

THE CASSAFORTE CHRONICLES, VOLUME III

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NASCENZA
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CONSPIRACY
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V. BRICELAND



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Visitors to the quaint city of Cassaforte are often so overwhelmed with its architectural beauties and the sweeps of color that enliven its streets, that they neglect to remember that for the traveler without vigilance, the metropolis can teem with danger.

— *Celestine du Barbaray, Traditions & Vagaries of the Azure Coast: A Guide for the Hardy Traveler*



From his vantage point high at the top of the insula, Petro Divetri commanded an unparalleled view. The city of Cassaforte sprawled before him, soaking up the summer sunshine like a lazy cat. To the southwest, citizens bustled around Palace Square, where the red stone columns of the royal residence vaulted high in the air to support its graceful glass dome. Further out, and all around, the rooftops of the shops and domiciles, bright and gleaming, stretched to the horizon and the almost unbearable brilliance of the sea.

A seagull landed on the battlement beside Petro and stared at him through jet black eyes. “There’s a logical reason for my predicament,” Petro explained to it. The bird’s throaty chirrup seemed to match Petro’s own strained mood. He sighed, and shifted as little as he possibly could. “There’s not much I can do now, at any rate.”

The piazza beneath the southern entrance to the Insula of the Penitents of Lena had been fairly quiet for the last several minutes. This remote corner didn’t attract much of the city’s traffic. A fruit vendor, his gondola laden to overflowing with limes and citrons, had punted his way down the neighboring canal, and several yellow-capped messenger boys had run by on their way to their destinations, but none had bothered to look up at the top of the insula’s facade. A little girl dragging a doll on the stones had wandered from the door of a private residence for a moment, and had sucked her thumb and stared back at him before

disappearing. Thus far, only the seagull had lingered.

“Oh gods,” he said, staring at the ground below. A small group of students was returning to the insula from a city walkabout, a tour to admire Cassaforte’s treasures of craftsmanship. Senior aspirants, by the look of them, all close to the age of twenty. And oh, by all that was holy, they were accompanied by Gina Catarre, the insula’s elder. Her attentions meant that soon this group would rise in rank and move on to new positions in the insula workshops, either in the city or at countryside outposts. Though the seriousness of his situation made Petro want to squirm, he didn’t dare. He had prayed not to be noticed, up here in his solitude, but all hope now was fruitless.

Sure enough, one of the gray-robed seniors stopped short of the tiled steps leading to the portico to stare at Petro. He tugged at the arm of a companion, who glanced up, did a double take, and promptly dropped the little leather-bound register in which he had been recording notes. Soon they were all craning their necks to regard Petro from below. Only when the elder turned to peer over her shoulder, baffled by the sudden inattention of the aspirants, did Petro stir into motion.

“Good afternoon, Elder Catarre,” he called down, as conversationally as possible under the circumstances.

The elder turned all the way around. Her familiar braid, long and thick as a man’s arm, fell in a rope down her back. Silver though her braid might have been, her eyebrows were still thick and black. They rose in twin arches as she planted both feet on the ground and let out a sigh that could have shaken the foundations of Caza Portello itself. “Petro Divetri,” she announced. “You appear to be hanging from Lena’s scales.”

The seagull opened its beak and let out a squawk that Petro felt bore an unfair resemblance to laughter. “Brother Cappazo was making a similar point today, in his lecture on philosophy,” he replied as pleasantly as he could. “I believe his point was that most of us find ourselves attempting to achieve a moral balance that ...”

The elder was having none of his nonsense. “Brother Cappazo never had anything as literal as your predicament in mind,” she said, her voice dangerously level.

Almost involuntarily, Petro looked over his shoulder at the relief sculpture of the goddess Lena, who serenely grasped the carved scales from which he dangled, suspended by his tunic. The weight of his body, swinging from the marble fulcrum of the scales, had distended the tunic, but the Ventimilla blessings and workmanship that had gone into its stitches ensured that it hadn't torn. For ten minutes, Petro had dangled like a game rabbit on a meat hook; any movement set him swinging again, which was the last thing he wanted. Although there was a balcony a mere eight feet below him, the last thing he needed to add to his humiliation was to be sick in front of a group of senior aspirants.

"Yes," he said weakly. "You might be right about that, Elder Catarre."

"Go fetch him down." In her long tenure as the head of one of the city's two craftsman training schools, Gina Catarre had doubtless seen many an escapade. She didn't seem at all surprised by this latest prank. A handful of the senior aspirants scampered into the portico to escape her immediate wrath. "Who put you up there?" she demanded. "Was it one of di Angeli's crew?"

It had indeed been Pom di Angeli who had scooped him up from the courtyard as Petro scurried along its edges with his friend Adrio. "What ho, little mousie?" Pom had said, thrusting out his barrel chest to obstruct Petro's path. When Petro attempted to evade him, first one then the other of the Falo twins, Pom's well-bred flunkies, had blocked his way. Adrio, wisely, had vanished immediately into the shadows.

"I have a summons," Petro had muttered, trying to remain as inconspicuous as possible. "Let me pass."

"A summons where?" Even when he wasn't trying, Pom wore a permanent sneer on his face—and he was trying, at that moment.

Petro had paused. If he'd been honest and admitted that he'd received word to report to the royal residence within the palace, they'd accuse him of pulling rank. "I have to be somewhere," he'd said instead, staring at the ground and hoping that his obstacle would vanish.

"Somewhere?" Pom asked.

"A fancy dress ball," suggested one of the twins.

The other pressed a dirty finger against the tip of Petro's nose and forced it up while crooning, "Sandwiches with the king and the cazarri. With the crusts

trimmed off so the widdle baby won't have to chew."

Through clenched teeth, Petro had growled, "If you'll excuse me ..."

