



Julia Talbot's
Masque



SCREWDRIERS

Masque
By Julia Talbot

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Chapter One

"I think Giada and I will retire now, Massimo."

Massimo di Rossi lifted his green and gold feathered mask and smiled at his brother, lifting his cheek for a kiss. He got one on both cheeks, Dante's rough hands snagging on the fine brocade of his doublet.

"You are far too fond of your wife, Dante," he replied. "'Tis unseemly."

"So they tell me. Still, you know how I hate these things."

Si. He knew very well how Dante felt about balls and masques and having to dress in finery. He preferred the wilds of Sicily to the hospitable bustle of Firenze. Still, he had come at Massimo's request for the family's midsummer ball without complaint.

Well, without too much, at any rate.

"You might do well were you more fond of your own wife."

Massimo snorted. "She is as easy to love as an eel."

"Baked in pie she would be more to your taste then?"

He laughed aloud. "You have the luxury of fondness with Giada. Remember that I married Serena for other reasons and be done with it."

"Si, si. She has retired?" There was that slightly pitying look of a man in love, and Massimo gritted his teeth on his smile.

"She has. And with you taking your provincial ways off to bed, I may begin to enjoy myself."

Dante nodded, hand clasping Massimo's shoulder again, squeezing. "Do that. But have a care. Your wife's family is about."

He would not roll his eyes. In fact, he did not, for which he was most proud. Serena's family could go straight to Hell, and take all of their little political machinations with them for all he cared. Tonight was for debauchery.

"Buona sera, Dante," he said, cutting off further discussion in that vein. "I will see you tomorrow. We will talk, hmm?"

Dante searched his face, then nodded, his usual stoic mask falling into place. "Si. At breakfast, hmm? Giada and I will stay at least through Mass on the rest day. Buona sera, brother."

After Dante left him, Massimo sipped his wine, staring at the crowd of people dancing a canarie. Such bright plumed birds they were, with their sparkling gold and silver fabrics, their glowing

jewels and their elaborate masks of leather and feathers. It was not one of them he sought, however.

It was the one over in the corner, dressed in black as glossy as a raven's wing.

Normally Massimo would dally with a woman at such affairs. It was much more acceptable to his lady wife, after all, but his attentions focused too strongly on his prey, a member of the elite guards newly employed by the public to keep the peace.

Strong legs encased in indecently tight hose, along with a snowy white camicia under a still brocaded black doublet that showed off broad shoulders, proved that this was a man, not a boy, someone mature enough to be interesting.

His wife would heartily disapprove.

Perhaps that was why Massimo moved, slipping his mask back into place and making his way lazily through the crowd. Here a woman in red velvet with rolled sleeves and a prodigious bosom stopped him to compliment him on his cook, waving a trailing piece of tripe under his nose. There a Medici cousin stopped him to talk treason, and Massimo handed him off to another young firebrand, who might entertain him with ideas of poison and passion.

Finally though, he made his way to the side of his soldier, bowing rather formally to begin his assault.

"Buona sera."

"Buona sera, signore." The guard bent formally as well, one muscled leg presented in a most pleasing manner.

"I could not help but notice your somber attire. Truly, it stands out against the crowd."

"It befits my office, signore Rossi."

Ah. So he was already at a disadvantage, despite the mask.

"And what is that?" he asked, though he knew very well the black was an affectation of the Otto di guardia e balia, as the guards were called. "And what is your name?"

A faint smile curved the mouth under the mask, and it occurred to Massimo to hope that the man was not pox-scarred or ugly. "Piero, signore. Piero di Migliozzi."

"And where do you come from, Piero?"

Like Massimo, the man was clearly not born and bred Florentine. The patterns of his speech said as much.

"My family comes from Ravenna, signore. But I left there when I was a child."

Oh, the fellow became more intriguing with each citrus scented breath. Massimo turned to a nearby table, broke off a piece of a spun sugar representation of David and Goliath. It was unusual to meet a man like himself, who had seen other places, who had not been in Firenze his whole life. Interesting, as well, for if a man was desperate enough to leave the safety of friends and family in these treacherous times, he was usually fleeing something.

"Your father. He was in trouble?"

Piero laughed, drawing rather shocked looks at the heartiness of the sound. "No, signore. He was an artist. He went where the patrons commissioned him to go."

"Was he any good?"

That earned him another laugh, and people began to mill about them, always drawn to something they might be missing. A single wave of his hand sent them scattering like pigeons, though.

"He did well enough. We did not want. And you, signore, your family is from Rome?"

Now came his own turn to laugh aloud, albeit wryly. "My family is everywhere."

He sighed, looking about them as two ladies of the Pitti family sidled up. "Walk with me?"

If the request surprised Piero he showed it not at all. Instead Piero presented an arm, which Massimo held lightly as they made their way out of the crush. It felt odd, as he and Piero were of a size, and Massimo would put his sword against Piero's any day. Still, the oddly courtly gesture fit the occasion.

The mask on Piero's face remained impassive, the gold and black lion's head staring. The sideways look he got from Piero's dark eyes, however, made him shiver.

"You know, signore, that the republic has enacted laws against the sin of sodomy."

"Why si, I do. Laws you are sworn to uphold."

"Truth."

They reached an elaborately carved door that led into a private courtyard, and Massimo pushed it open, beckoning Piero to follow.

"Are you planning to break your law, Piero?"

As soon as the gate closed behind them, Piero pressed him back against the wall, hands strong and demanding on his shoulders and one thigh slipping between his. Hot and cold chills ran up his spine to burst at the base of his skull, his cock hardening in a rush that left him breathless.

"Si, signore. I do indeed. It adds spice, si?"

"Si."

So accustomed was he to taking rather than being taken, Massimo fought the first kiss as it smashed down on his mouth with bruising force. Pushing and struggling only brought his prick into better contact with Piero's strong leg, though, reminding him that he'd wanted this, wanted a man, not a boy or a soft woman.

Finally he began to kiss Piero back, his scrabbling hands finding purchase in dark, springy hair while their half-masks scraped and caught. Masks. Massimo pushed Piero away, tugging at the mask covering the unfamiliar face.

Oh. Si. The promise of the sensual mouth and laughing eyes delivered a hard-carved face of utter masculine beauty, making Massimo fairly drool.

"No pox."

"No." Piero traced Massimo's own mask with sword-callused fingers. "You have none either. Your face I know as well as my own, signore. I have admired it for months."

His heart speeded. "Have you? Did you dress to catch my attention then?"

"I have hoped to, si." The mask fairly flew from his head and Piero knocked it aside. One strong hand slid down Massimo's shoulder, then his arm, taking his hand and pressing it to the front of Piero's hose. That was no codpiece pressing against him. "I have wanted, signore."

He squeezed, eliciting a gasp. "Do you think you might bring yourself to call me Massimo?"

"Si. Massimo."

They kissed again, a veritable battle of lips and tongues, the rasp of harsh whiskers on his chin and cheeks almost shocking. It had been years since he had been with such a man. Massimo let his free hand drop beneath the doublet and short coat Piero wore, cupping the fine buttocks, the other hand slipping up and down the hard length of cock beneath it, teasing both Piero and himself.

"I knew. I knew you would be this way."

"This way?"

His lips tingled, his arms hurt where Piero held him, and all Massimo thought about was getting closer.

"Strong. Passionate."

"Si."

Passion he had. In abundance. Finally Massimo yanked away layers of linen and brocade and embroidery, shoving his hand into Piero's hose to feel the hot flesh beneath. They both moaned as his fingers closed tight, thumb pushing up to rub the looser skin at the head over and back. Damp, heavy, and so hot it nearly burned him, Piero's cock was simply a work of art.

"Beautiful," he gasped out when the kiss finally ended. "So beautiful."

"Si. You are." The laces of his doublet gave way under Piero's touch, the sleeves slipping down, then the neck. His fine linen shirt made a harsh sound as the neckline tore against Piero's impatient pull. They struggled together to overcome the obstacle of cloth, and finally there was just enough skin to satisfy, at least for the moment.

Piero scraped short-cut nails over his nipples, across his throat, bending to lick at his lips, and across his cheek to his ear. Moaning, Massimo tilted his head back, offering better access, and an even louder sound came from him when Piero sucked the skin of his neck hard enough to mark it.

"My... oh. There. My wife will disapprove, caro."

Something hard and possessive flashed in Piero's night dark eyes. "Let her."

Indeed. Let her.

Massimo stroked Piero's cock, pulled it, demanded a response. Piero, in turn, thrust hard into his fist, hips rocking, short grunts sounding with each movement. They twisted, turned, and suddenly their naked skin touched, Massimo's cock rubbing Piero's, and both of them stilled for a moment of shocked pleasure.

Then they began to move again, both of the fast and furiously until their skin made slapping noises. His hand moved of its own volition, wrapping about both of their lengths, holding them together as they moved, as their heat became more than he could bear. His skin felt raw, so sensitive that he felt he might scream, and a look between them showed Massimo that Piero was wet, flushed a deep red, the foreskin pulled all of the way back to expose the head.

He could stand no more. His sight left him, the world going black and white and gray as Massimo spent himself against his own hand and Piero's skin. Piero shot himself as well, the heat and wetness redoubling as Piero shouted his pleasure to the night, the sound ringing in Massimo's ears.

Clinging to one another, they fought for breath, Massimo's legs threatening to buckle under his own weight.

"Does that qualify as sodomy, caro?"

Laughing, Piero nuzzled the mark on his throat, licking at it lightly. "In the strictest of terms? No. According to the new laws? It does quite well for itself."

"Ah. Si, but I am a stickler for terms. Come back to my rooms with me and we will see how many more laws we can break, hmm?"

How quickly he was learning to enjoy that laugh, so free and rich. "As long as your wife is not there, signore."

He laughed himself, as much at the imagined look on Serena's face, if nothing else. "She would be horrified, Piero. And so would I. Come. Let us enjoy the longest night of the year together."

Piero nodded. "Si, Massimo. Let us do just that."

They righted their clothing so Massimo could lead the way to another gate in the courtyard wall, this one well hidden among the vines. This led the way to his private chambers, so he was careful about who saw it. He did not believe he needed to worry about Piero. There had been ample opportunity to kill him should the man wish to do so.

The passage between his garden and his rooms seemed endless, especially with Piero right at his heels, so close Massimo could fairly feel Piero's warm breath on his nape. When they reached his chambers he took not even a moment to show Piero about the tapestried great room. Instead he took one strong hand in his and led Piero to his bedchamber, his great bed and an iron studded trunk that doubled as a candle stand the only adornments.

Piero laughed. "There is no doubt what this room is for, signore."

"Sleeping?" Raising an eyebrow, he pushed Piero toward the bed. "I want to see you. Now."

"Oh, you are imperious, aren't you?"

"I am. If you please."

"I do." Stripping off his coat and doublet, Piero gave him a fine showing, slowly peeling off the fine linen undershirt, then the soft boots and hose.

Massimo caught his breath. The man was simply beautiful. Piero's shoulders rose wide and strong above arms that rippled with muscle, and a chest sprinkled with just enough hair to excite him, to prove Piero was a man in his prime. The ridged belly gave credence to the idea that a man of the sword needed to be in top physical condition, and the way the tiny trail of hair widened low on Piero's pelvis made Massimo's hands twitch, his fingers wanting to touch that springy mass.

Their scent still lingered, strong and male, a deep rich musk that came up from Piero's clothing and body. Closing his eyes, Massimo breathed deep, letting it fill his nose, letting the scent lay on his tongue like an actual flavor.

"Do you like what you see?"

The question came from far too short a distance, and Massimo opened his eyes to find Piero directly before him, arms out, body displayed like an erotic statue.

"Dio. Si. I like. I want."

He touched. Lifting his hand, Massimo let it slide along Piero's cheek, the rough nap of whiskers catching his fingers. The smooth, fine skin over Piero's collarbones contrasted wildly, as did the hairs around those dark nipples.

"Massimo..."

"Si. I like to hear my name from your mouth, Piero."

"Good. I would see you too."

"Not yet."

There were still hipbones to be stroked, lush hair to be teased, and Piero's rising cock demanded a thorough examination.

He'd barely pushed the foreskin back, though, when Piero grabbed him roughly by the wrist and dragged him to the bed, tossing him down like a bag of stones.

"No. Now."

If he had doubted Piero's strength, he would now have no reason to. Blinking, he struggled to sit upright as Piero began to strip him, yanking roughly at his fine clothes.

"Have a care or you will rip them."

Piero shot him a look, eyes almost black with want. "Do you care?"

"No." He really didn't, did he? "But my valet will."

That got him a chuckle, one that ended on a moan as Piero bared Massimo's lower half. "I can smell us."

"Only just now? It's been driving me mad ever since we came together."

"Si. Oh, so good."

Without any more warning than that, Piero bent to touch his prick with those astonishing lips, tongue pushing through to taste him. Massimo arched, his back bending impossibly as he pushed his fingers into Piero's black hair, the curls seeming to grasp at his hands.

Piero's mouth worked him, the tongue rough as a cat's, scraping along his nerves until he thought he might scream. The vein on the underside received special attention, Piero licking it down, tracing it with closed lips on the way up. Massimo's balls drew up tighter, hot pleasure shooting up his spine.

"That must be a sin," he said, thumb stroking Piero's cheek.

"Mmmm. Of course it is. All of the good things are."

"Si." Piero's head moving up and down on his prick was simply the most erotic thing Massimo had ever seen. He simply watched for the longest time, his balls drawing up, a deep flush rising along his belly and chest. "I want... other things, Piero."

Piero looked up at him again, eyes glazed with need. "What things?"

"I want to be inside you."

"No." Sitting up, Piero eased up next to his hip, reaching out to touch his cheek. "No, Massimo. Not this time."

"But I thought you said..."

"I said, signore, that I was most happy to pass this long night together, and to see what other things we might do. But that is something I do not take lightly. If I am to sin so grievously I must mean it."

"Mean it." Well. Massimo pulled away, his cock wilting so that he covered it with one hand. "Of course."

Those near-black eyes were as sharp as a falcon's, as fierce. "Oh, Massimo di Rossi. I could too easily mean it with you. But you are a trifling man. It is well known."

"And you think I trifle with you now?"

"What else am I to think?" Laughing, Piero drew close, kissing his mouth hard enough to bruise. "Per favore, Massimo. Let us just pretend for tonight that we have a long acquaintance, and that we are two amicos, come together to play, hmm?"

That was acceptable enough, wasn't it? It was when things became serious between two men that the authorities intervened.

"Si. If that makes you happy."

Massaging his once more hardening prick, Piero nodded. The room suddenly seemed close and hot, the bedclothes stifling. Massimo shook Piero off and went to the trunk, removing the candle and pulling out a jug of wine.

"Would you like some?"

"Now I have angered you."

"No." No, not really. Baffled him, yes. Confounded him. But not really angered. The bed curtain fascinated him suddenly, and he fingered the pattern as he sipped wine from the goblet he'd filled. "You are not what I expected. You defy me. You pass control back and forth as if you were not a guard and I not a conte."

"Is that not what you want? Is that not why you sought me out?"

"I. Si. And no. You called to me."

"I know." The touch of Piero's hand on his was inescapable, drawing him back onto the bed. "I have wanted you for some time. But I simply cannot. Not tonight. Come. There are many other things."

He followed Piero back to the bed, his thoughts churning in his skull. He wanted this man, and badly.

Badly enough to wait.

Put simply, that scared him to his soul.

Piero's kiss blotted out his worry, filling the entire world, making him give up his fear for now at least.

Later he would have much to think on. A very great deal, indeed.

Chapter Two

"He has retired, signora"

Serena jumped as Marita slipped into her rooms through the servants passage, hand going to her chest, the bristles of her brush stinging her delicate skin.

"You should not scare me so, Marita."

"Mi scuzi, signora. You told me to come to you when he had."

"Of course." Peering into her small silver mirror, Serena frowned at the deep lines carved around her mouth. Damn Massimo anyway. "Who did he take to his bed tonight?"

"A man, signora." Gently removing the brush from her clenched hand, Marita began to brush her golden hair, one long stroke after another, soothing her.

"What sort?"

"What do you mean, signora?"

Marita's brown face in the mirror was bland as milk. Serena gritted her teeth. "What sort of man? A young, pretty one?"

"Oh, he was pretty enough, signora. Very handsome. But not a boy."

So sly, that girl. Serena really ought to beat her.

"So who?"

"A guardia, signora."

The brush tugged a tangle she'd made when she'd ripped her masked headdress off earlier, and Serena gasped. "Careful!"

"Si, signora. They went to his private rooms."

"Oh? Did you sneak in to watch them, Marita?" The girl could be as light-footed as a cat.

"No. The guardia is dangerous. I did not wish to disturb."

"I see." She bit one thumbnail, thinking on Massimo and his lover for the evening. Damn him. She wondered how many of their guests had seen them together. Why not a boy, or a pretty girl? Why must he continually humiliate her?

"Stop that, signora. You will ruin."

A sigh slipped out and she dropped her hands to her lap, looking for all of the world like a demure, sweet lady when she looked in the mirror. The brushing stopped, Marita setting the ivory-backed brush on the dressing table and smoothing her hair into one long plait.

"There. Would you like your cream?"

"No." She fingered the brush, trying to tamp down her rage as a woman of her station should, but she simply couldn't find the will. "No, I want you to undress."

Eyes like fine brandy met hers, calm and serious, before Marita stepped back. "Si. As you wish."

Moving back, Marita began to undress, starting with her hair, just as Serena preferred. The close-fitting linen cap came away, floating to the floor, leaving long, black locks to trail down Marita's back and over her bodice. Serena loved the contrast of her own lightness and Marita's darkness, loved the way their hair mingled on the sheets of her bed.

Massimo may have his toys, but she had her faithful Marita.

Next came the sleeves, Marita's clever fingers stripping the laces away and letting them fall, showing a rough chemise beneath. Turning in her chair, Serena watched, eyes moving over the curve of Marita's upper arm under the thin fabric. Strong, that arm, from work, though still not like a man's. Not like Massimo, who had too many muscles, too much rough brown hair all over him.

The laces down the sides of Marita's bodice fell next, the cloth falling away from Marita's breasts, the dark nipples clearly visible through the under dress.

There Marita stopped, moving instead to the soft shoes she wore. They made Marita all that much more alluring, mysterious. Most servants went barefoot indoors, and their feet became ragged. Marita had the feet of a lady.

"What do you think the master is doing now, signora?" Marita asked, slowly rolling down her stockings.

Serena scowled, her hands clenching in the fine silk of her dressing gown. Massimo's cousin, Santiago, had gotten it in Venice. 'Twas one of the few things she liked about being married to a Rossi.

"I have not the faintest idea what two men do together. Nor do I care. The rest, if you please."

"And if I do not?"

Such a coquettish look. Too bad she was not in the mood for teasing. Serena reached for the hairbrush, smacking the back of it against her palm. Her skin tingled in a most satisfying way.

"I will not ask again."

"Si, signora."

The stockings hit the floor, and finally, finally the chemise came off, lifted over Marita's head. Oh. Yes, that was just the distraction she needed. Soft breasts, rounded belly, sweet hips. She beckoned.

