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Opening extract from

Stravaganza: City Of Flowers

Written by

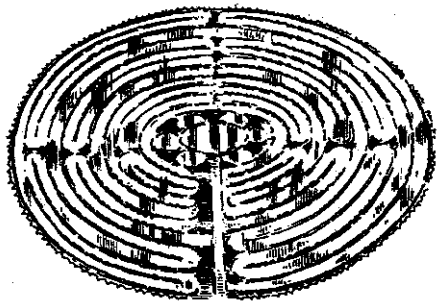
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Published by

Bloomsbury

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Prologue: *Walking the Maze*

In a black and white striped church in the north-west of the city, a friar in a black and white robe was waiting his turn to step on to a curious pattern set into the floor. It was a labyrinth made of strips of black and white marble contained roughly within a circle, and friars came and went along it, tracing the pattern with their footsteps. They walked in silence, but other friars were softly chanting plainsong from the choir stalls. It was early in the morning and the church was empty, save for the friars, weaving their silent patterns, moving past one another in the circle.

There were eleven circuits between the outside edge and the centre, but each was so folded into loops that the friars seemed to be thwarted in their goal the closer they got to it. Still, every few minutes one or

two reached the centre, where they sank to their knees in heartfelt prayer for several moments before continuing on the path that led them out to the edge again and back into the world.

Brother Sulien was the last to step on to the maze. It was his custom and his right as Senior Friar. Sulien walked the maze even more thoughtfully than usual and by the time he reached the centre he was the only one left. The other friars had gone about their business, some to feed the fish in the cloister pool, some to dig carrots and others to tend vines. Even the members of the choir had dispersed, and Brother Sulien was left alone in the uncertain dawn light of the church's cool interior.

He knelt stiffly in the centre, on a circle surrounded by six lesser circles arranged like the petals of a flower. At the very heart was an inlaid figure that the friar's robe concealed. Indeed, an early morning visitor to Saint-Mary-among-the-Vines would scarcely have been able to see Sulien either, his hood cast over his face, kneeling in stillness at the centre of the maze.

After a long meditation, Brother Sulien rose, said 'Amen' and started the slow return out of the maze to his daily life. So began every day for Sulien, but there was something different about this one. At the end of the ritual, he pulled a threadbare carpet over the pattern, as usual, but instead of walking back through the Great Cloister to his work at the Farmacia, he sat in a pew, considering the future.

He thought about the threat to the city of Giglia and how there was trouble brewing. The great di Chimici family, on whose wealth the city floated, was busier than usual. The Duke had announced the

forthcoming weddings of several younger members of the family, including his three remaining sons, all to their cousins. And no one doubted that there was more to these marriages than love.

It was common knowledge that the Duke had organised a spreading network of spies throughout the city, led by a ruthless agent of his known only as l'Anguilla, the Eel, because of his ability to get into and out of tight corners. The spies' purpose, both here and in other cities, was to sniff out all that could be known of a certain brotherhood or order of learned men and women – scientists, some people said, though others said magicians. Brother Sulien shifted on the hard wooden pew at the thought of this order, of which he was a member.

The di Chimici were resolutely opposed to the brotherhood and suspected that it was behind the resistance to their plans to expand their power throughout Talia. Duke Niccolò also believed that this brotherhood was responsible for the death of his youngest son, Prince Falco, less than a year ago. The young prince, horribly injured in a riding accident two years before, apparently committed suicide while staying at the di Chimici summer palace near Remora.

But everyone knew that the Duke believed it was murder – or perhaps something worse. Some said that the boy's ghost walked abroad, others that he was not really dead at all. When Duke Niccolò returned from Remora with his son's body, the whole city was shocked by the change in the Duke's appearance: he had aged by years and now bore a head of white hair and his beard was silver.

The funeral of Prince Falco had been a mournful if

splendid affair; the Duke had buried him in the chapel of his palazzo near the city's centre and the great Giuditta Miele herself had carved his memorial statue.

But Sulien knew that Giuditta's next commission was to come from Bellezza, the independent city-state in the Eastern lagoon. Its ruling Duchessa, the lovely young Arianna Rossi, was rumoured to be coming to Giglia for the di Chimici weddings. Despite her city's fierce resistance to all the di Chimici's attempts to overcome its independence, she was surprisingly friendly with the Duke's third son, Gaetano. He was one of the betrothed and so the Duchessa had accepted the invitation because of him.

