



JANUARY 31, 2018

Dear early readers,

Welcome to Vinalia, a world that blends an Italy-inspired setting with magic right out of a Miyazaki movie to create a sumptuous and sprightly romance.

This is the tale of Teodora di Sangro. Her talents include storytelling and secretly transforming her enemies into decorative objects. Her whole life, she's had to hide her magic, put her powerful family's needs first, and avoid falling in love.

But all of that changes when Cielo walks into her life. And so does Teodora.

Author Amy Rose Capetta has drawn on a rich tapestry of influences to create this world: fairy tales and folklore, Italian history, the lives of her real-life ancestors, and the *Godfather* trilogy, to name a few.

I hope this gives you a taste of the delights in store in this lush and endlessly surprising love story.

All best,

Kendra Levin
ASSOCIATE EDITORIAL DIRECTOR
VIKING CHILDREN'S BOOKS



ATTENTION READER:
PLEASE NOTE
THAT THIS IS NOT
A FINISHED BOOK.

A bound galley is the first stage of printer's proofs, which has not been corrected by the author, publisher, or printer.

The design, artwork, page length, and format are subject to change, and typographical errors will be corrected during the course of production.

If you quote from this galley, please indicate that your review is based on uncorrected text.

Thank you,
Viking



The Brilliant Death

by Amy Rose Capetta

ISBN: 978-0-451-47844-3

Ages: 12 up / Grades: 7 up

Pages: 352

Trim: 5½" x 8¼"

On sale: November 6, 2018

Price: U.S. \$18.99 / CAN. \$24.99

Rights: North American

PHOTO CREDIT: CORI MCCARTHY



AMY ROSE CAPETTA has written several novels for young adults and holds an MFA in Writing for Children and Young Adults from VCFA. She first dreamed of writing about Vinalia when she was younger than Teo. Once upon a time her father's family lived in Italy, in a small town in the mountains. Now Amy Rose lives in her very own mountains in Vermont, with her partner and their young son.

To learn more, visit amyrosecapetta.com.

Viking
An Imprint of Penguin Random House LLC
345 Hudson Street
New York, New York 10014

Visit us at PenguinTeen.com
Printed in the U.S.A.
Jacket design by Dana Li



*Teodora di Sangro's life
is built on secrets.*

She's grown used to hiding her magical ability to turn people into music boxes and mirrors. Making her family's enemies disappear is all that matters. After all, everyone in Vinalia knows that streghe—wielders of magic—are figures out of fairy tales. Nobody believes they're real.

Then she meets Cielo, a strega who can shift genders as effortlessly as turning a page in a book, and who shows Teodora what her life could be like if she masters the power inside her. She needs to learn quickly: the Capo, the new ruler of Vinalia, has poisoned the patriarchs of the five families that have long controlled Vinalia, including Teodora's father, and demands that each family send a son to his palace. To save her family, Teodora must travel to the capital—not merely disguised as a boy, but magically transformed into one.

On the long and fraught journey to the capital, Teodora begins to fall for witty and wild Cielo, and to strengthen her power to transform. Now that she's met someone who truly sees her for who she is, can she ever go back to a life of hiding?



THE BRILLIANT DEATH

Amy Rose Capetta



VIKING

An imprint of Penguin Random House LLC
375 Hudson Street
New York, New York 10014



First published in the United States of America by Viking,
an imprint of Penguin Random House LLC, 2018

Copyright © 2018 by Amy Rose Capetta

Penguin supports copyright. Copyright fuels creativity, encourages diverse voices,
promotes free speech, and creates a vibrant culture. Thank you for buying an authorized
edition of this book and for complying with copyright laws by not reproducing, scanning,
or distributing any part of it in any form without permission. You are supporting writers
and allowing Penguin to continue to publish books for every reader.

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA IS AVAILABLE
ISBN 9780451478443

Printed in U.S.A. Set in Manticore Book design by Kate Renner

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

For my dad
who gave me books from his shelf
and stories from the past,
who has three daughters
and has always believed in our magic

MAP TO COME

MAP TO COME





The Beginning

When I was a little girl, I thought my father was the king of Vinalia.

Our family lived in a round-walled castle that seemed to grow from the mountainside. Father's favorite chair had been carved out of a black walnut tree. When I squinted long enough, it became a throne.

The first time I saw him kill someone, it made perfect sense. A king had to protect his family and his mountains.

I shouldn't have been out of bed that winter night, but I traveled down to the kitchens, feet soft brushstrokes on cold stone, and stole a glass of milk. When I turned to leave by the back stairs, two men blocked my path. Father stood on the lowest step with his arm fastened around a stranger's neck. Snow clumped wetly on the man's shoulders.

I didn't dare move closer. If I'd been in a white nightgown, Father would have seen me by now, but the di Sangro family wore red, so everything I owned was a deep shade that turned black in the moonlight.

I watched as cold beads slicked the outside of my glass, a pretty thing that had been handblown in the city of Amalia.

Father's grip tightened on the man's neck while my grip weakened. Father grabbed a knife from his sleeve, and stabbed the man's side.

I dropped the glass.

The moment became a small eternity, giving me time to fear what came next. Father's anger. My punishment. I closed my eyes tight, twisting the story in a new direction. *The glass will dissolve into a pile of sugar. The milk will turn into a white, white moth and fly away.*

When I opened my eyes, the snow light coming through the window caught on a pair of wings. Pale wings. A moth fluttered, gone before I could be sure of what I'd seen. I pushed one toe past the hem of my nightgown; it found no shards of glass. I knelt, licked my fingertip, and touched it to the stone. It came back gritty with crystals. I brought them to my tongue. Sweet.

I gasped.

Father turned toward me, finished with his business. His brown eyes held only torchlight. "Wait here, Teodora," he said, shifting the dead man's weight against his shoulder. Father opened the heavy door and disappeared into the kitchen gardens for a long mire of a minute.

I burned to ask about magic, but I knew what he would say. *A strega is an old woman who has listened to too many stories.* When he came back to the doorway, his shirt blotched with damp, I lit on a new question. I had to speak quickly, before my boldness faded into the shadows. "Was it your fate to kill that man?"

I was only Niccolò di Sangro's second daughter, and had no right to ask. I thought he would wave his hand vaguely,

sending me back to bed. Father sat down at the coarse wooden table and patted the chair next to his.

“We won’t tell anyone, will we?” he asked.

I shook my head. Sat down. My feet swung lightly, inches from the floor.

Father reached into his sleeve and drew the knife. As he placed it on the table, I drank every detail: a spiral handle; a swerving crossbar; a long, thin blade that looked harmless until my eyes reached the point. I couldn’t find a single drop of blood. Father must have stabbed the snow outside to clean it.

The knife was sharp. The knife was lovely. I could see both of those truths, twisted together.

Father marked my reaction. “You don’t reach for it, but you don’t shy away.” He sounded pleased, but then his eyes pinched. “Why are you downstairs?”

So he had not seen the glass, the milk, the magic. “I was thirsty.”

I wondered how far the white moth had flown.

Father nudged the knife toward me. It lifted easily, much lighter than I had expected.

“You truly aren’t afraid, are you?” he asked.

“What is there to be afraid of?”

He chuckled, the sound as heavy as wet snow. “Well, I was younger than you when I learned what it means to be a di Sangro.” Father cupped his hands around mine like he was teaching me to pray. “You asked me if it was my fate to kill that man.” His eyes went dim. “Family is fate.”





One

The Least of Many Wrongs





1

Seven Years Later

One perfectly ripe summer day, I left the castle wearing a clean red dress and carrying a basket. I told a man from the village that I wanted to have supper in my favorite field, and he should join me. I'd been working to copy my older sister's smile, the one she used to make men say yes without thinking. And that was what Pietro did.

We set off up the mountain, talking of small things. His trip to the Violetta Coast, the new grapes he would harvest this year. He had no reason to suspect that the basket swinging from my arm was empty.

The hike from the village started out hot and stayed hot. By the time we reached the crossroads, Pietro and I were shedding drops of sweat as fast as the earth could drink. We crested a ridge and I came to a stop. "This is your favorite field?" Pietro asked.

"Yes," I said, clutching at a breath. "Isn't it perfect?"

The flowers were wilted and as white as old bone. The grass had given up and matted itself in defeat. Pietro gave me a look, one I had seen on dozens of different faces in Chieza. People thought I was odd.

Not a liar, a strega, or a thief of men's lives.

I spent my days with my half brother, Luca, or I wandered the mountain alone. *Odd*. I hadn't made friends with the girls in the village. *Odd*. If I wanted to live among the people on this mountain, I would have to keep earning that title. I couldn't have anyone scratching to see what was underneath it.

"Where would you like to eat?" Pietro asked.

I led him to a spot with fewer spiking weeds. The gentians and poppies that warred brightly on other slopes were missing here. I loved this field, not for its beauty, but for where it sat on the mountain, tucked out of sight.

Pietro shaded his eyes against the sun and gave me the wobbly smile of someone who thinks he might have made a mistake but still hopes to gain from it. I put down the picnic basket and wiped the sweat from my palms. It was time to work.

