

Rhapsody

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## Abstract

This thesis delves into the topics of love, despair, and perseverance. *Rhapsody* balks at the cliché of "Love will find a way" and instead embraces the theme of "Love is not always enough." This paper aims to show how flawed characters can still be heroes in their own way, even if they do not receive their happy ending. It takes place in Italy during the late Renaissance and follows the life of a young man named Niccolo, who has just killed a man in the name of love. In an adaptation of Queen's song, *Bohemian Rhapsody*, Niccolo flees from his home and meets a Scaramouche character named Borso, who guides him through Italy and a chance meeting with Galileo Galilei, hoping to reach Spain where Niccolo believes he will be safe. However, Niccolo is unable to reconcile the loss of his love, Guiliana, and the story ultimately ends in tragedy.

Dedication

I dedicate this work to the bold and beautiful Freddie Mercury and all who hunger for their voices to be heard.

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Table of Contents

Artist Statement .....7

The Importance of Strong Characters in Creative Writing .....14

Works Cited .....25

Rhapsody .....27

### Artist Statement

Sometime last year, I got caught up in the hype of the hit Netflix show *Stranger Things*. I was late to the party, which is pretty typical of my life in general, so I binge-watched the existing four seasons in a couple of weekends as all depressed Millennials do with TV shows. I attached strongly to one of the major plot points during the fourth season. One of the young girls in the show, Max, was trapped in The Upside Down, a dark and dangerous world where she faced both psychological and physical death at the hands of Vecna, that season's monstrous villain. She is eventually pulled out of this world when the other kids play her favorite song (*Running Up That Hill* by Kate Bush), grounding her in reality. While watching, I was asked which song I would choose to save my own life if I were ever trapped in the Upside Down. It did not take me long to respond: *Bohemian Rhapsody*.

In 1975, the glam-rock band, Queen, released a six minute long song titled *Bohemian Rhapsody*. The song's length was criticized by both managers and producers, who claimed it would only catch the public's attention if it was cut down to three minutes. Their data indicated that after three minutes, a radio listener would grow bored and change the station. Queen, who had never really cared much about the data, did not listen to their managers or producers. *Bohemian Rhapsody* has since gone down in rock and roll history as one of the greatest songs ever written.

Admittedly, the song sounds like a lot of nonsense upon the first listen. And the second listen. I must have listened to the song a thousand times before I began to pick out pieces of imagery and create flashes of a story in my head to explain what was happening. The first part of the song isn't too difficult to understand; a man has killed another man and recounts the story to his mother. He is obviously devastated by his actions and what it means for him, and after a good

bit of lamenting, he determines he must run away. The man in the song continues to lament his life throughout the first couple of verses, but then the song takes a turn. The music itself becomes lighter, and the lyrics are absolutely unhinged. It sounds like Freddie Mercury decided to piece together a bunch of random words in what I can only assume was some sort of insane acid trip or fever dream.

Who is Scaramouche? Why must he dance the Fandango? This Scaramouche/Fandango bit is interrupted with thunderbolts and lightning and... high pitched Galileos? What does Galileo have to do with any of this? And why the Figaro? And what in the world is that awful guttural sound they start chanting? I was in my thirties before I realized they were growling *Bismillah*, which still meant nothing to me. Beezlebub makes a brief appearance, and then Brian May lights up a guitar solo, and the song changes again to angry lyrics about being spit on and stoned and left to die. Sweet Freddie Mercury, who hurt you? What was in your head when you wrote this nonsense? The song ends on the same lamenting notes it took in the beginning, and by the time the music fades out, I find myself reaching for a cigarette.

There is a story there somewhere, I could hear it. And a few months ago I decided I would write it.

There are many analyses of what Freddie Mercury might have been trying to convey with this song. My theory of Mercury being lost in an acid trip has yet to appear in any scholarly journals, but there are several other viable options. Is the song about his struggles with his sexuality? Or his experiences as a young man from Tanzania being thrust into stardom? Or is he trying to tell a story? As I began to parse out my ideas and interpretation of the song, I made the choice to take the song as literally as I could. I began to obsessively listen to the music and research the lyrics to find the story lost inside, and in the process, I determined that Freddie



Mercury must have been an actual genius. Everything in Bohemian Rhapsody weirdly fits; it all makes sense, even the nonsensical bits.

I knew that this story would need a clear plot. It would need a setting, a time period, and an idea of what might have been going on in the lives of this poor boy and those he laments with. I searched for a connection and deep dove into researching the lyrics. Verse 4 is where all the fun begins: "I see a little silhouetto of a man/ Scaramouche, Scaramouche, will you do the Fandango?" Scaramouche is a character from a play dating back to the 16th century, and the Fandango is a dance of Spanish origin that emerged around that same time. "Galileo, Galileo, Galileo Figaro, *magnifico!*" Galileo Galilei died in 1642 in Rome, Italy. The Marriage of Figaro was composed by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart in 1786. This sparked my decision to have the story take place in Italy during the Italian Renaissance. The timeline isn't perfect. There are some inconsistencies, especially with *The Marriage of Figaro* happening a century after the Renaissance ended, but it's manageable for a fictional tale.

Verse 5 is where *Bismillah* shows up. *Bismillah* means "In the name of Allah," an allusion to Islam. A little later, we see, "Beelzebub has a devil put aside for me." This might be an allusion to Christianity or various Pagan religions. Muslims would not have been in Italy during the Renaissance, as Italy was decidedly Catholic and sat under the power of the Pope. There were, however, Muslims in Spain. This became a central plot point in my interpretation of the story. I began to write of Niccolo, a young man living in Naples, Italy, during the Italian Renaissance. He has killed a man, leaves his home for Spain, and meets Borso, the Spanish clown dressed as Scaramouche. They meet in Rome and travel together to Pisa, where they seek shelter in the home of Galileo Galilei.

With those lyrics worked out, I then needed to focus on an inciting incident. Niccolo (affectionately called Nico) has to kill someone. The one he kills has to be powerful enough to justify Nico fleeing to another country. Immediately, I knew he had to kill a Medici. The Medicis were an incredibly influential family in Florence, Italy, who have been credited with kicking off the Renaissance. They made their money through banking and commerce, became incredibly wealthy, and began to support artists as patrons, giving artists money so that they could create art without worrying about starving to death. (Note that I would love to see this practice come back, as I, too, would like to work on my art without having to work two other jobs to support it.) Over the centuries, the Medicis became akin to royalty and even ruled as uncrowned monarchs throughout Italy. I also learned they established their own form of police, the *sbirri*, which made Niccolo's predicament all the more precarious. He kills the son of the most influential family in Italy, who have their own police force. Of course, he has to flee the country.

But what is Nico's motive? Love. Of course. Nico is in love with a woman well above his station, and when he learns she is engaged to Marsilio Medici, Nico knows he must kill the groom to win the hand of the beautiful Giuliana. I do enjoy a good cliché.

I wanted to bring a piece of Freddie Mercury into this story, so I wrote him into Niccolo. I knew very little about Mercury until I began this project, and I have since watched movies and read books to grasp what his life's struggles and passions were. Mercury presented himself as flamboyant, incredulous, and always dramatic. Despite his deep insecurities, Mercury was so entirely full of himself. In an interview once, he was asked about Queen's success. "The reason we're successful, darling?" he questioned, "My overall charisma, of course." I have attempted to translate some of that charisma and confidence into Nico. Nico is dramatic and often over the top; he is passionate about everything he does. He is not always understood by those around him,

but most seem to love him regardless. I imagine Nico's mind is filled with insecurity, anxiety, and a longing to be seen and loved for who he is as a person. Mercury was not much different.

My story, *Rhapsody*, is now much more than writing out the lyrics of a song into prose. It is a tribute to Freddie Mercury and all the beautiful things he accomplished in his short lifetime. Mercury will live forever thanks to his incredible voice and unmatched songwriting, but I also know that he struggled throughout his life to feel loved and accepted for who he was on a deeper level. By creating a flawed character who is still seen and admired by his peers, I hope to give Freddie Mercury something he was not given while he was still alive.

I often feel I am now alongside the legendary songwriter as I have researched his life and analyzed the words to his music. He struggled with his sudden fame and the lack of support from his family. He came out as a bisexual man in the 1970s and parted ways with his beloved wife during his battle with his own sexuality. He was wildly taken advantage of by those who used him for their own personal gain and fell into drug use and deep depression as Queen became an overnight sensation. His untimely death was due to AIDS, and despite the horrible stigma attached to the disease, the world mourns the loss of such an incredible artist half a century before his time. I can do my best to extend his life through Niccolo, and I'm not sure if Freddie Mercury is grinning down at me from Heaven, cheering me on, or if he thinks the entire thing is a load of bollocks and wishes I'd just let him rest in peace.

As I began to write *Rhapsody*, it began to take a form that I did not intend. It takes a serious chain of events and tells them in the style of a Shakespearean comedy, at least in the beginning. Nico stands out with his flowery, dramatic language and actions, while everyone around him is much more pragmatic and often tires of Nico's constant antics. Nico strives to do what is right but often messes it up, making the tale feel lighthearted even though the substance

is very heavy. I do focus on a significant shift in tone in the final chapters, much like the song shifts in its final movement. The comedy evaporates, and it ends much more in line with a Shakespearean tragedy.

The focus is on the characters and their growth and their love for each other, even though every one of them is deeply flawed. It is a story of survival, connection, and the constant search for love and understanding. It is a story of conquering fears and achieving things no one thought possible, mixed with a healthy dose of unrequited love and jealousy, and the way we all fight for our own survival. It is the story of what would happen to us if we all just blindly followed our passions and our whims without regard to social contracts or basic morals, trapping us in our bubbles of safety and security. Niccolo is a bit of an anti-hero; his strength comes not from himself but from those around him.

Like *Bohemian Rhapsody*, which is a song with a million interpretations, my story encompasses various topics and emotions. *Rhapsody* does not have to be "about" any one thing. Artists weave their work with hidden meanings; my story is no different. There is a piece of myself in every character I've written, from Nico's dramatics, to Borso's sarcastic mannerisms. It is simple in the way that stories can be; at the surface, it's the tale of a young man who makes a grave mistake for love. But it is also about passion and acceptance and finding those around you who accept you no matter how imperfect you are. Art is beautiful. It is multifaceted, and if done well, it can inspire a multitude of people for a million different reasons.

One aspect I struggled greatly with was that of religion and Christianity, especially as I write this story for a Christian university. I am one of the many who have been deeply scarred by the Church and the religious teachings with which I grew up. I don't think it is unfair to say that I have suffered immense religious trauma, and it is not easy for me to write anything from a

Biblical worldview, as I'm not sure I even have one of those anymore. However, Christianity is an important part of *Rhapsody*, and I found that I could stay true to myself and my own beliefs while writing it without disrespecting a Faith that still holds my affection. Nico is staunchly Catholic, and we can see how his own faith affects his actions and the way he sees the world. It is not entirely unlike my own views, but as with everything in this tale, it is exaggerated or fabricated completely. I will assure everyone that I have never killed a man, but I have also struggled with sin and wrongdoing and have wrestled with what is right, especially when what I am hearing in my heart is different from what I have heard from a pastor's mouth.

I hope that anyone reading this story can identify in some way with the characters I have created. I hope I can inspire others to accept their flaws and see themselves as complete and loveable people. I hope to honor the man who wrote *Bohemian Rhapsody*, and much like Freddie Mercury, I hope to entertain. I want people to read my work and laugh or cry or roll their eyes at the ridiculousness of it all. I will echo a quote by the singer himself, "I love the fact that I can make people happy, in any form. Even if it's just an hour of their lives, if I can make them feel lucky or make them feel good, or bring a smile to a sour face, that to me is worthwhile."

So, without further ado, I present to you my work, *Rhapsody*. I hope it makes you happy, darling.

## The Importance of Strong Characters in Creative Writing

I recently read through William Shakespeare's *The Life and Death of King John*, one of the playwright's more obscure and rarely performed historical works. There is very little I remember about the plot. There seems to be a war over the throne, someone gets married, a mother is very angry, and a young boy apparently must die, as he is a threat to the current king of England. However, I can go into great detail on the characterization within the play. The character of the Bastard, Philip Faulconbridge, is so well written that I cannot imagine the story happening without him. The visceral emotion and complexity of that singular character drew me in, and now I may consider *The Life and Death of King John* amongst my favorites of Shakespeare's plays. In the words of John Jakes, "Readers don't remember plots. Readers remember characters. A good plot, essential to selling your story or novel, soon disappears from memory. A good character, never" (23). When I am reading a work of literature, whether it be nonfiction or fiction, I look for the characters that I could have a drink with. The ones that seem so entirely human that I want to get to know them better. I want to introduce them to my friends and drag them up to sing karaoke on Sunday nights. A good character will make an otherwise weak plot memorable and a story well-loved. But the reverse is not true: The best plot in the world will be quickly squashed and forgotten without strong characters to move the story forward. Strong characters create this drive by providing an emotional connection for the reader, giving readers a strong sense of identity, and inspiring readers to overcome their own challenges in life that may mirror those they have read about.

### **Memorable Protagonists**

Protagonists are the main characters within creative writing, the characters the story is about. They are usually presented as the story's "hero," but not always. It is obviously

incredibly important to have a strong protagonist with a clear arc and pattern of development. Otherwise, the story will be bland and almost useless to a reader. Readers want to see a protagonist yearning for things; we want to see growth and change happen throughout the plot as the character works toward their goal. We want to see them fail and experience human emotion, and we want to relate. To gain an idea of what it takes to be a great protagonist, we can study a few of the most memorable main characters in literature:

In *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker, we are introduced to the character, Celie. The book stretches from the years 1910 to 1940, and readers can follow Celie through thirty years of her life as a black woman living in Georgia. The structure of the story itself is different, as it is written in first person via letters Celie has written starting at the age of 14. First, she writes these letters to God, then to her sister, Nettie. Celie is one of those characters that pulls on a reader's heartstrings. We see her go from a scared 14-year-old trying to escape her sexually abusive stepfather, to a woman who has found her independence and strength to live a life she is happy with. Though I could not relate to many of Celie's struggles, I was deeply connected to her on an emotional level. While I have not endured the racial prejudices nor the many instances of rape and abuse by her stepfather, I could relate to feeling indebted and trapped somewhere with seemingly no way out. I relate to her naivete and the melancholy feeling of learning that the world is wide open, and sometimes it is possible to change our circumstances. Watching Celie gain life experience and perspective and her ability to move on and find herself and her independence was empowering to me on a personal level. I laughed with her, and I cried with her. If her character had not been written with so much emotional pull, the story would have been very dry and likely very short.

Celie is a clear protagonist, an obvious hero. But one does not have to be a good person to be a good protagonist. In J.D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye*, readers are introduced to 16-year-old Holden Caulfield, the anti-hero. The use of first person in this novel means that readers are able to get inside Holden's troubled head, and based on his own narrative, Holden is no hero. He isn't exactly a good guy in this story. He is an anti-hero and an incredibly strong protagonist. Holden struggles with his mental health, and his behavior is typical of a traumatized teenager. He lashes out and appears to be bitter about everyone he meets except for a couple of close family members. He enjoys mapping out the "phonies," but even in this, he is not consistent. He often complains about a person's actions only to go on to commit the same actions himself. There are a few mixed interpretations of Holden, and one critic likened his love for his neighbors to that of Jesus Christ (Temple). I feel this may be an opinion held by Christians to make them feel better about their children reading this book in their high school classrooms, as I tend to put Holden into a less holy light. He may not be Jesus, but Holden is still something of a touchstone for American teenagers. After reading the book, a reader might not remember the plot of *Catcher in the Rye* years down the road, but they will surely remember Holden Caulfield and his cynicism.

Even though Holden's thought process is erratic and troublesome at times, his character is relatable. I tend to believe myself to be a well-rounded, mentally stable individual, but I do struggle with anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder. Holden's darker thoughts are not far off from some of the dark thoughts I sometimes battle within my own brain. Holden might represent those intrusive thoughts we all sometimes have but never act on, which may explain some critics' desperation to put Holden in a good light. No one wants to believe we are bad, and if we relate to a bad character, it can make us question our own goodness. Regardless, I



believe most of us can relate to having moments where we despise society and all the people in it, even if fleetingly.

Some works of fiction don't have an entirely relatable protagonist, but readers are drawn in due to their fascination with the unknown. This might be the case with Jay Gatsby, the titular character in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. There are many ways Fitzgerald could have written this character, and one of the more genius ways he is able to describe Gatsby is through the narrator. Fitzgerald takes an unusual approach. The entire book is narrated by an entirely different character, who I cannot remember in the least. Is it Nick? Is the narrator's name Nick? I have no idea. But through this narrator, readers gain a unique perspective into the life of the elusive Jay Gatsby. Readers are immediately intrigued by this broody millionaire, who seems to have everything going for him and wants for nothing. Millionaires in mansions throwing incredible parties are not things the average person is familiar with, which makes Gatsby immediately interesting. As the story unfolds, we learn of Gatsby's obsession with Daisy and the unconventional way he became so wealthy. When I think back on Jay Gatsby, I feel great empathy and confusion. The book ends with Gatsby's suicide in a swimming pool. But there are so many questions, and unlike Holden Caulfield, we don't know Jay Gatsby's thoughts, except those that he has voiced. Some of his actions make no sense; there is no reasoning behind his obsession or his inability to move on. This adds to the intrigue and may be why *The Great Gatsby* has remained so beloved.

