

DEATH IN THE CATHEDRAL

Giovanna drank her way into the night until the alcohol and the fatigue challenged her to a duel. She lost. Her head had barely touched the pillow when the servants lifted her, wrapped a dress around her body and deposited the entire package into the coach. Only when the wheels of the vehicle started to turn, she realized that the worst day of her life was finally beginning. The day she was going to lose the Bank forever.

She tried to close her eyes during the journey, but her step-mother clapped her hands to keep her up — the sound echoed within the coach like a hurricane inside a glass of porcelain.

"Your face looks...unladylike," her step-mother said, struggling to find better words, "Let me help you with the make-up."

"I would rather not," Giovanna replied, struggling to keep the motion sickness in check.

But her step-mother had already started labouring on her face. The white powder landed on her brown cheeks and the red lipstick brightened her lips. She reluctantly witnessed the transformation from hungover monster into lady-like beauty, trusting the thaumaturgic qualities of her step-mother.

"You could be beautiful," she said with a reproachful voice.

Beauty was a prize within her grasp, but achieving it would have required an hefty payment — less drinking, less eating and less longing for things she could not have. *Screw that*, she thought.

The carriage stopped and a servant dressed with the colours of the Bardi family opened the door.

"We have arrived, my ladies," he said.

Giovanna stepped off the coach. She touched the ground and revelled in the cold air, a good medicine for her headache. The main square was already crowded with men arriving for the event of the century — the inauguration of the new Cathedral.

Giovanna looked at the Church rising in front of her. It was a giant pearl in the richest city of the peninsula, perhaps even the entire world. Only a man with immense wealth, power and ambition could have built such splendour in the span of twenty-five years. Giovanna felt pride thinking that such a man was her father, Matteo Bardi.

"We should go, Giovanna," her step-mother said, "they are waiting for us inside." They crossed the square with their servants making their way. Filthy men and ragged women were reaching out their hands for coins, but the servants hit them with wooden sticks when they got too close.

Some of them had black skin but most arms were of some tonality of brown — exactly like hers. She was a brown woman, a *shadow* woman. Yet she was expected to give coins away, rather than beg for them on the street.

She took a few lira from her purse and tossed them at a woman with two children. "Don't encourage them" her step-mother said, "they are already too close as it is". There was a stint of disgust in her voice, or perhaps of fear.

Giovanna and her step-mother finally reached the wooden door, adorned with scenes from the Mother's book. The inside of the Dome was colder than the square, despite the great mass of bodies one against the other.

The air was fresh because the tombs previously crowding the catacombs of the old church had been removed. "Dead men stink, and my Dome will not be stinking" her father had said. He had ordered the stone-workers to remove the corpses interred in the Church, heedless of the horrified protests of the nobility. But noble families did not rule the city anymore, so they had to take the bones of their ancestors in a bag and put them somewhere else.

She was supposed to sit in front of the altar, in a place of high honour, but to reach that spot she first needed to squeeze through the wealthy and the powerful of the city. She battled through the forest of bodies ignoring people who wanted a piece of her limited attention. One of the three Seneschal, the fat and fur-engulfed Messer Constanzio, tried to grab her attention by positioning his huge body in front of her, but she was not going to fall for that kind of trick. She walked through him with nonchalance, as he never existed.

"That was not polite," her step-mother muttered.

"I don't practise politeness when I have a headache."

She had to ignore a couple of more people, but she finally arrived at her designated place. Her step-mother, who was saluting every person passing by, was bound to reach her seat a few hours later. Well, someone had to be *polite* within the family.

The ceremony was finally starting. Giovanna seated in the second row, at the side of Roberto Capponi, her husband. He looked at her for a few moments, then moved his blue eyes elsewhere. The favourite of the City. The perfect noble and the perfect match. Or at least that was what her father had thought, when he had forced her into that marriage.

"Where have you been?" Roberto whispered without looking at her.

"I have been drinking."

"You haven't been home for four days".

"I had a lot of drinking to do".

A tight smile crisped Roberto's lips. Was it exasperation? Boredom? Hate? The conversation was apparently over. Giovanna tried to concentrate on her thoughts, but the endeavour was impeded by the sermon of cardinal Ardegni, who was presenting a famous passage of the Book of the Mother. Pepe, her step brother, walked by her mother and moved to the seat nearby her.

"Giovanna" he said "I am bored."

"Not now, Pepe. Shut up and enjoy the moment."

"Is there something to enjoy? The ceremony is so boring. I want to go home."

"Why do you always have to be such a little shit? Just do what I say."

