

CHAPTER ONE

Lady Isabella Catherine Giovanni turned her sweaty horse for yet another pass at the assorted vegetables spiked on poles in the practice field. Her destrier snorted, lathered at neck, hindquarters and deep chest, but he gamely obeyed the agile grip of her thighs and thundered down the course. As she had for the past three passes, Isabella neatly skewered a small pumpkin, a melon and a squash on her lance before she pulled up at the other end of the field. She tossed the lance to a servant, who removed the vegetables and bagged them to save them for the hogs.

Nothing was wasted at Castello di Giovanni.

They couldn't afford to waste anything; the Landuccis, allies of the Medicis, would snap up her person, her lands and her dwindling fortune, in that order, at her first sign of weakness.

So she could show none, which is why she pushed her servants, her vassals and her soldiers as she pushed herself--to the point of exhaustion. Like her heroine, Joan of Arc, Isabella had no choice but to prepare for war. Any day she expected Luccio Landucci to bring his far superior numbers of men at arms and hired mercenaries to acquire by force what he hadn't been able to win by guile.

Isabella was gritty and exhausted in the light chain mail she forced herself to wear, day in, day out.

Not for protection.

Not for effect.

Not even as a reminder to those who disapproved of the way she'd taken over the castello's affairs after her three elder brothers were murdered. She wore the mail for an even more basic reason: carrying the weight made her strong and supple.

Grimly, Isabella ignored her mount's wheezing and her own weariness, nodding at a tired servant to affix more vegetables to the stakes. Perhaps a country didn't lie in the balance as it had for the brave Maid of Orleans, but Isabella would also die before renouncing her right to fight. Female or not, she had justice on her side. God would guide her arm and make it strong.

She raised that aching arm, tensing in the saddle to prepare for her run, but Leopold ran out onto the field.

"Isabella!" Her young brother, five and ten in another month, caught her stirrup. "Lady Honoria has sent a servant begging you to come and bring your herbs."

Isabella's heart lurched. "The girl?"

"She is worse."

Isabella leaped off her horse and ordered her squire, "Rub him down and feed him for me, and have my pleasure mount saddled immediately."

She ran off the field, across the draw bridge into the keep, ripping off her headpiece as she went. As she climbed the stone spiral stairs that lead to her tower chamber, the aching dread in the pit of her stomach weighed her down. The news that Dom's adorable little girl, Theresa, was ill again added to her sense of foreboding. This year of our Lord, 1505, had been the worst year of Isabella's life. And the worst year for Dom and Honor since their abrupt return to Florence six years ago.

A sickroom was no place for a warrior, Isabella told herself as she dressed hastily in a simple dress and covered her riotous red hair with a severe snood. Grabbing her satchel of herbs, Isabella ran back down the steps.

As she went, she tried to view her home objectively, but she was still mystified as to why the Landuccis were so obsessed with stealing her estate. The castello was old. Unlike many of the new villas being built among the hills about Florence, it had neither the grandeur nor the modern conveniences of stone floors, glass windows and great kitchens with extensive storage capacities. At Castello Giovanni, they still swept hard packed dirt floors with rushes, their windows were barred, not glassed, and they still cooked on the great central open hearth or in the separate cookhouse on the grounds.

The castello possessed only one feature that none of the richest manses around Florence could match: high in the hills, its dominion held sway over one of the best fishing grounds and tributaries that fed into the Arno river. If the Giovannis chose to dam the stream as was their right, the villas downhill would have to rely on well water.

However, Isabella suspected that the Landuccis were motivated as much by hatred as by greed. Isabella's father and brothers had been firm Republican allies, and they'd done all they could to help cast out the detested de Medicis. When Dom's employer, Pope Alexander VI, a Spanish Borgia ally, died two years ago, the Landuccis had begun agitating openly again to help the de Medicis return to power.