First, I took Pietro's measure. He was older than me by half a lifetime, and I could see years of sun and wind trapped in his warm brown skin. He worked grape fields that had been owned by his father—now his. He had a number of lovers besides his wife. She probably kept her own, but she didn't get to boast of them in town, lilting their praises over cheap wine. And then there were Pietro's children, two little boys with hazelnut eyes. I had seen them hanging off him like a coatrack.

I wanted to dislike him. It would make the rest of this easier.

I'd been staring for a while—one benefit of being the odd di Sangro girl—when Pietro stepped in to tuck a bit of wayward hair behind my ear. He pitched his voice low, a bit rough, a bit gentle. "You look hungry, Teodora."

This wasn't the first time a man had brought his own ideas up the mountain. Having a father in the castle meant all I had to do was say no to make this attention dissolve like snow at high summer.

This time, though, I hesitated. I had always thought Pietro was beautiful. Whenever I saw him across the square in the village, my eyes danced after him. Now I let myself imagine what it would be like to take him as a lover. There would be kisses like moonlight, soft and brilliant. I would let him touch me with his practiced hands. I would keep the one rule of the village girls—I wouldn't let him inside. But everything else would be allowed. Everything else would be encouraged.

A flare from the white sun slapped me awake. I was not some silly girl who wanted silly things. I was a di Sangro.

"I think we should talk," I said.

"Yes," Pietro agreed, not moving away. His voice was warm, spreading.

I backed up, and a little distance broke the spell. "Now," I said. "Would you like to tell me the story of how you are cheating my father?"

Pietro went a shade lighter than the dead grass.

"No? Then I will have to tell it myself." I knew by then that Father was not the king of Vinalia, but he was an important man. We might have a new Capo, a son of the famously decadent Malfara family who loved to brag about bringing the country together under one flag, but the true power in Vinalia still sat with the five families.

I circled Pietro, the dry ground knocking like hollowed wood beneath my boots. "Your grape arbors have been under the protection of the di Sangro family since your

great-great-grandfather's time, but in the two years since you inherited them, money has gone missing. Not ragged chunks of the profit. A quiet sum. We trusted you to stop, but it has gone on and on. Maybe you have fallen in love with the gambling tables in Prai. Maybe you have a girl who aches for the newest fashions from the north. Maybe you thought we wouldn't notice, and you love the idea of fooling us. Do you see the dangers of letting someone else tell your story?" I twirled my fingers lazily. "I can twist it in any direction I like."

Pietro fell to his knees, wrapping his sweaty arms around my middle. I should have hated his weakness. I should have pushed him away. Instead I sank my hands into his loose, dark curls.

His voice doubled in thickness, becoming a sob. "I love my wife, Teodora."

"Really?" I asked. "Because you seemed ready to—"

"That money is for our children," he said, shaking me off the subject of his lust. "The five families have no right to it."

"We are not the Palazza," I said, as hard as unfinished stone. "We don't claim a right. We earn that money." Father worked to keep the Uccelli—the poorest region in Vinalia—from falling into complete ruin. I had seen how difficult that task was, how it had turned him old before his time.

I touched Pietro's chin and tilted his face up—not to me, but to the blank white eye of the sun. "Don't we make sure that your fields aren't set on by vandals?" Pietro nodded hastily. "And aren't there fair prices and people lined up to buy your wine?" He nodded again, a swallow held captive in his throat. "And when there is a siege, where does your family take shelter?"

All the people of the Uccelli could fit inside our castle walls, which was a good thing considering how often Vinalia was invaded. That was part of the false logic of unification—if we stood tall together, we wouldn't fall prey to the stronger powers of Eterra. But we had already weakened ourselves in long battles, including the ones the Capo waged against his own people.

"The new taxes from Amalia are too much," Pietro said. "We can't pay both."

I twisted my lips as if I'd been sucking on lemon rinds. The Capo had claimed a man's loyalty in less than a year, when we had worked countless generations for it. Either Pietro trusted the new government in Amalia more than the di Sangro family, or his fear of the Capo was greater. Neither of these messages would delight my father.

I knelt down in the dead grass. "Niccolò di Sangro is not here today. You are in the hands of his odd little daughter. Thank God for small mercies." I shoved Pietro's curls out of his eyes and asked, "Would you like to be a bookend?"

He squinted at me like I was a word in an impossible language. "What?"

I sighed. "I'm trying to give you a say in your future." Some of the men I came for were murderers. Others had taken women without their permission, and I had little problem plucking such men from the world. Pietro was nowhere near the worst. I wondered if there was any way we could let him pay the family back, quietly. But Father had said it so many times, I heard the words in his voice, like dark jagged stone. *The moment we let people think we can be swindled, we will be always swindled.*

I touched Pietro's forehead, and thought about how soon

he would be different. How quickly things changed. “The di Sangro family will look after your wife and children,” I promised. “And your grape arbors.”

The magic came when I called for it. I closed my eyes, breathing in air laden with heat. *Turn him into something pleasant*, I thought.

I opened my eyes and walked to the place where Pietro had stood. A glass and metal box sat at my feet, with a barrel at the center covered in raised dots, and a small hand crank on one side. I wound it tight and nestled the box in one hand. Notes came fast and clear. It was a complicated weaving. The song of a man who kept a wife and lovers, who worked hard, stole often, and had two boys with hazelnut eyes.

I picked up my new trinket and placed it in the empty basket.



HALFWAY DOWN THE MOUNTAIN, COOL AIR PRESSED ON MY skin, lifting fine hairs. I looked to the peaks behind me to see if bad weather was moving in. A solemn gray cloud perched over the mountaintop—and then a wind chased it away, leaving the day vivid and blue. Where the cloud had been a moment ago, someone walked toward me down the slope.

Odd.

The Uccelli only boasted a few passable roads, and the nearest ran five miles to the south. This traveler must have been skirting rocks and ravines for hours, yet his steps were light. Or *her* steps. From a distance, I couldn't tell if I was looking at a man or a woman. The stranger had skin so pale,

I thought of the wine casks in our cellar, hidden away from the sun. A sheet of black hair shimmered to the beat of each step.

I studied the person's clothes for a clue about which part of Vinalia they came from. Black trousers, brown boots laced above the knee, and a white shirt, all of basic stock. The cloak demanded more interest. Its fabric gripped both light and shadow. From some angles the fabric seemed rich green, and from others I could have sworn it was purple.

I told the magic to be ready, though I hoped I wouldn't need it. I had never transformed two people in the same day.

"That's a lonely walk," I called out. "Have you seen anything interesting?" Another one of Father's tactics. *Get a man talking, and he will hand you a weapon. Keep him talking, and he will show you where to point it.*

"I'm glad you asked," the stranger said, walking fast, speaking in a half-shouted voice as the distance between us closed. "I have seen three and a half interesting things today. The first was a tree that had swallowed another tree whole. Have you ever seen that? I had to wonder what the little tree had done to offend the big one." When I answered with a swath of silence, the stranger said, "Moving on. The second interesting thing was my foot, the left one, which turned a shade of purple I have never seen before."

With one more stride, the stranger and I were on same patch of the mountain, close enough that I could make a full inventory. Here was a long nose, a set of greenish eyes, cheekbones like two dangerous ridges.

The stranger circled me slowly. I countered the circle, as if we were caught up in a dance, or a duel. "The half of an interesting thing was a rabbit I nearly ate. But then it told me

a funny story and I had to let it go. I guess you could say the *story* was interesting, but only to a rabbit. When I let him run off, my stomach informed me I had better find something to eat. So you can imagine my excitement when I caught sight of one final interesting thing. Supper.”

He—for I had started to think of this person as a young man, though his voice had the songlike quality often found in women—nodded down at the basket I was holding. I clutched the handle tight enough that the rough weave marked my fingers.

The stranger held out a long, flat palm. “May I?”

I let a moment sit between us, unraveling, before I held out the basket. There could be no real harm in it, I told myself.

The stranger accepted the handle with great care, knelt on the grass, and plucked out the music box. For a hungry person, he didn’t seem disappointed to find a metal contraption instead of a hearty supper. I felt the slight shadow of a touch as he stroked the side of the glass box. He applied his long, pale fingers to the little crank.

“What’s your name?” I asked at last. If this was a dance, I had fallen three steps behind.

The stranger ignored the question, taking in the tinny sounds of the music box as a person savors a fine meal. He even closed his eyes, and I found myself staring at marble eyelids that looked cool to the touch. The stranger’s mouth stretched into a dreamer’s smile, private and satisfied.

It made me feel as though I had trespassed, even though this person stood on di Sangro lands.

I reached to snatch the music box away just as the

stranger's eyes snapped open. He angled his face up, and in the full light of the sky, his eyes were blue and brown as well as green. The swirl of colors felt impossible to name.

"It's a fugue." He handed the music box back to me with a deepening smirk. "Aren't we all."

The magic spiked inside me. Did it want me to stop this stranger before he could bring trouble to the Uccelli? I wasn't doing my di Sangro duty. I was allowing a pale, perfectly molded stranger to dance circles around me.

"What do you want here?" I asked.

He stood and picked up my basket, lingering over its emptiness. "I thought you might have something for me. Perhaps those briny olives, the green ones that have been well soaked so the salt stays on your lips?" I was suddenly aware of my own lips. I glared at the stranger, certain he'd done that on purpose.

