THE MASTER OF VERONA

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DAVID BLIXT

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The Master Of Verona

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For Jan ~

"I shall live in thy heart,
die in thy lap,
and be buried in thy eyes..."

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♦ VINCIGUERRA, COUNT OF SAN BONIFACIO – last of an exiled Veronese family

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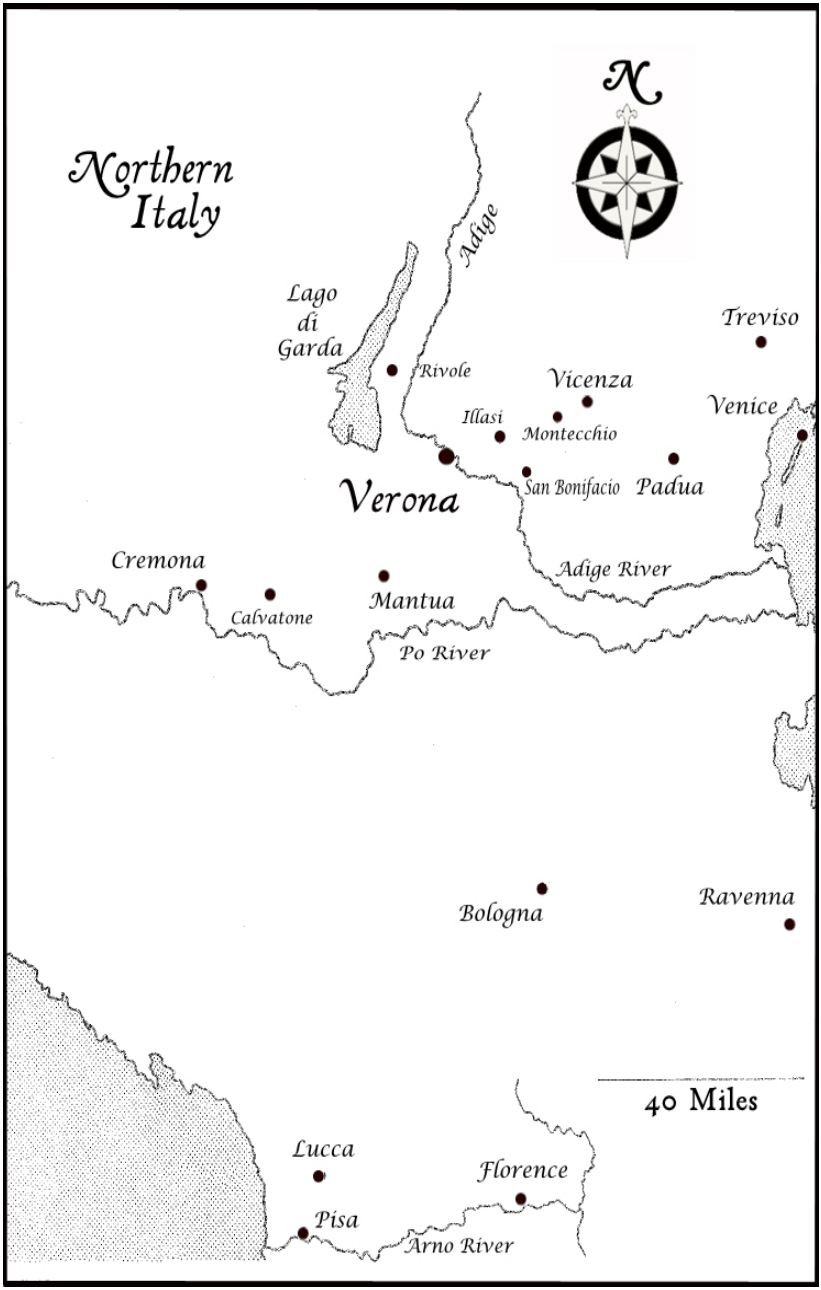
Northern Italy
N
Adige
Lago di Garda
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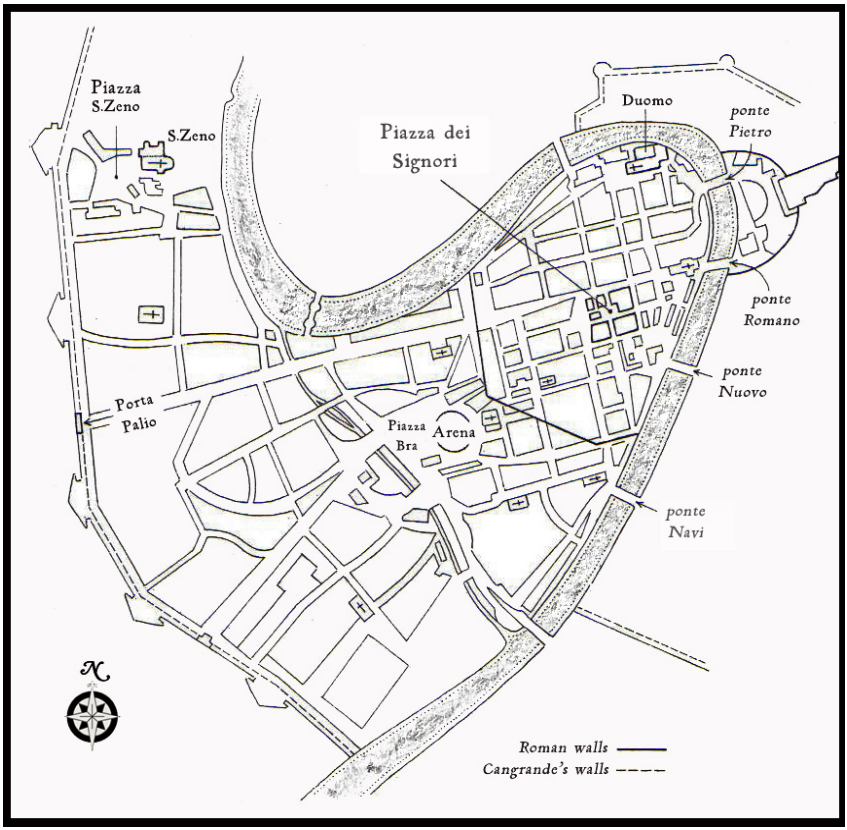
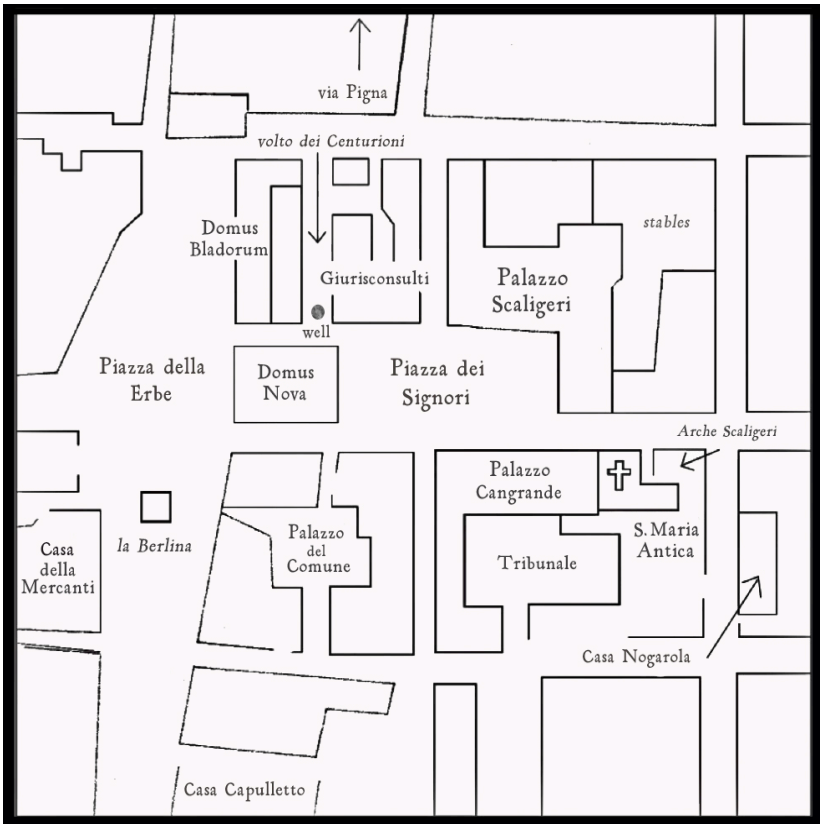