"We won't." Pom had gestured to the twins, one of whom had scooped up Petro by the collar and began dragging him toward the stairwell. The insula had been designed as a fortress, with thick walls and an impenetrable exterior. Indeed, both the Insula of the Penitents of Lena and the Insula of the Children of Muro had withstood long sieges during the Azurite invasion decades before. Thanks to their sturdy construction, the stairwells merely echoed with Petro's protests as Pom and the twins coerced him to the top.

"Petro Divetri, every teacher's pet. Petro Divetri, of the Seven. Petro, the suck-up. Perfect Petro," the twins had chanted, while Pom barked out orders.

"I'm not perfect!" That lesson, to his dismay, had been hammered into Petro's brain from the moment he'd set foot in the insula at the age of eleven. He was far from being a lag-behind, but he wasn't at the top of his classes, either. He studied only as much as was necessary, and no more. He declined to play bocce. And though he kept a straight face through the religious services, they bored him in a way that he thought the priests might find faintly heretical.

It was better to let bullies like Pom get the spleen out of their system. The less resistance he showed, the faster that might happen. "You think you're high-and-mighty, with that witch of a sister of yours?" Pom had said the moment they'd emerged into the sunlight of the roof. Sparrows scattered at the sound of his bray.

"Don't talk about my sister." Petro might not have cared so much about what the bullies said about him, but comments about Risa Divetri were off-limits.

"Why not?" said one of the twins. "The whole city of Cassaforte does."

His three opponents had laughed. "And how she hops in the king's bed at night, even though he won't marry her," said the other twin.

Pom had pushed Petro against the stone rail and leaned in close. He stunk of garlic and malice when he purred, "The king knows better than to marry a harlot."

Most people knew to fear Risa Divetri's temper. Petro must have also inherited their mother's fiery Buonochio blood, because the di Angeli boy's words made him see red. Like an animal, he had attempted to struggle out of Pom's grasp. He

wanted to blacken his eye, or bloody his lip, or throw him down and break his long, aquiline nose. Anything to remind Pom that he couldn't slander the Divetri family—one of Cassaforte's seven highest-ranking—and get away with it.

As with everything else in his life, though, Petro was not the biggest fifteen-year-old, nor the strongest, nor did he have much experience in fighting. The Falò twins had scooped him up as easily as if he were a doll made of corn husks. Up into the air he had gone, and over the balustrade. There was a terrifying moment when he swung out and over the hard stone of the piazza below. Then he felt his vest tighten from behind. When he looked around, he'd found himself suspended from the sculpture of Lena's scales. "He won't be so high and mighty when that slut of a sister of his is kicked out of the palace," Pom had crowed, before they all ran as far and fast from the scene of the crime as possible.

"Well?" Elder Catarre was demanding. Petro had almost forgotten she was there. "Who put you there?"

He shook his head. In his most engaging voice, the one he used to convince adults that everything was fine when it wasn't, he said, "No one. I tripped."

The aspirants who remained below laughed. "You tripped," repeated the elder, scowling. "You expect me to believe that you *tripped*?"

"And fell, of course. It's a logical corollary." Brother Cappazo would have approved of the terminology.

"Logical corollary, indeed. I've heard better logic from the insula goats!"

Gina Catarre then turned to one of the aspirants and began fussing, just as Petro heard a scuffle of feet on the upper walkway behind him. He assumed it was the aspirants who'd rushed into the building a few moments before, but when he gingerly looked up and over his shoulder, he saw his friend, Adrio, along with several others he recognized: Talia Settecordi, Amalia Caspiro, and Bruno Poscetta. All of them seemed astonished to see Petro hanging there like so much aged beef at the butcher's, but only Adrio appeared really to be fretting. "Sister Batrilla and her sketch-pad crew were hanging about the stairwell entrance, so we had to wait. We came as quickly as we could, though. Are you all right? Did they—?" Adrio hoisted himself up to look over the balustrade and caught his breath. "Gods," he muttered, at the sight of Elder Catarre.

"Adrio Ventimilla!" Elder Catarre howled, the moment she caught sight of his

head appearing over the rail. “What do you know about this affair? Don’t try to hide. I’ll have it out of you one way or another.”

Adrio gulped. “You’re in for it, aren’t you?” he whispered to Petro. “Aren’t you going to tell her about Pom? Do you want me to, so you can deny saying anything?”

“No.” Petro had borne his midair suspension well enough, but all the insistence that he turn in Pom di Angeli and the Falò twins made him twitchy. It wasn’t a matter of taking the high road. Bullies like those didn’t back down, and in the long run getting them in trouble would only make things worse. From below, he heard the sound of a door opening followed by footsteps on the balcony. Simultaneously, scuffling noises rose from the walkway over his other shoulder. “Just drop it. Please.”

He grunted as several pairs of hands grabbed at his vest and began to hoist him up. A pair of aspirants on the balcony below squinted into the sun as they stood with outstretched arms, ready to catch Petro should he fall, but obviously praying that they wouldn’t be tested. The group rescuing him managed to bang his head against the scale’s cornice, hard, and thoroughly to scrape his back raw on the stone as they hauled him up and over the rail, but in a matter of moments he was on his feet and more or less none the worse for wear.

Talia Settecordi immediately enveloped Petro in a mighty embrace. “I was so worried!” she exclaimed, resting her chin on his shoulder. “They shouldn’t do that to you! Don’t they know who you are?” She rocked him back and forth until it felt frankly uncomfortable.

Lately, rumor around the aspirant’s wing (also known as the lower insula) was that Talia and Petro were sweethearts. Petro suspected that the rumors had come from Talia herself, for he certainly had never shown any interest in the girl. Perhaps something was wrong with him, but none of the young women in his age group interested him that way yet.

“You’re of the Seven!” Talia crooned, still hugging him. “They’re only of the Thirty, and the Falos aren’t even of the upper Thirty. I mean, who are they, really? They make guitars.” She sniffed through her long, thin nose.

