* were arriving. He did not take his eyes away from the pistola and did his best to remain perfectly calm.

“Put the pistola away, *dinnelo!*”

With a sigh of relief, Mandero recognized the voice of the head of the *Kris*. He heartily agreed with his command but could think of far more appropriate names than “fool” for the pistola-waving *pral*—though he felt anything other than brotherly at the moment.

Mandero turned with the satisfaction of knowing the idiocy was over only to discover Petrus Lendaro and several older men staring at him as though he had sprouted wings and wore a dress.

“What?” he asked.

XIV

“Bad is never good until worse happens.”

—Danish Proverb

Don Cristoval Battista took a long, deep swallow of Conte Baiamonte Davizzi’s heady red wine. The deMedici bastarde did not like the coarse “peasant wine,” preferring expensive French imports. Cristoval knew this well enough since he paid for the wine, as well as the foods and other “necessities” for keeping a man of breeding, which was the way Conte Pierro deMedici wanted others to think of him.

In another month, Battista would be forced to sell off more precious farmland to support his guest. So much for the favor of the Duca deMedici whom he had hoped to win back as a sponsor by taking in his ill-born son!

“Old friend, you drink like . . .” His neighbor marshaled his expression toward one more solicitous. “Battista, think of your son and do not stay so much in the cups.”

Cristoval sighed and put his mug down. He managed a sad smile for Conte Davizzi. “Alas, it is my only escape these days.”

“Let me serve you something better at least . . . something not quite so intoxicating,” the conte suggested.

Battista shuddered. He had enough of fancy liquors these days. Thankfully, the priest and his cabal had departed after a short stay—displeased to learn that his neighbor, and just now Cristoval’s host, had taken a Romani woman to wife. They appeared only mildly pacified to learn that the conte had been widowed many years ago and his half-caste daughter even more recently had been murdered in the capital city. Despite everything the conte had done for the young heathen, she had taken to the ways of her mother’s kin. Even the conte’s new wife—his third, or was she his fourth?—a fine German aristocrat with a convent education had not been able to beat sense into the girl.

“Tell me your fine wife, the Contessa Ludmilla, has a sister yet unmarried and then, perhaps, my woes will be eased.”

The conte held up his hands helplessly. “Is it money, then?”

Battista picked up the mug, waving his free hand. “It is always my travail, is it not? My guest will kill me yet and leave nothing for Ludvico. As it is, I have only hopes of another marriage that might provide him an education of any merit.”

“You cannot place all your hopes on the next generation, my friend,” Conte

Davizzi said. The melancholy, which hovered ever near since his daughter Alessandra's death, seemed to consume the normally good-natured man.

"Forgive my discourtesy," Cristoval murmured. With the death of his daughter, Conte Davizzi was without heirs ... at least, in a direct line from his own seed, which was always a pitiful thing for any man, but especially farmers such as themselves.

Davizzi nodded and then, sighing, rose and crossed to his desk.

Cristoval swallowed the last of his wine, knowing what the conte was about. He was embarrassed, but his circumstances were too drastic for him to refuse.

"Take this, my friend," Conte Davizzi said, placing a thin leather wallet beside Cristoval's hand. "Do not be offended, please. We are beyond that now, I should think. Take it for Ludvico's sake. Consider it a year's lease on the pasture south of my orchard. I need a place to graze some brood mares."

Cristoval nodded and tucked the wallet into his coat. He rose then. "It is nearly the dinner hour and, alas, I have a guest."

"But of course," Conte Davizzi said, nodding as he followed Cristoval from his study to the vast entryway of the villa.

"Husband, you did not tell me we would be having guests for dinner."

Both men turned to discover the contessa approaching. She stopped in the doorway, folding her hands primly in front of her. Looking at her, with her pale-as-milk skin, her white-gold hair, and stocky features, Cristoval thought perhaps he was lucky she did not have a sister as he had only half jokingly suggested. It would take some effort to get used to that pallor. But then, he reminded himself, nothing took too much adjusting to if she came with a good dowry.

Don Battista bowed deeply, sweeping back the length of his coat with the flourish he detested in Conte Pierro deMedici. "The lady of the house—by far, the finest blossom of anything on your estate, Conte Davizzi!"

Ludmilla Davizzi's stolid, jowly expression actually managed something resembling a smile.

Don Battista crossed to her and took her hand, kissing it perfunctorily. "I am not to stay for dinner, Madonna, for I am called to my own estate by duty."

A servant hurried to open the door for him, anticipating, no doubt, his hostess' desire to be rid of him as soon as possible. The conte and his wife followed him onto the portico and stood there as he mounted. They waved as he made his erratic departure.

The gelding beneath Battista stopped, confused by the conflicting jerking on the reins and kicks. With a kick of his heels, he shook his head and headed toward his own stable.

* * *

"Papa! Papa!" Ludvico hurtled down the steps of Cristoval's own small villa as he rode up. Forgetting every lesson his father had ever taught him about horses, the

boy ran right up to the don's mount, jumping and squealing with excitement. "Have you heard? Have you?"

The ride had shaken off some of the influences of his afternoon in the cups. Cristoval wheeled his horse away from the boy, dismounting as he did so. "Have I heard what, lad?"

"Oh, it's so exciting! Why didn't you tell me, Father?" Ludvico crowed.

Cristoval slapped his horse on the rump, sending him to the stable where eventually one of the field hands would find him and put him away. He noted, even over his son's exuberance, the arrival of Conte Pierro on the steps.

Leaning indolently against the doorframe, the conte smiled—or at least his thin lips twisted heavenward. "He did not tell you, my boy, because I have not yet told him."

Cristoval restrained the urge to clamp tightly on his son's shoulders. He did not like the conte calling him that, even if it was merely a turn of phrase. In the months since Conte Pierro had taken up residence here, he'd deftly managed to alienate everyone on the estate except, unfortunately, for poor Ludvico. At the age of eight, the boy adored the tales of intrigue and bravery the conte liked to tell. Impossible tales, all of them, especially since they featured the conte as hero.

Cristoval also found he had to further restrain the urge to unleash his anger. What was it that the conte had discussed with his son that had the boy so excited?

Forcing a smile to his lips, Cristoval ruffled his son's hair and gave him a shoving pat on the back. "Off to the house. Tell Signora DelVecchio that we are ready for our supper."

Ludvico looked from his father to the Tuscan bastard. The boy frowned, clearly sensing his father's temper. "But, Papa—"

Cristoval looked down at his son. "Do as I tell you."

Clearly doubtful, the boy obeyed, well-mannered enough to know better than to argue. He ran toward the house, stopping in front of Conte Pierro and bowing very formally. He beamed when Pierro ruffled his hair much as his own father had just done.

"In with you, boy," Conte Pierro said, smiling. He watched the boy depart with the indulgence of a father.

Cristoval's anger burned like a bitter viper in his belly. Whatever the conte had promised the boy, he was determined to end this adulation. He took off his riding gloves and stuffed them inside his coat beside the leather wallet from his generous neighbor, Conte Baiamonte Davizzi. Somehow, he feared, on top of everything else, the deMedici had already spent Dav-izzi's money.

"What nonsense have you been filling my son's head with now?" Battista demanded, climbing the steps to his villa. With the conte standing in the doorway, he felt like a visitor to his own home. He refused, however, to take back his words or to

moderate them so they would not sound so openly hostile.

The conte merely appeared amused. He stepped back, ushering Battista into his own home, then led the way through the entry hall and inner courtyard to the office . . . which had also once been Battista's.

The conte closed the door to the office with a snap and motioned for Cristoval to choose one of his own chairs. At least for now, the conte was being a polite "host," which did anything but put Cristoval at his ease.

The conte shrugged when he did not choose a chair and took one himself, propping his feet upon the ebony table with silver mounts which had been a part of Don Battista's mother's dowry.

"While the good father was here," Conte Pierro began, bracing his elbows on the oak spindle armrests and stepling his long fingers, "we could not help but take note of the circumstances here . . . and in which young Ludvico is being raised."

"It is my affair to concern myself over such things," Cristoval said.

The conte waved his hand dismissively. "No one doubts the boy's parentage, Don Battista, but, surely, you cannot deny the *padre* his good intentions? For your son? I mean, being a good Catholic, surely you would not deny the benefits of the Church to your son?"

It was a fool's argument. There was only one answer, at least, one *acceptable* answer. Grinding his teeth, Battista gave in. "Of course not."

"Then you see? There is no cause for alarm," the conte said with a smile.

Battista fumed. "What, may I ask, are your plans?"

The conte sighed heavily, as though Battista's persistence was a trial. "A letter came today. I may return to society. I am welcome to return to the White King's court. Though I am only recently widowed, it is considered sufficient mourning for a bride of a few short hours."

"I thought you intended to return to Tuscany," Battista blurted.

Conte Pierro laughed merrily, clearly greatly amused. He brushed his left lovelock over his shoulder. "Do not be silly, Don Battista. My titles are Tyrrhian based . . . circumstances of my marriage. The letter from the White King affirms it and you may now refer to me as Your Highness for I am being permitted to keep my wife's title as well." He sighed, crossing his feet on the ebony table. "I could not have hoped for better conditions!"

Swallowing back his anger, Don Battista managed a sigh of relief. The conte—no, the prince!—would be leaving soon. Finally! At long last! His sudden bright mood darkened. "We were, however, Your . . . Highness, discussing my son."

Prince deMedici looked up, grinning broadly. "Yes, yes, I do like the sound of that."

"But my son, Your Highness?" Battista pressed.

“Yes, young Master Ludvico,” Prince Pierro grew more somber, businesslike. “As I said, the father and I discussed the boy when he was here. We have decided that there are benefits of the world that the boy will simply not have if he stays here at the estate. It works out very nicely that I will be returning to court as I will need a page—”

“Ludvico stays with me,” Battista growled.

The prince considered him coldly. He rose, straightening his coat as he took a princely pose. “You would deny me ... yes, I have seen your bitterness. You do not hide it well at all, but I have let that go. Now, however, you stand in the way of my young protege and that I cannot accept.”

“*Your protetto?*” Don Battista crossed himself. “*Dios mio!* You claim higher right to Ludvico than I, his own father?”

“I will give him what you cannot,” Pierro replied. He folded his arms. “*And I have the blessing of the Church.*”

“You have the blessing of *a* priest,” Battista retorted.

“You flout the blessing of a priest, do you?”

“That is not what I said!”

“It is the effect,” the prince countered. He smiled that cruel, smug expression that always left Battista with the urge to forget his years and pounce on the other man for a good rolling bout of fisticuffs.

“Papa! No!”

Both men turned. In their distraction, they had failed to note Ludvico scratching on the door. The boy stood in the doorway now. His bottom lip trembled and tears flowed down his cheeks in great rivers, then he turned and ran.

“See what you have done with your shortsightedness?” Prince deMedici said with a sneer. “I will go after the boy. You make sure that what passes for dinner in this house is ready when I return.”

Battista could only stare after the deMedici, hating him all the more. He was no servant, nor was his son free to be taken—

Cristoval sighed and dropped into a chair. Was there any point in fighting the deMedici bastard? He was a prince now, or so he claimed. But then, he had not claimed the title before when he had just as much right to it as he had a day ago. No, it must be as the deMedici said, the White King was granting him the title and probably the dowered properties that went with it. The deMedici was like his father now . . . except of even higher station. If someone of the Royal House claimed some lowly farmer’s son, what care was it to anyone? The boy would have the advantages of court, clothes, and education.

But if he let Ludvico go? It felt as though the heart were being ripped from Cristoval’s chest. He had two things in this world—the estate from his father and his son from his own loins. If he must give one up, then the estate could perish, even if

it meant dishonoring the loyalties of the tenants who worked the land and had given fealty to his family for untold generations.

If only he had never met the Duca deMedici those years ago, never accepted money from him. If only he had found himself a new wife with dowry before the conte—the prince—arrived. If only—Battista stopped the internal tirade that had been his lot in life. His father had once told him that he would be forced to take his own destiny in his hands one day and quit crying over what fate dealt him. He smiled bitterly. It seemed that time was nigh.

Cristoval rose and went to the mirror. He studied himself. His hair was askew, poorly cut, without concern for fashion. His clothes were abominable. His face was unshaven and smudged with dirt. There seemed, however, to be a new firmness to his fleshy chin. He smiled a little, pouring water from the pitcher into the bowl. He washed himself, preparing as best he could in the circumstances and then went in to dinner, hoping to find Ludvico and the prince there.

Ludvico looked up and then away, his brown eyes swollen from tears. The prince did not look up.

Cristoval took a chair. The prince, having reclaimed the head of the table, said a brief blessing and sat back looking distastefully at the simple fare. Cristoval took the platter of bruschetta, served himself and then his son. “Come, Ludvico, do not look so sad,” he said.

The boy sniffed and would not look at him.

“You are unhappy because you think I will not let you go to court, is that it?” He passed the platter and smiled pleasantly at the deMedici, who was watching him suspiciously. “Well, what have I told you, *figlio*, about listening at doors?”

“Not to,” the boy sniffed.

“Quite right—especially when we arrive at court,” the prince said, his eyes flashing at Cristoval.

“It is poor manners and what will people think of a father who has trained his son so?” Cristoval shook his head.

Ludvico looked up through the fringe of unkempt hair, recognizing a change in his father’s mood. He wiped his nose with the heel of his hand. “I would not want to embarrass you, Father.”

The prince made a rude noise at the head of the table.

Cristoval ignored him. “That is very good. Tomorrow, I will send Signora DelVecchio into town for the tailor. We will have new clothes made for both of us.”

“For you both?” the prince asked. His voice squeaked.

“Indeed, Your Highness,” Cristoval said with a nod. “It occurred to me, Sir, that you have no retainers at all. Arriving at the White King’s court without an entourage would be unseemly for a man of your station. You must, at least, have some small showing. If you will take my son as protege, then I am certain we will all be quite

happy and I may, once again, begin the search for a new Signora Battista.”

“So you plan to attend court as well as serve as my retainer?”

“Where else may I find a lady of suitable . . . standing? And, in the meantime, Your Highness, I will be available to assist you as I may. Are you not pleased?”
Cristoval smiled broadly.

The prince stared at him coldly. “Immensely.”

XV

*“This above all: to thine own self be true;
And it must follow, as the night the day;
Thou canst not then be false to any man.”*

—William Shakespeare

“Hold! Hold, I say, damn you!” Petrus slapped the pistola downward. The sharp action set the gun off with an explosion of turf and screams from the already overwrought crowd. As the sod and the crowd’s sentiment settled, all eyes turned once more to Mandero.

Petrus looked at him and looked again, staring at him for a time before saying, “You, *pral*, have explaining to do to the *Kris* and the *Daiyas*.”

Mandero reflected that he had had a better sense of what was going on the night he woke after being stabbed in the back, knocked on the head, and cast overboard into the hostile black waters of the Stretto. No amount of skill with the sword would see him through this sortie.

Somewhere in the crowd, a child complained and his neighbors grumbled. Mandero followed the direction of the crowd’s eyes and saw the *Beluni* and her council of women making their way toward him. *Grasni* and another young woman cleared the way for their elders. More unfriendly complaints to Mandero’s right drew his attention there. Within the course of a moment, he saw, blurrily, the reason for the hostile protestations.

Ten familiar men pushed through the crowd— *Escalade vigilare*, his own company. It gave Mandero a turn, especially when he recognized the *Duca de Drago*. Of the lot of them, only the *Duca* was dressed for the fine day, the others wore their blue and gold uniform hats, coats, and baldrics.

Mandero tried to sort out how his men had found their way to the *Romani* plantation and in such good time. Why were they *here* instead of at *Ragusa* where they were supposed to convene? Why did the *duca* now lead them and what

problems had arisen because of their presence? With no time for contemplation, Mandero bowed first to the *Beluni* and then to the duca as he at last pressed his way through the gathering.

As he straightened, Mandero realized even the *Beluni*, Duca di Drago, and his own men stared at him with shocked looks. Men he had trained and commanded for nigh on a decade stared at him as if he were a stranger. Mandero fought to maintain his composure. It was as if all these people recognized him and yet did not. Self-consciously, he straightened the fall of his blouson and ran his fingers through his hair. What did they stare at? Or, rather, why did they stare at him?

Petrus moved to stand between the gathering crowd and Mandero, then turned to face the people. "There is no business before the *kumpania*," he declared, folding his arms over his chest.

At the chieftain's words, the gathered Romani dispersed, slowly and with many lingering looks over their shoulders. As soon as it was clear that they were leaving, Mandero looked to his men. He saw surprise, welcome, consternation, and . . . della Guelfa's mouth twitched. Over too many evenings spent with a chessboard between them, Mandero knew that his first lieutenant was irritated.

"We will meet at my fire," the *Beluni* announced and turned.

"The *Kris* has business with the maggiore, *Mam*," Petrus said sternly. His hand fell heavily upon Mandero's shoulder.

"And they are welcome by my fire as well," Solaja Lendaro retorted. A sense of anger and purpose etched her expression. Her jaw jutted ever so slightly, in clear determination. "You will come with me *now*, Maggiore."

Mandero followed orders, especially when neither the chieftain nor duca countermanded her claim upon him. He did hesitate, however. "Excuse me, *Puri-Daiya*, but my men—"

"They will remain here," the duca said, nodding to della Guelfa who, in turn, signaled the men. The vigilare took their positions at the front of Mandero's *bender*.

None of them, Mandero noted, looked at him fully. The *Beluni* and the *Araunya* were less obvious, but his own men looked everywhere but directly at him after their first open-gazed stare.

"Maggiore?" Petrus murmured, motioning after the women now making their way to the *Beluni's* campsite. Behind the leader of the *Kris* stood a rough gathering of several middle-aged men with the all-too-familiar hostile expressions. The duca and the *Araunya* also hung back, watching and waiting.

Mandero bowed courteously to his superiors and started to retreat up the hill. Realizing he was short on allies, Mandero took a deep breath, touching his heart where Alessandra's plait of hair once stayed only to remember his sacred trust. Upon waking earlier, he'd left the *tesoro* by his bedside thinking that he only left the tent to take a moment's fresh air.

While he would rather do anything but cause further trouble, he was not about to

be parted from Alessan-dra's facsimile. He abruptly turned back toward his tent instead of following the *Beluni* as intended. Only the *Beluni* seemed unaware of his sudden departure.

Approaching his tent, he nodded to Marco della Guelfa and dodged inside. He reached into the bedding and, without sorting through the tangle of cloth, found what he was looking for. As he stood, the duca followed him into the *bender*.

"Don't be a fool, Maggiore!" he growled, catching Mandero's arm. He relaxed when, in the dim light of the tent, he saw the silken figure in Mandero's hand.

"You thought I meant to take a weapon?" Mandero asked, stunned by all that implied.

The door flap was thrown aside again, this time to reveal Petrus Lendaro, leader of the *Kris*.

Mandero acknowledged the *Beluni*'s son with a nod.

"What is the meaning of this?" Petrus demanded. He saw the poppet in Mandero's hand and stiffened. "Oh."

Outside, one of Mandero's company coughed, which served as a timely reminder just as the duca and chieftain ushered him toward the exit. Mandero tightened his grip on the poppet. The men would not understand the importance of the doll and considering their already strange reception to his appearance, Mandero was reluctant to give them any more reason to think about matters they still knew little or nothing about. "If you do not mind," Mandero said to the two men as he took his blue coat and folded it over his arm, thereby, secreting the shroud.

"Let us delay no further," the duca suggested.

"Aye," Lendaro said, holding back the tent flap for the other men to depart.

Mandero once more stepped out into the light of day with the duca and chieftain just behind. He stopped abruptly as he discovered the *Araunya* waiting in the company of his men and the members of the *Kris*. She looked at once curious about what had drawn him back to his tent and angry enough to put in a call for his head.

Delia Guelfa stood at the ready, quickly freeing the *Kris* elder from holding the flap for the duca. As Mandero passed by, their eyes met fully for the first time since this strange morning began.

Mandero saw in his eyes that no matter the misadventures, della Guelfa was still his man. The unfailing loyalty reassured him. Soldiers did not give their respect and service lightly and though his first lieutenant undoubtedly had questions, he was still prepared to obey Mandero.

Petrus once more began the march up the hillside to the *Beluni*'s campsite.

The duca stayed close to Mandero, but took his wife's hand and assisted her over the more treacherous ground. Mandero noticed for the first time that the duchessa carried the duca's heir. From his solicitous behavior, Mandero guessed that the duca was not happy to have his wife traveling. In normal *gadjé* life, she

would be in relative seclusion once she began showing the signs of her condition. What could have brought the duca and his wife to Ispica, then? From what indications he had, Mandero would have thought he was the cause, but how was this possible in the short time since his own arrival?

Only then did it begin to dawn upon Mandero that perhaps his one precious night in the land of the *lasa* may not have been so brief a time beyond the boundaries of the Fairy Wood in the commonplace world. Not just his eyes were blurred, but his sense of time and everything about him. He glanced back at his men, only to find himself looking into the *grizzled* face of a *Kris* elder instead. Mandero nodded politely in spite of the fierce glower of the other man and continued up the hill considering all of what passed this very late morning, in the light of his new theory. It made sense, but only led to more questions.

Already ensconced in her wooden spindle-backed rocker, the *Beluni* patted the chair beside her for the *Araunya* to sit, then drew a lap rug around her granddaughter as the younger woman sat obediently.

Mandero glanced at the company gathered round. Like last night, or at least the night when Alessandra's poppet was created, women gathered close to the *Beluni's vardo*, the youngest being Grasni who sat at the periphery of old mothers, those more learned in the mystical arts. The women ensconced themselves under the awning and occupied the majority of the rug the *Beluni* spread out for her visitors. The men of the *Kris* stood like a wall behind Mandero, as though to prevent some rash attempt to escape. The number of elders of both sexes were roughly equal. The duca, instead of taking the cushion beside his wife, remained at Mandero's side.

"We represent the families and *vitsi* gathered here of this *kumpania*," Petrus Lendaro said, his voice and tone formal and forbidding. "You have brought the unwelcome attention of the vigilare to our very homestead and the *Fata* alone know what other crimes against our people you have committed."

The *Beluni* frowned at her son and the men of the *Kris*. "We have other concerns before even these most imperative of issues, *Meero-kak*." She flung back her lap blanket and kicked free of the tangle of cloth. She pushed her way through the men and reached into the fire just being stoked for preparation of the evening meal. Returning, the *Beluni* carried a lighted twig. She protected its flame with the cup of her free hand.

She eyed Mandero again and then the members of the *Kris* waiting for their chance with him. The *Beluni* knelt and used her rapidly disappearing tinder to light a small oil lantern. The wick lit, she turned the flame up high before she approached Mandero.

The *Beluni* stood intimately close, enough that he smelled her scent of woodsmoke, earth, the heady aroma of crushed herbs—and even felt her at the very edge of actually touching. She was small, wiry, and strong as she leaned toward him, inspecting him . . . but for what? She lifted the lantern and held it so the flame warmed the skin of his face like a burn from the sun.

“Where is that which represents my granddaughter?” The breath of the *Beluni* played across the skin of his neck as she spoke.

Unable to bear the burning light cast by the oil lamp so near his eyes, Mandero finally closed them.

The *Beluni* stepped back, taking the lantern with her.

Mandero opened his eyes again. His right eye still held the fading blaze of light scorching his vision, but the sight of his left eye remained strangely unaffected by the flame—still fuzzy and not clearly focused as it had been since waking. He unfolded his uniform coat revealing the poppet and raised it to the *Beluni* for inspection. She reached for it. Mandero’s fingers tightened around the middle of the doll reflexively.

“You would deny my inspection?” the *Beluni* asked, her voice taut and breathless. The old mothers behind her murmured.

“You made me the guardian of the *tesoro*,” Mandero replied. He did not know why, but knew most assuredly that he would let no other hold the poppet. “You may inspect it as you please, but it will not leave my hands.”

“Maggiore, it is a doll—” the Duca began.

“No!”

The word was spoken in almost a whisper and yet none present failed to hear it. The *Araunya* rose from her chair and approached Mandero slowly.

“*Permisso?*” she asked as she stared at the black Gypsy Silk figurine.

Mandero nodded and held it out to her, his hands moved from gripping the doll to supporting it, allowing the black silk to flow over his left forearm.

In silence, Luciana di Drago studied the figure.

Mandero watched her, his eyes flicking from her face to the figurine. He noted, for the first time, changes in what had been a very simple doll made of knotted cloth and a shank of styled hair.

Perhaps because of the magic of the silk, the knot which formed the head seemed to have shifted. The fabric drawn tight and wrinkled by whorls somehow now took on the features of his *adorata* in miniature. The plait of hair seemed to actually grow from the silk rather than to have been tied into the fabric. At the end of the length of cloth designating arms, hands had formed with fingers distinct enough to display a wedding band of braided silver and gold.

“Grandmother, what have you done!” the *Arau-nya* breathed.

“*Mam-die*, we warned you—” Petrus began with a growl.

The *Beluni* shook her head and peered up at Mandero. “ ‘Tis magic more than was done by us so many nights ago.”

With one last valiant effort at what he hoped was sanity, Mandero corrected her. “No, *Puri-Daiya*, it was last night.”

“No, *pral*, thirteen days have passed since last we set eyes on you,” Petrus

Lendaro declared.

Mandero stared at the older man while he wrestled with accepting the idea that he might have been caught up in the fairies' magic and the incongruity of time. The chieftain's words resonated in his mind and only the certainty with which he spoke made sense.

He turned to the one other person he knew he could trust, the Duca di Drago, who stood at his side, a military man with schooling and a true comprehension of honor.

Duca Stefano met his questioning gaze and shook his head. "I know not how long it has been since this eve they speak of, but I know that your men arrived yesterday after waiting past the appointed time you bid them meet you in Ragusa. It has been a ten-day since the *Beluni* sent word that my wife and I were needed because you, the White Queen's emissary, were gone."

"Those were my words," the *Beluni* confirmed.

"Every man and youth has been searching the plantation for you at the command of the *Kris*. Your horse was where he should be, as were the rest of your belongings. Only you were not to be found," Petrus said. "Your men arrived yesterday and insisted upon making their own search."

"But then I woke and, suddenly, everything changed," Mandero said, folding the doll close to his chest.

"What excuse do you have for this missing time?" the duca asked, frowning.

"Don't be harsh with him, Husband," the *Araunya* said softly. She took Mandero's arm and pulled him toward the *Daiyas*. "Is there one among you who doubts where he has been? Look to his marks. Can you deny the silvering touch of the *lasa* upon him?"

"Silvering touch?" Mandero repeated curiously. Though not a vain man by far, he wished fervently for a mirror to see what the others spoke of.

"I've read accounts of men, scared to their mortal souls, who have reportedly had their hair turn white," the duca admitted.

"'Tis but a swath, not the full hair of his head, and what excuse for the eye? An injury healed . . . *already*?" the *Beluni* countered, staring fiercely at the duca.

The duca bowed his head. "I have no explanation for his eye. There has not been time for an injury to cause such scars that could have healed from when we last spoke."

The *Araunya* alone seemed to concentrate upon Mandero himself. Perhaps she noted his reaction to such overwhelming suppositions, but she took him by the arm and guided him to a place where she had him sit. "Grasni," she said quietly as the elders and her husband continued their debate upon the rational, the magical, and the responsible. "Fetch me a mirror."

"As you say, *Araunya*," Grasni said, rising and disappearing beyond the end of

the *Beluni's vardo*. For the first time since his arrival, it looked like the girl's sympathies seemed to include Mandero. She returned moments later, rubbing a square of metal upon her skirts.

Once in Luciana's hands, she knelt beside the mag-giore. "Are you prepared, my friend?" she asked. She smiled reassuringly when he nodded, then placed the square of polished bronze into his hands.

Nervously, Mandero peered into the mirror. At first he saw nothing more than his face, but gradually the changes began to register. Along the upper left portion of his face, the skin seemed white, like a partial mask spread across his face. Locks of hair, from the part in the middle of his forehead to the left ear, had lost all of their color.

Mandero reached up, touching the altered hair which lay limp amidst the curling, deep brown, near black of his normal hair. He raked his hands through the hair, feeling for the residue of artifice. Men and women at court affected different hair colors out of whimsy. His hair, however, felt no different than it ever had—light or dark.

He blinked and studied himself more closely in the mirror. The left eye which had been so difficult to focus since rising was also changed. The left eye appeared to be a silver pool of mercury with a ripple outward to a boundary of white. Mandero shifted the mirror to look more closely at the right eye. His normal brown eye stared back at him. With the mirror held at a distance, Mandero studied the full effect.

The upper left side of his face was completely changed, even the skin. From the hairline of snow-white hair to his nose, the skin also seemed unnaturally white, almost like the white scars which replaced burned skin. He had seen such on the battlefield, among veterans of artillery units, scarred by their proximity to flame, gunpowder, and cannons. But, on Mandero, the skin retained a healthy texture, there were no disfigurements . . . except for the color of his eye, hair, and partial albinism of his face. Still trying to comprehend the changes, Mandero felt numb as he returned the mirror to Grasni. No wonder everyone stared at him and treated him strangely.

To the *Araunya*, he said simply, "I do not understand."

"You should understand well enough," the *Beluni* said. She did not pretend to hide her anger.

" 'Twas the *lasa*, Maggiore," the *Araunya* said. "You were visited by the fairy folk. Yes?"

Reluctantly, Mandero nodded, confirming what he realized now was obvious to all but himself—and perhaps the duca—that his transfiguration must surely be a sign of *lasa* magic.

"By what right did you summon the fairies?" the *Beluni* asked.

"Summon? Me? I wouldn't even know how to begin!" Mandero protested. "They came to me ... or rather one of them. The first time I saw the *madonna lasa* was upon the road to Ispica after fighting the witch-hunters. I awoke to find her beside

me, propping me in the saddle. She gave me food and drink and set me upon the road through the Fairy Wood.”

Grasni nodded eagerly. “It makes sense, *Puri-Daiya*. It explains the unnatural rate of healing of his wound.”

“Your distrust is so easily set aside?” the *Beluni* asked the younger woman darkly.

By the late afternoon sun, Mandero watched the blush rise in Grasni’s cheeks. “In truth, *Puri-Daiya*, I was unfair. I resented that the *maggiore* lived when my lady, your granddaughter, was dead and accursed. I *thought* he betrayed her, but if the *lasa*, my lady’s own protectors, have nurtured him and sought him out more than once, then most assuredly I should have no grievance against him for my lady’s sake.”

The *Beluni* cocked her head to one side, her eyes dark and speculative. After a pause of several moments, she spoke evenly and with great control. “There is reason in what you say, *pen*, but we know nothing of what has passed between the *lasa* and the *maggiore* and by custom the fairy folk approach the women of our *vitsi*, not the men.” She turned her back to him very precisely and returned to her chair. “So, *Maggiore di Montago*,” she asked as she sat down, “what explanation do you offer for this peculiar draw the *lasa* have to you?”

Mandero shook his head. “I can offer no explanation, except that, like you, they seem to see me as a tool to protect and, hopefully, reclaim *mi amore*.”

“They share our intentions, then,” the *Beluni* said, pushing back on her rocker.

“Basically,” Mandero said.

The *Beluni* paused in mid-tilt. “Basically, you say?”

“What other motives do they have?” the *Daiya* of the Bliardi clan demanded.

The *Beluni* raised her hand to still the tumult of questions beginning among her peers. “Please, Sisters, allow the *maggiore* to explain.”

“I’m not sure that I *can* explain,” Mandero said. “They want. . .” Habit made him hesitate and it took effort to speak her name aloud. Each time, it was a stab in his heart that she was no longer among the living. “They want Alessandra free of the cardinal and his dark magics. They want her to be protected magically, to be immortally tied to me so that I could offer whatever nature of escape might be available to her.”

“That is what we did with our own enchantments when we created the poppet,” the *Daiya di Aurari vitsi* protested.

“When you gave Alessandra form, yes,” Mandero said. Feeling threatened, he held the doll close, out of reach of moving hands and those who might challenge his authority as its caretaker.

“But they wanted other assurances,” Luciana said, from beside him.

“What other assurances?” the *Beluni* asked, her irritation slowly becoming

curiosity. “We bound the two of them by all of the magics.”

“Except one,” the Duchessa di Drago said, ignoring her husband’s helping hand as he reached down to assist her up from her awkward position kneeling at Madero’s side.

“Which?” the *Beluni* asked.

As answer, Luciana took hold of Madero’s left hand and raised it, pointing to the simple band around his marriage finger. “Who did you take vows with, Maggiore?” she asked.

The acute quiet of their immediate gathering seemed to blanket and distance the noise from the other Romani going about their daily business. Madero’s ears felt on fire, a sure sign that his face was flushed with color.

“There is only one woman I would ever pledge my heart to,” he finally managed to say.

“Blaspheme!” One of the elders from the *Kris* behind him protested. “He, by his own words, has twice named himself *marimé*. I don’t want him in this camp any longer! The risk of tainting our children, our families, our—”

“Enough, Lasho!” Petrus growled. “Let the man speak his piece before we cast him out. With as much as I know, we might very well cast out every one of the learned mothers in this *kumpania* which includes your wife and your mother as well.”

Whichever of the *Kris* Lasho was, this seemed sufficient to silence him, but neither did it mean that Madero and his men were not going to be run from the camp before sunset.

With the renewed quiet, the *Araunya* pushed on. “You were wed to my sister?”

Slowly, Madero nodded. He was keenly aware of the men behind him stiffening with outrage and the startled looks of the women before him. The *Belunfs* eyes narrowed into slits, her expression seemed chiseled from stone.

“How did this marriage take place, Maggiore?” the duchessa asked.

“I would never have believed it had I not been there, so I do not expect you to believe me,” Madero said, scanning what members of his audience he could see. “It was a simple marriage, in the old way. We took hands and jumped the broom.”

With a surprised gasp, Grasni said, “You took her hand?”

“He admits to touching the dead,” Lasho grumbled.

Madero turned, rising from his kneeling position. “But she was not dead. She was as alive to me then as any of you are to me now.”

“He is deluded,” Petrus said. “*Mam-die*, I know you place great hope in this man, but the *lasa* have toyed with him—”

“I am no fool, babbling nonsense,” Madero protested. “I only answer questions as they are put to me.”

“Clearly, you have reached certain conclusions, *Meero-kak*. It is not the place of the women to stand in the way of the *Kris* nor to participate in their deliberations,” the *Beluni* said.

After a brief bristling silence, Petrus bowed to his mother and the other Roma women before gesturing the men of the *Kris* to follow him. Of the men, only Madero and the duca remained.

“So,” the *Beluni* murmured, staring across the space of her pavilion, “you claim to have married my *chavi*, do you?”

Madero nodded. “We exchanged rings as well.”

“You’re a soldier, Maggiore, without holdings, we’ve been told. You have—you had no copy of your family crest to bestow upon her,” *Daiya Aurari* said, breathlessly enrapt by his story. “Where did you come by rings in such a place?”

“The *madonna lasa*, my hostess, crafted them from lengths of hair and silk,” Madero said.

“Show me!” the *Beluni* commanded.

Madero crossed the carpeted camp site. An evening wind rose up, making the brightly dyed panels of the *Beluni*’s pavilion flap and buck. The duca tended to a flyaway tent stake jerked loose by a gust. Feeling as though he stood in the center of both the real and proverbial eye of a storm, Madero held out his right hand, unashamed and, strangely, at peace despite the hostility surrounding him.

“There is another exactly like it upon the right hand of the *tesoro*,” the *Araunya* said.

“The doll has no hands,” *Daiya Bliardi* protested, twisting in her position to peer at the poppet tucked close to Madero’s heart.

“Then the *lasa* have worked more magic than you thought,” the *Araunya* said.

Silence stilled the women as they gazed from one another to the poppet and Madero.

“How far are you . . . ?” The *Beluni* paused, leaning back in her chair, rubbing her lips, then her nose, and scratched the back of her head. At last she took a deep breath, “How far are you committed, Maggiore?”

“I have always—” Madero began.

The *Araunya* touched his arm. “No, Maggiore. You misunderstand the question. How far have you taken this binding of you to my little sister?”

“By the mercy of the Three Sisters!” *Grasni* suddenly squeaked as she turned to stare at him. “He has lain with her!”

“*Healing is a matter of time, but it is sometimes also a matter of opportunity.*”

—Hippocrates

Mandero sat in the center of the cavern, surrounded by aging women, old mothers, crones. These were women who had come into their own in a lifetime’s experience of tending scraped knees and broken hearts, hitching horses and harvesting food to feed their families along the roads they traveled, all the while gathering lore, secrets of the ancients and the way of the *chova*. These women were the true *Daiyas* of the various *vitsi* represented here at the plantation. Among them were a chosen few, young women not yet in their prime, who somehow displayed a gift or understanding of the magic, the *chova* these wizened women worked and were accorded attendance and, some even, participation. Grasni apparently fell within this last lot.

He’d spent the last hour guessing at what the *Beluni* and the other women intended to do. His fingers tightened around the poppet: possessively, protectively, determinedly. And then, as though she protested, he loosened his grip so as not to hurt Alessandra. What would he do if they tried to separate them? Tried, he thought resolutely, for he was not about to be separated from Alessandra by so much as a hair of her head.

Trying to remain calm, Mandero studied his surroundings. He had been told more than once this night that he was the first man to set foot—at least willingly allowed—in this sacred place.

The cavern had a naturally vaulted ceiling akin to the Moorish-influenced *cattedrali* he had seen on the continent. Two large portals gaped in its northern side. They served as vents and access to nature’s elements. The *Daiyas* seemed unconcerned that the gaps in their cavern’s highest points made excellent vantage points for the curious nor were they bothered by the proximity of a sizable bat population and the smell of the lair in an unseen side tunnel.

In the last moments of dusk, the unfolding and flapping of leathery wings reverberated softly in the bell-like chamber. Then, with a rush, the bats took flight, and the women stilled in their preparations. The bats swarmed, dipping and diving through the cavern before they swept out the largest portal and into the night. Mandero found himself catching his breath in anticipation as the chamber was filled with the echo of some great wind. He imagined it might be mistaken for the sound of a dragon taking wing.

As the last flurry of bats passed into the night sky, Grasni and the younger women took brands from the fire pit and fit them into the sconces hollowed out of the wall. By the time they were done, the chamber was as brightly lit as the *Sala da Ballo* at the White King’s court on the night of a dance or masquerade devised to entertain courtiers.

Even with the benefit of light, Mandero's left eye still did not function as well as it used to, though some vision had returned over the past several hours. Oddly, now and again, someone's hand became acutely distinct, but trailing sparks like the fluttering lights of the *candelas* who led him through the Fairy Wood last night ... at least, his last night. As the old mothers, Grasni, and another apprentice formed a circle around him, he noted, in achingly clear detail, a brooch worn by one, a ring on another, while others seemed like flashing, speckled hens. In an odd array, bits of clarity bloomed in a background of blur. The switching focus served only to make him sick to his already empty stomach.

* * *

Luciana pulled her arm out of Stefano's grasp, heading steadfastly outdoors. "Come if you wish it, but I cannot *not* be there."

"Your own grandmother does not want you attending," Stefano protested.

She stopped and returned to her beloved, stepping into his arms. Moonlight streamed into the *bender* and an oil lantern that hung from the striplings bent to form their dome-shaped tent served as their only light. The partial darkness made it harder to see than the complete black of night. But, even without sight, Luciana knew Stefano's face well, knew that his forehead would be creased with worry, his lips thinned with anxiety. She brushed her hands along his temples, feeling the tension in his face.

"You are my dearest love," she whispered into his shoulder. She relished the tightening of his arms around her.

"But . . ." he prompted.

Luciana sighed, tilting her head back as she focused as best she could on his eyes. "She is my sister, I must be there. Don't you see? The *maggiore* has allowed his heart to be his guide. He did not fully understand the essence of the *mulló*—"

"What difference can there be between a *gadjé* and a Rom ghost?"

"We have discussed this too many times and it is, forever, a long engagement." She shook her head, wary of his delaying tactics. "We must see what damage, if any, the *lasa* might have done and we must decide if the *maggiore* can still stand as her champion."

"You would not deny the man, surely," Stefano protested.

"It is a possibility. He may have already done more damage than good. We must see." She leaned up and kissed him. "I must go, the midnight hour is almost upon us."

"But what of our child, Luciana?" Stefano said, catching her back into his arms with his hands protectively covering the swell of her abdomen. "We've already lost one son. Please hear the counsel of your grandmother and the other women. Don't put this babe of ours at risk. I'll forever blame myself if something happens to this child and I might have saved him ... or her. I failed you once, I'll not let it happen again."

“You could have done nothing then, Stefan,” Luciana bit her lip willing the sting in her eyes to remain only the hint of unshed tears. He was afraid of the magic and, in all honesty, he had every reason to be. He had witnessed her death at the cardinal’s hands and participated in her resurrection ... all by magic. “I won’t be dissuaded. It matters not if I practice magic since it runs through my veins as surely as the black blood of the Romani. Come, if you will. The *Beluni* made a great concession when she gave allowance for you to attend—”

“To protect you if I couldn’t keep you away,” Stefano said.

“Then you will come,” Luciana said, breaking their embrace. She snatched up a heavily embroidered cinch sack by the door and stood for a brief moment before she let the canvas tent flap fall back in place.

Despite the dark of night, it might as well have been noon. Even as she stepped from her home tent, Luciana discovered the *kumpania* astir. The men, instead of lingering among the horses at the edge of the orchards with their plum wine and foul-smelling *si-garos*, moved uneasily along the borders of the middle camp and the high camp of the *Beluni*. The younger women hovered curiously, many with small children braced upon a hip.

Uncle Petrus moved out of the darkness, as though he had been waiting for her. “Luciana, a word?”

Luciana eyed the hillside and the grand *cava* where the *Daiyas* preferred to work their magic when in residence and then looked up at the moon. *La Luna* waxed toward ripeness, divinely radiant in the heavens. Midnight was almost upon them. Stefano came from the *bender* behind her.

“Talk to me, *Kak*, but as we walk,” Luciana said.

Petrus muttered an imprecation as he fell into step. “The *Kris* has decided that the *maggiore* and his *vig-ilare* must leave by sunrise.”

“If that is the will of the *Kris*, then it must be so,” Luciana said. It was unfair of the *Kris* to place so much blame upon the *maggiore*, especially when it was clear that the women of the *kumpania* had a hand in his current status, but this was the way of her people and the decisions of the *Kris* were obeyed. She gratefully accepted Stefano’s arm as she chose her course across a patch of stones which shifted underfoot.

“Luciana, you must do something to stop them. As *Araunya di Cayesmengri e Cayesmengro*, you have as much say as *Mam-die* among the *Daiyas*,” Petrus urged.

“I am flattered, Uncle, that you come to me, but I am as decided upon this as your mother,” Luciana replied as she crossed the last of the rocks to the sandy path, “and my aunt.”

“It is madness and *marimé*, *Araunya*,” Petrus protested.

“We have protected our people thus far, Uncle. We cannot abandon my sister even beyond death. If we allow just one such death to go unchallenged, one soul to

be stolen for service to the blackest magic, then we are no better than the *chovahano*, and our inaction is but encouragement for him and his kind to repeat their foul deeds. If we do not protect an *Araunya's* soul, then everyone ..." Luciana ended, grinding her teeth. She stared across the shifting stones at her uncle, Chieftain of the *Kris*, as though a great void lay between them. He would not understand because he chose not to. It was the duty of the *Kris* and its men to contend with the harsher realities of life, but it provided nothing for the undead. Trying to control her demeanor, she said, "Desperate times are upon us, Uncle, and desperate actions are called for."

"Is that your final word?" Petrus asked. She could sense his stiffening by the tone in his voice.

"It is," Luciana replied, glad that the dark covered her expression.

"Lucia, I must make one final plea. I love you as I did your sister when she was with us. I miss her, too, but this goes too far," Uncle Lendaro said. His voice was soft and tender in the night. Did she catch the husky note of tears in his words? "There must come a time when you let go. When the dead are simply dead."

Luciana took a deep breath turning up toward the escarpment. "If that were truly the case . . . were the dead simply dead, *then*, Uncle, I would agree with you." She reached out and found Stefano waiting staunchly at her side. Gripping his hand, she began her ascent.

At the top of what seemed nothing more than a sand and saw grass hilltop, Luciana paused to catch her breath. She had a stitch in her side which she refused to mention.

"Are you well?" Stefano asked beside her.

Luciana nodded as she stared out over the cliffs to the sea which spread to the distant sky, silvered by the moon. "I'm perfectly well," she said, glancing back over the path they had come up. Here on the crest of the hill, she could see the sea, the cliffs, and the torturous seaside road, and to her left, all of the camps, their fires piercing the night, laid out on the hillside below. "Come, there is little time left."

She took the path along the sandy bank and Stefano kept close behind. The wild saw grass grew long and waved wildly in the wind directly off the sea. It tangled in her skirts, tripping her and slowing her progress while Stefano seemed to have no such problems. The advantages of pantaloons and boots, Luciana decided, and pressed onward.

Just ahead, through the great gaps that vented the cave, light blossomed and flickered in pirouettes with its shadow cast against the canvas of the uneven walls and ceiling of the cave.

"We're late!" Luciana said. She hurried to the rough-hewn downward steps cut into the limestone beneath the sand.

"Please, Luciana, at least allow me this," Stefano called. He moved quickly in front of her, taking her hand and guiding her down the worn, narrow stairs into the

great underbelly of the cavern.

Small lanterns and stubby candles lit their way down the curving stair. A torch marked the bottom, casting light over a well and antechamber. Another torch lit the way into the greater chamber. They could hear the sound of women's voices issuing from their destination.

At the base of the stairs, Luciana paused, waving for Stefano to join her at the well. She dipped her hands into the chilly water and washed her hands and face, indicating that Stefano should do likewise.

There was no telling how old the well was, nor the depth of the salty pool. Some said that if you dove into it, it would take you to the sea if you could hold your breath long enough, but so far, to Luciana's knowledge, no one had tested the theory. Certainly, the water tasted of salt and the colorful algae found in the coastal waters crusted the inner walls of the well.

The well's presence had been the major reason the *Daiyas* chose this cavern above all others in the honeycombed *Cavas de Ispica*. It provided a way—by salt and by water—to cleanse oneself before and after rituals and also served as a seal against *marimé* being brought from this place outward to the camp and the innocents who lived in the valley plantation below.

Despite the large cavernous opening visible from the hill just above, the actual entryway into the main chamber was a short passage where two could not pass at the same time and required all but the shortest visitor to dip her head as she passed through.

* * *

As *Puri-Daiya*, the most senior of the women, the *Beluni* entered the circle drawn by the women earlier and squatted down in front of him. "Are you ill, Maggiore?"

He had sat there through early evening and well into the night, beginning to feel more and more like a pet dog. Perhaps a bite to eat during the dinner hour might have steadied his stomach, but he would not eat if they did not. "I am prepared to continue," he said.

"Which has nothing to do with my question," the *Beluni* retorted, "nor do you exactly have much choice in this matter."

Mandero ached to argue the point. He was here willingly, to answer these women's questions, to put them at ease and perhaps to learn a little something at the same time. Instead of speaking, he nodded, eyes closed. Head steady again, he opened his eyes to find the *Beluni* leaning as close as intimates again. Without thinking, Mandero jerked back and immediately regretted it.

The *Beluni* gave a satisfied grunt. "Let us try an experiment, shall we?" With the familiarity of a mother to her young child, Solaja untied the red *diklo* at his throat and stretched it across his right eye. "What do you see?" She shifted out of his line of vision.

Mandero scanned the room. Now the left eye was more focused, yet the bewildering bits of clarity on or near the women still remained, but were more exaggerated. “The sight is better, *Puri-Daiya*, but not as it was before I awoke.”

“Hmmm,” she murmured, leaning close to inspect his eye again. She dug about in the pocket of her heavily embroidered *joddakaye* and produced a pouch not much larger than a coin, bound in cord, sealed with wax, and smelling heavily of herbs. A little bag of prayers and charms, a bit of the *chova* that almost every Rom possessed in one form or another. “What do you see?” she asked, her voice expectant.

“A *boung*, *Puri-Daiya*,” Mandero replied, but even as he spoke, he realized that he saw it with a strange new sense of clarity. “It glows,” he said, surprised.

“What do you mean ‘it glows’? Is it like a flame to the night?”

“No, no,” Mandero whispered. “*Permisso?*” He took it from her hand before she could answer. “It is like the way you see the waves of heat rising off the road, or a kiln.”

“Ah,” the *Beliini* murmured and nodded to one of the elders in the circle. “You see, Truffeni?” To Mandero, she said, “Can you tell me anything more?”

Mandero shook his head. “Like what, *Puri-Daiya?*”

“No matter, no matter,” she said, retrieving her *boung* before taking his *diklo*, and now covering his left eye. “What do you see now?”

“I see as I have always seen,” Mandero sighed. He looked around the room, turning his head and shifting about in his cross-legged position. “And now movement does not make me ill.”

“It is good, then,” the *Beluni* said.

The old woman, Truffeni, coughed politely. “Take your hand away, *Puri-Pen*, and let him tell us what he sees without your hand also covering his eye.”

Solaja nodded agreeably and handed the *diklo* to Mandero. Eager for normal sight, he quickly tied the bit of Gypsy Silk across his head like an eye patch. He straightened and opened his eyes, swiftly letting out a cry as he was overcome by a stabbing pain in his eye which drilled through his very head. The shimmers of before were now like mincing blades of blazing light in his eye. Even closing both eyes gave him no ease.

Someone, undoubtedly the *Beluni*, ripped the strip of cloth from his face, leaving him with his eyes covered by his hands, rocking in place and out of breath from pain. “What was it? What’s happening to me, *Daiya?*”

“Forgive me, *pral*,” the *Beluni* said, placing her hand upon his shoulder. “It did not occur to me that this might happen.”

“What? What is happening to me?” Mandero demanded blindly. He regained enough control to stop rocking and to try and steady his voice.

“It was the glamour of the silk,” one of the old mothers said. Truffeni, Mandero guessed, by her voice.

“What will happen to me now? How can I find Alessa if I cannot see?” he cried angrily.

“Does anyone have a bit of linen? Wool? Even a patch of *gadjé* silk or cotton?” the *Beluni* asked the women.

“He may have my cravat.”

The voice of another man in this place where no men were welcome surprised him. Mandero noted the irony even as he regained his composure and the desperate pain began to subside. Mandero surmised the other man to be the *duca*, which meant that the *Arau-nya* was now in attendance as well. He remembered the harsh warnings of the *Beluni* to her granddaughter when the old woman thought he was not paying attention. It seemed that the *Araunya* was determined to be here, no matter the potential cost. The magics worked around the dead could claim her child. He felt something light drop onto his shoulder. He reached up, feeling about. The *duca* took his hand and placed his neckcloth in Mandero’s hand.

Before he could do anything else that might further distract him, Mandero made a second eye patch, but this time not from the magical Gypsy Silk. From the feel of the cloth, he guessed that it was Egyptian cotton. He wondered how many weeks of salary it would take to repay the *duca*.

* * *

Standing beside the *maggiore*, Stefano became aware of the wordless battle taking place between *Lu-ciana* and her grandmother. Had he not known the deep love these women shared for one another, he would have feared for the lives of both—and, noting his position, anyone in between.

Stefano stepped back, closer to his wife’s side, trying to think of anything he might say or do, but the *Beluni* broke the moment of tension and hurried to their sides.

“You take no heed of my counsel, then,” the *Beluni* said. Her voice sounded raw with anger.

“I value your advice, *Mami-daiya*, but I cannot do as you ask and remain true to my vow to avenge my sister.”

“What of your vow to him, to your *Rama* and the child you carry?”

Their private battle of wills, no matter how quietly carried out, now drew the attention of everyone in the cavern. Silence reigned and now the agitation spread like fleas on a hound.

Luciana gasped, covering her womb protectively, and stared at her grandmother as though the old woman had struck her. Stefano watched the *color* rise in his wife’s cheeks and her eyes spark. She took both hands, fingers spread wide to encompass her abdomen as she muttered words beneath her breath.

“*Solaja*, you go too far,” one of the eldest of all the women said. She left the herbs she had been preparing, dusting her hands as she came to stand between

Araunya and *Beluni*. She frowned at Stefano and then looked to Luciana. “You understand the risks, Lu-ciana di Drago. You are the last living daughter of your grandmother’s only daughter.”

Luciana nodded. “I know.”

“Do you . . .” the old woman glanced at Stefano again and stepped closer, lowering her voice all the more. “Do you *want* your sister back this much?”

Luciana looked at her husband and caught his hand in hers. “My sister is dead and she cannot be born again, not of my womb or anyone else’s. I am no fool who does not know that the child would more likely be mad or more evil than a *mulló*, but I also know that I cannot stand aside when we summon my sister. I was already caught unaware by the magics done in her name. I must see to it that *her* interests are protected.”

“You think that *I* would not have her interests at heart?” the *Beluni* asked, angry tears streaming down her face.

“I think, *Mami*,” Luciana began, pausing as though to choose her words carefully, “that you do not fully appreciate how important the *maggiore* was and is to my sister, that you have chosen a path for him. Now he has gone beyond your vision and you seek to control a destiny and path which must be left to the *Fata*, to weave the path my sister and her husband have chosen.”

“I choose my own path, *Araunya*,” the *maggiore* said, rising to his feet and coming toward them. Another of the women stopped him before he stepped beyond a line in the rock. “I am no dupe—”

“You misunderstand me, *Maggiore*. I know that my *mami* could not do what she has done so *far* without your consent. I am here to see that your will and the will of the woman we both loved is honored here tonight,” Luciana replied. She squeezed Stefano’s hand as she spoke.

Even clasped within his own hand, her fingers trembled. Stefano covered her hand with his other and returned the firm pressure. He recognized that his beloved wife could not stay away, that she sought for the *maggiore* and her sister what he and she had finally come to know ... a love unfettered, a living love even if it should be found only after the *maggiore* joined Alessandra in the beyond. This magic she wished to cast would be an act of love for him, in its own way, as it was for Alessandra.

“Your Grace?”

Stefano broke out of his reverie. The Bliardi clan’s *Daiya* had spoken to him from where she stood between Luciana and her grandmother. “Pardon?”

“You are the *Kris* of your family and its welfare is at issue,” the *Beluni* said. “How do *you* rule on your wife’s involvement?”

He blinked, realizing the *Beluni* had invoked a Ro-mani law. Luciana’s expression had become masklike with a feline aloofness. She would not make eye contact. She looked everywhere but at him. It was now within his power to command Luciana to

leave, to be safe, to protect their child. Would she ever forgive him if he did not trust her now? Could he ever forgive himself? “My *juvali* is the heart and spirit of our family.” He took a deep breath and solemnly, finally, looked into his wife’s eyes. “I will take her guidance as my own decision in this.”

Luciana stared, disbelieving for a heartbeat, then stepped into his arms. “Thank you,” she whispered in his ear and then turned. “The *Kris* means for the *maggiore* and his *vigilare* to be out of the camp by sunrise. There is work to be done.”

With that, Stefano released her. His stomach churned in knots. “There is nothing more to be said?”

Luciana shook her head, glanced at the women as they returned to their work at the circle’s edge and then quickly stole a kiss, her hand upon his cheek. “All will be well. You will not regret this.”

Stefano kept his own counsel, that he already did, and simply said, “I will be watching.”

“That is your right,” Luciana murmured. She turned so that her back was to the gathering women. Taking his hand, she pressed it to her cheek. “I know that you are worried, Stefan, but you are my strength.”

Stefano caressed her cheek with his thumb and nodded. Turning to the waiting women, he bowed his way from the circle and placed Luciana’s *nanta* bag just outside of the chalk line.

“Your *joddakaye*, *Araunya*,” the Bliardi woman said.

“Aye, *Daiya*,” Luciana replied, nodding. She knelt and pulled an apron from her bag.

Stefano took a position in the shallowest of crevices in the cavern just behind Luciana. His heart felt as though it were in his throat. He tucked his hands behind him rather than risk fidgeting and somehow affecting something. He could not help but think of the child to come. Luciana had faced her first pregnancy and birth without him. He understood now in ways that he never could have before, that simply assuring she was attended by the finest surgeons meant only that he had not loved her enough. Now, he must love her enough to trust her.

Knowing little about magic or the *chova*, as they called it, he knew enough to not like it. He remembered too well the torment in Alessandra’s eyes when her spirit rose in that other cavern on the opposite coast of Tyr-rhia’s heartland. He did not wish to see it again, nor ever to see that expression upon Luciana’s face.

His being the best vantage point—here, he could see all entrances and every act directly before him—

some of the younger girls edged closer. Apparently, they were here to attend to the needs of the *Daiyas* and, perhaps, to learn. He glanced at them warily and turned back to the business at hand.

Luciana had finished donning her *joddakaye* and was digging out various bundles

and placing them in the innumerable little pockets of the ceremonial apron.

The *Beluni* coughed into her hand.

Luciana looked up sharply. "I am ready, *Mami*."

In the center of the circle, the *maggiore* had grown visibly wary. "What is my part?"

"Say nothing unless we tell you," the *Beluni* retorted.

Luciana glanced back at Stefano who nodded meaningfully at Alessandra's lover. They could not afford for her to be distracted. Looking at the *maggiore*, Stefano realized that were their parts changed, had Luciana died instead of Alessandra, he would be in the *maggiore*'s place.

"But there may come a time, Madero, when your heart may bid you act," Luciana said. "Listen *first* to your heart."

Madero nodded, sharing a slight smile of appreciation.

"We begin, then," the *Beluni* said, her voice sharp and her irritation evident. "You, rise." She barked her orders at the *maggiore* who obeyed quickly.

Stefano noted that Madero wobbled a moment and wondered how long he had been forced to sit there on the cold, hard stone. Any man's legs would be sore and stiff with the ache only cold stone could give to a man. *Maggiore di Montago* managed to get his feet securely under him, then bowed to the *Beluni*.

"I stand at your service, *Puri-Daiya*," he said.

"Enough talking," the *Beluni* said. Her demeanor changed as she scanned the women also standing at service. "We must be *only* twelve. Floure, you have served well this day. Stand ready should we call upon you."

A young woman roughly *Grasni*'s age looked crestfallen, but did not protest as she hurried out of the community of women and rejoined the younger girls.

"We will seal the circle with the elements. Three will call upon the air, three will scatter sand for earth, three shall set the blaze of fire, and three will bear the water." As she spoke, the *Beluni* walked the circle, placing women at specific points around the chalk line, and handed each a *boung*.

Luciana was given the last post for the element of fire. Instead of one of the herbal packets, the *Beluni* waved for the dismissed Floure to bring one of the brands from its scone.

Stefano watched and wondered at the various elements of the process as he tried to figure out exactly what the purpose of it all was.

The *Beluni* completed her round, taking the primary position of air. Singing in Romani, only a smattering of which Stefano understood, the Romani Queen summoned the air from the sea. The women to her right began the song, each in turn, a half beat after her Romani sister.

The last words of their song resonated through the chamber and then another

Daiya began her song to the earth. It continued in this fashion through the summoning of water. With the last note sung, the women began to move widdershins around the chalk circle with the *maggiore* inside, chanting the words of their song and emptying the contents of their packets a little at a time as they moved. As the last woman in the fire cycle, Luciana swung the firebrand low.

Stefano jumped, jarring the girls beside him, when the first blast exploded from the scattered bits. He recognized the distinctive and unpleasant odor of gunpowder which, apparently, Luciana was setting off with her firebrand. To his relief, for the most part, the gunpowder only flared and sputtered hungrily at the bits of leaves, roots, and such. He was grateful that three women bearing pitchers of water followed close behind Luciana in the circle.

Floure scuttled, crablike, toward the circle to relieve Luciana of the torch as they finished.

“Now, we make this magic circle our own with dirt from the roads we have traveled and the crossroads we have met,” the *Beluni* announced.

Each of the women took a drawstring pouch from an apron pocket. Stefano recognized the doeskin bag Luciana withdrew from her *joddakaye*. How many times had he teased her when she gathered a bit of mud from a coach horse’s hooves or from the roadside when they were stopped to rest?

The *Beluni* turned to her left, taking a single step when Luciana called out for her to stop. Her grandmother did not look pleased by the interruption.

“Maggiore, your boots, please,” Luciana commanded.

Several of the women, including her grandmother, nodded as they realized her purpose.

“My boots?” The *maggiore* shot a quizzical look at Stefano who could only shrug and motion for him to obey. “My boots.” He sat on the ground again and struggled to remove his knee-high boots. After a heroic effort, he presented his footwear to Luciana.

Luciana turned the boots over frowning. “You keep your boots too clean, Maggiore.”

“As a member of the Escalade, I take pride in my appearance, Your Grace,” he replied, bracing his bare feet and straightening his back, his hands held joined behind his back in the stance of a soldier awaiting field inspection.