### **Memorable Antagonists**

Writers might put intense efforts into creating a strong protagonist and believe that other characters in the story do not need as much focus. But a strong antagonist or “villain” can have just as much impact on a story as a strong protagonist.

A personal favorite villain of mine is the iconic portrayal of Iago in William Shakespeare's tragic play, *Othello*. I recently spoke to an actor performing at The American Shakespeare Center in Staunton, Virginia, about the famous villain. Aidan O'Reilly had this to say, "It's a role I'm fascinated by and wary of playing as I think he's either jealousy personified or an utter sociopath." O'Reilly's comment only reinforces the idea that Iago's evilness confuses us all. In his analysis of the character, Richard Raatzsch opens with, "Perhaps Iago is the only person not puzzled by Iago, and there are signs in the play that he isn't entirely clear about Iago, either." He goes on to say that Iago is memorable, exciting, and universally hated by audiences, and one of those reasons may be because there seems to be no motivation for Iago's extreme actions. We can understand the jealousy he feels, but his scheme to utterly ruin the lives of nearly every other character is difficult to stomach. Iago claims he is angry that he was passed over for a promotion by Othello, which instead goes to Cassio, and also hints that he envies Othello for his wife. It seems a more logical approach would be to just kill Othello, but instead, he weaves an entire ploy to fool sweet Othello into believing Desdemona is having an affair with Cassio. The levels of manipulation Iago goes to are painful to witness. Critics have wrestled with Iago's character for centuries, and while many theories have been discussed, it still leaves the majority of audiences believing that Iago must be intrinsically evil. His various monologues throughout the play captivate readers and audiences so much so that if someone has seen a performance of the play on stage, viewers and other play enthusiasts will likely ask, "How was their Iago?" before they inquire about any other character or plot point.

J.R.R. Tolkien created some of the most infamous villains of all time in his epic fantasy, *The Lord of the Rings*. Sauron is the creator of the many rings that have been spread throughout the land, with his One Ring being the basis of the entire story. On a smaller scale, we can look at

the protagonist, Frodo Baggins, and compare him to one of the smaller villains, Gollum. Frodo is, of course, an incredible protagonist. Small-town boy, suddenly faced with a vast responsibility that he is not at all prepared for and overcoming insurmountable odds to achieve his goal of destroying The One Ring before Sauron can destroy the world. And then there is Gollum. One of the reasons Gollum makes such a good and memorable villain is because readers can empathize with him. In contrast to Iago, whom readers find difficult to figure out, Gollum's behavior is easily explained. He is violent and manipulative, but readers also know the horrible abuse Gollum has suffered at the hands of Sauron. It is clear that while Gollum may have always been troubled, his extreme behavior didn't happen until he was introduced to The One Ring, which led him through nearly 600 years of pain and compulsive behaviors.

J.K. Rowling is credited with writing the series that defined a generation. *Harry Potter* is rich with characters, but her villain is so entirely vile that he nearly overtakes the entire seven-book series. I am speaking of He-Who-Shall-Not-Be-Named, Lord Voldemort himself. Voldemort's arc is absolutely gripping. Readers first learn of him as the man who attempted to murder the Potter family but failed to kill the infant Harry Potter. As the series goes on, we learn that Lord Voldemort was once a young man named Tom Riddle who made a series of very bad choices and seems to have been born with a very serious dose of pure evil. The man manages to split his soul into eight pieces, hoping that if any of these eight items were destroyed, he could still manage to live on. His motivation lies in his obsession with "pure blood" witches and wizards. If you are unfamiliar, non-magic folk are called Muggles, and Voldemort is extremely opposed to witches and wizards poisoning their bloodlines by having children with Muggles. This causes his desire to conquer both the wizarding and Muggle worlds so that he can achieve a world of pure-blood dominance. Rowling managed to create an unparalleled villain in her series

that leaves readers longing for his defeat, and Voldemort is a very large reason why an entire generation of children lined up outside bookstores to read massive chronicles of fantasy.

Strong heroes are important to fiction if we hope to find a connection to the plot of a story, but strong villains seem to leave a weightier impression on readers. Even within this paper, there is much more to say about the villains than the heroes or anti-heroes.

We see this same phenomenon in many fairy tales. Readers don't care too much about Little Red Riding Hood, but they are enthralled by the big, bad wolf. In *Hansel and Gretel*, readers are captivated by the witch who wants to eat these innocent children. Strong villains can be just as, if not more, important and memorable as strong heroes.

### **Memorable Supporting Characters**

Behind every strong protagonist is a loyal supporting character. These characters can add intense drive to a story or provide a reader with comedic relief or a moral compass. Supporting characters sometimes hinder the protagonist in their journey, or they can be the reason the protagonist hangs on until the end. The Bastard in *The Life and Death of King John*, as mentioned in the introduction, is a good example of a strong supporting character. The story is not about him, but he is a very important part of it.

Few supporting characters can compete with the greatness that is Samwise Gamgee of Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*. Sam is always by Frodo's side, even though he has no reason to do so other than his deep loyalty to his hobbit friend. Sam is often a source of encouragement when Frodo is feeling (literally and figuratively) weighed down by the burden of The Ring, and it is clear that Frodo likely would not have completed his journey to Mount Doom without Sam. Sam is vulnerable, emotional, and, at times, the only voice of reason the reader hears. His character arch is just as complex and redeeming as Frodo's, but he receives none of the same

pomp and appreciation that Frodo receives. Luckily, readers remember Sam fondly, and most realize what an integral piece of the story he is. *Lord of the Rings* would have been very different without him.

Inigo Montoya is best known from the movie *The Princess Bride*. The movie is so well-loved that society as a whole sometimes forgets it is based on the wonderful work of literature originally written by S. Morgenstern and abridged by William Goldman. There are very few lines better remembered by humankind than Montoya's, "Hello. I am Inigo Montoya. You killed my father. Prepare to die." When we first meet him, he is part of a band of outlaws consisting of Vizzini, the Sicilian, and Fezzik, the Turkish wrestler. We quickly learn that Montoya has his own reasons for joining the troupe of outlaws, and later, he becomes one of the most beloved heroes of all time. When it comes to supporting characters, Inigo Montoya steals the show.

### **Memorable Minor Characters**

Writers may find themselves stuck on creating strong protagonists and equally strong antagonists and forget that minor characters also work to create a memorable story. Whether it be a lonely bartender who helps a hero find her way or a stranger on the street who stops to give the protagonist the time, a strong minor character in literature can be just as influential as a story's main characters.

Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* is a wonderful example of universally strong characters. The precocious Scout Finch is so well written, and I don't know anyone alive who doesn't wish they were just a little bit like her father, Atticus. But, one character that lives on in readers' memories is Boo Radley. Boo Radley lives in the neighborhood but has locked himself away in his home, which causes the children of the town to create horrible rumors and ghost

stories about the poor man. In the end, Boo steps up and protects the Finch children, and it is heavily implied that Boo Radley killed a man to do so. This minor character gives readers intrigue, and the development from a man afraid to leave his own home, to one that will (allegedly) kill a man to protect children, leaves us walking away contemplating how we as people often horribly misjudge others. This, of course, mirrors the entire major plot of the book.

This is certainly not the only time a minor character in a book has stepped up and saved the day. In the *Harry Potter* series by J.K. Rowling, Neville Longbottom is infrequently mentioned until the last book. Here, we suddenly learn Neville's entire story and how he was just as likely to be the "chosen one" as Harry Potter was. Neville stands up to Lord Voldemort and accomplishes things no one else would have done.

In *The Lord of the Rings*, Eowyn is a minor character introduced in Tolkien's second book of the series. The story in no way revolves around her, but she is the one who kills the Witch King in battle after disguising herself as a man so that she, too, can fight against the enemy.

Creating a minor character and having them eventually pull off a grand plot-saving gesture requires a writer to focus on small details of the character's development. In Boo Radley, we are given small hints throughout that he actually cares a great deal for the Finch children. Neville Longbottom is mentioned with small acts of bravery throughout the series, which makes his final actions in the book believable. Eowyn is often shown as a fierce, loyal woman who shows courage even when things look bleak. We believe these characters' actions, even if they are not a major part of the plot.

### **Why Strong Character Matter**

When we read a book, we are transported into lives and worlds that have sprung directly from a writer's imagination. Writers have the responsibility to make this world, this life, and these people real to readers. If a reader cannot transport themselves into a story, then they might close the book a few pages in and never pick it back up again. While an exciting plot and beautiful setting will certainly help move a story along, the characters within the world remain the most important to readers.

Merja Polvinen and Howard Sklar give some insight into why characters are so imperative to stories: "When we read fiction, we sometimes are given intimate access to the thoughts and feelings of characters in ways that would be impossible in our ordinary interactions with others. In fact, authors often attempt to represent characters whose minds are significantly different from their own, and in some cases different from those of most people." They are speaking of a specific character who is revealed to have intellectual disabilities, but this quote also explains why readers feel so close to imaginary characters. We see into their minds. We read their thoughts, their fears, their struggles, and their joys. We find pieces of ourselves or those that we know within the characters of books, and we respond emotionally. Fiction is not enjoyable to anyone without some kind of emotional response, and the best way to do this is by building characters that are relatable, or if not relatable, at least understandable and intriguing.

Marjorie Taylor, Sara D. Hodges, and Adèle Kohányi mention that one way writers are able to create such believable characters is through the illusion of independent agency. They describe the phenomenon of some writers believing, or at least treating, their characters as real people. Alice Walker, when writing *The Color Purple*, says that Celie and Shug would often join her for tea. She would have conversations with them, learn about them, and then she would write about them. The idea that the characters writers create might have a mind of their own and have

their own agency likely seems insane to anyone who is not a writer. But this scenario is described often. I have said it myself. I have watched characters develop and make decisions that I feel that they made for themselves, things that I never saw myself directing them toward. If a writer treats their characters as living, breathing people as opposed to figments of imagination, it naturally will encourage a realistic telling of the character, making the character and the plot itself stronger.

Readers long for emotion while reading; they want to feel a sense of identity or find something relatable to their own lives, and they want to feel that the challenges they face every day can be overcome. A character should have a clear want and a clear goal. They should have flaws. As much as we all want a hero to win, we also might want to picture ourselves grabbing a drink with that person after work. We like people because we see the flaws in them. We want to see them overcome struggles and have curve balls thrown at them because that is what readers deal with every day in their own lives. Readers want to read a book for entertainment, but they also want to read to feel something. The very best characters will make a reader feel something, and if this can be accomplished, then the rest of the story will easily fall into place.



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## RHAPSODY

## Chapter I

Guiliana de Marco was perhaps the most beautiful woman in all of Italy. No written word could possibly describe the way the sun enlightened the ebony locks of her hair and warmed her tawny skin.

Young Niccolo had tried for weeks to put together the perfect phrase to describe her eyes. He knew brown simply would not do. They were, at minimum, dark brown. He had yet to come up with a suitable word to describe dark brown.

“Nico?”

“Sable!” Nico shouted. That was it, the perfect word. He scrawled it onto a bit of parchment and shoved it into the pocket of his trousers, looking up from his seat on a flattened stone to Guiliana, who stood beside him. The lace in her gown made the tiny white wildflowers surrounding them come alive. Nico had never noticed them before, but he tended to not notice much of anything when Guiliana was around.

“What are you doing?” she asked, her brow creased and her lips pouted in mild concern. Nico scrambled to his feet, taking the hands of his love into his own. The beauty of the Napolitano countryside was dampened by the exquisite creature that stood before him. Nico squeezed her hands, which had been spared the mars of manual labor, and kissed her cheek.

"My darling," he professed, "I am merely finding the word to describe the deep beauty I find within your eyes." Guiliana was not matching his gaze. Instead, she frowned at something near Nico's ear.

"There is a bug in your hair," she said, brushing it away. "All that work, and you come up with sable?" Nico was momentarily deflated by Guiliana's clear displeasure at his word choice, but he quickly brightened.

"Would you prefer atramentous?" he asked, smirking at his choice of such pernicious vocabulary.

"I would prefer you speak the words of your heart," Guiliana answered, and she placed her hand on his chest. He held her hand there so that she might feel the beating of his heart. Though he had loved the woman for a year, he still fluttered at her touch. Her gesture filled his stomach with something like moths and his lungs with something like lead. He gazed at her, trying his best to appear adoring and not insane.

"Is this the real life?" he whispered in earnest. Guiliana's face fell.

"Nico, I must tell you something."

"My love, what troubles you?" He rested his hand on the curve of her jaw. Guiliana gnawed her bottom lip, and her gaze fell downward. "Oh, sweet Guiliana, if only my own lips could touch the delicate egress where your words first greet the summer air."

"What?" Guiliana blinked her atramentous eyes in irritation.

"I want to kiss you," Nico clarified.

"Why didn't you just say that?"

"Such simple words have no place in the glorious light—"

"Nico," Guiliana interrupted, "I'm to be married."

Nico dropped her hand, the weight of her words driving him to the ground. All feeling left his body as he tried to compose himself enough to form a reply. But even Guiliana herself became a blur as he peered past her, fixating on the treeline in the distance. Guiliana glanced

around awkwardly, then joined him on the ground to watch the treetops twitch in the wind. The skirt of her dress, pale green in color, covered his knee. He mindlessly picked at the fabric, fixating on the feeling of satin between his fingers.

“When?” asked Nico, finally.

“A fortnight,” she answered. Nico collapsed onto his back. Guiliana looked down upon him and stroked his hair from his face. “Nico,” she coaxed.

"Alack! Do not attempt to comfort me. I fear there is no escape from this cruel world that haunts me so." He threw his arm over his face, overcome with anguish.

“You’re being a touch dramatic, don’t you think?” Guiliana asked.

“Dramatic! You call me dramatic!” He threw his hands toward the sky. “Open your eyes, Guiliana! Look to the skies, Guiliana!”

Guiliana glanced upward, having no idea what Nico was going on about.

“We knew this would happen,” she said gently, “I’m the daughter of one of Italy’s wealthiest patrons. It is my duty to marry a man of similar background. My father would never consent to our marriage. You’re just a poor boy—”

“I need no sympathy!” Nico shouted.

"There is no sympathy!" she shouted back. She inhaled deeply, and Nico watched her attempt to regain her own composure. Then, with a puff of air, she said, "I'm to marry Marsilio de Medici."

“A *Medici*?” Nico spat, his mouth curling with contempt, “A Medici has won the tender hand of my love?”

Guiliana dragged one such tender hand over her face in exasperation. “Niccolo, I love you. But we knew there was no way we would be together.”

“We could run away together. Build a life. Have a family!” he bargained.

“And where would we go?” But it was not asked in interest. It was asked in what Nico recognized as pity.

"Any way the wind blows! It doesn't matter to me as long as we're together." He sat up, looking at her with frantic eyes, desperate for her to throw off the engagement and join him wherever they must go in order to be together. But Guiliana was eerily calm. How could she be so calm? Nico could feel his entire world slipping away from him, yet there sat his love, encased in sunlight, numb to the reality she had just thrust upon him. He waited for her response, but she continued to watch the horizon, chewing on her bottom lip.

"What are you thinking about?" Nico demanded. Guiliana shook her head, finally coming back to him. Her expression softened, and she touched Nico's cheek.

“It’s all going to be okay, my love,” she assured, kissing him lightly on the lips. “I have two weeks before the wedding. We can enjoy the little time we have left.”

It was not that simple for young Niccolo. He knew then that Marsilio de Medici must die.

## Chapter II

The vineyard was golden at this hour. The sun cradled low between the mountains in the distance, casting shades of rose and flaxen yellow over the crisp red of grapes not yet ready to harvest. It smelled of dirt and sour wine, but this went unnoticed by Niccolo as he toiled between the rows of crimped leaves and curled vines.

Also unnoticed was the farm cat, who prowled a few steps behind Nico until the whiskered menace rubbed against the young man's calf as he paused to ponder the utter injustice of his life.

"Oh, Freddie," Nico lamented, picking up the haggard tabby. Freddie did not much enjoy being held and balked a bit as Nico squeezed him in his arm so he could scrounge through the pocket that held the scrap of parchment he had hidden there a couple of hours before. "I finally found the perfect word to complete my poem." Nico shook the parchment to straighten the folds and held it out for the cat to see. Freddie was unimpressed. "I don't know if there's any purpose in finishing it now," Nico sighed. Freddie squirmed from the young man's arms, but upon safely reaching the ground, the cat looked up to Nico and meowed indignantly. Nico met Freddie's stare, "She's to be married."

Freddie meowed again. Nico continued to pace down the row of grapevines, checking over a few bundles of grapes as he went along. Freddie followed. Niccolo's vineyard rested in the Campania region, where the rolling hills were dotted with stone cottages not unlike his own. Narrow, winding roads cut through the hills and wrapped around the patchwork of other vineyards and golden fields, disappearing into the mountains well in the distance. Nico paused to look at the fading sea, which was just barely visible from his farm. He shook away the urge to run to the rocky cliff that kissed the sea and jump.

No. He could not yet die.

His defeat shifted into anger, which had been happening ever since he learned the news of Guiliana's engagement. Melancholy shifted to defeat, then to anger, then to anguish, then back to anger. He had experienced all of those emotions in such a cycle over the past few hours that he could hardly tell the difference between them. But he knew his heart ached, and he knew he must do something about it.

"I don't understand it," Nico went on, "I may not be a Medici, but I'm not a bad-looking man. I have a farm and a vineyard, just like they do. I'm perfectly capable of taking care of Guiliana." Nico gently squeezed a grape, testing for ripeness. Freddie meowed.