Adrio, who was two fingers shorter than Petro, peered up at the girl. “My family’s not of the upper Thirty, you know.” Thankfully, at that moment the

aspirants managed to detach Talia from her stranglehold and steer Petro in the direction of the stairs.

“Trust me, I know,” Talia replied to Adrio.

Her comment might have caused Adrio to deflate, but the tanner’s son did not let the topic go. “No, but you’ve managed to say just now that only the upper Thirty matter. Just because you’re of the upper Thirty yourself doesn’t mean ...”

“Don’t be a fool, Adrio,” Talia snapped. Petro sighed, and tried to shut out everyone’s noise. He hated all the fuss people made over him, everywhere he went. Without comment he let the two bicker as the senior aspirants dragged him downstairs.

Elder Catarre stood waiting at the bottom of the stairwell, her arms crossed. “Do we wish to talk about this issue, now that we have our feet firmly on the ground?” Adrio and Talia and the others retreated to a respectful distance.

“We don’t have much to say,” Petro said, with as much genuine respect as he could muster. “We—I was exploring a little, and tripped and fell.” He saw the elder’s shoulders tense up with a thousand reasonable retorts to his outlandish lie, and the last thing he wanted to do was rebut them. “Elder,” he interrupted, bowing in the proper manner with his hands folded. “I do beg your pardon, but I am expected ...”

She raised a single eyebrow. “Who else is more important than me, at this moment?”

Petro bit his lip. “My sister, Elder,” he admitted.

“He’s needed at the palace,” breathed Talia.

“So I gathered, Signorina Settecordi,” said Elder Catarre, her voice level and dry. Although Petro had two other older sisters—Mira, a master glass maker for the insula at the Fero outpost, and Vesta, who resided at the Insula of the Children of Muro—the only Divetri who truly mattered in most people’s minds was Risa. “As Brother Cappazo might say, I made that logical leap. But Cazarrino,” she said. Though she did not move so much as an finger’s width, to Petro it felt as if the elder suddenly loomed in upon him. “When you return from the palace, you and I will be having a discussion in my chambers. A very serious discussion.”

“Yes, Elder,” he murmured, bowing once again.

While the elder had been talking, the senior aspirants had been vanishing one by one from the stairwell. Adrio jerked slightly, obviously intending to follow, but Elder Catarre was too quick for him. “Cool your oxen, Ventimilla,” she ordered, grabbing him by the collar and returning him to place. Adrio muttered oaths to himself. “You will call upon me as well. Don’t keep your sister waiting, Cazarrino.”

“Yes, Elder,” he repeated. Bowing one last time, Petro sighed with relief and began to run across the outer courtyard as quickly as his sandaled feet could carry him.

He reached the egress from the courtyard and heard a voice behind him. “Oh, Petro,” it cooed in sticky, feminine tones, “be sure to come find me when you get back from the palace.” He turned to see Talia simpering beneath the main arch. “I want to hear everything.”

Petro winced. An evening spent having to endure Talia’s attentions? Perhaps he wasn’t getting off so lightly after all.

*You have requested that I pinpoint the vulnerability of
Cassaforte's king. This I can say whole-heartedly:
nothing weakens a man more than when he loves another.*

*—The spy, Gustophe Werner,
in a missive to the Emperor of Vereingtelände*



So are you taking Talia to the Midsummer revels?” Adrio had caught up with Petro at the insula gates. His legs were so much shorter than Petro’s, he gave the illusion of having to run twice as fast to keep up as the pair jogged along the canal walls toward the city’s center.

“No!” The annoyance in Petro’s response wasn’t at all feigned. “I don’t find her attractive at all.”

“Oh, absolutely,” Adrio said quickly. “What’s attractive about her?” He held onto his insula cap and puffed out his cheeks as the pair of them leapt over a narrow bridge to cross the royal canal, which did little to make him look older or taller. “Besides her fair skin, her beautiful face, her good manners . . . ”

In his most sentimental voice, Petro added, “And her voice like the strings of a well-tuned lute, not to mention the way her hair gleams in the twin moonlight?” Provoked by the good-hearted jibe, Adrio shoved Petro as if to push him over the canal wall and into the muddy waters below. “If you like her so much, why not ask her yourself?” Petro asked.

“As if she’d look at me. You’re of the Seven. You don’t know what it’s like.”

“What does my family being of the Seven have to do with anything? The Seven and Thirty are households of craftsmen,” said Petro, shaking his head. “Countries like Pays d’Azur and Charlemance have nobility. Not Cassaforte.”

“Do you honestly think the nobility of Charlemance started out as damas and ritters? No! They were once pig farmers!” Adrio spoke so loudly that several of

the merchants crowding the street craned their necks to look. “If I were of the Seven, I’d be plucking wenches for myself like oranges. If I were of the Seven, I’d be getting free drinks at the tavernas, just because I could. Baso Buonochio gets free wine and cakes whenever he goes down to Mina’s on the artist’s spit!”

“Baso Buonochio gets free wine because he was one of the heroes of the revolt against Prince Berto,” said Petro. Even after four years, his own sister still received abundant gifts of food for her own part in that affair. She sent them all to be shared among the impoverished boat people of the Temple Bridge. “If you were of the Seven, you’d be receiving letters from your parents reminding you to be humble and to say your daily prayers,” Petro said, speaking from experience. “You’d be reminded of your station in life almost constantly, and never have a chance to get your hands on any girls’ oranges. Honestly, Adrio. It’s not all cakes and wine.”

Adrio wasn’t convinced. “You’re wrong,” he said, circling around his friend and stopping his progress. “Care to make a wager?”

“I never take up any of your wagers,” said Petro, crossing his arms. “Not the bet about whether you could sneak out after the last horn to see Tania Rossi in that play on the Via Dioro ...”

“I could have done it,” Adrio muttered. “Besides, you’d already seen her, because you’re important and all. You *met* her.”