Isabella started through the great hall, wondering if Dom and Honor's problems also stemmed from the machinations of the Landuccis. They already hated Dom for killing one of their own in a tavern brawl in 1499, shortly before Dom's mysterious disappearance. But when the Pope hired him as captain of his guards and took him to Rome, they could do little but gnash their teeth. But it was two years now since Dom and Honor returned to Florence after Dom was summarily dismissed by the new autocratic Pope, Julius II. That, too, showed the fine Landucci hand, Isabella did not doubt.

Isabella was frowning in such fierce concentration that she started as a shadow darted toward her, her hand automatically reaching for the dagger she kept in a sheath at her waist.

But she relaxed when she recognized Giuseppe, her master of arms, hurrying toward her.

He rolled his soft cap between his hands over and over, a habit of his when he was worried or agitated. The bluff soldier was not tall, but he was stocky and powerful despite his graying hair. He had taught Isabella all she knew of war and fighting. Little scared him, but when he entered a shaft of sunlight from a tall embrasure, she saw his pale expression and stopped cold.

"What's wrong?"

He cleared his throat, then said grimly, "Lady Isabella, our gamekeeper has been murdered. In our own forest."

Isabella almost dropped the satchel, but she caught it tightly and said with equal control, "Poachers?"

"No signs of snares or traps. But signs of horses. War horses."

The Landuccis. Trying to terrify more of her servants to desert. Bitter fury almost choked her, but she knew that she couldn't prove this. "Double the guard about the castle, and confront anyone who strays onto our grounds. See that restitution is paid his widow."

"But my lady, we do not have the funds--"

"Then sell something. Another tapestry." She hurried out the door, but he trailed her.

"I do not think you should ride alone--"

"It's not far to Honor's cottage." She patted the sword in the saddle sheath and vaulted into the saddle without help. She hesitated, then decided to ride astride, be hanged to who saw her. Her dress was so full and loose that not even her ankles showed, anyway.

"At least put on your armor. Or let me escort you," Giuseppe begged.

"Theresa is frightened when she sees me dressed like that. And I cannot risk you or any of the men in a sick room. You know I never fall ill. I shall be fine." Isabella nudged her dun mare in the side.

His head bowed as if he couldn't bear to watch her ride away, Giuseppe muttered a quick prayer and crossed himself.

Despite her brave words, on the short ride up the hard-packed dirt road higher into the hills, Isabella started every time a bird cried or the tall summer grass rustled. It was on this very road that her brothers had been set upon and slaughtered. Bandits, it was said.

No, the true murderers were worse, Isabella reflected bitterly, no matter how noble their pedigree. Most thieves stole to survive and killed only when cornered. The Landuccis, along with their allies, stole because they were covetous and killed because they liked it. For over a year, she'd tried to gather proof, but there was nothing to tie the murders to her enemies. The weapons left behind were crude, the hoofprints those of unshod beasts of burden. But in the heart that burned for justice, Isabella knew the Landuccis had merely planned the assault with their usual cunning.

Animals. Men of blue blood but black heart. And she would kill her last surviving brother with her own hand, set fire to all her possessions and then fall on her own sword before she let Luccio take them.

When the cottage came in view, Isabella took several deep breaths, head bowed, and found a measure of calm. The children would immediately sense her agitation if she went in like this, and she came to bestow serenity, not ruin it. She tied up her horse, collected her herbs and went inside with a light knock. No one answered, and she was immediately struck with the unusual state of the cottage.

The simple three room structure was both dirtier, and smellier, than usual. Normally Honor kept fresh flowers in a clay pot on the table in the combined kitchen, living and dining area. The long table was normally shining, sporting delicate carvings Dom had done himself, but today the table was empty of flowers. It was smeared and scattered with crumbs.

The hard-packed dirt floor needed a good sweeping, and the strange contraption Dom had hooked to the well outside to give the cottage the miracle of running water dripped continuously into a drain that was piped outside. Still running down the drain was a smelly substance Honor had obviously recently dumped. It made Isabella rush into the bedroom the children shared. If the child was vomiting again, she was very ill.