"Come and kiss me."

Swaying her hips like a practiced courtesan, Marita came to her, leaning down to kiss her, lips soft and firm against hers. Marita tasted of coarse wine and of mint. Serena wondered if she tasted like the vegetable soup from dinner.

She pulled away.

"Now, go on and lie down on the bed." Serena rose, untying her dressing gown and pointing with the hairbrush to her high bed.

Marita knew what she wanted. Clever girl. Spreading out on the bed facedown, Marita turned her face to the side, smiling at her. Waiting.

Feet making barely a sound on the heavy rug, Serena crossed to the bed platform, stepping up, running her free hand down the length of Marita's back. Strong, firm, still young, Marita made her smile, made her mouth water. But first she would work out a few of her frustrations, hmm? Positioning herself perpendicular to Marita's hip, Serena raised the brush, bringing it down with a stinging smack.

A red spot appeared on Marita's bottom, spreading across the skin. Smiling, Serena raised her hand and brought it down again. And then again, spreading the blows out over both cheeks of that delectable flesh. The room became scented with Marita's need, her heat, and moisture began to leak from between those rounded thighs as they spread, bracing so that Marita could rise to meet each slap.

Oh, si. Her arm seemed never to tire, the power she wielded making her nipples draw up, making her pussy dampen. The heavily embroidered bedclothes rubbed against her thigh, scratching, adding maddening sensation to her already awakened body.

She kept on, kept going, until Marita's bottom glowed like the coals of a brazier. Until her arm felt numb.

Then and only then did she stop, her hand hovering over Marita's skin. "What do you think of that, hmm?"

"I think you are very angry at your husband, signora."

Another sharp slap made Marita jump and gasp. "I think you should watch your mouth unless you wish me to break the skin."

Her victim squirmed, and she could see the hard nipples of Marita's breasts rubbing the coverlet. "As you wish, signora."

"Si. It is always as I wish. And now I wish to see you as you would be with a man."

Eyebrows drawing together in a straight line, Marita looked up at her. "Signora?"

"I want you to spread yourself. Wider. Get up on your knees."

Rising, Marita did as she ordered, opening her legs. Dainty steps took Serena up on the bed so she knelt behind her maid, admiring the glistening pink flesh revealed to her. So wet for her, so hot. She could always count on her Marita. Slipping her fingers into the wet heat, Serena tested the resilience of Marita's inner walls, pushing her fingers apart.

A deep moan answered her movements, Marita beginning to rotate her hips around and around.

"Si. Such a whore for me."

"For you, signora. Only."

"Liar."

Withdrawing her fingers, Serena lined the handle of her ornate silver brush up at Marita's entrance, pushing it deep into the inviting pussy with a single thrust.

"Serena!"

Oh, perfect. When Marita lost the sense of the boundary between them Serena knew she was beyond sly or calculating. Now she was fully in the moment. The handle slid in and out easily, moving inside Marita, wet noises accompanying each thrust.

"Per favore, Serena. I need to touch myself."

"Si. Si, Marita. Show me how you want me."

She watched, always watching, as Marita reached down, fingering herself. Breath huffed out of Marita's chest as she started to pant. By God, the power of making this woman beg, of making her grunt and swing.

"Now, Marita mia. Now."

"Oh. Oh!" The sweet passage clamped down on the brush as if it would pull it out of Serena's hand, Marita wagging her hips in mad circles, short, sharp cries coming from her mouth.

"My bella Marita." Serena stroked Marita's back, rubbing the sweat into the skin there as she removed the brush handle and threw the thing aside. "So lovely. So responsive."

"Mmm." Rolling onto her back, Marita smiled, then hissed, raising her bottom up off the bed, breasts bouncing. "What would you have me do for you, signora?"

She smiled, stretching out beside Marita and spreading her legs, feeling her own wetness on her thighs.

"I think you should use your mouth, my dear. Make me forget all about Massimo and his guardia."

Rising above her, Marita smiled, eyes sparkling. "Si, signora. I believe I can do that."

That dark head bent between her thighs, the long hair spilling over her mound and belly. Just before Marita's mouth descended on her sex, Marita laughed and added, "And if we do not, we will find some other way to blot them out, signora."

"Did you see? The conte di Rossi left with your cousin Piero."

"Did he?" Fillipo tried not to worry about it. Piero was a big boy. He could take care of himself. Still, it looked as though the conquest had begun.

"Si. I wonder what the contessa will think of that?"

"What does she usually think?"

His companion, Orlando, was a sweet young man, and a chatterbox who was a fine source of gossip. Fillipo liked him a great deal.

"Oh, she hates his amors. This one really ought to curl her short hairs. He's never been taken with a man like Piero, I don't think. Usually I am more to his liking."

Fillipo could easily see why. Orlando boasted golden hair and greenish-gold eyes, and the longest eyelashes he'd ever seen on a boy. They were natural, too, not a smudge of charcoal to be found on the lad's cheeks. Though he suspected Orlando was older than he seemed at first glance, certainly old enough to be part of the intrigue that plagued the great houses of Firenze.

"Well, tonight you are to my taste, mio tesoro."

"Oh good."

Behind the eyeholes of the sea serpent mask Orlando wore, those long eyelashes batted for him, and Fillipo laughed. "Come. Dance with me."

"Dare we?"

The music rose to a new pitch, the minstrels earning their keep, and the swirl of bodies in the ballroom doubled, or perhaps tripled, the scent of sweat and perfume almost overwhelming.

"It is a country dance. No one will care."

That was true enough, with the lines of people lined up opposite one another. More than one pair of ladies or gentlemen together were obvious. Orlando nodded happily and went to stand opposite him, bowing as the new round started.

The dance brought them together for only the briefest of touches here and there, his hand under Orlando's elbow at this turn, Orlando's fingers brushing the small of his back at that one. The woman beside him had a mask with pheasant feathers that brushed his cheek every time he moved her way, once tickling his nose and making him sneeze.

That was the worst, but Orlando was the best of it, brushing him, pressing against him as they passed, the scent of him warm and musky, a pleasant difference from too many of the bodies around them. Fillipo found himself thankful for the protective covering of his crimson codpiece, as well as his bright red and orange mask, representing fire. He needed all of the cover he could find.

Finally the dance ended, he and Orlando close together, both of them breathing hard with more than just the effort of dancing in their heavy clothing.

"I know it is terribly forward, Fillipo. But can we go somewhere?"

"Si." He looked about, noting where the servants came and went from. "This way."

He wondered, just for a fleeting moment, what Piero and the signore Rossi were doing. He could only hope it went well, for all of their sakes. Knowing Piero and his charms, though, they should be just fine.

"I think you are not so much with me, Fillipo."

Oh, Orlando had the most glorious pout beneath his half mask, lips pink and inviting. He had to kiss them, so Fillipo pushed them behind a tapestry and took that mouth, forgetting everything but this for at least a little while. He tasted wine, dark and rich, completely at odds with the spring fruit look of Orlando. Almost mysterious.

They kissed long and deep, tongues touching, lips pressing against their teeth. Finally it was their masks that came between them, hindering their closeness.

"We are too much in the open here," he said, drawing Orlando into the serving passage. "We should find someplace more hidden."

"Si. Si, come."

Now it was Orlando who led like he knew where he was going. And perhaps he did; he seemed to know a great deal about the Palazzo Rossi, after all, a key factor in Fillipo's choice of companions for the evening.

That and the lively eyes behind the mask.

"There is a room just here. Ah. There." Some hidden catch must have opened the door, for he never saw a latch or handle but soon enough they were in a small, close room filled with table linens, the only light that from the still open door. Stilling Orlando's eager fingers as they would have pulled off his mask, Fillipo shook his head.

"A lamp, tesoro. Or a candle."

"Oh! Si. Give me a moment."

The slight form disappeared, and Fillipo took a moment to breathe deep, collecting himself. The night had been fraught with such tension, for so many reasons that it had translated into a need that might just scare his companion away should he reveal it.

"Here. How is this?" The little lamp Orlando came back with illuminated the tiny room, making the jewels at Orlando's throat glow bright green.

"Much better. Who gave you these?" he asked, stroking the cool emeralds. Usually only men of state had such fine things, and then only for rare occasions.

"A friend." That bright gaze slid away from his, Orlando avoiding his touch for a minute as well, stiff as a brocaded table runner.

"I am sorry, tesoro. I will not pry."

"Then I will not have to lie." The sweet smile was back, Orlando reaching to touch his cheek, pushing the mask off his head. "Oh. You are as wonderful as I'd hoped."

He knew he was not as handsome as his cousin Piero, but Fillipo did think he acquitted himself well, and it was all he could do not to preen. Instead he lifted Orlando's mask off as well, smiling at the almost delicate features he uncovered. Not girlish, just so finely chiseled they could be a statue of Adonis. Or Narcissus...

"You're lovely."

"Kiss me again?"

There was no way to deny such a request, so he did not, kissing Orlando at first gently, then with growing need. His cock ached where it lay pressed to his body by the codpiece, making him moan.

"So hungry."

"Si. I need."

"Let me help you."

Nimble fingers worked his laces, stripping away his covering in no time, doing away with his hose with equal quickness. Orlando knelt before him, breath hot and damp on his bared flesh, looking up at him.

"Take off the rest, Fillipo. I want to see it all."

Nodding, he fumbled with his laces, stripping off sleeves and doublet and chemise, feeling a fool with his cock standing nude and proud beneath all of the fine fabric until finally he was naked to Orlando's gaze.

"Oh. Si. So handsome. You are made for this."

Warm and firm, Orlando's fingers closed about him, the touch at once banking and stirring the fire within him. He caught his breath, belly going tight as his cock throbbed.

"Do not tease me, tesoro. I have too great a need for you."

"There will be time for teasing later. For now, let us ease you some, hmm?"

Clever, clever boy. That shining gold head bent to his skin, Orlando's lips slipping over the head of his shaft. Moaning, he threaded his fingers through that silky hair, letting it slip against his palms like he would rub soap between them, shivers running up his arms to his chest. His nipples rose high and tight and his skin itched with heat.

"Si. Like that, tesoro. Just like that."

"Mmhmm."

Tongue slipping about him, Orlando sank down on his cock, licking and sucking, soft noises vibrating along Fillipo's skin. The lad was not only talented, he was truly eager. Greedy. Softly, slowly, the pads of Orlando's fingers slid along from the base of Fillipo's cock to find his balls, tugging gently, and Fillipo rose up on his toes, a harsh cry escaping him.

"More."

Nodding, Orlando rose up on his knees, angling his head down until Fillipo's cock nudged the back of his throat, swallowing him whole. The scent of them mixed with the burning lamp oil and the strong soap from the linens made his head swim, made his eyes water, and Fillipo began to thrust, unable to keep his hips still.

He pushed into Orlando's throat over and over, until his shaft felt on fire, until the need in his balls seemed near to exploding. Then he started to stroke Orlando's cheeks, his hair, murmuring praises, love words they both knew he did not mean, and finally, curses.

When he emptied himself into Orlando's mouth, the relief was so profound that his vision went dark, spots dancing before his eyes much the way he and Orlando had done earlier.

"Mmm." Orlando cleaned him thoroughly, smiling up at him and holding him by the hips to steady him. Those pink lips looked slick and swollen, bright spots of color on Orlando's cheeks emphasizing them. "You taste as good as I knew you would."

"Do I? Come here and let me see how we taste together."

The sharp edge of the need riding him had been blunted, but not worn away. His prick remained half hard, heavy against his thigh as he pulled Orlando to his feet, kissing him so hard that Orlando bent back over his arm, hands flying up to grasp Fillipo's shoulders for balance.

Bitter. Salt. Earth. And still that deep wine flavor. They tasted like sex.

The kiss went deep and hard as he pushed Orlando up against a trunk, pushing him down so he sprawled, legs open and inviting.

"I would see you, tesoro. Tell me I may."

"Yes. Please. Fillipo."

"Good. That was the only answer." He smiled, tugging at Orlando's clothing, which was much more ornate than his. The emerald he laid aside carefully. The rest ended up on the floor with his own clothes, gathering dust to it.

Such a feast Orlando was for his senses. Smooth skin, like cream mixed with the barest hint of wine combined with golden hair to create an irresistible call to his hands and his mouth. The skin of Orlando's throat was rough just under the chin, proving as he'd thought that the lad was older than one immediately imagined. But as he moved down to the join of throat and chest, it became smooth and sweet, holding just a hint of sweat.

The nipples on Orlando's chest were dark red, not pink as he might have supposed, and hard for him. Fillipo knew that many men did not linger over what they considered a waste of time, but oh, he loved mouths on breasts, and as he closed his lips around one hard bit of flesh, he heard Orlando gasp and smiled to think his tesoro might like it as well.

He sucked, teeth scraping the sensitive bit, setting his mouth to Orlando's chest to suck up a mark just above. Orlando squirmed, cock bouncing between them, and Fillipo reached for it, pushing it down, watching fire leap in Orlando's eyes.

"Please."

Orlando's words asked prettily enough, but his voice demanded, sounding for all of the world like a pasha with a member of his harem. Fillipo was in the mood to tease now that his initial urge had abated somewhat, and he resisted the pull of those surprisingly strong hands, moving to the other side of Orlando's chest to bite and suck and lick, blowing air across the skin he'd just mauled.

Addictive. That was what Orlando was, and Fillipo was surprised at himself for even thinking it.

He had too many other things he should be thinking about.

It felt too good to let them all go, though, and his knees hit the hard floor as he worked down the flat belly, lips catching on the tiny golden hairs as he rubbed his chin against one hipbone.

This close Orlando's scent was glorious, male and sharp, making his mouth water. Fillipo lifted Orlando's cock, studying it, letting the sight of such perfection take away the rest of the night, all of his worries and cares. Long and slender, with a surprisingly heavy fold of skin about the head, Orlando's cock was simply lovely.

"Please."

"Please what, tesoro? Please taste? Touch?"

"Oh. Taste. Definitely taste."

"As you wish."

Fillipo wished it too, so he leaned and licked just under the head of Orlando's prick, closing his eyes at the sharp, earthy flavor as it burst onto his tongue. He slid his tongue down the underside, mouth closing around the shaft to suck, and Orlando gasped, grabbing his shoulders in an iron grip.

"Don't stop."

He would not. He wished to give Orlando the same pleasure he'd received, after all. 'Twas only fair. Working up and down, he brought his fingers up to meet his mouth, licking them as he rose off Orlando's cock, dipping to place them below Orlando's sacs as he worked back down.

Tight, hot, surrounded by the most tender skin he had ever felt, Orlando's hole tempted him, drew his fingers in just as if they belonged there.

"Oh. Fillipo. Si. Per favore."

Greedy. That's what Orlando was, from his mouth to his body. That tight hole simply opened for him as Orlando breathed deep. Pushing in two fingers presented no difficulty, so he tried three. That got him the resistance he wanted, the friction. Fillipo moaned around Orlando, moving his fingers in and out, preparing the way for what they both truly desired.

When he had Orlando shaking with need, when his own belly clenched with the fire in it, Fillipo rose, spitting into his palm, his eyes meeting Orlando's.

"I would have you, tesoro." The rough tenor of his own voice shocked him, low and animalistic.

"Have me, then."

The head of his cock lined up perfectly with Orlando's entrance, and before either of them could so much as blink he pushed in, splitting Orlando wide, feeling the tight heat of another close about him for the first time in far too long.

"Si. Oh, beautiful one."

Orlando only nodded, head thrown back so his golden hair spilled behind him like a girl's, legs coming up about Fillipo's waist. Cheeks flushed and mouth open, Orlando moved, pushing him nearly out before taking him in again.

The heat rising off Orlando's body seared him, made him think of the heat of a Sicilian summer, where the sun beat hard on the rocks of the coast. Orlando was nothing like the Sicilian boys, though, pale and smooth as he was. Remembering that he had hands, Fillipo touched Orlando's skin, tracing patterns on it as he thrust, memorizing the play of muscle, the vicious looking scar he discovered on Orlando's ribs.

"Harder, Fillipo."

"Goloso."

"Si. Greedy for you. More. Now."

Short nails scraped down his chest as Orlando pushed up, offering himself. The kiss they shared burnt between them, and he put an arm around Orlando's back, holding him close for more, hips driving. They made love with lips and tongues as surely as they did with bodies, bruising each other, panting for it.

One of them had to break first, and it was Orlando who did, rubbing up against him on his deepest thrusts, spreading liquid heat between them as he spent himself. When Orlando reached between them, gathering up the warm stuff and rubbing it across Fillipo's lips, it was too much. He shot like he had not done so only a short time ago, his hips snapping as he cried out, filling Orlando deep.

They lay together, panting, until Orlando pushed at him, their skin separating with a wet sound.

"I think you may have broken my back."

He looked over, eyebrows raised. "Is that a complaint?"

"Merely an observation. There must be something in this pile of cloth that would make a comfortable bed."

Taking the hint, Fillipo rummaged about until he found bedclothes instead of table linens, soft enough to make a nest. He moved the lamp back to the corner and piled the blankets up, beckoning.

"Come. Stay with me awhile."

He got a delighted smile for his trouble, Orlando gathering up their clothes and piling them neatly before coming to sit with him, curling against his side.

"Do you feel better?"

He stared. "Better than what?"

"You were tense. Worried. Far too watchful for a masquerade on mezza estate. You needed a distraction."

Had he not been thinking that himself only a short time before, he might not have looked on Orlando with such suspicion. As it was, he could only gape.

"I am not a stupid man, Fillipo."

"I did not say you were. I simply wonder why you cared."

"Because I needed a distraction myself. And you caught my eye."

"I caught your..." He let it go, moving instead to turn Orlando into his arms, stroking his soft skin. Who was he to argue that when the slight man in the green serpent mask had done just that to him?

"How did you get this?" he asked, stroking Orlando's side, the scar raised and fierce under his fingers.

"A duel."

"You? Fighting a duel."

"My sword is not just for show, I assure you." Orlando laughed, the sound as bitter as bad salt.
"One of my relations."

"Someone in your family? Why?"

He simply could not imagine his family turning against him.

"I am a bastard. They were trying to dislodge all possible male heirs."

"Ah." It was dangerous business to be the bastard heir. Now perhaps Orlando made more sense.
"What family?"

Tugging sharply at his chest hair, Orlando shook his head. "That is none of your business, Fillipo di Miggliozzi. Suffice to say that I mean you no harm."

He searched Orlando's greenish-gold eyes deeply, discerning that he told the truth, at least as far as that was concerned. He nodded.

"Very well. Then let us see if we might do each other more good."

Humming, Orlando turned, kissing his throat before climbing up to straddle him. "Si, Fillipo. Let's."

Marita slipped out of her bed just before daybreak, leaving a depression in the down and a warm spot on the bedclothes. It was almost a relief, as the night had been stifling, but Serena felt bereft nonetheless.

"Are you going to leave me without a word?" she asked, when Marita would have slipped out the servant's door holding her shift in front of her.

"Signora! I did not wish to wake you until I could come with breakfast. You wish to eat here, in your room, no?"

There was none of Marita's sly avoidance in that look, so Serena chose to believe, beckoning her back. They kissed, a long, lazy dance of lips and tongues before she swatted Marita's round bottom.