“I especially didn’t take up that wager with the frogs and the insula buttery. Remember what happened?”

Adrio reddened a little, but he had already worked himself into a bluster and didn’t want to lose it. “All right, so you don’t wager. For your own good, though, promise me something. Let’s agree that when we’re let loose for Midsummer revels this year, you won’t keep your skull mask on the entire time. Promise you won’t skulk in the shadows like always. Let’s have some fun, like the popular youths, instead of being wallflowers. Take advantage of your position. Be the sevenest Seven anyone has ever seen!”

“I want us to have fun.” Petro pushed on in the direction of the palace. The Midsummer revels was one of the few holidays of the year when those in the aspirant’s wing were allowed into the city after the last horn of the rite of fealty, to visit the midnight festival in Temple Square. Aspirants could stay out all night

if they wished it, though Petro had never been able to stay alert that long. “But if one word got back to my father that I had been puffed-up and arrogant, he would come up to the insula, grab the scruff of my neck, and throw me in the canals.”

Adrio shrugged as if that were nothing. “I’d fish you out.”

“By the way, I don’t skulk in the shadows. Or keep my mask on all night.” It was tradition, at the Midsummer festival, for celebrants to attend wearing skull-faced masks of some sort or another. The simplest were mere canvas sacks chalked out on one side, while those worn by the wealthy were often enameled and quite elaborate indeed. After tossing moon-shaped charms into the bonfires, very often the masks came off for the night. Petro had perhaps left his mask on more often than not, to avoid being noticed.

“You need to live!” Adrio tried to stop him once more, but Petro refused to be halted. He was already late to his appointment with Risa. “Putting up walls and hoping everything goes away is all very well when you’re a castle under siege,” Adrio continued. “You’re no castle, though.”

His friend’s choice of metaphor was apt, for Petro felt embattled from all sides. Especially at the moment. “I wish you’d stop.”

Adrio’s chattering did not cease, however. “Should I show you how to live like one of Cassaforte’s Seven? I propose this: come the Midsummer revels, you hide behind my cheap mask while I wear your costume and pretend to be you. Remember, it’s not as if anyone outside the insula knows what Petro Divetri really looks like. I wager that, when I’m you, I can cadge our fill of free roast lamb and as many pear pies as I can carry. Not to mention get any pretty girls we want.”

“But I don’t want to be you,” Petro replied.

Adrio’s tone shifted sharply. “Why? Because I’m not of the Seven, like the Divetris? I *am* of the Thirty, you big snob. Maybe of the lower Thirty, but the Thirty all the same.”

“The whole thing about there being a lower Thirty is a myth.” Petro wondered for a moment if anyone would notice if he pushed Adrio into the royal canal below. But they had reached the trade entrance to the palace, and the crimson-clad guard who’d quietly greeted them at the bridge would probably report something like that to Risa. A ranting Risa Divetri was the last thing Petro

needed. “Talia Settecordi is the one who talks about the lower Thirty, not me,” he added. Then a thought struck him. “Is this about Talia? Really, are you sweet on her?”

“No.” Adrio’s response was hasty. Too hasty. But he said nothing else as another guard nodded and joined them at the entrance.

“Petro,” the guard said.

“Mafeo.” Petro grinned at the man who’d become a familiar face over the last four years. Then, in a quiet aside to Adrio, he growled, “Well, don’t be angry with me because of Talia. I’m not a snob.”

Though he was quieter in the guard’s presence, Adrio was no less insistent as he murmured in Petro’s ear. “You miss the point. Common people are *happy* to be good to the Seven, Petro. They *like* it. They’ll talk about how they met me—met you, that is—for months. If someone is upset with anything you do at the revels, which they won’t be, and your family hears about it ... well, it wasn’t *really* you, was it?”

“You’re the one missing the point, and my answer is still no. Wait here and don’t get into any trouble.” Petro didn’t bother to look at Adrio’s reaction as he left him behind. He knew it would be sulky.

Inside, Mafeo followed Petro until they came to another post at the bottom of a stairwell, where he excused himself. Two more guards greeted Petro by name and gestured for him to follow them up a somewhat grim and functional set of stairs, lavishly hung with banners and tapestries, that led from the ground floor to the palace’s highest reaches in its northeast corner. Another two guards joined them at the top, marching Petro toward his destination. Approaching his sister’s quarters with a battalion of guards in attendance, and then leaving as they drifted away one by one, was a formality Petro was accustomed to by now.

The royal residence of the palace occupied most of those upper floors. It consisted not only of the suite occupied by the king himself, but of smaller accommodations allotted to those who had reason to live and conduct their business in the palace on a daily basis. The most essential servants, for example, occupied small apartments along the hallway where Petro now walked accompanied by four guards. The king’s bodyguard and her family occupied a suite within shouting distance of the king’s own. These days, after the death of

King Alessandro, the chambers on the topmost floor, where the extended royal family had once lived, were mostly empty. It was at the open door of one of the few occupied chambers that his entourage left him.

“Wartface!” For the second time that day, Petro found his rib cage nearly crushed by an enormous hug. He yelped, for his back still smarted from having been raked across the stone. “What’s the matter?” Risa Divetri added, loosening her hold immediately though not letting go of her grip on his waist. “Don’t tell me you’ve grown too grand for affection from your sweetest and most devoted sister.”

“Oh, is Vesta here, then?” Petro looked around the room with mock innocence. Risa whuffed with outrage, but before she could swat him in a painful place, Petro gently disengaged himself. “Take care!” he warned, sitting down on a plain and practical sofa. Risa had stripped her own apartment to a bare minimum of furniture and work space; very little of the frills and adornment found in the rest of the palace remained. “I hurt myself.”

“Hurt yourself?” Risa immediately sat down next to him, folding her hands in her lap and tucking her feet beneath herself with quite a display of decorum. “Or were hurt?”

