

## Festo's Arrival

## HOUSE CONTADINO KITCHENS

– Ottobre 307

Lucien leaped out of bed, eager to spend a few hours practising before his testing with Superiore Giancarlo. His first test, the previous year, had been unremarkable. He'd passed largely at the charity of Ruggeri and D'arzenta, eliciting a sneer and nothing more from the belligerent *superiore*. Lucien had noticed that Giancarlo's school were heavier in the shoulder than other students. They wore their hair cropped close, like the *Maestri di Spada* who trained them. Giancarlo's school was a mix of students from the lower classes, or else the second or third sons of noble families. At best they could hope for commissions among the guards of House Fontein. They were a far cry from the bravos trained by Ruggeri, or the gentlemen duellists tutored by D'arzenta. Giancarlo wasn't a teacher you respected, they said; he was one you feared.

Lucien regarded himself in the looking glass, adopting a stern demeanour. Certainly he could benefit from some additional muscle. A lean-limbed slip of a boy looked back from the oak-framed mirror. He hoped he'd be bigger next year, after he turned ten. Some boys remained small until they turned sixteen or seventeen, then sprouted suddenly, surprising everyone. These thoughts weighed on him with increasing frequency. He shivered in the cool morning air then flicked his fringe back from his face. His black hair had grown long in the year since Rafaela had taken him to the Contadino Estate. Since that awful day at the schoolhouse.

*Why doesn't your friend Luc have any ears?*

He recalled the words all too often.

He dressed himself in his practice clothes before belting his blade and checking himself in the mirror once more, keen that his disfigurement remained hidden. He waited for Rafaela to appear on her morning round. The long-case clock in the hallway chimed eight, audible through the stout oak door of his sitting room.

Still no Ella.

He didn't want for a nanny but no one had brought breakfast. And there was the fact he'd not spoken to anyone since dinner the previous night. Sharing the top table with Lord and Lady Contadino should have been a pleasure, but instead proved awkward. The nobles had a duty of care to him, though he was not their son and there was sparse affection. All interaction was bound up in formality and reserved in the extreme, conversations stunted on the rare occasions they flourished. The Contadini had their own children to dote on, and so Lucien would sit at the end of the table, slipping away as soon as etiquette allowed.

Still no Ella.

He fussed at his sword belt, checked himself in the mirror one last time, then set off on the long walk to D'arzenta's practice chamber. Disappointment dogged his steps, a rumbling stomach his only companion. The Majordomo had also failed to make his customary appearance, but this fact was largely unheeded by the armed boy stalking the corridors of the castle.

Rafaela was not alone in being unavailable to him that day. D'arzenta took ill barely twenty minutes into practice, blaming the damp climate of Landfall for setting off his racking cough. The pale *maestro di spada* gave his apologies and departed, wheezing his way down the curving corridors of House Fontein, leaving his student alone. Outside the wind howled, rattling the windowpanes. Lucien continued his forms, concentrating on cut and slash, thrust and riposte, making his footwork meticulous. Spine straight, chin tucked in, knees bent ever so slightly, weight on the balls of his feet. D'arzenta's words repeated in his mind like a whisper, chanted over and over.

*Tempo. Velocità. Misura.*

Finally he gave in to pique, swearing at the absent adults.

Angry at Rafaela for not greeting him, cursing the Contadini for being aloof, sneering at D'arzentia for his weak lungs. Was there no one in this damned edifice that would keep him company? He slunk out of the practice room clutching the hilt of his blade, a sour gaze reflected from the looking glass near the door. He chewed his lip a moment.

It wasn't until Lucien reached the kitchens that he became aware of the quiet inhabiting House Contadino like an elderly guest. He'd managed to walk off the greater part of his petulance, arriving at his destination in a curious state of mind. Camelia was there, humming to herself contentedly, her only companion a small boy sitting on the kitchen table. He gnawed mindlessly on a crust of bread and butter. The kitchen was a cavern of a room, packed full of blackened pots and pans of every dimension. Barrels and bins of produce littered the sides of the chamber. A selection of knives hung from hooks at the far end, glittering coldly in the autumnal light. It was tradition he be ushered out upon arrival, the porters griping there was little enough room without an Orfano underfoot. He'd not seen the kitchens so empty before. The room so often filled with industry did not suit being abandoned.

'Where is everybody?'

Camelia flinched and dropped a potato, before stopping it rolling under the table with a deft foot.

'*Porca misèria*, Lucien. You scared me half to death!' She was a large woman, tall with a hearty hourglass figure, blessed with a head of corn-blond hair contrasting with deep brown eyes set in a broad honest face. Camelia was taller than some of the men in Demesne but didn't stoop to soothe their vanity.

'Sorry, I just . . . It's strange seeing the kitchen so empty.'

'Everyone has gone to help at House Erudito. It's their turn to host *La Festa* this year. I'm looking after little Dino here and making some gnocchi.'

