

THE BONES YOU HAVE CAST DOWN

(excerpt)

Jean Huets

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CHIARAVALLE, ADVENT 1446

ON A CHILL day in my seventeenth winter, the daughter of the duke of Milan visited the girls' orphanage in the tranquil village of Chiaravalle. Mother Prioress told us to continue working at our embroidery, but not a thread got pulled as the lady strolled among the workbenches, her form plump and gracious, and womanly with the child inside her.

She paused here and there to praise a choice of colors, a tricky stitch set, a tidy work area. The embroidery sister had labeled my needlework precise and tasteful, and too inventive, but when the lady stopped before me she said nothing about my work.

"What is your name, young woman?" Her voice was melodious, and resonant for a woman.

"My name is Taria, ma dona Bianca Maria." And my voice, barely a squeak.

"You must please call me ma Bianca."

A breeze of whispers stirred the room. Even with my eyes down, I knew the prioress glared it to silence. I could feel it.

"Can you read, Taria?" ma Bianca asked.

"Yes, I can read, ma Bianca."

The prioress laid a hand on my shoulder. "And her

handwriting is nearly as neat as her embroidery.” The glib compliment did not conceal the strange tension in her voice.

“Will you read out loud for me, Taria?”

The lady’s attendant, a haughty girl about my age, handed her a book whose cover I recognized as fresh from our own bindery. I extended trembling hands, covered with the cloth I was working. Ma Bianca put the book on the cloth closed and spine down, and so it opened according to Divine Will.

“Auditui meo dabis gaudium et letitiam, et exsultabunt ossa humiliata—”

“Thank you, Taria.”

I held out the book, my eyes demurely downcast, my outstretched arms unsteady. Had she cut me off because of what I had read?

Make me hear joy and gladness, and the bones you have cast down will rejoice.

Why under heaven did Divine Will have to open the book to a passage about rejected bones? Or rather, why did I have to read that part? Glancing at the page again, I saw that I could have skipped on to prettier things, about clean hearts and upright spirits. Ma Bianca’s attendant took back the book with a sniff.

The prioress’s fingers tipped my chin up. She smiled, but some sadness haunted her eyes.

“Look at the lady, child,” she murmured.

I met ma Bianca’s eyes and saw in them masculine shrewdness deepened by a woman’s wisdom. She smiled, gave us a few words of gentle admonition, and left.

And life at Santa Caterina went on as always.

Except for mine.

Like the other girls not destined to take the veil, I had both dreaded and hungered for the time my life would change forever: when a kind patron or matron finished my dowry chest of

textiles with pewterware and glazed pottery so that I could be married to a pious artisan or merchant handpicked by the prioress. Any day now, I might be called into the prioress's office and told to pack my belongings.

That evening, that's exactly what happened: I was called into the prioress's office and told to pack my belongings. I was not joining a husband, though. I had been chosen to join the retinue of *ma dona Bianca Maria Visconti*, daughter of the duke of Milan.



CREMONA, SUMMER 1447

THE VISCONTI PALAZZO in Cremona was freshly stuccoed, with all the windows of the lower floors glazed. Inside, thick tapestries warmed the walls, and frescoes of flowering trees and gaily plumed birds decorated the ceilings. Candles and lamps brightened whatever room ma Bianca occupied until the lady herself was pleased to let night fall.

I had never been in such a grand place. The one time I said so, to Lucia, ma Bianca's attendant, she sniffed—a habit of hers—and declared it nothing compared to the Visconti palace in Pavia, or even to her own father's villa. I did not play the yokel again.

Lucia dared no more than sniffs and slights, for the senior girl Stefania ruled us with a firm hand and a sharp eye. The rest of ma Bianca's retinue, all well-born girls, treated me with benevolent indifference.

Loneliness emerged as my true enemy. I missed my convent sisters and mothers badly. Had my life gone as expected, I would have married a local man and been able to visit everyone. Ma Bianca's roving lifestyle meant I might get an occasional glimpse of my hometown, but her noble estate separated me forever from my childhood companions. And kind as she was, any hopes that

she would take the place of the mother I never knew were quickly dashed. She was my employer.

I wondered why she had taken me. I had no influential family to please, nor any outstanding talents, pretty as was my needlework. My appearance—slender and slight, with soot-black hair and big, dark eyes—was pleasing enough, but lacked the serenity, perfection, and charisma of beauty.

She must have liked what I had read, I reasoned. The passage spoke of bones, true, but those bones rejoiced. Or maybe it was my voice. Or my needlework. Or it could be the lady adopted me because she liked my quiet manners and cleanliness. Untidy though the duke, her father might be, the Visconti were fastidiously clean. Only later, when I became more politically astute, I realized that precisely because my appointment did not gratify any noble family, ma dona Bianca could use me as she saw fit. Nothing that happened to me would offend anyone important.

In truth, ma Bianca seemed hardly even to notice me those first months. As a minor member of the retinue, I mostly waited on the senior girls. Stefania said I would be promoted to mending, then decorating ma Bianca's wardrobe if I proved reliable. She referred not only to my needlecraft, nor to how biddable I might be. My deportment had to please ma Bianca. In a noble entourage, that meant much more than washing my hands and face, being on time for Mass, and not fidgeting. Court protocol had to be observed, precisely and gracefully.

With no time to teach me the minutiae of daily life, let alone courtly manners, Stefania assigned another senior girl to mentor me. At the announcement, Lucia sneered, too softly for Stefania to hear, but loud enough for me: "Poor Poli, how she's fallen."

Polidora was two years older than I, and her father was a *capitano*, a member of the Milanese ruling body. More important to us girls, Polidora was married and with child. But her husband Paolo, a military commander on campaign down south,

was not the one who made her baby. Gossip had it that her lover was ma Bianca's husband, Count Francesco Sforza.