The City of Verona



Piazza dei Signori

'A TE CONVIEN TENERE ALTRO VIAGGIO,'
RISPUOSE, POI CHE LAGRIMAR MI VIDE,
'SE VUO' CAMPAR D'ESTO LOCO SELVAGGIO:

CHE QUESTA BESTIA, PER LA QUAL TU GRIDE,
NON LASCIA ALTRUI PASSAR LA SUA VIA,
MA TANTO LO 'MPEDISCE CHE L'UCCIDE;

E HA NATURA SI MALVAGIA E RIA,
CHE MAI NON EMPIE LA BRAMOSA VOGLIA,
E DOPO 'L PASTO HA LIU FAME CHE PRIA.

MOLTI SON LI ANIMALI C CUI S'AMMOGLIA,
E PIU SARANNO ANCORA, INFIN CHE 'L VELTRO
VERRA, CHE LA FARA MORIR CON DOGLIA.'

'IT IS ANOTHER PATH YOU MUST FOLLOW,'
HE ANSWERED, WHEN HE SAW ME WEEPING,
'IF YOU WOULD FLEE THIS WILD AND SAVAGE PLACE:

FOR THAT BEAST THAT MOVES YOU TO CRY OUT
LETS NO MAN PASS HER WAY,
BUT SO BESETS HIM THAT SHE SLAYS HIM.

HER NATURE IS SO VICIOUS AND MALIGN
HER GREEDY APPETITE IS NEVER SATED –
AFTER FEEDING SHE IS HUNGRIER THAN EVER.

MANY ARE THE CREATURES SHE MATES WITH,
AND THERE WILL YET BE MORE, UNTIL THE GREYHOUND
SHALL COME WHO'LL MAKE HER DIE IN PAIN.'

Dante
L'Inferno
Canto I, 91-102

PROLOGUE

Padua
16 September 1314

CIOLO'S NERVES jangled in time with his spurs. During the whole ride they hadn't seen a soul. Not on the road, not in the fields. No one at all.

"What does it mean?" asked Girolamo.

"I don't know," said Ciolo.

"Is Padua under siege?"

"I don't know. Let's keep going."

"How will we get in?"

"Keep riding."

"But…"

"Think of golden florins."

"I've never been to Florence!"

"Shut up!" hissed Ciolo.

Empty fields gave way to empty suburbs. Some hovels and shacks were burnt out, but more were intact, even new – Ciolo saw fresh-cut timber struts and new bricks. Marks of an old siege, not a new one. If there were a present siege, by now he would have heard the sounds of hundreds of men muttering, cheering, singing, impatient horses stamping, the crack and whine of siege machines, the smell of fire and filth.

But the only smells were common night scents. The only sounds were crickets and the occasional goose or dog. There were no tents or firebrands, no bristling spears. The city wasn't under siege. So where the devil was everyone?

Ciolo's skin went cold with a horrible notion. *A pest*. A pest had come and even now the Paduans were hiding in their homes scratching at scabs and vomiting blood. He glanced at Girolamo but said nothing. Thinking of the money, he put his dirty hand over his mouth to keep out the bad air and rode slowly on.

They approached the city's north gate, crossing the Ponte Molino, an old Roman bridge the length of fourteen horses whose triple arches spanned the Bacchiglione River. The center arch was supported by two massive stone columns rising from the rippling water. Nearby mills creaked and groaned. Padua depended on the Bacchiglione for everything.

The bridge ended right at the lip of the fortified gate. Ciolo squinted hard. No bodies piled up outside. A good sign. But still there was no one in sight. Ciolo nudged his horse onto the bridge and began to cross it. Girolamo followed.

Halfway across, Ciolo could make out that the gates into the city were open, but dark.

Girolamo said, "I've got a bad feeling about this job."

Suddenly a flame appeared high on the tower before them. A torch. Two more joined it. At the same moment Ciolo heard a human noise. Thousands of voices, cheering. Men, women, children. Bells pealed and musicians played. All the people were inside the city walls, watching for sunset and the lighting of torches.

Sagging in his saddle, Ciolo mopped his brow. "See, it's nothing. A celebr—"

Then he heard thunder as an army of horses poured out of the gate right in front of them. Plumed helmets and shining breastplates reflected light from the brands held high as countless Paduan knights emerged from the city, riding furiously across the Ponte Molino.

Riding right at Ciolo and Girolamo.

Abandoning his horse, Ciolo threw himself from his saddle and ran, arms pumping, to the edge of the bridge. He didn't hesitate but threw himself into space. For a moment his arms flapped at the air. Then he hit the water feet-first, plunging below the surface. The sound of hooves vanished as the river swallowed him.

Ciolo didn't know how to swim. He lunged in the water, using his arms and legs as if he were running, flailing towards the bridge. His shoulder hit hard against something and he grabbed onto it as best he could. His fingers recognized the feel of stone. Whatever it was he grasped it and pulled himself along. It was slimy and slippery, hard to hold. He dug in with his fingernails. His lungs were beginning to burn. Then his hand emerged from the water and he pushed his head up and

through and sucked down sweet air.

He was holding onto one of the arches of the old Roman bridge. Above him he heard the continued cascade of mounted soldiers. *Idiots*. Wherever their enemy was, it wasn't here. Why charge, then – in darkness, when a horse was likely to trip and fall? Ciolo had nearly been killed in a night charge once. The horse in front snapped a leg, killing not only its rider but the two riders behind him.

He could still hear the cheering in the city, and he knew that he had almost been killed for the sake of a parade. A show of honour, of skill. *Fools*. Sputtering and shivering, Ciolo mouthed a string of curses against whoever had come up with the notion of chivalry.

Hand over hand he dragged himself to the edge of the support. He was lucky that the Bacchiglione wasn't flowing hard, and luckier that what current there was had been dulled by the mills. Otherwise he would have been swept clean away. For the first time he wondered what had happened to Girolamo. But it was useless to call. If he'd survived, he'd meet Ciolo at the house.

It took Ciolo ten minutes to reach the river's edge. Though the riverbank was solid, there was no way to reach the high gate from below. The only way was from the bridge. Ciolo took a breath and began to scale the cracked stone walls carefully. His wet fingers made it difficult. Muttering and cursing, he pulled himself onto a carving of some old god just below the lip of the bridge. There he stayed, waiting for the horsemen to pass. He squirmed until he found a position that freed his arms so he could wrap them around himself. His teeth chattered. Damn all Paduans and their stupid *patavinitas*.

The final horseman passed, with the citizens chasing after, cheering their fool lungs out. Twisting, he pulled himself up onto the bridge proper. No one stopped to help him. In fact, he was almost knocked over again by the press of the people. God, did he hate Paduans.

