

The King's Agent ~ Donna Russo Morin

The

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Donna Russo Morin

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You are my master and my author,

You-the only one from whom my writing drew the noble style

For which I have been honored.

-Dante Alighieri (1265-1321)

Divina Commedia

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Chapter One

Here one must leave behind all hesitation;

Here every cowardice must meet its death.

-Inferno

His hands quivered ever so slightly. Not with fear—he scoffed silently at the very notion—but with the exhilaration thrumming through his veins. His moment of triumph, of victorious possession, came upon him and he would not deny its power.

Battista della Palla stood before the carved door, shoulders hunched, broad body curled inward, as he jimmied the miniscule, well-worn silver rod into the small, square lock well. Dark eyes stole a quick, sidelong glance down each end of the empty corridor. A few flicks of his leather-cuffed wrist and...*click*.

He hummed a contented sigh, pushed back the swath of wavy black hair from his face, and pushed over the arched swing shackle of the padlock. The heavy, intricately scrolled device dropped into his hands and he palmed it into his satchel, such locks were a treasure worth filching. For Battista, their value lay far beyond the monetary; they were trophies of a hunt well served. With a last glance to the empty passageway, a waggle of dark, thick brows, and a twitch of a smile, he took a bow to an imaginary audience and slipped in.

Stepping into the largest private room of the palazzo, he tucked his small tool back into its pouch on his cuff. One lone candle burned low in the far corner, its pale yellow light outshone by that of the three-quarter moon. The gray glow streamed through the four tall leaded windows on the opposite wall, checkering the room with squares of muted incandescence.

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He had seen the inside of many a nobleman's bedchamber, spent more than a little time in them, for here the privileged kept their valuables. Here Battista did much of his work.

The fire burned low in the grate to his left, meek blaze sparking upon the gold cloth of the pastoral tapestries covering the inside wall beside him. There, in front of him, at the foot of the curtained bed, stood the mahogany strongbox, rugged and rigid with its thick steel bands, incongruous against the flowing cerulean bed draperies.

Battista grumbled an irritated chuckle. Two more padlocks bound each band, ones equally as intricate and as valued as the first. He knelt before the large chest, knees cracking, leather braces stretching against flexing calf muscles, nettled mumblings unchecked. The duca di Carcaci guarded his treasures well.

What a shame I must steal one.

The passing thought came and went in Battista's mind, one tinted with pale regret, brushed away with the impatient hand of his oft-thought though transitory vacillations. He had attempted to acquire the piece through diplomatic and pecuniary methods, had offered the duke a handsome purse—more than generous—and with it offered the nobleman a chance to assist Firenze. But both opportunities had been summarily denied, and now Battista must do what he must, whatever it took for his beloved Florence. If such efforts wrought him a princely income in the doing, then so be it.

He dealt with these locks—round, bulbous, and brass—as easily as the first, and tossed open the heavy cover of the chest, cringing at the grating creak of the hinges. His glance tripped up and about sheepishly, as if waiting for the door to be thrown open and incarceration to commence. But with no true cause. The stillness continued unabated, as did his thievery. Only his gaze faltered, fixed upon the massive portrait crowning the large bed.

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Four people gazed back at him, their happiness in the moment and in one another captured and undeniable. The *duca*, a middle-aged man but with a youthful countenance, his wife still pretty, a full figure enhanced by the attentions of a loving husband and the births of their two children. Two girls played at their feet, perhaps two years apart in age, yet identical in their dark-haired beauty and mischievous smiles.

Battista recognized his feelings of respect and longing, measured out in equal parts, for he respected a man who loved his family, as his own father had, and desired to see himself the anchor of such a portrait, the patriarch of such a family. The yearning grew with each passing year.

Not likely, he chided himself with a surrendering shrug and a quirk of his lips, *and not now*.

Florence needed him now; it could not wait while he found love or conceived children.

Battista turned his almost-black-brown eyes back into the cavernous strongbox, deep-dimpled chin tucked into his chest. His face bloomed at the treasures found within, so many of them made his hand tingle as it passed over them. But he came for only one, and rummaged quietly amidst the costly rubble within until he found it.

He stood the small statuette on the palm of his hand and studied every portion of the foot-length carving. There was no mistaking the Gothic style of Nicola Pisano, nor that this piece was a model created more than two hundred years ago as a basis for one portion of the artist's monumental work on the pulpit of the Siena Cathedral. Few knew this miniature existed, and its anonymity compounded its value tenfold. How Battista's patron knew of it was not for him to question.

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Drawing out a thick cloth from his sack, Battista efficiently wrapped the piece, and placed it vertically in the leather satchel resting on his hip—worn, smooth, and shiny, curved to his back where it had rested for years, as if it were an organic extremity born with him.

Battista closed the strongbox, reattached the locks, and—with a tip of his head in gratitude to the man in the portrait—exited the room with the same ease with which he had entered.

Quiet hugged the palazzo in its nightly embrace as Battista made his way unremarked and unnoticed to the ground floor—where Frado waited, impatiently, with their horses, just outside the kitchen door at the rear of the building as agreed—through a statue-guarded foyer, and down a west-facing corridor. It had cost Battista little to get the pretty scullery maid to explain the layout of the palazzo: a good dinner, some time in his bed—which he enjoyed as much as she, bless her feisty heart—and she'd told him of every corridor and door in the palace.

Turning left, he did little to muffle the clack of his boot heels on the ochre marble tile, or contain the strut swinging his hips. Though many locks held the treasure of the house, Battista's thievery had been far too easily done; a man with such little a mind for security as this nobleman deserved to be robbed. Battista quickened his step as he neared the end of the corridor and the two doors on either side.