Luciana seemed not to hear his explanation. She pulled a small stiletto from its sheath in her corset. “Hold out your hands, Maggiore, and catch what dirt you can.” With the knife, Luciana began scraping the soles and around the heel of his boot. She switched from one boot to the next, looking more and more dissatisfied. At last, she dropped his boots beside his feet.

“Maggiore, you must grind the bits of dried mud in your hand and then you must do as we do, but from within the circle. Do you understand? You must have enough dirt to complete the circle.”

Mandero inspected the contents of one palm, looking doubtful. “As you say, Your Grace.”

“You’d best move your boots out of the way,” the *Beluni* added.

The *maggiore* kicked the boots to the center of the circle.

“We continue, then,” the *Beluni* said. She turned to her left again, repeating the invocation. “Now, we make this magic circle our own with dirt from the roads we have traveled and the crossroads we have met.”

The women paced the circle deasil this time. Inside the circle, Mandero walked at Luciana’s side awkwardly mimicking her every motion.

“*Pen?* The circle is closed?” the *Beluni* called to the women at the edge of their creation.

One by one, each *Daiya* examined the piece of the arc in front of her and nodded. The tension building in the chamber of sorceries was like the bunched muscles of a well-bred horse champing at the bit to begin the race. Could he not sense it himself, Stefano could have determined as much by the way the girls had stopped moving and held their breath between tiny gasps of air.

“Mandero di Montago,” *Puri-Daiya* Solaja Lendaro called in a commanding voice as though he were farther from her than the six or so feet that placed him in the center of the circle. “It is time for you to summon your wife!”

XVII

“Death borders upon our birth, and our cradle stands in the grave.”

—Robert Burton

Conscious of all eyes upon him, Mandero swallowed hard and looked down at the poppet. The *Beluni* seemed so confident that he could summon Alessandra with a snap of his fingers or whistle her up as he might call his horse. He smiled. Imagine summoning anyone like Alessandra, especially in her lifetime. Her outrage would have made a fine scene and she would not care whose company they were in. He would never have done such a thing then and could only imagine her response now, as a *mulló*.

“*Maggiore?*” the duchessa called softly across the radius of the magic circle.

Mandero looked up. He could see the likeness in the sisters now, something he had never taken note of before. Both women, with wills of iron, were of a size to fit snugly within a man’s arms, appearing to be dainty and fragile. Their demeanor, however, seemed to add inches to their height and belied any frailties. The sisters

had skin the color of caramel and hair the color of charred cinnamon—deep black with hints of russet in the sunlight. Alessandra had preferred fancier arrangements for her hair than her elder sister. Both had eyes the color of smoke.

But Alessandra . . . Alessandra was not so very like her sister. She rarely wore earrings, which had permitted overly intimate nibbling for unmarried lovers. They were married now, though, and he had tasted more of her than her lips or the delicate lobes of her ears. He had luxuriated in her unbound hair, which fell in heavy rivulets well past her waist.

“Maggiore?” the duchessa said again.

As he thought of Alessandra, the *tesoro* began to warm in his hands. Distracted now, by the *Araunya*, he looked up at Alessa’s sister, but could not manage to focus precisely. He pulled the strip of cotton from his face, shaking his head.

“Command her, Maggiore!” the *Beluni* bade him.

He spun to face Alessa’s grandmother almost directly behind his original position. He knew more surely than how to breathe that there was no commanding Alessandra’s *mulló*. He realized now that *he* had more experience interacting with *mullós* than any of these learned women. He was not fool enough, however, to dismiss them, for they were his only hope as much as he was now theirs. As understanding struck, the poppet seemed to writhe in his hand. How, he was not sure, but he felt the elements the old mothers had summoned becoming embodied in the swathe of black silk carefully crafted by hand and later imbued, and forever shaped, with magic. It was almost as though he felt the poppet take breath and gain the mortal forms of earth, air, water, and fire.

High above them, an owl cried. Mandero could not look at the *tesoro* in his hand, instead his gaze was pulled to the highest cavity in the ceiling. The bird’s cry echoed off of the vaulted ceiling and down into the bell-shaped chamber.

The bird was small and as white as the moon that shone behind it. Mandero easily saw the ethereal glow of magic haloed around the owl. It keened again from its perch on some twiglike roots knotted as part of the ceiling.

Around him, Mandero heard the women gasp.

“It cannot be!”

“What matter, she has come,” another hissed.

“But white owls should be larger.”

“Pay it no mind. This is no natural owl, is it, Mag-giore?” the *Beluni* said.

He ignored them. The owl twisted her head to one side and, with a flutter of wings, dropped a dozen yards to a rocky perch just above the heads of the assembled. Mandero reached up with his right hand, the one bearing the poppet and whistled, not summoning but a bit of a love song that they had shared. How often had she played that in the garden as he sat, enrapt; her fingers dancing over the strings of her lute?

Someone cried a protest about the poppet.

The bird answered his call, swooping from the perch to his hand. Its talons gouged his flesh, bringing blood to the surface. The owl bent its head . . . and the silvery white of the bird seemed to blur as it joined the black silk of the *tesoro* in Mandero's hand, bathed by the crimson trails of blood running down his fingers.

A great wind seemed to rise up. It completely blinded Mandero as he became lost in the whirling air which seemed sucked from his own lungs while giving breath to the womanly shape drawn from the risen wind.

For a moment, not nearly long enough, Mandero remained intimately entwined in Alessa's arms with the swirling silks of her gown tangling in his legs. At first, they pretended to be alone, unwilling to share their moment. Alessa met Mandero's lips in a searching kiss, her fingers twining with his. He quickly released her hands and wrapped her in his arms. Only then did he realize that she was not fully corporeal as she had been on the night of their wedding. Certainly Alessa took form, he touched her, he felt her and yet... and yet she was no more than air. It reminded him of the resistance of water when he last swam in the rough waters of the Stretto d'Messina. He felt again, too, the aching heaviness, the sense that he was about to be consumed by something greater than himself.

"Enough of this!"

Mandero broke Alessandra's kiss, becoming suddenly and guiltily aware of his audience. Alessandra nuzzled his jawline, pressing against him as she reached for his lips. Reluctantly, Mandero dodged her lips. "Alessa!"

The *mulló*, his wife, pouted. In his heart, he would deny her nothing, especially when she looked so thoroughly kissed and ardent for more.

Alessa turned from the protection of his arms. With one hand curled around his wrist, she twisted around him, examining the course of the room. Frowning, she still seemed unaware of the women and the rest of their audience and more intent, instead, upon the sizzling spark of the circle boundary. His left eye ached, perhaps from the strain of seeing what his other eye did not.

Only after exploring the unwavering and multi-spelled circle did Alessandra acknowledge anyone else in the chamber. She moved immediately toward her grandmother, skipping, as though she were a small child, the short distance from Mandero.

"*Mami!*" she cried, reaching out to embrace the *Beluni*. Alessandra looked wounded when her grandmother did not reach for her in turn, but stayed well on her side of the line. "Do you not miss me, *Mami!*"

"*Chavi*, I miss you more than there are words to sing," the *Beluni* replied.

"Then why do you separate us thus?" Alessa demanded, pouting like an inconsolable child ready to lose herself in a veil of tears.

Though she seemed childlike, Mandero recognized something dangerous lurking in the ghost of the woman he had known and loved. He could not identify the source

or reason for the danger and that troubled him even more.

“I am no tender child, *Chavi*,” the *Beluni* said. “I expect to be with you in the Neverlands soon. I hope to first break this spell you are under so that you can find happiness and freedom.”

“But, Grandmother, I *am* happy!” Alessa protested. “I have my Mandero and the cardinal fears me! My powers have grown, *Puri-Daiya*.”

“Aye, *Chavi*, but where does your power come from?” the *Beluni* asked, her voice quiet and strong.

Alessandra frowned at her grandmother. Her unhappiness was plain to see. “You should be happy that he does not torture me while I wait for you to do something!” She turned on her spectral heel, swishing her skirts as she danced back to Mandero. She took Mandero’s hand, the one bleeding and marked by the bird, and turned into him so that he held her. She kissed the wounds, her tongue flicking out, tasting blood. It was the faintest, lightest of touches, but one that filled Mandero with a heady anticipation.

“Don’t!”

Mandero looked up, startled as he turned to the duchessa. “Don’t let her do that, Maggiore,” Alessandra’s sister warned.

Again Alessandra pouted, but it was only momentary, as though she had not known perfectly well who had spoken. “Luciana!”

Alessandra ran from Mandero’s arms and skidded to a stop at circle’s edge, almost as though she had run into a garden fence and her skirts had become entangled in thorny vines. Whatever she thought of the magical prison, Alessa kept it to herself and, instead, held out her arms. “Come, my beloved sister! I have missed you so!”

Tears streamed down the duchessa’s cheeks. “As I you, *Chavi-pen*.”

Alessandra reached out toward the tears but stopped, her hand still raised, flattened against an unseen barrier. “Can I give you no comfort, Sister?”

The *Araunya* shook her head. “No, *pen*, for as much as I love you, I cannot bring you the happiness you deserve.”

“But I *am* happy!” Alessa replied with a laugh.

It reminded Mandero of the old days. Her laugh always got the better of him. Of her many moods, her laughter filled him and answered every need he might ever have. To hear it again, now, was miraculous. He moved closer, drawn by the laughter and the power of their love. She reached back and pulled his arms around her.

Alessa wriggled against him, fitting snugly into his arms, arousing him in ways unfit for an audience. She rubbed the hair of her barely corporeal head against his chest, arching upward to bump his chin. “Make no mistake, beloved, I would never be apart from you and yet, now, we are not and we *are* man and wife. I have battled

the cardinal and won—”

“If you have won, Sister, why have you not gone on?”

“My beloved is here,” Alessandra said angrily as she turned in Mandero’s arms. “I stay because of him.”

“No, Sister. If you had truly defeated the cardinal, your spirit would have gone on, fulfilled and blessed, to that other place where you would wait for him, for Mandero. You could not help it.”

“No!” Alessandra shouted, nuzzling into Mandero’s neck and the warmth of his body. “You say that only because your love for your *gadjé* duca is not of the soul—like ours.”

Mandero burned from head to toe at the feel of her tongue on the throbbing vein in his neck. Gentle, barely existent teeth grazed where moments before she had wetted with her kisses, she then brought up his bloody wrist and suckled at it sensuously. It took every bit of Mandero’s self-control to remember the women encircling him since they seemed somehow distant even standing, as some did, within arm’s reach ... at least, in normal circumstances.

Seeing the stricken look on the *Araunya*’s face, Mandero kissed his wife’s cheek. While it was true that no one could love the way he loved his beloved Alessandra, and clearly by testimony and action she him, he could not be the wedge that broke these sisters’ closeness. “Have a care what you say, *amorata*,” he urged. As he put her away from him, facing her sister, Mandero felt flesh beneath the gauzy smooth silk.

Alessandra stared at her feet, like a chastised child again and slowly brought her gaze up toward her sister’s face. Midway, her gaze paused and her attention focused upon her sister’s hand which had dropped to her belly.

“A new life,” Alessandra breathed rapturously, moving to the very edge of the marked line. She knelt, her hands pressing against the invisible wall as a child might press against the windowpanes of a *pasticceria*.

On the outside of the circle, the *Araunya*’s left hand moved reflexively to her growing womb. Her right hand hitched her magic-working apron, the *joddakaye* of Gypsy Silk, a little higher, and then to encompass the lower portion of her abdomen as well.

A movement from the corner of his eye made Mandero turn. One of the older girls had caught the duca’s arm as he began to rise. Mandero could see the strain in the duca’s face as he watched his wife’s spectral sister focus upon his unborn child. Mandero then noted that many of the old mothers looked equally strained and, if it were possible, more anxious than they had been before.

Grasni played with bits of herb in her left palm. A spark, silver and cold, bright and sharp formed there seeming to have a life of its own. Like one of the *candelas*, little more than a fluttering of light, it began to spin and then leaped from Grasni’s palm. Shining high, it trailed a cord of power behind as it joined with the wall that

contained Alessa and himself. He had the impression of razor-sharpness as it began to dance in the maelstrom of the magical wall.

Grasni's sharp light was joined by another and more still. Looking around, Mandero saw that the old mothers were working similar spells. He turned, seeking out the *Beluni*. She, too, worked a spell similar to the others, but threads of energy came from the *Beluni's* core: low between the breasts but relatively high above the midriff. In casting, she had gone pale and seemed frail and older than he had ever seen before. Her lips pressed tight in a grim line of determination.

Mandero remembered now the harsh words between the *Beluni* and the *Araunya* after the earlier meeting. The *Beluni* had made clear to everyone that she did not want her surviving granddaughter present. He had not fully understood why, but realization dawned now as he watched Alessandra's expression. Her gaze sent chills down his spine and revulsion creeping along his skin. Alessandra leaned against the threshold. Hunger in its purest and simplest form etched her features.

"The infant is new," Alessandra murmured, stroking the boundary as though it were her sister's womb. "It is not yet wedded to its soul."

"The Blessed Sisters have begun to spin the baby's life thread," Luciana replied. She rubbed her hands purposefully around her belly. Something like a shield formed beneath her hands.

"But it is not yet fully attached to the child within," Alessandra said, smiling breathlessly. "Don't you see the opportunity, *pen*?" Her eyes glazed with a feverish hunger. "My thread has not been cut—not fully, or I could not be here with you now. I am disembodied and we fight the cardinal for the old. Take me into your womb. Was I not practically a child of yours anyway? I would be free of the cardinal and my old body would be useless to him without my soul," she continued her plea. "Mandero ... he could wait until—in my new life—I was of an age." She turned to her husband then. "Think of it, Mandero, not all of your youth will be gone and I will be fresh and new. Wouldn't that please you?"

"It would all be for naught, if the child to come were a boy," Luciana said.

"The child is new enough. I could change it ... if you were to make the little human, the homunculus, and pour into it all those features which are characteristics that do not suit me—"

"The homunculus is darkest magic ... as dark as what the cardinal has wrought!" the *Beluni* protested.

"Yes, but once those characteristics are transferred, the homunculus could be easily killed. It has no soul, therefore it is no murder."

"You would murder the child that would be, *pen*?" Luciana whispered, pain obvious in her countenance. "Knowing how I suffered after the death of my first son?"

"But you would be giving me life anew! I would no longer be lost to you. Don't you see? The plan, it is perfect!"

“No.”

Alessandra turned back, staring at Mandero.

“No,” Mandero declared again. “Were they willing, I could not take you under such circumstances. It’s wrong.”

“Wrong? How could it be wrong if we would finally be together?” Alessandra protested.

“The price is too steep and too dear,” Mandero said.

Air began to rise, swirling in the circle. Alessandra rode the wind, letting it carry her above them all.

Mandero could feel the force of her will freezing him through as her spirit filled the entire circle. Instead of the visage Mandero had always known, Alessandra’s skin began to shrink back on her head, deep hollow pockets of jet black replaced the youthful vigor of her gaze and, slowly, her other features began to sink in upon themselves. Her nails stretched into daggers as long as her fingers. Power emanated from her, power and an anger that would not be denied.

“You would gainsay me, *mi appassionato*? You who have sworn always to love me? You would deny me life?” Her voice rose to a pitch that seemed to scream with the raging winds that continued to raise her up.

“The injustice that was done to you—cutting your life short—I cannot allow you to commit such an act against another, an innocent,” Mandero said, fighting for air to breathe, flinching as stones and pebbles struck him as they were sucked into the sky. The earth beneath his feet seemed to shift. “Do not do to another what was done to you, Alessandra. We could never be together that way.”

“The child is not without sin. He was conceived in sin for which he has not yet atoned!” Alessandra roared, her voice echoing off the walls.

“That is the faith of the cardinal, Alessa, not of the *Fata*, not you!” the duchessa shouted.

“I want to live! I deserve to live! Don’t deny me this chance,” Alessandra shrieked, her voice the force of the storm and wind.

“I cannot deny the truth. No one here will deny your thread was cut short by the hands of a man,” the *Araunya* said, falling to her knees to protect the child within her own body.

“It is only a single, still-unformed child!” Alessandra protested.

“The child is *mine!*” Luciana screamed back at her sister. “To have it, you must kill me!”

The duca broke free of the girls then and ran to his wife’s side. Mandero could not spare an explanation to the duca about the power of Gypsy Silk, but the duca understood enough. As he reached the duchessa, the duca flung his brocade Gypsy Silk suit coat over her, encasing both Luciana and the child in another protective layer of magic and silk.

“Free me from this circle!” Alessandra commanded. “I will show you. There will be no pain and you can bring me life!” She rose farther, higher toward the top of the chamber. The lines of power that the women had been feeding into the circle seemed to twist around Alessandra’s limbs like cords of lightning and, yet, instead of restraining her, Mandero saw that she was drawing energy from them. The *Beluni*, even, was lifted off her feet, drawn up by the thread she had taken from her own being . . . her own life force.

He turned, searching for something to break the momentum. The women could not see that they fed her now and there was not enough air to speak. A moment of clarity seized him while insanity reigned all around. He took his boot knife and the Gypsy Silk baldric of his office. She had taken power, he realized now, from his blood and perhaps now, he could sever the connections to her sources of power with it again.

He sliced deep across the palm with his dagger. Expecting pain, Mandero felt only cold. Blood pooled quickly in his hand. He waited until blood filled his hand, seeping between his fingers, and then flung it up at Alessandra.

The shrieking wind eased and the gaunt, twisted form of the *mulló* turned her attention to the blood. She licked at her hands and arms as she sank lower, closer to Mandero and the source of blood.

“Alessandra, you must stop!” Mandero cried. He held out his hand, feeling the fluid run down his wrist and forearm.

The *mulló* moaned, slowly coming into the seeming of her more human form as she reached toward the near blackness of his blood.

“Alessandra, the child is not yours to take,” Mandero said. He took the baldric and wrapped the blade into his wounded hand. With the blade held upright, at arm’s length, he began to walk the circle. With his left eye, he saw the ley lines of power being severed and each of the *Daiyas* freed from feeding the hunger of one that they loved but whose nature had so radically changed.

“You cannot live . . . not like this, not and be the woman I loved. We could never live this way,” Mand-ero said, as he completed his circle and now faced the visage of his youthful, spectral lover.

Alessandra dropped to her knees, face in her bloodied hands as she sobbed. After several moments, she regained control over herself. “It could never be. It should never have been thought.” She turned toward her sister, wiping at the trail of ghostly tears with her hands and only succeeding in bloodying her face and making her visage that much more horrifying. “I know, Luciana, that you can never forgive me. I do not understand what happens in my heart, for I love you as always I have and am gladdened for the new soul you bring to the family ...”

Alessandra broke into sobs and fell at Mandero’s feet. “What have I done, mi amore, what have I done?”

Mandero knelt and stroked her hair back. In the glimmer of a heartbeat, in the faded light of the chamber where many of the torches had been snuffed by magical

forces, an owl shook itself free of black silk and, with a spectral cry, took to the air, leaving a poppet and a husband alone in the center of the circle.

XVIII

*“On cherubs and on cherubims full royally he rode;
and on the wings of all the winds came flying all abroad.”*

—Thomas Sternhold (c. 1549)

13 d’Septembre, 1684

From the hilltop road, Mandero turned Joro in a tight circle, reviewing his men. With one delay and another, he had begun to worry that they would not leave the Romani encampment before the appointed hour. In the cold, foggy stillness of early morning, their voices carried far more than he thought they realized.

Young Antoine perched atop his white mule, shivering in the gray damp and dewy haze of almost morning along the westernmost shores of Tyrrhia. “I still do not see why we couldn’t have waited until a decent hour to be on the road, or at least paused for something warm to put in our bellies.”

Marco della Guelfa, Mandero’s second, pulled up his blood bay mare beside the young Frenchman. “Another grumble will cost you a soldibianco from your wages. When the maggiore says ride—”

“We ride,” Antoine concluded, slapping the mule with his long sapling switch as much from petulance as to make the animal pick up its pace.

“Treat the beast a little more kindly and it’ll be an easier ride, boy,” Sergente Duarte suggested gruffly, from just behind. “You haven’t the wages to afford a real horse and the skill you’re showing that poor jenny makes me think you ought to be a foot soldier.”

Marco nudged his horse into a trot and joined Mandero on the crest of the hill. Joro picked up his feathered black and white legs, prancing prettily for Marco’s mare as they came alongside.

“The men are anxious, I know,” Mandero said with a nod of acknowledgment, anticipating his second’s remark.

“That, too,” Marco said. He slapped his mount’s neck when she nipped at Mandero’s stallion. “You will forgive me, I know—”

“Or I won’t and you’ll say it anyway,” Mandero retorted laconically.

“You look like you’ve visited hell, Maggiore,” della Guelfa said, proving his superior officer correct, though neither marked it much. “We all saw your face before you started covering it with that pretty bit of cloth. Your insignia baldric is bloodied and so are you.”

“Unfortunately, I did not have time to hire a washerwoman,” Mandero said as he examined his dark blue baldric. It would be tricky to get it clean, easier to hide, but having a second on hand was never truly wasteful. He would seek both the washerwoman and another baldric and chemise at the next garrison, if it was sufficiently staffed and supplied.

After their magical misadventures this past night, the *Araunya* had been good enough to dress the wounds on his hands and wrist. Blood already caked through the dressing on his left hand and, now that the excitement was over, his hand began to ache. At least it was not his sword hand.

“When we stop, then I’ll search out a washerwoman and tend to some mending,” Mandero said. He reached up and anchored his hat more firmly on his head, thereby keeping the eye patch which covered his startlingly transformed eye just as firmly in place.

“That’s not exactly what I meant—” della Guelfa began.

A long low whistle sounded from the back of the party, followed by the cooing of pigeons, interrupting anything further either man might have said on the subject.

“We’re being followed,” Marco said, looking over his shoulder into the depth of the morning fog rolling in off the Mediterranean.

“Probably someone assigned by the *Kris* to make sure we actually leave,” Mandero replied, sighing in frustration. That relationship had not ended the way he would have preferred. Two coos signaled two riders which meant that they were being followed out rather than chased down. The *Meero-kak* must have been furious when he saw his mother’s condition. The strain of the ceremony had nearly cost the *Beluni* and at least one other *Daiya* their lives. It apparently mattered little that it was his act of inspiration that saved them.

Mandero and Marco turned at the sound of a horse galloping through the long thrushes on the roadside. Second Lieutenant Brambilla skittered his big black gelding in a spew of sand and flotsam washed up from the sea’s edge no more than fifty feet to their left. Joro shied and snapped at the gelding, bugling his displeasure at the suddenness of its arrival.

The second lieutenant rose in his stirrups to an almost standing position. He snapped a smart salute while his other hand clenched his mount’s reins.

Mandero acknowledged the salute perfunctorily. “We’re being followed by two men?” Mandero said. It was less a question than a confirmation of the coded alerts.

“A man, yes, on one of them spotted ponies of your folk,” Brambilla confirmed breathlessly. “But the second is a woman in one them Romanes wagons the rest of the folk use.”

“A *vardo!*” Mandero murmured. *That* he had not expected. To della Guelfa, he said, “Until I notify you otherwise proceed on to the village and wait at the village well.”

“Take me—or maybe d’Este with you,” della Guelfa urged as Mandero purposefully wheeled Joro.

“There will only be a confrontation of words. Nothing more. I won’t show weakness by bringing another man with me. Besides, these matters are sensitive.” Mandero patted Joro’s flank as the stallion pushed aside Brambilla’s big black gelding.

“But every time you leave for a peaceful meeting, you come away with scars. You’ll forgive my concern, I hope, when I urge you to reconsider,” della Guelfa persisted, following Mandero off the road and into the bush.

Mandero drew Joro to a halt and turned. “Delia Guelfa, your caution is well-advised, but I do not accept it. I will be less than half an hour behind you. I urge you to hurry. It’s early enough and we might find one of the locals willing to sell something passing for breakfast.”

“As you say, Maggiore,” della Guelfa replied with a brief bow and salute before turning his horse back in their original direction. “Second Lieutenant Brambilla, find us the surest path to the village square. The younger women will be out doing their wash.”

“Yes, Lieutenant,” Brambilla nodded. “I’ll ride ahead and circle back every mile or so.”

“Done, but bear in mind what the maggiore has said and don’t take it into your head to circle farther back than Caporale Puddu.”

“As you say, sir,” Grifo agreed.

Satisfied, Mandero applied the heel of his boot to Joro’s heavy flanks. The horse moved with ease through the sliding sands, his large feet providing a steadiness on the uneven ground and tangled saw grass. He acknowledged the last of his men who paused to sort the reins of his horse and the lead rope for the pack mule so that he could salute.

Mandero sighed heavily and scratched at the juncture where the eye patch rested on his cheek. The men, down to Antoine, who was either too new or too stupid—Mandero opted for the first—were anxious, watching him and, even, in the little ways, testing him to be sure that he was, in fact, their Maggiore di Montago. He could understand their anxiety, what with the odd juncture of the *lasa’s* time with natural time. He was sure they had all heard that he had married “a ghost” in the form of a child’s doll. All of them watched Mandero carefully, to see a change? Or the poppet? Was this marriage true and was he still sane enough to lead them.

Naturally, they turned to della Guelfa—as they should—and followed his lead, but the excessive formality was already wearing thin and they had been back under his command for only an hour or two at the most.

He scanned the distance over the sea in search of the sun which would give him some sense of time. The fog lay heavy on the waters of the Mediterranean, obscuring any signs of the sun. Somewhere, not so distant, an owl hooted. There was sufficient light for him to know it was unusual for the nocturnal bird to be calling.

Something small and light glimmered through the creases of his eye patch then flitted across his narrowed line of vision to disappear into the gray wall of fog.

Mandero shifted the eye patch and squinted. A tiny light, like an unwavering beacon, rested ahead somewhere in the gray morning. He pressed his heels to Joro's blotched sides and felt the horse surge forward. Mandero drew him back a little, into an easy loping canter rather than the full run the well-muscled black and white horse preferred.

A goat bleated farther up the road. Listening with care, Mandero also heard the vague rumble of wheels and the creaking of leather harnesses, wooden undercarriage, and the gentle flapping of silk in the mild wind off of the sea.

Slowing Joro to a trot, Mandero concentrated upon the gleam which had flown by him earlier and now appeared to be at rest, probably on the *vardo's* bow top. He could just make out the dark shape of the *vardo*, smoke puffing from the interior woodstove.

"Greetings," Mandero called, drawing Joro up beside the paired skewbald horses rigged to the wagon. A goat stuck its bearded head out from between the curtains of the bow top *vardo* and bleated again. "Hello?" he called again as the horses continued their plodding way with only a ragtag goat as driver.

"Maggiore? Is that you?" a woman's voice called back, sounding somewhat distressed as pans clattered and heralded further bumps and clatters until, at last, she reached the front of the *vardo*. "Back, Nan!"

The rope looped around the goat's stringy neck tightened and its head quickly disappeared behind the deep green, heavy wool curtains.

"Can I help you?" Mandero asked, tempted to laugh, and yet the owl sitting upon the guideline keeping the chimney in place served to remind him of the more serious reasons he had left his men and come in search of the *vardo* and rider. He craned his neck, but saw no horsemen. Had he misunderstood? Was the man in the *vardo*? "*Mandi-pen*, I repeat, do you have need of assistance? Is there a man in there with you?"

Even as Mandero asked the question, he pulled his good scorpionini from his belt, loaded, and cocked it.

"No! Gracious, no!" At last, the woman seemed to have won the war with the goat as to who would be driving the team which all this time traveled solemnly along with no guidance whatsoever. Parting the curtains, the feminine goat wrestler revealed herself as none other than Grasni Nevi, Alessa's onetime maid, his own beleaguered nurse, and a member of the previous night's mystic activities.

“Grasni.” He stared at her, shocked, and more than a little amazed. Of all the women who might have followed, he might have anticipated the *Araunya* and the *duca* as her outrider, perhaps, but not Grasni.

“You welcome me with such friendly words,” Grasni said, gathering the reins into one fist. “I am so glad that I forswore bed and breakfast, tending to the *Beluni*, and the displeasure of the *Kris* to seek you out and try to assist you in your journey.”

Mandero looked down at his saddle, adjusting eye patch and his hat before speaking. “You will forgive my churlish reaction, I hope, Grasni. I was surprised that you would, as you say, skip bed and breakfast and all your other duties.” He fell silent awkwardly. “How far do you intend to share the road with my company?”

Grasni chuckled, as though she knew how hard it was for him to ask, and, considering their recent history, she probably *did* know. “I will follow you to the bitter end when our lady whose name I may not speak has finally found her path to the Neverlands and the physical vessel which once contained her can no longer be used for its foul purposes.”

“But we have no idea how long the journey will take us, or ... or where, for that matter. Tis no road for a woman,” Mandero protested.

“What? I cannot rely upon the protection of my lady’s husband? /, the first member in her household?” Grasni retorted. “Or is it your men that you do not trust?”

“My men are well trained. They may not be born gentlemen, but they comport themselves as though they were,” Mandero said staunchly.

“As good as gentlemen, are they?” Grasni said, shaking her head. She leaned toward him conspiratorially, “I had hoped for better. Gentlemen think they have the right to a good squeeze now and again.”

“The men in my command will behave themselves as gentlemen are thought to be raised, with expectations of honor and decency.”

“Do not let her get the best of you. The day has barely begun and she can be merciless,” Petrus Len-daro said as he rode up on the far side of the wagon. He dropped two braces of wild rabbits on the driving bench beside Grasni. “You look surprised to see me as well, Maggiore.”

“I did not anticipate that my sworn duties and obligations to the White Queen would ever include either of you, shall we say.” Mandero concentrated on appearing calm. He took a deep breath.

“Perhaps, but you have a duty to the Black Queen as well, or have you forgotten?” Petrus asked.

“I do not forget any of my duties or my debts, *Meero-kak*,” Mandero replied. “Is your mother well?”

“Thanks to you, I’m told,” Petrus replied. He patted his vest pockets and finally produced the stub of an old *sigaro* which he neatly planted between his teeth. “I did

not stay long, but I am told with confidence that she needs little more than rest.”

Grasni, Mandero noted, remained pointedly silent on this issue. He glanced toward where the sun had finally begun to blaze, resulting in a slow yet steady fading of the all encompassing fog.

“We have not gone from camp long, little more than an hour and perhaps a half and yet both of you have managed to decide to follow, prepare for the journey, and catch up. I am surprised. Are you sure that you are truly prepared for what may turn out to be a long and wandering journey? And what of speed? There will be times when there may be need for a pursuit—”

“Rest your mind, Maggiore,” Petrus said, rolling the unlit *sigaro* to the other side of his mouth. “The occasional need for fast travel is not new to the Romani and a *vardo* is well made for journeying.” He leaned over and slapped the brown-patched rump of one of the wagon team.

With hardly a jerk, the horses began moving forward along a road that did not particularly exist, but was clearer moving than through the overgrown, hip high grasses on their far side or the sea to Mand-ero’s side.

“Besides, there are benefits to having a *vardo*,” Grasni said, pushing aside the curtain with her elbow and clambering into the seat properly, while balancing with considerable grace since she gripped three earthenware mugs. She set two beside her and leaned out over the traces and rigging to offer Mandero one of the mugs.

Mandero looked warily at the contents of the cup and sniffed. Coffee, heavily laden with chicory, lightened with fresh milk—most probably supplied by the goat—and the sweet smell of honey. He inhaled again, letting the heat warm him, and then took a long swallow. Strong chicory or no, the coffee was this side of nirvana on this gray morning.

“There’s bread baking in the oven and a round of asiago. *Meero* Petrus has kindly provided meat for dinner. What soldier can afford to turn away ready food?” Grasni asked, smiling winningly.

She had learned that from her mistress. Alessandra had always concluded her arguments thus, all too much reason and a smile intended to throw a man off guard. Mandero savored the coffee and nodded.

He nudged Joro up past the *vardo*’s team.

“The strap there on your mug,” Grasni called out to him, “hang it from your saddle when you are done.”

* * *

Alessandra stirred. She did not sleep, except briefly, the one night in Mandero’s arms. She did not rest and yet there were periods of time where she was unaware.

Could it be that there were times when she did not exist? Was that what it would be like in the Never-lands or would it be like peaceful, sweet, dreamlike slumber or would it be living again, in some new place, in some new fashion? Would she have a

body there if she ever reached it?

Thoughts of the body drew her attention to her surroundings. She wrinkled her nose in disgust. She appeared to be in a cellar of some sort. It took her a few turns in the very limited space to find the remains of her earthly form wrapped in the aging tarp, bound in rope with a crucifix planted over the heart of the remains. She had been stuffed, rather unceremoniously, she noted, atop several kegs of wine.

A fine way to treat a lady, she thought, yet it was as much care as she seemed to be deemed worth . . . at least since Brother Tomasi had retired from the mortal game of wits and magic she and the cardinal played.

It occurred to her then that there really was no reason to feel confined by the space because, if she was right, her consciousness now existed in a noncor-porea! form. Which brought to mind then, in a flood of shame and horror, her behavior when last she was aware, when she came to Manderó's call ... in the shape of an owl . . . and there had been more. She could, however, only remember the fog and desiring to lead Manderó someplace.

Why was her memory so faulty? Alessandra gritted her nonexistent teeth and hit one of the wine kegs with her formless hand. She retained the memories of every moment of her lifetime, things that during her life she could never have been expected to recall, and yet her post-death memories were as dense as the fog. Was it because she was in the form of the owl and subject to its animalistic abilities to think and recall? But it was the same with the memories of her life as a Romani ghost. Was she all too far on her road to becoming a truly complete *mulló*?

In truth, however, Alessandra realized, she had no sense of the date, had no way of knowing how perilously close she was to the anniversary of her death on April 16th in the year 1684. Odd, how she *knew* that date. She knew the date as well as she knew her own name and even the freckles that dusted her nose and the backs of her forearms. She remembered birth and even Mama, whom she had never had memories of during her lifetime.

Thinking of Mama, she remembered in a full flood of clarity trying to tempt Luciana into sacrificing her child. In her lifetime she would never have thought of such a thing, nor spoke of the homunculus which was strictly part of the magic of the *gadjé* and dark magics for them as well. How could she have said what she had said? How could she have found the nerve?

But she knew the answer. It was the result of what that priest was doing to her. Concentrating, thinking of it now, she could feel a darkness in her soul. It was like the result of a spilled dye pot on a precious piece of Gypsy Silk. The fabric drank the dye thirstily and the resulting stain spread with deliberate, unswerving intent ... a consumption of the soul that could not be undone.

She was a foul thing siphoning life wherever she found it. Tears of self-hatred and loathing did not, could not fall, there could not even be the insignificant cleansing of remorse. Tears were denied her, but anger was not, nor, she had learned, was she completely tethered to the body whose foul miasma filled the tiny cellar.

She drew her hands through the oak barrels, allowing her fingers to rest in the liquid, fouling it in a way that mortals could not tell until they drank deeply of it or tested it by some magical means. Seeing no other mischief she could make, Alessandra concentrated upon being a bit of air, and pushed away from the stamped dirt floor of the cellar.

It felt strange passing through the floor and up through the tiled walkway into a little courtyard.

A tiny, well-tended medicinal garden grew within the square courtyard surrounding a fountain. A Catholic saint's statue reigned modestly over young urchins and their ubiquitous pitchers from which water flowed into the pool. Moorish-style grillwork created the gate or door that led into the cellar she had just exited by unconventional means.

Alessandra stayed back, amid the shadows of the tiled patio rather than in the sunlight proper since she had no sense of how visible she might be to the mortal eye.

Branching off from this central courtyard were long corridors. She followed one and realized that she was in an abbey filled with brown-robed monks who wore sandals and simple cotton rope for a belt. Along the corridor, she found a dormitory suitable for about twenty-five men, a chapel, and a refectory with an adjoining kitchen capable of serving one hundred or more. Toward the outer wall, she found personal chambers, clearly intended for guests. This was confirmed by the last room which had been magically marked. Entering the room was like pressing through the yolk of an egg to capture a bit of shell—almost impossible to pierce except for the very patient and cunning.

She found the paraphernalia of a priest, but recognized it as carrying the taint of her avowed enemy, the cardinal. Someone had attempted to take the austere edge off of the cell, with flowers in a vase near the barred window and extra straw stuffed into the mattress. It would not suffice the vainglorious tastes of the cardinal.

Peering and poking about the room, Alessandra finally found the cardinal's *nanta* bag. Someone—undoubtedly the cardinal himself, since she did not think he had found himself another lackey to replace Brother Tomasi just yet—had tucked the carpetbag into hiding underneath the altar cloth which covered the tiny personal altar intended for private prayers. It was an offense even to her to find a book of *magia nera* hidden there, and she shared little in common with the tenets of the cardinal's professed faith.

Focusing as much energy as she could, Alessandra attempted to shift the odd containers or to lift the book of black spells from the bag. It was warded, of course. She felt exhausted, certainly not as though she might be able to move anything.

In frustration, Alessandra drifted from the cardinal's room and went in search of the kitchen, for there was one other thing she remembered all too clearly and that was that blood gave her strength. Her need for the life fluid of human or beast ought to have sickened her. Indeed, Alessandra *tried* hard to find some bit of resistance or distaste, but found only hunger instead.

Her search of the kitchen ended in disgust. These priests used every morsel of meat and blood when they butchered. Her timing could be no worse for every bit of meat or associated materials were either well-cooked or so suitably seasoned that she found no nourishment in them. Feeling more than a little piqued, Alessandra wafted from the kitchen on the fumes of bruschetta and stale bread only to remember in the hallway the medicinal garden, which suggested this abbey might serve as a hospitalier and, if so, there would be those who suffered and, perhaps, if she was very lucky, had been bled within the hour.

The abbey, Alessandra discovered, was built in the form of a *crux dissimulata*, the curving long arms off of the standard crossed arms of the ancient swastika symbol. The curving arms eventually joined to make a solid outer wall of a round tower. A portcullis yawned open, sometime long ago having lost the ability to fortify a once defensible outpost set atop a hill. Beyond the walls of the tower was a sizable garden of gourds, vegetables, and grapes tended by several intent, brown-robed men. Inside, along the other long corridors which all led back to the heart of the abbey, the medicinal garden, and its chapel, were long wards. Most were empty. One chamber she smelled before she reached it. Passing half a dozen rooms without even looking, she followed the scent of blood to a large room.

At first, it looked as though the floors and walls were painted haphazardly in shades of russet brown and, in a sense they were, but the paint was the dried blood of human patients. The knives and saws of the surgeon hung on pegs on the walls.

Alessandra inspected the room carefully, her stomach growling as though she were alive and needed sustenance. Sustenance, in whatever form, she did need, but no surgery had been performed within these walls in some time. Desperate and willing to take her strength from wherever she might find it, Alessandra opened the curio jars and searched the corners. For her efforts, she found but a single finger—probably lopped off of an assistant to the surgeon when he did not move his hand quickly enough during the amputation of a limb—which had grown maggoty and dry.

Alessandra found enough internal substance to pick out the wriggling fat worms before she sucked and chewed upon the finger, as though it were a child's treat, hungry for what little fluid of life remained. It served her well enough to continue searching the wards.

She found, at the farthest end from anyone, a foul, dark room that reeked of human waste and nearly deafened even her eternal ears with the sounds of howling, crying, and the rattling of chains. Alessandra lingered there, feeling an unwholesome kinship with these poor maddened souls who lacked any future that did not suggest a deepening into the wild insanities that consumed them.

In the ward room beside the first asylum, Alessa found another, but this time filled with quieter sorts of patients than those that occupied the neighboring chamber. Through the grated window which allowed the keepers to maintain their watch on the residents of the room, Alessandra watched as most of them sat in refurbished chairs or shuffled through the rushes that covered the floor as far as their chains allowed. It

seemed a fate of living death, an existence she was far too familiar with. Shivering, she pressed onward.

Alessandra found the wards of the living on another wing not far from the medicinal garden which appeared to be in the very center of the abbey. Pausing in the open doorway of this patients' wing, she peered in.

Her stomach clenched into a tight ball of hatred at the instant recognition of her tormentor. The cardinal turned toward the door just as she peered in and, for a horrifying moment, their bodies almost touched . . . except that, because of him, she had no body, indeed, no entrails to twist in a nonexistent belly.

Hatred fueled her fading presence, giving her power to act—but to do what? Flying into fits of anger would do her no good and in this abbey, in this ward, there were suffering ones who might be harmed, thus calling forth the true power of faithful servants whose goodwill would be twisted against her, against she who had been wronged.

The cardinal's eyes widened and he stepped back abruptly from her, bumping into the friar who had been speaking to him. She watched as the pulse in Cardinal delle Torre's neck sped. He sniffed and reached out blindly. Alessandra could hear as well as see his pulse increasing. Delle Torre's face had gone pale and then gray. He knew she was here! Magically, she could feel him sensing her presence.

Alessandra concentrated upon not having substance, to be at one with the air that swept lightly into the ward. She smiled, pleased, when the cardinal straightened his vestments and had to turn his attention to the brown-robed brother who had been solicitously asking him if he was well for the third or fourth time.

"The travel has taken more out of me than I thought, Brother Gregorio," the cardinal murmured. Though he spoke to the cleric, his eyes were narrowed and he searched the immediate area for further signs of her. "It is most kind of you and your brothers to take Brother Tomasi in. I had hoped he would recover, but I fear what with the traveling, all that I am compelled to do in service for the Holy Father only makes him worse," the cardinal explained, returning to his subject.

The cardinal left the room first, bowed out by his host, but paused in the doorway, still searching for her.

Alessandra bit her lip, watching the cardinal. She longed to do something to him now, but then it would not serve her purposes for him to linger.

"Of course, and you must be tired as well," Brother Gregorio murmured. "I can have a light repast brought to your room for lunch. As an abbey, we normally take only two meals a day. Please, Your Eminence, rest as you need. We ring the bells for Vespers." Though the brother's words and attitude were solicitous, Alessandra was drawn to the look of doubt and mistrust in his hazel eyes.

"Yes, yes, Vespers," the cardinal said thoughtfully. "I will take your advice and rest before evening prayers."

"Dinner follows and, except for those tending the ill, we observe the final hours of

the day after prayers, as a time for silence and contemplation.”

As the men moved away, Alessandra allowed the fall breeze to sweep her into the hospital room. The monks' dormitory was laid out tighter than this ward where there were perhaps fifteen beds compared to the dormitories' twenty-five. Here, trifold screens were erected between patients. Several simple wooden stations were erected at points between the mattressless cots. Bowls of water, stagnant and containing the remnants of keeping the sick clean, occupied the table-tops. Oft used, yet freshly laundered rags were folded and took up the small shelf beneath the water bowl and ewers. Religious curios and bags of tools occupied the bottom shelf and beneath the stand were old-fashioned chamber pots.

Alessandra shuddered at the thought of public use of the pots. The exposure and lack of privacy for one of the most private acts bordered upon the conditions of *marimé*. Beside the chamber pots were pitchers of water for various uses. The patients here were already ill, seriously enough to merit a stay with the Hospitallers. How these healers could then compromise or worsen their patients' conditions by such exposure to moral filth seemed contrary to the professed intent of the holy brethren of Hospitallers.

She shook off her distaste over the circumstances. It served no purpose for her to worry over it as there was nothing she could do about it ... besides, she smelled fresh blood.

Alessandra followed the scent. A man, gray as much from age as his ailments, lay upon one of the cots. Screens were up on both sides of his bed, not that Alessandra expected to be seen. He lay there, sleeping, but already half dead. She could make out the gathering ethers that would form his spirit as his time grew near. The bowl of blood from his last bleeding sat there on the little stand by his head.

Her distaste for what she must do slowed Alessandra's actions. She dipped her fingers into the bowl of blood. It felt tepid. She licked her fingers and discovered it had little of the strength-giving kick the cardinal's hot and free-flowing blood gave her the last time. Glancing this way and that to be sure she would not be seen, she lifted the bowl and took a swallow. Not only was the power she gained from the blood meager, the taste was flat. Clearly, blood was a dish best served hot, for this held none of the same sustenance.

The old man on the cot beside her had not moved since long before Alessandra joined him in his small annex. She heard as clearly as the spoken word, the blood in his body slowing, the faltering of his heart. She hesitated as she sat there on his cot, wondering if she should do what it seemed so achingly clear she must. How she should go about this? A part of her clamored against this act, but it was overshadowed by her hunger and her anger at the cardinal.

The old man stirred when she sat on the cot beside him. Alessandra could see the fear in his eyes as he stared directly at her, but he made only a muffled moan when she pulled off the bandage that covered the site of his last bloodletting. She smiled at him, one of her pretty winning smiles that she knew would reassure him and then raised his arm to her lips.

At first, she licked the wound, but the blood had begun to dry and clot. Alessandra grazed the section of arm with her teeth, using the little bit of substance she had won in her fit of anger at the cardinal. It made her smile thinking how the cardinal gave her the energy, the power that she needed to find sustenance.

The old man whimpered. Alessandra paused and smiled at him as she would have at her own grandfather if she had ever had one. Gently, she lifted his arm to her lips again, imagining her teeth somewhat sharper so that they could more easily slice the man's wound, widen the slit flesh and then hungrily suck the life's fluid from his veins. The old man was too weak, too old to fight her, but, in turn, the shallow pulse thrummed through her, invigorating her body, her sensibilities, and gave her the power she needed to face the cardinal and to make life as difficult for him as she was capable.

XIX

“Have an open face but conceal your thoughts.”

—Italian Proverb

Signora DelVecchio huffed and puffed her way through the main hall, which also served as the entryway. Cristoval wished that he could lighten her load, but His Highness allowed no time for anyone else in his schedule. While packing for Prince Pierro, she also packed what few suitable belongings he and Ludvico possessed for the trip to court. While she managed the first chore, she continued to supervise the household, which now included a tailor and his staff taking measurements and beginning work on the wardrobes in the largest and, therefore, most suitable room of the house. She managed the constant negotiation for room between the field hands pulled into the house to move trunks and to help in other ways prepare for the journey.

Cristoval slapped the hand of the tailor's assistant who allowed himself to become distracted and pricked him with one of the long pins. By the end of the day, Cristoval knew he would look diseased or, at the very least, like one of the tailor's pincushions. This particular assistant had stabbed His Highness only once before being shooed off to assist in the pinning of someone else. Out of kindness for an eight-year-old boy already overexcited and far less still, Cristoval spared Ludvico and accepted this junior tailor's assistant for his own.

“What are you having made with that sackcloth?” Pierro sneered over Cristoval's shoulder.

Cristoval dropped the fabric proffered by another of the tailor's assistants. Knowing his budget, it had been an extravagance.

“Don Cristoval selected this for matching coats for himself and the boy, Your Highness,” the assistant said.

“Nonsense. I will look ridiculous,” Pierro said and waved the offending bolt of cloth away.

The assistant remained steadfast. As his master must have taught him, never back away from a confirmed sale. He had apparently neglected to advise the young man to never argue with royalty, which was forgivable since it was unlikely that the tailor often saw such elevated customers. No doubt he had mortgaged his house and shop for the wherewithal to offer the splendor in fabric he showed.

“Tailor!” Prince Pierro de Medici bellowed. “Get this idiot out of my sight!”

“But he is one of my best—” the tailor began and cleverly regained his sensibilities enough to swallow whatever else he started to say in the young man’s defense.

He had said enough, though. The prince bristled with all of the power his family name and newly recognized title warranted. “If he is among your best, then I have hired the wrong tailor.”

“No, Your Highness! Forgive me. The sun was in ray eyes, I did not see who offended you so!” the tailor protested.

All the men and even young Ludvico knew it to be the lie of a supplicant. They had been working by lantern light for more than an hour now.

The prince, however, practically purred. “I see that we understand one another.” He waved the hapless assistant away and crossed to the great table where a vast quantity of cloth—on bolts, in rolls, and folded— lay in an explosion of colors and textures. Looking over his shoulder and not finding the tailor at his side, Prince Pierro snapped his fingers imperiously. “Come along! You have little enough time to make three full wardrobes!”

“Yes, Your Highness, and they will be done by the fifteenth as you have requested. I have hired the other tailors in the next—”

Pierro made a rude noise. “I don’t care how you do it, just have them done and made properly. Now, the boy shall have a suit of clothes made of this fabric, his father a coat.”

Cristoval felt his ears burning with the heat of humiliation. He swallowed hard and cleared his throat. “Your Highness, I cannot afford—”

“If it must come from my purse, then so be it, but I won’t be made to look the fool by having my retainers looking like the fifth son of a petty house squire and a scullery servant,” the prince said.

“Thank you for your gracious gift,” Cristoval replied with a deep bow to hide his expression.

“Nonsense,” Pierro retorted, “I’m sure that you will more than earn these garments. We’re taking the woman with us, your governante.”

Signora DelVecchio missed a step on the stairs. She turned back toward the hall, her arms full of linens and stared down gape-mouthed. In normal days, she was a woman who spoke her mind and left no doubt of her opinions. So far, Cristoval had managed to keep her from making a ruckus by taking the prince down the peg or nine he deserved by listening to her long, sequestered rants. Thankfully, she responded well to hand gestures as Cristoval begged her for patience. Her gestures toward the prince, absorbed once more in fabrics, were equally clear about her opinion of the situation.

“Signora,” the prince said, musing over some fabric. “Yes, this for the signora,” he said to the tailor and then turned back to look up the stairs at the housekeeper. “Signora, when you are done with the linens, perhaps you might manage something for dinner and do not forget to have yourself measured.”

Leaving the table, Pierro stretched and smiled at Cristoval. Were he a cat, Cristoval would have searched for feathers. “Is there word on the refurbishment of the carriage?”

The pulse along Cristoval’s temple throbbed. The carriage had been retired after his last wife’s death since he preferred to ride and Ludvico rode his mother’s old palfrey. The prince had confiscated the coach—like everything else he wanted—and sent it to the farrier who also served as carriage maker, though where carriages were concerned, he spent more time in repairs than anything else. The prince was having the coach remodeled to suit current fashions, whatever they were, and to remove the Battista family crest and replace it with the prince’s own. The renovations did not stop there, they included refurbishing and re-stuffing the padding in the seats and replacing the aging window flap with curtains throughout. All in all, Cristoval judged it would have been cheaper to buy a new carriage—but, alas, that meant waiting and Pierro deMedici would hear none of that.

“Yes, Your Highness,” Cristoval replied. “The carriage will be ready for your approval in the morning.”

* * *

“Signs say it will rain tonight,” Grasni said, apportioning herself the last of the rabbit, wild greens, and a chunk of heavy brown bread.

Marco squinted up at the sky. “There are no clouds,” he said, “at least none to speak of.”

Grasni looked at him and seemed to debate arguing. At last, she shrugged and turned to Petrus. “Do we travel tomorrow, *Meero-kak?*”

The men stilled, but from their places around the night fire they looked expectantly from their maggiore to the Romani elder who sat on a stump beside him.

Mandero set aside his empty dinner plate and threw another log on the fire. “We’ve lost enough time already, so we will be on the road at first light,” he said in a quiet, even tone. “That, of course, is for the men in my command. You are welcome to travel with us, if you wish, but if you plan to travel with us, you might find it advisable to be ready for the road when we are.”

“Then we will be ready, Maggiore,” Petrus said firmly. “Your men are welcome to join us in the *bender* tonight.”

Marco glanced over at the roomy domed tent and then back at Grasni. His darling Maria would have fits at the unseemliness of eleven men sleeping in the same tent with an unmarried woman. There was also the matter of the men, some of them still young and randier than was necessarily good for them. Of them all, only he had taken a wife . . . excepting, of course, for the strange marriage vows the maggiore said he had made with the Lady Alessandra’s ghost. It was all a little too much for him to sort out, but to regular folk, as far as they were concerned, there would be a young woman sleeping in a tent with far too many men for her good name.

“The men are welcome to sleep there if they wish,” Madero said.

The maggiore was in a solemn, dark mood that Marco meant to discuss with him. It was one thing to give minimal information to the troops, but he was Madero’s second and, as such, needed to be informed. By the steel of every man’s blade, it was a necessity that he understand what had happened while the maggiore was with the Romani! So much had changed and there was not a man in the unit who did not wonder at the strangeness that seemed to have overtaken their commander. For the sake of the unit, there needed to be explanations.

“You’ll pardon me, Maggiore, Signore Lendaro—” Marco began.

“You will call me Petrus, Lieutenant della Guelfa. If we travel together, a little familiarity is perhaps a good thing,” the old Romani said. He lit a fresh *sigaro* with a wand of dried grass set alight by the bonfire.

“Military command is built upon formality, *Meero-kak*,” the maggiore said, “but if this is how you wish the men to address you, the choice is your own.”

Petrus Lendaro laughed heartily. “Then perhaps it is just as well that I joined neither the Armata nor the White Queen’s Escalade, as your men have done.” He took a long deep drag of his sigaro. “I meant that for you, as well, Madero, seeing as how we are now family.”

“Yes,” the maggiore replied, scratching the sash that covered his left eye. “I noticed the easy filial communication between you and your mother.”

“Maggiore,” Marco said, clearing his throat again. “While I am confident that our men will respect the virtue of this young woman—”

“Grasni,” she said in a clipped tone as she gathered the plates and mugs into a washbasin she took from a peg and cinch from the side of the *vardo*.

Marco nodded, rising and bowing slightly before sitting again. “While I am confident that our men will respect Grasni’s virtue—” He glowered at Tazio and Antoine, the two youngest and newest members of the unit. Tazio, even as he spoke, attempted to flirt with the young woman in question. “Our men *will* respect the virtue of Grasni, but were other travelers to pass our campsite, the appearance of impropriety would be just as damaging to her good name.”

“Psh!” Grasni snorted. “Whole families sleep together in the *bender* and *pral*

Petrus will be beside me.”

“But we are not a family and the lieutenant raises an excellent issue,” Mandero said. He rose and stretched. “There is a bed in the *vardo*—”

“I’ll not!” Grasni protested, letting the basin and its contents clatter to the ground almost drowning out an equally vehement response from Petrus.

“No!” the old man said, jumping to his feet. “The *vardo* does not belong to Grasni.”

“It’s just a bed,” Marco said, also rising. “It would protect her honor.”

“It would be a curse!” Grasni replied. Even by the flickering light of the bonfire, Marco could see she had gone dreadfully pale and looked like a trapped animal. “No woman sleeps in another woman’s *vardo*. It would be an invitation of another into her marriage bed! The *maggiore*, and *only* he, can sleep in the *vardo*.”

“But the *Araunya* is dead, isn’t she?” Caporale Tazio degli Tello said. “What difference does it make?”

Marco easily read the exhaustion in the *maggiore*’s expression. The two Romani seemed speechless with shock or offense, probably both.

“Caporale, your opinion was not solicited,” Marco said quietly. To Grasni and Petrus, he bowed. “I did not mean to cause offense, nor did the caporale who is very young. I have no such excuse—”

“Thank you, della Guelfa,” *Maggiore* di Montago said abruptly. He took a deep breath and moved closer to the fire, drawing everyone’s attention to him. “If we travel together, and it appears that we will, one and all of us must understand that our ways are not the same. We must find *our* way slowly.”

Taking another breath, the *maggiore* scanned the watchful faces of his men. “We have been apart for a short time, little more than a week—than a couple of weeks,” he corrected himself, “and in that time, much has happened. Much that I either cannot or will not explain, but know that I will help you all to understand as best as I am able.”

Mandero turned to Grasni and Petrus. “Grasni, there is no way that you could—” He let the sentence drop, seeing her horrified expression. “Of course not. Perhaps, then you might take separate shelter beneath the *vardo*?”

Grasni and Petrus stared at one another for a long moment. Petrus broke their silence. “I know of no reason she could not. Certainly shelter has been taken beneath a wagon before.”

“Grasni?” Mandero asked.

She chewed her lip a moment longer. “It ... it might be the best solution all around. You must sleep in the *vardo* and if there are ...” She glanced at the men surrounding her, listening to her every word. She licked her lips. “If, uh, if *she* comes to you in the night—if there is a problem, then I would be nearby.”

“So be it,” the *maggiore* said. “Let us finish our chores and go to bed.”

Marco knew he was not alone in wondering if he would get *any* sleep. There was too much said and yet left unsaid for them to have any answers. No, only more questions were raised.

* * *

Sated on the old man's warm blood, Alessandra had to consciously control staying ethereal and formless. It was like trying to remain calm and controlled, composed, when in actuality you were giddy. In fact, she felt more than a little giddy. Who would have thought blood would have the same effect as hard plum wine?

Alessandra ached to use her newfound strength, to trouble the cardinal and possibly find a way to defeat him, but instead, she stayed put. She lingered at the bedside of the old man.

When she had first approached him, the effluvium of spiritual existence had already begun to gather over him. She had hurried his death by, perhaps, a few hours—or maybe a day—by drinking all the blood she could nurse from his veins. She had drunk greedily from the site of his last bloodletting, taking every last bit of the life's fluid from him. She took great care not to waste a drop of the old *gadjé's* bequest, even when the blood still came relatively fast, filling her mouth easily with every suck she took. That had not lasted long and she was forced to use other methods to take his offering.

As the old *gadjé* failed, she allowed herself substance, wasting precious energy to massage his chest to aid his failing heart. He did not even wince this time when she used her teeth—surprisingly sharp, little razors—to reopen the wound left from an earlier bloodletting. She sucked and lapped at the old man's arm until she could not draw another drop from his aged body.

Finished with him, Alessandra's thoughts turned to the cardinal and his book of *magia nera* tucked securely beneath the private altar reserved for his room alone. Though she had never been of the cardinal's faith, the presence of such an evil text and tools in close proximity to the sacred symbols of his professed conviction offended her sensibilities. She wanted nothing more than to shred his foul book, but she remembered the painful spells she had encountered once before. She would have to be resourceful, she would find something that she could do. . . .

The old man gasped, drawing Alessandra's attention away from her plotting. She had intended to leave immediately, but then, through her giddiness, the *gadjé's* fear drew her back to his bedside. He was afraid of death, of course, being inexperienced with the transition. He almost seemed to be afraid of her. It made no sense, but perhaps the moment of death was irrational, she could not remember her own.

Since she had first sat upon his bed and taken his hand in hers, Alessandra had made herself visible to him. Initially, the old man had smiled and welcomed her tender ministrations. She had taken great care to cause as little pain or distress for him as she could, treating him respectfully. Now, the effluvium of his afterlife form gathered in wisps over him like so many puffs of smoke.

Alessandra felt him resist, felt him try to maintain some hold—as though that were possible—on his mortal vessel. The old one was weak and yet he held to his living shell with a tenacity she had not imagined possible.

Wringing her hands, Alessandra wondered if she should help the old man pass. With this existence, she felt no pain, no aches, and she knew he would most assuredly leave his ailments behind him. She glanced toward the closest door. Daylight faded. Soon, the brothers tending to the sick would light the lanterns. If she waited too long, the cardinal would be in his room for bed, making him close enough to spoil her plans.

And still the old man clung to life.

She focused upon the *gadjé*, saw the tethers he had made to his mortal shell over his years of living. Music, like a siren's song, began to tease at the edges of her mind, distracting her from her obligations. But one thought settled in her mind. The old *gadjé* was her responsibility, she could not go about her other plans, not when she was needed here; it was a basic courtesy, if nothing else.

The music sang to her and she remembered it now, the call of magic and all she need do was use it. She had been trained while living. Was there a difference to the magic available to her now, in her present state?

She began to hum, letting the magic lead her. It seemed like familiar old songs, but still, they were new to her. The sense of familiarity gave her confidence which gave her voice. She sang what words came to her, paying little attention to it as she concentrated upon the dying *gadjé* and the tethering points to his body. Alessandra envisioned them as strings tying the soul to its vessel. Some of the ties were already loosened, some even unraveled.

It was like plucking threads of silk, so delicate and sheer but also unusually strong, but silk was her element. She imagined tiny scissors in her hand, such as she had used when doing needlework. With slow, deliberation, Alessandra sang the music of magic and snipped each of the unyielding bindings.

As his fetters failed, the misting form hanging over the old man's bed absorbed the sparks of life. Though he had no strength to draw breath, somehow the *gadjé* managed to join the refrain with the last stutters of his life.

Finally, it was done. The body on the cot breathed no more, nor did his ravaged heart continue its solemn thump. The wisps of his existence joined the ethereal cloud which, now gravid, slowly faded from the hospital ward room.

Alessandra sat back, breathing a sigh of relief and ending her song; she was free to do what she must. Her duties were carried out to their fullest and she need have no further worries over the old man who had grown suddenly and irrationally fearful at his time.

In the moment of relaxation, Alessandra felt once more the exhilaration of her newfound strength. It bolstered her, making it possible for her to act in her own defense. She became aware of eyes watching her, feeling almost as though someone touched her.

A brother of the abbey carrying away bloodied bandages paused at the end of the old man's cot and peered at him. With a sudden cry of alarm, the friar dropped his bundles and rushed to the old man's side.

Alessandra moved away from the bed, leaving the brothers to do as they must while she locked eyes with a familiar face. Somehow, impossibly, Brother Tomasi seemed to see her as clearly as the blankets pulled up to his chin. He lay in the very first cot beside the door.

