

Excerpt of Brethren:
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One

Wherein I Take My Leave of Florence and Love

“Ulysses, are you prepared?” Alonso asked as he joined me.

“How do I appear?” I asked, turning from the wall mirror with a flourish. “Do I look the part of an English barbarian fool who some beleaguered and cultured denizen of Florence has attempted to dress?” I knew well that I did, and that it was less an act and more a truth than I often wish to own.

Alonso chuckled. “Perfectly. I could not envision a better representation of such a thing than you embody now. Your attire is expensive, though a trifle plain.”

I shrugged. I have never been one to cater to the fashion of the day. I suppose it has much to do with being raised during the Reformation. Though I am not a Protestant, my constant exposure to stolid black and brown during my youth left me ever ill-prepared for the colorful and ostentatious attire worn by all other men of means in Christendom. Though the cut of my clothing was as it should be for a wealthy denizen of Florence, I had chosen not to have my garments embellished with all the bows and feathers Alonso wore.

He was, as always, far more resplendent than I; though this would be true even if he stood there naked. His mahogany mane was naturally wavy, and curled quite obediently in the humid air. The feathers in his hat did not even droop, but sat at just the correct jaunty angle. I felt like some poor, pale, and bony relation from the distant north. It was worse when we shared a bed.

He crossed his arms and put two fingers to his lips as he perused me. He gestured with them as he spoke. “That blue silk does truly match your

eyes.”

I looked down at my silk jerkin and breeches. They were a vibrant azure. I had been quite taken with the color when our tailor showed me the fabric. And though I knew my eyes were blue, and had occasionally seen them clearly in particularly fine mirrors, I still found it difficult to believe they were the shade of my attire.

“And the servants have done wonders with your hair,” Alonso continued. “I did not think that straw you carry about on your head could be made to curl.”

I had not either, and I was well pleased with the result. I fingered my curling tresses and snorted. “Caterina has expressed an interest in my locks precisely because they are the color of straw and not dark. Or as she said, they glow like spun gold in candlelight. Of course, she was a bit drunk at the time.” I shrugged. “All my wigs are dark. I am thankful I have not been tempted to cut my hair of late. If I had, Gregorio would not have had so much to work upon. Still, you should applaud me for suffering hours of his ministrations in the name of tonight’s business.”

Alonso smiled and awarded me a polite clap. “You suffer so for the cause. I am sure Caterina will be truly dazzled by your golden locks. That is, if she is not blinded by that sword. Good God, Uly, could you find a gaudier weapon? It is irony at its finest. It is so appallingly encrusted with jewels and filigree as to appear unusable.”

I drew the sword and handed it to him. He tested the weight of the blade.

“This is actually a fine weapon,” he remarked. “Well balanced indeed. It is a damn shame it is so pretty.”

I rolled my eyes. The hilt of his sword was well worked in gold, with rubies set in the pommel. It matched the buckles on his shoes and the pendant nestled in the ornate lace of his collar. He was calling the kettle black indeed.

“It will serve me well, and I do not mind drawing attention to it,” I said of the sword. “Or losing it, as I will surely do this night. If your plan comes to pass, and I am actually perceived as a lovestruck barbarian swain, then it is fitting that I should be such a fool as to have spent all of my money on a gaudy and unusable sword. Though after three years here, much of it so obviously in the company of our fair patroness, I am sure I am well enough known that the ruse you have concocted should be nigh impossible for any but the naïve to swallow. So, if my reputation precedes me, as it often does, at least with this weapon they will not think I have come to duel this night.”

He returned the sword with a bow and a smile. “Forgive me, my fair Ulysses, for assuming you had not put much thought into the matter.”

I snorted. “Si, it is a rare thing indeed, my thinking.” Though he thought all philosophy the purview of fools and sophists, Alonso was ever chiding me and calling me a simpleton for the lack of thought I give much of my life. I prefer to live in the day at hand, and leap into opportunities as they present themselves. Alonso is more the careful sort, ever mindful of consequences.

I returned the blade to its equally ornate scabbard and stepped in to

kiss him. As always, when we were not in our rooms, his dark eyes darted about to see if anyone had observed my demonstration of affection. As if anyone in Teresina's house did not know we were lovers.

With an annoyed sigh, I went to the parlor's sidebar and poured us wine. He joined me; his arm stole around my waist.

"I worry when you do that," he whispered.

I stifled another sigh and said gently, "Alonso, I am not naïve, or blind. I know you are anxious of it. I am sorry I troubled you." The last was a trifle more acerbic than I intended.

"Consider it flattery," I added quickly in a milder tone. "Occasionally I am not content to merely gaze upon your beauty."

He rolled his eyes and awarded me a kiss to savor.

"I am sorry; I simply do not understand how you can be so free about it," he whispered when at last our lips parted.

"Why not? I have nothing to lose. And do you truly feel everything you do here will be reported to Madrid? You are working for a courtesan. I should think that would carry more familial reprisal than taking a man into your bed."

He dissembled like a boy with a hand in the sweets tin. "I do not see us as working for her."

"Si, she merely provides us with a house for some philanthropic purpose of her own." I clinked my glass to his and drank. I grinned. "Something of a wayfarer's shelter for the rogue sons of noblemen."

"What is this about rogues?" Teresina asked in Latin as she swept across the room. Her Castilian was not excellent, but proficient enough for her to hear or comprehend what she wished or needed. This had proven an embarrassment on occasion, as Alonso and I usually spoke Castilian with one another so as not to be understood.