Tendrils of Honor's long blond hair had escaped her snood to stick to her flushed temples, and from the redness in her eyes, she'd been crying. However messy the rest of the cottage, the sickroom was scrupulously clean. Honor had always been so adamant about burning soiled bedclothes and washing utensils and hands with caustic soap that her strange precautions had begun to rub off on Isabella. She'd used them during some fevers at the castle, and to her surprise, even some of the most virulent sicknesses had not spread.

Sometimes Isabella wondered if Honor's ancestors had also been witches burned at the stake, as some of the Giovannis were reputed to have been. How else to explain her friend's curious understanding of God's mysteries? But witch or not, Honor was the best friend Isabella had ever had. And Isabella loved Honor's bright, lovely and stubborn children--true offspring of Dominico and Honor--as much as she would have loved the children of her own she'd never have. Honor looked up at the shadow over the bed and smiled weakly, pausing in wringing out a rag in a clean bowl of water. "Thank God. Did you bring your herbs?"

Holding her bag up in reply, Isabella hastily opened it and began to mix a poultice for Therese's thin, laboring chest and distended abdomen. "Why did you not get me sooner?"

"I know you have many worries of your own. I thought it was just a slight relapse of her typhoid, that she'd overcome it and recuperate as she did before." She gently set the cool cloth against her daughter's forehead. "I tried everything you left for me, but nothing seems to help. Her fever..."

The moment she touched the girl, Isabella knew that her condition was grave indeed. Her fever had never been this high. "How long have you been bathing her?"

"Over an hour. I finally sent someone for you. Dom's taken Alberto with him into Florence to get him away from the sickness, and to plead with the doctor to come. But, well, I trust you more than that, that...quack." *Even if he comes. Which he won't,* Honor's frightened eyes said. Like everyone else in the environs about Florence except for Isabella and a few other brave souls, the doctor was too scared to flout the Landuccis and help their sworn enemy. A sworn enemy who had little money to pay him anyway.

Unsurprised, Isabella stirred powdered herbs into a glass and gently lifted Therese's tousled blond head, so like her mother's. But the child was so delirious that the liquid mostly dribbled down her chest. Isabella tried to hide her concern, but Honor had always been eerily astute about the feelings of others.

Turning her face away from her daughter just in case Therese was alert enough to see, Honor began to weep again. "Oh God, Ernie, you have to hear me. No one can help me but you. You have to listen. Please...."

Isabella touched her friend's shoulder. Honor sometimes spoke strangely, but she had never prayed to a false god before. She needed rest. "Honor, how long is it since you slept?"

Honor swallowed hard. "I do not remember."

"I will bathe her for a while, and give her my potion, sip by sip. You must rest, and bathe, and eat, or you will collapse and cause Dom even more worry." The magical words stirred Honor as nothing else would have, as Isabella had shrewdly suspected. She'd never seen a couple more devoted to one another than Dom and Honor. Both went to extraordinary lengths to spare the other from pain or worry in these pain-filled and worrisome times.

Taking a deep breath, Honor stood. "You're right, of course. Thank you, Isabella. I will try to rest for an hour or so." Honor walked to the door. "Remember, I have a clean dress waiting for you in the chest. Be sure you cleanse yourself thoroughly before you return home."

"I remember, Honor."

The moment Honor left, Isabella fell to her knees, bowed her head, took the tiny, hot hand and tried to impart some of her own strength into Therese. For a long time she knelt there, but finally her overtaxed muscles began to rebel. She stood and mixed another, stronger potion, dribbling it, drop by drop, between Therese's pale lips.

Since there was no one to see, she rubbed her aching, weary back. In these weak moments, she tried to revive her sagging spirits with the memory of how Joan of Arc had never faltered. Even when she was burning on the cross, her expression, it was said by observers, was serene. And her last words were the name of the only lord and master she'd ever vow allegiance to.

