

THE BETROTHED

By

TANITH LEE

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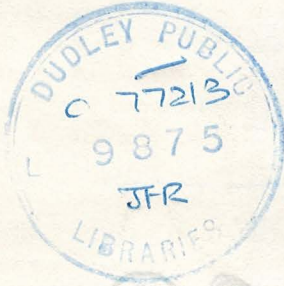
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Looking back, he saw a girl leaning from the tower and waving to him. Vitorli was a harsh enough man; he had seen madness before, and he knew it now. But something in the line of her frail body, and the intermittent flashes of her red hair blowing tangled against the darkening sky, made him draw rein and halt for a moment. She called out to him now, high and thin. He shrugged and turned away, and the shadow of the gate fell over him. He would have to be quick. He was some miles from Sienna, and he had his report to make to the fat Podesta before night-fall. A formality, Vitorli thought, spitting sideways from the horse. My Lord, the Podesta, knew as well as he, that those whom the Pope smiled on could do as they pleased. Still, there was that mad girl to be accounted for. The Tyrant of the Fortress Chiara had kept a light enough tongue for that. The shadow of the gateway was cold and dank, and Vitorli hurried to be out of it. This visit was all that would ever be done, and it was a slight to his neck to investigate further into the matter. Nevertheless, it made one wonder what had happened here. The wine shops in the borgo were full of speculation.

As he came from the gate, he saw the sun on the rim of the sky. There was a great stillness; and then the sound of a girl's voice, screaming.

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All that she could remember of him were his eyes. Large eyes many said were beautiful, full and clear and the colour of molten topaz. That was all she could remember, save for the thread of ice embroidering strange little aching fears through the network of her body.

He had stood at the end of the long table, dimly seen amongst the smoulder of the candles, draped in shadow, save for the light catching palely on one hand as it rode a knot of carving, and in his eyes. The rich voice of her father, stern from old battles that lived yet in the bleached ruins of skulls piked above the gateways of the citadel, rose from the darkness of her side.

"We are honoured, Genesta, by the presence of My Lord, Tyrant of Chiara and Forcenza, who is come to seek you as his wife."

Her heart had died in her breast, and she saw no reason why it should, since his name was no more than any unknown name to her. She was very innocent of world affairs. The fortress of Chiara lay in the brown hills beyond Sienna, she thought. For the rest, she could not see his face, only the lucid flicker of the light on his hand and in his golden eyes. She said nothing, and her curtsey seemed like fainting into the pool of shadow at her feet.

She could not think that he wished to marry her for her dowry, for her women spoke now of the frescoed splendour of Forcenza, and the invincible towers of Chiara, and the favour of the Pope. Neither did she think that he loved her for her beauty, which was like a flame, her pale delicate face and the white flesh of her body, framed by long, fox-red hair, like the glowing rim round the heart of the fire. As the time grew shorter, and the sun span through the sky, as though anxious that her bridegroom should claim her, she lay awake often and trembled at the thought of him. She had no specific fear; he was not physically repugnant,

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rather the reverse, and she must be thankful, she saw, that he was not blasted by the ghastly disease of the man to whom her sister had been wed. Yet she tossed in the bed, and moisture jewelled her forehead as she imagined some perverted, nameless thing that he would do to her.

And then, even as the golden pomegranates were finished upon her bridal gown, a young lord from Sienna came riding into her father's fortress. His name was Lorenz de Cerini, one of the many captains of fortune, come merely for the purpose of doffing his cap to the master of the citadel.

She watched him from the Maschio tower, as he rode with his condotta at his back, their blue pennons flying against the blue sky and the sunlight streaming along the limbs of the horses like water. Once he looked up, but did not see her. His hair was brown, shot with amber, lifting softly as he passed below the window. His skin was bronzed, flawless, his shoulders flexed wide beneath the mail he wore. Genesta drew back into the cool room and shut her eyes that she might see him again. He was imprinted on the lids, beautiful as a god, and the memory would not leave her.