How had she missed him when she came in? It did not matter.

"Old friend, I had wondered what had happened to you," Alessandra said, stopping at his bedside.

"Stay away!" Brother Tomasi cried, thrashing under the blankets to move to the far side of the impossibly narrow cot.

Alessandra shook her head. "Shush now. Is that any way to greet me? After the kindnesses you have shown me in the past?"

"Are you going to kill me, too?" he asked, trembling. The left side of his face and neck were ugly with the wounds from being burned, as were portions of his hands; she could not tell where the other burns were, covered as he was by blankets and a gown, though it was clear that they stretched well beyond the bandages.

"Too?" Alessandra asked, confused.

"The old man," Brother Tomasi whispered.

Alessandra stared at him in shocked amazement that her ministrations to the old man could be so misunderstood. "You are no enemy of mine if you are not doing the bidding of the cardinal."

"He must be obeyed. I didn't want to. I *never* wanted to, but he made me," Brother Tomasi protested, tears of very real terror sliding down his blistered cheeks.

"The madness is upon our brother. Someone get him a draught to help him sleep!" the monk tending to the cooling body of the old *gadjé* called out.

Madness. Yes, Alessandra realized then, that was the explanation for Brother Tomasi's words, perhaps even the reason he was able to see her. She felt sorry for him as one of the friars forced fluid down his throat, but only momentarily for while he had done her some kindnesses, he had also assisted the cardinal's evil acts upon her. Apparently the evil magic had taken its wage from Tomasi's sanity. So be it, that was the price of such things. Alessandra turned away. She had an appointment to keep.

*“In part to blame is she, which hath without consent been only tried:
He comes too near that comes to be denied.”*

—Sir Thomas Overby

Alessandra paused in the medicinal garden, finding that she was ever more pleased by green and growing things now that life itself was denied her. She could have wept in frustration, for all that she had lost, all that the court schemers had taken from her when they had no reason. Tears, however, would no more water this garden than nurse her revenge.

She sank to the carefully nurtured soil, identifying and cataloging the collection while she waited. From her vantage point, she easily witnessed the scullery lad as he left the kitchens and rang the bell which hung not far from the door of the dining hall and neighboring chapel. She could see, as well, the door to the cardinal’s room. Most of the friars had already taken leave of their assignments—excepting those in the nearby hospital ward—and made their way toward the dining hall where they would sup on their simple fare.

The cardinal departed his chambers late. His hawkish face looked hunted. Though outside, he did not immediately go in for his supper, but waited for a pair of late arrivals to pass him before going about his nefarious work. Alessandra watched him ward the door and it was perfectly clear why he had waited—so that none of the Franciscan brothers saw what he did, for the words and gestures he made were not common practice among the priestly ranks of the Roman Catholic Church. At least, she considered, as far as she knew and she knew most of what the cardinal’s hand movements meant.

Waiting, she lay low and laughed softly to herself. The cardinal, who bespelled her body, did her one favor she was sure he neither intended nor thought of. Without substance, the memory of mortal form tended to affect how she moved, except now she was not hampered by yards and yards of Gypsy Silk or boned corsets which gave as much trouble in breathing as they did in movement.

Even after Cardinal delle Torre finally realized he could delay no longer and, thus, went into his supper, Alessandra waited. She rose, reaching down to dust herself off, and stopped with another rueful laugh. Instead, Alessa turned her attention to maintaining her noncorporeal aspect as she began to make her way across the length of garden to the tiled mosaic floor beneath the passageway roofs. It was more difficult than she expected.

The sensation of giddiness had passed, but the warm blood of the old *gadjé* took away the aching sense of cold she had not been able to shake since first she was aware of her altered state. With the internal heat of the fresh blood, her body instinctively felt the urgent drive to take its natural form, but it seemed to do something more. She had recognized the cardinal’s warding spell, having used variants of it herself in times past. The cloud, which previously shielded so much of her life and experience, most pointedly her education in the mystical arts, was now

lifted.

Instinct made Alessa want to hide when she peered in at the men in the dining hall and with a laugh she dismissed it. It took a certain boldness, even in her state, to stand in the doorway of the hall and look about. She felt a strong temptation to dance around the tables. Knowing that only one of the twenty or thirty men might see her and that that one would be distressed by her presence, served as further temptation. There were, however, more important matters at hand that would do even more to bedevil the cardinal than take a risk that one of the ecclesiastical brothers possessed the gift of true sight.

The cardinal sat at the head of the room with only one other man at a high table she had not seen in her previous wanderings. From the looks of the other man's tonsured gray hair and the keys hanging from the end of his rope belt that did not hold a wooden crucifix, Alessandra guessed him to be the abbot.

Alessandra turned away. From the vaporous folds of silk covering her, which drifted about her as though floating, she plucked the feathers of another of her forms. The feathers came out easily enough though the twinge of almost physical pain came as a surprise. She dwelled on the sensation—her own this time.

As the pain faded, Alessandra knelt beside the portal to the dining hall. With one of the feathers, she drew a warding symbol in the dust and speared the center of it with the feather. She scuttled a few feet to her right, just outside the chapel and repeated her pattern with her remaining feather.

She stood and surveyed her work, nodding in satisfaction. The brothers of this abbey—at least some— would leave the room before the cardinal and the shallow lines would be destroyed before the cardinal could read them. This did not mean, however, that the spell would be destroyed. To the contrary. The first man to cross the symbol would activate it and it would continue until the cardinal passed over it, at which point, Alessandra would be alerted. The ward for the chapel was set to alert Alessandra twice; once as the cardinal entered and a second time when he departed to most likely retire to his room.

Task completed, Alessa took one long last look at the cardinal, feeling once more the shame of her present state as it affected those among her friends and family, never mind the dangers to her own soul.

Alessandra stopped at the door to the cardinal's room. His ward was not nearly so benign as hers had been. He seemed equally concerned about human and noncorporeal visitors, but at least the wards were well-established to secure his room before they could be set off.

She considered pressing through the ward just to see what dangers existed, but such was a fool's game that would only alert the cardinal. But then, what excuse would he make to leave the table? She dismissed the thought. He was crafty enough to think of something.

Passing the cardinal's door, she counted off a dozen bricks toward the outermost wall. Alessandra closed her eyes and stretched her senses. Tendrils of magic, like the

anchoring threads of a web, expanded beyond the door which served as its center. The magic of the web played a siren's song, its source as yet unknown.

Swaying to the arcane song which played without words or instrument to issue it, Alessandra danced to the farthest anchoring point and three steps more. With her attention so focused and the *gadjé's* blood giving her strength, pressing through the wall presented no more challenge than crossing a stream reaching no higher than her ankle, flowing strong, as though ready to sweep her away. Indeed passing through the wall was breathlessly easy.

Alessandra gazed about the room she had had only a few short minutes to examine before. The cardinal had warded the narrow, shuttered machicolations which, long ago, archers used to protect their small, outlying fort. Or, perhaps, the abbey had been built out of the ruins of a castle? In any case, it did not matter to her, there were other, more pressing issues at hand.

She found the cardinal's *nanta* bag still beneath the altar. Using an altar herself when worshiping the Three Sisters of Fate, she understood the defilement of this place of prayer just by the proximity. It was as though they negated one another, except that evil always went farther than that. She knew in the battle of good and evil, evil could never accept a draw.

When she closed her eyes and focused again, the miasma of evil hung like a low-lying fog stretching several paces away from the bag. Alessandra hissed in frustration with herself. She no longer had eyes, there was no reason that she could not see the outline of evil with her eyes wide open ... or something like that. She was growing confused about her state.

Maintaining her concentration of envisioning the remnants of evil, she looked around the room. In various places, a sickly-colored cloud clung to objects both hidden and in open sight. Deciding she would look at them as time allowed, Alessa yanked open the carpetbag.

An explosive force of light and subsonic sound flung her backward. Though she was nothing truly tangible, Alessa was aware of pain. Regaining her senses, she sat up gingerly, wondering how it was that she could be feeling the way she did. The beginnings of dusk and the night song of crickets made sense before anything else, and then there was the grass beneath her, the curve of a road and . . . the red-stoned abbey nearly a dozen yards away.

Stupidity, Alessandra grumbled to herself, sheer, undeniable, stupidity to not even suspect that the bag might be warded. She caught herself going through the ritual of dusting herself off, as though dust or debris might gather on her funeral weeds. The pain, she realized, must have come from being blasted straight through the wall without preparation. Yet another minor incident that demonstrated she was capable of sensation—to one degree or another.

From this side of the abbey, the cardinal's room was two stories above the grassy field in the company of cows and goats who glanced her way—sensing the abnormal disturbance—and dismissed her.

The easiest thing for her to do was float, but, she discovered, deciding to do something consciously and doing it without thought were not the same thing. Just as she began to waver off the ground, Alessandra felt the first ward release, like a gentle tap upon her shoulder. She smiled, knowing some part of her plan worked and that gave her a sense of buoyancy she had not anticipated.

To Alessandra's eyes, she had punched a veritable hole in the wall when making her unexpected departure. She chose to use this advantage and enter the room through that mystical portal which offered less resistance than the rest of the wall.

Easing into the room, she looked around for the cardinal, half expecting the *benglo* priest to be waiting for her, but apparently his ward was not one that alerted him to intrusion. But, of course, she realized, that would be totally unnecessary because anything that had the power to fling *her* as far as it had would cause some serious harm to a mortal, probably even kill him. No, the cardinal was confident that his ward would serve to protect the tools he used when practicing the dark arts.

Alessandra approached the *nanta* bag with a little more respect, not trusting her vision to reveal all of the magic that lay in wait. The spell to reveal was simple, one of the first Luciana had taught her. The effectiveness of the spell increased with the skill of the caster. It had been so long, though, so much was different. Would *real* magic work the same for her now? How much of her precious energy would it take?

There were no answers anyone could give her. She was—as far as she knew—on untried ground and there was work to be done. Reflexively, she drew a deep breath and murmured the words in her mother's tongue then sent the spell outward from her. The magic seemed drawn from the center of her being, where the energy of the *gadjé's* blood also welled. She felt it more now, the pulling of the magical silken threads unraveling inside of her, felt it now more than ever before. Alessandra sensed the oneness of being with the magic, the silk, a form of life separate and of itself. She longed to linger, to explore this discovery, but time was not on her side.

Whatever ward the cardinal had used, he trusted that one alone to protect his bag and the contents. Grinning, Alessandra reached into the confines of the bag for *la magia nera*. It came easily into her hands, as though it had been waiting for her, belonged to her, was her own book of spells. More disconcerting than all of that, the book of black spell works sang to her.

All magic sang, but this was no mere music. The tempo of the song swelled to match her own rhythms and, finding no natural pulse to wed itself to, created one for her. It was intoxicating, like the old *bosh-mengros* who had, over many years, become a part of their own instruments, the bow a mere extension of the hand and their music an evocation of their souls.

The tapping sensation on her shoulder woke Alessandra from the delirium and reminded her that she had little time—less now. This was the second of her three wards. Had she ever experimented with the Roman Church during her lifetime, she might have some idea how long the nightly Matins took. She had not, so fussing about it now only served to make another delay. It seemed a crime, now that she held the book, *la magia nera*, to destroy it, but it was not something that she could

carry with her, not in any fashion she knew of that would keep it away from the cardinal as well. Most important of all, she needed to keep the cardinal from using the book and there was no safe place she could think of to hide it.

Alessandra dropped the book on the floor, the easier to think. She longed to use it to expose the cardinal, but he could explain it away or harm the monks who questioned him. Though she did not believe as they did, she could not be responsible for placing the shears with which to cut the cord of life in the cardinal's hands. There was a way to wipe clean the written word, but it called for supplies she did not possess nor would she find them among the cardinal's packages.

With her temper, a wind rose riffling the pages of *la magia nera* as well as the papers on the cardinal's desk, some of which were caught up and whirled around the room. There was another, simpler spell she knew that would make the book of black spells useless.

Alessandra reached for the bottle on the desk, curling her fingers. It flew to her hands without further bidding. She uncapped the bottle of ink and poured it onto her hands, remembering as several drops blotched a page that she must first give her hands form. Page by page, Alessandra placed her palms firmly and obscured as much as she could. She sat back with satisfaction as she completed her task. The ink was expensive and the book of evil spells would require hours of careful study and spell work to reclaim the pages from the inky disaster she had created. She was further satisfied that the cardinal could not mistake who had done this, he would see the woman's handprint and know it was hers.

Cherishing the thought, Alessandra poured the rest of the ink into the bag, dropped the bottle on the stonework floor again and again until it shattered. The shards of glass she also gathered and deposited in the *nanta* bag. She scanned the room for other materials and reached for the bottle of wine from the bedside table. As she sat back, reflecting upon the mess and befouling of the cardinal's book and assorted supplies, she spotted his alb. He had not taken it to Matins with him. It held the glow of magic, a benign kind that many did not quite believe which made it, thereby, acceptable to the Church.

She rose and approached the length of embroidered satin with care. Waving her hand over the fabric, she revealed the source of magic to be twofold. The satin had the sheen of Gypsy Silk, imbued with the purpose of Cardinal delle Torre's holy office within his Church. The Gypsy Silk was of her people and so the first magic, the most potent, came from the Romani and, therefore, was subject to her will. The glamour of the Gypsy Silk was to enhance the cardinal's holy aspect when he wore it. She clenched the silk and re-invoked its glamour, willing it instead to reflect her enemy's degraded soul.

At first, she considered placing it into the *nanta* bag and despoiling it further. After more consideration, she put it back where she'd found it. The cardinal would have no reason to suspect the changed glamour and so would wear it, unwittingly revealing far more about himself than he ever intended.

Filled with a fierce sense of glee over the trouble she was making for her captor,

Alessandra studied the room looking for other ways to make his life difficult. Her gaze lingered for a long moment upon the spindle-backed chair which closeted the chamber pot.

It was a vile consideration, dumping the contents of the pot under the covers of his bed which would ruin the mattress, not to mention temporarily spoiling the rest of the bedding. The cardinal would get a nasty surprise, but it would be far less painful than her own experience of having to watch the slow, steady deterioration of her human form.

Ultimately, finding the pot empty turned Alessandra philosophical. The chamber pot was not her own, nor that of an employer, husband, or children and, thus, it was *marimé* to her. She needed no further opportunities to wed herself to that foul state.

Her whirlwind had made a mess of the cardinal's papers. Sheets of vellum lay scattered around the room, but it was an idle mischief and would cause the cardinal merely a loss in time for him to recover his book and replace the paraphernalia with which he worked his magic.

Alessandra paused again, her eyes focusing on the candle stub atop the bedpost, the waxy remains of a dozen or more candles draped down the post, commingling on its way to the floor. There were scrape marks. Apparently the thrifty friars gathered the wax periodically. But it was not really the candle which drew her attention as much as it was the lack of flame dancing upon its pinched wick.

The cardinal could not retrieve paper from ash, no matter his spell. She had concentrated upon causing him trouble and leaving her mark so that he had no doubt of the author of this mischief-making; instead of keeping her attention upon doing the cardinal the most damage by which she could forestall his future activities.

Alessandra whispered words into the palm of her nearly corporeal hand. It was not easy at first, to fully control her body's state and cast at the same time, but delving deep into her resources, she found the warmth pulsing through her, energizing and rejuvenating her. It was a simple spell she wished to cast, one she had done a thousand times ... in her lifetime. Anger swelled the spirit and lit a fire within her, within the vessel of the old *gadjé's* blood. Once more she felt the exultation rising from the joining of her emotion and the sustenance she had found this evening.

Completely absorbed in writing the magical cipher on her palm, she ignored the sound of the door opening behind her. The glyph leaped from her hand, a green incandescent ball of witch-fire. Knowing interception was fast upon her, Alessandra threw the buzzing ball into the cardinal's *nanta* bag and covered her eyes as magic met magic. The combustion blew through her and knocked the cardinal off his feet.

"No! You heathen *stronza*?" The cardinal spat the words mixed with blood from the corner of his mouth.

He reached upward and turned the key in the door latch just before the pounding began.

"Your Eminence?" the brothers chorused, rattling the door in its frame with their knocking and attempting to jiggle the lock free.

“Be gone! Leave me be!” the cardinal yelled as he staggered to his feet.

Only Alessandra knew that the priest spoke equally to those outside the room as well as to her within. She grinned, circling him. For a moment, nothing existed but the two of them as they assessed one another. Reality in the form of the friars outside broke their focus with the sound of rattling keys and cries of welcome to other monks answering their plight.

Holding up his hand, as though he might stay her, the Cardinal took a deep breath and called to the men outside. “Brothers, leave me this night. I am cursed . . . the long journey ... I have been too tired to maintain my meditations. Please, pray for me as I—”

The power inside felt white-hot, like Alessandra would burst as her body rose from the ground. The magic from the *gadjé’s* blood roiled through her as she felt herself changing. Her skin grew taut over her bones and her anger acted like a heady wine, threatening to betray her even as she faced her enemy.

“Come, Priest, let us begin!” Her voice hissed like hot coals dropped into water.

“Cardinal delle Torre?”

“Brothers, please, I must concentrate upon my prayers!” the cardinal yelled as he seized the ewer from beside the basin at the door and flung its contents through Alessandra onto the blazing bag.

The water sliced through Alessandra like knives of icy steel. The heat of her anger dispelled and, like the candle stub on the bedpost, Alessandra felt her form, her rage, her power snuffed.

The cardinal’s lip curled in disdain. “Is that all you had, *strega*? I expected something more than petty vandalism.”

Thus dismissed, Alessandra watched her nemesis defuse the sputtering sparks left in the carpetbag. As the assault upon her senses, the shock of cold, eased, she felt the bud of warmth in her slowly grow. As though pulsing through mortal means, the blood of the *gadjé*, taken while still warmed by the furnace of his mortal being, began to rekindle in her shattered parts and rejoin them.

“You are still here,” the cardinal said to the empty room as he knelt to examine the ashes of his mystical tools. “You have not stopped me, merely caused a delay. It changes nothing. You, after all, are still dead.” He smiled. “You were but an afterthought, a precaution while you walked. You are barely troublesome now. Cooperate with me and you will have power—more than you could ever have hoped for— and you shall have some, *some* of the benefits of mortality.”

Alessandra hated herself for even being curious. Her idle irritation betrayed her, sending an icy, wafting breeze swirling around the room.

“Ruination. It’s all ruined,” the cardinal said, but instead of showing anger, he smiled as he emptied one of his packs and scooped the remains of his supplies into it. “Think of how much better it would be if we were not fighting, if we joined our forces. We could arrange for your family to have your body. They would be at ease

while you, you would know more power than you ever might have in a lifetime.”

“Never!” It took much of her energy to speak. The chill of the water had cooled the internal fires, dulled the sparks of power gained through the old man’s blood and though she was slowly regaining that heat, she did not have the strength to stand against the cardinal now.

The cardinal laughed. “Has it occurred to you, that you are not the first wanton Gypsy chit I have dealt with?”

Startled, Alessandra stopped plotting her next move. What did he mean? Was this how he knew so much of the Romani *chova*? Why would this other have done this? Who could she be?

“Take pride in what you’ve done, *Araunya*,” he said to the room at large. “You’ve helped to expose me to the White King’s court and cost me an assistant in Brother Tomasi and, now, we must travel to my father’s home to reclaim some part of what you have destroyed today.”

Alessandra swallowed her derisive laugh. She would not waste precious energy. The cardinal took her for a fool, if he thought she might be gulled by his recognition of her battles won. In truth, there was no success or she would be free of him. What was there to say or do now? The warmth was slowly fading. She must do something, *anything* to take away his smug expression.

She left the cardinal talking to himself, no longer giving him an audience. Outside his chambers, she discovered one of the brothers sitting in a chair, apparently ready to assist the cardinal if he called for help while wrestling his demons in the night. Touching, unless one knew the monster they sheltered, believing they shared a kindred bond of faith and duty.

A little orange tabby cat, which had been curled on top of the monk’s sandaled feet, arched its back and hissed at Alessandra. She almost lashed out at the cat, but curbed the impulse, horrified at her automatic response.

Brother Tomasi struggled to sit up in his bed when Alessandra returned to the ward. He was unable to because of the ropes restricting his movement. Frustrated in his attempt, he settled for crossing himself and whispering prayers.

Alessandra left him to it and moved through the ward until she found the old man’s cot. In the time since she’d last visited, the monks had sewn the *gadjé* into his winding sheet and prepared him for burial. The bowl of blood from his last bleeding was gone now. Alas, his living blood had been so potent!

By the Three Sisters! Would anything work in her favor this night? And to make it all the more difficult for her, more of the friars were posted at stations every few beds making it impossible for her to select a patient losing his grasp on mortality and take what she needed. If she could not have blood fresh, she would drink from the bleeding bowls. She passed from one cot to the next, looking for the source of power she needed to fight the cardinal.

She found what she sought at the end of the long ward room. The patient was a

lad of about eight with a heavily bandaged left leg and bruises covering those portions of his body not hidden by the bed linens. Finger-shaped bruises wrapped around his thin arms. Clearly, whoever had charge of him did not spare the rod. So offended by his wounds, Alessandra hovered at his bedside, working a spell of protection for him.

The casting was exhausting work. She only realized exactly how draining it was as she drew the last glyph on the boy's chest with her finger. It would be a fair exchange, she thought.

She drank from the bowl greedily, trying to quench her unnatural thirst. Alessandra wiped her mouth with the back of her hand—visible and corporeal to only herself. The blood, she realized, must have cooled when free of the boy's body. She was filled completely, as though she just returned after a feast, but, without the warmth and power of fresher blood, she realized, it was as if she had dined exclusively upon the *dolce*.

Alessandra scanned the large room again. It was an effort in futility. What if she could find someone suitable and willing? Any vessel—including her illusory stomach—could only hold so much. The result of her latest search for sustenance weighed heavily and served only to dampen the fires within.

She chose to leave by the door that was next to Brother Tomasi. The friar in charge of the six beds which included the cardinal's erstwhile assistant had drifted off while reading his book of prayers. Tomasi, himself, seemed focused upon prayers. As she came closer, she recognized—thanks to her father who had insisted that she learn something of his faith—the prayer as the sacrament of Last Rites.

Curiosity compelled her to stop and watch him, feeling guilty for having totally destroyed the man's mind . . . but the cardinal must share in the fault as well, for he should have realized that Tomasi had neither the stomach nor the constitution for dabbling in the magical arts.

Tomasi completed his prayers for Last Rites and immediately began again. Looking over his shoulder, she discovered he cradled two poppets the size of his hands made of white Gypsy Silk, one poppet male, the other female. Again and again, Tomasi said Last Rites over the male poppet, the unction points smudged by the oils and dirt of his fingertips. Once in every five times, however, he gently laid the *tesoro* aside and cradled the female poppet in his badly burned hands to perform Last Rites for her.

“Brother, what are you doing?” Alessandra asked, moving closer. Were she human, she would be forced to sit beside him awkwardly on the narrow cot rather than stand within it, almost nestled.

Tomasi rolled his eyes to the side and then lifted his head to peer around at his keepers. “What do you mean to do to me now?” he whispered. He sounded for all the world like the whining hound some brute was about to torment with unrestrained blows and kicks.

Perhaps it was the puppish sound, but all animosity toward Brother Tomasi fled

her heart. There could be no forgiving the man for what he had done. Had he the spine or the moral conviction he had protested to acquire his robes, he would have been able to resist. No, he was probably nothing more than the youngest son of some petty lord who followed the tradition of raising one son destined for the Church. It was not so commonly done here in Tyrrhia, but she knew that some families still followed the old traditions. So, here she faced the hapless man who had the misfortune of falling into the manipulative hands of a diabolical master.

Probably his madness and the experiences with the dark arts practiced by his master, delle Torre, allowed him to see her. The others, the brothers who were now his keepers, did not understand. Tomasi was maddened, but any truth he spoke would be dismissed for figments and so Alessandra knew he faced a lifetime of frustration, of punishment for not reporting the evil deeds of the cardinal. She thought of the ward where the Hospitallers kept those poor victims with mental afflictions. Once, Alessandra would have been happy to know that Tomasi would join the raging, chain-bound, slaving madmen, but now she felt sympathy for his condition.

She sighed, realizing that Tomasi continued to stare at her, as though at the air from his caretakers viewpoint, waiting for an answer. "I mean you no harm, Tomasi. His Eminence has done more than enough to the two of us."

Tomasi chewed his ravaged lip, on the side opposite the deepest burns. "We are the same? Is that what you mean? Kindred?"

Alessandra sat back, startled by the assumption of such close relationship. He was *gadje*, not of her kind. The longing in his eyes, however, stayed her from voicing her revulsion. She knew as surely as if she were reading the cards that he sought a connection, a sense of belonging, something to diminish the horrible sense of loneliness. She knew that loneliness and could not reconcile herself to condemning another to it.

"Brother Tomasi? Did you need something?" The brown-robed cleric left his chair in the center row, drawing the attention of his fellows who looked up from their work or study.

Tomasi withdrew into himself, clutching his poppets as he hid them beneath the blankets covering him.

Alessandra placed a hand upon his shoulder, willing the sludgy, cooling fires of her power to grant firmness to her touch. Leaning close to the scorched cleric, she whispered, "You must remember, Tomasi. No one else can see or hear me. Take care in what you say."

Tomasi nodded, tearing his attention from her to the surgeon who now stood on the other side of his cot. "Brother Tomasi? Do you hear me?"

"Y-yes," he replied. "It is the pain ... I say prayers and talk to myself ... it gives me some comfort."

Alessandra squeezed his shoulder gently.

“Shall I bring another draught for you, then?”

Tomasi nodded and sighed when the attendant left in search of the medication discussed.

“Soon you will rest, Tomasi,” Alessandra murmured. “No, do not look in my direction. They will notice!” She gently pressed his cheek away. “You do not want them to think you mad.”

“They already do,” Tomasi whispered, his eyes closed. “His Eminence has told them that I was maddened by the fire and that I have been cursed by a Gypsy witch.”

“I did not curse you,” Alessandra said. She paid attention to the friar preparing Tomasi’s draught at the other end of the room.

“No, no, not you, my lady,” Tomasi said, shaking his head slightly where it rested on the pillow. “ ’Twas the other one.”

XXI

“An ape’s an ape, a varlet’s a varlet, though they be clad in silk or scarlet.”

—Second Century Greek Proverb

75 d’Septembre, 1684

Mandero touched the poppet inside his coat. Despite the heat which followed them well into fall, he made a point of wearing his blue wool sopra-bito. It hid the ills of a bloodied blouson and distracted the eye from his frayed baldric that none of Grasni’s tricks had been able to remove or hide particularly well. More importantly though, it gave him ease to carry the *tesoro* without it being in the open for all to see.

So far he had managed to be discreet with the poppet. If the men saw it, for surely they must have, they did not speak of it and he was not eager to engage in a discussion if it was not necessary.

He shifted in his saddle and looked back at his followers, a combination of an Escalade unit and two Romani—complete with *vardo*. They formed an odd *kumpania* and, despite his deep concerns when they first joined ranks, the company served one another well. Still, there remained the taint of prejudice, a reserve that had yet to be broached.

“Maggiore?”

Mandero turned to della Guelfa who had ridden up beside him. “Yes?”

“You will forgive me, I hope, but where does our road lie? I know we seek the cardinal; from that path I am confident you have not wavered, but . . .”

“You read the reports from the White Queen’s spies, did you not?” Mandero asked.

“Of course. You instructed that I acquaint myself with the information in it, but nowhere in those papers are we given any real indication of where the cardinal is *now*. We know only that he is on the move and that he has not left Tyrrhia proper and, of course, that he has your—your lady’s remains with him,” Marco replied.

“My lady,” Mandero nodded thoughtfully. “Just so, but why hasn’t he left Tyrrhia, do you think?”

The first lieutenant squinted at the road ahead as he concentrated. “I don’t know. There was no explanation within the documents and, for all we know, he may have left by now.”

Mandero paused to give that some consideration. After a time, he shook his head. He had a feeling, strong in his gut, that the cardinal remained in Tyr-rhia’s heartland, that he had not even gone so far as mainland Tyrrhia. “But what more could you gather from what was not there?” Mandero asked. “For instance, why has the cardinal not sought shelter with the Holy Father in Rome? Surely, the Pope would share his sentiment of wanting to claim Tyrrhia as a Catholic state?”

“Yes, but the cardinal also caused a battle of intrigue within the White King’s court. No one in Tyrrhia has been swayed toward his cause so far,” della Guelfa said.

“Really? What of the witch-hunters? What of those within the ranks of the Escalade who have been uncovered?” Mandero replied. “He’ll not want to be too far from the heartland. He has men and women who have answered his treasonous call and he can’t be seen by them to have abandoned them out of fear for his own well-being.”

“To my thinking, Maggiore, I can’t think that the Pope is ready to support the cardinal’s drastic measures either. The Church lost England, France is embroiled in holy wars over the Edict of Nantes, and Italy itself is rife with unsupported Inquisitions, heresies abound—”

“As you say, the cardinal has enough for him to consider here,” Mandero said with a firm nod to his second-in-command. “The witch-hunters here in Tyr-rhia, even in the heartland, have taken it upon themselves to judge and execute without the papal blessing. Take that and the fact that the White King and White Queen are nominally Catholic, and the Pope will have no great wish to start a fight with Tyrrhia, not with all else that goes on on the continent.”

Delia Guelfa nodded, glancing over his shoulder. “But that only hazards at *where* the cardinal might *not* be.”

“There are the bishops in the heartland. If anyone would have word—”

“But would they tell?” della Guelfa asked.

“We don’t know that they won’t, only that they have been placed in unenviable positions,” Mandero said.

“Girgenti! Girgenti!” Brambilla called as he dashed down the road, racing past them into the midst of the *kumpania*, whirled his gelding, and trotted back. “Just over yonder hill, Maggiore! We could be in the garrison there easily before supper is served!”

“Notify the post commandant of our imminent arrival. I will require some of his time this evening,” Mandero ordered.

Brambilla saluted, standing in his stirrups—partly out of respect, but more due to his infectious excitement. His sleek black gelding chafed at the bit, dancing and straining at his tight reining.

Joro jumped forward as Brambilla set heel to his horse as though the stallion would race the gelding to the garrison. Mandero pulled him back, turning him in tight circles and then trotting back to the *vardo*. Mandero touched the brim of his hat to Grasni in a casual salute. “We spend the night in the garrison just outside of Girgenti. No cooking for you and a bed to rest on,” Mandero said.

The two Romani exchanged glances. “Perhaps,” said Petrus, “it might be wiser if we were to stay just beyond city limits? To camp beyond the gates of the garrison?” Though he phrased his concerns in questions, it was clear that he was anxious.

“Do you wish to avoid the garrison or some anticipated slight by the commander?” Mandero asked.

“And if I were to say yes?”

Mandero shook his head. “Say yes to which, *Meero-kak*?”

The elder stiffened in his saddle. “To both, Mag-giore. I do not anticipate an enthusiastic response from the garrison commander.”

“We are all the queen’s men, *Meero-kak*, and follow the laws of the White King,” Mandero said, keeping the insult he felt from his voice as he focused upon being conciliatory.

“It is true that I have no experience with the Com-andante here, but my experiences don’t encourage me to expect such familiarity,” Petrus said.

Mandero nodded. He could not argue with the chieftain’s experiences. “You will be my guests, then.”

Grasni looked doubtfully at the *Kris* elder. “We follow you, Maggiore.”

“Good. Good,” Mandero said, seeing Petrus’ reluctant acceptance. He wheeled Joro and slapped the rump of the skewbald mare closest to him.

The comandante and a squad of his men met Mandero on the road a mile or two from the fort. Brambilla, who had ridden out with them, left the officer’s group and rejoined his own men.

Mandero drew up Joro and saluted the colonello who scrutinized Mandero's group. The senior officer's brows rose as he took in the *vardo* and outrider. He returned his gaze to Mandero and returned the salute as he moved his horse forward.

"I am Colonello Cesare Russo, Comandante del Fort Girgenti. How may we assist you and your . . . people, Maggiore?"

"As my man will have told you, we seek a night's rest and an opportunity to resupply ourselves," Mandero replied, sitting stiffly in his saddle. He watched the comandante's dark eyes flick over him and his men and linger once more upon the *vardo*. Mandero turned in his saddle, looking openly at Grasni and Petrus. "The Romani are Signore Petrus Lendaro and Signo-rina Grasni Nevi. They travel with us under my protection and have made themselves available to assist me in completing my orders from the White Queen."

"Come, let us get ourselves off the road and make the lot of you more comfortable," Colonello Russo said broadly. As he turned his horse to ride at Mandero's side. "These must be most curious orders indeed, Maggiore. Do you bring papers with you?"

Mandero nodded, tapping the pocket of his sopra-bità. "I am hoping, Sir, that there may be amenities wherein I may purchase additional clothing?"

"Ah!" the colonello smiled tightly, his gaze ranging over Mandero from head to toe once more. "I had hoped that this was not the standard example you set your men."

* * *

Colonello Russo motioned to an empty chair at the table. Mandero nodded to the other man, already seated, who made the gesture of half rising from his chair. Like Mandero, he wore the insignia of *pheons or saltirewise*—two golden arrows crossed—on the shoulder of his blue baldric indicating his rank.

"Come in! Please! Sit!" the colonello said expansively. "This is Maggiore Oliverio. Your friends? They did not mind dining without you?"

"I presume the food you serve here, in the cantina, or their rooms is just as fitting," Mandero said with a forced smile. He bowed and took the seat indicated, pretending not to notice how carefully Maggiore Oliverio studied him. He wore a new soprabita and baldric, but had had little time to wash the remnants of the road from his face and hands before being "invited" to dinner with the colonello. He had expected either a private audience or a company of officers so he was disconcerted by the limited guest list. There were, after all, but three chairs at the table and three places set.

"Wine?" Oliverio asked, unstoppering the bottle with a distinct pop of broken suction. He held the flagon hovering at the edge of his glass as he waited for Mandero's response.

Mandero noted that both the colonello and the maggiore were already drinking. He nodded curtly and held up a hand quickly before the cup was half full.

“Do you prefer something else, Maggiore di Montago?”

Mandero shook his head, taking a sip. He smiled in appreciation. “A fine wine,” he remarked.

“From my family’s vineyards not far out of town,” Russo said with a cordial smile of his own as he sat by the last place setting. “Perhaps I should take you . . . and your people, of course, on a tour? A sample of the grape, so to speak. My wife would be delighted to have her fortunes told by your young Gypsy girl. She does tell fortunes, yes?”

Mandero stiffened and tore a chunk of bread from the loaf on the table. “I do not know. I presume she does.”

“Colonello, I think you may have offended the maggiore,” Oliverio observed. “You don’t favor the girl, do you?”

“Hardly,” Mandero replied. “She was my lady’s maid.”

“But your lady is dead and it has been months already. Certainly your grief permits its diversions?” Oliverio asked, raising his brows suggestively. “She’s a pretty thing and most likely a wild one between a man’s sheets.”

Mandero stood. “Signorina Nevi is a woman of good family and high virtue, Signore, and under *my* protection.”

“She is Gypsy . . . Romani, if you prefer—”

“The Duchessa di Drago, sister-in-law to the queen, is an *Araunya* and full Romani. Would you speak so rashly before His Grace, Duca di Drago, Colonello in Her Majesty’s Escalade?”

“You are quite correct, Maggiore di Montago. Maggiore Oliverio, I am disappointed in the intemperate-ness of your suggestions,” Russo said.

Oliverio rose and bowed to Mandero. “Please forgive me. I spoke only in jest . . . and the traveling circumstances . . . she is unaccompanied by another woman and she is alone with so many men—”

“And now you challenge the ethics of my men,” Mandero said icily. “The elder Rom is her protector.” He looked at Colonello Russo. “I train my subordinates to behave as gentlemen no matter what class their family comes from.”

Colonello Russo sighed. “Again, Oliverio, you embarrass me with your crassness—”

Oliverio rose again, bowing to the colonello. “You are right, *Signore*. I ask your forgiveness and to you as well, Maggiore di Montago. I have made lewd and inappropriate suggestions.”

“You are excused, Maggiore Oliverio,” the colonello said, nodding to the door.

Oliverio bowed to the colonello and to Mandero and took his leave.

“Again, I offer my apologies,” Russo said, motioning for Mandero to take his seat again. “Oliverio is new to my command. I had thought him to be— how should

I say?—rough. His suggestions, however, were inexcusable and I promise to address this matter at once.”

Mandero sat, more because the colonello was a senior officer than from any particular interest in sharing a meal. Between them, they shared a chicken, fish, risotto, mushrooms, cheeses, and coarse bread, dining in relative silence. A caporale responded to the colonello's bellpull. He took away their plates, leaving the platter of bread and cheese, and delivered a bowl of fresh fruit. As their table was attended to, the colonello pulled a pipe and pouch of tobacco out of the inner breast pocket of his uniform *soprabita* and smoothed his lapels back into place. He offered the tobacco pouch to Mandero, then, when he was refused, set about packing the bowl of his pipe and lighting it with the stub of one of the candles on the table.

“So, Maggiore di Montago, you will see Bishop Milano tomorrow? What do you expect that he will tell you?”

Mandero rolled a red grape between his fingers thoughtfully before popping it into his mouth and plucking another from the bowl. “I do not know, Signore, which, of course, is why I must ask.”

“But what will you ask?” Russo pressed.

The silence that fell was awkward. The colonello had overreached. The White Queen's directive which he had received in the Letter of Introduction, was that Maggiore di Montago, Mandero, would have free license and that his mission was one where secrecy and discretion played a major part.

Mandero recalled his conversation with della Guelfa just a couple of weeks before. There were traitors to the White Throne, even in the Escalade, and, alas, they would be of all ranks—

“*Excusi*, Maggiore di Montago. I had not intended to be so . . .” the colonello paused, looking pained. “There is a matter which has been a concern here in Girgenti and the province. I meant only to explore if, when speaking to Bishop Milano, you might press a point for me.”

“For you?” Mandero did not bother to hide his surprise. “Surely, as comandante of the local *vigilare*, you have a far better expectation of a happy compromise?”

“Perhaps it is that we are so tightly bound, each of us serving the same community in our different ways, that we have not reached a conclusion that both of us find acceptable,” Colonello Russo said. Teeth gripping the stem of his pipe, he puffed deeply of the vaguely intoxicating tobacco. He shrugged out of his uniform coat and eased it onto the back of his chair, pausing briefly to return the smoking pouch to the breast pocket of his *soprabita*. “It is an uneasy matter, as well, you see, because it deals with a renegade priest who has thrown himself upon the mercy of the Church.”

“If he is renegade, as you say,” Mandero said, “why not leave it to the Church to address?”

“Ah,” the colonello murmured, “this is the argument made by the bishop, but

being of a Dominican order, I find him amazingly lax in his concern over the troubles this Padre Gabera has caused.”

“You will forgive me, I hope, Colonello Russo, but I greatly doubt that this . . . this renegade priest of yours will be among the subjects I must speak to the bishop about,” Mandero said.

“I could but hope. You, in kind, will forgive me my lapses this evening? I should not have pried into your affairs much less allowed another officer to make such offensive remarks. Believe me, I thought that another officer, one new to my command, might make this a little more social an affair, to put you at your ease, so to speak.”

Mandero rose. “I appreciate your pains on my behalf and on that of my men and company.”

Leaving the Comandante’s sala filled Mandero with relief. If it were an acceptable excuse for his behavior, no doubt the colonello allowed his duties to keep him away from the gentling affects of Signora Russo. Due to his lapses and lack of care in how he spoke, Mandero had no trouble imagining it had been several years since he had enjoyed the opportunities of court.

* * *

Mandero absorbed himself in the commonplace task of polishing his boots, a chore which had occupied many an evening over the years. It was a comforting duty because it allowed him freedom to think while he worked. There was much to think about after the dinner which now roiled in his gut.

He could not help but feel wary that the senior officer had pressed the point to uncover his mission, no matter how he excused himself afterward. Then there was the matter of Oliverio whose rudeness surpassed any explanation that either man made and he could not help but feel that it had been deliberate, that the maggiore had served as the colonello’s hound, scaring up the quarry for easier pickings.

However, Colonello Russo *had* been the model of an officer and gentleman of the Escalade so far as his obligations to the rest of Mandero’s *kumpania*, providing one and all with a filling dinner and accommodations appropriate to their rank and sex. Even so, Mandero requested that della Guelfa exchange chambers with Grasni so that her room was now between Lendaro and the lieutenant. There would be no “accidental” encounters that could not be undone.

In other areas, the colonello showed his generosity, having his quartermaster sell Mandero three chemises, two soprabitas and a new baldric from the fort’s stores. At last and at least, Mandero was finally able to replace the set of coat and baldric left punctured and bloodstained after his battle with the witch-hunters, not to mention the ruined chemise.

In addition to the most unsatisfactory table conversation, Mandero realized that far from the colonello accepting the queen’s general orders which gave Mandero his right of passage and authority to commandeer troops, the fort comandante had forestalled any questioning about witch-hunter activity in the district. He had, at least,

promised a personal Letter of Recommendation to the Bishop of Girgenti, one Excellent and Reverend Father, Lord Milano.

Mandero sighed, reflecting over the events of the evening. He eyed the *tesoro* laid out on the bed. Perhaps a second coat was an extravagance, but it was one he could afford having little enough to spend his wages upon these days. Were Alessa alive, he would have bought only a single soprabita and shirt, preferring, instead, to buy ribbons to adorn his fair lady's hair, or a costly little brooch, that fit just so along her bodice edge, which set off her laughing eyes.

Eventually, it seemed everything would remind Mandero of Alessandra. It made sense. Her life had given *his* meaning.

So tonight he prepared for his attendance upon the bishop, cleaning himself up, polishing his boots, and spending extra money upon wardrobe—coats, baldrics, and even Gypsy Silk blousons. Alessa would have teased him, of course. Mandero sighed, his heart aching. He looked to where the poppet lay, as though waiting for his attention. It was almost as if he could read an expression on the smooth, featureless folds. How he ached that it was not Alessandra waiting for him instead of a doll made from her shroud.

XXII

“ ‘Tis my vocation, Hal; 'Tis no sin for a man to labor in his vocation.”

—William Shakespeare

16 d'Septembre, 1684

Mandero nodded to Deگو Giordano as his second lieutenant pulled wide the chapel door. The lieutenant was dressed smartly this morning and only the most discerning eye would note the residue of boot polish imprinted upon the fingers of both men's hands. Like Mandero's new soprabita, Deگو's coat was also bright blue now that it no longer bore a coating of dust from the road.

They waited briefly in the narthex for a priest or some other functionary to greet them and, when none came, passed from the entry hall into the nave itself. With the high arching ceilings, their footsteps echoed on the heavily polished and well-worn gray marble floor. The relative silence within the church only served to amplify the sound of their entrance—their firm booted step, the faint kaching of their spurs.

Mandero paused, acknowledging those going about their silent Wednesday worship with a nod. Aware of the eyes of several old grandmothers watching him

through the folds of the lace mantillas that covered their hair, he bowed to the crucifix, the accepted nominal acknowledgment of a nonbeliever in another's house of worship.

With equal clarity of sound, a scraping latch, the slight banging of the cupboard-thin door of the confessional heralded the appearance of a middle-aged priest from one of the booths. He came swiftly to them. His footsteps created only the faintest whisper of soft-soled shoes and the flap and snap of fabric from his vestments caused by his sharp, curt movements.

"Gentlemen of the Escalade," the priest's face looked pinched with irritation. "As we told your brethren yesterday, we have given sanctuary to Gab-era—"

Mandero remembered the padre's name from his dinner with the colonello the night before. It seemed that the senior officer had omitted to express the urgency of his appeals to the Church for the custody of this so-called "renegade priest." Curiosity and speculation at once warred with his own obligations and the original reason for his visit. To forestall further well-rehearsed protests, Mandero held up his hand. "Ex-cusi, Father, but you misunderstand the reason for our visit—"

"He will not be forced to speak with you either," the priest insisted.

Ever more curious about the man availing himself of Sanctuary in the largest of the Catholic cathedrals in Girgenti and being pursued often, perhaps daily, by the local authorities even while in the religious stronghold, Mandero could not help but wonder what the priest had done. Was he a witch-hunter? If this was so, then, at the very least, he must write to the queen for guidance. But if he wasn't? That brought a whole new meaning to every encounter he had had since arriving in Girgenti. In the meantime, however, he concentrated on the matter at hand, all trails that lead to the Cardinal of Tyrrhia and Citteauroea and, thereby, to his captive, Lady Alessandra Davizzi y Patrini. This, too, was as the queen commanded. "Again, Father, I must interrupt. We do not seek this man who has claimed your protection."

"Really?" The priest's graying eyebrow arched, clearly disbelieving. "Then what, Signore, brings you to our humble parish?"

Again, Mandero drew a deep breath and focused upon the issue which brought him here, knowing that a loss of temper at the priest's single-mindedness only served to put them at odds. "The Church is available to all, is it not? Even we 'gentlemen of the Escalade'?" Mandero asked.

The priest looked openly disbelieving. "You have come to pray? To light votives for someone's soul?"

By the way he offered candles in prayer for someone's soul and, of course, his thick Roman accent, Mandero surmised that one of the wrinkles in this priest's cap was that Tyrrhian law forbade the Church's practices of selling indulgences. Supposedly, the funds helped the good work of the Church and was an act of contrition, but being able to buy indulgences prior to the bad act or—worse still—facing the necessity of buying a dead infant's way into heaven offended Mandero, but more importantly, it offended the White King and Queen and so was

forbidden in Tyrrhia.

Determined not to be distracted by this or the fact that he had never been greeted so brusquely by a member of the Catholic clergy, Mandero took a deep breath and began again. “Actually, Father, we have come to call upon His Excellency, the Most Illustrious and Most Reverend Lord Milano in the name of Her Most Royal Majesty, Queen Idala di Luna e Novabi-anco, Queen of Tyrrhia and Gerusalemme, Duchessa di Citteureoa.” As he completed the last of the White Queen’s titles, he snapped his shiny boots together at the heels and performed his most extravagant, formal bow, his plumed hat sweeping the floor. Beside him, Second Lieutenant Dego Giordano made an equally elaborate bow, mimicking his movements in absolute, military precision. From the breast pocket of his royal blue soprabita, Mandero withdrew his Letter of Introduction exposing the royal seal. He hesitated in handing it to the priest. Nothing more than a bit of stage work, holding it just long enough that it was obvious that he was not sure he could entrust the letter into the hands of the priest.

The cleric blushed deeply as he accepted the papers. He motioned toward the inner sanctum of the church before he actually managed to speak again. “I hope that you will forgive the ... uh ... misunderstanding. We have had something of a quarrel with your local counterparts about Padre Gabera’s future.”

“Oh?” Mandero murmured, not bothering to hide his curiosity.

“Um, well, yes,” the cleric said, hurrying just ahead of Mandero and Giordano through the transept and into the cloistered halls of the bishopric palazzo.

The palatial residence of the Bishop of Girgenti easily rivaled the riches of the royal palazzo in Citteaur-oea. The lavishness gave Mandero a surprising insight about the cardinal. Here lived a mere lord of the Church, and most certainly a bishop was below the station of a true prince of the Church, a cardinal. Yet this man—and most certainly his entourage and the various priests of his order—dwelt amid wealth equal to that of the King and Queen of Tyrrhia. Yes, extravagances such as these might give a man ideas of his place in the world, even sufficient to distract him from the matters of spirit and soul which were his chosen avocation. How the cardinal must have disdained his life amid the limited luxuries to be found in the palazzo of the White King and Queen—and not all of those had even been available to him.

Mandero did not allow his attention to remain on any one detail or to be distracted from the exact location of his Letter of Introduction in the priest’s hand as he and Giordano followed in the wake of their guide. Giordano, Mandero noted, took in every element of their surroundings and of the men and women they swept past as they were led deeper and deeper into the palazzo. As they climbed yet another staircase, Mandero began to suspect the priest meant to have them thrown from a window over the servants’ passage on the farthest side of the building.

Rounding one last corner and mounting one final set of shallow steps, the priest came to a breathless halt in front of the desk of a portly cleric with ink-stained hands and a brooding countenance.

“Padre Pacelli, these men seek a hearing with His Excellency. They are with the

Queen's Escalade," their reluctant host said breathlessly.

"Yes, so I see," Pacelli said, his dour expression changed only marginally to exasperation when his brother of the cloth did not react to his sarcasm. "The bishop sees no one on the feast day of Saint Ni-comedes. My apologies if Padre Roberti misled you into believing that an audience was possible."

"Perhaps he will change his mind when he learns that we come directly *from* the White Queen," Mandero suggested, staring pointedly at his Letter of Introduction.

Padre Pacelli leaned across his desk, snapping his fingers as though hoping the fillip would gather Roberti's wits. In the end, he snatched the paper, already creased and sweaty, from the other priest's hands.

Pacelli studied the carefully broken seal before unfolding the thick vellum and perusing the contents. His nose twitched as though he might sneeze. He rubbed it with a pudgy, inked finger and then swept his hand up, over his sweaty forehead and natural tonsure to rest, finally, on the back of his neck. He lay the paper down on his desk, staring at it as though it might bite. "You realize that this is highly irregular?"

"So we have been told," Mandero replied quietly.

Pacelli sat in his chair again, resting his head in his hands. He finally looked up and seemed surprised to see Roberti still standing beside Mandero and Giordano. "Are the duties of the confessional no longer worthy of your attention, Padre?"

"Yes . . . Yes, of course, but I thought that perhaps ..." Roberti flushed. "I will show the vigilare to the street."

"No. They will stay, for now," Pacelli said. "I will attend to them as His Excellency prefers."

Roberti nodded nervously and half-turned, looking from Mandero to Pacelli to a closed door beyond the guard post of the bishop's assistant's desk. "I will return to the chapel, then."

Pacelli waved him away without looking at him, focusing his attention upon the two officers. He smoothed his Dominican black frock and crossed his hands almost as though in prayer. "I must commend the colonello. He is both persistent and incredibly well connected, more so than we gave him credit for, for him not only to have already received an answer from Her Majesty, but to also have dispatched two envoys from the White Queen herself . . ."

"You are speaking of the gentleman who has availed himself of Sanctuary within the walls of this church . . . Padre Gabera, I believe was the name the good Padre Roberti gave him?"

"Yes, Padre Gabera," Pacelli nodded.

Mandero glanced toward Deigo. The matter of this Gabera was growing more interesting by the moment. Mandero could not help but make the connection to the bishop's order—the Dominicans who specialized in rooting out and destroying heresies—and the witch-hunters the queen had assigned him to root out.

Sighing, Mandero folded his hands behind his back and rocked on his heels. “Her Majesty is quite interested in Gabera, to be sure, but that is not the only reason we are seeking an audience.”

“Might I inquire what—”

“No. You may not,” Mandero replied curtly. “My business is with the bishop and I will see no other.”

The dark wood doors swung open to reveal a small man of dark complexion. His face was creased around the eyes and mouth, indicating a man familiar with laughter and a deep sense of peace. Mandero could not be sure if it was the haunted look in his eyes, the turn of his lips, or in the tone of his voice, but it was clear that this man’s confidence and inner peace had been badly shaken of late.

“Pacelli, you have been most efficient. I will see the officers.”

“As you say, Your Excellency,” Pacelli murmured without the slightest hesitation.

* * *

She stirred, feeling sluggish and cold. Though she no longer possessed any limbs, they ached as if she had been trampled by teams of horses and left to die. Alessandra’s laughter came out like a raspy cough. For a dead woman, she felt like hell and she had a growing familiarity with that Christian netherworld. From all she had ever heard of it, she knew she must, most certainly, be on one of its echelons.

She tried to sit up, to move in some fashion, no matter how small, but succeeded only in rolling her head on her spindlelike neck to rest with her chin on the left shoulder. Lethargy leached her will to move more. Craning her neck she saw ribbons tying her wrists. She hissed in anger. So the cardinal had finally done it! Her soul had been forcibly reunited with her decaying body.

Alessandra groaned, struggling for memory. She and the cardinal had fought and oh, how the battle had cost him! But then, she realized, it had cost her more, for here she was, anchored to her body, and trussed up like a pig ready for the spit. She began to weep—out of frustration? Or anger? No, self-pity.

She sniffled like a pathetic, snot-nosed child. Of course, she had lost the battle with the cardinal! She would have lost a battle with a babe in arms! Hmph! It was worse than that! She *had* lost a battle to a babe not yet born!

Anger pulsed through Alessandra like a living thing. It consumed every conscious thought, beginning with her self-loathing. Not even moments passed and the anger inside her erupted further. Her emotion was larger than herself, larger than the pitiable body which once housed her and her soul.

Alessandra reawoke from her anger to the awareness of pain. Pain in her limbs, at her throat. She twisted inside the wretched body. Her body’s wrists were swollen to the point of ballooning on each side of whatever bound her, covering it with her mortal flesh. She struggled. What had the cardinal done?

Come! Alessandra swore at herself. What had the *benglo* priest done to her now?

He was not inventive enough to have tried something new, she decided, especially when something else had not gotten its fan-try. Alessandra seized control of her anger and her body, just as though it had been the dove she'd been trapped in once before. She smelled dried blood now and recognized that much of it was her own . . . but not all. Alessandra forced her swelling anger into her body, back into the bag of bones, as though it might give her animus. She knew it would not, but smiled all the more.

Pain gripped like vises at her limbs. The pain slowly, gradually, thoroughly overwhelmed the anger until, at last, she reclined inside of her body, feeling the shell begin to slowly lapse back into its natural form.

As her flesh began to retake its shape, Alessandra once more felt her body, concentrating on the extremities. She was able to tip her head. She felt something cold and stonelike at her throat. As she moved now, the thing at her throat, stressed by her anger and agitation, shattered at her persistent stretch. She could not see what had held her neck, but guessed it had been tied by a set of ribbons—one each in red, white, and black—and the stone had been the magical ebulla with which the cardinal had endeavored to bind her once before.

Alessandra laughed, this time deeply and with rebellious pleasure. The cardinal could not hold her! Not if she wished otherwise.

She rolled her ephemeral shoulders and stretched, feeling the dry skin of the useless body the cardinal had hoped to make her cage. As she shifted and explored what damage her anger had wrought, she discovered that the skin felt strange upon her, as though it did not fit.

The raggedy body hung onto her at wrists, ankles, and waist, but there was space now so that the leaden shape of the cardinal's seal, his ebulla, no longer constricted or weighed too heavily upon her. It took but a moment of concentration and some small rekindling of her anger to release the fetters of her soul to her body.

At last, free of the tethers, Alessandra, *Araunya* of the Romani, rolled away from the corpse which tainted her soul and thereby limited her powers. She stood beside the corpse now, looking at it with repugnance. She shook loose her hair, combing it with her fingers as she turned to see what earthly confines had been meant to hide her while the cardinal was away.

Why, she wondered, was it, that he had gone away? She knew she should remember. She smiled and laughed beneath her breath. Surely she must remember, she had absolute confidence in being the cause of it!

She sighed, ignoring for just a moment her triumph, as she concentrated upon this latest site of interment. Dark gray stone surrounded her, above her head and beneath her feet. The chamber itself was rounded, as though a gigantic ball had been carved from the stone for the enjoyment of some giant's child. All around her, the carved stone was smooth, except for two points. One point was the section of floor that rose up toward the very center of the circular tomb and upon that flat altar lay the body she had just rejected and ejected herself from despite the best efforts of her

nemesis.

The second break in the absolute smoothness of the cavern was also circular in shape, a round stone rolled to cover the only exit. On the tomb's stone, a mason had once carved prayers for the dead in Latin. Above, below, and on either side of each of the three prayers, crosses embellished with gilt and semiprecious stones indicated the holy intent of this chamber.

Alessandra studied it more carefully, discerning something probably unbeknownst to the priest who said the prayers over this place and possibly even to the craftsman who set them into place. The rubies adorning the crucifixes as the blood of the Christ figure were set into place in such a way as to create a repelling ward to keep whatever lay in this chamber exactly where it was.

Disgusted, Alessandra turned to study the corpse which had once been herself. An errant thought gave her pause. She had spent a wedding night with Man-dero. While she had mightily enjoyed the pleasures of the flesh, her body had been in the custody of two supposedly celibate priests. Was her body as pure, at least sexually, as it had been the night she had died?

Studying her corpse, she realized for the first time since this awakening that it was covered by more than a tarp. Someone had taken the time to dress her in a simple white chemise with dainty blue ribbons at the wrist and neckline. Further efforts had been made to pick out the bits of herb and other effluvia from her hair and to bundle the long, curling dark mass into something resembling decorum. This definitely showed a woman's touch. *Only* a woman would be so particular about her hair and general appearance.

Her face was covered by a white mantilla. In actuality, the lace covered her body from up under the top of her head, across her face, neck, and chest to her folded hands. She looked like a bride fallen asleep on her wedding night while awaiting the attention of her husband. Alessandra laughed. As if she had ever been so demure!

But thought of her wedding night made her ache and her loins tightened with urgent need. She shook off the lingering distraction. Until she sorted things out, she was not going to be able to cross the barriers of stone and Christian prayer. Only *after* she had done that could she seek out her beloved Mandero and urge him to fill the aching void that was her need and, by the Blessed Sisters, his as well!

Alessandra studied the pretty picture they had made of her corpse. Drying out as it was now, the muddling soup which her skin and organs had begun to resemble had halted and by the magic of their arts, the monks or sisters or whomever they were had halted the decay. She shivered and gulped back the retching sensation. These people had the nerve to call the Ro-mani's art of magic and divination "dark" and yet look at the study they had made with the corpses. There had been chambers like this in the other hiding places the cardinal had used. In one of the necropoli, Andrea the bricklayer had shown her how the monks had laid out his body and preserved it.

All she knew of what was right and wrong, of good and evil told her that these

meddlers in death's duty were evil, complicit in undermining the natural work of the *Fata*, having no appreciation for what it was that they did.

She studied her body. The skin of her hands and feet were no longer a leprous gray-green, but brown once more, darkened as though kissed by the sun. That, at least, she knew to be false. No one would have exposed her body to the sun, not with the cardinal taking such pains to keep it hidden. So these changes, whatever they were, took place in this underground chamber after arcane treatments and deliberate time in this temporary, airless tomb. She had to believe that it was only temporary, that she would not be accursed to reside forever in this hellish land of the unclean, this land of *marimé*.

Once her pride, her hands had grown leathery and, Alessandra noted for the first time, withered. The skin grew taut over delicate bones. The once manicured and daintily stained nails had grown to talons. Alessandra smiled as her gaze rested upon her hands. She remembered now what she had done to so anger and delay the cardinal. The palms of her mortal hands remained stained from her last episode of freedom, when she had marked his unholy book and destroyed his *nanta* bag.

Yes, she thought happily, the damage had been substantial, but what was it that the cardinal said he would have to do? How long did that give her? And there was the further puzzle of finding her way out of this mummifying chamber.

XXIII

*“Though we have heard of stupid haste in war,
cleverness has never been seen associated with long delays.”*

—Sun Tzu

Marco della Guelfa scratched at his shoulder where he usually wore his baldric and the insignia of his rank. He so rarely went without it that he felt practically undressed now. Instead of the blue vigilare soprabita, he reluctantly wore an old-fashioned jerkin that had definitely seen better days. In his youth, he had taken up the fashion of wearing a single gold earring in his left ear. For some reason he had thought it made him look dashing. Thank the gods, common sense won the battle a few years back and he was unlikely to have his sons note it and use it against him for similar foolishness. He sighed heavily. At least that had been true until this morning. Grasni had, with a firm and practiced hand, re-pierced the earlobe with one of her very own earrings taken directly from her ear.

All of this had been done by way of a casual disguise which was part and parcel of the plan he and the maggiore devised in the middle hours of the night. This morning, he rose with the Rom and stowed his official garb at the foot of the

carriage where it could be easily retrieved from beneath Grasni's skirts if they were stopped.

He and the maggiore desperately hoped that seeing the Romani leaving town would be sufficient to avoid any trouble. The maggiore had not wished them to wait outside the cattedrale and bishopric palazzo, confident that that visibility would guarantee trouble— most aimed specifically at Petrus and Grasni. Since their departure from Girgenti was to be made separately, they took the precaution of increasing the Ro-mani's number. Hence Marco wore this casual Romani disguise and rode his mare beside Petrus upon his strawberry roan. Aiutante Ennio Santoro hid inside the *vardo* with two dozen backup scorpiniis taken from the men. Santoro occupied his time with loading the handheld crossbows and setting them aside should they be needed.

All these measures were taken in case of trouble. Besides the merchant refusing to sell him apples in the market plaza, they experienced little and nothing to complain of. They made the road toward the coast without further trouble and, as agreed, began heading north at a very leisurely pace.

* * *

Mandero squinted in the muted light, his uncovered eye dancing from corner to shadowy tapestry looking for an ambush. Deigo, inexperienced with acting as Mandero's aide and with such settings, was even more watchful than Mandero. Mandero decided to leave the looking out for Deigo and turned to concentrate upon the bishop who was quietly closing the doors between his guardian's office and his own retreat.

