

In the Company of the Courtesan

Sarah Dunant

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Extract

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HISTORICAL NOTE

The history of Europe in the first half of the sixteenth century is one of political and religious upheaval. A corrupt Catholic church, centred in Rome, found itself challenged by the emergence of Protestantism, which grew out of Martin Luther's rebellion in 1517 and spread rapidly through Germany and across northern Europe.

Italy was still a set of city-states, vulnerable to attack from within and threatened from without by foreign invasion, most notably by France and Spain, the latter under the rule of the Holy Roman emperor Charles V.

The most powerful Italian cities were Rome and Venice. With Florence in decline, the art and culture of the High Renaissance had moved to Rome, under the patronage of the popes. Meanwhile Venice, situated on the mouth of the Adriatic, was still at the height of her success. A republic run by a large group of noble families, she enjoyed remarkable domestic political stability, a cosmopolitan population, control of the western Mediterranean, and a dazzlingly rich economy built on foreign trade and commerce; Venice was a honeypot for merchants, travellers, and adventurers.

The story you are about to read begins in Rome in 1527.

*P*ART *O*NE

CHAPTER ONE

Rome, 1527

My lady, Fiammetta Bianchini, was plucking her eyebrows and biting colour into her lips when the unthinkable happened and the Holy Roman emperor's army blew a hole in the wall of God's eternal city, letting in a flood of half-starved, half-crazed troops bent on pillage and punishment.

Italy was a living chessboard for the ambitions of half of Europe in those days. The threat of war was as regular as the harvest, alliances made in winter were broken by spring, and there were places where women bore another child by a different invading father every other year. In the great and glorious city of Rome we had grown soft living under God's protection, but such was the instability of the times that even the holiest of fathers made unholy alliances, and a pope with Medici blood in his veins was always more prone to politics than to prayer.

In the last few days before the horror struck, Rome still couldn't bring herself to believe that her destruction was nigh. Rumours crept like bad smells through the streets. The stonemasons shoring up the city walls told of a mighty army of

Spaniards, their savagery honed on the barbarians of the New World, swelled with cohorts of German Lutherans fuelled on the juices of the nuns they had raped on their journey south. Yet when the Roman defence led by the nobleman Renzo de Ceri marched through the town touting for volunteers for the barricades, these same bloodthirsty giants became half-dead men marching on their knees, their assholes close to the ground to dispel all the rotting food and bad wine they had guzzled on the way. In this version, the enemy was so pathetic that, even were the soldiers to find the strength to lift their guns, they had no artillery to help them, and with enough stalwart Romans on the battlements we could drown them in our piss and mockery as they tried to scale their way upward. The joys of war always talk better than they play; still, the prospect of a battle won by urine and bravura was enticing enough to attract a few adventurers with nothing to lose, including our stable boy, who left the next afternoon.

Two days later, the army arrived at the gates and my lady sent me to get him back.

On the evening streets, our louche, loud city had closed up like a clam. Those with enough money had already bought their own private armies, leaving the rest to make do with locked doors and badly boarded windows. While my gait is small and bandied, I have always had a homing pigeon's sense of direction and, for all its twists and turns, Rome had long been mapped inside my head. My lady entertained a client once, a merchant captain who mistook my deformity for a sign of God's special grace and who promised me a fortune if I could find him a way to the Indies across the open sea. But I was born with a recurring nightmare of a great bird picking me up in its claws and dropping me into an empty ocean, and for that, and other reasons, I have always been afraid of water.

As the walls came into sight, I could see neither lookouts nor

sentries. Until now we had never had need of such things, our rambling fortifications being more for the delight of antiquarians than for generals. I clambered up by way of one of the side towers, my thighs thrumming from the deep tread of the steps, and stood for a moment catching my breath. Along the stone corridor of the battlement, two figures were slouched down against the wall. Above me, above them, I could make out a low wave of moaning, like the murmur of a congregation at litany in church. In that moment my need to know became greater than my terror of finding out, and I hauled myself up over uneven and broken stones as best I could until I had a glimpse above the top.