Closing her eyes, Isabella said that name, too. "*Iesu Christe*, give me strength. Deliver us from evil." The evil that could not be seen, the evil Honor called by the strange name of germs.

And the evil that could be seen. And touched. And killed.

For if all else failed, Isabella had not dismissed the notion of murdering Luccio as he'd murdered her brothers. Even if she in turn perished for it. When she cast off her woman's garments and took to the sword, she'd scorned a woman's weaknesses. She had no right, and less time, to pine for a champion. Her father and brothers were dead. Her young brother was more troubadour than warrior, and Guiseppe, while brave and true of heart, was but a simple peasant. He knew how to train fighting men and follow a lord into battle, but he knew nothing of strategy.

Dom was strong, and brave, but he was one man. He was too busy trying to save his own family to worry about Isabella and her lands, though he had rushed to her aid more than once anyway when she needed it. But men like Dom were few and far between.

When the potion was gone, Isabella changed the poultice on the child's chest, listening to her breathing. It seemed a little clearer. Isabella changed the rags, bathing Therese's brow, arms and legs. The child was so finely made, so perfect, that tears came to Isabella's eyes. She could not believe God was cruel enough to let such a lovely innocent die.

But at least Honor had known the pain and wonder of childbirth. The glory of a man's arms. As she sat here praying for a child she loved as her own, Isabella knew that, at the age of three and twenty, she was too old and independent to give herself to a man now. Doubtless she would die unwed, never know the honor and blessing of being a mother. And if, in her heart of hearts, she had a secret envy of the passion Dom and Honor shared, well, no one needed to know that, either.

Isabella shook her head at her own foolishness. Most of the men she knew wanted women chained to hearth and home from breakfast to bed, serving no one and nothing but their own interests in between. And Isabella Catherine Giovanni was simply not constructed that way. Whether she died on her own sword, perished in flames as her heroine had, or died unloved and unmourned, maidenhead intact, it would be a fate she alone decreed.

She was on her own. No champions would come to save her...

Outside his brownstone on a quiet residential street in New York City, Nick Escavido removed his fourth parking ticket for the week. He couldn't be more than a minute past the time when he should have moved his car, but the cops in this precinct hated his guts. Nick stuffed it in his pocket, ignoring the impulse to tear it into shreds. He'd add it to the pile in his drawer, and when they finally sent a warrant for his arrest, he'd go to a judge he knew for help. But he refused to be harassed in his own house.

As he walked up the steps to his apartment, he gritted his teeth and wished for the dozenth time that he'd used his head instead of his conscience when the D.A. came to him a few years back and asked for his help against the corrupt officers in his precinct.

Nick unlocked his front door and shoved it open. Too quiet, even though it was barely dark. The minute he walked inside, he knew something was wrong. He cocked his head, listening. A moaning sound came from his brother Ernie's room.

"No....Honnie, I can't reach you. Please....show me how."

Nick stalked into Ernie's room. Ernie was pale, sweating, his eyes flickering in R.E.M. sleep. He was obviously in the throes of a nightmare. Ernie wouldn't tell him what these dreams were about, but they were getting worse. If they didn't stop, Nick was going to have to get him some psychiatric help.

Sitting beside his brother, Nick shook him gently. "Ernie, wake up. It's just a dream."

Ernie struggled against the bedclothes, as if he felt trapped, but then he jackknifed to a sitting position, his eyes popping open. Slowly, the frantic frustration faded, leaving him pale

and exhausted. He slumped back against his pillows, glancing at the darkened window. "What time is it?"

"Too friggin' late." And they both knew Nick wasn't talking about time. "I'm calling a doctor, right now." Nick stood.

"Won't do any good," Ernie said quietly.

Halfway to the door, Nick turned on him. "Then what the hell am I supposed to do with you?"

"Believe me."