She was resplendent in a gown of patterned silk, with enough jewels in her intricately-piled chestnut hair and around her long white throat to ransom a prince, which I suppose in some way they may have. She was far more beautiful than her accoutrements, though. Venus had truly smiled upon Teresina.

She gave me a warm kiss and then had another for Alonso. I watched them together with desire. In an unusual turn of events, her only business at the ball was to escort us, so perhaps she could be enticed to welcome us into her boudoir this night. It had been months since the three of us cavorted together. It had been weeks since I had been alone with her, though I did not oft expect it. Her time was taken with men who brought her baubles, land, and power. I was thankful she took the services I rendered her as coin enough to spare me her attention on occasion. I did not begrudge her this. It was the way of her livelihood.

She took Alonso's right hand and my left, and stepped back to the length of our arms to regard us critically. She smiled approval and then raised an eyebrow.

"Uly, that sword is... truly... ornate. For you," she added quickly after glancing at Alonso's.

I chuckled and went to sprawl across an overstuffed brocade chair. "The tragedy is it is actually a fine blade. I asked the smith why he

designed it so, and he told me he had made it unadorned, but then some rake had asked for one with this type of working and he had not had another blade ready. So he did this, much to his chagrin. The miracle is that he was still able to balance it. Then the damned rake did not return to purchase it, despite having given a retainer for its completion. Our thought was that the fool lost his life dueling with another ostentatious piece of work that was not really a sword underneath. So I found it perfect for my purposes, and he was relieved to be rid of it. Who am I to refuse a gift from the Gods?"

"Ahhh," Alonso moaned, and pinched the bridge of his nose as he always did when annoyed. I had taken to imagining him tightening some little lock there to keep the anger in. "Ulysses, do not blaspheme."

Teresina threw her head back and laughed.

"Alonso," I chided. "We have discussed this many times. I do not believe in the Gods of the Romans. Like many a cynical Roman and Greek, I merely ascribe their names to the whimsy of fate and providence."

"Most would assign the name of God to His work," Alonso replied with a stern demeanor. He truly did worry about such things.

"However trivial..." I sighed. "I would not imagine He spares much time for me. He has kings and popes to advise, does He not?"

"Uly, I fear you will suffer eternal damnation," Alonso said.

"And you with me. Unless, of course, you Papists are correct, and you can truly be shriven of all your sins on your death bed. I cannot see how any God that created leprosy would be so magnanimous."

His stolid stance and glare were nicely juxtaposed by the cascade of Teresina's laughter. I gave him my best smile, which many call boyish. He did not return it.

"Oh, Alonso," Teresina said. "He only says such things to rile you."

"That is true. While I do believe such things, I only speak of them to rile you. If you were not so amusing when angry, I would not bother." I laughed.

He relented with a languid roll of his eyes. "I do not wish to speak on the matter again, or hear it spoken of." This was not the first time our discussion of this topic, jesting or otherwise, had ended with that pronouncement. And I would respect his wishes on the matter, until the next time I felt compelled to needle him.

Two of Teresina's girls joined us, and we were now fully assembled. Alonso and I would ride, and they would take the carriage. It was unlikely that if everything went as planned we would be leaving with the ladies. I gave the livery boy a coin, and Hercules, my black Moorish stallion, a kind word and a treat. Alonso mounted his grey gelding without comment. I was not sure if he was still angry with me, or whether he was annoyed that I was dotting upon my horse again.

We rode ahead. Even though the streets of Florence have been paved for centuries and are not prone to dust, I despise riding behind a carriage. I do not like having my pace constrained by the decisions of the driver and exigencies of the road. I wished I had time to take Hercules on a pleasant run through the countryside to soothe our spirits.

As we crossed the Ponte Vecchio, the setting September sun bathed

the Arno red beneath us. The bloody river flowing into the coming night beckoned to my soul, and I steered aside and stopped to allow Teresina's baroccio to pass.

"Is something amiss?" the footman asked as they went by.

"No, no, it is just..." I sighed. Were they blind? The scene before us was spectacular. I could not look away and ride on without savoring it for a moment. "Go along, I will be with you shortly," I called above the clatter of hooves on brick.

Alonso was beside me a moment later. "Why do you do this?"

"Watch sunsets?" I queried without turning.

"Worry me."

"My dear Alonso, I was engaging in this night's activities for years before I was graced with knowledge of your existence. Why do you fret so?"

"There is much at stake."

I chuckled. "All the more reason to watch the sunset then, is there not?"

He sighed and settled into his saddle. "What are your thoughts?"

"Amusing things you do not wish to discuss. I am gripped by this scene of unfathomable beauty before us, and I find myself wondering whether it is a thing without meaning that would occur with or without my observance of it. Or whether it is a thing the ancients would have deemed a portent sent by the Gods, or God. What does a blood-red river flowing into the west mean to one such as me? There are the obvious associations, to be sure. However, I do not believe that the gods and goddesses potentially involved in the delivery of omens would be so simple, much less direct, in their message. Gods are supposed to be mysterious and fickle entities."

He sighed heavily.

I echoed it. "And I am not saying this to rile you. You asked my thoughts."

He turned his handsome countenance skyward. I knew many a sculptor in Florence would find God's blessing in being able to recreate the planes of his face in that pose of heavenly supplication. I knew, because occasionally I suffered from delusions of having an artistic bent and wished to portray Alonso in marble or on canvas myself. At the moment I was less interested in him, though, and wished to embarrass myself with paints in an attempt to capture the sunset before us for posterity. I turned back to the river. The sun had sunk farther, and the Arno was no longer red. The spell was broken. I urged Hercules forward, and he eagerly complied. Alonso quickly came alongside.