The bishop was a small man, perhaps five feet, possibly less. What he lacked in stature, however, he made up for in presence and, by scratching aside his eye patch, Mandero saw that this "presence" was no glamour of Gypsy Silk. He felt himself wanting, almost instinctively, to like the man; his deep, inner quiet was soothing. It was the way he had felt when he laid his head upon Alessandra's lap and she toyed with his hair and made everything seem at peace again.

Shutting the herringbone-patterned double doors, Bishop Milano turned. He seemed surprised for a moment and then hurriedly moved into the room, motioning for them to follow him to a set of wing chairs spaced around an ebony table with silver mounts placed beside a heavily draped window seat.

As Mandero selected a chair, he pretended not to notice the bishop whisking away a serving platter with *two* goblets. He nodded toward one of the other wing chairs, set beside and slightly behind his own chair. By Deigo's expression, Mandero guessed that the younger man was just as happy taking the subordinate role.

"So, it will be the two of us, then?" the bishop said as he took his seat.

"Yes, Second Lieutenant Giordano joins me purely due to protocol," Mandero replied smoothly, though in truth, Deigo's company had been more for the purpose of an extra sword if they got themselves into any trouble Mandero could not talk their way out of.

The bishop held out his hand. “May I see the letter, please?”

Mandero nodded sharply and withdrew it once more from the breast pocket of his uniform coat, handing it to him in such a way that the queen’s seal was visible and upright.

Bishop Milano held the paper tenderly and unfolded it with something akin to reverence. He read the letter, nodded, and then read it again before gently refolding it and delivering it back into Mandero’s hands.

“You have been entrusted with a ... an exceedingly challenging mission, Maggiore, but how do you expect me to help?”

The bishop’s gaze was unwavering, his expression showing no indication of deceit.

“It had been, my hope that since, in the order of things as I understand them, you answer to Cardinal delle Torre, you might have some idea as to his location,” Mandero said.

Bishop Milano nodded, then paused. He steepled his fingers thoughtfully. “It is very easy to tell you the truth in this, because I sincerely do not know where the man is.”

“Would you tell us if you did know?” Mandero asked.

The bishop sagged back into his wing chair and sighed. “There we reach complication. I am torn in duty. My obligation, first and foremost, is to the Trinity and then to the Church as directed by the Most Holy Father. There is a hierarchy within the Church and we are expected to honor it.”

“Which means?” Mandero asked.

“Which means that I am torn between my obligation to the Church and to what I believe is moral and right according to prayer, contemplation, and even the given word of His Holiness.”

“You speak in riddles. As the queen’s representative—as representative to both the King and Queen of the White Throne, I need to know where you stand.”

“I stand with the Church, *always*,” the bishop replied. He rose, hands behind his back as he roamed closer to the window.

The heavy curtains muffled the sound of raised voices.

“What is going on out there?” Mandero asked, thinking of those of his men waiting for his return out in the streets.

“This?” the bishop asked with a smile. “This is the afternoon call to Faith.”

“It sounds more like a brawl,” Deigo murmured.

“Yes, it does, rather,” the bishop agreed. “Come, Maggiore, come see how my priests reach out to the men and women in the street who find it easier to ignore God ... or to dabble in the word of God without picking the Chosen path.”

With thundering heart, Mandero rose and moved quickly to the curtained window.

He reached for the curtain to pull it aside.

“No!” Bishop Milano called. He opened a door beside the window seats which occupied either side of the extruding patio and beckoned.

Mandero followed him and discovered an antechamber which had been built into the body of the parapet. Here, the bishop could watch the audience below. He could hear and see everything without making his presence known.

“You see, there, in the midst of the crowd? The Oratory?”

Mandero followed the bishop’s pointing finger to the ornate speaker’s block at the very center of the crowd. He looked and then looked again. The man holding forth from the Oratory was undoubtedly a Huguenot—a Protestant! Guards of the Church stood at either side of the Oratory. From all appearances, their reason for being there was to keep order in the crowd so that the orator could speak his mind freely.

Mandero must have said something to that general effect, because the bishop smiled and shook his head. “Women, too, Maggiore. Everyone is given their turn to speak. The guards and priests see to it.

“And when they’re done, one of the fathers speaks, arguing the wrongness of the position, pointing out the error in their ways, and leading them to God’s ways” the bishop said.

“Ah! I thought there would be a catch,” Mandero said.

“It is the host’s right, is it not?” the bishop responded. “We make the argument and the people decide. Everyone who wishes may have their turn and they are welcome to stay in the crowd to further argue their point.”

“It makes it easier to spot the witches, does it not?”

The bishop turned sharply, the quiet pleasure drained from his expression. “I guess that it would if that were my intent,” he said stiffly. “Some of us in the Church are more interested in bringing the word of God to the uninformed, education instead of persecution.”

“Really?” Mandero asked quietly.

Suddenly the little grated room seemed small and stuffy. The bishop exited the chamber into his office.

“Maggiore, it is easy to believe—especially of the Dominican order which has traditionally served so closely to the Inquisitions of the past, that we are dogmatic and that we might even believe that faith in God, the Son, and the Holy Ghost can be forced,” Milano said. The blood vessel at his temple throbbed as his face reddened. He took a deep breath and turned away from Mandero and Deigo, then turned back.

“I came to Tyrria by choice, as have most of the priests who serve my bishopric. I believe that it is better to lead people to God than it is to *send* them to Hell. Believe what you will, but there are some of us in the Church who find challenge and great hope in the concepts of the practices of this country. In Italy,

Spain, and France, half of what I believe and encourage my priests to believe is heretical enough to have me burned beside those accused of the craft.”

“The cardinal did not find so much charm in the Tyrrhian way,” Mandero said.

The bishop’s mouth pinched shut and his shoulders hunched. “The transition to Tyrrhia’s ways are not so easy for all of us.”

That platitude fell between them, draining the desire to speak. Outside, Mandero heard the strident voices of the crowd and a thought occurred to him. “I noticed that the guards you use to protect the Oratory wear the Church’s colors. Doesn’t this get in the way of speaking freely? With the vigilare so close—”

“We have found it easier to police our activities. The Oratory is on Church grounds—”

“But wouldn’t you draw more traffic say, in the market square?” Mandero asked.

The bishop grimaced. “Briefly, until the proper order of things is understood, and Maggiore Oliverio would see it communicated quickly.”

Surprised, Mandero asked, “Oliverio? Then you know him?”

“We know him. Even our more liberal priests stay out of his way. He has been a scourge to the community ever since he came here,” the bishop replied.

“Ever since? I was of the impression that Oliverio was new to the area,” Mandero said.

Bishop Milano shook his head. “No, Oliverio served in the King’s Armata for some years before returning to his home. He and that Colonello Russo arrived at much the same time and Girgenti has suffered their tyranny ever since. The colonello got along famously with the cardinal when he came for inspections.”

“I presume that you and the cardinal—”

“I will not speak ill of my superior, Maggiore,” Bishop Milano declared. His shoulders hunched again as he knotted his hands behind his back.

Mandero glanced at Deigo thoughtfully and back to Milano. “Deigo, you must see the antechamber and study the Oratory. I think we should include a report of this to Her Majesty, so study it closely.”

Deigo stared at Mandero as though he were suddenly speaking a Germanic tongue. Mandero nodded toward the small room. Frowning, he jerked his head toward the antechamber and, at last, the lieutenant seemed to understand what it was that his superior officer was suggesting.

Giordano rose quickly, bowing to the bishop. “Permisso?”

Watching the men carefully, Bishop Milano slowly nodded and waved his permission. When Deigo closed the door between the room and antechamber, Milano looked at Mandero. “The room ... it is not soundproof. He can hear every word we say.”

“But he will have to make the effort and that, Your Reverence, was the point of

my gesture. I have gained the impression during this interview that there is more that you would like to say to me, but have held your tongue. My guess is this comes of good sense and from a need to guard oneself.” Mandero strolled to the antechamber door and leaned upon it. “I have taken steps to demonstrate that your confidences are safe with me.”

“But the confidences I hold are not simply my own,” Milano said softly, his brow furrowing with his unspoken troubles.

“Allow me then to make it easier, thereby putting myself at some risk with what I trust to you,” Mandero offered. “I seek the cardinal not just because my queen tells me. I have vendetta against him. Due to his plots at Citteauroea, my betrothed—young and innocent—was murdered and then cursed. I seek out the witch-hunters, have fought one band hand to hand, sending more than one of them to his Maker for judgment. From what you have told me, I have caught Coionello Russo in a stupid lie. He used Oliverio against me to test where my sentiments fall.

“In uncovering the plots of the cardinal and the Princess Bianca, we have learned that the nobility and even the vigilare of the Escalade and Armata are rife with treasonous dogs who would see Tyrrhia become nothing more than an agricultural breadbasket to support Rome.” Mandero finished on a sigh, staring down at his boot.

“What I have told you could get me killed, possibly by some of my brother officers. There are few I can trust and I sense, Your Reverence, Catholic or no, you are someone worthy of my trust.”

“I am . . . honored,” Bishop Milano murmured. “There is some information that I can give you. I know that the cardinal passed through Girgenti not so long ago. He did not come to the bishopric, perhaps understanding that my sympathies lie elsewhere, which means that I must be on guard if His Holiness recognizes the cardinal as the ambassador between Tyrrhia and Rome again.” He sighed and shook his head. “You trust your man, let us not keep him in the closet.” He waved toward the antechamber and crossed to the bellpull.

Warily, Mandero called Giordano back into the room and together they sat.

The bishop gathered his black robes and sat on a chair opposite Mandero. “There is some information that I can give you—” He stopped at the sound of scratching on the outer door. He raised a warning finger and excused himself to the door. He opened it slightly and spoke with someone on the other side before shutting and locking it again.

While his back was turned, Mandero motioned to his weapons so that Deگو could follow his lead, releasing the peace-bonds one wore in polite company. Mandero also cocked and loaded a brace of scorpion-inis, positioning them where they would not be seen. He was ready with a look of interest that demanded nothing.

The bishop, instead of explaining who he had summoned and the reason, continued with his monologue. “There is a group active *within* the Church that calls themselves ‘Magnus Ignique.’ ”

“I’ve heard of them,” Manderero said.

“They are like a cancer and, as you suspect, have infiltrated all of Tyrrhia,” the bishop said. “The cardinal has lost his formal post as ambassador to Rome because of his ill-played plot. He must find some way to win himself back into the graces of the White Throne or find some other way of being useful to Rome for him to remain here. One guess is that he hopes to change the sentiments of those who rule Tyrrhia and thus win back his place.

“The witch-hunters, Magnus Inique, are his military, slowly working at the underpinnings of Tyr-rhian Law. Colonello Russo and Oliverio are part of his force. They have been after Padre Gabera ever since they learned he meant to betray Magnus Inique.”

“Betray Magnus Inique?” Manderero repeated. “You mean he was part of this witch-hunting force?”

The Bishop nodded. “Gabera was one of my priests. They thought him converted to the cardinal’s cause, but he was discovered. He barely managed to reach Sanctuary before Colonello Russo and his men— namely his assassin, Oliverio.”

“You can withstand the colonello only so long,” Manderero said.

Again Milano nodded, “Especially now that Oliverio is willing to break the seal of protection and come *into* the bishopric palazzo—”

“What?” Manderero gasped.

“It is so. The guards saw him. Gabera saw him, but he got away when the alarm was raised and we have no way of proving . . .” The bishop shook his head. “The colonello has had no success through traditional means. But Sanctuary can protect Gabera only so long. Now, with that attempt, we know that he will do anything. Their Majesties *must* be made aware of this society, especially now, as they become ever more acknowledged and accepted and as they unify with garrisons run by commandants with shared sentiments.”

“Are you suggesting that we ... that *I* take Gabera with me when we leave Girgenti?”

“When *do* you leave?” the bishop responded, leaning forward keenly.

Manderero rubbed the back of his neck uncomfortably. Could they really slip this Gabera out of the city under the colonello’s nose? Could he be sure his trust in the bishop was not misplaced? Bishop Milano *had* revealed the colonello’s lies, lies the senior officer never needed to make, unless he had something to hide.

Bishop Milano sighed after the silence between them had yawned into moments. “It cannot be done, then.”

“No, Your Reverence, I did not say that.” Manderero shook his head and caught sight of a fleeting movement. He leaned forward and asked in a hushed voice, “Is it possible for anyone to overhear us?”

“You mean someone who shares the sentiments of Russo and His Eminence, Cardinal delle Torre?”

“Them or anyone else, for that matter,” Mandero said with another affirmative nod.

“Do you mean some of my own order might—”

“Your techniques *are* unorthodox, Your Reverence, to the Church proper—as I know it. There are bound to be dissenters within your bishopric realm, even where you encourage all to speak freely. Is this not, after all, the very situation that the White Crown now faces?”

Bishop Milano bit his lip, looking over his shoulder. “The palazzo is riddled with secret passageways and priest holes. I’d be a fool not to make it my business to know all of them, especially all those that lead to, from, and pass by my chambers. We are secure.”

“What about the man in the cabinet behind your desk?” Mandero asked, rising with his heaviest bolted scorpionini aimed and cocked. “Do not try to escape, Signore, this shot *will* pass through the door and I daresay I’m a quicker shot than—”

“No!” Bishop Milano screamed and launched himself toward the weapon.

Mandero sidestepped the bishop’s grab as Deigo seized the older man.

“Now, you, in the armoire . . .” Mandero said, his hand remaining steadily pointed at the cabinet.

“Please! No violence! I come willingly.” As the man in the cabinet spoke, the caned door—which had allowed Mandero to see the shifting shades of darkness—moved.

The bishop shook Deigo loose and ran to stand in front of Mandero’s cocked weapon. “*Please*, let me explain!”

Mandero released the lever on the scorpionini and eyed the man who came out of the cabinet. In the light of day, it looked like it might have been a favor to shoot the man . . . the priest, or so he assumed, since this stranger wore the appropriate attire. It was difficult to make out his facial features for all of the swelling and bruising. He moved with the fragility of someone deeply wounded. “Padre Gabera?”

The man nodded, with apparent great effort, his thin right hand to his bandaged head. “Yes, I am Gab-era. Forgive my secretive entry. I intended no offense.”

Mandero withdrew the bolt and tucked it into the slotted cuffs on the sleeves of his soprabita. He hol-stered the scorpionini and frowned at his host. “I presume that you sent for him earlier?”

The bishop nodded. “At that time, I was confident that you were a man of honor, the queen’s man if not God’s.”

“You will pardon, I hope, my extra caution?” Gab-era said. He looked around and found a chair which he slid into.

“You will testify that the queen’s men did this to you?” Mandero asked.

“Maggiore, surely this is a farce?” Second Lieutenant Giordano protested.

Mandero frowned at him. “You are out of order, Lieutenant.” His man bowed his head in acceptance of the reprimand. “There is much that you and the other men are still not privy to. I have waited too long to tell you too much.” His hand moved instinctively to the poppet padding the inside of his coat.

“Will—will I be able to trust your men?” Gabera asked hesitantly. “It is just that . . . forgive me, but if you have no trust—”

“You misunderstand, Padre Gabera. Our mission, as you must understand, is one of secrecy demanding that as little information be released as possible. The fault is my own, not in my men. Every one of them would give his life protecting yours—whether they knew of your importance or not.”

Gabera frowned, wincing. He looked to the bishop. “I will trust your guidance, Your Reverence.”

“I fear for you, dear friend. Colonello Russo knows you are here and is proceeding through the courts to set aside Sanctuary. Earthly judges would believe he would protect you,” the bishop said heavily. He looked over his shoulder at Mandero. “I would trust Maggiore di Montago with *my* life, but that is all that I can speak for.”

“Do you understand the danger that my presence may bring?” the priest asked. “The other night a guard and two priests were killed when Russo sent his assassins within these cloistered walls.”

“My men and I will do everything possible to protect you.”

“Then the first challenge is how to get him safely from the relative haven of this palazzo and church and to the White King’s court,” the bishop said.

“I have been considering this. No doubt the colonello watches all possible exits. The simplest answer is out the very same exit through which the lieutenant and I entered,” Mandero said.

“Through the front doors of the Church?” the bishop sputtered. “Impossible!”

“Two vigilare enter and two leave,” Mandero said with a shrug. “Our greatest danger is how you move, Padre Gabera. Can you manage the steps and mount a horse without betraying yourself because of your condition?”

Gabera took a deep breath and nodded.

“Good! Dego, remove your uniform and we will begin our ruse,” Mandero said.

“A man’s own manner and character is what most becomes him.”

—Cicero

At the sound of Santoro’s warning whistle, Marco took a deep breath and turned his head just enough so it would look like he spoke to Petrus riding beside him. “Remember, diplomacy *first!*”

Within a breath of speaking, Marco heard the distinct thundering of hooves. Riders raced around them with a swell of hisses and catcalls. They did not, as Marco, and undoubtedly everyone else in their gathering, hoped, continue on their way, but once past by, they rounded their horses and blocked the road. Marco felt mild comfort in the observation that the men did not, at least, wear the queen’s colors. He did a rough count. Half a dozen men—a party large enough to beleaguer two riders and a woman driving a wagon, but small enough so that they would not draw too much attention as they made their way along the streets of Girgenti and out onto the open roads beyond. Marco took a quick look over his shoulder.

They had passed a pair of merchant wagons not five minutes ago and they should be visible in the distance. That they were not meant these braggadocios had advised them to delay their pace.

Marco set his jaw and scanned the surly faces before him. “Good day, Signore! A fine day to share the King’s Road.”

One or two of the men chuckled and nodded knowingly at one another. Marco recognized it as the cheap camaraderie of allied bullies. They had nothing unifying them but whatever hatred they shared.

“For some,” one of the men said.

By the way the others looked to him, della Guelfa recognized him as their leader. He wore a half mask of the kind persons of nobility favored as they traveled. The mask gave them a certain degree of anonymity as it did now for this man. The men he led, however, had settled for drawing their hats down low over their eyes.

“We would gladly welcome your company, Signore, for as long as we share the same road,” Marco said to the leader.

“We haven’t the stomach to be sharing the road with your kind,” one of the other men sneered.

The leader of the band cut him off with a jerk of his hand. “While I wouldn’t have used the words he did, my fellow has come straight to the point,” the leader said, raising his rapier just high enough that it was clear he intended to use it.

“Is this so?” Marco replied, nodding as minutely as possible to Petrus who slowly began to back his horse closer to the wagon. “You know, of course, that hampering the rightful travel of any citizen of Tyrrhia—”

“We will let you live if you hand over the witch there,” the leader said, pointing his

weapon unwaveringly in Grasni's direction.

"I'm afraid that I can't do that," della Guelfa replied in a steady voice.

"Then you die with her. Is that what you want for yourself and the old man? Just give us the witch and you pass freely," the leader said.

"You say that after taking the oath to protect the roads?" Marco retorted.

"What?"

"You are vigilare ... at least most of you are," Marco della Guelfa said.

The braggadocios laughed, but not so very convincingly. "Why would you think that, fool?"

Marco sighed and leaned forward intently. "Because, to my eye, there are at least four of you on Escalade mounts. You can leave off the regalia, but the saddle knows its blanket. More importantly, however, the horses are branded with Her Majesty's mark and they have not been obliterated as is protocol."

"And what do you know of the vigilare and the Escalade, Gypsy dog?"

"Allow me to properly introduce myself, Signore," Marco said, uncovering his baldric and slipping it over his neck. "I am Lieutenant della Guelfa. I ride under Maggiore di Montago out of Citteauroea."

The men of the opposing party shifted about uncomfortably on their horses looking to their silent leader. They had not bargained upon being identifiable.

"Since you are one of us—" The men began to grumble but hushed as the leader waved his hand for silence again. The senior braggadocio's eyes never left della Guelfa's. "Since you are one of us, I give you one chance to stand with your brother officers against these street swine you ride with now."

Marco looked back at Petrus and Grasni, who sat alternately on horseback and upon the driving ledge of the *vardo*. They nodded ever so slightly, as did Santoro still hidden within the shadows of the caravan. Ever aware of the lives entrusted to him, della Guelfa shook his head. "No, but I will give each of you this one opportunity to surrender yourselves to me for judgment before the Queen's Tribunal."

The bravos laughed, all of them. The leader was the first to settle his mirth and shake his head. "We would have had to kill you anyway, you understand?"

"Of course," Marco replied calmly. "I must bring to mind, Signore, that as we came upon one another, I was specifically not wearing my uniform, but was prepared to display it. This must indicate to even *un sciocco* that I was prepared for you. Si? If I am prepared, then I ask you, do you really think we are as vulnerable as you take us to be?"

" 'Tis nothing more than a bluff, a ruse," the rider beside the leading bravo pronounced. Before he could speak again, he fell from his horse.

Delia Guelfa felt the wake of the second bolt as it passed by his ear and caught

another man in the throat, who gave a colorful if inarticulate display, clutching at the source of life's blood spewing from his veins, before he, too, fell from his horse.

“He's got a *tiratore scelto!*” the leader yelled, kicking his horse into motion again as he scanned their small party. “There! In the caravan!”

Marco closed with the leader and engaged him with a rapier before he could shout further orders to the four men remaining.

The two men drove their mounts into one another, hacking and slashing. They bloodied one another as much as themselves before Marco stashed his rapier beneath his leg and pulled his long stiletto from the saddle sheath to bar the other's attack. Trapping the other man's rapier against the neck of his mount, Marco used his free hand to punch his opponent in the jaw, stunning him enough that he dropped his rapier.

Behind him, Grasni cried out. Marco turned, circling his bloodied mare. Grasni placed a booted foot in the braggadocio's chest and shoved him down off of the *vardo*, then crowned him with the pig iron pot she used to serve breakfast. Ennio had climbed from the inside of the *vardo* and finished the troublemaker with a shot, casting aside the spent weapon as he launched into the rider who had gotten past Petrus. Rider and Santoro disappeared on the other side of the horse.

Steel stung Marco's arm as he wheeled his mare once more; a painful reminder that he, too, had been engaged in battle. Thankfully the blow only reached his arm. He should have paid far more dearly for his lack of concentration—not that Marco had any intention whatsoever of giving the backstabber a second opportunity. He gave his mare the heel, pressing her once more up against the other horse. She squealed and cow-kicked when Marco diverted the leader's stab and the mare was stuck in the neck instead.

The other man's horse reared away from the mare's hooves, flattening his ears back against his head and snapping at her. Marco closed again and caught the leader in the chest as he struggled to stay mounted, coming down upon the long stiletto.

Marco could see in the leader's eyes that he had struck a mortal blow, but the other man was not finished quite yet. The wound in his chest gurgled audibly as he gasped and swung his fist.

For a moment, Marco saw nothing but shards of light in the left eye, which served to befoul his depth perception. He missed parrying the final plunge of the leader's weapon before the bravo joined his comrades crumpled on the road.

The mare shuddered beneath Marco as he pulled his enemy's stiletto from his thigh. It was, for the most part, a grazing wound that caught the back flesh of his leg a hand down from his rump. The more serious wound, Marco began to realize was to his mount, but before he could attend to her he twisted in the saddle in time to see the last of the bravos set heel to his horse and race back the way he had come.

“Santoro!” Marco called as he captured the reins of the leader's horse. “Here! That man has turned against his brother officers with treason in his heart. Chase him down and put an end to him!”

Aiutante Santoro saluted and jumped into the saddle of the horse offered him. Without delay, he was gone, leaving Marco to dismount and attend to wounds, both human and animal, and to remove the bodies to the side of the road in the prescribed manner.

* * *

Mandero cast a wary look at the priest. Gabera had somehow managed to stride confidently down the steps of the cattedrale and mount Dego Giordano's horse. Thankfully, they were able to reach a merchant's maze of shops and stalls before he tumbled to the ground in an indecorous lump.

Grifo kept a watchful eye on the crowd from astride his tall, long-legged, black gelding. Mandero tossed his purse to Caporale Puddu and sent him to distract the nearest merchants and their customers with loudly bartered purchases while he and Nuzzio—one of the two Roman Catholics in his squad—helped the priest back onto the horse again.

The sound of soldibiancos jingling in the pouch drew the interest of the merchants all around. With Antoine's commandeered belt, he and Nuzzio strapped Padre Gabera to the horse by way of the saddle.

According to Brambilla, who had kept watch the entire time, they managed the episode without drawing any attention from the local vigilare and also managed to procure a dozen sugared plums and pastries.

With his purse restored to him and the pale priest lashed aboard his horse to prevent any further falls and injuries, Mandero got his men free of the city gates as quickly as he could manage and, hopefully, out from under the immediate reach of Colonello Russo.

They met up with Lieutenant Giordano on the northerly road. Dego appeared visibly relieved when he looked back over his shoulder again and realized it was Mandero and the rest of the remaining squad.

"Were you followed?" Mandero asked.

Dego nodded. "I think I lost them inside the city and I haven't seen anyone until just now."

"It doesn't mean they haven't followed us. Release the bishop's horse, Lieutenant, he'll find his way home. Take your own mount. For now, you'll have to ride two astride. The padre cannot keep his seat and we have no other options until we are reunited with della Guelfa," Mandero ordered.

"I will loop back to see if we were followed," Bram-billa announced.

Mandero waved him on. "Let's make haste. We have no way of knowing if della Guelfa and Santoro met with any trouble."

"Could I have a moment to rest?" Gabera asked weakly. Though a relatively large man, he spoke with the strength of a kitten.

Mandero shook his head. "I'm sorry, Father, but we cannot afford to rest until

we are rejoined to the rest of my people. Dego, Padre Gabera is in your charge.”

“Aye, Maggiore!”

They traveled hard and fast, pushing their mounts to their very limits. The sun sat high and hot overhead when they came upon the bodies.

“They wear no uniforms, Maggiore, but they are laid out like *vigilare* as it is dictated,” Brambilla explained, leading Mandero across the roadside ditch.

“They are lying facedown,” Mandero said. “They were traitors.”

“Witch-hunters?” Lieutenant Giordano murmured.

“It would seem so. Get the padre,” Mandero ordered.

“Aye,” Giordano said with a nod and made his way back to the road.

“Do you think they might have attacked Lieutenant della Guelfa, Signore?” Grifo Brambilla asked, studying the seven bodies neatly laid out.

Mandero scanned the area, finally spotting a small mound of stones at the foot of the first cadaver—four to be precise and a white feather placed just beneath the top stone. “It would seem so, but at least the lieutenant and Santoro prevailed.”

“True,” Grifo said, “or we would see their bodies here as well.”

Mandero pointed to the stones. “Here, Brambilla. You might just as well learn a *Romani patrin* as anyone else. Either Petrus or Grasni made this. Four stones, four lives. The white feather indicates that the four of them yet breathe.”

“Maggiore! Maggiore!” Antoine called.

Mandero looked up to see the youth pointing excitedly toward the field just beyond.

“Damnation!” Grifo grumbled, dropping down so the grasses of the field beyond the bodies hid him from the view of anyone in it who might attack.

The other men also ducked low. Dego and Nuzzio who guided the priest toward the corpses shoved him to the ground and covered him with their own bodies.

“If there were others to attack us, they would have by now, don’t you think?” Mandero said, easing up slowly from his crouch. He looked around and finally rose to his full height. “I think these horses are remainders from these men here.” He turned and motioned to Duarte. “I see three horses. The others must have returned to their stables. Get me at least two of those mounts. The French lad has just earned himself a horse.”

Sergente Duarte saluted and went to collect his horse still on the road.

Mandero held out his hand to Gabera as he stumbled up the copse from the ditch while one of the other men turned over the bodies of the dead *vigilare*. Gabera took one look at the bodies, dropped to his knees, genuflected, and kissed his crucifix.

“We have little time if we mean to catch up to the others before dark, Padre,” Mandero said brusquely.

Alessandra had not had the benefits of these bravos, for even though they differed in policy, their crucifixes and cause identified them as Roman Catholic, and these men had the privilege of having one of their faith to say prayers over them. He was not particularly inclined to allow them more than what they had.

“I must say Last Rites,” Gabera said, rising shakily and turning in the direction of the first bandit on the left.

Mandero caught the priest by the arm and held him still as he collected himself. “Leave them. Just tell me if they were among the men who attacked you.”

“Leave them? But I have a duty to—”

“Padre, these men—or their confederates— attempted to kill you because your breed of Catholicism differed from theirs. The colonello will have men hurrying toward us to find the men who were separated from their mounts. I’m sure that he will see to it that the appropriate prayers are said over them. The same will not be true, however, if the colonello and his men are successful in finding us. I doubt if we will even be honored with being left by the roadside so that our brother officers can be summoned to deal with our deaths.”

“You mean to leave them? Here? By the road?” Gabera gasped.

“It won’t be for long, of that I am sure,” Mandero replied, turning so that his men heard him as well.

“But they are vigilare,” Nuzzio d’Este said.

“They stopped being our brothers when they became witch-hunters,” Dego Giordano growled. “Let us not forget that *they* attacked Lieutenant della Guelfa, Signore. Two men and a woman! I’ll waste no energy of mine to bury them.”

Mandero raised his hand before anyone else could speak. “Let us not forget our mission, gentlemen. There are witch-hunters weakening Tyrrhia and befouling the Crown. Padre, I ask you again, do you recognize any of these bravos?”

Gabera took another unsteady breath and turned away from Mandero. Grimacing over the waxen, bloodied faces, he surveyed them all. He pointed to the second and fifth bodies. “They are familiar to me as witch-hunters. I am not sure if they were among the *bricconcello* who beat me.”

“Good, Lieutenant Giordano, please take Padre Gabera on your horse. Sergente?” Mandero turned in a circle, scanning the horizon for his acquisitions and supply chief.

“Si, *Signore*?”

Mandero turned to the road. Sergente Duarte was assisting Recluta Conde onto a dapple-gray horse, making Mandero wonder if he had been wise to grant the youth a horse so soon. In either regard, they would travel faster and there would be a spare horse should the good father Gabera choose to remain with them even beyond the time he could safely go on his own way.

“Lieutenant Brambilla, Caporale Puddu, turn the bodies and catch up with us,”

Mandero ordered as he climbed onto Joro.

The pastries and sweets bought as they made their way out of the city walls served as their dinner, eaten while walking their mounts. Mandero was glad for the extra horses when Sergente Duarte's horse threw a shoe. Without the weight of a rider, the trouble could be minimized.

By twilight, they had passed several small villages and started seeing post signs to Montellegro as they followed semipassable traces of where previous travelers had gone before. But the moon and stars had fully claimed the sky for at least an hour, if not two, before Brambilla came riding back with Santoro to guide them to the camp already set up.

Anxious for a report—to assure himself that all was well with Petrus, Grasni, and della Guelfa—and something hot, even if it were only chickory-laced coffee, Mandero urged his men onward, pressing their stamina for the last time this day.

XXV

“Destroy the seed of evil, or it will grow up to your ruin.”

—Aesop

“But, is this trip to Rome absolutely necessary, Your Eminence?” His Highness, formerly Conte Pierro deMedici asked sourly?

Don Battista had long since grown past the point of being shocked at the way the deMedici bastard spoke to people, even those who were clearly above him in station. Could it truly be, though, that the newly appointed prince was so familiar with a cardinal? And, if a cardinal, then it could only be the Cardinal di Citteauroea who had fallen into disfavor with the White King and Queen.

“I told you, it is necessary. There are certain . . . papers that I need,” the cardinal replied, his tone casual and dismissive.

Don Battista wriggled on his narrow cot in the room Prince Pierro deMedici rented to store his bags. Initially, there had been a small room set aside for himself and the boy until he had learned that Signora DelVecchio, his chatelaine through the end of his own youth and all three of his marriages, not to mention serving as Ludvico's governess, was destined to sleep in the carriage house. Cristoval had gladly given her the chamber intended for himself and Ludvico, only to discover that the last room in the inn had been taken for the privacy and protection of His Highness' baggage. For Ludvico's sake, the prince had permitted two cots to be set in the room and the boy and his father assigned to them as well as to the role of guardians of the trunks.

As guardians of the trunks, Cristoval had quickly learned the benefit of their position, for this room connected to the prince's sala. The inn itself was nice enough, but it did not normally do business with gentlemen of the nobility. Board walls, therefore, stood between rooms and were only occasionally covered by a tapestry. Such was Cristoval's luck now, if one could call it that. He was not overly excited to hear talk of treason between the cardinal and the prince, even if they intended Tyrrhia to become a solid Roman Catholic state.

"How long will you be away?" deMedici asked his cloaked visitor.

"Less than a ten-day before I set foot in the Tyr-rhian heartland again, I'm sure."

"And what of the others? Our brethren in this movement of yours, Magnus Ignique?"

"Ours, deMedici, ours," the elder man retorted quickly. "You have always tried to separate yourself from what needed doing, but you are hopelessly tied to this and our fates lie in the hands of the faithful and with Tyrrhia's future."

"Papa?" Ludvico complained sleepily at Cristoval's bedside. "Papa? I'm cold—"

The men in the other room immediately fell silent. Cristoval's heart raced as he snatched up his son and covered the boy's mouth. Ludvico struggled instinctively. The silence from the other room seemed to roar in Cristoval's ears. He laid a finger to his lips, then pulled the boy onto the cot beside him. In an instant, it was as though the boy had never waked from his sleep. When their bedroom door opened, father and son lay snuggled under the covers of Cristoval's cot, the blanket pulled almost to the point of covering their faces. Cristoval kept his eyes shut, struggling not to scrunch them tightly closed, and held his breath, praying for the prince and cardinal to leave.

* * *

Luciana peered out the carriage window and smiled. Seeing the gates of the Royal Palazzo at Citteauroea, welcoming torches lit for late arrivals, was now worth riding in the carriage and sleeping in inns instead of driving the *vardo* and resting beneath the stars and the clear blue sky.

As Baldo pulled the carriage to its final rest in the courtyard, Luciana reached through the window, released the catch, and pushed the door wide, intent upon jumping the two feet to the cobblestones. Before she could take the tiny leap, Stefano's heavy hand fell upon her shoulder.

"What *are* you thinking?" Stefano muttered. He wedged himself between the door and Luciana's skirts and jumped to the cobblestones just as Baldo, their coachman, clambered down from the driver's seat.

"Allow me, Signore," Baldo said, moving quickly to release the steps and offer his arm.

Reluctantly, Luciana accepted their hands to help her down. As soon as the driver had stepped away, the major domo closed the remaining distance from the palazzo to their sides.

“Greetings, Your Grace, and to you as well, Your Grace,” the servant said as his lantern revealed their identities. While holding the lantern aloft, he bowed deeply, first to Stefano and then to Luciana. “Word has come announcing you. Chambers have been made ready for you.”

“Chambers?” Luciana repeated. “I had hoped to see the queen.”

“Her Majesty is in chambers, Your Grace, retired for the night at the order of the Royal Physician,” the major domo said as he raised the lantern higher and led them toward the palazzo. His white suit and pants almost seemed to glow in the dark of the night while the golden trimmings seemed dark as the night, except where bits of detail work were reflected by the light of his lantern and those which glowed forth from the palazzo. “I’m sure arrangements have been made for you to have an appointment within the week.”

“Within the week?” Stefano said, clearly surprised. “Does the child weigh so heavily upon her?” He immediately reached for Luciana, his free right hand curling protectively around her waist.

“You understand that I am not carrying gossip,” the major domo said. Servants inside opened the grand entry doors for them and the major domo paused to bow them in. He hurried to step ahead of them again before he continued relaying the court gossip. He was clearly pleased to be the first to share this tidbit of news. “It has become common knowledge, though not formally announced, the queen bears twins to be born after the new year.”

“After the new year?” Luciana repeated quietly to Stefano.

“‘Tis when our own babe will arrive, yes?” Stefano whispered.

Luciana nodded and set her finger to her lips.

Frowning, Stefano nodded and spoke no more.

She followed the servant through familiar halls and to a chamber she had inhabited not so very long ago. With Stefano guiding her, Luciana did not pay overmuch attention to anything beyond her own thoughts. So odd that the queen—available and apparently loving to the king—should become pregnant so precisely near Luciana’s own time of conception which was almost immediately upon Stefano’s return. Indeed, her own fertility had surprised her. She had thought it would take some little time for her to conceive, but it had been as though the first time they joined, this child was made. This could be explained by their long separation, but the queen . . .

The queen had been barren for more than a year after the plague that took the little princess, Ortensia Marie, barely more than a babe. It had been more than a year since the birth of Dario Gian without another child. No conceptions in a year and a half and suddenly she is taken with twins, to birth near my own time?

No, the only reasonable explanation was unnatural and Idala may very well have been anxious enough to take that step over the edge, into the void of magic.

But why did Idala not consult me? Who *had* she turned to? What and who was

her source for magic? Magicians were manipulators. In the righteous heart, spells were like explicit prayers and a way to divine the truth of past, present, and future. In her own faith of the *Fata*, the Three Sisters of Fate spun, wove, and cut the thread of lives as they saw fit. But the *chova-hano*, only months ago revealed, demonstrated that not all magicians were willing to leave their final fates to the gods and they were happy to manipulate the fates of others for their own interest.

Stefano closed the door to their apartment and lit an oil lamp that he set upon the gateleg ebony table with silver mounts which sat against the wall in the minuscule antechamber leading into their suite.

“Well, let’s have it,” Stefano said, turning the light up high.

“I know nothing more than you. I’m sure that Ki-saiya and your man have laid out our nightclothes. I am tired from these long days of travel,” Luciana murmured. Her hands fell instinctively to her abdomen and lower back. She turned purposefully toward the stairs which led up to the bedrooms.

“That is all that you have to say?” Stefano asked. He took her elbow with his right hand, held the lamp high in his left, and guided her toward the upper rooms.

Luciana paused on the narrow stairwell, placing her hand over his heart. “I *know* nothing, *camomescro*, but my heart weighs heavy. There is something very wrong. Whether it remains from our previous troubles or is something new, I do not know. I must sleep on this, gather my wits, my thoughts . . . and see Her Majesty.”

“You will not keep anything you know from me?” Stefano asked, his dark brown eyes searching her face for any hint of deception.

“I promise you ... I *promise* you, I will keep no secrets from you,” Luciana said.

“Except for ... ?”

“No exception, no delay, and—Husband? Will you do the same? We need unity, the strength of all our wits, or I fear we shall be undone.”

Stefano bent and kissed her nose. “No secrets, then,” he said.

Moments later, lying in the protection of Stefano’s arms, Luciana stared up at the tapestry cover of their four-poster bed, unable to sleep despite her exhaustion. She could not shake the sense that something was very wrong here at the palazzo. She feared that all that she loved and valued, from her unborn child to her friend, the White Queen, to all of Tyrrhia, the safest place her people had ever found was once again at risk.

* * *

How long? How many days had it taken for her to escape the sealed chamber? The cardinal had done a great deal to see to it her spirit remained, if not tethered to the body, in its company.

She hungered. She longed for sustenance . . . and for the comfort of Manderò’s arms. Her entire body ached with an empty, unquenchable longing that made her ethereal body tremble with need.

Concentrating on him as she now did, Alessandra saw what looked like a silken ribbon of gold dust and remnants of rainbows. It drew her on a journey without miles or markers to point her way. She had only the ribbon to guide her . . . until she saw the glow of a campfire and caught the familiar hint of horses and her *vardo*. With glee, she chased the ribbon literally into the flames and rose, like a wisp of smoke.

Hunger led her to the *vardo*. She paused at the closed door. So far, no portal had stopped her. Within the *vardo*, she heard the faint sound of a man's gentle snores and knew it to be her beloved, for only her husband had any right to sleep within her wagon.

Like mist, she flowed into the small living compartment and hovered over the bed, waiting for her beloved to turn his face in her direction, but when the man turned, it was not her Mandero but a stranger! Outrage boiled within her. She scanned the inside of her *vardo* to be sure. She recognized her cooking pots, the horses outside of the wagon, even the coverlet drawn up to this stranger's chin, and her ire grew, filling her with strength that only true anger gave her.

She placed a still formless hand over the stranger's mouth and nose, waiting for the lack of air to jerk him awake and took as her countenance the drying cadaver in the tomb appointed for her by the cardinal. She felt the skin grow taut on her face, bulging her eyes, curling her lips and exposing her teeth.

Even as the man jerked awake and turned toward her, flailing his arms, twisting his head back and forth, trying to find some source of air for his screaming lungs, Alessandra smelled the fresh bandages and, more tantalizing still, blood!

Alessandra shifted her fully formed hand just enough for him to suck desperately needed air through his nostrils. He flailed. Both hands struggled to pry her one hand free and then to batter at her, more weakly.

She smiled and climbed onto the bed. Straddling him, she wriggled as she was reminded of the initial hunger that had brought her here. She felt the substance of his instinctive response. Alessandra rotated her hips, glorying in the sensations of life. But no matter that hunger, this was not Mandero and, thus, he was not suitable to take as a lover no matter how his squirming aroused her.

She planted her free hand on his chest, hard, so that she compressed his lungs. She allowed the hand covering his mouth to stray to the wound in his shoulder. Positioned as she was, she felt him draw breath enough to call out for help and leaned her full weight upon his chest. And she discovered that her strength would do the job, making it impossible for him to breathe.

"You are the intruder here, not I," she hissed into his ear. She licked the sweat off that side of his face, from jaw to hairline, still intensely aware of the swelling in his groin beneath her.

"Don't!" the man finally managed to whisper.

"Silence, trespasser!" Alessandra said and then applied more pressure to his chest so that he could not take in enough air to speak out loud again. She leaned

down and nuzzled his neck while her free hand took hold of the collar of his blouson and ripped it apart, completely uncaring of the bruising she caused to the other side of his neck.

The veins in his neck pulsed wildly with the man's fear. Instead of taking sustenance from the wound on his shoulder as she originally planned, Alessandra enveloped the man with her arms and legs and bit into the wellspring of his pulse point. She bruised and abused his skin until, in her excitement, she remembered she could make her teeth razor sharp.

Blood, hot and wet, filled her mouth and bathed her face. The rush and glory of power filled her. This man, no matter his wounds, was a living testimony to health, and his life's fluid sent her soaring into raptures unlike anything she had known . . . beyond Madero's arms. She moaned in pleasure, drinking as her talons raked the bedding.

Suddenly, Alessa cried out, aware of only intense pain in her side instead of the pleasure. The pain ka-leidoscoped, sending the vision of raging flames behind the curtain of her eyelids. She coughed and gagged, pulling away from the deepening pain, and tumbled, in substantial form, to the narrow floor between the bed and the stove.

The man, the source of her feast, struggled up on his elbow waving something in his hand, but even at arm's length the thing hurt her, body awash in skin-searing agony. She shoved it away, despite the pain which coursed down her arm, and cried out.

Moonlight suddenly flowed into the back of the *vardo*, casting a glow from the man's hands, revealing a glinting crucifix. But how had that caused her so much pain? The cardinal's crucifix had touched her before, sometimes deliberately laid upon her as he cast his spell, and it caused nothing more than irritation. The pain subsided as the man lost consciousness.

"By the Fata! *Araunya!*"

Snarling, Alessandra turned upon the interloper and lashed out with her taloned hands.

Grasni fell from the doorway of the *vardo* onto the ground. Her eyes widened in fear as Alessandra bounded from the wagon to stand over her.

Alessandra stalked slowly around her onetime maid as she consciously adjusted her appearance to something more akin to her human form complete with the sheer feathery-silk chemise her cadaver now wore.

"You! After everything, you betrayed me by letting a stranger into my *vardo!*"

"They wouldn't listen," Grasni cried, cringing away from Alessandra.

"What do you mean, they wouldn't listen?" Alessandra growled, seizing Grasni by the hair and jerking her to her feet. "Did I ever harm you, beat you, mistreat you? No! And this is how you show me your gratitude!" Alessandra hissed into Grasni's ear. Seeing the flicker of something, hope, recognition, in the younger woman's

eyes, Alessa turned to find her Uncle Petrus just behind her with stiletto in hand. “My uncle? I am surrounded by betrayers!” With the back of her hand, she knocked the blade from his and seized him by the throat. She brought her conspirators together with a skull-cracking thud and then apart a few inches.

“The two of you! Deceivers! You know Romani law, Uncle, and yet a priest ... a *priest*, like the one who has done this to me sleeps in *my* marriage bed! It is an abomination!” Alessandra growled through gritted teeth.

“Spare the girl!” Petrus gasped, his hands at his throat where she held him.

“Spare *her!*” Alessandra raged, turning back to her maid who now sported a fast-swelling knot just beneath her right eye.

“It was I who overrode her counsel. I thought the priest’s injuries brought him under the law of hospitality. I did this in your name,” Petrus wheezed.

Growling again, Alessandra flung Grasni from her into the *vardo*. Grasni’s head thunked heavily on the wrought-iron pot lashed to the outside of the wagon and her body slid limply to the ground. Turning her full attention to her uncle now, Alessandra squeezed his neck a little harder. She could snap him with little effort, she realized. Instead she held him, feet hovering just above the ground, and watched the light of life slowly slip from her uncle’s eyes. She dropped him before the blood stopped coursing through his veins. She plucked up his arm and sliced open the veins at his wrist so that she could drink all the more.

The blood of a second healthy man sent her into seizures of delight as she built a wealth of power. She stopped before finishing him. He was a blood relation after all, she thought, and laughed. Rising, she realized, by the Fates, that she was drunk on power and all she wanted now was her beloved Mandero. She lifted Grasni’s head by the hair intent upon demanding to know where Mandero was, but she felt instead the life force slipping from her.

Alessandra’s hand was wet with blood. She tasted it. It had the scent of Grasni. She idly licked the blood from her fingers, considering the two people. She saw the vapors gathering over Grasni’s body and watched as her soul began the first steps of departure.

Once, a very long time ago, Grasni had been more than a maid, Alessandra reminisced, more than a helper. She had run errands, fetching messages back and forth between her and her beloved Mandero. It occurred to her then how surprised she had been when she found Grasni here, not that she had allowed herself the moment to realize it. Mandero was here, somewhere nearby. He must have summoned Grasni, must have need of her, or else she would not be here. The same was true of her uncle.

Alessandra touched the life tethers, saw the first snap. Grasni could come and be her helper again, she could stave off the horrible loneliness, but then Grasni was attended by Petrus and Mandero. They would not let someone, even Alessandra herself, keep the girl’s spirit. Among other Rom, Grasni, at least, would receive the proper burial. She would be sent on as was intended.

Bitterly, Alessandra watched as another life tether parted and the vapors grew thicker. Sighing, she rose and took hold of the distended cloud hovering over her maid. She poured some of the riches of power into her hand, into the vapors, and then drove it down, back into the husk of Grasni's body.

Grasni coughed, gave an inarticulate cry, and then took a single deep gasp.

Alessandra watched until she saw Grasni's chest begin to rise and fall normally before her thoughts turned to Mandero again and the single thought of him alone made her body ache with its own most natural hunger. The desire came upon her so swiftly that she felt her knees give slightly. This human form she now took was on fire and it begged to be stoked further. Mandero, wherever he was, Mandero could make this horrible night make sense and could ease her sorrows. But where was he? She knew now with a certainty that he was not in the immediate camp. So where had he gone? What was he doing?

Perhaps he knew that she was coming and arranged to be alone. That thought struck courage in her demoralized heart. She ran her hands through the length of her hair. Unbraided, her hair fell easily down her back to below her buttocks; since death, her hair had actually grown nearly the full length of her hand and more. Alessandra closed her eyes and reached for the golden ribbon that brought her first to the campsite. With concentration, the silky strip loomed forth, extruding from her abdomen outward into the trees beyond the camp.

Alessandra followed the cord, certain that it would lead to her beloved Mandero. The thicket she traveled through meant nothing, it only hampered her way when she forgot to concentrate upon keeping her wraithlike form. The aftereffects of drinking the blood of two men with physical heartiness surpassed her earlier experiences. She was far beyond giddy, she was very definitely drunk and, consequently, prone to remain substantial as the host or vessel of the men's blood. Thinking about it as she traipsed through the thicket and her gown snagged on a bramble bush, she willed herself to the lightness of the moonbeams. These transitions were *so very* easy with the warm, raw power she had consumed.

Through the thicket, Alessandra paused upon the hillock which overlooked the shore road. The sight before her stole her breath away as she was reminded of the beauty of nature, the majesty of the moon casting its shawl of beams upon the frothy tips of the rolling Mediterranean sea, but more pleasing to her eye than that was the man reclining upon the grasses, his dark head turned attentively toward the road.

"You may come around me now," the man said. He twisted as he spoke, a scorpionini aimed at what would have been the average man's heart. "Alessa!" he breathed, releasing the firing mechanism of his weapon and casting it aside as he scrambled up from his blanket.

Alessandra released her control which kept her in the ethereal form she had taken as she passed through the tangles of thorns and branches and once more bloomed into a tangible woman. In her earthly figure, she needed no bidding to run toward Mandero and laugh as he caught her up and swung her in a gleeful circle.

“Can it be true?” Mandero asked as he rained kisses upon her upturned face.

“That I am here, *camomescro*? Do your hands and lips not confirm what your eyes have told you?” She allowed herself to be folded into his arms in a deep and intimate embrace. Standing there in his arms, she began to tremble again and the warmth spread from her knees up through her abdomen.

“Are you cold?” Mandero asked, leaning away as though to reach for the blanket.

She caught him and, pulling Mandero back, stood on tiptoe to brush kisses along his jawline. “I am anything but that,” she whispered between kisses, her hands cupping his face. Looking into his one good eye was a distraction. She reached for the patch of Egyptian cotton.

Stilling her hand, Mandero deepened his kiss. He tasted her mouth as he scooped her into his arms and carried her to the blanket.

In Mandero’s protective arms, Alessandra felt like all the horribleness could disappear, that she would no longer be tested and tormented by the likes of the cardinal and his proteges, that even the horrible moment when she had bartered for Luciana’s child might be forgiven, that somehow they would find a way to be together forever, as they had promised one another so many times in the past.

He lay down beside her and pulled her closer. Leaning up on one elbow, he stared down at her in wonderment. “I can’t believe that you are here, that . . . the fairies said we would have only the one night . . .”

“I came to you on a ribbon. It must be the magics of the *Daiyas* and the *lasa* combined, but who cares how I come to you. Time is short. The cardinal left my body alone, but I know not for how long, when he will return and bring me back to him.”

“The cardinal has left you . . . your . . .” Mandero fell onto his back, closing his eyes.

Alessandra felt cold, more than the mere cold of the night. She needed him, her body, this shell she now possessed, nearly drove her mad with the wanting of him. From her belly to her knees, she felt a deep warmth that made her shiver almost convulsively with anticipation and need. She rolled over and snuggled into his side.

“The cardinal has left that shell which once was me. It is buried in a vault, dressed and prepared by nuns and sealed into a stone chamber ... to preserve it so he may continue with his magic. He has need of me, but I know not why,” Alessandra said. As she spoke, she worked her fingers into the uniform coat and found the collar button which she promptly worried loose.

“The cardinal is away, you say? Do you know where?”

“To his father’s house, he said,” Alessandra answered, pouting. Her fingers moved lower, feeling the springing hair of his chest as one by one she loosed each of the buttons of his blouson. Feeling his body tremble, the buds of his nipples grow tight and hard, the aching warmth in her body became a hungry blaze.

“Is there anything more that you can tell me?” Mandero asked, rolling onto his side and capturing her questing hand.

“Only that I shall go mad if you ask another question!” Alessandra said, pushing him onto his back and rolling atop him. She straddled him, as she had mistakenly straddled the felon in her *vardo*, but this time, she relished the hunger, feeling the hardening of her own nipples against the soft silk chemise.

Mandero’s hands came up, seeking beneath the edge of her dress hem and upward over her naked thighs, capturing her hips.

The feel of his hands upon her and his own need beneath her drove her into a state of wild abandon. They tumbled and rolled, struggling to unhamper his flesh so that they could be together, as one and, at last, the waiting was over as they sought to quench the unquenchable. She arched up, her fingers stretching and clutching at his back. He paused a moment, crying out—and then it did not matter as he buried his face in her hair, his breath hot upon her neck. Drawing him closer, she nibbled, nipped . . . and then it was all glory.

In the distance, someone cried, “Alarm! Alarm!” and there was a crashing through the undergrowth heralding new intruders.

Alessandra growled angrily and flung her right arm in that direction, preparing to cast.

Mandero grabbed her wrist, staring at her. “By the Fates! What has happened to you?”

Alessandra reached up, touching her face, realizing that she had made a transition when angered. She felt the stretched, leathery skin and fresh blood upon her face and hands. Crying out bitterly for all that the cardinal had done to her, for the first time, Alessandra caught the golden ribbon and retreated to the *comforts* of her solitary cadaver.

XXVI

“Charity and beatings begin at home.”

—John Fletcher

17 d’Septembre, 1684

Mandero could not get the image of Alessandra from his mind. In the time it took him to steal a breath, she had changed from the warm, passionate, and loving woman

of their courtship and wedding night to something barely this side of hell.

That Alessandra, that thing she became . . . *mulló*, his people called it. The priest gave her other names, calling her first a ghost haunting the *vardo* and then he pronounced her *vampira*, and succubus, before finally denouncing her as a hell-spawned demon. That Grasni and Petrus, both of whom had obviously also suffered at Alessandra's hands, did not agree with him was beyond the priest's understanding.

Listless and grim, Grasni told Gabera he suffered from brain fever. Had that been all she said or did, Mandero would have been left to hope that she yet had some life in her. Proving she still had her wits about her, Grasni also completely foiled his own plans to consult with the priest about the Cardinal and his witch-hunters this morning. Grasni gave the priest a tonic which immediately silenced him by way of a deep and unshakable slumber. By way of explanation, Grasni said, "He won't condemn the *Araunya's vardo* to fire just yet and I haven't the energy to argue with him."

Mandero gave her her peace and did not harp over the unconscious cleric. At Petrus' direction, Recluta de Conde and Caporale Puddu built a travois to carry the priest. Not even the men in his squad, *gadjé* all, would have pressed Grasni to put the priest back into the wagon, never mind the priest's reaction were he to wake there.

With the priest in the litter and neither Petrus nor Grasni back to full health, Mandero rubbed his neck self-consciously, and exhausted from their ill treatment and informal bloodletting by his lady wife's spirit, the majority of the party traveled slowly. Anxious to be on the road, to pursue the information Alessandra had given him, Mandero chafed at the delays of his party. They were close to Sciacca and, therefore, Menfi where Alessandra's father's estate was located. It would mean a further delay, stopping for filial obligations, but, he reasoned, there was no requirement that all of his squad nor the priest or Grasni and Petrus pay their respects.

Resolved to ride ahead, Mandero announced his decision. Everyone else finally dragged themselves into their saddles and Grasni planted herself on the driving bench all prepared for the day's travel. Delia Guelfa insisted, despite his own wounds from the day before—minor, he assured Mandero—upon traveling with his senior officer, and that Lieutenant Brambilla, who provided them with reconnaissance, should ride back and forth between the parties so that they were well acquainted with any problems that might arise.

Mandero had been anxious for a long ride by himself. It gave him time to think, hopefully to understand the two Alessandras he'd seen the night before. Was she able to control the changes in her appearance? Grasni speculated that she could, reminding him of the magical night in the cavern with the *Daiyas*.

The priest was quite graphic in his report of her attack. He called it rape, finally conceding to "molestation" which was the same thing to Mandero's mind. He was not bothered so much by the infidelity—if the priest remembered rightly—as much

as he was by the nature of her attack, that she had fed upon him. Mandero's hand went self-consciously to his own neck where there appeared the bruising of love-bites ranged from along his collarbone and up to the hairline behind his left ear. Among the shadows remaining from their lovemaking were marks where she had fed from him, shallow cuts that were on the priest and Petrus as well.

“Maggiore?”

Mandero broke from his thoughts, surprised to note that they had come some distance; neither Brambilla nor the rest of the company were within sight. “Aye, della Guelfa?”

“Last night. . . when I came to ... when the alarm was raised and I ...” della Guelfa fell into what was clearly a muddled silence.

“Yes, that was my lady ... or it was she at one time,” Mandero spoke quietly, choking back the emotions he felt—betrayal, horror, anger with himself for he should have known, should have expected . . .

“Pardon. I have no right to intrude,” della Guelfa said hurriedly.

“No, no,” Mandero said decisively. “You, if anyone have the right to an explanation. You are my second and my best man. That is the way that it has always been and, as far as I am concerned, will always be.”

Mandero fell silent trying to think how he might explain the insanity of the magic. It seemed, however, that della Guelfa had been an apt observer and understood most everything that Mandero had any ability to explain, though there was some doubt where the fairy folk were concerned. In the explaining, Mandero began to slowly come to terms with Alessandra's state. Time was slipping by, the madness of being neither dead nor alive tore at Alessa's mind. She could not help what she was becoming and it was his duty, his obligation, his oath that he would protect those in his *kumpania* as he must protect Alessandra from the cardinal . . . and, now, from herself.

Marco could not hide his disquiet. Mandero felt a pang of guilt, but it was necessary for someone besides himself to understand what was happening and he trusted no man more than he trusted della Guelfa.

At the sound of the beat of hooves, Mandero and della Guelfa turned, expecting to see Brambilla on his black. Instead, Petrus rode toward them on his strawberry roan mare. Pulling their horses to a halt, they waited for the Romani elder to reach them.

“Is all well?” Mandero asked, glancing down the road to see who else might have followed.

“Well enough,” Petrus said. He pointed to the stream at the roadside. “Do you mind? The water here is sweet.”

“You have been here before, then?” della Guelfa asked amiably as he and Mandero dismounted and led their horses to the spring-fed stream.

“Yes, of course, many times,” Petrus replied, moving purposefully downstream of his horse to bathe his face and neck and ease the heat of the day. “Perhaps you did not know, Lieutenant, but my sister, Jekima, married Conte Davizzi.”

Delia Guelfa frowned, “Your sister is the Contessa Davizzi?”

“Once, but she has been dead for nearly twenty years,” Petrus replied.

Delia Guelfa’s frown deepened. “I thought you did not speak the name of the dead.”

“Not for a year after their death, not until we have said the final prayers for them. We do not wish them to linger on their path to the Neverlands, to be torn between their mortal lives and what comes after,” Petrus said. “With some famigli, they wait longer, five years, some more. It depends upon many things, how their loved one met with death and if there are signs that the spirit lingers for one reason or another.”

“What brought you to join us now, *Meero-kak*?” Mandero asked as he climbed back into Joro’s silvered saddle.

“The priest is awake. I had little care for his company,” Petrus said, “so I relieved Lieutenant Bram-billa of this run.”

“Is he causing trouble?” Mandero asked, looking once more back over the road he had already traveled.

“No more so than his kind usually do,” Petrus said irritably, turning to spit on the rutted road.

Mandero nodded. “You might wish to acquaint yourself with this blackcoat. He spent time in the company of witch-hunters and suffers his wounds because his comrades learned his true affiliations. We take him to the queen to testify and to protect him from further attacks. Our host in Girgenti was one of them and doing everything he could to roust our Padre Gabera from the bishopric palazzo.”

Petrus’ brows raised, but he remained silent.

“You know the conte, *Meero-kak*,” Mandero said. “What can I expect of him?”

“I never claimed to know the man. For that you would have to speak to his daughter or her half sister.”

“Since neither of them are available,” Mandero said, touching the poppet nestled in his coat beside his heart, “perhaps you will enlighten me with what you do know.”

Petrus fell silent, ruminating, as they traveled down the lightly forested road toward Alessandra’s birthplace.

Once, she had described this very road to him, it being the road she and Luciana used when returning from their Romani family in Ispica in the silk seasons.

Leave the coastal road at Sciacca and take the easterly route toward Menfi. The land was lightly forested, as Alessandra had once painted it. She had protested the painting was a poor likeness. Despite her demurring, Mandero easily identified much of the scenery as she portrayed it. The inland stream alongside the road burred its

way toward the ocean. He had little more to do than follow the stream “toward morning” and it would eventually lead Mandero and his *kumpania* to the estate of one Conte Baiamonte Davizzi, Ales-sandra’s father.

Mandero shifted restlessly in the saddle and glanced over at Petrus. The Romani elder had grown quiet and thoughtful.

Mandero knew the elder would talk when he was ready; in the meanwhile, he reflected over the communications between himself and the conte. To date, their exchanges had been through amenable correspondence regarding the prospects of marriage to Alessandra. There had been an element of what . . . ? Relief in the conte’s words. Certainly, he made the point that he thought a marriage to a military hero was not a disappointment to him. Indeed, now that Mandero thought about it, it was as though the conte believed his half-Romani daughter was not the high prize she was and he had been thankful that he had acted quickly. Had there had some other man, one of noble station or who did not have Romani blood in him as well, Mandero was confident the marriage contract would have been signed before the man began to woo her.

“You must understand, Mandero,” Petrus said, breaking into his reverie. He wetted his lip and smoothed his mustache before speaking. “The conte never was particularly fond of his daughter’s kinsmen.”