“Don’t,” he begged. “You don’t know what it’s like, in the insulas. You’re lucky you missed all that.”

Her eyes flashed with a show of dry humor. “I suppose I am.”

“I didn’t mean—”

“I know.” Sometimes it was difficult to remember how traumatizing it had been for his sister four years ago, when she alone of all the children of the Seven and Thirty had not been chosen for either the Insula of the Children of Muro or the Insula of the Penitents of Lena. Petro, on the other hand, had never wanted to leave Caza Divetri. He would have gladly swapped places with Risa on that disappointing day and spent the rest of his life keeping the glass furnaces of Caza Divetri hot with wood, or sweeping out scraps from the workshop floors. Unlike Risa, he hadn’t wanted his life to change.

Risa, however, had burned to start a new life at the insula, and had been sorely downcast when told she was not wanted there. Of course, now Petro was living the insula life that Risa had wanted but never achieved, while, at the gods’ hands,

she had transformed into something wild and strange ... a sorceress, struggling to master powers greater than any Cassaforte had seen for centuries.

“Then again,” Risa continued, her voice neutral, “perhaps if you weren’t such an annoying little crybaby mama’s boy, the bullies wouldn’t ... ” She shrieked and leapt to her feet when Petro feigned a lunge at her. His back ached too much to follow through.

“Twit,” he said.

“Lack-brain,” she countered.

“Duck nose.” He was pleased to see her jaw drop and her hand fly to the slight snub in the middle of her face, even if she was only pretending to be offended by the old jibe. “And here I thought you were too grand to have an ordinary little brother.”

“What do you mean?”

It almost made Petro laugh—she was genuinely puzzled. “You can’t be serious.” With a sweep of his hand, he gestured to the finery she wore, from the sparkling circlet in her hair, to the gown woven at the Millefiori looms, to the pretty points of her slippers. “You look like a fairy-princess engraving in a Catarre book. When I last saw you—what was it, only three months ago?—you were wearing a lace ruff.”

“That was for a holy feast!” Risa narrowed her eyes. “I’ll have you know that I’m clothed rather plainly, by court standards. I don’t wear jewelry, really.” Her fingers sought out the circlet studded with the tiniest of Divetri glass beads. “Rings and necklaces, anyway. And brooches. I don’t wear those.”

“You’re wearing a gown! Your hair is actually tidy!” Petro laughed. “Do you remember how much of her own hair Fita tore from the roots, trying to keep you out of boys’ breeches?”

Risa’s lips twitched. She and the Divetri housekeeper had never seen eye-to-eye on most issues. “You’re the lucky one,” she finally said, after an awkward pause. “You’re not in the public eye like I am. Remember how Fita always said we’d besmirch some mythical Divetri family honor if we stepped outside the caza with a smudge on our faces? I live the real version of that now. Everyone looks at me to see what I’ll do. And if I make one misstep ... ”

The door opened to admit two servants, both bearing trays. One was a sweet-

faced girl who silently glided over to where they sat and placed before them a plate of toasted, buttered bread squares, spread thickly with crushed olives and fiddleheads, and a bowl of stuffed figs. The other servant was a thin, pinch-faced man who set a pitcher of iced ginger beer in front of them, then went to stand in a position of attention by the door.

“How is your daughter, Gloriana?” Risa asked the girl, taking one of the fruits.

“Very well, thank you, miss,” she replied, curtsying prettily. “She sends thanks for the books you were so kind as to give her.”

Risa beamed, happy to hear the words. “They’ll teach her well. I hope she enjoys them.”

Petro knew his sister. She’d probably spared no expense to give the girl books directly from Caza Catarre—books magically enhanced to speed and aid learning. His own family’s glass creations were likewise renowned for their special enchantments; Caza Divetri’s stained glass windows were not only beautiful but could withstand a battering that would reduce normal glass to mere shards, its wedding cups could help ensure a couple’s fidelity, and its extraordinary wine flutes could prevent any citizen wealthy enough to purchase them from being poisoned by an enemy. While all objects created by families of the Seven and Thirty carried enchantments, the creations of the Seven were especially sought-after.

The girl curtsied once more and vanished, with a nod of her head to the servant remaining. Risa watched her go with a smile.

While Petro ate, he studied his sister. *She is unlike anyone else*, he thought to himself, and not for the first time. Unlike anyone in recent centuries, Risa Divetri had the ability to enchant objects in ways that the Seven and Thirty could not, nor even imagine. She’d had success in ensorcelling reflective surfaces (Divetri’s glass bowls, mirrors) into devices through which people could conduct entire conversations from leagues apart. While Caza Piratimare, the ship builders, could construct a frigate from wood and ordinary materials that was almost unsinkable, Risa had once used a lapful of paper boats to create an armada of fireships to defeat an invasion from Pays d’Azur. Since then, she had invested much of her time and attention in maintaining various illusions designed to convince allies and foes alike that Cassaforte had a strong navy. Few

would guess that of the many mighty warships anchored in the city's harbor, more than half were disused gondolas enchanted to appear infinitely larger and more fearsome, or that the fortifications erected on Cassaforte's outermost islands were actually illusory.

"You really are lucky. Everything's so simple for you," Risa said again, once the servants had departed. "You don't have the Seven and Thirty watching your every move, waiting for you to make a mistake. All you have to do is attend your lectures, and do your turns in the workshops, and answer questions ..."

Petro's eyebrows shot up. "Yes, questions. I get them all day, every day. What are you going to *do*, Petro? Don't you have a *purpose* for your life, Petro? You're a Divetri who doesn't like glass!" Unlike Risa, Petro had never experienced any joy from the family craft. Glass blowing was hot and dangerous work, and all his efforts invariably ended up recycled as cullet. "And then there's the problems I have because of you."

"Because of me?" Risa colored.

