legend of doomed young love and lost innocence.
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ALSO BY ANNE RICE
Interview with the Vampire
The Feast of All Saints

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Florence, Italy.

Italy.

By anyone's standards, I am a remarkable vampire, most powerful, having lived five hundred years from the great days of Cosimo de' Medici, and even the angels will attest to my powers, if you

can get them to speak to you. Be cautious on that point.

I have, however, nothing whatsoever to do with the "Coven of the Articulate, " that band of strange romantic vampires in and from the Southern New World city of New Orleans who have regaled you already with so many chronicles and tales.

I know nothing of those heroes of macabre fact

or New Orleans. For now, I cannot know or care about it.

As I spend my tranquil nights, here, among the overgrown stones of the place where I was so happy as a child, our walls now broken and misshapen among the thorny blackberry vines and fragrant smothering forests of oak and chestnut trees, I am compelled to record what befell me, for it seems that I may have suffered a fate very unlike that of any other vampire. I do not always hang about this place.

On the contrary, I spend most of my time in that city which for me is the queen of all cities—Florence—which I loved from the very first moment I

And it was under Cosimo's roof that I saw, as a mortal boy of destiny and promise—yes, I myself saw—the great guests of the Council of Trent who had come from far Byzantium to heal the breach between the Eastern and Western church: Pope Eugenius IV of Rome, the Patriarch of Constantinople and the Emperor of the East himself, John VIII Paleologus. These great men I saw enter the city in a terrible storm of bitter rain, but nevertheless with indescribable glory, and these men I saw eat from Cosimo's table.

Enough, you might say. I agree with you. This is no history of the Medici. But let me only say that anyone who tells you that they were scoundrels, these great men, is a perfect idiot. It was the descendants of Cosimo who took care of Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo and artists without count. And it was all

I shall tell my tale naturally and effectively, wallowing in words, for I love them. And, being an immortal, I have devoured over four centuries of English, from the plays of Christopher Marlowe and Ben Jonson to the abrupt and harshly evocative words of a Sylvester Stallone movie.

You'll find me flexible, daring, and now and then a shock. But what can I do but draw upon the fullest descriptive power I can command, and mark that English now is no more the language of one land, or even two or three or four, but has become the language of all the modern world from the backwoods of Tennessee to the most remote Celtic isles and down under to the teeming cities of Australia and New Zealand.

I am Renaissance-born. Therefore I delve in all, and blend without prejudice, and that some higher good pertains to what I do, I cannot doubt.

As for my native Italian, hear it softly when you say my name, Vittorio, and breathe it like perfume from the other names which are sprinkled throughout

I wouldn't write a book to tell you that a vampire was happy.

I have a brain as well as a heart, and there hovers about me an etheric visage of myself, created most definitely by some Higher Power, and entangled completely within the intangible weave of that etheric visage is what men call a soul. I have such. No amount of blood can drown away its life and leave me but a thriving revenant.

Okay. No problem. Yes, yes. Thank you!—as everybody in the entire world can say in English. We're ready to begin.

Except I want to give you a quote from an obscure but wonderful writer, Sheridan Le Fanu, a paragraph spoken in extreme angst by a haunted character in one of his many exquisitely written ghost stories. This author, a native of Dublin, died in 1873, but mark how fresh is this language, and how horrifying the expression of the character Captain Barton in the story called "The Familiar":

Whatever may be my uncertainty as to the authenticity of what we are taught to call revelation, of one fact I am deeply and horribly convinced, that there does exist beyond this a spiritual world—a system whose workings are generally in mercy hidden from us—a system which may be, and which is sometimes, partially and terribly revealed. I am sure—I know . . . that

terious and stupendous—by agencies the most inexplicable and terrific;—there is a spiritual system—great God, how I have been convinced!—a system malignant, and implacable, and omnipotent, under whose persecutions I am, and have been, suffering the torments of the damned!
What do you think of that?

I am myself rather mortally struck by it. I don't think I am prepared to speak of our God as "dreadful" or our system as "malignant," but there seems an eerie inescapable ring of truth to these words, written in fiction but obviously with much emotion.

It matters to me because I suffer under a terrible curse, quite unique to me, I think, as a vampire. That is, the others don't share it. But I think we all—human, vampire, all of us who are sentient and can weep—we all suffer under a curse, the curse that we know more than we can endure, and there is nothing, absolutely nothing, we can do about the force and the lure of this knowledge.

At the end, we can take this up again. See what you make of my story.

It's early evening here. The brave remnant of my father's highest tower still rises boldly enough against the sweetly star-filled heavens for me to see from the window the moonlighted hills and valleys of Tuscany, aye, even as far as the twinkling sea below the mines of Carrara. I smell the flowering green of the steep undiscovered country round

where the irises of Tuscany still break out in violent red or white in sunny beds, to be found by me in the silky night.

And so embraced and protected, I write, ready for the moment when the full yet ever obscure moon leaves me for the hideaway of clouds, to light the candles that stand ready, some six, ensconced within the thick ruggedly worked silver of the candelabra which once stood on my father's desk, in those days when he was the old-style feudal lord of this mountain and all its villages, and the firm ally in peace and war of the great city of Florence and its unofficial ruler, when we were rich, fearless, curious and wondrously contented.

Let me speak now of what has vanished.

2

MY SMALL MORTAL LIFE, THE BEAUTY OF FLORENCE, THE GLORY OF OUR SMALL COURT— WHAT IS VANISHED

I WAS sixteen years old when I died. I have good height, thick brown hair down to the shoulders, hazel eyes that I are far too vulnerable to behold, giving me the appearance of an androgyne in a way, and a desirable narrow nose with unremarkable nostrils, and a medium-sized mouth which is neither voluptuous nor stingy. A beautiful boy for the time. I wouldn't be alive now if I hadn't been.

That's the case with most vampires, no matter who says otherwise. Beauty carries us to our doom. Or, to put it more accurately, we are made immortal by those who cannot sever themselves from our charms.

I don't have a childish face, but I have an almost angelic one. My eyebrows are strong, dark, high enough over my eyes to allow them entirely too much luster.

thick brown hair, making as it does a curly, wavy frame for the whole picture. My chin is slightly too strong, too squared off for the rest. I have a dimple in it.

My body is overmuscular, strong, broad-chested, my arms powerful, giving an impression of manly power. This rather rescues my obdurate-looking jaw and allows to me to pass for a full-fledged man, at least from a distance.

This well-developed physique I owe to tremendous practice with a heavy battle sword in the last years of my life, and ferocious hunting with my falcons in the mountains, up and down which I ran often on foot, though I had already four horses of my own by that age, including one of that special majestic breed made to support my weight when I wore my full suit of armor.

My armor is still buried beneath this tower. I never used it in battle. Italy was seething with war in my time, but all of the battles of the Florentines were being fought by mercenaries.

All my father had to do was declare his absolute loyalty to Cosimo, and let no one representing the Holy Roman Empire, the Duke of Milan or the Pope in Rome move troops through our mountain passes or stop in our villages.

We were out of the way. It was no problem. Enterprising ancestors had built our castle three hundred years before. We went back to the time of the Lombards, or those barbarians who had come down from the North into Italy, and I think we had

people known to history as the Etruscans.

Our household, being of the old feudal style, scorning trade and requiring of its men that they be bold and brave, was full of treasure acquired through wars without count or record—that is, old silver and gold candelabra and sconces, heavy chests of wood with Byzantine designs encrusted on them, the usual Flemish tapestries, and tons of lace, and bed hangings hand-trimmed with gilt and gems, and all of the most desirable finery.

My father, admiring the Medici as he did, bought up all kinds of luxury items on his trips to Florence. There was little bare stone in any important room, because flowered wool carpets covered all, and every hallway or alcove had its own towering armoire filled with rattling, rusting battle dress of heroes whose names nobody even remembered.

We were incalculably rich: this I had more or less overheard as a child, and there was some hint that it had to do as much with valor in war as with secret pagan treasure.

There had been centuries of course when our

abandoned ruins.

Our nearest neighbor did rule his own mountain enclave of villages in loyalty to the Duke of Milan.

But he didn't bother with us or we him. It was a remote political matter.

Our walls were thirty feet high, immensely thick, older than the castle and keeps, old indeed beyond anyone's most romantic tales and constantly being thickened and repaired, and inside the compound there existed three little villages busy with good vineyards that yielded marvelous red wine; prosperous beehives; blackberries; and wheat and the like; with plenty of chickens and cows; and enormous stables for our horses.

I never knew how many people labored in our little world. The house was full of clerks who took care of such things, and very seldom did my father

fields, orchards of olive trees and vineyards. They were all under our governance and loyal to us. If there had been any war they would have come running to our gates as their ancestors had done, and rightly so.

There were market days, village festivals, saints' days, and a little alchemy now and then, and occasionally even a local miracle. It was a good land, ours.

Visiting clerics always stayed a long time. It wasn't uncommon to have two or three priests in various towers of the castle or in the lower, newer, more modern stone buildings.

I had been taken to Florence to be educated

I was, however, a divided being. The mental part of me had been nourished in Florence by excellent teachers of Latin, Greek, philosophy and theology, and I had been deep into the boys' pageants and plays of the city, often taking the leading parts in the dramas presented by my own Confraternity in my uncle's house, and I knew how to solemnly portray the Biblical Isaac about to

be sacrificed by the obedient Abraham, as well as the charming Angel Gabriel discovered by a suspicious St. Joseph with his Virgin Mary.

I pined for all that now and then, the books, the lectures in the Cathedrals to which I'd listened with

they were in a trance of devotion.

Yes, I must have been a scamp. I know I was. I went out by the kitchen. I bribed the servants. I had too many friends who were out-and-out

routies or beasties. I got into mayhem and then ran home. We played ball games and had battles in the piazzas, and the priests ran us off with switches and threats. I was good and bad, but not ever really wicked.

When I died to this world, at the age of sixteen, I never looked on a daylighted street again, not in Florence or anywhere. Well, I saw the best of it, that I can say. I can envisage with no difficulty the

to do it, but then again, I was raising new hawks, training them myself and hunting with them, and the country round was irresistible.

By this age of sixteen, I was considered bookish by the clan of elder kinsmen who gathered at the table every night, my parents' uncles mostly, and all very much of a former time when "bankers had not run the world," who had marvelous tales to tell of the Crusades, to which they had gone when they were young, and of what they had seen at the fierce battle of Acre, or fighting on the island of Cyprus or Rhodes, and what life had been like at sea, and in many exotic ports where they had been the terror of the taverns

child on the night she died. And the child died with her. I'll come to that quickly. Well, as quickly as I can. I'm not so good at being quick.

My brother, Matteo, was four years younger than me, and an excellent student, though he had not been sent off anywhere as yet (would that he had), and my sister, Bartola, was born less than a year after me, so close in fact that I think my father was rather ashamed of it.

I thought them both—Matteo and Bartola— the most lovely and interesting people in the world. We had country fun and country freedom, running in the woods, picking blackberries, sitting at the feet of gypsy storytellers before they got caught and sent away. We loved one another. Matteo worshipped me too much

Ah. This is too much for me! I didn't know how hard this was going to be! Bartola. Kill anyone who touched her! And now nightmares descend, as if they were winged spirits themselves, and threaten to shut out the tiny silent and ever drifting lights of Heaven. Let me return to my train of thought.

My mother I never really understood, and probably misjudged, because everything seemed a matter of style and manners with her, and my father I found to be hysterically self-satirical and always funny.

He was, beneath all his jokes and snide stories, actually rather cynical, but at the same time kind; he saw through the pomp of others, and even his own pretensions. He looked upon the human situation as hopeless. War was comic to him, devoid of heroes and full of buffoons, and he would burst out laughing in the middle of his uncles' harangues, or even in the middle of my poems when I went on too long, and I

in ermine. His gloves were true gauntlets trimmed in fox, and he had large grave eyes, more deep-set than mine, and full of mockery, disbelief and sarcasm. He was never mean, however, to anyone.

His only modern affectation was that he liked to drink from fine goblets of glass, rather than old cups of hardwood or gold or silver. And we had plenty of sparkling glass always on our long supper table.

My mother always smiled when she said such things to him as "My Lord, please get your feet off the table," or "I'll thank you not to touch me until you've washed your greasy hands," or "Are you really coming into the house like that?" But beneath her charming exterior, I think she hated him.

The one time I ever heard her raise her voice in anger, it was to declare in no uncertain terms that half the children in our villages round had been sired by him, and that she herself had buried some eight tiny infants who had never lived to see the light, because he couldn't restrain himself any better than a rampant stallion.

He was so amazed at this outburst—it was behind closed doors—that he emerged from the bedchamber looking pale and shocked, and said to me, "You know, Vittorio, your mother is nothing as stupid as I always

As for her, when I tried to go in to her, she threw a silver pitcher at me. I said, "But Mother, it's Vittorio!" and she threw herself into my arms. She cried bitterly for fifteen minutes.

We said nothing during this time. We sat together in her small stone bedroom, rather high up in the oldest tower of our house, with many pieces of gilded furniture, both ancient and new, and then she wiped her eyes and said, "He takes care of everyone, you know. He takes care of my aunts and my uncles, you know. And where would they be if it weren't for him? And he's never denied me anything."

She went rambling on in her smooth convent-modulated voice. "Look at this house. It's filled with elders whose wisdom has been so good for you children, and all this on account of your father, who is rich enough to have gone anywhere, I suppose, but he is too kind. Only, Vittorio! Vittorio, don't... I mean ... with the girls in the village."

I almost said, in a spasm of desire to comfort her, that I had only fathered one bastard to my knowledge, and he was just fine, when I realized this would have been a perfect disaster. I said nothing.

That might have been the only conversation I ever had with my mother. But it's not really a conversation because I didn't say anything.

She was right, however. Three of her aunts and two of her uncles lived with us in our great high-walled compound, and these old people lived well, always sumptuously dressed in the latest fabrics from the city, and enjoying the purest courtly life

to them all the time, which I did, and they knew plenty of all the world.

It was the same with my father's uncles, but of course it was their land, this, their family's, and so they felt more entitled, I assume, as they had done most of the heroic fighting in the Holy Land, or so it seemed, and they quarreled with my father over anything and everything, from the taste of the meat tarts served at supper to the distractingly modern style of the painters he hired from Florence to decorate our little chapel.

That was another sort of modern thing he did, the matter of the painters, maybe the only modern thing other than liking things made of glass.

Our little chapel had for centuries been bare. It was, like the four towers of our castle and all the walls around, built of a blond stone which is common in Northern Tuscany. This is not the dark stone you see so much in Florence, which is gray and looks perpetually unclean. This northern stone is almost the color of the palest pink roses.

But my father had brought pupils up from Florence when I was very young, good painters who had studied with Piero della Francesca and other such, to cover these chapel walls with murals taken from the lovely stories of saints and Biblical giants in the books known as The Golden Legend.

Not being himself a terribly imaginative man, my father followed what he had seen in the churches of Florence in his design and instructed these men to tell the tales of John the Baptist, patron saint of the city and cousin of Our Lord,

stiffer work of Giotto or Cimabue, that my elderly uncles and aunts objected. As for the villagers, I don't think they exactly understood it all either, except they were so overawed in the main by the chapel at a wedding or baptism that it didn't matter.

I myself of course was terrifically happy to see these paintings made, and to spend time with the artists, who were all gone by the time that my life was brought to a halt by demonic slaughter.

I'd seen plenty of the greatest painting in Florence and had a weakness for drifting about, looking at splendid visions of angels and saints in the rich dedicated chapels of the Cathedrals, and had even—on one of my trips to Florence with my father—in Cosimo's house, glimpsed the tempestuous painter Filippo Lippi, who was at that time actually under lock and key there to make him finish a painting.

I was much taken with the plain yet compelling man, the way that he argued and schemed and did everything but throw a tantrum to get permission to leave the palazzo while lean, solemn and low-voiced Cosimo just smiled and talked him down more or less out of his hysteria, telling him to get back to work and that he would be happy when he was finished.

forgot that glimpse of the genius Filippo, for that is what he was—and is—to me.

"So what did you so like about him?" my father asked me.

"He's bad and good," I said, "not just one or the other. I see a war going on inside of him! And I saw some of his work once, work he did with Fra Giovanni"—this was the man later called Fra Angelico by all the world—"and I tell you, I think he is brilliant. Why else would Cosimo put up with such a scene? Did you hear him!"

"And Fra Giovanni is a saint?" asked my father.

"Hmmmmm, yes. And that's fine, you know, but did you see the torment in Fra Filippo? Hmmm, I liked it." My father raised his eyebrows.

On our next and very last trip to Florence, he took me to see all of Filippo's paintings. I was amazed that he had remembered my interest in this man. We went from house to house to look at the loveliest works, and then to Filippo's workshop.

Conception of Christ in her womb, and the way we played, he was supposed to be a pretty beguiling and virile angel, and Joseph would come in and, lo, find this overwhelming male with his pure ward, the Blessed Mary.

We were a worldly bunch, but you know, we gave the play a little spice. I mean we cooked it up a bit. I don't think it says anything in scripture about St. Joseph happening on a tryst.

But that had been my favorite role, and I had particularly enjoyed paintings of the Annunciation.

Well, this last one I saw before I left Florence, done by Filippo sometime in the 14408, was beyond anything I had beheld before.

The angel was truly unearthly yet physically perfect. Its wings were made of peacock feathers. I was sick with devotion and covetousness. I

reconcile, and they are sad, and wise, and never innocent, and always soft, reflective of mute torment."

On the way back home, as we were riding together through the forest, up a rather steep road, very casually my father asked me if the painters who had done our chapel were good.

"Father, you're joking," I said. "They were excellent."

He smiled. "I didn't know, you know/' he said. "I just hired the best." He shrugged.
I smiled.

was the Duke of Milan, Filippo Maria Visconti, a man
who had been our enemy whether we liked it or not
because he was the enemy of Florence.
But listen to what this man was like: he was

hideously fat, it was said, and very dirty by nature,
and sometimes would take off all his clothes and roll
around naked in the dirt of his garden! He was
terrified of the sight of a sword and would scream if
he saw it unsheathed, and he was terrified too to have
his portrait painted because he thought he was so
ugly, which he was. But that was not all. This man's
weak little legs wouldn't carry him, so his pages had

way, was not by the Duke's wife, poor thing, for she was locked up, but by his mistress.

It was this marriage which led eventually to the war. First Francesco was fighting bravely for Duke Filippo Maria, and then when the weird unpredictable little Duke finally croaked, naturally his son-in-law, handsome Francesco, who had charmed everybody in Italy from the Pope to Cosimo, wanted to become the Duke of Milan!

It's all true. Don't you think it's interesting? Look it up. I left out that the Duke Filippo Maria was also so scared of thunder that he was supposed to have built a soundproof room in his palace.

then my father commended the bold self-made Francesco and his courageous peasant father.

There had been another great lunatic running around Italy during earlier times, a freebooter and ruffian named Sir John Hawkwood, who would lead his mercenaries against anybody, including the Florentines.

But he had ended up loyal to Florence, even became a citizen, and when he departed this earth, they gave him a splendid monument in the Cathedral! Ah, such an age!

I think it was a really good time to be a soldier, you know, to sort of pick and choose where you would fight, and get as carried away with it all as you wanted to.

But it was also a very good time for reading poetry, and for looking at paintings and for living in utter comfort and security behind ancestral walls, or

required money. What happened after that was absolute mayhem.

Well, I could go on describing this wonderland of Tuscany forever.

It is chilling and saddening for me to try to imagine what might have become of my family had evil not befallen us. I cannot see my father old, or imagine myself struggling as an elderly man, or envision my sister married, as I hoped, to a city aristocrat rather than a country baron.

It is a horror and a joy to me that there are villages and hamlets in these very mountains which have from that time never died out— never—surviving through the worst of even modern war, to thrive still with tiny cobbled market streets and pots of red geraniums in their windows. There are castles which survive everywhere, enlivened by generation after generation.

Here there is darkness.

Here is Vittorio writing by the light of the stars.

Brambles and wild scratching things inhabit the

But it's very like the little plays we used to do in my uncle's house, or those I saw before the Duomo in Cosimo's Florence. There must be painted backdrops, props of fine detail, wires rigged for flight and costumes cut out and sewn before I can put my players on the boards and tell the fable of my making.

I can't help it. Let me close my essay on the glories of the 14008 by saying what the great alchemist Ficino would say of it some years later on: It was "an age of gold."

I go now to the tragic moment.

3

IN WHICH THE HORROR DESCENDS UPON US

THE beginning of the end came the following spring. I had passed my sixteenth birthday, which had fallen that I year on the very Tuesday before Lent, when we and all the villages were celebrating Carnival. It had come rather early that year, so it was a bit cold, but it was a gay time.

It was on that night before Ash Wednesday that I had the terrible dream in which I saw myself holding the severed heads of my brother and my sister. I woke up in a sweat, horrified by this dream. I wrote it down in my book of dreams. And then actually I forgot about it. That was common with me, only it had been truly the most horrid nightmare Td ever had. But when I mentioned my occasional nightmares to my mother or father or anyone else, they always said:

"Vittorio, it's your own fault for reading the books you read. You bring it on yourself."

To repeat, the dream was forgotten.

the first warnings of horror to come, though I knew them not to be, were that the lower hamlets on our mountain were quite suddenly abandoned.

My father and I and two of the huntsmen and a gamekeeper and a soldier rode down to see for ourselves that the peasants in those parts had departed, some time before in fact, and taken the livestock with them.

It was eerie to see those deserted towns, small as they were and as insignificant.

We rode back up the mountain as a warm embracing darkness surrounded us, yet we found all the other villages we passed battened down with hardly a seam of light showing through the chinks of a shutter, or a tiny stem of reddened smoke rising from a chimney.

Of course my father's old clerk went into a rant that the vassals should be found, beaten, made to work the land.

My father, benevolent as always and completely calm, sat at his desk in the candlelight, leaning on his elbow, and said that these had all been free men; they were not bound to him, if they did not choose to live on his mountain. This was the way of the modern world, only he wished he knew what was afoot in our land.

Quite suddenly, he took notice of me standing and observing him, as if he hadn't seen me before, and he broke off the conference, dismissing the whole affair. I thought nothing much about it.

But in the days that followed, some of the vil-

lagers from the lower slopes came up to live within the walls. There were conferences in my father's chambers. I heard arguments behind closed doors, and one night, at supper, all sat entirely too somber for our family, and finally my father rose from his massive chair, the Lord in the center of the table as always, and declared, as if he'd been silently accused:

"I will not persecute some old women because they have stuck pins in wax dolls and burnt incense and read foolish incantations that mean nothing. These old witches have been on our mountain forever."

My mother looked truly alarmed, and then gathering us all up—I was most unwilling—she took us away, Bartola, Matteo and me, and told us to go to bed early.

"Don't stay up reading, Vittorio" she said.

"But what did Father mean?" asked Bartola.

"Oh, it's the old village witches," I said. I used the Italian word strega. "Every now and then, one goes too far, there's a fight, but mostly it's just charms to cure a fever and such."

I thought my mother would hush me up, but she stood in the narrow stone stairs of the tower looking up at me with marked relief on her face, and she said:

"Yes, yes, Vittorio, you are so right. In Florence, people laugh at those old women. You know Gattena yourself; she never really did more then sell love potions to the girls."

"Surely we're not to drag her before a court!" I said, very happy that she was paying attention.

"Gattena?" I asked, and then as my mother turned away, refusing, it seemed, to say another word, gesturing for me to escort my sister and brother safely to bed, I realized the gravity of this.

Gattena was the most feared and comical of the old witches, and if she had run off, if she was afraid of something, well, that was news, because she thought herself the one to be feared.

The following days were fresh and lovely and undisturbed by anything for me and my Bartola and Matteo, but when I looked back later, I recalled there was much going on.

One afternoon, I went up to the highest lookout window of the old tower where one guardsman, Tori, we called him, was falling asleep, and I looked down over all our land for as far as I could see.

"Well, you won't find it," he said.

"What's that?" I remarked.

"Smoke from a single hearth. There is no more." He yawned and leaned against the wall, heavily weighed down by his old boiled-leather jerkin, and sword. "All's well," he said, and yawned again. "So they like city life, or to fight for Francesco Sforza over the Duchy of Milan, so let them go. They didn't know how good they had it."