Below me, as far as the eye could see, a great plain of darkness stretched out, spiked by hundreds of flickering candles. The moaning rolled like a slow wind through the night, the sound of an army joined in prayer or talking to itself in its sleep. Until then I think even I had colluded in the myth of our invincibility. Now I knew how the Trojans must have felt as they looked down from their walls and saw the Greeks camped before them, the promise of revenge glinting off their polished shields in the moonlight. Fear spiked my gut as I scrambled back down onto the battlement, and in a fury I went to kick the sleeping sentries awake. Close to, their hoods became cowls, and I made out two young monks, barely old enough to tie their own tassels, their faces pasty and drawn. I drew myself to my full height and squared up to the first, pushing my face into his. He opened his eyes and yelled, thinking that the enemy had sent a fatheaded, smiling devil out of Hell for him early. His panic roused his companion. I put my fingers to my lips and grinned again. This time they both squealed. I've had my fair share of pleasure from scaring clerics, but at that moment I wished that they had more courage to resist me. A hungry Lutheran would have had them split on his bayonet before they might say *Dominus vobiscum*. They crossed themselves frantically and, when I questioned them, waved me

on towards the gate at San Spirito, where, they said, the defence was stronger. The only strategy I have perfected in life is one to keep my belly full, but even I knew that San Spirito was where the city was at its most vulnerable, with Cardinal Armellini's vineyards reaching to the battlements and a farmhouse built up and into the very stones of the wall itself.

Our army, such as it was when I found it, was huddled in clumps around the building. A couple of makeshift sentries tried to stop me, but I told them I was there to join the fight, and they laughed so hard they let me through, one of them aiding me along with a kick that missed my rear by a mile. In the camp, half the men were stupid with terror, the other half stupid with drink. I never did find the stable boy, but what I saw instead convinced me that a single breach here and Rome would open up as easily as a wife's legs to her handsome neighbour.

Back home, I found my mistress awake in her bedroom, and I told her all I had seen. She listened carefully, as she always did. We talked for a while, and then, as the night folded around us, we fell silent, our minds slipping away from our present life, filled with the warmth of wealth and security, towards the horrors of a future that we could barely imagine.

By the time the attack came, at first light, we were already at work. I had roused the servants before dawn, and my lady had instructed them to lay the great table in the gold room, giving orders to the cook to slaughter the fattest of the pigs and start preparing a banquet the likes of which were usually reserved for cardinals or bankers. While there were mutterings of dissent, such was her authority – or possibly their desperation – that any plan seemed comforting at the moment, even one that appeared to make no sense.

The house had already been stripped of its more ostentatious wealth: the great agate vases, the silver plates, the majolica dishes, the gilded crystal Murano drinking glasses, and the best

linens had all been stowed away three or four days before, wrapped first inside the embroidered silk hangings, then the heavy Flemish tapestries, and packed into two chests. The smaller one was so ornate with gilt and wood marquetry that it had to be covered again with burlap to save it from the damp. It took the cook, the stable boy, and both of the twins to drag the chests into the yard, where a great hole had been dug under the flagstones close to the servants' latrines. When they were buried and covered with a blanket of fresh faeces (fear is an excellent loosener of the bowels), we let out the five pigs, bought at a greatly inflated price a few days earlier, and they rolled and kicked their way around, grunting their delight as only pigs can do in shit.

With all trace of the valuables gone, my lady had taken her great necklace – the one she had worn to the party at the Strozzi house, where the rooms had been lit by skeletons with candles in their ribs and the wine, many swore afterwards, had been as rich and thick as blood – and to every servant she had given two fat pearls. The remaining ones, she told them, were theirs for the dividing if the chests were found unopened when the worst was over. Loyalty is a commodity that grows more expensive when times get bloody, and as an employer Fiammetta Bianchini was as much loved as she was feared, and in this way she cleverly pitted each man as much against himself as against her. As to where she had hidden the rest of her jewellery, well, that she did not reveal.

What remained after this was done was a modest house of modest wealth with a smattering of ornaments, two lutes, a pious Madonna in the bedroom, and a wood panel of fleshy nymphs in the salon, decoration sufficient to the fact of her dubious profession but without the stench of excess many of our neighbours' palazzi emitted. Indeed, a few hours later, as a great cry went up and the church bells began to chime, each one coming fast on the other, telling us that our defences had been

penetrated, the only aroma from our house was that of slow-roasting pig, growing succulent in its own juices.

Those who lived to tell the tale spoke with a kind of awe of that first breach of the walls; of how, as the fighting got fiercer with the day, a fog had crept up from the marshes behind the enemy lines, thick and gloomy as broth, enveloping the massing attackers below so that our defence force couldn't fire down on them accurately until, like an army of ghosts roaring out of the mist, they were already upon us. After that, whatever courage we might have found was no match for the numbers they could launch. To lessen our shame, we did take one prize off them, when a shot from an arquebus blew a hole the size of the Eucharist in the chest of their leader, the great Charles de Bourbon. Later, the goldsmith Benvenuto Cellini boasted to anyone who would listen of his miraculous aim. But then Cellini boasted of everything. To hear him speak – as he never stopped doing, from the houses of nobles to the taverns in the slums – you would have thought the defence of the city was down to him alone. In which case it is him we should blame, for with no leader, the enemy now had nothing to stop their madness. From that first opening, they flowed up and over into the city like a great wave of cockroaches. Had the bridges across the Tiber been destroyed, as the head of the defence force, de Ceri, had advised, we might have trapped them in the Trastevere and held them off for long enough to regroup into some kind of fighting force. But Rome had chosen comfort over common sense, and with the Ponte Sisto taken early, there was nothing to stop them.