The sunset image continued to burn in my mind.

"You came as I did to a city renowned for its art," I teased, "and yet you seem to care not for beauty when God visits it upon you." Alonso had not come to Florence for its art, though I had.

"I do not possess your artistic soul," he said quietly. The words were almost lost in the clatter of hooves as we trotted to catch Teresina's carriage. I heard them, though, and recognized them for what they were, which was as much of an apology as I would receive. "I do not understand you," he added with vigor and volume.

"No, and I am pleased. If you did, you would cast me off, as you do all

things you grow bored with.”

My words apparently gave him pause, as he reined his horse in. We had closed on the baroccio, and as the vehicle pulled away again I saw the footman reward us with the exasperated look servants always adopt when their masters are behaving oddly. I grinned and waved at him before I turned to rejoin Alonso, who sat staunchly in the middle of the road. He was soon to be run over by the next carriage. I motioned for him to move aside, and we cleared the way. Once we were somewhat safe, I glanced about to see what else might have caught his attention; but there was nothing. His gaze remained steadfast on my person. I gave him a quizzical look.

“You drive me to abstraction,” he muttered.

“I am even more pleased.” I grinned. “As you are often so anchored in the firmament.”

“Uly, please be serious.”

Teresina’s baroccio was pulling into the palace gates well ahead of us; but I waited and regarded Alonso in somewhat patient silence. He was watching the other guests pass us by. When he did not speak, I asked pleasantly, “Alonso, what am I to be serious about?”

“Do you truly feel I would cast you aside so easily?”

“Alonso, do not behave like a bleeding twit if you wish me to be serious about the night’s endeavor.”

His shoulders stiffened, but his face was calm. “I am concerned.”

“Have you been visited by dire portents?”

“No, I was... realizing how much I would miss you if...” He looked away.

I dearly wanted to embrace him. I had not expected such words. Yet I forced myself to merely smile lightly and say, “Let us get this night’s work behind us, then retire to the house with a bottle.”

He nodded and urged his horse between a set of carriages. I quickly followed him. We stayed clear of the baroccios and their alighting passengers at the steps, riding further into the courtyard to dismount and hand our horses to the livery boys. I passed a coin to the lad who took Hercules’ reins, and bade him care well for the animal. The boy smiled and bowed with sincerity; Alonso rewarded me with a frown and an annoyed shake of his head. I grinned as I followed him through the battleground of arriving vehicles. He never understood my generosity with servants; he was a true wolf, and viewed all things created by God as existing for his convenience and little more. It was a sad philosophy, and I often tried to relieve him of its constraints.

In surveying the arrivals, I decided that anyone of any import in Florence was in attendance tonight. I remarked for Alonso alone, “You know, all who live here have told me that their beloved Florence is well past her prime, that she saw the flower of her glory a good century ago. However, I find it difficult to give credence to such dour pronouncements on nights such as this, when her entire populace seems to have arrived rolled in gold and splendor.”

Alonso shrugged. “I wonder how it seemed when she was in her prime.”

Teresina waited for us on the steps. She, of course, did not appear to be awaiting us. Teresina is a creature of appearances, and waiting upon

men is not an image her reputation could bear. So she was deeply engaged in conversation with a wealthy widow, the Baronessa di Pantaglia, who was of sufficient status not to fear being seen conversing with a courtesan. This stratagem worked well for all of the parties involved. It gave the widow the opportunity to eye Alonso and myself appreciatively, Teresina the leisure to wait upon us without appearing to do so, and we tardy boys the chance to escape a scolding from our patroness. Of the utmost importance, though, we gained the additional piece on the board I had been hoping for: an unescorted woman who would be announced upon entry.

Raven-sharp eyes were everywhere, hungry for gossip and any scrap of drama. We had stepped onto the stage the moment we entered the palace courtyard. I maneuvered beside the Baronessa and commented, "It is indeed a regrettable situation when a woman of your grace, beauty, and stature should arrive at such a fête unescorted."

She was amused by my overture, and not at all naïve. "I would be delighted to have a fine young gentleman as escort. I have not danced in..." She paused and smiled demurely. "Let us say it has been far longer than I am willing to own."

"I will be honored to escort you and share the floor with a lady who has practiced more than once or twice," I said.

She laughed and took my arm. And so I entered the soiree with a woman of sufficient status to be announced as we entered the hall. The moment her name was called out, several hundred eyes were upon us. I was assured the individuals I had business with tonight were aware of my presence, without my having to seek them out or do more to attract their attention.

Alonso followed with Teresina on his arm. It would have been exceedingly unacceptable for Teresina to be announced, but of course she did not require it. A ripple of eye flicks and whispers spread through the ballroom as she made her entrance.

The Baronessa led us through the crowd, greeting this person and that. She was gracious in her introductions, treating me as if I were what I actually am, a nobleman's legitimate son and heir, and not what she thought me to be: an English noble's bastard turned rogue. Though I must admit the rogue appellation would be correct in either opinion of my person. She was a handsome woman who carried her years gracefully, as they had not been harsh to her in the slightest. I found I enjoyed her company, and I was almost loathe to go about my business. As we parted, I vowed to call on her, and she seemed pleased with my offer and all it might imply.