"Surely you know." Petro could feel his own face reddening. With their identical chestnut-hued hair and red cheeks, they looked very similar. "You think everyone watches you for a misstep? Try walking in my sandals for a day. It's all right for our older siblings—they're out of the aspirant's wing and working in the insula proper. Romeldo's a priest but he'll be Divetri's cazarro sometime, so no one's going to bad-mouth him. Vesta and Mira both have their own lives. If you feel watched, all you have to do is hide in here, behind the palace walls. Or bury yourself in the libraries of Caza Cassamagi. Or hide in Papa's workshops. You've got that freedom. Me, though? At the insula we don't have privacy. I share a room with eight other boys. If I say something in a foul temper, it's all over the aspirant's wing before I can blink an eye. *Oh, I always knew those Divetris weren't as nice as they pretend to be.* If I don't pay attention and get called on in a lecture, and I say something witless? *It's such a pity that Petro turned out to be the least of the Divetris.* The brothers and sisters of the insula watch me like a hawk, and I know what they're thinking. *Is he going to turn out like Risa? Why isn't he talented, like Risa the Sorceress?* Gods. All I want is a chance to prove myself at something instead of being compared to you."

He hadn't intended to say so much. He certainly hadn't intended to say it quite

so loudly. For a moment Petro considered stuffing another of the toast squares into his mouth simply to shut himself up, but he suddenly wasn't hungry.

"I had no idea," Risa said slowly.

Petro looked away from her. She was staring at him in a way he didn't like, as if she'd never really noticed him before. "It's bad enough, with half of the Thirty in the insula looking for reasons to despise me," he continued. "But then the other half are busy trying to get into my good graces, because I'm Risa Divetri's brother. There's one girl, of the Settecordis. Talia. I can tell that in her mind, we're already married and raising a whole nest of Divetri insula babies. I could have the worst case of cabbage wind imaginable and she'd only sniff my gas as I walked by and say, *By Lena's grace, that Petro Divetri smells like cakes and rainbows!*" Risa's eyes blinked rapidly, as if she was torn between horror and wanting to laugh. "I'm glad I can tell who my enemies are. But gods, Risa. Not being able to separate the sycophants from my real friends is awful."

Risa's lips seemed to have settled into something resembling sympathy. She looked slyly to the side as she whispered, "Is she pretty? This Talia Settecordi?"

He glared. "Not a bit. She's practically a leper. You're horrid."

"Oh, Petro." Risa's hand shot out and stroked his cheek, then chucked his chin. "I'm a ninny. I've been so wrapped up in my own problems. It never occurred to me you would have a whole battery of your own."

"I don't like standing out. That's all."

"I understand. I'm sorry."

Slightly mollified by the apology, Petro shrugged. He felt as if he could manage one of the figs now. It was stuffed with some sort of honey-sweetened cheese and proved stickier than he'd expected.

"I'm very self-centered to think you wouldn't have your own problems," Risa said. "But now I fear I have to add to them."

At the sound of those words, Petro's heart sank. "Wha' do oo 'ean?" he whuffed out, his mouth full of sticky curds. Risa's mouth pursed as she thought how to proceed, and the action only made him more anxious. "Ritha? Wha' ith it?"

"I'm very sorry, Petro." His sister smoothed the fabric of her gown. "I know how you hate to stand out from everyone else."

His mouth finally clear, Petro gulped with apprehension. “What have I done?”
“Nothing,” Risa said. “But you’re not going to like this at all.”

*From the highest voice of our land comes permission to set the plan into motion.
Little do they know that the weapon for their destruction is one they themselves
planted,
and which we have nurtured as our own for nigh upon ten years.*

*—The Baron Friedrich van Wiestel,
in a secret parcel to the spy Gustophe Werner*



Will they rough up whoever you tell them to?” Adrio asked. He and Petro had managed to attract quite a crowd in the minute and a half since they’d returned to the insula. Almost immediately after entering through the front gates, they’d collected a crowd of gawkers, youth and instructors alike, who formed a curious train. By the time they reached the door to Elder Catarre’s chambers, the procession seemed to include half the lower insula. “Because that would come in handy.”

“No, they will not.” Petro’s reply was curt and to the point. He reached up to knock on the door, but hesitated.

“They’re guards!” Adrio said. “They’re trained to fight. You should use them to beat up Pom di Angeli. And the Falo twins. And Brother Michelo. I could come up with a list.” He licked his lips at the thought. “A long list. With codicils to be added later.”

The sight of two youths accompanied by palace guards was nothing unusual upon the city’s streets, but both the Insula of the Penitents of Lena and the Insula of the Children of Muro were so independent from the city that it was rare for either palace guards or city guards to invade the sanctity of the insulas themselves. The two guards that Risa had sent back with Petro had no chance of blending in among the grubby aspirants. In their crimson and gold uniforms, they stood out like two shining ingots among a bucketful of dull sea pebbles.

“It’s bad enough that we’re attracting the attention of every person inside these walls,” Petro growled at his friend. He felt too acutely aware of every gaze upon him at that moment. Assigning him guards for the indefinite future had indeed been the cruelest thing Risa could have done. “Do you really think I want to create enemies?”

“Aren’t the guards supposed to protect you against enemies?”

Though they spoke in whispers, afraid of being overheard, Petro could barely contain himself. “Every person who already dislikes me is going to think I’ve gone and blubbered to my big powerful sister!” he hissed. “This is awful.” Adrio appeared as if he might reply, but then shrugged. Petro shook his head, cleared his throat, and, before knocking, said to his new watchmen, “I’d prefer if you stayed outside while we visited the elder.”

“Those are not our orders, Cazarrino,” replied the older of the two guards. His hair was shaggy enough that Petro had mentally begun to refer to him as “Mop-Head.” “Your sister and the king himself have ordered us to accompany you ... ”

“ ... At all times, in all places, yes, I know.” Petro sighed. Elder Catarre had already responded to his tap at her door, and he couldn’t delay the confrontation much longer. “Blast my luck.”