And thus, on the sixth day of the month of May in the year of our Lord 1527, did the second sack of Rome begin.

What couldn't be ransomed or carried was slaughtered or destroyed. It is commonly said now that it was the Lutheran

lansquenets troops who did the worst. While the Holy Roman emperor, Charles V, might be God's sworn defender, he wasn't above using the swords of heretics to swell his army and terrify his enemies. For them Rome was sweet pickings, the very home of the Antichrist, and as mercenaries whom the emperor had conveniently forgotten to pay, they were as much in a frenzy to line their pockets as they were to shine their souls. Every church was a cesspool of corruption, every nunnery the repository for whores of Christ, every orphan skewered on a bayonet (their bodies too small to waste their shot on) a soul saved from heresy. But while all that may be true, I should say that I also heard as many Spanish as German oaths mixed in with the screaming, and I wager that when the carts and the mules finally rode out of Rome, laden with gold plate and tapestries, as much of it was heading for Spain as for Germany.

Had they moved faster and stolen less in that first attack, they might have captured the greatest prize of all: the Holy Father himself. But by the time they reached the Vatican palace, Pope Clement VII had lifted up his skirts (to find, no doubt a brace of cardinals squeezed beneath his fat stomach) and, along with a dozen sacks hastily stuffed with jewels and holy relics, run as if he had the Devil on his heels to the Castel Sant'Angelo, the draw-bridge rising up after him with the invaders in sight and a dozen priests and courtiers still hanging from its chains, until they had to shake them off and watch them drown in the moat below.

With death so close, those still living fell into a panic over the state of their souls. Some clerics, seeing the hour of their own judgement before them, gave confessions and indulgences for free, but there were others who made small fortunes selling forgiveness at exorbitant rates. Perhaps God was watching as they worked: certainly when the Lutherans found them, huddled like rats in the darkest corners of the churches, their bulging robes clutched around them, the wrath visited upon them was all the

more righteous as they were disembowelled, first for their wealth and then for their guts.

Meanwhile, in our house, as the clamour of violence grew in the distance, we were busy polishing the forks and wiping clean the second-best glasses. In her bedroom, my lady, who had been scrupulous as ever in the business of her beauty, put the finishing touches to her toilette, and came downstairs. The view from her bedroom window now showed the occasional figure skidding and hurtling through the streets, his head twisting backwards as he ran, as if fearful of the wave that was to overwhelm him. It would not be long before the screams got close enough for us to distinguish individual agonies. It was time to rally our own defence force.

I had called the servants together in the dining room as she entered. How she looked I shall save for later: they were all familiar enough with the power of her appearance and at that moment were more interested in saving their own skins than in standing in awe of hers. She took in the scene with a single glance. To her left Adriana, her maid, was crouching, her arms wrapped around herself so tightly it looked as if she could no longer breathe. Baldesar, the cook, was in the doorway, his face and upper arms shining with sweat and grease from the spit, while at the end of the newly laid table, the slender twin house-boys were standing, each with a glass goblet in his right hand, the only discernible difference in their appearance being the level of trembling.

‘If you cannot hold it properly, put the goblet down, Zaccano.’ My lady’s voice was strong and low. ‘Our visitors will not thank you for finding their places over shards of glass.’

Zaccano gave a moan as his fingers loosened around the stem, letting the glass fall into the open left hand of Giacomo, who, as always, seemed to know what his brother would do before he did it.

‘Bravo, Giacomo. You will be the one to serve the wine.’

‘My lady –’

‘Baldesar?’ she said, barely turning to look at him.

‘There are three guns in the cellars. And the kitchen has a drawer full of knives.’ He wiped his hands on his trousers. ‘If we take one each –’

‘If you take one each, tell me, please – how will you carve the pig?’ And now she turned and looked him in the eye.

He held her gaze. ‘If you’ll excuse me, madam, this is madness. Don’t you hear what’s happening out there? We’re the pigs now. They’re skewering us like so many cuts of meat.’

