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Opening extract from

Stravaganza: City Of Secrets

Written by

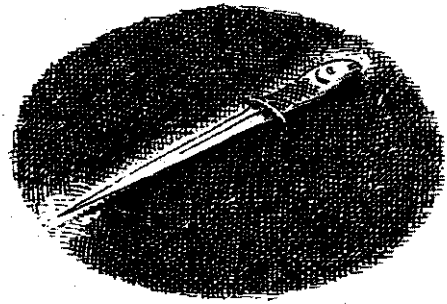
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Published by

Bloomsbury

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Prologue: *Cloak and Dagger*

'I can't be apart from Luciano on my birthday,' Arianna told Barbara. 'You understand, surely? You wouldn't want to be separated from your Marco on such a day, would you?'

Her maid Barbara was in an agony of indecision. Her mistress, the Duchessa, was asking her to do something very dangerous indeed. Proud as Barbara was to be taken into the Duchessa's confidence, she knew she ought to tell Senator Rossi, the Regent, what his daughter was planning.

Still, the maid also thought the Duchessa's plan was desperately romantic and Barbara loved anything that smacked of romance. She was engaged, just like her mistress, only to a young footman called Marco, and the Duchessa had promised her an expensive dress and

jewels to wear at her wedding. But this new scheme of the Duchessa's might mean Barbara lost her job long before her wedding day. And she'd be lucky if it was just her job she lost.

'Milady,' said Barbara cautiously, wondering how to dissuade her mistress without appearing disloyal. 'Forgive me but there are things an ordinary serving-woman like myself might be permitted to do that are not . . . fitting for a duchessa. And running off to Padavia to meet the Cavaliere when there is a state celebration for you here might be one of them.'

'But what if you were here to take my place at the celebration? You've done it before.'

That was when the maid had started to feel really afraid.

It was true that Barbara had impersonated her mistress once before and, on that occasion, had only narrowly escaped being murdered. Arianna had once sworn never to use a double but the longer she continued as ruler of Bellezza, the better she understood her mother who had been Duchessa before her. Silvia had used doubles for some state appearances for years. And on the final occasion it had saved her life.

The same was true for Arianna. She was only too aware that the last impersonation of her had led to a wound that would scar her maid for life, and could have killed her. After all, it was she, Arianna, who had stabbed Barbara's assailant, with her Merlino-dagger, before he could finish his attack. It still bothered her sometimes that she had never known the man's name or family.

Both the mistress and the maid were absorbed in their thoughts remembering that dreadful day.

'That was different, milady,' said Barbara at last. 'I didn't have to talk to anyone. I am sure the Regent and his wife would know in a moment that I was not Your Grace.'

Arianna decided not to press the point. She didn't really think that anyone would try to assassinate the Duchessa of Bellezza at her eighteenth birthday celebrations. Luciano – how she warmed just at the thought of him! – had told her that in his world eighteen was a very significant birthday and she had already planned to make his so for him, but it was not the case in Talia. Still, the city's ruler would have to have some kind of feast. And Rodolfo, her father and Regent, would be sure to make some very special fireworks. It was a pity she wouldn't see them.

*

It didn't look like a haven for someone on the run but that's what it was. The house in Padavia had lost its mistress and acquired a new tenant. The Widow Bellini had left for a new life in Bellezza with her new husband. And a tall slim young man, not yet eighteen, with black curly hair, now sat at the stone table in the garden, contemplating his future.

An elderly servant, rather flustered from the move to a new city, brought wine out to his master.

'Sit down a minute, Alfredo,' said the young man and the servant gratefully lowered his bulk on to a bench.

'Just for a minute then, Cavaliere,' said Alfredo, pouring the wine. 'There is so much to do. That housemaid Signora Bellini left behind has let the house

go. It needs a thorough spring clean.'

'In October?' said his master, taking a deep draught of wine. 'I don't mind if it isn't spotless. I'm going to be spending most of my time at the University.'