I had sighted my quarry, Caterina Garibaldi, shortly after my arrival an hour ago. She had maneuvered to stay within sight, and appeared relieved when I broke away from the widow. I went to make casual greeting, and found us under the watchful gaze of her cousins. This was as planned. I enjoy predictable people almost as much as I enjoy unpredictable ones. I made a clumsy go of surreptitiously suggesting that Caterina meet me in the gardens. She nervously agreed, her darting eyes ringing in her intent like the bells of a cathedral heralding mass. I was pleased with her.

Venus had not smiled upon Caterina, merely smirked. The young

lady possessed all the features of an attractive woman, but they did not work in concert to provide her with beauty in form, body, or air. If matters were not as they were, I would not have given the girl a second glance. Yet, as matters were as they were, I had paid her great heed at all of our prior encounters. I had even gone so far as to intimate she was the beauty of any given soiree. My lingering glances, dancing, courteousness, and attentiveness had taken their toll. I was sure she would meet me in the gardens in an hour as I wished, even though she was betrothed to Giancarlo Damazza, the nephew of one of Florence's wealthiest and most influential citizens.

While awaiting the appointed time, I sought out Alonso and the other young men of our acquaintance, where they were smoking on the balcony. I pretended to consume far more alcohol than many would consider prudent. Alonso pulled me aside to discuss the matter, and made a show of removing the bottle from my hand.

"Oh, stop, I am not drunk," I complained loudly, as if I were indeed intoxicated.

He towed me farther from the others, making a greater show of trying to quiet me. Once we were far enough removed to be able to speak in private, he grinned slyly. "And?"

"She is well hooked," I said quietly in Castilian. "We will meet at the clock's strike in the gardens." I grinned.

The tension left his shoulders, and he took a long pull of wine.

"I think I will pay the Baronessa a call," I said.

He rolled his eyes. "Uly, why?"

"She is a most pleasant lady, and I feel she has been too long without a good tumble. It is the least I can do in repayment of her unwitting assistance this night."

He shook his head and grinned. "You are an incorrigible philanthropist."

"You say that as if it reflects poorly on my character," I teased. I moved closer and pulled the bottle away in an unsteady manner, so that I lost my balance and leaned into him. Pretending embarrassment, I stepped back too quickly, and was forced to grab his arm to steady myself. He gave me a warning glare. I smirked and drained the bottle.

"Uly, you are so convincing at playing the fool you often sway me." His eyes were filled with admiration, and I laughed at his compliment, even though I bridled a little at the actual meaning. I knew his words to be true; he did often fall for my acts, though not always the ones he was aware of. However, after two and a half years, I felt he should know me well enough not to fall for the masks I showed the world.

I was almost distracted into sobriety by the arrival of Giancarlo Damazza on the balcony. He was with his older cousin, Vincente, who was the son of the wealthiest man in Florence. Even though the ball was not in his honor, Vincente was the reason of all of my night's activities. For Alonso and me, he was the focal point of several months' worth of work.

Vincente noticed my gaze. The guilt he may have seen in my eyes was sincere. I made little attempt to hide it. Then I made a show of nervously glancing at his cousin and slipping away.

Caterina met me in the gardens. We walked among roses, and flirted around the marble pillars of the galleria. I played the gallant swain who was too intoxicated with both wine and love to resist my infatuation. She played, with all sincerity, the blushing maiden who was too excited by the prospect of dallying with one of Teresina's boys to recall she was betrothed.

On the pretext of showing me a flower she plucked, she darted in and pecked my cheek quite sweetly. As we were still surprisingly alone, I decided to amuse myself by teaching the girl to kiss; and I swept her into my arms and claimed her mouth. Her initial modest protest smothered, she surrendered to passion, and the lesson proceeded smoothly enough to garner the heretofore missing interest on the part of my manhood.

This pleasantness was interrupted by a great deal of commotion, as Giancarlo and his companions finally found us. I looked over Caterina's head and past the apoplectic rage of her betrothed, to find Alonso playing the part of the placating friend and attempting to make excuses on my behalf to Vincente. The stage was set and the cast had arrived.

I feigned drunken shock and surprise at Giancarlo's presence and rage.

"Good sir," I sputtered in English, and then switched to Latin. "Good sir, this is not as it appears," I avowed loudly, with the appropriate slurring, while still clutching the horrified girl.

"Release her! Release her at once!" Giancarlo bellowed. He was a boy of slight build and a braying voice, and it was rather like being confronted by a belligerent goat. I let Caterina go; she slumped to her knees between us, sobbing and clutching at Giancarlo's breeches. Everyone ignored her, except for one of her brothers, who quickly pulled her to her feet and out of the way.

"I fear I..." I began.

"Fear, yes, you have much to fear, sir. I demand satisfaction," Giancarlo brayed. Vincente stepped forward and placed a restraining hand on Giancarlo's sword arm; but the boy would have none of it, and shook him off with vigor.

"I understand, good sir," I said with as much dignity as a supposedly intoxicated Englishman should have been able to muster. "Please name a time and place."

"Now!" the lad yelled.

It was as I had hoped.

"I s-s-s-ee, with what weapon...?" I stammered and checked to ensure I was wearing a sword with a fumbling hand. His hand was already on his hilt. I watched in amazement as he drew.

He was truly enraged beyond reason, and had no intention of following any of the proper etiquette for a duel. This was better than I had hoped. The other men stepped back. Alonso was giving me a worried look, and I gave him the subtlest of shrugs. I was not truly concerned. I had seen the boy practice with the sword, and he had of course never seen me do the same. This was better than pistols; once a bullet was involved, there was at least the remote possibility that the idiot would injure me. With swords, there was little probability of my suffering a wound at all, unless I wished it or the Gods took a sudden disinterest in my person.