"Yes, I know the Medicis are quite wealthy. And powerful," Nico argued with the cat as if Freddie were the one to suggest the reasoning behind Guiliana's impending nuptials. "My vineyards are just as impressive as those of the Medicis, but somehow I am not the most powerful man in all of Italy." Freddie rubbed against Nico's leg again. "Yes, I know the Pope is more powerful." Nico moved on down the row, kicking up the rich, red dirt with his boot. "I don't even know if the Pope has vineyards," he grumbled.

The Medicis had been in power for more than a century. Nico did not understand the entire history of how the family came into power, but it had a great deal to do with banking and something to do with commerce and somehow culminated in one of the Medici daughters marrying a King of France and the entire family being able to rule Florence as uncrowned monarchs. The Medicis' love for the arts sparked a cultural rebirth in Florence, which then moved into all of Italy and then into the rest of Europe. Guiliana's engagement to Marsilio would certainly solidify her family into a place of power. Nico knew the couple would likely be married



in Naples, where Guiliana's family lived, but then she would surely be taken away to Florence. Nico would never see her again.

He had spent the past year loving her, ever since their first meeting in the streets of Naples proper. Guiliana had slipped away from her chaperone and was giggling like a child as she hid in an alleyway. Nico had taken that same alleyway as a shortcut between two streets on his way back home, and thus was their introduction. She was crouched behind a stack of crates, leaving her hidden from the street but vulnerable to the alleyway. He cleared his throat as he approached, not wanting to startle her with his unknown presence. She had turned abruptly, frightened at first, but after sizing him up with a quick glance, she determined he was of no threat to her freedom. She grabbed his arm and pulled him down beside her, pressing a finger against her smile so that he wouldn't give her away. She charmed him immediately with her bright beauty and effortless wit, and they spent hours that day avoiding her chaperone so that she might have just a few hours to be something other than a wealthy man's daughter.

Once the day was over, they continued to meet in secret in various parts of the city and countryside. Niccolo never understood why Guiliana chose to love him, but she was equally charmed by the poor farm boy as he had been with her. His intelligence and dramatics proved attractive to the young Guiliana, who at 17 was still two years Nico's junior. He could read and write and speak with valor, but he was not masked in the same way the wealthy men were. He was authentic. And though he did not hold the pedigree of a Medici, Nico did not lack the handsome features desired by the young women of Naples. His skin was darkened by sunlight, his eyes dark like gunpowder, and his facial features angled like a crow's. He was thin due to the inevitable hunger he sustained as a peasant's son, but he was strong in a way most farmers are. His black hair curled like ram's wool, wild and unfettered about his neck. He did not want for

feminine affection. But the affections he did desire—most desired—were about to be plucked from him by a damned Medici. Nico wouldn't allow this to happen. It couldn't happen. He couldn't lose his Guiliana.

Nico recalled then that his father had left behind a pistol when he died. He had no memory of his father, as he had died when Nico was merely a babe. But he did remember the gun, as it was currently tucked into a chest in Nico's bedroom, untouched for nearly two decades. It was an ornate flintlock pistol with a barrel like a bugler's horn. Nico never knew why his mother held onto it, for it was far too exhausting to load and much too inaccurate to take care of the frequent vermin plaguing the field. But Nico ran the scenario through his mind: if he could get close enough to the Medici boy, a shot would surely kill him. Guiliana would then be free to marry Nico, which was surely what they both wanted. Niccolo had two weeks to figure it out. Two weeks to discern the best way to get a Medici alone. His own life would be spared this monstrosity, and he would win the hand of the most beautiful woman in all of Italy.

## Chapter III

"What are you doing, Niccolo?" Nico's mother, Emilia, sat by the window in their cottage, mending a shirt. It was a familiar sight. Emilia had spent so many evenings in that old rocking chair that little dents had been left in the dirt floor from her constant rocking as she darned socks or patched torn clothing. Nico always found the way his mother yanked her sewing thread through the fabric to be a bit off-putting. It was as if the woman had some kind of vendetta against cloth that had the audacity to show wear.

Freddie perched by Emilia's side, ears perked, head darting as he looked out the window at the birds that danced on the lawn. He was no doubt plotting their demise but was much too fat and lazy to actually attempt to catch them.

Niccolo stopped his hurried walk from his bedroom to the back door, looking down at the pistol he had pulled from the chest by his bed.

"Nothing," he responded, and tried to move once more to the back door.

"Nothing," Emilia mimicked, lowering her voice and furrowing her brows. Nico paused and turned toward her, annoyed by her mimicry. Emilia placed the mending on her lap and eyed her son with suspicion. "Why do you have your father's gun?"

Niccolo had yet to think this far into his plan. He hadn't considered what kind of excuse he would give his mother should she catch him mapping out a murder. His plan hadn't evolved much further than step one: acquire a weapon. Step two: kill the Medici. He met his mother's judgemental gaze and struggled to come up with any kind of intelligent phrase.

"Rats," he offered. His eyes darted toward the back door, then quickly back up to his mother.

"Rats?" Emilia questioned.

“There are rats in the wine cellar.”

“And you’re going to shoot them?” Emilia raised an eyebrow.

“Am I not a capable marksman, Mother?” he questioned, “Do you not believe I can rid the cellar of the infernal rat population?”

“Of course you can’t.” Her quick response offended Nico. Such little faith this woman had in her son. “I have watched you miss the literal broad side of a barn with a slingshot.”

“That was years ago, Mother,” Nico defended, “I’m sure I could hit it now.”

Emilia crossed her arms. “Do you even know how to use that thing?” Niccolo looked back to the pistol, turning it over in his hand to better study it.

“I can figure it out,” he shrugged.

Emilia scoffed, pushing herself out of her rocking chair. She was a small woman, but her size made her no less intimidating to the son, who stood a head taller than she. “Let me see it.” She held out her hand.

“Mother, you can’t—”

“Don’t tell me what I can’t do,” she snapped, “Give me the gun.”

Nico startled a bit at her veracity, feeling the warmth of her admonishment flush his face. He handed her the weapon, bowing his head as he did so. She stepped over to a drawer by the stove and rummaged around, first pulling out a black pouch, then a small rod, then some scraps of cloth, and finally a handful of lead bullets. She shuffled them onto the table, shoving the existing clutter to the side, while Nico watched with mild confusion. He had never seen any of those items before. Did she procure them through some sort of witchcraft, or had he simply never looked into the random drawers in the kitchen?

She motioned Nico to her, never looking up from the items she collected, and Nico obliged. He watched as she first pulled the hammer of the pistol halfway down, producing a click as it locked into place. She poured the contents of the pouch into the barrel, and the smell of sulfur and metal clouded the air. Nico easily identified the contents as gunpowder, even if he hadn't been able to see the black powder spattering into the barrel.

“You put gunpowder down the barrel,” she instructed, then wrapped a bullet in a scrap of cloth and pushed it into the barrel with the small rod. “Then you load the bullet.” She handed the gun back to Nico. “You’ll have to pour a little more gunpowder into that pan below the flint.” She pointed to the little plate that was exposed by the cocked hammer. “Pull the hammer back the rest of the way and shoot.” Nico looked at the gun, then looked back to his mother.

“How do you know how to use a gun?” he asked.

"Rats," she answered simply, then went back to her chair. Nico didn't move for a moment, waiting for Emilia to say more. But she had already picked up her mending and was back to yanking her thread through the fabric. If he found the constant stabbing and yanking off-putting before, now it was just unsettling after watching the woman load a gun with the dexterity of a Roman soldier. He waited for her to say more, but she went on with her mending as if Nico were no longer in existence. She clearly did not want to know her son's secrets any more than she wanted to elaborate on her own.

## Chapter IV

It took a few days of practice for Nico to get a handle on how to shoot the pistol his father left behind accurately. Much to his mother's disappointment, no rats had been harmed, but a single tree stump in the sloped yard would no longer be a threat to the safety of their home. If he could hit a tree, he was hopeful he could hit a man.

It was well past midnight now, officially the eve of Giuliana's wedding. Niccolo lay awake in his bed, a candle burning by his side. It had burnt down into an abomination of a thing, wax pooling around the stub of candle like bog water surrounding a broken laurel. Shadows twisted on the ceiling as Nico methodically tossed the pouch of lead bullets into the air and caught it again, finding comfort in the dull rattle it made every time the pouch met his palm.

There came a rapping at the window, and Nico turned his head instinctively. The pouch clinked onto his chest as he tried to decipher what stood just outside, distorted by the warped glass.

"Giuliana," he whispered. He scrambled onto his feet and pushed open the window, offering his hand to help her climb inside. "What are you doing here?"

She thrust herself into his embrace with such force that Nico nearly lost his footing. Her thin arms pressed into his ribcage, and she held little regard for the fact that she was standing on his foot.

"I just wanted to see you," she breathed. Nico still hadn't recovered from her sudden appearance at his bedroom window, wearing naught but a nightgown, with her dark hair wild and tumbling down her back.

"Are you okay? Are you hurt?" he asked. She shook her head, then looked up at him with an expression that seemed pensive, unsure. Nico watched her with concern. This anxious

creature was nothing like the unshakeable woman he had grown to love. He was afraid that at any moment, she would bolt or simply turn into mist. She took his face in her hands and pulled him into a kiss. Nico longed to melt into her, but he pulled away, unable to shake his concern. She sat down on the bed, not seeming to notice that he had broken their kiss. He remained standing, studying her, waiting for her to speak. When no explanation came, he spoke again, "This isn't like you. What is going on, my love?" He thought he caught the glimmer of tears in her eyes, but they dissipated just as quickly as they came.

"I don't know if Marsilio will ever love me the way that you do," she said suddenly. "You are a good and kind man. What if he is not?" Nico didn't know what to say to her.

"There is still time for us to run away," he offered.

"I don't know that I can do that," she answered, "And I don't know if I want to."

"Why?" He sat down next to her, taking her hands into his own.

"I've seen love grow in these kinds of arrangements. My mother and father were married in much the same way. I do believe I can grow to love Marsilio, and he will learn to love me." Her words wounded him, but he didn't want her to see him upset.

"Only a fool could not love you," Nico answered, his voice breaking.

"And I have two little sisters I need to think of. My marriage to a Medici can almost guarantee they will also live good and happy lives with good men that can care for them." She wasn't even looking at Nico, but past him, lost somewhere in her own thoughts.

"That is a great weight for you to carry," he said. Then, it was silent between the two of them. Nico didn't know what she wanted or why she was telling him all these things. His heart ached, wanting more than anything for her to shed the weight of her responsibilities and run away with him. He glanced downwards and noticed the box containing his father's pistol sticking

out from under the bed. That certainly wasn't something he wanted to explain to Guiliana in this vulnerable moment. He pushed it back into hiding with his foot, and when he looked up again, Guiliana was untying the strip of fabric at her neckline.

"Guiliana—" he began, but she silenced him with a kiss. He pulled away from her, trying to steady the pounding of his heart. This wasn't a good idea. "I don't—"

"Please," she pressed, her breath warm against his chin. "Tonight, I wish to be with the one I love." Her gown slipped to expose her bare shoulder. She kissed him again. "Please let me have you, just for tonight."

The candle snuffed out, releasing a ribbon of smoke and darkening the room. Unable to deny her, Niccolo fell into Guiliana's embrace.



## Chapter V

*I speak of love awake,*

*I speak of love in my dreams,*

*To the water, the shadows, the mountains,*

*To the flowers, the grass, the fountains.*

*-Mozart, The Marriage of Figaro*

Nico closed his eyes, leaning against the stone wall of whatever building that rested between him and Marsilio de Medici. Hidden in an alleyway, he waited. The wedding of Marsilio and Guiliana would take place within the hour. Niccolo was still reeling from the night Guiliana snuck into his room, allowing him to hold her for what he feared was the last time. She had remained until dawn threatened to creep over the mountains, then slipped out like a thief. By the time she left, she seemed to have made peace with her upcoming wedding and the decisions other men had made for her. But Nico had not.

Now, the wedding had taken over a large section of downtown Naples. Though the ceremony would be held in the cathedral at the city's center, the streets were filled with people hoping to catch sight of the renowned Medici family and the beautiful bride. An alley connected the streets between the groom's quarters and the Church, and Nico hoped he had chosen an apt hiding place, a place most likely to see Marsilio as he approached the location of the wedding. His entire plan would crumble if Marsilio went with a less obvious avenue to the cathedral, but it was a risk Nico had to take if he hoped to succeed in killing the man who had stolen away his love.

Nico breathed deeply, his father's pistol hanging limply in his hand at his hip. Then, the breaths slowed as he tried to compensate for the agitation of his beating heart.

*I speak of love awake*, he mouthed the words into air dense with the smell of piss and sweat, baked by warm sun and stagnant within the gap between the buildings. Guiliana loved the opera. *The Marriage of Figaro* often sweetened her lips, but now it tasted bitter on Nico's tongue. It was the story of two young lovers who betrayed the commands of a Count and married through acts of manipulation, and knowing so filled Nico with a sense of self-righteousness. He could not help but notice the parallels between Figaro's life and his own, which only fueled his decision to kill the Medici boy. Why else would Guiliana sing to him so often if not to encourage him to act in the ways of Figaro? Had she been pushing for this all along?

Nico opened his eyes, studying a rat scraping through the garbage. Rats had witnessed the first ignition of the weapon in the wine cellar, and now rats would witness its last. Smirking at the irony, he poured a bit of gunpowder into the plate below the flint of the pistol, just as his mother had told him. *I speak of love in my dreams*. His hands trembled. He cradled the weapon to his chest, careful not to spill any of the powder, as if the pistol were a sleeping child during Mass. He could hear music playing in the courtyard of the Church: wedding music. Guiliana would soon be there, dressed in white, her face hidden behind delicate lace and curls of her dark hair. But if Niccolo succeeded, there would be no bridegroom to meet her there.

A figure moved around the corner, and Nico pressed himself into the stone wall, veiled just enough by the shadows to go unnoticed by passersby. It was Marsilio de Medici, dressed in extravagance and ridiculous pantaloons, appearing lost in this corridor between the street and courtyard that held his bride. Nico's breath caught in his lungs, punctuating the flowing music that echoed through the alleyway. There was no time.

Blinded by rage and foolish convictions, Nico fell into obscurity. His mouth had gone numb; his fingers, too. The blood pulsing through him caused his head to throb with every

heartbeat. It took everything in him to raise the gun toward the unsuspecting figure. He could not tell if his finger reached the trigger; there was no feeling there. Marsilio met his eyes and opened his mouth to shout. Nico hesitated a half a breath, everything in him begging him not to pull that trigger. Was there still time for him to slip away? To abandon this foolish plot and return home to his mother?

A deafening crack rang through the alleyway. The rats scattered. And the Medici slumped to the ground. Nico stood rigid with the gun in front of him, gripping it so tightly that his knuckles had gone white. Smoke curled around the barrel, dissipating in the air. It smelled of sulfur.

The Medici lay dead on the ground before him, blood permeating the fabric of his costume, spilling onto the dirt around him. Nico heard footsteps quickening toward him, but he could not convince his legs to move. Even as more figures rounded the corner, Nico could not lift his damned feet from the walkway.

“Lorenzo!” one shouted as he fell onto the ground next to his brother.

Lorenzo, Nico realized. He had killed Lorenzo. He shot the wrong Medici.

More men were approaching him, all dressed in the same ridiculous costume, all glancing first at Lorenzo and then to Nico, who was now begging his body to react and leave, goddammit, leave.

“Get a doctor!” Marsilio shouted. Marsilio’s words gave Nico the jolt he needed. He fled. “And catch the boy!”

Nico flung himself from the alleyway and into the crowd that had gathered. Nico dropped his gun, squeezing through the people who seemed completely unaware of what had happened.

Lost in chaos, protected by the blissful ignorance of peasants with nothing better to do, Nico bullied through the elbows and shoulders and tattling toddlers. He had to get home.

Nico reached the edge of Naples proper, where fields and vineyards and stone landscaping surrounded him, and emptied the contents of his stomach behind a patch of laurel. He was out of the city, but there was not much to hide him out in the countryside. He didn't even know what continued to carry him as he ran further up the dirt path into the mountains that would lead him back to his farm. His legs were stone, and his lungs screamed for air, but he could not feel anything. His mind remained in the alleyway, watching Lorenzo fall to the ground, blood spilling from the wound in his chest.

Nico reached the rocky terrain of Comperia, the region outside Naples proper, and he stopped, collapsing behind a pillar of gray stone left behind by millennia of shifting and eroding earth. His tongue adhered to the roof of his mouth, dry from the exertion. He could not stop for long; he needed water and rest and the calming presence of his mother. His mother would know what to do. Emilia always knew what to do.

## Chapter VI

Nico was weak by the time he reached the cottage, but he pressed forward into the home with enough rage to startle Emilia from her seat at the table.

“Nico?” she called, her face contorted with concern.

“Mama.” He wanted to cry her name, but it came out as a whisper, the sound of his voice locked beneath his tired throat. He fell into her arms, and for all the love she had for him, Emilia was at first put off by the warm sweat that dampened her son and could not quite return the intense embrace she found herself forced into. She eased him into the kitchen chair, trying to avoid the mess of wet curls that threatened to brush her cheek.

“What’s happened?” she asked, turning to fetch the boy some water.

“Mama,” he whimpered, his eyes wild as she handed him a cup. He drank heartily, water dripping down his chin and mixing with the sweat that soaked his shirt.