Nick ran frustrated hands through his thick black hair. "You want me to lie, tell you I believe angels visit earth if we're good little boys and girls? Come on, Ernie. I'm not saying God doesn't exist, but He sure as hell doesn't seem to reward people who stick out their neck, either."

Ernie tossed back the covers and got up. "How will you know if you never try? Those guys at the station took more than your job away, Nick." Ernie stepped into jeans. "They took your hope, and your dreams. And that's more criminal than any of the money they skimmed or drugs they confiscated."

When Nick's dark eyes glinted, obsidian hard and equally deadly, Ernie sighed and shook his head. "Never mind. You've always been good at leveling with everyone but yourself. But guess what? I don't really care if you believe me any more. Because somehow, I'm going to help Honor, like I was meant to, just like she was meant for Dom."

"Oh, brother." Nick turned on his heel to avoid slapping some sense into his brother, squelching the sly thought, *We were all happier when Honor was here.*

Honor was long gone. Married to Dom, no doubt, in some tiny Italian village where the only phone was at the local tavern. Such a backwater upbringing was the only rational explanation for Dom's curious innocence of so many things the modern world took for granted.

The taste of hot dogs. Snow angels. How to count change in dollars and cents. Nick paced the living room, quelling his growing urge to try and track Honor down. She was an historian, both honest and practical. He had a feeling only Honor and Dom could clear up the mystery of what really happened last New Year's Eve.

The front buzzer sounded. Nick stalked to answer it. "Yeah?"

"Delivery for Ernie Escavido."

Ernie flew to the door and flung it wide, for a moment exuding some of his old vitality. "Thanks, guys. I appreciate you delivering so late."

Two men wearing the logo of a famous delivery company, using a special type of dolly, hustled a wide crate into the room. "Where you want it?"

"In my bedroom."

Nick trailed the cavalcade into Ernie's room. One man pulled a crowbar off a rack on the dolly and began to pull at the wood slats.

Scowling, Nick circled the crate. "Is this what you spent all your inheritance for?"

"Yeah. I went through an art dealer to get it, but the Italian government finally agreed to a price." Ernie quivered as he watched the wood fall away, revealing a tall object wrapped in layer after layer of bubble packing. The delivery guys cut through that with pocket knives.

A tall, beat up looking wall mirror was revealed. The gilt was peeling off the elaborately carved wooden frame, but the glass was surprisingly clear. After attaching the mirror to the bedroom wall at Ernie's direction, the two delivery men left, nodding at Ernie's profuse thanks.

Ernie proudly surveyed his acquisition. "Can't you see it's special, Nick?"

Nick was about to retort when a strange sound caught his attention.

Rafe stood in the doorway. He took one look at the mirror, gasped, backed out and shut the bedroom door. His steps faded quickly, but Ernie ran after him.

"Wait, Rafe!"

His hand on the front door knob, Rafe paused. "Yeah?"

"I've never asked you to back me up because I know you don't like to talk about it, but I need you to tell Nick what really happened that night."

Rafe still didn't turn. "Ernie, you'll never explain this situation logically to Nick's satisfaction, because it defies logic. Besides, I don't want to go anywhere near that mirror."

As Nick listened, he scowled. He couldn't imagine the SEAL afraid of anything, much less an old mirror.

Rafe sighed, turned and approached Ernie, concern in his face.

Watching him, Nick marveled yet again at how anyone so big and powerful walked like a cat. He made a helluva security analyst, a fancy term for test burglar, sneaking in and out of buildings that executives would have sworn were impregnable. But then, the U.S. government had paid dearly to teach those undercover skills. Nick was glad he'd been tagged as Rafe's guardian. In a way, he and Rafe were almost becoming friends.

He knew his employee well enough to know when something bugged him. But Nick was growing frustrated with Rafe's peculiar restlessness, for it fed on something within himself Nick couldn't yet acknowledge. His tone was harsher than he'd intended when he snapped, "Yeah, Rafe, tell me you believe in angels."

