




One



The dress I'm going to wear to meet my new Spanish patron has just been delivered – and it is simply gorgeous. I hold the skirts up against me and gaze at myself in the glass. It's truly one of Bianca's best. She chose the brocade for me – crimson and gold, straight in from Venice, she said, and she has given the dress the most glorious deep-red underskirt. At least nine yards of fabric in each piece, apparently. It feels thick and heavy and smooth and sumptuous, and it smells of warm spices.

I think I'm looking forward to this evening.

Crossing to my chamber door in my shift, with the skirts bundled in my arms, I call down to my manservant. 'Modesto, can you come up and help me put all this on? Cristo said he'd be here before the Angelus strikes, to take me to meet this . . . what's his name? Vasquez.'

His voice sounds from the kitchen. 'I'm just preparing your lime.'

I had almost forgotten. 'Thank you, *caro*. I'll come down and get it,' I call back. I lay the heavy skirts carefully across my bed.

Standing at the big table in the kitchen, Modesto has a knife in one hand and a lime in the other. I watch as he inserts the point of the knife just under its skin, about a third of the way down. He scores right around the fruit, then slicing through the rest of the



flesh, he separates the two sections. He squeezes most of the juice from the smaller half into a bowl, and finally flicks out a couple of stray pips with the tip of the knife. 'There you are, Signora,' he says, handing me the little cup he has made and sucking the lime juice from his fingers. 'That should do. Go and put that in.'

I run back upstairs to my bedchamber, pull my shift up and out of the way, and, with practised ease, tuck the lime-skin up inside my body. Modesto seems to know just the most comfortable shape to cut it – I can hardly feel that it's there.

I hear his footsteps on the stairs, and then he knocks at my chamber door. 'You done, Signora?' he says from outside.

'I am,' I say, shaking my shift back down over my legs again. 'You can come in. It's all done. Everything in place. No unwanted offspring. Hopefully.' I smile at him. 'Thank you, *caro*.'

'Come on then, let's get you ready, Signora. Bum first,' he says, picking up a crescent-shaped, stuffed linen roll. I obediently put my arms up and, standing so close in front of me that I can feel his breath on my cheek, Modesto reaches around my waist and lays the roll in place on my hips, shifting it so that it sits where it should, projecting out behind to give me a suitably voluptuous arse. He ties the ribbons neatly in front.

Over my head, then, go the underskirt and the beautiful brocade overskirt, trailing on the ground round my feet and looking exquisite. I reach for my bodice, and hand it to him. 'Can you lace me in?'

'Turn around then, Signora,' he says, 'and arms up again.'

The bodice is already loose-laced and the sleeves have been attached. Modesto lifts it up over my arms and head and pulls it down. I wriggle it into place, putting my fingers down inside the top edge to shift my breasts into a more comfortable position. I want them sitting up as high as possible for this dress – and for this





occasion. Modesto pulls the laces in tightly and fastens them in a secure bow. My chemise has crumpled inside all the boning – the lawn is so fine that that happens easily – and the folds feel irritating. ‘Can you pull my shift down for me, *caro*?’ I ask him. ‘It’s all rucked up.’ He obliges, crouching down in front of me, lifting my hem and reaching up into the impossible folds of the skirts, searching for and finding the bottom edge of my chemise. His fingers brush against my thighs. He tugs gently downwards and I can feel the rucks unfolding.

I straighten the V-shaped front of the stomacher and pat it flat, and we are almost there.

Looking down at my chest, and then across at my reflection in my huge glass, I bite down a smile. I asked Bianca to cut this one low – and she has taken me at my word. The neckline is wide – out to the points of my shoulders on each side – it’s been cut deep and she has lace trimmed it. In fact it’s only the lace that is covering my nipples. They are virtually on display. I let out a soft breath and touch them with the tips of my fingers.

‘He should be suitably impressed, Signora,’ says Modesto, smirking slightly.

‘Is it too much, do you think, *caro*?’

‘Absolutely not – you look wonderful.’ He pauses. ‘Let’s do your hair.’

