

The Medici Mirror

Chapter 17

Chateau de Chaumont

November 1552

Catherine shivered in the chill of the room, conscious of the dark silence hanging thickly, sticking to her, a heavy shroud around her shoulders. She tried to remember how long she had been standing like this. But she could not. She had heard the last small gasp of the wick as the candle extinguished itself. Then she had smelled smoke on the air as the fumes rose. It had caught in the back of her throat, hard and sooty, before eventually dispersing. But she had no idea whether that had been seconds or minutes ago. She tried to peer through the darkness, to see her reflection in the mirror that she knew was in front of her. But she could not. Neither could she see her hand when she raised it towards her face, nor where it finished and the darkness began. And standing in this cold black room, where time had ceased to have any meaning, she began to feel a strange sensation, almost of suffocation. As if the darkness was taking hold of her. Just as panic began to rise, as she was about to call out, she caught a flicker of light once more.

Immediately her breathing stilled and the rapid beat of her heart slowed. Through the half-light she could see the reflection of Tommaso in the mirror, his silhouette behind her, bending over a new candle. Cosimo, close to him, was marking out a pentacle on the stone slabs. The liquid he daubed onto the floor looked thick and black, no doubt the blood of some animal. But in the flickering candlelight Catherine could not see clearly. Perhaps that was for the best. She watched Cosimo, his movements confident and swift. When the pentacle was finished he placed a glass jar at each of its five points. One, she knew, contained earth, another air, a third water. Then he placed the candle in the fourth, the symbol of fire. The fifth remained empty – awaiting the spirit that would fill it.

Catherine swallowed, her mouth suddenly dry, and shifted her focus from the brothers back to the mirror. She looked over its thick silver frame. It was a beautiful piece, that was for sure. And that thought made her fury rise once more. She thought about Henri's mistress, with her skin, so white, so pale. She thought of the elixirs prepared to keep her young, the liquid gold she drank to preserve her youth. She thought about her vanity and her greed. She thought about her licentiousness. And Catherine smiled to herself. She had waited so long – so long on the sidelines, in the shadows - for the moment that would soon arrive, when Cosimo would perfect his craft. But that moment was almost upon her. The moment for her revenge to bite.

She was stirred by Cosimo's voice, calm, low, commanding, speaking in tongues that she did not understand. She continued to look into the mirror, avoiding her own reflection as instructed, waiting. Suddenly there was a change, a shift in the room. Cosimo ceased talking and an unquiet silence loitered in the spaces where his words had been. The darkness seemed to become fluid, moving around the room, moving tighter around Catherine, suppressing the candlelight. The hairs on her forearms rose. Fear bloomed within her as the darkness tightened its grip. Then she could smell it on the air, the stench of her own sweat. And she knew with absolute certainty that there was something to be afraid of within this new-found darkness. The dead were among them.

Her eyes flickered momentarily towards the reflection of the fifth jar on the floor behind her. But terror forced her to look away before she could focus. Instead, she made herself raise her gaze and stare directly ahead into the mirror. For the first time that night she allowed herself to see her reflection, to look into her own eyes. Through her rising fear she tried to remember what Cosimo had told her. 'Keep your eyes upon yourself alone once the ceremony has begun. Concentrate on your own gaze and when I tell you place your hands upon the mirror's surface.'

Catherine felt the knot in her stomach tighten as the mirror appeared to quiver and shift. She stared at herself, at her own eyes, yet the more she looked at them the less they appeared to be her own. She stared at her face but again she failed to recognise it. She willed herself to smile, to dispel the fear and tension, and although she was sure that she had not, could not, she was equally sure that the reflection which she saw smiled darkly back at her.

She opened her mouth to speak, but before she could do so she heard Cosimo's voice behind her, compelling her to touch the mirror. She hesitated, almost frozen with fright. His voice came again, authoritative in the darkness. And this time she did as she was told. For a moment she felt nothing. Then a tingling began in her fingertips. It spread slowly throughout her fingers and into her hands. And as she watched herself in the mirror, as she heard Cosimo's voice chanting once again behind her, she felt all her anger and rage, all her fear and hatred, all her frustrated desire and longing flood out of her. A moment later, exhausted, her hands fell from the mirror's surface and she stumbled backwards. Tommaso rushed to her aid, supporting her, as she closed her eyes and waited, just as Cosimo had instructed, for the incantation to be over.

As Catherine stood in the darkness she thought of her husband once more. She had done all for him: sacrificed everything, almost forgiven and almost forgotten. But she had not forgiven those closest to him, those who were corrupt and who defiled him in turn. She thought of his whore again. This had been done for her. It was time for retribution.

It was time for a gift tintured with vengeance.