Everyone knew that the count sired children as he pleased, and married off his concubines to favored men. Francesco himself was the offspring of his father's paramour, and ma Bianca's mother was not the duke's wife, but rather a lady-in-waiting.

Duke Filippo had loved his concubine while remaining utterly cold to his wife. Francesco and ma Bianca loved each other, though. The older girls could recite by heart the letter he wrote to her on the eve of their wedding:

I confess I engaged in harsh war against your honored father to show that all I did was for the sake of our love. I resolved with a burning heart to die if I could not get you. I did not seek to offend, but only to defend myself against your father the duke. Now I offer peace and though I must still be a soldier, I promise to be a quiet and loving husband.

A loving husband Francesco was, but not quiet; nor was his wife quiet. I myself heard her dictate a scathing letter to him on the subject of infidelity. And a persistent rumor claimed that in the early days of her marriage she had paid assassins to murder an especially beloved paramour. We none of us believed that she would do such a thing, really, and the birth of her own two babies, according to Lucia, had pacified her somewhat. Still, she did not accept Francesco's amorous adventures with cheerful resignation. Polidora's supposed liaison with the count hurt all the more in that ma Bianca considered us her own. "My maidens," she called us. And Polidora had been one of her pets.

Custom, and maybe ma Bianca's husband, and perhaps a bit of clinging sentiment, too, commanded that Polidora remain in her care until after the birth. But Lucia was right: the assignment to mentor me, a new girl of low birth, confirmed that she had been cast out of ma Bianca's inner circle.

For all that, and despite our differences in temperament and station, Polidora never showed me anything but kindness. Like the sun to my moon, bright-haired to my darkness, she warmed away my loneliness with her smile, with stories that made me laugh, with lessons tucked between the lines. I had nothing to give back: no gossip, no travels, no adventures—there was nothing to tell of my life.

On an early summer day, breezeless and heavy, we sat sewing near the doors of ma Bianca's study, apart from the others as usual.

"I'm sorry you're stuck with such dull company, Polidora."

She leaned to kiss my cheek. It was a bit of an effort; she was quite round. "I love you, Taria." She glanced through her golden eyelashes at ma Bianca, sitting at the big table with her secretary Diana. "I'll miss you when I have to join my husband."

It was the first time she had referred to Paolo. She had not even met him yet. They had been married by proxy, the groom's brother standing in for him. She paused at her work to check mine, replacing the padded collar on a *mantella* whose rich fabric made my legs sweat. "Careful not to let it twist," she said. "The collar must make a smooth curve. Here..." She kneaded the collar until the padding worked into place. "Like so."

We sewed on, and I ventured to ask, "Will you miss this life?"

"It depends on what Paolo's like."

"I hope he's nice," I said. "And handsome." I could have blushed at such a feeble and childish response, but Polidora only smiled.

"He can't ever be what my true love is...was." She glanced at ma Bianca again, then continued hardly above breath. "I only wish I could convince ma Bianca that I didn't betray her. Taria, can you keep a secret?"

"Of course."

She searched my face, then lowered her voice still more. "I

have never made love with the count Francesco, not even with a kiss or a cuddle, no, not even with a look.”

I lifted the mantella to cool my legs, and settled it again. “Has Francesco not told the truth?”

“Ma Bianca doesn’t believe him. And my word angers her.”

Polidora’s little smile revealed the only bitterness I ever saw in her. It had not occurred to me that she herself would feel betrayed by ma Bianca’s suspicion and jealousy.

“You can’t reveal the real father?” I asked.

“I want to tell just you. In case things don’t go well. The midwife is unhappy with the way the baby lies inside me.”

“You’re strong, Polidora. All will go well.” I spoke heartily, but my stomach went cold.

“Of course all will go well. But just in case, eh?” She leaned toward me. “My baby’s father is ma Bianca’s great-great uncle. Galeazzo Visconti the first.”

“Galeazzo the first?” I could not understand why Polidora would take as a lover someone that ancient.

Too ancient.

Polidora spoke my thoughts aloud. “Unbelievable. Yes. But you haven’t yet heard it all. Let’s go for a walk. I feel restless.”

And we could talk more freely outside.

We got permission from Stefania to go out—easily given. Ma Bianca probably felt more easy with Polidora out of the room.

We walked arm in arm along the loggia. The scents of sweet and bitter potted flowers and herbs blended with the smell of horse, and from the cobbled courtyard below came the patient chant of a groom training a horse to a gentle gait. Scarlet roses burgeoned, and the sky was deep blue.

“My lover,” Polidora said, still quietly, “my true love is Galeazzo Visconti. The first Galeazzo Visconti, son of Matteo Visconti who ruled Milan one hundred and fifty years ago. Yes. It’s

the truth.” She squeezed my arm. “Oh, Taria, I’m so glad to be telling someone, finally.”

“But how.... I don’t understand.” It crossed my mind that her pregnancy made her a bit the *pazza*.

“When we girls last were in Brunate—you remember, right?”

“You mean where the convent is,” I answered, “up above Lake Como.”

“That’s right. I wish you could have come with us.”

I shrugged. Though the girls had bemoaned the stifling boredom of the convent guesthouse, I had chafed at being left behind to tend to Stefania, who had been down with the croup. Mainly, though, the trip was memorable for its timing. The count Francesco had been there, and three months later Polidora’s pregnancy became known.

My thoughts must have been obvious enough. Polidora patted her belly and laughed. “Yes, I know. But the count and his boys spent most of their time spying over his towns. You can see a long way from up there. With just the nuns and a few old folks pottering around, the place was so quiet, my ears rang. I didn’t like it much, but maybe boredom is good for the soul, because for three nights, I dreamt of a woman saint.”

“Who was it?”

“I’d never heard of her. Guglielma. She was old and humble, and she wore a plain brown dress. I think she was a *pinzochera*. She seemed like the type, somehow.”