“You’ll be fine,” Adrio assured him. “She probably won’t even notice.”

Whether his friend was deluded or merely optimistic, Petro had no idea. What he did know for certain, however, was that the moment he opened the door to the elder’s book-lined chambers, she looked up from her writing table and, peering over the tops of her tiny Cassamagi spectacles, absorbed the tableau just beyond the door frame. First, she saw the two boys—one with the Divetri chestnut hair and an expression like he had bitten into a lemon, the other quite short and unkempt. Then she took in the large, muscular guards accompanying them, and finally noticed the people crowding in the arched corridor to see what was happening. At last, her lips parted and she spoke. “My assistants did not inform me the circus had come to town.”

“I beg your pardon, Elder Catarre.” Petro attempted to sound as though he weren’t surrounded by madness. “You wished to see us?”

Though she didn’t lose her considerable composure at all, it was obvious that the elder was at a momentary loss for words. She rose from her cluttered table

and leaned forward, her palms flat on its surface. “Indeed I did, Divetri. Indeed I did. What I did not expect to see, however, was the ringmaster of a carnival accompanied by his toy monkey, touring the provinces and dazzling the yokels. Nor an illusionist awing his audience, nor a pasha who treats the world as his harem! Are those what you think you are, Divetri?”

There was no answer to any of those questions, save, “No, Elder?”

“Close the door.” At her flinty words, Adrio leapt to obey, though not before the two guards glided smoothly inside. Once they had some privacy, the elder continued. “Why is it, Divetri, that I cannot take ten steps within my own insula, a large enough establishment, to be certain, without constantly encountering reminders that you are here? Who are these men and why are they in my insula?”

“The guards are ... I didn’t ask for them!” Petro protested. When he looked at the men in crimson, they stared blandly into space, offering no assistance. “She ... I ...” His voice trailed off as he tried to think how to explain.

Back at the palace, Risa had sighed deeply and sincerely before breaking the news to him. “I’m going to say this as quickly as possible. Milo is hosting a delegation from Vereinigtelände. They arrived last night. We have it on the best authority that they plan to suggest something truly appalling. They will be proposing that a close alliance between their country and Cassaforte is the best way to avoid war. They would gain access to our ports and harbors; in return, they would pledge their armies for our protection.”

“That doesn’t sound appalling at all,” Petro had said, not understanding. Vereinigtelände shared Cassaforte’s northern border. Only the *pasecollina*—a one-hundred-league stretch of farmlands and dense woods belonging to Cassaforte—lay between the city and the foothills of mountainous Vereinigtelände. “It seems everyone gets something.”

“Except for me.” No castor-bean elixir was as bitter as Risa’s words. “Everyone except me.” She sighed once more. “This close alliance they are going to propose will come about through a marriage. The marriage of King Milo of Cassaforte to one of the Emperor of Vereinigtelände’s daughters.”

Petro had blinked, staggered. Milo and Risa had been in love for years. “What does Milo think about this? I can’t imagine you’ve hidden your reaction from

him.”

“What does that mean?” Risa had snapped.

“Risa! You’re not exactly known for concealing your emotions. You yell. You throw the most amazing tantrums.”

“This woman—she’s almost thirty!” His sister’s indignant tone had subsided a little bit. “I’ve tried to think of a hundred reasons why Milo shouldn’t do it, and I can only come up with one. One single, selfish reason.” She didn’t have to say what it was. Petro already knew.

“Doesn’t he love you?”

“Love ... love isn’t always easy and sweet, like the songs from the broadsides.” Risa spoke in the softest voice possible. “I’m more *myself* with Milo than I am with anyone else, even family. That’s what’s important. Oh, don’t be offended. You’ll know how it is one day. But love is not the only consideration. I’ll be here for him when he needs me, and that dreadful old wrinkled crone will be up in the mountains and the snow in Bramen, eating pickled radishes and sausages and playing with her bunions. They’ll meet twice a year and produce an acceptable heir, while I continue to work with him and be whatever it is he wants me to be. I won’t stop loving him! I just won’t be married to him. That’s all.” His sister toyed with the hem of her sleeve and smiled, but Petro hadn’t been fooled. Her face was that of a little girl pretending to be brave.

Watching his sister capitulate had been almost worse than the marriage scheme itself. Even now, it was difficult to think about. After some gargled sounds in his throat, Petro finally managed an explanation for Gina Catarre. “There is a situation at the palace, Elder, that my sister—as well as King Milo and the High Commander of the guards, Lorco Fiernetto—feels warrants the presence of guards for the Divetris.”

“Oh, she feels that, does she?” The elder looked as if she had an opinion on that subject.

Petro tried to explain with as few details as possible. “My sister feels that someone overzealous might use the Divetris to attempt to influence her opinion, with, um, violent means.”

“Like cutting off Petro’s ear to make Risa agree to something she doesn’t want to do,” Adrio added, trying to be helpful.

The elder stared at them both. In a voice so dry it could have withered a plump melon, she inquired, “How likely, Cazarrino, am I to stumble across your disembodied appendages in the course of my daily events?”

“It’s a formality, and only until the wedding—I mean, not likely at all,” Petro mumbled, looking at the floor. “I don’t want these guards. If they’re a bother, send them back to the palace.”

“Your entourage is out of my hands at this point,” she replied. “What I mind is that very much of my life of late has revolved around Petro Divetri. I have instructors from the upper insula applying to me constantly, asking if they might have you in their workshops.”

“Really?” asked Petro, suddenly interested.

“Requests made not due to your academic fumbblings, but rather from a desire to test any skills, latent or active, in the younger brother of Risa the Sorceress.”

Petro’s shoulders slumped. Better to have remained unexceptional than sought-after because of Risa.