‘I dare say they are. But despite their gross lack of manners, I doubt even they have the temerity to assuage their hunger by roasting and eating us after they have killed us.’

To her side, Adriana let out a long wail and sank to the floor. I made a move towards her, but Fiammetta stopped me with a glance.

‘Get up, Adriana,’ she said sharply. ‘It is well known that when a woman is on the ground, it is a good deal easier to lift her skirts. So get up. *Now.*’

Adriana rose, the whimpering caught in her throat. The room vibrated with her anxiety.

Fiammetta turned on her heel, and I watched the fury collide with the fear. ‘What is wrong with you all?’ She slapped her hands on the table, hard enough to make the cutlery rattle. ‘Think about it. They cannot massacre every single one of us. Those who live will save their skins by cunning as much as by any set of blunt kitchen knives – for which, you should know, I excuse you, Baldesar, because your sauces make up for the butchery of your cuts.’

‘When they get here, I dare say there will be those who are still hungry for cunt and bloodshed, but there will also be others who have had enough. Hell roasts even its own devils, and it can

make you sick as well as mad, this killing frenzy. So we are going to save them from themselves. We are going to open our house to them; to offer them comfort and hospitality, an art in which we are well practised. And in return, though they will take – indeed, we will offer them – the cutlery, the glasses, the rugs, the trinkets, and anything else they can rip from the walls, if we are lucky, they will leave us our lives. Not least because when you have been on the road for years, a house to come home to can be a great solace as well as a safe place to store your booty, and the only thing better than a good whore is a good cook. And this house, I would remind you, has both.’

In the silence that followed, I could almost hear the applause of another audience: one of clerics, bankers, or scholars, powerful men who, having eaten and drunk their fill, revel in the art of debate with a beautiful woman, especially when the elegant is spiced with the crude – a talent in which my lady excelled. But there was no one applauding now. Did they believe her? She had sounded convincing enough to me. It didn’t matter. As long as they stayed. Still no one moved.

She took a breath. ‘So – for those who want it – there is the door.’

She waited.

Finally the cook turned, growling . . . ‘I’m on my own in there. If you want good cooking, I need the girl to help.’

‘She’s not ready. You’ll have to do with one of the boys. Zaccano. Don’t fret. You will not be separated for long. Giacomo, you get the tapers ready. I want the candles in all the holders for when dusk comes. You, Adriana, get to avail yourself of the finest cloth. Take the blue dress with the high neck from my chest and a pair of satin slippers to match. Use a little rouge on your face – but only a little. You are aiming for sweetness, not seduction. And don’t take all day about it.’

The girl, caught now between joy and terror, made for the

stairs. As the room cleared, Fiammetta sat down at the head of the table. Now, with the light on her face, I could see a fine sweat on her skin.

‘It was well done,’ I said quietly. ‘No one will leave now.’

She shrugged and closed her eyes. ‘Then they will probably die here.’

We sat for a moment listening. The noise level outside was rising. Soon those few lost souls would be a rush of madmen.

The doubt was there anyway. I simply gave it voice. ‘Can we do this?’

She shook her head. ‘Who knows? If they are as starved and weary as the rumours say, then maybe we stand a chance. Let’s pray for Spaniards. I’ve never yet met one who didn’t savour the juices of life over the piety of death. If it’s the Lutherans, then we would do better to hold on to our rosaries and hope for martyrdom. But I’ll take a stomachful of jewels with me first.’

‘Then what? Shit them out in Hell and bribe the guards.’

Her laughter flared up like a small flame of hope. ‘You forget I am a cardinal’s courtesan, Bucino. I’ve got enough indulgences to see me at least as far as Purgatory.’

‘And where does that leave the cardinal’s courtesan’s dwarf?’

‘Small enough to be concealed under a penitent’s shift,’ she said, and as she did so a single voice rose up from the clamour for an instant with a few mangled but recognisable words: ‘*Casas de la gente nobile . . . Estamos aquí.*’

The enemy, it seemed, had arrived. If grace belongs to God, there are those who say that luck belongs to the Devil and that he looks after his own. All I know is Rome was a playground for destiny that day, and when they came to pile the bodies into the pits, there were as many innocent souls slaughtered as there were guilty ones who survived. About our status, I leave it to others to make up their minds.

My lady stood up and smoothed her skirts, a finely dressed

woman rising to meet her guests. 'Let's hope their captain isn't far behind. I wouldn't like to waste my best gold brocade on a rabble of soldiers. You'd better check Adriana. If she looks like someone's daughter, she might survive longer than a servant. Though too obvious a virgin will undo us also.'