Her senses might well have warned her to avoid a meeting with him, but such was made impossible, for her father had a mind to employ him and his men, and so kept him to dine. She came into his sight, shy and confused by the male beauty that was in every line of him, and in every action that he made. But she could not be unaware that his gaze touched frequently on her, and lingered there for as long as it courteously might. Also there was in his manner a subtle arrogance, a contrived display, like a peacock fanning out his magnificent feathers to impress the hen of his choice. At last when her father's attention was elsewhere, she hesitantly raised her eyes to his. They were as deep a blue as the banners of his condotta. He smiled to

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her, a more gentle smile than she would have thought so proud a face could express. He seemed about to speak to her, but her eyes fell away as suddenly as they had ventured to rise and the fire flooded her cheeks.

She slept far worse than before that night, and a great cloud of horrible despair woke her as the sun rose. She lay on her pillows and thought it best to kill herself, but she had neither the means nor the courage to accomplish the thought. At last the women flocked into the room to dress her. Barely could she endure the ritual: the scent of sweet herbs; the shimmering silk cascading over her head; the combing and braiding of her hair. Descending the vast staircase, she began to pray, her lips moving, though she was unaware of it.

"O, let him be gone. Let him have ridden away," she whispered at first, and then: "O God, let him be here still,"

Her second prayer was answered, but she did not know it until she had reached the gardens. The dew was on the lawns, drawing out the flowers to the sun. White roses bloomed gloriously, thrown wide to reveal their tawny, dappled hearts. The cream petals lay scattered everywhere.

At once she was aware of him, somewhere near her in the velvet silence of the garden. And without knowing where he was, she felt herself move towards the place; as though he held her hand, and drew her. And then there was an almost formless thing, merging in the chiaroscuro of the leaves, and after that a glow, like marble breathing into life. Then there was he. He carried his doublet on his arm, and the shirt beneath was unlaced, falling back from his breast. The flesh was paler than that of his face and neck, but strong with the hard smooth contours of the muscles framed under it.

A little, coiling rivulet of warm russet hair glistened in the centre of the white torso. For a moment she stared at him, then turned her head away, abashed that it should stir

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her as she had supposed only men might be stirred, at the sight of a woman's nakedness. What they said to each other she barely realized. She fancied it was but a prelude to some other thing that was to come. Their real speech did not come out of their minds, and between their lips as words. There was a sensation like the mounting of a wave in summer, and a strange tremulous pain that left no room for anything else. But even though it hurt her she was scarcely conscious of being hurt. All feelings and all thought were governed inexplicably by one part of her body and that governed by one part of his. And she wondered at it afterwards, in the drowsy grass; half afraid at this thing that he had found for her in herself.

But then she slept, and in the darkness of sleeping were two points of light. At first they seemed to be candles, with the soft smoke rising. After that she knew them to be eyes, and under them the white hand, prone on the carved chair, like an albino animal on a black rock. She woke in fear, and the fear continued in the daylight. The Lord of Chiara and Forcenza would know that he had got himself a tainted bargain, and a frozen terror drove through her. She felt herself alone.

Desolate and cast into a hell of icy flame, she lay shuddering with the sheer pain of this agony of cold.

A hand touched her, and an arm encircled her; an arm that was strong and warm, and pressed her against a body that lived and moved against hers. Only then was she conscious of the tears on her cheeks and the small sounds of distress which came helplessly from her throat. She lay in the safeness of his warmth and let him comfort her. She saw now the fault was his, for he told her, speaking softly against her ear.

"But Chiara.....?" she whispered.

He laughed low, contemptuously. Kissing her hair, he

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said: "You would do better with me. Or do you think otherwise?"

She trembled briefly, and was still again. "What choice have I?" He sensed her body growing stiff with misery in his arms, and held her closer to shut it out.

"Here you have but one choice", he told her, "and that is to come with me."

Genesta raised her head to look at him, and she saw how his blue eyes mocked her own wonder. Because he laughed at the terrors she felt, she thought he must be invincible. She listened to what he had to say, passively. They would ride to Sienna and be married there. He would leave his condotta behind, save for three or four men to guard them on the road, so that their journey might be speedy and unhampered. The rest should be left under a suitable command, to reach the city in their own slow time. There were other greater lords than her father, whom he might profitably serve. At the end he cupped her delicate face in his hands, and asked her if she would come. And Genesta, as she sat in the shadow of his beauty and his strength and his fearlessness, felt all the love in her being well up into her, because he asked her so humbly what he knew she must give.



