

I

The Looking-Glass

HOUSE FONTEIN ANTECHAMBER

– *Febbraio* 315

Lucien di Fontein stood in the antechamber waiting, feeling his pulse quicken and his mouth go dry. It was always the same before a testing. His breath steamed on the air. This part of the castle lacked heating, and he was grateful for his vest, dress shirt and frock coat. He clenched, stretched and clenched again his nearly numb fingers, chiding himself for not requesting gloves. He made a mental note to obtain calfskin fingerless ones. Assuming of course he lived out the rest of the day.

The room was a simple affair. Behind him stood tall double doors. Ornate black iron hinges lent the aged wood a severe solemnity. A pair of matching doors loomed ahead, a portal to the training room beyond. Two pews, narrow and uncomfortable, ran down either side of the chamber. A faded flag in the scarlet and black of House Fontein had been left in the corner, the fabric providing a feast for the moths. Latticed windows let in pale autumnal light, throwing a diffuse net shadow over the interior.

A lone pot plant grown monstrous and a full-length looking glass were the only other decorations. Biology was not his forte, although he suspected the growth was poisonous in some way. The looking glass reflected a man-child of eighteen summers, a grave expression etched onto his face. He had polished his knee-length boots to an impressive shine, the deep brown leather worn and sturdy. The buckles had been buffed to a honey-coloured gleam. His trousers and frock coat were of a blue so deep as to be mistaken for black in poor light. He

was particularly taken with the fine embroidery on the lapels, a repeating motif of vines and leaves. The buttons had been made from shark teeth on his insistence. Virmyre had told him the creatures regrew their teeth many times over the course of their lives. The idea of renewal had appealed to Lucien, the possibility of attaining something once lost. He'd imagined the buttoner cutting his fingers to shreds on the awful teeth. Filing down the triangular shards into ivory discs must have been an ordeal – still, there were worse things in Demesne. Hoops of copper run to verdigris decorated the epaulettes of the jacket, just as he'd requested. Being Orfano he was expected to present a certain profile and had taken a fancy to sketching unlikely outfits when his tutors bored him. All in all he rather liked his new wardrobe; too bad it would see ruin at the hands of his opponents.

Worst yet, it might be the outfit he died in.

He was aware enough by now to know his obsession with finery was simply compensation. He couldn't change the way he looked. He hoped he might yet grow into a more aristocratic-looking young man. His brow was too heavy for his tastes, his eyes too deeply sunken, lips too thin. He felt rather stocky and squat, sulking for a month when he realised he would never be as tall as Golia. No matter. He'd be the better of Golia in other ways, ways that mattered. He raised his right hand to his hair. Thick, black, coarse hair that he'd let grow long against Superiore Giancarlo's wishes. And Mistress Corvo and a number of other teachers. He hesitated from lifting the swathe of black, not wanting to see the disfigurement beneath. And his nails. The newer staff thought him effete, or affected, or both. His nails matched his hair but he'd never once painted them. Angelicola had been unable to tell Lucien why his nails should be such a dismal hue. Nor had the belligerent *dottore* managed to decipher why Lucien bled clear fluid that turned pale blue after a few seconds.

It was the same for all of the Orfani: they hid their disfigurements as best they could. The deformities were an open secret among the subjects of Demesne in spite of the Orfani's attempts to appear normal. Lucien knew full well

the common folk branded the Orfani witchlings – *streghe* in the old tongue. He felt the familiar sting of pique. His hand strayed toward the ceramic blade resting in its sheath on his right hip.

Lucien drew the weapon, holding it out in front of himself, the tip just inches from the floor, looking almost casual. Almost. He brought the blade up to his face in the fencer's salute. None of the Orfani were allowed to carry a metal blade. It was tradition, so they said. Only proven men or women could be trusted to carry such an expensive weapon. Metal cost money and could not be squandered on the young. Lucien didn't believe a word of it. Ceramic blades were just as difficult to produce, so he'd been told. Still, this blade was his, a constant yet silent companion. The weapon had a stylised crosspiece in the Maltese fashion. The hilt was bound in taut scarlet leather, worn soft by endless training. Three notches marked the leading edge, almost too small to see. The blade was the colour of bone and it pleased him, he'd chosen it especially.