Between us we concoct a web of complicated braids, leaving a fair amount of hair down, and then I wind a string of red Murano glass beads through the web. Garnet ear-drops and a heavy gold ring on my little finger, and I think my preparations are complete.

‘Stand back, then, and let’s see,’ Modesto says.

I stand back and preen, as Modesto frowns in appraisal, his thumbnail caught between his teeth. He stares for a full minute, as I turn this way and that, pushing my chest out and arching my





back, arms held out sideways like a dancer, so that he can have a full and uninterrupted view of the package I intend to present to my new patron in an hour or so's time.

Finally, he draws in a long breath and says gravely, 'Well, if this doesn't impress him, he's either blind or stupid, or would rather be fiddling with some grubby little *bardassa's* ill-fitting codpiece.' He smiles at me and his black eyes crinkle. 'You look like a queen, Signora. Go and sit down in your chair and keep yourself clean, and I'll fetch you some grapes.'

'Thank you.' A thought occurs to me as Modesto turns to leave the room. '*Caro*, could you run round to the other house after we've gone, and let Ilaria and the twins know that I won't be back till the morning? I believe they think I'm coming home tonight.'

He nods a brusque assent.

I'm so glad I didn't know about limes before I had the girls. I don't know what I would do without them.

I have a cloth over my lap as I eat my grapes, and Modesto has given me a bowl into which I have been told to spit the pips. Cristoforo – the Conte di Benevento, *Capitano di Cavallo* in the King's Regiment – is a little late, and while I am waiting, I am entertaining myself by holding the bowl out at arm's length and trying to spit my pips from increasing distances to test the accuracy of my aim. Cristoforo knocks and enters my chamber just as I am leaning forward and holding the bowl out at full stretch. I have just let fly with one of my pips, and it has just plipped into the bowl, when his face appears around the door. My smile of satisfaction vanishes at his obvious amusement.

'So, this is what the more eminent courtesans do when they're alone, is it?' he says, grinning.

'Don't make fun of me!'





‘I wouldn’t dare!’

I pretend to scowl. ‘I was bored and you were late.’

Cristoforo bows low in apology and I stand up, letting my cloth drop to the floor. His gaze rakes me from head to foot and, much to my satisfaction, it is clear that he approves of what he sees. ‘You look particularly lovely, if you will allow me to say so,’ he says. ‘My Spanish friend is going to be . . . *overwhelmed*, I think.’

‘And shall you be jealous of his spending time in my company while you’re away, readying yourself for battle, Cristo?’ I say, looking at him. Stocky, crop-haired, heavily muscled, he is struggling to keep his face straight.

‘Of course. I shall be devastated – how could I not be?’ He puts on a stricken expression, but beneath this, the smile he seems unable to prevent is open and happy, and I don’t believe him for a moment: I doubt he’ll pine for me when he is away. I understand that he will be preoccupied – of course he will, he’s an important soldier – and I know that he is introducing me to this man, Vasquez, out of concern for my well-being while he’s away, but his lack of involvement feels almost insulting. He has, after all, been one of my most regular patrons since I first arrived in Napoli.

‘So, are you ready, *cara*? Shall we go?’ he says.

I nod, and together we go down to my front door. Modesto watches us leave the house.

Despite the fact that Vasquez’s apartment is well within walking distance, Cristo has come to collect me in a little covered carriage. Inside, it’s very small and smells of warm leather, and my skirts fill the space between the two red velvet bench seats; they billow up in front of me, puffing up much higher than my knees. No floor space can be seen at all, and when Cristo climbs in from the other side and sits down on the seat opposite, he has to push the brocade out of the way to make room for his legs. He taps the roof





of the carriage with the hilt of his sword and, with a rumbling lurch and a scrunch of pebbles, we are off.

‘Now, listen again,’ he says. ‘I want to make sure you remember exactly what’s going to happen. This needs to go well.’

Feeling a little frisson of excitement – I’ve always enjoyed the moment of introduction to a new patron – I lean forwards to hear what he has to say.