“What happened?” she demanded. Nico had never been afraid of his mother. Intimidated, yes. But never afraid. Except for this moment, when he had no idea how to break to his mother the horrible deed he had just committed. “Nico!” she shouted.

“I just killed a man!” Nico panicked. Emilia instinctively stepped back.

“And?” she asked.

“What do you mean, 'and,'” he mimicked, “This seems like something you should be alarmed by.”

“I know you didn’t take your father’s gun to shoot rats, Niccolo. I am not a stupid woman,” she answered.

“Why didn’t you try to stop me, then?” he shouted.

“Don’t blame me for your own foolish behavior,” she growled. “I didn’t stop you because some men deserve to die.”

Her words startled him. It was an incredibly unsettling thing to hear from the mouth of his mother. He took a breath, “This one didn’t.”

“What are you talking about?” she asked. Nico covered his face with his hands, reducing himself to sobs. “Nico,” she prodded with a false calmness, “What did you do?”

Nico heard the anger rising in his mother’s words, felt the distance between them, noted a look that rivaled disgust on her face, and an eruption in his stomach caused him to fight down his own bile. Emilia gripped his shoulder, giving him a stern shake. Nico’s mind no longer seemed to be part of his body. “Niccolo,” she spoke through gritted teeth, her voice rumbling like sustained thunder during a storm. “What did you do?”

Nico appeared as a corpse. His face was devoid of color, his eyes cold and unblinking. But he could hear his mother's voice speaking, and his eyes found hers.

“I killed a man.”

The air cooled around them, and Emilia dropped her hands from his shoulders as she lowered herself into the chair adjacent to him. "I'm going to need a little more information here, son," she said. Nico opened his mouth to respond, then closed it again. "Nico," she pressed, anxiety growing in her voice.

"I was in the city, and I shot someone," he said.

“Was there any... reasoning... behind this?” she asked.

“Well, yes. I didn’t just kill someone with complete disregard for volition.”

“Then what happened?” she asked again.

“I’ve been with a woman for the past year who told me two weeks ago that she was betrothed to another.” He wrung his hands together as if he were a child admitting to some mindless folly.

“And?” Emilia coaxed, though her expression exposed that she likely already knew where this story was headed.

“I... sought to kill her suitor. Today. Her wedding day,” he continued.

“Of course,” Emilia scoffed. “You men have no more brains than sense in your skulls.” She crossed her arms, daring him to continue. “So what now? The wedding is canceled, you and your lover intend to run away together?”

“I don’t believe the wedding was canceled,” Nico went on, chancing a glance to his mother’s face. She was not pleased.

“So you didn’t kill a man?”

“No, I did,” he stumbled, “I meant to kill Marsilio de Medici—”

“You tried to kill Marsilio de Medici?” she hissed.

“Yes, but—”

“The son of the most powerful man in Italy?”

“He’s not the most powerful—”

“Yes, yes, the Pope. We all know about the Pope,” she waved her hand in the air, dismissing him.

“I didn’t kill Marsilio.” Nico clenched his fists; the feeling was finally coming back to his fingers.

“Then what exactly is the problem here?”

“I accidentally killed his brother, Lorenzo,” Nico admitted.

“How did you accidentally kill Lorenzo?” Emilia’s eyes were widened, her jaw set.

"They look very similar, Mothe!" he retaliated. "He turned the corner, and I thought it was Marsilio, so I shot him."

Emilia pursed her lips, clearly attempting to quell her anger. She was not successful. “You idiot child.” She spun around, the floorboards quivering as she stomped to a cabinet in a corner. The cabinet doors threatened to break off their hinges as she tore them open, ripping out a large canvas sack with a leather strap. “You couldn’t even kill the right damn Medici.”

Her words cut him, and he sat dumbly at the table as he watched his mother besiege the cottage, haphazardly shoving things into the bag. Articles of clothing, food, water bags... nothing seemed safe from her maddened grip.

“Mama,” Nico begged.

“No!” she shouted, looking at him with an emotion somewhere between rage and fear. “You have thrown your entire life away. Do you realize this?”

Nico's lip quivered, and he swallowed back the vulnerability, attempting to appear unphased by her words. But his mother had every right to be enraged with him, and his effort to hide his own emotions failed him.

"Mama," he whimpered, begging her to take pity. Emilia paused, breathing deeply to regain control of her fear. She placed the bag into his arms, and Nico could see tears in her eyes threatening to spill onto her cheeks. "I didn't mean to make you cry," Nico said.

“You have to go,” Emilia quipped. “They will find you here, and they will kill you.” The notion turned Nico’s desire for pity into a fight against the hot anxiety that now numbed his limbs.



“Where do I go?” He stood from the table, not realizing he was doing so, and slung the bag over his shoulder.

"Spain." Emilia crossed her arms once more, but Nico could not tell whether it was out of anger or a form of self-soothing. "You will be safe in Spain."

“How will I be safe in Spain?”

"Because it isn't Italy." She said the words sharply, with authority he hadn't heard since he was a child. Then, her expression softened. "And it's lovely this time of year."

“What about you?” Nico asked.

“I will be fine.”

“Mama—”

“You must go. Now,” Emilia cut him short but placed her hand gently on her son’s face. “I love you.” A hard lump formed in Nico’s throat. He had never been away from his mother. He could not recall a single day without her. And now he was just to pick up and move to Spain? Without her? When would he see her again? He never realized how heavily he relied on the stability his mother provided until he was suddenly faced with the possibility of never seeing her again.

“I love you,” he choked.

“Write to me when you can. So that I know you are safe.” She kissed his cheek.

“I will.”

“Now go.”

Nico slung the bag over his shoulder, and without knowing what else to do, he approached the back door.

“Wait,” Emilia called. Nico stopped, hoping she would tell him to stay. Hoping she knew of some way to get him out of this without leaving the country. Those hopes were quickly dashed as she picked up a pair of boots. “You should probably change your shoes.”

## Chapter VII

Niccolo woke three days later in a room he didn't recognize. Warm morning light streamed through a window carved into the brick walls covered in yellowing plaster. The room was empty, besides the bed he occupied and a small end table sitting haphazardly next to it.

He attempted to orient himself, but a pounding in his head made it difficult to remember what had happened the night before. The last he could recall, he had arrived in Rome as night fell. He attempted to find an inn to rest when a lovely young woman offered him a cup of wine.

"Oh, god." Nico was naked. He peered at himself under the blankets to confirm. The door to the room swung open, and Nico covered himself to the chin with the blanket. A beautiful woman, clothed in a tunic that clearly exposed the shape of her breasts and the skin of her thigh, shadowed the doorway.

"You must leave," she said simply.

"What kind of debauchery did you force upon myself last night?" Nico questioned. The woman raised her eyebrow, seeming just like Nico's mother, which was not the image he wished to have while naked before this siren.

"If I recall, young bard, you drank four cups of wine, attempted to play a jolly tune on a stolen lute, and had to be carried by myself and three other courtesans away from a fountain which you threatened to jump into."

The events began to solidify in Nico's mind. None of this explained his current state of undress.

"Why am I naked?" he asked.

"You smelled," she answered.

“But we didn’t—” he trailed off, afraid to voice the suggestion that he might have allowed himself to be deflowered in what he now realized was a brothel.

“God, no,” she scoffed. “You couldn’t afford me.”

Nico somehow felt simultaneously relieved and insulted. “Then, I suppose, I should thank you—”

“You need to leave,” the woman repeated. “There are those in Rome who will actually pay for this bed.” She disappeared behind the door and snapped it closed, leaving Niccolo alone once more.

He found his clothes hanging on a hook by the window and realized the courtesan wasn't wrong: his clothes did indeed smell. Not a shocking revelation, as he had been walking through the Italian summer for the past three days without so much as a splash in the river. Rome was known for its beautiful public baths, and as he slipped out the back door of the brothel, he determined before he moved onward in his journey, he should likely take advantage of a good soak.

The sun still crept close to the horizon, but the Roman streets were already bustling with people. He passed near the city's forum, where many had gathered to shop and seek entertainment. The bathhouse was easy enough to find, and he slipped inside. He had never been inside a bathhouse and was a bit overwhelmed by all he saw. The enclosed space at the entrance continued down a closed pathway with small changing rooms, which he headed to after paying a few meager coins. He could hear the soft flow of water and the muffled roar of furnaces as he changed, and once he had undressed, he stumbled naked into the open-air facility that housed several different bathing options. It was not yet crowded, so he had his pick of where to go and

decided immediately on one of the heated baths, where only two others relaxed, scraping olive oil from their glistening skin, completely oblivious to anything else.

Nico was not quite as comfortable with his nakedness as the Romans, but he quickly overcame his sense of shame once his body submerged into the hot waters. He didn't realize how sore he was until suddenly all his muscles released, and he spent several minutes just allowing the waters to consume him. It almost seemed a chore then to actually wash himself, and since soap was such a rare luxury, he took the olive oil at the side of the bath and did the same as the others: smoothed it over his skin, then scraped it all off, along with the layers of dirt and sweat that had accumulated over the past few days.

As more people trickled in, he again grew uncomfortable and reluctantly left the warm waters for the frigidarium. The cold air inside cooled him down and dried him off, leaving him feeling more refreshed than any time he could ever remember. He regretted having to put his clothes back on, as they almost made him feel dirty again, but there was not much else he could do unless he found a stream to wash them in, as well.

He wasn't sure where to go once he left the bathhouse, but he was quite taken by the goings on in the forum. He wandered around, buying himself a piece of fruit and observing the performers that peppered the streets. Several people had paused to view the antics of a street clown dressed in black garb and wearing a white mask. Nico watched him as well, amused by the clear portrayal of Scaramouche, a character in a play he had seen before back in Naples.

“What say you?” the clown demanded, hiding behind his cape like a villain.

“Dance for us, Scaramouche!” someone from the crowd shouted. The clown straightened and began to dance in such a way that Nico had never seen before.

"No, no," someone else refused, "Do the waltz!" The clown fluidly formed into a waltz, dancing with an invisible partner.

"Saltarello!" another called. Again, the clown began the dance with no partner.

"Will you do the fandango?" Nico shouted, and the clown stopped abruptly. He turned to face Nico, standing regally with his hands clasped behind his back.

"Oh, no, my boy. I will not do a dance of the Spaniards."

It was then that a man began to juggle a series of glass vases, pulling the attention away from the clown. No expression could be seen behind the clown's mask, but he began to pack away the few props he had back into a trunk. His back was turned, and Nico approached him.

"Excuse me." Nico was close enough now to touch him.

"Jesus!" the clown startled and whipped back around to face Niccolo. The abrupt turn caused his cape to somehow catch around Nico's arm. The two attempted to release the cape, but the struggle to free it only seemed to cause the cape to wrap more tightly. After a panicked dance to unhitch the cape, the clown stopped abruptly and yanked the fabric free, smoothing it back over his shoulder. "You can't sneak up on a man like that." The clown pulled off his mask, exposing features that Nico determined were decidedly Spanish. Nico was still a bit put off by the cape incident and stuttered the beginnings of an apology. "Are you dumb, boy? Spit it out!" the clown shouted.

"Your performance was very good," Nico answered dumbly. The clown rolled his eyes and turned back to his trunk.

"Thanks."

"Have you been performing for long?" Nico asked. The clown huffed and turned back to Nico.

“What do you want?” he demanded. Nico swallowed hard, suddenly nervous around this weirdly aggressive entertainer.

“I don’t know,” Nico admitted. “I’m sorry I bothered you. I’ve had a very long week.” Nico turned to step away from the clown, tending to his wounded pride.

“Wait,” the clown grumbled. Nico perked and looked back. “My name is Borso, and I’ve been performing for a very long time,” he said gently, trying to muster a bit of sympathy for the haggard boy.

“The crowd seemed pleased,” Nico responded.

“Not as pleased as they were with the man tossing around some vases.” The clown shouted the last part pointedly toward the juggler, who smirked but showed no other signs of hearing what was shouted.

“Common folk are often fooled by common gimmicks,” Nico shrugged. Borso studied the boy with mild suspicion.

“Who are you?” Borso asked after a moment. Nico looked around cautiously, paranoid of a danger he could not yet place.

“Niccolo. I’m from Naples.”

“Naples?” Borso questioned. “Wine country.”

“I suppose,” Nico answered.

“Do you make wine, boy?”

“On occasion.”

“Do you have any of that wine on you?” Borso pressed. Nico pulled at the wine flask hung around his shoulder.

“I do.”

“Well, give us a little of that, and I’ll forgive your transgressions,” Borso countered.

“What transgressions?” Nico pulled the flask back again and tucked it protectively under his arm.

“You’re a nuisance,” Borso answered shortly. Now Nico studied Borso, whose expression remained flat. He couldn’t get a read on the clown, but Nico was young and quite dumb, so he decided to trust him.

"Fine." He pulled the top from the wine flask and offered it to Borso, who drank it as if it were a duty, then handed it back with a frown. He nodded his thanks, and Nico tucked it away once more.

“If you help me carry my trunk back, I’ll feed you some lunch,” Borso offered. Nico wasn’t sure when he last ate, but he knew he was hungry now, and he didn’t feel like he could refuse a free meal. He took the clown’s trunk by a handle and extended his hand.

“Then, after you.” Borso scoffed, but appeared to be amused, and the two set off away from the forum into a series of alleyways. Borso opened a door hidden in the dark below what Nico assumed was a bakery, and the two ducked inside.

Borso's home consisted of a single room filled to the brim with clutter. It was dark, the only light came through a single, small window near the ceiling where only the feet of passersby could be seen. Various props lined the walls, and many were thrown into a random corner. A particularly frightening puppet hung from the ceiling, appearing to Nico as a man hanging from a noose, and he startled, looking away, only for his eyes to land on a series of gnarled masks hanging on a wall. Borso shoved past him, unbothered by Nico's hesitation, and went to the stove to the left of the door.



“Just set it there,” Borso instructed, nodding indiscriminately toward the window. It took him a moment to realize the clown was speaking of the trunk still clutched in Nico’s hand. He put it down where instructed and startled again when more puppets peered at him from behind another stack of trunks.

“Tea?” Borso asked, placing a kettle on the stove.

"Please," Nico answered, glancing away from the puppets. Borso watched the kettle for a moment, frowning. He didn't appear particularly upset about anything; his face was just fixed that way. He grunted at the kettle as if frustrated by the time it was taking to heat, then turned his attention to pulling out some hard cheese, lumps of bread, and dried meat from the cupboard above his head. He set them down absentmindedly, then went back to the kettle.

Nico tried to refrain from grabbing whatever was closest to him. His stomach churned and ached with hunger, but if Emilia taught him anything, it was first, how to load a pistol and second, how to exercise proper table manners. Finally, the tea was ready, and Borso poured it into a set of chipped cups, signaling it was now safe for Nico to eat. Borso kept the frown as he ate, glancing at Nico every so often like a guard observing a man eating his last meal.

“Where are you headed, boy?” he asked. Nico paused, suddenly chewing his food very slowly.

“Spain,” Nico answered. Borso raised an eyebrow.

“What’s in Spain?”

“I—” Nico paused again. “I don’t know.”

“Maybe a better question would be: why are you leaving Italy?”

Nico looked at the clown, who didn't look much like a clown anymore. He had scars on his face as if he had been slashed with a knife. His hands were scarred, as well, and rough,

knotted, with dirt staining the cracks in his knuckles. He looked like a man who had done his own share of running.

“I killed a man,” Nico responded, and was unable to meet the clown’s eyes for a moment.

“Everyone has killed a man,” Borso dismissed, and took a bite from one of the loaves of bread. “Not worth running away over.” Nico was a bit taken aback by Borso’s cavalier approach to murder.

“Not quite.” Nico could feel the anxiety building in his chest, wondering if this street clown might possibly lead to his downfall. But Borso didn’t appear to be entirely innocent of crime himself. “Lorenzo Medici,” Nico whispered. The only indication of alarm Borso showed was the slight hesitation of his cheese-filled fist to his mouth.

“That’ll do it,” Borso said. He took a moment to chew his bite, then looked at Nico with dark eyes. “I’ll take you to Spain.”

“Why would you take me to Spain?” Nico questioned. Borso shrugged.

“My sister has been writing constantly, wanting me to come visit my nephews. This is as good an excuse as any.” Nico nodded to himself, not sure how else to respond. “Do you know anything about performing?” Borso asked.

“Does a flower know to drink from the light of the sun?” Nico returned. Borso looked to the boy, his heavy brow unamused.

“What?” Borso asked.

“A flower does not need to be taught to follow the sun. It sprung from the ground with the knowledge to do so. Just as I did not need to be taught to perform, I sprung from the womb of my mother already knowing how.”

“Well, that’s a... visceral image,” Borso answered, “And not at all how performing works. But I suppose I can have you carry the trunk for a denari.”

“You want me to perform with you?”

“I want you to carry my trunk,” Borso corrected.

“I thought we were going to Spain.”

"We need money to get there, boy," Borso dismissed. Nico watched the clown, waiting to see if he would say more. But Borso appeared to have lost interest in the conversation and continued his meal in silence, not even bothering to glance his way anymore.

His dismissal reminded him of the way his mother often did the same, and he thought then that Emilia and the clown would likely get along quite well.

## Chapter VIII

Every day for two weeks Nico carried Borso's trunk up to the forum while Borso put on his shows. And every day Borso handed the boy a denari, which Nico stored away in his purse, knowing he'd need the money once he arrived in Spain. After a few days, Borso began to drag Nico into his performances. He was always the fool, which Nico found ironic, as Borso was already a fool. A fool's fool, Nico began to call himself, but he played the part well.