I turned away from him and looked over the woods again, and down into the valleys that I could see, and beyond to the slightly misty blue sky. It was true, the little hamlets seemed frozen in time down there, but how could one be so sure? It was

and that an agitation had gripped my mother, so that she was no longer engaging in her endless courtly chatter. Conversation was not impossible, but it had changed.

But for all the elders who seemed deeply and secretly conflicted, there were others who seemed relatively oblivious to such things, and the pages went about serving gaily, and a little group of musicians, who'd come up the preceding day, gave us a lovely series of songs with the viol and the lute.

My mother couldn't be persuaded to do her old slow dances, however.

It must have been very late when an unexpected visitor was announced. No one had left the main hall, except Bartola and Matteo, who had been taken off to bed by me earlier and left in the care of our old nurse, Simonetta.

The Captain of my father's Guard came into the hall, clicked his heels and bowed to my father and said:

"My Lord, it seems there is a man of great rank come to the house, and he will not be received in the light, or so he says, and demands that you come out to him."

Signore away?" the Captain asked.

"Tell him that he is most welcome to come into my house as my guest," said my father, "that we extend to him in the name of Christ Our Lord our full hospitality."

His very voice seemed to have a calming effect on the whole table, except perhaps for my mother, who seemed not to know what to do.

The Captain looked almost slyly at my father, as if to convey the secret message that this would never do, but he went off to deliver the invitation.

My father did not sit down. He stood staring off, and then he cocked his head, as though listening. He turned and snapped his fingers, drawing to attention the two guards slumbering at the ends of the hall.

"Go through the house, see to everything," he said in a soft voice. "I think I hear birds which have entered the house. It's the warm air, and there are many open windows."

These two went off, and immediately two other soldiers appeared to take their place. That in

I was out of my chair at once and after him. I heard my mother cry out softly, "Vittorio, come back."

But I stole down the stairs after my father, and into the courtyard, and only when he himself turned around and pressed my chest hard with his hand did I halt.

"Stay there, my son," he said with his old kindly warmth. "I shall see to it."

I had a good vantage point, right at the door of the tower, and there across the courtyard, at the gates in the full light of the torches, I saw this strange Signore who would not come into the light of the hall, for he did not seem to mind this outdoor illumination.

The huge gates of the arched entrance were

antique scabbard, and casually over one shoulder was a cloak of the same wine-dark velvet trimmed in what seemed to my distant eyes to be ornate gilt symbols.

I strained, trying to make them out, this border of signs, and I thought I could see a star and crescent moon worked into his fancy adornments, but I was really too far away.

The man's height was impressive.

My father stopped quite far short of him, yet when he spoke his voice was soft and I couldn't hear it, and out of the mysterious man, who still revealed nothing now of his face but his smiling

mouth and white teeth, there came a silky utterance that seemed both surly and charming.

"Get away from my house in the name of God and Our

"Search it from top to bottom and batten it down and call out the soldiery and fill the night with torches, do you hear? I will have men in every tower and on the walls. Do it at once. It will give peace and calm to my people!"
We had not yet reached the supper room when

an old priest living with us then, a learned Dominican named Fra Diamonte, came down with his white hair all mussed, and his cassock half unbuttoned, and his prayer book in his hand.
"What is it, my Lord?" he asked. "What in the name of God has happened?"

you in this state, I will not tolerate this distress." She touched her belly.

I realized she was with child again. And I realized, too, that my father was really alarmed about something. What could it mean, "Do not leave the children alone for a moment"? What could this mean?

The chapel was comfortable enough. My father had long ago provided some decent wooden and velvet-padded prie-dieux, though on feast days everyone stood. Pews didn't exist in those times.

But he also spent some of the night showing me the vault beneath the church, which opened by means of a

When we came back up into the chapel, he put the trapdoor right, laid down the ring, relaid the marble tile, and the whole was quite invisible.

Fra Diamonte pretended not to have seen. My mother was asleep and so were the children.

We all fell asleep before dawn in the chapel.

My father walked out in the courtyard at sunup, when the cocks were crowing all over the villages inside the walls, and he stretched and looked up at the sky and then shrugged his shoulders.

Two of my uncles ran at him, demanding to know what Signore from where dared to propose a siege against us and when we were supposed to have this battle.

get to see my father alone, if I couldn't push my way into the locked chambers where he sat with his uncles and the priests arguing and fighting. Finally, I hammered so loudly on the door and kicked so much that he let me in.

The meeting was about to break up and he drew me down by himself, and he said with wild eyes:

"Do you see what they've done? They took the very tribute they demanded of me. They took it! I refused it and they took it."

"But what tribute? You mean the children?"

He was wild-eyed. He rubbed his unshaven face, and he crashed his fist down on his desk, and then he pushed over all his writing things.

"Who do they think they are that they come to me by night and demand that I tender to them those infants unwanted by anyone?"

"Father, what is this? You must tell me."

"Vittorio, you will tomorrow be off to Florence, at

making a sound he rose to his feet, his fists on the desk, seemingly uncaring of the light that the candles threw on his shocked and wary face.

"What do you hear, my Lord?" I said, using the formal address for him without so much as realizing it.

"Evil," he whispered. "Malignant things such as God only suffers to live because of our sins. Arm yourself well. Bring your mother, your brother and your sister to the chapel, and hurry. The soldiers have their orders."

"Shall I have some supper brought there as well, just bread and beer, perhaps?" I asked.

He nodded as though that were scarcely a concern.

Within less than an hour we were all gathered inside the chapel, the entire family, which included then five uncles and four aunts, and with us were two nurses and Fra Diamonte.

The little altar was decked out as if for Mass, with the finest embroidered altar cloth and the thickest golden candlesticks with blazing candles. The Image of Our Crucified Christ shone in the light, an ancient colorless and thin wooden carving that had hung on the wall there since the time of St. Francis,

We sat on plain brown benches brought in for us, nobody speaking a word, for Fra Diamonte had that morning said Mass and bestowed into the Tabernacle the Body and Blood of Our Lord in the form of the Sacred Host, and the chapel was now, as it were, put to its full purpose as the House of God.

We did eat the bread, and drink a little bit of the beer near the front doors, but we kept quiet.

Only my father repeatedly went out, walking boldly into the torch-lighted courtyard and calling up to his soldiers in the towers and on the walls, and even sometimes being gone to climb up and see for himself that all was well under his protection.

My uncles were all armed. My aunts said their rosaries fervently. Fra Diamonte was confused, and my mother seemed pale to death and sick, perhaps from the baby in her womb, and she clung to my sister and brother, who were by this time pretty frankly frightened.

It seemed we would pass the night without incident.

It couldn't have been two hours before dawn when I was awakened from a shallow slumber by a horrid scream.

At once my father was on his feet, and so were my uncles, drawing out their swords as best they could with their knotted old fingers.

of the trapdoor, he threw it back and thrust into my hand a great candle from the altar.

"Take your mother, your aunts, your sister and your brother down, now, and do not come out, no matter what you hear! Do not come out. Lock the trapdoor above you and stay there! Do as I tell you!"

At once I obeyed, snatching up Matteo and Bartola and forcing them down the stone steps in front of me.

My uncles had rushed through the doors into the courtyard, shouting their ancient war cries, and my aunts stumbled and fainted and clutched to the altar and would not be moved, and my mother clung to my father.

My father was in a very paroxysm. I reached out for my eldest aunt, but she was in a dead faint before the altar, and my father thundered back to me, forced me into the crypt and shut the door.

I had no choice but to latch the trapdoor as he had shown me how to do, and to turn with the flickering candle in my hand and face the terrified Bartola and Matteo.

"Go down all the way," I cried, "all the way."

They nearly fell, trying to move backward down the steep narrow steps that were by no means easy to descend, their faces turned towards me.

"What is it, Vittorio, why do they want to hurt us?" Bartola asked.

"I want to fight them," Matteo said, "Vittorio, give me your dagger. You have a sword. It's not fair."

aunts!

The air was cold and damp, but it felt good. I broke out in a sweat, and my arm ached from holding the big golden candlestick. Finally we sank down in a huddle, the three of us at the far end of the chamber, and it felt soothing to me to touch the cold stone.

But in the interval of our collective silence I could hear through the heavy floor howls from above, terrible cries of fear and panic, and rushing feet, and even the high chilling whinnies of the horses. It sounded as if horses had come crashing into the chapel itself over our heads, which was not at all impossible.

I rose to my feet and rushed to the two other doors of the crypt, those which led to the burial chambers or whatever they were, I didn't care! I moved the latch on one, and could see nothing but a low passage, not even tall enough for me, and barely wide enough for my shoulders.

I turned back, holding the only light, and saw the children rigid with fear, gazing up at the ceiling as the murderous cries continued.

"I smell fire," Bartola whispered suddenly, her face wet at once with tears. "Do you smell it, Vittorio? I hear it."

I did hear it and I did smell it.

"Both of you make the Sign of the Cross; pray

spell victory.
Bartola and Matteo clung to me, on either side.
Above, there was a clatter. The chapel doors were being thrown back, and then quite suddenly the trapdoor was yanked up and open, and in the glimmer of firelight beyond I saw a dark slender long-haired figure.
In the gust my candle went out.
Except for the infernal flicker above and beyond, we were committed unmercifully to total darkness.
Once again distinctly, I saw the outline of this figure, a tall, stately female with great long locks and a waist small enough for both my hands as she appeared to fly down the stairs soundlessly towards me.
How in the name of Heaven could this be, this woman?
Before I could think to pull my sword on a female assailant or make sense of anything at all, I felt her tender breasts brushed against my chest, and the cool of her skin as she seemed to be throwing her arms about me.
There was a moment of inexplicable and strangely sensuous confusion when the perfume of

hand, she raced up the stairway into the firelight.

I pulled my sword with both hands, rushed after her, up and out into the chapel, and saw that she had somehow by the most evil power all but reached the door, an impossible feat, her charges wailing and crying out for me, "Vittorio, Vittorio!"

All the upper windows of the chapels were full of fire, and so was the rose window above the crucifix.

I could not believe what I beheld, this young woman, who was stealing from me my sister and brother.

"Stop in the name of God!" I shouted at her. "Coward, thief in the night."

I ran after her, but to my utter astonishment she did stop, still, and turned to look at me again, and this time I saw her full in all her refined beauty. Her face was a perfect oval with great benign gray eyes, her skin like the finest Chinese white enamel. She had red lips, too perfect even for a painter to make by choice, and her long ashen blond hair was gray like her eyes in the light of the fire, sweeping down

standing now with the sword down, staring at me still and at the sobbing children.

Suddenly her head turned. There was a whistling cry, and then another and another. Through the door of the chapel, seeming to leap from the fires of Hell itself, there came another red-clad figure, hooded in velvet and wearing gold-trimmed boots, and as I swung my sword at him, he threw me aside and, in one instant, cut off the head of Bartola and then severed the head of the screaming Matteo.

I went mad. I howled. He turned on me. But from the female there came a sudden firm negation.

"Leave him alone," she cried in a voice that was both sweet and clear, and then off he went, this murderer, this hooded fiend in his gold-trimmed boots, calling back to her.

still clutched her sword as if it were not severed. She replaced the limb I had cut off. I watched her. I watched her put the limb in place and turn it and adjust it until it was as it should be, and then before my astonished eyes, I saw the wound I had made utterly seal up in her white skin.

Then the loose bell sleeve of her rich velvet gown fell down again around her wrist.

In a twinkling she was outside the chapel, only a silhouette now against the distant fires burning in the tower windows. I heard her whisper:

"Vittorio."

Then she vanished.

I knew it was vain to go after her! Yet still I ran

No. Please.

At dawn, finally, when the sun poured arrogantly through the door of the chapel, when the fires had died away, when the birds sang as if nothing had happened, the innocent little heads of Bar-tola and Matteo were lifeless and still, and very obviously dead, and their immortal souls were gone from them, if they had not flown at the moment when the sword had severed these heads from the bodies.

I found my mother murdered in the courtyard. My father, covered with wounds on his hands and arms, as if he had grabbed at the very swords that struck him, lay dead on the stairs of the tower.

The work all around had been swift. Throats cut, and only here and there the evidence, as with my

had been left alive, and there was a hooded demon man who had witnessed it, a vicious hooded assassin who had slaughtered two children piteously

And whatever was the nature of this angel of death, this exquisite Ursula, with her barely tinted white cheeks and her long neck and sloping shoulders, I didn't know. She herself might come back to avenge the insult I had done her.

I had to leave the mountain.

That these creatures were not anywhere around now I felt instinctively, both in my heart and from the wholesomeness of the warm and loving sun, but also because I had witnessed their flight, heard their

to find them and get them. And if they couldn't come out by the light of day, then it would be by that means that I would get them! I would do it. For Bartola, for Matteo, for my father and mother, for the humblest child who had been taken from my mountain.

And they had taken the children. Yes, that they had done. I confirmed it before I left, for it was slow to dawn on me with all my concerns, but they had. There was not a corpse of a child on the place, only those boys of my age had been killed, but anything younger had been stolen away.

For what! For what horrors! I was beside myself.

I might have stood in the tower window, with

as if this were an ordinary day, dressed myself in my best dark hunter's green silk and velvet, put on my high boots and took up my gloves, and then taking the leather bags which I could affix to my horse's saddle, I went down into the crypt and took from my parents and my aunts and uncles their very most treasured rings, necklaces and brooches, the buckles of gold and silver which had come from the Holy Land. God help me.

Then I filled my purse with all the gold ducats and florins I could find in my father's coffers, as if I were a thief, a very thief of the dead it seemed to me, and hefting these heavy leather bags, I went to get my mount, saddle him and bridle him and start off, a man of rank, with his weaponry, and his mink-edged cape, and a Florentine cap of green velvet, off into the forest.

4

IN WHICH I COME UPON FURTHER MYSTERIES, SUFFER SEDUCTION AND CONDEMN MY SOUL TO BITTER VALOR

NOW, I was too full of rancor to be thinking straight, as IVe already described, and surely you will under-I stand this. But it wasn't smart of me to go riding through the woods of Tuscany dressed so richly, and by myself, because any woods in Italy was

My head was swimming. And the landscape gave me little time to think.
Nothing could have been more forlorn.

I came within sight of two huge ruined castles very soon after my departure, copings and ramparts lost in the greedy forest, which made me mindful that these had been the holdings of old Lords who had been fool enough to resist the power of Milan or Florence. It was enough to make me doubt my sanity, enough to make me think that we had not been annihilated by demons but that common enemies had made the assault.

It was utterly grim to see their broken battlements looming against the otherwise cheerful and brilliant sky, and to come upon the overgrown fragments of villages with their tumbledown hovels and forgotten crossroads shrines in which stone Virgins or saints had sunk into spiderwebs and shadows.

When I did spy a high distant well-fortified town, I knew well it was Milanese and had no intention of going up there. I was lost!

As for the bandits, I only ran into one little ragged band, which I took on immediately with a deluge of chatter.

. If anything, the little pack of idiots gave me some

have a florin for each of you if you can tell me anything. We mean to cut them down on sight. I'm tired. I'm sick of this."
I tossed them some coins.
They were off immediately.

But not before they let slip in talk of the country round that the nearest Florentine town was Santa Maddalana, which was two hours up ahead, and that it would close its gates at night, and nobody could talk his way into it.

I pretended to know all about that and to be on the way to a famous monastery that I knew lay farther north, which I couldn't possibly have reached, and then threw more money over my shoulder as I raced off, hollering out that they ought to ride on to meet the band coming behind who would pay them for their service.

I know they were debating all the time whether to kill me and take everything I had or not. It was a matter of stares and bluffs and fast talking and standing one's ground, and they were just utter ruffians, and somehow I got out of it.

I rode off as quickly as I could, left the main road and cut towards the slopes from which I could see in the far distance the vague outline of Santa Maddalana. A big town. I could see four massive towers all gathered near the obvious front gates, and several

The afternoon sunshine was brilliant but now at a slant. I had to make for Santa Maddalana.

When I reached the mountain proper on which this town was built, I went up sharply on the small paths used by the shepherds.

The light was fading fast. The forest was too thick to be safe so near a walled town. I cursed them that they didn't keep the mountain cleared, but then I had the safety of cover.

There were moments amid the deepening darkness when it seemed virtually impossible to reach the summit; the stars now lighted a glowing sapphirine sky, but that only made the venerable town in all its majesty seem ever more unattainable.

Finally the heedless night did plunge down amongst the thick trunks of the trees, and I was picking my way, counting on the instincts of my horse more than my own failing vision. The pale half-moon seemed in love with the clouds. The sky itself was nothing but bits and pieces thanks to the canopy of foliage above me.

I found myself praying to my father, as if he were safely with my guardian angels about me, and I think I believed in him and his presence more surely than I had ever believed in angels, saying, "Please, Father, help me get there. Help me get to safety, lest those demons render my vengeance impossible."

I gripped my sword hard. I reminded myself of the daggers I wore in my boots, in my sleeve, in my jacket and in my belt. I strained to see by the light

of the sky, and had to trust my horse to pick his way through the thick tree trunks.

At moments I stopped very still. I heard no unusual sound. Who else would be fool enough to be out in the night of this forest? At some point very near the end of the journey, I found the main road, the forest thinned and then gave way to smooth fields and meadows, and I took the twists and turns at a gallop.

At last the town rose right up in front of us, as it happens when you reach the gates by a final turn, you seem to have been thrown up on the ground at the foot of a magic fortress—and I took a deep breath of thanks, no matter that the giant gates were firmly shut as if a hostile army were camped beneath it. This had to be my haven.

Of course the Watch, a sleepy soldier hollering down from above, wanted to know who I was.

Once again the effort of making up something good distracted me from wayward, near uncontrollable, images of the fiend Ursula and her severed arm, and the decapitated bodies of my brother and sister fallen on the chapel floor in mid-gesture.

I cried out, in a humble tone but with pretentious vocabulary, that I was a scholar in the employ of Cosimo de' Medici come on a search for books in Santa Maddalana, in particular old prayer books pertaining to the saints and appearances of the Blessed Virgin Mary in this district.
What nonsense.

insisted as he opened the small lower gate only a crack, his lantern held high to inspect me.
I knew I made a good picture on my horse.

"De' Bardi," I declared. "Antonio De' Bardi, kinsman of Cosimo," I said with fierce nerve, naming the family of Cosimo's wife because it was the only name that came into my head. "Look, kindly man, take this payment for me, have a good supper with your wife as my guests, here, I know it's late, I'm so tired!"

The gate was opened. I had to dismount to lead my horse with lowered head through it and into the echoing stone piazza right inside.

"What in the name of God," asked the Watchman, "were you doing in these woods after dark alone? Do you know the dangers? And so young? What is the Bardi these days that they let their secretaries go riding all over unescorted?" He pocketed the money. "Look at you, a mere child! Somebody could murder you for your buttons. What's the matter with you?"

This was an immense piazza, and I could see more than one street leading off. Good luck. But what if the demons were here too? I had no clue as to where such things might roost or hide! But I went on talking.

He ran out of pockets for the money, but managed somehow to stuff it in his shirt and then led me by torchlight to the Inn, banging on the door, and a sweet-faced old woman came down, grateful for the coins I thrust into her hand at once, to show me to a room.

"High up and looking out over the valley," I said, "if you please, and some supper, it can be stone cold, I don't care."

"You're not going to find any books in this town," said the Watchman, standing about as I beat it up the stairs after the woman. 'All the young people go off; it's a peaceable place, just happy little shopkeepers. Young men today run off to universities. But this is a beautiful place to live, simply beautiful."

"How many churches do you have?" I asked the old woman when we'd reached the room. I told her that I must keep the lighted candle for the night.

"Two Dominican, one Carmelite," said the Watchman, slouching in the little door, "and the beautiful old Franciscan church, which is where I go. Nothing bad ever happens here."

I fell on my plate like an animal. All I wanted was strength. In my grief I couldn't even think of pleasure. I looked out on a tiny bit of high star-sprinkled sky for a little while, praying desperately to every saint and angel whose name I knew for help, and then I locked up the window tight.
I bolted the door.

And making sure that the candle was well sheltered in the corner, and plenty big enough to last until dawn, I fell into the lumpy little bed, too exhausted to remove boots or sword or daggers or anything else. I thought I'd fall into a deep sleep, but I lay rigid, full of hatred, and hurt, and swollen broken soul, staring into the dark, my mouth full of death as if I'd eaten it.

I could hear distantly the sounds of my horse being tended to downstairs, and some lonely steps on the deserted stone street. I was safe, at least that much was so.

Finally sleep came. It came totally and completely and sweetly; the net of nerves which had

light, slipping down against the wall of the town and giving my little chamber the attitude of a prison cell.

I felt the cool fresh air come down around my neck and felt it on my cheek. I clutched the sword tight, listening, waiting. There were small creaking sounds. The bed had moved ever so slightly, as if from a pressure.

I couldn't focus my eyes. Darkness suddenly obscured everything, and out of this darkness there rose a shape before me, a figure bending over me, a woman looking right into my face as her hair fell down on me.

It was Ursula.

Her face was not an inch from mine. Her hand, very cool and smooth, closed over my own, on the

my cheek gently, almost respectfully.

I felt the length of her body against me, the definite swell of her breasts beneath costly fabric, and the smooth length of her thigh beside me in the bed, and her tongue touched my lips. She licked at my lips.

I was immobilized by the chills that went through me, humiliating me and kindling the passion inside me. "Get away, strega," I whispered.

Filled with rage, I couldn't stop the slow smolder that had caught hold in my loins; I couldn't

stop the rapturous sensations that were passing over my shoulders and down my back, and even through my legs.

Her eyes glowed above me, the flicker of her lids more a sensation than a spectacle I could see with my

She lay against the very evidence of my desire. I couldn't have hidden it. I hated her.
"Why? What for!" I said, tearing my mouth

loose. Her hair descended on both sides as she lifted her head. I could scarcely breathe for the unearthly pleasure.

"Get off me/' I said, "and go back into Hell. What is this mercy to me! Why do this to me?"

"I don't know," she answered in her clever, tremulous voice. "Maybe it's only that I don't want you to die," she said, breathing against my chest. Her

infatuation of mind as well as body. On my

chest she climbed, and though she rode me, looking down at me with exquisite smiling lips, she parted her legs gently for me to enter her.

It seemed a delirious blending of elements, the wet contracting secretive pocket between her legs and this great abundance of silent eloquence pouring from her gaze as she looked lovingly down at me.

Abruptly it stopped. I was dizzy. Her lips were against my neck.

I tried with all my might to throw her off.

"I will destroy you," I said. "I will. I vow it. If I have to chase you into the mouth of Hell," I whispered. I strained against her grasp so hard that my own flesh burned against hers. But she wouldn't

the fiend I'd seen in the firelight of my chapel, needed no potions or spells to advance her cause. She was flawless and intimately magnificent.

"Oh, yes," she confessed, her half-visible eyes searching my face, "and I do find such beauty in you it pulls on my heart/' she said. "Unfairly, unjustly How am I to suffer this as well as all else?"

I struggled. I wouldn't answer. I wouldn't feed this enigmatic and infernal blaze.

"Vittorio, get out of here," she said, lowering her voice ever more delicately and ominously. "You have a few nights, maybe not even that. If I come to you again, I may lead them to you. Vittorio—. Don't tell anyone in Florence. They'll laugh at you."

She was gone.

her left breast, just above the little nipple, made it bleed.

"Witch!"

I rose up to grab hold of her, to kill her, and instead felt her hand grasp my head, and there came the pressure of her left breast into my very mouth, irresistibly frail yet firm. Once again, all that was real melted and was swept away like so much idle smoke rising from a fire, and we were together in the meadow which belonged only to us, only to our diligent and indissoluble embraces. I sucked the milk from her, as if she was maiden and mother, virgin and queen, all the while I broke with my thrusts whatever flower remained inside of her to be torn open.

I was let go. I fell. Helpless, unable even to raise a hand to keep her from flying, I fell down, weak and stupid onto the bed, my face wet and my limbs trembling.

I couldn't sit up. I could do nothing. I saw in flashes our field of tender white irises and red irises, the loveliest flowers of Tuscany, the wild

Finally, shakily and with dim vision, I sat up. I rubbed at my neck. Chills ran up and down my spine, and the backs of my arms. My body was still full of desire.