Sulien was familiar with Bellezza, since he had only recently come from a religious house near the lagoon city to take over the friary at Saint-Mary-among-the-Vines. He saw the danger to the young Duchessa. The city of Giglia would be fuller than usual of strangers and visitors during the period of the weddings and it would be hard to afford the Duchessa the protection she needed. Indeed, he was a little surprised that her father and Regent, Senator Rodolfo, had agreed to it.

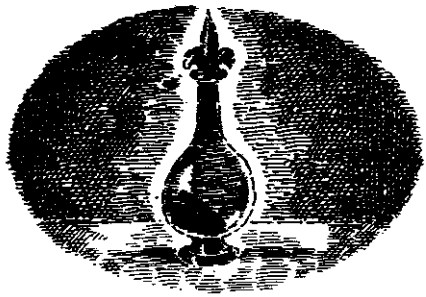
Now he gathered up the skirts of his robe and strode off to the Farmacia, as if he had come to a decision. He walked through the tranquil Lesser Cloister, with its series of chapels, and on to the Great Cloister, where a door opened into the first room, his laboratory.

As always as he climbed the two stone steps into his domain, Brother Sulien breathed its fragrant air with relief and joy. Things in the city might change but here, in Saint-Mary-among-the-Vines, certain things remained the same – the maze, which always brought

calm, and the perfumes and medicines distilled here in the Farmacia now newly under his guardianship.

He passed through the laboratory, where two young apprentices, in the robes of novices, were bent over the distillery equipment. After the briefest of greetings, he took himself into his inner, private room, hardly more than a cell, and sat at his desk. He was writing a list of recipes for all the perfumes, creams, lotions and medicines made here in the monastery's church. Not forgetting its famous liqueur and the secret of making drinkable silver.

Now he pushed the parchment to one side and sat gazing at a small blue glass bottle with a silver stopper which he had taken from a shelf. Beside it he placed a silver cross, which he usually kept locked in a carved wooden box. He looked at the two thoughtfully. Then, 'It is time,' he said. 'I shall go there tonight.'



Chapter 1

A Blue Glass Bottle

Sky woke, as usual, to the smell of flowers. But it was stronger than usual, which meant that his mother was up and uncorking bottles. This was a good sign; perhaps she would work today.

Heaving Remedy, the cat, off his feet – another good sign because it meant he must have already been fed – Sky made his way to the kitchen and found his mother spooning coffee into the cáfetière. She looked bright, with a rather hectic flush on her cheeks.

'Hey, Mum. Morning,' he said, giving her a hug.

'Morning, lovely boy,' she said, smiling fondly at him.

'Why didn't you wake me? It's late.'

'It's only half past seven, Sky.'

'Well, that's late,' he said, yawning. 'There's a wash

to do before school.'

'Already on,' said his mother proudly, pouring the just-boiled water on to the coffee. Then her mood changed abruptly and she sat down at the table. 'It's not right that a boy your age should have to worry about housework,' she said, and Sky saw the telltale glitter of tears gathering in her eyes.

'Now, none of that,' he said, deliberately heading her off into a different mood. 'What's for breakfast? I'm starving.'

He didn't want one of those heavy 'We're all each other has got' scenes so early in the morning. His mother couldn't help her illness, which was so erratic that some days, like today, she would seem normal, and on others she couldn't even get out of bed to go to the bathroom, which meant he had to tend to her most private needs.

And Sky didn't mind looking after her; it was true that they were all-in-all to each other. Sky's father had never been around, except on CD covers and concert posters. Rainbow Warrior, the famous black rocker of the '80s, had been interested in fair, shy Rosalind Meadows for all of one night and that was all it took.

When Rosalind found she was pregnant, her best friend, Laura, who had dragged her to the Warrior's concert in the first place, wanted her to have an abortion, but Rosalind couldn't bear the thought. She dropped out of university and went home to brave her parents' wrath.

Although her parents were strict Plymouth Brethren they were surprisingly understanding, even when the baby turned out to be chestnut brown in colour (she hadn't said a word about his father). But when Sky

was eighteen months old, they had suggested she might be happier in London, where a very pale-skinned blonde with a brown baby might attract less attention than in a sleepy Devon village. Not attracting unnecessary attention to oneself was something Rosalind's parents considered to have the force of an Eleventh Commandment.

So she had packed her bags and her baby and arrived in London with the deposit on a flat in Islington, a diploma in Aromatherapy and no other means of support. Her greatest consolation was that Laura was also in London, working as an MP's secretary, and she would often babysit while Rosalind built up some contacts in the evening with people who wanted aromatherapy.