Rafe stopped cold. "I know better than to tell you anything, boss man."

Nick ran a hand through his hair, leaving it even more of a curly mess. "Sorry. Maybe you can talk some sense into Ernie. I give up." Nick stalked into his bedroom.

Rafe hesitated, staring at Ernie, but then he shrugged and went into the kitchen to rummage in the refrigerator.

Ernie slumped down at the table, resting his head on his knuckles, watching Rafe prepare a sandwich.

"You want a sandwich, Ernie? You're not eating enough."

"I'm seldom hungry. Rafe, the dreams are getting worse."

Those immense shoulders stiffened slightly, but Rafe continued calmly buttering bread. "Big brother's right about one thing. You need to see a doctor, kid. You never should have spent so much for that mirror. They're gone, they're happy, and there's not a damn thing either of us can do about it."

"You so sure about that? You saw what happened."

Rafe shuddered slightly. "I hope I never have to see another angel again until I die. She was gorgeous and all that, but I tell you, it still gives me the heebie-jeebies just thinking about it. So I try not to. Much less talk about it. You got any sense, you'll do the same. The millennium's here, the world didn't end, and whatever magic took Dom and Honor that night is gone forever."

"Heathen," Ernie teased him. But his cheeks were pale, and his brown eyes dull. "You ever think you're tempting fate when you talk like that?"

Sitting down to eat, Rafe retorted, "I'm not the one who has bad dreams every night."

Ernie's weak smile faded. "Something's wrong with Honor, Rafe. I don't know how I know, I just know. And somehow, I'm supposed to help."

"Well, I'm warning you, kid, you talk like that to your brother any more, he's going to lock you up and throw away the key. He'll do anything to protect you. Even from yourself."

Nibbling at one of Rafe's chips, Ernie agreed sourly, "Big brother always has to be right."

Rafe smiled, his broken nose detracting not in the slightest from the charisma he could exude on the rare occasion when he was happy. His turquoise eyes, so like Dom's, made a striking contrast to his chocolate brown hair and tanned skin. "Well, he's right again, isn't he? They *are* in Italy. Just Italy five hundred years ago." Rafe scarfed down his food, and then stood. "I gotta get outta here for awhile."

Ernie shoved his own depression away long enough to say with concern, "You're not exactly chipper yourself. What's eating at you?"

His movements spare and precise, as they were in everything he did--when he wasn't drunk--Rafe rinsed his dishes and stuck them in the dishwasher. "Don't worry about me. I've been a good little boy, attending all my AA meetings. I just need to take a breather from this new respectability." He stalked out.

Tired of worrying about Rafe and Honor, tired of worrying period, Ernie glanced at the clock on the wall. He really should get dressed, go out with friends to take his mind off the continual visions of Honor crying, in pain. He really should shower and try to join the modern world again instead of pine for the old.

Instead, Ernie went back to bed.

Inside his bedroom, Nick stared out the window at the darkened street. He didn't want to have to commit his only family. He'd walk through fire, cut off both arms and both legs for his brother, but he wouldn't buy into Ernie's dreams just to keep him happy. Self-delusion was beyond Nicco Escavido, as he'd learned the hard way. He preferred his reality and his sex like his scotch--straight.

Might as well face it. He was almost as restless and bored as Rafe, and not just because of Ernie. An image of his ex-wife Sylvia flickered across his mind. He wondered how she liked her new husband and new flat in Greenwich Village.

For a long time after she'd kicked him out, he'd been bitter. Sure, she left him for another cop, a decorated veteran about to make lieutenant, which had, at the time, hurt as much as his wounded pride. But now he knew he wasn't blameless. Their relationship had been on the skids a long time before all the trouble started. She wanted a politician who played the game dirty if he had to, anything to advance, make more money, win more prestige. Her new husband fit that bill much better than he.

