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Opening extract from

Stravaganza: City Of Masks

Written by

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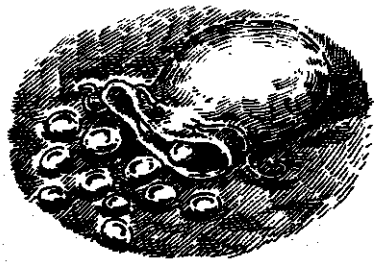


Prologue: *Reading the Future*

In a room at the top of a tall house overlooking a canal, a man sat dealing cards out on to a desk covered in black silk. He made a circle of twelve cards, face up, methodically moving widdershins, placed a thirteenth in the middle of the circle, then leaned back and contemplated the pattern.

'Strange,' he murmured.

The card in the middle – the most important one – was the Sword, signifying danger. Rodolfo was used to that symbol setting the tone of his readings. It was no surprise either to see the Queen of Fishes as the seventh card, to the right of the Sword. Danger often appeared close to the most important woman in Bellezza and the water queen was obviously the Duchessa. But the Princess of Fishes was the first card,

to the left of the Sword, and he had no idea what she could signify.

It was the oddest reading he had ever seen. The only number cards to appear were fours, all four of them, one from each suit – Fishes, Birds, Salamanders and Serpents. They were ranged like guards on either side of the Princess and the Queen. All the other cards were major trumps – the Lovers, the Magician, the Goddess, the Tower, the Spring Maiden and, most disturbingly, Death.

Rodolfo looked at the array for a long time before sweeping the cards up, shuffling them thoroughly and setting them out again. Princess of Fishes, Four of Serpents, the Lovers, the Magician ... By the time he set the Sword down in the middle, Rodolfo's hands were shaking. He had dealt exactly the same pattern.

Hastily, he swept the cards up again and wrapped them in their black silk. He stowed them in a drawer of the carved desk and removed from another a velvet bag containing glass stones. Closing his eyes, he put a hand in the bag and drew out a handful of the stones, which he cast lightly on the desk top, where they glittered in the candlelight.

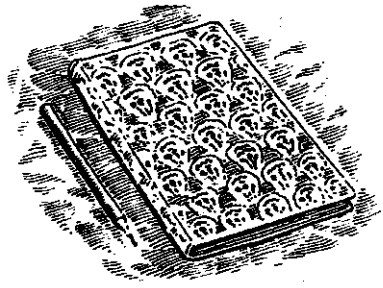
Each nugget of shining glass had a silver emblem embedded in the middle. Wonderingly, Rodolfo identified a crown, a leaf, a mask, the number 16, a lock of hair, a book— He started when he saw the book.

Then he stood up. 'Silvia again,' he murmured, holding the piece of smooth purple glass containing the silver crown. He walked to the window and looked out over his roof-garden. Lanterns swung gently between the trees, illuminating the flowers and

leaves, bleached of their vivid daytime colours. In the distance a peacock screamed.

He walked back to the desk and took a pair of twelve-sided dice from a drawer. Six and ten he threw, eight and eight, seven and nine – wherever he looked tonight the number sixteen kept coming up. That and the symbols of a young girl and danger. Whatever it meant, it was linked with the Duchessa and he would have to tell her about it. Knowing Silvia, she would not tell him whatever significance his divinations had for her, but at least she could prepare herself for whatever new danger was approaching.

Sighing, Rodolfo put away his means of divination and prepared to visit the Duchessa.



Chapter 1

The Marriage with the Sea

Light streamed on to the Duchessa's satin bedcovers as her serving-woman flung open the shutters.

'It's a beautiful day, Your Grace,' said the young woman, adjusting her mask of green sequins.

'It's always a beautiful day on the lagoon,' said the Duchessa, sitting up and letting the maid put a wrapper round her shoulders and hand her a cup of hot chocolate. She was wearing her night-mask of black silk. She looked closely at the young woman. 'You're new, aren't you?'

'Yes, your Grace,' she curtsied. 'And if I may say so, what an honour it is to be serving you on such a great day!'

She'll be clapping her hands next, thought the Duchessa, sipping the dark chocolate.