"Go get me breakfast. Fruit. Cheese. And tell me what my dear husband is up to. He'll want to dine with Dante, which means he'll be up soon."

They shared a wry smile. Dante was a country man at heart, rising with the pigs and the birds. Like a servant.

"Si, signora. I will do this."

"Tell me too who he brings with him."

Marita stopped near the door, frowning. "None of his amors are ever here to break fast, signora."

"I have a feeling about this one. Marita. Just come back and tell me. And have hot water sent as well."

"Si, signora."

Marita slipped out and Serena propped herself up in the bed, thinking on what she needed to do if this... *man* that Massimo had taken to his bed became something serious. She did not know why she believed it would. She only knew she did believe it, and for the first time she worried about her place in Massimo's life.

Damn him to Hell for everything he put her through.

How she hated that man.

Chapter 3

The sun was just creeping over the horizon when Massimo rose, stumbling to the chamber pot and then the basin to splash tepid water over his face.

Normally he would still be abed, and he looked at the sleeping form of Piero still lying there with real regret. There would be no time for dallying today. Dante was about, and their time together was both precious and short of late, so Massimo would go to his brother.

Piero turned, making a soft noise and reaching, dark head lifting when his hands grasped at nothing.

"Are you leaving me so soon then?"

"I would make you leave if I truly wanted to be rid of you." A smile stretched his cheeks as he went back to the great bed to take a kiss, Piero's lips sleep warm and pliant. 'Twas true enough. In fact Massimo could not remember the last time he awoke with someone else.

"Why are you about so early? I would think a man in your station would be able to lounge all the day long."

He gave Piero a look, but the wicked smile he received in return told him that Piero knew better. He took another kiss, then another, smiling into it himself.

"My brother wishes to break his fast with me. I would not miss it. He leaves in two days time to return home to the wilds of Sicily."

"Really? I knew your family spanned from Rome to Venice, but I did not know of this brother."

Something niggled at his brain, twitching like something slimy rising out of the ocean. He pushed it down. "You know a great deal about my family."

"Who does not, Massimo? Your family is famously well known to all."

"Si." He supposed that was true. Most people simply didn't mention it. "Are you. Would you like to come with me?"

The impulse to ask he did not question. Dante was an excellent judge of character. If Piero were hiding something, Dante would know.

Massimo devoutly hoped Piero was just as he seemed.

"Would you like me to?" Black brows winging up, Piero stared at him, caught in the act of sliding off the bed.

"I would. I think you will like Dante."

Surprise and something else that he couldn't identify flashed over Piero's face. "I would like that, Massimo."

"Then come. Get your clothes on and we will go."

He had the luxury of watching Piero rise and dress, the fine body slowly disappearing from view. Oddly, it was as erotic as it had been when Piero undressed the night before, making his cock rise. Massimo thumped it down. Dante would not wait.

They left together walking silently side-by-side, Piero glancing at him every so often. It was not uncomfortable, simply... odd.

The hall seemed echoing and empty after the revelry the night before. The evidence of the ball still littered the floor, feathers and gold threads and the remains of food strewn everywhere. Serving girls worked to clean it, scrubbing on their knees.

Dante waited for him as Massimo knew he would, smiling from one end of the long table set by the fire, nibbling an apricot. He stood when they drew near, grasping Massimo's upper arms and kissing both of his cheeks.

"It is good to see you without the mask, my brother."

"As it is you, Dante. I hope you do not mind, but I-I brought someone. This is Piero di Miggliaozzi."

Piero bowed slightly and Dante nodded. "Buon giorno, Piero. Come. Both of you. Sit. We have the pick of the morning feast, hmm?"

"We always do when you are here."

They sat, Piero staying quiet but for a murmured hello, reaching for a bunch of grapes. Massimo smiled at them both, hoping to ease the way.

"I hear you left the ball nearly as early as I did Massimo, leaving some of your guests terribly unhappy."

Wrinkling his nose, he gestured for a servant to fill his cup. "Only those who wished to curry favor. I vow, Dante, I may have to come and live with you."

That produced a mock horrified look. "Never. I enjoy having my land and wife to myself. You would monopolize both."

Piero raised a brow at that but said nothing, merely smiling into his cup. Massimo kicked him under the table.

"So, Piero. You are a member of the night guard, hmm? Tell me, is that difficult, given your proclivities?"

Massimo stared at Dante but Piero only laughed, the sound truly delighted. "It keeps me from having to worry about it, does it not? For the rest of the guards are my peers. Usually, I admit, I am more discreet. Your brother brings out the daring in me."

"Does he?"

"Oh yes." Such a look Piero gave him. It made his cock try to rise yet again. Really he had not had this problem since he was a green boy.

Clearing his throat, Massimo reached for a piece of soft cheese. "So tell me Dante, what news? When will you and Giada produce yet another heir?"

"Soon, I hope. She will be well into confinement by the time we get home."

He stared. "I was only teasing. Is she really?"

"Si. That is why she is not here this morning. I fear she has the usual malady."

"You really do mean to populate your little island kingdom, don't you?"

A proud grin creased Dante's cheeks. "We do."

"How many children do you have now?" Piero asked, and Dante was off and running, expounding about his three sons and one daughter. It gave him a chance to watch his brother and his new lover interact. New lover indeed, for he planned to keep Piero. He really did.

"What about you, Piero?" Dante's question snapped him back to the present. "Do you have a wife? Children?"

"Not yet. Or rather, not now. I was betrothed as a child, but she died of the plague when I was twelve. My father never arranged another match, and I have been most lazy in finding my own."

"That may be just as well. Look at poor Massimo here. His wife is not at all in charity with him."

His goblet thumped to the table. Loudly. "She is neither here nor there. Tell me about the crops this year."

If it was not his children Dante went on about, it was his land. It made Massimo happy to see Dante so contented, though, so he smiled and nodded and listened with pleasure to Dante's takes of artichokes and grapes, and how he had high hopes for figs this year.

"We should go out to see your land while I am here, Massimo. Spend the night at the country house."

"While I have guests?"

"Is that not the best time to remove?" Dante gave him a sideways look. "Piero could join us. Let your wife entertain for a bit. If she is not avoiding you she is perfectly charming."

His cheeks heated as he glanced at Piero. "I am not sure Piero would want to come with us."

"Of course I would. If it would not be an imposition on family time."

"Not at all. It is settled then." And for Dante it was, just like that. "You see to the arrangements, Massimo. I will take Giada her breakfast."

Nodding to them both, Dante rose, grabbing up a platter and filling it with enough of the best fruits and cheeses to feed three men, let alone one very small, pregnant woman. Massimo hid a smile until Dante left, only to find Piero grinning at him.

"I like him. He's very forthright."

"He is. He likes you, I can tell."

"Is that important?"

"Oh, yes. I intend to keep you around. How long will it take you to ready yourself?"

"Not long." Just the tips of Piero's teeth sank into a grape, his tongue shockingly pink against the deep red fruit. Massimo breathed deep and smelled the juice, tangy and fresh. "I must talk with my commander, then pack a few things. Also..."

"Also?"

"I have a cousin with me. He came to the masque last night. I am just, well, uncertain as to where he might be. I will need to contact him as well."

"I see. Well, then, why do you not take yourself off and do what you must as soon as you are well fed. I will leave word with the servants that I am to be notified when you return."

The prospect of spending his nights in the country with this man appealed more than he thought possible.

"Very well." Another grape disappeared into Piero's mouth. "Should I wait to bathe with you?"

Bathing. With Piero.

"Si. We will bathe tonight, after we travel."

Together. All of Piero's nude skin would be at his disposal, wet and slick. God. Something must have shown on his face, for Piero's eyes darkened and he leaned close. Just as Massimo would have reached for him though, he caught sight of Serena's maid, Marita, staring at them with malice in her sloe eyes as she filled a heavy bowl with food.

Massimo sat back, waving her over.

"Si signore?"

"As soon as your lady has broken her fast I wish to see her. Have her meet me in the map room no later than mid-morning."

Lashes drooping to cover her eyes, Marita nodded. "Of course, signore. I will tell her."

"Grazie. You may go."

She made no sound as she left, reminding Massimo that even in his own house there were spies, and good ones at that. He raked his fingers through his hair as she left, mentally listing all of the things he would need to do.

"I should go."

"You'll be back by midday?" He wanted Piero near. It was a new feeling for him, and not entirely pleasant.

"I will. I promise."

"Then I will see you then."

"Oh. I have a mount. Should I bring her for the trip?"

"If you wish, then si. I would very much like to ride with you, and Dante will not ride in the carriage I assure you."

Dante loathed closed conveyances.

"Then we shall... ride together." He got a wink and a short press of Piero's hand on his shoulder as Piero rose, sending a thrill through his body. "By the by. Where is your country house?"

"Near the Valdarno. Some five hours by carriage. Near Reggello."

"That's beautiful country. Very well. I will be back soon. Do not leave without me."

"I would not dream of it."

Nor would he, he thought as he watched Piero leave. It should scare him to death. Instead it left him smiling, even whistling as he went off to talk to his steward, even the thought of his wife's displeasure not enough to dampen his good mood.

What a very odd thing.

"He wishes to see you, signora. In the map room."

Marita carefully pulled her hair back from her face, pinning it back severely before creating a bun at the back of her head and arranging tendrils about her with a hot metal rod heated at the brazier. She hissed as the rod came too close to her cheek, swatting at Marita's buttocks.

"Why?"

"How would I know, signora?"

Oh, now the girl was going to pout. Serena sighed. "The same way you always know. You eavesdrop."

A husky chuckle and a sweet caress to the back of her neck told her Marita agreed. "Si, si. He is going to the country with his brother."

"Is he now? While we have guests?"

Marita pushed gently under her chin, tilting her head up to whisk a rabbit's foot covered in white powder over her cheeks, then pink. "He says you can handle the guests, signora. His brother says so too; he says that you are charming."

She closed her eyes so Marita could finish her face, sweeping charcoal on her lashes. There, she thought, looking at herself in the mirror. Freshly armored for battle.

"Perhaps I should have married Dante then."

"You would not like him, signora. He insists that his wife bed him."

She swatted again but this time Marita moved out of her way, skirts swishing. "Yes, and we all know how I enjoy that. I should go see him. You go and see Michelo. Tell him I want him with the entourage."

Michelo was Marita's brother. He would be their eyes and ears while her husband was off dallying and playing man of leisure.

"Si, signora."

The servant's door opened and closed silently. Serena rose, composing herself for her meeting with Massimo. Such things were always trying. She thought she looked particularly well in her dark green velvet, her sleeves slashed across to show the black fabric beneath, the front panel of her gown shot through with golden threads.

She had chosen pearls for her ears and throat. For purity.

The map room was well chosen by Massimo for this meeting. Ever the tactician, her husband. Soaring walls towered high above her, covered in tapestries of maps, from Firenze to Rome and beyond. Ancient Greece and Syria, the lands to the north, Spain, all of them loomed over her. The few pieces of furniture had a heavy quality, as if their clawed feet and carved animal faces were needed to hold down the marble floor that echoed beneath her slippers.

There was Massimo at the great table in the center, pressing his seal into a folded parchment. He did not even bother to acknowledge her presence until she cleared her throat. Bastard.

"You sent for me?"

There, yes, now he looked up, examining her with a critical eye. Then he smiled that astonishingly beautiful smile his family was cursed with, coming to kiss her hand. Damn his blue eyes anyway, the color of the sea, and the one thing about him she'd fallen in love with.

"I did. I imagine you know I intend to take Dante to Reggello."

"I had heard. It is impossible to keep secrets in Firenze. You know that."

"Especially in the Palazzo Rossi." His lips twisted and his eyebrows moved up and down, acknowledging the truth of that. "I would like for you to stay. You enjoy the masques more than I, and have spent a great deal of time planning them. I, however, have had enough of the social niceties."

"Have you?" She took her hand back, walking around the table, hand trailing over the cool, heavy wood. "I understand you were very social indeed last evening after I retired."

"I enjoyed the company of one person, yes."

"Is he accompanying you to the country?"

She expected a flat refusal. Massimo would never take one of his whores on a trip with his precious Dante. So the unadorned "Si" she received took her completely aback.

Serena whirled about, her heavy skirt nearly toppling her as it caught on the corner of the table.

"You cannot be serious."

"I can and I am. I will take with me whomever I please."

"Everyone but me."

Massimo rolled his eyes. Her hand itched to slap him for it.

"I thought you would be pleased. You may invite as many Pittis as you like now. As many Medici and Tornabuoni cousins as it pleases you. You will not have to worry about me embarrassing you as you plot together."

"I loathe you," she spat, fingers clenching so that her nails cut her palms.

"I know. Keep the party going, my dear. Keep the guests entertained. We will return in a few days time."

"And I will be here," she said. "Where else would I go?"

Where else *could* she go?

Someday she might just put all of her formidable intellect into finding out.

Fillipo woke to the sound of someone trying his door. He had latched it from the inside with a piece of leather that fit around a hook on the doorframe, not wanting to be disturbed. He eased off his pallet, but Orlando stirred anyway, making an enquiring sound.

"Shh."

Wide greenish-gold eyes blinked at him for a moment before Orlando looked at the door and nodded, showing he understood. Drawing his sword from its sheath, Fillipo worked his way to the door, avoiding every squeaky board in the garret floor.

"Who is it?" he demanded softly, not willing to become fodder for the neighbors' gossip.

"Piero, you dolt. Let me in."

His shoulders relaxed and Fillipo lowered his sword, opening up to let his cousin in. They shared their rented accommodation, after all.

"I did not expect you back so soon, cousin."

"I am only here to collect a few things for a trip away."

Still wearing his fine clothes from the night before, mask on his right sleeve, Piero reeked of sex. Fillipo wrinkled his nose.

"You need to bathe."

"So do you. So does he, come to that."

Piero nodded at Orlando, who sat nude and unconcerned on the pallet. Dio, Fillipo had forgotten him that quickly.

"Where do you go?"

He kept the query casual, light, but he watched Piero's face carefully. Wherever, they needed to be near, so he would follow.

"Reggello."

"Ah. So signore il conte has asked you to his country home, hmm?"

They both looked at Orlando, who stretched out, leaning back on his elbows. Fillipo was quite taken with the way he looked, all pale, golden skin and blonde hair.

"Apparently." Obviously Piero was not so taken, given the tone of his response.

"That's quite a coup. He does not trust easily."

"And you know him so well."

Orlando shrugged. "As well as any outside his family, I would wager. He and my brother were great friends once."

Fillipo glanced at Piero, eyebrows up. Piero nodded.

"What happened?" Piero asked.

"My brother died. Poison, they believe."

So blasé was Orlando about it that it took a moment to sink in. "Why?"

Orlando shrugged. "Why does that happen to anyone? Family ambition, jealous wife. Would you like me to go so the two of you may talk alone?"

"No."

"Si."

Again he and Piero stared at one another, Piero frowning fiercely at him. He sighed and went to his clothing, rummaging for a few coins.

"Why don't you get us some food at the market, Orlando? We should be done in a few moments."

Nodding easily, Orlando slipped into his chemise and hose, took the coins and padded out of the room, leaving them alone. Piero checked the door before coming back to pack a bag.

"Who is he?"

"A diversion. So you have made it into Rossi's good graces then?"

"I have. I do not think..."

"Think what?"

"I cannot do it, Fillipo."

"Do what? Go with him to the country? Of course you can."

"No, I mean I cannot go through with the plan as it stands. He is a good man."

Surely his ears were deceiving him. "So you slept with him and now declare him exempt from justice?"

"No. I talked with him. Met his family. I cannot believe it now, Fillipo. I just cannot."

"You will go with him to Reggello. You will do what you are told. And then we will return home. That's that. I will follow anon."

Piero turned on him, brows drawn together. "As soon as you have done with your diversion, cousin? You sleep with him and so you allow him to sway *you* from your appointed tasks. Who is calling whom a slave to their urges, hmm?"

Bristling, he stepped close to Piero, their chests touching. "I am not the one bedding the enemy."

"No, you are just the one who suggested it."

They glared at each other, neither willing to back down. Finally Piero shook him off. "I must go. It will take us hours to reach Reggello, as Massimo's brother's wife comes with us as well, and she is in a delicate state. You have time to say goodbye to your *diversion* properly."

Fillipo reached out, touching Piero's arm. "Please. Have a care, cousin. I would miss you is aught should happen to you."

"So would I." Mercurial as always, Piero threw an arm about him, kissing his cheeks. "I will see you sometime soon. If you need me, find a way to get a message into the house."

"I will. Go on, before he leaves without you."

Piero nodded, changing quickly into traveling gear, a leather jerkin and hose over a rough undershirt.

"Be safe, Fillipo. There is something about your new toy... he seems more than he should be."

"I am not an idiot, cousin. I know. Go on, now. I will see you soon."

As soon as Piero left Fillipo started tossing things in his saddlebags. He would not need much, just his clothes and his sword. He looked up when he was done packing his shirts to find Orlando watching him intently, chewing a piece of dark bread.

"So, you will follow?"

"I will. He may need me."

"What is it you want with the Rossis, Fillipo? They are dangerous enemies."

"Is that firsthand knowledge, caro? Was it Massimo Rossi who poisoned your brother?"

"What? No. I don't think that at all." Orlando came to him and handed him bread and cheese. "It was the beginning of the end, though."

"Of what?"

"Of the good will between our families. He was my half brother, by the way."

Such a mystery, Orlando, at once secretive and forthcoming. "Who was he?"

"His name was Guilio. Guilio di Medici."

His sword clattered to the floor, his fingers suddenly nerveless. "Then the Rossis are bitter rivals. What were you doing at his ball?"

"Trying to get an audience with him. I want him to depose my cousin."

Just when he thought things could not become more complicated, they always did. God in Heaven. He sat on the bench along the wall, unable to take it in. Of all of the people he could become infatuated with he picked a Medici bastard. And one who wanted a Rossi alliance at that.

"What are you going to do? You missed your chance at an audience."

"I am going with you, of course. If I can meet either Massimo or his brother in Reggello I will have done my job."

"What about his wife? Is she not a distant cousin of yours?"

"She is. Sadly she is not popular among either family." Orlando shrugged and licked his fingers. "If you have other plans, I will understand if you do not wish me to go with you. I can go on my own. It just seems silly for us to travel alone when we can go as two. The road is dangerous."

The bread and cheese Orlando had given him lay on the floor next to his sword. Fillipo picked it up and brushed it off, chewing a bite to give himself time to think. They were truly at cross-purposes with one another, but Orlando had a point. Traveling together would be safer by far.

"How long will it take you to be ready?"

"An hour. Perhaps less. I am not staying far away."

"Then we will go together. If we must go our separate ways after, then so be it."

He did not want to give Orlando up as quickly as he'd found him, but that was what he would do if duty demanded it. Family came first. His father had taught them that.

Orlando came and sat next to him, turning his face with one gentle hand on his cheek. He received a kiss, soft, almost sweet.

"Thank you. Fillipo."

"Do not thank me yet. We may well become enemies before the day is out."

Orlando gave him another kiss, then another, tongue slipping out to taste him. "I could never be your enemy, Fillipo."