I nodded. Pious and capable, the *pinzochere* took some vows but remained uncloistered, free to conduct worldly business on behalf of monks and nuns. In my hometown they served the abbey and the convent.

We stopped at a potted rosebush near the balustrade of the loggia. A page strode through the brick-paved courtyard below. He had distracted my eye before, for he was very beautiful, with blond curling hair and eyes as blue as Our Lady’s robe. Polidora

leaned clumsily to smell one of the rose blossoms, and I hastily took her arm.

“Mmmm,” she sighed as she straightened. “What glory.” We began strolling again. “The holy woman never actually said that she was a pinzochera, though. The only thing she told me in the first dream was her name, Guglielma, and she said: *“Auditui meo dabis gaudium et letitiam, et exsultabunt ossa humiliata.”*”

Goose bumps sprang up over my skin.

Make me hear joy and gladness, and the bones you have cast down will rejoice.

Those were the exact words I read to ma Bianca, that fateful day at the orphanage. To Polidora, and anyone who might be spying on us, I preserved an even and calm face. “Did you tell ma Bianca about that?” Maybe Polidora’s dream was why the countess had chosen me.

“No,” Polidora said. “I didn’t think there was anything to tell. And when I learned more, I feared to tell a soul. You’re the only one I’ve trusted not to think I’m crazy.”

“I would never doubt you, Polidora.” I felt a little guilty for hiding what those words meant to me, but I wanted to learn more before making my own revelation. It is the way I am. And a doubt crept into my mind: maybe she was having a little joke on me. Lucia or ma Bianca herself might have told the girls what I had read.

“In the second dream,” Polidora continued, “we—Guglielma and I—were in a cloister garden. She didn’t say anything this time. She only pointed to a hole dug into the earth beneath a fountain. I don’t know how, but I could see right through the fountain. In the hole was a dirty rag. It looked like a woman’s napkin, to tell the truth. And that was the end of the dream.”

“It was just a dream, after all.” An inauspicious dream, for Polidora’s condition. Discarded bones, a bloody rag in a hole.

“No. The next day, I went into the cloister garden, where

they grow herbs.” As if to illustrate, she plucked a stem of lavender and smilingly brushed it under my nose. “It doesn’t have a fountain, but I was sure it was the same as the garden in my dream. An old woman—a pinzochera—was tinkering around in there. I pretended to be interested in gardens and said how pretty the place would be if it had a fountain. And, Taria, she told me it used to have one! A stone fountain stood in the center of the garden when the first sisters arrived ‘to live in pious solitude,’ as she said. She showed me exactly where it had been—just where Guglielma had pointed.”

“*Ai*, Polidora, that’s amazing.”

Girls at the orphanage had often boasted such dreams: portents, saints, visitations. Polidora’s telling, though, lacked the breathless drama of those accounts. Its truth-feeling raised chills again over my skin. “What did you do then?”

“I waited for the old woman to leave. I thought I would burst! She chatted, I chafed; finally, the bell rang for Vespers and she hobbled into the church. I darted and dug. I found an old pot sealed so tight I had to break it open. And there was the cloth, just like in the dream! But it was not a rag—and certainly not a napkin. Look.” Polidora took something from the *borsa* that hung at her belt and gave it to me.

The object was a thin wallet about as big as my hand, covered in red brocade and held closed with a dark blue ribbon. At Polidora’s nod I untied the ribbon.

The wallet contained a picture drawn in black lines on thick paper. At home, the nuns gave us such cards as rewards for lessons well learned, and the other girls would beg me to paint them in colored ink. Printers made them by the thousands. Ma Bianca even had her favorite artist make of it a *tarocchi* card, an allegorical playing card. But this one was strange. It portrayed a woman in nun’s robes. Nothing odd in that—except that over the veil and wimple she wore a papal tiara.

“The female pope,” I said. Stories told of a female pope, first

esteemed as a man, then reviled when her true sex was revealed. Stefania believed them mere political slanders. True or not, never had I seen a popess on a holy card.

"I don't know," Polidora said. "It's not Guglielma: she was old. But Taria, that's not even the most amazing part."

She paused until we reached the end of the walk and turned back—so we could see the door. No one could creep up on us.

"My final dream of Guglielma took place in the Lady Chapel at Brunate. She put the card in my hand—without the cover, just the card—and I looked down at it. When I looked up again, I found myself sitting under a chestnut tree in a little piazza in a country town. Like where you used to live."

"Chiaravalle," I murmured.

My hometown seemed very, very far away from the Visconti palace with its rich and strange decorations. My eye glanced on one that was particularly bizarre: the Visconti family crest, a coiled, crowned serpent swallowing a man. I found the image repulsive—one of many opinions I kept to myself.

"What happened then?" I asked, as if she were talking about a real-life event.

She laughed. "I woke up. But I couldn't stop thinking about those dreams. So strange, that they came in a set of three. And they were more real than normal dreams. More real than this." She waved at the pots of heavy-scented, sun-drenched herbs and flowers. "I went in the Lady Chapel to get away from the magpies"—the other girls—"so I could think things over. I took out the card and looked at it and, Taria, suddenly I was in that town! Under the chestnut. But I had not only gone to another place. I went to another time. Somehow I'd gone back to the past, back to Galeazzo's—*Ai!*"

Polidora gripped my arm, gasping with fear and pain. I will never forget the sight as she lifted her skirt to reveal blood-soaked slippers.

+ + +

POLIDORA SCREAMED, THEN wailed, then panted. Groaned. Whimpered.

Now only shallow, long-spaced breaths passed her lips. The priest, an ancient as deaf as a turtle, had given her the viaticum, and he sat at the bedside, head bowed, muttering a mixture of Latin and Italian: "Jesu, Maria, Giuseppe...." Of the girls, only Stefania and I remained in the room. She dozed in a chair against the wall, her eyes gray-circled. I was there because Polidora had begged that I be allowed to stay.