The elder circled her desk until she stood directly in front of Petro. Adrio scooted to the side to give her room. “Several glass workshops in the outposts are already squabbling over which of them will eventually be graced with your presence, though I have seen no evidence you have the skill or desire to work glass. I constantly receive requests from the parents of aspirants asking that you become friends with their children—as if I could arrange such a thing. And just when I believe I am having a quiet morning’s walk away from Signor Petro Divetri, I find him dangling from the insula masonry.”

Although the crowd was out in the hallway, Petro could feel their curiosity through the closed door. It almost seemed to suffocate him. “I don’t mean to be a problem.”

“I have ledgers and correspondence,” continued the elder, in an increasingly strident tone. “Fifteen outposts look to me for guidance. I manage the everyday concerns of our residency wing. The vast number of my concerns should push you to the fringes, and yet I find you impossible to ignore, much less avoid.” From his position slightly behind Gina Catarre, Adrio held up his hands and, as if they were stocking Pulcinella puppets, pretended to make them talk. Without turning her head, Elder Catarre grabbed Adrio’s ear and gave him a rough shake.

“Ow!” Adrio squawked. “And to think I never believed when they said you’d eyes in the back of your head.”

Elder Catarre released his lobe and sent him reeling to one side. “Cazarrino, it is for these reasons, and not because of your new attendants, that I have decided to declare the Insula of the Penitents of Lena completely Petro Divetri-free, beginning two days from tomorrow.”

The small hairs on the back of Petro’s neck all stood in alarm. Risa had worried about what their parents thought when she was denied admission to the insulas, but that was absolutely nothing compared to the things they would say when Petro was sent home from his. “But I ... you can’t ... !”

With another sigh, the elder relented. “Oh, don’t look so stricken. It’s not forever. I’m merely sending you to Nascenza for the Midsummer High Rites.” As Petro blinked rapidly, trying to clear his eyes of panic-induced haze, she added, “Surely, as a member of one of Cassaforte’s leading families, you are aware that the Midsummer holiday is not simply an excuse to stay out until sunrise, drinking and wenching?”

“It isn’t?” Adrio asked.

Petro himself wanted to cuff Adrio. He tried to clear his throat. “Yes, Elder, I’m aware. Midsummer festivities are supposed to ... to honor the birthplace of the gods, and to give us a chance to remember those who have passed on.”

“Correct. And every year, the elders of the Insula of the Penitents of Lena and the Insula of the Children of Muro send aspirants as representatives to the High Rites, which are held at the amphitheater of Nascenza, deep in the *pasecollina*. Our representatives are received as highly honored guests and given seats near the altar. Ordinarily, I choose aspirants who have distinguished themselves academically or spiritually. This year, due to the circumstances just elucidated, I have decided that you, Cazarrino, will be our representative.”

“But it’s boring! The High Rites in Nascenza are day after day of prayer, from sunrise to sunset!” Adrio burst out, unable to contain his upset. He composed himself almost immediately, though he didn’t moderate his comments. “There isn’t even a feast! Have a heart, Elder Catarre. Petro’s already made a new mask for our Midsummer revels! He’ll miss the midnight festival! And the throwing of the charms!”

“We’ll miss,” said the Elder, smiling.

“And the fireworks!” Between midnight and dawn on Midsummer’s night, the palace of Cassaforte always provided a wonderful array of fireworks that filled the sky with color and noise. “He’ll miss the fireworks! Wait. Did you say *we*, Elder?”

“Indeed. Our insula sends two representatives. And, given that this year the outstanding characteristic for selection is the ability to induce a splitting headache, you, Ventimilla, are the second representative.”

Adrio’s head swiveled from the Elder to Petro, then back again as the truth sunk in. “Goat turds,” he finally groaned.

“Sister Beatrice from the Insula of the Children of Muro will act as the escort for the pilgrimage, as she has for many a year,” the elder continued smoothly. “Rest assured, Ventimilla, I believe that the throwing of charms is a part of the High Rites. As for Cassaforte’s feast and fireworks, there will be other Midsummers.”

Petro was still trying to sort through his own battling emotions when Elder Catarre put her hand on his shoulder. In a confidential tone, for his ears alone, she said, “Try not to think of it as a punishment, Cazarrino. A fortnight away from the insula will encourage everyone to settle back into their normal routines. Your detractors may see the trip as your comeuppance and be inclined to leave you alone upon your return. The palace can provide you as many guards as they choose for all I care, so long as they carry their own camping supplies. There are no inns or barracks at Nascenza.”

Petro thought for a moment, then nodded. “I understand, Elder.” The alarm he had felt a few moments before had left his skin feeling as tight as a drum, but now he was beginning to feel more like himself. She was giving him the chance to have a holiday from his own reputation, which was exactly what he needed. “I honestly do. I’m very sorry.”

“And who knows,” said the elder, sounding kind for the first time in weeks. “By the time you return, perhaps your sister’s woes will have found resolution and you’ll no longer need those guards.” She smiled at him briefly, then raised her eyebrows at Adrio. “Well, Ventimilla? Don’t you have packing to do?”

“Stupid High Rites,” Adrio muttered, kicking the dirt over the broken mosaic.

“Stupid Nascenza. It’s not even a proper destination! It’s just an amphitheater in the middle of nowhere!”

“If that’s your attitude, I’m certain your year-mates will be anxious to learn whether your visit to Nascenza will change your opinion of its architecture and situation. A thousand-word disquisition on the pilgrimage, I think, to be read aloud at assembly.” Adrio groaned loudly, but clamped his mouth shut to prevent any further outbursts. “As for you, Cazarrino,” Elder Catarre proclaimed, in stern tones once again, “let us not cross paths before you depart. I beg of you.”

“I won’t.” Even if he had to hide beneath his bed for three days solid, Petro swore she wouldn’t hear so much as a peep.

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