He took a step closer, tighter than any of the dances I knew. I found a new color in his eyes. Yellow. "You can tell me," he said. "It's safe." His breath was soft on my skin. His words slipped past my mind, straight to my magic.

It didn't wish to change him into a red ribbon or a bone knife or a stamp for sealing letters. It didn't wish to change anything.

A cloud of disappointment slid through the young man's eyes, turning them almost gray. "There's nothing you wish to tell me?" He seemed to be waiting for a specific answer, though I couldn't imagine what words he thought I would hand over.

I gave my head a tiny shake.

With a hard sigh and a long stride, the stranger headed

down the mountain. At the crossroads, he turned toward Chieza.

The magic said *follow*.

But I would already be getting home late, and I had failed spectacularly to find out this person's name and purpose. The least I could do was attend the rest of my afternoon lessons. I'd promised Luca I would be there. And I wouldn't feel better until I had Pietro settled. My di Sangro duties stretched out, as long and treacherous as a mountain range.

The stranger turned into a speck in the distance. Above him, clouds gathered and trotted like dogs at his heels.

I turned and headed back toward the castle.

2

I found my father and brothers in the torture chamber.

It was buried under the castle, deep in the muscle of the mountain. I had to walk through near-endless wine cellars to get there, and my candle had dripped down to a fat waxen thumb by the time I arrived.

“Ah, Teo,” Father said. Torchlight picked out the first silver hairs that had crept in among the brown.

Beniammo turned to me, his eyes shining like the moon on dead water. “Go back up and help Fiorenza with dinner. You won’t like what we’re talking about.”

I crossed my arms over my body and held tight. “When have I ever skipped a lesson?”

“When you forgot because you were out on the mountain,” Luca muttered without looking up from the notes he was inking.

My little brother was my greatest ally in the castle, and I had let him down. The failure sat like a stone in my shoe, rubbing against the larger discomfort of meeting that stranger on the mountain. “When have I ever skipped a lesson because I was too delicate to stomach it?”

“You have nothing to fear, Teo,” Father said, patting my shoulder. “I won’t get into the worst of the details today.”

“Don’t water the wine because I’m drinking it,” I said, frowning up at him. Father gave the boys lessons in politics, history, land ownership, anything he thought would profit a di Sangro son. I had started paying attention when I was ten because the magic loved the sound of Father’s voice. Soon I had learned all of the best ways to intimidate a person, to turn his own ideas against him. Everything I’d done to Pietro—besides one brief moment of magic—I had learned at Father’s knee.

I sat down, wedging myself between the chair and the desk, and grabbed at paper, an inkwell, and a pen. “Well, then,” Father said roughly. “If we’re all settled. We’ll begin where we left off. At the Well of Blades.” He pointed to a deep pit at the farthest corner of the room.

“Does it work?” Beniammo asked, sitting forward.

“Are you asking if it can still send someone to a slow and miserable death? No. The glass was removed years ago. This dungeon hasn’t held prisoners for generations.” Father stared down Beniammo. “This is a history, not a practical guide.”

Father moved on to other tortures. A pole that could be tied to women’s hair, to tear the scalp free. A pot for boiling. As the list grew, my stomach rioted. The di Sangro family didn’t rely on torture anymore, but that didn’t mean we had turned our backs on violence. We treated it like an old friend, one we visited whenever things grew difficult.

I couldn’t help thinking that magic was the best solution to our problems. I didn’t have to kill anyone. I could simply

stopper them as though I were putting them in a collection of small bottles.

But you can't turn them back, the magic whispered. How is a music box better than a hole in the ground?

It was true that I didn't know how to change people into human form again. But I could always learn.

When? the magic asked. How?

I shifted under the unfair weight of the question. I had no idea if I would ever learn more about the power that lived inside me. It wasn't as if my di Sangro duties included daily magic lessons.

"What was the first instance of torture used against heretics within the five families?" Father asked.

Luca answered Father's question, and the next one. His intelligence rushed ahead of mine, which was stuck in muddy thoughts of my day on the mountain, and Beniamino's, which had never been able to keep pace. Beniamino's body shifted into hard ropes of anger as Luca proved, over and over, that he was the smarter of the two brothers.

When no one was looking, I kicked Luca in the ankle and mouthed, *Slow down*.

Luca tilted his chin away, ignoring my good advice.

My eyes went to every little scar and burn on his skin. I didn't want a new one to tend to. Since we were young, Beniamino had punished us when he thought life had treated him unfairly. That included any moment when Father favored Luca, heaped praise on Mirella, or showed me affection. It began in the nursery, when Beniamino would corner us and tell us our crimes. The runners of rocking horses crushed our forearms. Wooden swords bruised our stomachs. Metal

pieces from the Game of the Goose were heated in fireplace ashes and set to our skin.

“What is the swiftest method of bloodletting?” Father asked.

“Arteries,” I said, leaping in before Luca could. “Preferably in the neck.”

“That sounds simple enough,” Beniammo said, looking me over as if seeking a good place to cut.

My voice prickled in my throat, but I knew that if I told Father about what Beniammo was doing, my older brother would deny it now and double the punishment later. And he had moved beyond nursery games.

I took Beniammo’s measure quickly, the same way I had with Pietro. The magic whispered, *He would make a nice pair of boots*. I clamped my teeth, bone grinding against bone. It was one thing to change our enemies. It was another to use magic against family.

Father asked a new question, but I barely heard it before Luca’s voice rang out with the answer.

Beniammo’s eyes cut a rough line to our little brother.



AFTER A LONG DAY OF MAGIC AND DUNGEONS, MY BEDROOM promised relief. I knew every pockmark in the stone, every trinket on the shelves. It would have been a perfect sanctuary if Luca hadn’t plunked down on the edge of my bed, punishing me with his saddest stare.

“You left me there for an *hour* while Father stuffed my head full of bloody history. He’s nicer when you’re in the

room. Less like a commander in some invisible war and more like . . . well . . . a father.”

I was so often jealous of the way Father treated the boys that it rarely occurred to me there might be jealousy flowing in the opposite direction. I let out a small, “Hmm,” but I was distracted.

I needed to find a spot for Pietro.

I’d already covered nearly every surface in the room with ornaments. I tried setting Pietro next to porcelain dishes, a decorative fan, a set of red prayer beads, a compass with a cover of dull gold. I kept picking him up again. Pietro didn’t sit near the top of the ranks of terrible men. He deserved a special place.

My brother paced, his body a cup spilling discontent everywhere. “Did you hear what I said?” He tossed a pillow at my stomach to get my attention, not knowing that the pillow had once been the baker’s son.

“How are your experiments coming along?” I asked in a naked attempt to change the subject.

Luca’s expression opened like a book. His fascination with the natural world encompassed every leaf and star and vein of crystal he could find in our mountain’s dull rock. Now it seemed he had fallen in love with something called electricity. “Even you will be impressed, Teo. Light without flame! It’s magic.”

My own magic perked at the use of that word. But if I told my brother the truth—that I’d been able to transform people and objects since I was nine—he wouldn’t understand. Luca believed he was a modern Vinalian. How could I explain magic to a boy who worshipped science and reason? If

I had learned one thing in seven years, it was this: magic is *not* reasonable.

"I told Father about electricity too," Luca mumbled.

"Ah," I said, finally digging up the roots of Luca's foul mood. "And what did he say?"

"He growled something about torchlight being good enough for our fathers," Luca said, tossing his hands in the air. "I told him that other family heads are heeding the future. Altimari and Moschella sent their sons to university."

"Fourth and fifth sons," I reminded, not liking how easily Father's side of the argument flew out of me.

"I looked at universities in Eterra," Luca said, scowling down at his hands, which he did whenever he didn't wish to face the truth. "Of course Vinalia has the best work in the sciences, a long tradition of advancements, even if the rest of Eterra thinks we're backward. I told Father I want to go to Gravina. Soon. And that's when he told me he needed me to stay here while he travels across the mountains for Mirella's wedding, as if that makes any sense." My little brother was writhing against his fate like a fish in a net. He would never go off to the famous universities at Gravina to learn about science, any more than I would leave the mountains and study magic.

I passed the music box from hand to hand and observed Luca, his skin touched with red at the neck, the first place where his anger showed. His complexion was a touch lighter than my own summer-browned and beauty-mark-dappled shade of olive, but we had the same dark brown eyes. All around his, Luca's face had started to change. Round cheeks gave way to sharp bones underneath. He had recently grown one blasphemous inch taller than me. When I looked at him,

I saw the boy he had been a few years ago, and the man everyone wanted him to be now. Time blurred, the past and the future sliding against each other unpleasantly.

He caught me staring. "What are you doing, Teo?"

"Didn't you pay attention this afternoon?" I asked. "I'm torturing you. It's an ancient technique." I thought I would win a laugh, but Luca winced. The di Sangro lessons troubled him deeply. Each step down this path carried my brother further away from himself. "I'll talk to Father."

"You will?" Luca asked, flinging his arms around my neck.

I finally set the music box on my bedside table beside a potted rose that never stopped blooming. "Anything for you," I said. My eyes skimmed over Pietro, all the men I had changed. "Anything."