The midwife and her helper had finally delivered the infant. While they bathed the baby, a serving girl and I changed the blood- and sweat-soaked sheets for fresh. Polidora lay oblivious as we rolled her to and fro, her eyes a slit of white under their lids.

The serving girl carried out the soiled linens; the women stayed with the baby, the priest now with them. I glanced around to make sure no one was near, then leaned to bring my mouth close to Polidora's ear. "May the blessed Guglielma preserve you," I whispered. Inwardly, I asked the Lady of Heaven to take the job, if Guglielma was not truly sainted.

The room had fallen quiet. Too quiet. The baby should have been wailing or grunting. The midwife cuddling her murmured, her words carrying in the silence, "Just a girl anyway, poor little mite." So my own unknown mother might have thought on abandoning me. The nurse kissed the baby, sighed and took a step toward the bed, then stopped. She would spare Polidora knowledge of her baby's death, in her last moments on this earth.

No one opened the shutters to release the cloying, sour reek of medicine and blood and sweat. Still, a wisp of tender dawn air and birdsong managed to get through the cracks, and I glimpsed the bright morning star: surely a sign that the Heavenly Lady had

heard my prayer. And a more sure sign: Polidora's eyes opened. Through the blessings of her saint Guglielma she would live!

Like Polidora's daughter, the wild hope died as soon as it was born. Death's gray, sure hand hovered over my friend's face.

"All is well," I lied, and added another lie. "Your baby is a fine strong boy."

"My son," Polidora whispered. "Let me hold him."

"In a few minutes." I cast about for a delay. "They're swaddling him."

"His name.... You remember?"

"Galeazzo he shall be, after his father."

A weak smile curved Polidora's mouth. "Bless you." Her eyelids sank closed, then struggled open again. "You will bring him to his father? You must! Promise. Promise you'll bring my son to his father."

"I promise." I kissed my friend's forehead, and smoothed the linen sheet with its border of needlework by my own hands: birds and flowers and pretty things for Polidora and her baby to see. "All will be just as you wish."

Polidora's eyes grew distant. Then blank. I stared back just as blankly until the midwife leaned over me to close the lids, then put her big warm hands on my shoulders.

The deathbed oath lay in my mouth like a stone.



BRUNATE, SUMMER 1447

THE SKY BLAZED deep blue over the convent of San Andreas, Brunate. Servants bustled out to take our luggage.

Finally, I drew near the possibility of visiting the Lady Chapel. Once there, I would take out the holy card hidden in a secret pocket sewn into the seam of my skirts. And when it didn't send me to a long ago time and place, at least I could rest easy in the knowledge that in all good faith, I tried to redeem my vow to Polidora.

The most I could do at the moment, though, was try to dismount from my little donkey without collapsing onto the gravel.

The swaying, bumping, heaving motion of boat, coach, and even donkey had wrung out the very fibers of my being. I had finished each day of our journey limp, sweat-sodden, emptied of maybe everything I had eaten in my whole life. At every stop from Cremona to Como, ma Bianca, Stefania, two physicians and several maidservants tried to coax me to stay behind and rest. But I forced myself to rally time and time again, and forced bowls of broth and cups of noxious potions down my throat.

I had finally worked out that I would twist and turn, slide down the beast's side—

The count himself stood before me, his arms lifted to help me down.

I was not so lost in misery—and the balmy mountain air braced me—as to tumble into that trap. No more than Polidora would I cross my lady patron by falling into her husband's arms. Not that Francesco was unhandsome, if you like soldierly men who are aging, fattish, balding, and sun-roasted brown as a Moor.

I pretended to think that he was hurrying me so the hostlers could take the tired donkey to the stables, and I followed my plan of sliding down the kindly beast's side, landing at least on my feet. Then I turned my back and busied myself with the saddlebags.

The count gave an easy, knowing laugh, and his footsteps crunched away over the gravel. "Ma Taria will do fine," I heard him say to ma Bianca.

It was true. The moment my feet touched the blessedly solid, stationary ground, a sense of home filled my heart. The convent in which I had grown up was larger than this, richer and busier, what with its studios for scribing, bookbinding, and needlework. Yet the guesthouse dormitory of Brunate resembled my old home in miniature: the narrow beds, the simple linens, the fresh matting on the floor, the tiny unglazed windows, and the gentle or crabby faces of the lay sisters.

A village lay down the lane, and a few villas peeked from the forested slopes above, but the deep quiet was only accentuated by the wild songbirds and poultry, oxen and our own horses and donkeys, and the knock-knock-knock of a hammer somewhere up the mountain. That quiet, and the long journey's fatigue subdued us girls as we settled in.

Dampened as my wits were, I made sure I got the bed closest to the door. We put our things up, on hooks or in the chests along the wall, and took turns at the washbasin. As we revived,

so did our usual chattering, but it was ma Bianca's son, little Galeazzo, who put a definite end to the monastic tranquility.

In vain over the long journey, we'd muttered and clucked and cooed against his wailing woe. Taken from his suckling nurse, a dairy farmer's wife, he was pitiable. But I had grown plain weary of his whining and howling.

As he absorbed the attention of the retinue—only a half-dozen of us, since ma Bianca was too tactful to burden this small place by traveling in state—I glanced around, then took Polidora's picture book from its secret pocket.

Stefania had distributed what trinkets of Polidora's her husband did not take, but Polidora herself had given me her most prized possession. I treasured it, not only for the simple, sweet features of the saint, but for its having been cherished by Polidora.

I was furtive with it, though. A woman wearing a papal tiara would be hard to explain. And even in the secrecy of my own heart, I would not admit the whole of my fascination, which had grown as we ascended to Brunate. Would it really transport me back in time? I nestled it at the bottom of my pocket, then hurried to join the procession going into the church.