I moved towards the stairs.

'Bucino.'

I turned.

'Can you still remember how to juggle?'

'You learn something early enough, you never forget it,' I said. 'What would you have me play with?'

She smiled. 'How about our lives?'

It took longer than we thought for them to get to us. But then rape and pillage is a time-consuming business, and there were so many and so much to get through. It was almost dusk when I stood up on the roof watching them flood into the street below. They took the corner howling, nine or ten of them in front, their swords out and their clothes half off them, mouths open like black pits, bodies jerky and wild, as if they were puppets strung up by the Devil and dancing to his tune. Behind them came a dozen or so more, dragging a cart piled high, and some way behind them there was a man on horseback, though if he was their captain, he was clearly no longer leading from the front.

As they reached our piazza, they stopped for a moment. The city was filled with rich houses, all with locked doors and shuttered windows. A couple of the men were swaying on their feet. Rome had better wine than the sad countryside they had ravaged, and they must have downed barrels of it by now. A big man from behind let out a roar and grabbed an axe off the cart, lifting his arms high in the air and staggering a little as he ran before smashing the axe down on the window frame of the

spice merchant's house on the corner. You could hear the crack echo through the building and then the fluttering screams it evoked from inside. The sound drew the rest like moths to a flame. It took maybe a dozen of them ten minutes to smash their way in. Behind them, others were eyeing the rest of the square. The officer was almost off his horse as I moved from the roof to call down to my lady. But the courtyard below was already empty, and I got back to the edge in time to hear the main doors unlock beneath me and watch her move out into the twilight of the square.

What did they see as the doors swung open to reveal her? By this time in her life, Fiammetta Bianchini had received more than her fair share of compliments, many of them substantial enough to be buried away in grand chests under a heap of dung. But for now we will keep it simple, like the men she faced. She stood tall, in the way only rich women can do, used as they are to riding with their heads above the crowd, and she was beautiful. Her skin was smooth and pale as alabaster, and her breasts pushed up from her gold-threaded bodice in a way that revealed as much as it concealed: the perfect modest seduction in a city of rich celibates who needed to pretend virtue even when they walked the streets with their cocks up like flagpoles underneath their clerics' robes.

Her eyes were green as new growth, her lips full and red, and her cheeks had a dusting of peach blush to them. But it was her hair that set her apart. Because my lady had hair like a golden river in spring flood, its hues as rich as the rush of the waters; streams of white gold and sunflower mixed with honey and red chestnut, so strange and yet so natural that it was clearly God's gift rather than that of any apothecary's bottles. And because she had no ring on her finger or husband in her house, when she entertained she wore it long and rippling free, so that on an evening when the mood took her and she flung back her head in

laughter or pretended pique, this rich curtain of hair flew with her, and if you were close by, you might swear that the sun had come out for you alone.

So, yes, those club-limbed peasants reeking of death and booze were stopped in their tracks when she appeared. Rome was a city filled with lovely women then, many grown lovelier on its easy virtue, and each and any one of them would have been like a cool draft to men dying of thirst. But few had my lady's wit, which was sharper than a toothpick, or her cunning when presented with a fight.

'Good evening, soldiers of Spain. You have come a long way, and you are welcome to our great city.' Her voice was strong and her vocabulary honed on a generous handful of Spanish merchants and itinerant clerics. A good courtesan can seduce in many languages, and Rome had trained the best of them. 'Where is your captain?'

The man on horseback across the square was turning, but there were others nearer. Now that her voice had broken the spell, they started to move towards her, one ahead of the others, grinning and holding out his arms in jubilant supplication, the knife an added attraction to his charms.

'I am the captain,' he said in a thick voice, while behind him the men whooped and snorted. 'And you must be the pope's whore.'

He was almost upon her now. She didn't move, simply drew herself up a little higher, until she had maybe two inches on him. 'The whores, sir, you have already had. This is the house of Fiammetta Bianchini. It offers food and lodging for men who have not yet tasted true Roman hospitality.'

He grunted, staring at her, as if the words befuddled him. Behind him three more moved forward, smelling the kill. The captain was off his horse now, pushing his way through the knot of men who had gathered. Next to me on the roof, Zaccano's

hands were starting to shake so much that I began to worry about the gun in his grasp. You would be hard-pressed to find two brothers in Rome more beautiful, but such was the synchronicity of Giacomo's and Zaccano's twinned characters that it was always a danger separating them. Without the stable boy, though, we had no choice.