They left in darkness, under a sky smooth as velvet, where a quarter moon shone like a burnished coin. The way was muffled and secretive, through a dank passage leading out from the fortress, beneath the garden, a precious route in time of siege, but unguarded now. They stole like ghosts through black avenues of poplar, the three men stepping behind, wordlessly. Only once did she hesitate, to brush the lip of an old sundial the moonlight was painting four o'-

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clock. But she left without regret.

She had learnt to expect no love from this home. There could be no mercy where there was no love. Had she confessed to her father, she realized now he might have killed her. As a child he had shown her the value of obedience when he made her lift unwilling eyes to those severed heads upon the gates. They were horrible to look on, and the blood ran fresh from them, drying black and foul, like mud.

It was easily accomplished. Soon they had mounted in the shadow of the walls, and were riding in a low drumming of hooves, and the silvery jingle of the harness. So she turned to gaze on him, this Lorenzo de Cerini, captain of fortune, who but a few days before had been unknown to her. He had the profile of a god, she thought, and his eyes were brilliant, and blue as twilight, even in the blanching beams of the moon. Beside his strength she was safe from all the nightmare of the world. For the first time now she knew herself happy.



As they rode, the land became wild about them. In places it was barren, foliowed by great copper shades of chestnut trees, or stretches of yellow oak, straining their python arms to the sky. It was savage country that made her afraid, for until now she had never known other grasses and trees than those of gardens; and there nature had been a servant, set in avenues and arches, and climbing the stone stems of pillars. Now it was all free and everywhere around her, limitless and burning in the sun. On the shimmering horizon was a burst of limestone rises, and they seemed to her like white bones erupting from the torn flesh of the hills.

After the fire of the day the evening dropped cool, and where the sun sank the sky was the colour of an apricot. In

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this dimmer light Genesta raised her head, for she had long since bowed it under the aching glare of the afternoon. Lorenzo had turned away to look at the dark swell of rocks on their left hand. When he turned back his eyes were sombre and perplexed.

"Some devil has led us onto the wrong road," he said briefly. His voice was strange, it seemed to her.

"What lies up there?" she asked him softly. He shook his head, and would not answer her, and the familiar small fear stirred in her body.

"Chiara," said her lips, although no sound came between them.

His hand brushed gently over her hair. "Coming this way, the journey will be shorter."

But her fear was unreasoning, and would not be comforted. She watched the sun droop on the edge of the hills, and then vanish suddenly like the shutting of an eye. On her hair his hand momentarily stiffened. The next instant Genesta heard the quick beat of hooves moving towards them in the dusk.

Lorenzo drew rein, and a flicker of his hand brought the three soldiers to their side. In silence they waited, save that one of the men murmured that it was a time for robbers. But the figures that came into view wore shining mail, and their leader a yellow plume in his cap that shivered as he rode. And then they were level.

"What is your business?" Lorenzo cried harshly. The man gestured. "Not mine, My Lord; my master's."

"His name?"

"You will know that, sir, when I tell you he is the Tyrant of Chiara and Forcenza."

A pang of sickness shot through her, and it seemed the firm, warm body of the horse had been withdrawn from under her own so that she hung suspended, and utterly

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weightless, in the still air.

"My Lord knows that you are travelling to Sienna, and tenders his hospitality for as long as you may wish to enjoy it."

"Thank your lord, but we will find our own." Genesta did not turn to him as he spoke, for somehow she could not take her eyes from that swaying yellow plume. But she heard the strangeness in his voice.

The face beneath the plume smiled a little. "My Lord is insistant," was all he said, and behind him the ten mailed condottieri smiled too, a visual echo.

Suddenly Lorenzo moved in the saddle. She felt his firm hand grasp hers fiercely, and when she lifted her eyes to his they were like two blue shafts flung into the core of her, willing her to trust his strength in her terror, and at the same time feeding on her love to give him that strength.