‘*Maestre* Vasquez can’t wait to meet you,’ Cristo says. ‘He’s had a meal prepared for the two of you, I believe, so I hope you have an appetite. His is prodigious.’

‘I haven’t eaten anything other than a small bunch of grapes since this morning.’ I’m starving, if the truth be told.

‘Modesto and I have sorted out the financial side of the affair—’

‘Yes, he told me.’

‘And you’ll be pleased to hear that your new friend will be paying handsomely! More than I do, at any rate. So you’ll be financially secure while I’m away, at least. All you have to worry about now is looking beautiful and doing what you do best.’

I smile at him, pleased at his confidence in me. But I am still a little hurt that he seems so happy to be handing me over to another man.

‘When we arrive, I’ll leave you in the care of *Maestre* Vasquez’s servants, who will help you set up the surprise. They’ve been paid well to keep the details from their master and they’ll make sure everything runs smoothly.’

And Cristo runs through the exact details of what I am to do, one more time.

Cristoforo raises a hand in a final farewell salute as the door closes, leaving me inside with the *Maestre*’s servants. This is not the front door to the big house in the Via dei Tribunali, but an unimpressive





side door that we only reached by stumbling down a cobbled alleyway so narrow that I had to hold my skirts bundled up in front of me, to stop them brushing against the walls and getting stained.

Inside, even in these servants' quarters, this house is opulent. Cristo was right – my new patron is clearly wealthy. The three young men who are to prepare the 'surprise' hustle me down a long covered walkway, one behind me, one on either side, pressing in close, moving fast. They are dressed in old-fashioned, stiff black fustian doublets with starched ruffs, and they all seem intrigued and excited by their task. They are grinning, and chattering to each other in Spanish. All three keep glancing around them. It feels clandestine and furtive. I smother a laugh.

'Quick, this way, Señora!' the tallest of the three whispers, in heavily accented Italian this time, pointing to an iron-studded door to our right. He reaches out in front of me and opens the door, whereupon, feeling these men's hands on my shoulders and in the small of my back, I am shuffled through and out of sight. The men close and latch the door, then whistle out their relief at having succeeded in their covert operation so far.

Just inside this door is a spiral staircase – wooden, narrow, winding up and out of sight. My new friends urge me to begin climbing and, with one man in front and two behind, I have little choice in the matter. We soon reach another door, which proves to lead into a beautiful upstairs room: huge and bright, with four great floor-to-ceiling windows, through which the evening sun is blazing in thick, downward-sloping diagonal shafts of yellow light.

At the far end of the room, a table has been laid for two; it is positively glittering with glass and silver and I can see a spray of some brightly coloured flowers in a bowl in the middle. Several dishes, covered by gleaming silver domes, have been placed on a nearby *credenza*.





I wonder what we shall be eating.

Between each of the windows, facing into the room, stands an ornately carved, cross-framed chair, upholstered in gold-coloured silk. And at this end of the room, just near where we are standing, fiercely lit by the sun, is an enormous *lettiera* – a monumental bed. The carving on this great monster matches that of the chairs, and the hangings are of the same silk. It is as though the bed has been swathed in sunshine.

One of the three servants darts forward now and draws back the bed-hangings. The bed within is made up, with the sheets neatly folded back on one side, away from one of several plump pillows. The latent sense of invitation is irresistible.

I feel my hand being taken – the tallest of the servants, who seems to be the only Italian speaker, is pulling me towards the bed, saying, ‘Señora, my master arrive very soon. But he not expecting you for another hour. We must get you ready for surprise him.’

I nod. The servant pulls from a pocket in his breeches a roll of a deep red satin ribbon – as wide across as the span of my spread hand. This he flicks out to lie widthways across the bed. Then, from under the bed, he drags a bolt of fabric; pulling the whole length of it off its roll by the armful, he flaps it all out, like shaking out a freshly laundered sheet, across the bed on top of the ribbon. This fabric is sheer and golden – almost transparent – and it shimmers in the low light from the window. It’s absolutely beautiful. It is far wider than the bed, though – I watch as the servant leans across and carefully doubles it over, making it two thicknesses deep.