I squeezed my eyes shut, refusing to think of her yet wanting anything, any source of stimulation, that would soothe this awful need.

I lay back again, and was very still until this carnal madness had left me.

I was a man again then, for not having been, at random, a man.

I got up, ready for tears, and I took my candle down to the main room of the Inn, trying not to make a sound on the crooked winding stone stairs, and I got a light from a candle there on a hook on the wall, at the mouth of the passage, and I went back up, clinging to this comforting little light, shielding the shuddering flame with my cupped hand and praying still, and then I set down the candle.

I climbed up and tried to see what I could from the window.

Nothing, nothing but an impossible drop beneath me, a sloping wall up which a flesh-and-blood maiden could

revenge as completely as I believed in her, this witch whom I had touched with my very own fingers, who had dared to kindle a wanton conflict in my soul, who had come with her comrades of the night to slaughter my family

I couldn't overmaster the images of the night before, of her standing bewildered in the chapel door. I couldn't get the taste of her off my lips. All I had to do was think of her breasts, and my body would weaken as if she were feeding my desire from her nipple.

Make this subside, I prayed. You cannot run. You cannot go off to Florence, you cannot live forever with nothing but the memory of the slaughter you saw, that is impossible, unthinkable. You cannot.

I wept when I realized that I wouldn't be alive now if it had not been for her.

It was she, the ashen-haired one I was cursing with every breath, who had stopped her hooded companion from killing me. It would have been a complete victory!

A calm came over me. Well, if I was going to die, there was no choice, really. I would get them first. I would somehow do it.

As soon as the sun was up, so was I, and walking around the town, my saddlebags over my shoulder casually, as if they didn't contain a fortune, I sized

It was a marvelously peaceful and prosperous town.

The forges were already at work, and so were the cabinetmakers and also the saddlemakers; there were several shoemakers dealing in some fine slippers as well as the workaday boots, and quite a cluster of jewelers and men who worked in a great variety of precious metals, as well as the usual swordmakers, men who made keys and the like and those who dealt in hides and furs.

I passed more fancy shops than I could count. One could buy fancy fabrics here, right from Florence, I supposed, and lace from north and south it seemed, and Oriental spices. The butchers were having a time of it with the abundance of fresh meat. And there were many wine shops, and I passed at least a couple of busy notaries, letter writers and the like, and several doctors or, rather, apothecaries.

Carts were rolling through the front gates, and there was even a little crush in the streets now and then before the sun was even high enough to come fiercely down over the close-tiled roofs and hit the bare stones on which I plodded uphill.

The churches rang their bells for Mass, and I saw plenty of schoolchildren rushing past me, all rather clean and neatly dressed, and then two little crews being paraded by monks into the churches, both of which were quite antique and had no ornament on the front at all, save for statues deep in niches—saints

facades obviously having weathered the frequent earthquakes of this region.

There were two rather ordinary bookshops that had almost nothing much, except the prayer books one would expect to find, and these at very high prices. Two merchants sold really fine wares from the East. And there was a cluster of carpet sellers, too, who dealt in an impressive variety of country-made goods and intricate carpets from Byzantium.

Lots of money was changing hands. There were well-dressed people showing off their fine clothes. It seemed a self-sufficient place, though there were travelers coming uphill with the clop of horses' hooves echoing on the barren walls. And I think I spied one neglected and very much fortified convent.

I passed at least two more inns, and as I crisscrossed through the barely passable alleyways here and there, I ascertained that there were actually three basic streets to the town, all running parallel up and down the hill.

At the far deep end were the gates by which I had entered, and the huge farmers' markets opened now in the piazza.

At the high end was the ruined fortress or castle where once the Lord had lived—a great cumbersome mass of old stones, of which only a part was visible from the street, and in the lower floors of this complex there were the town's governing offices.

There were several small grottoes or piazzas,

busy, shuffling along with their market baskets and their shawls in spite of the warmth; and I saw beautiful young girls about giving me the eye, all of them very young.
I didn't want any part of them.

As soon as Mass was over and school had begun, I went to the Dominican church—the largest and most impressive of the three I could readily see—and asked at the rectory for a priest. I had to go to Confession.

There came out a young priest, very handsome with well-formed limbs and a healthy look to his complexion and a truly devout manner to him, his black and white robes very clean-looking. He looked at my attire, and my sword, indeed he took me in very respectfully but quite comprehensively, and obviously presuming me to be a person of importance, invited me into a small room for the Confession.

He was gracious more than servile. He had no more than a crown of golden hair clipped very short around the top of his bald head, and large almost shy eyes.

He sat down, and I knelt close to him on the bare floor, and then out of me came the whole lurid tale.

With bowed head, I went on and on with it, rushing from one thing to another, from the first hideous happenings that had so stirred my curiosity and alarm, to my father's fragmented and mysterious words and at last to the raid itself and

word did I look up and realize that the young priest was staring down at me in perfect distress and horror.

I didn't know what to make of his expression. You could have seen the very same face on a man startled by an insect or an approaching battalion of bloody murderers.

What had I expected, for the love of God?

"Look, Father," I said. 'All you have to do is send someone up that mountain and see for yourself!" I shrugged, and implored him with my open hands. "That's all! Send someone to look. Nothing's stolen, Father, nothing's taken, but what I took! Go look! I'll wager nothing has been disturbed except by ravens and buzzards if such are like to go up there."

He said nothing. The blood was palpitating in his young face, and his mouth was open and his eyes had a dazed, miserable look.

Oh, this was too marvelous. A silky boy of a priest, probably fresh out of the seminary used to hearing nuns tell of evil thoughts, and men once a year muttering resentfully about vices of the flesh because their wives had dragged them to their duty I became incensed.

assassins."
"No, no, no, Father," I pleaded, shaking my head. "I saw her hand fall. I cut off the creature's hand, I tell you. I saw her put it back. They were demons. Listen to me. These are witches, these are from Hell, these beings, and there's too many of them for me to fight alone. I need help. There's no time for disbelief. There's no time for rational reservations. I need the Dominicans!"
He shook his head. He didn't even hesitate.
"You are losing your mind, son," he said. "Something dreadful has happened to you, there's no doubt of that, and you believe all this, but it didn't happen. You are imagining things. Look, there are old women around who claim they make charms..."
"I know all that," I said. "I know an ordinary alchemist or witch when I see one. This was no side-street magic, Father, no country bunch of curses. I'm telling you, these demons slaughtered everyone in the castle, in the villages. Don't you see?"

"What is that?" I said coldly. I wanted to get away. I had to find a monastery! Or a damned alchemist. There were alchemists in this town. I could find someone, someone who had read the old works, the works of Hermes Trismegistus or Lactantius or St. Augustine, somebody who knew about demons.

"Have you read St. Thomas Aquinas?" I asked, choosing the most obvious demonologist of whom I could think. "Father, he talks all about demons. Look, you think I would have believed all this myself last year at this time? I thought all sorcery was for backdoor swindlers. These were demons!" I could not be deterred. I went at him.

"Father, in the Summa Theologica, the first book, St. Thomas talks of the fallen angels, that some of them are allowed to be here on earth, so that

understand, I cannot do any of this without your solemn permission."

"Yes, I know all that," I said. "What good will this do? Let me see this Pastor."

Now I was being too haughty entirely, too impertinent. I was exhausted. I was doing the old Signore trick of treating a country priest like he was a servant. This was a man of God, and I had to get a grip on myself. Maybe the Pastor had read more, understood more. Oh, but who would understand who had not seen?

There came back to me a fleeting yet vivid and

This drew him out of his troubled ruminations. He looked at me as if I'd startled him.
At once he gave his blessing and his absolution.

"You can do what you wish with the Pastor," I said. "Yes, please, ask the Pastor if he will see me. And here, for the church." I gave him several ducats.

He stared at the money. But he didn't touch it. He stared at this gold as if it were hot coals.

"Father, take it. This is a tidy little fortune. Take it."

"No, you wait here—or I tell you what, you come out into the garden."

The garden was lovely, a little old grotto, from which you could see the town sneaking up on the right

under the Seal of Confession. What are you going to do if I don't leave?" I asked.

"I don't have to do anything, that's just it!" he said. "Go away and take your misery with you." He

stopped, clearly at a loss, embarrassed perhaps, as if he'd said something he regretted. He ground his teeth and looked off and then back at me.

"For your own sake, leave/' he said in a whisper. He looked at the other priest. "You go," he said, "and let me talk to him."

The young priest was in a total fright. He left immediately.

I looked up at the Pastor.

"Leave," he said to me in his low, mean voice, his lower lip drawing back to reveal his lower teeth. "Get

crazy, you're imagining things. I'm trying to save you from persecution and villainization."

I turned around at the door to the church and glared him into utter silence.

"You've tipped your hand," I said. "You're too merciless. Remember what I said. Break the Seal and I'll kill you/'

He was as frightened now as the young priest had been.

I stood looking at the altar for a long while, ignoring him, forgetting him utterly, my mind pretending to have thoughts in it, to be construing and planning when all I could do was endure. Then I made the Sign of the Cross and I left the church. I was in utter despair.

For a while I walked around. Once again, it was

slightest evidence that this town somehow harbored the demons, that Ursula had not found me here, but that I had found her.

The mere thought of her overcame me with a cool, inviting shock of desire. I saw her breasts, felt the taste of her, saw in a blurred flash the flowered meadow. No!

Think. Make some plan. As for this town, no matter what the priest knew, these people were too wholesome for harboring demons.

5

THE PRICE OF PEACE AND THE PRICE OF VENGEANCE

AS the heat of the day started to really rise, I went into the arbor of the Inn for the heavy noon meal and sat down I by myself under the wisteria, which was blooming magnificently over the latticework. This place was on the same side of the town as the

me what was mine, whether I had kinsmen or not, but a story of demons? I'd wind up locked up somewhere in Florence!

And talk of the stake, of being burnt for a sorcerer, that was entirely possible. Not likely. But possible. It could happen very suddenly and spontaneously in a town like this, a mob gathering, denunciations by a local priest, people shouting and running to see what was up. This did now and then happen to people.

About this time, my meal was set out for me, a good meal with plenty of fresh fruit and well-cooked mutton and gravy, and as I started to dip my bread and eat, up came two men who asked to sit down with me and buy a cup of wine for me.

I realized one of them was a Franciscan, a very kindly-looking priest, poorer it seemed than the Dominicans, which was logical I suppose, and the other an elderly man with little twinkling eyes and long stiff white eyebrows, sticking up as if with glue, as if he were costumed as a cheerful elf to delight children.

think." I was talking with my mouth full, but I was too hungry to stop. "Sit down, please." I started to rise, but they sat down.

I bought another pitcher of red wine for the table.

"Well, you couldn't have found a finer place," said the little old man, who seemed to have his wits about him, "that is why I am so happy that God sent my own son, back here, to serve in our church, so that he could live out his days by his family."

"Ah, so you are father and son," I said.

"Yes, and I never thought I'd live so long," said the father, "to see such prosperity come to this town as has come. It's miraculous."

"It is, it is the blessing of God," said the priest innocently and sincerely. "It's a true wonder."

"Oh, really, instruct me in this, how so?" I asked. I pushed the plate of fruit to them. But they said they had eaten.

"Well, in my time," said the father, "you know we had more than our share of woes, or that's how it seemed to me. But now? It's utter bliss, this place. Nothing bad ever happens."

"It's true," said the priest. "You know, I remember the lepers we had in the old days, who lived outside the walls. They are all gone now. And then there were always a few really bad youths, young men causing

people have returned to God with their whole hearts."
"Yes," said the old elfin man, shaking his head, "and God has been merciful in so many other ways."
I felt chills on my back again, as I had with Ursula, but it was not from pleasure.
"In what way is that, in particular?" I asked.
"Well, look around," said the old man. "Have you seen any cripples in our streets? Do you see any half-wits? When I was a child, why, when you, my son, were a child"—he said to the priest— "there were always a few unfortunate souls, born ill formed, or without good brains, you know, and one had to look out for them. I can remember a time when there were always beggars at the gates. We have no beggars, haven't had any for years."
'Amazing," I said.
"Yes, true," said the priest thoughtfully. "Everyone here is in good health. That's why the nuns left so long ago. Did you see the old hospital shut up? And the convent out of town, long abandoned. I think there are sheep in there now. The farmers use its old rooms."
"No one ever takes sick?" I asked.
"Well, they do," said the priest, taking a slow drink of his wine, as though he were a moderate man in this respect, "but they don't suffer, you know. It's not like the old days. It seems if a person is like to go, then he goes quickly."
"Yes, true, thanks be to God," said the elder.
'And the women," said the priest, "they are

lucky here in birth. They are not burdened with so many children. Oh, we have many whom God calls home to himself in the first few weeks—you know, it's the curse of a mother—but in general, our families are blessedly small." He looked to his father. "My poor mother," he said, "she had twenty babies all told. Well, that never happens now, does it?"

The little old man stuck out his chest and smiled proudly. 'Aye, twenty children I reared myself; well, many have gone their way, and I don't even know what became of ... but never mind. No, families are small here now."

The priest looked slightly troubled. "My brothers, maybe someday God will grant me some knowledge of what became of them."

"Oh, forget about them," said the old man.

"Were they a spirited bunch, might I ask?" I said under my breath, peering at both of them and trying to make it seem quite natural.

"Bad," muttered the priest, shaking his head. "But that's our blessing, see, bad people leave us."

"Is that so?" I asked.

The little old man scratched his pink scalp. His white hair was thin and long, sticking in all directions, rather like the hair of his eyebrows.

"You know, I was trying to remember," he said, "what did happen to those poor cripple boys, you remember, the ones born with such miserable legs, they were brothers ..."

"Oh, Tomasso and Felix," said the priest.

"Yes."

"They were taken off to Bologna to be cured.

remember, poor little child."
"Yes, yes, of course. We have several doctors."
"Do you?" I said. "I wonder what they do," I murmured. "What about the town council, the gonfalonier?" I asked. Gonfalonier was the name for the governor in Florence, the man who nominally, at least, ran things.
"We have a borsellino" said the priest, "and we pick a new six or eight names out of it now and then, but nothing much ever happens here. There's no quarreling. The merchants take care of the taxes. Everything runs smoothly."
The little elfin man went into laughter. "Oh, we have no taxes!" he declared.
His son, the priest, looked at the old fellow as though this was not something that ought to be said, but then he himself merely looked puzzled. "Well, no, Papa," he said, "it's only that the taxes are ... small." He seemed perplexed.
"Well, then you are really blessed," I said agreeably, trying on the surface to make light of this utterly implausible picture of things.
'And that terrible Oviso, remember him?" the priest suddenly said to his father and then to me. "Now that was a diseased fellow. He nearly killed his son. He was out of his mind, roared like a bull. There was a traveling doctor who came through, said they would cure him at Padua. Or was it Assisi?"
"I'm glad he never came back," said the old man. "He used to drive the town crazy."
I studied them both. Were they serious? Were

"Oh, I know that's not quite the proverb."
"Don't tempt the Almighty!" said his father, downing the dregs of his cup.
I quickly poured out the wine for both of them.
"The little mute fellow," said a voice.
I looked up. It was the innkeeper, with his hands on his hips, his apron stretching over his potbelly, a tray in his hand. "The nuns took him with them, didn't they?"
"Came back for him, I think," said the priest. He was now fully preoccupied. Troubled, I would say.
The innkeeper took up my empty plate.
"The worst scare was the plague," he whispered in my ear. "Oh, it's gone now, believe you me, or I wouldn't utter the word. There's no word that will empty a town any faster."
"No, all those families, gone, just like that," said the old man, "thanks to our doctors, and the visiting monks. All taken to the hospital in Florence."
"Plague victims? Taken to Florence?" I asked, in obvious disbelief. "I wonder who was minding the city gates, and which gate it was by which they were admitted."
The Franciscan stared at me fixedly for a moment, as if something had disturbed him violently and deeply.
The innkeeper gave the priest's shoulder a

loose jaw, and his deeply creased face looked sad suddenly.

The very old man chimed in that there had been a whole family down with the plague out in the country not very long ago, but they had been taken to Lucca.

"It was the generosity of ... who was it, my son, I don't..."

"Oh, what does it matter?" said the innkeeper. "Signore," he said to me, "some more wine."

"For my guests," I gestured. "I have to be off. Restless limbs," I said. "I must see what books are for sale."

"This is a fine place for you to stay," said the priest with sudden conviction, his voice soft as he continued to gaze at me, his eyebrows knitted. 'A fine place indeed, and we could use another scholar. But—."

"Well, I'm rather young myself," I said. I made ready to rise, putting one leg over the bench. "There are no young men here of my age?"

"Well, they go off, you see," said the elfin one. "There are a few, but they are busy at the trades of their fathers. No, the rapscallions don't hang around here. No, young man, they do not!"

with you," he whispered.

I leant towards him. The innkeeper, seeing this confidential manner, turned away and busied himself somewhere else. The old elfin one was talking to his cup.

"What is it, Father?" I asked in a whisper. "Is the town too well-off, is that it?"

"Go on your way, son," he said almost wistfully. "I wish I could. But I'm bound by my vow of obedience and by the fact that this is my home, and here sits my father, and all the others have vanished into the wide world." He became suddenly hard. "Or so it seems," he said. And then, "If I were you, I wouldn't stay here." I nodded.

"You look strange, son," he said to me in the same whisper. Our heads were right together. "You stand out too much. You're pretty and encased in velvet, and it's your age; you're not really a child, you know." "Yes, I see, not very many young men in the

"Pray for me," I said. "That's all."

I saw in him a species of fear as real as that which I had seen in the young priest, but it was even more innocent, for all his age, and all his wrinkles, and the wetness of his lips with the wine. He looked fatigued by that which he couldn't comprehend.

I stepped free of the bench and was on my way when he grasped my hand. I bent my ear to his lips.

"My boy," he said, "there's something... something ..."

"I know, Father," I said. I patted his hand.

"No, you don't. Listen. When you leave, take the main road south, even if it's out of your way. Don't go north; don't take the narrow road north."

"Why not?" I demanded.

went out the wide-open gates and into the open country. The breeze was at once magnificent and welcome.

All around me lay rich, well-tended fields, vineyards, patches of orchard and farmhouses—lush and fertile vistas which I couldn't see when I had come in by darkness. As for the road north, I could see nothing of it due to the immense size of the town, whose uppermost fortifications were northward. I could see, below on a ridge, what must have

been the ruins of the convent and, way down the mountain and far off to the west, what might have been

Of course I couldn't hope to cover even one street of the place, but I was determined to discover what I could.

In the booksellers, I went through the old Ars Grammatica and Ars Minor, and the big beautiful Bibles that were for sale, which I could only see by asking that they be taken out of the cabinets.

"How do I go north from here?" I asked the

bored man who leaned on his elbow and looked at me sleepily.

"North, nobody goes north/' he said, and yawned in my face. He wore fine clothes without a sign of mending, and good new shoes of well-worked leather.

"Look, I have much finer books than that," he said.

me. She seemed tired and worn out. "You think it's easy to take care of a sick child? Look in there."

I stared at her as if she'd lost her mind. But then it dawned on me, clear and cold. I knew exactly what she meant. I poked my head through a curtained doorway and saw a child, feverish and sick, slumbering in a dirty narrow bed.

"You think it's easy? Year after year she doesn't get better," said the woman.

"I'm sorry," I said. "But what's to be done?"

The woman tore out her stitches and put down her needle. She seemed past all patience. "What's to be

looked at you. I mean God will be merciful. He's very old/'
"Hmmm, I see," I said.
She looked at me with cold cunning eyes, as if they were made of metal.
I bowed and went out. The old man had started to take off his shirt again, and the other sister, who had been silent all the time, slapped him.
I winced at it, and kept walking. I meant to see as much as I could right now.
Passing through rather peaceful little tailors' shops I came at last to the district of the porcelain dealers, where two men were having an argument about a fancy birthing tray.
Now, birthing trays, once used in practicality to receive the infant as it came from the womb, had become by my time fancy gifts given after the child

turned at once to snatch a handsome plate from the shelf and pretend to be much impressed with it. "So lovely/' I said, as if I hadn't heard them.

The merchant got up and started to extoll the contents on display. The others melted into the gathering evening outside. I stared at the man.

"Is the child sick?" I asked in the smallest most childish voice that I myself could muster.

"Oh, no, well, I don't think so, but you know how it is," said the man. "The child's smallish."
"Weak," I volunteered.

In a very clumsy way, he said, "Yes, weak." His smile was artificial, but he thought himself quite successful.

Then both of us turned to fussing over the wares. I bought a tiny porcelain cup, very beautifully painted, which he claimed to have bought from a Venetian.

I knew damned good and well I should leave without a word, but I couldn't stop myself from asking him as I paid, "Do you think the poor smallish weak child

and closed the doors, he said, "North, eh? Well, good luck to you, my boy/' He gave a sour chuckle. "That's an ancient road. You better ride as fast as you can from sunup."
"Thank you, Sir/' I said.
Night was coming on.

I hurried into an alleyway and stood there, against the wall, catching my breath as though someone were chasing me. I let the little cup fall and it shattered loudly, the noise echoing up the towering buildings. I was half out of my wits.

But instantly and fully aware of my situation, and convinced of the horrors I had discovered, I made an inflexible decision.

I wasn't safe in the Inn, so what did this matter? I was going to do it my way and see for myself. This is what I did.

Without going back to the Inn, without ever officially leaving my room in the Inn, I turned uphill when the shadows were thick enough to cover me, and I climbed the narrowing street towards the old ruined castle.

Now all day I had been looking at this imposing collection of rock and decay, and could see that it was indeed utterly ruined and empty of all save the birds of the air, except, as I have said, for the

Well, I made for the tower that overlooked the town.

The government offices were shut up of course already, and the curfew soldiers would soon be out, and there was noise from only a couple of taverns that obviously stayed open no matter what the law was.

The piazza before the castle was empty, and because the three streets of the town took many a curve in their way downhill, I could see almost nothing now but a few dim torches.

The sky, however, was wondrously bright, clear of all but the most rounded and discreetly shaped clouds, very visible against the deeper blue of the night, and the stars seemed exquisitely numerous.

I found old winding stairs, too narrow almost for a human being, that curved around the useful part of the old citadel and led up to the first platform of stone, before an entrance to the tower.

Of course this architecture was no stranger to me whatsoever. The stones were of a rougher texture than those of my old home, and somewhat darker, but the tower was broad and square and timelessly solid.

I knew that the place was ancient enough that I would find stone stairways leading quite high, and I did, and soon came to the end of my trek in a high room which gave me a view of the entire town stretched out before me.

There were higher chambers, but they had been accessible in centuries past by wooden ladders that could be pulled up, to defeat an enemy

and isolate him below, and I couldn't get to them. I could hear the birds up there, disturbed by my presence. And I could hear the breeze moving faintly. However, this was fine, this height.

I had a view all around from the four narrow windows of this place, looking in all directions.

And most especially, and important to me, I could see the town itself, directly below me, shaped like a great eye—an oval with tapered ends—with random torches burning here and there, and an occasional dimly lighted window, and I could see a lantern moving slowly as someone walked in a leisurely pace down one of the thoroughfares.

No sooner had I seen this moving lantern than it went out. It seemed the streets were utterly deserted.

Then the windows too went dark, and very shortly there were not four torches that I could see anywhere.

This darkness had a calming effect on me. The open country sank into a deep dark tinge of blue beneath the pearly heavens, and I could see the forests encroaching on the tilled land, creeping higher here and there, as the hills folded over one another or sank steeply into valleys of pure blackness.
I could hear the total emptiness of the tower.

Nothing stirred now, not even the birds. I was quite alone. I could have heard the slightest footfall on the stairs down below. No one knew I was here. All slept.

What did I expect to see in this sleeping town? Anything that happened in it.

Now, what did I think that was to be? I couldn't have told anyone. But as I circled the room, as I glanced again and again down at the few scattered lights below and the hulk of the descending ramparts beneath the glowing summer sky, the place seemed loathsome, full of deceit, full of witchcraft, full of payment to the Devil.

"You think I don't know where your unwanted babies are taken?" I muttered in a rage. "You think that people who are down with the plague are welcomed right through the open gates of your neighboring cities?"

I was startled by the echoes of my own mur-murings off the cold walls.