"There is a young lady over there that is eyeing for your affections," Borso suggested. The day was bright, and the sun reflected painfully from the stone forum. Borso was peering behind Nico's shoulder, bidding him to have a look. Nico turned his head, the bells on his fool's hat jingling, and noticed the woman Borso spoke of. He quickly turned back to Borso.

"I can't," Nico said simply, his mouth forming a thin line.

"You can't go dance with a beautiful woman?" Borso questioned.

"You know my heart belongs to another," Nico said. Borso flicked one of the bells on Nico's hat.

"Yes, and your love is currently keeping her *husband's* bed warm." Nico flinched at Borso's strong words, but Borso continued to watch him from beneath his heavy brow. "Go dance with the young woman." Nico was still unsure. "Dance with her and you can keep whatever coin she gives you."

Nico sighed through his nose, glancing again to the young woman clearly eyeing him in the background. He did desperately need the money, whatever little bit she might give him.

"Fine," he agreed, and turned away before Borso could respond.

Nico approached her with an exaggerated bow, extending his hand to her. Those gathered around clapped, egging him on. The young woman responded with a small curtsy, then placed

her own porcelain hand in his. It had been a long time since he'd danced with a woman, he had never even danced with Guiliana. It was uncomfortable at first, but the young woman smiled at him brightly, laughing as he spun her around. The dance became natural, familiar, comfortable, and when the dance stopped and the applause followed Nico recognized the feeling in his heart as *joy*. Oh, how long it had been since he felt joy. The young woman curtsied, and Nico bowed, and they smiled at one another.

“You dance well, fool,” she said as she pressed a coin to his palm.

“As do you,” he answered with a nod. He noted her curly hair and blue eyes, the way her lips pressed together as she tried to hide her grin. Was she embarrassed? “Are you well?” he asked, taking her hand gently.

“Oh, quite,” she answered. “You’re a very handsome fool, as well.” She brushed her lips against his cheek then went back to a woman that Nico assumed was her mother. She waved as they walked away, and Nico paused as he tried to decipher whatever feeling reverberated in his heart. Then he shook his head, focusing again on Guiliana. Guiliana was his love, he would find her and they would be together. He could not distract himself with limerence. When he turned back toward Borso the clown was waiting with a smirk, clearly very proud of his own involvement in the previous interaction.

“Let’s go,” Nico said before anything else could be mentioned. He pulled the hat from his head and began shoving props into the trunk, feeling flustered for reasons he didn’t understand.

“What’s the hurry?” Borso asked.

“I’m ready to go.”

Borso clamped a large hand over Nico's shoulder in a gesture that felt fatherly, but not quite comforting. "It was just a dance, boy," he said. Nico straightened, still washed with emotions he couldn't place.

"I know. I don't know what's wrong with me."

"Let's get you something for your nerves," Borso offered. Nico nodded, gripping the handle of the trunk. They left the forum, finding a tavern nestled in one of the many side streets of Rome. The *caupona* was nothing extravagant, but the dusty stone walls were already reverberating with the chatter of patrons crowding the marble bar. Natural light flooded the pale stone, and a few candles lit the back of the *caupona* so none were left in the dark. Nico and Borso sat down at the bar, and it was not long before a stew made from onions and turnips paired with cups of wine appeared in front of them.

"I'm sorry," Nico said suddenly. The pair hadn't spoken since they left the forum.

"No need," Borso answered, broth dripping down his chin.

"That woman was very beautiful," Nico continued.

"She was," Borso nodded.

"And she danced with such grace." Nico took a sip of wine, but curled his lip at the flavor. It was not like the wine they made in Naples.

"They do that," Borso conquered.

"Do what?" Nico asked.

"Women. They're beautiful and graceful and drive men to do things we'd never do if we weren't made wild by their aforementioned beauty and grace." He looked at Nico, wiping his chin with the heel of his hand. "Don't waste your life pining for the wrong one."

"Guiliana isn't the wrong one," Nico defended.

“She’s married,” Borso said.

“She didn’t want to be married. That was the whole point. She *wanted* to be with me.”

“It doesn’t matter what she wanted. She isn’t yours anymore.” Borso’s words were short, impatient. “Every day we come out here and every day young women flock to you.”

“They don’t,” Nico dismissed.

“They do. You are just blind to it because your thoughts are focused elsewhere.”

“Of course my thoughts are focused elsewhere,” Nico said.

“I am not suggesting that you run off and marry the first harlot that takes your hand. But I have known you for a very short time and I’ve watched you fade. Obsess. Pine. And I just want you to understand that it won’t always be this way. You are far from a leper. God, I would have been a force to be reckoned with if I had your looks and charm at your age.”

“I can’t imagine any life without Guiliana,” Nico answered, again sipping his wine.

“Give it time, my boy. You will get there.”

The spark of anger that Nico felt at Borso’s unsolicited advice did not have time to ignite, as his thoughts were interrupted by a conversation happening at the other end of the bar. He could only pick up a few words clearly, but from the little bit he heard he knew that rumors of Lorenzo de Medici’s murder had finally reached Rome. He was suddenly filled with anxiety, would his mention of Guiliana give him away? No. No, of course not. There were many Guilianas in Italy, no one would know he was specifically speaking of *the* Lady Guiliana, wife of the brother of Lorenzo. But even as he tried to logic his way out of his anxiety, it still remained. Borso also seemed to notice the conversation, but he remained stoic, continuing to shovel stew and wine into his mouth, offering a concerned look every once in a while.

Nico was suddenly overcome with emotion and he covered his face with his hands, dragging them down to his lips, where they remained folded almost as if he were in prayer. An image he had repeatedly shoved out of his mind resurfaced now at the mention of Lorenzo's name. It had tried to haunt him before but was always chased away by his fear and his urgency to escape. But now it would not leave: the image of Lorenzo's face, shocked and pained and begging, as Nico shot him.

Nico closed his eyes, trying to focus elsewhere. But all he could see was Lorenzo slumping to the ground, life fading from him like the tides fade from the shore. He remembered being unable to move once the gun had fired. Nico had stood there in the alleyway watching this man perish, surrounded by the rats and the smell of piss that had intertwined with the hot, metallic smell of gunsmoke. And he remembered Lorenzo's face. The brief hesitation before he collapsed to the ground, resting in a smattering of his own blood. His eyes had widened and met Nico's, his tongue breached his lips, trying to utter a sound that just would not come out. Lorenzo had whimpered. This powerful man, brought down by a farm boy, had whimpered.

It had only lasted half a moment. But as it replayed in Nico's mind it dragged on and repeated, some instances flashing before him more frequently than others. Nico faded from reality. He was no longer with Borso. He was no longer in the tavern. He was back in that alleyway.

"Niccolo?" Borso called. Nico heard him but could not respond as he trapped himself in memory. "Nico." Borso shook the boy's arm and watched Nico slowly return to him.

"I'm sorry," Nico stuttered, realizing that he was gripping his own hair. "I—"

"We should go." It was not often that Borso spoke to Nico without harshness, but this request was made with empathy; concern. Nico nodded, not wishing to give himself away more



than he already had. They left the tavern hurriedly, and Nico felt worse than he had before they even entered.

## Chapter IX

Performing wasn't the same after that. As the days went on, the conversations surrounding the death of Lorenzo de Medici increased. More guards entered the city, and Nico very quickly became paranoid of anyone who looked in his direction. Though neither of them had come out and said it, both Nico and Borso knew their time in Rome had run out. It was time for them to leave.

"If we leave tonight we can get out of the city," Borso said.

"Right now?" Nico questioned, watching Borso throw items into a sack similarly to the way his mother threw his own items into a sack a few weeks prior. They had just stepped through the door of Borso's flat after a long day at the forum. Nico did not anticipate such a hurried departure.

"It's always best to travel at night," Borso responded.

"You seem to know a lot about running away," Niccolo commented. Borso met his eyes briefly as he, for some reason, shoved a puppet into his bag.

"You aren't the only one with crimes to your name." Nico didn't answer. He had never felt more useless in his life.

"Quickly," Borso stated, reaching for the door.

"We just got back," Nico argued.

"They want to hang you, boy. We need to get out now." Nico wasn't sure what was causing Borso's sudden urgency. Certainly he wasn't purely concerned about the state of Nico's neck. But he didn't know what else to do, and since he didn't have anything of his own to pack, he grabbed his bag from the corner and followed Borso out the door.

A hint of sunlight remained in the sky, but the sun itself was lost behind a veil of clouds. Nico found Borso's sudden demeanor to be unsettling, but decided against speaking to him until after they were out of the city. He followed the clown into the tangled mess of streets, ducking his head and remaining close to Borso who pulled a hood up around his ears. It took over an hour to exit the city gate, opening up to the countryside, where darkness enveloped them. They went on for a couple more hours, in near silence, before finding a grove of trees where they could rest.

"You're quiet," Nico said finally as Borso handed him a bit of bread. The silence was wearing on him, giving him too much space for his own troubled thoughts.

"I'm always quiet. You're the one that never gives us a moment's peace," Borso answered, tearing into the heel of his own bit of bread.

"You're nervous," Nico continued. The clown was clearly shaken by the sudden increase in Roman guards.

"I don't like the sbirri nosing around," Borso said.

"What are you hiding?" Nico prodded.

"It's none of your concern." Nico felt frustration press against his mind, agitated by his aloof companion.

"You have the benefit of knowing my crimes. I'd feel more at ease if I were privy to yours," Nico bargained.

"No you wouldn't," Borso dismissed. He reached for Nico's wine skin, but Nico pulled it away. "That's unfair," Borso protested, "You can't hold a man's drink as a form of blackmail."

"Of course I can," Nico shrugged, and took a drink himself. "Now what are you running from?" Borso clicked his tongue in agitation.

“Lots of things.” Borso’s voice was without inflection, and he went back to gnawing his bread, as if to appear unbothered. “Theft, mostly. A few tavern brawls. Then there was the time I caught my wife in bed with another man. That ended well for no one involved.”

“You were married?” The news surprised Nico.

“A long time ago,” Borso answered.

“And you believe you’d be in trouble with Rome if they found you?” Nico was trying to understand.

“Obviously.”

“You aren’t a man of many words.” Nico held the wineskin out to him, which Borso took with annoyance.

“You use enough words for the both of us.” Borso looked around him, as if searching for something. “This might be a good place for us to stop for a bit. Get some sleep, I’ll keep a lookout.”

“You’re sure?” Nico asked.

“We’re out of the city. We should be safe for now,” Borso explained. Nico nodded, not fully understanding, but not caring enough to ask for further clarification. He used his pack as a soft place for his head, and watched Borso for a long time as he busied himself around the trees. With time his eyes grew heavy, and at last sleep overcame him.

## Chapter X

After a few days of travel the pair approached the city of Pisa. It sat nestled in the Italian countryside, the backdrop of mountains making the city appear both small and somehow cascading at the same time. It had been a grueling trip, Borso had not slowed down, but his demeanor had improved as the distance between them and Rome increased. He was in as bright of spirits as Nico had ever seen him, but then the clouds rolled in, turning the twilight skies prematurely black. They appeared alongside their first viewings of Pisa, still a distant point in the midst of nothingness. Within a few minutes the rain began to fall. It was not a stinging rain, more of a mist that clung in droplets to their clothings and the hairs on their arms, but after another hour of walking, thunder began to roll in the distance.

Borso became agitated, but they continued forward. Through the fog that now blanketed the grass around them, Nico could see lights piercing through the darkness, emanating from a few homes outside the city. As Pisa drew closer, the skies opened and the soft mist that had clung to them turned into a downpour of thick raindrops, cold and consuming. Lightning blazed the sky and thunder rocked the scenery around them. They finally entered the city, which was all but abandoned by people, hoping to find shelter. But between the darkness and the storm, they found it impossible to navigate the city. Large puddles filled in the crevices on the stone streets, splashing dirt and sewage up onto their trousers and soaking their boots. Nico was frustrated, but Borso was beginning to panic.

“What is happening?” Nico shouted over the storm.

“I don’t care for storms,” Borso answered.

“Hello there!” A voice cut through the sound of thunder, startling them both. “Ho, what are you doing out in this?” They turned to the sound of the voice and spotted an old man poking

his head out his front door, warm yellow light glowing behind him. “Come inside, you’ll catch your death out there!”

Nico exchanged a concerned glance with Borso, but they were both eager to leave the storm, and without weighing the risks too heavily, they both went inside. Despite the darkness outside, the home was warm and golden with candlelight. It bounced off numerous metallic instruments that were strewn about, and before Nico’s eyes adjusted he could not quite tell what he was walking into. At the windowsill a Venetian glass pointed toward the sky, an instrument Nico had only heard of in passing, never seen for himself. It immediately piqued his curiosity as he tried to gain some understanding into where exactly they were. He looked around, noting the many charts of stars, maps of the sky, and various drawings that went well beyond his own comprehension. Whoever the man within the home was, he was far more intelligent than Nico. The table was littered with the remains of some kind of machinery that had been clearly torn apart and not yet put back together.

“Thank you, *signor*,” Borso said, pulling off his hooded cape. “I am no fan of storms.”

“They are much more enjoyable indoors,” the man related.

“I am Borso, this strapping young man is Niccolo.” Borso clamped Nico’s shoulder as he introduced him, giving him a jovial shake. The old man hesitated before he spoke.

“I am Gal,” he said finally.

“Gal?” Nico questioned.

“Galileo,” the old man elaborated.

“As in Galilei?” Nico prodded, shocked at the notion.

“That is correct.”

“The heretic?” Nico went on. The old man raised an eyebrow.

“Heretic?” Borso chimed. “You mean the genius?”

“Perhaps. But it certainly isn’t very smart to go up against the Catholic church,” Nico argued.

“Thank you,” Gal interjected, “for that summary of my life. Would you gentlemen care for tea?” He had already started to pour it into cups for the three of them.

“I’m sorry,” Nico began, his face warm with embarrassment. “I didn’t mean to offend.”

“Yes, don’t listen to him,” Borso waved, taking a cup into his hand. “He’s a poor boy and nobody loves him.” Nico shot him a pointed look, but Borso pretended not to notice, smirking against his teacup.

“It’s all right,” Gal assured. “I don’t blame you for believing the lies the Church has told. You must first consider your own salvation.”

“I found your findings fascinating,” Borso said.

“Oh, really?” Gal asked, taking a seat at the table. Borso joined him, carefully pushing aside the machine parts that littered the surface. Nico slumped down with them, but knew he would have nothing constructive to add to the conversation.

“I am Muslim, I have no attachment to the teachings of the Pope,” Borso explained.

“Ah,” Gal smiled, “A true heretic.” Nico felt truly uncomfortable listening to the conversation between Galileo and Borso. Borso noticed the alarmed look on Nico’s face.

“Oh, come now, don’t act so scandalized. You’re the one that just killed a Medici.” Nico glared at Borso with the same intensity as a mother silently correcting her child during Mass. He shook his head subtly, begging the clown to keep his comments to himself. But of course, Borso’s claim piqued Gal’s interest, and the old man’s attention turned to Nico.

“You did what now?” Gal asked, smirking in a manner similar to Borso.

“It’s a long story,” Nico dismissed.

“It’s not that long,” Borso egged, “Go ahead and tell it.” Nico set his jaw, refusing. Borso looked back to Gal. “He did it for a girl.”

“Oh, don’t we all do stupid things for the love of a woman?” Gal commiserated.

“It’s not quite that simple,” Nico argued.

“Please,” Gal said sincerely, “I’d love to hear.” Nico glanced to Borso, filling his lungs with air. Borso raised his eyebrows as if to goad him to continue.

“I fell in love with a woman well above my station,” Nico began.

“Been there,” Gal shared a knowing look with Borso, who nodded in agreement.

“We wanted to be together, but it was difficult. And then she became engaged.”

“Typical,” Gal said.

“I know she didn’t want to marry him. She was forced. And I couldn’t watch her be forced to marry someone she didn’t love,” Nico paused. “She loves *me*.” He took a sip of tea. “I waited for her groom in an alley on the day of their wedding. When I saw her betrothed turn the corner I shot him.”

“So you succeeded?” Gal questioned. Nico sighed deeply.

“No,” he answered. “She was betrothed to Marsilio. I killed his brother, Lorenzo.”

“You shot the wrong man?” Gal asked.

“They look very similar!” Nico clenched his fist, then calmed himself. “It didn’t stop the wedding. And now all of Italy is out for my head.”

“You are safe here. I have no love for the Medicis,” Gal said.

“We won’t be able to stay long,” Borso interjected.

“I’ll set you up a place for tonight. This storm isn’t going anywhere. You can leave in the morning,” Gal said.

Nico looked to Borso, trying to gauge how the clown might be feeling.



“That sounds grand. We won’t be a bother, we’ll leave in the morning.”

“*Magnifico*. I’ll go find some blankets.”

## Chapter XI

Their plan to leave the morning following the storm was disrupted by the sheer exhaustion felt by both Borso and Nico. They slept well past normal waking hours, and by the time Nico woke, stiffness groaning from his travels, the sun was high in the sky and the remnants of lunch could be spotted at the table.

Borso and Gal sat together, hovering over the scraps on their plates and whispering like two old friends. Both seemed pleased to see Nico stirring.

“Help yourself to fruit and tea,” Gal offered.

