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Disappearing Duchess

Written by

Imogen Rossi

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Chapter One

'Powdered sheep's bones, beetle shells, lead, clay, azurite, onion skins, pollen from flowers harvested at the full moon, and the mucus of a certain snail . . .'

Bianca just watched, her legs curled under her on the cool tiled floor as her master, the great Annunzio di Lombardi, strode around the Duchess Catriona's chambers listing the ingredients of paint pigments. The Duchess sat on a long couch, her red silk skirt gathered around her, sketching her view of the sun-baked courtyard through the white stone arches.

'. . . ground together by hand to release their natural acids. Bianca!' di Lombardi barked, turning so sharply, the end of his long white beard wrapped around his shoulder. 'Show the Duchess.'

Bianca scrambled to her knees and held up her metal tray. The glazed clay pots clinked together, filled with all the ingredients di Lombardi had named, and several more.

Di Lombardi's instructions had been very clear when he'd

chosen Bianca to assist him at the Duchess's art lessons. *Do not stare. Do not speak. Do not fidget and fiddle. In fact, if you can follow my orders without breathing, please do so.*

Bianca tried. But it was hard when the Duchess was only two years older than her with dark, dancing eyes and a wicked sense of humour.

'Beetle shells? And . . . mucus?' the Duchess repeated dubiously.

Bianca stifled a smile as Duchess Catriona swept a strand of red-gold hair from her face and leaned in to peer into the pots, her nose wrinkling. She had a birthmark on her cheek that Bianca had never seen before, because she was always painted without it. Bianca didn't know why; she thought it was quite becoming.

'Nothing wrong with mucus,' said di Lombardi. 'Art can come from anywhere, Your Highness.'

'The murex snail . . .' Bianca began, and then clamped her lips together.

Di Lombardi looked at her. 'Yes, Bianca, why don't you explain to us about the murex snail?' He gave her a tiny nod.

Di Lombardi had given her the same nod the first time she'd been allowed to help paint a few of the shadows in one of his magical trompe l'oeil scenes. Bianca remembered the flush of terror she'd felt as she'd raised her brush. He wouldn't have allowed her to do it if he hadn't believed she could. But still, she'd had to brace her elbow against the wall to keep her hand from shaking. Her heart beat almost as fast now.

She put down her tray and sat up straight to address the Duchess.

'Um, well. It's a very rare snail, and its mucus is purple, and you make amazing purple dyes from it. Most of the purple clothes we have are dyed with it, but it's very expensive, and hard to make, and that's why only very important people . . .' She met di Lombardi's fierce eyes and broke off, bowing her head.

Bianca swallowed. *I've done it now. I'm going to be washing out the sulphur pots this evening, for certain.*

'My gown for the Ascension is purple,' said Duchess Catriona, evenly. Then she giggled, the birthmark wrinkling with her smile. 'I can't wait to tell Baron da Russo that I'm wearing a snail-slime dress!'

Bianca had to disguise her own laugh with a cough.

'Very amusing, Your Highness,' said di Lombardi, his bushy eyebrows drawing together. 'My hilarious assistant will now demonstrate how we create paint with a carmine red.' He gave Bianca another nod.

Bianca straightened her back and scanned the clay pots in front of her, picking out the one filled with small dried insect shells. They glistened deep red-brown as she poured a handful into her mixing bowl.

Di Lombardi carried on talking and pacing, his shoes clacking across the white and ochre tiles while Bianca ground the shells into a fine, sticky powder with a stone pestle. The crushed shells brightened from reddish-brown into a vivid blood red. 'Of course, there are more complicated alchemical processes, which are far too

dangerous and secret to perform outside my studio. Now, the green—'

'Are they magical paints, then?' the Duchess interrupted, her eyes bright with curiosity. Her skirts rustled as she shifted on the couch. 'I've always wondered whether your wonderful illusions were enchanted before or after the picture is finished.'

'With the greatest respect, Your Highness, that is not your concern,' said di Lombardi. For a moment Bianca thought he was annoyed, but he met her eye, and gave the tiniest hint of a wink. Then his face went back to its natural dour expression and he turned his back to her, addressing the Duchess. 'Now, this is very important: you must beware the green.'