The maid clasped her hands ecstatically. 'Oh your Grace, you must so be looking forward to the Marriage!'

'Oh, yes,' said the Duchessa wearily. 'I look forward to it just the same every year.'

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The boat rocked precariously as Arianna stepped in, clutching her large canvas bag.

'Careful!' grumbled Tommaso, who was handing his sister into the boat. 'You'll capsize us. Why do you need so much stuff?'

'Girls need a lot of things,' Arianna answered firmly, knowing that Tommaso thought everything female a great mystery.

'Even for one day?' asked Angelo, her other brother.

'Today's going to be a long one,' Arianna said even more firmly and that was the end of it.

She settled in one end of the boat gripping her bag on her knees, while her brothers started rowing with the slow sure strokes of fishermen who spent their lives on the water. They had come from their own island, Merlino, to collect her from Torrone and take her to the biggest lagoon festival of the year. Arianna had been awake since dawn.

Like all lagooners, she had been going to the Marriage with the Sea since she was a small child, but this year she had a special reason for being excited. She had a plan. And the things she had in her heavy bag were part of it.

'I'm so sorry about your hair,' said Lucien's mother,

biting her lip as she restrained herself from her usual comfort gesture of running her hand across his curly head. The curls weren't there any more and she didn't know how to comfort him, or herself.

'It's all right, Mum,' said Lucien. 'I'll be in fashion. Lots of boys at school even shave theirs off.'

They didn't mention that he wasn't well enough to go to school. But it was true that he didn't mind too much about the hair. What really bothered him was the tiredness. It wasn't like anything he had ever felt before. It wasn't like being knackered after a good game of football or swimming fifty lengths. It had been a long time since he'd been able to do either of those.

It was like having custard in your veins instead of blood, getting exhausted just trying to sit up in bed. Like drinking half a cup of tea and finding it as difficult as climbing Everest.

'It doesn't affect everyone so badly,' the nurse had said. 'Lucien's one of the unlucky ones. But it has no relation to how well the treatment is working.'

That was the trouble. Feeling as drained and exhausted as he did, Lucien couldn't tell whether it was the treatment or the disease itself that was making him feel so terrible. And he could tell that his parents didn't know either. That was one of the scariest things, seeing them so frightened. It seemed as if his mother's eyes filled with tears every time she looked at him.

And as for Dad – Lucien's father had never talked to him properly before he became ill, but they had got on pretty well. They used to *do* things together – swimming, going to the match, watching TV. It was when they couldn't do anything together any more

that Dad started really *talking* to him.

He even brought library books into the bedroom and read to him, because Lucien didn't have the strength to hold a book in his hands. Lucien liked that. Books that he knew already, like *The Hobbit* and *Tom's Midnight Garden*, were followed by ones that Dad remembered from his boyhood and youth, like *Moonfleet* and the James Bond novels.

Lucien lapped them all up. Dad found a new skill in inventing different voices for all the characters. Sometimes Lucien thought it had been almost worth being ill, to find this new, different Dad, who talked to him and told him stories. He wondered if he would turn back into the old Dad if the treatment worked and the illness went away. But such thoughts made Lucien's head ache.

After his most recent chemotherapy, Lucien was too tired to talk. And his throat hurt. That evening Dad brought him in a notebook with thin pages and a beautiful marbled cover, in which dark reds and purples swirled together in a way that made Lucien need to close his eyes.

'I couldn't find anything nice enough in WH Smith,' Dad was saying. 'But this was a bit of luck. We were clearing out an old house in Waverley Road, next to your school, and the niece said to dump all the papers in the skip. So I saw this and rescued it. It's never been written in and I thought if I left it here on your bedside table, with a pencil, you could write down what you want to say to us when your throat hurts.'

Dad's voice droned on in a comforting background sort of way; he wasn't expecting Lucien to reply. He was saying something about the city where the

beautiful notebook had been made but Lucien must have missed a bit, because it didn't quite make sense.

'...floating on the water. You must see it one day, Lucien. When you come across the lagoon and see all those domes and spires hovering over the water, well, it's like going to heaven. All that gold...'

