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The Borgia Bride

Jeanne Kalogridis

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I

I am Sancha of Aragon, natural daughter of the man who became Alfonso II, King of Naples, for a year and a day. Like the Borgias, my people came to the Italian peninsula by way of Spain, and like them, I spoke Spanish at home and Italian in public.

My most vivid childhood memory was formed at the end of my eleventh summer, on the nineteenth of September, the year of our Lord 1488. It was the Feast Day of San Gennaro, patron saint of Naples. My grandfather, King Ferrante, had chosen that particular date to celebrate the thirtieth anniversary of his ascension to the Neapolitan throne.

Normally, we royals did not attend the event held in Gennaro's grand Duomo, the cathedral built in his honour. We preferred to celebrate in the comfort of the Chiesa Santa Barbara, the church enclosed within the magnificent walled grounds of the royal palace, the Castel Nuovo. But that year, my grandfather deemed it politic to attend the public ceremony, given the anniversary. Thus, our large entourage processed into the Duomo, watched at some distance by the *zie*, the aunts, *di San Gennaro*, the wailing, black-clad women who pleaded with the Saint to protect and bless Naples.

Naples needed blessing. It had been the site of many wars;

my family of Aragonese royalty had won the city through bloody battle only forty-six years prior. Although my grandfather was peacefully handed his throne by his father, the revered Alfonso the Magnanimous, Alfonso had violently wrested Naples from the Angevins, supporters of the Frenchman Charles of Anjou. King Alfonso was beloved for rebuilding the city, for constructing grand palaces and piazzas, strengthening the walls, restocking the royal library. My grandfather was less loved. He was more interested in maintaining a strong hold on the local nobles whose veins held Angevin blood. He spent years in petty wars against different barons, and never came to trust his own people. In turn, they never came to trust him.

Naples had also been the site of earthquakes, including one witnessed in 1343 by the poet Petrarch, which razed half the city and sank every ship in the normally placid harbour. There was also Monte Vesuvio, which was still prone to eruptions.

For these reasons, we had come to beseech San Gennaro that day, and, with luck, to witness a miracle.

The procession into the Duomo was no less than grand. We royal women and children entered first, escorted by blue-and-gold clad guards to the front of the sanctuary, past the black-clad commoners who bowed before us like wheat beneath the wind. Ferrante's Queen, the nubile Juana of Aragon, led us, followed by my aunts Beatriz and Leonora. They were followed by my then-unmarried half-sister Isabella, who had been assigned the care of myself and my eight-year-old brother, Alfonso, as well as Ferrante's youngest daughter, my aunt Giovanna, born the same year as I.

The older females were dressed in the traditional garb of the Neapolitan noblewoman: black gowns with full skirts, tightly-laced bodices, and sleeves narrow at the shoulders then blossoming to the width of church bells at the wrist, so that they draped downward well past the hip. We children were allowed colour: I wore a gown of bright green silk with a

brocade bodice laced tightly against absent breasts. Around my neck hung pearls from the sea, and a small gold cross; on my head was a veil of black gossamer. Alfonso wore a pale blue velvet tunic and breeches.

My brother and I walked hand-in-hand just behind my half-sister, careful not to trip on her voluminous skirts. I did my best to look proud and self-assured, my gaze restricted to the back of Isabella's gown, while my brother stared freely out at the assembly. I allowed myself one sidewise glance, at the great cracks in an archway between two large marble columns; above it, a round portrait of Saint Dominic had split in two. A scaffolding stood just beneath it, marking the last of the repairs from an earthquake that had ravaged the Duomo two years before Ferrante came to power.

I was disappointed to have been left in Isabella's care, and not my mother's. My father usually invited my mother, Madonna Trusia Gazullo, a ravishing golden-haired noblewoman, to all functions. He particularly delighted in her company. I believe my father was incapable of love, but certainly he must have come close to it in my gentle mother's arms.

King Ferrante, however, declared it unseemly to bring my father's mistress as part of the royal entourage inside a church. Just as strongly, my grandfather insisted that my brother Alfonso and I come. We were children, not to be blamed for the accident of our parentage. After all, Ferrante himself was of illegitimate birth.

For that reason, my brother and I had been raised as royal children, with all rights and privileges, in the Castel Nuovo, the king's palace. My mother was free to come and go as my father wished, and often stayed at the palace with him. Only subtle reminders from our half-siblings and more pointed ones from our father reminded us that we were lesser creations. I did not play with my father's legitimate children, as they were several years older, or with my Aunt Giovanna or Uncle Carlo, both close to my own age. Instead, my little brother Alfonso

and I were inseparable companions. Though my father's namesake, he was the opposite: golden-curled, sweet-faced, good-natured, his sharp intelligence remarkably free of guile. He had Madonna Trusia's pale blue eyes, while I resembled our father to such a striking degree that, had I been a son, we would have been twins separated by a generation.

Isabella led us to an aisle at the front of the sanctuary which had been roped off; even after we had settled into our place in the Duomo, my brother and I continued to clasp hands. The great cathedral dwarfed us. High overhead, the distance of several Heavens, was the massive, gilded cupola, rendered dazzling by the sunlight that streamed in through its arching windows.