"I will speak to your lord," he said at last. Chiara's mercenaries were about them in a moment. Behind her one of de Cerini's men gave a low curse. They rode into the darkness of the rocks.

She did not know how long it took them to reach the fortress. Her eyes were sightless. Everything was dead in her, but for the hand he still held. Their fingers were knotted together, and she could not tell where hers ended now, and his began. So they rode into the citadel. There was a sensation of dismounting, when every limb seemed paralysed and aching, and then an arm about her, holding her, and she felt only the arm. Then the arm was drawn away, and she could feel nothing at all.

Abruptly there was torchlight piercing her eyes, yet it was as dense as black smoke to her. She heard the tone of the man who had led them here, very distant and muffled, and she sensed that his hand was placed on Lorenzo's shoulder, and that Lorenzo threw it off, saying angrily that there was

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more than one lord in Sienna who would not lightly countenance such abuse to the name of de Cerini. After that there was a brilliant clarity to the scene, and the figures were printed in fire. Two of the mercenaries seized his arms from behind, and their leader, with the dainty yellow plume still nodding on his head, stepped forward and struck him hard in the face with his gauntleted fist. She saw them begin to pull him across the floor, and she felt all her soul come terribly alive in a body that would not move. She fought to make it run after them. She felt her hands wrenching at their arms and her nails clawing him free of them, even as she stood there. But her body was dead.

Now they were gone, and there was only this huge, dark hall, seeming to stretch away endlessly on every side. Genesta trembled. Through the dark came two points of light; at first they were like the sparks of candles, after that she knew them to be eyes. Under them moved the white hand. She felt them watching her, the eyes and the hand, and the floor rose around her, soft, like a cushion, supporting her, and there was only darkness.

And now the nightmare was finally over, and she could open her eyes fearlessly, and feel the gentle sun on her face, and see Lorenzo asleep beside her in the tinderred grass. She opened her eyes. She lay on a great bed, and candles burned round her. The sneering face of a boy darted before her.

"My Lord Chiara awaits you."

She was conscious of hands lifting her, and a curtain brushed aside, and then an endless stairway. Each step she took carefully; they were measured and slow, and there was no sound to them. Her feet were two moths, moving towards a dim glow of amber, and when she hung back they drew her on, in their mad seeking of the light. Genesta lifted her head. She stood in a chamber that burned with gold; alone.

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"I am honoured, Madonna, to entertain you as my guest."

The voice seemed unembodied, but a hand was on her arm, a passionless hand, resting so lightly that she barely felt it through her sleeve. A great coldness settled in her, that made her both afraid and glad. For she no longer trembled, and yet at the same time, she hardly seemed to breathe, and her eyes had grown langourous, and sightless almost, so that the room was merely a huge rippling tapestry spun into flame.

All the while she was aware of his voice saying things that she did not hear. And now they were seated at a table where the light had splintered in the opal wombs of the Venetian goblets. She sat at his side in silence, and strangely came the knowledge that this was how they might have sat had her father's bargain been completed. But she could not have sat so stilly then. Her flesh would surely have writhed in terror. Her own body would have slain itself before the Lord of Chiara and Forcenza had got her into his bed. But now she came to him as one who had loved and been loved, and in that love had left nothing for his lust to take. A sudden cold exulting filled her at the thought that she had cheated him.

"You do not eat, Madonna," she heard him say at last; his tone was peculiarly soft. "If the fare is not to your liking, you must pardon me that I can offer you no meat. For all her greatness, my fortress of Chiara is poorly supplied to-night."

His pale hand slid before her eyes. The table was caught in the net of his motion. Through the golden mist her gaze followed it, and she saw him to be right. "Be patient," he said then, "I do not neglect my guests. You shall have meat tomorrow."

Slowly the fear rose in her again. The coldness that had shielded her swam in her veins, and stifled the words in her

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throat as she uttered them.

“For what purpose do you keep me here?” She felt the yellow light of his eyes play over her face. The soft and emotionless timbre of his voice made her afraid.

“Your father has entrusted you to me, since you have left his protection.”