Dad's voice tailed off. Lucien wondered if he'd thought he'd been tactless mentioning heaven. But he liked Dad's description of the mysterious city – Venice, was it? As his eyelids got heavier and his mind fogged over with the approach of one of his deep sleeps, he felt Dad slip the little notebook into his hand.

And he began to dream of a city floating on the water, laced with canals, and full of domes and spires...

Arianna watched the whole procession from her brothers' boat. They had the day off work, like everyone else on the lagoon islands, except the cooks. No one worked on the day of the Sposalizio who didn't have to, but so many revellers had to be fed.

'There it is!' shouted Tommaso suddenly. 'There's the Barcone!'

Arianna stood up in the boat, causing it to rock again, and strained her eyes towards the mouth of the Great Canal. In the far distance she could just see the scarlet and silver of the Barcone. Other people had seen the ceremonial barge too and soon the cheers and whistles spread across the water as the Duchessa made her stately way to her Marriage with the Sea.

The barge was rowed by a crew of the city's best

mandoliers, those handsome young men who sculled the mandolas round the canals that took the place of streets in most of Bellezza. They were what Arianna particularly wanted to see.

As the Duchessa's barge drew level with Tommaso and Angelo's boat, Arianna gazed at the muscles of the black-haired, bright-eyed mandoliers and sighed. But not from love.

'Viva la Duchessa!' cried her brothers, waving their hats in the air, and Arianna dragged her eyes from the rowers to the figure standing immobile on the deck. The Duchessa was an impressive sight. She was tall, with long dark hair, coiled up on the top of her head in a complicated style, which was entwined with white flowers and precious gems. Her dress was of thin dark blue taffeta, shot with green and silver, so that she glittered in the sunlight like a mermaid.

Of her face there was little to be seen. As usual she wore a mask. Today's was made of peacock feathers, as shimmering and iridescent as her dress. Behind her stood her waiting-women, all masked, though more simply dressed, holding cloaks and towels.

'It is a miracle,' said Angelo. 'She never looks a day older. Twenty-five years now she has ruled over us and ensured our happiness and yet she still has the figure of a girl.'

Arianna snorted. 'You don't know what she looked like twenty-five years ago,' she said. 'You haven't been coming to the Marriage that long.'

'Nearly,' said Tommaso. 'Our parents first brought me when I was five and that was twenty years ago. And she did look just the same then, little sister. It is miraculous.' And he made the sign that lagooners use

for luck – touching the thumb of the right hand to the little finger and placing the middle fingers first on brow and then on breast.

'And I came two years later,' added Angelo, frowning at Arianna. He had noticed a rebellious tendency in her where the Duchessa was concerned.

Arianna sighed again. She had first seen the Marriage when she was five, too. Ten years of watching and waiting. But this year was different. She was going to get what she wanted tomorrow or die in the attempt – and that was not just a figure of speech.

The barge had reached the shore of the island of Sant'Andrea, where the church's High Priest was waiting to hand the Duchessa out on to the red carpet that had been thrown over the shingle. She stepped down as lightly as a girl, followed by her entourage of women. From where they were on the water, Arianna and her brothers had a good view of the slim blue-green figure with the stars in her hair.

The mandoliers rested on their oars, sweating, as the music of the band on the shore floated over the water. At the climax of silver trumpets, two young priests reverently lowered the Duchessa into the sea from a special platform. Her beautiful dress floated around her in the water as she sank gently; the priests' shoulder-muscles bulged with the strain of keeping the ceremony slow and dignified.

As soon as the water lapped the top of the Duchessa's thighs, a loud cry of 'Sposati' went up from all the watchers. Drums and trumpets were sounded and everyone waved and cheered, as the Duchessa was lifted out of the water again and

surrounded by her women. For a split second everyone saw her youthful form as the thin wet dress clung to her. The dress would never be worn again.

'What a waste,' thought Arianna.

*

Inside the State Cabin of the barge another woman echoed her thought. The real Duchessa, already dressed in the rich red velvet dress and silver mask that was required for the Marriage feast, stretched and yawned.

'What fools these Bellezzans are!' she said to her two attendants. 'They all think I have the figure of a girl – and I do. What's her name this time?'

'Giuliana, Your Grace,' said one of them. 'Here she comes!'