The royal men came next. My father – Alfonso, Duke of Calabria, that sprawling, rustic region far to the south, on the eastern coast – led the way. Heir to the throne, he was renowned for his ferocity in battle; in his youth, he had wrested the Strait of Otranto from the Turks in a victory that brought him glory, if not the people's love. His every move, every glance and gesture, was imperious and forbidding, an effect accentuated by his severe costume of crimson and black. He was more beautiful than any woman present, with a perfect straight, thin nose and high, upward-slanting cheekbones. His lips were red, full, sensuous beneath his thin moustache, his dark blue eyes large and arresting beneath a crown of shining jet hair.

Only one thing marred his handsomeness: the coldness in his expression and eyes. His wife, Hippolyta Sforza, had died four years before; the servants and our female relatives whispered she had given up in order to escape her husband's cruelty. I remembered her vaguely as frail with bulging eyes, an unhappy woman; my father never failed to remind her of her failings, or the fact that theirs was a marriage of convenience because she came from one of Italy's most ancient and powerful families. He also assured poor Hippolyta that he

took far greater pleasure in my mother's embrace than in hers.

I watched as he moved in front of us women and children, forming a row directly in front of the altar, to one side of the empty throne that awaited the arrival of his father, the King.

Behind him came my uncles: Federico and Francesco. Then came my father's eldest son, named for his grandfather, but affectionately called Ferrandino, 'little Ferrante'. He was nineteen then, second in line to the throne, the second most handsome man in Naples but the most attractive, for he possessed a warm, outgoing nature. As he passed the worshipers, feminine sighs echoed in his wake. He was followed by his younger brother Piero, who had the misfortune to resemble his mother.

King Ferrante entered last, in breeches and a cape of black velvet, and a tunic of silver brocade embroidered with fine gold thread. At his hip was the sheathed, jewelled sword given him upon his coronation. Though I knew him as an old man with a limp exacerbated by gout, on this day he moved gracefully, without any hesitation in his gait. His good looks had been eroded by age and indulgence. His hair was white, thinning, revealing a scalp burned pink by the sun; he had a ponderous double chin beneath his trimmed beard. His eyebrows were dark and startling, especially in profile, due to each thick hair's attempt to launch itself in a different direction. These stood above eyes strikingly like mine and my father's – an intense blue with hints of green, capable of changing colour depending on the light and hues surrounding him. His nose was red, pock-marked, his cheeks covered with broken veins. But his bearing was straight, and he was still capable of silencing a crowd simply by walking into a room.

His solemn expression, upon entering the Duomo San Gennaro, generated pure ferocity. The crowd knelt even lower, and waited for the King to settle himself upon a throne near the altar.

Only then did they dare rise; only then did the choir begin to sing.

I craned my neck and caught a glimpse of the altar, where a silver bust of San Gennaro wearing his bishop's mitre had been placed in front of burning tapers. Nearby stood a marble statue, slightly larger than life, of Gennaro in full regalia, two fingers of one hand lifted in blessing, a crosier resting in the crook of his arm.

Once the King was situated and the choir had fallen silent, the Bishop of Naples emerged and gave the invocation; his assistant then appeared, bearing a silver reliquary in the shape of a lantern. Behind the glass was something small and dark: I could not see clearly from my position, being too short – my view was blocked by the backs of my black silk-clad aunts and the men's velvet capes, but I peeped in between. I knew it was a vial containing the dried blood of the martyred San Gennaro, tortured, then brutally beheaded on the orders of the Emperor Diocletian over a thousand years before.

Our bishop and the priest prayed. The *zie di San Gennaro* let out sonorous wails, beseeching the saint. Carefully, the priest, without touching the glass, turned the reliquary end-over-end, one time, then two.

An eternity seemed to pass. Beside me, Isabella had lowered her head and shut her eyes, her lips moving in a silent prayer. On my other flank, little Alfonso had lowered his head solemnly, but was peering out from beneath his curls in fascination at the priest.

I believed fervently in the power of God and the saints to intervene in the affairs of men. Deeming it safest to follow Isabella's example, I bowed my head, squeezed my eyes closed, and whispered a prayer to Naples' patron saint: *Bless our beloved city, and keep it safe. Protect the King and my father and mother and Alfonso. Amen.*

A murmur of awe passed through the crowd. I caught a glimpse of the altar, of the priest proudly displaying the silver

reliquary, holding it up for the crowd's scrutiny. '*Il miracolo e fatto,*' he proclaimed.

The miracle is accomplished.

The choir led the congregation in singing the *Te Deum*, praising God for bestowing this blessing.

From my vantage point I could not see what had occurred, but Isabella whispered in my ear: the dark, dried substance in the vial had begun to melt, then bubble, as the ancient blood once again became liquid. San Gennaro signified that he had heard our prayers, and was pleased; he would protect the city which he had served as bishop during his mortal years.

It was a good omen, she murmured, especially for the King on his anniversary. San Gennaro would protect him from all enemies.

The current Bishop of Naples took the reliquary from the priest and stepped down from the altar to the throne. He held the square, silver-and-glass box before King Ferrante and waited for the monarch to unseat himself and approach.

My grandfather neither rose nor knelt in the presence of such a marvel. He remained settled on his throne, forcing the bishop to bring the reliquary to him. Only then did Ferrante yield to ancient custom and press his lips to the glass, beneath which lay the sacred blood.

The bishop retreated to the altar. The royal males of Aragon then approached one by one, my father first, and kissed the holy relic in turn. We women and children followed – I and my brother still firmly clinging to each other. I pursed my mouth against the glass, warmed by the breath of my relatives, and stared at the dark liquid housed inside. I had heard of miracles, but never before seen one; I was amazed.

