

SIENA – 1723



Chapter 1 - The Owlet

For her nineteenth birthday, Pia Tolomei, the most beautiful woman in Siena, was given a necklace and a husband.

Her name-day was spent sitting quietly in her chamber, a day like any other - the same, the same, the same - another bead on the rosary of her placid and deadly life.

But then – a change.

When Pia's maid told her that her father wished to see her she knew exactly what was coming. She'd been expecting this moment since she was eleven. She laid down her hoop of embroidery with a shaking hand and went down to the piano nobile at once. Her knees shook too as they carried her slight and upright form down the stair, but she had courage. She knew it was time to face what she had dreaded for years, for as long as she had had the sentience to understand the expediencies of the marriage market.

Since she was eleven Pia had expected, daily, to be parcelled up and handed in marriage to some young sprig of Sienese nobility. But Fate had kept her free until now. Pia knew that her father would not marry her beyond her ward,

the contrade of the Civetta, the Owlet. And here she had been fortunate, for the male heirs of the good Civetta families were few. A boy that she was betrothed to in the cradle had died of the water fever. Another had gone to the wars and married abroad. The only other heir she could think of had just turned fifteen. She had a notion her father had been waiting for this lad to reach his majority. She went downstairs now, fully expecting that she was about to be shackled to a child.

In the great chamber her father Salvatore Tolomei stood, as if he had planned it, in a shaft of golden light streaming in through the windows. Her father had always had an instinct for the theatrical. As if to augment the moment he waited until she approached him and laid her cool kiss upon his cheek, before he pulled a glittering gold chain from his sleeve with a magician's flourish. He laid it in her palm where it curled like a little serpent and she saw that there was a roundel, or pendant, hanging from it. 'Look close,' Salvatore said.

Pia obeyed, humouring him, masking the impatience she felt rising within her. Now the time had come she wanted to know her fate. She saw a woman's head depicted on a gold disc, decapitated and floating. 'It is Queen Cleopatra herself,' whispered Salvatore with awe, 'on one of her own Egyptian coins. 'Tis more than a thousand years old.' His ample form seemed to swell even greater with pride. Pia sighed inwardly. She had grown up being told, almost daily, that the Tolomei were descended from Egyptian royalty, the Ptolemy. Salvatore Tolomei - and all the Civetta capitani before him - never stopped telling people of the famous queen Cleopatra from whom he was directly

descended.

Pia felt the great weight of her heritage pressing down on her and looked at the long-dead queen almost with pity. That her long, illustrious royal line should distill itself down into Pia, the Owlet, daughter and heir to the house of the Owls! Pia was queen of nothing but the Civetta contrada, sovereign of a quiet ward in the north of Siena, regent of a collection of ancient courtyards, and empress of a company of shoemakers.

'And on the other side?'

Pia turned the coin over, and saw a little owl in gold relief.

'Our own emblem, and hers; the emblem of Minerva, of Aphrodite, of Civetta.'

She looked up at her father, waiting for what was coming; waiting for the meat of the matter. She knew he never gave without expectation of return. 'It is a gift for your name day, but also a dowry,' said he. 'I have spoken with Faustino Caprimulgo of the Eagle contrada. His son, Vincenzo, will take you in marriage.'

Pia closed her hand tight around the coin until it bit. She felt a white hot flame of anger thrill through her. She had not, of course, expected to choose her own husband, but she had hoped in her alliance with the Chigi boy that she could school him a little, to become the most that she could wish for in a husband; to treat her with kindness and leave her alone. How could her father

do this? She had always, always done as Salvatore asked, and now her reward was to be a marriage to a man she reviled, furthermore a man from another contrada, which was unheard of.

She knew Vincenzo by repute to be villainous and cruel, near as bad as his father the notorious Faustino Caprimulgo. The Caprimulgo family, captains of the Eagle contrada, were one of the oldest in Siena, but the nobility of their antique family was not reflected in their behaviour. Their crimes were many – they were a flock of felons, a murder of Eagles. Pia was too well bred to seek out gossip but the stories had still reached her ears; the murders, the beatings, Vincenzo's numerous violations of Sienese women. Last year a girl had hung herself from her family's ham-hook. She was barely out of school. 'With child,' Pia's maid had said. 'Another Eagle's hatchling.' Apparently Salvatore could overlook such behaviour in the light of an advantageous match.

'Father,' she said, 'I cannot. You know what they say of him – what happened to the Benedetto girl. And he is an Eagle. Since when did an Eagle and an Owlet couple?' In her mind she saw these two birds mating to create a dreadful hybrid, a chimerea, a griffon. Wrong, all wrong. Salvatore's face went still with anger and at the same instant she heard the scrape of a boot in the shadow behind her.

He was here.

She turned slowly, a horrible chill creeping over her flesh. He walked forth from the shadows,

Vicenzo Caprimulgo.

A strange trick of light catching his nose and eyes first. Beak and beads – like the stuffed birds in her father’s hunting lodge. His thin mouth was curved in a slight smile.

‘I am sorry, truly, that the match does not please you.’ His voice was calm and measured, with a whisper of threat. ‘Your father and I have a very particular reason for this alliance between our two contrade. But I am sure I can...persuade you to think better of me, when you know me better.’

(Pia threw out the notion of stating that she had no wish to know him better.)

‘It’s something you can do at your leisure, for your father has agreed that we will marry on the morrow, after the Palio, which I intend to win.’

He came close, and she could feel his breath on her cheek. She had never been close to a man save her father. ‘And I assure you, mistress, that there are certain arenas in which I can please you much better than a fifteen year old boy.’ The malice in his eyes was unmistakable, and there was something else there too, a naked desire which made her bones water. She shoved straight past him and out of the door, her father’s apologies raining in her ears. He was not apologizing to her, but to Vicenzo.

Pia did not realize until she was half way across the piazza that when she had gone it was not an act of defiance but acquiescence – her father would

smooth things over and the match would go forth as planned. She was powerless.

In desperation Pia marched straight to the Civetta church across the square and prayed and prayed, the pendant still between her palms. She did not look up at the images of the Christ or Mary. She thought it more likely that the ancient totem between her hands could help her. She prayed for something to happen, some calamity to release her from this match. When she opened her hands there was the imprint of Cleopatra on one palm and the owlet on the other.