“Gal has graciously offered us a place to stay for the next few days, so we can be well rested for the last leg of our trip,” Borso said. Nico had not yet shaken the sleep from his mind, so he just nodded along as he joined them with his breakfast. He did not much feel like conversing with the two, so he pulled out some parchment and his quill and ink from his pack to write a letter to his mother. He had barely finished the greeting before Borso asked him what he was working on.

“I’m writing to my mother,” he answered plainly. “She will want to know I’m safe.”

“You don’t speak much of your parents,” Borso said.

“Neither do you,” Nico said, touching the quill to the parchment.

“I don’t even know your family name,” Borso realized.

“Benintendi,” Nico answered. “I am Niccolo Benintendi.”

“That’s Florentine,” Gal commented. “Is your family from the Florence region?”

“As far as I know we’ve always been in Naples,” Nico shrugged. Gal appeared skeptical, or maybe just curious.

“What are your parents’ names?” he asked.

“My mother is Emilia. My father was Carlo,” Nico replied. “My father died when I was very young, though. My mother raised me.”

“And you have no siblings?” Gal continued. Nico looked up at him, now curious himself as to why Gal was so inquisitive.

“No. It’s only me. Mother never remarried.”

Gal studied Niccolo in a way that made the boy very uncomfortable. He looked as if he wanted to say something, but was holding back.

“What is it?” Nico asked, setting down the quill.

“I once knew an Emilia and Carlo Benintendi, who lived here in Pisa, and they had a babe named Niccolo,” Gal admitted.

“What?” Nico questioned. He shook his head, dismissing the idea. “It’s a common name. Perhaps you knew another family who just happened to have the same name.”

“Perhaps,” Gal conceded. “But I don’t think so.”

“I don’t remember ever being in Pisa,” Nico said.

“You wouldn’t. You were a baby. Your mother left very quickly after your father’s death.” Nico didn’t know how to respond. Emilia had never mentioned ever living in Pisa, even if it was back when she was young and without a husband or child. But it wasn’t an outlandish thought, his mother tended to be very guarded and secretive, he just never pressed her for more.

“You knew my father?” he asked.

“Vaguely,” Gal answered. “I didn’t know your parents well, but your mother often attended my lectures when she was younger. Back when I taught mathematics.”

“What?” He was not looking for an answer, the news was simply shocking to him. This was never spoken of to Nico. It also suggested his parents were not the poor farmers he had

believed. If his mother attended lectures in Pisa she, at least, would have had *some* wealth to her name. “Then what happened?”

Gal frowned, and his wrinkled brow came together with concern. “How much do you know about your father’s death?” That question caused alarm to rise in Nico’s chest. It took him a moment to answer the old man.

“Nothing.” His shoulders twitched and he stared wide eyed at Gal, needing to know more. Gal pressed his lips together.

“I’m not sure if it’s my place—”

“Oh, you’re going to have to elaborate now,” Borso interjected. “The boy will never let it go.”

“Has your mother told you nothing of your father?” Gal questioned.

“I never really cared to know,” Nico admitted. He looked at his plate as if searching for some kind of advice from the chunks of fruit that rested there. Gal sighed, clearly uncomfortable.

“This is why you don’t get involved,” Borso said, sipping his tea, his eyes moving from Gal then to Nico.

“All right.” Gal sat up in his chair. “I had known of your mother for a very long time, since she was a child herself,” he began, “She was a bright, beautiful girl, but very quiet. She always did exactly as she was told.”

“*My* mother?” Nico asked. There were many words he would use to describe his mother, but *quiet* and *submissive* were not two of them.

“And your father was quite the opposite. He was loud and charismatic. He was not the most intelligent, but he was well liked.” Gal busied his hands with a deconstructed timepiece, picking it up and setting it back down again. “You look like him.” Hearing that he resembled his

father struck Nico in a way he couldn't fully decipher. A softness came over him, something like warmth and nostalgia for a person he had never known.

"Your father hid who he really was. He presented himself one way to the world, but it became known that he was incredibly hard on your mother. She hid herself away, and the last time I remember seeing her she was at the market, carrying you on her hip, and she had very obviously been beaten." The softness and warmth Nico felt before quickly dissipated and was replaced with a prod of despair. "A few weeks later your father was found dead in the street. He had been shot." Nico stared at the old man, his mouth opened in disbelief. He needed a moment to process.

"He was *killed*?" he asked. Borso let out a low whistle, clearly invested in this story about Nico's murdered father. Gal nodded. "Who killed him?" Both Gal and Borso stared at the boy, brows raised, waiting for him to make the connection that everyone else seemed to make immediately. "My mother?"

"She was never arrested. No one could prove it was her. And I don't think anyone wanted that proof. It was ruled as a random mugging. But--"

"Everyone still assumed it was her," Nico completed the thought. Gal nodded again.

"She disappeared after that. No one knew where she went." Heaviness settled in the small room. It was silent except for the sound of Borso sipping his tea. Nico looked at the clown.

"Did you know this, too?"

"Of course not. I was in Spain," he shrugged. Nico slumped back in his chair, raking his hand nervously through his hair. His mind began to race through memories of his mother, of the life they had in Naples, and things that always eluded him suddenly became clear. Emilia never pursued another marriage. She was a warm and loving mother, but she was often distant. She was

full of fire and sarcasm, and had always taught Nico gentleness, especially with women. Then of course, her alarming knowledge of the firearm he had used to kill Lorenzo. Nico wondered if it was ever actually his father's, or if it was actually Emilia's weapon. Was it the same weapon she had used to kill his father? The thoughts came quickly and soon overwhelmed him. Borso and Gal were speaking softly to one another but while Nico could see their mouths moving, he couldn't hear any sound. It was as if their voices were passed and distorted through a distant tunnel.

"I need air," Nico said suddenly, pushing himself away from the table. Borso attempted to protest, but Nico ignored him, stepping outside into the bright sunlight.

And young Niccolo began to walk.

## Chapter XII

Pisa was not like Naples or Rome, the buildings weren't quite so crowded together, there was more grass to be seen around the city. But it was busy with workers. A river ran through the center of town where ships came in carrying goods that would then be distributed to the town itself, or transferred to other cities. It was loud near the river as angry workers cursed to one another and beggars screeched at anyone who walked by. Nico didn't know where he was going, he just wanted to walk, but after a while he spotted a tavern and skulked through the entrance.

He sat down at a small table with his goblet of wine, feeling such weight within himself that the rest of the world disappeared. The woman he loved had married another, that on its own was enough to crush a young man's spirit. But then his foolish decision to assassinate a Medici boy, and leaving all he had ever known for an entirely new country, added more weight that he already found difficult to slough off. But the news of his father, and especially that of his mother, now threatened to crush what little will he had left.

"What has you so sad, boy?" Nico looked up to a young woman standing next to him, her hand on her hip. Her accent was French, and she did not dress in the typical fashion he was accustomed to seeing on women. She wore a simple green dress that brushed the floor, and as Niccolo was not a blind man, he noticed the way it clung to her figure. Her hair, the color of roaring embers, was wrapped like a crown around her head.

Nico opened his mouth to speak before he had fully worked out what to say, so his mouth hung open for a moment before he responded, "Life," with a shrug.

"You have sad life?" she asked.

"For now," he answered.

"I sit?" she questioned, pointing to the chair across from him.

“If you want,” he answered, and he pulled his goblet a little closer so she wouldn’t accidentally knock into it as she sat.

“I am Alodie,” she said, then winced as she banged her knee as she attempted to move her chair under the table.

“Nico,” he answered, now completely blindsided by the erratic actions of this young woman. “Are you all right?”

“Oh, yes. I am just clumsy,” she said, fixing her skirt. “*Merde!*” She cursed, looking back to the bar. “I’ve forgotten my drink.”

“I’ll get it.” Nico held his hand out, encouraging her to stay seated. God knows she worked hard enough to get into that chair, he wasn’t going to force her out now. When he returned Alodie had crossed her legs and she swung her foot rhythmically in the air as she absentmindedly twirled a strand of hair around her finger. Her face brightened when Nico set the goblet in front of her, and she sipped it happily.

“I have sad life, too,” she said. “Not that you asked.”

“Oh, I’m sorry—”

“You are not protagonist in everyone’s story.” She peered at him suggestively over the goblet she still held by her lips. “You are merely side character in mine. I do not yet know your purpose.”

Nico found this young woman amusing, and scoffed at her wit. “Then what has made your life so sad?” he asked.

“Oh,” Alodie began. “My husband kill himself. And now I must live in Italy.”

Nico was startled by the way she so simply told him of what must have been a horribly traumatic experience. “I’m so sorry about your husband,” he started.



“It is fine. I did not like him,” Alodie said. She again drank from her goblet. Nico did not know how to respond to this, but he was so intrigued by this woman that he was determined to continue the conversation.

“Why must you live in Italy?”

“I am not safe in France,” she answered.

“Why is that?”

“A lady is entitled to secrets.” She again straightened the skirt of her dress, tossing the fabric over her crossed leg to hide her shin.

“Do you care to hear about my sad life?” he asked, and he realized his tone was almost flirtatious.

“No,” she quipped. “My life is sad enough. I do not care much about yours.”

“You just want to sit here and have a drink, then?”

“Yes,” she scanned the room around her. “And watch the people. They are fascinating.” Nico followed her lead and looked around, but he did not find the population as interesting as Alodie apparently did. “Look at this man.” She pointed to a gentleman in the corner, leaning closer to Nico as she did. “What is his story, do you think?” She looked at him, her eyes searching his.

“He just looks like a man enjoying a drink,” Nico answered.

“No no.” Alodie waved her finger at him. “You have no imagination. This man has story. Look at his outgrown face hair. And his tired eyes. Those dark bags hanging below them. Those are the eyes of a man who does not sleep.”

“All right.” Nico was trying to understand this game she had. “Why do you think he hasn’t slept?”

“Maybe his wife left him. Found man with not such tired eyes.”

“That’s horrible,” Nico said with a grin.

“Yes, much hardship in the world.”

“What about me?” Nico asked, crossing his arms. “What is my story?”

“Oh that’s easy. You kill a man,” she said with a smile. The color drained from Nico’s face, and Alodie obviously noticed. She squeezed his arm. “I only tease! No need to look so dead,” she assured. Then she tilted her head, her eyes narrowing as she studied him. “But you do look like me. Someone just trying to be safe.”

“You’re very good at this,” Nico said. “What made you so good at reading people?”

“I am writer. I study people then I write about them. Only sometimes am I right,” she answered. She gave Nico a quick once over with her eyes. “You have broken heart?”

“Among other things,” Nico said. “Will you write about me?”

“Yes. You will be side character. Likely have you die at end.” She picked up her goblet.

“I look forward to reading it.” He held his own goblet out to her and she tapped it with hers, then they drank heartily until their goblets were emptied.

“I must go now. It was lovely meeting you,” she said. She began to stand and Nico stood with her out of courtesy.

“Will I see you again?” he asked.

“No.” She kissed her fingertips and waved to him as she walked away, leaving Nico standing numbly at the table. He had not been so charmed by a woman since he met Guiliana. He wondered briefly, fleetingly, if perhaps there was a shred of hope that he could survive without the love of the woman he had killed for. Then anguish overcame him once more as he refused the possibility. He knew that even if he were to try, even if he truly wanted to, he could never love

another as he loved Guiliana. He downed the remainder of his wine, hoping it would dull the rage and heartache, and slipped back out onto the streets of Pisa.

“There you are,” Borso growled. He grabbed Nico’s shoulder and pulled him around to face him. “I knew you’d seek a drink.”

Nico had meandered mere steps from the tavern and was immediately annoyed by the clown's sudden and aggressive presence. “I am in no mood,” he warned.

“I don’t care what kind of mood you’re in, you can’t go tramping the streets of Pisa on your own,” Borso said, his cape falling over his arm as he released Nico’s shoulder. The clown looked around as if filled with paranoia.

“No one knows me here,” Nico said. His voice was low but firm. All he required was a few moments of peace, a few moments of having no one breathing down his neck and telling him what to do.

“They will,” Borso shot back, his dark eyes pointed and angry. “Because you are young and you are stupid.”

“I’m not stupid.” Nico turned away from Borso and continued down the street, hoping the clown would be lost in the crowd. He had no such fortune. Borso stuck to him like despair.

“If anyone here gets breath of who you are—”

“Stop!” He waved Borso’s breath from his ear. “Do you not think that chasing me down the streets of Pisa to chastise me like a child will draw more attention to me than my quiet wine in a tavern?”

Borso set his jaw. He knew Nico was right, but he was too proud to admit it. “We need to get back.” He continued to glance at the people around him, and Nico, too, noticed eyes on them.

“Fine,” he quipped. “We will return to the mathematician’s, and you will leave me alone.”

## Chapter XIII

“I see you found him,” Gal greeted as both Nico and Borso stormed through the old man’s door. He was at the table, scribbling on a piece of parchment, but Nico paid him little mind.

“He went to a tavern,” Borso said. He yanked off his cloak and threw it over a hook by the door. Nico had nowhere to go to find solace, so he simply paced the floor, trying to control the anger he still felt. It was displaced, he knew. He didn’t truly think he was angry at Borso, but he felt it nonetheless.

“What has you worked up, my boy?” Gal asked, his voice low and calming.

“I needed a moment’s peace,” Nico answered, attempting to keep his voice from rising. “Just one moment.” He stopped pacing and glared at Borso. “I do not think I am angry with you, Borso, but I *am* angry. And your gathering me up like a toddler in a nursery did not help.” His voice was sharp and the words short as they left his tongue.

“You are too cavalier with your actions. I cannot trust you to not deceive our safehouse. I am risking a lot to help you, boy—”

“No one cares about your petty theft, clown,” Nico shot. Borso’s own anger visibly flared.

“Easy,” Gal redirected, speaking to Borso.

“A month ago my life was perfect.” Nico’s voice cracked as he said it. “And now it has all gone to shit.” He fell into one of the kitchen chairs, burying his head in his hands.

“*Bismillah*, Niccolo, all of our lives have gone to shit,” Borso said, not moving from the doorway where he stood. “But you are careless. Going out alone was unwise. You sat down this morning to write a letter to your mother. How will it be delivered? You don’t think the sbirri

watch the passage of correspondence? That they won't see your letter to your mother and immediately know what you've done? You are thoughtless and you cannot be trusted. You will get us all killed."

"I don't know that I wish to live!" Nico shouted.

"I wish to live," Gal stated.

"As do I!" Borso added.

"It was only a few days ago that you had me on the streets of Rome dancing for money," Nico said, "How is going to a tavern here worse than that?" He legitimately wanted to know. He and Borso frequented many establishments in Rome. There was never this kind of secrecy.

"Because now I'm scared, too," Borso said, and it was the first time Nico had ever witnessed any weakness from the clown. It surprised him, and he had no immediate response. "What we did in Rome was dangerous. I didn't know it at the time. But once the rumors began to reach our ears, it was difficult to ignore that your crime would not remain in Naples. It will follow you wherever you go. I didn't know that when we were in Rome. I don't know why I didn't know that. You didn't kill a common man. You killed the son of Italy's most beloved family. Your only hope for survival—*my* only hope for survival—is to reach Spain, where no one cares about the Medicis."

Nico took a moment to process what Borso had said. What he said made sense, but one thing stuck out to him. "Why are *you* so scared of me being caught?" Borso sighed and came to the table, sitting down to join Nico and Gal.

"The selfless answer would be because I care for you. I don't want to see you hanged. But while that is true, I must also consider the selfish answer: I have also killed a man. I have also committed a great deal of crimes. And me harboring a murderer is just one more to add to

the list. If you are caught, I will also die. Likely for treason. I don't imagine it would be a very pleasant death."

"And now I've helped the both of you, all while battling the Catholic Church," Gal stated matter-of-factly. He had all but disappeared into the scenery.

"This involves so much more than yourself," Borso said, placing his hand on Nico's shoulder, "We need you to be careful." As much as Nico wanted to defend himself, state that Borso had put them in much more danger today than he himself had, he longed for peace more. So he nodded, conceding, and tried to put his anger behind him.

## Chapter XIV

A rap on the door woke Nico the next morning. Nico elbowed Borso, who snored soundly next to him on the straw mat Galileo had laid out for them. Galileo appeared from his bedroom, holding a finger to his lips. “Go to the wardrobe,” he whispered, nodding his head toward the door to his bedroom. Nico and Borso scrambled from their spot on the floor and slipped into the wardrobe. It was not a particularly spacious wardrobe, and though anxiety flooded Nico like a morning tide, he could not ignore Borso’s elbow lodged into his ribcage, or the mass of fabric violating his vicinity, threatening suffocation.

“Good morning,” Gal greeted. Gal’s voice cut through the doors of the wardrobe, the sharpness somehow making it seem louder than it actually was. The conversation with the guards seemed friendly enough, but Nico knew things would quickly become chaos if the guards learned of their hiding.

“Did you have visitors?” a guard asked suddenly. Nico assumed they must have spotted the mats on the floor, which would have been fully visible from the door.

“Briefly,” Gal answered easily, “I took in a pair caught in the storm the other night. They’re long gone now, though.”

“Why are the mats still out?” the guard questioned.

“Because I’m old and haven’t felt up to putting them away yet,” Gal said with annoyance in his voice. “Why are you here?”

“We are looking for the man who killed Lorenzo de Medici,” the guard said.

“And you think *I* did it?” Gal asked.



“Of course not, Messer Galilei. But there were two men on the street matching the description we were given from Rome. Someone said they saw them heading here. Is there any chance the pair you took in were a young man and a street clown?”