Lucien crossed the kitchen, trailing fingers along the smooth wood of the long table. The room smelled of flour and a soothing chord of woodsmoke, oregano and other herbs he'd yet to learn the names of. Onions and garlic hung from hooks in the wall, someone had placed wild flowers in a cracked vase on

the dresser, a tiny riot of blue and red petals. Camelia's blouse sleeves were rolled up and she was grating potatoes into a large bowl with gusto.

'Why do we have it?' he asked.

'*La Festa?*' Camelia smiled. 'Well, it's a custom – we have it every year. And it gives Duchess Prospero a chance to wear one of *those* dresses.' Lucien knew full well what she meant and coughed a barely concealed laugh into his fist. Camelia straightened a moment and stretched her back, then regarded Lucien with a curious look.

'We celebrate the harvest and give thanks that we have enough to eat. Don't your tutors teach you this?'

'Why don't we have a party to thank the farmers of House Contadino instead? Wouldn't that be, I don't know, more appropriate?'

'Appropriate!' Camelia broke into a wide smile. 'You sound more like noble's son every day.'

'But it would, wouldn't it? For the farmers,' he pressed.

'*La Festa* isn't just about crops and harvest, it's about being grateful to the king for finding us, for waking us from the deep sleep, for building Demesne for us. If it weren't for him you and I might never have been born.'

Lucien paused to consider this for a moment.

'So what do the mimes and performers have to do with it then?'

'They just add a sense of occasion. You know, fun. Don't you like them?'

'I think they're a nuisance,' he replied, crossing his arms over his chest.

'Well, there's many that might think you a nuisance too, young man, so mind your manners.'

Lucien looked around the kitchens a while before letting his gaze come to rest on Dino. The boy looked at Lucien from under a heavy brow, continuing to worry the scrap of bread he was clutching in cherubic fingers. Lucien had never seen a child so small, so young.

'How old is he?'

‘Dino? Why, he’s all of three, or thereabouts, we don’t know for sure because he’s...’

‘Orfano.’ Lucien took a step back, regarding the boy anew. He had dull grey eyes and soft brown hair. He looked completely unremarkable, could have been any child from any estate. Lucien pouted a moment, frowning at the small boy, the innocent usurper, before realising Camelia was watching him.

‘Don’t go gaining the wolf, or I’ll turn you out of here with a broom handle.’ She put one great hand on her hip. ‘And you’ll not get any dinner tonight.’ She gave a sigh and rubbed her forehead with the back of her palm, smudging flour onto her face.

‘Does he have any...? You know. Does he...?’

‘Yes, I know what you’re asking.’ She raised her eyebrows. ‘I wouldn’t be surprised if he doesn’t grow those awful spines from his forearms like Golia. He also has trouble with his eyes.’

‘Trouble? How so?’

‘The place where your tears come from...’

‘Ducts,’ supplied Lucien, a rare flash of biology coming to him. Virmyre would be proud.

‘Yes, well, they don’t work. Dino’s tears are blood. The poor little thing. Fortunately he’s a stoical boy and isn’t given to crying too often. We have to keep giving him milk and ground beef to build him up.’

Lucien scrutinised the infant some more. He’d not met any Orfani other than Anea and Golia. Everyone knew of the reclusive Orfani who lived with House Prospero, but he’d never bothered to learn her name, just as she’d never bothered to leave her apartment. He imagined her in an attic somewhere, talking to herself in a made-up language.

‘That said,’ continued Camelia, ‘he reminds me of you in a way. You used to sit right there when you were his age, good as gold, staring at folk, oh so serious.’ She smiled at Lucien kindly and he reciprocated with a touch of embarrassment. Camelia had always been someone he’d gravitated to. He invariably ended up lurking in the kitchen, getting in the way or peeling potatoes for want of an excuse to remain. Better busy in the kitchens than alone in his apartment. She’d sat through the

night with him a few times when the pneumonia was on him, and sometimes to read to him, which no one else did except Rafaela.

‘I suppose you’ve come down here for gossip and tittle-tattle,’ said Camelia after a moment.

Lucien leaned on the kitchen table, one hand resting under his chin. He looked at her blankly.

‘Surely you’ve heard?’ she asked. ‘A new Orfano was found outside of House Erudito. They’re saying it’s lucky he survived the night. It was dreadful chilly under the stars on those stone steps. They’re calling him Festo.’

Lucien shrugged. D’arzenta hadn’t mentioned it.

‘There’s quite a fuss over who will look after him,’ continued Camelia. ‘Someone suggested Duke Prospero adopt him. *Porca misèria*, can you imagine? It took them an hour to get Duchess Prospero down off the ceiling.’

Lucien wondered where the Orfano materialised from but knew better than to ask. He’d received more than his share of stern looks for making such enquiries in the past. He pushed the tip of his thumb into the corner of his mouth, testing how sharp his teeth were. He thought back to when he was three and found his memories of those times sparse, the few available to him cloudy and indistinct. Something didn’t quite fit.