"But what do you do with them, Ursula? What would you have done with my brother and sister?"

My ruminations were madness perhaps, or might have seemed so to some. But I learnt this. Revenge takes one's mind from the pain. Revenge is a lure, a mighty molten lure, even if it is hopeless.

One blow from this sword and I can strike off her head, I thought, and heave it out that window, and then what will she be but a demon stripped of all worldly power?

Now and then I half-drew my sword, then put

so much light, but as I narrowed my eyes and focused my mind, I saw that this was out of the question.

There was no riotous glare on the few visible clouds above, and the illumination, for all the breadth of it, was contained as if it emanated from a vast congregation gathered together with a fantastical quantity of candles. How steady yet pulsing was this orgy of fierce light!

I felt a chill in my bones as I looked at it. It was a dwelling! I leant over the window edge. I could see its complex and sprawling outline! It stood out from all the land, this one luxuriantly lighted castle, all by itself, and obviously visible from one entire side of this town, this spectacle of forest-shrouded house in which some celebration appeared to require that every torch and taper be lighted, that every window, battlement and coping be hung with lanterns.

North, yes, north, for the town dropped straight off behind me, and this castle lay north, and it was that direction of which I'd been warned,

but free of its gravity. Were they coming towards me?
Had I been charmed?
No, I saw this. Or did I?
There were dozens of them!
They were coming closer and closer.

They were tiny shapes, not large at all, the largeness having been a delusion caused by the fact that they traveled in packs, these things, and now, as they came near to the town, the packs broke apart and I saw them springing up to the very walls beyond me on either side like so many giant moths.
I turned around and ran to the window.

They had descended in a swarm upon the town! I could see them dip down and vanish in the blackness. Below me on the piazza, there appeared two black shapes, men in streaming capes, who

His laughter filled the tower.

'Ah, but that does not hurt me, child, and if you're so curious, well then, we'll take you too with us to come and see what you long to see."

He caught me in a suffocating swaddle of fabric. And suddenly I felt myself lifted off the floor, encased in a sack, and I knew we had left the tower!

I was head down, sick to nausea. It seemed he flew, carrying me on his back, and his laughter was now half blown away by the wind, and I could not free my arms. I could feel my sword, but couldn't reach the handle.

Desperately I felt for my dagger, not the one which I must have dropped when I had been caught by him, but

moved, and swung the sword with one hand, clumsily, but with all my force, hearing it smash into his side with a sickening moist slosh of a sound. The gush of blood in the bright light was horrific and monstrous.

There came his worst cry. He fell to his knees.

"Help me, you imbeciles; he's a devil!" he screamed. His hood fell back.

I scanned the immense fortifications rising to my right, the high crenelated towers with their

you're bloody dead!" I cried out. "You murderous fiend, you're dead. Go get your head. Put that back on!"
Ursula flung her arms around me, her breasts

sealed against my back. Her hand imprisoned mine once more and forced me to bow the tip of the sword to the ground.
"Don't touch him," she screamed again, with a threat in her voice. "Don't come near, I charge you."
One of the others had recovered the shaggy blond head of my foe and held it up as the others watched the body twitch and writhe.
"Oh, no, it's too late," said one of the men.
"No, put it back, put it on his neck," cried

"Bring them both," he called out. "Ursula, quiet yourself, lest you frighten everyone."

I made a swift bid for freedom. She tightened her grip. There came the pinprick of her teeth in my neck. "Oh, no, Ursula, let me see what's to happen!" I whispered. But I could feel the murky clouds rising about me, as though the air itself had thickened and was enfolding me with scent and sound and the sensuous force.

Oh, love you, want you, yes, I did and can't deny it. I felt myself holding her in the high moist grasses of the field, and she lay beneath me, but these were dreams and there were no wild red flowers, and I was being taken somewhere, and she had but

which had all been taken from me. I nearly lost my balance and fell backward.

The music was repetitive and dull and pounding as it rose up from some faraway place below, with too many muffled drums and the thin nasal whine of horns. It had no melody.

I looked up. French, yes, the high narrow pointed archway that led to a long balcony outside, below which some great celebration was in noisy progress. Fancy French, the tapestries of the ladies with their tall cone-shaped hats, and their snow-white unicorns.

Quaint antique, like the illustrations in prayer books of courts in which poets sat reading aloud the boring and tedious Roman de la Rose, or the fables of Reynard the Fox.

The window was draped in blue satin covered in the fleurs-de-lys. There was old filigree crumbling about

white breasts bare almost to her nipples, beneath a rich full little bodice of flowered red-and-gold velvet.

At a desk, on an X-shaped chair, there sat the Elderly one, his age quite true to the posture I had glimpsed silhouetted against the castle light, and he was pale as they, of the same deadly white complexion, both beautiful yet awful and monstrous.

Turkish lamps hung on chains about the room, flames glittering deep inside them, giving off a hurtful light against my dazed eyes, and also a fragrance as of roses and summer fields, something alien to heat and burnt things.

The Elderly one had a bald head, as ugly as the unearthed bulb of an iris, upended and shaved of all root, and implanted with two gleaming gray eyes, and a long narrow solemn uncomplaining and unjudging mouth.

'Ah, so," he said to me in a soft voice, lifting one eyebrow, which was scarcely visible except for the sharp arching wrinkle of his perfect white flesh. He had thick slanting lines for cheeks. "You realize you've killed one of us, don't you?"

On a great trestle-board table to my left lay the dead blond thief who had hefted me body and soul into his big cloth sack. Ah, the debt was paid in full.

He lay still, shrunken horridly, as if his limbs had collapsed upon themselves, and his bloodless white head, lids open on dark clotted eyes, lay against his roughly torn neck. What a delight. I stared at one skeletal hand of the being, which hung over the edge of the table, white and like some shriveling creature of the sea beneath a merciless sun on sand by the oceanside.

'Ah, excellent," I said. "This man who dared to abduct me and bring me here by force, quite dead, thank you for the sight of it." I looked at the Elderly one. "Honor demands nothing less. We don't even have to talk of common sense, do we? And what others did you take from the village? The wild old man who tore at his shirt? The infant born small? The weak, the infirm, the sick, whatever they'd give you, and what do you give them in exchange?"

"Oh, do be quiet, young one," said the Elderly solemn male. "You are courageous beyond honor or common sense, that's plain enough."

"No, it isn't. Your sins against me demand I fight

"Well, you've very nearly got it right," said one of the bearded soldiers in a deep bass of a voice. "We are the Court of the Ruby Grail, that's our very name, only we prefer that you say it properly in Latin or in French, as we say it."

"The Court of the Ruby Grail!" I said. "Leeches, parasites, blood drinkers, that's what you all are. What is the Ruby Grail? Blood?"

I struggled to remember the prick of her teeth against my throat without the spell which had always come with them, but there it was, threatening to swallow me, the drifting, fragrant memory of meadows and her tender breasts. I shook myself all over. "Blood drinkers. Ruby Grail! Is that what you do with all of them, the ones you take? Drink their blood?"

The Elderly one looked pointedly at Ursula. "What is it you're asking of me, Ursula?" he put the question to her. "How can I make such a choice?"

"Oh, but Godric, he's brave and fine and strong," said Ursula. "Godric, if you but say yes, no one will go against it. No one will question it. Please, I beg you, Godric. When have I ever asked—."

'Asked for what?" I demanded, looking from her solicitous and heartbroken face to the Elderly man. "For my life? Is that what you ask? You'd better kill me."

The old man knew that. I didn't have to tell him. There was no way I could be given mercy at this

them again, seeking to bring down another or another.

Suddenly, as if quite angry and impatient, the Elderly figure rose with surprising agility and grabbed me by the collar as he swept past me in a great graceful rustle of red robes, and dragged me with him, as if I weighed nothing, out through the archway and to the edge of the stone railing. "Look down on the Court/' he said.

The hall was immense. The overhang on which we stood ran all around, and below there was scarcely a foot of bare stone, so rich were the hangings of gold and burgundy. The long table below hosted a string of Lords and Ladies, all in the requisite burgundy-red cloth, the color of blood, not wine, as I had believed, and before them glared the bare wood, with not a plate of food nor a cup of wine, but all were content and watching with cheerful eyes, as they chattered, the dancers who covered the great floor, dancing deftly on thick carpets as though they liked this padding beneath their slippered feet.

There were so many interlocking circles of figures moving to the throb and beat of the music that they made a series of arabesques. The costumes embraced a great nationality of styles, from the very French to the modern Florentine, and everywhere there were gay circles of red-dyed silk or the red field covered with flowers or some other design which looked very like stars or crescent moons, I could not quite see it. It was a somber yet tantalizing picture, all of

other witches and heretics.

I heard Ursula let out a little gasp. "Vittorio, be wise," she whispered.

At her whisper, the man at the center of the table below—he who held that very high-backed chair of honor, which my father would have held at home—looked up at me. He was blond-haired, blond as the shaggy one I'd slain, but his long locks were pampered and silky on his broad shoulders. His face was youthful, far more so than my father's yet plenty older than my own, and as inhumanly pale as all the rest, his searing blue eyes fixing upon me. He returned at once to his study of the dance.

The whole spectacle seemed to shiver with the hot smoking quaver of the flames, and as my eyes watered, I realized with a start that the figures worked into the tapestry were not the quiet ladies and unicorns of the small studious chamber from which we'd come, but devils dancing in Hell. Indeed, there were quite hideous gargoyles in the most violent and cruel style, carved beneath the porch all around, on which we stood, and I could see at the capitals of the branching columns that held up the ceiling above us more of the demonic and winged creatures carved into the stone.

Grimaces of evil were emblazoned on the walls

slightest opinion on the matter. "She wants us to bring you into our Court as a reward for the fact that you slew one of us, that is her logic."

His glance to me was thoughtful, cool. His hand on my collar was neither cruel nor rough, merely simple.

I was a tempest of half-uttered words and curses, when suddenly I realized I was falling.

In the Elderly one's grasp, I had fallen over the rail, and in a second descended to the thick layers of carpet below, where I was yanked to my feet, as the dancers made way for us on either side.

We stood before the Lord in the high-backed chair, and I saw that the wood figures of his regal throne were, of course, animalian, feline and diabolical.

All was black wood, polished so that one could smell the oil, and it mingled sweetly with the perfume of all the lamps, and there came a soft crackling from the torches.

The musicians had stopped. I couldn't even see them. And then when I did, saw the little band quite high up in their own little balcony or loft, I

forearms and wrists. A huge chain of medallions hung about his neck, each heavily worked circle of gold set with a cabochon stone, a ruby, red as his clothing.

He held one slender naked hand curled on the table, simply. The other I could not see. He gazed at me with blue eyes. There was something puritanical and scholarly about his bare hand, and the refinement and cleanliness of it.

Across the thick overlapping carpets, Ursula came with a quick step, holding her skirts in two dainty hands. "Florian," she said, making a deep bow to the Lord behind the table. "Florian, I am begging you for this one, on account of character and strength, that you bring him into the Court for my sake, for my heart. It's as simple as that."
Her voice was tremulous but reasoning.

It was a beautiful voice, a voice of ringing clarity and charm, tinged with the accent of the French, which can in itself be so beguiling. It was with a French restraint and regality that he expressed himself.

He smiled at me, and his smile was gentle, as was Ursula's smile, but not pitying, and not at all cruel or sarcastic.

I had no eyes now for the other faces to the left and the right of him. I knew only that there were many, and some were men and some women, and the women wore the stately French headdresses of

stood.

The figures at the table might have been made of china, so fixed they were. Indeed it seemed that the very act of posing to perfection was inherently part of their attentiveness.

"Oh, if I had but a crucifix," I said in a soft voice, not even thinking about what I was saying.

"That would mean nothing to us," said the Lord matter-of-factly.

"Oh, how well I know; your lady here came

into my very chapel to take my brother and sister prisoner! No, crosses mean nothing to you. But it would mean something to me just now Tell me, do I have

there are no guardian angels that I can see about you. And we are always visible, as you know, for you have seen us at our best and at our worst. No, not really truly at our best, not at our finest."
"Oh," I said, "and for that I can't wait, my Lord,

for I am so in love with you all, and your style of slaughtering, and there is of course the matter of what your corruption has done to the town below and how you've stolen the souls of the very priests themselves."
"Hush, you work yourself into a mortal fever," he said. "Your scent fills my nostrils as if the pot is boiling over. I might devour you, child, cut you up and give your pulsing parts up and down the table to

But still the Lord remained unperturbed.
"Ursula," he said. "This can be considered/'
"No!" I cried out. "Never! Join you? Become one of you?"
The Elder's hand held me powerless with clamped fingers on my neck. I would only make myself foolish if I struggled. Were he to tighten his grip, I would be dead. And maybe that was best. Only I had more to say:
"I will never, I won't. What? How dare you think my soul so cheap you can have it for the asking!"
"Your soul?" asked the Lord. "What is your soul that it does not want to travel centuries under the inscrutable stars, rather than a few short years? What

and encroaches upon us, upon the forests which are ours, so that we must be cunning where we would be swift, and visible where we would be as the Gospel 'thief in the night/ "

"Why did you kill my father and my family!" I demanded. I could keep silent no longer, I didn't care how beguiling his eloquence, his soft purring words, his charmed face.

"Your father and his father," he said, "and the Lord before him—they cut down the trees that crowded your castle. And so I must keep back the forest of humans from mine. And now and then I must range wide with my ax, and so I have, and so it was done. Your father could have given tribute and remained as he was. Your father could have sworn a secret oath that required all but nothing of him."

"You can't believe he would have surrendered to you our babes, for what, do you drink their blood or sacrifice them to Satan on some altar?"

father live, as we let the stag live in the forest so that it may breed with the doe. It's no more than that."
'Are there any humans here?"
"None that can help you," he said simply
"No human guards by day?" I asked.
"No guards by day," he said, and for the first time he smiled a little proudly. "You think we require them? You think our small pigeon coop is not content by day? You think we need human guards here?"
"I certainly do. And you're a fool if you think Td ever join your Court! No human guards, when right below is an entire village which knows what you are and who you are and that you come by night and cannot by day?"
He smiled patiently. "They are vermin," he said quietly "You waste my time with those who are beneath contempt."
"Hmm, you do yourself wrong with such a harsh judgment. I think you have more love of them, in some way or another, my Lord, than that!"
The Elder laughed. "Of their blood perhaps," he said under his breath.

"You are fools if you do not think the townspeople below will rise up and take this citadel by the light of the day and open your hiding places!"

There was a rustling and noise throughout the great hall, but no words, none at least that I could hear, but it was as if these pale-faced monsters were communing with each other by thought or merely exchanging glances which made their ponderous and beautiful garments shift and move.

"You are numb with stupidity!" I declared. "You make yourselves known to the whole daylight world, and you think this Court of the Ruby Grail can endure forever?"

"You insult me," said the Lord. A bit of rosy color came divinely and beautifully into his cheeks. "I ask you with courtesy to be quiet."

"Do I insult you? My Lord, allow me to advise you. You are helpless by day; I know you are. You strike by night and only by night. All signs and words point to it. I remember your hordes fleeing my father's house. I remember the warning, 'Look at the sky/ My Lord, you have lived too long in your country forest. You should have followed my father's example and sent off a few pupils to the philosophers and priests of the city of Florence."

Ursula cried out under her breath, but I wouldn't be stopped.

"You may have bought off the old generation of idiots who run the town right now," I said, "but if you don't think the worlds of Florence and Venice and Milan are not moving in on you more fiercely than you can ever prevent, you are dreaming. It's not men such as my father who are a threat to you, my Lord. It's the scholar with his books; it's the university astrologers and alchemists who'll move in on you; it's the modern age of which you know nothing, and they will hunt you down, like some old beast of legend, and drag you out of this lair in the heat of the sun and cut off your heads, all of you—."

"Kill him!" There came a female voice from those who watched.

"Destroy him now," said a man.

"He isn't fit for the coop!" screamed another.

"He's unworthy to be kept in the coop for a moment, or even to be sacrificed."

Then a whole chorus let loose with demands for my death.

"No," cried Ursula, throwing out her arms to the Lord. "Florian, I beg you!"

"Torture, torture, torture," they began to chant, first two and three and then four.

"My Lord," said the Elder, but I could scarce hear his voice, "he's only a boy. Let us put him in the coop with the rest of the flock. In a night or two he won't remember his name. He'll be as tame and plump as the others."

"Kill him now/' screamed one voice over all. And: "Be done with him," cried others, their demands rising ever louder in volume.
There came a piercing shout seconded at once: "Tear him limb from limb. Now. Do it." "Yes, yes, yes!" It was like the beat of battle drums.

7

THE COOP

GODRIC, the Elder, shouted loudly for silence, right at the moment that numerous rather glacial hands had I tightened on my arms.

Now, once in Florence I had seen a man torn apart by a mob. I'd been far too close for my own desire to the spectacle, and had been nearly trampled in the efforts of those who, like me, wanted to get away.

So it was no fantasy to me that such could happen. I was as resigned to it as I was to any other form of death, believing, I think, as powerfully in my anger and my rectitude as I did in death.

But Godric ordered the blood drinkers back, and the entire pallid-faced company withdrew with a courtly grace that bordered upon the coy and the cloying, heads bowed or turned to one side, as if a moment before they had not been party to a rabble.

I kept my eyes fixed on the Lord, whose face now showed such a heat that it appeared near human, the blood pulsating in his thin cheeks, and

brown, and his blue eyes were filled with pondering and concern.

"I say that he be put in with the others," said Godric, the bald Elder.

At once, Ursula's sobs broke forth, as though she could not restrain herself any longer. I looked over to see her, her head bowed, her hands struggling to completely shield her face, and, through the creases of her long fingers, droplets of blood falling as though her tears were made of it.

"Don't cry," I said, not even thinking about the wisdom of it. "Ursula, you have done all you can. I am impossible."

Godric turned and looked at me with one thickly creased raised eyebrow. This time I was close enough to see that his bald white head did have such hairs to it, scant eyebrows of gray as thick and ugly as old splinters.

Ursula brought up a rose-colored napkin from the fold of her long high-waisted French gown, a pale pink tissue of a thing stitched on the edges with green leaves and pink flowers, and on this she wiped her lovely red tears and looked at me, as if she were crushed with longing.

"My predicament is impossible," I said to her. "You've done all you can to save me. If I could, I would put my arms around you to protect you from this pain. But this beast here is holding me hostage." There were outraged gasps and murmurs from

a Prankish absurdity and delicacy to them, and of course they were all demons.
The bald Elder, Godric, only chuckled.
"Demons," I said, "such a collection."
"The coop, my Lord," said Godric, the bald one. "With the others, and then I may make my suggestions to you in private, and with Ursula we shall talk. She grieves unduly."
"I do!" she cried. "Please, Florian, if only because I have never asked anything of this sort, and you know it."
"Yes, Ursula," said the Lord, in the softest voice which had issued from his lips yet. "I know that, my loveliest flower. But this boy is recalcitrant, and his family, when from time to time they had the advantage over those of us who wandered from here to hunt, destroyed those unfortunate members of our tribe. It happened more than once."
"Marvelous!" I cried out. "How brave, how wondrous, what a gift you give me."
The Lord was astonished and annoyed.
But Ursula hurried forward, in a flurry of dark shadowy velvet skirts, and leaned over the polished table to be close to him. I could see only her hair in its long thick braids, twined exquisitely with red velvet ribbons, and the shape of her gorgeous

dress, suddenly appeared at my side, to assist Godric, it seemed, in having me taken off.

Before I knew what was to befall me, a soft binding of cloth was put over my eyes. I was sightless.
"No, let me see!" I cried out.

"The coop then, it is, very well," came the Lord's voice, and I felt myself being taken away from the room, fast, as if the feet of those who escorted me scarcely needed to touch the floor.

The music rose again, in an eerie throb, but I was mercifully being escorted away from it. Only Ursula's voice accompanied me as I was carried up staircases, my feet now and then bruised coarsely on the steps, and the fingers that held me carelessly hurting me.

"Be quiet, please, Vittorio, don't struggle, be my brave one now in silence."

'And why, my love?" I asked. "Why set your heart on me? Can you kiss me without your stinging teeth?"
"Yes, and yes, and yes," she said in my ear.

We were high within the walls of the castle, that I knew. And the courtyard itself was enclosed on all four sides, and I could see as I looked up that the walls were faced in white marble and there were everywhere the narrow pointed twin-arched windows of the French style. And above, the heavens had a bright pulsing glow, fed no doubt by countless fluttering torches on the roofs and abutments of the castle.

This was all nothing much to my eyes, except that it meant escape was impossible, for the nearest windows were far too high, and the marble too smooth to be scaled in any physical way.

There were many tiny balconies overhanging above, and they too were impossibly high. I saw the pale red-clothed demons on those balconies looking down at me, as though my introduction

peasant huts of mere straw, and open wooden shacks, and little stone enclaves, and trellised gardens and countless circuitous pathways.

It was a drunken labyrinth of a garden gone wild under the naked night.

The fruit trees grew thick in clusters and then broke open to reveal grassy places where people merely lay staring at the stars, as if they were dozing, though their eyes were open.

Myriad flowering vines covered wire enclosures that seemed to have no purpose but to create some alcove of privacy, and there were giant cages full of

fat birds, aye, birds, and cooking fires scattered about—and big kettles simmering on beds of coals, from

Children, old women, the famed cripples who never appeared in the town below, hunchbacks, and little twisted bodies which had never grown to full size, and big hulking men as well, bearded and swart, and boys my age or older— all of them shuffling about or lying about, but dazed, and crazy, and looking up at us, and blinking and pausing as though our presence should

mean something though they could not make out what.

I swayed on the landing, and Ursula held my arm. I felt ravenous as the heavy fumes filled my nostrils. Hunger, hunger such as I'd never known. No, it was a pure thirst for the soup, as though there were no food that was not liquid.

Suddenly the two gaunt and aloof men who had not left us—they who had blindfolded me and dragged me

the jagged thorny branches of the blooming orange trees, where fruit hung still, as though none of these swollen, lethargic souls needed such a fresh and bright thing as an orange.

The Lords took up a stance on either side of this first kettle, and each, extending a right hand, slashed his right wrist with a knife which he held in his left hand, and let the blood flow copiously into the brew.

A weak happy cry rose from those humans gathering meekly around them.

"Oh, damnable, it's the blood, of course," I

brought me back to the castle had been rude huntsmen. How well it was all thought out, but this, my narrow-shouldered love, with her soft yielding arms and her shining tear-stained face, was a pure Lady, was she not?

"Vittorio, I want so badly for you not to die."

"Do you, dearest?" I said. I had my arms around her. I could no longer stand without this support. My vision was fading.

Yet with my head against her shoulder, my eyes directed to the crowd below, I could see the human beings surrounding the kettles and dipping their cups into the brew, dipping their cups right where the blood had fallen, and then blowing on the hot liquid to cool it before they drank.

your night to give; give in honor of our new acquisition."

Ursula seemed shamed by all of this, and held me gently with her long fingers. I looked into her eyes. "I'm drunk, drunk merely from the fragrance."

"My blood is only for you now," she whispered.

"Give it to me then, I hunger for it, I'm weak to dying," I said. "Oh, God, you've brought me to this. No, no, I did it myself."

"Sshhh, my lover, my sweet," she said.

Her arm coiled about my waist, and there came just under my ear her tender lips sucking on the flesh, as if she meant to make a pucker there on my neck, warm it with her tongue, and then the prick of her teeth.

I felt ravaged, and with both hands in a fantasy I reached out for her figure as we ran together through the meadow which belonged only to us and to which these others could never be admitted.

"Oh, innocent love," she said even as she drank

ing cooling dream of blue skies and tender breaking stems, to turn and go to her. But out of the corner of my eyes, I beheld something of such splendor and magnificence that my soul leapt.
"Look, yes, you see!"
   My head fell back. The dream was gone. The high white marble walls of the prison castle rose above my hurting gaze. She held me and stared down at me, bewildered, her lips bloody.
   She hoisted me in her arms. I was as helpless as a child. She carried me down the stairs, and there was nothing I could do to rouse my limbs.
   It seemed all the world above was tiny figures ranging on balconies and battlements and laughing and pointing with their tiny outstretched hands, so dark against the torches all around them.
Blood red, smell it.
   "But what was it; did you see it in the field?" I asked her.
"No!" she cried. She looked so frightened.
   I lay on a heap of hay, a makeshift bed, and the poor underfed demon peasant boys stared stupidly down at me with bloodshot eyes, and she, she wept, her hands again to her face.