“I didn’t ask many questions. I pulled them in from the storm, but was feeling unwell so I retired once we determined the rain wasn’t going to stop. They left before daybreak yesterday morning,” Gal stated. Nico’s breath caught in his lungs, hoping Gal’s lies would suffice.

“Did they tell you where they were headed?”

“Florence, I believe,” Gal answered. “Do we know the name of this supposed killer?”

“Lady Guiliana suspects it is Niccolo Benintendi of Naples. He apparently harbored an obsession for her. We know he left Naples, but his mother claims he ran away with a neighboring farmer’s daughter.”

Nico felt tightness in his throat and his face flushed with warmth. Guiliana? Guiliana told them this? Had she really betrayed him? His stomach rolled and the rest of the world seemed to disappear as what he just heard consumed him. Numbness took over his body and all senses focused on Guiliana and the fear that not only had he lost her to another man, but that she hated him so greatly that she would betray him to the sbirri?

“They’re gone,” Gal called, but though Nico heard the words he could not react to them.

“Come on, boy,” Borso urged. He had already made it out of the wardrobe, and now took Nico by the arm, coaxing him out, as well.

“I have to go find her,” Nico said as he stumbled back to the sitting room.

“That would be a terrible idea,” Borso denied.

“I don’t believe she would betray me,” Nico argued. His regulatory system was shutting down. His emotions swung wildly, and at that moment all he could focus on was finding Guiliana. He had to speak to her. His entire body screamed for him to find her.

“I understand,” Borso said as if speaking with a tantruming child. “But that would be incredibly unwise right now.”

“I don’t care. I have to go find her.” Nico picked up his bag, scrambling to leave. Galileo stepped knowingly in front of the door, gently blocking his way.

“Borso is right. You can’t go.”

“Let me go!” Nico shouted.

“I will not let you go,” Gal stated calmly, and his calmness only angered Nico.

“Move out of the way, old man,” Nico growled.

“Niccolo!” Borso snapped. “The sbirri have just left the doorstep. We cannot leave right now!” Nico stared with disdain at the two men blocking his escape. No one moved. They both looked at him with a sort of stern pity, and this went on for a few moments before the anger clouding Nico’s judgment dissipated.

“You are right,” he said finally, and dropped his bag to the floor. “How could she betray me?” The numbness completely overcame him, and he sat down on top of Gal’s desk. Gal opened his mouth to protest the sudden disturbance of his life’s work now being shuffled by Nico’s presence, but promptly closed it again, trying to empathize with the young man’s turmoil. Nico fell into a fit of sobs, hiding his face behind his hands. They were not loud or ostentatious sobs, but silent, shaking sobs that drained all other emotion from the room.

Borso looked to Gal, both trying to determine how to best comfort the boy. “What do we do?” he mouthed. Gal shook his head, indicating he didn’t know. After a moment Borso

approached Nico and offered him the handkerchief from his pocket. Nico took it, trying to calm himself.

“Tea?” Borso asked, also glancing to Gal. Gal acknowledged the prompt and immediately went to the stove.

“All right,” Nico agreed. He followed Borso to the table and slumped into one of the chairs. “There are times I believe that Beezlebub has a devil put aside for me.”

Borso sat down across from him and Gal soon came with the tea. The two shared a look, and Gal took a seat next to Nico.

“My dear boy,” Galileo started, in a tone similar to a grandfather sharing wisdom. “When I was a younger man I fell in love with a woman from Venice. We were together for many years, but though she gave me three beautiful children, she would not marry me.”

“What?” Nico questioned, taken aback by the information, “Why not?”

“It wasn’t in her best interest. I was not a good match for her.”

“Then what happened?” Nico asked.

“She married another man,” Galileo said. “I took our daughters and placed them in a convent, as they would not have been able to marry given their illegitimate birth. My son joined us later. I have not seen Marina in many many years.”

“Did you never meet another?” Nico asked.

“I dedicated my life to my work,” Gal answered. Nico looked around, seeing all the beautiful contributions the old man had made to the world. Contributions that now left him in danger of imprisonment by the Catholic Church.

“Well, that hasn’t seemed to work out very well for you,” Nico said bitterly.

“Niccolo,” Borso growled, “Your anger is making you callous. This man has risked his own safety to protect you. It is best if you change your attitude.” Nico stewed for a moment longer.

“I apologize.”

Gal took a sip from his cup. “All is well,” he said.

“Do you think Marina loved you?” Nico asked.

“Oh, I’m sure of it,” Gal answered. “Just as I am sure Guiliana loves you. It is not easy to be a woman. They are unable to do the things we as men can do, they cannot forge their own path. They don’t always have the option to marry for love, they must marry for provision and survival.”

“What am I supposed to do?” Nico asked.

“You go to Spain. You live a good life,” Borso answered.

Nico nodded, defeated. He did not want a good life right now. He did not want to be alive at all.

## Chapter XV

Borso and Nico both hoped to spend more time with Gal, but with the sbirri already suspecting their whereabouts, they all knew the pair needed to continue on to Spain. They took one more day to gather supplies, which Gal picked up for them so they wouldn't risk being seen again. They hoped Gal's false information would send the sbirri to Florence, allowing Nico and Borso to reach Spain without any more trouble. At least not from the sbirri. There was always a risk when traveling, especially while avoiding the main roads. Before they left, Gal presented Borso with a saber, which Borso promptly refused.

"Take it," Gal urged. "The roads between here and Spain may be dangerous. I have no use for it."

"You've been far too kind already," Borso said, fastening the scabbard around his waist. "This is too nice of a gift."

"I will pray for your safety in Spain," Gal said. Nico embraced the old man.

"I'm sorry I called you a heretic," he said as he pulled away, "And an old man." Gal laughed.

"I *am* a heretic and an old man."

"Thank you for everything," Nico said.

"That's enough of that." Gal shooed them toward the door. "Just be well, my friends. May we meet again in this life or the next." With those words they said their goodbyes, and the young man and the clown began the next stint on their journey to Spain.

"How long until we reach Spain?" Nico asked a few hours into their travels.

“A fortnight, likely,” Borso answered. He shifted the pack on his shoulder, keeping his eyes forward along the trail. “We can stop in Marsailles for a day or two, and it won’t take too long after that to reach Barcelona.”

“Marsailles? In France?” Nico questioned. He had never been to France. He’d barely ever been out of Naples so the thought of seeing an entirely new country excited him.

“Of course,” Borso smiled, “Did you think we’d go all this way without partaking in some French culture?” Nico remembered Alodie, which caused a bit of melancholy sadness, but he quickly moved past it.

“And we will settle in Barcelona?” Nico asked. Up until this point he hadn’t heard where exactly Borso was taking him.

“Yes.” Borso’s face brightened about as much as the stoic clown’s face was capable of brightening. “It is where I am from.”

“What is it like there?” Nico pressed.

“Not too unlike Rome. It’s warm and full of life and art and music. It feels different, though. Rome always seemed so heavy to me. The art is heavy. The philosophy is heavy. Religion is heavy. We have all these things in Barcelona, but it all feels a little lighter,” Borso explained. “It’s more lively.”

“It sounds lovely,” Nico said.

“It is. I mean, it is still largely Catholic, but the Pope does not have full control like he does in Italy. There is still much suffering for the sake of salvation, but at least people seem happier about it.”

“We all have our trials we must overcome, just as Christ did,” Nico said somewhat defensively.

“I’m familiar.” Borso stopped to rest on a fallen log and Niccolo sat down on the ground next to him, leaning against the peeling bark of whatever kind of tree it had once been.

“But you’re Muslim?” Nico asked as he pulled a few scraps of cheese from his bag and popped them onto his tongue. He offered some to the clown.

“Vaguely,” Borso answered, accepting Nico’s offer. “My mother is descended from the Moors. And while most were driven out of Spain a century ago, a few stayed behind. My family being some of them. We’ve coupled with so many Spaniards I doubt I have much Moorish blood left in me.”

Nico scoffed at his own ignorance, “I thought the whole world was Catholic.”

“Spoken like a true Christian.” Borso wiped his hands on his trousers and stood again, extending a hand to Nico to help pull him up. “Come on. We’ve a long way to go. We can speak more on the fallacies of religion as we walk.”

## Chapter XVI

It had been two days since Nico and Borso had left Gal and now the pair tramped down a dirt path notched with marred trees and thick underbrush. The rough road seemed to be affecting Borso as his mood had dramatically shifted into some sort of aggressive irritation, and he developed a limp shortly after they left their camp for the night. Nico didn't mention the limp for a while out of fear of embarrassing the clown and unleashing his sharp tongue, but, by mid morning, Borso had produced something between a grunt and a growl with nearly every step he took.

"Do we need to stop for a bit?" Niccolo asked.

"Why would we need to stop?"

"You're limping."

"It's what happens when you get old, boy. You limp," Borso quipped.

"You aren't that old," Nico argued.

"What do you want?" Borso stopped suddenly and turned to glare at Niccolo.

"I want to remind you that I am supposed to be the dramatic one in this troupe. You're the reasonable one," Nico said with a hand on his hip. Borso rolled his eyes.

"I am entirely reasonable. It's an old wound. It acts up sometimes. We're walking through a goddamned forest. Leave me alone." He turned back around and continued forward, now trying to mask his obvious discomfort.

Nico obeyed Borso's request for quiet. Briefly.

"Is it from that time your wife's lover stabbed you?" he asked. Borso stopped again.

"That never happened."

"Did you trip over a tree root?" Nico guessed.



“You are insufferable,” Borso said as he began walking again.

“What happened?”

“Dog. I was attacked by a dog as a boy.”

Borso shoved a low hanging branch out of his way, clearly losing his patience.

“What *did* happen to your wife’s lover?” Nico asked, too desperate for conversation to worry about Borso’s state of mind.

“Seriously? You want to talk to me about this right now?” Borso demanded.

“Have we anything better to do?” Nico questioned. He heard Borso sigh, but no answer came. “What happened to him?”

“I killed him,” Borso responded without emotion.

“And your wife?” Nico was almost afraid to know.

“I killed her, too.”

Nico hesitated. Not long enough for Borso to notice, but he found the information quite alarming. More alarming was the cavalier way Borso surrendered the information. The clown stopped and sighed before he turned to face Nico. “I’m not a good man, Niccolo.”

Nico looked at him with concern. “You’ve done much to help me,” he countered. Borso began to walk again, more slowly this time. Nico crept behind him, uncomfortably close.

“I’ll tell you a story, boy, since we’ve nothing better to do and I don’t believe you’ll leave me alone until I do.” He pushed away more underbrush, not bothering to make sure Nico had made it through before releasing it.

“All right,” Nico said, somewhat perturbed as he brushed leaves from the underbrush off of his cloak.

“I had a son once, a very long time ago,” he began. “He’d be about your age now, maybe a little older. My wife and I—”

“What was her name?” Nico interrupted.

“Lucia,” Borso answered. “I did love her,” he said almost defensively, “And I loved Luis, our son. Luis was a perfect boy. Strong, healthy, intelligent—” he paused for a moment.

“We lived just outside Barcelona, alongside the Besòs River. It was not a grand home. We were very poor. But as far as I knew we were all very happy together.”

Nico noticed that as Borso spoke of his life in Barcelona, his accent became notably Spanish as if he were finally unlocking a part of himself he had covered up for nearly two decades.

“Luis was very young. Only four years, but he was filled with that ignorant confidence all children have. One night, there was a very bad storm, and Luis kept telling Lucia and me how he wasn’t afraid. We had a dog, though, who we kept in a little shed behind the house. We could hear the dog howling because, unlike Luis, he was very scared of storms. I, wanting to encourage my young son’s bravery, asked if he would like to go out and fetch the dog. We could let him stay inside for the night while the storm passed. Luis was thrilled to be given this responsibility and happily hopped outside, completely unbothered by the rain and the thunder and the lightning.” Borso paused again. Nico remained silent. He watched the back of Borso’s head which occasionally turned so that Nico could hear a little better.

“But Luis didn’t come back. I went to the window and saw the shed door open, but neither the dog nor Luis were anywhere to be seen. I immediately went out looking for him.” Borso cleared his throat, as it was beginning to crack.

“I looked all night, through that god forsaken storm, trying to find him. The dog turned up at some point, whimpering and carrying on. We were near the river at that point, and the dog ran ahead. I went running after him, and he had stopped right by the river. Whimpering, sniffing, his tail tucked between his miserable legs. And there was Luis, stuck to a branch in the river.” Borso stopped walking but would not look back at Nico. The clown rubbed at his mouth, his voice breaking. “He was dead. Just floating there as the river, swollen and angry from the storm, raged past him. God.” Nico placed a gentle hand on his friend’s arm. “I had to pull him from the river and carry his lifeless little body, all pale and tinged with blue, home to Lucia. The sound that came out of that woman when she saw him—” He shook Nico’s hand away. “I still hear her screams in my sleep.”

“My god, I am so sorry,” Nico said. Borso just shook his head, trying to hold himself together.

“It changed us. We fought all the time. I began to drink. I was never home, I was always at a tavern somewhere. I became a person I’m not proud of. I could barely stand to look at Lucia because she looked so damn much like Luis. My mind was too rotted from the alcohol, and as our fights became more frequent they became more violent. I began to beat her. She needed to get away from me because I was dangerous.” Borso began to walk again. “She went to the city and fell in love with another man. When I learned of her affair, I hunted her down and I killed them both.” He breathed deeply, “Neither of them deserved it. I should have been the one to die.”

“I don’t know what to say,” Nico answered solemnly.

“That’s a first,” Borso said, but it was not with his usual enthusiasm. “But thank you.”

“How long ago was this?” Nico asked.

“Nearly 15 years,” Borso said, “Then I left Spain, joined a theatre troupe, and ended up in Italy. I’ve been here ever since.”

“You haven’t been home in 15 years?” Nico asked. Borso shrugged.

“What else was there for me in Spain?”

Nico could only see the back of Borso’s head. A thought intruded into Nico’s mind that if Borso wanted, at any time he could simply turn around and kill Nico. The revelation caused a sudden spike in his chest, but it quickly dissipated. He shook the thought away, knowing that if Borso had wanted to murder him he would have done it a long time ago. To lighten his own dark mood, Nico spoke up, “You aren’t going to do to me what you did to them, are you?”

“If you don’t shut up I can make no promises,” Borso growled. Nico scoffed, but the pair did not speak again for a long time.

## Chapter XVII

It was on the cusp of Genoa when Niccolo first spotted the carriages. He and Borso were still in the thick of underbrush, but the homes on the outskirts of the region were beginning to pass them by, and any glances they caught of the main road showed it was getting wider, indicating the city was not far from them. They could hear the sounds of the Mediterranean to their left, which provided such soothing sounds of water and bird calls that Nico found he was perpetually sleepy.

Until they spotted the carriages.

“Someone is coming,” Borso announced and he slipped off the trail and into the underbrush. Nico followed, ducking beside a large rock. His curiosity overcame reason and he shifted so he could better see the approaching threat, and it only took a moment for his heart to fill with adrenaline as he recognized who approached.

“It’s Guiliana,” Nico whispered intensely to Borso. Borso held a finger to his lips to silence him. Nico squeezed his hands into fists, trying to force blood into his numbed fingers. His stomach turned and he swallowed hard as the black carriage pulled by two black stallions drew closer. He recognized one of the stallions immediately. He had two white markings around his front hooves, and a streak of white in his otherwise pristinely black mane. It was the horse Guiliana loved the most, the one she would pick of all the stallions in her father’s stables. Two more carriages led the procession and a few guards walked alongside, helping to navigate the poorly maintained roadway. Nico could hardly contain himself as he waited for them to pass, and once they finally escaped their view Nico noted that he had been digging his fingernails into the stone beside him. Leaving white marks on the stone, and the tips of two of his fingers bloodied. He started to stand but Borso grabbed his arm, yanking him back down.

“Don’t,” the clown said firmly.

“She’s right there!” Nico exclaimed, jerking his arm free.

“And what are you going to do about it?” Borso shot.

“I have to talk to her,” Nico responded as if the answer were completely obvious.

“She is surrounded by sbirri. And how can you even know that it’s her?” Borso was trying his best to keep his voice quiet, but his voice could not quite contain the intensity of his words.

“The markings on the carriage were that of the de Marco family, and I would recognize her horse anywhere,” Nico told him.

“Listen,” Borso started, “I know your little brain is working hard right now, but I will tell you right now that going to speak to that woman is a horrible idea.”

“Why?” Nico asked. Borso paused for a second, as if unsure he should speak what was truly on his mind.

“I know you think that you will speak with her and everything will be okay. You think you can rescue her from this horrible life she’s been forced into—”

“Yes, exactly!” Nico’s eyes widened, feeling that Borso might actually understand.

“Niccolo,” Borso said sullenly, resting a hand on the boy’s arm to calm his excitement.

“What if she doesn’t want to be rescued?” Nico shook his head, confused.

“What do you mean?”

“What if she likes where she is?” Borso probed. Nico’s face fell, and Borso continued, “If she doesn’t want to be with you, she will quickly call on all those guards and you will be arrested. You’ll likely be put to death.”

“That’s not going to happen. Guiliana wouldn’t betray me,” Nico said with stubborn confidence.

“But what if she does? What if she did?” Borso asked. His mustache twitched as he looked at Nico, now squeezing the boy’s arm, hoping he would take the warning seriously. Nico stared back, the circumstances he faced and their various outcomes coursing like fire through his mind.

“What if I can get her alone?” Nico asked, and Borso threw his hands up in the air with exasperation. He turned away, continuing his march down the trail.