Dry land under him, he was swept along by a different kind of current as the mob wept with joy and pride. Blending in, he forced his chilled lips into a smile. The crowd was warming him up, and he was pleased when he realized how easy it would be to get into the city now. Knowing his own horse had probably bolted, he didn't bother to look for it. He just played the part of happy citizen watching his army go off to glory.

"Fall in, did you?" asked someone with a grin.

"Y-y-yes," replied Ciolo with a shrug. "Quite the fool." He'd been to this city three or four times before. He'd even once been defended on some petty-theft charge by the famous Bellario. So Ciolo was able to fake the accent.

The thrill eventually passed and slowly the Paduans began returning to their homes. Recrossing the Ponte Molino with them, Ciolo made jokes and slapped backs, joining in the laughter at his obvious misfortune.

Halfway along the bridge he found the body of Girolamo. Ciolo recognized him from his vest, since his face had been crushed. Ciolo bent down quickly, but it was no use. He'd already been robbed.

Ciolo entered Padua, joining a group of men heading for a tavern. He held himself to one bottle of wine, but sang with gusto and thumped the table for as long as it took for his clothes to dry. Then telling his new best friends there was a wench waiting, Ciolo took his leave.

He had a job to get on with.

A life to end.

♦ ◊ ♦

Ciolo found the house, right where it was supposed to be. There was the hanging garden. There was the juniper bush. The house was frescoed with a pagan god holding a staff with two snakes on it. The deity stood between two barred windows and above two massive lead rings for tethering horses. Just as described.

The front of the house had torches burning, and Ciolo passed through the flickering light, walking drunkenly in case anyone was watching. He'd been told there was no possible entrance from the ground, so he didn't waste time looking for one. Instead, he circled the block until he came to a three-story wall outside a dyeyard. The wall's covering plaster had worn away at the street level, showing a mix of round stones and proper bricks. It was dark in this street, the light from the stars the only illumination. Still playing the drunkard, Ciolo stood in the open, loosened the points on his hose, and relieved himself. Using his free hand to lean against the wall, his fingers quested. No one passed, not even a cat. Readjusting his points, Ciolo rubbed his hands together and, having found the promised fingerholds, began his ascent.

Along the top were curved spikes to keep intruders out of the dyeyard. But Ciolo didn't want in. He wanted passage. Reaching up one hand he carefully wrapped his fingers around the inch-thick base of the spike. He didn't put much pressure on it at first. It might be sharpened along its whole length, not just at the curve. But in this too his instructions were accurate. The flat edges of the spike were dull. Ciolo gripped the spike harder, praying it would bear his whole weight.

It did. Feet dangling, he swung his free hand up to grasp the next spike. Then the next. Hand over hand he passed down the row of spikes, around the shadowed corner between two houses.

By now his breath was coming hard, his hands and shoulders aching sourly. But he only had another half length of wall to travel. He started on it, then froze as a noise came from the house behind him. Did they have dogs? Or worse, geese? Pressing himself against the high wall, feeling his sweaty fingers slipping, wishing for a cloud to hide the stars and plunge him into deeper shadow, Ciolo listened.

It was a child. A child's cry in the night. Unattended, it went uncomforted.

In a perfect world he could have waited for the child to sleep again. But his hands were losing their strength. He continued quickly down the final length of the wall, mouthing foul pleas not to slip. The next move was tricky – he had to twist around until he was hanging with his back against the high wall and leap to a window across the four-foot divide. He doubled up his grip with his one hand, then twisted around and threw out his free hand. It brushed past one bar but firmly found the next. Hanging now with his back to the dyer's wall, he faced his target. The arched window was open, the wooden door swung wide. Knowing the longer he waited the worse his nerves would get, Ciolo curled his feet up, released the bars, and kicked off hard.

His ribs banged against the windowsill and he hit his chin as he began to slip. Flinging his arms wide, he pressed his elbows against the inside walls. Feet scrambling, he pulled himself awkwardly over the sill and into the house. Graceless, but successful.

Crouching low, Ciolo found himself in a long hall, narrow, with a pair of doors on each side. He squinted until he was sure all the doors were closed. He felt like his breathing was making more noise than a bellows. If someone found him now he would be useless, his arms were shaking so fiercely.

But no alarums. No cries but the child's, which were subsiding. Ciolo flexed and stretched, each second gaining him another breath, each breath easing his beating heart. His eyes began to play tricks on him in the dark. He imagined that the doors were all open, and twice he swore he saw movement. But each time he was wrong. Or hoped he was.

After two or three minutes of watching from the shadowy corner by the window, Ciolo was as ready as he was likely to be. His right hand dropped to his left hip. Gripping the leather-wrapped hilt, he withdrew a dagger nine inches long.

Keeping well out of the faint light coming in the window, he made his way down the hall. The house plan Ciolo had memorized indicated he had not far to go. Down this hall, a right turn into a grand room, and up a single flight to a double door. Simple.

The hallway was tiled and clear of rushes. Ciolo placed first one foot, then another, so much on his toes that his boot heels hardly brushed the floor. He came to a pair of doors facing each other. Both were closed. Holding his breath, he picked up the pace past them. Nothing leapt out at him and he sighed, then instantly cursed himself for the noise.

The second pair of doors were also closed. Again, everything was proceeding as planned. He forced himself to stop and listen. One flight up the infant was still making noise, but the rest of the house was still.

Fortune favours the bold, thought Ciolo. Creeping around the corner, he felt along the wall for the beginning of the stairs. Tripping would be bad. Most stairs creak at the middle, so Ciolo kept his weight to the far outsides of each step where the wood was unlikely to bend.

At the top of the stair there was another window, facing north. He could see the sliver of the moon, and it could see him. He crouched down, his back to the wall, and looked for the double doors.

There they were. The light from the partial moon just brushed their bottom edges. Inside he could hear the child. It was neither wailing nor giggling. More of a string of burbling noises. Ciolo thought the room must be small because he could hear an echo, as if the child's own voice was answering itself.

He waited, listening to the room beyond the doors. Was there a nurse waiting with the baby? Surely not, or else he'd be calmer. Or else she was dead to the world. And soon would be moreso. Smiling, Ciolo trained his eyes on the moonlight. He prayed to a merciful God to send a cloud, then on second thought redirected the entreaty to the Fiend.

Whoever heard his prayer, it was answered almost at once. The light crept away. Once it was dim, Ciolo moved swiftly. Lifting his knife, he grasped the handle to the child's room and pulled the door wide.

Blackness within. Ciolo stood to one side of the doorway, pausing for his eyes to adjust to the more complete darkness. Still the child burbled. Ciolo squinted at the corner the noise was coming from and thought he saw an outline. Reversing his dagger from point up to point down, a stabbing grip, he stepped fully into the gap, one hand on the door frame to guide him into the room. He was a professional. What did it matter that his victim was a child. He was certainly going to the Inferno already. One step. Two…

A sharp cracking noise made Ciolo wince. An instant later the breath exploded from his body. Confused, he found himself sprawled several feet back down the hallway. Something had hit him in the chest, hit him hard enough to stun him and knock him backwards. His free hand came up and found a thin line of wood protruding from his breastbone. His fingers brushed the fletched end absently. He whimpered, afraid to pull on the arrow's shaft.

A hinge creaked as the second door opened. A shuttered lantern was unveiled and the light approached him, growing brighter. To Ciolo's dazzled eyes it seemed to be borne in the hands of an angel. An angel all in white. The colour of mourning.