I pulled as quickly as I dared without revealing that I was not

intoxicated, and blocked his first rush, making sure I stumbled back. The fight continued on this way, with me swinging as badly as he, and both of us gaining and retreating in a seemingly haphazard manner around the pillars of the galleria, until I marked the position of everyone present and developed a plan. I began to drive him in the desired direction.

When he tripped on a broken tile, I pressed on with a drunken rush that brought us toward Vincente and Alonso. My excellent fortune held out, and Giancarlo tripped again, toward his cousin, who felt obliged to catch him. A sober man in a serious duel would have stopped and allowed his opponent and a non-combatant to recover. I kept charging; and a moment later I ran Vincente through, seemingly by drunken accident in the heat of combat. It was nearly perfect. Unfortunately, Giancarlo was not aware of this, and was still flailing about with his weapon. I was forced to block with my arm, getting myself badly cut in the process.

Then all was silence as everyone, including the now-cognizant Giancarlo, watched Vincente slump to the ground with my sword in his chest. Giancarlo dropped his weapon and stepped away, as another of their cousins checked Vincente's condition. Alonso rushed to my aid and wrapped a kerchief around my wound. Caterina's wails were smothered by one of her brothers. The man kneeling next to Vincente raised his eyes to Giancarlo, and shook his head sadly. I gasped in feigned horror, and stumbled forward to check the body myself. Vincente was quite dead. Our job here was done. It was time to leave.

"Oh my God, please forgive me," I said quietly and stood.

Giancarlo would not meet my gaze; but the man who had checked the body regarded me with sympathy and whispered, "It was an accident. All here saw that."

I looked around, and found myself regarding Federico, Vincente's younger brother and the man who would now inherit their father's fortune. Federico was tractable and manageable in all the ways his brother Vincente had not been. Once their father passed, his power would be in the hands of Federico; and the boy would be in the hands of the individuals who had asked Teresina to task Alonso and myself with this little drama. Federico's eyes were filled with rage and sorrow. He had been quite fond of his brother, and was not at all aware of the plot he was now in questionable benefit of.

"I am sorry," I breathed.

"I cannot accept that," Federico whispered. I wanted to laugh at the irony.

The other man stepped between us. "It was an accident." He looked over his shoulder at me. "You should leave."

I nodded mutely, and allowed Alonso to help me retreat. We quickly skirted the building and made the courtyard to retrieve our horses. Within the hour, we were at the house Teresina had loaned us for the last two years. A surgeon had been summoned to see to my arm; and I had retired to my room to shed clothing and boots and drink in earnest while awaiting his arrival.

Vincente was not the first man I had killed for purposes other than my own. I was relatively sure he would not be the last. Since I had left my

father's house, I had learned to forgive myself a good many things. Still, the initial guilt was strong, and I wanted nothing more than to drown it before it pulled me into the murky depths of melancholy.

Teresina and Alonso joined me. She was still in her gown and dripping jewels, but he had shed his jerkin. She gave me a deep kiss filled with promise, as all her kisses were. It did not drive the darkness away.

"Alonso said you were magnificent as always." She smiled beautifully as she sat on the footstool and arranged her skirts.

I had planned and executed the deaths of three men at her request. I had not done it because of her exquisite bone structure, or the bewitching conformation of the curves of her breast and hip. I did not do it because she occasionally granted me the privilege of her bed, or because she had taught me things I had not dreamed were knowable in the pleasing of myself or others. I did not do it because she provided me with a house, servants, horses, weapons, clothing, and anything else I might fancy in order to live at the level of comfort I was born to. I did not do it because she was one of the more formidable powers in Florence, and crossing her meant certain death or destruction. No, I did it because I loved her. Even though I well knew that loving her was lunacy of a high order.

Teresina did not love. She doted, nurtured, befriended, and adored on occasion, but she did not love. Yet any man in her presence understood why a man would dash himself against the rocks of her fortitude for even the hope of entrance into her heart – even while any wise man knew that it was probably a barren place to obtain, and the journey was worth far more than the arrival. I am the sort of man who enjoys journeys and romantic notions and idealistic foolishness, and so I loved her.

Gazing upon her now did not make Vincente's death taste any better, but it did make it easier to swallow.

She leaned forward and took my hand. "Uly, my love." She paused and sighed. There was such sadness in her eyes.

My breath held in my chest, and fear clutched at my bowels.

"What is wrong?" I whispered.

"You need to leave Florence now. All are saying Vincente's death was an accident. Yet you are still responsible. If you stay, I will be forced to deliver you up to appease the father's anger. I would rather miss you than lose you."

My heart thudded painfully, as it understood her words far more readily than my flailing mind did. I was unable to speak or move, except for my eyes. I looked to Alonso, hoping he would make a lie of her words. I wished to see him grinning as if this were some grand jest they had concocted. Alonso did not appear surprised, and his eyes were sympathetic. He had known.

"Ulysses, you knew this day would come," Teresina said softly.

This was true. I forced myself to breathe and smile.

"Lady, I know death will come but I avoid it because I can rationally foresee the devastation it will wreak upon my life. Yet after death, I will be beyond this mortal coil, and either in eternal pleasure or damnation. This thing that you do is worse than death, as it will leave me alive and in a perpetual state of agony. You may as well cast me into Hell."

She shook her head with a sad smile. "Uly, if you feel this is Heaven... well, then, how very little you expect of perfection."

I chuckled. "I strive to ask little of life in order to avoid disappointment." I studied her. "There is truly no other way?"