‘Ella hasn’t always been my nanny, has she?’

‘What makes you say that?’ said Camelia.

‘Just a feeling. I mean, she’s much too young. She would have only been seven when I was a baby.’

Camelia grinned and paused a moment, regarding the growing pile of shredded potatoes. She set down the grater with a clatter.

‘I see those lessons are paying off.’ She rested one hand on her hip and looked down at him. ‘Rafaela’s mother died when you were just four – it was she who looked after you when you first came to us. She was a lovely lady. Kind and patient. Rafaela looks just like her. Uncanny it is. Sometimes Rafaela walks through that door and, well, it’s like her mother never passed on. Of course, you’re probably too young to remember.’

Camelia wiped her hands on a cloth.

‘Rafaela had been raised to see the care of the Orfano as a great privilege. She petitioned and schemed and argued for the right to keep on looking after you. She’d always helped her mother, you see?’

‘And they turned me over to a eleven-year-old girl? Just like that?’

‘Not exactly.’ Camelia broke some eggs and fetched a large wooden spoon from a dresser further down the kitchen before continuing. ‘You just about screamed the place down for about a month. You were unbearable. In the end they gave in to Rafaela. She was the only one who could do anything with you. I thought Mistress Corvo was going to throw you out of the window one night. *Porca misèria*, you were a noisy thing.’

‘Where’s Ella today?’

‘She’s at home. Her sister is ill.’

Lucien blinked a few times. Ella had never mentioned a sister before. Suddenly he realised there was a whole side to Ella he knew nothing about. He was embarrassed to realise he’d never thought to ask.

‘Sister?’

‘Yes. She’s called Salvaggia, about your age.’

A bang and scrape in the corridor broke Lucien from his introspection and he suppressed a shudder. It came again with a constant even rhythm, growing louder with each iteration. A cowed figure emerged from under the pointed arch of the doorway, darkness releasing him into the well lit kitchen. The Domo turned his seemingly blind gaze toward them and approached, staff continuing to tap out the dull percussion of his stride.

‘Lucien,’ he droned in his flat voice, the head bobbing in the slightest imitation of a bow. Technically the Domo outranked everyone in Demesne barring the king, but he always nodded to the Orfano. ‘I had not expected to find you here.’

Camelia stepped forward and slipped one arm around Lucien’s shoulders, pulling him close to her.

‘Isn’t he growing up to be a fine young man?’ she said. Lucien thought he detected a note of challenge in her words. The Domo simply stood in front of them, not saying anything.

Behind them Dino smacked his lips and continued gnawing on the bread.

‘He is indeed growing up,’ said the Domo, the flat line of his mouth betraying nothing. His eyes were, as ever, hidden in the deep shadow of the grey hood.

‘I dare say he’ll make a fine addition to the castle.’ Camelia squeezed him, but Lucien could not drag his eyes from the looming presence that filled the kitchen. Another awkward pause and then the chief steward spoke again.

‘Perhaps he can be of some help. It occurs to me there may be a job he could perform admirably.’ And then the Domo turned abruptly, drifting from the kitchen, the hem of his dour robe sliding over flagstones, the staff resuming its plaintive clatter.

‘He’s a strange one,’ whispered Camelia. ‘They say he’s older than sin and twice as ugly.’

Lucien sniggered, caught himself for a moment, then resumed laughing anyway.

‘What do you think he meant? About performing a job, I mean.’ Lucien chewed his lip, suddenly anxious.

‘Who knows what goes on under that hood. Best not to wonder at it.’

‘What will I do when I grow up, Camelia?’

‘I’m not sure.’ She narrowed her eyes a second, hands resting on her hips. ‘I’ve always known about the Orfano, but Golia was the first I’d ever seen. People say there were more back in older times. Then you came along, and Anea, and Dino. And now we have Festo.’

‘But why?’

‘I couldn’t say. And we’re told not to ask.’ Camelia smiled, stifling a laugh behind one flour-dusted hand. She was looking at Dino, who was holding out a soggy crust of bread to Lucien.

‘Looks like you’ve made a new friend.’

Lucien nodded, noticing Dino’s shy smile.

‘Don’t you have somewhere to be? I’ll be in just as much trouble as you if your teachers find you down here.’

‘My testing isn’t until later.’

‘Well go and practise then, for goodness’ sake.’ She sighed. ‘You’ll be the death of me, Lucien Contadino.’

He shrugged awkwardly. He'd always hated that expression. He didn't want to be the death of anyone, certainly not Camelia. She pulled him close, kissing him on the forehead, before shooing him out of the kitchens. Dino waved, at Camelia's insistence, dropping the crust of bread on the floor in the process. Lucien waved back and headed through the arch, into the labyrinthine corridors beyond, and on to his testing.