"Not dead, then?" asked the angel as she came to stand over him. "Good."

Ciolo sputtered, the blood on his lips leaving the taste of metal on his tongue. "Holy Madonna..."

"Shhh." The angel set aside both the lantern and the instrument of his demise, a small trigger-bow. Her right arm must have been hurt firing it, for she used her off hand to take the blade from his unresisting grasp.

Behind her was another shape, a young girl clutching a baby. The infant Ciolo had come here to murder. He didn't know if it was a boy or girl, it was too young to tell and he'd never asked. He wanted to ask now, but breathing was trouble enough. Still his mouth tried to form the words.

The woman shook her head. With a lilting accent Ciolo found beautiful, she said, "Say nothing except the name of the man who paid you."

"I – I don't..."

"Not a good answer, love."

"But – madonna forgive me, but – it was a woman."

The angel nodded but didn't smile. Ciolo wanted her to smile. He was dying. He wanted absolution – something. "Angel, forgive me."

"Ask forgiveness of God, man – not of me."

His own knife flashed left to right in her pale hand. He made the effort to close his eyes so as not to see his life's blood spill to the floor. With a choked whimper, Ciolo lay still.

The cloud above passed, revealing the stars once more.

I

The Arena

ONE

The Road to Verona
The Same Night

"Giotto's *O*."

In the middle of a dream in which no one would let him sleep, it seemed to Pietro that the words were deliberately meant to annoy him. Almost unwillingly he dreamed a paintbrush touching a rock, forming a perfect circle.

The painter used red. It looked like blood.

"Pietro, I'm speaking to you."

Blinking, Pietro sat up straight in the rattling coach. "Pardon, Father."

"Mmm. It's these blasted carriages. Too many comforts these days. Wouldn't have fallen asleep in a saddle."

It was dark with the curtains drawn, but Pietro easily imagined his father's long face grimacing. Fighting the urge to yawn, he said, "I wasn't asleep. I was thinking. What were you saying?"

"I was referencing Giotto's mythic *O*."

"Oh. Why?"

"Why? What is nobler than thinking of perfection? More than that, it is a metaphor. We end where we begin." This was followed by a considering pause.

Shifting, Pietro felt his brother's head on his shoulder. Irritiation rippled through him. *Oh, Poco's allowed to sleep, but not me. Father needs an audience.*

Expecting his father to try out some new flowery phrase, he was astonished to hear the old man say, "Yes, we end where we begin. I

hope it's true. Perhaps then I will go home one day."

Pietro leaned forward, happily letting Jacopo's head fall in the process. "Father, of course you will! Now that it's published, now that any idiot can see, they'll *have* to call you home. If nothing else, their pride won't let anyone else claim you."

The poet's laugh was sour. "You know little about pride, boy. It's their pride that keeps me in exile."

Us, thought Pietro. *Keeps us in exile.*

There was a rustling beside him, and suddenly there was light as a groggy Jacopo pulled back one of the curtains. Pietro tried to feel ashamed at his satisfaction for having woken his brother up.

"The stars are out," said Jacopo, peering out of the window.

"Every night at this time," said their father. Pietro could now see the hooked nose over his father's bristly black beard. But the poet's eyes were deeply sunken, as if hiding from illumination. It was partly this feature that had earned Dante Alaghieri his fiendish reputation. Partly.

The light that came into the cramped carriage wasn't from the sky but from the brands held aloft by their escort. No one traveled by night without armed men, and the lord of Verona had dispatched a large contingent to protect his latest honoured guest.

Verona. Pietro had never been, though his father had. "Giotto's *O* – you were thinking about Verona, weren't you, father?" Dante nodded, stroking his beard. "What's it like?" Beside Pietro, Jacopo turned away from the stars to listen.

Pietro saw his father smile, an unusual event that utterly transformed his face. Suddenly he was young and full of mischief. "Ah. The rising star of Italy. The city of forty-eight towers. Home of the Greyhound. My first refuge." A pause, then the word *refugio* was repeated, savoured, saved for future use. "Yes, I came there when I gave up on the rest of the exiles. Such plans. Such fools. I stayed in Verona for more than a year, you know. I saw the Palio run twice. Bartolomeo was Capitano then – a good man, honest, but almost terminally cheerful. In fact, it *was* fatal, now I think of it. When his brother Alboino took over the captainship I made up my mind to leave. The boy was a weasel, not a hound. Besides, there was that unfortunate business with the Capelletti and Montecchi."

Pietro wanted to ask what business, but Jacopo got in first, leaning forward eagerly. "What about the new lord of Verona? What about the Greyhound?"

Dante just shook his head. "Words fail me."

Which probably means, thought Pietro*, he doesn't really know.*

He's heard the stories, but a man can change in a dozen years.

"He is at war though, yes?" insisted Jacopo.

Dante nodded. "With Padua, over the city of Vicenza. Before his untimely death, good Emperor Heinrich VII gave Cangrande the title of Vicar of the Trevisian Mark. Technically this means he is the overlord of Verona, Vicenza, Padua, and Treviso. The Trevisians and Paduans disagreed, naturally. But Vicenza is ruled by Cangrande's friend and brother-in-law, Bailardino Nogarola, who had no trouble swearing allegiance to his wife's brother."

"Then how is the war about Vicenza?" asked Pietro.

"Vicenza was controlled by Padua until they threw off the yoke and joined Verona. Two years ago Padua decided it wanted Vicenza back." Pietro's father shook his head. "I wonder if they realize how badly they've erred. They gave Cangrande an excuse for war, a just cause, and they might lose more than Vicenza in the bargain."

"What about the Trevisians, the Venetians?"

"The Trevisians are biding their time, hoping Padua wears down Cangrande's armies or wins outright. The Venetians? They're an odd lot. Protected in their lagoon, neither fish nor fowl, Guelph nor Ghibelline, they don't care much about their neighbour's politics unless it affects their trade. But if Cangrande wins his rights, he'll have their trade in a stranglehold. Then they'll intervene. Though after Ferrara, I imagine the Venetians won't desire land anytime soon," he added, laughing.

"Maybe we'll see a battle!" At fourteen, Jacopo didn't care about politics. Ever since joining them in Lucca, he had treated his brother to a litany of dreams involving serving under some mercenary *condottiero* and proving so brave he'd be knighted by whatever king or lord was handy. Then, Jacopo insisted, came the money, leisure, comfort.

Pietro wanted to want such a life. It seemed like the right kind of existence, leading to the right kind of death. Women, wealth, maybe a heroic scar or two. And comfort! That was a dream he and his siblings held in the way only a once wealthy, now ruined family can. Dante's exile from Florence had beggared his children, and his wife had only saved their house by using her dowry.

But Pietro couldn't imagine himself as a soldier. At seventeen he'd hardly been in a friendly scuffle, let alone a battle. He'd had a lesson in Paris, one quick tutorial that basically told him which end of the sword was for stabbing. The only other combat moves he knew he'd copied from fightbooks.

As the second son he'd been intended for a monastic life. Books, prayers, and perhaps gardening. Some politics. Lots of money. That was

the life Pietro was brought up for, and he'd never really questioned it. He'd lived in a kind of distant awe of the old poet.

Not that father is old. Thirty-five at the turn of the century, the years since Dante had found himself *'Midway though the journey of our life'* had been darker than the wood he'd written of. Denied fire and water, his property confiscated, he was declared *hostis* to his friends and family – a family whittled down from a healthy seven children to three. Alighiero, the brother nearest Pietro's age, had died at twelve when a pestilence swept through the city. The same plague had claimed the baby of the family, little Elisio, aged eight. Dante had never even seen his youngest child, born three months after his exile.