Luciano smiled to himself, thinking about the kind of messy house-share or communal university hall he might have lived in if he had remained in his old life in his old world. By comparison, Silvia's house was a palace.

The smile turned to a sigh. It wasn't often now that he thought of might-have-beens but his move from Bellezza to university in Padavia was just the sort of rite of passage that brought his old life back to him with renewed vividness.

His mother Vicky and his father David would have pored over prospectuses with him, asking his views about where he wanted to go and what subject he wanted to study. He imagined them packing his belongings into the family car and driving him off to Brighton or York or Edinburgh, wherever he had got a place.

The application process had been quite different in the lagoon-city of Bellezza. For a start, he was a year younger than he would have been in England but that was normal for Talia; some students went to university at fifteen. Then again, he was engaged to the Duchessa. Thinking of Arianna brought the smile back to Luciano's lips.

There was no way he would ever have dreamed of asking a girl in his old world to marry him when they were both only seventeen but a lot was different about his new life. He was a Cavaliere, which his foster-father had explained was something like a knight in

Elizabethan England. And now that he was going to marry Arianna, he would soon be a duke.

That is, if he lived to see the day.

There was a warrant out for his arrest, signed by the Grand Duke of Tuschia. It accused him of killing the previous Grand Duke, Niccolò di Chimici. And it was true; he had done it. But it had been in a duel and Niccolò had played dirty, poisoning one of the foils. It wasn't Luciano's fault they had somehow been switched.

That had been nearly six months ago. He had escaped from the Grand Duke's city of Giglia, smuggled out in a crate with a marble statue of Arianna. And as soon as he had been released from the crate he had asked the subject of the sculpture to marry him.

There was something about life in Talia that speeded things up. Life expectancy was short: a phial of poison or a silent dagger could cut it off in its prime. People married young. Luciano had decided he just couldn't wait any longer to be with Arianna.

*

Professor Constantin was a Stravagante. And, oddly, he wasn't Talian; he came from an Eastern part of Europa and had settled in Padavia, where he taught Rhetoric at the University. He was a middle-aged, mild-mannered man with a neat grey beard but there was more to him than met the eye.

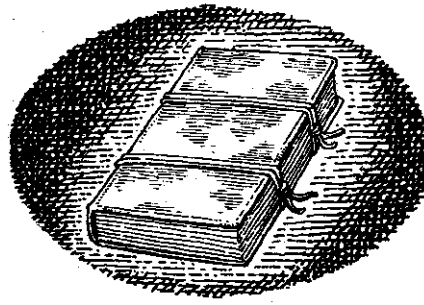
He was in charge of the Scriptorium, where all the books written by professors at the University were printed – a respectable extra job for a respectable-seeming man. But only Constantin and a chosen few

knew that there was a concealed door at the back which led to a second Scriptorium where a hidden printing press made copies of books of secret lore.

He was an old friend of the Regent of Bellezza. And he had recently accepted from him an important charge.

'Luciano is as dear to me as my own child,' Rodolfo had told him. 'I want you to teach him what you can. And keep him from being killed.'

And it said a lot for their friendship that Constantin was as ready to accept the second commission as the first.



Chapter 1

Birthdays

It was a real downer having a birthday so close to the beginning of term, thought Matt, as he did every year. It should feel special, turning seventeen, legally able to drive a car, but starting his first year in the sixth form and being nearly a year older than some of his mates made him feel stupid, as if he had been made to retake a year. Matt was used to feeling stupid but that didn't mean he liked it.

It didn't help that his younger brother, Harry, was June-born and top of the class in every subject. But then Harry wasn't dyslexic. He was just a normal, rather bright kid.

'Being dyslexic doesn't mean you aren't clever.' That was a mantra Matt had been hearing ever since his problems had been discovered in primary school. His

mother said it, his father said it and every ed psych he'd ever seen told him the same thing. He'd often wondered whether he should have it tattooed across his forehead or printed on a T-shirt. Whether that would help him believe it.