‘We could deliver you to Vasquez in a carpet, like Cleopatra,’ Cristo had suggested.

He seemed excited by the idea, but I demurred. ‘That’s a horrible





idea, Cristo,' I said. 'It would probably ruin the dress, which cost a fortune, any carpet you might be able to find will probably be filthy and I'll end up covered in dust and cobwebs, and smelling of old wool. Not very attractive. It may have been all very well in ancient Rome, or Egypt or wherever it was, but I don't fancy it in the slightest, here in Napoli.'

Cristo saw my point in the end, and so we discussed for some time how we might adapt Cleopatra's plan to suit the occasion – he was wedded to his idea of concealment and would not be moved from it. 'People like unwrapping gifts,' he said.

'Quick!' the servant says. 'Get up here!' He and the other two men help me to seat myself as near to the middle of the bed as we can manage, without creasing my clothes, rumpling the golden fabric or disturbing the straightness of the ribbon. They almost lift me, in fact. I lie down; both ribbon and gauze stretching out flat on either side of me.

'Ready, Señora?' my new friend asks. His tone is deferential, but his eyes are dancing. He licks his lips, twitching down a smile.

I nod again. 'Quite ready, thank you. Just don't wrap it too tightly. It must be left loose – this dress will be ruined if it's crushed.' I fold my arms across my chest.

'*Maestre* Vasquez will be here in moments, Señora,' he assures me, leaning across me and taking the far ends of the sheer length of doubled-over fabric. He lifts it back towards himself, letting it fall so that it completely covers me from head to foot. He gently tucks it in under me. Then he takes the other side and folds this back over the first layer, tucking that in on my other side, until all the ends are (so I imagine – I can now see almost nothing) out of sight and I am neatly wrapped like a big parcel inside four layers of cypress gauze. The last thing I feel is the servant's hands tying





the ribbon around the level of my belly. Not one part of me remains visible – not a wisp of hair, not even the tip of one shoe.

I feel somewhat confined, and find that I cannot really move my arms properly, but I suppose it *is* still more comfortable and sweet-smelling than a carpet would have been.

‘Are you quite comfortable, Señora?’ my friend asks.

‘Quite, thank you,’ I reply politely. My words sound oddly muffled.

‘We go downstairs, now, and tell *Maestre* something important is deliver to the upstairs chamber – as soon as he home. He not be long. You wait.’

I hear footsteps, the click of the door closing, and finally a soft and sunlit silence.

As I have been instructed, I wait.

And wait.

And wait.

All I can hear is my own breath, inside my silk cocoon, and the rustling of my skirts as I shift position a fraction.

What will he be like, this Vasquez? Cristoforo has assured me of his wealth, his eminent standing as a senior official in the occupying army, and of his desire for my company. But what sort of man is he? I wonder if I shall enjoy what is about to happen. Will he be gifted in the arts of the bedchamber? Might he even be someone who will turn out to be more to me than a paying patron? Perhaps, in time to come, I shall look back fondly on this evening as the moment something extraordinary began. But then, of course, the converse is just as possible: tonight’s tryst could as easily turn out to be that fateful encounter that every courtesan secretly dreads. Because such fateful encounters do happen. It happened to me all those years ago, after all, did it not? I was lucky to survive that night.





I might not be so fortunate another time.
 My scar tweaks as I remember.
 But . . . Cristo made it all sound so enticing the other day.

'You tell me you need a new patron – well, what would you say to a Spaniard?' he said.

'A Spaniard? An Inquisitor?'

Cristo laughed. 'No, no, no – nothing like that – can't imagine any of them spending a single scudo on such sinful and wicked activities as a liaison with a courtesan – even one as beautiful as you, Francesca. No, this man's a tremendously wealthy Maestre de Campo in the Spanish Army. I've been working with him for months. Now, I could be wrong, but from what I've heard him say, I am given to understand that he's becoming increasingly desperate for the attentions of a beautiful woman. He rarely goes an hour without mentioning the fact, as it happens.'