"... time for the Mass."
"You won't take him tonight."
"Why are they crying?" I asked. "Listen, Ursula, they've all started crying."
One of the scrawny boys stared right into my eyes. He had a hand on the back of my neck and a warm cup of brew to my mouth. I didn't want it to slop down my chin. I drank and drank. It filled my mouth.
"Not tonight," came Ursula's voice. Kisses on my forehead, on my neck. Someone snatched her away. I felt her hand hold tight to mine, then I felt her pulled away.
"Come now, Ursula, leave him."
"Sleep, my darling," she cried in my ear. I felt her skirts brushing me. "Vittorio, sleep."
The cup was thrown aside. Stupidly, in utter intoxication I watched the contents spill and sink darkly into the mounded hay. She knelt before me, her mouth open and tender and luscious and red.
She took rny face in her cool hands. The blood poured out of her mouth and into mine.
"Oh, love," I said. I wanted to see the field. It didn't come. "Let me see the field! Let me see it!"
But there was no meadow, only the shocking sight of her face again, and then a dimming light, a gathering embrace of darkness and sound. I could no longer fight. I could no longer speak. I could no longer

When next I opened my eyes, it was morning. The sun hurt me, and my head ached unbearably.

A man was on top of me, trying to get my clothes off me. Drunken fool. I turned over, dizzy and sick, sick to vomiting, and threw him off, and with a sound blow knocked him senseless.

I tried to get up but I couldn't. The nausea was intolerable. All around me others slept. The sun hurt my eyes. It scalded my skin. I snuggled into the hay. The heat beat down on my head, and when I ran my own fingers through my hair, my hair felt hot. The pain in my head throbbed in my ears.

"Come into the shelter," a voice said. It was an old crone, and she beckoned to me from beneath a thatched roof. "Come in, where it's cool."

"Curse you all," I said. I slept. I drifted.

Sometime during the late afternoon I came to my senses.

I found myself on my knees near one of the kettles. I was drinking in a slovenly wretched manner from a bowl of brew. The old woman had given it to me.

"The demons," I said. "They are asleep. We can . . . we can ..." but then the futility of it overcame me. I wanted to throw away the cup, but I drank the hot brew.

"It's not just blood, it's wine, it's good wine," said the old woman. "Drink it, my boy, and feel no pain. They'll kill you soon enough. It's not so terrible."

When it was dark again, I knew it.

I rolled over.

I could fully open my eyes, and they did not hurt as they had in the day

I knew that I had lost the whole arc of the sun in this drugged and stupid and disastrous languor. I had fallen into their plans. I had been helpless when I should have been trying to rouse these useless ones around me to mutiny. Good God, how could I have let it happen! Oh, the sadness, the dim distant sadness ... And the sweetness of slumber.

"Wake, boy/'

A demon voice.

"They want you tonight."

"Oh, and who wants me for what?" I asked. I looked up. The torches were alight. All was twinkling and glowing, and there came the soft rustle of green leaves overhead—the sharp sweet smell of the orange trees. The world was woven of dancing flames above and the entrancing patterns of the black leaves. The world was hunger and thirst.

The brew simmered, and that scent blotted out all else. I opened my mouth for it, though there was none of it near me.

"I'll give it to you," said the demon voice. "But sit up. I must clean you up. You must look good for tonight."

"For what?" I said. "All of them are dead."

"Who?"

"My family."

"There is no family here. This is the Court of the Ruby Grail. You are the property of the Lord of the Court. Now, come, I have to prepare you."

"For what do you prepare me?"

"Get up, boy. They'll want you. It's almost midnight."
"No, no, not almost midnight, no!" I cried out. "No!"
"Don't be afraid," he said, coldly, wearily. "It's useless."
"But you don't understand, it's the loss of time, the loss of reason, the loss of hours during which my heart beat and my brain slept! I'm not afraid, you miserable demon!"
He held me flat to the hay. He washed my face.
"There, there, you are a handsome fine one. They always sacrifice those such as you right away. You're too strong, too fine of limb and face. Look at you, and the Lady Ursula dreaming of you and weeping for you. They took her away."
'Ah, but I was dreaming too ..." I said. Was I talking to this monstrous attendant as though he and I were friends? Where was the great magnificent web of my dreams, the immense and luminous majesty?
"You can talk to me, why not?" he said. "You will die in rapture, my pretty young Lord," he said. 'And you'll see the church all alight, and the Mass; you'll be the sacrifice."
"No, I dreamed of the meadow," I said. "I saw something in the meadow. No, it wasn't Ursula." I was talking to myself, to my own sick bedeviled mind, talking to my wits to make them listen. "I

"It's the clock, striking the third quarter of the hour. It's almost time for the Mass. Don't pay attention to the noise. It's the others who'll be sacrificed. Don't let it unnerve you. Just so much common weeping."

HAD ever a chapel been more beautiful? Had ever white marble been used to such an advantage, and from which I fount of eternal gold had come these glorious curlicues and serpentine adornments, these high-pointed windows, illuminated from without by fierce fires that brought into the perfection of jewels their tiny thick facets of tinted glass to form their solemn narrow and seemingly sacred pictures?
But they were not sacred pictures.

I stood in the choir loft, high above the vestibule, looking down over the great nave and at the altar at the far end. Once again I was flanked by ominous and regal Lords, who seemed now to be absolutely fervent in their duty as they held me firm and standing by the arms.

My mind had cleared, but only somewhat. The wet cloth was once again pressed to my eyes and forehead. The water was as if from a mountain stream of flowing melted snow.

Paintings covered the cove behind the altar. Demons dancing in Hell, graceful among the flames as though they bathed in a welcome radiance, and strung above them on loose and unfurling banners the golden letters from St. Augustine's words, so familiar to my study, that these flames were not the flames of real fire but only the absence from God, but the word "absence" had been replaced by the Latin word for "freedom."

"Freedom" was the word in Latin worked into the high white marble walls, in a frieze that ran beneath the balconies on either side of the church, on the same level as this, my place, in which more of the Court beheld the spectacle.

Light rose to flood the high-groined arches of the roof.

And what was this spectacle?

The high altar was draped in crimson trimmed in gilt fringe, its abundant cloths short enough to reveal the tableau in white carving of figures

less grotesque about the Crucified God if He Himself had been there.
My guards held me firm. Had I tottered?
From the assemblage around me and behind me, from those whom I had not even regarded, there came suddenly the muted roll of drums, ominous and slow, mournful and beautiful in their own muffled simplicity.
At once there followed a deep-throated chorus of horns, in lovely weaving song and effortless sweet intermingling, playing not the repetitious chord music of the night before, but a strong plaintive and imploring polyphony of melodies so sad that they flooded my heart with sadness, stroked my heart and made the tears nearly spring to my eyes.
Oh, what is this? What is this blended and rich

This music alone might have engaged me, filled my soul, its threads of melody interweaving, overlapping, harmonizing and then drifting apart. It left me no breath to speak or eyes for other things. Yet I beheld the statues of the demons who ran from right to left—so like the Lords and Ladies of the Courtly table of last night—from the imposing figure of their Devil.

Were they blood drinkers all, these terrible gaunt saints of Hell, carved from hardwood with its own reddish mahogany glint, in their stark stylized garments, cleaving to thin bodies, their eyes half-lidded, their mouths open, and against each

lower lip two white fangs, as if made from tiny bits

and devout kiss, and into their bodies, by the will of God, they shall take my life's blood, my rapture, my soul's ascent through their own, so as better to know both Heaven and Hell in their Dark Service."
The reed organ played its solemn song.
Into the Sanctuary of the church, there pro-

ceeded now, to the fullest most lustrous strength of the polyphony yet, a stream of priestly figures.

I saw the Lord Florian in a rich red chasuble as if he were the bishop of Florence himself, only this garment bore the Cross of Christ impudently upside down in honor of the Damned One, and on his untonsured

took their positions ranked down the long marble Communion Rail.

Once again, there rose the magnificent chorus of voices around me, falsettos mingling with

true sopranos and the throbbing basses of the males, as redolent of the woodlands as the wooden horns, and beneath it all the heavy driving brass declaration.

What did they mean to do? What was this hymn which now the tenors sang, and what was the answer that came from all the voices so close to me, the words in Latin unstrung and only incoherently enveloping me:

"Lord, I am come into the Valley of Death; Lord, I am come to the end of my Sorrow; Lord, in thy deliverance I give life to those who would be idle in

guard beside me. "Watch, for what you see here you will never see between Heaven and Earth again, and as you will go unconfessed to God, you will burn in darkness forever."
He sounded as if he believed it.

"You have no power to damn my soul," I whispered, trying in vain to clear my eyes, not to so love the weakness that still caused me to depend upon their clamping hands.

"Ursula, farewell," I whispered, making of my lips a kiss.

But in this miraculous and private little moment, seemingly unnoticed by the whole congregation, I saw her head shake in a small secretive negation.

No one saw because all eyes were now on another spectacle, far more tragic than any of the controlled and modulated ritual we had beheld.

dreamed, and once again came the bright green limitless meadow to my eyes, and once again, as Ursula ran from me, as her spirited young form rushed across the high breaking field of grass and lilies, there rose another figure, another familiar figure—.

"Yes, I see you!" I cried out to this vision in my half-rescued dream.

But no sooner had I recognized it, locked to it, than it vanished; it was gone, and with it was gone all comprehension of it, all memory of its exquisite face and form and its meaning, its pure and powerful meaning. Words fled from me.

From below I saw the Lord Florian look up, angered, silent. The hands beside me dug into my flesh.

"Silence," said the guards next to me, their commands overlapping one another.

The lovely music rose higher and higher, as though the climbing soprano voices and the throbbing, winding horns would hush me now and pay tribute only to the unholy baptism.

The baptism had begun. The first victim, an ancient

from their backs, to see them washed and then delivered to stand trembling along the stretch of marble balustrade.

It happened very fast.

"Cursed animals, for that is what you are, not airy demons, no!" I muttered, struggling in the grasp of the two loathsome minions. "Yes, cowardly minions, both of you, to be a party to this evil."

The music drowned out my prayers. "Dear God, send my angels to me," I said to my heart, my secret heart, "send my wrathful angels, send them with your fiery sword. God, this cannot be borne."

The Communion Rail now had its full complement of victims, naked and trembling all, and blazing with carnal human color against the luminous marble and the colorless priests.

The candles flickered on the giant Lucifer, with its great webbed wings, who presided over all.

The Lord Florian now stepped down to take the first Communicant in his hands, and lowered his lips to drink.

The drums beat fierce and sweet, and the voices twined and reached to Heaven. But there was no Heaven here beneath these branching white columns, these groined arches. There was nothing but death.

All the Court had begun to make two streams along

they wanted, and some shared, and one victim was passed from one to another, and so on it went, this mockery, this lurid, predatory Communion.
Only Ursula did not move.

The Communicants were dying. Some were already dead. None struck the floor. Their pliant dried-up limbs were captured silently and deftly by the attendant demons, and bodies were whisked away.

More victims were still being bathed. Others were taken to the Rail. On it went.

The Lord Florian drank again and again, one child after another put before him, his slender fingers capturing the small neck and holding it as he bent his lips.
I wonder what Latin words he dared to speak.

Slowly the members of the Court slipped out of the Sanctuary, moving down the side aisles again to pivot and take their old stance. They had had their fill.

All through the room the color of blood infused once pallid faces, and it seemed to my misted vision, to my head so full of the loveliness of song, that they all were human now, human for this little while.

"Yes," said Florian, his voice arching out soft and sure to my ears over the length of the nave. "Human now for this one instant, with the blood of the living, incarnated again, we are, young prince. You have understood it."

'Ah, but Lord," I said, in my exhausted whisper, "I do not forgive it."

An interval of silence fell. Then the tenors declared:

"It is time, and the midnight hour is not finished."

The sure and tight hands in which I was held focused me now to the side. I was spirited out of the choir loft and down the winding screw stairs of white marble.

As I came to myself, still supported, staring up the center aisle, I saw that only the baptistry fount remained. All victims were gone.

But a great cross had been brought into the hall. It had been positioned upside down, to one side of the altar, and forward, at the Communion Rail.

The Lord Florian held up for me to see five huge iron nails in his hand, and beckoned for me to come.

The cross was anchored into place, as though it had often been brought to this spot. It was made of rich hardwood, thick, heavy and polished smooth, though it bore the marks of other nails, and no doubt the stains of other blood.

The very bottom of it fitted right at the Railing itself against the marble banister, so that he who was to be crucified would be three feet above the floor and visible to all the worshippers.

"The worshippers, you filthy lot!" I laughed. Thank God and all his angels that the eyes of my father and mother were filled with celestial light and could see nothing of this crude degradation.

The Elder revealed to me in his outstretched hands two golden goblets.

grew immense behind the glittering pontifical figure of Florian. My feet did not touch the marble. All around me the members of the Court turned to attend my progress, but never so much that their eyes were not upon their Lord.

Before the baptismal fount my face was washed.

I tossed my head, twisting my neck, throwing the water impudently on those who tried to bathe me. The acolytes were in fear of me. They approached and reached hesitantly for my buckles.

"Strip him," said the Lord, and once again he held up the nails for me to see.

"I see well enough, my cowardly Lord," I said. "It is nothing to crucify a boy such as me. Save your soul, Lord, do that! And all your Court will wonder."

The music swelled from the loft above. The chorus came again, answering and underscoring the anthem of the tenors.

There were no words for me now; there was only candlelight and the knowledge that my clothes were about to be taken from me, and that this horror would take place, this evil inverted crucifixion, never sanctified by St. Peter himself, for the inverted cross not now to be a symbol of the Evil One.

immense long red veil that hung to her feet, and threw it out so that it descended like a cloud of red around her. Beside her, an acolyte appeared with my very sword in his hand, and my daggers.

Once again the tenor voices implored:

"One soul released to go forth into the world, mad, and bearing witness only to the most patient ears to the power of Satan."

The chorus sang, a riot of melody erupting from them, and it seemed a swift affirmation had overtaken their song.

"What, not to die!" I said. I strained to see the face of the Lord in whose hands all of this rested. But he was blocked from my view.

Godric the Elder had come between. Opening the gate of the marble Communion Rail with his knee, he moved down the aisle towards me. He thrust one of his golden cups to my lips.

"Drink and forget, Vittorio, else we lose her heart and her soul."

down my throat. I saw my sword lifted before my closing eyes as if it were a cross, the long hilt, the handles.

Soft mocking laughter rose and blended with the magical and indescribable beauty of the choir.

Her red veil swirled about me. I saw the red fabric rise up in front of me. I felt it come down around me like a spellbinding shower, full of her perfume, soft with her tenderness.

"Ursula, come with me ..." I whispered.

Those were my last words.

"Cast out," cried the swelling voices above. "Cast out. . ." cried the huge choir, and it seemed the Court sang with the chorus, "Cast out," and my eyes closed as the red fabric covered my face, as it came down like a witch's web over my struggling fingers and sealed itself over my open mouth.

The horns blared forth the truth. "Forgiven! Cast out!" sang the voices.

"Cast out to madness," whispered Godric in my

their words, its delirious hymn growing ever more tremendous in my half-slumber.

(A fool to wander the world in contempt," said Godric.

Blinded, sealed in the softness of the veil, intoxicated by the drink, I could not answer them. I think I smiled. Their words were too senselessly mingled with the sumptuous soothing voices of the choir. And fools that they were, they had never known that what they said simply had not mattered.

'And you could have been our young prince." Was it Florian at my side? Cool, dauntless Florian. "We could have loved you as she loves you."

"A young prince," said Godric, "to rule here with us forever."

tormented painter, his apprentices would know me. He would not, but the helpers who had seen me weep that day at his work. And then, then, these men would take me to the house of Cosimo in the Via del Largo.

"Fee, fee?" they said. They repeated my clumsy attempts at speech. I had failed again.

I started towards the workshop. I staggered and almost fell. These were honest men. I had the heavy bags over my right shoulder, and my sword was clanking against me, practically throwing me off balance. The

care for him."

"No, no, no, I need to talk to Cosimo!" I shouted. Again, they shrugged and shook their heads.

Suddenly I stopped. I rocked and steadied myself by rudely grabbing hold of the younger man's shoulder. I stared at the distant workshop.

The street was no more than an alleyway here, barely sufficient for horses to pass and for the pedestrians not to be injured, and the stone facades all but closed out the slate-gray sky above. Windows were opened, and it seemed that a woman could reach across upstairs and touch the house opposite her.

I knew the rolled curls of the one, whose head was crowned with a wreath of small perfectly matched flowerlets, his loose mantle crimson, his undergarment a bright clear sky blue trimmed in gold.

And the other, I knew him as well, knew his bare head and soft shorter hair, and his golden collar, and the insignia on his mantle, and the thick bands of ornament on his wrists.

But above all I knew their faces, their innocent pink-tinged faces, their serene full yet narrow eyes.

The light melted down, somber and stormy still, though the sun was burning up there behind the gray sky. My eyes began to water.

"Look at their wings," I whispered.

panels, the yawning mouth beyond which the work was carried out.

The other angel shook his head somberly. "I don't go along with it," he said in the most serene and lilting voice. "We can't go that far. Do you think this doesn't make me weep?"

"What?" I cried out. "What makes you weep?"

Both angels turned. They stared at me. In unison, they collected their dark, multicolored and spectacled wings close to themselves, as though they meant to shrink thereby into invisibility, but they were no less visible to me, shining, both so fair, so recognizable. Their eyes were full of wonder as they gazed at me. Wonder at the sight of me?

"Gabriel!" I cried out. I pointed, "I know you, I know you from the Annunciation. You are both Gabriel, I know the paintings, I have seen you, Gabriel and

appeared light, near translucent, as though the fabric were not of a natural weave any more than their incandescent skin was natural. All of their makeup was more rarefied, and fine-woven with light.

Beings of air, of purpose, made up of presence and of what they do—were these the words of Aquinas coming back to me, the Summa Theologica on which I had learnt my Latin?

Oh, how miraculously beautiful they were, and so safely apart from all around them, standing transfixed in the street in their quiet wide-eyed simplicity, pondering as they gazed with compassion and interest at me.

One of them, the one crowned with flowers, the one who wore the sky-blue sleeves, the one who had so caught my heart when I had seen him in the Annunciation with my father, the one with whom I had fallen in love, moved towards me.

He became larger as he drew closer, taller, slightly larger all over than an ordinary being, and so full of love in the soundless shuffle of his loose

Florentine street, oblivious to the men who could not see him as he stood now so close to me, letting his wings spread out and then folding them again tight, so that I only saw the high feathered bones of them above his shoulders, which were sloped like those of a young boy

His face was brilliantly clean and flushed with all the radiant color Fra Filippo had painted. When he smiled, I felt my entire body tremble violently with unadulterated joy

"Is this my madness, Archangel?" I asked. "Is this their curse come true, that I shall see this as I gibber and incur the scorn of learned men?" I laughed out loud.

I startled the gentlemen who had been trying so much to help me. They were thoroughly flustered. "What? Speak again?"

But in a shimmering instant, a memory descended upon me, illuminating my heart and soul and mind all in one stroke, as though the sun itself had flooded a dark and hopeless cell.

"It was you I saw in the meadow, you I saw when she drank my blood."

Into my eyes he looked, this cool collected angel, with the rows and rows of immaculate blond curls and the smooth placid cheeks.

"They can't see us," said the angel to me simply. Again came his smooth easy smile. His eyes caught the light falling from the brightening sky as he peered into me, as if he would see deeper with every moment of his study

"I know/' I answered. "They don't know!"

"But I am not Gabriel, you must not call me that," he said very courteously and soothingly. "My young one, I am very far from being the Archangel Gabriel. I am Setheus, and I'm a guardian angel only." He was so patient with me, so patient with my crying and with the collection of blind and concerned mortals around us.

He stood close enough for me to touch, but I didn't dare.

"My guardian angel?" I asked. "Is it true?"

"No," said the angel. "I am not your guardian angel. Those you must somehow find for yourself. You've seen the guardian angels of another, though why and how I don't know."

"Don't pray now," said the old man crankily. "Tell us who you are, boy. You said a name before, your father, tell us."

The other angel, who stood as if too shocked to move, suddenly broke his reserve and he too came forward in the same silent barefooted style, as though the roughened stones and the wet and dirt could not

'And you, you are in the other painting, I know you too, I love you with my whole heart," I said.

"Son, to whom are you speaking?" demanded the younger man. "Whom do you love with your whole heart?"

"Ah, you can hear me?" I turned to the man. "You can understand me."

"Yes, now tell me your name."

"Vittorio di Raniari," I said, "friend and ally of the Medici, son of Lorenzo di Raniari, Castello Raniari in the north of Tuscany, and my father is dead, and all my kinsmen. But—."

The two angels stood right before me, together, one head inclined towards the other as they regarded me, and it seemed that the mortals, for all their blindness, could not block the path of the angels' vision or come between me and them. If only I had the courage. I so wanted to touch them.

The wings of the one who'd spoken first were rising, and it seemed a soft shimmer of gold dust fell from the awakening feathers, the quivering, sparkling feathers, but nothing rivaled the angel's meditative and wondering face.

"Let them take you to San Marco," said this angel, the one named Setheus, "let them take you. These men mean well, and you will be put in a cell and cared for by the monks. You cannot be in a finer place, for this is a house under Cosimo's patronage, and you know that Fra Giovanni has decorated the very cell in which you'll stay."

angel with the simplest shrug, looking wonder-ingly at his companion. Nothing characterized their faces so much as subdued wonder.

"But you," I said, "Setheus, may I call you by name, you'll let them take me away from you? You can't. Please don't leave me. I beg you. Don't leave me."

"We have to leave you," said the other angel. "We are not your guardians. Why can't you see your own angels?"

"Wait, I know your name. I can hear it."

"No," said this more disapproving angel, waving his finger at me as if correcting a child.

But I would not be stopped. "I know your name. I heard it when you were arguing, and I hear it now when I look at your face. Ramiel, that's your name. And both of you are Fra Filippo's guardians."

"This is a disaster," whispered Ramiel, with the most touching look of distress. "How did this occur?"

Setheus merely shook his head, and smiled again generously. "It has to be for the good, it must be. We have to go with him. Of course we do."

"Now? Leave now?" demanded Ramiel, and again, for all the urgency, there was no anger. It was as though the thoughts were purified of all lower emotions, and of course it was so, it was perfectly so.

Setheus leaned close to the old man, who couldn't of course either see him or hear him, and he said in the old man's ear:

"Take the boy to San Marco; have him put in a

our charge; how can we do such a thing without permission?"

"It's meant to be. This is permission. I know that it is," said Setheus. "Don't you see what's happened? He's seen us and he's heard us and he's caught your name, and he would have caught mine if I hadn't revealed it. Poor Vittorio, we are with you."

I nodded, almost ready to weep at the sound of myself addressed. The whole street had gone drab and hushed and indistinct around their large, quiet and flushed figures, the finespun light of their garments stirring about them as if the celestial fabric were subject to the invisible currents of the air which men cannot feel.

"Those are not our real names!" said Ramiel scoldingly to me, but gently, as one would scold an infant.

Setheus smiled. "They are good enough names by which to call us, Vittorio," he said.

"Yes, take him to San Marco," said the man beside me. "Let's go. Let the monks handle all this."

The men rushed me towards the mouth of the street.

"You'll be very well cared for at San Marco," said Ramiel, as though he were bidding me farewell, but the two angels were moving beside us, and only falling a little behind.

our pace.
'All right/' said Setheus. "Don't worry so, Vittorio. We're coming."
"We can't simply leave our charge like this for another man, we can't do it," Ramiel continued to protest.
"It's God's will; how can it be otherwise?"
'And Mastema? We don't have to ask Mastema?" asked Ramiel.
"Why should we ask Mastema? Why bring care to Mastema? Mastema must know."
And there they were, arguing again, behind us, as I was hurried through the street.
The steel sky gleamed, then grew pale and gave way above to blue as we came to an open piazza. The sun shocked me, and made me sicken, yet how I wanted it, how I longed for it, and yet it rebuked me and seemed to scourge me as if it were a whip.
We were only a little ways from San Marco. My legs would soon give out. I kept looking over my shoulder.
The two lustrous, gilded figures came on, silently, with Setheus gesturing for me to go along.
"We're here, we're with you," said Setheus.
"I don't know about this, I don't know!" said Ramiel. "Filippo has never been in such trouble, he

said the old man, shaking his head as he escorted me along, the young madman in his charge with the clanking sword.