I stood beside Alfonso as he took his turn; afterwards, we processed back to our assigned places.

The bishop handed the reliquary back to the priest and made the sign of blessing, two fingers of his right hand slicing

a cross through the air, first over my grandfather, then over the assembled royal family.

The choir broke into song. The old King rose, a bit stiffly. The guards left their positions about the throne and preceded him outside the church, where carriages waited. As always, we followed.

Custom required the entire congregation, including royals, to remain in place during the ceremony, while each member came forward to kiss the relic – but Ferrante was too impatient to be kept waiting for commoners.

We returned directly to the Castel Nuovo, the trapezoidal hulk of mud-coloured brick built two hundred years earlier by Charles of Anjou to serve as his palace. He had first removed the crumbling remnants of a Franciscan convent dedicated to the Virgin Mary. Charles had valued protection over elegance: each corner of the castle, which he called the *Maschio Angiono*, the Angevin Keep, was reinforced by vast cylindrical towers, their toothy merlons jutting against the sky.

The palace stood directly on the bay, so close to the shore that, as a child, I often stuck an arm through a window and imagined I caressed the sea. On that morning a breeze rose off the water, and as I rode in the open carriage between Alfonso and Isabella, I inhaled with pleasure the scent of brine. One could not live in Naples without being in constant sight of the water, without coming to love it. The ancient Greeks had named the city Parthenope for the ancient siren, half-woman, half-bird, who for unrequited love of Odysseus had cast herself into the sea. According to legend, she had washed up on Naples's shore; even as girl, I knew it was not for love of a man that she had been lured into the waves.

I pulled off my veil to better enjoy the air. To get an improved view – of the concave lunar crescent of coastline, with dusky violet Vesuvio to the east, and the oval-shaped

fortress, Castel dell'Ovo, just to our west – I rose in the carriage and turned round. Isabella reseated me at once with a harsh tug, though her expression remained composed and regal, for the benefit of the crowd.

Our carriage rumbled through the castle's main gate, flanked by the Guard Tower and the Middle Tower. Connecting the two was the white marble Triumphal Arch of Alfonso the Magnanimous, erected by my great-grandfather to commemorate his victorious entry into Naples as its new ruler. It marked the first of many renovations he made to the crumbling palace, and once the arch was in place, he rechristened his new residence the Castel Nuovo.

I rode beneath the lower of the two arches, and stared up at the bas relief of Alfonso in his carriage, accompanied by welcoming nobles. Far above, his hand reaching beyond the towers, an exuberant, larger-than-life statue of Alfonso gestured toward the sky. I felt exuberant, too. I was in Naples, with the sun and the sea and my brother, and I was happy.

I could not imagine that such joy could ever be taken from me.

Once inside the inner courtyard with the main gate closed, we climbed from the carriages and entered the Great Hall. There, the longest table in the world held a feast: bowls of olives and fruit, all manner of breads, two roast boars, their jaws propped open with oranges, roast stuffed fowl, and seafood, including succulent little crayfish. There was much wine, too – the *Lachrima Christi*, the tears of Christ, made from Greco grapes cultivated on the fertile slopes of Vesuvio. Alfonso and I took ours diluted with water. The Hall was adorned with flowers of every variety; the vast marble columns were draped with swags of gold brocade, trimmed in blue velvet, to which were fastened wreaths of blood-coloured roses.

Our mother, Madonna Trusia, was there to greet us; we ran to her. Old Ferrante liked her, and cared not a whit that

she had borne two children to my father without the benefit of wedlock. As always, she greeted each of us with a kiss on the lips, and a warm embrace; I thought she was the loveliest woman there. She glowed, an innocent golden-haired goddess amidst a flock of scheming ravens. Like her son, she was simply good, and spent her days worrying not about what political advantage she might gain, but what love she might give, what comfort. She sat between me and Alfonso, while Isabella sat to my right.

Ferrante presided over the feast at the head of the table. In the distance behind him stood a great archway which led to his throne room, then his private apartments. Over it hung a huge tapestry of Naples' royal insignia, gold lilies against a deep blue background, a *fleur-de-lis* legacy from the days of Angevin rule.

That archway held special fascination for me that day; that archway was to be my passage to discovery.

When the feast ended, musicians were brought in and dancing began, which the old King watched from a throne. Without so much as a sidelong glance at us children, my father took my mother's hand and led her away to dance. I took advantage of the merriment to slip from Isabella's half-attentive gaze and make a confession to my brother.

'I am going to find Ferrante's dead men,' I told him. I intended to enter the King's private chambers without his permission, an unforgivable violation of protocol even for a family member. For a stranger, it would be a treasonous act.

Above his goblet, Alfonso's eyes grew wide. 'Sancha, don't. If they catch you – there is no telling what Father will do.'

But I had been struggling with unbearable curiosity for days, and could no longer repress it. I had heard one of the servant girls tell Donna Esmeralda – my nursemaid and an avid collector of royal gossip, that it was true: the old man had a secret 'chamber of the dead', which he regularly visited. The servant had been ordered to dust the bodies and sweep

the floor. Until then I had, along with the rest of the family, believed this to be a rumour fuelled by my grandfather's enemies.