The most deeply felt loss was Dante's eldest son, Giovanni. A few years older than Pietro, he'd had the duties and rights of the first-born. Just nine when the poet was exiled, Giovanni had joined his father traveling through northern Italy for his next nine years. Then, as Dante prepared to visit the University of Paris, Giovanni was drowned in a river mishap. The city of Florence refused Dante the right to return and bury his son, so Dante's firstborn now lay in a tomb in Pisa.

That tragedy had altered Pietro's life. Nearly sixteen, he was suddenly elevated to the role of heir, summoned to follow his ever-wandering father in his brother's stead. His two remaining siblings, Jacopo and Antonia, had remained in Florence until last year, when the city leaders started making noise about executing all male heirs of exiles. Dante's wife had quickly sent her remaining son off to join his father, who hadn't exactly been pleased.

Since then they had traveled over the Alps back into Italy, down to Pisa and Lucca. A stone's throw from Florence. No wonder his father was thinking about home.

If asked, Pietro would have said he was a disappointment to his father. He hadn't the wit to be a poet, and he was a poor manager for his father. Pietro often thought his little sister would be a better traveling companion for the great Dante. She had the mind for it. Pietro's sole consolation was that his little brother Poco, by his very presence, made Pietro look good.

Like now, as Jacopo pressed their father further. "The Greyhound. What's he really called?"

"Cangrande della Scala," said Dante importantly, lingering over each syllable. "Youngest of the three sons, the only one still living. Sharp, tall, well-spoken. No, that won't do. I said before, words don't do him justice. He has a… a streak of immortality inside his mind. If he continues unchecked, he will make Verona the new *Caput Mundi*. But ask me no more about him. You will see." When Jacopo opened his

mouth Dante held up a hand. "Wait. And. See." He pulled the curtain shut, blocking the stars and plunging them once more into darkness.

They rode on through the night. Pietro listened to the easy chatting of the soldiers outside. They talked of nothing important – horses, wenches, gambling, in the main. Soon his father's breathing became regular. A minute later the coach was filled with snores as Poco joined in.

But Pietro couldn't sleep now if he tried. Instead he carefully peeled back a section of curtain and watched the miles pass by. Dante always insisted on riding facing forward, so Pietro could only see the road behind them, illuminated in bizarre twisted patches by their escorts' torches. A wind was fretting the oak trees and juniper bushes that lined the road. He could smell the fresh breeze. A storm, maybe. Not tonight. Maybe not even tomorrow. But a storm.

In a little while the trees thinned out, replaced by farms, mills, and minor hamlets. A jolt of the wheels and suddenly they were rattling over stone rather than dirt. The clop of each hoofbeat hung crisply in the night air. Pietro was again glad of their escort. Too many things happened to foolish nighttime travelers.

Spying Pietro, one soldier cantered his mare closer to the carriage. "We're coming up on the city. Won't be long now."

Pietro thanked him and kept watching. *Verona*. A Ghibelline city, which meant they supported the Emperor, who was dead, rather than the pope, also dead. Verona had a famous race called the Palio. They exported, well, everything. Any goods from Venice that weren't going out by ship had to pass through either Florence or Verona. Florence led only to the port at Ostia, but Verona was the key to Austria and Germany, and thus on to France and England. It lay at the foot of the Brennero Pass, the only quick and sure route through the Alps.

All of a sudden the suburbs were upon them, the disposable homes, shops, and warehouses of those not wealthy enough to buy property inside the city walls. But already it smelled like a city. Pietro found it strange that the smell of urine and feces was a familiar comfort, but he'd lived in cities all his life. Florence, Paris, Pisa.

As the carriage slowed to a walk, then stopped, Pietro's father roused. "What's happening?"

"I think we're outside the city gates, father."

"Excellent, excellent," said the poet sleepily. "I was so consumed with composing the encounter with Cato – I told you about Cato? Good – I lost all track of our travels. Open the curtains. And wake your brother!"

Their escort was hailed by the guard at the gate. The escort

shouted out the names of the passengers – one name, really, followed by "and his sons!" The city's guards acknowledged the claim and came forward to confirm the number of passengers in the carriage. And, Pietro knew, to gawk a little at his father.

"It is you, then?" asked one.

"I thought you'd have Virgil with you," said another. Pietro hoped he was joking.

Dante smiled his fool's smile. "You didn't recognize him? He's the coach driver." One guard actually looked, then laughed in an abashed way. The poet passed a few more words with the guards, and one of them made a comment that he thought witty until Dante sighed. "Yes, yes. Hellfire singed my beard black. My sons are tired. May we enter?"

They were delayed while word was sent ahead and the gate was opened. Then the coach resumed its course, passing into the dark archway that led into the city. When Dante recognized a church or a house, he named it.

All at once Dante smacked his hands together and cried, "Look! Look!"

Pietro and Poco twisted around to see where he was pointing. Out of the darkness Pietro could make out an arch. Then another, and another. Arches above arches. Then the torches revealed enough of the structure for Pietro to guess what it was. The only thing it could be.

"The Arena!" laughed Poco. "The Roman Arena!"

"It's still in use," proclaimed Dante as proudly as if he'd built it. "Now that they've evicted the squatters and cleaned it out, they can use it for sport again. And theatre," he added sourly.

Quickly they were past it, but Pietro kept picturing it in his mind's eye until the coach came to a halt. Laughing, the driver called down, "The full stop!" Everybody was itching to show off his wit to the master poet.

A footman opened the coach door and Pietro poked his head out. Word of their arrival must have spread faster than fire. A crowd of men, women, and children, grew larger every second. After two years of traveling on foot, of leaving their hats on posts in each new city they came to until someone lifted them, thus offering lodging and food, Pietro still wasn't used to his father's newfound fame.

Stepping out of the coach, he made sure his hat was at the proper angle. A present from the lord of Lucca, it was Pietro's only expensive garment. But even in his fancy hat with the long feather he heard the crowd's sigh of disappointment. He didn't take it personally. Instead, he turned to hold out his arm to his father.

Dante's long fingers grasped Pietro's outstretched arm, putting more pressure on his son's flesh than he showed. As his feet touched the stones of the square the crowd took a single step back, pressing the rearmost hard against the walls. They were gathered to glimpse Dante, an event Pietro guessed they'd tell their friends of while making the sign to ward off evil. The old man *was* evil, but not in that way.

"Fool carriages," muttered Dante. "Never get cramped like this on a horse."

Jacopo had popped out of the other side and now came around the back of the carriage, an idiot grin on his face. With a word to the porters to stow their baggage, they followed a beckoning steward. The awed crowd parted for them.

Following the steward's lamp, they passed under an archway with a massive curved bone dangling from it. Dante chuckled. "*La Costa*. I had forgotten. That bone is the remains of an ancient monster that the city rose up and killed in olden times. It marks the line between the Piazza delle Erbe to the Piazza dei Signori." The marketplace, the civic centre.

The alleyway opened out into a wide piazza enclosed all about by buildings both new and old. The whole square was done up in cloth of gold and silken banners that shimmered in the torchlight. Below this finery were Verona's best and brightest. Dressed in fine gonellas or the more modern (and revealing) doublets, these wealthy nobles and upper crust now stood by as Dante Alaghieri joined their ranks.