The stones of the building had been donated by ma Bianca's father, the duke Filippo Maria, and the rough plaster on the walls still exuded dampness. We gave thanks for our safe journey and, as usual, prayed for the duke's recovery from one or another sickness. I revived enough to face dinner.

The guest dining room had a smooth plank floor and parchment-covered windows. The tapestries were simple, pretty crewel work, probably a first, proud project by little girls—and then with a start I recognized it as the work of my own girls—the little ones I had instructed back at Chiaravalle. It was nothing to boast of, among my well-born companions, but it made me happy.

Linen cloths and dishes sent ahead by ma Bianca as gifts

to the nuns covered two trestle tables. Some nobles would have sent hand-me-downs, but none of ma Bianca's dishes had a chip or dent, and the linens were spotless—though they would not be for long, the way the boys ate. Ma Bianca encouraged us girls, too, to eat well of the good butter and cheese, the fresh-baked bread, the simple stew of lentils and greens.

I ate better than I would have thought possible only a few hours ago. The country food went down easier than the greasy, spicy food that every anxious host along the way had pressed on us. Still, my mind was not on food, nor on the table of men and boys facing us. It fixed on the church we had just left—more exactly, on the Lady Chapel.

Unable to bring myself to believe that Polidora lied to me with her dying breath, I had created a story. She made a mistake with one of the count's retinue or another noble who had not the courage to acknowledge his offspring. Her chagrin caused a dream to take on, in her mind, the flesh of reality, and Galeazzo's decrepit bones to take on the flesh of a virile young man.

So I told myself. Yet I could not throw away the wish to bring the card into the Lady Chapel, to see.... Well, just to see. I tried it before we came up to Brunate, in stolen moments of solitude, but either the card did not work at all or, as Polidora said, it worked only here in the Lady Chapel.

“La Topolina eats well, and I'm glad to see that.”

I barely kept myself from jerking in surprise at Francesco's words, and his using my nickname, Little Mouse. I glanced up through my eyelashes. The count must have known I would peek. His smile was winning, his eyes warm.

I looked down at my plate, but curious or jealous stares burned from the other girls and the boys. I had been singled out twice already today.

“Not such a little mouse these days,” Lucia murmured, just loud enough for me and a few of her tittering sycophants to hear. I ignored her. True, I was not a broomstick like her, and I had

filled out some since joining ma Bianca's retinue. But I was far from fat.

What Lucia thought of my figure hardly mattered, anyway. I could only pray that ma Bianca understood I would not betray her.

Compline followed supper, and finally all the lights were extinguished.

Soon, the deep quiet of the night, broken only by an occasional owl or rodent—and by Lucia's snores—made me struggle to stay awake myself. After fighting sleep for a few hours, I eased out of bed, praying to San Giuseppe and the angel Raffaele that baby Galeazzo would stay asleep for once. I pulled from under the blankets the clothes I had hidden, then sneaked out in my *camicia*, not wanting to risk waking anyone by dressing in the room. In the passage, I pulled my *cotta* over my nightgown, the summer night being warm, checked its pocket again for the card, then set off.

The house was quiet as a tomb, but brighter, the windows pale with the rising moon. My ears burned inside and my throat throbbed with fear. I had come up with a story to tell if I were caught: that I had never walked outside in the moonlight before, and thought it would be safe and discreet to do so here, in a country convent. The story was just silly enough to be believed. Or so I assured myself over and over.

San Niccolo, who watches over thieves, must have heard my prayers. Well tended, neither doors nor floors creaked. I glided softly out into the cloisters, over the cool, moist flagstones. I had indeed never walked in the moonlight before—or in the night at all. Luminous blue tinted the roses, the shrubbery, the herbs and sundial and pillars. Witches and demons supposedly prowl by moonlight, but I sensed no evil in this dewy realm. Rather, the glowing summer night held a dreamy joy, peaceful yet potent.

At the church, carefully, carefully, I opened the door a crack and peeked in.

No one was doing penance, holding vigil, meeting a friend. I slipped in, still cautious, but breathing again. I paused near the door to let my eyes become yet more catlike. I did not want to collide with any of the chairs scattered about.

The scent of incense and candles was near as tangible as a swathe of velvet cloth, and the dim altar light, flickering with the draft of the door opening and closing, tricked my vision with wobbling shadows. I went forward, at first slowly. Then I darted through the sanctuary—no use to creep—like Topolina indeed, a little mouse scampering. I reached the refuge of the Lady Chapel panting and trying to calm myself.

Had I not been so nervous I would have laughed at the excuse I had come up with. Going out to see the night? Anyone who heard it would think me a witch, or crazy, or just plain lying. Why not say I was holding vigil for Polidora? There was truth in that, for I could not lay my grief to rest until I tried to fulfill what I could of my deathbed promise: to give news of her to the man she claimed as father of her child.

I took the card, still in its cloth, from my pocket. I tenderly unwrapped it, and gazed at the gentle face of the unknown saint—

—a light, or a crash: a flash of lightening

—no time to cringe, to cover my eyes, to cry out, even to gasp



HAD I DISCOVERED myself in heaven or hell, I could not have been more amazed. From the dim Lady Chapel in the Brunate convent church, I found myself on a bench in a rustic piazza, shaded by an immense and ancient chestnut whose budding leaves let through young, spring sunlight. It was just as Polidora had described: the chestnut, a country town piazza with crisp new brick pavement and a decrepit cistern. A mother cat nursed her kittens under the bench against a sun-warmed tavern wall. I gaped around as I closed the card back into its cover and put it into my dress pocket....

No pocket. Because it wasn't my dress. I wore an overdress of drab gray wool, ill-fitting and ill-cut: tight at the top with the neck cut much too large, as was the neck of the underdress. My head was swathed in what felt like *bombasina*, a cheap cloth made by the wagonload in Cremona—though this was surely not Cremona.