AT DINNER, I ATE AS IF I WERE INVENTING THE CONCEPT. I started with three pieces of bread and then moved on to white beans with rosemary, rabbit stew, a course of cheese and olives. When the brine hit my tongue, I recalled the stranger on the mountain. His hands all over my basket. Or *her* hands. Either way, they hadn't found what they were searching for.

I pushed the olive dish away.

"You have an appetite," my stepmother said approvingly, noting the ruins on my plate.

I took another bite of stew, sopping it with more bread. "I missed supper."

Fiorenza took in my words, and then the rest of me with a single glance. "Where were you?"

"I went to the village to see if I had a letter from Rosina." She was a girl from the far side of the Uccelli. A girl who hadn't caught word that I was odd, whose father or cousin I hadn't changed into a clock. We met in Chieza on a market day. She walked at my side, sifting her fingers through snow-falls of linen, stirring barrels of dried beans, so gentle with everything she touched. She never took her eyes off me.

At the end of the day, at the fringes of the woods, she asked me to come with her to a barn at the edge of the town where young women brought their lovers. The idea startled me so much that it pried open my lips.

I didn't say a thing. I only kissed her once, as hot and swift as a fireplace poker, and ran off.

Rosina and I had never exchanged letters. Even if I'd known where to send one, I had too much to say, and no words that would change anything. It was no great secret that a man might choose to kiss another man, and certain women took women to their beds, yet these things were rarely spoken of, and never seen. I could kiss Rosina at the frayed edges of the woods, but when the time came, I would have to marry a man.

I could not pretend Rosina and her dark eyes out of the world, though, so I had invented a friendship with her to explain the baubles in my room. "She sent me a music box," I said. "It plays a lovely tune."

Fiorenza gave me the sort of look that always followed such an announcement, as if she'd taken a bite of her frangipane and found the almond gritty. But I couldn't let Fiorenza think the trinkets in my room were gifts from men. And I couldn't tell her the truth.

"I heard a bit of news when I was in Chieza," I said over

the sound of my little sisters arguing, Father and Luca arguing, Fiorenza and Mirella arguing, all of them adding layers to the din. “It was about Pietro, that farmer with all of the grape arbors.”

Father and Beniammo swung toward me, and I savored the moment when I knew I had their attention.

“Well? What has become of our good friend Pietro?” Father asked in an unmistakable tone. Everyone at the table knew that when he spoke the word *friend* with such a lingering bite, he didn’t mean someone close to his heart.

“Pietro didn’t watch his step, it seems,” I said. “He fell into the Storyteller’s Grave.” The ravine to the west of the village had earned that name because men from Chiezza drank and stumbled to its edge, shouting stories into the darkness. The least fortunate fell in. With so many missing men to explain, the ravine had become useful to me.

Father hung his head and said in a half-chanting voice, “God’s will be done.”

Echoes ringed the table, but I didn’t dare let those words touch my lips. What had happened to Pietro on the mountainside wasn’t God’s will. It was mine.

Beniammo shifted in his chair. “This keeps happening. It can’t be chance. Someone is doing away with our enemies.” His forehead shone, his breath sour with wine and disappointment. My brother wanted to be the one doing the killing.

“If a person is ridding the world of our troubles, shouldn’t we thank them?” I asked.

Father pointed his fork at me, the tines catching a glint of light. “Teo is right.”

For that, I received a pinch on the leg that would have made a less prepared girl scream. Above the wooden surface

of the table, Beniammo gave no sign he was hurting me. I tried not to imagine what he would do if he found out I was the one stealing his excuse to hurt those men. I twisted and breathed slowly, willing time to pick up like a river and rush me to the end of this.

Talk moved away from Pietro, landing where it always did, on the subject of Mirella's wedding. She went silent at the attention, slowing the prim dance of her fork. My own food writhed in my stomach. Father talked about the alliance with the Otto family as Beniammo dug at my leg. His ragged, bitten nails pressed through the sturdy cloth of my dress.

"May I take the little girls to bed?" I asked hoarsely.

"Yes, yes," Father said, turning his fingers into a broom and sweeping his young daughters away from the table. "This is not a matter for wildflowers." That was what he called Carina and Adela, though I could remember a time when I had been the wildflower. Mirella had always been a rose, trimmed and perfect.

I rushed away from the table, limping slightly. When we reached the nursery, I had to shake my little sisters from my limbs as they asked for a story.

"The Pear Girl," Carina said.

"The Castle without a Soul," Adela countered. She was only eight, but that commanding tone had already earned her the name "Little Tyrant." Carina had a softer manner, and a smile as pink as strawberries.

I settled them both onto Carina's bed. "In that time," I said, starting neither of the stories they had asked for, but an old favorite of mine, "there was a strega who could change into a scrap of wind, or a drop of water, or the sunlight that kisses a pretty girl's cheek."

Carina giggled and held her hands up to her own face. Adela nodded sagely.

The stories were an escape from the bruise ripening on my leg, but they brought their own pain. The same one, every night. What if I was the only strega in Vinalia? These tales were as old as starlight—I had never heard of a *new* strega story. I had taken over the telling from Fiorenza when I'd turned twelve. Father had always disliked this particular chore, although he wouldn't say why. Maybe he thought strega tales were too common, too whimsical for a di Sangro child. Maybe his life was so gray that their bright colors seemed a lie. I had always loved them. But as the years went by, their words seemed less like a promise and more like an ache.

"Another," Adela demanded as soon as I finished.

"I have to go see Father." I had given Luca my word.

"Another *short* one," Adela said, squinting shrewdly. She had already learned to bargain, and her di Sangro lessons hadn't even begun.

"Once there was a strega," I said, and Carina and Adela looked off into the distance, as if a strega were the most far-flung, impossible thing. As if they didn't have one sitting right in front of them.



I STOOD IN FRONT OF THE OPEN DOOR TO FATHER'S STUDY, shifting on restless legs. Something about lingering in his doorway turned me nine years old, as easily as flipping the pages to an earlier chapter in a book.

"Come in, Teo," Father said.

I crossed the stone floor of the room Father called his study. This castle had been built centuries ago, not as a palazzo for a fine family but as a stronghold to protect the mountain. A black walnut chair and a desk laden with papers didn't change the nature of it, any more than a pair of pants would change a wolf into a prince.

Still, Father had covered the walls with books. He had the most thorough library in the Uccelli, shelves bricked from top to bottom with tomes, and not one held the words *magic* or *strega*. It was like staring at the world's largest collection of mirrors and not seeing your own face.

Father finally looked up from his letters. News came to us in a slow pour of honey, from other family heads, and from Father's brothers and cousins who conducted di Sangro business throughout Vinalia. Then there were letters asking for help and favors, written by anyone in the Uccelli who could scrape together a sentence. Father entered everything of importance into an endless series of ledgers. Births, deaths, matters raised and settled, visitors from across the mountains.

"Look at this," he said, slapping a piece of paper down on the wood. "A man who thinks I should kill his cousin over a goat. As if I should sharpen my knives because the cheese is a little chalky. He's been loyal to the family, so I will have to scare off the cousin. But no killings. I don't trade in men's lives for so little."

I nodded.

I wanted to ask: *How little is too little? Did Pietro really have to be done away with? How do you know? Is there a feeling that pairs with such a truth? A moment when the world tips and can't be righted any other way?*

But I had built a neat cage for questions like those long ago. When I didn't speak, or leave, Father asked, "What do you want?" in the same flat tone I had heard him use on squabbling villagers and desperate merchants.

"It's about Luca. He wants—"

"Things he can't have," Father said, cutting me off. "Like any young man. Is this about the wedding? I told him I need him here." When Father made up his mind, the result was a current in a fast-moving river. People crossed at their own peril. "It will be good for Luca to see how it feels to be in charge, don't you think?"

I thought Luca would rather tumble down the mountain headfirst.

"Well, Teo?" Father asked, his forehead crimping with concern. He could do this in a single moment, change from a family head who declared things to a man who begged opinions from his daughter. I longed to tell him he was right, because it would make us both happy. But tonight I gave him something that, over the years, had become rarer than any spice or metal traded in the ports along the Violetta Coast. I gave him the truth. "I wanted to go with you over the mountains. To Mirella's wedding."

"And why shouldn't you?" he asked, everything about him sharp again, down to the scratch of his ink on the ledger.

"Luca needs me." I couldn't leave my little brother alone in the Uccelli. What if trouble stirred while Father was gone? Luca had no idea how to run things. His mind, though keen, was a compass needle pointed firmly in another direction.

Father flicked through a few more letters. "That's all?"

I thought about Pietro, the music box, the collection upstairs that grew and grew.

“That’s all,” I said.

Father picked up a letter, not from the top of the pile. He’d set one aside. “We received a summons with the Malfara family crest.” He showed me the icon of the running wolf, stamped into a blister of red wax. Father shook one hand in a rude gesture he rarely used. His disdain for the Capo in Amalia was as rich as the rabbit stew we’d eaten for dinner. All I knew about the youngest son of the Malfara family was that he’d raised his own army to unite Vinalia, often by force, and then declared himself our glorious new leader. Father didn’t like to speak of the man. The Capo was a sickness he was ignoring, hoping it wouldn’t fester or grow worse.