"You might if you become Massimo di Rossi's friend."

A frown pinched Orlando's face, those pretty eyes cloudy. "Then we will take that day as it comes. Kiss me before I go, just for good luck?"

"You said you would be back in no time."

"But I am greedy. I want a kiss."

He grinned, fully aware of what Orlando was doing; Orlando was distracting him again. "Very well. Come here."

This time the kiss was no light meeting of lips. It went hard and deep, bruising them, making his lips tingle. He wanted to feel it, wanted to remember it in case they could not do this again.

Orlando moved to straddle him, wrapped around him and clung like a limpet, mouth opening under his onslaught to let him taste and take. The thin cloth of Orlando's tunic was the only barrier between them, and he could feel Orlando's cock, hard for him, and hot. His own prick rose between his thighs, rubbing against Orlando's belly, and Fillipo cupped that delectable ass, pulling them closer and closer.

Fumbling, Orlando pulled the cloth out of the way, the fine linen scraping over his skin and making him groan. He moaned even louder when their cocks came together, rubbing length on length, sharing heat and wetness.

His balls drew up as Orlando reached between them to stroke them both, hand moving hard and rough on their skin. Gasping, grunting, he arched into the touch, bending to lick at Orlando's throat, biting down hard enough to mark.

"Are you claiming me?" The words came on a breathless chuckle, Orlando's head tipping back even as their hips rolled together.

Was he? "Si. Si. You will remember this even if..."

"I will. Please Fillipo. Please. I need."

He needed too. Needed to touch and feel. One hand stayed under Orlando's bottom, lifting and pushing. The other joined Orlando's on their flesh, stroking the skin of their cocks up and down, thumb pushing against first his slit, then Orlando's.

"Oh! Oh, si." That was all of the warning he got before Orlando spent himself, hot and wet between their bellies. He felt every tremor, smelled the sharp tang of Orlando's seed, and he shook himself, holding on as long as he could to watch Orlando's face.

When Orlando brought a finger coated in come to Fillipo's mouth, pressing it against his lips, it was too much. He shot hard, a harsh cry tearing from him, his hips jerking madly.

They sat for long moments, panting together, Fillipo completely aware of how ridiculous it was to think himself in love so soon, but there it was. He felt it so strongly it was as a physical ache.

He thought perhaps Orlando felt it too, as slow and reluctant as he was to lever himself up and dress.

Watching, Fillipo had a hard sense of foreboding steal over him. Neither he nor Piero were meant to find entanglements here. And they both had. One a Rossi, one a Medici. It could mean nothing but ill, surely.

Once dressed, Orlando came and kissed him again, fingers smoothing out the lines on his forehead.

"Do not fret so. I will meet you here in no time at all. Have you a mount?"

"I do. He is stabled elsewhere, though. If I am not back when you come, wait for me."

"I will." Another light meeting of lips and Orlando was gone, slipping out the door like smoke.

He shook himself, rising and wiping himself off before he dressed, trying not to let the scent of them distract him too much. He dressed, packing away the few valuables he and Piero had to share between them, hiding the rest of their things in a niche in the wall they had made and covering it back up with the carefully cut piece of plaster. They were paid up for a fortnight, and their landlady seemed honorable enough. It should be fine.

The last thing was to pick up his sword where it had fallen and tie it on, checking to make sure it was loose in the scabbard, just in case.

He needed to keep his wits about him, difficult as it was.

He could only hope Piero would do the same.

Chapter Four

The ride to Reggello took nearly until sundown. They stayed with the carriage as outriders, keeping Dante's wife safe, so they stopped several times for her to be violently ill at the side of the road.

Massimo felt awful for her, but Giada remained in good spirits despite it all.

"That is the way of it," she'd said. "When you are with child, even watching your husband breathe at night can make you sick with motion."

'Twas enough to make him thank God he was not a woman.

For his part, Piero said little, simply rode next to him, ever watchful. And when he thought no one was watching him, he seemed sad. Massimo longed to ask what the matter was, but with Dante there, he did not.

The house came into view and even the horses seemed to know they were close, sidestepping and snorting, causing them no end of trouble on the loose, rocky scree of the hillside.

"Maybe we can hunt some while we are here, hmm? Do you hunt, Piero?"

Dante smiled over him at Piero, who shrugged.

"I have not had much occasion to, no. My father was not a nobleman by birth. And he was an artist. We lived in the towns, always where he was commissioned to work."

"Ah. I knew of your father then. He was quite good."

Something passed between Dante and Piero that he did not understand, a look he could not decipher.

"You knew him?" he asked Dante.

"No. I said I knew of him. He had great talent. Come, let us get inside before it gets dark."

Dante spurred away and Piero would not meet his eyes, so Massimo marked that subject down to bring up later, to each. Separately.

The servants awaited them; the runner Massimo had sent ahead had done his job. The house had been opened and aired, maids whisking Giada away to see to her comfort. Dante had murmured his apologies and wandered off behind, looking bereft.

Which left him alone with Piero.

"Are you well, Piero? You seem out of sorts."

"Hmm? No, I am fine." Smiling, Piero moved close, slipping an arm around his waist. "Am I allowed to do this before the servants?"

"They are Rossi servants, and therefore loyal. Si, you may. You might even kiss me."

He got what he asked for, and the kiss felt good and right, and heartfelt enough that it assured him whatever was bothering Piero it was not this.

"Mmmm. Si. Just what I needed. Are you hungry?"

"Starving." That was a wicked look, one that he would be happy to see over and over. "Why not get a tray and go to your rooms? We might eat in private that way."

"That is a fine idea, caro." Massimo waved over a servant, ordering wine and cheese and cold meats, fruit and sweets. "To my chambers please. I trust all that I asked be delivered there is ready?"

"Si, signore." The steward, Marcello, gave him a reproving look. "It is all as you wish."

"Excellent." Clapping Marcello on the back, he smiled. "I can always count on you, Marcello. Oh, and have me a bath drawn?"

"Of course. And may I say, signore, it has been too long."

"It has, Marcello. It has."

Heart light, Massimo lead Piero down the rough stone hallway toward the inner ring of rooms. Set around a central courtyard that afforded privacy as well as safety, his family rooms were simple but pleasing to the eye, and most importantly, they gave comfort with their rich colors and pastoral art, and the windows that looked out on the fountains and statues in the garden.

They gained his chambers and Massimo stretched, loosening his heavy robe and tossing it off, leaving him in just doublet and hose.

"That's much better. You should try it."

"Should I?" Piero gave him that look again, the one that heated his blood. Those eyes, so dark and full of mystery simply captured him. "Very well."

Piero started with his outer robe but went one step further, shedding the embroidered doublet as well, leaving him in hose and blousy linen shirt, showing off the strong form beneath. Massimo caught his breath.

"By God, you're beautiful, caro."

"Am I?" Moving close, Piero attacked Massimo's own laces with nimble fingers, pulling off first the elaborate sleeves, then the torso. "I think that is you, Massimo di Rossi. Such eyes I have never seen on a man before. Like the sea. And you have the face of an emperor. Strong and stern, yet so handsome when you smile."

He lifted his hand, tracing the hard-cut planes of Piero's face. "And you have the look of a warrior."

"Hence me not going into art like my father. He said I was a throwback to the generations past, when our family were little more than bandits and plague followers."

The ridge of Piero's nose sported the slightest bump, telling Massimo it had been broken once. A tiny scar sat right at the dip of Piero's lips. And his chin was bristly with stubble now at the end of the day, which it had not been at the masque, so Piero must have bathed and shaved before the ball.

"It's a fine face."

"Thank you."

Just as Piero bent to kiss him a knock came at the door, a servant slipping inside with a laden tray of cold foods, wine and goblets. He set it on a low chest by the fire and retreated, bowing as he went.

"We should eat first, hmm?" Piero's wry smile brought out an answering one from him.

"We should. They'll be bringing in the bath. We can wait."

They ate together, the fruit bursting with the flavor of the surrounding hills, juicy and good. The simple bread and cheese tasted like the finest feast when eaten from Piero's fingers. His lips tingled where Piero touched them, making him laugh at himself. Truly he was in too deep with this one already.

"Tell me about your father. Dante seems to know of him, but I do not recall him at all."

Piero sobered, all of the laughter fading, leaving his face hard and set. "He was a painter, I told you."

"Yes, and you said you were from Ravenna. What happened to him?"

"He died. Would you like more wine?"

"No, grazie." Massimo stared, the change so drastic as to make him apologize. "I am sorry if I upset you. It just seemed odd that Dante might mention it."

"Did it?" Mouth twisting, Piero rose, moving to stare out the window. "I suppose it must have."

He would have queried further but the servants came then, dragging in a tub and several buckets of hot water, pouring them a luxurious bath. When the oils had been poured in and the servants had gone, Massimo shed the rest of his clothes, beckoning.

"I am sorry, Piero. I did not mean to spoil the evening. Come and bathe with me."

"It's not spoiled at all." For long moments the hunched back and crossed arms belied Piero's statement, but then he unbent, coming to the side of the tub and stripping off hose and chemise. "I am sorry, it's just a sore subject with me still. So soon after."

"Then we will not dwell on it." Testing the water, Massimo slid in, moaning at how good it felt. "Join me."

"Of course."

Piero stepped in as well, settling across from him. Neither of them were small men, so their legs rubbed all the way, ankle to hip and knee to knee. Delicious. Taking up a pot of soap, Massimo lifted Piero's right foot and began scrubbing.

"Tell me something else, then. You say you've lived many places. Which is your favorite?"

"Rome," the answer came immediately, no dithering. "I adored Rome. The old monuments made me feel young, and the world timeless."

"And you say you inherited no talent for the arts. That was poetry." The other foot received the same attention. "Which is your favorite? The coliseum? The forum?"

"The Pantheon. Something about it strikes me mute."

The Pantheon did indeed have a quality that struck a man numb when he looked up at the hole in the great dome, feeling the majesty of it rise above him. "It is majestic. I like the forums. Such an idea of what life must have been like."

The hairs on Piero's leg caught at his fingers as he washed calf and knee, making him chuckle. Piero squirmed, cheeks heating. Lust stabbed at him, hardening his cock in a rush that left him breathless and without thinking, he used the captive leg to pull Piero closer.

Soon they sat nearly on each other's laps, legs draped over legs. Massimo splashed water up over Piero's back and began to scrub, pushing forward under Piero's arms to wash the sensitive skin there, eliciting gasps and moans. Shaking himself, Piero started touching back, hands slipping and sliding, coming up to pinch and pull at Massimo's nipples.

They moved together in the hot water, touching and kissing until the water churned around them from the force of their thrusts together. Their cocks rubbed, soft skin over steel, until finally Piero had the presence of mind to reach between them and grasp their cocks, pulling at them.

He pulled Piero to him, kissing deeply, tasting the need on their mingled breath. Massimo's back arched, his hips rolling up as he clutched Piero hard by the shoulders, grunting with each push of his prick into the tight, wet grasp. He could feel his little death rising at the back of his skull, feel it in his trembling arms and legs and finally he shot, spending so hard that he saw stars.

Piero came not far behind, gasping out a curse as he spent, hips rising and falling so hard that water sloshed out of the tub. The force of it left them weak and gasping, clinging to one another for long moments while they fought to regain equilibrium.

Without a word, Piero rose, pulling him up to rinse them off with the remaining bucket of warm water, careful and slow.

"Should I have the servants come and take this away?"

"Mmhhh. Then come to bed with me. My brother and his wife will not appear again tonight, so we can play."

"Si." Piero nodded, eyes shadowed and serious. "Si, Massimo. We can play."

"You do not trust him."

"Hmmm?" Dante rubbed Giada's feet, trying to help reduce the swelling that already came, though he could barely find another sign of her pregnancy to be found. "Who?"

"Piero di Migglionzi. Do not try to treat me like a fool, amato."

"No, I do not trust him." His Giada could always see through them. "His father as a brilliant artist, but his father's brother is a dangerous man."

"And does he have reason to be a danger to us?"

"He thinks he does. It is a long story. Giada. And I am weary. Can we not eat in peace and talk about it in the morning?"

"Si. Of course." She touched his cheek, soft skin against his rough face. "I just want to be sure nothing happens to my husband, hmm?"

"With you as my protector, nothing could."

Still, even as he kissed her and settled in to sleep for the night, Dante could not help the feeling that Piero was here for no good purpose, a betrayal that would score Massimo to the bone. His brother was already far too much enamored of his new toy.

He and Piero would just have to have a talk.

Tomorrow.

Stretching, Massimo rolled up on his elbow to watch Piero as he slept. He'd looked so tired the night before and Massimo had wanted to press for answers, but he had not. Instead he had loved Piero until he collapsed, pushing him into much needed sleep.

Answers would come. First Piero must trust.

Easing out of bed, he went to open his chamber door, waving at the servant who dozed outside.

"Go and see if signore Dante is awake please. If not I will break my fast here."

"Si, signore."

"So imperious."

Piero sat up as he came back into the room, bruises showing on his chest and throat from their more vigorous play. Truly appetizing.

Massimo went to take a kiss, thumb tracing the lines next to Piero's eye. "And you look so unhappy. Have I done something?"

"What could you have done?" He got a smile, more genuine than any he'd had the night before, and another kiss, this one deep and long. "I am sorry, Massimo. The talk of my father seems to have put me in an ill humor. I will try not to let it do so today. What plans have we?"

"None set in stone. I know Dante will wish to ride out and look at the lands."

Dante the farmer. He always wanted to see how the grapes fared, how fat the cattle were.

"And the hunt?"

"Perhaps tomorrow. These things take time to arrange."

"Of course."

They sat only inches apart, Piero playing idly with Massimo's fingers, staring down rather than meeting his eyes. Finally Massimo laughed, the sound forced.

"I vow, Piero. I will think you are up to something."

"And if I am?"

His belly went cold, a hard knot settling in it. "Then I will deal with you as I do all of my enemies." His voice had gone cold too, and harsh, he knew, but it would be a crushing blow if this man were against him. Their connection had been too immediate to deny.

"Tell me why you are here," he demanded.

Now Piero did meet his eyes. "I told you I wanted you from the moment I saw you. I did not lie. I am here because I want to be. Because I must be."

"Si. You must."

The kiss they shared eased him more than even Piero's words, which rang with truth. The kiss did not lie; it was filled with desperation and need. He clutched Piero's shoulders and kissed just as hard in return, his chill turning to heat in the blink of an eye.

Piero took the lead, pushing him down roughly and settling atop him, rubbing against him so their cocks pressed together, pushing them higher and higher. So fast. Too fast, for he could not hold it in when Piero reached to stroke him, pulling his seed right out of him. Massimo shot with a shocked gasp, his whole body writhing as he spent.

"Beautiful." Piero kissed him one last time, hips snapping as hot seed fell between them, Piero just as quick to arrive.

They lay together, panting, for a long while. He knew not how long, but it was until a fierce pounding on the door had him sitting straight up in the bed.

"Signore. Signore, come quickly! It is young Fredo. He is very ill."

The steward, Marcello, waited for him when he opened the door, his hastily assumed hose and shirt hanging askew.

"Fredo?"

"He was bringing your breakfast, signore. He is sick. Very sick."

Massimo ran down the hall toward the kitchens, infected with Marcello's urgency. Halfway there they came upon a knot of servants milling about and talking in hushed voices. When they saw him they fell silent and parted leaving him a wide path to what lay at their center.

Fredo could not have been more than twelve. He was no longer sick, though the evidence of spread abundantly over the stone floor. No, young Fredo was dead.

"Buon giorno."

Fillipo moaned, cracking one eye open to see a Orlando smiling at him, fresh as a spring flower. Really, it was unfair for anyone to look so pleased with themselves after spending the night on the hard ground, wrapped in their own cloak.

"Buon giorno to you as well." Joints popped as Fillipo sat up, groaning and stretching his arms over his head. They had arrived at Reggello far too late to attempt to find paid shelter, and had settled instead for an abandoned outbuilding on some long dead farm. His body had not liked the floor or hard packed dirt and rock at all.

"I have bread and cheese. Milk as well."

"Did you charm the local milkmaid?"

Orlando laughed. "No. I took it from a windowsill. Come on, eat with me and tell me what your plan is."

"There is no plan. I am simply here to see that Piero does his job."

"Which leads me to believe there is indeed a plan. I do hope you don't mean to kill him before I can meet him."

He did not think he would understand this mercurial man even if he stayed with him a hundred years. Fillipo shook his head.

"What they have done to my family, to my father, deserves revenge, Orlando."

"Ah, revenge. Every family in Firenze deserves that for some misdeed, including my own. 'Tis the way of the city. Oh, this cheese is delicious. Try it?"

The cheese did indeed melt in his mouth, the sharp, smoky flavor going a long way toward waking him up.

"So what is your plan?" he asked.

"Well, if Massimo and Dante hold true to form, they should go out on a hunt tomorrow. I will try to hail them during that time, and at least set a meeting. Until then I suggest we find a place to stay that is more congenial than this. Perhaps a bath?"

Oh, a bath sounded fine. Just lovely. He'd been used to a far better style of life than he'd had of late, traveling and living out of rented accommodations.

"And where will we find that, pray tell?"

"In the village."

Flinging his clothes at him, Orlando went to ready the horses, whistling a jaunty tune. Fillipo rose and dressed and went to him, turning Orlando and pressing him against the horse's shoulder to take a kiss. When he pulled back those fine greenish eyes held a dazed expression.

Fillipo smiled. "Now we have truly said good morning."

"Oh? I think I might not have heard correctly. Try telling me again?"

"Very well."

He took another kiss, then another, one running into the other until they were both lost in them, parting only when Orlando's gelding took exception and tried to take a chunk out of his shoulder. Jumping, he laughed, patting the stubborn mule's rump.

"Si, si. We will behave until we find you someplace to graze. We should be off, tesoro, to find a place."

Orlando glanced at him sideways. "You just do not want to make love on the ground again."

Nodding, he settled his sword belt about his hips. "That's right."

Nor did he want to be too far from the Rossi manor, should Piero need him.

He was sorry for it, but his plan took precedence over Orlando's. That was just how it would have to be. No matter how fond he was becoming.

He owed that much to his father.

Chapter 5

Massimo stared at Fredo's body, then looked about at the faces of his servants, finally settling on Piero who stood in the crowd, milk pale and seemingly stricken. He drew a deep breath, clenching his hands to stop their shaking.

"You say he was bringing my breakfast."

"Si. Just the leftovers from the meal last night, signore. Soup, bread. Water and wine."

"Was he sick before?"

"No." One of the women stepped forward, stout and stolid. "He was fine this morning, signore. In good spirits and health. I think..."

"You think what?"

The servants all turned to Marcello, prompting him. He nodded. "He was poisoned, signore. By your breakfast."

"You're trying to say someone attempted to poison me?"

"That's exactly what they are saying and I think I know the culprit." Dante appeared, dressed only in his hose, sword in hand. "Take this boy away. Leave the food. All of you, go."

As Piero would have left with the servants, Dante moved in front of him, quick as a snake, sword at Piero's throat. "All but you."

