

THE PRISONER OF PARADISE by Rob-Samborn

EXCERPT

The flood of questions never left Nick's lips. Large hands wrenched him up by his armpits.

A hushed voice spoke in his ear. "Come with us. Quietly."

The grip tightened.

Nick twisted his head to his sides. Bernardo led him away, staring straight ahead. Another security guard in a navy-blue suit flanked him. The man was about Nick's age, with a close-cropped beard and light brown hair pulled into a tight ponytail—and considerably heftier than Bernardo.

"Dante," said Bernardo to the guard, "please notify—"

Nick whipped his arms from Bernardo's hold. Twisting, he whacked Dante's earpiece, jamming the device into the large man's head. Then he shouldered him into the nearest wall. Appalled gasps rose from the remaining tourists.

Bernardo grabbed Nick from behind. Nick's elbow blasted backward, landing with a shattering blow in the man's ribs. Dante dug his finger into his ear and pulled the piece out. He flicked it at Nick, poised to attack.

Confident he was quicker, Nick ducked, popped up, and discharged a quick snap of his fist.

Blood from the brawny guard's nose sprayed across the polished marble wall.

Museum patrons, many holding cell phones, cameras, and tablets, backed up, giving the fight a wide berth. Nick clocked Bernardo. His wide tungsten wedding ring connected with the man's jaw.

Bernardo stumbled, falling to the floor.

Nick sprinted for the exit and down the hall, tossing the hat and scarf as he ran.

Bursting through the Palazzo doors, he descended the Giants' Staircase three steps at a time but slipped on the courtyard's stone surface and crashed on his back. A jolt to his tailbone rang up his spine. He rolled onto his side and checked the staircase.

Bernardo and Dante loomed at the top. The two men hustled down, their dark jackets flowing behind them.

Tiny gravel pebbles burrowed into Nick's palms as he scrambled up. He darted for the main entrance, disregarding what felt like a sledgehammer pounding his lower back with every step.

"Arrestatelo!" Bernardo called out.

Two uniformed guards rushed to block the front gate.

Nick stormed ahead.

The guards braced themselves. Nick plowed into the larger one, his speed and weight bowling the man over.

The smaller guard dove for Nick, wrapping a firm hold around his ankle. He pitched forward and fell to the ground.

"Fuck." Nick kicked his free foot out. It hit the man's cheek with a sickening crunch. A bloody tooth flew out and skipped across the ground. The guard's grip loosened.

Nick clambered to his feet and bolted for the entrance. He dodged a college-aged tourist, jumped the turnstile, and sprinted for St. Mark's Square.

A large woman in a neon pink shirt with a matching visor shouted at him. She pulled her young daughter to her as Nick ran by, almost knocking them down. He regretted the bedlam he was causing, but what choice did he have?

Pigeons flew upward in alarm as he made his way through the golden, late afternoon light of the square. He glanced over his shoulder.

Bernardo and Dante closed in, thirty feet away.

Nick's throbbing back screamed for attention, but he upped his speed and crossed into an alley in the corner of the piazza. He reached the other side, raced through the passageway between buildings, and entered a narrow street. He shuffled into a group of revelers who had overflowed from a crowded wine bar. Shimmying through the people, he spotted a small bridge over the next canal. Nick dashed across it and made another right, which led him to yet another alley.

Stagnant, rank air engulfed him.

"Son of a bitch."

A dead-end. Illegible graffiti covered the walls. Even in the moment, the vandalism pissed Nick off.

A steel door was the only possible exit. The rusty knob didn't budge. Nick pivoted back toward the alley entrance.

His pursuers cast long shadows that extended to Nick's sneakers. Despite their broken posture as they fought to catch their breath, their expressions championed triumph. Dante wiped the blood from his nose with a grin.

"You were warned more than once." Bernardo's voice echoed off the walls.

Unsure how he'd escape, Nick retreated until he bumped against the door.

The men advanced. Each pulled a silver short sword from a concealed holster beneath their suit jackets.

Fear and desperation caused Nick's heart to pound so violently, he thought he heard it. But the blood churning through him generated a stronger urge: revenge. And he could only do right by Isabella if he survived this mess.

Bernardo lunged. Though burly and one-armed, his movements were lithe.

Nick dropped low as the sword whizzed over his head.

Dante positioned his weapon high and brought it down, slicing through Nick's shirt and into his forearm.

Nick hollered as the pain seared through him.

He charged Dante, who raised his sword again. Nick caught his hand and body-checked him into the brick wall. Nick sensed Bernardo behind him and rotated, barely avoiding the blade slicing for his back.

Planting his foot, Nick went for the sword. His hands clenched around Bernardo's, and they struggled for control of the hilt. Nick spat in his eyes and wrested the weapon away. With the last of his wavering strength, he slipped behind Bernardo and brought the sword to the man's armpit under his one arm.

"Drop it," he said to Dante, who had his back to the alley's end.

Dante scowled but let his weapon fall with an echoing clang.

"Now kick it over here and lay down. On your stomach. Arms out."

Dante did as instructed.

"Get next to him," Nick ordered Bernardo with a shove. "Flat."

Bernardo followed suit.

Retrieving Dante's weapon, Nick kept watch on their forms. His opponents counterbalanced the stare, studying his every move. Nick wrapped his fingers around the hilts. Holding swords felt good. Natural. He flourished them simultaneously and grinned, unaware he had that skill.

Nick had a peculiar sensation, not that of anger but distinct determination. His mind played through potential outcomes, and one came into focus: he imagined rushing the men, and with raised blades, he hacked their bodies—first their faces, then their necks and torsos. Their warm blood drenched his skin.

The scene gave him a surge of foul power. He teetered from the unfamiliarity of it and shook his head to clear the image.

No. Nick wasn't a murderer.

Instead, he turned and raced for the alley entrance, tossing the swords away in disgust. His heart sank as he heard the two men getting to their feet. Rounding the corner, Nick ran under an archway connecting two buildings. He angled for the building wall, stepped on a brick edge, and jumped up, catching an exposed pipe ten feet up.

As footsteps approached, he swung and kicked, striking a direct hit into Bernardo's face. Bernardo toppled into Dante, the two landing hard on the ground. Nick dropped from the pipe and sprinted in the other direction, his torn shirtsleeve flapping off his bloodied arm.