Father tapped one finger against the envelope. “Will you read this for me?”

I could sense he wanted to give me some little task, to make me feel important. Apparently, Father felt like I was nine years old tonight too. I almost grabbed the letter, but the magic rushed to stop me. It wanted to hear Father speak. After all of the ways I had displeased it, I couldn’t deny it such a small thing. It craved his voice, the way I craved the sight of green after the white plague of winter.

“You read it,” I said. “I’ll advise you.”

Father smiled and reached for a knife as thin as a feather, working it along the top of the envelope. My thoughts slid to the other knife, the stiletto with the twisted handle and the killing point. The one undoubtedly hidden in his sleeve.

The seal broke, dead flakes of wax falling away. Father pulled the letter from the envelope. The paper was as thick and creamy white as besciamella, a gold edge spun all the way around.

Father scowled. "Men who waste money on beautiful things . . ."

"End up decorating the gutters," I finished.

Sometimes Father felt more like a collection of favorite sayings than a person, but anyone who looked around the castle would see that we lived by his words. Whatever the di Sangro family had was put to use, including children. Luca would travel, like Father's brothers, doing the family's work in other towns, other cities. Mirella's marriage to Ambrogio Otto, a family head in the making, would forge a strong alliance between the Otto and di Sangro lines. Beniamino was being groomed to take over from Father.

I had made myself useful too.

Father held up the letter, and I snapped to attention. "The great and noble di Sangro family," he said, reading in the pompous voice the villagers used when they put on puppet shows. "The head of your family is now dead." His voice tripped, fell flat. "A representative must . . ."

He lost his grip on the paper as a tremor worked its way through his muscles. One hand reached for me, tossed by an invisible wind. It dropped, and he followed, sliding to the floor as I ran around Father's desk.

I knelt, afraid to touch him as he writhed. I reached for the magic, begging it to do something. But changing Father into a decorative box or a brush to sweep ashes wouldn't help.

I needed help.

"Please," I cried, but the word didn't go far. My voice was a bird with broken wings. "Mother!"

Father curled on his side, breath scraping the air.

I capped my mouth with both hands, afraid more useless words would fly out, battering my heart as they went.

Mother was dead. She could do nothing to save him. I could do nothing to save him.

I held Father up by the shoulders. His weight sagged against me like wet sand, his face slack. "Don't go," I begged simply, as if it were still a matter of him traveling across the mountains and leaving me behind.

I stood to run for Fiorenza, but the white paper with glittering edges claimed my view. It had fallen to the floor beside Father. I spent one precious second hating it. The letter wasn't beautiful at all. It was the color of death, Father's skin a pale match. The words stared up at me—a few scant lines of ink. I knew what they meant.

The Capo had declared war on the di Sangro family.

3

Fiorenza had the portrait hall turned into a sickroom. Father lay across a cushioned table. The faces of long-dead di Sangro family heads stared down at me, the grit of blame in their dark brown eyes.

“I don’t want him moved upstairs until the doctor can be fetched from Arresti,” Fiorenza said.

“There are nearer doctors,” I argued, my mind in ragged threads from what had happened in the study. I couldn’t seem to tie the simplest knots of logic. All I knew was that Father had to be cured.

“We must have someone absolutely loyal,” Fiorenza said, and I could see what a fool I’d been. The Capo meant to kill Father. We couldn’t hand the knowledge that he still drew breath to someone who might have ties to the Palazza.

Father stayed perfectly still on his makeshift bed, but his heartbeat darted and hid like a frightened child. Luca put his scientific knowledge to use, drawing small amounts of blood and disappearing to test them in his vials. Mirella knelt at his side for hours, her voice moving in hills and valleys over the well-worn paths of prayer. Carina and Adela climbed right into Father’s sickbed and told him the story of Pearina.

Beniamo sat in the far corner and stared at everyone with mounting irritation. When Father's breath caught and struggled in his throat, my brother leaned forward.

Mirella prayed for Father to improve.

I hoped he would start back to life.

Beniamo waited for him to die.

Night bled into a new day, and as the sun rose, visitors from Chieza ringed Father's body. Fiorenza sifted through the crowd, murmuring, "Thank you for your prayers. Your discretion is appreciated."

The villagers knew that if they spoke of what they saw, someone would come when they least expected it and deliver a punishment. That someone would probably be me.

"Your father will heal, I am sure of it," the priest's cousin told me in a rickety tone. I knew she meant well—they all did—but by the tenth time I heard those words, it felt like the villagers were passing around a dull knife, each one stabbing me in turn.

What was more, I heard the name of Melae slipped into their prayers. The goddess of death had never quite disappeared from Vinalia, no matter how hard the Order of Prai tried to scrub away every trace of the old religion they called heresy, and men like Luca called history, and everyone else kept in a drawer in case they needed it. According to ancient belief, Melae helped a dying person take on two new forms, spirit and flesh, each one bound for a new fate as soon as they parted.

I knelt at Father's side and closed my eyes, pretending I wanted to be nearer to God and not simply farther away from the sight of Father's gray skin. Whispers churned behind me.

“Melae protect him.”

“Melae greet him.”

“Melae walk with him.”

“Go!” I shouted, startling the villagers into flight. They left in a great drove, eyeing me as they pulled their prayer shawls tight. In less than a minute, Father and I were alone. I tried to take his hand, but snatched back from skin as dull as stone.

People only invoked Melae’s name when the end was in sight.



I MADE IT MY BUSINESS TO DEAL WITH THE LETTER.

I found my thickest pair of leather gloves—which had once been a man with a penchant for selling di Sangro secrets—and scooped the paper up from the hearth in Father’s study with the shovel meant for fireplace ashes.

I expected my heart to clench and my breath to come in starts. I didn’t expect the magic to speak up, and tell me in a cold voice: *dead*.

Father isn’t dead, I snapped, still angry at the magic for not doing anything when I needed it most.

No, it said. *The letter*.

How could a letter be dead? The magic insisted that whatever had hurt Father was gone. Still, I wasn’t about to touch the page that had brought on so much pain. There had to be poison lurking in it somewhere.

I left it perched on the shovel and read from a safe distance.

The great and noble di Sangro family. My stomach seized at

the flattery and ridicule. *The head of your family is now dead.* My eyes stuck on that last word. Anger fought its way up, past my throat, burning at the back of my eyes. *A representative must report to the Palazza in one week's time.*

I folded the letter into neat squares and shoved it in my pocket, keeping the gloves on. So this was what the Capo wanted. To treat with a new family head, one who wasn't Father.



I WENT DOWN TO THE KITCHENS, WHERE I KNEW I WOULD FIND Fiorenza. She reigned over the wooden table, her hands covered in flour. Around her, piles of dough were stretched into long rectangles for cornetti. Turning flour and lard and a handful of sugar into pastry took hours, and a person could empty an entire body's worth of feelings into the work. Fiorenza had taught me long ago that stillness helped no one. Of course, Beniamino had been given a different lesson. He had been taught to wait, and to let what he wanted come to him.

Our single kitchen servant turned on a sharp heel at the sight of me, either out of respect at my state of near-mourning, or out of fear at how I looked after a night with only a passing nod at sleep. She left me alone with Fiorenza in the whitewashed room, pinked by morning light. The rose tint should have softened my stepmother's face, but worry lines plucked at her mouth and the creases of her eyes.

Fiorenza handed me a small tin of lard. It was my job to pinch off pieces and add them to the dough. I took great care with the dollops, placing them just the right distance away

from each other. I worked up the courage to ask an unbearable question. "What happens if Father doesn't wake up?"

Fiorenza kept her eyes on her kneading. "Watch your tongue."

My stepmother loved Father. I saw it in the way they argued, her voice as lively as water at a boil. But I loved him too, and he would not want us to wait for him to come back from the gray land between the living and the dead. Not when there was a war on the table and the family to protect.

I set the letter on the table in front of Fiorenza. "Don't touch it."

As she took in the words, I let myself dream of the best way to change the Capo. I could turn him into a pretty piece of paper and tear it to bits. A bottle of ink that I could dash to the floor. A flake of ash, bitter on my tongue, but not bitter enough to stop me from swallowing it.

Fiorenza looked up from the lovely white paper. "So the Capo thinks he will kill my husband and claim my children."

"They'll come for all of us if we don't send someone," I said.

Fiorenza, who could argue any point until it had the polished glow of truth, only said, "Yes."

I folded over the dough. Its slack weight reminded me of Father's skin, the way it had seemed to melt at my touch.

"Which one of us will go?" I asked.

I already knew it would be Beniamino, and that I would argue until I was allowed to go with him. Not as the representative, of course—that was impossible. They would laugh a girl out of Amalia if she claimed to be the head of the di Sangro family. But that letter had some magic in its weave, and I knew magic.

Not well, my magic reminded me.

Fiorenza nodded at the letter. "Take that back to your father's study and burn it in the grate."

"And then what?" I asked. "Should I fetch Beniammo?"

Fiorenza only blinked down at the table, and went back to working the dough.



I SET THE LETTER DOWN IN THE STUDY FIREPLACE AND SET A candle to it. Strange flames washed over the page, yellow and green, the color of a bruise as it struggles to heal.