'Which style will you fight in?'

Lucien spun and almost lunged. Dino gave an almost imperceptible shake of the head, disapproval etched on his lips. He was dressed in sober grey.

'Trying to get yourself killed?'

The boy shrugged and pushed out his bottom lip. His hand rested casually on his own blade, but there was no suggestion of drawing. The Orfano bore a certain fearlessness in his grey eyes despite being six years Lucien's junior.

'You'll make a fine assassin one day if you keep sneaking around like that.'

'So they tell me.' Another shrug.

Lucien sheathed his blade. 'Is there something you need?'

'Thought I should wish you luck,' replied Dino. 'We've not spoken for a while.' His eyes showed nothing; he folded his arms and slouched against the wall.

'Virmyre sent you, didn't he?'

The boy nodded. Lucien felt no need to fill the silence that followed. Dino let it spool out between them until his curiosity snagged a question from his lips.

‘Any idea who you’ll face? What style?’

Now it was Lucien’s turn to shrug. Rumours of his intended opponent had been scarce, unusually so considering gossip was currency in Demesne. He still didn’t know what awaited him beyond the doors of the training chamber, whether it was to be a fight to first blood or to the death. The one thing he could depend on was Maestro Superiore di Spada Giancarlo. The *superiore* administered every testing. A sour tang flooded Lucien’s throat. His palms began to sweat.

Maestro di Spada D’arzenta had been Lucien’s primary teacher, an even-handed but reserved man in his mid-thirties. He taught in the *stile vecchio*, a single blade in the leading hand, the empty hand for balance.

Superiore Giancarlo taught *spada e pugnale*, attacking with the sword and parrying with a dagger in the off hand, although his opinions were sharper than both. Lucien had endured a dozen lessons by the *superiore*. Eleven lessons too many.

Maestro Ruggeri didn’t waste time on opinions, if indeed he had any. Ruggeri simply taught. There was the correct way or the incorrect way, no praise, no chastisement. Ruggeri favoured the cloak and sword.

‘Well, the pleasure was all yours,’ mumbled Dino, interrupting Lucien’s thoughts, but there was no real bite to his sarcasm. The younger boy edged toward the door, made to let himself out.

‘Dino.’

The boy turned, mouth set, a flat line holding something back.

‘I’m sorry. For that night.’ Lucien cleared his throat, ‘After *La Festa* when you were with Stephania . . .’

‘Well, it’s done now.’ Dino shrugged again, a slow blink of those grey eyes. A touch of sadness about them perhaps. ‘What happens if you fail today?’

‘I’m not sure,’ replied Lucien, ‘Shame and embarrassment certainly. Perhaps success leads to some position in Demesne. I don’t know what failure will bring.’

‘They say Golia may join the *Maestri di Spada*.’

‘All I ever wanted was to be part of House Fontein.’ Lucien

chewed his lip, regarded the hilt of the sword. ‘And now I’m here at my final testing, and I don’t know what I want.’ A weary breath escaped him.

‘Don’t fail,’ said Dino. ‘And don’t die.’

The younger Orfano flicked a lazy salute and was gone. Lucien stood in the chamber remembering the bitter morning after *La Festa*. How he’d felt responsible for Stephania coming to his chamber somehow. Ridiculous of course. Regret coiled around him like mist. The doors behind opened again and he resisted the urge to draw his blade in response. The history books of Landfall were littered with feuds between the houses. The Orfano were not immune to such internecine violence, despite being under the nominal protection of the king. Assassination had been a currency paid out all too keenly in earlier decades.

Anea slipped into the room unescorted. Lucien realised he was holding his breath. As ever she wore her veil: midnight-blue fabric covering the bottom half of her face. Tiny bronze discs and tassels decorated her forehead, suspended from a headscarf of white. Her dress, a matching midnight-blue, was tightly fitted. The sleeves were elegantly slashed to show the white blouse beneath. Her skirts were of an impressive volume, almost floor length. She reached into her sleeve and Lucien’s hand drifted to his blade, he dropped back a step. Anea caught the motion, holding out her hand, placating. She drew a palm-sized leather-bound book from her dress and searched for a particular page.