'Here you are,' said his mother, beaming as she slid a hot plate of bacon, egg, tomato and fried bread in front of him. 'Special birthday breakfast.'

'What about me?' complained Harry, but his own plate arrived before he could get into his stride.

'And me?' asked their dad, up unusually early and already waving his knife and fork as his wife produced his with a flourish.

'Anyone would think it was their birthdays too,' mumbled Matt through a mouthful of fried bread.

'Aah, diddums, would you like an extra tomato?' asked his mum. She wasn't having a cooked breakfast herself and she didn't usually wait on the rest of them, so that did make it special, even though she had chivvied the boys out of bed half an hour earlier than usual so they could eat a big breakfast before school.

Matt's mother contemplated her family with satisfaction. It was no mean feat to have raised two teenage boys in London without their ever having got into any trouble. Harry was doing really well at school and Matt was coping well with his dyslexia. Her husband Andy was smiling at her over his fried breakfast, his brown hair flopping into his eyes as it had when she had first met him twenty-two years ago. Jan noticed with a small pang that it was beginning to go grey.

'Don't eat a big lunch,' she told the boys. 'Remem-

ber we're going to the Golden Dragon tonight.'

But it was an unnecessary caution. Her sons could eat all day and still put away vast quantities of dinner.



On the morning of Arianna's eighteenth birthday, Luciano was missing her just as much as she might have wished. He had arranged for Rodolfo to give her a small package from him, containing the earrings he had chosen himself from the ducal silversmith, but it wasn't the same as seeing her eyes sparkle when she opened it.

He rode from Silvia's house near the many-domed basilica to the university building where he was due for a class in Rhetoric. He had to smile as he thought of it. If he had stayed in his old world, he might have studied Music or History. And when Rodolfo had first suggested sending him to study in Padavia, they talked about Alchemy and other subjects that might help a Stravagante to practise what Rodolfo called Science, though Luciano still thought of it as Magic.

But once he had asked Arianna to marry him, everything had changed.

'You must have the education of a proper nobleman,' Rodolfo had declared and, surprisingly, Luciano's foster-father, Doctor Dethridge, had agreed.

'Rhetoricke, Grammar, Logicke,' the old Elizabethan had said. 'Thatte wich we calle the Three-folde Waye will give ye a good grounding in al ye neede to knowe.'

Luciano wondered what his real dad would have said about those as a set of A level subjects!

'Grammar?' he queried. 'You mean like nouns and verbs? I think I know that already.' He remembered his Head of English at Barnsbury Comprehensive School, Mrs Wood, who had been a great stickler for grammar.

To his surprise, Rodolfo and William Dethridge had both burst out laughing.

'Harken to the ladde,' said Dethridge. 'Ye might as well saye thatte since ye knowe whatte a bricke be, ye canne build an house!'

'I don't know what Grammar means in your twenty-first century England, Luciano,' said Rodolfo, 'but at university here in Talia it includes the study of History, Poetry, all kinds of literature. Including reading it aloud.'

Luciano had a vision of himself standing up with his hands behind his back, reciting a poem he had learned by heart. It was his turn to laugh.

'I see it doesn't daunt you,' said Rodolfo, clapping him on the shoulder. 'We shall make you a complete sixteenth-century Talian nobleman, able to take his place beside any duke or prince in the land.'

Even a grand duke? thought Luciano to himself. He could never forget that he had made a powerful enemy of Fabrizio di Chimici. But he was content to do what his foster-father and his mentor wanted. He trusted them with his life. And he was secretly a bit relieved not to have to study Science, since he hadn't been very good at it in his old life.

He turned his horse up the street of the Saint towards his first class of the day, which was in the Palazzo del Montone, the building of the ram. Professor Constantin would be waiting.