The words sang to her as she lay in the dark bed. The father who would have killed her had entrusted her to the man whom she had cheated. Her tears burned the pillow. And in her misery she longed for the warmth of Lorenzo beside her, and his strong, gentle arms comforting her. The longing ached in her, growing like a great, white sea and in the darkness she conjured his form like a prayer. Her need was so vast it seemed to become a creature in the room, pale and trembling; calling out to a Heaven that did not hear. But the night heard, and the night answered. It answered with the voice of a man. A voice that screamed once, and then was silent.

Genesta lay immobile. Through the high window a translucent sickly moon peered in at her, filling her open eyes with restless light. Then, like a child that has met a devil in its dreams, and waking fears it still, she turned and hid her face, until a sleep like death came and lay down at her side.

The morning brought a woman in black velvet, who dressed her body, moving soundlessly. Her strange cool hands coiled Genesta's hair, hovering lightly as butterflies through the red petals of a poppy. But when Genesta spoke to her, the woman parted her lips, and showed her that she had no tongue now to reply with.

All the fortress was brilliant with sun, a bloated thing wounding the metallic sky. It made her weak with fear, this heat, pouring through every room. Small drops like little pearls trembled on her temples, and the palms of her

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hands were constantly crushing the fingers into them, crushing them harder and more fiercely until they throbbed, and were bruised. There was a horrible hunger in the hands, and like anemones she felt them reach again for the white fingers, drawing them in and devouring them. In their veins was the mad, ecstatic strength of the strangler. She felt it there.

She did not see the Lord of Chiara. Yet his eyes were in the hot sun. It watched her as she went from chamber to chamber, it licked at her blue-stained fingers, and when she found shade, it drained it away, creeping about her in a pool. When the dusk came, she heard him near her in the still room. And she knew now that he would be both in the sun and the darkness of Chiara, for Chiara was his, and everything in it, even herself.

"I heard a man cry out in the night," she said, and was afraid to say more, with this stifled voice that was not hers.

"A hawk, Madonna, may cry like a man."

She lifted her gaze to his face, which she had never seen before: and she could see only the eyes, like topaz, and the rest was a pale blur, that seemed to be laughing. Her own eyes trembled and fell.

"A hawk," whispered the voice in her throat.

"Or a bad dream, Madonna, born of the poor feast I offered you. Your sleep will be sweeter tonight I trust."

Suddenly she thought: "He has brought me here hoping to win me. He shows me the splendour of his home, and he knows I am afraid of him." But instead of fear there was a strange surge of passion in her for Lorenzo. She loved him so greatly that her very love had kept him alive. He could not be dead. And Sienna — The city would gather arms against an enemy of the Cerini. She remembered the strength in her hands; it was Lorenzo's strength: he had left part of himself in her body. Even as she thought it, Genesta sensed

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a flower of warmth blooming upwards through her flesh. He was with her, and she had no need to be afraid.

Chiara led her to the dark table, where the filmy reflections of the dishes and the fragile goblets flamed softly. She was very hungry now, for her body was young, and the fear had left her, and she was warm with hope. She ate. The meat was fragrant with heavy spices; the wine was rich, and she felt the slow blood rise in her cheeks. All the while the Lord of Chiara did not eat, but sat in an ebony chair. And his strange eyes followed her hands as they moved amongst the candle light. They rested on her lips, her own eyes, and on the lids of her eyes, delicately tinted the colour of an iris. But she sat defiant, and the hot wine built a drowsy fortress round her limbs. The image of Lorenzo stood strong in her mind, the sun rimming his hair, the white god's torso, the heat of his body, and the scent of him, like summer.

She lay still in the dark bed. Her longing for him was sharp, but unlike the other longing she had felt; that first longing of a child for comfort in the black shadows of the night. "Dear God," she prayed, silently, "let the army of Sienna come quickly." And in her sleep they marched, their pennons blue as sapphire against the grim walls of the fortress, where the Lord of Chiara gesticulated helplessly, tiny as a doll. And so her lover entwined her in his arms again, and she rose in the inexplicable sensation of pleasure that he had taught her.