She shook her head again.

"You knew this was the outcome." I was not asking; I was merely stating what all in the room now knew, now that I had achieved some degree of understanding. I felt betrayed. Yet I wondered what I would have done differently, if I had known; perhaps devised a strategy that would have accomplished the objective without our involvement being known. Why had no one suggested that very thing?

In answer to my statement and the questions she must have guessed at, she squeezed my hand. "Please do not hate me."

She wanted me to leave. She was through with me. I managed to say, "At the moment I do not feel that is possible. I cannot offer guarantee as to my future feelings, though."

Now I wanted her to go. I did not want her to witness my pain and anger. She had suddenly and inexplicably become the enemy. I marveled that her eyes still seemed sincere.

"Go home, Uly. Regain your father's good grace, marry, have children, and then make some courtesan a very happy woman." Her features settled into resignation, and she stood with a tired sigh. "You are free to do anything your heart desires. Make yourself happy." She leaned down to kiss my cheek. I did not try to touch her, even though her words had squashed my anger.

"You can leave here," I said as she walked to the door.

She turned to regard me sadly. "No, I cannot." She held up a hand to stifle my protest. "I do not wish to leave," she added.

Without doubt, I knew she lied. I wanted to know who I had to kill to release her, what walls I had to tear down to set her free. There was so much sincerity in her lie, though, that I could not battle it. I was overcome with helplessness, and I did not feel I could battle that, either.

"I will miss you."

She appeared relieved at my words. "I have brought money to provide for your journey."

"I do not..."

"I know."

I sighed. "There is one thing I would have of you."

"If I am able," she said.

"That." I pointed at the portrait of her on the wall. It was one of the last paintings my beloved Joseph had done. It was as tall as I, and I did not know how I would transport it if we were on the road. "Please keep it safe until I can send for it."

She nodded and smiled. She gave Alonso a parting look, and I realized they had already said their farewells. Then she was gone.

I sat watching the door where she had stood. I did not want to think. I did not want to converse with Alonso. I did not want to exist in this moment in time. I wanted to be far away, and all of this only a passing memory.

The surgeon arrived. Alonso handed me a goblet as the man examined the wound. After a night of pretending to be intoxicated, I wanted desperately to drink myself blind. I gasped in pain at the man's prodding, and realized I would not manage to become inebriated enough to dull the wound or my heart before I would be forced to experience their agony. I could still make the attempt, though.

So I drank wine and let Alonso hold my arm, while the surgeon pronounced the wound a clean slice and stitched it closed. I could not look at it myself, as I am quite squeamish when it comes to my own blood. The damned man added that there was always the possibility it might become noxious and feverish, and I could lose the arm in the end.

Finally the surgeon left, and we were alone. Alonso found another bottle on the sideboard and opened it.

"I did not expect it all to end so soon," he said in Castilian.

At first I thought he meant the bottle in my hand. I was pleased I had already managed such stupefaction. Then I knew what he truly meant, and I felt he was lying. He had obviously thought it would end much sooner than I had. I was not drunk enough to escape just yet.

"I am beginning to feel a trifle bitter," I said carefully. "I am sure it will become a raging torrent of righteous indignation all too soon. How long have you known?"

"Since she asked us to perform the task," he said with an apologetic shrug.

I glared at him.

"Uly, you are truly brilliant when it comes to strategy, but you never consider the consequences past the problem at hand. You are always living in the day, and never thinking about the future. I have been thinking about the future a great deal lately."

There he was, saying it again. And there he was, being ever so correct yet again. He would never understand that tonight's events were why I do not think about the future. If I did, I would fear things such as had transpired.

"I am proud of you," I muttered.

"Uly, please, we need to talk now."

"Alonso, I feel betrayed, and used, and discarded."

"We are the tools, not the tool users."

"I do not wish to be either, but I suppose the only other alternative within the human milieu is to become a sheep."

He raised a curious eyebrow.

"We are wolves," I said, happy to ramble about something and nothing in an effort to think nothing or something. "We were raised by wolves to be wolves. We are members of the aristocracy, despite whatever condition we may find ourselves in over the course of our lives. It is in our blood, and etched upon our minds and probably even our souls. We are destined and designed for lives of power and privilege. We rule over sheep."

"So noblemen are wolves and peasants sheep?" he asked.

I frowned. "No, nobility does not make a wolf, but wolves are most often nobles and peasants are most often sheep. A wolf will seize power if he is not granted it by birth, and fight like a demon to keep it. They can see no

other way to live. Sometimes one finds wolves in sheep's clothing, acting timid and allowing themselves to be herded. But in their hearts, they are wolves and expect to be allowed to act like sheep. On the other side of the fence, sheep do not believe they have the right to expect any such thing, such as being allowed to act like a wolf. Occasionally you get a very bully sheep who does think like a wolf, in which case a wolf they become; and they are no longer a sheep, no matter what skin they may don."

He was grinning at me mischievously. "So, a sheep can become a wolf, but a wolf cannot become a sheep."

"Correct, it would be akin to stuffing the chick back into the egg."

"So you feel the natural order is for sheep to become wolves."

"Si, if they are able. Everyone wants to be a wolf, if they are intelligent enough to understand what being a wolf means. Many sheep think the thing that separates them from the wolves is gold, or blood, but they are wrong. Sheep and wolves are different because wolves have big teeth and fangs and eat sheep and they know it. Sheep do not eat wolves. It is a state of mind. It is a thing of assigning primacy to one's own well-being above all other things, including the lives of others."