“And what of you for your sister’s husband?” Mandero asked.

Petrus made a grimacing smile. “I think you suspect the right of it. Let me say simply that I never understood why they married.”

“Oh?”

“My sister was a passionate woman. Beloved as she was, your . . . your wife was *il piccolo topo della famig-lia*,” Petrus replied.

Mandero laughed out loud at the thought that Alessandra might ever have been considered “the mouse of the family.” “My Alessandra?” He shook his head. He still felt the catch in his throat whenever he spoke her name.

“It’s true. Even as a babe, she was mild and sweet-tempered,” Petrus insisted.

“Sweet-tempered,” Mandero said, nodding. By the Fates, how he missed her . . . and, yet, it had only been a matter of hours since they were last . . . together. He stretched and arched his back, suddenly keenly aware of the deep raking marks upon his back. His Alessandra, beautiful and charming, yes, but she had a tongue as sharp as the talons which gouged his back last night during their lovemaking. He thought then of the horrid *thing* she became in that last moment and wondered if it could be considered lovemaking now that the demonic nature of the *mulló* she was had begun to take over.

“. . . It was all quite a scandal, him marrying Jekima so suddenly when he had been courting a nobleman’s daughter from Santa Margherita, I think it was.” Petrus sighed. “She took young Luciana and made her home with him, here at the estates we come to.” He pointed to a crossroad about a hundred yards ahead. “To the right

is Casa Battista. The old don was peaceable enough. We will take the road to the left, to the estates of Davizzi.”

“We are so close?” della Guelfa remarked, looking around at the quiet country setting without sight of workers or herdsman or field hands.

Petrus nodded, squinting. “Aye, we are. These are some of Davizzi’s orchards, the wilder end. Mostly he works the lands beyond his *maniero*.”

“I should go ahead, then,” della Guelfa said, looking to Mandero. “How should I announce you, Maggiore?”

“Tell him that I ride with my squad of vigilare and some kinsmen of his daughter,” Mandero said.

Delia Guelfa saluted and spurred his horse on.

“So, *Meero-kak*, what should I expect from my father-in-law?”

“I wouldn’t tell him he *was* your father-in-law, were I you. Leave yourself the grieving affianced and tell him as little about matters as you can, though I doubt he’ll be overly curious.”

“You think not? Alessandra was— *is* his daughter and—”

“She was buried in the graveyard of la famiglia reale. To his mind, no doubt, better even than marriage to you.”

“Surely not!” Mandero protested.

“I did not say he does not grieve ... in his own way, but he has a contessa now who made Alessandra’s last years here a misery. She’s convent raised, that one, and has little patience for our ways. Her heart is with the witch-hunters to be sure and she’s made this a site where we don’t linger overlong.”

“How do you mean?”

“She sends the older lads to molest our women. One year, under the guise of hunting, she felled one of our prize horses right out from under a lad of ten. The boy was lucky to have only a broken leg and some lost teeth.”

“Are you sure? I mean, could her intent be mistaken?” Mandero asked.

“The *chavo* is my grandson and I was first to his side. She made sure ‘twas clear such accidents might happen again,” Petrus replied. He looked pointedly at Mandero. His anger shone clear in his eyes, and as hot as if the incident had just happened.

“Has the new Contessa Davizzi been acquainted with the White King’s Laws?”

Petrus laughed shortly. “The White King’s Law is a fine bit of paper, and where the White King is, the White King rules, but this was private land and the contessa reminded us of it.”

“What did Alessandra say? Or her father?”

“The conte had just left, taking his daughter to the White King’s court and leaving

the lands in the care of his steward and his wife. We had been here to see your wife on her way. We left that day,” Petrus said.

“Then this was . . . what? Little more than a year ago!”

“Artaros is twelve now, so I won’t argue your reckoning,” Petrus said with a shrug.

“Did you report this?” Madero asked.

“To whom? We are almost halfway betwixt Girgenti and Palermo without a friendly force to count on between.”

“I would not count upon Colonello Russo and his men in Girgenti as a friendly force either,” Madero said, “despite his hospitality.”

“Yes, I learned you were not an overly cautious man yesterday,” Petrus said, rubbing his shoulder that had taken, thankfully, only a grazing wound. “Considering we were out-manned, your plan saw us through what might have been an ugly little misadventure.”

“A little bit of caution beforehand is better than any repairs after the course.”

“Yes, that, too, is true,” Petrus said quietly. He shifted uneasily in the saddle, pointedly looking to the road ahead and behind. “Which brings us to last night’s misadventure. You understand that she practically killed Grasni? She fed off the priest and . . . and ... I was a fool to agree to putting the priest in the *vardo*. I should have known what would happen. Now, she has reached the stage where she has learned to feed off the living. I do not know all that there is to know about the *mulló*, though I’m sure you’re already more familiar than I and neither of us yet knows what more we will learn before the adventure is done. She is your beloved and I understand that, but she is something more now, and you must be on your guard.”

“Yes, *Meero-kak*, I know,” Madero said. He still could not shake the vision of Alessandra’s transformation beneath him, while they were still joined in the act of love. He could not bear to let his mind slip toward what her change had felt like.

“Soon, she might be strong enough to bleed your entire squad of all their life’s blood. I have not seen it, but I’ve heard tell it is a horrific death. When the time comes—”

“Her love for me won’t stop her,” Madero finished. “Yes, I’ve recognized that.”

“Your priest, Gabera, swears the *vardo* is haunted,” Petrus said.

“To an extent, he is right, is he not?” .

“To an extent,” Petrus replied. “Your man returns.”

Delia Guelfa pulled his horse to a halt beside Madero still facing back to where they had come and the rest of the party. “The contessa bids you welcome, Maggiore, and says that she will lay out a table for the vigilare and the priest.”

Madero snapped his mouth shut, knowing he looked the fool staring at his second-in-command as he had. “She was this specific, Lieutenant?”

Delia Guelfa's cheeks reddened. "Yes, Signore, the Contessa Davizzi was *very* specific."

"It is as I expected," Petrus said with a snort.

"And the conte? Was he there?" Madero asked.

"No, Signore. The contessa said that her husband was attending to business elsewhere. It is possible that he will return this evening, but it may be a few days. We are welcome to make camp near the house."

"She was specific here, too, as to who might camp?" Madero asked.

Again, della Guelfa's face reddened as he nodded. "If you will forgive the impertinence, Maggiore, but your lady's life with this woman as her stepmother must have been hellish." He shook his head. "One can certainly find it easy to believe that she came from the continent. She has the look and sound of coming from one of the Germanic states."

"We find intolerance enough within our own borders, Lieutenant. There are continentals who have a civil mind," Madero replied.

"What do I tell the others?"

"I will meet with the contessa, but I see no reason that anyone else suffer her. Take the road westerly toward Santa Margherita, we might yet make it by nightfall. If not, we shall camp along the Belice," Madero said.

"Do you wish me to accompany you to the—"

"No, the obligation is a private one," Madero said. "I daresay I'll join the rest of you shortly."

"What about me?" Petrus asked.

Madero turned toward the older man, surprised once more. "You would put yourself though such a meeting?"

Petrus nodded, "For Artaros' sake, if no one else's, she must see that she has not frightened us away, but that we simply choose anything other than her company." He nodded to della Guelfa as the lieutenant took his leave of them. He paused, frowning, "It occurs to me that, perhaps, you wish to make a good impression and my antagonizing her would—"

"I have no interest in currying the favor of a person whose mind is so narrow as to dismiss another's value based upon their bloodline. She may be my mother-in-law, but she doesn't know it and, if I can help it, she never will," Madero replied as the two men rounded a curve in the road.

The courtyard to the Davizzi *maniero* house lay alongside the road, so close that they blended into one another. Servants were scurrying from the house bearing food and drink, as several able-bodied men set up a grand wooden table—nothing so fancy that it might have come from within the house proper, but was, perhaps, the dining table for the servants. Madero felt a pang at his short notice. These men and women were, no doubt, preparing to serve Madero and his men what was set aside

for their own dinner. He took a deep breath. Just as well then that he had decided not to stay or trouble the contessa further.

While it would not have been the first time Mandero was served a meal by a hospitable landowner, he could not help but notice the table was set closer to the stables than the house and the crudeness of the offering. His own mother would have been mortified to set such a table and his parents had been only minor landowners at best.

The front door opened and a tall, milk-pale woman with silver-golden hair and an imposing demeanor stepped out onto the high landing. She was of indeterminate age though it generally took someone more than two decades to develop the imperious demeanor the woman had. She was dressed in black, her gown of the current fashion and her hair was drawn up in a simple, austere style. She reviewed the table as the meal was being laid out and called out instructions to one of the attendants. As though she knew she was being watched, the contessa turned toward them.

Mandero saluted her and dismounted. Petrus was at his side in an instant and took Joro's reins, giving Mandero a knowing grimace. Quickly brushing himself off with his kidskin riding gloves, he tucked the cuffs into his belt and proceeded on.

The contessa remained on the landing of her portico, watching his approach.

At the base of the curving twin staircases, Mandero stopped and bowed deeply. "Signora Davizzi, I am honored. I am Maggiore Mandero Ercole di Montago of Her Majesty's Escalade."

The pale blonde woman looked down her nose from the height of her balcony. After a moment, she sighed as though pained and spread an ornate fan. Waving it idly, she came down the steps and held out her hand near the base. Mandero offered his wrist and assisted the woman down the final stairs.

Mandero motioned to the meal being laid out, because there could be no mistaking it for a feast of any sort—not even the hastily organized sort wherein the larder is laid open. "Please tell me, Madonna, that you have not gone to all this trouble for my company!"

"It is most certainly ..." she paused, staring pointedly at Petrus. "It is most certainly intended for you and *your* men."

"I must humbly beg your pardon, Madonna. When I sent my man to announce me, it was merely so that I might stop and pay my respects. I thought it unseemly to pass so near the Davizzi estates and not stop considering the negotiations that had been underway until ..." Mandero faltered, staring into the woman's cold blue eyes. Not because he feared her, but because he could not shake the image of Alessandra under this woman's merciless care. He coughed into his hand and finished his sentence. "... until so recently."

"You!" the contessa pointed to one of the boys standing by, "Bring the maggiore wine!"

"Perhaps some for Petrus, as well, Madonna?" Mandero pressed, beckoning him

closer.

“I host none of those *schmutziger Ziguenerbastards*,” Alessandra’s stepmother said sharply, using her childhood language as her speech became indelicate and therefore unsuitable for a woman of breeding. Her meaning, however, was abundantly clear.

Mandero glanced at Petrus and then back to the contessa. “Perhaps you are not familiar with Signore Lendaro. He is ... was Signorina Alessandra’s uncle.”

He waved off the proffered glass of wine. He would not take anything from this woman under false pretenses or what appeared to be her conditions.

The contessa wrinkled her nose in distaste. “My stepdaughter could not help what her mother was. I did what I could to make a lady out of her—what was possible after that sister of hers had had her say over her upbringing all those years.”

“You mean the Duchessa di Drago?”

The contessa’s features stiffened and grew colder than before, if it were truly possible. “She married well above her station in life.”

“Ah,” Mandero murmured, shifting from one foot to the next.

“Let me give you some advice, Maggiore,” the contessa said gruffly. “You would be well-minded to have a care over who your traveling companions are. The likes of him can’t be trusted.”

“But he is, after all, my lady’s kin and I made no secret of my own heritage in the marriage negotiations,” Mandero replied evenly.

“*Your* heritage, Maggiore?” the contessa repeated, staring at him with growing alarm.

“Indeed, Madonna. My own mother was of the Ro-mani blood,” Mandero said.

The contessa took a full step back, away from him. “Well, then, you know the sort of company you keep very well.”

“Indeed, Madonna, as well as those I meet along the way in my travels for the queen.”

“You will not be staying, then?” the contessa said, her voice rising with her pique.

“No, Madonna, I fear we cannot. The day is young and we have many miles yet to go,” Mandero said, giving her a small bow. “I thank you for your trouble and beg your forgiveness over the confusion.”

“Of course,” she replied, moving a little farther away.

“You will tell your husband that we came?”

Her icy blue eyes never looked away from his. She nodded.

“Then I shall trouble you no longer, Madonna,” Mandero said with another bow, deeper and with a flourish of his doffed hat. He would have sworn, had anyone asked, that he felt needlelike daggers piercing his back all the way to the roadside

and his horse.

XXVII

“Let us take warning from another’s wounds.”

—St. Jerome

Luciana scratched at the door to Idala’s innermost rooms. As the night before, the queen was not receiving visitors by order of the Royal Physician, but then, Luciana was neither a guest nor a woman to be easily intimidated by the pronouncements of physicians.

The door opened, after several attempts to draw the attention of an attendant. A young woman peered into the atrium, her expression perturbed.

“Giuletta? Who is it?”

Luciana was shocked by the queen’s voice. It sounded ragged and weak, neither of which she had ever known Idala to be.

The girl glanced over her shoulder and glowered at Luciana. “Haven’t you been told that the queen is not receiving—”

“I know perfectly well what the physician has said. I, however, am family,” Luciana replied, standing as tall as she could and taking the pose of one who would be reckoned with. She gently but firmly pressed the door and the young handmaid back.

“Giuletta?” the queen called.

Luciana brushed past the young woman and into Idala’s sitting room. She paused, momentarily alarmed by the muted light and cloying smell of heavy incense and burning perfumed oils. It took her a full moment to get her bearings in the sitting room, long enough for Giuletta to move once more into her path to Idala’s side.

Giuletta looked up at Luciana, her jaw jutted determinedly.

“Child, do not persist. I have no temper for it. I commend your service to Her Majesty and your loyal protection, but she needs me,” Luciana said.

“Luciana? Is that you?” the queen called from her daybed.

“Yes, Majesty,” Luciana replied. This time she took the maid by the shoulders and moved her to one side. “Here I am.”

“But I thought it was agreed you would not return to Citteauroea so soon? There will be talk now that you are back,” the queen said.

“There are matters more important than what people might say about me,” Luciana replied, squinting in the hazy light. As alarmed as she had been about the queen’s voice, the sight of her made Luciana’s heart leap to her throat.

Idala lay on her rose chaise propped up by pillows. Her face was pale and gaunt, her eyes hollow-looking, with deep rings around them. Her dark brown hair was lackluster, pulled back into one braid which fell over her shoulder. The hand that took Luciana’s was frail and clammy. “Why have you come? You should be in seclusion now.”

Luciana allowed herself to be drawn down onto the chaise beside the queen. “I came because Stefano and I thought we might be needed and so, it seems, we are.” She reached up and stroked Idala’s cheek, tucking a tendril of hair behind her ear. She sighed heavily, scanning the room for occupants and for some relief from the oppressive atmosphere. She bent and kissed the queen’s cheek again, saying, “Wait.”

Luciana rose and turned full circle. “No ladies-in-waiting except the girl?” She shook her head and turned again, spotting the aforementioned young woman seated in a chair on the far side of the room, her expression, one of gloom with the air of a schoolgirl anticipating a chastising. “Giuletta?”

The girl rose and curtsied obediently. “Your Grace?”

“Come. Let us open some windows. Fresh air and light to see by will do us all good,” Luciana said, proceeding immediately to the curtain which hid the large-paned doors leading to the queen’s private solar.

“But, Your Grace, the physician has me burning incenses to balance her humors and—”

Luciana paused, turning to look at Giuletta. “Women were having babies before there were physicians or incenses! She needs to breathe fresh air and have light to see by. That, most assuredly, has never done anyone harm.”

“But the physician—”

“Do as she says, Giuletta,” the queen called from her bed.

“As you say, Majesty,” the girl conceded, clearly on the brink of tears.

Luciana shook her head and pushed back the heavy curtains and flung wide the doors. Sunlight seemed to blow into the room on a soft fall breeze with a whirl of new fallen leaves and birdsong. With that done she took a deep breath and returned to Idala.

Stefano would have been beside himself had he seen her hoist the weight of the tapestries and to be absolutely truthful, after having done the exercise, she would not have blamed him. She stopped, feeling the child within her roll and kick. Luciana caressed her stomach. Each sign of the life within her was a moment to treasure. She breathed in, savoring the moment, though she did not tarry long with the queen waiting for her.

In the clear light of day, the queen's appearance was ghastly, wraithlike. In spite of better intentions, Luciana gasped out loud and hurried back to the chaise. "Oh, Idala, what have you done?"

Idala understood the question all too well, Luciana saw it in her eyes before the queen looked away. "It is just the two children I grow within me for the Tyr-rhian crown. After the children are born . . . after, I will be my old self."

Luciana shook her head fiercely. "The babes do not come until after the new year and already you languish. Why didn't you come to me?"

"When you pursued your sister's murderer? I should ask you then?"

"Yes," Luciana replied softly. How could she have so forsaken her friend and sister? "Magic is not to be tampered with lightly."

"Alban needed another heir. I— Do not be angry with me, Luciana, I won't be able to stand it."

Luciana shook her head again. "I am not angry, no, not angry, but I have failed you utterly if you went to another source for help in this." She leaned forward intently, "Idala, you *must* tell me who helped you. Do you understand? Your very life may depend upon it ... and those precious children as well."

The queen looked alarmed, her hands moving protectively over her own abdomen. "Not them!"

"If something happens to you before they are born, what do you think the fate of the children will be?"

"But I have taken great care, obeyed the physician's every counsel—"

"But it was not a physician's council which got you with child, nor was it Alban alone," Luciana said, gripping her friend's hands. "You are no witch or caster of spells. You do not understand the powers you were wielding. Did you intentionally include me in your spell?"

The queen blushed and let her eyes drop to her lap.

"I thought as much," Luciana murmured with a nod.

"But magic alone did not get you with child. Stefano played some part in it. Tell me that you do not want this child of yours!" Idala challenged.

"No, I'll not say that. I do indeed want this babe and once we were reconciled, Stefano and I would have gotten about the business of having another," Luciana said.

"Would you? Would you really? After you lost the boy?" Idala asked, her shadowed eyes piercing as she watched Luciana.

"I would have had my reservations, yes, but it was not your place to decide this for me," Luciana said.

"But you and Stefano are happy again, aren't you?"

"Yes, but that is not the point. You meddled with forces you did not and do not

understand. *Who* did you consult?"

"Why is that so important?" Idala asked tiredly.

"It will then give me some indication as to the spells they would have you use to increase your fertility," Luciana said.

"And then what would you do? Would you take the babes from my very womb? Will you do so with your own *quello piccolo*?"

Luciana stood up, surprised and offended by the question. "I thought we knew one another better than that, Idala, that you might look on me as I consider you, a sister—no less because it is through marriage. I should have known better once I learned you used magic and did not consult me even when I was on hand, no matter that you even cast *upon* me without asking!" Heartsore, she turned toward the door, struggling to make a composed retreat.

"Luciana! No, don't go! Stay! Please?" the queen called.

Luciana stopped. She felt sickened even at her own joy for the child within her. Once a spell was used, all she—experienced in the ways of casting—had to do was fall quiet and listen and the strains of dark magic sang its way to her. Life would be so much easier if she simply stopped and listened, but she could not. She had been controlling what magic she used, observing—for the most part—her husband's plea to avoid magic. And, now she learned that the very little one they sought to protect from magic was made by it and made by an author unknown. She wanted nothing more than to find some silent place and cast upon the child to hear what strains of music it sang.

"Forgive me, *Sorella*," the queen pleaded.

Calling her sister now ... what did it mean? Luciana bit her lip. "Of course, Majesty."

"You do not understand. I sought only to protect these children. What difference whose magic helped plant the seed?" the queen wept.

Luciana tugged the lacy kerchief from her sleeve—slipped there to prevent the hidden bracelets and bangles on her arms from jangling—and turned, wiping her own eyes. "After so many weeks of trials with poisoners and the traffickers in ill-used spells who have gone so far as to steal my sister's body, how can you not understand that some magic is of a foul nature?"

"But you have said to me often that it was a matter of intent by the caster and the means to which they would go that determined good and bad magic," Idala said. She, too, daubed at her face with an embroidered kerchief.

"Oh, Idala!" Luciana sighed heavily and returned, taking the chair beside the queen's divan. "That is the simplest explanation, but the heart of the caster is judged not only by intent but what she ... or he ... chooses as her method, which of so many spells most exactly suits her plan."

The queen burst into tears again. "It seemed so simple then and . . . and I meant

you no harm!”

“I know, I know,” Luciana murmured, stroking the queen’s hand. “Had you but . . . no, we will not go there again.”

“I sent Giuletta for my instructions, Luciana. I spoke to the Guild mistress when she fitted me for a dress. I cannot remember the shop’s name and I do not know the proprietor—”

“Proprietress,” Luciana said with another, this time a heartfelt, sigh.

“You know of where I mean?” Idala asked, sniffing into her kerchief. A look of hope crossed by fear sparked in her eyes as she looked to Luciana.

“Yes, the shop would be The Dragon’s Hearth and the proprietress . . .”

Only then, as both the queen’s and Luciana’s tears had given way to hiccuping sighs, did Luciana become aware of another’s weeping. As she and Idala quieted, Luciana followed the queen’s gaze to the only other person in the room, the handmaid, Giuletta. Luciana’s stomach began to churn.

“What makes you weep so, Giuletta?” the queen asked.

The girl tried to gather her composure and eventually succeeded enough so that she could manage words. “Your Majesty, I did not know . . . I thought I was doing the right thing and he said that I was and I never thought . . .” At which point, she dissolved into tears again.

Luciana and Idala exchanged worried glances.

“What have you done?” the queen asked quietly.

“If I knew then . . . At the time, I thought . . .” Giuletta dissolved into tears again.

Taking Luciana’s hand for support, the queen sat up fully in her daybed. “What have you done, child? No more of your tears, just tell us so that we will know what to do.”

“I feared for your soul, Majesty, so I went to the cardinal,” Giuletta said in a rush before another storm of tears. “I-I didn’t know then that he was the opposite of everything I thought him to be!”

Idala reached out, grabbing Luciana’s hands. “What do we do now?” Idala asked. “I cannot lose my children . . . not to *him!*”

“*Never* to him,” Luciana vowed.

“Then what shall we do?” Idala asked, collapsing back onto her divan.

“As with everything else, we must discover what he has done and undo it,” Luciana resolved.

*“Destiny waits alike for the free man as well as for him enslaved by another’s
might.”*

—Aeschylus

Everywhere Alessandra turned, she saw the shock and horror on Mandero’s face. She could not escape it, could not close her eyes to it, could not wipe clean the slate of her memory. He had stared down at her, his silver fairy eye boring into the very ugliness of the corrupted spirit that was left.

She raged in her chamber, creating a whirlwind of gossamer funeral weeds and a cry that should have pierced the cardinal’s ears. He had stripped everything from her . . . her youth, her life, her beauty . . . she gagged at the sight of her drying corpse. She knelt, staring at the cadaver which had once been her mortal shell. *This* body, with its drying skin that felt like a soft dried apple and unbound hair, showed that some hint of her beauty remained here, but not in the most natural of the forms she took. It was the cardinal’s fault that she looked like this, that she had transformed into that abomination when she would have cast the spell that would give her just a little more time with her beloved, her beautiful Mandero!

She swept around the chamber again, her anger toward the cardinal mounting. She had drunk life’s fluid from the stranger in her *vardo*, and from her Uncle Petrus when he intruded. That accumulated energy made her restless spirit wild, but from Mandero she had also fed—from the love bites she had taken during their lovemaking—and the concentration of magical energy within her would have made her burst if she had had a truly mortal body. But, more importantly, Mandero had given her his seed, a very different and far more potent life’s fluid and it sparked within her, crackling through her like lightning through the night’s sky.

If *only* she knew where the cardinal was, she might have enough amassed strength to truly hurt *him* this time, instead of allowing him to cast upon her and her shell. As she looked at the body once more, she saw, for the first time, tendrils, leftover scraps of past attempts to control her through the body. She followed the tendrils, even as they escaped through a crack between the stone chamber and the large rock rolled into place to seal her tomb. But these tendrils of silk, instead of being the golden ones she used to find Mandero’s arms, were black and she knew immediately to whom they would lead her. She seized them gleefully and began to pull herself. . . into the whirling vortex, into nothingness where she could barely retain the consciousness of self, where nothingness wrapped itself around her and began to divide her thoughts, like dispersing herself as granules of sand in the four winds.

* * *

And then she became aware of herself. She, Ales-sandra, lady-wife to the handsome and good Mandero di Montago. The list of other titles and ties of kinship did not matter . . . except for one. She struggled to remember that other *one* who

equaled her Madero, who had tried to save her. Ah, memory! Her sister who had been almost mother to her . . . grasping again and again she at last remembered a childhood name . . . Lucia, but no more.

It was of no consequence now. No, all that mattered was the darkened room wherein lay a certain priest, prince of the Church and her immortal enemy, Cardinal Pius Enrico delle Torre.

Light and dark made no difference to her now. The room was lush with wealthy abundance. Gold-leafed frescoes covered the ceiling and wall. A painting of a man—the Christ, she thought—walking with a woman in red robes adorned the ceiling. Spindle-backed chairs and gateleg tables made of precious woods filled the room, waiting to be used. A rosewood secretary and accompanying bow-legged chair sat in the far corner, near the balcony. Ornate tapestries hung on walls and where they did not, paintings hung. A grand bed occupied a large portion of the room, big enough to hold half of Madero’s company of vigilares. A golden cornice high on the wall above the bed held massively embroidered draperies which encircled the head of the bed wherein lay the cardinal.

It was none of these fixtures, however, that captured Alessandra’s unwavering attention, for in her survey of the room she had noticed the movement of a being. She noted it because of how it moved, as though it floated like she did. Brother Tomasi’s final words to her rang in her head. “Not you. The other one.”

At the time, considering the cleric’s condition, she had paid him little mind. Now she understood all too well. She remembered time and again the glimmers she had sometimes noted hovering above the cardinal’s shoulder when he was casting and now she realized that she would never be lonely again, for there was, indeed, another “one,” another *mulló*.

Though the thing moved, it did not stray far from the cardinal’s side. By choice or control? For it to have been so hidden from her all this time, Alessa realized, it must have been part of the cardinal for many long years. This *mulló* had been denied its full mortal death for years, denied the Neverlands and been forced to serve one such as the cardinal. Alessandra’s clearest thought was that this ancient, undead Romani had lost what was left of its humanity and, with it, much if not all of what had kept it from an evil heart.

It continued to stare at Alessandra as she took it in and though she was *mulló* herself, she was suddenly very afraid.

As though sensing her fear, it left the cardinal’s side and came to her as a snake of fog, slithering on coils of nothingness, barely more than eyes and a mouth. It twined around her, slipping easily on its insubstantial coils and locking her in its clammy cool control. The eyes danced before hers, rubbing her face of nothingness against Alessa’s face in an intimate nuzzle. Its ice-cold, waxen tongue slid from the base of her throat up and over her face.

“So, the little pretty has found her own way.” The words tickled in her left ear. “Has she come to feed on the Master?” it whispered into the other ear . . . and then

the eyes were directly before Alessandra. Yellow, shot with red, the eyes stared into hers unblinkingly. Its coils shifted like oily smoke. “Or has the pretty come to feed the Master?”

XXIX

“We must as second best. . . take the least of two evils.”

—Aristotle

18 d’Septembre, 1684

“I’m surprised that you haven’t even attempted to speak to me before this,” Padre Gabera grumbled. He had taken a liking to Recluta Antoine’s cast-off white mule and rode her now at Mandero’s side.

Mandero nodded thoughtfully and took in a deep breath of sea air. They had left Corleone behind them and planned to make Palermo by nightfall. It was a hard pace, but the priest, despite the battering he had taken before falling into Mandero’s hands and all that had happened to him since, said that he was up to it.

“Tell me first, Padre,” Mandero said. “Would you have trusted me the other day? Having no real experience with either me or my men?” He raised his hand as the priest began to speak. “Answer not what you would say today but yesterday or the day before.”

The priest seemed to swallow his words. “I would have had good reason—”

“But of course you would, Signore. You were within the brotherhood of Magnus Ignique for what? Nearly three months, the bishop said, did he not? You could not have lasted there so long, if you gave your confidences too easily. You would have been discovered in a matter of hours. So, of course, I would, as a man of honor and one familiar with strategy, choose to let you *see* my men and me as we go about our business.”

The priest scratched his protruding stomach. He was the sort of man who was deceptively fit. While he looked like he was probably overly fond of the dinner plate, his bulk was more muscle than fat. “You’re, all of you, a strange lot I have not made head nor tails of, but I’ve seen you defend the weak, at least nod-dingly respect the dead, and protect my hide when it put you at the disadvantage. At this point, I’ve said my prayers and will take you on faith.”

“If that is your basis of trust, then so be it,” Mand-ero said agreeably. He rubbed

at where the cotton patch rested against his cheek. He wanted nothing more than to rip the thing off, but every time he tried to go without it, his silver eye saw little more than flashes and sparks of magic anywhere he looked . . . including at every member of his party. Grasni had assured him it was nothing more than the totems and charms Tyrrhians were inclined to use. He now regretted leaving it in place during his last tryst with Alessandra.

“I do not understand this business of your wife and the gypsies and that accursed wagon, but I assure you—”

Again Mandero raised his hand. “Padre, I am confident that you have many opinions, but while you are a part of this *kumpania*, you will follow my directives. The *vardo* ... I made a mistake by insisting that you sleep there. I offer my humble apologies. Beyond that, Signore, I have nothing to say about any of these things and I cannot be swayed. Am I understood?”

“But—”

“I think I was reasonably clear, Padre Gabera. Is there anything that bears repeating?” Mandero asked, turning to fully gaze upon the priest riding the smaller animal.

The priest glowered but shook his head. “I understand your . . . orders, Maggiore.”

Mandero nodded. “Do you wish to tell me about Magnus Ignique, or do you prefer to wait until you see the White King and Queen?”

“I do not know what of it needs telling, Maggiore di Montago,” Gabera replied stiffly. He sighed and stretched his broad shoulders. When he spoke next, the frost was gone from his tone and his expression had grown contemplative. “I am Tyrrhian by birth. I suppose that it was what attracted them to me. That and that I was Jesuit-trained and my order has been given the jurisdiction of responding to the heretics and protestants of the Holy Roman Church that have made themselves known, lo these many years. That and my familiarity with the sword.”

“Sword?” Mandero murmured, caught by surprise.

“You have not noticed the military acumen of the witch-hunters?”

“I thought that circumstantial. I battled some a few weeks back. I was alone. Had any of them known much about sword work, I would have been in some serious trouble.”

The priest chewed on the inside of his cheek and scratched his belly again. “I suppose that is the nature of things. The instigators, the so-called ‘*Padri del Mov-imento*,’ are losing track of their followers. Some take their own initiative rather than wait for the priest to be sent to them, to organize them.”

“Then this organization is born at the Vaticano?” Mandero asked, astonished that the Roman Church would so openly become involved. The Church, historically, carried a heavy fist against those royal houses throughout the known world that defied the beliefs and edicts of the Church, and struck more straightforwardly.

“Yes, but not as you think. If it were so, I would be forced to give up my collar,” Gabera said.

“How long has the Magnus Ignique been here in Tyrrhia? Do they attack any other country?”

The priest shook his head. “I think not. The bloodletting of Queen Elizabeth’s reign is too fresh in England, but here, the Catholics are not being hunted down and killed.”

“All the more reason for tolerance,” Mandero observed.

Again Gabera shook his head. “No, to the contrary. This philosophy state of Tyrrhia’s, it promotes that which the Church does not encourage. So, here, a Tyr-rhian Catholic is just as bad as an Anglican.”

“If you think that, then why do you still not fight with Magnus Ignique?” Mandero asked.

“Their methods are too extreme and the hearts of too many padri are not clear of hate. They have been swayed by the cardinal—”

“Cardinal delle Torre of Tyrrhia?”

The priest nodded. “One and the same. He stinks of madness, otherwise I might have been more taken with the movement, but any venture led by a madman is ill-fated, at best,” Gabera said with a shudder.

Somewhere a woman screamed. Mandero whirled Joro around, anticipating trouble with Grasni. She looked up from her horses, genuinely confused.

“Alert!” Mandero called to his men.

“The woman’s scream came from there!” Antoine called, motioning just over the hill they had passed.

“ ‘Twas a seagull, nothing more,” Lieutenant Dego Giordano proclaimed.

The scream sounded again. It was no seagull. Mandero spurred Joro in the woman’s direction, muttering imprecations at himself for having been too involved in conversation to pay much attention to the shoreline as they passed by it.

* * *

Alessandra felt the strength of the blood of three men and the life-giving seed of another inside her. The old *mulló* was strong, stronger than she might have imagined, but she was strong as well!

The cardinal, seemingly unaware of the immortal battle, had risen and gone about whatever were his daily obligations. They were aware of him, his movements, his search for power. What energies he needed that day were leached not from either one of them directly, but from the castoffs of their struggle which took place in that plane of existence just beyond the comprehension of mortal men. What awareness the cardinal had of them resulted in a headache, for which Alessandra was undeniably pleased.

She had broken through the crush of the other's coils, shattering its image and forcing it to reassemble. As it did, Alessa attacked with her talons, striking deep and sharp. She tried thinking of spells, of something to say or do that would make this *mulló* leave off.

The contemplation of spells led to a startling and obvious realization. If the cardinal had trapped another Romani for use in his spells, as he had her, then that other Romani, more than just "the Other" was now a Romani sister!

One spell slipped easily into Alessandra's mind, but there were no herbs, no candles to draw the *Fata* to her as helpers. She would simply have to try. Murmuring the words of the incantation slowed the other . . . her. Was she growing still at the sound of Romani words? Alessa did not wait to be sure. She pictured herself casting the spell, using the herbs, anointing her forehead and temples with the scented oil newly gained, and made her way into the heart of the other, her sister.

The *mulló-pen*, the Romani sister, was awash in memories, the very fiber of her being *was* memories. To the very core of her, the memories of the cardinal flooded through . . . and everywhere was the poison of hatred, every fiber of the other *mulló's* being resounded with unbridled hate and anger. Alessandra recognized the anger and responded to it.

In the core of the other, her Romani *pen*, Alessandra searched for something familiar, a name, but only a young woman's screams rang in her head "I curse you! *I—curse—you!*" From all sides the words bombarded her, along with the stench of burning—burning human flesh, human hair.

The other folded itself inside itself, suffocating Alessandra, pressing against her nose and mouth. At first, Alessa struggled toward freedom, toward air, away from memories that were becoming her own. And then she stopped. She needed no air, breath served no purpose. Like a fish into water, Alessandra dove back into the pain and fear searching for a name, an understanding. The other battled against Alessa, a new fear raging inside it.

The story of the *mulló's* afterlife played itself before her like a minstrel's tale gone mad. Flashes of life, flashes of a priest, glaring truth—the cardinal as he was early on, harangued by the *mulló*.

Again Alessandra dove deeper, playing out every ounce of life fluid she had absorbed. It would mean she would be vulnerable to this sister *mulló*, an easy toy for the cardinal, but somehow, Alessa sensed that this was far more important. "I curse you!" rang in her ephemeral ears, echoed through the illusory fibers of her nonbeing. Deeper she dug, to the heart of a Gypsy's first and last curse, uttered upon a pile of fagots, her hands chained behind her back, smoke choking her while heat ravaged the bottom of her feet and flames began to dance along the bottom of her skirt. "*I—curse—you!*" A cry uttered from tortured lungs that became the death chant in place of the others' cries for mercy.

This *pen* sank her last conscious thought into this curse, staring at the youthful priest who condemned her to the flames. She willingly embraced becoming a *mulló*,

instead of fighting it. Her soul leaped from her body with the very last utterance . . . “*I— curse— you!*” and wedded her life’s essence to the most horrible of their people’s fates.

That very night, her *mulló* had sought out the priest, had found him, had claimed him, had joined her unformed soul to his body, becoming a part of him suckling her soul with his very body. And where corruption had been, the seed was sown. *She, mulló-pen*, had *become* her curse, slowly rotting every fiber of self-righteousness into the cesspit of the Cardinal delle Torre as he presented himself today.

Alessa released her hold upon her *mulló-pen*, having no name with which to summon her, but an understanding was born. A twinning of curses was wound tight: “*We . . . curse . . . you!*”

And Alessandra slept.

* * *

Luciana rose from her chair by the queen’s divan at the sound of scratches on the door. A particular pattern of scratches that she recognized and so, sent Giuletta back to her needlework. She crossed the queen’s chamber, scented with medicant herbs allowed to flow freely with the breeze that swept through the suite of rooms. Glancing back at Idala and the handmaid, she slipped into the antechamber and greeted her husband with an ardent, welcoming kiss which was wholeheartedly returned.

Feeling breathless and just a little dizzy, she allowed Stefano to set her at a proper distance before leaning over and brushing kisses on her nose and lips.

“By heaven above, I never get tired of that!” Stefano whispered with a rakish grin.

“Whatever do you mean, Your Grace?” she asked cheekily.

Stefano chuckled and pulled her into his arms.

Like this, with the child between them, Luciana could almost believe that they would be safe and that all would be well. By the Sisters Three, she prayed hard enough for it to be so. Until now, this pregnancy had been remarkably easy, certainly compared to the last one and Idala’s latest. Her body welcomed this child and grew bounteous toward the day . . . at her reckoning still five months away.

Though their pregnancies had taken at much the same time, watching her, Luciana was sure that the queen would not be able to stay that course. Idala looked decidedly better under the combined attentions of the Royal Physician and herself—not that she would admit it to him any more than he would admit it to her.

“How does my sister fare?” Stefano asked, peering nervously over Luciana’s head.

Luciana controlled the protective, instinctive urge to pull the door shut behind her. “She sleeps now, or I would invite you in. She does much better than I found her yesterday.”

“The king said that he was pleased with the change in her,” Stefano said with a

nod.

“He looks little better than she. I barely held my tongue upon sight of him last night,” Luciana whispered, shaking her head.

“So you said, my dear.” Stefano chuckled her gently beneath the chin, but his smile, however faint, did not reach his amber-brown eyes.

“What is it you’re not telling me?”

“Is it so easy to read me?” Stefano asked, then held up his hands. “Let us pretend that I did not ask you that. It is the ... the *dukkerin*, you call it. Yes?”

She kissed his cheek. “You see? You are the apt student after all.”

“Would that I had your skills or that you could be spared from my sister’s side,” Stefano murmured. He closed his eyes and shook his head, his hand touching her stomach. “You are supposed to be in confinement and this journey to Citteauroea was improper.”

“But I did not guide you wrong, did I? We were ... We *are* needed here.”

“Desperately,” Stefano agreed with a nod. “The Palantini is as much in distress as the White King and his queen.”

“The king’s own council?” Luciana gasped. “Do they doubt him? Alban has not become so infirm that he cannot perform his duties, has he?”

Stefano shook his head. “He tires more easily and for a man in his prime . . .” He tapped a finger to her lips as she started to speak. “I know. I have spoken with them. He is our king, he still rules justly. I have bid the council mind the queen. Theirs is a love match. *That* has never been denied. It would be worrisome to me if Alban did *not* reflect some concern for his wife’s condition.”

“But . . . ?”

“They are . . . anxious, and rightly so. I fear for the king as much as you fear for the . . . for my sister,” Stefano said. “He is not himself . . . not fully, not the man I grew up with. A ride, followed by lovemaking or swordplay—”

“It is all the same, of course,” Luciana murmured.

“Your Grace!” Stefano whispered. He pulled her into his arms and kissed her hard on the lips. “While there may be *some* similarities, trust me, no swordsman is so anxious to sheath his weapon as the man in chambers.”

Someone squeaked behind Luciana.

Luciana turned to discover the crimson-faced Giuletta. She moved as though to step out of her husband’s arms, but he held fast. Sniffing, Luciana patted her flushed cheeks. “Pray, what is it, child?”

“I—” Giuletta stopped what she had begun to say, chewing upon her upper lip. No doubt she had intended to protest her assumed youth and considered the better of it. Still blushing, she pointed behind her. “The queen . . . she is asking for you, Your Grace.”

“For me?” Stefano asked.

Luciana shook her head. “Give her a day more. I fear she could not stand the expression in your eyes if you saw her now.” She turned back to Giuletta. “Tell Her Majesty that I will be with her in a moment and see if you can get her to drink more of the mulled wine.”

“Since we have but a moment more . . .” Stefano sighed and withdrew a note, unsealed, bearing her handwriting.

Luciana immediately felt her face turning red again. She reached behind her and pulled the door shut. “I had planned to tell you of this tonight.”

“But of course,” Stefano murmured. He spread the paper open with one hand and read, “T entreat you, in all due confidence, to call upon one lady proprietor of the shop called The Dragon’s Hearth and bid her attend me and the queen at once. ‘ ”

He looked at her quietly, but his displeasure was obvious to see. “I thought we had discussed this . . . during the pregnancy ... I have already been most tolerant, I believe, and that business with your sister . . .” He shuddered, clearly unable to say more. “Tell me that I am wrong, *mi amore*. Tell me that this Dragon’s Hearth is not an establishment of the sort it very much sounds like it is.”

“I will not lie to you, Stefano,” Luciana said quietly.

He smiled grimly. “No, but you would go around me. Did you think that the desk sergente would not bring this to my attention?”

“I had hoped that he would do what he was bid to do,” Luciana replied, crossing her arms over her bosom. “There is magic at play in the illness of the queen . . . quite possibly even in the king’s state. It—”

“But you promised me, for the child’s sake,” Stefano protested.

Luciana shook her head in frustration. If only the man had done as he was bid instead of involving himself in her marriage! “I have not known how to tell you this, Stefano, but the child in my womb, just as those in the queen’s, is there, in part, by magic.”

“What have you done?” Stefano whispered, staring at her.

Stung, Luciana fought the ready tears. “I? Nothing. I seek only to undo what harm has been done. Your sister cast the spell and had it been with my guidance, she would not have involved us in the matter and the cardinal would never have been consulted.”

“My sister? The cardinal? This makes no sense, Lucia!”

“Luciana!”

She broke from his grasp. “Please ... if you have ever loved me, please see that the proprietress is brought here forthwith,” she whispered. “I—I must go to the queen.” Luciana turned her back upon her husband and stepped quickly into the queen’s chamber, snapping the door shut behind her.

* * *

“I curse you!”

Mandero followed the woman’s screams until at last in a cove completely unnoticed before, well below the road, he found her. She was strangely dressed in vibrant colors and several layers. Her hair was covered in a turban of sorts and a dark cloth in which she must have wrapped herself was being swept from the beach by the waves. She wrestled with one man, while five others looked on laughing.

“I curse you, *cani turchi!*” the woman swore again, flinging her fists wildly at her attacker. “*Serbest b’rak-mak beni!*”

Mandero did not need the woman to identify the men as Turks; he recognized them by their dress and the curved swords they carried. He had fought them on many beachheads in his tenure. Pirates, the lot of them, scavenging, pillaging, and raping . . . apparently even this one who, though dressed as one of theirs, spoke in clear Tyrrhian words, jumbled with what the maggiore presumed to be Turkish.

“Who has the best shot?” Mandero called to his men.

“I do!”

The vigilare turned to stare at the upstart Recluta, Antoine, pulling a scorpinini from his saddle as he slid off his horse.

“You?” Aiutante d’Este scoffed.

Very seriously, Antoine de Conde scanned the disbelieving faces of his fellow vigilare and, finally, turned to Mandero. “Name your shot, Maggiore. I have seen them shoot.”

Mandero nodded, dismounting and signaling his men to do the same. “If he grabs her, finish him. Do you hear? Don’t let him get her on that boat . . . any of you,” he commanded. “Conde gets first shot.” So saying, Mandero pulled his sword and yelled as loudly and forcefully as he could in an effort to be heard over the gusts of wind off the sea. Far from shore, he noted the Turkish cruiser. “Release the woman!”

Immediately, all of the Turks went for their swords and the one upon the beach reached for the woman. Reached, but did not touch. The first bolt caught him in the eye and the second in the vicinity of his heart. One or both had the efficient effect of dropping the man where he stood.

The woman scrambled away from her fallen attacker, pointing up to Mandero’s men and himself on the road above her. “You see? The Escalade comes to my rescue! Soon there will be more!” the woman cried.

“My men are prepared to shoot!” Mandero yelled. He pointed to Dego Giordano. “Show them, they speak that language.”

The second lieutenant stood at the edge of the cliff and aimed at the man closest to the woman and shot a bolt narrowly missing his hand where it rested on the rowboat.

The men below yelled out in their native languages, some to the woman, others to Madero. More importantly, the two men outside the boat began to push it back into the water and the oarsmen set to work.

“Brambilla, watch them. Delia Guelfa, with me,” Madero ordered. He paused briefly to study the rocky cove and figure the best way down. It would be a tricky climb. The rock was mostly hard-packed sand that gave when enough weight was placed upon it. After sliding the first dozen feet and just catching himself before pitching the rest of the long way down, Madero called up. “Delia Guelfa, mark your steps. Giordano! Find me a better path up! Our good woman will not make her way up here!”

“Aye, Maggiore!” the second lieutenant called back, saluting sharply.

The journey to the beach was not his most graceful, but he managed it with a bit of care and a good grip upon whatever came to hand. Delia Guelfa followed in his footsteps carefully and avoided kicking sand in either his face or his path. As he made his way, Madero noted that the woman collected her wrap and stood waiting, with folded arms over her chest. Thankfully, she did not appear to be the hysterical type. He had had more than his share of adventures, daring battles, narrow escapes, and prickly charges these past weeks and she was about to be enough of a predicament considering that she could not ride inside Alessandra’s *vardo* which would appear to be the most obvious conveyance.

Reaching the beach, Madero took a moment to dust his hands and clothes—long enough for della Guelfa to finish his descent—before going to greet his new ward.

She stood stiffly before him, buffeted by the wind off the sea. While he covered the last distance, the woman had unbound the cloth confining her hair. Seeing the rich, red locks, Madero had an unmistakable premonition of trouble, but the damage was done and he could not have done anything other than he had. Yet he also could not escape the odd feeling that the entire encounter seemed almost like something staged for his benefit.

“Madonna, I am Maggiore di Montago of the White Queen’s Escalade,” he said, bowing before her. He motioned to Marco, “And this is Lieutenant della Guelfa, my second.”

“White Queen?” the woman repeated archly. “Then Orsinio is dead?”

“Indeed, Madonna, for these past nine years,” Madero said, dread eating at his gut. “The king—”

“There is no king!” the woman proclaimed, throwing her head back and staring down her nose at him. Like her sister, his late enemy, she was tall and haughty no matter what her circumstances. “I am Ortensia Elettra Rosaria Novabianco, rightful Queen of Tyrrhia!”

XXX

*“Yea, even mine own familiar friend, whom I trusted:
who did eat of my bread, hath laid great wait for me.”*

—Book of Common Prayer, Psalm 41 v.9

Cristoval tapped young Ludvico’s primer. “Continue the lesson, *figlio*, before the light fails you.”

The deMedici bastard gingerly removed the black gloved hand from covering his eyes. “Pray tell me that we are nearing Palermo, Don Battista,” he said with great weariness.

Today, he was dressed from head to toe in deep black, from the plume in his black hat to the bows in his lovelocks right down to those upon his heeled shoes. Likewise, he had ordered Ludvico, Cristoval’s own son, to wear a dove-gray suit coat with matching bow tying back his hair. He chose a light teal coat and pantaloons with contrasting silver brocade vest and also the single bow in his hair for Cristoval. The deMedici had taken up the humiliating habit of ordering how he, Don Cristoval Battista, and Ludvico dressed the first day after they left the Battista estate!

Cristoval glanced out the window. They were yet upon the seaside road and, therefore, still some distance from the city. Even as he shook his head and started to speak, however, the carriage driver slowed.

“If we are not in Palermo, why does the man stop?” Prince deMedici raised the curtain and looked out his window. “Damn the Escalade!” he grumbled.

Taking his sword cane in hand, the deMedici struck the roof of the carriage, just above Cristoval’s head, forcing him to duck or risk being hit. “Drive on!” he bellowed to the driver.

“But ‘tis the Escalade, Your Highness, and they are waving us down!” the driver’s assistant—Cristoval’s stable boy—called down through the vent in the roof just behind the driver’s seat.

“I am royalty! I do not answer to the Escalade—”

“Papa! Look at the funny lady! She has red hair just like fire!” Ludvico exclaimed as he peered out through the curtained window.

“Curb your son, Don Battista! I’ll not have him peering out like some churl!” deMedici snapped. He glowered at Cristoval. “Did you hear what that woman was saying?”

Cristoval shook his head as he moved his son to the other side of the carriage. “No, Your Highness.”

“I am surrounded by fools and incompetents!” deMedici growled, jabbing at the roof once more with the head of his cane. “Stop! Stop, I say! Back the carriage!”

The coach rocked to a halt. Arrayed in the paraphernalia of coach rigging, the horses seemed reluctant to back up no matter how the driver coaxed and cajoled.

Muttering further imprecations, Prince deMedici twisted the door latch and let himself out, snapping the door closed when Cristoval moved to follow him.

“Stay here with the boy,” deMedici commanded.

Feeling chastised and put out, Cristoval crossed his arms and leaned back.

Ludvico looked up at him, tears sparkly in his innocent eyes. “Is he angry with me, Papa” the boy asked.

Cristoval shook his head. “No, figlio. Now, mind your primer.”

“I don’t want the prince to be angry with me, Papa,” Ludvico said. “Will you explain for me?” the boy pressed.

Cristoval sighed. “Of course I will speak to him. You study.”

“Yes, Papa,” Ludvico replied, looking much more at ease.

So far, nothing Cristoval had been able to say or do moved the prince. Before the day the White King elevated him to his new rank—was it only a week ago?—the difference in their stations had truly been minor, excepting of course, for the station of deMedici’s father to whom Cristoval was financially, politically, and morally indebted. Yet, to young Ludvico, the deMedici bastarde had always been a prince among men.

Determined to get at least civility for his son, Don Battista pushed wide the carriage door and leaped lightly to the ground. He followed deMedici, catching up to him just as the other man reached the Escalade vigilare. Considering his irascible temper just a few short breaths ago, Cristoval was shocked by the deMedici’s demeanor.

The deMedici bowed deeply, “And I, dear lady, am Prince Pierro Novabianco e deMedici. If I can be of service—”

“*Prince Novabianco?*” the woman repeated. Her eyes squinted as she looked over deMedici’s shoulder at Cristoval for a moment and then returned to deMedici. “Have you married my sister, Bianca, then?”

“Indeed, Madonna, I have, only to—”

“She did not claim the throne in my absence?” the woman asked, frowning at the agitated men surrounding her. “I was prepared to fight her over my rightful title.”

“Alas, even if she had been crowned queen ...” deMedici made a pretty show of choosing his words. “I am afraid, dear Lady, that I am no husband, but a widower.”

“Widower?” the woman repeated.

Cristoval watched her as she talked. She was dressed in an outrageous costume, one of colorful layers more suited to the Gypsies these vigilare had in tow than a

high-ranking courtier. For a moment, on the far side of the Gypsy wagon, Cristoval thought he saw a familiar face, but it was lost immediately in the crowd and excitement of the moment.

“What do you mean, Bianca is dead?” Ortensia demanded. “She is a young woman!”

“I am on my way to Citteauroea now, Your Highness,” Prince deMedici said. “Join me. We will stop in Palermo briefly and I will explain all there is to explain.”

“Highness?” The woman’s voice rose in anger.

DeMedici bowed again. “Forgive the impertinence but—as I, a poor Tuscan, understand the matter, until you are confirmed queen by the Palantini, you are but yet, alas, still princess.”

“It will be a minor matter of confirmation, but until then, as you say,” the woman agreed, nodding to her newfound brother-in-law.

“Cristoval!” deMedici called with his hand raised. Turning, deMedici found Cristoval at his back. He frowned sourly. “Get your lad. The others will be along soon. You will ride with them. Her Highness has been through a great deal and needs her rest.”

Cristoval balked. It was one thing to hurt his son’s tender feelings, but to now put him out of the carriage! Into one of the wagons with servants! He had no pretense that the prince had any kinder idea for him either. A moment’s wit saved him—or so he hoped.

“Your pardon, Your Highness,” Cristoval said, struggling to keep his voice calm and pleasant, “but the good lady is unmarried . . . yes?” He looked hopefully at the princess who, after an interestingly long pause, nodded her confirmation. “It would be unseemly to have her ride unaccompanied by a duefia with a man not her husband.”

“Worse still that she travel with three,” the deMed-ici retorted.

“My son hardly counts as—”

“Oh, please, save me the whimpering of children!” the princess protested. “Besides, Signore, while I thank you for your consideration of my good name, circumstances do not allow a woman to accompany me for I most certainly will not ask that Gypsy upstart to assist me and the ... uh ... His Highness is family by marriage and is, therefore, a suitable companion for a woman of my years.”

“Your years? You say that as though you were not still in the bloom of youth,” deMedici said sweetly as he offered the princess his arm.

Cristoval turned and stormed back to the carriage to get his son. Ludvico watched with large eyes as la famiglia reale claimed the coach for themselves. Before telling the coachmen to drive on, however, Prince deMedici stepped down and whispered into the boy’s ear, chucked him under the chin. As the carriage pulled away, young Ludvico performed a perfect little bow.

“What did he say?” Cristoval asked his boy.

Ludvico looked up proudly. “That I am a man today, Father, and that giving the princess my seat made me like a knight.”

Cristoval shook his head and returned with his son to the vigilare. He found a place to sit by the road and wait for the wagon. Ludvico joined him, placing his head in his father’s lap. “You need not wait upon me,” he said to the vigilare standing by.

One of the younger officers offered him a flask.

Cristoval accepted with an appreciative nod and sniffed at the contents. Some form of wine. He gladly drank from it and returned it. As he did, he noticed again that familiar face. Was it the man’s black robes that threw him? Or, he smiled in recognition, the way he carried himself as he was locked in conversation with the vigilare leader? The priest was one of those men from Magnus Ignique, but what was he doing here now? With the vigilare?

Before he could speculate any further, the wagons carrying those servants he had brought along arrived and he did not have the opportunity to ask.

* * *

“I tell you, there is *no* mistake, the prince and his man . . . the one who waited here with the child but moments ago are with the Magnus Ignique! I was there myself when Father Caserta initiated him,” Gab-era repeated to Mandero.

Mandero rubbed his forehead, looking thoughtfully down the road. Delia Guelfa hovered close by. “Get the men mounted, Lieutenant,” Mandero ordered. He stalked a few feet away and then back. “Are you sure the fellow—”

“Don Battista, as I recall,” the priest confirmed.

“Don Battista? The same man who is neighbor to—”

“Your lady’s family. Yes, sir. You see my concern? He has seen me. He is, for lack of better description, the prince’s man. Don Battista was merely initiated. The prince was fully aware of the inner workings of the order.”

“And I have just delivered—if I can believe the woman—Bianca’s own sister into his hands,” Mandero said, climbing into Joro’s saddle.

“I am more concerned, Maggiore, that they have seen me and now know that I am in your company,” the priest said.

“That is reasonable, but then you do not understand the political quagmire and the potential importance of that woman.” Gathering Joro’s reins, Mandero cursed himself for a fool. He felt as though he’d fallen into a trap from which there was no escape. If that woman was whom she claimed, how had she come to be on that vessel and how had she managed to get away so conveniently close to help?

Well, what was done was done, and certainly, he could not ignore the priest’s concern. “I do not mean to make light of your worries, Padre, but, in all honesty, since Colonello Russo attacked my men and our Romani, he already knows to a reasonable degree of certainty that you are with me.”

The priest sighed, nodding. "I cannot argue with your logic, Maggiore. I guess ... I had hoped to ... to escape his attentions."

"And you have done that, to an extent, for you are free to roam, free to travel to the king and queen and give witness against those who have broken trust," Mandero said.

"Some have more than broken trust. The cardinal . . ." Here the priest shook his head. "He is mad with his lust to bring Tyrrhia under the aegis of the Roman Catholic Church."

"And you, a priest who have not forsaken your vows, do not agree?" Mandero asked.

Gabera shook his head again. "Some things are for the temporal leaders of the world. It is our place to guide and instruct, not to conquer and control. All come to God in their time."

Mandero looked at the priest and scratched his head. "I think it is easier for me to understand the cardinal, and reconcile it all with the history of the Church, than it is to comprehend and compare your attitude."

"Yes. Some might say that I am heretical, but I am not alone. I have studied what the Church Fathers have said—"

"Just as the cardinal has, yes?" Mandero countered. He urged Joro into a less leisurely pace, yet one that the other riders and the *vardo* could easily match.

"Yes," Gabera concurred, coaxing his mule. "The cardinal, however, does this adventure outside the direct bounds, strictures, and guidance of His Holiness. He has his own reasons, beyond the spiritual claims he makes. But tell me why this woman concerns you so. I thought her mad."

"She may just be. Her sister was and she was the cause of many horrible acts by which she hoped to gain the Church's blessings and the Tyrrhian throne. If this woman is who she says, then her claim to the throne is even stronger. The King's High Council will be in the thick of it to be sure and now I have delivered her, apparently, into the hands of the very man I should have kept her from. Prince deMedici married the woman's sister—if she *is* Ortensia—through the machinations of the cardinal, to bind her closer to the Church. It serves no good to have her in the hands of the surviving conspirators of the last battles for the throne."

"Then let us hope that the cardinal is *not* in Palermo as you thought he might be and that the prince takes her straightaway to the king's court," Gabera said.

Mandero shook his head. "I was so focused upon the cardinal and so eager to continue to believe that Pierro deMedici was only a token by which to bind Bianca to the Church *and* the cardinal, that I did not consider him to actually be capable of being a threat as well."

"We will get her back, then," della Guelfa said, coming up on Mandero's other side.

Mandero shook his head. “It was a safe and reasonable judgment I made to place her with deMedici. Trying to take her back now will only reveal to deMedici that we are on to him. In Palermo, I must send word to the king and queen.”

XXXI

*“If it were possible to heal sorrow by weeping and to raise the dead with tears,
gold were less prized than grief.”*

—Sophocles

There came a scratching at the door to the queen’s chambers. Giuletta looked first to Idala, who slept, and then to Luciana who nodded quietly toward the door.

Casting backward glances at the queen, the young woman rose and moved to the door.

“Unhand me, I say!”

The voice was female, loud and angry. The door burst open even before Giuletta reached it. Two members of the vigilare stumbled into the chamber holding a diminutive, white-haired woman with layers of colorful skirts enough that she might have, at first, been taken for a Romani. She managed to jerk free of the officers and, in the process, fling herself to the ground at the feet of Luciana and the newly roused queen.

Giuletta immediately moved to shush her, her finger upon her lips. The vigilare looked pained and confused, the woman ignored them, one and all. She rose, straightening her dress and patting at her hair.

“Madonna, are you well?” Luciana asked, bending forward so that she was at eye level with the old woman.

“I haven’t been so badly handled since . . . since . . .” The woman drew a deep breath. She turned on the men, her thumb to her nose and her small finger waving in the air. “As to you—”

Luciana caught the old woman’s hand, forestalling her curse. “Good officers, you will leave us now. Let it be known to your sergente that you have mightily offended one who was summoned as a visitor to the queen’s chambers.”

“But—!” one of the men began.

The other elbowed him fiercely. “As you say, Your Grace. Begging your pardon, Madonna.” With deep bows, the vigilare withdrew from the queen’s chambers.

The old woman sniffed loudly and touched her hair. She seemed to realize in an

instant that any arrangement was beyond saving and merely left it as she turned to face Luciana and Idala.

“It’s my first appearance before royalty, Majesty, but I’d thought it to be a nicer experience than mine has been,” the proprietress of The Dragon’s Hearth said in a tight, pinched voice. She ignored Giuletta and looked at Luciana with interest. “Your Grace, isn’t it? *Araunya*, too, yes?”

Luciana nodded. “Yes, Madonna, it has been some weeks since last I visited you.”

“You remember me, then?” the old woman asked, her voice tight with anger. “You remember what was entrusted to me ... of yours? And yet you summon me this way?”

Luciana placed her right hand over the child reflex-ively as she rose. She curtsied. “Madonna, your deepest pardon is begged for. I did not mean for you to be brought before Her Majesty and myself so roughly. You heard—”

“Pretty palaver. The guards will accept whatever you say. I saw the exchange. My eyes are not yet enfeebled.”

Luciana nodded, sinking back into her chair. “I have no way of convincing you, Madonna, but I did stress haste and urgency which was, clearly, mistaken for something else. I humbly beg pardon.”

“Why do you beg her pardon?” Giuletta protested. “You are the sister of the queen. She has been summoned before you!”

Luciana took a deep breath. “Giuletta, you do not understand and speak out of turn. Your assumptions are why we are in this predicament ... at least, in part.”

The queen had the good grace to blush and look away. “Sit, child, and be still.”

“Yes, Majesty,” the young lady murmured, dropping back to sit once more in the shadows.