Sighing, Nick pulled the curtain back in place. Sometimes, in his grimmer moments, he wished he'd kept his yap shut, refused his part of the take and kept the job he loved. His idiotic heroics got him canned, banned and panned all in one week. Still, he missed the chase, the battle, the sense of accomplishment in making the world safer.

The only thing he had to look forward to right now was Frankie's trial. It would give Nick great pleasure to testify in open court to Frankie's corrupt brand of justice.

What he needed was a long, hot shower. Better yet, a cold one, something to sluice away this empty, aching feeling and the hardness at his groin. As he turned on the taps, he reflected that intimate relationships were like the little luxuries of life he scorned, such as Rolex watches and antique mirrors: they lost their luster with use.

Maybe that's why, unlike Ernie, he'd never been one for casual relationships. He'd only dated a few women in the past few years, taking two of them to bed. That's all he needed, he told himself as he sudsed his tall, muscular frame.

A good lay....

Ernie's romanticism had stirred him up, that was all. But try as he might, Nick couldn't banish his memories of Honor. She'd risked her life to save those she believed in, turned her back on civilization for some backwater, and all for love. *Be realistic, chump*, he told himself bitterly. *Women like her are few and far between.*

Turning off the taps, Nick got out of the shower and briskly rubbed himself down. But even when he climbed into bed, he tossed and turned, taking his fractious thoughts with him into uneasy slumber. In the morning, he didn't remember much about his dreams except some nonsense about glowing mirrors and knights on white horses....

A quiet day died a quick, merciful death. Ernie spent an inordinate amount of time on the net, but at least he got dressed. Rafe, too, went back to work. Whatever strange mood had come over him seemed to have passed. They landed a lucrative contract that day, and Nick forced away his own vague sense of dissatisfaction, walking firmly down the course he'd plotted for himself. He'd drag Ernie and Rafe with him, if he had to.

And then, two days after the mirror was delivered, Ernie's cock-eyed world tilted Nick's reality on its axis.

The moment Nick entered his apartment that evening, he felt a difference. He didn't hear anything at first, at least nothing to justify the hairs rising on the back of his neck. Quiet conversation came from Ernie's room, but the female voice was so harmonious that its lilt sounded like music rather than talk.

Several steps inside the living room, Nick stopped, his head inclined as he tried to make out the exchange, but Ernie's door was closed. Nick hesitated. A girl in Ernie's room? Such behavior was so atypical that Nick set aside his own fastidious dislike of invading Ernie's privacy, strode to the door, and shoved it open.

Bright light smote him in the face, knocking him two steps back. He squinted against the brilliant rays, wondering why he felt no heat. What was the source of that eerie new age music? Ernie liked acid rock. Nick crept forward, dread clutching him about the throat. And then, as his eyes adjusted to the light, he barely made out the sight of his brother, his profile more peaceful than Nick had ever seen it, as Ernie looked up at the ceiling.

Nick kept inching forward, telling himself to look up, but he was afraid. Afraid at what he'd see. Afraid he, too, was going mad.

"...this I promise," Ernie said. Ernie was dressed weird, in tights and jerkin like a latter day Robin Hood, with a green cap and strange slippers. He carried a bulging, old-style valise. As Nick watched, trying to draw breath from his laboring lungs to call to his brother, Ernie gave a last beatific smile and stepped into the source of the glow.

Nick shielded his eyes with his hand. Only then could his blinded gaze separate the gilt frame from the eerie pool of liquid light. The mirror! Ernie was stepping into the mirror! And strangely, the antique frame had grown taller, and wider, forming almost....

A door? A door leading where?

As Ernie lifted his foot, the light splintered. The image changed, forming a pristine meadow centered among green, rolling hills dotted with the silver white of olive trees. Beneath the hill stretched primitive fences, a strange-looking barn, and a moated castle.

