

Prologue

The boy was used to his house being transformed into chaos on a regular basis. The party inside was bustling as usual, bright and loud and teeming with people. Voices overlapping into a roar of words and laughter, mostly forced. Light conversations he found sinful overtop the live music, and the lights so bright they made his skin and eyes burn, even from the tree where he sat. Zeno resembled the people inside, to some extent.

His lanky body, in the awkward period between boyhood and early adolescence, was fashioned in formalwear just like the people inside. It had taken one of the most talented tailors in Italy to make the suit conform to his figure, and he had opted to cover most of this in his favorite antique overcoat regardless. An overcoat now strewn across one of the branches at his side.

Zeno's white hair was tamed into a smooth coif at the start of the night, but now it had deep ridges where he had run his fingers countless times. His pink eyes, long trained to watch the ground, had been powdered in a semi-successful attempt to conceal the deep bags and dark circles endemic to his face. Zeno's skin, even more translucent and pale than others with his condition, required a special formula for a natural foundation.

Few trees were allowed to grow gnarled like the one outside his bedroom in this part of Florence. Zeno wasn't sure why this one had been allowed to twist and turn without intervention for centuries, especially when it had always been surrounded by immaculately groomed hedges. Every weed was torn from the ground. This grooming, of course, wasn't exclusive to the manor's exterior. The boy's room itself had permanently folded sheets and the same baroque decor it had for centuries. Zeno never slept under the covers.

As usual, he tried to ignore the urge to wash the dirt and bark from his fingers, and the crimson from his arms. He had discovered there was no way for him to climb into the tree without getting scratched up a bit. He looked to the ground and mentally plotted potential paths, but was could not find any route that was more efficient than his usual.

The sounds from inside the manor suddenly swelled for a second. Another boy, slightly older, had crossed the forbidden barrier, but at least had the decency to shut the door behind him quickly.

“Ah, Zeno,” he said. “I should have known you would be here.”

Zeno, having already found his way to the ground, stared up at the teenager. “Oh. It’s just you, Basilio,” he spoke, monotone. “Did my father send you to bring me back in?”

The teenager rested with his arms atop the barrister of the balcony and rolled his eyes.

“Why do you think he had to have sent me? Why couldn’t I just want to see you?”

Basilio was barely older than Zeno and had the same condition, yet their appearances could not be more different. Basilio’s shoulders were broad, his body lean yet proportionate, his skin creamy yet featuring a natural glow and a healthy flush. Despite how much he had been dancing that night, the ponytail his medium length hair had been pulled into still didn’t have a hair out of place. Zeno blinked once, unimpressed, then brought his attention to pressing a handkerchief against his bleeding elbows.

“I see,” stated the younger boy. “So he did send you.”

“Well...yeah but...Look, you can’t hide out here every time there are guests.”

Zeno pulled away the cloth, saw that the scratches had not yet clotted, and returned the handkerchief again. Without looking back, he replied. “I’m not hiding.”

“Then what *are* you doing?”

“Rotting.”

“Rotting?” Basilio chuckled. “How could you be rotting when you’re alive?”

“I am dead,” came the grave reply. “My body hasn’t caught up to it yet, but I died a long time ago.”

At this point, Zeno had simply tied the handkerchief around his arm and was ignoring the red spots seeping through the white. Instead, he was kneeling over and digging through a pile of leaves with a stick. After realizing his cousin had little interest in speaking to him face to face on the balcony, Basilio easily scaled the tree to the ground.

“What are you talking about? You’ve been acting so peculiar lately. Did you hit your head or something? Have a bad transfusion?”

“No,” came the grumbled response. “And I didn’t have a transfusion this month.”

Basilio tightened the handkerchief and scoffed.

“You refused *again*? No wonder you’re bleeding so much.”

Finally, Zeno met his older cousin’s eyes. “How can you stand it? Every single month, another transfusion. Looking forward to a life of pain and needles. ”

Basilio shrugged. “You’re going to be 14 in what, a year? I hear it isn’t so bad once you get a beniamina. I’ll let you know once I get mine.”

“I don’t want one,” Zeno responded immediately.

“Why not?”

After several lingering seconds passed, it became apparent Zeno would not bother with responding. With a grimace, the boy finally used his hands to brush aside the leaves.

“Where did you bury her? You told me you were going to get her a gravestone. Where is it?”

Basilio laughed. “Is all this about the *bird*? Of all the — you can get another bird, Zeno!”

Zeno finally looked up and met his cousin’s gaze. For the first time, Basilio could see that although Zeno’s eyes were empty, tears had gathered in their corners.

“Carmen wasn’t just a bird. She was mine.”

Basilio kicked a nearby pile of leaves, causing them to blanket the spots Zeno had uncovered. Zeno forgot all about cleanliness and plunged his hands into the dirty leaves to clear them away. Basilio groaned loudly and threw his arms to his side.