A *flick* came from behind me, the sound of a great wind snapping. I turned from the hearth to face the rest of the study. The room lacked windows, and the air at the heart of the castle usually felt as still as a word unspoken.

I heard light, airy footsteps in the hall.

Follow, the magic said.

When I reached the door, the back of a slender young man moved away from me, leaving the castle at a clip. He had a fall of black hair. A green-purple cloak.

The boy on the mountain.

What was he doing here? Had he been in Father's study?

I ran to overtake his steps, grabbing him by the elbow. He whirled around, tears studding his greenish eyes. A surprised blink chased them away.

"I'm sorry," I said. I had made a mistake. These eyes were familiar, but set in a slightly rounder face than I'd expected. And while the person I'd grabbed ahold of stood tall and slender; she had curves that could not be denied.

"How long do you think you'll need my arm?" she asked

in a low voice, looking down at my fingers as if they were welcome visitors.

I darted my hand away. "What are you doing here?"

"What are *you* doing here?" she asked, her voice pitched a step higher than the boy's had been, but otherwise a perfect mirror. I remembered the stranger so clearly. He had strolled into my head as easily as he strolled across the mountain.

"This is my home," I said.

"You're a di Sangro," she said. "Of course. That answers so many questions all at once."

"I met your brother on his way over the mountain. He wouldn't tell me his name," I said.

Or his purpose, I thought.

My mind tied a tricky knot, one that had been out of reach all day. The boy on the mountain hadn't wanted to say what he was doing here. So few visitors came over the Uccelli, let alone ones dressed nobly enough to hail from the Capo's court in Amalia.

He had carried the letter.

I gripped the girl's arm.

"That's a bit tight," she said with a nervous smile. "You either like me much less or much more than you did a minute ago."

Her words summoned heat to my face. "I need to find your brother," I said.

"I'm afraid I can't help you there."

"Why? Because you're part of his scheme?" I asked, with none of the care I had used to lay out a snare for Pietro. The patience I'd had only yesterday scattered, gone. "Did you come here to see my father dead?"

The girl's face set in the hard lines of truth. "I came to

ask Niccolò di Sangro a simple question. I had no idea your father would be . . . well . . .”

“Dying?” My voice snapped in half over the spine of the word.

She didn’t deny it like the people at Father’s vigil. She didn’t lie to me one moment and whisper to Melae the next. “I’m sorry he’s been taken from you,” she said, looking down at her hands. They were long-fingered, empty.

Sadness turned my grip to water, and the girl slipped away. As she rushed toward the front door, she turned back and gave me a pained smile.

Don’t let her go, the magic said.

It had told me the same thing when the stranger on the mountain walked away and I’d chosen not to follow. The girl in the door vanished, her green-purple cloak snapping out of sight. It was the same length, the same richness, etched with the same faint pattern. It was the exact same cloak, and of course her brother could have lent it to her. But she had never admitted she *had* a brother. His existence wasn’t the only way to explain this—it was simply the one I’d seen at first glance.

The boy on the mountain, the girl in the hall.

“They’re the same,” I said.

Yes, the magic hissed, disappointed in me for taking so long.

Which meant the person who had just strolled out the front door had delivered the poisoned letter to Father.

I picked up my skirts. I had felt powerless all day, but as I ran out of the castle, giving chase, I returned to what I was best at, what I’d bent my life and magic toward: punishing enemies of the di Sangro family.



THE PATH FROM THE CASTLE LED DOWN TO CHIEZA, THE TOPS of pink-red tile roofs as bright as a batch of flowers beneath us. The stranger rushed down the dusty road toward the village, disappearing around a sharp turn.. I staggered downhill, setting my boots sideways against the steep grade, pebbles flying off the side of the mountain into open air. Running like this reminded me of a game Mirella and I had invented when we were little, pretending that we were avalanches, that if we gathered enough speed and strength, we could change the face of the mountain.

The path spat me out near the edge of Chieza. I passed white homes rivered with dust, bougainvillea bursting its way up the walls. Villagers walked slowly in the midday heat, simmering and shouting. They usually stayed inside until the passeggiata, when the air was cooler and gossip had built to a head. But with Father on his deathbed, they had far too much to talk about.

Then they caught sight of me, the second di Sangro daughter, tearing through the village when she should have been keeping a vigil at her father's side.

In the crowds, I spotted a figure, taller than the rest, with hair like a bottle of ink poured straight down his back.

Her back.

I was running again, chasing the stranger down, until I almost caught up to her on the far side of Chieza.

"Stop!" I cried.

The stranger looked back at me. The twist of the shoulders, the span of the chest, told me this was the boy I'd met

on the mountain. The dress I'd seen in the castle had been shucked and traded in for plain traveler's clothes.

He took one look at my face and ran twice as fast.

My feet knew these woods, had memorized every place where rocks spiked upward in small fists and where roots broke the path. As soon as I had the boy's back in sight, I called up my magic. It sang through me like a second bloodstream, beating like a second heart.

Give him the ugliest form you can, I said, keeping the boy squarely in sight. He ran like a rabbit, flitting back and forth, and the magic hit the tree next to him. It turned into a giant fish balanced on its tail, mouth pursed at the sky. I tried again—*uglier, please*—and hit another tree. It became a dung heap, complete with flies.

The boy looked over his shoulder and laughed.

If I hadn't hated him before, I did now. He wasn't properly afraid of me.

Knowing how proud and precise the magic was, both the giant fish and the dung heap would smell soon. I could only imagine what the villagers would say when they came across such things.

I stopped bothering with magic and took off at a blinding run, hacking my steps off when the woods broke open. The ravine gaped before me, a wide dark mouth. The Storyteller's Grave laid claim to my breath no matter how many times I saw it. There was no easy way across—only long, ragged paths around in both directions.

I looked to see which the stranger had chosen.

Neither, it would seem. He stood a few steps away, facing the ravine, completely naked. My eyes went to the matching dents at the lowest curve of his back. At first I thought this

was the world's strangest distraction. Then I thought he'd chosen to give up and pitch himself into the darkness—although I couldn't imagine why he needed to be unclothed.

Now, I told the magic.

It murmured inside of me, rushed and frantic. I couldn't understand what it wanted to say.

The boy knelt to the pile of clothes at his feet, his spine standing out like a ladder. He reached for the little leather book.

Then he changed.

It was like the world itself had turned a page. Again, a *flick* sounded, echoing in the empty ravine. The boy was replaced by a bird with stunning black feathers, a high gloss, and red patches that showed when he flapped his wings. He grabbed the book in his talons and swept the string of the cloak up in his beak.

He flapped away, across the ravine.

This stranger was a strega. That was why the magic hadn't wanted me to change him. I had finally met someone else with magic—not in a story, but right in front of me, flapping and cawing. It felt like I had spent my entire life speaking a secret language and then stumbled on someone else who was perfectly fluent.

But that didn't change the fact that this strega had brought the letter from Amalia. It didn't bring Father back from the edge of his own dark ravine.

When the bird reached the far side, I expected him to fly in hard strokes, over the scrub meadows, past the tree line. Away from me. Instead he dropped the book only a few feet from the edge, landing beside it on delicate bird feet. He nudged the pages with his beak, and the book fell open.

Pale skin flashed, and with a quick whirl the cloak covered the better part of the boy's nakedness. He stood up and faced me across the ravine. The strega tilted his head, a bit birdlike even now, waiting to see what I would do.

The magic leapt at the challenge. I told it to calm itself. I was here to punish this strega, not impress him. I turned around and grabbed the longest stick I could find, closed my eyes, and thought, *A bridge. I need a bridge, strong enough to hold me.*

I swore I could hear the magic grumble.

I dropped the branch and it shot across the ravine, smooth as a plank. Not a showy change, but it worked. Then I tried to take a step and my stomach pitched. I could barely place one foot on the thin beam.

I filled my lungs before starting across, afraid a troubled breath would set me off-balance. I anchored my eyes to the strega's on the far side. Blue, gray, green. Halfway across, I hit a knot in the wood. My toe scuffed, stuck.

And I was falling.

Sky above, darkness beneath. Then the colors vanished, and everything turned grainy and gray. My heart went blank with fear. I would hit a rock, or my mind would give way, and a merciful darkness would claim me.

I fell.

And fell.

A wind curled itself around my body. Warm, whipping, strong enough to lift me. The plummeting in my guts dissolved, and a new feeling swam in. I sailed skyward, through gray, toward impossible shades of blue.

The wind dumped me on the grass.

This was the wrong side of the ravine, the one I had

started on. The wind rushed away, and a few moments later a great breath rustled the pages of the book on the far side.

Flick. The boy was back again. He gathered the green-purple fabric around him before standing up.

The strega had become a wind to save me. *Why?* Before I guessed at an answer, another thought struck hard. He had lifted my body, carried me. Was that the same as brushing his hands all over me?

“Are you spent?” he called. I couldn’t help but notice his hard breathing, the rush of color in his cheeks. “I could keep going, if you like.”

I stared at the strega, unable to speak.

“Good,” he said. “Now, let me tell you I had no idea that letter would harm your father. Why would I poison him and then go pay him a visit?”