A bedraggled and sneezing girl, not now looking much like a duchess, was half carried down the stairway to the cabin by the waiting-women.

'Get her out of those wet things,' ordered the Duchessa. 'That's better. Rub her hard with the towel. And you, take the diamonds out of her hair.' The Duchessa patted her own elaborate coiffure, which was the exact duplicate of the wet girl's.

Giuliana's face, though pleasant enough, was very ordinary. The Duchessa smiled behind her mask to think that the people had been so easily deceived.

'Well done, Giuliana,' she said to the shivering girl, who was trying to curtsey. 'A fine impersonation.' She glanced at the amulet on a chain round the girl's neck. A hand, with the three middle fingers extended and the thumb and little finger joined. It was the islanders' good luck token, the *manus fortunae* – hand of

Fortune – signifying the unity of the circle and the figures of the goddess, her consort and son, the sacred trinity of the lagoon. But it was doubtful that this child knew that. The Duchessa wrinkled her nose, not at the symbolism but at the tawdriness of the cheap gold version of it.

Giuliana was soon warm and dry, wrapped in a warm woollen robe and given a silver goblet of ruby red wine. She had taken off the peacock mask, which would be preserved, along with the salt-stained dress, along with twenty-four others in the Palazzo.

'Thank you, Your Grace,' said the girl, glad to feel the iciness of the lagoon's embrace receding from her legs.

'A barbarous custom,' said the Duchessa, 'but the people must be indulged. Now, you have heard and understood the conditions?'

'Yes, Your Grace.'

'Repeat them.'

'I must never tell anyone how I went into the water instead of Your Grace.'

'And if you do?'

'If I do – which I wouldn't, milady – I will be banished from Bellezza.'

'You and your family. Banished for ever. Not that anyone would believe you; there would be no proof.' The Duchessa glanced, steely-eyed, at her waiting-women, who were all utterly dependent on her for their living.

'And in return for your silence, and the loan of your fresh young body, I give you your dowry. Over the ages many young girls have been so rewarded for lending their bodies to their betters. You are more

fortunate than most. Your virtue is intact – except for a slight incursion of sea water.'

The women dutifully laughed, as they did every year. Giuliana blushed. She had the suspicion that the Duchessa was talking dirty, but that didn't seem right for someone so important. She was longing to get home to her family and show them the money. And to tell her fiancé they could now afford to be married. One of the waiting-women had finished undoing her hair and was now briskly braiding it into a coil around her head.

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Tommaso and Angelo rowed behind the Barcone as it travelled slowly back across the lagoon to Bellezza, the biggest island. On deck the Duchessa stood in a red velvet dress with a black cloak thrown over it, which blurred the lines of her figure. The setting sun glinted off her silver mask. She now matched the colours of the Barcone, was one with her vessel and the sea. The prosperity of the city was assured for another year.

And now it was time for feasting. The Piazza Maddalena, in front of the great cathedral, was filled with stalls selling food. The savoury smells made Arianna's mouth water. Every imaginable shape of pasta was on sale, with sauces piquant with peppers and sweet with onions. Roasted meats and grilled vegetables, olives, cheeses, bright red radishes, dark green bitter salad. Shining fish doused with oil and lemon, pink prawns and crabs and mounds of saffron rice and juicy wild mushrooms. Soups and stews simmered in huge cauldrons and terracotta bowls

were filled with potatoes roasted in olive oil and sprinkled with sea salt and spikes of rosemary.

'Rosmarino – rose of the sea!' sighed Angelo, licking his lips. 'Come, let's eat.' He tied up the boat where they would easily find it after the feasting and the young people went to join the throng in the square. But no one would eat just yet. All eyes were fixed on the balcony at the top of the cathedral. There stood four brazen rams and in a moment a scarlet figure would come out and stand between the two pairs.

'There she is!' the cry went up. And the bells of Santa Maddalena's campanile began to ring. The Duchessa waved to her people from the balcony, unable to hear their wild cheers because her ears were firmly stopped up with wax. She had failed to take this precaution on her first appearance at the Marriage feast – but never since.