“Come on! I told your father it would only take a few minutes to get you back in. We need to get you cleaned up. There are people who want to meet you. How are you supposed to get a beniamina if you hide out here every time?”

There was no response but the skittering of leaves. Basilio nudged his cousin, who gave him a glare, but continued what he had been doing.

“I was so foolish to think that you would be normal once those damn birds were gone,” Basilio grumbled to himself.

Zeno’s head snapped up. “What did you just say?”

Basilio widened the space between them and held up his hands. “Look, Zeno, i-it wasn’t my idea.”

“What the *fuck* did you just say?” Inch by inch, vertebrae by vertebrae, Zeno lengthened his spine.

“And it was painless! I had them use natural gas, so it only took a few—”

Basilio didn’t get the chance to finish the sentence before his collar tightened around his neck. He gaped and clawed at his throat, trying in vain to dig his feet into the ground instead of

allowing himself dragged back onto the tile beneath the balcony, but the very leaves he had kicked prevented him from getting a grip.

Screaming, Zeno grabbed his cousin by the hair and bashed his head into the base of a column once, twice, three times. He only stopped once he saw teeth through Basilio's split open lips and his chin a crooked mess of blood and bone. Zeno's own knuckles broken. He picked Basilio up with his intact hand and dug his fingers into his cousin's scalp until blood gathered beneath his fingernails. He threw Basilio to the side and kicked him as hard as he could in the stomach until vomit and gurgled sobs spewed from Basilio's lips.

Just as Zeno lurched forward to start another onslaught of punching, a large hand pulled him back. Another hand grabbed his other arm, seamlessly pulling them back into an uncomfortable x behind his back. Zeno kicked and fought despite the risk of dislocating his arms, then went limp when he realized who was holding onto him.

"All this where guests could have seen you?" said the unmistakably low voice of his father. Every time his father spoke, thought the boy, it sounded like a dirge.

Zeno wilted onto the ground, and his father let go of him. His father knelt close, so close that his lips were almost touching Zeno's ear.

"You're so fucking lucky that nobody else heard this," he hissed. "You're so lucky that I even call you my son."

Several people crowded around them, several guards lifting Basilio and rushing him off. Zeno's father shoved his son so that he was belly-up and spat in his face before stalking away. Even once his father turned his back to him, Zeno didn't wipe it off..

"You're disgusting."

Those familiar footsteps, slow and even, faded into the distance, leaving the boy alone.

Curled up in a ball, face covered in tears and vomit and blood and spit, Zeno whispered back, "I know."

Chapter 1: In bocca al lupo

I wondered how my mother would feel if she knew what I planned to do with these vampires. Would she throw back her head and laugh that all the time and money I spent on school had gone nowhere? Would she spit at my feet and tell me that selling my body, my blood, month after month, was no better than what she had spent her life doing after Pa died? Or would she muse that it only made sense for a girl she had surrounded in Gothic novels and Bibles to wind up in an abbey?

When I had left that morning, I didn't think that my interviewer was correct in assuming I would arrive so late. After all, Sicily was a small island and the abbey of Santa Dymphna was well-known, so why would I need to rely on all the maps she had laid out for me to guide my path to such a massive building? But as I had discovered, my formidable grasp of Italian was useless when conversing with the Sicilian-speaking inhabitants of rural Sicily, and I couldn't speak a word with the man who had driven me all this way. By the time I reached my destination, the sky was a mottled mixture of pinks and blues and the abbey itself was rendered a bare silhouette against the orange sun. It was only thanks to the old-fashioned lantern that Doctor Ntumba held that I could spot her among the shadows.

After I gathered up what little luggage I possessed and hopped out of the taxi, it puttered away, leaving me alone to approach the abbey and my interviewer. With a gulp, I sized up the woman before me. Doctor Ntumba was a curvy woman wearing a white button-up shirt, knee-length tweed skirt and matching fitted jacket. The relatively conservative color-scheme of her clothes helped bring out the brightness of her hot pink heels and the deep red ombre of her braids. Behind a pair of rectangle glasses were heavy-lidded discerning eyes which were equally rich in color as her umber skin.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Miss Bowling,” she said in Italian, her deep tone lilted with an accent I couldn’t decipher.

“Please,” I replied, shifting my suitcase into my left hand and holding out the other. “Call me Cora.”

“In that case, call me Noor.” She accepted my hand with a robust shake. The doctor opened a heavy iron gate, leading me into the front perron. I stared in awe at the land around me as street lights flickered on. I had seen images of fantastic chapels and basilicas from Rome and other major Italian cities, but I had not expected such majesty from a rural abbey. At the center of the garden was a massive fountain with a plume of water bursting from its center. It was surrounded by a ring of gravel, followed by a flawlessly trimmed wall of flowering shrubbery. On the periphery of this were flowerbeds as intricately woven and colorful as a tapestry and on either side of me were two symmetrical lanes, a bosquet of evenly spaced alternating rows of trimmed hedge and olive trees.