“You wanted to steal something,” I said, trying to sound certain, but only half convinced, of my own logic.

“You think I’m a thief?” the strega asked. “Interesting. You know, the first thing a person accuses someone of is often their own vice. But you can search me, if you like.” He finished with a broad smile that might as well have been a bow.

I forced myself to think of Father shaking on the floor, in the grips of the letter’s poison. I had been confused and charmed by this strega once. It wouldn’t happen again. I steadied my voice against the tremble that came when I slipped back to that moment in the study. “You deserve to die.”

“Is that how you thank someone who lifted you bodily from a ravine?” the strega asked. “I would think a card, or maybe some nice pears.”

"I didn't ask you to save me!" I shouted.

"It was a gift, freely given!" he shouted back.

"The five families don't believe in such a thing," I muttered. As far as I could tell, it was less common than magic. "Every man, woman, and child in the Uccelli is loyal to the di Sangro family," I added, dangerously aware that those words might not be true anymore. "One of our people will catch you."

"Really?" he asked, smiling as if we were playing a game and he had just taken all the points. The strega thumbed to a new page in his book, and the change came with another great *flick*. Where he had been standing a moment ago, there was the girl I'd seen in the castle. The cloak clung to her body, the fabric pulled tight by her breasts, flaps open slightly and showing a sliver of her skin, as pale and glowing as a moonlit path. "Who, exactly, will you tell them to look for?"

The strega turned, cloak swishing over her bare legs, and started the long, lonely walk up the mountain.

4

When I got back to the castle, I hurried past the portrait gallery. I couldn't pay respect to Father with my dress torn, my magic muttering curses, and my heart half drowned in failure.

I climbed the stairs to find Fiorenza and Luca waiting in my room. My brother sat on the bed, his hands pressed together between his knees. My stepmother hovered, touching her fingertips to the music box as it pricked its way through Pietro's song. "This is pretty," Fiorenza said. She didn't ask about where I'd been, the dust on my dress, the hitch in my breath.

Something was wrong.

When my stepmother stared at me, I was hit by a double slap of sadness and beauty. One of my first memories was Fiorenza's misery. It spun me back to her first year with us, when she missed her home, her family, the bright splash of flowers and deep indigo waves of the Violetta Coast. She had been a celebrated young woman from a noble family, with amber eyes and skin that seemed to match in shade and a slight glowing property, rich brown hair that fell almost to her knees. Father was—well, Father. And yet Fiorenza chose

him, and came to live with us, a mother that I longed for more than I dared to admit. Every night when I went to bed I feared she would leave, fleeing our grim mountains before I could wake. But she stayed and taught me about *the brilliant life*. It was a truth that many Vinalians lived by, she said, choosing to battle the harshness of this world with as many forms of beauty as possible. Fiorenza made cornetti instead of wading in thoughts of Father's death. Now she played music to keep herself from crying. "I need you to help ready Luca for his trip," she said. "And accompany him over the mountains."

"What?" I asked.

"Luca's *trip*," she said, repeating the words carefully. Fiorenza had always been good at telling a story, and I could see a truth hidden within this one, like a secret room that opened up when I looked at the right angle.

She had chosen Luca to respond to the Palazza's summons.

Luca's knees stuttered up and down. He knew how dangerous it was to go behind Beniammo's back and act as if Luca were head of the family. And yet Fiorenza had decided it was the best course. She was the acting head of the di Sangro line until Father regained his health, or until he died and one of his sons took his place. My stepmother had the space of a few breaths to make such a move. It would look, to the rest of the world, like a play for power. For herself. For her son.

"Are you sure you don't want to send Beniammo?" I whispered, thinking of my brother's dead eyes, how they only came alive when he thought he was being robbed of something that was rightfully his.

Fiorenza shook her head. "Your father had doubts about how Beniammo would fare on such a journey."

In a great crash of understanding, I saw why Father had insisted on Luca staying behind for Mirella's wedding. It was a way for Luca to gain some experience, to give him confidence. Father had decided, well before the letter arrived, that Luca would someday be the head of the di Sangro family.

Jealousy swelled at the back of my throat, but I forced words around it. "If that's what Father wants."

Fiorenza took a deep breath, a storm mustering all of her winds. "You leave tonight."

"Tonight?" I cried. After chasing that strega all over the mountain, I needed a wheelbarrow full of dinner, a hot bath, and several nights' worth of sleep. But Fiorenza was right. It would take three days to cross the Uccelli, and another to reach Amalia. And the longer we stayed here under Beniamino's nose, the more likely he would sniff out our true purpose. "Fine," I said.

Fiorenza clutched me to her. She wore the same sweet powder as always, smelling of oranges and anise, but it couldn't cover the sweat that came from replacing sleep with fear. She pressed me tighter, and I felt a hard lump below her neck. Fiorenza usually wore a string of Violetta pearls, but this was the wrong size and shape. I pulled away to see a ring of dull iron in the smooth spot at the center of her collarbone. It stood out against her red silk dress and hard-won grace.

"Where did you get this?" I asked, drawn to the dark ring. Touching iron was supposed to keep away hardship, a belief that lingered from the days of the old gods. It had been worn down to a superstition, just as the old temples scattered through Vinalia had been worn down to beautiful ruins.

"This was your mother's," Fiorenza said.

"But you two never met," I said, my voice as raw as the dough Fiorenza had been working earlier. Even now, thinking of Mother did that to me.

Fiorenza lifted the charm away from her skin and worried the cord between two fingers. "Your father gave it to me when he asked me to marry him. Not the sort of gift most young women received, but I could see that it meant a great deal to him." The forceful bottling of tears made her eyes gleam. "He made me promise that in times of trouble, I would wear it for protection."

Yours, the magic whispered.

"Can I bring it to Amalia?" I asked. "For luck?" I couldn't stop staring at the dark, careworn metal. My hands wanted to grab for it, instinct scrubbing away both reason and manners.

Fiorenza took a steadying breath. She slipped the ancient-looking leather cord from around her neck and put it over my head. "It was meant to protect me. And I was meant to protect you." The iron fell into place at the neckline of my dress.

Fiorenza turned to Luca, hugging and kissing him so many times that I thought we would never be able to leave the Uccelli. When she was gone, I immediately wished her back. Luca broke out in a sweat, sick with fear, and I had no balm for it.

The red of late afternoon snuck in through the narrow windows. The day was slipping away from us. "Meet me in your rooms an hour from now," I said. "And don't just pack your microscope and slides."

"This is wrong, Teo," Luca muttered lowly. "You know it's wrong."

"Fine," I said. "Bring the microscope, but leave room for at least one fresh pair of clothes. You're going to ripen fast on the road to Amalia."

Luca glared at me as if the attempt at humor was as bad as a stab in the heart. I didn't want him to answer the summons, but I couldn't see any other way. "In some situations, there is no right thing," I said. "Only the least of many wrongs."

"You sound like Father," Luca said, each word carved out of pain.

"It's one of his favorite sayings."

Luca rubbed his forehead with one hand, frustration peeling away years until he was a little boy again. "You see? I should know that."

My brother wouldn't look at me, and all I could do was stare at him. The new head of the di Sangro family.

The choice made sense from where Father sat. Luca was smarter, more evenhanded than Beniammo. Most families followed the rule of the eldest son, but for men fate could be nudged in a new direction. Niccolò di Sangro was a third son. He had worked the hardest, proved himself the cleverest, sacrificed for the di Sangro family without question. Father must have seen the same qualities when he looked at Luca.

I wanted to know what he saw when he looked at me. I wanted to be the one to answer the summons. "I would do this for you, if I could."

Luca tried to smile, but it wouldn't take hold. "It's a shame you aren't a boy, Teo."

I thought of the strega at the ravine, and the different forms that all seemed to belong to one person. A boyish body and a girlish one, swapped with ease. In both cases, the

strega was tall, with dark hair and pale skin, but there was no mistaking a change had occurred.

I tried not to let hope push me straight into the arms of idiocy. “Maybe it’s something I *can* do,” I said, laying the words like stones, one by one, with great care. I wanted this—wanted it more than anything I’d ever imagined.

Luca looked at me, a frown gracing his lips. “You mean dress up as a boy?” he asked. “That works in stories. There’s no way it would trick everyone at the Palazza.”

“It wouldn’t be a trick.” There was nothing false about strega magic. If I became a boy, it would be real. Another version of me, as true as this one.

I almost told Luca about my magic then and there. But I didn’t have a way to change—not yet. Only a picture in my mind, of a strega who could flick back and forth as easily as the wind played over the trees.

The last bar of sunlight painted a red line across the floor. We would be leaving soon.

“We’ll get on the road first,” I said. “And then we’ll see what can be done.”



LUCA LEFT TO PACK, AND I THREW MY OWN THINGS INTO A CANVAS bag. A spare traveling dress, stockings, underthings, rags for my bleeding, and as many coins as I could scrape from the dresser drawers. I looked around the room at the collection I had built up. I picked out the music box, the prayer beads, the gilded mirror, and the potted rose that bloomed all year. They might be useful as bribes. Anyone who believed in *the brilliant life* would see their worth.

With my pack weighing down one shoulder, I took the stairs to Mirella's tower.