The servants filed out, two footmen carrying the unfortunate Fredo. Once they left, Massimo whirled on Dante.

"Surely you do not think he had aught to do with this? He was in my rooms, in my bed."

"All night? Are you sure of it?"

"Sure enough that he would not have had time to get to the kitchens. What on earth are you about Dante?"

"He thinks I've come here to harm you," Piero answered, voice cracking. "He's right. But I did not try to poison you."

"He's right..." His legs felt cut out from under him, weak with a mixture of astonishment and rage.

"I couldn't do it." Piero waved at Dante's sword, still pointed and unwavering. "Please, may we go someplace more private?"

"So you can finish the job?" Dante's face was as stone, reminding Massimo how ruthless his brother could be. "I think not."

"I did not start the job! Please. I only wish to explain. After that you may do what you will with me."

"Si, I think he should explain, Dante." Massimo could not look at Piero. Would not. How could anyone explain away the pain in his chest? "I think he should tell us everything."

"Very well. Someplace more private then, and you, signore di Migglionzi will explain yourself to my brother in full."

"My library." Massimo did not keep his library in Firenze. The books were too valuable to him and the threat of fire or other damage too real. He led the way to the room along the interior wall, where his volumes, the finest collection in Tuscany outside of the church, resided. The smell of the books comforted him, with their vellum and gold bindings and slight hint of mustiness.

"Now," he said, pinning Piero with his gaze, putting all of his pain and rage into one look. "Tell me."

"Si. Now if you please." Dante still held the sword, the easy grip deceptive, for he could swing into action with not even a moment's notice. It seemed that Piero understood that, at least, watching Dante warily.

"Your brother is right, Massimo. My original intent was to... to harm you. I was to get close to you, and then kill you."

So baldly stated, it sounded even worse than it had when he'd just thought it. Massimo sat, the one large armchair in the room his target. Luckily he actually sat in it, for he had groped blindly.

"Why?"

"Why not ask your brother?"

"Dante?" He knew that Dante knew more than he, especially in light of the conversation yesterday.

Dante snorted softly. "He thinks we ruined his family. His father's brother, to be precise. Do you remember when you bought the land for the hospidale?"

"Si. Of course I do. I am not in my dotage."

"The house on that land belonged to my uncle," Piero murmured. "He was in Rome, trying to sell my father to the highest bidder, really, to make the money to keep it."

"But I did not buy the property from your uncle..." He was certain of that. The owner had been no Migglionzi.

"No." The word was spat out at him, dripping with bitterness. "You did not buy it at all. You foreclosed."

"What? I have a bill of sale. I bought the land, I assure you."

"Oh?" Piero tried to scoff, but there was terrible hope in his eyes. "From whom?"

"From a once trusted friend," Dante answered for him. "One who is now dead and cannot tell the true tale of what happened. Guilio di Medici."

They found a room to rent from a widow woman, who also took in their washing, declaring them in desperate need of clean clothing. She had wide hips and a prodigious bosom and a laugh so booming and genuine that it made Fillipo smile to hear it.

They sat naked on the straw pallet in their room, idly tracing patterns on each other's skin. Much as he loathed waiting, Fillipo found it easier with Orlando to keep him company. And who would not, with such skin and hair and eyes to keep him enthralled?

Still, it did not keep him from biting his lip worrying about Piero in the viper's den with no one to help him.

"Stop it. You will not help anything by worrying so. If you have such energy to be used up, use it with me."

"How can you be so calm?"

"Why should I not be? I have nothing to hide."

Fillipo sighed. He supposed that was... A ruckus outside the door stopped him cold, the signora's voice rising in protest over a deep male rumble. Scrambling, Fillipo dug for his extra pair of hose, slipping into them and a shirt before snatching up his sword and standing ready. Behind him, Orlando moved frantically, but he could not look. Not if he wanted to be on guard.

The door to their rented room flew open to bang against the wall, revealing three armed men wearing Rossi livery.

"Fillipo di Migglionzi?" One of them asked, hand on the hilt of his sword, loosening it in its scabbard.

His heart beat loud. "Si."

"Bene. You will come with us, if you please."

"And if I do not?"

"Then we are instructed to take you by force. Please, signore. We can do this easily."

Or they could do it hard. He understood. Nodding, he lowered his sword, feeling Orlando behind him, hand brushing against his back.

"The signora has our clothing."

"Dress in what you have, then, and we will retrieve it later. My lord has asked that you be his guest at the villa Rossi."

"Of course he has."

Disgusted, he turned and found his cloak, wrapping it about him, grabbing his bag as well. "Stay here," he told Orlando. "Hopefully I shall return ere long."

Golden brows drew together as Orlando scowled. "No. I will go with you. Why would I waste this chance?"

"He will come with us, signore." The guard added. "Now."

Nothing was going his way today, he could tell. Stifling a curse, Fillipo went, giving in to the inevitable. The guards led them out, their horses already saddled and waiting for them. The signora stood by with her arms crossed, tossing the occasional curse at the Rossi men.

The ride to the house should have been lovely. The hillside was abloom, a profusion of orange and blue and yellow. The green of grass and grape vineyard and scrub brush blended, standing out against the rock. It should have been glorious. Fillipo eyed it dully, fearing the worst had happened to Piero.

Orlando tried to rein in close to him several times, but the guards nudged them apart, making sure no doubt that they could not conspire.

The guards led their horses away once they dismounted, and a servant ushered them into the cool confines of the atrium. The first thing he saw was Piero, waiting for him, serious and tense, but whole. Thank God.

"Cousin." He went to Piero, kissing each cheek. "All is well?"

"That depends. Fillipo, I would have you meet Massimo and Dante di Rossi. This is my cousin, Fillipo."

Fillipo spat to one side, glaring at the two men who could have been twins, though he knew they were more than a year apart. He knew far too much about them, learning all that he could before enacting his plan.

One set of sea blue eyes narrowed, the other danced with amusement. Dante di Rossi was not a man to trifle with, but Massimo seemed more inclined to find Fillipo's rage entertaining rather than threatening.

"And who is this?" Dante asked, indicating Orlando.

Orlando came forward and swept Dante a deep bow, ending with a flourish. "I am Orlando di Medici, signore. At your service."

Dante di Rossi considered himself a patient man. Especially where his family was concerned. At that very moment, however, he lost what little patience he had with Massimo and yelled.

"I cannot believe you believe him! You are besotted."

Massimo sat, arms folded, a smile playing about his mouth. "I believe him and I believe his cousin. If they had tried to kill me I would be dead."

"And I cannot believe you are harboring that viper Medici in our house."

"He begged an audience. What could I do?"

"You could have sent him packing. Or better yet clapped him in the cellar."

"Oh, Dante." Settling deeper into his chair, Massimo watched him as he began to pace, appearing calm as a lake in the early morning. "Better to have him where I can keep an eye on him. And he could hardly have poisoned Fredo."

"He could have paid one of the servants to." Really, Massimo simply refused to see his danger here.

"Certainly. But I don't believe it. I do believe Fillipo and Piero meant to kill me, but Piero could not once he met me. And Fillipo was to wait for him to do the job. As for the Medici, well, he was with Fillipo, not by his admission, but by Fillipo's. So I believe that as well."

"Then you are a fool."

Massimo stood and came to him, grabbing his arms to keep him still, staring into his eyes. "I am not about this, Dante. I would never put you in danger, you know that. So why would I harbor someone who could harm you, or Giada. Trust my instincts."

"I want to." He searched Massimo's face. "You know I do. But I fear you are too much involved with Piero. I have never seen you as over the moon for anyone. It clouds your judgment."

"We will look into Fredo's death. Si? We will keep all three of them here, where we can see them. And we will find out who did it. I promise you."

"And what are you prepared to do if it is Piero and Fillipo?"

Massimo's face went hard, eyes dark. "I will kill them."

Dante stared for long moments before nodding, kissing his brother's cheek. "I believe you."

"Good."

"I can't believe you believe him." Arms crossed, Fillipo stared at his cousin, lips pursed and toe tapping.

"I do. And so should you. He is not like the rest, Fillipo. He would not lie. He is...he is not afraid of the truth, hmm?"

Oh, that smile was enough to make him want to smack Piero right across the face. It held smug superiority, and also a hint of sexual satisfaction. Fillipo wanted to scream. "Are you so fond of his cock that you cannot see what he is?"

"You're a fine one to talk. A Medici bastard?"

His back went up. "So?"

"So, he is dangerous. And puts us in a much more tenuous position."

"Well, at least he did not try to poison anyone. What were you thinking?"

Piero stared, mouth open. His reply echoed through the chamber, bouncing crazily off the walls. "Are you mad? Poison is a woman's weapon. If I were to do what we planned I would have stabbed him while he slept."

"And been killed outright." They both jumped at Orlando's voice, neither of them noticing him as he came into the room. "Which would have been a terrible waste if you ask me."

"We did not." Drawing himself up, Piero crossed to stand before Orlando, footsteps ringing on the stone floors. "We did not ask you for aught, and yet here you are. Popping up everywhere. Why?"

"Because Fillipo is here. And the Rossi family is necessary for me to succeed in what I plan."

"And what you plan is what?" Piero asked. "Killing enough Rossis to get back in your family's good graces?"

Cheeks going a mottled red, Orlando stepped forward as well, hand going to where his sword would be, had they not all been stripped of their weapons. Fillipo stepped in.

"Enough, both of you. We all have our motives and reasons. Arguing amongst ourselves will not help."

"What will?"

Piero snorted indelicately. "Finding out who did poison the lad and why."

Orlando nodded, thoughtful, stroking his chin. "Si. We should start with the servants, hmm? Start with whoever made the food."

"The food?"

"Si," Piero replied. "The boy who was poisoned ate food intended for Massimo."

"And for you, don't forget."

Fillipo put his hand on Piero's arm. "For you? Tell me everything."

"The tray was for our breakfast, si. But I hardly think..."

"Don't think. He could have been trying to kill you!"

"No. If Massimo di Rossi wanted you dead, you would be." Orlando turned and paced to the end of the room and back again, brow knitted up. "Someone else. Dante would simply have called you out had he suspected... Dante's lady wife is hardly the poisoning type."

"But perhaps you are?"

Again, Piero and Orlando bristled at each other, and Fillipo stepped in. "He was with me. Piero. All night. And he had no time to get to the servants either here or in Firenze."

"Then we must find out who did," Piero said. "Before it is too late and the only scapegoat they can find is us."

Orlando smiled, lighting up his entire face. "Now that we can agree on."

It would, Fillipo decided, have to be enough.

"I hope you do not mind my summons."

They had been apart less than a day and already Massimo craved Piero's attentions. He looked Piero over thoroughly and thought Piero looked tired.

"Would it matter if I did mind?"

Closing his eyes for a moment, Massimo waved a hand. "If you wish to go, go. I simply...wished for your company."

Oh, the smile he got when he opened his eyes again made this all worth it. It lit Piero's fierce features, brightened his eyes. "After all of this?"

"Si. After everything."

Massimo stopped himself from going to Piero only through sheer will. He wanted, no, needed, for Piero to come to him. To touch him willingly, else Massimo would fear he did it out of false

motives. To his everlasting relief, Piero did just that, coming to him and touching his cheek, thumb brushing the thin skin under his eye.

Leaning into the touch, he sighed, feeling better than he had since he saw the lifeless body of Fredo in the hall early in the morning. He did not know why he trusted this man. But he did.

"Thank you."

"For what?"

"Your touch."

"Would you like more?"

His lashes fluttered as Piero stroked his cheek, up and down. "Si. Please."

"It is yours."

They kissed, Piero simply leaning forward until their lips met. Warm, firm, Piero's mouth opened under his and Massimo shoved forward, kissing so hard that their teeth clacked against each other. His need was urgent suddenly, riding him hard so that he found his hands already struggling with Piero's doublet, trying to rid them of the cloth between them.

They did not make it to the bed in his chamber. Before he could even think to move toward it, Piero pushed him down on their pile of clothing and pressed against him, skin hot and slick against his, so good he gasped to feel it. Their cocks rubbed together, the tips already damp, both of them grunting as they rubbed.

"Couldn't hurt you, Massimo. Couldn't do it."

"Shhh. I know." Stroking Piero's back, Massimo bit into the skin of Piero's shoulder, marking him. Showing Piero he understood. "I know, caro."

"Massimo..."

They rocked, Piero reaching down to adjust them so their balls rested together, their pricks rolling and squeezing as they moved. His belly hot and tight, Massimo touched and loved with hands and mouth, harsh words pouring out. Promises, threats, words of love, all of them fell on Piero's skin as Massimo cradled him, knees drawing up to get more contact between their hips.

The embroidered brocade of his doublet scratched his back nearly raw, the stone floor hard beneath his head, but Massimo did not care. He concentrated on the feel of soft skin and rough hair, on the scent of them together, hard and male.

"Please."

Dio! Piero begging him in that rough voice, cracking like a whip across his nerves, was all he could stand. Massimo spent himself, wetness spreading across their groins. Piero soon followed, grunting and rutting against him, cock jerking and finally stilling.

Once the initial desperation passed, he could feel every bump of his scabbard and sword under his left hip.

"To the bed, caro, before my back becomes permanently damaged."

Chuckling, Piero lifted him off the floor, both of them slipping a little on the pile of clothes against the slick floor. They gained the bed without further incident, though, and though the day was warm, Piero closed the bed curtains most of the way, cocooning them in darkness.

They lay together, simply touching lazily, kissing gently for the longest time. Massimo was not as young as he once was, after all, and such things took time. Piero stroked his side, fingers counting his ribs.

"My cousin thought I set out to poison you."

"So did my brother." He laughed. "I assured him you had ample opportunity to do me in some other way."

"Si." Piero rolled half atop him, nuzzling his throat. "I could have smothered you while you slept."

"Or stabbed me."

"Or killed you with pleasure..." One large, warm hand wrapped around his cock, thumb working the loose skin surrounding the head. Massimo gasped.

"You might do that yet."

"I can certainly try."

"Good." Reaching down, Massimo pressed Piero's hand harder against him, searching for more sensation. There. Like that, si. That was what he needed, the rough press of that callused hand, stroking up and down. In the dark Piero's smile flashed very white.

"You like that, hmm. Or perhaps this."

"This" was Piero reaching down to grasp his balls firmly, pulling them down. It was almost too much, leaving him trying to pull away and push closer at once. It hurt, but that was what made it good.

"Si. Piero."

"Si. Do you remember what I said I would not do unless you meant it, Massimo?"

"I do." His breath left him in a rush. "I do remember, caro."

"I want to do that now."

"Are you sure?" His chest went tight and his ears rang. Massimo wanted this man so much it hurt.

"I am. You would not believe me if you did not...and I trust you."

Given their situation it was almost more than he could believe. Massimo chose to have faith, though. And he was greedy.

"Then let me get the oil."

He left Piero lying on his back, stroking himself, which was all of the incentive Massimo needed to hurry his return. That strong, heavy muscled body enthralled him. As did Piero's eyes, so dark, with so much going on behind them. He'd never liked a vapid lover.

Oil in hand, Massimo returned to the bed, the coverlet on this one not nearly as uncomfortable as his bed in Firenze. The thought made him smile as he knelt next to Piero's hip.

"Are you certain?"

"I have said so. Do you not believe me?" That look. Oh, it was searching and telling, Piero's hand coming out to rest on his thigh. Massimo nodded.

"I just want to be sure before..."

"Please, Massimo. You're making me nervous." Only Piero didn't look nervous. Instead he had a predatory air about him, even in his passive position. Perhaps it was the hard cock poking up out of Piero's fist. Or perhaps it was the scalding heat in Piero's eyes.

The carafe of oil dangled from his fingers as Massimo reached out with his other hand to trace the contours of Piero's body. Each dip and curve of muscle, each hard plane of bone he touched, watching Piero's chest rise and fall quickly with his breathing. It soothed them both as much as it incited them.

Soon, though, Massimo could wait no longer, and he unstopped the oil, coating his fingers with the thick fluid. The heat that met him when he placed his fingers at Piero's entrance astonished him. His eyes held those dark ones, and he looked deep.

"Are you ready?"

"Si, Massimo. Si. Please."

He was ready as well, and he slid two fingers in. Piero was no delicate maiden needing sweet, gentle care. He was a man, one who could take what Massimo gave and beg for more. Which he did, arching up, legs spreading wide so that Massimo had better access. So hot inside, so slick and needy, and he felt like the greediest man on earth, wanting to search out every one of Piero's secrets and bring it to light just for him to see.

Moving restlessly, Piero pressed down on his fingers, gasping for breath as Massimo touched a spot inside him. Oh, si, there should be much more of that sound. Searching it out again,

Massimo pressed that spot over and over until Piero begged, cock slapping his belly, hard and wet-tipped.

"Per favore. I need. Massimo, enough. Inside me. All of you."

Nodding, Massimo slipped his fingers out and took up position between Piero's thighs, the muscles straining under his hands as he spread them wider. The oil had spilled some on the bed where he dropped it, but enough remained for him to ease the way, slicking his cock until it shone in the gloom of the bed.

"Now, Piero." Slipping and sliding, he pushed against Piero's hole, his cock easing inside. It made his eyes roll, tore a deep groan from his chest. And he was not the only one to feel so. Piero clutched at him, pulling him closer still, body opening right up to take him in.

"Massimo..."

"Shhh." They kissed, Massimo bending down to take Piero's mouth with his, the angle pushing him in even more. Sweat beaded and ran on his skin, fusing him to the strong body beneath him, making them slide and rub. The feeling became big, bigger than he ever expected. Huge.

They moved, slowly at first, then faster as the incredible heat of it made Massimo crazed, caused his hips to jerk wildly out of time. Strong legs wrapped about his hips, Piero's muscles squeezing down on him and Massimo cried out, gasping for breath as he spent himself into Piero's body, hot and wet.

Grunting, Piero squirmed under him, face set in a grimace as he worked himself, and it finally occurred to Massimo to touch him, reaching for the thick cock and working it from head to base. Once, twice, three times, and then Piero's eyes went wide and blank, a harsh noise tearing from him as he shot between their bellies, liquid heat scalding Massimo's chest.

They fell back to the bed together, both of them wheezing, and Massimo kicked the bed curtain open with his foot, letting air in.

"Are you well, Piero? I did not hurt you?"

"No. No, you did not hurt me at all. No. Wait..." Pulling him back when he would have slipped free, Piero kissed him, lips and tongue gentle on his swollen mouth. "I just need."

"Si. Si."

He needed it to, the moment of closeness, but had been uncertain that it would be well received. Now that it was, Massimo settled, lips against the pulse that still beat hard in Piero's throat.

"Why now?"

"Because you believe me, despite all of the evidence to the contrary."

He did. God help him he did. He opened his mouth to say so, but was interrupted by a furious pounding on his door. He jumped, his heart pounding as the events of the last evening seemed to replay themselves.

"Come quickly, signore. Please. You must come."

His bedrobe lay across the trunk by the door, so he grabbed it and shoved his arms into the sleeves before letting the portal swing open.

"What is it, Marcello?"

He half expected another poisoned servant, so all of the blood drained out of his head when Marcello answered, "It is your brother, signore. He has been stabbed."