Nick forgot fear, he forgot to disbelieve the evidence of his own eyes. He only wanted to save his brother from whatever madness engulfed them both. Using all his strength, Nick dove full length, trying to catch Ernie's jacket to hold him back. But Ernie's other foot joined his

first. For a split second, Nick saw his brother step down onto plush grass, his slim form silhouetted by azurine sky of a purer blue than Nick had ever seen.

And then Nick's fingertips bent backward as they impacted hard glass. The image winked out as the mirror contracted again. He hit the hard wood floor with a thump hard enough to jar his teeth together. Winded, Nick lay prone, his eyes tightly shut, praying he was dreaming.

"Nicco Escavido," said that pure, musical voice.

Some dream, when you answer back! Still slumped on the floor, Nick muttered, "What?"

"Do you love your brother?"

Nick rolled over. Lying on his back now, he could no longer deny the evidence of his own eyes. A beautiful woman hovered over him in mid-air. She was garbed in some long, flowing robe that was so gossamer he couldn't tell its color, but the things moving gently behind her back were plain enough.

Pure white.

Wings.

He *was* nuts. Nick squinted past her surreal glow, looking for wires holding her to the ceiling. Maybe Bruno and Ernie had planned this....

"You are a hard man, Nicco."

His eyes snapped back to her lovely countenance. A thrill of fear, legacy of the catechisms of his childhood perhaps, made him sit up so he'd feel less vulnerable at the disapproving frown on that unlined, almost childish face. Since she hovered there, awaiting an answer, he finally managed, "Yeah, well, life's made me that way."

"No, Nicco. Your own choices have made you unhappy. Do you love your brother?"

Nick swallowed, hard. "Yes."

The severity eased a bit. "Then you must grant him the right to choose his own destiny, as you must choose yours. It is not God's plan to dictate, only to delegate."

What gobbledegook was this? Nick wasn't sure if he gave credence to his own eyes here, but even if this....being really was an angel instead of some kind of sick joke perpetrated upon him, he resisted her Sunday school advice. Ernie didn't *choose* to be gay, Nick didn't *choose* to be drummed out of the force because he tried to do the right thing. Some things are forced upon you, and all you can do is accept and go on.

Incredibly, she read his thoughts, for sadness tinged her lovely voice. "Poor Nicco. Revelation will not come easily to you. So it is with the strong...."

A great sense of unreality descending over him, Nick scrambled to his feet. He refused to believe he was arguing with an angel. "Hey, I'm not the great seeker of truth here. All I want to know is what happened to my brother and how I can bring him home. He's not hero material."

"You would risk yourself to save him?" A wisp of hope fluttered in the air along with her languidly beating wings.

"I'd risk anything to keep my brother safe." Nick sensed movement in the mirror behind him. His skin crawling, he whirled.

A different image formed before his eyes as the mirror expanded in size again. From this angle, the castle was closer. He could see flags flying at the battlements, a draw bridge lowering over a brackish moat. A large white horse, its powerful breastbone decorated with a royal blue breastplate to match the saddle vestments, cantered across the bridge. A tall, slim knight, dressed in light chain mail and high boots, wore a helmet and held a shield. Bearing a lance in a holder, the knight rode the snorting war horse across the meadow....

....toward the hill upon which a slight figure in green stumbled under the weight of an overstuffed valise.

Nick's knees grew weak. The knight. The horse from his dreams. And they were riding straight toward Ernie.

While he stared in shock, that sweet taunt went on. "Heaven has sore need of heroes, Nicco Escavido. Enjoy your life as you wish to live it. Or seek a better world--for yourself, your brother, and the future of your people."

The horse was galloping now. A lance assumed the jousting position, its tip gleaming wickedly in the brilliant sunlight. Nick saw Ernie's head lift. He froze, bleated in terror as he realized he was being charged, and turned to run.

Nick barely heard the angel's last words, much less comprehended them. Pausing only long enough to be sure he had his piece in his shoulder holster and his extra clip, Nick dismissed every version of reality but the one staring him in the face.

Ernie needed him.

He stepped into the mirror.