I smiled, and Cristo grinned at me. 'He's as rich as Croesus,' he said. I glanced over to where Modesto was standing by the door to my chamber, but my manservant's face was unreadable.

'He's young,' Cristo went on, 'younger than me, a good soldier – not the brightest, perhaps, but clever enough to have been promoted several times. He's a bit particular, I suppose you could say. Others might say pedantic, but—'

'I really meant, shall I find him attractive?'

Cristo laughed. 'That's not for me to say, really, is it, cara? Come with me the day after tomorrow, though, and I'll present you to him – with a suitably ostentatious flourish, I think – and then you can decide for yourself what you think of our young Miguel Vasquez.'

I wanted to know what Modesto thought of this idea, before I agreed to anything.

'I think you should do it,' he said after a moment's pause. 'What





with the death of the Conte di Vecchio, and now the news that the Signora here is leaving the city –’ he nodded towards Cristo then turned back to me ‘– you have to think of your financial position. With the likes of Emilia Rosa and that simpering little bitch Alessandra Malacoda rising to such dizzying heights in the city, you’re going to have to make sure you keep pace. Old and decrepit he might well have been, but the Conte di Vecchio had status in Napoli, and his patronage was a godsend last year.’

I looked at my feet and pushed the toe of my shoe down into a knot hole in the floor. He was right, I knew, but, wanting to justify myself, I said, ‘But I have other patrons. There’s Filippo . . .’

Modesto rolled his eyes.

Irritated, I added, ‘And I took on Signor di Cicciano a few weeks ago.’

Cristo’s eyebrows lifted. ‘That young reprobate? I’ve heard of him. You should be careful, Francesca – I’m surprised you’re still in one piece, from what people have said. I’m serious, you must take care.’

The same thought had occurred to me, on a couple of occasions in the company of this new patron. Michele di Cicciano can be very wild. Perhaps Modesto had a point, I thought. I need someone steady. Rich and steady. At least whilst Cristo is away.

A door bangs somewhere below me. Somebody shouts, and then several male voices rumble incomprehensibly. Heavy footsteps thud on a staircase. My pulse quickens. Perhaps this is him. Oh, dear. Cristo said he had a ‘prodigious appetite’ . . . What if he is enormous? Shall I end this evening completely flattened? I fiddle my lips between my teeth to redden them, then lick them. I try to lift my arm to pinch colour into my cheeks, but the servant has tied the ribbon too tightly, and I can’t reach my face without spoiling the lie of the cloth.





No one comes into the room, however, and within seconds, the sounds from below fade away. My thoughts begin to wander again.

The poor Conte di Vecchio. I feel horribly responsible for his death. I told Cristo about it – I said I'd killed him. Oh, I know I didn't actually do it, but I still feel so guilty about it that it seems to me sometimes that I did. I should never have agreed to see Vicino da Argenta that day – vile man that he is. It was stupid of me. Modesto has always told me I should keep away from him. And if Argenta hadn't been with me that afternoon, the Conte di Vecchio would still be alive, Modesto would be happy with the money I'm earning, and I wouldn't be lying here like an oversized birthday present, unable to move, almost entirely ignorant about the man I am to bed.

Cristo was shocked when I told him about the Conte di Vecchio. He had known that the old man was dead but not how it had happened.

'I hadn't seen him for two or three weeks,' I said. 'He'd been on a trip, I think.' I pictured the old man – Giovanni Battista, the elderly Conte di Vecchio: stooped, stiff and slow in his movements, the wreck of a once debonair adventurer. Lovemaking had cost him dearly every time, I think, but he had enjoyed it – on the days when he was able to manage it – and on those occasions when his bones had ached too fiercely to permit him to rut, he had just liked sitting in my bed with me and listening to me reciting poetry, or reading to him from my diaries. He was a dear old thing, he was the means of my establishment here in Napoli, and I am genuinely sorry he's gone. And not just because of the money, either.