Chapter 6

"Are you mad?" The red imprint of her hand throbbed on Marita's cheek, but all Serena could think was that she wanted to give the idiot girl another. "How could he have done something so stupid? And how could you think I would help you cover it up?"

Marita present the very portrait of outraged innocence, eyes blazing. "He did it for you, signora! To protect."

"To protect what? Massimo will kill me." Her hand went to her throat. Just thinking what he might do made it tight and scratchy. "And he has no idea if Dante lives?"

"No. He ran."

Stupid, stupid boy. And his stupid sister. And Serena knew she was just as much of a fool for believing they could handle the situation with Massimo and his new lover. "Well, he cannot be here when Massimo returns. Send him away."

"But, signora. He is my brother."

"And he has killed my husband's brother. Massimo loves Dante more than anything on earth." Serena paced, her soft slippers catching on the rough flagstones of the servant's passage. "He will kill me as well as your brother if he finds out who the culprit is."

An insolent expression settled on Marita's features. "We do not know he is dead. And you would do well not to throw my brother to the wolves, signora."

She whirled, advancing until she was right against Marita's body. "Are you threatening me?"

"Si, signora, I am. And you would be best served by listening. If you think I have slaved away to serve you all this time out of loyalty, you are sadly mistaken."

"Then what..." Swallowing, Serena backed away, smoothing the rough fabric of her overskirt. "I do not wish to know. Send him away."

As she retreated, Marita advanced. "I will not. And neither will you. You *will* know, lady, and all of it. Beginning to end. I know all of your dirty secrets, do I not? I know what you taste like. And if you are not very careful, signora, I will give my family exactly what they have been asking for these last two years. All of your secrets. And your husband's too."

"Dante? Dante, can you hear me?"

His brother was not dead. That thought kept Massimo sane during his vigil at Dante's bedside, while the fever wracked his brother's body. It was a lonely vigil as well, only he and Marcello and the healer Aleya allowed in his brother's chamber.

Piero. Massimo close his eyes as the pain of it threatened to overwhelm him. Piero was locked up in a storeroom with the cousin and the Medici bastard. Treacherous, beautiful Piero, distracting him while Fillipo took his vengeance on Dante.

Oh, they had all protested, hadn't they? But how could he believe them now?

The fever had lapsed during the night into the stillness that would either end in Dante's death or in his recovery. Massimo held Dante's hand fiercely. His brother would not die. He was strong. Too strong to let a blade between his ribs send him to the afterlife.

"We will hang them together, Dante. I swear it. I will kill them all for you, but only if you are there to see it. You must wake up."

Aleya came in and out while Massimo talked, placing clean, wet cloths on Dante's head, putting fresh compresses on the wound. The wizened old woman said not a word, just let him run on like water over stone, until the blackest part of the night made the light from the lamps look feeble and his voice gave way to harsh croaks.

Then Massimo put his head down on their joined hands and prayed like he had not since they were children, silently begging God to spare his brother. He could lose anything he had acquired in his life, lose anyone he had loved. Anyone but Dante.

Somewhere in the night, right as dawn came creeping in fact, he heard a harsh noise, one that woke him from a light doze. At first his heart raced, so sure was he that it was Dante's death rattle. When he raised his head, though, Massimo saw Dante's eyes, open and aware, for the first time in nearly three days.

"Oh. Brother. I knew you would not die."

Dante's lips moved, the only sound coming out a dry grunt. Aleya had told him to wet Dante's lips. He had forgotten. He dipped a cloth in the wine goblet beside the bed, patting it against Dante's mouth.

"I have them, Dante," he said, while he waited for Dante to rest. "They are locked up, awaiting your recovery so we might deal with them."

"Who?"

Dante's voice, even raw and broken, was the sweetest thing he had ever heard. "Piero. Fillipo. The Medici, Orlando."

"No." Dante mouthed it, barely audible. "No. Wasn't them..."

"How can it not be? They've poisoned the serving lad and Piero distracted me with...with. While his cousin stabbed you."

Shaking his head violently, Dante groped for his hand, grasping it with a grip so weak it nearly made Massimo weep. "Wasn't...him. Michelo. The servant."

"What?" A serving boy? From their own household? How could that be?

"Tired."

"Of course. I will find him, Dante. And detain him. I promise you."

Dante only nodded, eyes closing as he leaned back against the bed, skin pale as milk. He was just pulling his hand away from Dante's when Giada came in, hair mussed and eyes swollen. He had sent her away to sleep some time ago. For the baby's sake.

"He is well?"

Poor Giada. She looked like a child herself, all bare feet and hollow eyes. When Dante opened his eyes and smiled at her, though, it was like day broke in her smile.

"You can see for yourself, I think, that he will mend." Rising, Massimo went and kissed her cheek. "Guard him well. I have a traitor to find."

"Wait. You know who did this?" Her hand on his arm was like an iron manacle. "Tell me."

"It was a servant, Giada. Not one of our guests, as I might have supposed. You will have your day with him."

"Good." Her brown eyes glowed with zeal. "He tried to kill my husband, Massimo. I will have his head."

He nodded. "We all will."

"Good."

"What do you think he intends to do with us?"

As if he really did not care what the answer might be, Orlando studied his nails, sitting on an empty barrel, feet drawn up under him. Fillipo could not help but scowl at him. Piero sat, quiet and composed and pale as a virgin's thighs in the other corner, staring at the wall.

For his part, he paced.

"I do not know. But I fully intend to be gone before he does it."

"Oh? And how do you intend to get out? They've taken our weapons and we've tested the doors and walls."

"You're pushing me, tesoro. Do not."

"Why not? You are spoiling for a fight. Why not give it to you? We know we did not do it, as we were er, otherwise occupied."

A loud snort from Piero drew a smile from Orlando. "Si, as was Piero with his Massimo."

"He is not mine. Obviously."

Piero had such a dejected look that Fillipo took up for him immediately, going to Orlando and leaning right into his face. "Leave him alone."

Bright green eyes laughed up at him, Orlando unable to be serious for a moment. "I have not bothered him. Come, Fillipo, you take this too seriously. What could any of us possibly have to gain by doing this? Massimo is hot tempered, but quick to cool down. He is a smart man. He will not hang us for an offence we did not commit."

"He will if Dante dies," Piero murmured. "You did not see him, see his face. He loves his brother. So very much."

"Of course he does..."

Orlando broke off as the door jangled and squeaked, opening in on them. Massimo di Rossi stood there, the lines around his eyes and mouth deep and harsh, and for a moment Fillipo knew that Dante was dead. Then he smelled the mouthwatering aroma of meat and vegetables cooked in a broth, so sharp and fresh that his stomach protested loudly.

They'd had nothing but watered down wine for near three days.

A serving boy came in and set the tray on an empty cask, leaving them when Massimo waved his hand. The door remained unlatched.

"Please. Eat. I have a great deal to apologize for," Massimo said, "but first I will feed you."

A trilling laugh came from Orlando. "Only if you join us, signore."

A small smile playing at his lips, Massimo nodded and came to sit, breaking off a piece of bread to dip in the soup. He ate, eyes closing at the first bite. Perhaps Massimo had not eaten during his vigil either.

Piero cleared his throat, the sound a dry click. "Your brother."

"He will recover."

A look passed between Piero and Massimo, one that made him ache for his cousin after what he saw there. Piero nodded. "I am glad."

"So am I."

"Ahem. As touching as this is, could you possibly tell us when the execution is?"

Massimo shot Orlando a glare. "Are you always so flippant?"

"Always."

"Very well. As you must know, I am no longer holding you for this crime. My brother awakened in time to tell me who did this. And the culprit has now disappeared, according to Marcello."

"Who was it?" That from Piero, who had color in his cheeks once more.

"A servant name Michelo. He has fled the house."

"Why?"

"I wish I knew, Fillipo. We will find out." Massimo turned to Piero, moving to put a hand on Piero's cheek, sighing when he got a flinch in return. "I owe you an apology, caro. It was just...Dante was the one to warn me to caution, and then suddenly he was hurt and I lost my head."

"I know. It will still be hard to forgive the things you said."

"If you two are going to fornicate, please go away before you spoil my supper." Oh, that insolent pup. Orlando munched a piece of bread, laughing at all of them as they stared. "What? You have near starved us. I doubt I am the only one to think it, even if I am the only one to say it."

Fillipo sighed, intervening by grabbing a hunk of bread and a bowl and handing it to Piero. "We all need to eat. And then we need to rest. And then, signore, I suggest you think long and hard about who else you tell about your brother still being alive. Someone wants the two of you dead."

Massimo simply nodded, eyes shadowed and serious. "Si. Someone who, unlike you I think, will go to any lengths to do it."

Dante woke to a throbbing pain in his right side, his mouth as dry as the land across the sea. Like sand. Light came through the shuttered window, telling him day still held sway, but the room was cool and dark.

He remembered waking to find Massimo there, but he could not recall....Had Massimo understood? Trying to rise made him groan as the pain sharpened, stabbing through him just as the stiletto had the first time.

"Shh. Hush now." Soft, cool hands soothed him, pushing him back. Giada. Oh, thank the blessed lord she was well.

"Tell me." Oh, his throat ached, dry as a bone. "Tell me Massimo has not hanged them."

"No. You told him. Lay back, amato."

"What? How?"

"You told him and he set them free and is looking for the one who did do it."

"And you?"

"I am fine."

His beautiful wife. She smiled at him, patting her belly, and he relaxed as told, breathing shallowly around the pain. It had been a long time since he'd hurt so badly. Not since he was a child and Massimo had pushed him out of a tree. "What news then?"

"None, really. Massimo has told everyone to keep what has happened quiet until he decides what to do."

"And what do you think we should do?"

Her eyes lit up, the gold in them coming out as it did when he asked her opinion. Her father had believed women to be stupid. Any Rossi worth his salt knew that was untrue.

"I think he is right. I think perhaps we ought to pretend you are dead. Just to see what it draws out."

"For how long?"

"Until we return to Firenze at least."

Dante contemplated that. "You think it stems from there."

"I do. I think that both of you have been threatened and whoever is doing this is using the other three as a convenient blind."

That made an odd sort of sense. They'd all been so concerned about the Medici, the artist's sons. "And who do you think *is* behind it?"

For she would have a theory.

"Serena."

Before he even thought he sat partway up, his ribs pulling, making him groan. "She would not dare. She has not the brains or the courage."

"And which of these attacks takes either. Poison? Stabbing you in a dark hallway? It is just the sort of thing she would do."

They would have to talk on it, he and Massimo. The idea might hold water, indeed. Dante held out his hand. "Come and lie with me, Giada. I need to feel you against me."

"I will hurt you," she scolded, even as she crawled up on the bed, curling against his side, head on his shoulder.

"Not unless you refuse me. I am so tired, sweet."

"Of course you are. You bled."

Laughing, he pulled her closer, chin resting on her head. "I did. Perhaps now you will not tell me I know nothing of pain."

A soft snort was her answer. "Until you bear children? I will not believe it at all."

"How is Piero?"

Orlando sat next to Fillipo on the bed in the room they were once more assigned, combing out his hair. They had bathed, eaten, and were much more congenial now, though he still held on to some lingering resentment of Orlando's flippant attitude. He sighed.

"Well enough, I suppose. Massimo asked me to leave him so they might talk."

"Mmm. I like how Migglionzis talk."

"You are not amusing."

"Of course I am. That is the only reason my half-brother's remaining relations have not killed me."

Said with utter seriousness, it told Fillipo more about Orlando than any of their previous encounters. He shook his head, smiling. "You are charmed, tesoro, to still be here."

"I must be. I have you." There. The flippant coquette was back in full force, Orlando all but falling against him, making him laugh as he caught the surprisingly heavy body against his.

"Oh, yes, so lucky to be embroiled in my affairs."

"If I think I am, why should you think otherwise? Kiss me, Fillipo."

So he did, despite all that he knew they should do instead. He kissed Orlando hard and deep, bending that slender body back over his arm, making Orlando gasp and hold his shoulders for balance. They were alive. They were alive and they were no longer on the way to the hangman and suddenly he wanted to celebrate it in a primal way.

Orlando kissed him back, mouth opening under his to let his tongue in, teeth scraping the underside of it. Sucking on it. Fillipo moaned, pressing close, the scent of strong soap and hot skin overwhelming him. He would do it right then, still dressed, given half a chance, but Orlando struggled with him a moment, until he finally eased up and raised a brow as he looked down.

"What?"

"Clothes. Too many. I want to do this properly."

"Si." That he could do. Pushing Orlando flat on the bed Fillipo struggled with ties and hooks, finally baring all of Orlando's smooth skin to his eyes. The still damp hair fanned out on the bed, dark gold against the heavy coverlet, making him itch to stroke it.

"No." Orlando slapped his hands away, smiling, licking his lips. "Undress first."

Why he had bothered to put on clothes after their bath he did not know. They were only a hindrance now. Struggling out of his linen and leather, Fillipo tossed them aside and came down atop Orlando, rubbing all along him. Oh, so good. Soft skin, rough hair, and enough heat to rival the summer sun outside.

"Tesoro. How beautiful you are."

"Mmmhmm." Wrapping around him, Orlando clung, kissing his mouth and cheeks and chin, fingers stroking his nape, his shoulder blades. In those green gold eyes Fillipo looked into, he was the beautiful one. The adore one. He could see it.

His cock rubbed Orlando's belly, hard and wet, the foreskin sliding back with each movement.

"I want inside you, Orlando."

"Then have me."

"We don't have anything..."

"Use your mouth."

Groaning, Fillipo did just that, lips and tongue moving on Orlando's skin. The long throat already tasted of salt, Orlando's Adam's apple bobbing as Fillipo licked and nibbled. The muscles in Orlando's arms stood out as he gripped the bedclothes, beckoning Fillipo to stroke them with one hand, using the other to prop himself up. He tested the resiliency of one nipple with his teeth before pulling back to blow cool air on it, making Orlando squirm.

"Tease."

"I am not teasing, tesoro, I assure you. I wish to taste all of you."

"I am not sure I can stand it."

He glanced up, noting flushed cheeks and glazed eyes. "You will take what I give you and love it."

"Oh." Eyes going a shade darker, Orlando put his arms above his head, holding to the bed, stretching out so inviting. "Promise?"

"Oh, si. I promise."

He would make Orlando scream with pleasure.

Counting each rib with his tongue and teeth made Orlando chuckle, but there was no laughter when he rubbed his cheek against the downy hair on Orlando's lower belly. Only moans. One quick kiss to the head of Orlando's cock and Fillipo moved down to the end of the bed, lifting one of Orlando's long legs by the heel. Sinking his teeth in just above the ankle seemed surprisingly naughty.

"Fillipo..." Orlando thrashed, hips rising and cock bouncing. "Please."

"Not yet." The back of Orlando's calf had round, hard muscle that did not give to his touch, where the thigh had some softness just where it met that sweet bottom. The blonde hairs tickled his lips as he worked his way up, then down the other leg, feeling Orlando shiver, hearing him moan.

"Tesoro. How you please me." Finally, finally Fillipo moved between Orlando's thighs, thumbs sliding up the insides to bracket Orlando's balls. The scent here was rich, masculine, making his nose twitch with pleasure. Strong hands came to hold his head, trying to push him down, but he resisted, running his lips along the velvety tip of Orlando's cock before bending to mouth the swinging sacs.

"Please. Please."

Dio, how he loved to hear Orlando beg. It was not close enough to screaming, though. Not nearly.

His mouth moved slowly down, ever down and back as he lifted Orlando's narrow hips to get to the tiny hole beneath. Hot, so hot, and tight as he pushed his tongue against it, as it resisted him.

Then his tongue slid right in, Orlando's flesh giving way. The taste came dark and slightly bitter, a bit soapy. Pushing, licking, Fillipo opened Orlando up for him, readying that tight, hot space for his aching cock. It was all he could to wait, to hold his seed and not spill on the bed, especially as Orlando pushed down, riding his mouth.

When Orlando felt wet and open and Fillipo could no longer stand it, he rose up and settled his cock at the entrance, rubbing back and forth at the red, sensitive skin. Gasping and grunting, Orlando opened greedily, body grasping at him, trying to pull him. They both wanted it, needed it, and he gave it, surging into Orlando's body, shocks running up and down his body as he did.

They moved together faster and faster, the heat inside making him so sensitive it almost hurt. Fillipo still could not believe how fast this had come, how easily. How fascinating this man was despite the fact that Fillipo was not sure he trusted him.

Flushed cheeks and bright eyes, that was what Orlando was, staring up at him and stroking his back, crooning love words like a broken song. Fillipo talked back, harsh, filthy words about how good he felt, how good Orlando was, how beautiful.

It went on and on until he knew he would burst before Orlando gave in. The harsh cry that came from Orlando proved him wrong, as did the hot seed against his belly. That was close enough to a scream for him. Fillipo shot hard, his body bucking and shaking as he bit his lip to hold back a cry.

Orlando should scream, not him.

They collapsed together, sweating and flushed, their skin all but squeaking as it rubbed harshly.

"Better?" Orlando stroked his back, nuzzling his cheek.

"Of course. Is that why you provoke me, tesoro? To help me spent my fury?"

"Naturally, amato. Why else would I do it?"

"Because you are perverse."

"I am. But you I adore."

Fillipo collapsed in helpless laughter. "Oh, good."

"Are you well?"

Banal, at best. Still, it was all Massimo could think of to say. Piero sat quietly in the courtyard in the shade of a fig tree, staring into the distance. His face held deep grooves, and his lips sat tightly drawn.

"I am well enough."

Massimo sighed, sitting next to Piero. "You are angry. I cannot blame you, but I think too you cannot blame me. You came into my life and admitted you were to be an assassin, then my servant is poisoned drinking my wine and my brother is stabbed."

"Of course. I do understand, signore."

"Stop. Caro, please."

"Stop what? You are right. I came to do you harm. That I have not been able to does not excuse it. You have had every right to suspect me. Still, it stings."

"It does." What else could he say? He found the situation intolerable.

"What will you do now?"

"I do not know."

He would wait until Dante mended enough to talk, and then they would decide together. If their unlikely assassin had returned to Firenze, or had run beyond that, they had time before the next attempt came. Time to plan.

"Then we will wait here with you."

"You are free to go."

"I know." Piero turned to him, eyes dark, liquid. "I cannot, it seems."

"Good." Somewhere, in a deep place in his belly, that satisfied him. "For I cannot leave you in peace either."

He could not. No matter how he told himself it was the right thing. He would think about Piero's skin or his scent and become hard, wanting. His thoughts wandered that way too often. In fact, they went that way now, and Massimo leaned to kiss Piero, mouth gentle on the open lips. The sun beat down on his neck, the breeze stirring his hair, and for a moment they might have been two young lovers in any village in any place.

Too bad they were not.

The kiss ended when Piero pulled away, searching his face. "We should not."

"No. But I wish to."

"Si."

"Then let us. Just this once."

They kissed again, Piero's hand sliding behind his head to hold him close. Tracing Piero's lips with his tongue, he hummed at the taste, loving the slip and slide of it, the heat. The stubble on Piero's chin scraped his face, reminding him how long it had been since they slept.

"We should go inside."