'After all,' Laura would say, jiggling Sky inexpertly on her lap, 'he wouldn't be here at all if I hadn't taken you to that concert in Bristol.' Rosalind never mentioned that Sky wouldn't be there at all if she had followed Laura's other suggestion too.

When Sky was two, Rosalind wrote to Rainbow Warrior, feeling stupid about not knowing how to address him. In the end, she just wrote:

Dear Rainbow,

I don't suppose you remember me but I was at your concert in Bristol in '87. Your son, Sky, is two years old today. I don't want anything from you, only for you to know that he exists and to have this address, in case you ever want to get in touch with him. I enclose a photo taken a few weeks ago.

She hesitated. Should she put 'love from'? It was a

common enough empty phrase but she didn't want him to get the wrong idea, so she wrote 'Yours sincerely, Rosalind Meadows'. The letter was sent care of the Warrior's agent and marked Personal and Urgent, but the agent took no notice of that; women were always putting that sort of thing on letters to the Warrior. And it was definitely from a woman; the envelope smelt of flowers.

'Hey, Colin,' he said, waving the letter when he next saw his famous client. 'It seems you've been sowing some more of your wild oats.'

'Don't call me that,' said the singer irritably, snatching the envelope, 'and don't open my personal correspondence – how often do I have to tell you?'

Gus Robinson was one of the handful of people in the world who knew that the great Rainbow Warrior, famous across four continents, had been born Colin Peck on a council estate in Clapham Junction.

The Warrior sniffed the envelope, read the formal little letter, looked at the photo and smiled. That 'Yours sincerely' got to him the way no hysterical tear-stained diatribe would have done. Yes, he remembered Rosalind, so shy and so smitten. And the little boy was cute.

'You should get that letter framed,' said Gus. 'So you can prove she said she doesn't want any of your dosh.'

'Mind your own business,' said the singer, and that night he wrote a letter of his own, not very well-expressed and full of spelling mistakes but enclosing a huge cheque, which he could easily afford.

Rosalind had been stunned and wanted to send the money back but Laura convinced her otherwise.

'It took two, didn't it?' she demanded. 'And he should have been more careful. It must have been obvious that a goose like you wouldn't even have been on the pill.'

'But he says he doesn't want to see Sky,' said Rosalind, her tears spilling down her cheeks.

'So much the better,' said Laura firmly. 'Take the money and run.'

In the end Rosalind had used the money to pay off her mortgage and return her parents' loan; there was no denying how useful it was. She wrote to the singer again, saying that she would send a photo of their son every year, on his birthday. This time Gus Robinson didn't open the letter or all the other sweet-smelling envelopes that came from her once a year, but handed them to his richest client without a word.

Rainbow Warrior had been married three times and had fathered eight children, but no one knew about the brown-skinned laughing boy and his fair mother, except for the singer himself and his agent. And between them the subject was never mentioned.

Nor was it often mentioned between Sky and his mother. When he was old enough to understand, she showed him a picture of his father, in *Hello!* magazine. He was getting married to wife number four, a leggy Colombian model called Loretta. There were lots of children at Sky's primary school whose parents had split up, so he was not particularly disturbed by the photos of the tall dreadlocked singer and his new wife; they seemed to have nothing to do with him.

Rainbow Warrior felt much the same each year as he looked at the latest photo of his secret son. But he kept them all. Sky didn't know that his mother sent

pictures of him to his father. There was a period of some months around his thirteenth birthday when he rowed with Rosalind almost every day and once threatened to find his father and go and live with him, but these violent feelings eventually went away and soon after that Rosalind fell ill.

It was the flu, and she stayed in bed for a week, with a fever and a cough that no amount of hot lemon and honey brought relief to. The week turned into months and that was when Sky began to learn how to look after himself and his mother.

ME, said the hospital doctor to Rosalind after months of visits to the GP and being told to pull herself together. No treatment – only time and rest. That had been nearly three years ago and sometimes Rosalind still couldn't get out of bed in the morning. After a year, Sky took his courage in both hands and wrote, without telling his mother, to the famous Rainbow Warrior:

Dear Mr Warrior,

I am your son and I am worried about my mum. She has been ill for a year. Can you send her to see a top doctor? By the way, what she has got is called ME. She is NOT imagining it.

Yours sincerely,

Sky Meadows

He sent it to a venue where the Warrior was appearing and he never got a reply. We can manage without him, he thought bitterly. We always have done and we always will.