

CHAPTER 1

The Last Battle

‘Tis no use telling you my name, for I am about to die.

Let me tell you hers instead – Simonetta di Saronno. To me it always sounded like a wondrous strain of music, or a line of poetry. It has a pleasing cadence, and the feet of the words as they march have a perfection almost equal to her countenance.

I should probably tell you the date of my death. It is the twenty-fourth day of February, in the year of Our Lord 1525, and I am lying on my back in a field outside Pavia in Lombardy.

I can no longer turn my head, but can move only my eyes. The snow falls on my hot orbs and melts at once – I blink the water away like tears. Through the falling flakes and steaming soldiers I see Gregorio – most excellent squire! – still fighting. He turns to me and I see fear in his eyes – I must be a sorry sight. His mouth forms my name but I hear naught. As the battle rages around me I

Marina Fiorato

can hear only the blood thrumming in my ears. I cannot even hear the boom of the evil new weapons giving tongue, for the one that took me deafened me with its voice. Gregorio's opponent claims his attention – there is no time to pity me if he is to save his skin, for all that he has loved me well. He slashes his sword from left to right with more vigour than artistry, and yet he still stands and I, his lord, do not. I wish that he may live to see another dawn – perhaps he will tell my lady that I made a good death. He still wears my colours, save that they are bloodied and almost torn from his back. I look closely at the shield of blue and silver – three ovals of argent on their azure ground. It pleases me to think that my ancestors meant the ovals for almonds when they entered our arms on the rolls. I want them to be the last things I see. When I have counted the three of them I close my eyes for ever.

I can still feel, though. Do not think me dead yet. I move my right hand and feel for my father's sword. Still it lies where it fell and I grasp the haft in my hand – well worn from battle, and accustomed to my grip. How was I to know that this sword would be no more use to me than a feather? Everything has changed. This is the last battle. The old ways are as dead as I am. And yet it is still fitting that a soldier should die with his sword in hand.

Now I am ready. But my mind moves from my own hand to hers – her hands are her great beauty – second only to her face. They are long and white, beautiful and strange – for her third and fourth fingers are exactly of a

The Madonna of the Almonds

length. They felt cool on my forehead and my memory places them there now. Only a twelvemonth ago they rested there, cooling my brow when I had taken the water fever. She stroked my brow, and kissed it too, her lips cool on my burning flesh; cool as the snow which kisses it now. I open my lips so that I may taste the kiss, and the snow falls in, re-freshing my last moments. And then I remember that she had taken a lemon, cut it in twain and squeezed the juice into my mouth, to make me well again. It was bitter but sweetened by the love of her that ministered to me. It tasted of metal, like the steel of my blade when I kissed it just this morning as I led my men to battle. I taste it now. But I know it is not the juice of a lemon. It is blood. My mouth fills with it. Now I am done. Let me say her name one last time.

Simonetta di Saronno.