A few more steps, into the door on the left, and he'd be in the kitchen and on his way out. He grinned, lifted the pronged latch, and pulled the door open.

All air left his lungs with a wheeze. His eyes protruded almost painfully from his head.

The four armed and armor-clad men lounging about the room—polishing swords and playing at dice—stared at him with the same bewildered gape...but only for a fleeting moment.

“Arresto! Stop!”

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“Get him!”

The cries erupted as the guards jumped to their feet, overturning chairs, upending tables, in their rush toward the intruder. Battista jumped backward out of the room as leather-clad fists and sword tips stretched out at him.

“*Porca vacca*. Damn it! The *right* door is the *right* door!” Battista cursed himself, slamming the door shut in their faces.

Shoulder bolstered against the portal, his whole body trembled as hard warrior bodies crashed against the other side, jarring the door violently in its cradle. With one hand, he set the latch. The other seized the handle of the largest of the three daggers tucked into his belt. He planted one foot back, stretched his arm high and taut above his head, arching his back, stretching like a bow about to launch its arrow.

With a propulsive growl, he slammed the dagger into the wood of the door at its edge, penetrating through it and into the jamb surrounding it.

Seconds, the thought rushed at him as rushed across the hall. *It gives me seconds, no more.*

Barging through the opposite door, he almost fell into the nearly abandoned kitchen. The house fire embers glowed red in the two large stone alcoves at either end of the massive room, the blood-colored gloom festering in every corner.

Three servants, two boys and a woman—those on night duty should the master return and call for anything—flinched back, already roused by the screaming and banging from across the hall. They stared openmouthed as Battista ran through the room, pulling down copper pots and cauldrons with a deafening clatter as he went, anything to throw between him and the angered guards soon to follow.

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“*Scusi.*” He ducked his head sheepishly to the older woman as he rushed by her, seeing his mother’s condemnation in her wrinkled face and narrowed eyes. His steps faltered, his head swung back, and he swiped a *biscotto* off the counter between them. “*Grazie, donna mia.* Thank you, my lady.”

The woman rolled her eyes, but not without a hint of a grin.

With a raucous splintering of wood, the door across the hall ruptured open and the four men burst out, a rushing ocean hurling through a broken dam, tripping over one another to get out and get at him.

“*Sbrigari!* Hurry!” The old woman flapped her apron at Battista, pointing him to the wide double door in the east corner of the room with one fleshy finger.

Battista spared her no more pleasantries, running for escape as the guards jumped and tumbled over the obstacles thrown down in their path.

He burst through the doors, gasping at the cool night air as with his last breath. If he didn’t move quickly, it would be.

In the shadowy courtyard, two horses whinnied in alarm; a male voice squeaked in almost-feminine surprise. Battista turned to the sound, finding his horse and his accomplice waiting, just as they planned, on the cobbles below the portico, the small, round man no more than a perched ball on the smaller of the two powerful steeds.

“We must away!” Battista shouted, running full tilt now, hurtling himself from the top of the five steps, leaping across the beast’s derriere with a two-handed launch, and landing directly, if painfully—with a gruesome groan at the jolt to his groin—on his horse’s saddle.

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“They are on to us, *amico mio*,” he hissed at the flustered man bouncing on the horse beside him, grabbing the reins, and taking control of his mount. “The chase is afoot, my friend. Hiiya!”

The leather straps snapped at his will and his horse leaped forward, Frado's following, impelled by the panic now thick in the air.

The horses' metal shoes clopped nosily against the stones and into the quiet of the night, thudding onto grass-covered field, an ever-increasing thrumming of urgency. In those seconds Battista foretold, cries of protest rang out behind them and galloping pursuit exploded, muffling the men's bellows.

“*Dio mio*.”

Battista spared a quick look at his praying friend, the urge to laugh barely contained at the sight of the flabby man hanging on to his reins and the saddle's pommel for dear life, bereft of even the pretence of control over his horse as he bounded up and down, grunting with each downward slam on the hard seat.

The sound of pursuit grew ever closer. Battista dared a look and saw their pursuers had taken form, if only as ghostly shadows intent upon malice. Were they close enough for his dagger to find them? He couldn't be sure. No matter, only two blades remained and at least four men came for them, if not more, as the alarm most surely had brought others to the chase.

He tugged his horse closer to Frado's, close enough to see the look of sheer panic upon the man's round, red-splotched face.

“We have no choice,” Battista raised his deep voice over the thunder of the hooves. “We must throw them.”

Frado answered with a pitiful look of pleading, but Battista shook his head.

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“Do it, Frado. You know you can.”

With a curled lip of anger, Frado reached into the saddlebag behind him, drawing out a moist goatskin sack, one of a perfect size to fit into his palm. Without looking backward, tilting precariously as he lifted his right arm, he threw the dripping ball, quickly reaching in for another, then another again.

The sound of splitting skin and splashing liquid pop, pop, popped behind them and within second, a screeching of horses followed, answered by painful, frustrated human cries and a rumbling as bone and flesh—of horse and man—tumbled hard upon the ground.

The sounds of pursuit faded behind them, dissipating into the dominion of night's stillness, returning it to tranquility once more.

With more than a modicum of disgust, Frado shook the residual drops of wolf urine off his hand, casting a worried glance toward Battista.

“I hope the horses are all right.”

Battista's brows jumped up his forehead as he turned, catching the glint of amusement in his friend's winking eye. He threw back his head then, howls of laughter ringing out through the starlit sky, bursting with peals of relief and triumph.

“To home, my friend,” he hooted.

“Sì, home.” Frado chuckled, round head bobbing in relieved agreement.

They turned their horses south, no one behind them close enough to see, and made for Florence.