The old woman watched her, her eyes narrowing, and then she turned to Luciana and the queen, her gaze intent upon their condition. When the Queen would have spoken, she held up her hand. She looked at Giuletta and then back to Luciana, a frown deepening the creases in her worn face as she hunched even more into herself. “Tell me, *Araunya*, that this is not your doing.”

“It is not,” Luciana replied.

The proprietress leaned heavily upon the foot of the queen’s chaise and then a little table as she moved to stand before Giuletta. “I remember this child ... or am I mistaken?”

“You are not,” Luciana answered.

“And I remember ... let me see . . . she came for . . .” The proprietress paused again, her frown deepening enough that it threatened to swallow the features of the old woman’s face. “*Araunya*, I would not have expected you to cast a spell of this nature.”

“I am as other women, Madonna. I wish to please my husband with a child,” Luciana said evenly, firmly.

“But a spell when nature could take its place, *Araunya!*”

“I—I know,” Luciana said. “It was foolish and now . . .”

“The queen and you will both pay for dabbling in magic,” she said.

Luciana nodded her understanding.

“I owe my king this story if I am to save my own neck from the noose for witchcraft affecting the throne,” the proprietress said. She nodded to the girl. “And she will be held responsible as well.”

“Me?” Giuletta cried out. She fell to sobbing, “It is a fit justice for what I have done.”

“It is crazy magic that I would not have expected from one as well schooled as you appeared to be when we consulted over the ... eh ... the other matter,” the old *strega* observed, her gaze flitting to the queen and back again. “It could mean the death of us ... all three—”

“Stop it! Stop it, please!” the queen burst out and she, too, fell into quiet sobbing. “It was my own fault. I did this . . . my fear that I had not presented my husband, the king, with more than one suitable heir and what the Palantini might pressure him to do.”

“Idala!” Luciana gasped in surprise, turning. “How could you think the Palantini or any other council would be able to get Alban to set you aside? He loves you and there is one heir. If, in time, that is not enough, there is always the Palantini Tribunal who can decide upon another king or queen. Alban would set aside the crown before he would allow anyone to take you—”

Idala shook her head. “But don’t you see? I could not let him do that! I could not, cannot, and will not have him lose the throne because I have failed in my duties!”

“And so,” the proprietress of The Dragon’s Hearth concluded, “you did not consult anyone but took up the use of magic as though it were no more dangerous than a scepter.”

“No more dangerous than a scepter?” Idala repeated. “With my scepter, I can justly take command over the lives and deaths of hundreds—citizens or no—before anyone would dare stop me! The scepter is the wand of kings!”

“The comparison is well made,” Luciana murmured to no one in particular. She turned to the older woman. “You see the trouble we face?”

“And I, too, though I do not house the children in this old frame,” she said.

“I will write out a writ. You are under my command, acting as my directed counselor,” Idala announced. She twisted in her seat and snapped her fingers at the still weeping Giuletta. “Get me paper and ink!”

“Your paper will not save my neck from your husband’s ire should he decide to hold me responsible,” the proprietress said.

“Then what would you have me do?” Idala asked.

“I would have you tell your husband the truth of what you have done . . . *and*, I suspect her husband as well, for I can only imagine what he, with the aide of his in-laws, might do to me,” the old woman responded.

“It is as though we must have permission—” the queen sputtered.

“Yes! When working magic, everyone must be conscious of what they do, Majesty. You must needs get the understanding of the king and her husband before I will go further,” the proprietress said.

“Madonna, what you ask . . .” Luciana hesitated. “What you ask is very difficult.”

“Magic, done right, is difficult. There is always a price. I cannot simply undo this spell, not without risking your lives and the lives of the children you bear. Tell me now if the children are forfeit,” the old *Strega* demanded.

Idala and Luciana cried out against such an idea in one voice.

“ ‘Twould be easier, safer for you all,” the old woman said, her voice lilting as though she cajoled small children.

Luciana rose. “I am confident that I speak for both of us. We cannot concede the children. Brought by magic ill-cast, they are, but they are just as clearly fruit of our wombs and the seed of our husbands. We could no more sacrifice the children than we could abandon our husbands.”

“Then you are willing to go through with this, no matter the cost?” the old proprietress said.

“No *matter the cost*,” Idala swore.

“Be careful what you say,” Luciana warned.

Idala looked at her, thinking, then turned back to the old woman. “No matter the cost.”

“Then send for your husbands, Signoras, and pray they forgive you in this impossible bid at the future.”

* * *

Alessandra awoke to horrendous pain roaring through her being. That it was not her own, but something she shared, only compounded the agony. The other *mulló* had formed a gray bubble around her and it was this that allowed her to be aware without experiencing the pain of the other directly. And yet, protecting her only seemed to accentuate the sensations rippling through the *mulló* as she surrounded her.

“What can I do, Sister?” Alessandra cried, pressing upon the wall of the bubble, searching for some way out of her prison. There was none. Nothing but the other’s pain. Alessa called to her sister *mulló* again and again, struggling to sustain her with

what energy she had left from her excursion into the land of mortal men.

“See.”

“See?” Alessa repeated, confused and dizzy within her confines. “I do not understand.”

“*See!*” the bodiless voice commanded.

As though a curtain were suddenly drawn, Alessandra saw the tableau before her. It took her several moments of confusion before she realized that she, cloaked by the other *mulló*, hovered over the left shoulder of the cardinal. And then the weeks of seeing some odd spark around the cardinal’s head made sense. All those times, she had seen hints of what she had now discovered. She had seen the *mulló* as her energy was being sapped.

See, the voice had said. Alessandra looked outside the bubble, looked outside of herself and into the world around her.

Cardinal delle Torre worked in a chamber without windows. The walls were made of stone, as were the steps that spiraled down to the earthen floor. In a far corner, in the shadowy arch below the steps, stacked in heaps, were the usual contents of a larder laid in for a large population. Beside the stores, arranged along the outer wall behind the cardinal were giant oak kegs of wine bearing the name and crest of *famiglia delle Torre*.

See and understand.

Alessandra realized then that wherever this place might be, it was home to the cardinal. The home, no doubt, where he was raised until the time came for him to be a good son and join the Church. Was he a third son, then? First son to be heir, second son for strategic marriages with hopes of inheritance. Third, and some later sons, dedicated to the Church. Such had been the way on the continent for many generations. Had the cardinal chosen his calling, or was it chosen and forced upon him as he compelled her sister *mulló* into slavery of the soul, using her mind, spirit, and immortal being as something no greater than the workaday donkey that trod dutifully in circles, grinding the miller’s wheat to flour.

But the cardinal did not make flour. No. Not flour. Alessandra watched. He sat upon a stool at a makeshift workbench. Beside his right hand lay a text . . . much like the one Alessandra had destroyed in her earlier attempt to forestall his activities.

Upon the page, emblazoned for all to see in common Italian, *In the matter of constructing the homunculus . . .*

Had Alessandra had any blood left—of her own or harvested—it would have run cold through her. Awareness of that came with the stabbing pain that penetrated her bubble, and her spirit, with its ice blade.

Upon the cardinal’s work space were countless bottles and containers of myriad size, shape, color, and construction. Pipes of precious glass connected fluted jars, filtering fluids in a maze of startling proportions. Immediately before him sat a tripod with an oil lamp’s blue and gold flame flicking beneath it. A great bottle sat upon the

tripod, comparable in size to the small cauldron she had once used when casting particularly large and difficult spells.

From a brocade bag sizable enough to hold a small child, the cardinal removed a packet which he laid on the table, taking several more . . . carefully, one at a time, studying the oddly shaped bits as though he compared them to some mental bill of goods. With the last of the packets, he drew a stiletto and neatly slit the cord that held each of the packets closed.

Exposing the contents of the first and largest package revealed something lumpy wrapped in silk— Gypsy Silk—inside the plain burlap. Delle Torre unfolded the edges of silk with delicate and precise movements to reveal four dark brown, gnarled and “hairy” roots. Two were each approximately eight inches long with the others more than double the size of those. Mandrake.

Simple court ladies, unfamiliar with the magical arts and unable to tell the difference, were willing to pay thirty soldibiancos for one Byrony root. Oft as not, the false root—like the cultivated mandrake—was grown in a mold and decorated, then put to the purpose of drawing the love of one young man or another. The mandrake was by far the more costly and those allowed to grow free of the mold to take their natural shapes were even more of an expense ... but then, if one were decided upon the making of a true homunculus, it would not be worth the time, expense, or danger if one did not have the best of all possible tools.

With the feather of a raven, the cardinal set about the business of cleaning the three fetid-smelling roots, studying them as he moved along with his task.

Though in life she had never cast the like of such spells, nor contemplated them, for that matter, Ales-sandra found herself anticipating the steps outlined in the book. Where did this knowledge come from? Her sister *mulló*? The cardinal who had unwittingly won her full, complete attention? Or was it something darker? Something related to her nature as she changed? The thought made her shudder. She was not completely won over though she now recognized herself perilously close to being forever lost.

“See! Understand!” The voice resonated around her like she was the clapper of a bell.

Having cleaned and studied the larger roots, the cardinal selected one of the larger roots, then picked up the dagger again. His first cut was below the point where the root forked. The root had one branching arm of its own. The cardinal sliced into the Mandrake, creating a second “branch.” However crude, it looked distinctly human now though with an odd bulge in its middle. With an air of practiced ease, the cardinal sculpted something resembling facial features. Of the square of undyed Gypsy Silk—nearly as valuable as one of the mandrake roots—he fashioned a simple dress. One soldibianco, one end pressed into stone, created a serrated edge. He pressed the coin into the “head” of the *puppette* he was creating. Raising the skirt of the dress, in the mounded midriff, delle Torre planted two dried white beans. Adjusting the dress with a satisfied smile he set it aside.

Alessandra stared at it in a blur. Her *mulló* sister kept pressing her to understand, but her mind revolted from the obvious conclusion.

“Man’s seed, ova of a red hen . . .” the cardinal muttered as he added ingredients from a bottle, a speckled egg. “Blood of the hen that laid the egg . . .”

Words echoed in Alessandra’s mind. She continued staring, trying to find a way to deny the obvious. The cardinal’s aims for the Tyrrhian throne were far from over.

XXXII

*“I speak truth, not so much as I would, but as much as I dare;
and I dare a little the more as I grow older.”*

—Michel Eyquem, Seigneur de Montaigne

“I cannot believe that you would do this . . . you?” Stefano murmured, staring dumbfounded at his sister.

“Would you find it easier to believe if *I* had cast the magic?” Luciana asked.

Stefano struggled to find the words of denial, but the hesitation said everything. Luciana turned away, deeply wounded.

“But why?” the king protested as he came to Idala’s side. The queen continued to weep into the lacy sleeves of her *vestaglia*.

Stefano touched her arm. “Must we discuss this now?” he whispered into her ear. “I am sorry. I did not mean to hurt you or offend you.”

“Of course,” Luciana murmured, breathing deeply through her nose. As she started to turn, Stefano stilled her. “You dabble, yes ... but I did not think ... I did not mean you would go this far.”

“But you would have believed this of me before your sister,” Luciana said.

“Only because you have better access . . . Luciana, I was wrong to doubt you. You had warned me. Forgive me?”

“Of course, Stefano,” Luciana replied softly.

Stefano captured her chin and turned her face up toward his. “*I was wrong*. We need you ... I *need* you. Please?”

She nodded, turning back toward the main tableau in time to hear the king speaking to Giuletta.

“And you took it upon yourself to consult the cardinal? Without Her Majesty’s

permission? This is a serious lapse in judgment. It has already had detrimental effects on the queen and, through her, the throne of all Tyrrhia. You are to absent yourself from these chambers at once. Restrict yourself to your rooms until I have decided what to do with you.”

“But, Alban—”

The king rose imperiously. “I will hear you on this matter later. Giuletta?”

“Yes, Majesty,” the girl said, dropping into a deep curtsy. She whisked herself silently to the door, pausing only then to turn. “Majesty?”

“Yes?” Idala said before her husband could speak.

“Majesty, for my part in this ... I thought only to do what was best for you. I would never ... I could never . . .” Giuletta paused painfully. “I—I meant no harm.” With those words, she opened the door and slipped from the room, leaving Their Majesties, Stefano, and the proprietress in the room with Luciana. Beyond the antechamber, the sharp voice of the *physician alla famiglia reale* could be heard questioning Giuletta, calling after her.

“I will have the physician come in now,” Alban said, starting to rise.

“Perhaps it would be best, Majesty, to wait for that,” the proprietress suggested boldly.

Alban stared down at her as she stood hunched over a walking stick.

“Be good enough to remind me who you are,” Alban ordered. He sat upon the chaise, putting Idala firmly behind him.

Bracing herself on her crooked little cane, the old woman somehow managed to straighten herself. “I am the proprietress of The Dragon’s Hearth in Citteuroea. I specialize in curious goods, herbs and suchlike, that folks workin’ magic find themselves needin’.”

“I presume you have a name?” the king demanded shortly.

The old woman smiled tightly. “Some call me *Strega Rui*,” she replied, standing her ground.

“And your mother, what did she call you?” the King asked.

“Nunzia Rui, Your Majesty,” she replied lightly.

“And what business do you have in this matter?” the king pressed. “It is due to you that this has come to light. Why?”

“Why, Majesty?” the proprietress replied. “There is a law that all who dabble in magic should be acquainted with in this land, if none other, and that is that the use of magic to directly affect the throne is considered treasonous. I haven’t lived this long that I want this old corpse hanging from a noose without having at least gotten something for my troubles.”

Alban’s lips twitched. At a less momentous time, he might have laughed. Luciana knew he found considerable worth in plain speaking. “And so, I say again, what part

do you play in this?"

"Until now, Majesty, only a minor one and had I known then—"

"Yes, yes, get on with it," the king insisted.

"I sold the girl the supplies she wanted. Not being a denizen of the court, I did not know the part the girl played. I thought her only a foolish young courtier."

"Then you knew what spells she planned to cast?"

"With those ingredients, I suspected, but I thought it for herself to perhaps entrap the man of her heart's desire," *Strega Rui* said amiably. She shifted her old frame.

"And you didn't try to stop her?" Stefano protested.

The old woman looked at him through narrowed eyes. "You would be ... His Grace—"

"The Duca di Drago. This is my wife and this my sister," Stefano replied.

The proprietress winced, possibly in sympathy for him or more likely because she grew tired standing in attendance on Their Majesties. Luciana longed to offer her a chair. She needed this woman's good graces, but this was the queen's chamber and the king was having an audience. "Beggin' your pardon, Si-gnore, but if I tried to stop everyone without sense enough to know better, I'd never make a sufficient living for myself."

"Or your granddaughter, wasn't it?" Luciana said softly.

The old woman's eyes were piercing as she studied Luciana. "I am surprised, *Araunya*, that you would remember such details."

"It has not been so very long since I last visited your shop," Luciana replied.

"True, but most folks take no notice of such things and, truth be told, I'd hoped to keep the girl out of this," *Strega Rui* said.

"You said your involvement until now," the queen murmured, breaking her silence. She dabbed at the remnants of her tears and leaned back.

"Well, considering the beginning of this conversation, ere the gentlemen were involved, I said that I would do my best to help—"

"No, you didn't, but we'll gladly take it," Luciana observed quietly. To Alban, she bowed slightly. "Majesty, I grow tired—"

"But, of course, please sit down. Stefan, find Madonna Rui a chair," the king replied, waving his hand.

"You will forgive me, Your Grace, if I do not excuse you. I would greatly appreciate your skill and knowledge in this matter . . . now that the course has been committed."

"The course, as you say," Rui murmured, nodding her thanks as she sank into a chair, "is not completely committed, Your Majesty. What was begun in magic could be ended in magic—"

“I’ll not consider anything that threatens my children!” Idala burst out.

“Yes, yes, we were at about this point. And you, *Araunya!*”

Luciana stared at her hands unable to look up at her husband for fear of what his expression might tell. “I want my child very much. Though—forgive me, Idala—I was not party to the magic, I acknowledge that origin while in my heart this child will always be nature’s son ... or daughter.”

Though he stood to her left and almost out of sight, Luciana felt Stefano’s tension ease greatly. He sat down in another chair he had drawn close and, reaching over, silently took her hand.

“Where does this leave us now?” the queen said.

“We should—” the king began.

Idala gripped his wrist with sufficient strength that her knuckles shone white. “Alban, there is reason for my desperation and even forgiving that, I have borne these children too long to willingly consider *anything* that threatens their lives. Do you understand?”

Alban dropped his gaze to her hand on his arm and covered it with his own hand. “I worry that you have been so ill. If magic—”

“Any pregnancy might weigh heavily. I am your queen and I owe you sons and daughters. There is no telling whether another pregnancy would be different,” Idala said, determination edging her voice.

“We have discussed this before—” Alban began, shaking his head.

“Then you know that I am committed. Yes?” Idala said. “My *only* regrets are that I presumed to interfere with the affairs of my brother and his wife who is my dear friend, and whom I should have consulted before I acted.”

“How do we know that we can rely upon this woman?” Alban asked, nodding toward *Strega* Rui.

“I have evidence of my trustworthiness,” the old woman said.

The four of them turned in surprise toward the proprietress. Luciana’s stomach fluttered with apprehension, but she waited.

“I was given but a moment when the vigilare collected me. I think, *Araunya*, that these are yours,” the *Strega* said. As she spoke she reached inside the cuff of her left sleeve and withdrew a small bundle of silk which she handed to Luciana.

The apprehension turned to dread. She knew the contents of the silk parcel, knew that an explanation would be necessary and that Stefano, once again, would not understand. She held it in her hand a long moment . . . long enough that the others grew still with anticipation, still enough that she could hear their breath as easily as the birds who played in the branches of the queen’s outer solar.

“What is it?” Stefano asked.

She could hear the uneasiness in his voice, felt the heat of his concentration. She

covered the bundle with her hands and drew a deep breath. “Would my word be adequate that she has proved herself?”

Silence fell again. Frustration, curiosity, anger . . . all of it radiated from where Stefano sat. The king looked from her bundle to her husband and then into her eyes.

“I think, Your Grace, that it will not be sufficient for your husband and, knowing him as I do, I will side with him. What is it that you have there?”

Luciana drew a deep breath and quietly exhaled before untying the first knot. The second knot came undone by itself and the contents of the packet were revealed. A braid of black hair and the remains of neatly pared fingernails.

“Luciana?” Stefano prompted.

“Some weeks ago, when there was the matter of a vendetta against my sister’s murderers, I had need of ... of particular information. The price was high,” Luciana explained. She glanced back at Stefano. “Between us, Your Grace, you would think we could meet the price of anyone’s asking, but this was *special* information that exacted a ... a more prized payment. What you see here are a lock of my hair and the trimmings of my fingernails.”

Again those in the room fell silent. *Strega* Rui watched the group like a cat studying the mousehole. Again, Luciana could practically feel her husband stiffening. He was not pleased.

“I do not pretend to be a ... a student of this art, but, Your Grace, isn’t that enough for someone—”

“To use against me magically? Yes,” Luciana said.

“And you knew enough of the goings on at the palace to know that this . . . this bit would sell for a most handsome price?” the king said to *Strega* Rui.

The proprietress inclined her head, tendrils of white hair escaping the scarf she wore on her head.

“And you gave it anyway?” Stefano whispered.

Luciana continued to study her hands, knowing she could not meet her husband’s eyes.

“It was ... for my sister, Stefan,” was all Luciana could manage by way of explanation. She looked up at him, her hand reaching for his arm, “Can you truly say that, as a leader of men, that you have never placed yourself in harm’s way?”

XXXIII

“Time is that wherein there is opportunity, and opportunity wherein there is no great time.”

“Don Battista!”

Cristoval looked up, turning toward the ever-demanding voice of Pierro deMedici as he came down the hallway of the inn where they were to reside for the next day or two. “Si, Signore?” What mind-numbing job did he have to look forward to now in service of Tyrria’s bastard prince? “On to bed,” he whispered in his son’s ear and gave him a gentle shove into the room he and his son—and the baggage—shared. He closed the door and looked up again into the frowning countenance of the Tuscan.

“Did you not hear me, Don Battista?” the deMedici asked crossly.

“Of course, I heard you, Your Highness. I did respond and I am attending you now,” Don Cristoval Battista murmured as civilly as he could manage. It had been a long and eventful day, with the last half of it spent with Cristoval and his young son occupying the back of the wagon carrying their baggage while the prince and his absurdly dressed woman rode in the Battista family carriage—even if the prince had renovated it and placed his own crest upon the doors.

“In our time together, you have not learned—!” the prince snapped. He seemed to forcefully control himself, expelling a lungful of air through pinched lips. He took another breath, straightened, and adjusted one of his curling black locks. “Don Battista, would you please do me the kindness of not embarrassing me ...” He paused and sighed again. “Mind my words, Don Battista. It will be important to both our futures and if you have no mind for *your* future, then at least think of Ludvico.”

“He is my son. He *is* my future, Your Highness,” Cristoval said smoothly, concentrating hard upon *not* grinding his teeth. “You needed me for something?”

“Yes. As you know we have appointments made for tailors in the morning. In the late afternoon, Her Royal Highness, Ortensia Novabianco and I will meet with the head of the local Gypsy Silk Guildhouse for the most special of the court accoutrements in our wardrobe. All of this has been arranged. I have even sent a courier to the Guildhouse announcing Her Highness’s intent to join us . . .”

“Forgive me, Your Highness, but this woman could be mad for all we know. She has no way of proving who she is. The Princess Ortensia was lost more than a dozen years ago—” Cristoval said.

“As her sister’s husband, there are . . . similarities with which I am familiar which lead me to believe that this woman is who she says she is. I will tolerate no questions about her identity after this. The princess has been through some horrible ordeals too horrendous to tell in light company. I wish to make her as comfortable as possible. Do you understand?”

Don Cristoval bit his tongue and managed a thin smile as he nodded. “It will be as you say, Your Highness.” At this point he was willing to agree to almost anything, in

preference to extending his stay in the man's company.

"Very good! Now, as I was saying, I was reserving the noon hours for a light meal and a rest. Instead of attending the morning tailor, I need you to go about locating a priest—"

"A priest?" Cristoval repeated, glancing at the door of the room the deMedici had assigned her. "Does she need confession? The Extreme Unction? She did not appear to be wounded. Perhaps a barber or a physician—"

"Neither of which will help in my endeavor, Don Battista. The princess and I wish to be married—"

"Married?" Cristoval repeated, feeling as though he had woken in the midst of some warped nightmare.

"Yes, Don Battista. We are to be wed ... on the morrow, if you will be so kind as to collect a priest, sometime approaching the noon hour."

"But marriage, Your Highness? You are now considered to be part of la famiglia reale as would she be, shouldn't you consult with His Majesty? What if the king takes this amiss?" Cristoval protested.

"I was given her sister to wed. If Bianca was suitably matched to me, now that she is dead, I see no reason not to take her sister as replacement."

"But . . ." Cristoval stuttered to a sigh.

"I see it this way. Princess Ortensia was kidnapped and . . . savagely made a member of a sultan's harem and such has been her life for these past twelve and a half years. She managed to buy her way to freedom without assistance from the Crown of Tyrrhia—"

"But that was King Orsinio, Your . . . Your Highness. Her own father gave her up for dead," Cristoval said.

"So it is, but she has been abandoned to these merciless Turks all of these twelve years without benefit of marriage. She bore the sultan a son and a daughter. She has been . . . defiled," Prince Pierro deMedici explained. "She might even now be with child. It is my duty, as her family, to assist her. I am uniquely positioned in that I am family but through marriage instead of by the blood. I am widowed, thereby free to give her my name should the assaults upon her person produce . . . problems. It is the only gentlemanly thing I can do and she has agreed. Now. Will you find the priest or must I find another?"

Cristoval blinked twice, a third time. "I—I will fetch the priest, as you have asked, Your Highness."

"Good. By this time tomorrow, I will be wed to the rightful heir to the throne and you, my man, will be on your way toward a better day! *Buona notte!*"

Cristoval could only manage a nod. If he had had any doubts, the kind of politics the prince played were well and truly above anything he might attempt.

* * *

“Mandero!”

He stirred from his sleep though it still kept its hold on him. Mandero had not slept this deeply in weeks and now waking was an unpleasant trial. He allowed himself to drift, awash in the waters of slumber.

“Mandero!”

The voice was persistent now, as much a part of sleeping as waking. He rolled onto his back, sighing as the waves of sleep sent him ever closer to the shores of waking instead of to watery dreamland pleasures . . . where he met with his Alessa and she was gay and laughing. How he missed the sound of her laughter—clear, sweet, and uncontrived.

“Please, *camomescro!*”

Mandero sat up, fully awake. He occupied a spartan room, suitable for officers visiting the Palermo *cita-della*. His room was bathed by the light of a full moon. He searched the room, his eyes flicking from one corner to the next. Something tapped, then battered at the window of his second story quarters.

Instinctively, his right hand curled around the hilt of his stiletto. He saw nothing at the window when first he looked, but, upon a second glance, he saw a misshapen shadow.

“*Camomescro ...*”

Was it the wind? A trick? Mandero scanned the room, free of his eye patch and saw nothing that glimmered.

“*Camomescro!*”

The word danced like a breath of song in his ears. The shadow on the windowsill moved and revealed a white owl. Harbinger of Death.

Mandero shivered uncontrollably, a frisson of alarm ran down his spine. “Alessandra?”

“*Camomescro!*”

The voice came fully, plaintively through his mind. *Her* voice, desperate and tearful.

“Show yourself, Alessa,” Mandero commanded, scanning the shadowy depths of his bedchamber. With either eye, he still saw nothing.

The owl rattled the window, beating it with its massive wings. Its beak clattered against the panes of glass, threatening to break them.

“Alessa?” Mandero asked the bird.

“Please, Mandero!” her voice begged.

Staring at the great white owl, Mandero asked again. “Alessa?”

“I grow weak, *camomescro!* Let me *in!*” Undeniable desperation filled her voice.

She could not enter without permission, he realized. Grasni’s warnings ran

through his mind. He was thoroughly forewarned . . . but he could not deny her; he just could not bring himself to do it.

Mandero turned the latch of the window and pushed it wide, stepping back quickly. The owl hopped onto the ledge, but came no farther. It flapped its mighty wings and turned its piercing yellow eyes on him. It was impossible for him to discern if the bright white halo effect around the bird was caused by the moon behind it or the glimmer of magic from Alessandra's presence.

"If you are my Alessa, then you are welcome inside," Mandero said.

Without further bidding, the great owl spread its wings and leaped into the air, landing in the midst of the area carpet. Great shimmering drops of effluvium fell from the bird as though it had traveled through a thunderstorm of immense proportions. In time, a puddle formed around the taloned feet of the owl and, as the last of it fell, the bird blinked its luminous yellow eyes, twisting its neck this way and that, as though suddenly confused. With a hoot, it flapped its wings wildly, springing first to the spiral-spoked wooden bar at the end of his bed and from there, aloft and into the night.

"*Camomescro*, help me!" Alessandra's voice whispered into his mind.

Mandero stared at the puddle lying on the floor, remnant of the owl's visit. He moved closer and stared down into it. The shimmering pool acted like a mirror except that Alessandra's face was reflected instead of his own. How could he help her? What was there that he could do? He did not use magic, did not know the words of spells. Where Alessandra was concerned, his greatest power was his love for her and, excepting these visits, which everyone warned him against, he had nothing . . . except for her shroud! He returned to his bed and pulled the shroud of black Gypsy Silk formed into a poppet from the tangle of sheets. He moved back to the puddle of effluvia and dropped the poppet onto it.

Through his fairy-touched silver eye, Mandero watched the transformation of silk as it absorbed the sparkling blue-gray pool. Like a dried sponge, the poppet consumed the magical fluids and began to expand into the preternatural form of his beloved Alessandra.

Mandero realized that he had been holding his breath and released it in a gust. She was his Alessandra. The top of her head came to his chin, her form was perfect, and yet she remained little more than black silk from head to toe. The only thing which was not as pitch-black as tar were her eyes, two bright dots of blue-gray instead of the brown they should have been. They gleamed much as the puddle had, shot with lightning, of prescience and self-awareness.

One more item identified her as more than the poppet, their wedding bands glimmered gold, silver, and bronze as though the magic of the *Fata* were at work this very moment. The ring tingled on his hand, making him all the more aware of his longing to touch her. He reached out, but stopped and let his hands drop to his sides. The last time they had been together . . .

Mandero tried to shake free of the horror she had transformed into while in his

arms, wound round one another as they still lay coupled. Seeing her darling face become stretched taut and leathery, her eyes seeming to almost jump from their sockets, her teeth animalistic and revealed by the rise of her snarling lips, pinched thin . . . and the smell of her from lavender and rose petals—fragrances she adored during her lifetime—turning septic and overpoweringly like vinegar . . . Mandero shook his head again. He could not vanquish that image, and now she stood, wavering before him, little more than a human-sized poppet.

“Help me,” she pleaded. Her voice was raw and weak.

In spite of himself, Mandero stepped back. He turned the movement into pacing away from her, though he watched her with care. “I am told I cannot trust you, Alessandra.”

“Do you love me, oh, best beloved of mine own heart?” the silk wraith asked.

Despite the color of her eyes being other than the soft cinnamon brown he knew, he saw enough there to fully recognize her. He had thought she could not take a form that would rival the horror of the wraith, but something about her as nothing more than silk was just as bewildering and overwhelming. He carried the poppet she now inhabited with him wherever he went. To see the *tesoro* standing before him now, life-size, tied knots in his stomach.

“I love you still, but, for your sake—and mine and those who accompany me—I am wary of you,” Mandero said. He fidgeted. He was used to facing danger head-on with a sword or a scorpion in his hands, but that would serve nothing here . . . and yet, he still longed for something to do with his hands. He ran the left one up the side of his neck to where she had bled him during their lovemaking two nights ago. “Why do you come to me now, Alessandra?”

“Not beloved? Not Alessa, but Alessandra, as though we were nothing more than strangers to one another,” the poppet moaned.

“In truth, we are strangers. Each time you appear to me, you have changed. You are not the Alessa I knew and fell in love with.”

“But I am!” she protested, approaching him with her black silken hands outstretched. “It is I that you carry close to your heart. Didn’t the *Beluni* and the other old mothers cast the fiber of my being into this magical semblance? Didn’t the *lasa* use it to summon me to you so that we might wed?”

“Yes, but . . .” Mandero hesitated. Grasni’s stern warnings ran through his mind, every one logical and steeped in the knowledge of magic. Who was he to question her? And yet, deny her as much as he wished, this *was* who his beloved now was and the becoming of this was neither his nor her doing. Why should she be punished? Why should he? They had done nothing wrong.

“Please, *camomescro*, I need you,” the silk shroud begged.

“What do you need, Alessa?” he asked softly. Having reached the conclusion that, in spite of Grasni’s warning, neither of them deserved the enforced separation, that the *lasa* and the *Beluni* had tied them together and now, no matter what, he was

inexorably joined to her.

Alessandra, embodied in her shroud, looked away, staring at the feet peeping out from below the stylish black gown the shroud had become. "I ... I must feed. I would not have reached you but for the grace of the *panto boohaloos*."

"Feed? You mean blood," Madero said.

Alessandra nodded, then looked up. "I cannot help that this is the form of nourishment my ..." She began to sob quietly. "It is no body ... no single body, but blood is what sustains it and what gives me the strength to fight the cardinal and thwart his plans again and again."

"The other night . . . you fed then. To my knowledge, never before then did you need to ... to feed. Will it always be thus?" Madero asked.

Alessandra shook her head and then, without speaking, dropped to the floor.

Madero caught her up, shamed that he had pressured her for answers when he should have taken action. He carried her to the bed and laid her down. Whatever she was now, Alessa needed him. There were some things, Madero decided, that Grasni simply did not need to know.

He removed the stiletto from beneath the pillows, unsheathed it and cut himself across the palm of his left hand. He waited for the blood to run fast before he hoisted the life-sized *tesoro* into a sitting position and offered the contents of it to her.

They shifted awkwardly, trying to find the best position for this unnatural act. Alessandra finally steadied his hand with her own and began lapping at the blood as it welled in his cupped hand.

Very gradually, the oversized poppet began to transform into at least the visible form of the woman he knew. He relaxed and sat down on the bed beside her.

The bloodletting was having an odd affect upon the balance of his humors. He felt light-headed and tired, but also strangely warm and protective. Madero wondered briefly if his feelings were the result of magic and ultimately decided that he did not care. His feelings now were not so very different from the way he felt about Alessandra anyway.

The bed was not intended to hold more than one, but they managed. Madero closed his eyes and drifted off to sleep, completely at ease while his wife suckled at the vein he had cut open.

* * *

"*Camomescro*."

How many times had Madero woken to those words drifting through his mind? At least once every day since her life was snuffed short. He turned away from the sweet torture of the dream, digging deeper into the cycle of sleep that might allow him escape.

And then Alessandra stroked a lock of his hair that had fallen into his face behind

his ear.

Mandero came awake with a start, leaping from the bed like a scalded cat. He stared at Alessandra who looked to be naked beneath the bed linens; her dress, being the shroud which had been his constant companion, lay in a heap beside the bed. To be more accurate, they had been sharing what was little more than a cot. How the two of them fit was a puzzle that was the least of his concerns. As one hazy thought connected with another, he looked down at his left hand to discover the long slice across his palm had been neatly stitched and was surprisingly painless.

“You—you have been here all night?” Mandero asked.

Alessandra cocked her head toward the window. “ ‘Tisn’t dawn quite yet and I arrived late, so, no, I couldn’t say that I have been here all night.”

“But we were never meant to share another night together. The *lasa*, the *Beluni*, the *Araunya*, *Grasni*. .. all of them have said that we could have but that one night,” Mandero said. He found himself feeling decidedly groggy and sat down abruptly, bruising his tailbone in the process.

“We have been told many things, *mi amante*” Alessandra replied, shrugging her pale shoulder. The bed linens dropped back with the gesture, exposing the hardened tips of her breasts.

In spite of himself, Mandero felt the heated swell in his own loins. He tried desperately to concentrate upon her words rather than the clear invitation of her body. The conflicting urges to caress her breasts or to pull the linens securely up to her chin was quickly driving him to distraction as he warred with all the warnings he had been given about her. But here she was now. *His* Alessandra, his wife, in his bed—such as it was—where she belonged. The heat in his loins punctuated the argument that it was all but a sacrilege to have such a beautiful woman in his bed, one that he was bound to beyond life and death and then behave as fastidiously as a monk.

Alessandra pulled the linens back and stroked the mattress beside her. With warnings ringing in his ears, Mandero rose and slid beneath the covers. Moments like this, when they were together so naturally, his grief over losing her as his lifelong companion subsided at least a little, for a brief time.

* * *

With Alessandra lying curled into his side, the sweat of their love-making still upon them, Mandero stroked Alessandra’s hair.

“It is almost time that I take my leave of you,” she whispered as she wriggled up closer to him and planted her chin upon his shoulder.

Mandero arched his neck toward the window. The sky had taken on the deep purple hue of impending dawn. “What keeps you away during the day, Alessa?”

She shook her head and burrowed into him. “Perhaps I wake when the cardinal is least watchful. Even he must sleep sometime and Brother Tomasi never had the stomach for it. He was too afraid.”

“Brother Tomasi?” Madero repeated. “Who is he?”

“For a time he was the cardinal’s attendant,” Ales-sandra said, shrugging.

“Was? He does not now follow the cardinal?” Madero asked.

Sitting up clutching the blankets to her chest, Ales-sandra sighed and shook her head. “He did me some kindnesses . . . covering her—”

“Her?” Madero asked.

The color rose in Alessandra’s cheeks. “You know . . . the . . . the . . .”

“The body?” Madero said for her.

Alessa nodded her head as well, as though supporting a great weight.

“Alessa, do you know where your body is?” Madero asked as he sat up and drew her into his arms.

She shook her head. “I can only say that I am in one of the underground tombs. It.. my other self.. has been tended by someone, from the looks of it a woman, probably from a religious order. The tomb is sealed with a stone that I cannot move.”

“Then how did you reach me?” Madero asked and then felt supremely stupid. “You . . . you don’t need to leave the tomb physically, of course.”

“No, the *Beluni* and the old mothers saw to that. It is like there is a cord which ties us together and I use that to find you.”

“Is there nothing else you can tell me that might help us find your body and the cardinal?”

Alessandra smiled suddenly. “I have learned much since we were last together. When I was last with you ... I was so ashamed that I sought escape . . . and revenge . . . and in doing so have discovered much.”

“Such as?” Madero prompted, ever aware of the lightening of the sky which was now a deep, vibrant mixture of pink and blue.

“I have learned that becoming evil is not inevitable. There is hope yet.”

Madero nodded, not challenging her on this. He himself had seen what she did. She had practically killed Grasni. It was better not to confront her. “And what else?”

Alessandra stared at him, placing her right hand over his heart. “Did you not hear me, *camomescroi* It is not inevitable that I will become evil. We have reason for hope.”

Madero nodded again, warily. He had no other option but to humor her on this. “Of course, mi amore, of course!”

This time it was she who shook her head. “Madero, you have never been able to lie to me and you can’t do it now. You don’t believe me!” She stood up on the cot and stepped off, dragging all of the bed linens with her to wear as a drape.

Exposed, both literally and figuratively, Madero grabbed his pants and shoved

his legs into them as he paced across the room. “Alessandra, what you say flies in the face of hundreds of years’ worth of study by the women of our people blessed with the gift.”

“One hundred people can say the same thing and still be wrong and so it is if they number in the thousands. It is not evil that makes me do the—the things I have done, Madero, it is a—a kind of madness. The anger is . . .” She paused, her eyes beseeching. “It is anger and frustration that consume me, that drive me.”

Madero stopped pacing, his mind racing. “Alessandra, if you are to fight this, then you must face the truth. Evil worries at your soul. Why else would you prey upon men? Molest a priest and feed upon him . . . and then your uncle, and you nearly killed Grasni?”

“I did not molest the *benglo* priest! What is he doing in your *kumpania*?” Alessandra snarled back.

“He was with the witch-hunters—”

“And you dare charge me as evil?” Alessandra laughed harshly.

“You did not hear all of it. He was a spy. When they found him out, they beat him. They thought him dead, but he lived and found Sanctuary. I take him back to the White Queen so that he can witness against his previous compatriots,” Madero said. “And if you did not molest the priest, what was it you *were* doing to him the other night?”

Alessandra stared at him and then she laughed. “You are jealous!” She shook her head and came closer. “You are my *camomescro*, Madero, and I seek no other lover. What business had that man to lie in my bed in my *vardo*? The only man who sleeps in a woman’s *vardo* is her husband.”

He blinked and frowned. “You mean, you thought. . . But why attack your uncle? And Grasni?”

Alessandra shook her head. “They . . .” She shook her head again. “I don’t know. I can’t remember. My memories are not the same as when I lived. They . . . they accosted me and I wanted you. I—I couldn’t let anyone stand in the way.”

“And the change . . . when we were together?” Madero asked.

Alessandra turned away and dropped the blankets. She stood for a moment, naked in the dim light of almost morning. Here she seemed so real, so natural, her rounded curves and full bosom with her hair falling in rivulets down her back to the gentle cupping of her buttocks. She was everything he had ever dreamed and now it was a nightmare in proportions he could never have imagined. Without speaking, she bent and collected the black silk shroud. Standing, she wrapped it around herself. As the fabric bathed her flesh, sliding sensuously over the skin he had caressed not so very long ago, the shroud slipped naturally into the form of a dress. More magic, he thought. Was it hers or the shroud’s? He could not be sure, but his fairy-touched eye clearly indicated that magic was involved.

“You haven’t answered me, Alessa . . . about the change when we—”

“Yes, I know,” she whispered. She sighed and turned back to him. “This new existence has many forms. What you saw was one of them . . . close, I suspect to what I see when I look at my shell. I hate it. I hated our moment together being interrupted, I was angry about the man . . . the priest in my *vardo*. He hurt me with something and so I lashed out when I encountered my uncle and Grasni . . .” She rubbed her face. “I do not have all the answers, my beloved. I don’t understand most of what happens to me, but I know my heart and it is not evil. The anger at the cardinal who has done this to me . . . and, yes, I am angry with my loved ones who have not saved me yet. Anger eats at my soul, overrides my . . . my sense of self . . . but I have learned much in recent weeks. If I . . . If I feed, I am stronger and more able to fight delle Torre. I do not want to become his slave like the other one—”

“Other one?” Madero interrupted, looking up in surprise. “You said ‘other one.’ What other is there?”

Alessandra rubbed her eyes. “I cannot remember what if anything I have told you. I have these gaps in my mind, times when there is nothing. They are like explosions in my consciousness. The moments we steal together mean so much, but I can’t remember always when I have learned something. It is as though my existence is outside of time.”

“We may well be out of time soon, *camomescro*. The sun rises. You spoke of another one. Tell me what you meant,” Madero urged.

Alessandra shrugged. “Surely I have told you before? There is another *mulló* with the cardinal. She is his slave, but still she fights him.”

“She?” Madero prompted. “How do you know it is a she?”

“Because she laid a curse upon the cardinal,” Alessandra said. She frowned thoughtfully. “There is little left of the spirit of who she was before. I can learn no name . . . but she uses magic, and she is *mulló*, therefore, she must be . . . she must be ‘she’. Beneath the anger there is much sense of innocence lost.”

“Is there more you can tell me about her?” Madero asked.

Shrugging again, Alessandra’s expression grew vacant as she concentrated. “They have been joined, in part because of her curse, but he—the cardinal—feeds on the anger and uses it to cast spells—”

“What sort of spells?” Madero asked. “What have you seen?”

“There was the doll . . . the dolls. He made them from mandrake root. She, the other *mulló*, made me watch and learn. He made a large *tesoro* and dressed it in white silk and placed a circlet of crenellated gold on her head. He placed two beans in its belly. I did not understand—”

“Alessandra, think! Think hard. Could the *tesoro* have been of the queen?” Madero asked.

Alessandra laughed. “No, it couldn’t have been the *Beluni*.”

“I meant the White Queen. She carries twins. Is that what the beans meant?” he

asked.

She fell silent, seemingly unaware both of the urgency of what she might have seen and of the sun which rose steadily toward early morning. Already Mandero could hear a rooster crow and the sounds of servants in nearby houses rising to prepare the morning meal for their masters.

“It could have been the White Queen. Brother To-masi had little poppets of the White Crown. One for the king and another for the queen. He had them in his bed and kept fingering them. It meant something . . . what he was doing, but I cannot remember . . .”

“Is Brother Tomasi still with the cardinal?” he asked.

Alessandra shook her head. “No. No, I think not. It is the order of things, you see. He worked over the ... the body of the *Araunya* with the cardinal, but I frightened him away ... I burned him with an overturned lantern. Yes, and he was in the Hospitallers’ ward after that.” She grew vaguer still and, more importantly, began to fade.

“Alessa, do not leave just yet! I have questions,” Mandero pleaded.

Alessandra frowned deeply. “I am being summoned . . .”

“Where is the cardinal now?”

“He has been in my tomb, and on the shore . . . Yes, we met a ship’s captain on the shore and we traveled by boat . . . but not far ... he was leaving me in a tomb to myself ... I saw him in the root cellar of a castle bearing the delle Torre name, but he is also in the Hospitallers’ abbey.”

“But where is he now?” Mandero pressed.

Alessandra looked up at him and shook her head. “Time is confusing. My sister needs me,” she said.

“Luciana needs you?” Mandero asked in surprise.

Alessandra laughed. “The other sister ... the *mulló*. I go to battle, beloved. I am joined in war. Kiss me for luck. I may not return.”

Mandero crossed the floor with a leap. He took her into his arms and kissed her. “Fight, Alessandra. I mean to save you, even if it should cost my own life. I *will* save you.”

“*Camomescro* ...” she whispered and faded into nothingness as the sun’s first beams struck her, leaving Mandero holding a silk shroud, its features more deeply defined than before, but still merely silk.

“Politics have no relation to morals.”

—Niccolo Machiavelli

19 d’Septembre, 1684

Spotting Stefano sitting at the table on the patio, Luciana paused. His back was to her, he would not see her depart, but she could not leave for the day without speaking to him. She set the brocade bag which held her needlework on a small table to the back of a gateleg, winged back sofa in the salon of the apartment she shared with him and the very few servants they employed to assist them.

Stefano turned at the sound of her shoe on the cobblestones. He managed a brief smile and gestured to the meal before him. “There is more than enough. Join me.”

Luciana considered his mood; it seemed conciliatory enough. The queen would not expect her this early. She nodded and allowed him to seat her at the table. As she reached for the unused plate, her husband held up his hand and took it himself, leaving Luciana to sit back and allow him to serve her from the dishes laid out. The cook’s assistant raised the domed lid of any dish Stefano looked at.

She stared down at the plate that he set before her and tried to imagine eating half of what he’d served her. Determined to do her best, Luciana sprinkled raisins and pine nuts on her polenta and was just about to take her first bite.

“I am surprised to see you up at such an early hour,” he observed casually.

“Your sister needs me. Alban dismissed the last of her ladies-in-waiting yesterday when he sent Giuletta away.”

“But where are her other ladies? A queen should have a full company of women dying to assist her,” Stefano said.

“That was apparently the problem. After ...” Luciana stopped, even after all that had gone on in recent weeks, she had difficulty speaking her sister’s name. “After my sister’s death, some of the women got it into their heads that there would be a Gypsy Curse on the queen.”

“Distance before valor, eh?”

“What do you expect? *Gadjé* women are cosseted and taught so little of consequence that they turn timorous—and never mind what the difficulties between Alban and the Church did for matters. I find it no surprise at all that a queen as fair and sweet as your sister—one raised within the same household as yourself and who also believes in a certain amount of sparsity where staffing is concerned—would find it difficult to compel service. It is not her way . . . nor, from my observations, is it your way either. All in all, a laudable trait.”

“This by way of argument about hiring a nurse and other attendants to assist you

as the time progresses,” Stefano said.

Luciana smiled, swallowed, and said, “Precisely.”

“But when the time comes—”

“When the time comes, I will be ready and have in attendance those women who can provide the services that I will need,” Luciana replied.

“But we have access to the Royal Physician and his Barber here that we might take advantage of—”

“I have no intention of being bled. If my humors need balancing, I shall adjust them with herbs and tisanes, thank you. I cannot spare anything going out that might possibly be better for me staying within my body. The gods put this stuffing here for a reason,” Luciana retorted, pushing away her plate with a heavy sigh.

“You hardly ate,” Stefano said.

“It is not uncommon,” Luciana said. “I will have cycles when I will threaten to empty the royal larder. For now, I am more interested in getting the queen to eat something.”

Stefano’s silence was abrupt, awkward as he became suddenly pensive. As an afterthought, he waved the cook’s assistant away. He watched the lad leave and then turned back to his wife. “Yesterday, when you said that she was . . . that I should wait to see Idala, I thought you were only being delicate, that she was in dishabille . . . I was shocked when I saw her.”

Luciana bit her lip and elected silence. She did not want to start a fight with him this morning. They had been at odds since he showed her her own private correspondence requesting the vigilare to go to The Dragon Hearth for its proprietress and the later revelations about the involvement of magic in both her pregnancy and that of the queen. He seemed to sense where her mind had wandered, for he suddenly leaned forward and took her nearest hand.

Turning the palm toward him, he kissed it and then the inside of her wrist where she daubed perfume. “I truly am sorry for what I said last night. It was . . . unforgivable.”

“No,” she said quietly shaking her head. “No. I have learned so much since my sister died. Only death, I think, is unforgivable . . . there are no retreats from that—unless the maggiore has had some great success that he hasn’t bothered to share with us.”

“I am too quick to judge,” Stefano insisted.

Luciana did not argue. “The king,” she murmured thoughtfully, “he has shadows about him, shadows that shouldn’t be there. He is too young. How is his health, truly? I have seen him only wearing his coats of Gypsy Silk and the magic in the cloth hides many ills.”

“He promised to see the physician this morning,” Stefano replied. He looked over his shoulder toward the mantel clock that had just struck the seventh hour. “Perhaps

it is nothing more than the remnants of the poisoning by Exilli before he escaped.”

Luciana shook her head. “No. It has been weeks and he should be fully recovered. I fear it is something more, such as what ails the queen.” She held up her hand to forestall Stefano’s laughter. “He does not share her condition, obviously, but there is more than the queen’s dabbling in magic afoot here. You must speak to Lord Strozzini and find out if he knows anything.”

“I thought we had chased the magic users out of Citteauroea . . . that you were the last courtier—”

“I thought so, certainly I hoped so, but too often the courtiers are not kept busy enough to stay out of trouble. Some take the study of philosophy to new areas that ought best be left alone . . . and, yes, Stefano, I mean myself as well. You understand, however, that to save the queen and her children and possibly even the king himself, magic may very well be involved?”

Stefano nodded, sighing. He appeared to have suddenly lost his appetite and tossed his napkin onto the plate before him. “Yes ... I saw that would be inevitable, but I do ask, if it is possible to avoid it—”

“I will do so,” Luciana assured him, squeezing his hand, hoping that he would accept her heartfelt sincerity.

“I am to go riding with the king,” Stefano said abruptly and shoved his chair back from the table. He offered her his hand, helping her to rise.

Luciana accepted his hand. She was only beginning to reach the cumbersome stage and she had not planned on spending this time serving as lady-in-waiting to Idala. She received his kiss on her cheek as she smoothed the front of her gown, thankful for the loosened ties of her bodice. Kisaiya, her maid, had already sent to Dragorione for her gowns made with suitable allowances for the growth in pregnancy, but nothing was suitable for court, no doubt because of the time of confinement.

It was clear, now, that she and Stefano would be spending much of the next weeks and months here at the Palazzo Auroea di Citteauroea. She would have to send for the Guildmistress in the city so that something appropriate could be fashioned. Thinking about it, this would make a lovely distraction for at least a week. Idala was never averse to a new dress.

* * *

Mandero paused outside the cantina to slip his gloves on and, thereby, neatly hide his recently stitched palm. He had given his men the morning to set about whatever odd chores and business needed attending to.

The officer in charge last night had given permission for the *vardo* to be settled in a small pasture beside the stables and for Grasni and Petrus to camp there. Padre Gabera had gladly accepted the hospitality of the fort’s chaplain. The men, of course, being vigilare were all found bunks in the barracks and Mandero, himself, an officer’s quarters. All had been content the night before. Mandero had an

appointment shortly with the commanding officer of the fortress, to discuss a number of things, only one of which was the continued housing of his party members. Before then, however, he needed to speak with Grasni.

He paused near the *vardo*. Grasni, even after their late arrival, had apparently insisted upon setting up a full camp though she would only be attending to the needs of Petrus and herself. Even as he arrived, the indefatigable young woman looked up from her cook fire.

Seeing him, Grasni reached for the teapot and a mug.

“No, Grasni, thank you,” Madero said hurriedly. He glanced around the campsite. It was well contained to encroach as little as possible upon the vigilare who were their hosts.

Grasni nodded, setting aside the brand she had been using to stir the fire as she rose. “You are early this morning, Maggiore.”

“Roll call is at dawn, even for visitors,” he replied with a shrug. “Are you comfortable here? Has anyone bothered you?”

“No, we have been quite content,” she said. “Petrus is buying nails from the fort blacksmith, if you needed him.”

“No, actually, I came to speak to you, but since you’ve mentioned it, is anything wrong with the *vardo*?” Madero asked, too easily distracted.

“Just changing a horse’s shoe, I think. Why have you come looking for me?”

“Do you ride?” he asked bluntly.

“Ride? But leave the *Araunya’s vardo*?”

“Yes, but for a day, possibly two. Petrus would be here to guard it. Do you ride?” Madero repeated.

Grasni nodded. “I can sit a horse as well as any man.”

“Good! I will be speaking with the Comandante of Fort Palermo soon,” he glanced at the sun and frowned, turning. “Pack your *nanta* bag. After the comandante, I’ve an appointment with the Bishop of Palermo ... or so I hope. When I am done . . . well, be prepared for a long hard ride, will you?”

Grasni shrugged and nodded. “It will be as you say. Can I know what this is—” She stopped suddenly, her eyes narrowing. She closed the distance between them, only a matter of a few yards, but she drew closer nonetheless. She looked at him hard and then drew a deep breath. “She visited you again last night.”

It was not a question. It was a statement of the obvious, or, at least, it was to her. There was no sense in denying it.

“She did.”

Grasni’s lips thinned. “You are pale . . . gray almost. I will make a tea. Come for it before you leave to see the bishop. It will help to balance your humors and better prepare you for this ride. You will tell me, when there is time, what she has said?”

This *was* a question, yet there was still that underscore of iron, the expectation of agreement. It made Mandero, oddly, think of Alessandra who was common to them both, and he could not help but wonder at that silent strength within his *adorata* that kept her the mistress in the relationship with Grasni. He suspected that life with Alessandra would have been full of more surprises than their relationship *after* her death.

“Maggiore! Maggiore di Montago!”

“You are being summoned,” Grasni murmured, nodding her head at the youth running toward them calling his name.

“Until this afternoon, then,” Mandero said, turning. He waved at the youth and hurried in his direction.

The comandante was a man in his later years, though not so very long out of his prime that he had lost his military bearing. Mandero found him standing at the window of a well-appointed office. He wore formal clothing, heavily polished boots, and the linen of his shirt was crisp and white. He stood perhaps an inch or two over Mandero’s medium height and, as with many military officers, had forgone the full lovelocks draping down from his temples, curled and bowed as was popular in court. His dark graying hair was tied back with a simple ribbon of blue, as was Mandero’s own custom.

After a long moment of silence which began with the closing of the door after the comandante’s assistant announced Mandero and departed, the older man turned away from the window. He examined Mandero carefully, approaching him and circling round while Mandero stood at formal attention. Coming round to Mandero’s front again, he nodded and held out his hand.

“Papers, Maggiore.”

Mandero withdrew the queen’s letter of introduction from the inner breast pocket of his coat and held it out to the commander.

“Mmm,” the comandante murmured, noting the broken seal. He took the paper to the window and, placing his back to it, used the sunlight to review the contents. He snuffled and murmured several times as he perused the letter. At last he partially folded it and waved at the chair opposite his desk. “Please, Maggiore, be seated.”

Mandero bowed and claimed the chair with as much quiet grace as he could muster. Sitting down, he removed his gloves and laid them across his knee.

The commander glanced at the letter again and handed it to Mandero as he took his own seat. “I understand you have a report to make?”

“Signore,” Mandero replied. “It should be noted that on the coast between Carini and Palermo, my men and I encountered a small landing party of Turks.”

The commander’s bushy gray eyebrows rose nearly to his hairline. “You are certain of this?”

“*Assolutamente!*” Mandero replied.

“Beyond Capo Gallo?”

“Within Palermo Bay itself, Signore,” Mandero said. He glanced at the map on the wall. “If you wish it, I will approximate the point of landing—”

“The distance is narrow enough, Maggiore. What were they about, or could you tell?”

“It appeared to be a merchant vessel rather than a military one, Signore, and they brought to shore a woman, dressed as one of their own, but she spoke fluent Tyrrhian Italian and, after we rescued her, she claimed to be none other than the missing Princess Ortensia.”

“Impossible!” the comandante proclaimed, slamming the flat of his hand down upon his desk. “Where is this woman?”

“Here ... in Palermo.”

“But not with you?” the older man asked as his brows again rose to meet his hairline. “How could you have allowed her out of your sight? I presume that you did not permit her to go somewhere unattended?”

“Certainly not,” Mandero snapped back, a little sharper than he had intended. He shook his head. “No, Signore, I had every intention of bringing her here, but at that time we encountered His Royal Highness, Pierro deMedici, and his party. The lady chose to leave in his company and I felt I had no reason to hold her against her wishes.”

“She claims to be the missing princess and you have no reason?” the comandante blustered, his dark complexion becoming ruddy with irritation. “And this prince . . . again?”

“His Royal Highness, Pierro deMedici. He was married to Princess Bianca and he was recently granted—”

“Yes, yes, of course,” the comandante muttered, nodding. “Considering her claim of identity, she should not be in hiding long, especially not in the company of her supposed brother-in-law. You dealt with at least one member of la famiglia reale, of course you had no choice.” He continued to mutter to himself, shaking his head. After a moment he looked up. “I was in the Armata when she was taken. We searched the seas for her. The little princess—Her late Highness—we ransomed her. It was a devil watching those sneering brigands leave with our cannons set for an easy shot, but then, we had hope of reclaiming the sister. Yet we were never able to. How could she suddenly appear on our shore, fleeing from a ship she should never have been on, and arriving just in time to be rescued, first by you, and then the prince?”

“We learned from the prince’s man that His Highness planned a visit of several days here. That he intended to have clothes made for his return to court,” Mandero said.

“Return to court? Return—!” the comandante shook his head. “It hasn’t been six months and he returns to court!”

“Deplorable,” Mandero agreed, “however, the marriage did not last beyond *la ricezione di nozze*, certainly not even to the wedding night.”

“Yes, yes,” the older man concurred, shaking his head. “But then, he is Tuscan and practically French. Certain allowances must be made, I presume. Do you know where they planned to stay? No?” He sighed again, picking up the queen’s letter. “Now, this business for the queen—”

“Is a matter of confidence, as she explained,” Mandero said.

“You have read the letter, then? I see the seal is broken.”

“I was aware of the contents. It became necessary for me to share this with *il Comandante del Fort Girgenti*,” Mandero explained.

“Colonello Russo,” the comandante said. The inexplicable lack of emotion or regard spoke more of this colonello’s opinion than anything he might actually have said. He sniffed once, twice, and then tapped the letter with a scarred and weathered hand. “I presume you bring this to me because you are in need of my assistance?”

“If you could be so kind as to draft a Letter of Introduction to the Bishop of Palermo. I must see him as soon as possible.”

“Done. And?”

“If I may, I would like to draw my *kumpania*—my squad’s wages from your paymaster?”

“Done. Is there more?”

“Si, Signore, it is very likely that I will need to make a short trip with but a few members of my party. I need to garrison my men . . . and the Romani elder who is with the young woman—”

“What is their story and why do you travel with these Gypsies, Maggiore? It is unorthodox at best for them to be traveling with your unit,” the comandante said. “Is it possible that they have committed crimes of which I should be aware?”

“No, no, not at all. I depend upon them greatly— as does Her Majesty,” Mandero said.

“Then it shall be done. Return on the hour. Bishop Bragadini is an old friend,” the comandante said.

“Thank you, Signore,” Mandero murmured.

“Is this all you request?”

“Yes, Signore.”

“Then I have one for you. You say you and your men saw this woman . . . the one who claimed to be the Princess Ortensia?”

“Yes, comandante.”

“And they have, of course, seen this Prince deMed-ici as well, yes?”

“Certainly.”

“Then I will take them into Palermo with me when we seek out the supposed princess and the deMedici whom I have never met.”

“They will be honored, Signore. I will make sure they are prepared to assist you.”

“Good. Now, I believe we are finished and you can be on your way within the hour.”

“It will be as you say, Signore, ” Madero said, rising and bowing.

XXXV

“The only stable state is the one in which all men are equal before the law.”

—Aristotle

Cristoval shouldered his way through the market square. On every side men, women, and even children hawked their wares—candied nuts here, silk ribbons and wine on the next aisle, perfumes and produce sold from the back of a wagon. He pressed on through the merchant quarter, his destination visible on the skyline, its steeples and bell tower standing well above the multistoried residences and more successful shops that could afford permanent lodgings in the district. Though his visits were infrequent, it seemed every time he visited Palermo, the merchant quarter expanded by leaps and bounds. As long as he kept his eye on the church and kept to the main streets, he could pass through much of old Palermo with little concern for his person or his purse. Getting accidentally turned onto a smaller street opened up too many opportunities for the less savory residents of the city who also wished to lighten his purse. Thinking of his purse, Cristoval resisted the urge to pat it. It was thin enough without inviting a cutpurse to liberate what little he had by drawing attention to it. No doubt anyone trying to rob him would be so offended he would make a contribution to the Battista coffers.

The deMedici had certainly done little to change that matter. Though he and young Ludvico were treated as servants, neither of them enjoyed the benefit of wages and their services were commandeered. Their one bright and shining opportunity was to accompany a prince to court and, for that eventuality, receive an embarrassment in riches to be seen only in their wardrobe. Apparently the prince had realized that he would not have retainers dressed to his standard unless he saw to it himself, because the prince, very uncharacteristically, had paid for the wealth of fabric and the service of the tailors.

Dodging beggars whom he presumed were better off than he, Don Cristoval Battista mounted the shallow stone steps of the Cattedrale de Palermo. As he reached for the door, another man grabbed it first and held it open for him. He

turned to thank him and was briefly at a loss for words. “It’s Maggiore del—”

“Di Montago,” the vigilare officer responded with a pleasant smile. He bowed slightly and motioned for Don Battista to go before him.

“Thank you,” Don Battista murmured. He paused in the annex to dip his fingers in the holy water and cross himself before actually entering the chapel. “You have come for the confessional?”