Just three years younger, nearly matching him in height, he guessed she was wearing her heeled boots, buttons running to the ankle in neat precision. Her blonde hair had enchanted the houses when she had first arrived on the steps of House Contadino. She looked up, caught him with her piercing green eyes, proffered the book to him. Her exquisite script curled and ran across the page:

I know things have been difficult between us lately but I wanted to wish you luck. Keep your wits and your feet. Don’t let him talk down to you.

Everyone knew Anea, the silent Orfano. Aranae Oscuro

Contadino by birth, Anea on account of hating her full name. It was tradition for Orfani to petition a house for adoption at sixteen. They took the name of whoever they lodged with in the interim. Anea was, if rumour were to be believed, the most fiercely intelligent Orfano in a hundred and fifty years.

‘Thank you,’ he replied. ‘I should have spoken with you since *La Festa*, but I’ve been busy training.’

Anea took a moment to scribble another message in the book, a pencil appearing from nowhere in her clever fingers.

And with the wedding plans? It seems you are destined for great things, provided you survive the day.

Lucien read the note, then glanced at her, unsure if he was being mocked.

‘The wedding isn’t set. No formal offer of marriage has been made.’ He struggled to maintain a polite tone of voice. ‘I’m still undecided.’ This last an escaped stray thought. Demesne had been aflame with talk from the ruling nobles to the farmers in the fields. There could be few in Landfall who didn’t know of the potential pairing.

Anea’s eyes narrowed above the veil, her pencil resumed its scratching in the book, the strokes more hurried. Lucien waited, flinching as she thrust the book at him.

You’d be a fool not to marry Stephania. What else is there? Marrying into one of the great houses is your most prudent option. A political marriage could give you a degree of safety.

‘Safety? What do we know about safety?’ Lucien curled his lip. ‘We’re protected by the king’s own edict, yet we live our lives in fear of poison and fire, blade and maul. Some safety. Do you really suppose a political marriage will change anything? For you? For me?’

Anea stared, green eyes hard like jade. Tears formed but refused to brim over. Lucien immediately regretted mentioning the fire. Clearly the memory of that particular night burned all too brightly in her mind. She scribed another message, agitation obvious, her handwriting now jagged.

You’re pathetic. You don’t even have the sense to save yourself. Even after everything that’s happened.

She snatched the book back from his fingers before he could

respond and swept out of the room, not bothering to close the doors behind her. Lucien sighed. He made to close the doors, pausing a second to watch her march down the hall, passing from darkness through pools of lantern light and back again. Her heels rang out on the stone floor, fading into the distance as she passed deeper into the castle, back to her studies in House Erudito.

The antechamber was silent again. Now he could press on with the business of clearing his mind, letting the noise and confusion of the day quieten. Dino's visit had provided some measure of closure, Anea had only reminded him of a situation that was all but inevitable. Thoughts came to him, roiling waves breaking on the shore. The anxiety in his stomach rose and fell, his breathing continued slow and steady. Superiore Giancarlo was on the other side of the doors, waiting for him in the training chamber. Giancarlo and all of his towering disdain. Lucien pushed the thought away and kept breathing. Maestri di Spada D'arzenta and Ruggeri would also be there. This was a more welcome thought but he turned it to one side all the same. Quite why Anea had suddenly appeared was a mystery. Images of her leather-bound book and angry green eyes filled his mind. He reined his concentration back, setting aside the curious visitation. The anxiety within dwindled. He breathed, immersed in the sound of the wind howling around ancient towers and weathervanes.

His thoughts strayed to Rafaela. She'd been conspicuous only by her absence these last few days. Their paths crossed less and less, it seemed.

Back to concentration, back to a clear mind. The tension moved out of his gut now, lurking in his shoulders and at the backs of his knees. That was to be expected. He remained standing, kept breathing. The doors to the training chamber opened, yawning wide, creaking on ancient hinges.

'Are you ready to be received?' said a deep voice. Lucien raised his face, eyes hard.

'I am ready to be received.'

Lucien stepped into the chamber beyond, chin pulled in tightly, staring out from under his brow. His fingertips rested

on the hilt of his blade. Two final diversions raced across his mind before the testing began. The first was of gloves for his icy fingers, the second was of Rafaela.