The days passed lightly as falling leaves. There was nothing to speed her time, the hours shone dully before her each morning, cups to be filled with the drops of wasted minutes. Yet suddenly, about the mellow limpidness of noon, the sun was blown out, the seconds raced madly, and the night had entered the rooms of the fortress. Then came the white hand to lead her to the feast, and the golden eyes to watch her as she ate.

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His words were few and courteous, but he said nothing of Lorenzo de Cerini. Once as the woman moved her hands through her hair, braiding and looping and coiling, Genesta whispered:

“Do you love your master?”

The woman's face seemed as translucent as milky glass, so that the shadow of her bones was visible beneath the flesh. Her hands lay still. Her immobility was eloquent.

“Tell me then, will you send a message to Sienna?” She could hardly speak. The woman stared at her. “I am a prisoner here, and my lord, Lorenzo also - I can give you nothing now, but you shall be rewarded, I swear it!”

The woman shook her head, once. Genesta put out her hand to touch her in appeal, but she shrank away and made a sound in her throat like an idiot.

The torchlight in the hall was the colour of chrysanthemums. Genesta looked about her, across the length of the room, and beyond the dark gloamings of archways. The Lord of Chiara and Forcenza was absent; and when she came to the long table she found that it was bare, save for a tray of beaten gold. This was perfectly engraved with a tiny picture of two lovers embracing in a garden of leaves and starry flowers. She began to tremble, and when she moved away her limbs were stiff and nervous, stepping haltingly on the patterned floor. She paced every inch of the chamber, almost searching for this man who was her tormentor and her jailor. He had led her into this room, and sitting motionless had pierced her with his great yellow eyes, making her afraid. But now she was more afraid, inexplicably afraid, that he was not here.

At the windows the shadows came flitting like huge dusky

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bats. Something made the candles falter. For a moment it seemed as if the whole hall would be plunged in darkness, and then the light rose up again from the fluttering of the small wicks, and she heard Chiara's voice behind her.

"You cried out, Madonna. What has alarmed you?" She stared at him, her eyes enormous and wild. "The wind blew some of the candles out?" he asked. He laid his hand weightlessly on her shoulder. "They shall be relit. Madonna Genesta, I must speak with you."

A spear of sickness plummeted through her body. She shivered free from beneath his hand.

"No. Let me speak." What she said was barely audible, but he paused. Cold amusement emanated from him. For a vast second she sucked an alien courage from herself. He waited, seeming to watch it rise, like smoke in her eyes. At last a soft clear voice touched the stillness.

"Where is Lorenzo?" it questioned. After this small achievement, the strength ebbed out of her. Her face shone in the candle gleam, colourless as wax.

"Lorenzo is beyond that door, Madonna."

For an instant she could not breathe or think; then she turned and ran across the chamber, the tessellated floor passing dizzily under her feet. She pulled the door wide with both her hands. She saw something lying there, broken, in the dim light, and the hot tears fell out of her eyes; for he was dead, she knew. After that the light grew clearer. In her agony she knelt beside him, and leant forward to touch his dead face. A wisp of the amber hair brushed her fingers. But the awful stench of a rotting corpse made her draw back, and as she did so she saw that his left side was covered by some horrible laceration. Part of his arm and the flesh beneath it had been torn away. The torso ended in raw, bloody strands, and a protrusion of severed arteries.

She dragged her body upright, and fled back into the hall,

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half-blinded by what she had seen. The eyes regarded her impassively. The white hand stroked the carving of the ebony chair.

"He must be burnt now, Madonna, for as you can see, he is decaying." Then, as she gazed at him, mad with grief and a deep, gnawing horror, he added gently, "But you cannot grudge him that. He has served you while he might." Her lips were white, and her eyes blazed like embers, their light cast lucid on her cheeks.

"Have you no fear of Sienna's laws?" she shrieked, for her own fear was drowned in her.

"My duty to yourself is my excuse, Madonna."

"Duty? Can anything excuse what you have done?"

"Yes, Madonna." The glow of a huge topaz was mirrored in her face as she looked at him. Slowly it drew a skein of ice through her veins, like liquid snow. "You are my guest, and entrusted to my protection. I could not let you go without meat."

There was a great quietness, and then the sound of Genesta's voice as the screams vomited from her throat.