The year my older sister started to bleed between her legs, she was whisked away from the castle. I was only eight, and cried every day, believing she was lost to me forever, like Mother. It didn't matter how many stories Fiorenza told me, how many promises Father made that Mirella would return. When she did, it wasn't for long. She came and went like a fickle season, spending much of the year with the other four families, slowly and carefully choosing a husband. When Mirella came home, she lived in a tower all by herself. Each window slit that belonged to her, each perfectly shaped white stone, toppled me with jealousy.

I stood now at the border of Mirella's round tower room. Leaded windows from Prai had been put in, and through them our mountain wavered blue in the twilight. Mirella sat at her desk, writing with such fierce strokes that it looked like they would rip through the paper and scar the wood.

She didn't even notice my arrival. She must have been trapped in thoughts of Ambrogio, the man she had finally chosen for her husband. If the Capo had tried to kill Father, it was likely he had moved against the rest of the families. Ambrogio might be the new head of the Otto line, or he might be dead. While I went over the mountains to Amalia, Mirella had to sit and wait and worry. This was the fate of the first daughter, and I could see clearly enough to know I wanted none of it.

I wanted to be a di Sangro son. Now that I had named it, there was no question in my mind.

I cleared my throat. "Luca and I are—"

"Fetching the doctor," Mirella said. "Yes, Fiorenza told

me. Go swiftly and come back safe." She shook powder over her freshly inked paper, folded it, and held it out to me. She didn't even bother with a seal. There was no time to melt the wax. "If you see Ambrogio, give him this."

"No," I said, unable to bear the weight of a third failure. Father had collapsed as I'd watched. The strega had escaped because I couldn't stop him. "I can't promise—"

She pressed the letter into my hands, clenching our fists together in a sort of seal. A bittersweet smile did nothing to change the grim look in her green-glazed brown eyes. "You are stubborn, little sister." Mirella's voice was hoarse, worn to a nub from too much praying. "Be stubborn enough to see Ambrogio gets this." I nodded, hugged her, and left on quick feet.

They carried me to the nursery, where Adela waited with her demands. "Three stories tonight. You promised."

Carina clapped in a quick, delighted flurry.

"I only have time for one," I said, speaking as quickly as I dared, not wanting to draw attention to my hurry. Adela opened her mouth to argue, so I began. "The day the princess met the strega, she thought it was only an old woman hobbling down the road." I let my voice travel the curve of that road, while my mind forked onto a new path. A strega boy—who was also a girl and a bird and a great wind—had handed my father a letter and taken away the person I loved most. But the strega had also given me a gift, something more than lifting me from the ravine. A gift that would come with me over the mountains, packed in my heart like a secret.

I wasn't alone.



LAST, I VISITED FATHER.

I wanted to kiss his cheek, but I knew it would upset me when Father didn't rub the spot where I'd set my lips, saying it would bring him luck. Everything Father and I did together was like a passage from one of the strega stories, comforting because it stayed the same, even if little differences crept into the telling. But things had already changed without my permission. If I found some way to turn myself into a boy, everything would.

I slid my hand inside Father's sleeve, caught between his arm and roughspun fabric. I knew, from memory, where he hid the stiletto. It came away in one satisfying sweep.

It was the same knife from seven years ago. I had not gilded the memory. The handle twisted in a way that called up the sight of wind-blasted trees. I longed to run a finger over the S-shaped curve of the crossbar. The narrow blade drew my eyes to the killing point.

I tucked it in the hidden loop inside my sleeve. Father had them put into all of my dresses, against Fiorenza's wishes.

"I promise I'll bring it back," I whispered.

If I was right about what sort of trouble awaited us at the Palazza, I would need this more than Father did.



WHEN I CLIMBED THE STAIRS TO LUCA'S ROOM, HIS PACK SAT SILENTLY, abandoned on the bed. A pale night shouldered in through the arrow slit.

"Luca," I said. "Luca?"

I thudded down the back stairs, coming out into the kitchens. I checked Luca's laboratory, a converted pantry

where he kept all of his scientific equipment. Moonlight polished Luca's specimens. Vials winked at me in the dark. The table was covered in bits of rock from different parts of the Uccelli, shells from the Violetta Coast, dead insects pinned on cards. The tiny room looked as though it had been troubled by a fresh wind. Luca had grabbed what he imagined he'd need in Amalia, and dust outlined the brass microscope's place of honor. Below where it used to sit, a line of slides had been dotted with Father's blood.

"Luca?" I tried again, though he'd clearly come and gone.

I gave the kitchens a quick scour, picking up food as I went and stuffing it into my pack. The cornetti were still rising on the table. I wished I could stay long enough to claim one as Fiorenza pulled them from the oven, crisp and buttery.

I rushed through the dining hall and paused outside Father's study. When I pushed in the door, the room appeared empty. I walked around Father's desk, and a flash of white in the grate caught my eye.

White, with a cutting edge of gold.

The letter that I had thought I'd burned was lying there for anyone to see. I had been so distracted by the strega that I'd forgotten it. I had seen it coated in odd-colored flame but not turned to ash. Whatever magic had turned it poisonous must have made it impossible to burn.

Here was the message, clearly inked. *A representative must report to the Palazza in one week's time.*

A cold mist of fear settled over me.

I started toward the back staircase and my own room, to be sure that Luca hadn't gone looking for me.

That was when I heard it.

A brutal cry. Ridged like a knife for cutting bone. High

as a wind ravaging the tree line. I dropped to my knees and put my ear against the cold stone. The sound was rising from beneath my feet.

Luca once taught me that light moves faster than anyone can see, or understand. That was how I ran, feet blind, muscles burning. I rushed down to the cellars, past the wine casks, into dark, winding cells that smelled of earth and minerals and, underneath that, rot. I didn't need light; I had that jagged, hopeless cry to guide me.

The walls pinched tight as I headed for the dungeon without thinking. The lesson that Father had given about the history of torture must have lodged in Beniamo's mind like a challenge, or a promise. A torch's stuttering glow led me to a hunched doorway.

Beniamo stood over Luca, naked to the waist. He had tied our little brother hand and foot, trussed like a hare. Bare patches on Luca's hands glistened red. Beniamo had peeled the skin off his palms, and Luca was bleeding freely. The sight called out to my own blood, turning it sickly hot.

Beniamo didn't need torture devices. He was skinning Luca alive.

My older brother caught sight of me and stepped back. Guilt darkened his face—then anger spread over him like torchlight, oily and glaring. "No arteries, see?" Beniamo waited for me to inspect his work, how he had started with Luca's hands before moving on to more deadly places. "I want this little traitor to live as long as possible before he dies."

My eyes met Luca's. He mouthed, *Run*.

I tilted my chin away. Luca would be upset if I disobeyed his dying wish, so I would have to pretend I had never been aware of it.

"You have no right to hurt anyone," I told Beniammo, words that had waited years to leave my body. "Besides, Luca is a di Sangro son. He's done nothing but his duty. He doesn't even *want* to be in charge!"

"But here we are," Beniammo said, spreading his hands wide. "Since the day I was born, I've known my fate." I heard the dark shadow of Father's words that night so many years ago. *Family is fate*. "Fiorenza can't change things because she wants her son at the head of the family."

"Do I need to remind you of your lessons?" I asked. "Father's seat belongs to the person he chooses to pass it to."

"Father isn't here," Beniammo said. "Now turn around."

I tried to master the shivering that came over me in fits. I had Father's knife in my sleeve, and I thought about drawing it, but I couldn't fight Beniammo and win. Not that way.

The smallest, bitterest wisp of a smile came over Beniammo's face. "You want to watch? Maybe you really are my sister."

Like a silver wing, the knife flew toward the delicate veins in Luca's wrist. The magic that had been waiting to have its way with Beniammo since the nursery exploded from me. I had no time to think, to ask for anything. Beniammo dropped the knife. Luca, who had been pouring himself out of his lungs, went silent.

A new sound filled the chamber—throaty, hollow, inhuman.

Where Beniammo had stood a moment before, an owl thrashed. It clearly didn't know how to work its enormous wings, mottled black and brown. Orange eyes, as bright as every moment of pain Beniammo had given me froze me in place. With fresh confidence, the owl sped at me, tail fanned and talons curled. I crouched to avoid being slashed. Beniammo

passed me with a gust that could have blown out a hundred candles.

I had transformed my brother. Even if he had hurt me, even if he had wanted to kill Luca, he was my brother. I took this new guilt and ripped it out of me. I'd done what I needed to do. I had kept Beniamino from taking Luca away. I couldn't lose him, not after Mother had left me, not with Father on his deathbed.

But wasn't that what Beniamino had said? He only wanted to protect what was his?

I clamped my arms over my stomach, sick at the notion that I was no better than my brother. No. That couldn't be right. I had tried to keep Beniamino from hurting countless other people.

Of course, I might have failed at that, too.

"An owl?" I asked the magic. "You've given him claws, a beak, and an excuse to be heartless."

When I turned around, I found Luca pointing one hand at the place where Beniamino had changed. Blood dripped from his fingers, but he barely seemed to notice. My little brother stared at me as if I had picked up the entire world and moved it an inch to the left.