Di Montago shook his head firmly. “I have an appointment, and you, Signore?”

“I—I come for a priest ... for Madonna Ortensia,” Cristoval said. Though he thought it foolhardy for two members of *la famiglia reale*—if the woman was who she claimed to be—to marry without the prior consent of the king, he somehow thought better of mentioning his exact purpose to a servant of the White Crown.

“Then the good signora is still in your company . . . or rather His Highness?” di Montago asked.

Cristoval nodded.

“She is doing well, I presume?” the officer pressed.

“Si, when last I left her company she was quite well. I will pass on your good wishes, Maggiore.”

“Actually, Don Cristoval—yes?—I felt it might be better if I call upon her. We did rescue her from Turkish captors and last night was not the appropriate moment for an interview. Where are you staying so that I or a more senior officer may call upon her?”

Don Battista hesitated but could think of no reason not to provide the officer with the information. In all likelihood the marriage ceremony would be complete by then and the deMedici should have little to complain about. “We stay at *la Locanda del Coronet Dorato*.”

“And you will be a guest there for how long?” the officer asked good-naturedly.

“For the next several days, to be certain,” Don Battista said.

“Ah! Very well, then. I leave you to your own affairs and me to mine,” di Montago said, bowing with a small flourish before the men went their separate ways.

* * *

“Oh, Maggiore?”

Mandero turned back to Don Battista. “Yes?”

“Were you traveling with a priest yesterday?” the don asked.

“A priest? Why do you ask?” Mandero said, maintaining an aloof smile.

“It’s just that I thought . . . well, you see Prince Pierro received some priests during his stay in my home and I thought I recognized one of them with you.”

“Perhaps it was one of the Rom. They spent considerable time at the estate of Conte Baiamonte Davizzi. He is your neighbor, if I am not mistaken.”

The don blinked in surprise. “You are well-acquainted with me and my holdings. Have I done something wrong that I come under the scrutiny of the queen’s guard?”

“Not at all, Don Battista. We called upon Conte Davizzi the other day on a personal matter and noted the proximity of the Battista estate. I assumed that this was the manner of things,” Mandero said.

“You are, of course, quite correct. My family estate lies alongside Davizzi’s.”

“Then you most assuredly recognized one of the Rom with us,” Mandero said confidently.

“You must be right, but he did look so familiar . . . like one of the priests, I mean.”

“The Rom do not often get the calling to service in the Roman Church and my impression is that the prince is not greatly enamored of the Romani, so, surely you must be mistaken,” Mandero insisted with a smile.

“Yes, that must be so,” Don Battista reluctantly agreed. “Forgive my imposition on your time, Maggiore.”

“No, at all . . . and I will ask the Rom if they know you from previous visits,” Mandero assured him. “Yes . . . well . . . thank you!”

Don Battista bowed again and set off about his business. Mandero watched him hail one of the acolytes circulating among those waiting for the confessional. When the don’s attention seemed completely focused upon his own affairs, Mandero stalked up the aisle to the clerk positioned outside the cloister.

“I’ve business with His Reverence, the bishop,” Mandero said. He produced the letter confirming the audience from his breast pocket and turned it over to the clerk.

The clerk was barely more than a youth, certainly no older than his *recluta*, Antoine. No more than a shadow of a beard dusted his chin, but for all of his youth, he was serious about his business and reviewed the paper Mandero handed him with care, noting the broken seal of the bishop’s signet.

“Follow me, Maggiore,” he said simply. He rose from his desk and opened a narrow door into a back hallway. Without speaking, he began climbing the stairs leading up.

At each landing, the back wall contained a myriad of portraits, with a focal piece noted as a predecessor of the current bishop. Beyond the paintings, the walls were plastered and varnished and, otherwise, left plain. The stairs were narrow, causing a perilous hazard when one cleric coming down the stairs was forced to stay on the landing until they had passed.

It most likely would have been more comfortable using the front entryway into the bishopric palazzo. Most surely, the stairway would have been wider and the decor more suited to receiving visitors, but Mandero preferred the back way. It made his arrival less ostentatious, less of an occasion. Entering through the front foyer, he would have been impressed, no doubt, by the richness the Church had to offer. But this way also gave him the opportunity to compare the conditions of those of lower

rank than the bishop.

A great deal could be judged about a man by how he treated his subordinates. One thing that did not serve the king well, was having the leaders of the religious ghetto within Citteauroea palazzo grounds live within the same walls as the royal family. It kept these religious men from setting up house for themselves and their men and thus exposing many important flaws of character.

His guide stopped at one of the many landings with doors while there were still stairs leading heavenward and opened it, beckoning Mandero inside.

Mandero found himself surrounded by a kind of quiet stillness, the sort of place that eased the weary soul as much as the thick carpet beneath him cushioned his feet. His guide motioned for him to take a seat and crossed the room to a large tapestry that shielded one section of the room from the other. Within moments, he disappeared within, leaving Mandero alone in the reception chamber of Bishop Bragadini.

He surveyed the room, noting the large, engraved door on the other side. A large, luxurious fireplace with a low-burning fire occupied the wall opposite the tapestry separation. The picture of Pope Innocent the XI above it, with gold filigreed frame, was almost larger than the marble mantelpiece. A chair and footstool sat before it. Large chests were set against the walls and covered with carpets and cushions in the old-fashioned manner for holding private court. Apparently, the bishop allowed for others to sit in his presence.

Upon the main carpet, sunlight cast a cross made of sunbeams. Mandero rose, stepping around the corner of the reception area, and wandered to the tall, narrow parabolic sash window. Inlaid stained glass formed a frame of sorts around a viewing area in the form of a cross. The speckled colors of the window had been lost on the carpet.

“Ahem.”

Mandero turned. He bowed deeply to cover his being caught by surprise.

Bishop Bragadini waved him up, and Mandero obliged.

The bishop was a big man, mostly due to his large and imposing frame. Though obviously well-fed and tended to, he was not a man who appeared to bear an inch of fat. He would not be surprised, Mandero realized, if he were to learn that at least at one time, the bishop had been a man of arms, skilled with the sword. Evidence of the supposition could be seen in the way the older man moved. Despite having developed the stoop some elders were prone to, he was taller than Mandero.

“Come, sit down, Maggiore, and let us discuss this business of the queen’s that brings you to me.”

“I have come regarding the cardinal,” Mandero said bluntly.

Immediately the bishop’s gray eyes lost their sparkle though his expression remained candid. “Favor an old man, will you, Maggiore? Let us sit.” Without waiting for a response, the bishop turned toward his chair by the fire, which would

leave Madero to sit upon the footstool, stand in attendance, or seat himself at an awkward distance. After a pause, the bishop crossed to one of the trunks, readjusted some of the pillows and sat down. "Normally, I would counsel you to take your questions about someone to them, but as things are . . ." He waved his hand vaguely. "What may I do to help Her Majesty? It is my dearest wish that the differences between the Church and the Tyrrhian Crown be settled once and for all."

"I do not think that I speak out of place when I tell you that the queen, at least, has no problems with the Church per se, but she has . . ." Madero fumbled for the right word. Finally he let out an exasperated sigh. "The cardinal's absence from Citteauroea was very sudden. It is my desire that I might reacquaint the cardinal with Her Majesty."

The bishop nodded thoughtfully. "You are, of course, aware that the cardinal's departure from Citteauroea was . . . not planned?"

Madero inclined his head, deferring to the bishop. "Yes, Your Reverence, which is why I am seeking him out. There are certain obligations which he was expected to fulfill as the Church's representative to Tyrrhia."

"When last I spoke with the cardinal, he described a certain distancing from the throne," the bishop said.

"When was it that last you spoke with the cardinal?"

"Spoke? Mmm. Yes," the bishop mumbled. "It has been some weeks to be sure. Why, Maggiore, does the queen send you to me? Am I suspect of something?"

"The cardinal is your superior in the Church, of course, and so we have turned to the two bishops of Tyrrhia. I have already interviewed Bishop Milano who was most kind and helpful. He ... uh ... had not seen the cardinal personally, but suggested that you might have and, indeed, so you have revealed. You have spoken with him."

"Ah, Bishop Milano. He remains ever helpful, does he not?" The bishop smiled sourly. "Where the cardinal goes is none of my affair, you understand, and the politics of one man is not necessarily the politics of another. That, more than anything, is what troubles our land, Maggiore. Tyrrhia is torn apart by the differing opinions with nothing to unite them. The Church would bring all men and women, all Tyrrhians, to be of one heart, one mind, and thus *realize* its place in the world."

Madero rubbed the bridge of his nose thoughtfully. "Your Reverence, I have no doubt that you are sincere in this belief, but there are too many who would *not* agree with you. The king holds the position, last I was aware, that all allegiances should be to Tyrrhia's Crown, not some foreign national who places less priority on the welfare of the people of Tyrrhia than its position on religion—" Madero stopped abruptly. He rose and bowed. "Please forgive me, Your Reverence. I am a guest in your own sitting room bringing up theosophical matters adverse to your own beliefs."

"You are respectful, if not, I suspect, 'of the faith,' " the bishop replied. He gave an eloquent shrug. "As to the cardinal, I have not seen him for some time now. I have received reports that he passed nearby Palermo as recently as a few days ago,

but I do not know if any of that is helpful.”

“Do you, perhaps, know where he was going?”

Again the bishop shrugged his shoulders. “From Palermo, you can leave by as many main roads as there are directions and by sea, your destination would be entirely unpredictable.”

“But in the past, when he has traveled through Palermo, what were his destinations?” Mandero asked.

“From Palermo to the capital, to Girgenti, to Napoli—”

“Where?” Mandero asked.

“Napoli, just north of Salerno,” the bishop replied.

“Why does he go there? Many would think it an indirect route to Rome,” Mandero said.

“He has people there. His family is Neapolitan, after all.”

“I did not know,” Mandero murmured. Napoli was less than a day’s travel from Tyrrhia’s northernmost continental border, near enough for many Neapolitans to send their young men to the university in Salerno— noted throughout the continent for its studies in medicine, theology, and philosophy. From Palermo, it was but a barge ride home. “Do you know when he plans to return?”

“Seeing that I did not know where he was going, I can most certainly not tell you when he shall return,” the bishop said tartly. He rose to shift the pillows around him, then sat again.

“No, of course not,” Mandero said.

“Is there some other way that I may be of assistance to you, Maggiore?”

Reminding himself how generous the bishop had already been with his time, he started to shake his head no, but stopped. “There is another matter.”

“Yes?” the bishop urged.

“Two, actually if I am to be absolutely thorough. Though I suppose that I could ask one of the other—”

“No, no. You are here with me now. It is no bother and certainly no reason to take one of my priests from his duties.”

“Thank you for your graciousness, Your Reverence. I will attempt to keep these queries brief.”

The bishop nodded and waved for Mandero to go on while he leaned back against the tapestry-covered wall.

Mandero restrained his urge to pace. “Is there a Hospitallers’ order between Palermo and Girgenti?”

“There are several, of course.”

“Can you give me anything more specific?”

“Ah, my dear Maggiore, that would require more specific information from you. What else can you tell me?”

Mandero thought back to his talk with Alessandra. Had it only been a few hours since last they were together? He pushed the thought away. His dealings with Alessandra were private, thinking of them now might lead to questions he was not prepared or willing to answer. “They might have room in their abbey to house those who have lost their wits.”

“You mean a madhouse?” the bishop prompted. A touch of cynicism turned his broad facial features sour and twisted. “There is one such as this, but I would not say that it was necessarily between Girgenti and Palermo as it is too far west.”

“And this place is?” Mandero prompted.

“Alcamo in the Trapani Province has the Abbey of Four Brothers. It is easy enough to find, if you know Trapani at all,” the bishop said. “Beyond that there is a Franciscan order in Acquaviva Platani in Caltanis-setta Province.

“I thank you again, Your Reverence.”

“Why, pray tell, do you ask after the cardinal *and*, in practically the same breath, the humble hospital houses where the Church has provided for the care of the idiots and maniacs that distract the common folk and destroy all that is good for themselves and their loved ones?”

“Forgive me, Your Reverence, I did not mean to suggest anything by my questions. They are practically two different subjects.”

“Practically? So there *is* some semblance . . . ?” the bishop asked.

Mandero could not be sure if the man were genuinely insulted, though he suspected not. More likely, it was curious banter. In either case, he decided that the bishop would have to make do with his suppositions.

The bishop apparently realized he was not going to have satisfaction on the subject, so, with a sigh, he asked, “And there was one more matter you wished to ask me about?”

Mandero pinched the bridge of his nose briefly, trying to find the most delicate approach to his final subject. He cleared his throat and reclaimed the seat beside the bishop, moving the cushions away and toward the bishop. “Have you heard any reports of the witch-hunters active in Tyrrhia?”

“Of course I have. How could I not?”

“And, pardon, Your Reverence, but how did you come by the news?”

“From the parishes in my district, visitors who have shared it. The ways are multiple, but the message has been consistent.”

“What rumors have you heard, Your Reverence?”

“You ask me?” the bishop asked in surprise, shaking his head disdainfully.

“I wish to compare what you have learned with what I have learned.”

“And, of course, you will share the difference in the information. Yes?” the bishop prodded.

Mandero nodded reluctantly. “I will tell you what I can.”

“And I will tell you what I can,” the bishop retorted. “So. I have told you that I have received word of witch-hunters from my parishes . . . some of my parishes, not all.”

“The witch-hunters, at least some of them, have begun to organize under the name of Magnus Ignique.”

“I have heard the name, but as a movement by distressed citizens of Tyrrhia,” the bishop said. “Tyr-rhians are confused. They turn to their king for guidance and when he does not supply the answer, they create their own.”

“Does this condone the murders of innocent women and children? I think not,” Mandero replied. First his *amarata*, Alessandra, came to mind, followed closely by the midwife and the woman and child in her care. He would get nowhere arguing politics with a priest, but, more importantly, it was not his place. “Forgive me, Your Reverence, in my duties to the queen I have seen things . . .” He did not bother trying to hide his shiver of revulsion. “I understand that you are in sympathy with this movement, but there are laws of both God and Man being broken here without people being given the right to commend their soul to God. I do not ask you to stop them, but if you know of any way to—”

“To rout them out? My friend Colonello Ferrari has already made that request and I have promised that I would give him information should it come to me.”

“Thank you,” Mandero said, rising once more.

The bishop shrugged. “I hope that I have not offended you, Maggiore. I enjoy a good test of wits and this issue is dear to me . . . and to my superiors. There is much that the Church has to offer Tyrrhia if the king and the Palantini would give up this centuries-old concept of a Philosophers’ State. It is madness.”

“It is Tyrrhia.”

XXXVI

“I know how men in exile feed on dreams of hope.”

—Aeschylus

Alessandra watched. In time, she had grown ever watchful, looking for any

opportunity, any lapse and, as yet, the other *mulló*, her Sister-kindred, protected her even while Sister suffered agonies as the cardinal stripped away pieces of her essence to wrap around his own spell work, to give it power, vigor . . . life.

The cardinal sought to commit the greatest possible spell and, therefore, the one forbidden, leaving it to the realm of the gods. The cardinal sought to create life itself and to capture it into the carved poppets of mandrake root.

This cellar had become a familiar place, though Alessandra could not remember when she first came to it or how often she had returned. From the crest on the great oak wine casks to the alchemist's workshop of bottles, unctions, and the maze of tubing connecting one of this to two of that, it was just familiar.

The cardinal concentrated upon two bottles connected to a glass dome. Both bottles contained a twisted brown thing suspended in a solution that smelled strongly of expensive red wine and herbs. The major component must have been water because the resulting color was like that of a bowl of water as blood dripped into it. Within the red swirls, herbs floated and a heavy sediment lay at the bottom. The whole of the mixture smelled reminiscently of her preservative bath in the marble casket beneath the palazzo in Citteauroea . . . except that her wine had not been quite so expensive, which disgruntled her.

In an immortal sense of outrage, she listened to the cardinal as he slipped a long glass tube into the bottle and gently stirred the contents. "Come, my children, come. Take life," he murmured over and over again.

The mandrake roots actually seemed to respond to the cardinal's cajoling while Sister-kindred writhed and wept. In spite of her pain, the other *mulló* wrapped itself around Alessandra to protect her from the cardinal's leaching spells and from detection, all without consideration of her own pain, her own needs.

The cardinal appeared content, talking to the two roots like a father to his children. Continuing his gentle, soothing murmurs, he took a small dagger from the workbench, then quickly, and with a surprising amount of force, he drove the pointed blade into his own palm.

Had she been able, Alessandra knew that she would have screamed . . . despite the situation.

Smiling through what must have been considerable pain, the cardinal raised his hand to the narrow mouth of one bottle and dribbled his life fluid into the body. "Blood of my blood. Body of my body, creation of my mind to yours. Let it be so!" Over the second bottle, he repeated the steps. When he was done, he brought an oil lamp to sit beneath the tripod stand upon which the bottles sat.

Alessandra watched as the cardinal next drew out a bowl of cannellini beans soaked in the blood of the chicken from the last time he cast in this dark chamber. The beans were no longer white, but had taken on the rich red of the raw innards of newly slaughtered cattle.

"Seed of my dreams. Seed of my purpose," the cardinal murmured. He took the wooden bowl and drained the blood from it into a slop bucket. He then fed the

ensanguined beans in the bowl his own blood, letting his vital fluid slide down his fingers as he stirred the beans, again crooning to them as though they were children.

Alessandra could do nothing but watch this deepest of black magic. Being this close ... it was *marimé* more so than ever her state as a *mulló* could have caused. She was sickened, repulsed, and yet realized the awful horrors Sister-kindred must have faced in the countless years she'd spent enslaved to the cardinal. She could hear the call of the deep magic, the music which entwined itself with spell work, particularly Romani.

Was the madness of the music coming in reaction to the cardinal or because the magic was being drained from a Roma? Whichever, she realized light-headedly—she giggled, she could not be light-headed as she had no head—the cardinal was using Sister-kindred so deeply to her core that the cloaking shell she placed around Alessandra was not being as effective as it had been before.

In spite of her horror, she laughed, watching as tendrils, hungry, reaching, grasping tendrils grew from the blood beans.

The cardinal began to hum as he worked. He heard the dark magic, too! Did he know what it meant? Did he care?

From beneath the glass dome, the cardinal retrieved the *tesoro* of the White Queen. As he sang over it, the queen's features began to imprint themselves upon the mandrake. The queen's features, but none of her essence, the softening of her chin, her gentle eyes . . .

Eyes. The *tesoro* had eyes, but they were black and staring, like two little beads, and they overwhelmed the artificial characteristics. And the evil magic sang on in counterpoint to the cardinal's whispers and murmurs.

Had she blood of her own left, it would have run cold as the cardinal lifted the strip of silk that served as the poppet-queen's dress. The untreated cannellini had grown roots since last she saw them. The roots intertwined with one another and burrowed deep into the soil which was the mandrake root. The Cardinal took one of his swollen, bloody beans and carefully parted the beans already rooted and placed the new one between them. He and the magic continued their song.

*“... Two to weigh heavy upon my queen
And now another sits in between
So that three it would be
But, lo, where there is three
there should best be one more
So let us make it four ...”*

The evil magic sang to Sister-kindred's high scream.

* * *

"I cannot leave you in charge of my men, *Meero-kak*—"

The Romani elder waved him off. "This is a military installation, the men must answer to a military command, and, Maggiore, the time has come and gone for you to call me by my given name."

"I do not wish to be—"

"Disrespectful?" the Rom asked with a laugh. "No. Titles are your way of life, but it is not mine. You may call me by the name my mother gave me on my natal day or Uncle as you should because of your wife."

Mandero nodded. "So be it. You, too, are free—"

"Too confusing, I think. We shall leave it as it is, Maggiore. As to this trip, are you certain that you wish to take only Grasni?"

"I have to travel fast and I need her skills with magic," Mandero explained.

"Take me, too, at least, Maggiore, and allow me to earn my keep."

Mandero and Petrus turned to discover della Guelfa standing nearby, holding the reins of three horses. Mandero started to shake his head, but della Guelfa leaped in.

"Brambilla is perfectly capable of supervising what must be done. The men know what they are about," della Guelfa said.

With a nod, Mandero agreed and reached for Joro's reins. "We might as well take Antoine. It'll give him some experience at hard travel and some of our other duties. Padre Gabera will be coming as well," Mandero said.

"So much for your smaller party," Petrus observed, with a wink.

Mandero forestalled a sigh. "Do you wish to join us as well, Uncle?"

Petrus shook his head. "There is a spoke on the left rear wheel of the *vardo* which needs attention and this two-day will be perfect for me to work on it."

"Very well," Mandero said, relieved. "Della Guelfa, will you find out what is keeping Padre Gabera so long and have Antoine and one of the others saddle horses for them?"

Somewhat later in the day than Mandero intended, his party of five departed the Escalade fortress on the southernmost point of Palermo and headed in the direction of Trapani Province.

* * *

Alessandra withdrew from the *marimé*, the vile cardinal, even from Sister-kindred.

She ached knowing what that other must be feeling, how she was suffering because Alessandra had had a taste of it for herself. It made her all the more determined to not become the cardinal's supply of magic which he was too lazy to gain on his own. Had he dedicated the time, the learning, the craft to what he now did—well, he would not do those things that he now did because he would know better, would understand the wrongness of stealing a mortal soul's hereafter.

She swirled around her tomb like an ill-gotten wind. She *must* remember, no matter how hard, how difficult, she *must* remember this for Mandero! Already, some of the events were slipping away, like sand in a tide, memories were being washed away.

How could she save the queen? The cardinal clearly intended her harm and if he had his eye on the queen, then most assuredly he was also after the king. But how? What was he doing and what could she do to stop it when she was his captive, trapped and held in the prison of almost living and almost dead? Her people thought her *marimé*. She knew she was *marimé*, but then, after meeting Sister-kindred, she knew that it was possible to be *mulló* and not evil. No, if Sister-kindred were evil, she directed her “evil,” her anger, at one man . . . the one who made her what she was . . . and what Alessandra was, for that matter.

Alessandra faced the knowledge that she had acted stupidly—selfishly—pursuing her own needs without conscience because she thought there was no hope, but now there was. She thought of the old man in the hospital ward and was sick, retching an acidic bile of effluvia. She could not bear to think of what she had done to her loved ones. The choices she made *were* evil, but that did not mean that her choices would always be, that she would therefore forever be evil.

That certain knowledge gave her hope even here in her exile. She had hope. There had to be a way to help and she was determined to find the way.

XXXVII

“The heartache and the thousand natural shocks That flesh is heir to— ‘Tis a consummation.”

—William Shakespeare

Luciana sat back laughing at a story told by Nunzia Rui, the proprietress of The Dragon's Hearth. Sated by the simple meal prepared by the queen's personal cook, she relaxed and enjoyed the sight of the queen the most at ease she had been since their arrival. The grayness on her face, the tightness around her mouth, had faded with the morning fog. She almost looked like her old self and was now excited about

the imminent arrival of the Gypsy Silk Guild de Citteauroea.

“And you will have gowns for the *bambini piccolis-simi*?” Nunzia Rui asked.

“Oh, Luciana, that would be so wonderful. With the children coming so close together, we must have them all wearing matching gowns for their *primo presentazi-one* at court!” Idala said.

“Will there be a difference in the gowns for boys or girls?” Luciana laughed indulgently.

Idala cocked her head. “That is true. I didn’t think of that,” she said, leaning back on her chaise. She sat up again very suddenly, dislodging her quiet little black and tan terrier and sending her needlework flying. “There are ways, folkways to tell what our children will be. It isn’t *exactly* casting magic, Luciana. Please?”

“She couldn’t, Your Majesty, even if it wouldn’t displease her husband,” Nunzia chuckled.

Idala turned to Luciana, downcast. “Is it true?”

Luciana nodded. “Because I am to bear a child as well and we are at the same stage as one another, the old ways would be conflicted upon which of us to read and even if we were to have three boys between us, the needle might still confuse us and pronounce us as having girls. But all is not lost. Donna Rui can do the test.”

“Will you?” Idala asked, turning anxiously to the old woman who had, in the last day, become an important fixture in the queen’s confidence.

“As you wish, Majesty,” Nunzia said. She rose and went to the far corner of the room. With a hop onto the footstool so recently supplied, the old woman yanked on the bellpull. Just as nimbly for her age and old bones, Nunzia leaped down and returned. “We will send for tea, Majesty, and that way we can learn a little something about each bambino’s personality as well.”

Idala smiled happily, rubbing her hands in anticipation. “You must do Luciana first!”

Donna Rui turned to Luciana. “*Araunya*?”

Luciana looked from the old woman to the queen, who was clearly excited. She sighed in a long-suffering manner. “If that is what pleases Her Majesty, then let it be so.”

“Shall we do this by the needle, then?”

“Needle?” the queen asked, her voice squeaking.

“Yes, that is best, most reliable, I think,” Luciana concurred. She finished a stitch of needlework and neatly bound off the thread before snipping it and her needle loose. As she was handing it to Donna Rui, a servant appeared unobtrusively, but ready.

“Tea for three, please,” Donna Rui said, without looking up from her adjustments of the threaded needle.

The servant looked to the queen, who nodded and sent him away with a gesture of impatience. “What will you do?” the queen asked, her face wrinkling with concern as Donna Rui held the needle aloft to the light.

“Watch, Majesty,” Donna Rui bid the queen as though she were some overanxious child. She turned, frowning. “Have you truly never seen this before?”

The queen shook her head. “The Royal Physician does not believe in the folkways.”

“Then he shall be having kittens these next few months,” Donna Rui muttered with a glimmer of amusement. She shook her head. “You have only ever been attended by men, Majesty?”

“There were the nurses and assistants,” the queen said. She shrugged. “His Majesty has always insisted upon the best, the most modern care.”

“Modern!” Donna Rui huffed. “When a woman is birthing, she needs a good midwife who has done this herself and helped other women, not some man who thinks of childbirth as nothing more than theory in practice!”

“Are . . . are you a midwife?” the queen asked quietly.

Donna Rui turned, giving the queen her whole attention. “No, Majesty, but I know of one who is very good. She attended the birth of both of my daughter’s children.”

“Then you will send for her this afternoon,” the queen said decisively.

“There is another that I know of, Idala,” Luciana said. She remembered a visit in the dark not so very long ago. She had noticed the shingle of the midwife by the door, though she had not stopped to take special note of it at the time. Since arriving, she had begun queries—preparing for her own time.

“I will interview them both, then,” Idala said. She cast aside the blanket and rose from her chaise, scooping up her little terrier as she sat upon the stool at Luciana’s side. “Now, Donna Rui, what do you have to do next?”

Donna Rui smiled as she held the needle aloft and over Luciana’s womb. “Ready?”

When Luciana nodded, she lifted the sewing needle and began to swing it in a circle. As her hand stilled, she chanted,

“Left and right,

“Girl in sight.

“Top and bottom,

“A boy to come!”

Luciana found herself holding her breath as the needle slowed so that she did not interfere with the natural course of the needle. As the circling stopped, the needle began to twitch from left to right.

“A daughter, *Araunya*,” Donna Rui said, her head tilting to one side. “Good for your people, but what will the duca say?”

Luciana bit her lip. What *would* Stefano say?

Idala patted Luciana's hand. "He will be ecstatic, Luciana, just wait and see. He'll indulge her horribly and heaven forbid some callow youth should break her heart."

Luciana laughed. He probably would, and if this child had the spirit of her mother and father, she would not thank her father for chastising her lovers, preferring to do it herself.

At the sound of a rattled teacup, the women turned and noted a young kitchen maid settling a sterling tea set upon a side table. She blushed at her mistake in distracting them, curtsied, and backed out of the room.

"*Araunya*, will you serve the tea?" Donna Rui asked.

"Of course," Luciana said, rising. "Let us first get Idala back to her couch."

As the queen rose with their assistance, Luciana was shocked by the queen's girth. "You have grown, Majesty!" Luciana said.

The queen looked down at her belly and paled.

"You look as a woman ready to birth in less than a week," Donna Rui said. "You most certainly are more gravid than yesterday. Something is afoot."

"Magic," Luciana said.

"I must send to my store. I have need of my wares," Donna Rui said, rising purposefully.

"Aye, and we have need of a midwife. Begging your pardon, Nunzia, but the midwife I have in mind has impeccable political standing as well as midwifery skills. I am sending for her at once."

* * *

It took perhaps an hour, perhaps more, for things within the queen's apartment to settle back down to something akin to order. The midwife had been sent for, as had unnamed supplies from Donna Rui's store. In the aftermath of excitement, the women lay back in their chairs, staring at nothing in particular.

"The tea!" Donna Rui said suddenly, jumping to her feet. She went over to the tea set and touched the pot as though she expected that it might still be hot. Scowling, she said, "I guess there will be no fear of the tea burning your lips."

Swirling the teapot, she poured out two cups, sweetened them both without consulting either the queen or Luciana, and brought them over. "Drink up now," the old woman said.

The tea was sweet and cold. Lucia drank hers in two gulps. Resisting the urge to peer down at the cup and do her own reading, she caught Donna Rui's attention and returned the cup.

"Majesty?" Donna Rui asked.

Idala shook her head. "I have not finished. Please, do Luciana first."

Donna Rui inclined her head and then contemplated the remnants of Luciana's cup. "The girl will be like her parents . . . strong-willed, fierce in her emotions, and her heart will be loyal to few, but absolute once it is given."

The old woman sat back, appearing exhausted.

"Is there more?" Idala asked.

Donna Rui peered down at the cup she had let drop into her skirts. "The leaves provide only a peek, Majesty."

"Does it say nothing of her appearance?"

"Her parents say more to her looks than the cup, but it tells me the girl will be fair and frequently called upon, much to her dismay."

"Then she shall look like you, Luciana," Idala laughed and handed the old woman her cup. "Are you too tired?"

"No, Madonna, I have energy enough," Donna Rui said, sitting up. "But we have not done the needle test upon you yet."

"I had forgotten," Idala murmured.

Luciana's eyes narrowed as she studied the queen. There could be no way the queen could or would forget something like that. She was hiding something again, but Luciana could not intervene in the matter, not with Donna Rui here, not without exposing the queen's lie.

"The needle from your tapestry work," Luciana said, pointing to Idala's needlework before she could change her mind.

"Yes, that will do," Donna Rui said and held out her hand.

Idala took up her needlework, and tied off the fiber almost reluctantly.

Donna Rui looked as though she, too, noted the queen's odd behavior but did not mention it. "Relax, Majesty, this does not hurt," she said gently.

There was a hint of humor in the proprietress' voice; but even watching her mostly from behind, Luciana could tell the woman knew something was amiss.

Luciana rose and moved to sit at the head of the chaise and take Idala's hand. "Go on, Donna," Luciana murmured.

The old woman began the process of twirling the needle, but as it should have come to rest in a single pattern of right to left, top to bottom, the needle simply stopped at dead center.

Idala looked troubled. Luciana squeezed her hand and said quietly, "Try again, Nunzia, but this time, focus upon the first child."

"Aye," Donna Rui nodded. "I'll focus on that child which lies in the first cell of her womb as the common books say. Lay back, Majesty, and try to relax."

Idala nodded and lay back a little farther, taking a deep breath almost as though she were preparing to birth the child. The queen's little dog whined and crept along

Idala's side until it reached the queen's free hand and began to lick it.

"We can't have her fouling the spell," Luciana laughed and picked up the dog, then returned to hold Idala's hand.

Donna Rui waited until the chatter subsided and began again. This time a girl was indicated. The test for the child in the second womb marked another girl.

Idala sighed, not looking completely happy. She had clearly wanted another son, one more likely able to inherit the throne.

"Girls may claim the throne as well," Luciana said. "Bianca was in line, but she was not fit and she proved that with her treasonous behavior. She cared more for herself than for Tyrrhia. Any daughter you raise, Idala, will be as suitable as Dario Gian to inherit."

"Yes, of course, you are right—what are you doing?" Idala interrupted herself to address Donna Rui who had begun yet another indicative spell.

"Considering your state of gravidness, testing for another child only makes sense, Majesty," Donna Rui explained, frowning.

"Why does the needle jump so?" Idala asked.

Donna Rui shook her head. "I do not know. I do not understand it myself—"

As she spoke, the needle gave off a tiny eruption of pings and then burst in two.

"What does that mean?" Idala demanded.

* * *

Mandero pulled Joro to a skittering halt at the crossroads. Grasni reined in her piebald mare, part of the team which drew Alessandra's *vardo*, beside him. Though he had been surprised to see Grasni ride astride, he could not help but be impressed with her horsemanship.

"Why do we stop?" Grasni asked a little breathlessly as her gaze went toward the sky. The fog was rolling in off of the Tyrrhian Sea and the sun was near to setting. The trees growing in clumps by the roadside had long since begun to look like lurking highwaymen.

Delia Guelfa at last caught up, shepherding the priest, Gabera, and young Antoine.

"Will you be able to make it, Padre?" Mandero asked. Even in the murky light of dusk, he could make out the man's pallor and pinched features. Mandero had to admit he had pressed the priest hard with their travels since he had joined the ranks of the *kumpania* and he had been soundly trounced, battered, and bruised *before* that.

"I will make it," Gabera said. "I will make it if for no other reason than that our destination puts me in the hands of—with all due respect to Signorina Nevi—chirurgeons and physicians!"

Rather than being insulted, Grasni laughed good-naturedly. "So, Maggiore, how much farther?" she asked.

“I was hoping the good padre knew,” Mandero replied, motioning to the signpost standing at the very nexus of where the road parted. “To the right leads us north and to Alcamo proper. To the left . . .” He ended with a shrug.

“I have not been to the Abbey of the Four Brothers myself, so I am not familiar with the exact road,” Gabera said, shaking his head.

“We could go to Alcamo and ask,” Antoine suggested.

“But then, it might take another hour to reach the town proper and, therefore, might lead us as much as two more hours off our destination,” della Guelfa said.

Gabera and Antoine groaned audibly.

Grasni shook her head. “I will figure it out,” she said, dismounting and tossing della Guelfa the reins to her mount. To Mandero she said, “I will need you to move back a way. I do not wish to spook the horses.”

“So be it,” Mandero said, turning Joro back. “Gentlemen?”

“What’s she going to do?” Antoine asked, craning his neck this way and that so that he might get a better sight of the proceedings from amidst the clump of men and horses.

“Magic,” Gabera said. His distaste for it was obvious by the edge in his voice.

Antoine scoffed, “No one believes in such fairy tales anymore—”

He had learned to fall silent when della Guelfa gave him a particular look and Antoine must have seen it now, Mandero realized, but he was watching Grasni. She knelt down at the splitting of the way, gathered the light, dusty dirt of the road. Standing, she held her hand high and let the dirt sift through her fingers. Caught by the subtle wind, the dust blew southward.

Grasni let drop what remained in her hand and dusted her hands on the back of her skirt. She knelt, with the men still watching her. After what seemed several minutes of prayer, she stood again. With her eyes closed and cast skyward, she raised both arms as though beseeching the heavens and slowly began to turn herself in a circle, twisting south, counterclockwise.

With her head and arms raised to heaven, she slowly gathered speed as she turned, like the reverse of a child’s spinning top. Slowly but steadily she gained speed, faster and faster, until it seemed that any moment she would stumble and fall . . . and that was precisely what she did.

Grasni landed with a soft thud, sending up another cloud of dust.

“Stay here,” Mandero ordered the others and urged his mount forward to Grasni’s side. He leaned down to get a better look at the young woman who had once been his beloved’s maid and confidante. She lay on her back with her eyes closed. “Are you ill?”

“No,” Grasni said quietly, “merely very dizzy. Which direction am I pointed?”

“Pointed?” Mandero said, then nodded in understanding. He studied where she

lay long and hard.

“Well?” Grasni asked, opening her eyes.

“You are pointed directly at the signpost, but your arm that is pointed forward indicates to the south.”

Grasni sighed and sat up slowly. “Then the abbey lies almost directly ahead and we will take the southern road as the one ever so slightly preferred. No doubt there will be another juncture at which point we take the northern road for some slight distance.”

Mandero nodded thoughtfully. “You would be handy to have around in all my travels,” he observed. “The time you would save me!” He started to dismount to assist her.

“Stay in your saddle, Maggiore. I am well enough to stand and mount,” Grasni said. “As to the direction, ‘tis nothing more than an old Romani road trick. There are others, of course, but I preferred this.” As she spoke, Grasni got slowly to her feet. “Come, the sun is nearly gone.”

“Too true! Antoine, bring Grasni her horse!” Mandero commanded. To his comrades all, he said, “We take the southern road, but ere long there will be another road to the north and we will take it.”

* * *

“But, are you sure—?” the woman was saying as she was backed into the audience chamber for la fami-glia reale. The door snapped shut in front of her, leaving her nothing to do but turn and face the occupants of the room.

Luciana rose immediately, “Signora della Guelfa, how good of you to come!”

Here, the woman stopped. She dropped the large brocade bag she had carried, one hand going to the scarf that covered her hair and the other brushing the front of her apron. She dropped immediately into a deep curtsy, her trembling hands clutching her skirts.

“Please, rise, Madonna,” the king said, looking expectantly from the woman to Luciana who had stopped beside her.

“Please,” Luciana said softly and took her hand to help her stand—it would be the only way she could climb out of the curtsy without falling to her hands and knees. Luciana saw Signora della Guelfa note her pregnancy as she accepted help.

As soon as she was able, the Signora della Guelfa broke her hold on Luciana and stood on her own. “I—I—” She looked around the room, noting in turn the Royal Physician standing behind Luciana at the fireplace, Stefano occupying the other side of the fireplace, the queen who was ensconced on the couch, Nunzia Rui retreating comfortably to the shadows among the wall tapestries and, last, the king who stood at the foot of the queen’s perch.

Signora della Guelfa took a deep breath and stood a little straighter. “I am very sorry. I think I was misdirected. Forgive—”

“No, Madonna, you are where you were meant to be,” the king said.

Luciana wished he could manage to look a little less disapproving, but then, perhaps, the loss of weight and his own pallid and gray complexion made him look more severe than he intended. It had taken the better part of two hours to convince him that the queen’s pregnancy demanded a woman’s attention. She did not savor the idea of trying to convince him that the Royal Physician’s prescription of regular bleedings for himself might not be the best approach. The argument would have to be made, but tonight . . . tonight the queen’s afflictions were the order of business.

“Forgive me if I am out of place, Majesty, but . . . I do not understand why I have been summoned . . . unless it is on some matter concerning my husband?” Signora della Guelfa’s voice rose, as did her hand to her throat, at the thought.

“Husband?” the king queried, looking expectantly at Luciana.

She saw the narrowing of Stefano’s eyes as the king turned expectantly to her. Her husband was not pleased that she was already so deeply embroiled. She smiled hopefully at her husband, but addressed the king. “Her husband, Majesty, is in the Queen’s Escalade and serves under Maggiore di Montago.”

“Di Montago,” the king repeated, rubbing his temples, and then he nodded. “He was Alessandra’s . . . yes, uh, and he is on the special assignment, my dear?” This last the king addressed to his wife.

“Yes, you have it, but let me first reassure this poor woman that she is not by any knowledge of mine in danger of becoming a widow,” the queen replied. “Donna della Guelfa, rest assured, from one wife to another, that as far as I know your husband is still well and serving with the maggiore who is about the business of the White Crown.”

“Thank you, Majesties, you are most kind,” the signora said breathlessly, dipping another curtsy in their direction, this time not so deep that she needed to be rescued.

“I especially called upon Donna della Guelfa because she and her husband were most kind and served the Crown in secret when it was necessary to hide the maggiore . . . eh, he was capitano then,” Luciana explained from the woman’s side. “I know that she tended the capitano’s wounds while he was with her and that she is a midwife. I’d intended to call upon her myself soon, if we were to stay longer in Citteauroea.”

“Happy tidings, Your Grace,” Signora della Guelfa murmured and then to the queen, “and, of course, to you, Majesty . . . if I may be so bold?”

“Yes, of course you may, especially since I call upon your help,” the queen said.

“Majesties, I really must protest!” the Royal Physician proclaimed.

The queen pulled herself up into a better position. “Protest all he wants, Alban, he will not touch me again!” she said, refusing to look at him.

“I am being shamed for no call. I have not served you wrong, Majesties! I have used every single skill at my disposal—”

“Precisely,” Idala snapped, her chin jutting.

The physician rounded on Luciana. “You are the cause of this! I—”

“Will be more careful when addressing my wife,” Stefano said. He spoke in that lethally quiet voice that made Luciana shiver as much from the implied danger as the excitement of it.

The physician drew himself up, sucking a lungful of air through his nostrils. Though he was taller than Stefano by a head, there was something in the duca’s eyes which made the good doctor look away. “I am overexcited by Her Majesty’s condition. Might I stay to—to consult?”

Alban looked at his wife. A battle raged between them, their eyes expressing the full of it. At last the king nodded. “You are welcome to stay, Bonta . . . to consult.”

“Thank you, Your Majesties,” Royal Physician, *il Dottore Bonta*, said with a deep bow. Despite himself, he could not hide the edge of bitterness in his voice, but neither the king nor queen paid it any attention, so neither did Luciana.

“Forgive me,” Signora della Guelfa squeaked. She cleared her voice and continued more normally. “Am I to attend the queen’s birth?”

“You are ... or We would wish it to be so,” the king said.

“Perhaps the physician . . . that is to say, he has attended you this far ... Majesty, forgive the indelicacy, but am I to understand the arrival of the heir? Heirs? . . . heir is imminent?” Signora della Guelfa asked.

“The queen is no farther along than I,” Luciana said, nodding at the amazed expression of the midwife, “and this is why ... in part . . . why we needed you, someone with your skills ... a midwife.”

* * *

It was well into the dark of night before Mandero saw the yellow light of flame, of a torch lit in welcome to travelers in need. He had pressed on, with his trailing party members. The road had been no Fairy Wood, but the dark of the forest had consumed their path and, at times, their ability to see one another. Fog swirled about the legs of the horses, doing little to help them on their way. Gaps among the trees allowed for the moon to expose the way, confirming that the road stretched before them. At last, the Franciscan Abbey of the Four Brothers lay before them with nothing more than a stretch of road surrounded by meadows and a planted field.

The abbey was built upon the remnants of some bygone castle, part of a circular tower which now, for the most part, seemed to be only two, and in some places three, stories high.

“We are here!” Mandero called.

Four weary faces followed his gaze to the abbey, the end of this night’s journey . . . and another step on the way to uncovering the cardinal’s activities.

XXXVIII

“If an injury has to be done to a man it should be so severe that his vengeance need not be feared.”

—Niccolo Machiavelli

20 d’Septembre 1684

Alessandra stretched herself, her mind, her being, searching for the cardinal. How could it be that the very thing she had wanted since she had memory of herself in this state had finally been answered just when she was determined to do something good?

It would be easy to rail at her fate, to succumb to the pettiness that had consumed her life . . . her existence . . . since death. It would be easy to bemoan all of it, but that would finish her, would rob her of her newfound conscience. Not so very newfound, the voice inside her whined, in life she had had conscience. And yet, to this existence, her conscience seemed new even when she had so little concept of time.

Alessandra shook off the petty musings that threatened to consume her. She envisioned the dark ties that always led her to the cardinal, to Sister-kindred.

The ties evaded her, as though someone did not want her to connect to her ties beyond. The white tethers that led her to Mandero sprang readily to mind, but she turned away. She did not know how long it had been since they were last together, but it seemed she had so little to share with her beloved. She needed something . . . something tangible that demonstrated she fought to remain good, that even in death she did good.

She opened herself further, risking hurt to her core, that part of her which she had so far protected from the cardinal. It appeared she, too, must take chances to do good. As she opened her mind and being, reached desperately far for the cords that would take her to the cardinal, she felt a glimmer, something new. She could not pull herself to it. She grasped at the strangeness, like grasping through cold streambeds after flitting fish. That took skill, it took concentration, it took determination.

Reaching, Alessandra was jarred, as though she had slammed into something, but she did not drop the fish she grasped. She hung on, loosely. Too tight and the fish would squeeze out of her hands and be gone.

Again something knocked against the foundation of who she was and the fish was no sardine, but a mighty tuna. It slammed against her time and again, but Alessa held

on, held true and, finally she began to reel in her catch.

It came free of the waters of beyond, thrashing and battering her, but still Alessandra hung on ... until the fighting stopped and she recognized Sister-kindred. Here. She had pulled Sister-kindred from the cardinal's side to her own, to the chamber where her body lay. Here, Sister-kindred looked like a young woman, not so very different from the form she preferred, her old form, the body she had had in life.

Sister-kindred stared at Alessandra. Alessandra stared too. Had she stolen Sister-kindred from the cardinal's very own grasp?

* * *

Mandero stalked the narrow space of the underground cellar. He had come so close! He now stood within feet of where Alessandra's body had lain but three days ago. He had spent the past several days chasing across all of the Tyrrhian heartland in search of the cardinal and the precious bundle he carried with him. It had been a harebrained search with so little real information about where the man might be found and it took his dead wife to make him finally close in. Of all the spy reports he had, they were as nothing compared to the information she had given him just the other night. She seemed so disconnected from reality . . .

Reality. In reality, he thought, as though his wife's existence was almost as commonplace as della Guel-fa's wife's. Mandero shook his head. This way led to nothing. He stopped his pacing and looked up at Marco and Grasni who sat on the steps watching him, waiting for word from him. He needed action . . . but he could not leave, not until he had seen this Brother Tomasi of Alessandra's and learned all that he could from him.

"Marco," Mandero growled at his second-in-command.

"I attend your every word, Signore."

Mandero sighed. It did no one any favors taking his frustration out on others. He took the moment to compose himself. "I want you to take Antoine and return to Palermo. The men will have had a day to attend to their business. You and the men are to crawl through every sewer in Palermo if you must, but you find out where the cardinal has gone to. In the papers from the queen, it tells where his family is from and what his expectations of them might be. Track the cardinal to wherever he is now."

"As you say, Maggiore," della Guelfa murmured. "But if the cardinal has taken flight—"

"That is half our problem, Marco, he hasn't taken flight. He has simply stayed on the move so it would be harder to locate him. We now know that until three days ago, he was here and when he left, it was to Palermo and always with this 'unusual' bundle of his. If we have missed him there, then find him. Do not act. Wait for me. I will probably be little more than a day behind you. I've no intention of staying here any longer than necessary."

“So we find the cardinal and we wait?”

“No, not just wait. My wife—” Mandero bit his words off half said.

“What has the ghost told you, Signore?”

Mandero stared at della Guelfa, caught off guard.

“You knew?” Grasni blurted, then covered her mouth with her hands and looked from Mandero back to his second.

“I’d figured out much of it,” della Guelfa admitted, raising his shoulders in an expressive shrug. “I saw her that night . . . when you were . . . when you were *with* her. I know your heart, Signore, and the only explanation was that she . . . that thing . . . that she was your wife in one guise or another.”

“Very enterprising, but that is why you are my second,” Mandero said. “After you have found the cardinal, my wife—” he hesitated, wiping a hand across his mouth. This was the first time he had acknowledged her very real, ongoing existence to someone besides the Romani. “My wife has indicated that she, or rather, her body, might not actually be with the cardinal. If this is so, then the question that must be answered is where does he have her now? Do you understand my meaning?”

“The . . . *Araunya* would need to be somewhere where she would be inconspicuous,” della Guelfa said.

“There are the old catacombs where bodies are kept from ages gone by,” Mandero said.

Della Guelfa nodded excitedly. “And they would certainly have room for her, perhaps the keepers even have the knowledge to continue to preserve her.”

“Yes,” Mandero said, remembering the day when he had pulled her swollen, disfigured body from the bath of wines and vinegar. “Yes, that would make sense. He would want to slow, if not actually still the hand of time that decomposes her body.”

“*Marime*,” Grasni said, shaking her head and shuddering.

“You want me to take Antoine? Are you sure you don’t want to keep him, in case you need a messenger . . . ?” della Guelfa began, but stopped. “He doesn’t know Tyrhia well enough. You are right, Maggiore. I’ll take him, of course . . . of course.”

“Maggiore di Montago?”

“Yes?” Mandero replied to the voice of the brother calling him. He squeezed between where della Guelfa sat and Grasni stood some steps up, ducking on the low ceiling which cut off mid-stairwell.

The Franciscan waited for him in the alcove across from the kitchens which led to the cellar. Grasni and then Marco followed Mandero up the stairs. When they were all up, the Franciscan ushered them to the open corridor. “Come. Your friend, Father Gabera, is ready to see you now.”

“Thank you,” Mandero murmured. He paused and turned to della Guelfa. “Grasni

and I will stay. You'd best be on your way."

"Yes, Maggiore," Marco nodded.

"You are leaving us?" the Franciscan asked.

"Just my men, for now," Mandero replied.

"I will arrange with the brothers who maintain the kitchens that you can have some food to take with you."

"Thank you, Brother," della Guelfa replied with a brief bow.

"Stop at the kitchen, then, before you go and, now, Maggiore, your companion is this way."

They were left alone—or as alone as anyone could be in a ward room with sixteen other afflicted men and four ministering monks—with Father Gabera tucked neatly into one of the cots with their crisp sheets and fresh blankets.

Mandero took a chair from the bedside of another patient and placed it at Gabera's bedside. He motioned to Grasni to take the seat and leaned up against the wall. "So, Padre, how do you feel now that the physician has looked you over?"

"Not much has changed, except I am bandaged, bled, and bathed," Gabera replied, slurring his words slightly.

"Have you discovered which one is Tomasi?" Grasni asked, glancing over her shoulder, clearly speculating.

Gabera shook his head. "They gave me some broth with medicine in it."

Mandero and Grasni both looked at the priest a little closer. Looking at him, the vacant stare told as much as his words. "Who tended you, Gabera?"

"Brother Egidio, or so he told me," Gabera said.

"Am I needed?" an aging monk, thin and stern, who had been attending to another of the convalescents, rose and swept toward them.

"No-no," Gabera slurred. He rubbed his head and squinted as though he had trouble focusing his eyes. "I spoke only of you treating me."

"Is there some question? Did I fail to treat—" the monk began.

"No, no, not at all. We wished only to know whom to thank . . . and to whom we might speak regarding another visitor who might be staying with you," Mandero explained.

Brother Egidio frowned, an expression that easily fit the creases of the man's face. "I am not sure that that would be appropriate, Maggiore."

"And if it were a matter of the Crown's business?" Mandero replied.

Brother Egidio's frown deepened. "Anyone who is here has true wounds ... of the mind or spirit, sometimes both. I do not see how any invalid in our care could have any business with the Crown . . . and we are of the Church."

“But you must answer to the Crown as well, if for no other reason than the ambassador of the Church, Cardinal delle Torre, has vacated his position under questionable circumstances,” Mandero replied.

Brother Egidio shook his head and motioned toward the closest door to the ward, leading out onto the open corridor. Reluctantly, Mandero followed, aware of Grasni close behind and yet hanging back discreetly.

“Do you have a name or do you plan to ransack the wards to find someone?” Brother Egidio asked.

“We would not presume to ‘ransack the wards’ as you say . . . unless, of course, we were given no other choice. I make this a request, as a gentleman,” Mandero said.

“But it is a request that cannot be denied,” Brother Egidio said sourly.

“Most assuredly, the request could be denied, as a matter of course. It is just that in this matter for the White Crown, I would unfortunately be forced to insist,” Mandero replied quietly. He concentrated on keeping an open countenance and his tone friendly.

“Have you spoken with Father Abbot?”

Mandero shook his head. “Your father abbot has been unavailable.”

The monk nodded. “Of course, this is Monday and he would be visiting the poor until well after noon. Is it possible, Maggiore, that you could wait until Father Abbot returns?”

Mandero hesitated. He wanted to see this man now and not wait another minute to discover what he knew of the cardinal’s business, but then, if he had waited this long, there was something to be said for patience. “I can wait until this afternoon,” he agreed.

* * *

“But, if magic is involved, I truly do not know what I can do to help her, Your Grace,” Donna della Guelfa said. Her fingers worried at the hem of her apron.

There was a homey motherliness about the stocky woman that comforted with just her presence. Luciana already found her presence a balm, helping to soothe her worried mind.

“That is why I am here,” Donna Rui said gruffly. “Between us and the *Araunya* here, we should be able to get the queen through this.”

Donna della Guelfa shook her head. “I am not so sure as you. Do we even know how many babes she carries? It is phenomenal that she has carried these children so far.”

“Until yesterday, we thought her to only have twins,” Luciana said.

“And twins are hard enough upon a woman, but she looks the size of a woman near ready to present her twins to the world, not someone who is still shy of the

halfway mark,” Donna Guelfa said. “She is barely into her second season . . . The best hope for the queen is to end the pregnancy, but even that would be dangerous.”

“The queen will not consider it,” Luciana said. She paced the length of the queen’s outer solar, her footsteps muffled by the damp leaves fallen from the fruit trees. A sparrow twittered to its mate in the higher branches and the two took flight, as though frightened by the presence of the three women.

“Even if—”

“I have tried, as has the *Araunya*,” Donna Rui. “She cast that magic because she was desperate to have another child. She’s learned enough now to understand the foolhardiness of her actions, but she will not be talked into undoing them—”

“Nor will I. I cannot blame her in that,” Luciana sighed.

“You? You cast. . . ?” Donna della Guelfa stopped, staring in horror.

“No, no. The child the *Araunya* bears is a wonder of contagion. The queen cast the spell that sees both the queen and the *Araunya* with child,” Donna Rui explained.

“There was the natural . . . contagion as well,” Luciana said, smiling slightly as she thought of Stefano. Far from being angry with her last night as she had feared, he had been pleased with her efforts to care for his sister.

“Then what am I expected to do?” Donna della Guelfa asked, obviously distressed.

No doubt, Luciana realized, she feared for her own life as much as the queen’s. Maria della Guelfa was unaccustomed to the special circumstances of caring for the next generation of nobility, much less royalty, but her references were superb. Even the Royal Physician knew of her reputation and could vouch for it— however reluctantly. She had not been Donna Rui’s first choice, but upon hearing that Luciana was sending for Donna della Guelfa, she had happily provided her own references for her. This, perhaps, was the first time that Maria della Guelfa had reason to regret her reputation as a midwife and herbalist.

“You must do your best, as we all must. The first priority is the queen. Were the king to choose . . . there would be no choice. His wife is supreme and the queen may have other children,” Luciana said.

Donna della Guelfa shook her head emphatically, “No, Your Grace, even should the queen deliver her children as God intended it, likely, there will be no other children. It is often this way when a woman carries a heavy pregnancy such as this.”

Luciana sighed. It would have been so much easier to pretend to Idala that there would be other children.

“When you speak to the queen, Donna della Guelfa, you must give her reason to hope. She fears for these children and if something happens, she must have hope for the future, at least for now. Do you understand?”

Donna della Guelfa nodded.

“We are of—” Luciana began.

“Luciana!” Idala’s voice raised in distress brought all three of them scurrying from the solar to the Queen’s side.

Idala visibly relaxed upon seeing Luciana. “I did not mean to alarm you,” the queen murmured, “I just thought ... I dreamed . . . Never mind what I dreamed.” She sat up, allowing Donna della Guelfa to fuss over the pillows and press a cup of tea into her hands.

Everything worried Luciana about her friend, sister, and queen, but watching her accept the care of these women without protest, that concerned her most of all.

* * *

“Maggiore, I am told that you wish to speak with one of our residents?” the father abbot said as he approached Mandero in the garden.

Mandero rose respectfully. “Yes, Reverend Abbot. I do not wish to overtire him, but merely to speak to him briefly.”

“This man ... his name?”

“Brother Tomasi. I am told that the cardinal brought him to you,” Mandero replied.

The father abbot nodded, folding his hands into the sleeves of his brown linen robes. “I had thought this might be the one. Who told you that the cardinal delivered him to us?”

Mandero bit his lower lip, but forced himself to meet the abbot’s gaze evenly. “We have been tracking the cardinal for some time ... I am not at liberty to share with you all of my informants.”

The abbot sighed heavily. “We are—were—aware of the cardinal’s problems with the Crown, but our mission does not allow us to turn anyone away. You understand? We live and work happily in Tyrrhia and do not wish to end our work here, but even he was a part of the reason we are here.”

“I understand,” Mandero replied, nodding. “Your mission serves for the good and I would not wish to interfere, but, alas, we must see this Brother Tomasi.”

“We?” the abbot asked, his left brow rising high.

“The girl and I. She is a witness,” Mandero said.

The abbot was quiet, contemplative for a long moment. “You understand that the man you wish to speak to is badly burned? It is not something easy to look upon and it is only a matter of time before his injuries turn him over to God’s care alone. The pain has made him quite mad.”

“I had ...” Mandero closed his eyes, remembering Alessandra’s confession. She, whom he loved with all of his being, even now as she was torn by diabolical forces, had done this to a man. Facing what she was capable of was too painful, too much for him to consider, even though she had acted to protect herself. “I had heard that he was badly damaged. I will make sure that the young lady is suitably prepared.”

“I am not sure what you hope to learn from him, but fetch the young woman and I will take you to see him,” the abbot said.

Mandero bowed and hurried to the cell the brothers had given Grasni to stay in. He scratched at the door and was immediately summoned in though the door opened before he could reach the handle.

“It is time,” Mandero said. “The abbot has warned me about his injuries.”

“I should imagine that the *mulló*, our lady, has done him significant harm,” Grasni said frankly. “I am as prepared as it is possible to be.”

“Then the abbot waits for us,” Mandero said.

The abbot led them past the ward where Father Gabera lay and into the circular hallway that spiraled deeper into the old tower. After passing several doors, the abbot stopped at one which faced into the center of the building. He turned to Mandero. “Brother Ja-copo has been his most constant companion these last few days. Because of his condition and because Brother Tomasi is one of us—a man of God—we have reserved to him this private chamber and dedicated attendant.”

Mandero nodded his understanding.

The father abbot studied Mandero and Grasni for a long moment before turning and pounding upon the door with his fist. “Brother, it is I, Father Filberto. I’ve come with visitors.”

The sound of keys in the door heralded Brother Jacopo’s response. As the door opened, it was possible to see the Franciscan. He was a tall, willowy man in the prime of his life. He, too, peered at Mandero and Grasni for a long silent moment, then said, “He is quiet now. You are welcome.” He held the door open wide.

“Thank you,” Mandero murmured.

“I leave you in Brother Jacopo’s hands. Try not to overexcite Brother Tomasi,” Father Filberto said before commending them to the brother.

The cell inside was simple, like those made available to Mandero and his party last night. Two cots were set beside one another. One was made and the other occupied by a man with his back to them. A small altar stood near the beds, a simple stick chair sat between the beds and a rustic screen occupied the far corner, blocking from easy sight a close stool. Medici-nals lay upon a tray tucked beneath the occupied bed.

Brother Jacopo motioned to his patient and then stepped back into the shadows of the doorway, creating at least the illusion of privacy for them.

Mandero looked at Grasni. He had gotten her into the room. He had told her of Alessandra’s claim to spells cast upon poppets, now it was her turn to lead.

Grasni nodded and crept over to the bed with Mandero close behind her. As they came abreast of the bed, the smell of burned flesh and hair rose like the stench of death. Mandero had encountered it in the field of battle, shattered bodies, torn flesh from cannon fire. Grasni’s only reaction was to pause briefly before she circled the

foot of the bed toward the chair. Mandero stopped at the foot of the bed.

Grasni's hand went to her mouth as she looked down upon Brother Tomasi. She turned away from him, toward the dark tuffa stone wall, and shuddered.

"Gypsy!" Brother Tomasi keened suddenly. He twisted in his bed, jerking away from Grasni.

Only then did Mandero see what Grasni had seen . . . the handiwork of his beloved . . . and he was sickened. The coverlet hid whatever grief had been done to his body, but scorch marks ran from his chest up, across his face, and into the hairline. As Tomasi twisted, Mandero saw that some of the scorching went up to the top of his head; only part of his right ear remained, looking more like a curved stick protruding from the side of his head than any ear of man or animal. The flames had tortured almost half his chest, curved up along the neck, along the side of his face until the temple where the fire had caught into his hair, singeing his brow and then moving into his hairline again. His skin was pocked and blistered, most of the wounds were oozing. The stench of infection brought the bile to Mandero's throat.

Somehow, Grasni had regained her composure. She knelt murmuring beside the bed.

Brother Tomasi responded to her words, moaning and keening as he locked his pain-maddened eyes with hers.

Brother Jacopo left his place by the door. "There is a tea for him there—"

Grasni found the cup and spoon, holding it up for the brother to approve. When he nodded, she carefully slipped several spoonfuls into Tomasi's mouth.

"I will pray ... the Extreme Unction seems to calm him and has done much to keep him alive this long. Every day . . . every day is a new blessing for him," Jacopo said.

Mandero shook his head. He could not imagine living another day in such a condition as being anything near a blessing, but then, it was not his to reason why. *Fata Atropos* cut the thread of life when the spinning and casting of her sisters were complete.

"Gypsy lady," Tomasi whispered, "we have wronged you."