I was known for my daring. Unlike my younger brother, who wished only to please his elders, I had committed numerous childhood crimes. I had climbed trees to spy upon relatives engaged in the marriage act – once during the consummation of a noble marriage witnessed by the King and the Bishop, both of whom saw me staring through the window. I had smuggled toads inside my bodice and released them on the table during a royal banquet. And I had, in retaliation for previous punishment, stolen a jug of olive oil from the kitchen and emptied its contents across the threshold of my father's bedchamber. It was not the olive oil that worried my parents so much as the fact that I had, at the age of ten, used my best jewellery to bribe the guard in attendance to leave.

Always I was scolded and confined to the nursery for lengths of time that varied with the misdeed's audacity. I did not care. Alfonso was willing to remain a prisoner with me, to keep me comforted and entertained. This knowledge left me incorrigible. The portly Donna Esmeralda, though a servant, neither feared nor respected me. She was unimpressed by royalty. Though she was of common blood, both her father and mother had served in Alfonso the Magnanimous' household, then in Ferrante's. Before I was born, she had tended my father.

At the time, she was in the midst of her fourth decade, an imposing figure: large boned, stout, broad of hip and jaw. Her raven hair, heavily streaked with grey, was pulled back tautly beneath a dark veil; she wore the black dress of perpetual mourning, though her husband had died almost a quarter of a century before, a young soldier in Ferrante's army. Afterwards, Donna Esmeralda had become devoutly religious; a gold crucifix rested upon her prominent bosom.

She had never had children. And while she had never taken to my father – indeed, she could scarcely hide her contempt for him – when Trusia gave birth to me, Esmeralda behaved as though I was her own daughter.

Although she loved me, and tried her best to protect me, my behaviour always prompted her reproach. She would narrow her eyes, lips tugged downward with disapproval, and shake her head. 'Why can you not behave like your brother?'

That question never hurt; I loved my brother. In fact, I wished to be more like him and my mother, but I could not repress what I was. Then Esmeralda would make the statement that cut deeply.

'As bad as your father was at that age . . .'

In the great dining hall, I looked back at my little brother and said, 'Father will never know. Look at them . . .' I gestured at the adults, laughing and dancing. 'No one will notice I'm gone.' I paused. 'How can you *stand* it, Alfonso? Don't you want to know if it is true?'

'No,' he answered soberly.

'Why not?'

'Because it might be.'

I did not understand until later what he meant. Instead, I gave him a look of frustration, then, with a whirl of my green silk skirts, turned and threaded my way through the throng.

Unseen, I slipped beneath the archway and its grand tapestry of gold and blue. I believed myself to be the only one to escape the party; I was wrong.

To my surprise, the huge panelled door to the King's throne room stood barely ajar, as if someone had meant to close it but had not quite succeeded. I quietly pulled it open just enough to permit my entry, then shut it behind me.

The room was empty, since the guards were busy eyeing their charges out in the Great Hall. Though not quite as imposing as the Hall in size, the room inspired respect: against

the central wall sat Ferrante's throne: a structure of ornately carved dark wood cushioned in crimson velvet, set upon a short dais with two steps. Above it, a canopy bore Naples' insignia of the lilies, and on either side, arched windows stretched from floor to ceiling, framing a glorious view of the bay. Sunlight streamed through the unshuttered windows, reflecting off the white marble floors and the whitewashed walls, giving a dazzling, airy effect.

It seemed too open, too bright a place to hold any secrets. I paused for a moment, examining my surroundings, my exhilaration and dread both growing. I was afraid – but, as always, my curiosity overpowered my fear.

I faced the door leading to my grandfather's private apartments.

I had entered them only once before, a few years earlier when Ferrante was stricken by a dangerous fever. Convinced he was dying, his doctors summoned the family to make their farewells. I was not sure the King would even remember me – but he had laid his hand on my head and graced me with a smile.

I had been astonished. For my entire life, he had greeted me and my brother perfunctorily, then looked away, his gaze distant, troubled by more important matters. He was not given to socializing, but I caught him at odd moments watching his children and grandchildren with sharp eyes, judging, weighing, missing no detail. His manner was not unkind or rude, but distracted. When he spoke, even during the most social of family events, it was usually to my father, and then only of political affairs. His late marriage to Juana of Aragon, his third wife, had been a love match – he had no need to further his political advantage, to produce more heirs. But he'd long ago spent his lust; the King and Queen moved in separate circles and now spoke only when occasion demanded it.

When he had lain in his bed, supposedly dying, and put

his hand upon my head and smiled, I had decided then that he was kind.

Back in the throne room, I drew a breath for courage, then moved swiftly toward Ferrante's private chambers. I did not expect to find any dead men; my anxiety sprang from the consequences of my actions were I caught.

On the other side of the heavy throne room door, the sound of the revellers and music grew fainter; alone, I could hear the sweep of my silk skirts against marble.

Tentatively, I opened the door leading to the King's outer chamber. I recognized the room, having passed this way when Ferrante had been sick. Here was an office, with four chairs, a large desk, tables, many sconces for late-night illumination, a map of Naples and the Papal States upon the wall. There was also a portrait of my great-grandfather Alfonso wearing the jewelled sword he had brought from Spain, which Ferrante had worn earlier in the Duomo.

Daringly, I pressed against walls, thinking of hidden compartments, of passageways; I scanned the marble floor for cracks that hinted at staircases leading down to dungeons, but found nothing.

I continued on through an archway into a second room furnished for the taking of private meals; here again, there was nothing of note.

All that remained was Ferrante's bedchamber. This was sealed off by a heavy door. Squashing all thoughts of capture and punishment, I boldly opened it, and made my way into the most interior and private of the royal chambers.