"My boy, be quiet now," said the other man, who took the larger burden of supporting me. "We can understand you only too well now, and you are making less sense than ever, talking to people that no one can see and hear."

"Fra Filippo, the painter, what's happening with him?" I demanded. "There's some trouble."

"Oh, it is unbearable," said the angel Ramiel behind me. "It is unthinkable that this should happen. And if you ask me, which no one has and no one will, I believe that if Florence were not at war with Venice, Cosimo de' Medici would protect his painter from this."

"But protect him from what?" I demanded. I looked into the eyes of the old man.

"Son, obey me," said the old man. "Walk straight, and stop banging me with that sword. You are a great Signore, I can see this, and the name of

to the great painter?"

I turned, and the two angels suddenly covered their faces, as tenderly as ever Ursula had covered hers, and they started weeping. Only their tears were marvelously crystalline and clear. They merely looked at me. Oh, Ursula, I thought with excruciating pain suddenly, how beautiful are these creatures, and in what grave do you sleep beneath the Court of the Ruby Grail that you cannot see them, cannot see their silent secret progress through the city streets?

"It's true," said Ramiel. "It's all too terribly true. What have we been, what sort of guardians, that Filippo has gotten himself into this trouble, that he is so contentious and deceiving, and why have we been so helpless?"

"We are only angels," said Setheus. "Ramiel,

We had come to San Marco. We stood in the Piazza San Marco right before the doors of the monastery, which were flush with the street, as was the case with all such buildings in Florence, as if the Arno never overflowed its banks, which it did. And I was glad, oh, so glad to see this haven.

But my mind was rampant. All memories of demons and horrid murder had been swept clean from me in an instant by the horror that the artist whom I cherished most in all the world had been put on the rack like a common criminal.

"He sometimes ... well," said Ramiel, "behaves like a common ... criminal."

"He'll get out of it, he'll pay a fine," said the old

man. He rang the bell for the monks. He patted me with a long, tired, dry hand. "Now stop crying, child,

digested wine and blood.

The whole horror of the Court of the Ruby Grail seemed manifest in this moment. Hopelessness seized me, and I heard the whisper of demons in my ear, witless and scorned, and I doubted all that Td seen, all that I was, all that had transpired only moments before. In a dreamy woodland, my father

and I rode together and we talked of Filippo's paintings, and I was a student and a young lord and had all the world before me, and the strong good smell of the horses filled my nostrils with the smell of the woods.

"Let them take you inside, and then you must sleep a natural sleep, and when you wake we'll be with you."

"Oh, but it's a horror, a story of horrors," I whispered. "Filippo never painted such horrors."

"We are not painted things," said Setheus. "What God has in store for us we will discover together, you and Ramiel and I. Now you must go inside. The monks are here. Into their care we give you, and when you wake we will be at your side/'

"Like the prayer," I whispered.

"Oh, yes, truly," Ramiel said. He raised his hand. I saw the shadow of his five fingers and then felt the silken touch of his fingers as he closed my eyes.

10

IN WHICH I CONVERSE WITH THE INNOCENT AND POWERFUL SONS OF GOD

WOULD sleep and deeply, yes, but not until much later.

certain sublime ways in which no other monastery was.

As all Florence knew, Cosimo had lavished a fortune on San Marco, maybe to make up for all the money he made by usury, for as a banker he was a taker of interest and therefore a usurer, but then so were we who had put money in his bank.

Whatever the case, Cosimo, our capo, our true leader, had loved this place and given to it many many treasures, but most of all perhaps its marvelously proportioned new buildings.

His detractors, the whiners, the ones who do nothing great, and suspect all that isn't in a state of perpetual disintegration, they said of him, "He even puts his coat of arms in the privies of the monks/'

His coat of arms, by the way, is a shield with five protuberant balls on it, the meaning of which has been

the name of God shall I say to these people in this House of God?

No sooner had that thought popped out of my sleepy head and, I fear, my drugged and sleepy mouth, than I heard Ramiel's laugh in my ear.

I tried to see if he was at my side. But I was blubbering and sick again, and dizzy, and could make out only that we had entered the most tranquil and pleasing cloister.

The sun so burnt my eyes that I couldn't thank God yet for the beauty of the square green garden in the center of this place, but I could see very starkly and sweetly the low rounded arches created by Michelozzo, arches which created gentle colorless and humble vaults over my head.

And the tranquillity achieved by the pure columns, with their small rolled Ionic capitals, all of this added to my sense of safety and peace. Proportions were always the gift of Michelozzo. He opened up things when he built them. And these wide spacious

Trying desperately not to heave up my guts again, I relaxed all my limbs as I saw this Florentine enclosure.

Down around the cloister, down around the burning hot garden, the large monk, a bear of a man, beaming down at me in habitual and inveterate kindness, carried me in his burly arms, while there came others in their flowing black and white robes, with thin radiant faces seeming to encircle us even in our rapid progress. I couldn't see my angels.

But these men were the nearest to angels that the world provides.

I soon realized—due to my former visits to this great place—that I was not being taken to the hospice, where drugs were dispensed to the sick of Florence, or to the pilgrims' refuge, which was always swarming with those who come to offer and pray, but up the stairs into the very hall of the monks' cells.

In a glaze of sickness in which beauty brought a catch in my throat, I saw at the head of the stairway, spread out on the wall, the fresco of Fra Giovanni's Annunciation.

My painting, the Annunciation! My chosen favorite, the painting which meant more to me than any other

thought. Try not to remember her soft fingers being pulled loose from you, you fool, you drunken fool, try not to remember her lips and the long thick kisslet of blood slipping into your own open mouth.

"Look at it!" I cried out. I pointed one flopping arm towards the painting.

"Yes, yes, we have so many/' said the big smiling bear of a monk.

Fra Giovanni was of course the painter. Who could have not seen it in one glance? Besides, I knew it. And Fra Giovanni—let me remind you one more time that this is Fra Angelico of the ages— had made a severe, soothing, tender but utterly simple Angel and Virgin, steeped in humility and devoid of embellishments, the visitation itself taking place between low rounded arches such as made up the very cloister from which we had just come.

As the big monk swung me around to take me down the broad corridor—and broad it was, and so polished and austere and beautiful to me—I tried to form words as I carried the image of the angel in my mind.

I wanted to tell Ramiel and Setheus, if they were still with me, that look, Gabriel's wings had only simple stripes of color, and look, how his gown fell in symmetrical and disciplined folds. All of this I

saw them in the street and in the paintings. But you see in the painting by Fra Giovanni, the halo is flat and surrounds the painted face, a disk hard and golden right on the field of the painting

The monks laughed. "To whom are you speaking, young Signore Vittorio di Raniari?" one of them asked me.

"Be quiet, child," said the big monk, his booming bass voice pushing against me through his barrel of a chest. "You're in our tender care. And you must hush now, see, there, that's the library, you see our monks at work?"

They were proud of it, weren't they? Even in our progress when I might have vomited all over the immaculate floor, the monk turned to let me see through the open door the long room crowded with books and monks at work, but what I saw too was Michelozzo's vaulted ceiling, again, not soaring to leave us, but bending gently over the heads of the monks and letting a volume of light and air rise above them.

It seemed I saw visions. I saw multiple and triple figures where there should only be one, and even in a flash a misty confusion of angelic wings, and oval faces turned, peering at me through the veil of supernatural secrecy.

"Do you see?" was all I could say. I had to get to that library, I had to find texts in it that defined the demons. Yes, I had not given up! Oh, no, I was no babbling idiot. I had God's very own angels at my assistance. I'd take Ramiel and Setheus in there and

We know, Vittorio, wipe the pictures from your mind, for we see them.
"Where are you?" I cried out.
"Quiet," said the monks.
"But will you help me go back there and kill them?"
"You're babbling," said the monks.
Cosimo was the guardian patron of that library. When old Niccolo de' Niccoli died, a marvelous collector of books with whom I had many times spoken at Vaspasiano's bookshop, all of his religious books, and maybe more, had been donated by Cosimo to this monastery.
I would find them in there, in that library, and find proof in St. Augustine or Aquinas of the devils with which I'd fought.
No. I was not mad. I had not given up. I was no gibbering idiot. If only the sun coming in the high little windows of this airy place would stop baking my eyeballs and burning my hands.
"Quiet, quiet," said the big monk, smiling still. "You are making noises like an infant. Hhhhh. Burgle, gurgle. Hear? Now, look, the library's busy. It's open to the public today. Everybody is busy today."
He turned only a few steps past the library to take me into a cell. "Down there . . ." he went on, as if cajoling an unruly baby. "Only a few steps away is the Prior's cell, and guess who is there this very minute? It's the Archbishop."
"Antonino," I whispered.
"Yes, yes, you said it right. Once our own Antonino. Well, he's here, and guess why?"

smoothed back my hair.

This was a clean large cell. Oh, if the sun would only stop. What had those demons done to me, made me into a half-demon? Dare I ask for a mirror?

Set down on a thick soft bed, in this warm, clean place, I lost all control of my limbs. I was sick again.

The monks attended me with a silver basin. The sunlight pierced brilliantly upon a fresco, but I couldn't bear to look at the gleaming figures, not in this hurtful illumination. It seemed the cell was filled with other figures. Were they angels? I saw transparent beings, drifting, stirring, but I could catch hold of no clear outline. Only the fresco burned into the wall in its colors seemed solid, valid, true.

"Have they done this to my eyes forever?" I asked. I thought I caught a glimpse of an angelic form in the doorway of the cell, but it was not the figure of either Setheus or Ramiel. Did it have webbed wings? Demon wings? I started in terror.

But it was gone. Rustling, whispering. We know.

"Where are my angels?" I asked. I cried. I told out the names of my father and his father, and of all the di Raniari whom I could remember.

"Shhhhh," said the young monk. "Cosimo has been told that you are here. But this is a terrible day. We remember your father. Now let us remove these filthy clothes."

fount? No. I saw the fresco, the holy figures, dimly, and more immediately the real live monks who surrounded me on their knees on the stone, their big sleeves rolled back as they washed me in the warm, sweet-scented water.

"Ah, that Francesco Sforza . . ." they spoke in Latin to one another. "To charge into Milan and take possession of the Dukedom! As if Cosimo did not have enough trouble, without Sforza having done such a thing/'

"He did it? He has taken Milan?" I asked.

"What did you say? Yes, son, he has. He broke the peace. And your family, all your poor family murdered by the freebooters; don't think they'll go unpunished, rampaging through that country, those damned Venetians ..."

"No, you mustn't, you must tell Cosimo. It was not an act of war, what happened to my family, not by human beings ..."

"Hush, child."

Chaste hands sponged the water over my shoulders. I sat slumped against the warm metal back of the tub.

danger had passed.
"I am not mad!" I said clearly
"No, not at all, only grief-stricken."
"You understand me!"
"You are tired."
"The bed is soft for you, brought specially for you, hush, don't rave anymore."
"Demons did it," I whispered. "They weren't soldiers."
"I know, son, I know. War is terrible. War is the Devil's work."
No, but it wasn't war. Will you listen to me?
Hush, this is Ramiel at your ear; didn't I tell you to sleep? Will you listen to us? We have heard your thoughts as well as your words!
I lay down on the bed flat on my chest. The monks brushed and dried my hair. My hair was so long now. Unkempt, country Lord hair. But this was an immense comfort to be bathed and gentlemanly clean.

robes. His hands were so clean. "You are in a special cell. Cosimo has sent men to bury your dead."
"Thanks be to God," I said.
"Yes."
So now I could speak!
"They are still talking down there, and it's late," said the monk. "Cosimo is troubled. He'll stay the night here. The whole city is filled with Venetian agitators stirring up the populace against Cosimo."
"Now hush," said another monk who appeared suddenly. He bent down and lifted my head to place another thick pillow beneath it.
What bliss this was. I thought of the damned ones imprisoned in the coop. "Oh, horrors! It's night, and they're waiting for the horrible Communion."

The thin monk with the remarkably scrubbed hands knelt by me. He smoothed my forehead. 'And the beautiful sister, the sister who was to be married, is she too ... ?"

"Bartola! She was to be married? I didn't know. Well, he can have her head for a maidenhead." I wept. "The worms are at work in the dark. And the demons dance on the hill, and the town does nothing."

"What town?"

"You're raving again," said a monk who stood beyond the candles. How distinct he looked,

A strange thought came to me. It rung in my consciousness with the clarity of a golden bell. I myself possessed no guardian angels! My angels had left me; they had departed, because my soul was damned.

I had no angels. I had seen Filippo's because of the power the demons had given me, and because of something else. Filippo's angels argued so much with each other! That's how I had seen them. Some words came to me.

They came back to me from Aquinas, or was it

painting of different incidents, in sequence, and above, Christ was standing in His same smooth and multiwrinkled pink robes, but here He was agitated, as agitated as Fra Giovanni could make Him, and Christ had lifted His left hand, as if in wrath.
The figure who fled from Him was the Devil! It

was a horrid creature with the webbed wings I thought Td glimpsed earlier, and it had hideous webbed feet. It had dewclaws on its webbed feet. Sour-faced and in a dirty gray robe, it fled from Christ, who stood firm in the Desert, refusing to be tempted, and, only after this confrontation, then had the ministering angels

unnatural. To what can I compare it? It was not foul like urine; it was like water that is full of minerals and metal and will leave a chalk on you and choke you. It was bad!

I put it aside. Very well then. Time to study. Time to take up the candles, which I now did.

I went out of the cell. The hall was empty and glowing in the pale light that came from tiny windows over the low-ceilinged cells.

I turned to my right and approached the doors of the library. They were unlocked.

I entered with my candelabra. Once again, the tranquillity of Michelozzo's design brought a warmth to me, a faith in all things, a trust. Two rows of arches and Ionic columns moved down the center of the

stand here forever, dreaming, near to things of the mind, and things of the soul, and far away in memory from the wretched enchained town on its cursed mountain and the castle nearby, which at this very moment probably gave forth its ghastly, ugly light.

Could I discern the order of this wealth of books?

The very cataloger of this library, the very monk who had done the work here, the very scholar, was now the Pope of all Christendom, Nicholas V

I moved along the shelves to my right, holding high

had thought it so very fascinating and funny and so much poppycock. Oh, what a fool Td been.

I took down the hefty fat volume, number nine of the text, slipping it into the crook of my arm, moved to the first desk and then carefully placed the candelabra in front of me, where it would light me but throw no shadows under my fingers, and I opened the book.

"It's all here!" I whispered. "Tell me, St. Augustine, what were they so that I may convince Ramiel and Setheus that they must help me, or give me the means to convince these modern Florentines, who care about nothing right now but making war with paid soldiers on the Serene Republic of Venice up north. Help me, Saint. I'm telling you."

Ah, Chapter Ten, of Volume Nine, I knew this . ..

lived there with them forever. Evil, evil. Well, this is proof, and I have it here, and I can show it to the monks!"

I read on, skimming to find the kernels that would make my case grow. Down to Chapter Eleven:

Apuleius says also that the souls of men are demons. On leaving human bodies they become lares if they have shown themselves good, if evil, lemures or larvae.

"Yes, lemures. I know this word. Lemures or larvae, and Ursula, she said to me that she had been young, young as me; they were all human and now they are lemures/'

According to Apuleius, larvae are malignant demons created out of men.

I was overcome with excitement. I needed parchment and pens. I had to note the place. I had to mark down what I had discovered and go on. For the next point was obviously to convince Ramiel and Setheus that they had gotten into the biggest—.

My thoughts were brought to an abrupt halt.

Behind me, a personage had come into the library. I heard a heavy footfall, but there was a muffled quality to it, and a great darkening occurred behind

I turned slowly and looked over my shoulder.

'And why do you choose the left?" asked this personage.

He rose up before me, immense and winged, peering down at me, his face luminous in the flicker of the candles, his eyebrows gently raised but straight so that there was no arch to them to make them anything but severe. He had the riotous golden hair of Fra Filippo's brush, curling beneath a huge red battle helmet, and behind him his wings were heavily sheathed in gold.

He wore a suit of armor, with the breastplates decorated and the shoulders covered with immense buckles, and around his waist was a blue sash of silk. His sword was sheathed, and on one lax arm he wore his shield, with its red cross.

I had never seen his like.

"I need you!" I declared. I stood up, knocking the bench back. I reached out so that it would not clatter to the floor. I faced him.

"You need me!" he said in muted outrage. "You do! You who would lead off Ramiel and Setheus from Fra Filippo Lippi. You need me? Do you know who I am?"

It was a gorgeous voice, rich, silken, violent and piercing though deep.

"You have a sword," I said.

"Oh, and for what?"

have gleaned from your feverish mind. Of course I know. You need me, you say, and Fra Filippo Lippi lies in bed with a whore who licks his aching joints, and one in particular that aches for her!"
"Such talk from an angel," I said.
"Don't mock me, I'll slap you," he said. His wings rose and fell as if he were sighing with them, or gasping rather, at me in umbrage.
"So do it!" I said. My eyes were feasting fiendishly on his glistering beauty, on the red silk cloak that was clasped just below the bit of tunic that showed above his armor, at the solemn smoothness of his cheeks. "But come with me to the mountains and kill them," I implored him.
"Why don't you go yourself and do it?"
"Do you think I can?" I demanded.
His face went serene. His lower lip gave the smallest most thoughtful pout. His jaw and neck were powerful, more powerful by far than the anatomy of Ramiel or Setheus, who seemed more youths, and this their splendid elder brother.
"You are not the Fallen One, are you?" I asked.
"How dare you!" he whispered, waking from his slumber. A terrible frown broke over him.
"Mastema, then, that's who you are. They said your name. Mastema."
He nodded and sneered. "They would, of course, say my name."
"Which means what, great angel? That I can call on you, that I have the power to command you?" I turned

"Put down that book!" he said impatiently yet coolly. "There is an angel standing before you, boy; look at me when I speak to you!"

(Ah, you speak like Florian, the demon in that far castle. You have the same control, the same modulation. What do you want of me, angel? Why did you come?"

He was silent, as if he couldn't produce an answer. Then, quietly, he put a question to me. "Why do you think?"

"Because I prayed?"

"Yes," he said coldly. "Yes! And because they have come to me on your account."

My eyes widened. I felt light fill them up. But the light didn't hurt them. A soft cluster of sweet noises filled my ears.

On either side of him there appeared Ramiel and Setheus, their milder, gentler faces focused on me.

Mastema raised his eyebrows again as he looked down at me.

"Fra Filippo Lippi is drunk," he said. "When he wakes up, he'll get drunk again until the pain stops."

"Fools to rack a great painter," I said, "but then you know my thoughts on that."

'Ah, and the thoughts of all the women in Florence," said Mastema. 'And the thoughts of the great ones who pay for his paintings, if their minds were not on war."

"Yes," said Ramiel, glancing imploringly to Mastema. They were of the same height, but Mastema

didn't turn, and Ramiel came forward some, as if to catch his eye. "If they weren't all so carried away with war."

"War is the world," said Mastema. "I asked you before, Vittorio di Raniari, do you know who I am?"

I was shaken, not by the question, but that the three had now come together, and that I stood before them, the only mortal being, and all the mortal world around us seemed to sleep.

Why had no monk come down the passage to see who whispered in the library? Why had no Watchman of the night come to see why the candles floated along the passage? Why the boy murmured and raved?
Was I mad?

It seemed to me quite suddenly and ludicrously that if I answered Mastema correctly, I would not be mad.

This thought brought from him a small laugh, neither harsh nor sweet.

Setheus stared at me with his obvious sympathy. Ramiel said nothing but looked again to Mastema.

"You are the angel," I said, "whom the Lord gives permission to wield that sword." There came no response from him. I went on. "You are the angel who slew the firstborn of Egypt," I said. No response. "You are the angel, the angel who can avenge."

He nodded, but only really with his eyes. They closed and then opened.

"God has given me no leave to punish these demons of yours. Never has God said to me, 'Mastema, slay the vampires, the lemures, the larvae, the blood drinkers/ Never has God spoken to me and said, 'Lift your mighty sword to cleanse the world of these/ "

"I beg you," I said. "I, a mortal boy, beg you. Kill these, wipe out this nest with your sword."

"I can't do it."

"Mastema, you can!" declared Setheus.

Ramiel spoke up. "If he says he cannot, he cannot! Why do you never listen to him?"

"Because I know that he can be moved," said Setheus without hesitation to his compatriot. "I know that he can, as God can be moved."

Setheus stepped boldly in front of Mastema.

"Pick up the book, Vittorio," he said. He stepped forward. At once the large vellum pages, heavy as they were, began to flutter. He put it in my hand, and marked the place with his pale finger, barely touching the thick black crowded writing.

I read aloud:

And therefore God who made the visible marvels of Heaven and Earth does not disdain to work visible miracles in Heaven and Earth, by which

from me to guard it from my tears.

A noise had penetrated our small circle. Monks had come. I heard them whispering in the corridor, and then the door swung open. Into the library they came.

I cried, and when I looked up I saw them staring at me, two monks whom I didn't know or didn't remember, had never known.

"What is it, young man? Why are you here alone crying?" the first spoke.

"Here, let us take you back to bed. We'll bring you something to eat/'

"No, I can't eat it," I said.

"No, he can't eat it," said the first monk to the other. "It still makes him sick. But he can rest." He looked at me.

I turned. The three radiant angels stood silently staring at the monks who could not see them, who had no clue that the angels were there!

"Dear God in Heaven, please tell me," I said.

that he must have anything he desired."
"Go on, leave him now," said Setheus softly.
"Hush," said Ramiel. "Let Mastema tell them."

I was too flooded with sorrow and happiness to respond. I covered my face, and when I did so I thought of my poor Ursula, forever with her demon Court, and how she had wept for me. "How could that be?" I whispered into my own fingers.

"Because she was human once, and has a human heart," said Mastema to me in the silence.

The two monks were hurrying out. For one moment the collection of angels was as sheer as light, and I saw through them to the two retreating figures of the monks who closed up the doors as they left.

Mastema looked at me with his still, powerful gaze.

"One could read anything into your face," I said.

those awful wretched prisoners, and you must stand before the townsmen, or let loose that crippled flock and flee."

"I understand."

"We can move the stones away from their sleeping places, can't we?" asked Setheus. He put up his hand to hush Ramiel before Ramiel could protest. "We'll have to do it."

"We can do that," said Mastema. "As we can stop a beam from falling on Filippo's head. We can do that. But we cannot slay them. And you, Vittorio, we cannot make you go through with it, either, if your nerve or your will fails."

"You don't think the miracle of my having seen you will uphold me?"

discourses of Scripture.

"Don't read those words to me; they don't help me!" I said. "Can she be saved? Can she save her soul? Does she possess it still? Is she as powerful as you are? Can you Fall? Can the Devil come back to God?"

He put down the book with a swift, airy movement that I could scarcely follow.

'Are you ready for this battle?" he asked.

"They'll lie helpless in the light of day," said Setheus to me. "Including her. She too will lie

endow them with color or splendor or individuality, and they had no garments or motion to them or anything that I could love.

"What is it? Why won't they speak to me? Why do they look at me that way?"

"They know you," said Ramiel.

"You're full of vengeance, and desire," said Setheus. "They know it; they have been at your side. They have measured your pain and your anger."

"Good God, these demons killed my family!" I declared. "Do you know the future of my soul, any of you?"

"Of course not," said Mastema. "Why would we be here if we did? Why would any of us be here if it were ordained?"

again that I would do it, yes, I would do it, I would do it.

'At dawn," said Mastema, "the monks will have fresh clothes laid out for you, a suit of red velvet,

and your weapons freshly polished, and your boots cleaned. All will be finished by then. Don't try to eat. It's too soon, and the demon blood is still churning in you. Prepare yourself, and we will take you north to do what has to be done in the light of day."

with it all of a peaceful evening long by the fire. My daggers were ready.