I reached to rearrange the headscarf to cover my nearly naked shoulders when a young woman carrying a pitcher emerged from a house at the corner of the piazza. Her clothes were the same as mine. It was the style of this place. My arms fell to my sides as my wits scattered.

The woman gave me a curious but friendly stare. "Are you lost, signorina?" she asked.

What other explanation could there be: a strange girl on her own without a water pitcher, or a basket, or anything to give her purpose as a serving girl, or whatever station my clothes gave me.

"I'm looking for—for—" I cut myself off before saying his full name, which would only have compounded my apparent lunacy. "The household of signore Visconti."

The young woman's eyes filled with astonishment, then a doubting comprehension. What she was doubting and comprehending, though, I could not have said. She took my hand. "Come, sister."

"Your water?" I asked, nodding at the pitcher.

She laughed. "Never mind. That's not important."

We went back to the house from which she had come. The fragrance of clove and cinnamon and peppercorns filled the entry. We passed through and emerged in a walled courtyard, where a dozen or so people sitting at table greeted us merrily, as old friends. As I sank onto one of the benches flanking the table, I caught the homey grunt and reek of pigs rooting outside the walls.

"I found a pilgrim in the piazza," the woman said. To me, "I thought you might like some refreshment."

"Oh, yes, thank you." I wondered if I were lying in my bed in the Brunate convent dormitory, raving and delirious. Then I made a decision that allowed my composure to return: I had dozed off in the Lady Chapel and was having an extraordinarily vivid dream.

The sensible thing to do would have been to wake myself up and go back to bed. Instead, I looked around.

A portico along the house sheltered piles of rough-woven sacks as big as my skirts—my normal skirts, which were fuller than these. An orange tree in a huge pot flowered against the south-facing wall. A pile of bricks and a heap of sand were next to an incomplete doorway. Through the narrow arch I saw a pig trot along the dirt *calle* outside.

“You didn’t bring us much water, Flordibella,” said a young man across from me. Though his clothes were much as everyone else’s, they could not disguise the wealth that sharpened his regard. Yet no sycophancy tainted the hearty laughter that followed his remark, just good cheer and a fellowship that deepened the meaning of his words, so that they seemed more a message than a mundane observation.

“Ah, but I did catch a fish,” Flordibella replied. Again, they all laughed as if she had made the greatest joke in the world. I smiled, too, their warmth and friendliness infectious.

“Now let us get to know our new sister,” the young woman said. “I’m Flordibella.”

“I’m—

“Taria!”

A man who had been coming to the table stood stock still, staring at me. In the quietness that fell, he began to speak, stopped himself. Then he unfroze, sitting on the bench opposite me.

“You are Taria, Polidora’s friend. And I’m Andreas. I welcome you to my home.”

He knew. Polidora must have spoken of me, planned that I might come in her place. A certain intensity in Andreas’s look signaled that I should conceal my origin from the others.

For the rest of the men and women around the table definitely did not know where, or rather when I came from. At the least, they should have flooded me with a thousand questions about their descendants, their future. They smiled at me with not a touch of amazement, awe or fear.

No titles decorated names, and unlike court where people vied for effect, their clothes had no distinction. The women and men wore clothes of workaday cloth and make, even if they resembled the antique costumes in some of ma Bianca’s painted books.

But not antique. In this time, they were fairly new.

I abandoned that thought as simply too immense.

It was their hands that gave away their stations in life. Those of a cabinetmaker were rough yet graceful. A lord's hands—those of the young man who spoke to Flordibella—were kept neat and assured. An artist had ink-rimmed nails. But hands could be deceptive. Mine, folded on the table, were pampered as a high lady's, and yet I was only an embroideress whose hands must not snag silken threads. My station was closest to the artist's, I suppose. His abstracted stare did not discomfit me. Maybe he saw in my black hair and pale face a minor angel, or an attendant to fill out the retinue of a noble portrait: a young woman pretty but somewhat dour, or studious. Or dazed.

I did not need to study hands to be sure that the young man across from me was Galeazzo. His polite nonchalance, and his nose and chin, gave him away even before he spoke his name. Yet in his countenance, I saw none of the arrogance to be expected in a young lord. On the contrary, he struck me as gentle, even shy. A serenity not entirely assumed mantled him, though his life was hardly peaceful. His father Matteo had a troubled reign, ma Bianca had told us, due to trickery in the family and tribulations inflicted by the pope, His Holiness Giovanni—"the whore," ma Bianca had added just under her breath. Ma Bianca's secretary had told me, while she and I trimmed quills by ourselves, that Pope Giovanni had excommunicated Galeazzo's father and set the Inquisition on them with charges of sorcery.

Galeazzo Visconti, ma Bianca's ancestor.

Telling myself again that all this was a dream made looking at a long-dead youth a fraction less disturbing.

Dream or no, with so much to take in, to try and understand, my mind jumped from one thing to another, like a bird hopping at a spill of fodder, resting only long enough to snatch morsels of knowledge. And despite the astonishing presence of a long-dead Visconti noble, my attention returned most to a nun, *suor* Maifreda, and to Polidora's father Andreas.

Maifreda wore the Umiliata habit, a plain brown dress tied at the waist with a cord, and a white head covering. Drab as her clothes were, she glowed like a vessel of moonlight, as if she were clear light itself, and yet fire-tinged rays streamed from her. Her face was meek at one moment, firm and questing at the next, sorrowful yet brimming with deep joy.

If Maifreda held her joy quietly, Andreas could hardly keep his overflowing spirits in check. His eyes twinkled, he smiled, he tap-tap-tapped with a quill end on a scrap of parchment. I would not have been surprised if he had jumped up and danced around the courtyard. His gray-dusted black hair curled—how could it do otherwise?—and his plumpness indicated an appetite as hearty as his smile. He wore a linen apron, luckily for his clothes, for it was sprinkled with ink. He glowed red and white and gold with energy, determination, and enthusiasm.

