

- Chapter Twenty-One -

She took a step back. *La Galleria degli Specchi* was an icy hall on fire, forever melting in crystal drops, self-admiring wall to wall and in the high shine of the floor. It was still a long way from one golden end to the other, but reflection had a different meaning.

"Come closer, *signorine*." Alessandro didn't leave Despina uninvited, if just to provoke her refusal, bowing to Donatella. "You will."

She also moved towards one of many elongated mirrors in-between lighting clusters like Medusa's hair, a splash of wax falling on her barely sleeved shoulder.

Alessandro brushed it away but not before it caused a mark and some pain. He got the attention of a very adolescent page. "Have you sweet oil? *Questa Signorina* has been burned by *candele inferiori*."

It seemed the whole room was watching, not believing what a princess had hoped but hoping too. Except those who could

never side with him, frowning at Donatella insisting she was alright.

"What I wanted you to see." Alessandro struck a pose with her on his arm, the view of herself only improved because he was part of it.

"Should we enjoy the show tonight, Signor," asked approaching belligerence, "or find it too serious?"

*"Non è la mia composizione!"*

"But you may still be of interest."

"I hope so."

"Nothing more active?"

"Not this evening." Alessandro sought Donatella's listening through a glance.

"But there will be others."

*"Bravo! What reasoning, Signore Lomellino!"*

"And yours?"

"To take a breath."

"As if your last?"

The questioner was joined by another like him in looks if not bluster. "Careful, Baccio..."

"No." Alessandro enjoyed any uncertainty in their chain of command. *"Il mio primo."*