I climbed out of the bed and dropped down to my knees in prayer. I made the Sign of the Cross.

"God, give me the strength to send in your hands those who feed on death."
It was a whisper in Latin.

One of the monks touched me on the shoulder and smiled. Had the Great Silence not yet ended? I had no idea. He pointed to a table where there was food laid out for me—bread and milk. The milk had foam on the top of it.

I nodded and smiled at him, and then he and his companion made me a little bow and went out.

and length, but having no time to ask for a barber to cut it shorter than my shoulders. At least it was long enough, and had been for a while, to stay back over my shoulders and off my forehead. It was luxurious to have it so clean.

I dressed quickly. My boots were a little snug because they had been dried by a fire after the rain. But they felt good over the thin hose. I made right all my fastenings and positioned my sword.

The red velvet tunic was plaited along the edges with gold and silver thread, and the front of it was richly decorated with the silver fleurs-de-lys, which is the most ancient symbol of Florence. Once my belt was tightly fastened, the tunic didn't come to halfway

My angels stood before me, my very own guardians, in long flowing robes of dark blue, which appeared to be made of something lighter yet more opaque than silk. Their faces were ivory white and shimmering faintly, and their eyes were large and like opals. They had dark hair, or hair that seemed to shift as if it were made of shadows.

They stood facing me, their heads together, so that their heads touched. It was as though they were communing silently with one another.

They overwhelmed me. It seemed a terrifying intimacy that I should see them so vividly and so close to me, and know them as the two who had been with me always, or so I was to believe. They were slightly larger than human beings, as were the other angels I had seen, and they were not tempered by the sweet faces I had seen on the others, but had altogether smoother and broader countenances and larger though exquisitely shaped mouths.

"Because we are sent to do it, and will be with you until you die."

"Lovelessly?" I asked.

They shook their heads again in negation.

Gradually the light brightened in the room. I turned sharply to look up at the window. I thought it was the sun. The sun couldn't hurt me, I thought.

But it wasn't. It was Mastema, who had risen up behind me as if he were a cloud of gold, and on either side of him were my arguers, my advancers of the cause, my champions, Ramiel and Setheus.

The room shimmered and seemed to vibrate without a sound. My angels appeared to glisten, and to grow brilliantly white and deep blue in their robes. All looked to the helmeted figure of Mastema.

An immense and musical rustling filled the air, a singing sound, as if a great flock of tiny golden-throated birds had awakened and rushed upwards from the branches of their sun-filled trees.

I must have closed my eyes. I lost my balance, and the air became cooler, and it seemed my vision was

I turned and entered a dim courtyard, my breath suddenly taken from me by the height of the walls that surrounded me, climbing to the distinct cube of the bright blue sky.

Surely this was only one courtyard, the one at the entrance, for before us there loomed another immense pair of gates, quite large enough to admit the greatest haywagons imaginable or some newfangled engine of war.

The ground was soiled. High above on all sides were windows, rows upon rows of the double-arched windows, and all were covered over with bars.

"I need you now, Mastema," I said. I made the Sign of the Cross again. I took out the rosary and kissed the crucifix, looking down for a moment at the tiny twisted body of Our Tortured Christ.

The huge doors before me broke open. There was a loud creaking sound, then the crumpling of metal bolts, and the gates groaned back on their hinges, revealing a distant and sun-filled inner court of far greater size.

The walls through which we walked were some thirty to forty feet in depth. There were doors on either side of us, heavily arched in worked stone and showing the first signs of care that I had glimpsed since we entered.

Here, as I stood up, I saw windows such as I remembered, hung with rich banners and strung with lanterns that would be lighted by night. Here I saw tapestries carelessly thrown over window ledges as if rain were nothing. And very high up I saw the jagged battlements and finer white marble copings.

But even this was not the great courtyard that lay beyond. These walls too were rustic. The stones were soiled and untrodden in many a year. Water was pooled here and there. Rank weeds sprang from crevices, but, ah, there were sweet wildflowers, and I looked at them tenderly and reached out to touch them, and marveled at them, existing here.

More gates awaited us, these two—huge, wooden, banded in iron and severely pointed at the top in their deep marble archway—gave way and sprang back to let us pass through yet another wall.

Oh, such a garden greeted us!

As we made our way through another forty feet of darkness, I saw the great groves of orange trees ahead of us, and heard the cry of the birds. I wondered if they were not caught down here, prisoners, or could they soar all the way up to the top and escape?

Yes, they could. It was a great enough space. And here was the fine white marble facing I remembered, all the way to the summit, so high above.

As I made my way into the garden, as I walked on the first marble path that traversed the beds of

violets and roses, I saw the birds coming and going, circling broadly in this wide place, so that they could clear the towers that rose so distantly and majestically against the sky.

Everywhere the scent of flowers overcame me. Lilies and irises were mingled in patches, and the oranges were ripe and almost red as they hung from the trees. The lemons were hard still and touched with green. Shrubbery and vines hugged the walls.

The angels gathered around me. I realized that all along it was I who had led the way, I who had initiated any movement, and it was I who held us all still now, within the garden, and that they waited as I bowed my head.

"I am listening for the prisoners," I said. "But I can't hear them/'

I looked up at more of the luxuriously decorated balconies and windows, the twin arches, and here and there a long loggia, but made of their style of filigree, not ours.

I saw flags fluttering, and all were in that dark blood-red color, stained with death. I looked down for the first time at my own brilliant crimson clothes. "Like fresh blood?" I whispered.

"Tend to what you must do first," Mastema said. "Twilight can cover you when you go to the prisoners, but you must take your quarry now."

"Where are they? Will you tell me?"

"In deliberate sacrilege, and in old-fashioned rigor, they lie beneath the stones of the church."

"The door there, and the stairs beyond it. The church lies on the third floor, up to our left/'

I made for the door without further delay. I rushed up the steps, taking turn after turn, my boots clattering on the stone, not even looking to see if they followed me, not wondering how they did it, knowing only that they were with me, feeling their presence as if I could feel their breath on me when no breath came.

At last we entered the corridor, broad and open on our right to the courtyard below. There was an endless strip of rich carpet before us, full of Persian flowers deeply embedded within a field of midnight blue. Unfaded, untrammeled. On and on it went until it turned, ahead of us. And at the end of the corridor was the perfectly framed sky and the jagged speck of green mountain beyond.

"Why have you stopped?" Mastema asked.

They had materialized around me, in their settling garments and their never-still wings.

"This is the door to the church here, you know it."

"Only looking at the sky, Mastema," I said. "Only looking at the blue sky."

'And thinking of what?" asked one of my guardians in his toneless, clear whisper. He clung to me suddenly, and I saw his parchment-colored fingers, weightless, settled on my shoulder. "Think-

then I opened wide one side and then the other, though why I made such a vast and broad escape for myself I do not know. Maybe it was a passage for my mighty band of helpers.

The great empty nave lay before me, which last night no doubt had been crowded with the gaudy blood-drenched Court, and above my head was their choir loft from which the most ethereal dirge had come.
Sun violently pierced the demonic windows.

I gasped in shock to see the webbed spirits emblazoned so immensely in the fractured and welded fragments of glittering glass. How thick was this glass, how heavily faceted, and how ominous the expressions of those webbed-winged monsters who leered at us as if they would come alive in the blazing light of day and stop our progress.

There was nothing to be done but to rip my eyes off them, to look down and away and along the great sprawling marble floor. I saw the hook, I saw it as it had been in the floor of my father's chapel, lying flat in a circle cut in the stone, a hook

when I had been brought to this place.

I saw him and saw his fierce burning yellow eyes, fine gems set into the red marble, and saw the white ivory fangs that hung from his snarling upper lip. I saw all the fanged demons who lined the walls to the right and the left of him, and all their jeweled eyes seemed greedy and glorying in the light.

"The crypt," said Mastema.

I pulled with all my might. I couldn't budge the marble slab. No human could have done it. It would have taken teams of horses to do it. I locked both hands more tightly around the hook, yanking it harder, and still I couldn't budge it. It was like trying to move the walls themselves.

"Do it for him!" Ramiel pleaded. "Let us do it."

"It's nothing, Mastema; it's only like opening the gates."

Mastema reached out and pushed me gently

into a pit of them," said Ramiel. "Mastema, move them."
"Let me move them," said Setheus.

I drew my sword. I hacked at the first of the spears and knocked off its metal point, but the jagged wooden shaft remained.

I stepped down into the crypt, at once feeling a coldness rise and touch my legs. I hacked again at the wood, and broke off more of it. Then I stepped beside it, only to find with my left hand that I felt a pair of spears awaiting me in the uneven light. Again I lifted my sword, the weight of it making my arm ache.

me, embracing me and carrying me down in a soft plummet to the floor of the chamber.

I was at once let go. And I scrambled around in the dimness until I found my sword. I had it now.

I stood up, panting, holding it firmly, and then I looked up at the sharp distinct rectangle of brightness above. I shut my eyes, and bowed my head, and opened my eyes slowly so as to become accustomed to this deep damp dusk.

Here the castle had no doubt let the mountain rise up under it, for the chamber, though vast, seemed made of only the earth. At least this is what I saw before

I was yanked back out of the clutch of his fingers only just in time. I turned to see Ramiel holding me, and then he closed his eyes and bowed his forehead into my shoulder.
"Now you know their tricks. Watch it. You see.

It folds its arm back now. It thinks it's safe. It closes its eyes."
"What do I do! Ah, I'll kill it!" I said.
Snatching up the veil in my left hand, I raised my sword in my right. I advanced on the sleeping monster, and this time, when the hand rose, I snared it with the veil, swirling the fabric around it, while, with my sword, I came down like the executioner on the

above.
"Lucifer, you see that?" I called out. The echo

came back to taunt me, "See that? See that? See that?"

I rushed to the next. "Florian!" I cried out, as I grabbed the veil.

Terrible error.

When he heard his name, his eyes snapped open even before I had drawn abreast of him, and like a puppet yanked on a chain he would have risen if I had not struck him hard with my sword and gashed open his chest. Expressionless, he fell back. I brought the

heads languished, greasy and blackening, and the mass thickened and the ashes were only a few.

Did they suffer? Did they know? Where had their souls fled on invisible feet in this harsh and terrible moment when their Court was dissolved, when I roared in my work and stomped my feet and threw back my head and cried and cried until I couldn't see through my tears.

I had done with some twenty of them, twenty, and my sword was so thick with blood and gore that I had to wipe it clean. On their bodies, making my way back to go down the other side of the crypt, I wiped it, on one doublet after another, marveling at how their white hands had shriveled and dried up on their

their rich robes, and the two simpler, plainer, more somber souls—all of them looking at me in utter suspense. I saw Setheus look at the pile of smoldering heads, and then again at me.

"Go on, poor Vittorio," he whispered. "Hurry on."

"Could you do it?" I asked.

"I cannot."

"No, I know that you are not permitted," I said, my chest aching from the exertion and now the talk I forced from myself. "I mean could you do it? Could you bring yourself to do it!"

"I am not a creature of flesh and blood, Vittorio," Setheus answered helplessly. "But I could do what God told me to do."

I went on past them. I looked back at them in their glorious radiance, the cluster of them, and the

I could hear my heaving breaths. I let the edge of my sword drag, singing on the stones. I licked at my parched lips. I didn't dare to look at them, though I knew they were collected only a few yards from me, staring at me. And in the thick stillness, I heard the crisping and sizzling of the burning heads of the damned.

I thrust my hand inside my pocket, and I drew out the rosary of amber beads. My hand shook shamefully as I held it, and then I lifted it, letting the crucifix dangle, and I hurled it at her, so that it struck her, just above her small hands, right on the white swell of her half-bared breasts. It lay there, the crucifix nestled in the curve of her pale skin, and she didn't so much as stir.

The light clung to her eyelashes as if it were dust.

Without excuse or explanation, I turned to the next one, ripping off the veil and assaulting him or her, I

hit the floor, and with my sword I speared it through its dripping stump of a neck. "Know me, monster?" I cried again to the fluttering eyes, the gaping, drooling red mouth. "Know me?"

I walked with him to the pile of the other heads and laid him like a trophy on top of it. "Know me?" I wailed again.

And then in a fury I went back to my work.

Two more, then three, then five, then seven and then nine, and then some six more, and the Court was finished, and all its dancers and Lords and Ladies were dead.

And then, reeling to the other side, I made swift work of those poor peasant servants, who had no veils to cover their simple bodies, and whose feeble half-starved white limbs could scarce rise in defense.

"The huntsmen, where are they?"

"At the far end. It is almost dark in here. Take great care."

"I see them," I said. I drew myself up and caught my breath. They lay in a row of six, heads to the wall like all the others, but they were perilously close together. It would be a hard approach.

ripped back my sword and chopped the hand off him. "Die, bastard, you who stole me with your fellow; I remember you."

And at last I came to the final one and had his bearded head hanging from my hand.

Slowly I walked back with this one, kicking others before me, others I had not had the strength to hurl very far, and I kicked them like so much refuse until the light fell on all of them.

It was bright now. The afternoon sun was coming in the west side of the church. And the opening above gave forth a terrific and fatal heat.

Slowly I wiped my face with the back of my left hand. I laid down my sword, and I felt for the napkins the monks had put in my pockets, and I took these and cleaned my face and cleaned my hands.

Then I picked up my sword, and I went to the foot of her bier again. She lay as before. The light was nowhere near her. It could not have touched any of them where they lay.

She was safe on her bed of stone, her hands as still as before, fingers beautifully folded, the right hand over the left, and on her mound of white breast there rested the Crucified Christ in gold. Her hair

that she'd worn when I'd seen her. Only the deep rich blood red was the same, but all the rest was splendid and ornate and new, as if she were a regal princess, always prepared for the kiss of her prince.

"Could Hell receive this?" I whispered. I drew as close as I dared. I could not bear the thought of her arm rising in that mechanical fashion, the sudden clutch of her fingers on the empty air or her eyes opening. I couldn't bear it.

The points of her slippers were small beneath her hem. How daintily she must have lain down to her rest at sunrise. Who had pulled closed the trapdoor, whose chains had fallen? Who had set the trap of the spears, whose engines I had never inspected or compassed with my thoughts?

For the first time in the dimness, I saw a tiny golden circlet on her head, lying just around the crown and fixed by the tiniest pins into the waves so that its single pearl rested on her forehead. Such a small thing.

Was her soul so small? Would Hell take it, like the fire would take any tender part of her anatomy, like the sun would burn to horror her immaculate face?

In some mother's womb she had once slept and dreamt, and into some father's arms been placed.

What had been her tragedy to bring her to this foul and reeking grave, where the heads of her slain companions lay burning slowly in the sun's ever patient, ever indifferent light?

I turned on them. I held my sword down at my side.

Ramiel covered his face and turned his back on me. Setheus continued to stare but shook his head. My guardians only gazed at me with their level coldness, as they always had. Mastema stared at me, soundlessly, concealing whatever thought he possessed behind his serene mask of a face.

"No, Vittorio," he said. "Do you think a bevy of God's angels has helped you past these barriers to leave one such as these to live?"

"Mastema, she loved me. And I love her. Mastema, she gave me my life. Mastema, I ask in the name of love. I beg in the name of love. All else here has been justice. But what can I say to God if I slay this one, who has loved and whom I love?"

Nothing in his countenance changed. He only regarded me with his eternal calm. I heard a terrible sound. It was the weeping of Ramiel and Setheus. My guardians turned to look at them, as though surprised, but only mildly so, and then their dreamy soft eyes fixed again, unchanging, on me.

"Merciless angels," I said. "Oh, but such is not fair, and I know it. I lie. I lie. Forgive me."

"We forgive you," said Mastema. "But you must do what you have promised me you would do."

"Mastema, can she be saved? If she herself renounces ... can she ... is her soul still human?" No answer came from him. No answer.

"Mastema, please, tell me. Don't you see? If she can be saved, I can stay here with her, I can wring it out of her, I know I can because her heart is good.

..."

"Vittorio," came the whisper from Ramiel. 'Are your ears stopped with wax? Can you hear those prisoners starving, crying? You have not even set them free yet. Will you do it by night?"

"I can do it. I can yet do it. But can I not stay here with her, and when she finds she is all alone, that all the others have perished, that all the promises of Godric and Florian were tyranny, is there no way that she can render her soul to God?"

Mastema, without ever a change in his soft cold eyes, slowly turned his back.

"No! Don't do it, don't turn away!" I shouted. I caught hold of his powerful silk-clad arm. I felt his unsurmountable strength beneath the fabric, the strange, unnatural fabric. He gazed down at me. "Why can't you tell me!"

"For the love of God, Vittorio!" he roared suddenly, his voice filling the entire crypt. "Don't you realize? We don't know!"

He shook me loose, the better to glare down at me, his brows furrowed, his hand closing on the hilt of his sword.

to touch her, couldn't bear to touch her, and he backed away from her, shoving me away, forcing me back as he did.

I broke into weeping. The sun shifted, and the shadows began to thicken in the crypt. I turned finally. The patch of light above was now pale. It was a rich radiant gold, but it was pale.

My angels stood there, all gathered, watching me and waiting.

"I'm staying with her here," I said. "She'll wake soon. And I'll put it to her, that she pray for God's grace."

I knew it only as I said it. I understood it only as I made it plain.

"I'll stay with her. If she renounces all her sins for the love of God, then she can remain with me, and death will come, and we will not lift a hand to hasten it, and God will accept us both."

"You think you have the strength to do that?" Mastema asked. 'And you think it of her?"

from a canyon into which he's fallen."
"But it is not such a thing, and I cannot."
"Then let us stay with him," said Ramiel.
"Yes, let us stay," said my two guardians, more or less at the same time and in similar muted expressions.
"Let her see us."
"How do we know that she can?" asked Mastema. "How do we know that she will? How many times does it happen that a human being can see us?"
For the first time I saw anger in him. He looked at me.
"God has played such a game with you, Vitto-rio!" he said. "Given you such enemies and such allies!"

on the mercy of God, and that we leave this crypt and, if necessary, find the priest who could absolve her human soul of all her sins. For if she could not make a perfect confession for the love of God alone, well, then, the absolution would surely save her.

I poked around the crypt, stepping among the drying-up corpses. What light there was gleamed on dried founts of blood that ran down the sides of the stone biers.

At last I found what I had hoped to find, a great ladder that could be lifted and thrown up to the ceiling above. Only, how could I wield such a thing?

I dragged it towards the center of the crypt,

bald head of Godric, which was now black like leather with its yellowed slits of eyes, and I piled these heads where the light could not fail to continue its work on them.

Then, stumbling over the ladder, I fell on my knees at the foot of Ursula's bier.

I sank down. I would sleep this little while. No, not sleep, rest.

Not willing it, indeed, fearing it and regretting it, I felt my limbs go limp and I lay on the stone floor, and my eyes closed in a blessed restorative sleep.

How curious it was.

I had thought her scream would awaken me, that like

"Blessed Vittorio," she said. Then clasping me about the waist, she rose upwards and we passed the broken spears, without so much as touching their splintered tips, and found ourselves in the

chapel in the dusk, the windows darkened and the shadows playing gracefully but mercifully around the distant altar.

"Oh, my darling, my darling/' I said. "Do you know what the angels did? Do you know what they said?"

"Come, let's free the prisoners as you wish," she told me.

I felt so refreshed, so full of vigor. It was as if I'd suffered no exhausting labor at all, as if war hadn't worn down my limbs and broken me, as though

victims are free now. This is our time, yours and mine, come."

Her skirts went out in a great dark circle as down we flew, down and down, down past the windows, and down past the walls, until my feet were allowed to touch the soft ground.

"Oh, Lord God, it's the meadow, look, the meadow," I said. "I can see it as clearly under the rising moon as ever I saw it in my dreams."

A sudden softness filled me completely. I twined her in my arms, my fingers digging deep into her rippling hair. All the world seemed to sway about me, and yet I was anchored in dance with her, and the soft

The tiny crucifix dangled down against my neck.

"But you must do this for me, you who let me live below, you who spared me and fell asleep in my trust at the feet of my grave, you must do this..."

"What, blessed one?" I asked. "Tell me and I'll do it."

"Pray first for strength, and then into your human body, into your wholesome and baptized body, you must take all the demon blood out of me which you can, you must draw it from me, and thereby free my soul from its spell; it will be vomited forth out of you like the potions we gave you, which cannot hurt you. Will you do it for me? Will you take the poison out of me?"

I thought of the sickness, of the vomit that had

will draw off the blood as if from a cankerous wound, as if it were the corruption of a leper. Give it to me, give me the blood."

Her face was motionless above mine, so small, so dainty, so white.

"Be brave, my love, be brave, for I must make room for it first."

She nestled in against my neck, and into my flesh there came her teeth. "Be brave, only a little more to make room."

'A little more?" I whispered. 'A little more. Ah, Ursula, look up, look up at Heaven and Hell in the sky, for the stars are balls of fire suspended there by the angels."

But the language was stretched and meaningless and became an echo in my ears. A darkness shrouded me, and when I lifted my hand it seemed a golden net covered it and I could see far, far away, my fingers shrouded in the net.

The meadow was suddenly flooded with sunlight. I

She opened her mouth, and from her came the stream of blood, the deep dark kiss of blood. "Take it from me, Vittorio."

'All your sins into me, my divine child," I said. "Oh, God help me. God have mercy on me. Mastema—."

But the word was broken. My mouth was filled with the blood, and it was no rank potion mixed of parts, but that searing thrilling sweetness that she had first given me in her most secretive and perplexing kisses. Only this time it came in an overwhelming gush.

Her arms were tucked beneath me. They lifted me. The blood seemed to know no veins within but to fill my limbs themselves, to fill my shoulders and my chest, to drown and invigorate my very heart. I stared up at the twinkling playing sun, I felt her blinding and soft hair across my eyes but peered through its golden strands. My breath came in gasps.

The blood flowed down into my legs and filled them to my very toes. My body surged with strength. My organ pumped against her, and once more I felt her subtle feline weight, her sinuous limbs hugging me,

my body so full of her blood, echoed off stone walls!

The meadow was gone or never was. The twilight was a rectangle high above. I lay in the crypt.

I rose up, throwing her off, back away from me as she screamed in pain. I sprang to my feet and stared at my white hands outstretched before me.

A horrid hunger reared up in me, a fierce strength, a howl!

I stared up at the dark-purple light above and screamed.

"You've done it to me! You've made me one of you!"

She sobbed. I turned on her. She backed up, bent over, her hand over her mouth, crying and fleeing from me. I ran after her. Like a rat she ran, round and round the crypt, screaming.

"Vittorio, no, Vittorio, no, Vittorio, no, don't hurt me. Vittorio, I did this for us; Vittorio, we are free. Ah, God help me!"

And then upwards she flew, just missing my outstretched arms. She had fled to the chapel above.

"Witchlet, monster, larva, you tricked me with your illusions, with your visions, you made me one of you, you did it to me!" My roars echoed one upon the other as I scrambled about in the dark till I found my sword, and then dancing back to gain my momentum, I too made the leap and cleared the spears and found

She backed up into the bank of red flowers that barely showed in the starlight that passed through the darkened windows.

"No, Vittorio, don't kill me, don't do it. Don't," she sobbed and wailed. "I am a child, like you, please, don't."

I tore at her, and she scrambled to the end of the sanctuary. In a rage, I swung at the statue of Lucifer with my sword. It tottered and then crashed down, breaking on the marble floor of the cursed sanctuary.

She hovered at the far end. She dropped down on her knees and threw out her hands. She shook her head, her hair flying wildly from side to side.

"Don't kill me, don't kill me, don't kill me. You send me to Hell if you do; don't do it."

"Wretch!" I moaned. "Wretch!" My tears fell as freely as hers. "I thirst, you wretch. I thirst, and I can smell them, the slaves in the coop. I can smell them, their blood, damn you!"

I too had gone down on my knees. I lay down on the marble, and kicked aside the broken fragments of the hideous statue. With my sword I snagged the lace of the altar cloth and brought it down with all its many red flowers tumbling on me, so that I could roll over into them and crush my face into their softness.

A silence fell, a terrible silence full of my own wailing. I could feel my strength, feel it even in the timbre of my voice, and the arm that held the sword without exhaustion or restraint, and feel it in the painless calm with which I lay on what

Oh, she had made me mighty.