"Si. We should."

The sound of a throat clearing drove them apart. They jumped back and Massimo found Giada standing a few feet away, smiling.

"Dante wants to see you. All of you. Piero, do you think you might find your cousin and repair to my husband's rooms?"

Piero gave him a keen look, but only bowed his head and rose. "Of course, lady. We will meet you there."

"Grazie."

The sound of Piero's footsteps on stone faded before Giada put a hand on his arm, studying his face. "How are you?"

"Tired." Tucking her arm under his, Massimo started the long walk back to Dante's rooms. "And you? Are you and the child well?"

"Oh, we are managing. It was Dante I feared for, but the fever passed, as you know, and he feels stronger now. Strong enough to make a plan. Who knows he still lives?"

The question had him looking at her askance. "The whole of the villa I imagine."

"Then we must make certain it does not go beyond the villa. Can you speak to Marcello?"

"Of course..."

"Dante will explain."

Of course he would. Dante knew all. Massimo smiled to himself. If he was able to be resentful then his brother must be mending. The room, when they entered, had light streaming in the open shutters, and no longer held the scent of the sickroom.

"Massimo."

Dante smiled and held out a hand. Massimo took it, sitting on the bed to be close. The line cut deep in Dante's face had faded somewhat, even if he was still pale as chalk. "You look better," he said.

"I feel better. The tender ministrations of my wife, no doubt."

A trilling laugh came from Giada. "Oh certainly. I threatened him with greater harm did he not recover."

"Always effective." It felt good to laugh. "So, what is this I hear about your death?"

Dante sobered, eyes going serious, the blue darkening to green. "I think we must draw out whoever is behind these attacks. Letting them think I am dead will lead them to believe I am weak. We should wait for the others to arrive before we say more."

His fingers drummed on the back of Dante's hand. "I thought you did not trust them?"

"I do not. And yet we need them to make this charade effective."

"How?"

"Yes, do tell us how we are to serve you, oh lord of the villa."

Orlando came in, Piero and Fillipo behind, and as one man they gave Orlando a glare for his flippancy. Dante just smiled.

"Sit down and I will do so, you little peacock."

Chuckling, Orlando pulled Fillipo down on a bench with him, while Piero chose to stand, leaning against the wall.

"I have asked you all to come because I believe we may help each other. Orlando, tell me why you sought an audience with us."

"To ask you to depose my cousin, of course."

"Why?" Massimo knew the answer, but he wanted to hear it.

"For killing my brother."

He thought Fillipo's surprise at that was comical. Such innocents both Piero and Fillipo were. "And why do you think we would help."

"Well, to clear your names of it, to begin with."

Dante barked out a laugh, and Massimo squeezed his hand. Dante just nodded at him. "Only your family believes we did it, Orlando," Massimo said. "Why would we care?"

Orlando stared at him, all trace of mirth gone. "Because you loved my brother. Both of you did."

True enough, and hurtful as well. His bond with Guilio di Medici had gone deep; they had been the best of friends. Dante had like Guilio a great deal as well, declaring him the only one of that so-called noble family not rotten to the core.

"Fair enough. But how were we supposed to go about declaring war on your cousin?"

"That's irrelevant," Dante broke in. "What I want to know is if they knew what you were planning."

Orlando appeared very young suddenly. And uncertain. "I thought not. Now I am not so sure."

"And what of us?"

Massimo and Dante exchanged a glance before Dante gestured at Piero and Fillipo. "I think if anything, you were allowed to get close to us in hopes that you would do the job for... whoever it is that wants us dead. When it became apparent that Piero would rather bed Massimo than slay him, they were forced to move on their own."

Color flooded Piero's cheeks and he snapped upright from his slouch, but at a wave from Fillipo, he subsided.

"That may be true," Fillipo said. "So what do we do?"

"We give them what they want." Struggling, Dante sat up and Massimo clucked, reaching to help him. Dante shook him off. "We make them think I am dead. And Massimo will return to Firenze to attend the details of my funeral."

At the shocked looks of everyone in the room, Dante nodded, smiling, the look one Massimo recognized from his childhood as the one Dante would get just before he pushed Massimo off his pony.

"Si. Exactly. If they believe Massimo weakened they will come after him. What better way to draw out a killer?"

Massimo shook his head, knowing there would be no talking Dante out of it.

What better way, indeed.

Chapter 7

"Ciao, Serena."

The stuffed fig fell from Serena's hand and bounced across the floor as she started violently, whirling to find her cousin Paolo standing not a foot away. She had not seen him for three years. She was not thrilled to see him now.

"How did you get into my rooms?"

"Marita let me in."

The little bitch. Wait. "You know her?"

"Who do you think sent her to you?"

Marita...a Pitti spy? For two years now Serena had trusted that woman with her deepest secrets. Her nails dug into her palms.

"What do you want?"

"Just to talk. Sit down, Serena."

When she did not obey, Paolo grabbed her arm and twisted, making her yelp and forcing her down into a chair.

"There. Now we may talk like civilized people."

"You call this civilized?"

Paolo had once been handsome, with his golden hair and brown eyes, and a sharply cut face that intrigued. Now he simply appeared florid from too much drink, his chin sagging and round as a woman's. The frown he wore did not help the portrait.

"I call this a meeting to discuss strategy. I have word that your husband's brother has died."

Her hand went to her throat. "So he is. He's dead?"

"Si. I had a message this very morning." Looking like a cat with a mouse's tail still dangling from his mouth, Paolo sat as well, elbows on his knees. "I have reason to believe that your grieving husband shall also depart this world shortly, leaving you a widow of some means."

The room spun about her as her gaze darted about the chamber, looking everywhere but at Paolo's face. "How. How would you know that Massimo is dying?"

"Because it is arranged."

Much as she loathed Massimo, she wished he were there now. He was a strong man in the face of her relatives. She? Was simply frightened.

"Do you mean...could I go home?"

Paolo laughed at her, right in her face. "No. With both brothers dead, you will inherit."

Now came her turn to laugh, and she did, until tears ran down her face and the sound of his palm connecting with her cheek rang loud. "Do not laugh at me, you whore."

"You are laughable." The inside of her mouth throbbed where she'd bitten her cheek. "You really think the Rossis will give up? Massimo and Dante have a sister, one who is very well connected in Rome. And there is Dante's widow. Giada. She will find a way to see me hanged for this."

"She will be too concerned with her other properties in Sicily. You will inherit here, and then after a proper period of mourning, you will remarry."

"To whom?" Dread sat heavily in her belly. She feared she knew what was coming. Paolo was also recently widowed. His wife had died during the birth of their fifth child.

"Why to me. Of course."

Every movement of the wagon jarred his wound, causing Dante to catch his breath and curse. Massimo and Giada both argued that he should stay behind, assuring him that with the Migglionzis' help, as well as Orlando, they could carry on the charade without him.

Now he wished he had listened. Oh, he had no intention of letting them do this without him, but as the wagon hit every rut in the pitted road between Reggello and Firenze, he wished himself back in his soft bed, his warm and willing wife at his side.

The hastily assembled box in the back of the wagon creaked and popped as he drove, still smelling of pitch. The rough leather jerkin rubbed his shoulders where the thin linen of his shirt did not cover him adequately. Still, it was better than being in the box, he supposed.

"How are you?" Massimo rode up beside him, the big bay gelding tossing his head, the heat of the day causing the horse to foam along the reins.

"Sore. You?"

"Hot."

He nodded. "Have Orlando and the others seen anything?"

"Not yet, no."

"Bene."

He was hoping they could make it to Firenze uneventfully, but Dante knew prudence demanded that they take care. They had an armed escort, and the Miggliozzi brothers and Orlando had agreed to ride both point and rear, keeping an eye on the comings and goings of other travelers.

"Do you think we will have trouble? Still?"

Massimo looked so hopeful, peering off at the horizon. Dante took in the blinding sun, the rocky road and the carriage holding his wife and her maid and shook his head. "I hope not, but I have a feeling."

"I dread your feelings. I will be on the ready then."

Massimo spurred off until he once again rode even with the carriage rather than the wagon. It would seem odd, if anyone were watching, Massimo di Rossi talking to a lowly driver.

The carriage was draped in morning, the crest covered in black gauze, and it jolted him every time he looked at it, almost as badly as the scarred road under his wheels. He knew no one had died, but it still had an ominous look, one that he could not ignore no matter how he tried.

Clucking to the horses, Dante put less space between wagon and carriage. If an attack came, they needed to be...

A shout from ahead made him pull up, heart racing. The carriage stopped as well, the guards drawing in to surround it, Massimo drawing his sword. Dante reached for his as well as the thundering sound of hooves assaulted his ears.

They came from both sides of the road, ahead and to the right, from the rear to the left. Their only luck came in the imperfection of the ambush spot. Their attackers must be inexperienced indeed to give them so much room to fight.

A quick twist at the waist and he was down on the ground, the pain all but forgotten as the rush of battle filled his senses. Three horsemen rode in from behind him, two of their guards breaking off to help him give fight, and his sword arm felt the shock of another blade hitting his.

Clumsily.

Never hire a thug to do the job of a skilled assassin, he thought as his steel sank into the gut of the man above him. One of the bandits, already unhorsed, screamed as he ran at Dante, giving him ample warning to turn and impale him, the sound of a blade scraping along ribs so recently familiar that nausea rose in his belly and throat.

Before it even began it ended. Their attackers lay bleeding out into the dirt, and only one of their guards seemed to have sustained injury. Twisting cautiously, Dante tested his own wound, wincing as it pulled. But it did not bleed.

Massimo. Giada. Dante limped to the carriage to find Massimo leaning on it, a shallow gash on one arm, and Giada pulling the covering from the window to see out.

"All is well?" she asked.

"I think so, si." He looked about, finally finding Piero and Fillipo, who had ridden in to the rescue, helping one of the guards catch the bandits' horses. "Where is Orlando?"

"I have not seen him." Massimo cast about, breathing hard, and Dante clapped him on the shoulder.

"I will get Fillipo to look for him."

"Wait." Massimo touched his arm. "Are you well? You have not hurt yourself?"

"No." Grinning, he flexed for their benefit, twisting at the waist. "You see? Good as new."

Without awaiting a reply, he strode back to Fillipo and Piero, clearing his throat so that they both looked at him. "Piero, I believe my brother could use your care."

The man moved like his boots were ablaze, leaving them alone, and Dante motioned to Fillipo. "Orlando is not among us. Do you want me to help you look?"

"No. I will go." Without another word, Fillipo swung up on his mount and cantered off past the front of their little procession, off toward where Orlando should have sounded a warning.

He only hoped the boy was alive. Their plan would be much harder without him.

Fillipo resisted the urge to spur his horse into a run, trotting along the road instead, searching the sides for any sign of Orlando. A good thing, too, for he almost ran the still form over, his horse's hooves coming within a handspan of Orlando's head, the peasant clothing Orlando wore having blended right in.

"Orlando!"

Orlando did not stir, causing his heart to drop into his belly. His mount sidestepped as he all but flung himself from the saddle, carefully turning Orlando face up. A large, sickening bruise marred the familiar face, from right temple all the way down past the cheekbone.

"Tesoro. Can you hear me?"

"Mmm?" That Orlando still breathed he had been sure of, but relief still hit him hard, causing his hands to shake.

"Wake up and look at me."

"Horse. Threw me. As I gave chase."

"And you hit your head on a rock, from the looks of it."

"No. Glanced off a hoof."

God, just the thought made his blood run cold. "You could have been killed."

Finally opening his eyes, Orlando blinked at him, one pupil only slightly larger than the other. "Would you have missed me?"

"Idiot."

Helping Orlando to sit up, Fillipo looked about. There was no sign of Orlando's mount. Of course, he saw no sign of more bandits, either, so that was just fine.

"How did the others fare?"

"All are well. The guards sustained only minor injuries, and Massimo had a furrow on one arm. Can you stand?"

"Certainly." Except that when Orlando tried, he swayed dangerously, knees and elbows going all directions.

Holding him close, Fillipo took most of Orlando's weight, helping him to the side of the road where Fillipo's horse waited for them. "Should we attempt to have you ride, do you think?"

"Only if you hold on to me. I fear I am listing."

"Si. I would say you are." A smile spread across his face. If Orlando could joke so he must not be too bad off. "Come. Use this rock as a boost."

They managed to get into the saddle, Orlando before him, and were the situation different, Fillipo would have enjoyed the feel of the sweet, round bottom between his legs. As it was, he simply worried every time Orlando swayed or dry heaved.

The guards snapped to when they appeared, but soon relaxed, and Piero came out to meet them on the road. "He is well?"

"A bump to the head, so far as I can tell."

"He can ride with me in the carriage," Giada di Rossi said, making him smile and bow his head. She was a gracious lady, for certain. "We can be violently ill together," she continued.

Gracious and evil.

"Si, signora. And grazie. He seems to have lost his horse."

"My horse..." Orlando's head lolled back against his shoulder. "The only thing I owned in the world, save my sword."

"We will replace your horse. I imagine he'll turn up at our stables anyway. Most of the traders between Firenze and Reggello end up at our door."

Such a crowd they were, standing in the road with Massimo joining them, hand on Piero's back. Piero and Massimo was a turn of events he would never have believed nor expected, but it did not look likely to change soon. Fillipo just shook his head over it.

"We should get moving. Whatever advantage we have gained will be short lived." Massimo turned, the stain on his tunic a bright reminder of their recent battle. The rest of them followed, getting Orlando settled with the ladies, pulling the guards together once more and assigning new point riders.

It was only too bad they had left none of the bandits alive.

For himself, Fillipo would love to know who was behind the attack. In fact, he was fairly certain they all would.

"Come, signora. You must rise and make arrangements."

"Arrangements?" Serena stretched, luxuriating in the slip and slide of the covers against her skin, her nipples going tight at the scrape of cloth. She hooked an arm about Marita's neck, pulling her down for a kiss, floating in that half-awake place that heightened pleasure so intensely.

Marita's mouth moved over hers, one rough maid's hand cupping Serena's left breast and squeezing.

"Si, signora. For the funeral feast."

Their heads cracked together as Serena sat up, eyes wide and watering. "The funeral feast?"

"Come, signora. I know you were informed about this. By your cousin."

The conversation she'd shared with Paolo came flooding back, and Serena scrambled away from her maid, pulling the sheets up to cover her.

"Traitor."

"To whom? You hated your husband."

"I hate Paolo more. He is disgusting."

"Of course he is." Marita reached out to cup her cheek, ignoring her flinch. "He is a man. All men are pigs. But you will be better this way, with all of the families united in a common cause."

She snorted, the sound so unladylike that she could hear her departed mother scold her even now. "If you think for one moment that the Pitti family and the Medici will ever find peace, you are mistaken. As for the Rossis, it will not matter if I am happy, for they will kill me. And you too, should they find you had a part in their patriarchs dying."

"Such pessimism, lady." Marita advanced, crawling like a cat in heat over the bed to her, leaning in for a kiss that Serena wanted to ignore but could not. How perverse she was, needing comfort, even from the enemy. "Try to think how well you will suit your new role, truly ruling this household for a change."

"As if Paolo would let me do that. Oh. Si, Marita. There."

The covers slid back and Marita stroked Serena's thighs, thumb working between her legs to press against her mound, fingers opening her, bringing out her moisture. She wanted to resent it, to hate it, but it gave her forgetfulness. And when Marita bent and put that wide, soft mouth on her, she found bliss. Even if it was only for a short time.

The Palazzo di Rossi bustled with activity as their little caravan arrived, the central courtyard full of people coming and going. Artisans, food merchants, and all sorts of people Massimo had never seen before ran about, seemingly on urgent errands. Massimo pulled his hat down tighter over his eyes, watching Dante pull the caul of his peasant shirt up around his face. Piero jumped down from his horse, motioning to a servant.

"See to our horses, man. And the wagon. Have a care, it has the lord's brother's body in it."

"Si, signore." The servant looked keenly at Piero, who simply stared him down, and Massimo hid a smile as he opened the door of the carriage and helped Giada down.

"Have my rooms prepared," Giada told another passing servant, this one who snapped to at the sight of her. "Send for my husband's brother's wife. I would see her immediately. Come Fiamina. Orlando. You four!" She waved at he and Dante, Piero and Fillipo. "Bring my trunk and my bags."

Massimo could not but admire her. Even pregnant, and under the stress of a nearly successful attempt on her husband's life, Giada was every inch the imperious, if grieving widow. Her black veil and heavy black brocaded dress gave her such a somber look that it was no wonder the courtyard had fallen quiet, everyone moving about in a hush.

As soon as Giada swept away, though, the chatter started right up, speculation running rife as he and Dante unloaded Giada's bags.

"Why do you think there's only one box," someone said. "Isn't the service to be for both of them?"

"Maybe they're both in this. 'Tis heavy enough, for sure."

Beside him, Dante stiffened and began to turn, but Massimo nudged him with an elbow, silencing him. If the world at large thought he too was dead, perhaps they had the advantage. He and Dante took the trunk, Fillipo and Piero the other bags, and soon enough they were inside, out of the hot sun, carrying their load to Giada and Dante's rooms.

"They think you are dead, Massimo."

"Si, Giada. We heard it downstairs. I wonder why that is?" He knew his irony was not lost on the company at large, so he left it at that, simply watching as Dante went to Giada and pulled her close, one hand resting on her belly.

"Are you well?"

Smiling up at him, she patted his arm. "Fine now the carriage has stopped. Serena will come soon. Do you all wish to be here?"

"You will rest first."

"No. We must handle this now."

"When we are too tired to see?"

They could argue all day if no one stepped in. They gloried in it. Dante had told him once that it added spice.

"Enough," Massimo cut in. "Giada, you will send a servant for Serena and tell her that you are overcome by nerves and grief, and will see her at the evening meal. Dante will stay with you. Fillipo will take care of Orlando, and we will all rest. We will meet back here at sundown to discuss our plan of action. Si?"

Dante nodded, and even Giada had to admit defeat, calling Fiamina to go and inform the lady of the house what she wished.

With that settled, Massimo slipped his hand into Piero's, who started and gave him a wide-eyed stare.

"Now, if you will excuse us, I am calling upon Piero to clean and bandage my wound. We will use the passages, Dante, should you need to find us. The master's extra rooms."

Fillipo and Orlando followed silently through the small hidden door beneath the mosaic on the bedchamber wall, the tiny spiral stone stairs proving too narrow for him to keep a hold of Piero's hand.

Even with the musty, unused smell in his nose, and the throbbing wound in his arm, Massimo felt better now that his home surrounded him again, full as it may be of the enemy. He knew this place, knew every stone, knew where to hide. Up and up they climbed, and he heard Orlando's breathing become labored behind them, heard Fillipo murmur to him. The day had taken its toll on them all.

"Here." Massimo stopped at a small landing, pushing at a stone rosette that blended neatly into the dark walls. "Here is a room you may use for now. The bed will not be aired, but turning it should be a simple enough matter. We will come for you when it is time."

"Grazie, signore. I."

He cut Fillipo off. "I understand."

Fillipo smiled. "I think you do."

When Piero would have followed, though, Massimo caught him by the shoulder. "Please, Piero. I want you with me. I meant what I said."