He glowed. So did Maifreda. They glowed like saints in mandorlas. Even as I stifled a gasp, the vision faded.

“Our dear Taria,” said Andreas, “how is Polidora?”

The Visconti boy leaned toward me. “Yes, ma Taria, have you come from her?”

I drew a deep breath and nodded.

“How did her lying in go?” Love burned in his eyes, and so did fear. I longed to spare him.

“I’m sorry, sir. Ma Polidora died in childbed. So did her daughter.”

I had lied to Polidora about the sex of her baby, so that she would die joyful in having borne her lover a son. I told the truth to Galeazzo so that the blow would not fall so hard. Sadness pierced me, not so much at the deaths I had already mourned, but at the betrayal of my own sex.

The young Visconti lord buried his face in his hands, and Flordibella burst into tears. An old woman put an arm around her and crooned comfort. Andreas’ eyes, too, filled with tears. His grief’s sincerity could not be doubted, but it could not

suppress the natural joy flowing forth from his soul. A bright ruddy golden swirl danced around him, reaching now to me, now to Polidora, now to the old woman, now to the Visconti man. His spirit endeared him to me, for the melancholic yearns for the warmth of the sanguine.

Then, like everyone else, I looked to suor Maifreda. She had not spoken, but only exerted her light, her presence, and our minds went to her like birds to their keeper's crumbs. We all joined hands; I did not question that I should take the soft hand of the man—a wool-worker I guessed—on my right, and the age-knobbed hand of the woman on my left.

Maifreda prayed: "In the name of God the father, his beloved son the Christ, and the Holy Spirit, and through the intercession of our blessed Santa Guglielma, we pray that mother and daughter are exalted to sublime and ultimate joy."

The loud chorus of "amen" startled me. Short as was the odd prayer, it had gone through and through me, like wine mixed into water, purifying, enriching, uplifting. The people around the table smiled. Some—Andreas and the Visconti lord—even laughed through their tears. The moment we released each other's hands, Andreas dipped his quill in ink and scribbled on the parchment. The written prayer, though, could never have the permeating warmth lent by Maifreda's voice. I felt a melting heat in my heart, as if a candle had been lit there.

She had gifts of the spirit, this ordinary woman, aging but still sweet-faced. Her eyebrows, thin and delicately arched, reminded me of one of the nuns at the orphanage—which made me remember I was no mere stranger here. Amazingly, I had become so immersed in this time, I had forgotten it was not my own.

My friend's card had been in my hand. I had gazed at it, and passed through a host of light and sound, and then through a small *piazza* to come here, to this table. I had moved from

night to day in a moment, and from summer to spring, and from Brunate to someplace else.

As if to answer these thoughts, church bells began ringing Nones. And they told exactly where I was. The distant, deep voices of the abbey bells, the clanging bell of the town hall, the tenor bells of the very convent in which I had grown up: I was in Chiaravalle!

I had only a moment to take this in, when Andreas began singing a long hymn of devotion to their holy woman Guglielma. Each stanza described her deeds: ministry to the poor and sick, prophecies, healings, all tinged with the miraculous: a bird mauled by a cat and made to fly again, a woman healed of chronic head pain, a barren womb quickened. Whether it was the song, the wonder of this day, or the radiance of Maifreda, joy filled me.

Courtly life and amorous lords knit their intrigues in another time, another world, a world and time in which I was an orphan. Here, all of that fell away. It was as if Guglielma's followers were the family for which I had always yearned. Whatever doubts and dissensions tumbled my thoughts, deep in my heart, I felt at home.

Yet though the sun shone robust, a strange chill took hold of my hands and feet. I knew intuitively that even if my spirit wanted to abide in this time and place, my body could not. I chafed my hands under the table.

By the time the meeting ended, the chill had crept up to my knees and elbows. Everyone left, except for Andreas and Flordibella. Panic rose in me. I had no idea how to get home. "I don't know..." I began. "I'm lost."

Flordibella tried to warm my hands between her own. "Poor Taria! You need to go out on the piazza and look at the card. That's how you got here, right? By looking at the card of Santa Guglielma?"

“Ah, but Taria,” Andreas said, “do you have just a little more time?”

“Papa, she can’t stay.”

“Maybe a few minutes,” I said.

Andreas took my other hand, as if he were a doctor, then felt my arm up to the elbow. “A few minutes,” he echoed.

We sat at the table again.

“No one but suor Maifreda, Flordibella, and I know of that miraculous card,” Andreas said. “Not even signore Galeazzo knows. Polidora told him she sneaked out to meet with us—and him, as it turned out.”

“We had to keep the card secret,” Flordibella said. “You understand, yes?”

The consequences of revealing that I came from a future time was simply beyond comprehension. “I will certainly keep the secret.”

“Even among us three, let us not to speak of it,” Andreas said. “Except on one matter. Our blessed Guglielma. Everyone reveres her in this town. Pilgrims flock to her tomb. Yet Polidora told us that our lady Guglielma has been forgotten in your time.”

“I never heard her name until Polidora spoke of her,” I admitted, “and I’m from here, from Chiaravalle.”

“You’re from here? How miraculous!” Andreas cried.

Flordibella, too, smiled. “Surely it’s the working of blessed Guglielma.”

Despite the chill in my limbs, their excitement caught me. “Where is the tomb?” I guessed its church had been rebuilt, and the tomb moved elsewhere, to rest quiet and forgotten in a crypt.

“Our saint’s remains are at the abbey. You’ve been to the abbey, ma Taria?”

“Oh, yes, many times.”

“How could it be that you haven’t heard of her?” His question was not meant to be answered, but Flordibella answered.

“You know why that might be, Papa.”

Andreas shook his head. "That happened years ago. Anyway, Polidora was going to speak with ma dona Bianca about Santa Guglielma, but she never got the chance. She said the lady suspected her baby was count Francesco's. That ruptured their friendship."