The buildings, ornaments, and men were all impressive, but Pietro's eyes were drawn to a central pillar flying a banner. A leap of torchlight caught the flapping flag, revealing an embroidered five-runged ladder. On the topmost rung perched an eagle, its imperial beak bearing a laurel wreath. At the ladder's base was a snarling hound.

Il Veltro. The Greyhound.

Suddenly the crowd parted to reveal a man standing at the heart of the square, looking like a god on earth. Massively tall, yet thin as a corded whip, his clothes were of expensive simplicity – a light-coloured linen shirt with a wide collar that came to two triangular points far below his neck. Over this he wore a burgundy *farsetto*, a leather doublet. But this was of the finest tanning, soft yet shimmery, and instead of common leather ties it bore six metal clasps down the front. His hose, too, were dark, a wine-red close to black. Tall boots reached his knees, the soft leather rolled back to create a wide double band about each calf. He wore no hat, but was crowned with a mane of chestnut hair with streaks of blond that, catching echoes of the brands, danced like fire.

Yet it was his eyes that most struck Pietro. Bluer than the midday sky, sharper than a hawk's – unearthly. At their corners laughter lurked like angels at the dawn of the world.

Cangrande della Scala, the master of Verona, walked forward with his arms outstretched to greet the greatest poor man in all the world. A man whose only wealth was language.

Releasing Pietro's arm and drawing himself upright, Dante walked with dignity to the center of the square. He took off his hat with the lappets and, just as he had done a hundred times during his exile, placed it at the base of the plinth at the center of the square. The silent gesture was eloquence itself. From Dante the crowd might have expected speeches. But Pietro's father had a keen sense of drama.

Pietro watched with the rest as Cangrande stooped for the limp old-fashioned cap. As he rose, Pietro caught his first glimpse of Cangrande's famous smile, his *allegria*, as the lord of Verona twirled the hat between his fingers. "Well met, poet."

"Well come, at least," said Dante. "If not well met."

Cangrande threw back his head and roared with laughter. He waved a hand and music erupted from some lively corner. Under its cover Dante spoke. Pietro was close enough to hear. "It is good to see you, my lord." The poet bobbed his chin at the ornate decorations all around the square. "You shouldn't have."

"Sheer luck, I must confess! Our garlands are for tomorrow's happy wedlock. But I feel the hand of Fortune, as they are far better suited to grace your coming."

"Silver-tongued still," replied Dante. "Who is to marry?"

"My nephew, Cecchino." Cangrande gestured to a not-so-sober blond fellow, raising his voice as he did. "Tonight he takes his last hunt as a bachelor!"

Dante also pitched his voice to carry. "Hunt for what, lord?"

"For the hart, of course!" The crowd broke with laughter. Pietro wondered if they were indeed hunting deer, or girls – he'd heard of such things. But he spied a handsome young man, dark of hair, well dressed, who carried a small hawk. So, deer. Pietro was both relieved and disappointed. He was seventeen.

Dante turned to face his sons. "Pietro. Jacopo." Jacopo tried to flatten down his hair as Pietro stepped eagerly forward to be introduced, ready to make his best bow.

But his father forestalled him with a gesture. "See to the bags."

With that, the poet turned in step with Cangrande and departed.

TWO

Vicenza
17 September 1314

VINCIGUERRA, Count of San Bonifacio, sat on horseback atop a hill overlooking the walls of San Pietro, a suburb of Vicenza. Beneath the metal protecting his arms the muscles were thick from years of slinging a sword. The beefy hands inside the gauntlets were calloused from fire and leather. The stout legs were well used to the combined weight of plate and chain armour.

He paused to mop his forehead with a cloth. A large man, he sweated freely. His aged visage was round and cheerful, a face belonging to a merry friar or a troubadour with a fondness for German beer. It seemed sorely out of place atop the body of a knight and soldier.

Beside him was the *Podestà* of Padua, Ponzino de' Ponzoni. Not only an unfortunate victim of alliteration, but a poor man's general. At the moment the *Podestà* was visibly sickened by the destruction of his honour. "Is there nothing we can do?"

Daubing his face with a handkerchief, the Count shook his head. "Nothing until they've spent themselves. If we try to stop them now, we'll get a spear in the back and be robbed of our armour."

The day had not gone well for the *Podestà* of Padua. So auspiciously begun, it had turned into a waking nightmare. *Too intellectual,* judged the Count. *Too devoted to the damn Chivalric Code.*

But then Ponzino was a disappointment in every regard. He'd wasted the summer campaigning months, insisting upon avoiding confrontation, concentrating instead on razing Verona's lands. Against a different foe it might have worked, but Ponzoni hadn't compre-

Afterword

Historical Apologies and literary Addendums

Now that the story has been launched, a few notes.

My sources were many and varied. The major ones were Barbara Tuchman's A DISTANT MIRROR, Alison Cornish's READING DANTE'S STARS, ASIMOV'S GUIDE TO SHAKESPEARE by Isaac Asimov, and a collection of differing versions of ***Romeo & Juliet*** (ironically published by the Dante University Press). This last includes works by Masuccio, Luigi da Porto, Bandello, and, of course, the Bard of Stratford. Then there was the first volume of NARRATIVE AND DRAMATIC SOURCES FOR SHAKESPEARE, which reprints Arthur Brooke's (long, awful, boring!) ***Tragicall Historye of Romeus and Juliet***.

Most important for historical data was A. M. Allen's century-old A HISTORY OF VERONA. Though Ms. Allen takes much legend as pure fact, her analysis of events and insights into the people and their politics are fascinating. She also has several lovely turns of phrase, making her book an enjoyable as well as informative read. I am indebted to the Newberry Library in Chicago and the University of Michigan Graduate Library in Ann Arbor, both for their copies of this book and the several other diamonds of data in the historical rough. For hunting down a copy of my own, I have to thank Barnes and Noble Online for their used and out-of-print book search.

I also quite enjoyed PADUA UNDER THE CARRARA by Benjamin G. Kohl, again thanks to University of Michigan.

For details of Dante's family history, I relied greatly upon DANTE e GLI ALLIGHIERI a VERONA, by Emanuele Carli. For more personal information, I was honored with an interview with Count Serego-Alighieri, the direct descendant of Pietro. Visiting him on the vineyard

bought by Pietro in 1353, my wife and I found him gracious and generous with his time and his knowledge of his family's history. With a wonderfully Italian casuality, he gave us many details of his family's history and guided us around the mansion that has housed Dante's kindred for nearly seven hundred years. And the wine grown on the estate is superb.

Though I've read the Longfellow, the Oxford, and the Penguin translations of THE INFERNO, the one by Robert and Jean Hollander flows better than any other, and their commentary is magnificent (though not for the faint of heart).

For the duel in the book, I went to the fifteenth-century fight master Hans Talhoffer, whose illustrated manual of swordfighting and close combat has been used for centuries. This was where I discovered the oval shield-spear I put in Pietro's hand.

At the eleventh hour I discovered a tome that is to be treasured – the DANTE ENCYCLOPEDIA. In spite of the occasional error (the Lucius Junius Brutus that overthrew the Tarquin was decidedly *not* the son of the Marcus Junius Brutus who murdered Caesar!), the vast effort of compiling so much knowledge regarding the Infernal Poet and his scribblings is to be commended and savoured.

Harriet Rubin's DANTE IN LOVE came in during the final edits to give me a little period flavour – which side of the hat Guelphs wore their feathers on, etc.