'Go on,' Cristoforo said.

'Well, as I say, he'd been away for ages. So had you.'

'It's an annoying habit of the army, to request one to work from time to time.'

I ignored his sarcasm. 'So, seeing as all my favourites had declined





to come and see me, I had to resort to scraping the bottom of the barrel.'
I paused. 'Vicino da Argenta.'

Cristoforo did not need to comment. The expression of disgust on his face was eloquent.

I gave him a wry smile. 'I know – the man's repulsive.'

'Then why?'

Shame glowed warm in my cheeks as I admitted it. 'Because I needed the money.'

Cristoforo shook his head and made a soft 'tut' of disbelief with his tongue. The heat in my face flared now with irritation. 'Don't look at me like that!' I said. 'I have a living to make just as you do. I have two houses to manage and my children to care for. If the men I prefer choose not to come and see me, I have to make do with the ones I would rather avoid.'

He inclined his head in reluctant acceptance of this.

'Anyway,' I said. 'Vicino had come here early on the evening that Giovanni Battista died. He was drunk – which was hardly a surprise – and he was being particularly boring. I had no wish to engage him in conversation, and he seemed incapable of actually doing anything very exciting, so I decided that the best way to deal with the situation was probably just to make sure he couldn't expect me to talk to him.'

Cristoforo raised a quizzical eyebrow.

'My mother always told me it was ill-mannered to speak with your mouth full.'

Cristo tipped back his head and barked out a laugh. I continued my tale. 'And then, the door to my chamber – this chamber – bangs open. Thinking it's Modesto, I take no notice, and just carry on with what I'm doing – Vicino's too drunk to care about the interruption – but it isn't Modesto. It's Giovanni Battista.'

I had glanced over my shoulder from where I was crouched on the floor in front of Argenta. The expression on his poor face – it's still





haunting me. He looked utterly devastated. He said nothing, just stared at me for several seconds, and then blundered blindly out of the door. I made to follow him, but as soon as I started to stand, bloody Vicino caught my wrist and tried to hold me back, and by the time I had pulled myself from his grasp, the front door had slammed and the Conte di Vecchio had gone.

I explained all this to Cristo, and then finished my story by saying, 'Modesto told me how the poor man had staggered off up the street, and then collapsed when he reached the piazza. Several people – including Modesto – tried to help, but it was no good. He was dead in minutes.'

Cristoforo rubbed a hand around his unshaven jaw, and puffed out a disbelieving sigh. 'Poor old man.'

A dove clatter-flaps past the window, startling me out of my reverie. It's warm here, and the sun is lying across the gauze over my face. I wriggle a little, feeling a prickling tingle in one of my feet.

He has to be here soon.

And then the door opens, banging back against the wall and making me jump.

Oh, *Dio!* I hope it's him – I shall feel decidedly foolish, trussed up here like a goose prepared for the table, if it's anybody else. Several sets of footsteps clack into the room, and I hear men's voices, speaking in Spanish. One of them is my servant friend from before, I think, but the others are unfamiliar. Their indecipherable conversation rumbles for a moment, and then an order is barked out, the various footsteps retreat and the door clicks shut.

Somebody strides across the room. I hold my breath. The newcomer pauses, and then I hear soft male laughter, which ends with a cough. A voice says in Italian, 'Oh, yes! Juan was quite right –





this delivery is indeed “*significant*”. Well, well, well, I wonder what it can possibly be. Whatever it is, it must be investigated *immediately*.’ This voice, like the servant’s, is breathy and heavily accented, though this man speaks more softly, and his grammar is accurate.

A faint tug near my middle pulls me slightly to one side – he’s undoing the ribbon. Taking his time, he peels back the fabric, bit by bit, leaning over me to untuck the various layers of gauze. I can hear his breath, soft in his nose. Then, after several seconds, blinking in the light, I am finally able to see who has released me from my wrappings: at first he is silhouetted against the window, but then he moves to one side into the shadow of the damask-hung bedpost, and I can make him out more clearly.