Another soldier, his face black from the soot of spent shot, shoved his companion aside and marched up to my lady, closer this time. His hand moved towards her body. She stood stock-still until it came within an inch of her breast, then, with the speed of an evening swallow, she swooped her right hand up and cracked his aside. His yelp was as much of indignation as of pain.

'I am sorry, sir,' she said, and quick as an ink stain, her left hand had pulled out a silk embroidered handkerchief, which she held out to him. 'Your hands are dirty. After you have washed, I will be happy to make your acquaintance. Please – keep the cloth.'

He took it, and after he had briefly wiped himself, he turned on her again. But whether to give it back or to add something to it I never found out, because that was the moment when my hand slipped and Zaccano misread my panicky nudge as the sign for action. The shot rang out mercifully far above their heads. Their eyes swivelled upward. Along the line of the roof, three guns and half a dozen broomstick handles fashioned crudely to resemble gun barrels sat trained down onto the street. With the smoke of the shot still in the air, the house might even have looked defended. We have since disagreed about that moment, she and I. I say that while she had not yet lost the game, the shot gave them good pause for thought. She is of the opinion that she could have won them over without it. As it was, the hesitation lasted long enough for the captain to get himself to the front.

He was as tall as she but skinny; even his face was more bone than flesh, and though, after he cleaned up, he lost ten years off

his age, the look in the eyes never got any softer. Killing is a grown-up business, even when the young do it. A crude city map was pushed into his belt. To judge from the size of the cart, it had made them better treasure seekers than those working on blind frenzy. He and his men already had more than enough booty to make them rich, but his status and his strategies would give him the pick of the most precious things. And one of those was now standing in front of him.

‘My lord,’ she said, smiling. ‘Please forgive my servants. They are over-zealous in the protection of their mistress. I am the lady Fiammetta Bianchini, and it is my pleasure to invite you and your men to a feast in my house. Bucino!’ And while her voice lifted up to me, her eyes never strayed from the captain’s face. ‘You hear me? We are among friends and have no need of weapons now. Throw them down from the roof and get yourselves back to the kitchen.’

We did as we were told. Three old guns and six broomsticks hit the stone below, the soldiers yelping in delight at our pathetic subterfuge.

‘Gentlemen. We can offer you suckling pig with truffle sauce, roast capon, salted pike, and the choice of finest salamis – you would not believe their size . . .’

Their laughter turned to whoops of delight, and my lady laughed with them, though not enough to take her concentration off the prey in front of her. ‘Followed by marzipan, milk puddings, and sugared fruits, along with the best of our cellar. We have the highest-quality beeswax candles with scented oils, entertainment with sweet lute music such as the Holy Father himself delights in, and once you have eaten and drunk your fill, you can fall asleep on clean linen over fresh straw in the rooms and stables below. While for you, Captain’ – and here she paused for just a second – ‘there is a carved bed and a goose-feather mattress soft as a cloud. Our house is yours for as long as you

care to stay. When you leave, you may take your pick of whatever riches it possesses. All we ask is that you give us your protection from those who may follow.'

I dare say that, if he was well born, he might have come across her like before. Or maybe he had lived on dreams till then. Well, she was real enough now. Each and every one of the men was watching him. While it is possible he might have done less killing than some of them – the ones who give the orders also yield something of the risk – he was clever enough to have earned their attention. And for now, at least, their obedience. Though that might have had as much to do with the smell of roasting pig flesh, which was rolling in waves through the open doors out into the square. I swear, even from the roof I could spot the drool on their lips.

He nodded, then glanced around him and grinned. 'Roman hospitality! What did I tell you about it?' He yelled, and the roar rose up around him. 'Put the cart into the courtyard and sheath your weapons. Tonight we sleep on soft beds with the lady Bianchini as our host. Let's show her how Spanish manners can match Roman wealth.'

Then he turned back to her and held out his hand. And, though it was no less bloody and stained than that of the man before, she laid her own gently within it and bowed.

As for me, well, I went back to juggling. In lieu of balls, after our guests had stuffed themselves stupid, I took half a dozen of my lady's pricked copper pomades and spun them through the air in the candlelight, though their musk perfume offered scant relief against so many gaping mouths belching bad breath. Drunken men can be a dwarf's worst enemies, for their curiosity turns easily to violence, but these had had their fill of blood, for a while at least, and wanted only to be entertained. So they yelled and applauded my skills and grinned at my devil faces and

guffawed as I waddled around the room with a napkin the shape of the papal crown on my head, blessing everyone who approached to touch my robes, each of them by now too drunk and raucous to know what else he might be missing. So it was that Adriana kept her virginity, the cook his kitchen knives, and our mistress her pearl necklace and her best Murano glass. For that evening at least.