Many of my other source texts were in Italian, German, or Latin. When this is the case, it behooves one to read these languages with something that resembles fluency. Though my Italian has improved greatly, I was still often forced to rely on translators. For their work in this capacity, I must thank Sylvia Giorgini (Italian), Professor Martin Walsh (German), and my old high school chum, Professor John Lober, for his help with a bit of Latin.

Then there are the living Veronese. Antonella Leonardo at the Ministry of Culture was unbelievably kind and helpful, answering questions and arranging for my wife and me to meet a half dozen fascinating people while we stayed. It was due to Antonella that we were invited to visit Count Serego-Alighieri.

Antonella also connected me with Professor Rita Severi. Rita teaches at the University of Verona. She, her husband Paolo, and their lovely daughter Giulia took us out for the single most enjoyable evening in a three-month tour of Europe. I learned more about Verona in that night than in two years of reading. Rita led me to the city library, where I was inundated with books as a gift from the head librarian. She also translated Manoello Guido's verses for me. I am very much in her debt.

Two days later we were taken on another tour by Daniela Zumiani,

who showed us the Roman ruins under the city, available through shop basements and restaurant wine cellars. She was as enthused as could be by our little project. In her honor, let me plug her book, SHAKESPEARE AND VERONA – PALACES AND COURTYARDS OF MEDIEVAL VERONA, available in both English and Italian.

In spite of all this research, there will be errors. They are entirely my own.

Of course, none of this would be possible without the words, wit, and wisdom of William Shakespeare.

♦ ◊ ♦

I've written about the origin of this novel at length elsewhere (including a collection of essays entitled *Origin Of The Feud*). But it's worth mentioning here, at least quickly:

The cause of the famous feud in ***Romeo & Juliet*** is never actually mentioned in Shakespeare's play, because it's not vital to the story. By the top of Act One, the 'ancient grudge' is already an established fact. Nothing more needed.

Awhile back, I was hired to direct ***R&J***. It was my first time directing Shakespeare, and I was poring through it religiously. I was just finishing the final scene when a line jumped out at me. Paris, Romeo, and Juliet are all dead, and the parents are discovering the bodies. As Romeo's father enters the tomb, the Prince says to him:

> ***Come, Montague, for thou art early up***
> ***To see thy son and heir now early down.***

Lord Montague replies:

> ***Alas, my liege, my wife is dead tonight;***
> ***Grief of my son's exile hath stopped her breath.***
> ***What further woe conspires against my age?***

These lines baffled me. Clearly I didn't need Lady Montague for the final scene – her husband just told us she's dead. I flipped back to find her last scene. Lady Montague hasn't been heard from since Act One, Scene One, in which she uttered a mere two lines. Huh? Why do we care if some woman we barely remember is dead?

Of course in Shakespeare's day, the actor playing Lady Montague was probably needed in another role. The exigencies of the stage. Still, the rules of dramatic structure nagged at me. An off-stage death like that is supposed to be symbolic. But of what?

Then it hit me – the feud! The thing that gets closure at the end of the show is the feud! Montague and Capulet bury the hatchet.

They're even going to build statues to honor their dead kids. Could Lady Montague's death be symbolic of the end of the feud? The only way that could work would be –

If she were the cause of the feud.

Like Athena from the brow of Zeus, the idea was born fully formed. A love triangle a generation earlier, between the parents. Romeo's mother, engaged to young Capulet, runs off with young Montague instead. A feud born of love, dies with love. The symmetry was irresistible.

Oddly enough, all this doesn't affect the actual performance of the show. The play stands, as it always has, on its action and language. A backstory is superfluous. But the idea had its hooks in me. Doing research, I found that Dante was in Verona, Giotto was in Verona, Petrarch comes to Verona. I read about the Palio, and Cicero's letters. I visited the city, made friends, toured ruins and explored.

Most of all, I discovered Cangrande. Things came full circle for me when I decided to tie Cangrande's history to Shakespeare's best young character – Mercutio. Thus was born the Star-Cross'd series, of which this is the first.

♦ ◊ ♦

I expect to get mugged by Shakespeare and Dante scholars alike. The Dante folk will take issue with several of my choices. His movements prior to his arrival in Verona are much debated, and I've chosen one of the more contentious routes, having him go to Paris to teach at the University. It was merely an excuse to have Pietro witness the final humiliation of the Knights Templar, but it is still plausible, if not probable.

I also have Dante growing a long beard, something his contemporaries say he had, but some modern scholars deny vehemently (who cares? I mean really). And I spell his name wrong. Alighieri is the Florentine spelling of the name. But after he was exiled from Florence, why would he use their spelling? I have him returning to an earlier variation of the name, and Pietro, ever the obedient son, does likewise. I am always one for flouting expectations, and I find I'm in good company. Dante himself uses this spelling in his Epistle to Cangrande – specifically, *'Dantes Alagherii.'* Of course, there is debate whether Dante himself wrote it. And on and on…

The historical Pietro is something of an enigma. There are a few known facts, and great swathes of his own writing, but nothing on his early years. So I gave him a life that will surely be seen as ludicrous by the Dante set. All I can say in my own defence is, Dante would have done it. So would Shakespeare. They both loved a good story.

For all that I'm going to piss off the Dante brethren, my treatment

of Shakespeare may well be worse. I'm not messing with the man, they're used to that. I'm screwing around with his work. To the lovers of the Bard, I say this – all my initial ideas came from Shakespeare's text. I never work to correct him, as other authors have done (quite well, in some cases). Unlike the historical Macbeth and Richard III, Romeo and Juliet were not real people in need of defense.

Besides, Shakespeare was something of a thief himself. He stole plots right and left – including the story of Romeo and Juliet. His talent was in taking old stories and breathing new life into them. In a way, I feel I am honoring the Bard by following in his thieving foot-steps.

A few notes on spelling. I've bastardized quite a bit of Italian, especially titles and honorifics. 'Why?' you ask. 'Why not use the correct titles?' Because I'm straddling two worlds: the real, and the Shakespearean. Shakespeare had his Italians call nearly everyone *Signor*, so I've used a variation of that. And for words like honour and armour, I've gone with the more British spellings. Because while Shakespeare never seems to have spelled his name the same way twice, and certainly the First Folio uses both, when the words were important he added that extra vowel.

For the various inspirations, as well as cut scenes and editorial debates, please visit my blog, www.themasterofverona.com, or my website, www.davidblixt.com. And for up-to-date news on these and other books, there's my Facebook author page.

♦ ◊ ♦

A bit about names. Mariotto and Gianozza are both taken from Masuccio Salernitano's thirty-third novel from IL NOVELLINO, an early version of the R&J story involving secret marriages, deaths of kinsmen, and a young groom fleeing to Alexandria. The bride is then forced to marry against her will, but is given a draught by the Friar that makes her appear dead. Unfortunately the Friar's message detailing the plan is waylaid by pirates (shades of ***Shakespeare in Love***!). The story plays out the same as R&J, except Gianozza flees to a convent in Sienna, where she dies. Pregnant, if I recall correctly.

The love scene between Mari and Gianozza in the church is my homage to Luigi da Porto's version, in which the lovers court each other in secret in Friar Lorenzo's church all through a long winter until they can resist their passion no longer.

The name Antony I also borrowed from da Porto, a native Vicentine. In his version of the story (the first to name the lovers Romeo and Giulietta), he mentions the young girl's father is called Antonio. Juliet's mom in that story was named Giovanna, but that was the name of Cangrande's wife. Besides, it's way too close to Gianozza, so we won't be

running with that.

Most other characters I borrowed from Shakespeare or from history, or else extrapolated from family histories. A few, like Tharwat and Morsicato, are pure invention.