"Ma Bianca was kind to Polidora," I said, "but she is wrathfully jealous where her husband is concerned."

"Taria, would you learn what is known of Santa Guglielma?" Andreas asked. "There must be some record of her somewhere. Ma dona Bianca is a pious and powerful woman, by Polidora's account. She'll know what to do, how to put things right."

I stared at Andreas. "You want me to prevail on ma dona Bianca to worship the holy woman Guglielma?"

His eyes sparkled as he reached across the table to grasp my hand. "Yes! That's exactly what you must do! And then she will use her influence with the Holy Father to have our lady canonized!"

Andreas's request rang childishly naive, even to me, a baby in the ways of the world. I drew my hand away from his moist, hot palm, but slowly, so as not to reject him.

"Maybe Taria isn't one to speak to ma dona Bianca in that way," Flordibella said.

I nodded. "I'm not a noblewoman. I'm just an orphan girl on the outer ring of Bianca Maria Visconti's retinue." Depressing words, and true. But rank presented the least obstacle to the quest. Ma Bianca's ancestors had long warred with popes, and as if to carry on their legacy, her husband was at war with the current pope. The Holy Father would hardly grant sainthood to a favorite of hers. Yet this mystical adventure tugged my spirit.

My life was better than any girl of my birth could expect, but a formless ambition fell like a tiny seed into my heart: that I might do more with my life than sew pearls and colored threads onto court clothes, and perhaps end up bearing a nobleman's bastards.

My friends watched me, silent, awaiting my word.

I nodded. "I'll try."

"Thank you, Taria," Andreas said. "Now, return, and return again."

Flordibella walked me out of the house onto the piazza.

"How very strange you must find all this," I said as the mother cat entwined our ankles.

She laughed. "More strange for you, I think. We've had more time getting used to it, with Polidora." She dropped her voice to a whisper. "Suor Maifreda enjoined us to secrecy and ordered us not to ask about your time, except in regard to Santa Guglielma. How wise she is!" She squeezed my hands. "But your hands are like ice. It was that way with poor Polidora too. You'd better go back now."

As we kissed each other she whispered, "Be careful. Papa doesn't like to remember that the Dogs have already sniffed at us."

The ice in my limbs jumped to my heart. "The Inquisition?"

"I was just a child, but Papa said they didn't like the idea that Jews and Saracens can be saved by the Holy Spirit alone, without conversion."

I could not even guess if such an idea was truly heresy. "I'll go carefully."

"May our holy Guglielma guide you."

Once Flordibella went back in her house, I was alone on the square. I hardly knew what to do except hope I would appear in the Lady Chapel in Brunate at the right time as I gazed at the card in my hand—

—a flash of light

—a shout



BRUNATE, SUMMER 1447

THE LADY CHAPEL was silent, lit by the single sanctuary lantern. I sank into a chair to contemplate what had just happened—then jumped up and ran out the side door to vomit in the bushes. Once my stomach was clear, I felt fine. I even smiled at how the journey just taken made me ill, just as the journey to Brunate had.

I ghosted back to the dorm. All the girls and the baby boy, too, were tucked in and asleep. In Andreas's little courtyard, I had wished to remain in that long ago time, but I found myself overwhelmingly glad to be back in my own time. Even Lucia's snoring sounded sweet.

I had not thought to mark how much lamp oil burned while I was "gone." Without knowing how long the dream or vision—whatever it was—had lasted, nor how I would appear to people here during a visit to a past Chiaravalle, I could not risk revisiting Guglielma's devotees again except as I already had: in the secrecy of a peaceful night.

Unfortunately, that first night at Brunate was the only such night we had.

Thereafter, baby Galeazzo's screams pierced the nights and broke our sleep into doses of hot milk, honey tits, games, prayers,

herbs, and other attempts to hush him. Darkness held particular terror for him, and a candle had to be kept burning at his crib. I knew from my own experience that many children are sensitive to the demons that revel in darkness. Maybe those same demons prompted me to agree for once with Lucia, when she muttered between gritted teeth, "I could shake him to death." Stefania slapped her face, but not hard enough even to raise a blush.

I quelled my frustration to take my turn at cuddling the child and ended up the only one who could soothe him. As a reward, I was given care of him when he was at his most fretful, peevish, and possessed.

When ma Bianca announced we would return to the plains, the other girls danced with joy. It was not only the prospect of returning little Galeazzo to his nursemaid. The sedate life of the convent, homelike for me, bored them beyond endurance, especially since all the men and boys—except the baby—left a week after our arrival.

I might have been glad too. Except once we left Brunate, my long-ago friends would be out of reach for a long time, maybe for years, maybe for the rest of my life. Not that I had any news for them. Flordibella's warning about the Inquisition made me cautious of revealing Guglielma's name, and my feeble mention to ma Bianca and the girls of "a woman saint from Chiaravalle" had drawn only polite, pious interest.

The impending journey also meant days of debilitating nausea—more even than expected. As we descended the mountain, ma Bianca announced a change in plans. Francesco had reached a truce with the pope, and the count beseeched his lady to join him at his ancestral home. Another dance of joy: where the count was, boys were.

Though I was not of a station to do more than look at boys, I relished masculine beauty as much as any girl. Still, ma Bianca's news settled a bleakness in my soul. The journey to Cotignola would be twice as long as that to Cremona.

I survived the three weeks of travel over road and river, a journey every bit as grueling as expected. The destination hardly offered better. Cotignola in August was hot and damp as a laundry, and graced with the stench of marshes. It took a few days of lying in bed motionless even to think of eating more than broth and gruel.

Once I rejoined the world, the novelty of my surroundings revived me. Francesco's family home could have been in Marco Polo's far-off Thibet, it differed so from ma Bianca's courtly and decorous household. Even Stefania could not shield us from the flood of boys and men and noise and chaos that filled the villa.