Grasni blinked hard and looked to Mandero. "I forgive you, Brother Tomasi," she whispered back.

"Already done," Brother Tomasi said. His eyes glazed as he sighed and relaxed again. He turned his head toward Brother Jacopo who prayed at the altar. Tomasi's eyes slipped closed and his hand reached under his pillow.

Grasni's eyes widened and she waved Mandero closer, pointing to whatever it was in Tomasi's hands. At first, Mandero could not tell the difference between the white linen and whatever it was in his hands. Reluctantly, Mandero stepped closer and saw what Grasni saw. In Tomasi's hands were two *tesoro* made of white cloth and, as Jacopo prayed, so did Tomasi, running his fingers over the dolls in the

prescribed order. Mandero had witnessed it countless times on the battlefield. Even as Jacopo ended his prayers and retreated to the shadows once more, Tomasi continued the prayer over the dolls.

“You see how the prayer gives him strength?” Jacopo said, shaking his head. “It is a gift to have this much faith in God, when others would wonder why they were the afflicted.”

Grasni seemed unable to turn her eyes from the dolls. Mandero studied them closer. Dawning realization came slowly. The dolls were dressed crudely in white, made of white cloth ... a perfect little figure of a man and one of a woman . . . the White King and Queen . . . receiving the Extreme Unction, the Last Rites.

Mandero reached up and shifted the cloth away from his fairy-silvered eye. The brilliance of what lay before him staggered Mandero backward. Each breathy utterance erupted from Tomasi’s lips like a flame of blazing silver and white. Drifting above the bed were images of the White King and Queen connected by a mystical funicular cord. With each cycle of the prayer, one or the other of the vaporous images dimmed as though their life force were slipping away.

It took all of Mandero’s self-mastery to restrain himself from jerking the *tesoro* out of Tomasi’s hand. Even as his heart pounded with alarm, his own *tesoro* of black, his own dark princess, Alessandra’s heart beat in time with his own.

Could he call upon Alessandra here? Now? What good would it do? Whatever it would do, Mandero did not care. He clutched the poppet of Alessandra beside his heart and called for her with every ounce of energy he could muster. He thought of them entwined, of their fairy binding, every connection to Alessandra he had made within these recent times, he used them all to summon her here, to him, now.

XXXIX

“I am but a gatherer and disposer of other men’s stuff.”

—Sir Henry Wotton

Alessandra felt Mandero’s cry for her like an arrow through her heart. She felt the golden ties binding her to Mandero, completely ensnare her and speed her to him as *she* became the arrow. His cry enveloped her—wrenching, pulling, taking her. Dragged from her consciousness in the tomb with Sister-kindred, Alessandra felt herself propelled through portals of time and space, summoned to her beloved’s side.

She arrived in an explosion of lights and color, of raucous cries that could only have been from herself and Sister-kindred. The cry that continued, however, was

mortal and unknown.

Sister-kindred lashed out, unfamiliar with mortals beyond her scope of the cardinal for, lo these thirty years. Alessandra, separate and yet still at one with Sister-kindred, muted the blow before seeing whose scream was cut short. A tall, thin, brown-robed monk slipped to the floor.

Mandero turned at once to the fallen man.

“It is not dead,” Sister-kindred said through the recollection of Alessandra’s vocal cords. Her voice rang through the chamber like the harsh scream of a frightened horse.

“What—?” Mandero turned. “Alessandra?”

“I am here, *camomescro*,” Alessandra replied. Had she been mortal, her voice would have been raw from Sister-kindred’s first words in over three decades. Unable to completely part from the kindred, Alessandra took what shape she could manage. Though only a shadow of her youthful appearance, she managed the inky black illusion—thin as silk that ran through the hand like sheer water—surrounded by Sister-kindred, who appeared as roiling smoke around her.

“What have you done?” Mandero demanded, betrayal in his voice.

“It was not—the monk still lives,” Alessandra said.

“Will he live like him?” Mandero asked, pointing beyond her.

Alessandra turned, confused at first by Grasni who stared at her, covering her heart with both hands to protect herself from the *marimé* of the dead. The fear in her maid’s eyes stung, all the more for knowing it was deserved. It was only as an afterthought that she saw Brother Tomasi, who reached for her.

“The *Araunya minore!*” Brother Tomasi whispered loudly, his words slurred. He turned toward Grasni. “Tell me, Gypsy, do you see her, too?”

“Aye, I see her,” Grasni said.

Alessandra stared at the dissipating images of the White King and Queen. “Does he still work his spell of death on the White Crown?”

“He does,” Mandero said. He would not meet her eyes and Alessandra was shamed.

“I smell the cardinal’s magic,” Sister-kindred screeched. The smoky miasma, bodiless being that she was, expanded in the room, swelling like a dry sponge introduced to water.

Grasni backed away from it until she bumped down onto the second cot. She immediately drew her feet up and pulled herself back against the wall, mashing herself against the wall lest the *marimé* of death touch her. Alessandra could hear the sound of her heart, beating rapidly in fear. She wished she could speak to her erstwhile maid, but feared it would upset her more.

Sister-kindred continued to swell as she searched out the cardinal’s magic. She

stopped, as Alessandra knew she would, beside Brother Tomasi.

“What are you doing, Alessa?” Mandero demanded.

“ ‘Tis not I, but Sister-kindred,” Alessandra cried. “She is of the cardinal, she smells his magic, she’s found it!”

“Brother Jacopo?” The sounds of men’s voices filled the hallway.

“Sister-kindred!” Alessandra cried again. She knew the fear Sister-kindred had of monks, no matter what their order, it was the effects of having been tortured and put to the stake.

“I must undo!” Sister-kindred writhed.

“Brother Jacopo!”

* * *

“Brother Jacopo!”

Mandero twisted round, looking through the smoke-like fog to where the Franciscan monk had fallen. An angry wind had begun to blow. Anything smaller or lighter than a man’s shoe was swept up into the whirlwind. Mandero heard Alessandra cry out. He turned just in time to dodge a butter knife which, instead of striking him, buried itself to the hilt in the wall.

Brother Tomasi cried out in protest as the two white poppets were torn from his hands and swept into the air. The ceramic bowl with the pain-relieving liquid flew in the fast, howling wind and crashed into Brother Tomasi’s head. He fell, sagging across his pillow.

Grasni’s scream was all but swallowed by the roar of the winds and yet in the stillness just beyond the closed door, Mandero could hear keys rattling in the lock, knew they heralded the Reverend Abbot Filberto. At last, in the rolling smoke which covered the floor beneath the winds, Mandero found the fallen Franciscan monk.

With great effort, Mandero managed to lift the seemingly boneless monk into a standing position. As the door flung open, the wind stopped with a pop, leaving the room suddenly and unnaturally still.

And then Grasni’s scream could be heard and Brother Jacopo, rousing, fell from Mandero’s arms.

“What goes on here?” Father Filberto demanded, motioning for two of the brother monks to assist the still groggy Jacopo.

“Thank the Lord we were protected by the two men of God!” Mandero declared. Dropping to his knees, he mimed a penitential pose. On his knees, Mandero seized the tattered poppets of the White King and his Queen and rent them into pieces even while he raised them up for the father abbot’s inspection. “It’s proof of the cardinal’s magic, Reverend Father. The girl uncovered it and . . . and the brothers saved us.”

“Is this so, Brother Jacopo?” the father abbot demanded.

The monk called upon could only shrug and shake his head in vague confusion. “I think it is time that you leave,” Father Abbot Filberto said. Mandero was never more happy to comply.

XL

“If thy heart fails thee, climb not at all.”

—Thomas Fuller crediting Elizabeth I

27 d’Septembre, 1684

Alessandra watched, Sister-kindred by her side, as Cardinal Pius Enrico delle Torre paced the chamber. She relished the moment and felt the bitter satisfaction of Sister-kindred. The cardinal was vulnerable. He danced ever closer to disgrace and secular justice and they were to witness his downfall! She relished this moment.

Disconnected from time, Alessandra only knew— but not for an absolute certainty—every experience she remembered during a new encounter was a memory of something that had already happened. She had maintained a long span of consciousness since last summoned by Mandero. Her consciousness, until recently, was not steady and her confidence in her theory was not absolute, but she prayed—and, yes, she learned, even a *mulló* can pray—it was true.

She longed to release her state of waking, to perhaps lose Mandero’s expression. The horror and anger of what she had done to Brother Tomasi tore at her. One other memory hurt almost as much as this. They were joined in the act of love and, at an interruption, she had transitioned into an image far more reflective of the state of her body than when they met. The revulsion on his face would have been a mortal wound were that possible, but she was no longer mortal or capable of being wounded.

But she could, she realized, be wounded. Only Mandero had the power to wound her emotionally. The most grievous heartbreaks came when she saw his distress over her previous acts, before she knew that there could be hope, even for a *mulló*. There was only one who could wound her further . . . actually affect her mortal body and her soul. That was the cardinal.

Delle Torre was responsible for these painful memories, he was responsible, at least in part, for her premature death and for her circumstances as a *mulló* as he was

accountable for Sister-kindred's similar state.

In their time together, the other *mulló* had regained some of her humanity, but at a loss of more of Ales-sandra's own. With the humanity, Sister-kindred brought memories of what she had been, what she had lost. Her core, her identity, had been stolen. Alessan-dra called her Sister-kindred because she had no name, no recognition of the personal aspects of a life. Her memories consisted only of the very basic facts of her mortal death ... a death that also came prematurely because of the influence and accusations of a single man, a priest then, a cardinal now.

This mortal man, who had such power over them, now paced the receiving room of another cardinal, awaiting word of a very important audience.

Delle Torre looked up at the sound of a door closing. He straightened and breathed deeply, adjusting his cassock of scarlet Gypsy Silk. The cardinal broke sanction against magic, especially in the Vatican, by wearing even something so simple as cloth woven with a glamour. Alessandra knew of the ban from her early years as the *Araunya di Cayesmengro* when a gift had been returned.

Was it vanity or fear which made him risk detection to bolster his image as a holy man, a man of the Church, a *prince* of the Church? What the cardinal had not accounted for was the effect of his enslaved *mullós*. As Romani, as women with intimate understanding of the Gypsy Silk, they had sufficient knowledge and combined energy to counter any effects the glamour had for him. Indeed Alessandra had already altered Gypsy silk belonging to him.

The heavy tapestry which separated the receiving room from the audience chamber was moved aside and two men, wearing the vestments of cardinals of the Holy Roman Church, entered the otherwise empty chamber.

"Philippe, Henre," delle Torre murmured as he bowed first to the older of the two men, who looked very much as though he did not truly consider gluttony one of the seven sins, and then to the other who looked considerably younger than delle Torre or the other. "It is so good of you to see me."

"Yes," the heavysset cardinal said, his fingers smoothing his thin straight mustache. He made a moue with his lips, "And we—both of us—are so sorry that we could not see you when first you arrived."

Delle Torre smiled thinly, bowing again. "Your work with the college must keep you very busy, both of you. I am grateful for your time."

The heavy priest, Philippe, rubbed his girth and glanced askance at his companion. "What do you expect of us, Pius."

"I would expect nothing less than your good friendship that I have enjoyed and profited from, lo, these many years; just as I expect you have enjoyed my friendship and goodwill over the years," delle Torre said. Try as he might, his diffidence was reflected in his voice.

"Over time, some friendships grow more . . . costly, enough that old alliances must be reevaluated," Henre said.

“But there is more value in friendships and alliances that have lasted over time, even if an old friend might . . . might be in a time of transition. The bold man stands to win the most in such times.

“And he stands to lose the most as well,” Philippe said.

Delle Torre paused, toying with his beard thoughtfully. “That is so, but then I have never been allied with sheepish men. We have all taken risks . . . great risks for one another.”

“Again, I ask, what do you expect of us?” Philippe replied.

Privy to delle Torre’s thoughts as well as his surroundings, Alessandra saw delle Torre’s longtime associate’s gray eyes set like flint. If he had a heart of gold, the three of them—Alessandra, Sister-kindred, and their cardinal—knew it was because he had amassed sufficient fortunes to have it gilded. He had grown comfortable over the years and resented the risk of having once been delle Torre’s friend, if one could call their relationship that.

Cardinal Henre de Fleur, on the other hand, was still young, with his future and his fortunes yet to be won. Certainly, as closely connected to Cardinal Philippe Foglio as he was, this younger man was not hurting for opportunities. Delle Torre decided that he must focus his charms upon de Fleur, but he did not dare risk offending Foglio in the process.

“It was my hope,” delle Torre said, “that you might be able to do something about His Holiness’ decision to see me. I need someone within the College who can plead my case.”

“And what do you mean,” Henre said, “when you ask us to plead your case? To whom? His Holiness, who will not see you, or the College, which demands some form of reconciliation with Tyrrhia’s Crown?”

“It is my most heartfelt wish that the College—if not His Holiness—will support my position that Tyr-rhia must be brought into the flock of our Church,” delle Torre said.

“And our history with such broad sweeps, instilling the teachings of the Church by coercion or political pressure has gotten us nothing but bloody rebellion. Look at England! We still have not regained our foothold there and the losses have been monumental!” Philippe said with a scoffing laugh.

“And France! We have a war on that front already. Why should we get into political maelstroms in more than one arena? It could be a fiasco!” Henre added.

“But the Huguenots will be dealt with. Louis is on the side of right. As France’s king, he fully supports the Church,” delle Torre argued.

“We battle with the Protestant plague in more than just France, Pius. Do not blind yourself to the truth because of your desire to control the Crown of Tyrrhia,” Philippe said. “For now, content yourself with the allowances they make. It chafes, but once the Church has regained its foothold on these other fronts, *then* even His Holiness will support you in your plans for Tyrrhia.”

“It is an outrage, this ‘Philosophy State’! It was impractical when Aristotle suggested it. Augustine disproved it in his many writings! It is madness in this time of uncertainty to allow a kingdom in the very bosom of the Church to pursue this—this purposeful self-delusion,” delle Torre argued.

“And some say it is madness to flaunt His Holiness,” Henre countered, “and then expect his support and appreciation. It is a dangerous gambit at best.”

* * *

“The ferry’s capitano was sure?” Madero asked.

“On my honor, Maggiore, I asked every possible question about any way that I could think of for the cardinal to have secreted her body off the heartland,” della Guelfa said. “The ferry capitano swore on the queen’s own name that the only compartments that were big enough were wine kegs he ordered for personal use.”

“Wine kegs?” Madero asked.

“His daughter’s wedding in Salerno two days hence,” della Guelfa explained. “The cardinal was alone and with him he brought two carpetbags, one which appeared to be clothing and the other was ink-stained from within. Despite the damage, delle Torre insisted upon carrying that bag himself.”

Madero shook his head. “If he has left Alessandra here, then we must search here. Unfortunately, Napoli is beyond our borders. Would it not be breaking the queen’s command, I would have us make a mad dash into the Italian states and bring him back, but alas, such is the queen’s word. Della Guelfa, considering the circumstances of who he is, the queen may be willing to lift the ban. I charge you with committing a report and request to paper for my signature.”

“Yes, Signore,” della Guelfa said with a bow. He immediately went to the writing desk in the corner of Madero’s room and set about his duty.

Brambilla looked at him expectantly. “Give me a word, Maggiore, and I will do it. I could be in Napoli tonight, scouting the cardinal’s position.”

“No. We will not break the King’s Law nor the queen’s command until we have explicit permission. Too many of our brethren have already taken it upon themselves to adapt the laws to what they believe is most expeditious to their plans. You will stay here.”

“What of me?” Padre Gabera asked. “When am I to be taken to the queen?”

“We send word of you to the queen in our report, Padre,” Madero said, looking pointedly at della Guelfa sitting at the writing desk.

“Of course, Maggiore,” della Guelfa said without looking up from what he was doing.

“For now, you are in my hands. I’ve been given to understand that I am the leading investigator in search of the witch-hunters and the cardinal. Your testimony is within my purview and keeping you close to me keeps you safe. If you are to go to the queen promptly then I must leave off the search for the cardinal to deliver you to

the Queen,” Mandero said.

“You could just send some of your men—”

“Padre, you are in *my* care. I trust my men implicitly, but they can be overwhelmed. If you are to be taken by anyone, then it is I for I shall be the one responsible. In this matter of the investigation ... I will not question your word regarding the text of your good book if you will please refrain from questioning my military decisions. There is a reason I am in charge,” Mandero responded crisply.

The priest pointedly closed his lips and turned away.

“Padre, I know that you are anxious to give your testimony, and it shall be done. However, there are matters before us in which your unique skills might be of assistance,” Mandero said.

“My ‘unique skills.’ Pray tell, what are these that you would call upon?” Gabera asked, his tone stern and cold.

“As I’m sure you know, we are trying to find the body of my wife—”

“Your wife? I thought she died before you were married,” Gabera said bluntly.

Delia Guelfa sat, pen poised over paper, meeting Mandero’s eye. It was a bad slip. Delia Guelfa knew the way of things and, he suspected, most of his men had figured matters out to one degree or another, certainly Brambilla pointedly avoided eye contact. Grasni and Petrus knew, had formed some friendships among the men. They would be close-lipped for the most part, but his men were quick, which was why they were *his* men, so how much the Romani had revealed was uncertain. One thing the Rom would not do was share the details of *marimé*, of its idiosyncrasies, with a man who, until recently, had been part of a cell of witch-hunters and whose reason for leaving them was still unclear. Testimony to how little they trusted the priest was that they still spat on the ground whenever Gabera crossed their paths, placing water between their course and his. His own men were anxious with a witch-hunter in their midst, so Gabera knew nothing of the fairy marriage until Mandero mentioned it.

“We were so close to being wed, I sometimes forget,” Mandero murmured.

“You ‘forget’ most of the time, Maggiore. She was half-Rom and a part of the silk trade. She was an *Araunya*, wasn’t she?”

Mandero nodded wordlessly.

“You, too, are Romani, yes?”

Mandero nodded again. “My father was Tyrrhian . . . *gadjé*.”

“You are not Catholic?”

“No.”

“The spirit... in the wagon, it expected you, didn’t it?” Gabera asked.

Mandero nodded again.

“Because you were its husband.”

Mandero sighed. "We were fairy-wed . . . and joined by Romani magic."

"So, instead of taking me to the queen, you pursue a personal vendetta?"

Mandero looked up angrily. Brambilla straightened, his hand upon the stiletto in his cummerbund. Delia Guelfa set aside the feathered pen and rose from his seat.

"It is not a personal matter, Padre. I was assigned this inquiry because of my personal connections. The cardinal and his confederates murdered my beloved because they thought she knew something that I only suspected. I could not protect her from him when he and his people stole her body, and they have been using it all these months in their nefarious deeds. Have you ever wondered why the cardinal would steal the body of a young woman, the *Araunya di Cayesmengro, la minora*? Surely, you must have been curious?"

Gabera stared at Mandero, a mixture of horror and repulsion on his face. At last he shook his head. "I... I confess that I never really thought much about it."

"No? What reason would a priest have to justify such a thing, Padre?" Mandero asked.

Gabera looked down at the toes of his boots, temporarily lost in thought. Finally he shook his head. "I cannot even guess."

"He hopes to use her, the store of angry magic that makes her the 'thing' she is now to supply him with more knowledge, more power for his spells," Mandero said.

Gabera stiffened, shaking his head. "The cardinal is many things and has failed Tyrria and the Church miserably by encouraging the witch-hunters and antagonizing the Crown, but using witchcraft? Himself? I do not believe it, I cannot believe it. I will *not* believe it!"

"Because the idea so affronts you? But I *know* it is true. I saw him use magic, death magic. I saw a good man die to save the *Araunya Maggiore* from his spells," Mandero said.

"And I, too, saw this," della Guelfa said.

"No, no, this cannot be!" Gabera protested.

"Then you tell me why he has my wife's body? What intentions he has. Why has he hidden it all this time?"

"But Cardinal delle Torre is a Jesuit. He was on the council of the *auto-de-fe*! If anything, he is overdetermined to the Church. This is the cause of Magnus Ignique."

"He already works outside of the Church, the birth of Magnus Ignique proves it. He is above Church law, what difference this?"

"No. No. I will believe many things of the cardinal, but not this."

"Then work with us, Padre Gabera, and prove me wrong," Mandero said.

"Done!"

XLI

“So very difficult a matter is it to trace and find out the truth of anything by history.”

—Plutarch

4 d’Ottobre, 1684

A void of black, of utter darkness, darker even than the Fairy Wood, surrounded him. The smell of must, dust, and stone filled the air. Water trickled from creases in the rock above to puddle underfoot. At least it smelled fresh. Thankfully, the openly deposited bodies had been removed from this site; even so, there remained a faint odor of decomposing flesh and the ichorous remnants of that process.

Mandero shifted aside the sash covering his fairy-silvered left eye. With it, he saw glimmers of ancient magic, religious magic cast by priests with prayers and penitence. His fingers brushed Alessandra’s shroud tucked loosely in his vest. He murmured to her, as though the *tesoro* were she, but did not invoke her. He took comfort in the soft play of silk and the thatch of braid. He could almost pretend the silk was her skin and the thatch something more than just a single braid given to him as a favor.

As he rubbed his thumb along the silk, his gaze was drawn back down the length of the corridor. He saw the glimmers where the rites of the dead had been said again and again in centuries long past, covering layers of recessed apertures that stoned in the ashes of entire families and then were plastered over and painted. He could not see the art, the plastering, but knew it was were there, as it had been in the last two catacombs he had searched.

Among all of the shimmers of magic, one caught his eye. In absolute darkness—with no hint of light even from behind—he suddenly realized that he had no depth perception. He had gotten comfortable in recent weeks adjusting his vision due to the loss of the general use of the silver eye. It had not occurred to him until now that while using both eyes, the darkness obliterated depth perception as thoroughly as the functional loss of one eye. He saw another glimmer, a stronger glimmer, now that he considered it carefully, that bore investigation. The insight made him want to gnash his teeth with irritation. Had the searches of other catacombs been a waste, destined to be redone because of his oversight? He had no idea how much longer he would have to find her body. He had teams of men watching the docks for the cardinal’s return, but still—

A hand fell upon his shoulder, startling him, even though he knew della Guelfa, the priest, and two more of his men guarded his back.

“The dark grows wearisome, Maggiore,” Marco della Guelfa murmured.

“Open the lantern’s latch and let us see what we have down here, then,” Mandero said.

Della Guelfa pulled the latch and a beam of focused light shone down the corridor.

“Down here,” he said, edging forward.

Like the other caverns they had visited in the last several days, many of the walls were white-plastered with detailed murals from ancient times. In places, the tombs were marked with the name of the family preserved for all time within.

Mandero moved toward the area where he had seen the flow of magic. The dampness of the site made him feel clammy and dirty. If luck were on their side, and so far it had not been, then perhaps the glistening of magic he had seen would lead to something more than another dead end with no explanations.

“Maggiore, what do you see?” della Guelfa asked.

“There is fresh-used magic down there,” Mandero replied.

“And you know this . . . how?” Gabera asked.

The priest’s cynicism was beginning to wear on Mandero’s nerves. Ever since he had revealed the cardinal’s use of magic, they had been at odds.

Mandero slipped aside the sash of cotton, revealing his silver eye in the eerie halo of dancing light cast by the oil lantern. He heard the priest’s surprised gasp.

“ ‘Tis a fairy *blessing*” Mandero said. “I’ve had it since my spectral wife and I jumped the broom. I presume it was meant as some form of a wedding present, though till now I confess to considering it pretty much a curse.”

“What does the eye see?” Gabera asked, leaning in curiously to inspect the organ.

“It sees what the other eye sees, with the added benefit of seeing magic and things of a magical nature,” Mandero said, his gaze dropping to Gabera’s crucifix. Pointing to it, he added, “Like that.”

“It is no magical thing, but a symbol of my faith, a focus for my prayers.”

“An icon, you mean? Like the cord I wear upon my wrist to remind me of the Three Sisters of Fate?”

“It’s not the same at all,” Gabera snapped.

“You’ll pardon me if my eye sees no difference,” Mandero snapped, turning back toward the corridor. “Marco, dim the lantern a moment.”

Mandero could feel the priest’s open hostility. It was foolishness to bait the man, he had risked so much to come forward. It was natural, he suddenly realized, that Gabera would defend delle Torre even after knowing of his involvement with Magnus Ignique. They had taken the same vows. Gabera felt as secure with his crucifix as Mandero did having his sword on his person.

Mandero turned back. "Padre, forgive me. I have allowed my . . . anxiety to influence my behavior. I beg your pardon."

Gabera looked at him in the dim light, as though to be sure Mandero's apology was no ruse.

"Perhaps I have allowed my views to color what you have told me. Continue on, Maggiore," Gabera said. "I have your back."

Though it was actually della Guelfa, not Gabera directly behind him, he understood the priest to mean he would support Mandero. That was good enough for now.

"Come, we have too many corridors to search before dark," Mandero said.

"You can tell the difference?" della Guelfa asked.

Just a hint of sarcasm tinged his voice. In the other men, he would have reacted swiftly to the censure in the tone, but della Guelfa had been with him since he first served as a commander. When the other men were not about, his humor and goodwill was appreciated.

"Lower the latch," Mandero grumbled good-naturedly. "Keep a hand on my shoulder, Marco, and you, Padre, on him. We will alternate between my vision and the lantern's and have a care to mark our way with chalk, I have a feeling there won't be many interested or willing to come search for us, but if they do, let's make it easy on them."

"Better, easier on us to get out, I pray," Gabera muttered.

"Precisely," Mandero agree, stopping abruptly. The magic seemed closer now. "Lantern."

Marco lifted the door, this time revealing a side corridor off to the left. Mandero led the way into the corridor and, about ten feet farther down, discovered a strange collection of odds and ends. It made no sense. "Lantern," he snapped, ripping the sash from his face.

Mandero knelt. Even with the light of the lantern shining on it, he could still see that this had been the source of his magic. He bit back the temptation to swear. Why, *Fatal* Why couldn't they help in this trial? He had searched miles and miles of catacombs. It was a perfect hiding place. The cardinal had not left *with* Alessandra; where could she be?

"What is it, Maggiore?" Marco della Guelfa asked.

Mandero shook his head. "It's magic all right, but not the sort we searched for."

"Then what's it doing down here?" the priest asked.

Mandero took the lantern from della Guelfa and raised the main shutter to reveal what he had found. In miniature, two crude dolls lay upon a bed and a hand awl had been driven through the back of the one he supposed was the male and then through the longer-haired one, neatly staking them both to the bed. "I would say it was petty magic . . . someone who did not want to be caught in wishing two lovers their end.

Perhaps one betrayed her . . . the caster, I mean,” Mandero said.

“You’re supposing of course, that the caster was female, but that need not be so,” Marco pointed out.

Gabera dropped to his haunches, shaking his head. “This is the very sort of thing the Church fights against, the type of thing Cardinal delle Torre speaks of when recruiting for Magnus Ignique.” He reached down and obscured the writing in its base of mud and then knocked the dolls over. “ ‘Tis nothing more than petty spite.”

“Perhaps, perhaps not,” Mandero said. “It may have been cast in a prelude to murder. He took his handkerchief from his sleeve where he routinely tucked it and carefully bound the dolls, bend and all together. ”I’ll give it to the comandante at the fort in case there are any suspicious deaths,“ Mandero said. He tucked the remains of the destroyed spell into his belt pouch and rose to continue his search. ”Let’s go,“ Mandero said.

“Maggiore, I do not look forward to another meeting with your . . . with your . . . your wife, but wouldn’t our searches be much more expeditious if we consulted her?”

“It might if she had any concept of her temporal circumstances,” Mandero said, busying himself with cleaning his hands in the shallow trickle of water.

“But couldn’t she help some way?” Gabera asked.

Marco della Gelfa pulled the priest aside and whispered in a voice that echoed along the chambers. “Do not press the maggiore, Padre. He will summon her when there is aught for her to do.”

“Thank you, Lieutenant,” Mandero said. “As usual, you have the right of it.”

* * *

“Where are you?” the cardinal demanded angrily as he stalked about his workshop.

Alessandra and Sister-kindred stayed out of his reach, in the tomb of her body. At long last, the cardinal had had time to concentrate, to reach for Sister-kindred and realize that she was not waiting in attendance upon him. “Is this how you answer me?” the cardinal demanded. His mind shot out tiny tendrils, seeking, sorting little fingers that hunted for what the cardinal considered his own.

“Just a few more days, little *mulló*, and then I will have fresh power,” the cardinal told himself.

Alessandra laughed. He did not realize that, together, they could witness his very thoughts. Sister-kindred thrashed, clawing at the walls of their psychic cell with fingers that had been made raw with her struggles to avoid the prince of the Church.

“Laughter, *mio piccola*? You laugh at me? Have you gained so much power then?”

The fingerlike tendrils homed to Sister-kindred’s fear. Alessandra tried to shield her, deflecting some of them with her own essence. But the cardinal was too

practiced in his technique for searching out Sister-kindred when she tried to escape him. Alessandra understood in an instant through her link with the other *mulló* that this had become a pattern of late, that the cardinal had taken so much from her that it was *he* who had taken her memories of self for the greater magic it gave him. Alessandra reached for Sister-kindred, but, for the first time since their union, found herself rebuffed. She tried again. Sister-kindred chose to rebuff Alessandra, leaving herself vulnerable to the cardinal.

“There you are,” the cardinal murmured. “Have you grown so old, *mio piccola* that you slip away from me?”

Sister-kindred’s vulnerable essence pushed forth the images of fading weakness, of failing, dying even, alone.

“*Foot piccola,*” the cardinal murmured, smiling with an almost vicious glee. “Soon your struggles will be over. Soon you will fade to nothingness . . . oh, I suppose there will be a part of you that is aware, but you will be old and crippled. I will replace you with one who is young and vibrant, though she still fights me. You . . . you, *mio piccola*, I think I will place in a jar. I wonder what that last bit of you will look like? A puff of smoke?”

Sister-kindred spoke clearly and urgently into Alessandra’s mind. “Protect yourself while you are still able!”

XLII

*“As to the field of battle it is the abiding of the dead.
And he who decides to die will live, and he who wishes to live will die.”*

—Wu Chi

5 d’Ottobre, 1684

“What do you mean the cardinal is already where?” della Guelfa demanded.

Brambilla remained at attention. “It has been reported to me that the cardinal left the bishopric palazzo not more than an hour ago.”

“Reported? Who reported?” Mandero asked, rising. He shoved aside the plate, which had been his first real dinner in days. He had thought his watch secure. How had the cardinal found his way into Palermo?

By the streets of course, Mandero realized. He had had his men watch the wharves, the most obvious place for delle Torre’s arrival, having been his point of

departure. Had the cardinal been warned? Yes. If he saw the bishop, he was warned. Mandero had no misapprehensions about the alliances of Bishop Bragadini.

Della Guelfa was continuing his reproaches of the reconnaissance officer's skills. Mandero placed a hand on his arm. "I know how we were undone and my planning is at fault," he said.

"You are most kind, Maggiore, but I should have—" Brambilla began.

"I have no time for self-recrimination from either of you. Brambilla, how did you discover the cardinal's presence?"

Grifo straightened, bowing slightly. "One of the vig-ilare here has a source within the bishopric—"

"You spied upon the Church?" Gabera interrupted, his voice betraying his abhorrence.

Mandero tapped the table in front of Gabera. "We have no time for this. We are military and do what we must to keep the law and our people safe," Mandero said. "Do you know where the cardinal is now?"

Brambilla nodded. "I have Giordano and Santoro following him while I came to make my report."

"Good. Good. Has he gone to the catacombs?" Mandero asked.

Brambilla shook his head. "Not when I left, no."

"It's near midnight," Gabera said, rubbing the back of his neck. "The cardinal has gone to his bed—"

"Not likely," Mandero replied.

"You're right, Maggiore. He left the bishopric and headed into the city proper," Brambilla said.

"There might be catacombs we don't know of," della Guelfa said, handing Mandero his belt, baldric, and sword.

"You mean to go out?" Gabera asked, even more aghast than before.

"The cardinal does not sleep, then neither shall we. I wish I could leave you to your own bed, Padre, but I will have need of you this night, I am sure. I have need of all my resources. Brambilla, did you—"

"The Rom are waiting at the gate," Brambilla replied.

Mandero nodded. "Good man! Let's be off."

Gabera rose reluctantly from the meal the comandante's cook had prepared them. The priest grabbed the bottle of wine, bread, and a salami before wearily following Brambilla and della Guelfa into the hall.

"Delia Guelfa, as we gather, make sure the coman-dante has a report left for him when he rises. I do not know where we will be or what we will be in the middle of and he deserves an explanation, if nothing else."

“Aye, Maggiore,” his second said as they set out on their way.

* * *

Mandero froze at the sound of the whistle, low and clear, trailing into birdsong. It was the unit signal call. He glanced around and faded back into the shadows of the building.

Somewhere overhead, Mandero heard the throaty hoot of an owl. He looked up, scanning the sky. Ales-sandra’s shroud weighed heavily against his heart where it lay inside his blue soprabita. “Tonight, beloved. Tonight I will end our suffering,” he whispered. He looked at the sky and the waning moon. Where was the *lasa* and her folk? Would he have to finish this without them?

As though in answer to his question a golden ember whirled by, dancing just in sight from the corner of his eye. He turned. “*Lasa?*”

“Pardon?” della Guelfa asked.

Mandero shook his head. “I just thought I saw something. Pay it no mind.”

“Are you calling upon the fairy folk now?” Gabera asked. He was scandalized though he tried to hide it.

“She is their *Araunya*, too,” Mandero said. “At this point, I’ll deny no one who wants to give me aid.”

“Even the devil himself?” Gabera asked.

Mandero turned from searching the streets for signs of Giordano or Santoro. “Do not press me on that one,” he warned the priest. He looked away, returning to scanning for his men. Giordano or Santoro had seen them, but they must be careful lest the cardinal spot them.

The night was gray, as were the streets, with long, deep gray shadows. A good night for a footpad to be out and about his work . . . and there were women, too, perhaps they also made some of their coin from cutting the purse strings, but overall they appeared to be women whose fortunes cast them out and about on nights like this looking to provide what most men should be finding in their homes.

Mandero looked away. The cardinal, with his control over Alessa’s body, had turned her into a woman such as these . . . except they were here by choice, at least to some degree, and usually came away with something for their service.

He shivered uncomfortably. These women had their place and there was nothing he could do for them, but soon, perhaps, he might finally have the chance to serve his beloved Alessandra, rescue her from her fate as he could not these women, many of whom lived very different lives during daylight. They were mothers who might do good and charitable works, but his beloved Alessandra was the same no matter the station of the sun.

The cardinal had systematically destroyed Alessandra. Mandero shuddered again, remembering the mad ravings of Brother Tomasi. He had seen her react to his *tesoro*. She was becoming more powerful, surrounding herself by roiling clouds of

some kind of vapor, unhesitating to strike down the weak, but still controlled by the cardinal.

Another whirling, dancing *candela* sparked by, leaving a shimmering path of pink in its wake, drawing Mandero's gaze till, at last he spotted Giordano who made hand gestures, though indicating what, Mandero was not sure.

Delia Guelfa read the sign, apparently, and reached over to press Mandero and Padre Gabera deeper into their very narrow shadows.

With Marco's hand still on his arm, still elbowing the priest into the wedge of dark, a man stumbled past. Nothing more than a drunk . . . until Mandero caught a glimpse of the red cassock beneath the length of his great cloak.

Mandero tensed, nodding to della Guelfa that he saw. He tapped Gabera's arm, pointed two fingers at his eyes and drew his gaze down to the telltale scarlet that was a mainstay in every cardinal's wardrobe.

Gabera's gray brows rose and he nodded his understanding.

Across the courtyard, a minor scuffle broke out. The Cardinal paused in his false drunken gait, his own attention drawn immediately toward the commotion.

Grasni and Petrus waited there with Antoine, the recluta, who had stepped too hastily from his hiding place to take up pursuit of their retreating quarry.

"Where are you going, then?" Grasni called out in the overly familiar language of the night women and wrapped her arms around Antoine. The boy, apparently sheltered from such things, froze. Grasni covered for him by laughing and shoving him against the wall, pressing her own body against his, in a very promiscuous fashion, before drawing him back into the shadows.

Mandero watched the cardinal, wondering if he had noted Antoine's Escalade baldric. After a very long moment, which ended with Mandero finally taking another breath, the cardinal returned to his charade of a drunkard.

Mandero and the others pursued, keeping to the shadows. Behind them, Grasni could be heard protesting over her bodice strings and that he would pay for that, too. *Fata* bless Grasni's quick thinking and her willingness to appear to be a woman of easy virtue for the cause. As her guardian, Petrus would be required to take issue with this when their little adventure was over. Mandero did not care if Petrus even charged the full bride price for the little play she had performed and it all came out of his own pocket. He hoped, however, that the embarrassment of the moment, would teach the lad a lesson, not that he cared overly much about reproaching any of his men now that they were finally on the cardinal's heels.

The cardinal led them on a circuitous tour through the city, sometimes disappearing into the shadows himself for long moments to see if anyone followed him and would rush by, thereby exposing themselves.

Mandero moved into the lead position and, thereby, set the distance between the cardinal and his men. He drew them all to a halt when the Cardinal broke from the cluster of city walls and headed into the ruins of an old church, *il Sacro Cuore*, its

name marked by the broken metal shingle which dangled perilously from the arch of the filigreed gate. Madero swallowed a bitter curse. He and the others had spent days in the catacombs of *il Sacro Cuore* where they led down from the cloister just off the chapel.

Il Sacro Cuore had been a working church up to fifty or so years ago when Tyrria had been rocked by one of its many quakes. The historic structure dated from days when the Arabs had governed parts of the island state. Much of the rubble had been cannibalized from the site and put to work in other buildings in areas of the city less devastated by the last great quake.

The cardinal, however, did not leave the center area of the chapel to go toward the catacombs Madero and his party had searched; instead, he climbed up onto some of the fallen ceiling to gain a better vantage point of the area around him.

Madero waved his men down among the rubble of what remained from this part of Old Palermo. After satisfying himself that he was not followed, the cardinal divested himself of his cloak, and then leaped nimbly from the rocky remains. He circled round the rubble he had climbed up and abruptly disappeared.

Madero waited and, therefore, so did his men. After several minutes, Madero threw all caution to the wind and rose. With gestures and hand signals, he assigned the men before they approached the point where the cardinal had disappeared.

Crouching low, Madero followed the cardinal's circular path up onto the rubble of what was once the ceiling. Only then did he see the deep gash in the chapel floor. Madero cursed himself for having missed this site. This opening to the catacombs seemed nothing more than shadows between what once were two towering steeples over the chapel.

With hand signals, Madero indicated where his men should go according to the plan that had been developed over the last couple of weeks. Petrus, the Romani elder, saluted him in his fashion and loped back toward the garrison and Alessandra's *vardo*. The rest of the men spread out to the various positions they were to hold in case all other plans failed and the cardinal attempted an escape by way of their post. Padre Gabera, Grasni, and della Guelfa accompanied him into the catacombs.

These cavernous corridors were much the same as any of the others he had seen in recent weeks and, no doubt at some point were joined to the ones he had visited through the cloister, there being no great distance between the two. This first level gave them easy headroom and lots of access to roam. It also had, Madero saw, the remnants of a witch-light like a newly doused candle.

Madero sniffed. He could practically smell the cardinal's magic. It felt like a buzz reverberating through his nostrils. He pulled the sash of cotton from over his eye and discarded it, letting the wind or the merry *candelas* growing ever more common sweep it away like so much flotsam upon the wind.

With his silver eye, Madero saw the witch-light clearer still ... a trail of green haze, like the visual echo of a torch in full blaze. It was easy enough for him to step

into the void of darkness, following only the trail of magical light.

He had no idea, of course, if Grasni or della Guelfa or the priest could see anything, but they followed one another with Grasni directly behind him, holding on to the cloth of his cummerbund.

The trail led them on a circuitous route and, finally, to stairs leading to another level. Mandero placed his hands on the wall and worked his way slowly down the stairs. Alessa's shroud seemed almost to wake and, even possibly to shift. Mandero could not help but be reminded of their last private visit, when she had come riding the great white owl and dropping from it like a puddle of rain. Now she—or was it merely the magic of the *tesorol*—felt like a miniature of herself, pulsing as though with a heartbeat.

Distracted by the changes that—however slight—were bringing the *tesoro* alive without his bidding, Mandero stopped, and so did the others.

“Have you lost him, Maggiore?” Grasni asked softly.

Mandero turned, frowning. They were in absolute darkness, none of them here had paused to light so much as an oil lantern.

Mandero shook his head, only then remembering that they could not see even the simple shaking of his head. “No, no, I have not lost him,” he said. Turning, he discovered that he did, indeed have to look hard to find the trail. Had he waited too long? “Come on.”

This second level farther down was a tighter fit. The corridors were narrower, now there was no question of going by two. Mandero hurried, walking in crab-fashion as he progressed through the maze of lightless corridors.

It was as though by accident that Mandero and his group suddenly bumped their way into a chamber.

The cardinal bounded to his feet. “What are you . . . How . . . ?”

He stared at Mandero. “So, Maggiore, you have found me at last. Now what will you do as an enforcer of the King's Law?”

* * *

Alessandra woke feeling trapped and distressed. Sister-kindred screamed in one long piercing cry.

Be still, Alessa urged the other. The scream stopped abruptly, falling silent in echoes of its former self. The cardinal was prepared now. All the promises he had made, the vows about a torturous afterlife, trapped and aware, were apparently nigh and Alessa could not blame Sister-kindred for her fear. As she became more fully aware, fear quaked through her as much as it did through Sister-kindred.

With full awareness, she realized that the cardinal had returned to the cavern where her body had been stored, the sealing stone had been rolled back . . . but the cardinal paid neither her nor Sister-kindred any attention. He concentrated upon something beyond the cavernous chamber. . . .

It was Mandero and Grasni and one of her beloved's men, della Guelfa, and a stranger . . . priest by his dress.

“*Camomescro!*” Alessa cried, her hands to her mouth.

In recent times, she thought herself forsaken and so channeled all that she had to preserving Sister-kindred, who had also been an innocent victim of the cardinal's climb to power. But now Mandero was here! There was little that she could do to affect what was about to transpire, but she vowed that she would do all she could so that the living survived and found their way out of this hell the cardinal had made.

“Come for your Gypsy witch?” the cardinal asked grimly.

“Your Eminence, please!” Father Gabera protested.

The cardinal turned his attention on the priest for a moment. “You! You were one of my own! *You* were the turncoat!” the cardinal roared with anger. He flung out his arm, pointing at him, his fingers raised like daggers. “Die!”

But Alessandra had seen him fight this way before, knew it was coming, and swelled her essence up and around the cardinal, encasing him with the wealth of her noncorporeal being and deflecting the affects of the spell.

The cardinal screamed—in shock and pain. He grasped his right arm and held it to him.

“I could not fight you before, *benglo*, but now I have the will and the knowledge,” Alessandra hissed into the cardinal's ears.

* * *

“I could not fight you before, *benglo*, but now I have the will and the knowledge.” The words seemed to erupt out of Alessandra and echo down the corridors.

Could it be? Could it truly be that she had not succumbed to the evil that was said to be the *mulló*'s nature? Mandero looked to Grasni who stood beside him, having just shoved Gabera to the floor and out of the way of the spell's effects. She seemed as amazed as he that Alessandra was capable of helping and had the will to do so.

Mandero took no longer, knowing time was precious. As Alessandra's *mulló* surrounded the cardinal, he ran down the steps toward her body.

“No!” the cardinal screamed, struggling to be free of Alessandra's entanglement.

Inside the chamber, Mandero knelt beside the stone pallet. Her body had been obscured from vision until now. Seeing her this way, truly dead, he faltered. There were signs of decay, if he looked for it, but in the muted magical light, it was easy to see her as she had been last April, when he had taken his temporary leave of her, never realizing it was their last mortal good-bye.

A dark gloom, separate from the overwhelming dark naturally a part of the catacombs, rose like the rolling mist. Mandero had seen it before, except now, it did not appear to be a part of his Alessa and, in recognizing that, he realized it had not

been part of her the last time when he questioned Brother Tomasi.

The mist took a hazy form. “Take her! Take her now!” A voice commanded from within it.

Mandero brushed aside the rootlike poppets the cardinal had laid on Alessandra’s body and scooped it into his arms. As he rose, he found himself face-to-face with delle Torre.

“You shall not have her. She is mine!”

“She was never yours,” Mandero yelled and rammed him with his shoulder, keeping Alessa’s body away from him. He managed to make it past the cardinal and to the open space at the base of the stairs.

The cardinal roared and ran after Mandero, who waited for the older man to come up the steps and be kicked back.

“Let me take her,” della Guelfa offered, reaching for Alessandra.

“She is mine,” Mandero said.

“Yours? Yours? You want her, then to her be bound—!” the cardinal raged, pointing up at Mandero where he stood on the stairs with Alessandra in his arms.

Grasni stifled his last words by flinging pebbles and other bits from the floor.

Gabera rose from where he had fallen, momentarily stunned. “Your Eminence, *you* are casting spells and doing the work of the devil—the work you sought to end with Magnus Ignique!”

“I am doing God’s will, you fool!” delle Torre snapped.

“The work of the devil! Maggiore, Lieutenant, help me! He is possessed!” Gabera commanded, taking up his crucifix.

“I am not possessed—”

“Then what have you to do with these?” Gabera demanded, kicking one of the poppets Mandero had shoved to the floor.

“No!” Cardinal delle Torre shouted, lunging for the poppets, focusing upon one of the smaller ones that had been broken by Gabera’s boot.

Della Guelfa leaped from the stairs and bowled the distracted cardinal off his feet. From there, della Guelfa struggled to keep him down. Gabera ran to his side and joined the fight.

“Go!” Grasni yelled at Mandero. “Go while we have him down!” She shoved Mandero toward the stairs.

The cardinal fought like a lion ... or a man gone crazed, kicking della Guelfa in the face and sending him reeling back, leaving only Gabera to hold him down with one hand while he frantically paged through the Holy Bible which he always carried upon his person.

The cardinal blindsided Gabera and rolled to his feet with a twisting haymaker to

the face. Instead of going for escape or Alessandra's body, delle Torre attacked Grasni, flinging her against the stone wall as he grabbed for the poppets. Though bleeding profusely from the head, Grasni had the wits about her to kick the poppets just out of the cardinal's reach.

The prince of the Church rounded on Grasni with a howl of rage, speaking something in a guttural tongue Madero did not recognize. Grasni flung up her arms defensively, yelling something back at him.

There was a moment of absolute silence wherein della Guelfa rolled to his feet and Gabera seemed to have found something in his little black book, and then an implosion rocked the chamber knocking everyone off their feet.

From where he lay, della Guelfa launched himself at the cardinal's legs while Grasni struggled for control of the poppet in delle Torre's hand. Bucking furiously in an attempt to break away, the cardinal screamed and clawed with his free hand, raining blows upon Grasni as if she were a man.

Madero set Alessandra's body down and joined the fray, struggling to confine the cardinal's hands.

Gabera began a prayer, bracing the cardinal's head between his knees.

The cardinal roared and writhed and when he was unable to move himself, clung to the one poppet he had gotten hold of. Almost in counterpoint to Gab-era's prayers of exorcism, Cardinal delle Torre began his own prayer.

* * *

Alessandra felt the draining effects of the spell, saw the misty existence of Sister-kindred begin to fade.

"Sister!" Alessandra cried, reaching for her in her bodiless form.

"He will spend me with his spell," Sister-kindred moaned, fading ever more quickly.

"No! It's not fair! It's not right!" Alessandra cried. "Grasni!"

The young woman who had once served Alessandra started, turning this way and that. She folded her hands over her heart and whispered the prayer to protect herself. "What do you want, *Araunya?*"

"Please . . . you must help me!" Alessa pleaded. "I am sorry for what I did to you, Grasni, but you must help me."

Grasni rolled into the corner, leaving the battle to the men. "What more do you want of me, *Araunya?*" she asked, nursing her bloodied nose.

"I am not evil . . . there was another . . . another *mulló* and she taught me this. The cardinal is killing her. You must help me stop him!" Alessandra pleaded.

"But we have come to save you from the cardinal, *Araunya,*" Grasni said.

"Saving me without protecting this other would be unjust. She has been tormented longer, was lost to the cardinal's wickedness, and no one came for her.

Save her first," Alessandra demanded.

"You sound now like my mistress of old. What is it you would have me do?" Grasni asked.

"The other small poppet, get it. The cardinal has imbued it with spells ... we will give this Sister life again," Alessandra said.

"But not you, my mistress?" Grasni gasped, pausing with her hands wrapped around the legs of the smallest *tesoro*.

"She had no life. It must be hers," Alessandra declared.

"No," the fading Sister-kindred protested.

"There is no time to question me, Grasni. Do as I say," Alessandra commanded.

The *Araunya* slowly recited the spell the cardinal had prepared. In moments, Grasni was echoing the cardinal who was so focused upon his own work that he did not notice, but Madero did and it cost him a boot in the side of the head for his inattention to the still struggling cardinal, whose voice sometimes raised to a howl as he chanted his spell. Gabera continued his prayers of exorcism, his intonations growing ever louder and more demanding as his right hand pressed down upon the cardinal's forehead with every intention of distracting him from his own chant.

Sister-kindred cried out ... a desperate cry of misery, disconsolate with loss. The cardinal was spending her as fast as ripping out knit stitches. Sister-kindred's essence began to disintegrate in the cardinal's all-consuming search for power.

"Was that you?" Grasni asked, her eyes blindly searching the netherworlds where Alessandra had found a home.

"No. Tis Sister-kindred. You must finish without me," Alessandra said.

"But I do not know the spell! I do not know the words!" Grasni protested.

Alessandra paused and took a moment to embrace this very young woman whom she had clearly never fully appreciated before. She had no idea what her otherworldly arms felt like to Grasni, but she hoped it was soothing, encouraging, and conveyed the depth of gratitude she felt.

"You have learned much in so little time. You can follow the cardinal as he says his spell or you can change it to your will. Bring my Sister-kindred forth so that she may live!"

Alessandra grasped the shimmering fog of Sister-kindred as she slowly slipped into the incantation of the cardinal's spell. Envisioning herself a knife, Alessandra cut the cord of afterlife between the cardinal and Sister-kindred and placed herself in the cardinal's reach for power.

The pain was intense. It felt, at each word the cardinal spoke, as though strips of skin were peeled from her body, like cutting away the peel of an apple to get at its most juicy fruit. Sister-kindred reached for her, but she was already bound into Grasni's spell and joined with the poppet. Alessandra felt herself grow dizzy and weak, was barely conscious of the vise-like grips which seized her.

* * *

Mandero sensed a change in the cardinal. It was as though the man had found renewed strength and then his mind leaped easily to Alessandra. He could not help but look at her corpse still lying at the bottom of the stairs where he had put it, Alessandra had done something and now Grasni appeared to be mimicking the cardinal by word and gesture.

He seized Grasni by the shoulders. "What's happening?"

Grasni could only shake her head and continue her prayers.

While he was distracted, the cardinal managed to dislodge della Guelfa by rolling upward and kicking.

Free of the soldiers, Gabera was nothing to escape. The cardinal scrambled to his feet and ran to Alessandra's body. He turned, laughing. "Your pretty *Araunya* has given herself to me. She will be mine evermore!"

"No!" Mandero screamed. He had thought that the cardinal meant to reclaim her body, but he barely touched it.

The cardinal laughed once more and then dropped to the ground, his body atop Alessandra's.

Mandero rushed over, knocking the cardinal off of Alessandra's body. He bent down, intent upon recapturing the cardinal, but it was unnecessary. Mandero felt the unwavering weight of death. Mandero knelt and rolled the cardinal over. The bastard's eyes were wide with laughter! Somehow, he had enjoyed his death, caused it even.

Mandero turned to Grasni as her chanting stopped. "Where is Alessandra? Where is my wife?" he demanded.

Grasni shook her head. "I do not know."

"What *do* you know?" Mandero asked, waving off the priest and Gabera's attempts to comfort him when the man could not even understand what he, what Alessandra had lost.

"Alessandra said there was another ... a *mulló*, I think, and that the cardinal had prevented her from having any life and she wanted to save this other. She called it 'Sister,' " Grasni said. She rose unsteadily to her feet. The *diklo* covering her hair was askew, as were her clothes. She bled from the nose and deep bruises darkened on both her eyes and jaw.

Mandero tried to digest this news. So, at last, he had saved her mortal exterior, only to find that she had given herself so that another might live. Her generous nature, her kind heart, her willingness to make sacrifices, these were all things he loved about her, but, ultimately, it appeared that it would separate them in the end.

He bent and took Alessandra's body into his arms, placing a kiss upon her cheek, paying no heed to the condition of the skin or the vinegary scents mingled with others.

From his position, Petrus saw Mandero climb out of the catacombs. He saluted and then set the torch to the *vardo* in preparation for receiving her body.

Mandero would not allow anyone else to help him with his burden. Grasni kept pace, a worried expression on her face. There was nothing she or anyone else could do.

At the pyre, Mandero stepped into the *vardo* where flames licked the floorboards and laid her gently on the bed. “How could you deny us like this, *camomescro*?”

He pulled the shroud from inside his shirt and laid it beside her. Looking at them side by side was an eerie sensation.

“Maggiore! Hurry out of there!” Petrus called.

“I will,” Mandero said. “I say my good-byes.” He looked at the body which he had sought so long and hard for these recent weeks. How could victory be snatched from them in the final hour? He touched the shroud, rubbing the face, and invoked his wife.

Smoke and cinders rose snapping, cracking and choking his breath.

“Alessandra!” Mandero cried, burying his face in her skirt.

“Maggiore—” a voice said.

“I’m coming,” he yelled out the back of the wagon, only to realize the voice came from within the *vardo*. Smoke stung his eyes and made him cough.

A hand settled upon his shoulder. Mandero turned, rising, surprised to see the red-cloaked fairy woman. “*Madonna lasa!*” Mandero exclaimed.

“Alessandra broke her trust with us. In her attempts to escape the cardinal, she used dark magics which are forbidden to us,” the *lasa* said as though completely unperturbed by the rising smoke.

Distantly, Mandero heard someone calling his name. “But she was frightened and desperate,” Mandero argued for her.

The *lasa* shook her head. “In the end, she has almost paid her debt by the sacrifice she made for another fairy-blessed.”

“What more could she give? Is there anything I might give to cover the loss?” Mandero asked easily.

The *lasa* looked at him long and hard. “There is a way . . .”

* * *

Petrus lifted his *diklo* to cover his nose and ran into the burning *vardo*. The smoke played tricks with his eyes, he thought and closed them. He reached out with hands, feeling for the body of Alessandra or Mandero. They were gone! He turned, starting to leave, but stopped. A single purple feather lay upon the bed. But how? Petrus had searched the *vardo* and prepared it before setting it alight. There had been no feather. He took the feather, took one last, long look, and scuttled out of the wagon as the walls began to cave in.

“Where is he?” della Guelfa demanded.

Petrus shook his head. “They were both . . . gone.”

Grasni took the feather from his hand and raised it up to the glimmer of the sun in this early moment of dawn. “Was there only one, *Meero-kak*?” Grasni asked.

“Only one,” Petrus agreed.

She smiled and touched della Guelfa’s shoulder. “You have seen the last of your commander, Lieutenant. The maggiore has gone the way of his beloved.”

“Then he’s dead?”

Grasni shrugged. “It would depend upon who you asked. Me, I would ask a fairy.”

XLIII

“There is no possession more valuable than a good and faithful friend.”

—Socrates

“Is there no way?” Donna della Guelfa asked the old sorceress, Nunzia Rui, looking from the old woman to Luciana.

“I have never heard of such a thing,” Luciana said, sinking down onto a couch. She glanced warily across the room where the queen napped.

“It just seems to me that if it is possible to use magic and, thereby, carry so many, that by the same mode it might be undone ... at least partially,” Donna della Guelfa said.

“What you say is reasonable, most certainly,” Donna Rui murmured, “but it would put the whole of the pregnancy at risk and the queen will not have it.”

“Then, perhaps, for the sake of the queen, we must ignore her command. I fear for her life. I have never heard of a woman bearing four . . . and you are as certain as I through our various methods that this is so; the queen carries four babes . . . who lived,” the midwife said.

“Would you be willing to take the consequences? That your sister, instead of visiting and tending your womenfolk, stay to raise your children and take over your business?” Donna Rui asked. Clear as day in her words, she was not willing.

“But it would save the queen, surely she would understand?” Donna della Guelfa protested.

“There would be too much risk to the whole of the pregnancy and you are

suggesting . . . minimizing? . . . il famiglio reale,” Luciana said. She shook her head. “I do not think she would forgive even I . . . even if it were for the good of herself and the other children.”

“But—”

Donna della Guelfa’s further protests were interrupted by the sound of running in the halls beyond the queen’s chamber. Luciana rose, “One moment,” she murmured and ducked into the antechamber where visitors to the queen were admitted. She opened the door and peered out.

Duca Sebastiani hobbled hurriedly toward the Clock Walk and the Throne Room. His gout-swollen foot slowed him down. Other courtiers brushed passed him, one lord passing close enough and in such a hurry that he knocked against the senior gentleman’s ailing appendage.

Luciana hurried to the duca’s side, catching hold of his free arm as he reeled back.

“Damnable . . .” Duca Sebastiani swallowed whatever other curses he was about to make when he realized that he leaned against the pregnant wife of another member of the Palantini, the King’s Council. “Forgive me, Your Grace,” he murmured, pushing away from her so that he stood on his own feet . . . and the crutch he used for balance.

“What is the excitement all about?” Luciana asked as another lord and his lady hurried by.

“I’m told that Prince Pierro has returned,” Duca Sebastiani said, wincing as he allowed his foot to hold more of his weight.

“Such excitement over the deMedici?” Luciana asked, shaking her head.

“It is not so much he, but who he has brought with him,” Sebastiani said.

“Oh?”

“Aye,” Sebastiani said, hurrying along the corridor. “It’s who he has brought with him.”

Again, Luciana blinked and managed another, “Oh?”

“She claims to be Princess Ortensia!”

Upon which news Luciana wished to do nothing more than hurry the rest of the way to the Throne Room but she could not, by then, abandon Duca Sebastiani.

They arrived in the Throne Room together. What must have begun as a relatively private audience had now turned into a full court presentation. Prince Pierro preened before the public. The woman at his side seemed ever more regal—at least she, Luciana noted, wore Gypsy Silk.

The woman was tall, as Bianca had been, but appeared taller with a small caplike fontage of gold crowning the piles of her red hair. Her hair had been adorned with a delicate net of pearls and pinned in place with matching emerald brooches. Luciana

examined her from the dyed green kid boots to the stunning array of shades of green . . . from a yellow-green apple-colored bodice which set off the darker green, jeweled stomacher. Luciana's gaze was drawn to the stomacher and the ease with which it lay upon the woman's midriff, rather like her own.

Self-consciously, Luciana's hand went to her own stomach, protecting her daughter who lay within. Not all of the sudden tendency toward gravidness among the royal household, could be laid upon the Queen's ill-advised magic.

How long, she wondered, had the deMedici been wed to his new bride, practically the twin of his first, Bianca? How long had he hidden her? How had he—

She recalled with a sudden horror the dispatch they had received nearly a week ago from Alessandra's maggiore. At the time, she and Idala had been anxious to read it, but had been summoned away, but by what? She shook her head. She could not remember. It did not matter now. All that mattered was the fact that it had been forgotten and then mislaid. It now, without doubt, put the king at a disadvantage. Luciana felt the blood rise in her cheeks.

Luciana felt a gentle hand at her elbow, steady and strong. She relaxed somewhat and turned to find her husband. "Oh, Stefano . . ."

Looking at her, their silent exchange must have conveyed much of Luciana's guilt, for his lips pressed tight. He quietly shook his head and led her to the front of the room as was their place.

"How do you know that this woman is who she claims to be without our examination? Some proof by her own people would seem only reasonable," Alban continued. The gray around the king's eyes and mouth had deepened, aging him at least a decade beyond his years.

"Without being indelicate, Majesty, there were things this fine lady knew about the wife who widowed me which convinced me that she was who she claimed," Prince deMedici responded. He smiled winningly.

"Then she is of the Royal House ... as are you. Your marriages are subject to the command of the king," Alban said. "You have both married without my permission—"

"I thought, considering my position as her brother by marriage and also being one of the Royal House that I was uniquely situated to be of assistance to her. While she was with the Turks, she was not handled as ... respectfully as we would have wished, and there was the possibility that happy tidings were in order though the circumstances for the tidings were anything but happy." Pierro continued with a smile. "I thought I did the Royal House a favor, by giving my name— a fine name with connections to status and wealth as you pointed out—to what otherwise might prove an embarrassment for no other reason than that she could not defend herself."

Alban stared down stonily at Pierro and his new bride, the self-proclaimed Heir to the throne.

"There will be hell to pay in the King's Council this afternoon," Stefan predicted.