About Kate and Petruchio – a lark, but putting them in this tale was actually a textual choice based on two sets of lines in the party scene from R&J. A lovely in-joke for anyone who's seen Shrew, and thus we have our time frame between the two plays.

♦ ◊ ♦

One historical caveat. I have, with a few exceptions, stayed true to chronological history, something Shakespeare himself would never have bothered with. That said, records indicate that Katerina della Scala was replaced by her husband with a new wife in 1306, by whom he had two sons. I assume Katerina was dead when he did this, though one can never be sure with these medieval Italians. But I chose instead to breathe life into her for a good while longer, giving Bailardino's second wife to his brother, Antonio Nogarola. In a moment of pure practicality, I have kept the two children of Bailardino and made them Katerina's own, conceived late in life.

There is another problem, this one having to do with what building was called what when. The current layout of the Piazza dei Signori is almost exactly what it was, except there have been so many façades added, so many rebuilds, that it is almost certainly nothing like what it was. I have blended the then with the now in my mind and, though it may be wrong, the square is at least clear in my head. I hope it is as clear to you.

As for the Scaliger himself, I wish to point out that all the great feats I have attributed to him are entirely true. I've played with numbers of the enemies he faced, *downsizing* them from the tales that have grown over the centuries. But he *did* break the Paduan army in 1314 with less than a hundred men, he *did* appear in disguise in 1317, cheering the invading Paduan army on, only to fight them back minutes later. In short, Cangrande is one of those figures whose life is greater than fiction.

For an idea of what Cangrande's sword looks like, find Del Tin Armories online. Among the Italian sword-maker's exquisite reproductions is the sword that was unearthed when Cangrande was exhumed in the 1920s.

In a fit of silliness, I hid two Shakespeare-related anagrams in the text. Go drive yourself mad.

Those who have studied Shakespeare's sources will be critical of my choice of years. Luigi da Porto, whose version of the story was penned in the early Sixteenth Century, firmly places the events of the play between

1301 and 1304, during the reign of Bartolomeo della Scala, Cangrande's older brother. Working backward from there, the events of this book would have taken place about 1276. While this is a fascinating period in Veronese history, with such notable characters as Mastino della Scala (the first) and Ezzelino da Romano (the third), for me it lacks the drama of the fall of Verona. Verona reaches its greatest heights under Cangrande. That gives it so much farther to fall.

I claim da Porto was misinformed. The original feud between the Montecchi and the Capelletti was indeed buried in 1302, when Gargano Montecchio and his uncles slaughtered the last of the Capelletti in the Arena in Verona. But it flared up again in 1315, and did not die for another twenty-five years, when Verona lost everything it held dear. The tragedy of Shakespeare's play is not just the demise of the young lovers, but the death of every young knight in the city. The flower of Verona's youth is blighted in a single week. For Mari and Antony, it is indeed a plague on both their houses, but the scourge takes other lives as well. From the height that Cangrande lifts it to, Verona falls, never to rise again.

♦ ◊ ♦

There's an old saying that a book is never finished, only published. This is certainly true for me. I was told in 2007 not to revisit the novel for at least two years. I went longer, only ever opening it to look for a particular reference or for public readings. Which means when it came time to release it again, I was coming to it almost fresh.

I discovered some wonderful and disturbing things:

1) I like the story.

2) I am a much better writer now than I was ten or even five years ago.

3) St. Martin's typesetters were not overly diligent.

4) There were things missing that I would have sworn I'd left in, that I had no recollection of cutting. Things I missed. Oh, very small moments – Manuel's poem before his song, talk about a horse's armour, the scene with Antonia and the scribes. Nothing that alters the plot, but it's those details that make historical fiction worth reading.

So I've embraced this miraculous opportunity to take another whack at the piñata. There are no significant changes - an additional scene here and there, several infelicities mended, fixing a few Italian blunders (the plural of *podestà* is *podestà*), etc. But nothing affecting plot or character. I do hope those who read the older version will enjoy this new one even more. It is, in my opinion, a better read.

♦ ◊ ♦

The best question to ask an author is, "Who do you read?" Lately I'm reading less and less fiction, but the current writers I always follow are Sharon Kay Penman, M.J. Rose, C.W. Gortner, Michelle Moran, as well as Neil Gaiman and Jonathan Carroll. My inspirations are Dorothy Dunnett, Bernard Cornwell, Colleen McCullough, Patrick O'Brian, Mary Renault, Alexandre Dumas, and above all, Raphael Sabatini. That's enough of a reading list to last years. Have at!

To my editor, Michael Denneny, I owe more than I can say. His initial words had a profound impact on me, the kind of thing that you carry with you the rest of your career. He told me that I had confused 'what a writer needs to know to write the book with what a reader needs to know to read the book – which is much less.' Setting aside his professional skills, his enthusiasm for the story spurred me just when I had stalled. Thanks, Michael. Also thanks to Keith Kahla at St. Martin's Press for having me reimagine the opening chapter.

Early readers were vital. The gifted playwright and heart breaking actress Kristine Thatcher was the second to read the book, and her excitement carried me through the end of the first year. That year I had the joy of sharing a stage with Mike Nussbaum, popcorn fiend and actor *par excellence*. He kept pestering me backstage to finish the second draft, and thank God he did. Also big thanks to Jeremy Anderson, actor and writer, who trod the boards in the production of ***R&J*** where all this was dreamed up. He swore he 'couldn't put the damn thing down.'

For their support, I have so many friends to thank. The Michigan contingent, where all this started, includes Jeff, Nona, Jason, Dennis, Gabe, Pat, and Paulie. In Chicago, where the bulk of the writing and all the waiting was done, I found Tara, Gwen, Ben, Breon, and Page, among others. Then there's my friend, Broadway superstar Rick Sordelet. Rarely have I been so blessed.

I must express gratitude to every cast of ***R&J*** I've ever worked with – among them: Greenhills High School, Shadow Theatre Company, Ann Arbor Civic Theatre, Michigan Shakespeare Festival, Arts Lane, First Folio Shakespeare Festival, Chicago Shakespeare Theatre, and A Crew of Patches.

Big thanks to Dave 'Pops' Doersch for introducing me to the wild world of stage combat, not to mention the production of ***R&J*** he directed. For him, of course, this book was 'so simple a monkey could do it.'

My parents, Al and Jill, are inspiring role models as well as tireless supporters of the arts. They gave me a unique gift in raising me as they did, and I am ever grateful. My brother Andrew has taught me how to be open to the whole world. And the new maps for the series were done by my mother. Thanks, Mom!

My son Dashiell came onto the scene in April 2006, as the edits for this book were under way. In fact, we had just found out about him when the novel sold. As Mike Nussbaum says, babies bring good things. Thanks, Dash.

Our daughter Evie was born eleven months after the first edition of this book, just as the paperback was coming out. Again, babies bring good things.

Saving the finest for last, we arrive at my best friend: my love, my wife, Janice. The unofficial coauthor of this book, she set aside her own work to listen to me read whole chapters at a time. I don't know how many times she's read it – more than I have, I'll bet. Armed with red, green, and black pens, she settled in and, like a surgeon with a scalpel, excised sections I was too lily-livered to cut myself, and she kept me from doing dumb things like starting at the ending just because I was bored. She and I met playing Kate and Petruchio, hence my giving them - after a very tempestuous start! - the best relationship of the novel.

Jan, *cara mia*, you are my friend, partner, fellow conspirator, and love. I breathe you.

The next book is entitled *Voice of the Falconer*.

Ave,
DB

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