Down in the square the feasting began. Arianna sat under one of the arches, with her legs tucked under her, a large heaped plate on her lap. Her eyes darted everywhere. Tommaso and Angelo steadily ate their way through mounds of food and kept their eyes on their plates. Arianna was content to stay with them for the time being; the moment to slip away would be when the fireworks started.

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Inside the Palazzo, a rather more refined feast was in progress. The Duchessa was disinclined to eat much while wearing her silver mask; she would have a substantial meal sent up to her room later. But she could drink easily enough and now that the day's farce

was over, she was happy to do that. On her right sat the Reman Ambassador and it took a lot of the rich red Bellezzan wine to put up with his conversation. But it was her single most important task for the evening to keep him sweet, for reasons of her own.

At last the Ambassador turned to his other neighbour and the Duchessa was free to look to her left. Rodolfo, elegant in black velvet, smiled at her. And the Duchessa smiled back behind her mask. After all these years, his bony hawklike face still pleased her. And this year she had a particular reason to be glad of that.

Rodolfo, aware as so often of what she was thinking, raised his glass to her.

'Another year, another Marriage,' he said. 'I could get quite jealous of the sea, you know.'

'Don't worry,' said the Duchessa. 'It can't beat you for variety and slipperiness.'

'Perhaps it's your young oarsmen I should envy, then,' said Rodolfo.

'The only young oarsman who ever meant anything to me was you, Rodolfo.'

He laughed. 'So much you wouldn't let me become one as I recall.'

'Mandoliering wasn't good enough for you. You were much better off at the university.'

'It was good enough for my brothers, Silvia,' said Rodolfo and he wasn't laughing any more.

It was a delicate subject and the Duchessa was surprised he had brought it up, especially tonight. She hadn't even known of Rodolfo's existence when his brothers Egidio and Fiorentino had applied to the Scuola Mandoliera in the first year of her reign. As

was her right, she had selected them for training and, as was her practice with the best-looking ones, she had taken them as her lovers.

It was only when the youngest brother turned up at the School a few months later that her heart had been touched. She had sent Rodolfo to university in Padavia and, when he had returned, equipped the finest laboratory in Talia for him to do his experiments in. And then they had become lovers.

The Duchessa reached out and briefly brushed the back of Rodolfo's hand with her silver-tipped fingers. He took her hand and kissed it.

'I must go, Your Grace,' he said in a louder voice. 'It is time for the fireworks.'

The Duchessa watched as his tall thin figure walked the length of the banqueting-hall. If she had been an ordinary woman, she would have wanted a confidante at this moment. But she was Duchessa of Bellezza, so she rose from her seat and everyone stood with her. She made her way alone to the window-seat, which overlooked part of the square and the sea. The sky was a dark navy blue and the stars were about to be rivalled in brightness.

In a minute, she must gesture to the Reman Ambassador, Rinaldo di Chimici, to take his place beside her. But for a moment, with her back to the throng of Senators and Councillors, she removed her mask and rubbed her hand over her tired eyes. Then she caught sight of her reflection in the long window. She regarded it with satisfaction. Her hair and brows might have been helped to stay dark and glossy, but her violet eyes owed nothing to artifice and her pale skin was only lightly etched with lines. She

still looked younger than Rodolfo, with his silver hair and slight stoop, though she was five years older than him.

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The crowd in the square was getting merry with wine and the sheer pleasure of a three-day holiday. The Bellezzans and islanders knew how to enjoy themselves. Now they were dancing in ragged circles, arms linked, singing the bawdy songs that traditionally accompanied the Marriage with the Sea.

The climax of the evening was coming. Rodolfo's mandola had been spotted making for the wooden raft floating in the mouth of the Great Canal, which was loaded with crates and boxes. Everyone was expecting something special for the Duchessa's twenty-fifth Sposalizio – her Silver Wedding.

They were not disappointed. The display began with the usual showers of shooting stars, rockets, Reman candles and Catherine wheels. The faces of the Bellezzans in the square turned green and red and gold with the reflected light from the display in the sky over the water. All eyes were now turned away from the Palazzo and from the silver-masked figure watching at the window.

Arianna and her brothers were in the square too, jostled and crowded by their fellow-islanders.

'Stay close to us, Arianna,' warned Tommaso, 'We don't want you going missing in this crush. Hold Angelo's hand.'