Maestre Vasquez – I presume this to be him – must be some thirty years old; he is neat and slightly built, with short dark hair and a tidy beard. Like a mythological faun, he has pointed tips to his ears. On meeting my gaze, his smile broadens, he runs his tongue over his lips and, holding out a hand, he gestures to me to sit up.

‘Señora Felizzi? I was not expecting to see you so soon. Or for you to arrive quite so *covertly*.’

‘Signor Vasquez.’ I swing my legs around and stand, smoothing out my skirts with my hands. Then, my gaze on his, I drop down into a curtsy, but my would-be patron takes my hand and pulls me back to standing. We are much the same height. He releases my hand, and, stretching out to touch the neckline of my dress, he feels his way softly down from my shoulder, fingering the lace as he goes. His hand moves across the horizontal, then pauses, his eyes widening as he reaches the first of my all-but-exposed nipples. ‘Are you hungry?’ he says, pinching it for a brief second.

I run my tongue over my lips and smile assent.





‘I have had food prepared for us. Come and eat.’

Vasquez lifts the covered platters over onto the table. He seats me in one of the two chairs, pulling the other round so that he is sitting close to me. Filling our glasses with a tawny-coloured wine, he then lifts off the domes. Olives. Some sort of tiny bird’s eggs, nestling in a bed of shredded leaves and little flowers. And oysters. Shucked and gleaming and dressed with lemon slices.

Picking up an olive in his fingers, he offers it to me, obviously expecting to put it directly into my mouth. ‘Señora?’ he asks.

I smile and open my mouth a little. His fingers rest on my lips for a brief second. I turn the fruit over with my tongue, enjoying the briny sharpness, and, having removed the flesh, I push the stone forward so that it protrudes from between my teeth. My new friend grins and takes it from me.

‘More?’ he asks.

I nod.

He repeats the process. Twice.

I reach forward then and pick up an oyster, holding it up for him to eat. He tilts his head back, and, touching his lip with the edge of the shell, I slide the oyster into his mouth. He flicks his head to throw it to the back of his throat and swallows it. As he sits forward again, a thin line of liquor runs down his chin into his beard, and I lean towards him and run the tip of my tongue up the track of the juice, holding the side of his face with my fingers. He smells of brine and incense and garlic.

Letting out a long, slow breath that shivers as it leaves his mouth, he says, ‘Oh, you are going to be worth every *scudo*! Benevento sang your praises to the heavens, but I think now that he failed to do you justice.’

‘I always hope to please.’

‘Your hopes are being fulfilled as we speak, believe me,’ he says,





picking up another oyster. He raises his eyebrows questioningly. I nod, and he slithers it into my mouth. Its sea-smelling bulk is thick in my throat for an instant and then it's gone. Vasquez leans forward and runs his tongue along the edge of my lip.

I open my mouth a fraction.

And that, it seems, is invitation enough for him. He stands, takes my hand, and flicks his head towards the great gold-draped edifice on the far side of the chamber. 'Come with me, now, Señora,' he says softly.

And, tracing around inside the curve of his palm with my fingertips as we walk, I follow him across the room.





Book of Encounters

I suppose in the end it was not an unpleasant evening

As I lay wrapped in silk like a spider's supper last night, waiting for Vasquez to arrive, I passed the time wondering what my new patron would be like. And, now that I've lain with him, I know that he's greedy. Maestre Miguel Vasquez is a greedy man – greedy for me, greedy for food, greedy for life. His appetites for both his fine suppers and my body would appear to be irrepressible. At times last night I felt that he might almost devour me . . . my lips are tingling this morning – they're quite bruised from his attentions – and my poor breasts are almost numb.

He says little, the Maestre. But there's a fervent eagerness about him – an unsettling intensity that seemed not far from desperation at times yesterday. Has he always been like this, I wonder, or is it just that he has been waiting a long time for an encounter such as we had last night?

Perhaps he will relax a little more next time.

I hope so. Appetites like his often lead to trouble.