Unlike the other bright, cheerful rooms, this one was oppressive and dark. The windows were covered with hangings of deep green velvet, blotting out the sun and the air. A large throw of the same green covered most of the bed, accompanied by numerous blankets of fur; apparently, Ferrante suffered from chills.

The chamber was fairly unadorned given the status of its

resident. The only signs of grandeur were a golden bust of King Alfonso on the mantel, and gold candelabra flanking either side of the bed.

My gaze was drawn to an interior wall, where another door stood fully opened. Beyond it lay a small, windowless closet, outfitted with a wooden altar, candles, rosary, a statuette of San Gennaro, and a cushioned prayer bench.

Yet at the termination of that tiny chamber, past the humble altar, was another portal – this one closed. It led further inward, its edges limned with a faint, flickering light.

I experienced excitement mixed with dread. Had the maidservant told the truth, then? I had seen death before. The extended royal family had suffered loss, and I had been paraded past the pale, posed bodies of infants, children, and adults. But the thought of what might lie beyond that interior door taxed my imagination. Would I find skeletons stacked atop each other? Mounds of decomposing flesh? Rows of coffins?

Or had the servant's confession to my nursemaid sprung from a desire to keep the rumour alive?

My anticipation rose to near-unbearable levels. I passed quickly through the narrow altar room, and placed unsteady fingers on the bronze latch leading to the unknown. Unlike all the other doors, which were ten times my girlish width and four times my height, this one was scarcely large enough to admit a man. I pulled it open.

Only the cold arrogance conferred by my father's blood allowed me to repress a shriek of terror.

Shrouded in gloom, the chamber did not easily reveal its dimensions. To my childish eyes, it seemed vast, limitless, due in part to the darkness of unfinished stone. Only three tapers lit the windowless walls: one some distance from me, and two on large iron sconces flanking the entrance.

Just beyond them, his face lit by the candles' wavering golden glow, stood my welcoming host. Or rather, he did not

stand, but was propped against a vertical beam extending just past the crown of his head. He wore a blue cape, attached to the shoulders of his gold tunic with *fleur de lis* medallions. At breast and hip, ropes bound him fast to his support. A wire connected to one arm raised it away from his body, and bent it out at the elbow, the palm turned slightly upward in a beckoning gesture.

Enter, Your Majesty.

His skin looked like lacquered sienna parchment, glossy in the light. It had been stretched taut across his cheekbones, baring his brown teeth in a gruesome grin. His hair, perhaps luxuriant in life, consisted of a few dull auburn hanks hung from a shrivelled scalp. And his eyes . . .

Ah, his eyes. His other features had been allowed to shrink gruesomely. His lips had altogether disappeared, his ears become thick, tiny flaps stuck to his skull. His nose, half as thin as my little finger, had lost its fleshy nostrils and now terminated in two gaping holes, enhancing his skeletal appearance. But the disappearance of the eyes had not been tolerated; in the sockets rested two well-fitting, highly-polished orbs of white marble, on which were carefully painted green irises, with black pupils. The marble gleamed in the light, making me feel I was being watched.

I swallowed; I trembled. Up to that moment, I had been a child on a silly quest, thinking she was playing a game, having an adventure. But there was no thrill in this discovery, no precocious joy, no naughty glee – only the knowledge that I had stumbled onto something very adult and terrible.

I stepped up to the creature before me, hoping that what I saw was somehow false, that it had never been human. I pressed a tentative finger against its satin-breeched thigh and felt tanned hide over bone. The legs terminated in thin, stockinged calves, and fine, tufted silk slippers that bore no weight.

I drew my hand away, convinced.

How can you stand it, Alfonso? Don't you want to know if it is true?

No. Because it might be.

How wise my little brother was: I wished more than anything to disremember what I had just learned. Everything I had believed about my grandfather shifted then. I had thought him a kindly old man, stern, but forced to be so by the burden of rulership. I had believed the barons who rebelled against him to be bad men, lovers of violence for no reason save the fact they were French. I had believed the servants who said the people despised Ferrante to be liars. I had heard Ferrante's chambermaid whisper to Donna Esmeralda that the King was going mad, and I had scoffed.

Faced with an unthinkable monstrosity, I did not laugh now. I trembled, not at the ghastly sight before me, but at the realization that Ferrante's blood flowed through my veins.

I stumbled forward in the twilight past the chamber's sentry, and saw perhaps ten more bodies in the shadows, all propped and bound, marble-eyed and motionless. All save one.

Some six dead men's distance, a figure bearing a lit taper turned to face me. I recognized my grandfather, his white-bearded visage rendered pale and spectral in the flickering glow.

'Sancha, is it?' He smiled faintly. 'So. We both took advantage of the celebration to slip away from the crowd. Welcome to my museum of the dead.'

I expected him to be furious, but his demeanour was that of one greeting guests at an intimate party. 'You did well,' he said. 'Not a peep, and you even touched old Robert.' He inclined his head at the corpse nearest the entrance. 'Very bold. Your father was much older than you when he first entered this place; he screamed, then burst into tears like a girl.'

'Who are they?' I asked. I was repelled – but curiosity demanded that I know the entire truth.

Ferrante spat on the floor. 'Angevins,' he answered. 'Enemies.