"About your arm."

"No. About being sorry I did not trust you."

"Then I will come with you."

And they went together, up one more flight of stairs to the master chamber that Massimo's father had once housed his mistress in, the one that he had loved above all else. The room had a damp odor, and the darkness was absolute until Massimo found the tinder box and lit the lamp that sat exactly where he remembered it, the oil still filled.

Oh, he remembered playing here as a child. He'd neglected it, let the bed hangings get faded with dust and age, let the floor become covered with a thick coat of grime. But it was still his, for he was the master of the palazzo.

"Thank you."

Piero raised a brow. "For what?"

"For coming with me."

"How am I to tend your arm with no water and no bandages?"

"I think you know this is not about my arm." Massimo moved close, trapping Piero between his body and the wall, trying for a kiss. It landed on Piero's cheek.

"You do not trust me."

"I have just shown you the most secret place I have ever had. Dante is the only other who has been here since my father's death. I trusted you to keep me safe on the road. What else would you have of me?"

"I would have what I gave you, Massimo. Your body."

"Oh." Oh, Piero meant... "Very well."

Piero stared, eyes so dark they were black through and through. "You mean it? Here and now?"

"Si. Here and now. I am yours, if you will take me."

"I will."

They found the bed together, mostly by dint of groping and scraping along the floor with their feet, so lost were they in their kisses. Their clothes were loosened in some places, lost in others, and before Massimo could even think he lay on the bed, legs spread, Piero between them, licking at him, opening him with tongue and fingers.

Massimo thrashed, trying to get more, closer, away, stop. It had been far too long since he had played this game and his body protested even as his cock rose full and hard and his voice cracked on his begging.

"Please, Piero. Please, now."

"Si. Amato." Slipping against him, Piero slid his cock inside, hot and deep and wide. He felt it would simply split him in two. That he stayed intact amazed him, but what amazed him more was the feeling that came when Piero began to move.

Inside he felt on fire, the friction and heat nearly more than he could bear. Outside his skin felt like it might just burn away, fused as it was to Piero's with sweat, and so sensitive that even the smallest brush of skin or cloth made him shake.

His legs came up to wrap about Piero's waist, his hands digging into the heavy muscles of Piero's hips, and Massimo just took everything. All of it. Inside him.

"Caro..."

"Si. Massimo. Amato mio. So...so hot."

Piero bent to kiss his mouth, his throat, his chest, scrunching up almost double to bite at his nipples. They hardened even more, drawing up under the touch of tongue and teeth, and Massimo rubbed his cock against Piero's belly, humping hard, grunting as the head scraped and the skin around it pulled back even more.

"I cannot hold it, Piero."

"Then do not. Let me feel your pleasure, amato."

And so he did, his seed spilling between them, hot and wet as Piero continued to move, eyes wide and gazed as they looked down into his. Then he felt it, Piero's release inside him, burning him. Filling him. That thick cock throbbed, making him gasp, twitch.

They lay in silence for a long time, until Massimo felt sure Piero slept, so even was his breathing. But finally Piero turned dazed eyes to his. "I think perhaps I am in love with you, Massimo."

Massimo laughed, fingers pushing Piero's hair out of his eyes. "Si. God help us."

How dare she?

How dare that...that peasant woman Dante married keep her waiting? She was the lady of this house, had been before and was even more so now. She should be the one to decide when to meet.

And where.

The thought of going to the chambers of a man who had been killed in part by her own ambition caused sweat to coat her palms and run between her breasts.

She paced the corridor outside the rooms. She'd been summoned some time ago and spent the intervening moments cooling her heels, locked out by a bolted door.

When it opened, Serena stormed past the maid, brushing her aside like an annoying insect. She worked up a good roiling temper as she found the main room empty, striding into the bedchamber and poking at Giada with a pointing finger.

"Who do you think you are, you swollen little bitch, keeping me waiting in my own home. I should have you clapped in irons."

Giada said nothing, smiling serenely and staring over Serena's shoulder, behind her where the door closed with an ominous click.

She whirled about her, slip catching so that she almost fell. It was not until she steadied herself that she got a clear view of the man standing before her. The sight was enough to make all of her blood drain to her very feet.

"It cannot be! You are dead."

And then she did the only thing a true lady could do when faced with the sudden reappearance of her supposedly dead husband.

Chapter Eight

Orlando panted as he leaned against the wall, his head swimming. They had left him alone, Fillipo accompanying Massimo and Piero to confront Massimo's wife about her treachery. Apparently the attack on the road, as well as the stabbing and poisoning, could be traced right back to her.

Too bad Orlando did not believe Serena clever enough to make such a plan by herself. So he crawled out of the comfortable, if dusty, bed that he had been ensconced in, and made his way down the secret stairs and out into a chamber he'd not seen before, a sort of study, he supposed. He tried to mark in his mind where the door latched, though with his head rattled as it was, it might be a difficult task.

Then he went searching. One thing Orlando excelled at was eavesdropping, and no one knew him here, save perhaps a few servants who might have seen him when he arrived. Surely he could find something to report, perhaps even before the lady of the house finished her no doubt tearful plea for lenience.

He crept along the wall, as much for his own sake as for stealth. His head pounded unmercifully.

"I vow, Paolo. Something is going on. I like it not at all."

Orlando stopped cold. He knew that voice. Knew it extraordinarily well. It belonged to his cousin. Alonzo di Medici.

Steeling himself, Orlando stepped around the corner, striking a pose he hoped stood unmarred by his bruised face. "Ciao, Alonzo."

The sudden nausea as his head pounded became all too worth it when Alonzo, along with Paolo Pitti, the bastard, jerked as if struck, their mouths dropping open.

"Orlando." Alonzo recovered quickly, as always. "What a pleasant surprise. I should think Serena would not even recognize you after all of these years. Have you come to throw herself on her good graces like the rest of the family?"

"Is that why you are here?" Alonzo needed no one's good graces. Ever. He was the undisputed head of the Medici, since he'd killed Guilio, was he not? Now Paolo, to be kind, was an idiot. And a follower, who would never do anything without someone else's backing.

"No. We are here to offer condolences to a beloved member of the family."

"Beloved." He managed to raise a brow, going for sardonic. "I had thought she was out of favor. Though I suppose now that she is a wealthy widow..."

Alonzo laughed, clapping his hands. "Is that not why you are here?"

"Of course. Though I was hoping to use her newfound influence against you, you see."

"Then you play a very dangerous game."

"All of your games are dangerous, Alonzo. One would only need to look at what happened to Guilio to know that."

Paolo stared first at one, then the other of them, looking for all the world like a giant landed fish, gasping for air. Alonzo did not have Paolo's difficulty with thinking on his feet.

"I am surprised Serena let you in," Alonzo said, taking two steps toward him.

"So you said already. She does not know I am here yet, to be quite honest. I bribed a guard."

There was no way he could outrun Alonzo. Paolo, with his fondness for rich food and drink, yes. But not Alonzo, not in his current state. And he had no blade on him. Stupid. So very, very stupid. Orlando took a step back, hand coming out to brace against the wall.

"What happened to your face, Orlando?"

Alonzo said it very gently, like he would speak to a child, smiling his insane smile. Oh, dear.

"I fell." That was true enough after all. "I fear stone stairs are dangerous, hmm?"

"Oh, yes." Eyes darting from him to the end of the corridor where a set of stairs rose, Alonzo nodded. "Definitely dangerous."

Orlando turned and fled, listening to the pounding of his heart and the pounding of heavy feet behind him. He was in very great trouble indeed.

"Wake her up."

"How? She's still quite unconscious."

Massimo nudged Serena's still form with his toe, wrinkling his nose. "Throw water on her."

Just as he'd suspected, the thought of ruining her finery had Serena moaning dramatically and rolling her head side to side in the pretense of waking. He nudged her again, making her grunt and sit up, glaring at him.

"You're supposed to be dead."

"Well I am sorry, my dear. I fear that the news of my death is somewhat misleading. I wonder though, how you would know so soon, as the ambush that "killed" me was only just this morning."

"What?" Her delicate brow furrowed ever so artfully. "But I heard two days ago that both you and Dante were killed. It was awful."

Oh, she was good. Her eyes even welled up.

Giada snorted. Massimo grinned at her before holding a hand down to Serena, hoisting her up off the floor. With her heavy gown she was rather like an overturned turtle.

"Who told you?"

"We had a runner. From the villa in Reggello. He came and said that Dante had been stabbed to death, and that you were poisoned. I assure you, I had every intention of investigating, but then..."

She sobbed, throwing herself at him. "Then my family came. Oh, Massimo, they have been awful."

"Have they indeed." Her arms gave under his fingers, the soft skin bruising as he held her away from them. "Who is here now?"

"Now? Oh." Her eyes slide to one side, not meeting his. "No one. They left last night, when I would not prepare rooms for them. But I am sure they will be back."

"No doubt. Tell me who, Serena."

"Please, you're hurting me."

"I shall hurt you even more if you do not tell me."

Just as he bent over her, determined to squeeze the answers out of her, a panel opened in the wall behind Giada, a slight body stumbling through it, Dante and Fillipo following behind.

"We found him, Massimo. This is the one who stabbed me and ran."

"Ah. Michelo." Massimo studied him, an idea dawning. "You are Marita's brother, hmm?"

The boy stared at the floor sullenly. Serena, though, began to struggle. "Let me go, Massimo. You are hurting my arms."

He let go, and so abruptly that she staggered back, bouncing off the panels of the door behind her. She groped for the latch, but Piero suddenly appeared from behind the tapestry hiding him, sword at the ready.

"If you so much as twitch, lady, I will run you through."

"How dare you threaten me? You, my husband's catamite! I ought to have *you* run through."

Lightning struck in Massimo's brain, and he whirled, going to Michelo and grabbing him up by the throat. "The poison was not meant for me, was it? Not originally?" He shook the boy, making those sloe eyes so like Marita's bug out. "Was it?"

"No, signore. Was for him." Michelo gestured weakly at Piero. "My sister. She told me."

"Told you what?"

"For the lady. Because you insult her."

"Then why stab me?" Dante asked, coming to peer down at the lad's face. "Why take that chance?"

Tears streamed down Michelo's face, much more convincing than his wife's. "He found me. I knew he would have me hanged. I ran."

"Well, yes. Killing someone is usually an offense punishable by death," Dante replied, making Massimo snort.

"Fillipo. Could you take him to the captain of the guard? Despite my wife's claims of her own ascension to the head of household, I know he is loyal. Oh, and gag him first."

He got an unreadable look and a nod from Fillipo, who used a strip cut from the lad's own tunic to gag him before ushering him out the door. Now, as to Serena.

"Who gave the order to kill Piero? You or Marita?"

"I would have had I known it was possible. But it was Marita."

How such a pretty face could become so ugly with hatred, he did not know. Massimo sighed, rubbing the back of his neck. It all seemed too pat.

"What should we do with her?"

He and Dante exchanged glances. Dante nodded, always knowing what he was thinking. "Hold her where she has no chance to speak to anyone else until we find out the truth of what they say. There is more here than meets the eye."

Piero nodded. "Here?"

Giada laughed, the sound full of devilry. "Si. Here. Tie her to the chair there. I shall entertain her while you go and secure the house once and for all. It is a Rossi house, damn it."

"Si." Dante drew up despite his wound, as did Massimo, though his arm hurt like the very devil. "And it's about time we took it back."

"Orlando!"

Really, Fillipo thought, this finding Orlando in a boneless heap had to stop. He was on his way back to Dante's rooms after delivering the murderous serving boy to the captain, and he found Orlando on the stairs, bleeding from the nose and from a split lip.

Thank God Orlando still breathed.

"Can you hear me, tesoro?"

Those long gold lashes fluttered, and Orlando groaned, trying to move.

"Stop. Stop, tesoro, until we can see where you are hurt. I do not want you to injure yourself more.

"Massimo. Must warn them."

"Warn them about what. Who did this to you?"

"Cousin. Alonzo di Medici."

While he feared moving Orlando might harm him, Fillipo knew he had no choice. He bent at the knees and hauled Orlando into his arms, thanking the good Lord that Orlando was so damnably slender. They reached Dante's chamber door just as his arms gave out, and he eased Orlando to the floor, kicking the door hard.

"Who is it?" Fiamina demanded.

"Fillipo. Let me in. I have news."

The door cracked open, the little maid gasping when she saw Orlando. "Oh! Not again. Come in, come in."

"Where is Massimo?"

"He and Dante went to search the house," Giada said, coming into the antechamber. Bring him to the bed."

Together they dragged Orlando to the bed, his head lolling as they lifted him up, a moan sounding. It tore at Fillipo to hear it.

"Now, Orlando. Tell me about your cousin."

"Alonzo. Here. With Pitti...Paolo Pitti."

Giada gasped, grabbing his shoulder. Obviously it meant more to her than it did him. "I will care for Orlando," she said. "You must find your cousin and Massimo. And my husband. Tell them we know who is behind Marita and Serena's treachery."

"Si, signora." How he wanted to protest. But Orlando would be well under Giada's ministrations, while his dear cousin was in jeopardy. Fillipo left, not through the antechamber door, but through the secret passage.

Whatever it meant that a Medici and a Pitti were in this house together, it was urgent to Giada.

He would do his duty and deliver the message.

The main hall finally yielded what they sought. Dante stopped Massimo with a hand on his arm, motioning at the two men who stood chatting at the center of the soaring room. Alonzo di Medici.

Rage built in his chest like steam in a closed kettle. Alonzo. Of course. He was the reason behind all this somehow, the reason for it all. Without thinking, Dante drew his sword, the sound echoing about them, and reached the pair in just a few long strides.

The other man, Paolo Pitti, if Dante recalled, recoiled, his face going pale. Alonzo only smiled at him.

"Ah. Dante. I wondered if you might not be cleverer than I thought."

Massimo and Piero rushed out to guard his back, Massimo giving him a most reproving glance. Si, si. He rushed into things sometimes.

"Massimo. And the Migglionzi bastard. Has no one told me the truth? I was assured you had all died."

"I should have known, Alonzo. You utter bastard." Poor Massimo. He'd never forgiven Alonzo for first his falling out with Guilio, then Guilio's death.

"Of course you should have, Massimo. How silly of you not to. Paolo. Kill them."

It was, naturally, not only Paolo who tried. He had men stationed in the hall, and as soon as steel rang on steel, both sides joined the fight. Dante found himself facing a very desperate Paolo Pitti who, while unskilled, had the panache of a swordsman with nothing left to lose.

They engaged, Paolo beating him back, Dante having to watch for scattered rugs imported from Venice. His arm began to throb with each parry, Paolo's wild thrusts so unpredictable as to be worrisome. The wild eyes that stared into his own held no sanity, no semblance of humanity any longer, and Dante finally put Paolo down like he would a mad dog, dispatching him with a quick thrust and twist of his wrist, driving his blade deep into Paolo's gut.

Sudden silence reigned as hot blood covered his hand and wrist, the fighting over nearly before it had begun.

Alonzo di Medici had obviously far discounted the loyalty of a Rossi guardsman.

Massimo and Piero stood panting, one on either side of Alonzo di Medici, who stood with his hands up, sword at his feet.

"What will you do now, hmm? Kill me?"

Dante growled. "We should, you treacherous bastard."

Running footsteps pounded along the corridor, Fillipo bounding into the room, sword at the ready. He stopped, looking from one of them to the other.

"Ah. You found them, then."

"Si, Fillipo. Grazie."

"You cannot kill me. The rest of my considerable family all know where I am, and of course they have been informed that Paolo Pitti has gone insane and hired assassins to kill off the di Rossi clan so he can take their lands."

"By marrying Serena."

"Brilliant, hmm? Too bad you all refused to die. And too bad," Alonzo said, turning to Piero and Fillipo, "the two of you simply refused to do your jobs."

He saw Massimo blanch, staring, and knew he needed to clear Piero's name, as Dante understood suddenly what he meant.

"Michelo was to poison Piero, which would then lead Fillipo to kill Massimo and Dante, leaving your hands clean."

It was brilliant. It was also the most repellant thing he had ever heard.

"Is that how you dispatched Guilio?" Massimo asked, eyes spitting green fire. "With the falsely represented land deal, hoping someone would kill him over it?"

"Perhaps. The Migglionzis proved terribly useless then as well."

Piero lunged at Alonzo, ready to skewer him if his raised sword was any indication. Massimo caught him up. "Do you want the Medici after you for the rest of your life?"

"I want someone to pay for what he has done to my family."

"And so he will." Dante smiled at Alonzo, baring his teeth. "By first buying back your family estate and giving it to you as a gift, hmm?"

He knew he had Alonzo by the short hairs. So did the di Medici. Paolo could only be blamed for so much. If the rest was to be kept quiet, Alonzo di Medici would owe them favors.

For life.

"Are you sure you will not stay?" Massimo kissed both of Giada's cheeks before turning to Dante and hugging him so hard that their bones creaked. Dante's ribs had healed fully before they decided to go, but Giada was nearing the time when she could not travel, and wanted to be home to have her baby.

"We cannot. But you have company, hmm?"

Massimo's cheeks heated. "Si. And I have planned a masked ball in honor of our new business alliance with the famiglia Migglionzi."

"Well, enjoy then. I have had enough of masques to last me a good long while."

Massimo knew Dante did not necessarily mean fancy dress balls.

"Si. Travel well, brother. I will see you at the end of the harvest season, on the island."

"We will look forward to it. And to you meeting our son."

"Daughter," Giada rejoined. "Come, Dante. It is time."

Dante gave him one last embrace, whispering to him. "Good luck with him, brother."

"Grazie. Be safe."

Across the courtyard, Orlando and Fillipo sat their horses, also making their goodbye, Piero holding Fillipo's mount's bridle. Massimo joined them. A carriage sat behind, his wife Serena inside, awaiting her banishment to a convent far above in the mountains. Where the snow never melted. Orlando and Fillipo would take her part of the way, leaving her in the capable hands of one of their numerous cousins. This one a nun.

"Are you certain you will not stay for the ball?" Piero was asking.

"We cannot. We are needed in Ravenna. To start things going again there. I trust you, cousin. You will do well here."

The land that the Migglionzis had originally lost could not be returned, but Alonzo di Medici had deeded them a splendid palazzo in Firenze, and enough money to restore Piero's father's home in Ravenna as well. Fillipo and Piero were changing places. Piero would stay in Firenze, while Fillipo went to Ravenna. With Orlando.

"This will not help you depose Alonzo," Massimo said to Orlando.

Orlando laughed, a light, happy sound, the bruises all gone from his face. "You have him by the balls, signore. That is all I need to love a life without fear of him. Good luck to you."

"And to you."

Spurring their horses, Orlando and Fillipo clattered off, leaving him alone with Piero. "You will attend the ball, though, si?"

Piero nodded, eyes alight. "I will. As long as the night beyond it is mine."

He drew Piero inside, ducking into a niche beside the doorway. "All of them are yours, caro. All of them from now on. You may trust in that implicitly."

"I will, amato. As much as I know you now trust me."

Finally, Massimo thought. Finally he had found a mask he enjoyed wearing.

That of Piero's lover.

She fainted dead away.