“For once in your reckless and pathetic life I wish you would listen.” Nico chased after him.

“I have to do this, Borso,” he said. The clown didn’t answer right away. Nico could tell by Borso’s heavy walk and the way he swatted vines out of his way that he was angry. “Borso,” Nico said gently. Borso whirled around to face the boy, shoving a finger in his face.

“You are going to get us killed.” Those were the last words Borso spoke to Niccolo for many hours.

## Chapter XVIII

The young man and the clown reached Genoa the next morning. The city was not nearly as grand as Rome or even Pisa, and Nico liked it less than Naples, but it was a welcome sight after their days walking through forest and underbrush and weaving through stones the size of pillars. The city was incredibly flat, laid out like a strip along the Mediterranean coast. The buildings and homes there were spread in an odd fashion, as if someone had filled an enormous cup with enormous rocks then rolled them along the countryside, allowing the rocks to land wherever they pleased and shift into whatever house or establishment they desired to be.

Nico was no longer thinking of Spain. His mind was consumed with finding Guiliana and Borso knew it. But after being harshly reprimanded by the clown numerous times, Nico no longer tried to talk of finding Guiliana. Nico instead did his best to leave her name off his tongue and circled through any half-formed thought that came to his mind of how he could speak to his love after all these weeks of being apart. Borso appreciated the reprieve from Nico's near constant chatter. Though he would not have been happy with what was going on in the boy's head.

Borso found an inn for the pair to stay for the night. They settled into the tavern located on the lower level, but they did not speak beyond a few pleasantries here and there. Nico did not love the disconnect he felt from Borso, but he wasn't sure how to repair it, either. Nico knew that once he spoke with Guiliana, convinced her to join him, then the three of them would have a grand time running away to Spain. Borso would love her, Nico knew he would.

They left the tavern to gather a few more supplies, and as they walked around the city Nico spotted Guiliana's carriage outside the *Palazzo Nicolosio Lomellino*. It was one of the many noble palaces located within Genoa, this one owned by the Garibaldi family. The de Marco's had



been close friends with the Garibaldis for generations, so it was no surprise she would be staying there. The black and gold facade was striking in the sunlight, and Nico tried not to be too distracted by the stone forms of naked women and intricate artistry plastered over every door and window. The artist in Nico found it all breathtaking. The darker side of Nico wondered how difficult it would be to break into.

That night, when Nico was sure Borso had entered into his log-like depth of slumber, Nico left the inn. The night was a bit chilled, but a warm breeze blew in from the sea which made the temperature rather pleasant. Of course, Nico was not much focused on the weather, he was focused on how he would approach Guiliana when he finally saw her again.

The Palazzo was not a far walk from the inn, but the issue came once he reached it. He knew he couldn't simply rap on the door and expect to be let in, and he wasn't sure where exactly Guiliana would be sleeping or if there would be guards nearby. He stood outside the grand building, studying the windows, trying to decipher whether or not he could climb one of the trellises or perhaps a statue of a naked woman in order to get inside. He walked around the corner, but the side of the palace was not as well decorated as the front. He would find no footholds there. He returned to the front, growing impatient and fearing his own recklessness.

"Excuse me." The voice came from behind him and Nico whipped around before he even had time to fully process that someone had spoken. And there before him, appearing as an angel, or maybe a dove, or really any kind of beautiful creature, stood Guiliana.

"Niccolo?" she asked, her voice so low that his name sounded like a growl.

"Guiliana," Nico breathed, reaching for her hand. She withdrew, leaning backwards ever so slightly. Her subtle recoil wounded him and he looked at her, not understanding.

“What are you doing here?” she asked. She crossed her arms and looked around as if she expected more men to pop out of the landscaping.

“I wanted to talk to you,” he answered, his brow wrinkled with concern.

“How did you find me?” Her voice was not as he remembered. It was short, curt, and angry. Nico was disarmed, confused.

“I saw your carriage yesterday on the road to Genoa. This morning I saw it again outside the Palazzo,” he explained.

“You followed me here?” Her lip curled in disgust

“I just wanted to talk to you.” He suddenly felt very small. He had felt this way many times in his life, but never with Guiliana.

“I have nothing to say to you, Niccolo,” she said harshly, “But I do not wish to see you die. You must go.”

“I don’t understand,” Nico answered, again reaching for her hand. She pulled away with no subtlety behind the movement this time.

“You tried to kill my husband. I know it was you,” she shot.

“I didn’t succeed,” Nico said meekly.

“No, but you managed to kill my brother-in-law just fine.” Her voice was breaking, which in turn devastated the boy. “Do you know what would have happened to me if you killed Marsilio?”

“I—” Nico stammered, stunned by her reaction.

“You knew we couldn’t be together. I don’t you as much from the very beginning. I have a duty, Niccolo. You could have ruined me!” Guiliana shouted.

“I didn’t think you wanted to marry him,” Nico stumbled, “I thought you wanted to be with me.” He looked at her with desperation, “I’ve come all this way hoping you would come with me.”

“Why would you think that I’d want to go with you?” she demanded, her voice tinged with heat.

“Because—” he paused, “because you love *me*.”

“I don’t,” she answered.

“No?” he asked, feeling heat reach his own voice. “That is not what you said two nights before your wedding, when you came to *my* bed—”

“How dare you,” she snarled. Nico felt a wall build up inside of him, trying to hold back the sudden rage he was now experiencing.

“What?” he questioned callously, “You don’t want anyone to know that your virtue was taken by a farm boy?” At his words Guiliana slapped him. Startled, he stepped back.

“Get out now before I call my guards,” Guiliana warned. She attempted to walk past him but Nico stepped in front of her, blocking her way.

“Are you the one that told the sbirri that I killed Lorenzo?” The wall he had built no longer contained his anger. He could feel the blood pulsing behind his eyes.

“Of course,” she said with a curl in her lip.

“Are you looking to stone me? Spit in my eye?” he cried. His anger and heartache gripped him like a snake.

“Leave,” she commanded. “Now.”

“Guiliana,” Nico pleaded.

“Guards!” she shouted, but her voice broke as she did so. Nico attempted to flee, but before he could round the first corner he was tackled to the ground by a member of the *sbirri*. Two more soon joined and yanked Nico back to his feet. He fought against their hold, but the struggle was futile. Guiliana came to where they stood, appearing regal and fully embracing her command.

“This is the man who murdered Lorenzo de Medici,” she said calmly. “I do not wish for him to die until he has faced trial.”

“Where should he go?” one of the men asked.

“Take him to Florence.” She raised her chin a bit, knowing the power the Medicis held in Florence and the love the family had there.

“You can’t do this, Guiliana!” Nico cried.

“Oh, yes I can,” she countered.

“This is how it ends?” Nico asked. “You intend to love me and then leave me to die?” Their eyes met and for a brief moment Nico thought he saw regret behind the quiver in Guiliana’s lip.

“Take him away,” she growled. She turned away from them and disappeared back around the corner, never to be seen by Niccolo again.

## Chapter XIX

“Where are you taking him?” Nico heard the voice from inside the prison carriage and perked his head up from his knees. The carriage was lined with bars, allowing for a view outside, but the man questioning the sbirri was blocked from Nico’s sight by the horses.

“Do you know this man?” one of the guards asked. The carriage stopped, but whether it was because they physically could not move due to the man in their way or because they simply wished for some entertainment, Nico could not tell.

“Vaguely,” Borso answered. Of course it was Borso. Nico felt a rush of relief and affection as he recognized the clown’s voice. Nico wasn’t sure how his friend had found him, but he could not have been happier to know Borso was there.

“He will go to the *carcere delle Stinche*,” one of the guards informed. He was the only guard to be on his own horse while the other two guards sat holding the reins to the carriage. The entire situation made Nico uneasy. Borso was not a small man, but he appeared that way next to the decorated horses.

“The prison? In Florence?” Borso questioned. The Stinche was incredibly well known, as most who entered did not tend to leave unless it was to face their execution. The realization put Borso on the defensive. “You can’t take him there,” Borso argued, “he’s only a boy.”

“He murdered Lorenzo de Medici,” the guard returned. “He is no boy.” Nico stood, gripping the bars of the carriage, his arms heavy with the weight of the shackles fastened to his wrists.

“Borso,” he called gently. “Let them take me.” The thought of facing his own execution did not exactly fill him with confidence, but he no longer had the will to fight anyone over it. He

could still be found innocent, and though he knew it was unlikely, that sliver of hope calmed him enough to encourage Borso to leave.

“Borso?” the guard questioned. “We’ve heard your name as well.” A pinch of panic rose in Niccolo as he realized his mistake. He said the clown’s name, putting him in direct danger.

“How in Hell would you hear *my* name?” Borso demanded. Nico could see him now, just barely, standing threateningly to the side of the carriage driver.

“You’ve been with him since Rome. Of course we’ve heard of you,” the guard said. “Aiding a criminal? Do you recognize your own crimes?” Borso instinctively stepped back, but as he glanced back at Nico, Nico realized Borso was not willing to flee and leave Nico to his likely death.

“Run!” Nico shouted, but it fell on deaf ears. Borso was seized but determined not to go quietly. He was not a weak man and was quickly able to free himself from the grip of the guard that had joined him on the ground. He drew the saber Gal had gifted him, and though it caused one guard to hesitate, the guard on horseback merely laughed. The laughing did not last long. Borso took the horse down first with a lethal blow to the great animal’s ribcage, throwing its rider to the ground. Everything happened quickly after that. All Nico could see was a blur of motion and the glint of metal. Borso struck down one guard, leaving only two, but one was quickly besting the clown. Nico could see sweat beading on his companion’s brow, which may have obscured his vision, as Borso did not seem to notice one of the guards approaching him from behind, his sword drawn.

“Borso!” Nico warned, clinging to the bars of the carriage. The clown looked up at Nico for just a second, and in that second Nico watched as the blade of the guard’s sword stabbed

through Borso's back, poked through his chest, and exited once again. Borso slumped to the ground, life quickly draining from him.

Nico heard a piercing cry, not realizing it was the sound of his own voice screaming for Borso. Nico collapsed onto his knees in a fit of sobs, unable to look away from his companion.

"Someone is going to need to shut him up," one of the remaining guards growled. The guard approached the carriage with his lip curled up in an expression that resembled a sneer or a smile, raised the hilt of his sword, and Nico slipped into darkness.

## Chapter XX

The Stinche was a large, windowless, box of a building in the middle of Florence. If Nico had seen it in other circumstances, he would have found its plain brown exterior to be a stark contrast to the otherwise beautiful city that had been crowned in the wealth of the Medici family. But he had never been to Florence so he could not speak much to the beauty of the city. All he knew was The Stinche. And even this abomination, where lost souls went to die, held more life than what now rotted inside of young Niccolo.

He wasn't sure how long he had been there. Long enough for him to no longer notice the stench of piss and bile and death which stagnated the air. Long enough for his skin to turn black with dirt and sweat and blood. Long enough for food to no longer have taste. He lay curled on the cot left for him, staring at the wall, studying the divots left in the stone and places where paint had worn down. The sun had just come up over the horizon, but Nico couldn't see it. The only opening to the outside in his cell was a small hole carved in the stone to help regulate the smell.

His door opened, and he startled, reactively turning toward the sound. A guard walked in, but it was the good guard. The kind guard. The one Nico had taken somewhat of a liking to. His name was Compelli, or at least that is how others addressed him. He was not as old as the other guards, and while Nico did wonder occasionally what kind of story Compelli bore, he didn't have the wherewithal to ever inquire about the guard's private life. They participated in pleasantries and small talk, nothing of depth. Sometimes they would play cards together, but Nico noticed that Compelli carried no games today.

"Your trial begins tomorrow," Compelli greeted. "You would benefit from some soap and water before then."



“I smell,” Nico said and a smile touched his lips. He remembered the woman at the brothel in Rome who told him exactly that. It seemed to be part of another life, but it hadn’t been more than a month or two before.

“I’ll bring some by tonight,” Compelli promised.

“Do you think you could find me some parchment and ink?” Nico asked. He had been too nervous to bring it up ever before. Prisoners weren’t granted writing supplies, and it could be dangerous to even ask for them. “I would like to write to my mother.” Compelli nodded.

“Yes. I’ll see what I can find before anyone else comes by.”

“Thank you,” Nico said and watched Compelli leave the cell. He sat idly on his cot, nibbling absentmindedly on some bread Compelli left behind. The guard returned in mere minutes, but Nico had lost all sense of time and the absence felt much greater. Compelli didn’t enter the cell this time, just slid the parchment and ink through a slot in the door where food was sometimes delivered.

“I have to take care of a few things. I will be back around soon,” Compelli told him.

“Wait,” Nico called after inspecting the quill. “Do you have a blade? The quill is dull.” Compelli hesitated, but something seemed to be requiring his attention at another part of the prison, so with some reluctance Compelli passed his quill knife on to Nico.

“I’ll be back,” Compelli said. Nico nodded a goodbye and took everything Compelli had just given him over to the cot, spreading it out around him. Nico had experienced very few comforts since he arrived at the *carcere delle Stinche* and seeing a simple bundle of parchment and ink made him feel more human again. Somewhere beneath all the dirt and heartache the spark of a person returned. He unfolded the blade of the quill knife and haphazardly cut along the

tip of the quill. He used to treat this step as an artform. Nico had once made beautiful quills. But not now, his hands didn't have the strength anymore.

He used his bread plate as a hard surface for his writing and after a few deep breaths he began to scrawl.

*Mama,*

*I am sorry I have taken so long to write. I know you wanted me to so you'd know I am safe. It's been quite an adventure to get here, but I am indeed safe and have managed to reach Spain. You were right, it is beautiful here.*

*I am staying with a man named Borso, whom I met back in Rome. He has taken wonderful care of me during these past weeks. We are staying with his sister and she's been absolutely lovely. I am not sure where exactly I will go from here, the journey was not an easy one, and I am hoping I have not yet worn out my welcome.*

Nico stopped for a moment, gazing at the wall in front of him to gather his thoughts. He didn't want Emilia to worry for him, but there was so much he needed to say. He felt a lump form in his throat and his hand trembled as he continued to write.

*I am sorry for all the ways I have failed you. You taught me to be so much better than what I actually am. Regardless of what my life might bring or whatever kind of tomfoolery I mix myself up in, there is nothing you could have done differently. I don't know what's going to happen to me in the future, but know*

*that I could not have wished for myself a better mother. I think I must just have too much of my father in me, God rest his violent and idiotic soul.*

*I am not too keen on the thought of death, but there are times I wish I had never been born at all. I hope my life in Spain allows me to be more like you. Less afraid. Less obstinate. Maybe I'll learn to listen to people for once. There is a fire in you that I wish I had a spark of. I am trying to be optimistic, but things right now seem rather bleak. I have made such horrible choices in my life. I wish I could go back and do everything differently. But maybe this is where I was always meant to be. I don't know, but it's difficult for anything to matter to me anymore.*

*Except for you. I do love you, Mama. Thank you for all that you've done. I hope we meet again, whether it be in this life or the next.*

*With love, your son,*

*Nico*

*P.S. Galileo says hello.*

Nico folded the parchment carefully and set it on the plate beneath the ink and quill. He then turned the quill knife around in his hand and slipped it under his blanket, hoping Compelli wouldn't notice its absence. A blade is always useful, especially inside a prison.

## Chapter XXI

Compelli returned in the afternoon with more food for Nicollo. Nico didn't have much of an appetite, but he ate it anyway. He handed the letter to Compelli, pressing it into his hand.

"Will you make sure this gets where it needs to go?" Nico asked.

"Where does it need to go?" Compelli questioned.

"Emilia Benintendi in Naples," Nico said. Compelli nodded, carefully placing the letter into his breast pocket.

"I will do my best," Compelli said. "I'll be back soon." Nico didn't respond. As Compelli left the room Nico returned to the cot, curling onto his side. He tried to sleep but his mind would not calm enough to do so. He felt the quill knife press against his knee beneath the blanket and fished it out, turning it over in his hand. Would there be any chance for escape? Could he kill another man with the short blade to ensure his freedom? He turned onto his back, holding the folded blade so that the candlelight from the hall glinted against it.

"*I speak of love awake,*" Nico murmured. He flipped open the knife with his thumb and it clicked as the blade locked in place. His heart rate quickened and the sensation surprised him. He had felt no form of excitement since the night Borso died. His breath kept pace with his heart and warmth washed over him as he held the knife in his fist. He sat up, folding his legs beneath him on the cot. He pushed his sleeve up with the same fist that held the blade, uncovering his arm, streaked with dirt. Blackness clung to the hairs there, sticking into the pores like dots of ink on parchment. The blade hovered over his pale flesh and he flexed his fingers, hoping to expose a vein. A single vein, that's all he needed. He touched the blade to his wrist, testing the way it felt on his skin. The cold soothed him, but then he pulled the blade away, wavering a moment as he stared down at his arm. He made the sign of the cross on his chest, the blade scraping his shirt

with the motion. With a few quick breaths he bit his tongue and before he could waver any longer, pushed the point into the base of his palm. He winced as the pain came, but it was a welcoming hurt. He dragged the blade from his wrist to his forearm, then fell back onto the bed, curling onto his side once more. He watched the blood pour from the wound, running down his fingertips and dripping like autumn rain onto the prison floor.

He was suddenly very tired, and began to hum a tune he could not place. “*Any way the wind blows,*” he sighed. And with his last warm exaltation, young Niccolo was no more.