A scent overcame me. I looked up. She stood just above me, tender, loving thing that she was, with her eyes so full of the starlight now, so glinting and quiet and unjudging. In her arms she held a young human, a feeble-minded one, who did not know his danger.

How pink and succulent he was, how like the roasted pig ready for my lips, how full of naturally cooking and bubbling mortal blood and ready for me. She set him down before me.

He was naked, thin buttocks on his heels, his trembling chest very pink and his hair black and long and soft around his guileless face. He appeared to be dreaming or searching the darkness, perhaps for angels?

"Drink, my darling, drink from him," she said, "and then you'll have the strength to take us both to the Good Father for Confession."

I smiled. The desire for the feeble-minded boy before me was almost more than I could endure. But it was a whole new book now, was it not, what I might endure, and I took my time, rising up on my elbow as I looked at her.

"To the Good Father? You think that's where we'll go? Right away, just like that, the two of us?"

She began to cry again. "Not right away, no, not right away," she cried. She shook her head. Beaten.

I took him. I broke his neck when I drained him dry. He made not a sound. There was no time for fear or pain or crying.

watching for my howls and wails, and ever catching hold of me to kiss me and ply me with her sobs when I shook with rage.
"Come out of here," I said.
It was just before sunrise. I told her I would spend no day beneath these pointed towers, in this house of horrors, in this place of evil and filthy birth.
"I know of a cave/' she said. "Far down the mountains, past the farmlands/'
"Yes, somewhere on the edge of a true meadow?"
"There are meadows in this fair land without count, my love," she said. 'And under the moon their flowers shine as prettily for our magical eyes as ever they do for humans by the light of God's sun. Remember His moon is ours.
'And tomorrow night . . . before you think of the priest . . . you must take your time to think of the priest—."
"Don't make me laugh again. Show me how to fly. Wrap your arm around my waist and show me how to drop from the high walls to safety in a descent that would shatter a man's limbs. Don't talk of priests anymore. Don't mock me!"
". . . before you think of the priest, of Confession," she went on, undeterred in her dainty sweet

13

CHILD BRIDE

WE didn't put the torch to Santa Maddalana. It was too much of a pleasure I to hunt the town.

By the third night, I had stopped weeping at sunrise, when we retired together, locked in each other's arms inside our concealed and unreachable cave.

And by the third night, the townspeople knew what had befallen them—how their clever bargain with the Devil had rebounded upon them— and they were in a panic, and it was a great game to outsmart them, to hide in the multitude of shadows that made up their twisted streets, and to tear open their most extravagant and clever locks.

In the early hours, when no one dared to stir, and the good Franciscan priest knelt awake in his cell, saying his rosary, and begging God for understanding of what was happening—this priest, you remember, who had befriended me at the inn, who had dined with me and warned me, not in anger like his Dominican brother, but in kindness—while

patience and grace. I could scan a mind, find a sin and eat it with a flick of my tongue as I sucked the blood from a lazy, lying merchant who had put out his own tender children once for the mysterious Lord Florian, who had kept the peace.

One night we found that the townsmen had been by day to the abandoned castle. There was evidence of hasty entry, with little stolen or disturbed. How it must have frightened them, the horrid saints still flanking the pedestal of the Fallen Lucifer in the church. They had not taken the golden candlesticks or the old tabernacle in which I discovered, with my groping hand, a shriveled human heart.

On our last visit to the Court of the Ruby Grail, I took the burned leathery heads of the vampires from the deep cellar and I hurled them like so many stones through the stained-glass windows. The last of the brilliant art of the castle was gone.

Together, Ursula and I roamed the bedchambers of the castle, which I had never glimpsed or

The game became ever more invigorating to me. For now, those who remained were quarrelsome and avaricious and refusing to give up without a fight. It was simple to sort the innocent, who believed in the faith of the vigil light or the saints to protect them, from those who had played with the Devil and now kept an uneasy watch in the dark with sword in hand.

I liked to talk to them, spar with them verbally, as I killed them. "Did you think your game would go on forever? Did you think the thing you fed would never feed on you?"

As for my Ursula, she had no stomach for such sport. She could not endure the spectacle of suffering. The old Communion of Blood in the castle

lighted room at night, playing a game of cards with himself, as if he did not even now guess what was going on.

On the fifteenth night, it must have been, when we arrived in the town, we knew at once that only two persons were left. We could hear the little old man singing to himself in the empty Inn with the doors open. He was very drunk, and his wet pink head gleamed in the light of the candle. He slapped the cards down on the table in a circle, playing a game of solitaire called "clock."

The Franciscan priest sat beside him. He looked

up at us, fearlessly and calmly, as we came into the Inn.

I was overcome with hunger, ravening hunger, for the blood in them both.

Ursula looked at me in confusion. She didn't know what was in my mind. I had never witnessed her speaking to any human being except for me myself and for the children with whom she'd played—in other words, only with those for whom her heart had quickened and whom she did not mean to destroy.

What she thought of the little man and his son, the Franciscan priest, I couldn't guess.

The old man was winning the card game. "There, you see, I told you. Our luck!" he said. He gathered up his greasy loose cards to shuffle them and to play again.

The priest looked at him with glazed eyes, as

as we are, and you have seen us. You have seen hellish things; you have seen sloth and treachery,

cowardice and deceit. You see devils now, vampires. Well, I want you to know that with my own eyes I saw angels, true angels, magnificent angels, and that they were more glorious than I can ever tell you in words/'

He regarded me thoughtfully for a long time, and then he looked at Ursula, who sat troubled and looking up at me, rather afraid that I would unduly suffer, and then he said:

"Why did you fail them? Why did they come with you in the first place, and if you had the aid of angels,

another card. "What separates them now from a good Confession is weakness and the fear of Hell if they must give up their lives."
The priest stared at his father in amazement.
So did I.

Ursula said nothing. Then she kissed me on the cheek. "Let's leave them now," she whispered. "There is no more Santa Maddalana. Let's go."

I looked up, around the darkened room of the Inn. I looked at the old barrels. I looked in haunted perplexity and appalling sorrow at all things that humans used and touched. I looked at the heavy hands of the priest, folded on the table before me. I looked at the hair on his hands, and then up at his thick

child bride." She looked at the priest with renewed animation. "I was, you know. They came to my father's castle and purchased me as such, they said that I must be a virgin, and the midwives came and brought their basin of warm water, and they examined me and they said I was a virgin, and only then did Florian take me. I was his bride."

The priest stared fixedly at her, as if he could not move if he wanted to move, and the old man merely glanced up again and again, cheerfully, nodding as he listened to her, and went on playing with his cards.

"Can you imagine my horror?" she asked them. She looked at me, tossing her hair back over her shoulder. It was in its ripples again from the plaits in which she'd had it bound earlier. "Can you imagine when I climbed onto the couch and I saw who was my bridegroom, this white thing, this dead thing, such as we look to you?"

silk, and all this he tore from me, and took me first with his lifeless, seedless stone-hard organ and then with his fang teeth, like these very teeth which I have now. Oh, such a wedding, and my father had given me over for this."
The tears coursed down the priest's cheeks.
I stared at her, transfixed with sorrow and rage, rage against a demon I had already slaughtered, a rage that I hoped could reach down through the smoldering coals of Hell and find him with fingers like hot tongs.
I said nothing.
She raised her eyebrow; she cocked her head.
"He tired of me/' she said. "But he never stopped loving me. He was new to the Court of the Ruby Grail, a young Lord and seeking at every turn to increase his might and his romance! And later, when I asked for Vittorio's life, he couldn't refuse me on account of our vows exchanged on that stone altar so long ago. After he let Vittorio leave us, after he had him cast down in Florence, certain of Vittorio's madness and ruin, Florian sang songs to me, songs for a bride. He sang the old poems as though our love could be revived."

"Yes," she said in her exquisite voice, with certainty and a small accepting smile. She clasped my left hand in hers and rubbed it hard and tenderly. "Children forever. But he was only a young man, Florian, just a young man himself."

"I saw him once," said the priest, his voice thick with his crying but soft. "Only once."

'And you knew?" I asked.

"I knew I was powerless and my faith was desperate, and that around me were bonds that I could not loose or break."

"Let's go now, Vittorio, don't make him cry anymore," said Ursula. "Come on, Vittorio. Let's leave here. We need no blood tonight and cannot think of harming them, cannot even ..."

"No, beloved, never," I said to her. "But take my gift, Father, please, the only clean thing which I can give, my testimony that I saw the angels, and that they upheld me when I was weak."

"And won't you take absolution from me, Vittorio!" he said. His voice rose, and his chest seemed to increase in size. "Vittorio and Ursula, take my absolution."

"No, Father," I said. "We cannot take it. We don't want it."

"But why?"

14

THROUGH A GLASS DARKLY

SHE didn't lie.

We journeyed that night to my I father's house. It was nothing for us to I make that journey, but it was many miles for a mortal, and word had not reached that forlorn farmland that the threat of the night demons, the vampires of Florian, was gone. Indeed, it is most likely that my farms were still deserted because ghastly tales were given out by those who had fled Santa Maddalana, traveling over hill and valley, mouth to mouth.

It didn't take me long to realize, however, that the great castle of my family was occupied. A horde of soldiers and clerks had been hard at work. As we crept over the giant wall after midnight, we found that all the dead of my family had been properly buried, or placed in their proper stone coffins beneath the chapel, and that the goods of the household, all of its abundant wealth, had been taken away. Only a few wagons remained of those which must have already

steward were keepers of the accounts of the Medici bank, and on tiptoe, in the dim light of a star-studded sky, I inspected the few papers they had left out to dry.

All of the inheritance of Vittorio di Raniari had been collected and catalogued, and was being taken on to Florence for him, to be placed in safety with Cosimo until such time as Vittorio di Raniari was twenty-four years of age and could thereby assume responsibility for himself as a man.

Only a few soldiers slept in the barracks. Only a few horses were quartered in the stables. Only a few squires and attendants slept in proximity to their Lords.

Obviously the great castle, being of no strategic use to Milanese or German or French or Papal authority, or to Florence, was not being restored or repaired, merely shut down.

Well before dawn, we left my home, but before going, I took leave of my father's grave.

I knew that I would come back. I knew that soon the trees would climb the mountain to the walls. I knew that the grass would grow high through the crevices and cracks of the cobblestones. I knew that things human would lose all love of this place, as they had lost their love of so many ruins in the country round. I would return then. I would come back.

That night, Ursula and I hunted the vicinity for the few brigands we could find in the woods, laughing gaily when we caught them and dragged them from their horses. It was a riotous old feast.

'And where now, my Lord?" my bride asked me

veil of wild blueberries that would hide us from all eyes, including that of the great rising sun.

"To Florence, my love. I have to go there. And in its streets, we'll never suffer hunger, or discovery, and there are things which I must see with my own eyes/'

"But what are those things, Vittorio?" she asked.

"Paintings, my love, paintings. I have to see the angels in the paintings. I have to ... face them, as it were."

She was content. She had never seen the great city of Florence. She had, all her wretched eternity of ritual and courtly discipline, been contained in the mountains, and she lay down beside me to dream of freedom, of brilliant colors of blue and green and gold, so contrary to the dark red that she still wore. She lay down beside me, trusting me, and, as for me, I trusted nothing.

I only licked the human blood on my lips and wondered how long I might have on this earth before someone struck off my head with a swift and certain sword.

15

THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION

THE city of Florence was in an uproar. "Why?" I asked.

It was well past curfew, to which I no one was paying much attention, and there was a huge crowd of students congregated in Santa Maria Maggiori—the Duomo— listening to a lecture by a humanist who pleaded that Fra Filippo Lippi was not such a pig.

No one took much note of us. We had fed early, in the countryside, and wore heavy mantles, and what could they see of us but a little pale flesh?

I went into the church. The crowd came out almost to the doors.

"What's the matter? What's happened to the great painter?"

"Oh, he's done it now," said the man who answered me, not even bothering to look at me or at the slender figure of Ursula clinging to me.

The man was too intent on looking at the lecturer, who stood up ahead, his voice echoing sharply in the overwhelming large nave.

"Done what?"

be a man.

"Well, he asked for the fairest of the nuns to pose for the altarpiece that he was painting of the blessed Virgin, that's what he did," said the first student, black-haired and deep-eyed, staring at me with a cunning smile. "He asked for her as a model, asked that the convent choose her for him, so that the Virgin he painted would be most perfect, and then..." The other student took it up.

".. . he ran off with her! Stole the nun right out of the convent, ran off with her and her sister, mind you, her blood-kindred sister, and has set up his household right over his shop, he and his nun and her sister, the three of them, the monk and the two nuns . . . and lives in sin with her, Lucrezia Buti, and paints the Virgin on the altarpiece and does not give a damn what anyone thinks."

There was jostling and pushing in the crowd about us. Men told us to be quiet. The students were choking on their laughter.

beside me.

"Tormented," I whispered. "Tormented." His face came back to me, the monk glimpsed years ago in Cosimo's house in the Via Larga, the man arguing so fiercely to be free, only to be with a woman for a little while. I felt the strangest conflict within, the strangest darkest fear. "Oh, that they don't hurt him again."

"One might wonder," came a soft voice in my ear. I turned, but I saw no one who could have spoken to me. Ursula looked about.

"What is it, Vittorio?"

But I knew the whisper, and it came again, bodiless and intimate, "One might wonder, where were his guardian angels on the day that Fra Filippo did such a mad thing?"

I turned in a mad frantic circle, searching for

"But where are we going?"

"To the house of Fra Filippo, to his workshop. Don't question me now."

Within moments we had found our way, echoing and clattering down the narrow street, and we stood before the doors that were shut up and I could see no light, save in the third-story windows, as though he had had to flee to that height with his bride.

No mob was gathered here.

But out of the darkness there came suddenly a handful of filth heaved at the bolted doors, and then another and then a volley of stones. I stepped back, shielding Ursula, and watched as one passerby after another slunk forward and hurled his insults at the shop.

Finally, I lay against the wall opposite, staring

oil."

I was chastened by her firmness. I kissed her hand again. I told her I was sorry. I held her to my heart.

How long I might have stood with her there, I don't know. Moments passed. I heard the sound of running water and distant footsteps, but nothing of consequence, nothing which mattered in the thick night of crowded Florence, with its four- and five-story palaces, with its old half-broken towers, and its churches, and its thousands upon thousands of sleeping souls.

A light startled me. It fell down upon me in

bright yellow seams. I saw the first, a thin line of

only for that."

"Is that a command, Ursula?" I asked. My eyes were so clouded I could scarce see the poised flat kneeling figures of Ramiel and Setheus.

But as I tried to clear my vision, as I tried to gather my wits and swallow the ache in my throat, the miracle I feared more than anything in this world, yet craved, yet hungered for—that miracle commenced. Out of the very fabric of the canvas, they

appeared simultaneously, my silk-clad blond-haired angels, my haloed angels, to unravel from the tight weave itself. They turned, gazing at me first and then moving so that they were no longer flat profiles but full robust figures, and then they stepped out and

tonelessly.

"Every time you ever look at one of his paintings, you will see us," said Setheus, "or you will see our like."

There was no judgment in it. There was merely the same lovely serenity and kindness that they had always bestowed on me.

But it was not finished. I saw behind them, taking dark shape, my own guardians, that solemn ivory pair, draped in their robes of shadowy blue.

How hard were their eyes, how knowing, how disdainful yet without the edge which men lend to such passions. How glacial and remote.

My lips parted. A cry was there. A terrible cry.

make her on the face of the earth, with my arms stretched back to hold her so that she could not, must not, be taken away.

"Ah," said Mastema, nodding, smiling. The sword was uplifted. "So even now you would go into Hell rather than see her die!"

"I would!" I cried. "I have no choice."

"Oh, yes, you have a choice."

"No, not her, don't kill her. Kill me, and send me there, yes, but give her one more chance ..."

Ursula cried against my shoulders, her hands clinging to my hair, catching hold of it, as if by means of it she'd be safe.

"Send me now," I said. "Go ahead, strike off my head and send me to my judgment before the Lord that I may beg for her! Please, Mastema, do it, but do not

Through the streets we were being dragged, and suddenly there appeared before us a great crowd of idle mortals issuing from a wine shop, drunken and laughing, a great jumble of swollen, natural faces and dark breeze-tossed clothes.

"Do you see them, Vittorio? Do you see those upon whom you feed?" Mastema demanded.

"I see them, Mastema!" I said. I groped for her hand, trying to find her, hold her, shield her. "I do see them, I do."

"In each and every one of them, Vittorio, there is what I see in you, and in her—a human soul. Do you know what that is, Vittorio? Can you imagine?"

I didn't dare to answer.

The crowd spread out over the moonlighted piazza, and drew closer to us, even as it loosened.

"A spark of the power that made all of us is within each of them," cried Mastema, "a spark of the invisible, of the subtle, of the sacred, of the

lovely gleaming and numinous presence, this precious and unquenchable fire.

I pivoted, my garments snagging around me, and I saw this flame envelop Ursula. I saw her living and breathing within it, and, turning back to the crowd, I saw again that each and every one of them lived and breathed in it, and I knew suddenly, understood perfectly—I would always see it. I would never see living human beings, be they monstrous or righteous, without this expanding, blinding, fire of the soul.

"Yes," Mastema whispered in my ear. "Yes. Forever, and every time you feed, every time you raise one of their tender throats to your cursed fangs, every time you drink from them the lurid blood you would have, like the worst of God's beasts, you will see that light flicker and struggle, and when the heart stops at the will of your hunger, you will see that light go out!"

I broke away from him. He let me go.

With her hand only, I ran. I ran and ran towards the Arno, towards the bridge, towards the taverns that might still be open, but long before I saw the blazing flames of the souls there, I saw the glow of the souls from hundreds of windows, I saw the glow of souls from beneath the bottoms of bolted doors.

I saw it, and I knew that he spoke the truth. I

I cried out and cried out and let my cries echo over the water and up the walls on either side. I was mad with grief, and then through the darkness there came a toddling child towards me, a beggar, already versed in words to speak for bread or coins or any bit of charity that any man would vouchsafe him, and he glowed and sputtered and glittered and danced with brilliant and priceless light.

16

AND THE DARKNESS GRASPED IT NOT

OVER the years, every time I saw one of Fra Filippo's magnificent creations, the angels came alive for me. It was I only for an instant, only enough to prick the heart and draw the blood, as if with a needle, to the core.

Mastema himself did not appear in Fra Filippo's work until some years later, when Fra Filippo, struggling and arguing as always, was working for Piero, the son of Cosimo, who had gone to his grave.

Fra Filippo never did give up his precious nun, Lucrezia Buti, and it was said of Filippo that every Virgin he ever painted—and there were many— bore Lucrezia's beautiful face. Lucrezia gave Fra Filippo a son, and that painter took the name Filippino, and his work too was rich in magnificence and rich in angels, and those angels too have always for one instant met my eyes when I came to worship before those canvases, sad and brokenhearted and full of love and afraid.

In 1469, Filippo died in the town of Spoleto, and there ended the life of one of the greatest painters the world has ever known. This was the man who was put on the rack for fraud, and who had debauched a convent; this was a man who painted Mary as the frightened Virgin, as the Madonna of Christmas Night, as the Queen of Heaven, as the Queen of All Saints.

And I, five hundred years after, have never strayed too far from that city which gave birth to Filippo and to that time we call the Age of Gold.

Gold. That is what I see when I look at you.

That is what I see when I look at any man, woman, child.

I see the flaming celestial gold that Mastema revealed to me. I see it surrounding you, and holding you, encasing you and dancing with you, though you yourself may not behold it, or even care.

From this tower tonight in Tuscany I look out over the land, and far away, deep in the valleys, I see the gold of human beings, I see the glowing vitality of beating souls.

So you have my story.

What do you think?

Do you not see a strange conflict here? Do you see a dilemma?

Let me put it to you this way.

Think back to when I told you about how my father and I rode through the woods together and we spoke of Fra Filippo, and my father asked me what it was that drew me to this monk. I said that it

Filippo was a storm unto himself. So am I.

My father, a man of calm spirits and simpler thoughts, smiled at this.

But what does it mean in relationship to this tale?

Yes, I am a vampire, as I told you; I am a thing that feeds on mortal life. I exist quietly, contentedly in my homeland, in the dark shadows of my home castle, and Ursula is with me as always, and five hundred years is not so long for a love as strong as ours.

We are demons. We are damned. But have we not seen and understood things, have I not written things here that are of value to you? Have I not rendered a conflict so full of torment that something looms here which is full of brilliance and color, not unlike Filippo's work? Have I not embroidered, interwoven and gilded, have I not bled?

Look at my story and tell me that it gives you nothing. I don't believe you if you say that.

And when I think back on Filippo, and his rape of Lucrezia, and all his other tempestuous sins, how can I separate them from the magnificence of his paintings? How can I separate the violation of his vows, and his deceits and his quarrels, from the splendor which Filippo gave to the world?

I am not saying I am a great painter. I am not such a fool. But I say that out of my pain, out of

I write of blood thirst that is never satisfied. I write of knowledge and its price.

Behold, I tell you, the light is there in you. I see it. I see it in each and every one of us, and will always. I see it when I hunger, when I struggle, when I slaughter. I see it sputter and die in my arms when I drink.

Can you imagine what it would be like for me to kill you?

Pray it never takes a slaughter or a rape for you to see this light in those around you. God forbid it that it should demand such a price. Let me pay the price for you instead.

THE END

Cornell University Press.

Professor Trexler has also written other wonderful books on Italy, but this book is a particularly rich and inspiring one, especially for me, because Professor Trexler's analyses and insights regarding Florence have helped me to understand my own city of New Orleans, Louisiana, better than anything directly written by anyone about New Orleans itself.

New Orleans, like Florence, is a city of public spectacles, rituals and feast days, of demonstrations of communal celebration and belief. It is almost impossible to realistically explain New Orleans, and its Mardi Gras, its St. Patrick's Day and its annual Jazz Fest, to those who have not been here. Professor Trexler's brilliant scholarship gave me tools to gather thoughts about and observations pertaining to those things I most love.

Other works by Professor Trexler include his Journey of

Lippi, published by Scala, text by Gloria Fossi, which is for sale in numerous translations in Florence and other places in Italy as well. The only other book of which I know that is exclusively devoted to Filippo is the immense Fra Filippo Lippi by Jeffrey Ruda, subtitled Life and Work, with a Complete Catalogue. It is published by Phaidon Press in England and distributed in America by Harry N. Abrams.

The most enjoyable books for the general reader that I have read on Florence and on the Medici have been by Christopher Hibbert, including his Florence: The Biography of a City, published by Norton, and The House of Medici: Its Rise and Fall, published by Morrow.

There is also The Medici of Florence: A Family Portrait, by Emma Micheletti, published by Becocci Editore. The Medici by James Cleugh, published originally in 1975, is available now through Barnes & Noble.

Popular books on Florence and Tuscany—travelers' observations, loving memoirs and tributes—abound. Primary sources in translation—that is, letters and diaries and histories written during the Renaissance in Florence—are everywhere on library and bookstore shelves.

In trying to render correctly Vittorio's quotations from Aquinas, I used the translation of the Summa Theologica by Fathers of the English Dominican Province. In dealing

building, and there are many books available on the architecture of Florence entire. I owe a debt of gratitude not only to the museum of San Marco for having so beautifully preserved the architectural work of Michelozzo, so praised in this novel, but for the publications readily available in the shop there on monastery's architecture and art.

In closing, let me add this: if Vittorio were asked to name a recording of Renaissance music which best captures the mood of the High Mass and Communion which he witnessed at the Court of the Ruby Grail, it would inevitably be the All Souls' Vespers, requiem music from Cordoba Cathedral, performed by the Orchestra of the Renaissance led by Richard Cheetham—though I must confess, this music is described as circa 1570—some years after Vittorio's fearful ordeal. The recording is available on the Veritas label, through Virgin Classics London and New York.

In closing these notes, allow me one final quote from St. Augustine's The City of God.

For God would never have created a man, let alone an angel, in the foreknowledge of his future evil state, if he had not known at the same time how he would put such

A NOTE ON THE TYPE

This book was set in Monotype Dante, a typeface designed by Giovanni Mardersteig (1892-1977). Conceived as a private type for the Officina Bodoni in