And the chapel... It was completely and utterly magnificent, the sort of Sicilian Baroque architecture that you could write a thesis on. A beautifully detailed lava stone stairway leading up to a gardened terrace, a pair of large carved and embossed wooden doors set between a large

façade. Elaborate statuary featuring grinning masks staring down at me from above, and numerous sets of eyes and swirling vines embedded in colosseums. And through large, curve-topped windows, I could discern paneled murals all along the ceilings, clearly inspired by the central dome of Sistine Chapel. All this, stretching impossibly long and tall in every direction.

In my moment of awe, Doctor Ntumba's words had slipped past me entirely. I vaguely got the sense that she had spoken to me, but the specific words eluded me entirely.

"English or Italian?" She repeated, though not harshly.

"English please," I replied a bit too quickly, picking the first word that came to mind. "Or whichever you prefer, I suppose."

"English it is then."

She led me into the chapel, and despite my desire to stop and marvel at every historical inch, Doctor Ntumba's swift pace and countless turns occupied all my attention. After what seemed like a dozen lefts and rights, I was swept quickly into what I later learned was a minor scriptorium.

Doctor Ntumba stepped out briefly to grab my papers, giving me a chance to look around the small room. I sat in a floral armchair, turned back against the entrance, facing a broad oak bureau and behind it, a large, outswing window. On either side of me were two bookcases that took up the entirety of their respective walls, crammed with books that appeared as if they would fall apart if even touched. This room was just as ancient as the rest of the abbey, yet somehow, it felt its age rather than like a timeless artifact. Dust-covered cobwebs swayed against what air could make its way in through a scarcely open window panel, the only source of freshness in an otherwise murky room. A stained-glass lamp with an Edison bulb served as the only artificial

light in the room, for all the candles had been snuffed out long ago. I could tell all the furniture had only received a single, cursory sweep of dusting.

My eyes immediately sought the contents of the shelf closest to me, but before I got the chance to examine the titles, the door behind me gently closed. Doctor Ntumba took her seat in a simple wooden chair in front of me rather than in the plush chair behind the desk, a gesture which immediately struck me as a good sign. She glanced briefly over my labs — purely for show, I was certain, as she seemed like the sort who would have examined every value before even offering an interview.

“These look quite excellent,” she said, glancing up at me. “You have some excellent hematology labs and no discernible nutritional deficiencies.”

I bowed my head slightly. “Yes, I try to keep a healthy diet despite my...” I paused, trying to find the right word. “Limited budget.”

At the mere mention of money, the student loan debts and immigration fees I had accumulated over the last few years burned at the forefront of my consciousness. Doctor Ntumba set aside the lab results and tapped my resumé with the back of a ballpoint pen.

“I see you attended the London School of Economics, but you don’t have any major listed.”

Heat rushed to my face. How was my education relevant to this job? I had deliberately *not* written down my major for fear of looking opportunistic, but it appeared I had no choice.

“I majored in Renaissance vampiric history,” I admitted. “With a minor in biology.”

She gazed at me for a pronounced period. I feared ulterior motives may be suspected, yet her blank stare did not indicate so.

“That sounds interesting,” Doctor Ntumba finally replied. “Which is what brings you to Sicily, I assume?”

“Yes. I plan on doing my thesis on Papal history, once I get enough saved up.”

I conveniently neglected to mention the specifics, and she did not pursue them, instead responding with a contemplative pause. Finally, she spoke once more.

“You realize that given the remote nature of Abbazia di Santa Dymphna, you are effectively cut out from the outside world, correct? And you are aware that Duca de' Medici is not fond of many guests?”

I nodded, a bit more eagerly than intended. “That isn’t an issue at all. I have more than enough paperwork and research to keep me occupied. And I’m not exactly the most social person either, so that won’t matter.”

Again, a pronounced silence. Unlike the former, this one was punctuated by a series of rapid-fire questions.

“Do you have any allergies?”

“No.”

“Do you follow any particular diet?”

“I try to eat healthy and avoid alcohol. Otherwise, no.”

“Do you smoke?”

“No.”

“Blood type...?”

“B negative.”

“Any medications that could transfer?”

I bit the inside of my cheek. “Yes.”

She raised a brow, and I continued.

“100 milligrams of sertraline, daily at night.”

“For?”

“Panic disorder.”

Doctor Ntumba made a brief note of this, then said, surprisingly jovially, “Duca de' Medici could probably benefit from a dose or two of that, as you'll soon find out.”

My heart leapt to my throat at the insinuation of that last bit.

“I'll take you to the piano room to meet Duca de' Medici for the second part of the interview. Follow me.”