That one' – he pointed to Robert – 'he was a count, a distant cousin of Charles d'Anjou. He swore to me he'd have my throne.' My grandfather let go a satisfied chuckle. 'You can see who had what.' Ferrante moved stiffly over to his former rival. 'Eh, Robert? Who's laughing now?' He gestured at the macabre assembly, his tone growing suddenly heated. 'Counts and marquis, and even dukes. All of them traitors. All of them yearning to see me dead.' He paused to calm himself. 'I come here when I need to remember my victories. To remember I am stronger than my foes.'

I gazed out at the men. Apparently the museum had been assembled over a period of time. Some bodies still had full, thick heads of hair, and stiff beards; others, like Robert, looked slightly tattered. But all were dressed in finery befitting their noble rank, in silks and brocades and velvets. Some had gold-hilted swords at their hips; others wore capes lined with ermine, and precious stones. One had a black velvet cap with a white ostrich plume, tilted at a jocular angle. Some simply stood. Others struck various poses: one propped a wrist on his hip, another reached for the hilt of his sword; a third held out a palm, gesturing at his fellows.

All of them stared ahead blankly.

'The eyes,' I said. It was a question.

Ferrante blinked down at me. 'Pity you're a female. You'd make a good king. Of all his children, you're most like your father. You're proud and hard – much more so than he. But unlike him, you'd have the nerves to do whatever's necessary for the kingdom.' He sighed. 'Not like that fool Ferrandino. All he wants are pretty girls to admire him and a soft bed. No backbone, no brains.'

'The eyes,' I repeated. They troubled me; there was a perversity to them that I had to understand. I had heard what he had just told me – words I had not wanted to hear. I wanted to distract myself, to forget them. I wanted to be nothing like the King, like my father.

'Persistent little thing,' he said. 'The eyes dissolve when a body is mummified – no way around it. The first ones had shut eyelids over empty sockets. They looked like they were sleeping. I wanted them to hear me when I spoke to them. I wanted to be able to see them listening.' He laughed again. 'Besides, it was more effective that way. My last "guest" – how it terrified him, to see his missing compatriots staring back at him!'

I tried to make sense of it all from my naive perspective. 'God made you King. So if these men were traitors, they went against God. It was no sin to kill them.'

My remark disgusted him. 'There is no such thing as sin!' He paused; his manner turned instructive. 'Sancha, the miracle of San Gennaro . . . it almost always occurs in May and September. But when the priest emerges with the reliquary in December, why do you think the miracle so often fails?'

The question took me by surprise; I had no inkling of the answer.

'Think, girl!'

'I don't know, Your Majesty . . .'

'Because the weather is warmer in May and September.'

I still did not understand. My confusion registered on my face.

'It's time you stopped subscribing to this foolishness about God and the saints. There's only one power on earth – the power over life and death. For the time being, in Naples at least, I possess it.' Once more, he prodded me. 'Now, think. The substance in the vial is at first solid. Consider the fat on a pig, or a lamb. What happens to that fat if you roast the animal on a spit – that is, expose it to warmth?'

'It drips down into the fire.'

'Heat turns the solid into a liquid. So perhaps, if you took the reliquary of San Gennaro from its cool, dark closet out into the Duomo on a warm, sunny day and wait for a while . . . *il miracolo e fatto*. Solid to liquid.'

I was already shocked; my grandfather's heresy only deepened that sensation. I recalled Ferrante's cursory attitude towards all things religious, his eagerness either to absent himself from or to be done swiftly with Mass. I doubted he ever knelt at the little altar which led to the chamber housing his true convictions.

Yet I was simultaneously intrigued by his explanation of the miracle; my faith was now imperfect, threaded with doubt. Even so, habit was strong. I prayed silently, speedily to God to forgive the King, and for San Gennaro to protect him despite his sins. For the second time that day, I prayed for Gennaro to protect Naples – though not necessarily from crimes wrought by nature or disloyal barons.

Ferrante reached with his bony, blue-veined hand for my smaller one, and squeezed it in a grip that allowed no dissent. 'Come, child. They will wonder where we are. Besides, you have seen enough.'

I thought of each man within the museum of the dead – how they must have been introduced by my gloating grandfather to the fate awaiting them, how the weaker ones must have wept and pleaded to be spared. I wondered how they had been killed; certainly by a method that left no trace.

Ferrante held the taper high and led me from his soulless gallery. While I waited inside the altar room as he closed the little door, I reflected on the clear pleasure he took from the company of his victims. He was capable of killing without compunction, capable of savouring the act. Perhaps I should have feared for my own life, being an unnecessary female, yet I could not. This was my grandfather. I studied his face in the golden light: it wore the same benign expression, possessed the same ruddy cheeks with their latticework of tiny broken veins that I had always known. I searched his eyes, so like mine, for signs of the cruelty and madness that had inspired the museum.

Those eyes scrutinized me back, piercing, frighteningly lucid. He blew out the taper and set it upon the little altar, then retook my hand.

'I will not tell, Your Majesty.' I uttered the words not out of fright or a wish to protect myself, but out of a desire to let Ferrante know my loyalty to my family was complete.

He let go a soft laugh. 'My dear, I care not. All the better if you do. My enemies will fear me all the more.'

Back through the King's bedchamber we went, through the sitting room, the outer office, then last of all the throne room. Before he pushed open the door, he turned to regard me. 'It's not easy for us, being the stronger ones, is it?'

I tilted my chin to look up at him.