Not everyone survived, though. Before the night was out, the bloodlust returned and two men had skewered each other over the dining table. Ours was a house that had seen cardinals and diplomats gamble away the tribute of a small town over which of them should share my lady's bed that night, but no one before had died from pique over who should drink from the wineglass and who from the silver goblet. Within seconds one had his fingers around the other's throat, while his adversary was flailing at him with a knife. By the time the captain got down from the bedchamber, his clothes half on and his sword unsheathed, it was already over and both of them were on the floor pumping blood into puddles of red wine. They were so drunk that if it had been sleep rather than death, I daresay neither of them would have remembered it in the morning. We rolled them up in old sheets and bumped them down the stairs to the coolest part of the cellar. Above, the party continued unabated.

Eventually, excess exhausted them. In the yard, even the pigs slept, their great carcasses rolling and snorting over our hidden riches. The smell in the house was much the same. The place reeked of belches and urine, each room filled with heaving, snoring men, some in blankets, some on straw, some lying where they had fallen. At least they were loyal enemies now. Our doors were locked and bolted, with the posted sentries semi-comatose, empty flagons by their sides. In the kitchen, the cook was asleep under the sink, while Adriana and the twins were inside the

larder, the temptation of their various beauties locked out of harm's way for the night, and I was sitting on the table, picking scraps off pig bones and teaching Spanish swear words to my lady's parrot, whom, though he would never thank me for it, I had saved from roasting earlier that evening. Outside, the sounds of the city were a ragged chorus from Hell: distant blasts of gunshot mixed in with staccato yelps and howls.

Somewhere in the dead of the night, the horror got closer when a man in one of the neighbouring houses started screaming; a single, protracted screech of agony followed by moaning and shouting, then another scream, and another, as if someone was chopping off his limbs one by one. Those who keep their houses locked have something to save apart from their skins. Where does a rich merchant hide his coins or his wife her jewels? How many cuts do you have to suffer before you tell them where to look? What point to jewelled rings when you have no fingers left to wear them on?

The banging came at the side door at the same instant.

'Bucino? Adriana? Open up. For God's sake . . .' A rasping voice, then a more rasping cough.

One of the guards growled, then snored on. I opened the door, and Ascanio fell into my arms, his chest catching for breath and his face shiny with sweat. I helped him to the bench and he gulped down some watered wine, the liquid slopping out of the cup with his trembling. 'My God, Bucino,' he said, taking in the chaos of the kitchen. 'What happened here?'

'We are occupied,' I said lightly, cutting him off a bit of left-over meat. 'And have been entertaining the enemy.'

'Fiammetta?'

'Is upstairs with a captain of the Spanish guard. She used her charms to buy his protection.'

Ascanio laughed, but it rolled back into his lungs, and for a

moment he couldn't speak for coughing. 'Do you think when death comes she'll offer to fuck it first?' Like every man in Rome, Ascanio had a longing for my mistress. He was assistant to the city's greatest printer-engraver, Marcantonio Raimondi, a man of stature enough to be an occasional visitor to my lady's soirées, and like his master, Ascanio knew the ways of the world. How many evenings had the two of us sat together while the powerful went to bed with the beautiful and we drank their leftovers, talking scandal and politics long into the night? While Rome was now being punished for its worldliness and decadence, it had also been a place of wonder and vibrancy to those with the talent or the wit to join. Though not any more . . .

'How far have you come?'

'From Gianbattista Rosa's studio. The Lutheran devils have taken everything. I barely got out alive. I've been running all the way with my belly close to the ground. I know how you see the world now.'

He started to cough again. I refilled his glass and held it up to him. He had come from the country originally, with a fast brain and deft fingers for setting the letters into the press, and, like me, his dexterity had got him further in life than he could have expected. His master's books were in the libraries of Rome's greatest scholars, and the workshop engraved the art of men whom the pope himself employed to beautify his sacred ceilings and walls. But the same press also inked satire and gossip sheets for Pasquino's statue in Piazza Navona and, a few years before, a certain set of engravings had proved too carnal even for His Unholiness's steady gaze, and Ascanio and his master had tasted the hospitality of a Roman jail, which had left them both with weak chests. There was a joke that they now mixed the ink for the paler washes with their own phlegm. But it was meant well enough. In the end they earned their living by spreading the news rather than by making it, and thus they were neither

wealthy nor powerful enough to be anybody's enemies for long.