Arianna nodded, but she had every intention of going missing. She took the hand that Angelo held out to her, brown with the sun and calloused from fishing,

and squeezed it affectionately. They were going to get into such trouble when they went back to Torrone without her.

After a pause, the dark blue sky began to brighten with the fire-pictures of Rodolfo's set pieces. First a giant brazen bull pawing the sky, then a blue and green wave of the sea, out of which grew a glittering serpent. Then a winged horse flying above them and seeming to sweep down into the water of the canal, where it disappeared. Finally, a silver ram seemed to emerge from the sea and grew massively large above the watchers before it dissolved into a thousand stars.

Angelo let go of his sister's hand to join in the applause.

'Signor Rodolfo has excelled himself this year, hasn't he?' he said to Tommaso, who was also clapping. 'What do you think, Arianna?' But when he turned to look at her, she had gone.

Arianna had laid her plans well. She had to stay on Bellezza overnight. The day after the Sposalizio was the city's great holiday and no one but a native-born Bellezzan was allowed to stay on the main island. Even the other lagooners, from Torrone, Merlino and Burlesca, had to return to their islands at midnight. The penalty for breaking this rule and remaining in Bellezza on the Giornata Vietata – the forbidden day – was death, but no one in living memory had taken the risk.

Arianna was not taking any chances; she knew exactly where she was going to hide. At midnight, the bells of Santa Maddalena would ring out once more and at the end of their peal every non-Bellezzan, whether islander or tourist, must be away in their

boats across the water. Tommaso and Angelo would have to go without her. But by then Arianna would be safely hidden.

She slipped into the cavernous cathedral while everyone outside was still gasping 'Ooh!' as the fireworks were let off and 'Aah!' as they fizzled out. Santa Maddalena was still ablaze with candles but it was empty. No one to notice a slight girl running up the worn, steep steps to the museum.

It was Arianna's favourite place in all Bellezza. She could always get into it, even when the cathedral was so thronged with tourists that they had to queue all round the square and be let in in batches, like sheep going through a dip. They didn't seem to care much for the museum, with its dusty books and music manuscripts in glass cases. Arianna hurried through the room with the four original brazen rams and out on to the balcony where the Duchessa had stood an hour or two earlier, between the two pairs of copies.

Arianna looked down into the square, milling with people. So many, it would be easy to mislay one. She couldn't pick out her brothers from the many swaying revellers but her heart went out to them. 'Don't be soft,' she told herself sternly. 'This is the only way.' She settled down beside one brazen leg, clinging on to it for comfort, as she got the best grandstand view of the end of Signor Rodolfo's display. It was going to be a long, uncomfortable night.

*

Lucien woke to feel the sun on his face. His first thought was that his mother had been in and opened

the window, but when he came to more fully, he saw that he was out of doors.

'I must still be dreaming,' he thought, but he didn't mind. It was a lovely dream. He was in the floating city, he knew that. It was very warm and yet still early in the morning. The beautiful notebook was still in his hand. He put it in his pyjama pocket.

He stood up; it was easy in the dream. He was in a colonnade of cool marble, but between the columns, where the bright sun splashed in, were warm pools of light, as comforting as a hot bath. Lucien felt different; he reached up to his head and felt his old curls. This was definitely a dream.

He stepped out into the square. There seemed to have been some huge party going on; the few people who were about were sweeping up and putting rubbish into bags – not plastic bin-bags, he noticed, but more like sacks made of rough cloth. Lucien gazed at the huge cathedral opposite him. It was vaguely familiar, but something about it was not quite right.

He turned the other way and looked out over the water; this was the most beautiful place he had ever been in. But more beautiful still was being able to walk about in it. Lucien had almost forgotten what it was like to do that.

But a moment later, the dream changed completely. Someone came up on him from behind and grabbed his arm, dragging him back into the cool shadows of the colonnade. A fierce boy, about his own age, whispered in his ear, 'Are you mad? You'll be killed!'

Lucien looked at him in astonishment. His arm really hurt, where the boy was pinching it. In his real

life Lucien couldn't have borne such a touch; it would have made him cry out in pain. But the point was, he could feel it. This wasn't a dream at all.