'I'm old, and there are those who will tell you I'm becoming feeble-minded. But I still notice most things. I know how you love your brother.' His gaze focused inward. 'I loved Juana because she was good-natured and loyal; I knew she would never betray me. I like your mother for the same reason – a sweet woman.' He drew his attention outward to study me. 'Your little brother takes after her; a generous soul. Worthless when it comes to politics. I've seen how devoted you are to him. If you love him, look out for him. We strong have to take care of the weak, you know. They haven't the heart to do what's necessary to survive.'

'I'll take care of him,' I said stoutly. But I would never subscribe to my grandfather's notion that killing and cruelty were a necessary part of protecting Alfonso.

Ferrante pushed open the door. We walked hand-in-hand back into the Great Hall, where the musicians played. I scanned the crowd for Alfonso, and saw him standing off in a far corner, staring owl-eyed at us both. My mother and Isabella were both dancing, and had for the moment altogether forgotten us children.

But my father, the Duke of Calabria, had apparently taken note of the King's disappearance. I glanced up, startled, as

he stepped in front of us and stopped our progress with a single question.

'Your Majesty. Is the girl annoying you?' During my brief lifetime, I had never heard the Duke address his father in any other fashion. He looked down at me, his expression hostile, suspicious. I tried to summon the mannerisms of pure innocence, but after what I had seen, I could not hide the fact I had been shaken to the core.

'Not in the least,' Ferrante replied, with good humour. 'We've just been exploring, that's all.'

Revelation, then fury, flashed in my father's beautiful, heartless eyes. He understood exactly where my grandfather and I had been – and, given my reputation as a miscreant, realized I had not been invited.

'I will deal with her,' the Duke said, in a tone of great menace. He was famous for his vicious treatment of his enemies, the Turks; he had insisted on personally torturing and killing those captured in the Battle of Otranto, by methods so inhuman we children were not permitted to hear of them. I told myself I was not afraid. It was unseemly for him to have me, a royal, thrashed. He did not realize that he already imposed on me the worst punishment possible: he did not love me, and made no secret of the fact.

And I, proud as he, would never admit my desperate desire to gain his affection.

'Don't punish her, Alfonso,' Ferrante said. 'She has spirit, that's all.'

'Girls ought not to have spirit,' my father countered. 'This one least of all. My other children are tolerable, but *she* has done nothing but vex me since the day of her birth – a day I deeply regret.' He glared down at me. 'Go. His Majesty and I have matters to discuss. You and I will speak about this later.'

Ferrante let go my hand. I made a little curtsy and said, 'Your Majesty.' I would have run full tilt had the Hall not

been filled with adults who all would have turned and demanded decorum; as it was, I walked as swiftly as possible over to my waiting brother.

He took a single glimpse at my face and threw his arms about me. 'Oh, Sancha! So it *is* true . . . I am so sorry you had to see. Were you frightened?'

My heart, which had grown so chilled in the presence of my two elders, thawed in Alfonso's presence. He did not want to know the details of what I had witnessed; he wanted only to know how I had fared. I was a bit surprised that my little brother was not more shocked to learn that the rumour was true. Perhaps he understood the King better than I did.

I drew back, but kept my arms entwined with his. 'It was not so bad,' I lied.

'Father looked angry; I fear he will punish you.'

I shrugged. 'Maybe he won't. Ferrante didn't care a whit.' I paused, then added with childish bravado, 'Besides, what will Father do? Make me stay in my room? Make me go without supper?'

'If he does,' Alfonso whispered, 'I will come to you, and we can play quietly. If you're hungry, I can bring you food.'

I smiled and laid a palm on his cheek. 'The point is, you mustn't worry. There's nothing Father can do that will really hurt me.'

How very wrong I was.

Donna Esmeralda was waiting outside the Great Hall to lead us back to the nursery. Alfonso and I were in a jolly mood, especially as we moved past the classroom where, had this not been a holiday, we would have been studying Latin under the uninspired tutelage of Fra Giuseppe Maria. Fra Giuseppe was a sad-faced Dominican monk from the nearby monastery of San Domenico Maggiore, famed as the site where a crucifix had spoken to Thomas Aquinas two centuries earlier. Fra

Giuseppe was so exceedingly corpulent that both Alfonso and I had christened him in Latin *Fra Cena*, Father Supper. As we passed by the classroom, I solemnly began the declension of our current favourite verb. '*Ceno,*' I said. I dine.

Alfonso finished, *sotto voce*. '*Cenare,*' he said. '*Cenavi. Cenatus.*'

Donna Esmeralda rolled her eyes, but said nothing.

I giggled at the joke on Fra Giuseppe, but at the same time, I recalled a phrase he had used in our last lesson to teach us the dative case. *Deo et homnibus peccavit.*

He has sinned against God and men.

I thought of Robert's marble eyes, staring at me. *I wanted to know they were listening.*

Once we were in the nursery, the chambermaid joined Esmeralda in carefully removing our dress clothes while we wriggled impatiently. We were then dressed in less restrictive clothing – a loose, drab gown for me, a plain tunic and breeches for Alfonso.

The door to the nursery opened, and we turned to see our mother, Madonna Trusia, accompanied by her lady-in-waiting, Donna Elena, a Spanish noblewoman. The latter had brought her son, our favourite playmate: Arturo, a bony, long-limbed hellion who excelled at chases and tree-climbing, both sports I enjoyed. My mother had changed from her formal black into a pale yellow gown; looking at her smiling face, I thought of the Neapolitan sun.