'Sweet Jesus, have you seen what's happening out there? It's a charnel house. The city is blazing halfway to the walls. Bloody barbarians. They took everything Gianbattista had, and then they set fire to his paintings. The last I saw him he was being whipped on like a mule to carry his own riches onto their carts. Ah! God damn it!' Under the draining board, the cook gave a grunt and knocked a wooden spoon across the floor, and Ascanio jumped like a fish out of water. 'I tell you, Bucino, we're all going to die. You know what they're saying on the streets?'

'That this is God's judgement upon us for our sins?'

He nodded. 'Those stinking German heretics are reciting the fall of Sodom and Gomorrah as they smash the altars and ransack the churches. I tell you, I keep seeing that madman hanging off the statue of St Paul and ranting about the pope.'

"Behold the bastard of Sodom. For your sins will Rome be destroyed," I said, rolling my voice down into my chest. It had been the talk of the season: how the wild man with flaming red hair and a naked, stringy body had come out of the country, climbed up onto St Paul's stone shoulders with a skull in one hand and a crucifix in the other, damning the pope for his evil ways and foretelling the sack of the city within fourteen days. Prophecy may be a divine art, but it is an imprecise one: two months later he was still in prison. 'What? You really think that if Rome had changed her ways, this wouldn't be happening? You should read more of your own gossip sheets, Ascanio. This place has been rank for decades. Pope Clement's sins are no worse than those of a dozen holy embezzlers who came before him. This isn't bad faith we're suffering from but bad politics. This emperor doesn't brook challenge from anyone, and any pope who took him on – especially a Medici one – always risked getting his balls squeezed.'

He sniggered at my words and took another gulp of wine. The

screaming began once more. The merchant again? Or maybe the banker this time? Or the fat notary, whose house was even bigger than his paunch and who earned his living creaming off cuts from the bribes he processed into the papal coffers. On the street, he had a voice like a gelded goat, but when it comes to agony, one man's screams sound much like another's.

Ascanio shivered. 'What do you have that's so precious you wouldn't give it up, Bucino?'

'Nothing but my balls,' I said, and I tossed two of my lady's pomades high into the air.

'Always the smart answer, eh? No wonder she loves you. You may be an ugly little sot, but I know a dozen men in Rome who'd swap their fortunes for yours, even now. You're a lucky fellow.'

'The luck of the damned,' I said. Strange how, now we were so close to death, the truth seemed to tumble out so easily. 'Ever since my mother first looked at me and fainted in horror.' And I grinned.

He stared at me for a moment, then shook his head. 'I don't know what to make of you, Bucino. For all your twisted limbs and fat head, you're an arrogant little bastard. Do you know what Aretino used to say about you? That your very existence was a challenge to Rome, because your ugliness was more true than all of its beauty. I wonder what he'd make of all this, eh? He knew it would happen too, you know. He said as much when he blasted the pope in his last *prognostico*.'

'Just as well he isn't here then. Or both sides would have set fire to his pen by now.'

Ascanio didn't say anything, just slid his head down on the table as if it was all too much for him. There was a time when you would have found him hunched over the machines late into the night, running off newly printed gossip sheets to keep the city informed of its own bowel movements. He had liked being

on the edge of it all then; I daresay it made him feel like he owned a slice of it. But the rankness of a prison cell had drained his spirit and pumped bitterness into his veins. He gave a groan and started up. 'I have to go.' But he was still trembling.

'You could stay here, for a while at least.'

'No, no, I can't . . . I—I have to get out.'

'You going back to the press?'

'I—I don't know.' He was up and moving around now, the energy of nerves, twitchy and jumpy, eyes everywhere at once. Outside, our neighbour's screams had turned to wild, sporadic moaning. 'You know what I'm going to do as soon as this is over? Get my stinking carcass out of here. Set up somewhere on my own. Taste the good life for myself.'

But the good life was seeping away all around us. His eyes darted around the room again. 'You should come with me, Bucino. You can do accounting in your head, and those juggler's fingers would be good with the typesetting. Think about it. Even if you make it through this, the best whores last only a few years. This way I could see us both right. I've got money, and with your knowledge of the back streets, I bet you could find us a way out of here safely tonight.'

There came a sound from inside the house. Someone was up and moving. Ascanio was at the door before I could answer. He was sweating again, and his breathing was rough. I went with him to the main entrance, and, because he had been a friend, of sorts, I told him a back way through to near the gate of San Spirito, where yesterday there had been a city wall but now there would be a gaping hole. If he made it that far, he might stand a chance.

Outside, in the darkness, the square was empty. 'Good luck,' I said.

He kept close to the wall, head down, and as he turned the corner, it struck me that I would never see him again.