"So you cannot become a sheep by your own admission."

"True. I am a wolf without a pack."

"Are you sure you have no pack?" he asked kindly.

"I do not know. It has been ten years now since I departed. Perhaps."

"I did not mean in England."

I regarded him with a twinge of guilt as I grasped his meaning. "No, I am not sure I have no pack. Yet, I am not sure I have one, either. One I counted amongst its number walked out that door not long ago."

He moved closer, and his fingers traced my cheek. "Abandoning you is not my intent."

"What, then? Where shall we go? If you have known, you, who think about the future, must have some plan in mind. So where? Will Venice or Rome be safe? Genoa? I have only been away from Vienna these three years, and I feel that is not sufficient time for tempers to have cooled there. Paris, perhaps? How is your French?"

His big brown eyes managed to convey both guilt and hope. My gut clenched even tighter.

"What?" I prompted quietly.

"I have been corresponding with my family."

That was interesting. He had often told me he communicated less with them than I did with mine. And since my communication with my family was limited to an annual set of letters to my Uncle Cedric and my former tutor, Rucker, Alonso's frequency and depth of discourse should have been very small indeed; but apparently not.

He sighed. "Uly, we are getting too old for this life. I will have thirty years soon, and you have what, twenty-seven?"

"Twenty-six," I said flatly. I was visited by the impression that he had rehearsed this speech many times.

"You are the eldest son and heir of the Earl of ..." he frowned.

"Dorshire." I did not fault him on not remembering; I spoke little of it and thought on it less. "I am John Williams, Viscount of Marsdale, and

heir to the Earl of Dorshire." I had not felt myself to be my father's heir since I left his house in the middle of the night; but while I lived, I surely was. Unless I had been disinherited, of course.

Alonso nodded. "Unlike you, I am not the eldest son; yet I believe I have duties to my family, and to myself. I have given it great thought, and recently come to the conclusion that it is time to put aside boyish adventures and return home to the life that is expected of me."

Oddly, his words came as no surprise. Perhaps it was the wine, or perhaps I had known he would say such a thing someday.

"You said you were not abandoning me."

His eyes conveyed hope again. "I want you to accompany me."

I blinked, as he had grown foggy in my vision for a moment. "To Madrid?"

He nodded.

"Are you mad? Our nations are at war."

"I do not think so," he said with a perplexed frown.

"Perhaps not at the moment, but they are always on the brink, and nonetheless they like each other little."

"Your Castilian is excellent."

"For an Englishman. Alonso, I am blond, pale, and skinny. You are robust and swarthy."

"We have skinny and blond Spaniards."

"Do tell? Who speak Castilian like Englishmen?"

He sighed and rolled his eyes.

"I would look like a scarecrow left in the sun too long," I added.

"I did not think you would pretend to be Spanish. You have several personas, with documents."

"Si, I do." In truth I was already considering various means of enacting his plan. "I could assume an Austrian identity, unless I ran afoul of someone with an ear for languages."

He warmed to my seeming acquiescence. "We would not remain in Spain long."

"Truly? Then what?"

"My family wishes for me to join my brother in the New World and assist with our interests there. We have a plantation in Panama."

I was vaguely aware of Panama's location. I believed it to be on the Main itself and not in the West Indies. I was curious about the New World, yet there were many things troubling me. I took a long breath, relieved him of the bottle he held, and finished it.

"That is wonderful. Perhaps I shall pay you a visit, if my travels ever lead me there."

He stood with annoyance and went to the window to peer into the night, presenting me with his back.

"I thought that," he said carefully. "I knew that you would not want to leave here until forced. That is why I did not discuss it with you. I harbored the hope that you would wish to accompany me because... at least you would still have me."

I was seeing things in a truly harsh light, as I recognized his tone and gesture as one of calculation and practice. But all that really meant was

that he truly wanted me to go and he was willing to play everything in his hand to achieve it.

I loved Teresina with a boyish romantic fancy. Alonso, however, had been my companion for more than two years. He was not an unreachable destination, but a fellow traveler on the journey. I studied the lines of his back and wondered how I would live without him. Alonso had been gifted by many a god: Adonis, Mars, Apollo, and even Jupiter when one considered his birthright as the son of a Spanish count. Alonso was all any man should want to be, and as such he was attractive to me in every facet. I loved Alonso in a manner that I would never love Teresina, or be loved by Teresina, or any woman for that matter. And I was not merely thinking of carnal delights. Alonso was a man, and I am one of those men blessed or cursed to favor men. I prefer their company, and their bodies, but mostly their company. Alonso and I had shared plans, schemes, homes, beds, weapons, jokes, friends, women, and wine. He was my lover, and brother in all but name and blood.

So there were two questions hanging betwixt us. How could I let him go without at least trying? And how could he have been so close and yet know me so little?

“And what would we do there?” I asked. “Who would I be?” My thoughts floated along in the wine, and I did not like where the river was leading. “Would I be posing as your manservant?”

He turned back to me and eagerly closed the distance between us. “It would not be like that.” He did not seem convinced by his own words.

“Then how would it be, Alonso? You say I do not think things through; you are correct. Let me rectify that now. What would we do? What is this plantation like? What does it grow? Would we while away our days hunting and drinking?” Something else tickled at my mind. “What else does your family expect of you? Marriage?”

He nodded glumly. “They have already found me a wife.” He threw up his hands. “But it is nothing. You know women. I will need to bed her until she gets with child, and then leave her alone until well after she births it. If I am lucky, I will only share her bed a few times a year.”