'Little ones,' she announced. 'I have a surprise. We are going on a picnic.'

Alfonso and I whooped our approval. We each grasped one of Madonna Trusia's soft hands. She led us from the nursery into the castle corridors, Donna Elena and Arturo in tow.

But before we reached freedom, we had an unfortunate encounter.

We passed my father. Beneath his blue-black moustache, his

lips were grim with purpose, his brow furrowed. I surmised he was headed for the nursery to inflict my punishment. Given the current circumstances, I could also guess what it would be.

We came to an abrupt stop.

'Your Highness,' my mother said sweetly, and bowed. Donna Elena followed suit.

He acknowledged Trusia with a curt question. 'Where are you going?'

'I am taking the children on a picnic.'

The Duke's gaze flickered over our little assembly, then settled on me. I squared my shoulders and lifted my chin, defiant, resolved to show no sign of disappointment at his next utterance.

'Not her.'

'But Your Highness, it is a holiday . . .'

'Not *her*. She misbehaved abominably today. It must be dealt with at once.' He paused and gave my mother a look that made her wilt like a blossom in scorching heat. 'Now *go*.'

Madonna Trusia and Elena bowed again to the Duke; my mother and Alfonso both shot me sorrowful little glances before moving on.

'Come,' my father said.

We walked in silence to the nursery. Once we arrived, Donna Esmeralda was summoned to witness my father's formal address.

'I should not be required to waste an instant of my attention on a useless girl child with no hope of ascending to the throne – much less such a child who is a bastard.'

He had not finished, but his cursory dismissal so stung that I could not let an opportunity to retaliate pass. 'What difference does it make? The King is a bastard,' I interrupted swiftly, 'which makes you the son of a bastard.'

He slapped my cheek so hard it brought tears to my eyes, but I refused to let them spill. Donna Esmeralda started

slightly when he struck me, but managed to keep herself in check.

'You are incorrigible,' he said. 'But I cannot permit you to further waste my time. You are not worth even a moment of my attention. Discipline should be the province of nursemaids, not princes. I have denied you food, I have closeted you in your room – yet none of this has done anything to calm you. And you are almost old enough to be married. How shall I turn you into a proper young woman?'

He fell silent and thought a long moment. After a time, I saw his eyes narrow, then gleam with understanding. A slight, cold smile played on his lips. 'I have denied you the wrong things, haven't I? You're a hard-headed child. You can do without food or the outdoors for a while, because while you *like* those things, they are not what you love most.' He nodded, becoming ever more pleased with his plan. 'That is what I must do, then. You will not change until you are denied the one thing that you love above all else.'

I felt the first pangs of real fear.

'Two weeks,' he said, then turned and addressed Donna Esmeralda. 'She is to have no contact with her brother for the next two weeks. They are not permitted to eat, to play, to speak with each other – not even permitted to catch a glimpse of each other. Your future rests on this. Do you understand?'

'I understand, Your Highness,' Donna Esmeralda replied tautly, her eyes narrowed and her gaze averted. I began to wail.

'You cannot take Alfonso from me!'

'It is done.' In my father's hard, heartless expression, I detected traces of pleasure. *Filius Patri similis est*. The Son is like the Father.

I flailed about for reasons; the tears that had gathered on the rims of my eyes were now in true danger of cascading onto my cheeks. 'But . . . but Alfonso loves me! It will hurt *him* if he can't see me, and he's been a good son, a perfect

son. It's not fair – you'll be punishing Alfonso for something he didn't do!'

'How does it feel, Sancha?' my father taunted softly. 'How does it feel to know you are responsible for hurting the one you love the most?'

I looked on the one who had sired me – one who so cruelly relished hurting a child. Had I been a man, and not a young girl, had I borne a blade, anger would have overtaken me and I would have slit his throat where he stood. In that instant, I knew what it was like to feel infinite, irrevocable hatred for one I helplessly loved. I wanted to hurt him as he had me, and take pleasure in it.

When he left, I at last wept; but even as I spilt angry tears, I swore I would never again permit any man, least of all the Duke of Calabria, to make me cry.

I spent the next two weeks in torment. I saw only the servants. Though I was allowed outside to play if I wished, I refused, just as I petulantly refused most of my meals. I slept poorly and dreamed of Ferrante's spectral gallery.

My mood was so dark, my behaviour so difficult that Donna Esmeralda, who had never lifted a finger against me, slapped me twice in exasperation. I kept ruminating over my sudden impulse to kill my father; it had terrified me. I became convinced that without Alfonso's gentle influence, I should become a cruel, half-crazed tyrant like the father and grandfather I so resembled.

When the two weeks finally passed, I seized my little brother and embraced him with a ferocity that left us both breathless.

When at last I could speak, I said, 'Alfonso, we must take a solemn oath never to be apart again. Even when we are married, we must stay in Naples, near each other, for without you, I will go mad.'

'I swear,' Alfonso said. 'But Sancha, your mind is perfectly sound. With or without me, you need never fear madness.'

My lower lip trembled as I answered him. 'I am too much like Father – cold and cruel. Even Grandfather said it – I am hard, like him.'

For the first time, I saw real anger flare in my brother's eyes. 'You are anything but cruel; you are kind and good. And the King is wrong. You aren't hard, just . . . stubborn.'

'I want to be like you,' I said. 'You are the only person who makes me happy.'

From that time on, I never once gave our father cause to punish me.