Pepe smiled. Giovanna grumbled, trying to look away. But she had her lovely husband from one side and her petulant step brother on the other, so she was surrounded without any possibility to escape. The moment was drawing close, the cardinal Ardegni was finally concluding the sermon.

The crowd was reshaping behind her, the noises of boots, sandals and even bare feet coming and going. Terzo Capponi, her father in law, was leaving the church with the rest of his clan; others were rushing into their seats of honour in time for the inauguration speech of Matteo Bardi, the father of the Republic.

"Go now with your Father" her step mother was saying to Pepe. But the child did not want to move.

"I don't want to go. Too many people."

"Giovanna," her step-mother said, "do something"

The little shit was taking everything away from her. Her job, her dreams, her future. And she was supposed to be the one convincing him to do the taking.

"What's the problem, Pepe?" she asked without looking at the child.

"Too many people. I am afraid of people."

Giovanna turned towards him, putting a hand on his head. "Being afraid is not a good reason to be a coward. If a new thing doesn't scare you, then it is not worth doing it. Now don't be a little shit, and do what your mother says"

Pepe looked more confused and annoyed than he was before, but he complied. His father rose and went to the altar, Pepe following him with a meek face.

She resisted the impulse to cry, or to scream in the middle of the crowd. She was supposed to be there, to inaugurate the Dome with her father before the entire city. He had raised her with that purpose.

"You will lead the bank one day" he had said. She was a shadow woman born out of wedlock then, but still the blood of his blood, his only child. Not anymore, though. Her father now had a white nine years old son to replace her. He did not need his brown, motherless daughter anymore.

"Fuck you" she whispered. Roberto Capponi turned towards her, uncertain on whether the insult referred to him, to her father or to the entire city.

The cardinal Ardegni bent with the heavy golden font, splashing the head of her father and her step brother with holy water. Then he left the altar, leaving Matteo Bardi alone to speak to the entire crowd.

"You all know I am a man of few words," her father began "but I have an announcement to make that will change this city forever. In a few days...in a few days..."

Matteo Bardi did not complete the sentence. He remained where it was, frozen.

"Father?" Giovanna whispered. Then she saw the man behind him, a tall figure dressed in black, with a white mask on his face. A blade coming out of his father's body. The lips of his father moved, trying to say something else, but blood came out of the mouth instead of words. He fell, but the noise of his body against the floor was covered by the voices all around Giovanna.

People were now screaming, pushing, running and stomping away. Giovanna saw another masked man. He was also dressed in black, the white mask had a twisted, fake smile. He was walking towards her with a long knife in his hands.

"You cannot bring weapons in the Dome!" a fat priest cried. In response, the man inserted the knife in his belly. For a few seconds the blade disappeared inside the man, to be extracted in a fountain of blood.

People near Giovanna started to run. She felt the hands of her husband blocking her, screaming to remain close, but she moved away from him and started to run towards her father. The world was spinning now. Her body was shaking and her head was pulsing. She found herself before the altar, where a few minutes ago the cardinal was generously distributing the holy water.

One man from the guild of the judges was in front of her, until one of the masked men appeared, starting to cut the judge's throat with his knife. The victim did not want to die, kicking his legs and moving his arms, looking at Giovanna as if she could have saved him, but decided not to. When he finally collapsed, Giovanna was already running away.

"Giovanna, help!" she heard her step-brother screaming. Then another scream, more distant. "Let me be!"

"Pepe!" she screamed back "where are you?" One masked man had taken Pepe by the hair and was walking with the boy in the opposite direction of the rest of the people. Towards the exit.

"Leave him be!" Giovanna screamed running towards him.

"Giovanna! Save your brother, please". Giovanna turned, and saw her step-mother. A masked man appeared behind her. Giovanna tried to say something, but the long blade was already killing her.

Her scream never left her throat, the mouth dry and full of fear. Death was walking, running, pushing, stabbing all around her. Coming to her. Coming for her. But that was not yet her moment, first she needed to reach Pepe. She was not able to understand what she was doing, screaming, or running? She was getting closer to the man with her step-brother, so she had to be running.

"Stop!" she screamed. The man put Pepe down for a second and moved towards her. Giovanna walked away from the attacker, backwards. But everyone was running in the opposite direction. A shoulder coming from behind pushed her, making her spin. The leg of a shadow hit her own, endangering her precarious balance. When her legs found the ground again, her feet met an obstacle. She collapsed on the floor.

Moving her head, she realised she had fallen on her father's body. His eyes and mouth were still open, but every sign of life was gone.