“Will you be able to share mine the rest of it?” I asked.

Alonso grimaced. “Uly... You know... We would need to be discreet, even more so than here. And you do not like me to share your bed every night.”

“And you would not want me chasing boys; so if I am your servant, what does that leave me, your maids?” I asked.

He was taken aback by this. I realized he had not thought everything through.

“Alonso, I have seen men like myself living lives of that nature. Always... outside... watching and waiting for their lover to come to them, when it is safe, or convenient. I do not want that.”

“It will not be that way,” he said doggedly; but I knew he could see what I spoke of. He knelt beside me, his face earnest. “Uly, I want you. I care for you more deeply than I ever imagined I would. And these last weeks have been very hard on me, knowing we would come to this discussion. I do not want to be without you. I am willing to do everything I can to keep us

together." His eyes were pleading, moist and bright in the dim candlelight.

The wine had finally truly dulled my senses and my heart. My arm even throbbed less. I was in a distant place, observing him through a lens that brought him closer yet kept him out of reach.

"Alonso, I love you, and I will miss you terribly. Yet, I could no more live in your shadow for the rest of my existence than you could live in mine."

His shoulders tightened. Then he sighed before regarding me with a new resolve. "Maybe we could travel elsewhere, then?"

Those words pushed through the fog of wine and grasped at my heart. I found myself nodding, yet there were reservations in my soul. I could feel them rustling about, though I could not name them. It did not matter: we were beyond further discourse. He closed the final distance between us, and his lips covered mine. I returned the kiss and urged him to deepen it. When we pulled apart a breathless minute later, I whispered, "Your room."

He smiled and shrugged. I still disliked sharing a bed with anyone in the aftermath of passion, even him. I stood on shaky legs and let him lead me down the hall.

We took turns pleasuring one another for hours, until what remained of the night was spent and we along with it. He performed every trick he knew to convince me that I could not live without him. My body surrendered to his ministrations time and again, until he had verily wrung me dry more times than I could remember. I even allowed him to do that which he always most desired and I usually refused. With my ankles on his shoulders, I watched him through the haze of pain, both real and remembered. I knew he loved me, but I felt little of that lofty emotion, and it was not solely due to the wine.

At last we lay in the grey before dawn, he sleeping and I watching him, wondering how deeply asleep he truly was. I was not sure when I reached the decision, but reached it I had. It must have been the carnality; it always makes me think. He was correct. We had played the fools too long. It was time we made amends with our birthrights and accepted the yoke of duty. I would go home. I did not know what awaited me there, and perhaps I would not stay; but I would at least make the attempt.

And more important than concerns of familial honor and the like, I could not run from Shane forever. There was much to resolve. I was no longer the boy who had run away in the night. I owed it to myself to exorcise that demon.

It had taken Alonso months of patience and persistence to induce me to yield to our mutual desires and overcome the fear that haunted me. Yet finding peace in his arms had not healed me; it had only made me aware of how very wounded I still was. In some utopian version of the world that only existed in my dreams, I would return to England with Alonso, confront Shane and say, "Here, this is what it can be." But that was the stuff of fantasy, and fantasies are like brightly painted eggs. They are beautiful to consider, but if you grasp one it shatters, and you are left with a most unholy stench.

I pushed a strand of hair from Alonso's brow and told myself that it was better this way, as I would never see his beautiful body sag and turn to fat. I would not be forced to watch him wed. Or worse yet, and even

more probable, watch him slip away from me in the manner of people everywhere as they grow and age. He would always be perfect in my mind as he was at this moment. Except that was not true. At the moment he was no more perfect than Teresina had been in that last conversation. I was angry, and as a result my memories of them now held a taint. I hoped that would pass.

Love, so far, had not proven to be an invincible gem of beauty, but rather an ephemeral ray of color in the morning mist, something easily seen until one turned one's head. It had not been a thing that could easily be lifted and transported in all its glory to another place or time. This wispy, momentary quality of love had permeated every relationship I dared label as love. I wondered at the words of poets and philosophers who professed of loves that transcended all earthly concerns and bound the participants with unbreakable chains of the heart. Perhaps they had only been dreaming, too.

I slipped from his bed and padded on bare feet back to my room. I almost tripped on a small bag at his door. There was another at mine, which I hefted with surprise. Teresina had been generous in funding our travel. My bag contained a fortune in florins. I was thankful, as I had little else to call my own, save my weapons and horse. I had lived ten years through the beneficence of friends and the misfortune of adversaries. Now, I supposed, I would throw myself upon my father's goodwill, as was my birthright.

I began to pack. The growing loneliness did not burn so much as it froze. I grew numb. Even though it was Alonso I was deserting, it felt as it had with many of the women I had taken as lovers. It was morning and I wanted to be away with the changing of the heavenly watch. I wanted Florence behind me, since there was nothing in it to hold me anymore. I left everything except the money, my weapons, and a few changes of warm clothing.

Many would think me mad to consider crossing Europe alone on horseback carrying a small fortune, especially while riding a fine horse. I may be rash, but I am not naïve. I would avoid the inns and well-traveled roads. The hardships of the journey would serve to buff the mettle of my soul. This would serve me well, as I would need to know what I was made of before entering my father's house again.

Less than an hour later, I sat upon Hercules and chewed the remains of my hurriedly-snatched repast. I rode to a bridge over the Arno and watched the sun rise. The angle was wrong, due to the difference in direction from the night before. The river did not glow gold as it had burned red. I rode west anyway.

Perhaps the Gods had been trying to tell me something, after all.