Bianca couldn't help rolling her eyes. She knew this was a crucial lesson, but even though she was di Lombardi's youngest apprentice she felt like she'd heard him give it hundreds of times.

'Green pigment is as dangerous as it is beautiful,' she mouthed along with her master. '*For it is made with arsenic, and so it is very, very poisonous!*' Her words matched di Lombardi's exactly. He even used the same tone of voice every time, rising and falling dramatically. She opened her eyes wide like a mad soothsayer as di Lombardi worked up to the big finish, gesturing with his arms wide. A gesture Bianca copied. *'Beware the green! Or else, you could go mad, and then blind, and eventually die!*'

Bianca looked up to see what effect di Lombardi's speech had had on the Duchess, and nearly dropped her pestle.

The Duchess was staring at Bianca. She'd caught her mimicking her master. But instead of saying anything, the Duchess smiled at her, then fixed her attention on di Lombardi.

Bianca let out a long breath of relief.

'Now, Your Grace,' di Lombardi said to the Duchess, 'what must you do?'

'Beware the green, Master di Lombardi,' said Duchess Catriona, her face suddenly serious.

Di Lombardi nodded his approval and then spun around. 'Is that carmine ready yet, Bianca?'

'Er . . .' Bianca turned away hurriedly, working the pestle hard into the red powder. 'Nearly, Master.'

Di Lombardi stretched. His old bones creaked and cracked. 'Well, while Bianca's finishing her work, let me take a look at today's sketches.'

Duchess Catriona passed him her sheaves of parchment. Di Lombardi looked through them, his eyebrows twitching as he turned over each one.

'Hmm. Not bad,' he said.

The Duchess grinned. Not many people in the city of La Luminosa would dare to criticise their beloved Duchess, but 'not bad' was high praise from Annunzio di Lombardi.

'This shade study is well done. You've almost captured the brilliance of the sunlight on the marble, but . . .' He turned over another sheet and shook his head. 'No, no, no. Very poor perspective on this one. You see how this tree looks, in comparison to this fountain? Let me show you . . .' di Lombardi reached over to the low marble table

beside the Duchess's couch, but his hand closed on thin air. 'Where's my chalk?'

Bianca looked around, but she couldn't see Master di Lombardi's chalk anywhere. He started stalking around the room, moving cushions, picking up the corners of rugs, and peering through the leaves of the potted orange trees. He tugged aside a curtain at one end of the room and glared into the antechamber beyond. A group of people looked back at him in confusion. They were barefoot, and dressed in simple coloured tights and tunics. One man was balancing on one hand, and two others were holding a woman up in the air in a flying pose.

'*Pfft*, players,' di Lombardi muttered, turning away.

Bianca glanced at the Duchess. She was gazing at the painted ceiling, watching the illusions of clouds and jewel-coloured birds fly overhead, her face pulled into an expression of total indifference. Bianca guessed this innocent look must mean the Duchess was guilty of something.

Master di Lombardi frowned in suspicion. 'Your Highness hasn't seen my chalk, I'm sure,' he said. Duchess Catriona's expression didn't change but her eyes flickered to the painted wall behind him.

The old man turned to look at the wall and huffed through his beard. The scene was one of his own trompe l'oeil paintings, magically enhanced like the ceiling. Although the wall was solid, a masonry archway had been turned into a living picture of a balcony overlooking softly rolling green hills. The leaves on the trees swayed in a breeze and the silhouettes of birds circled lazily in the

bright blue sky. Golden sunlight flooded into the room through the mural. Bianca could even feel the painted sun's heat gently warming her face whenever she walked by.

Di Lombardi sighed and sank creakily to his knees. He reached out and put his hand inside the painting, fishing around underneath a painted couch on the painted balcony. His arm vanished up to the elbow.

A few seconds later, the Duchess broke down and giggled as he pulled out a long stick of blue chalk. 'Come, Master di Lombardi, I'm sure I'm not the first of your pupils to get sick of the sight of that thing,' she laughed.

But you're certainly the first to let him know it! Bianca thought.

Di Lombardi simply raised one bushy eyebrow, and the Duchess fell dutifully silent. He started to correct her drawing with long, assured strokes of the chalk.

Bianca's attention was distracted by the soft thud of hands and feet on stone floor. The curtain to the anteroom had been left open, and she could just about see the players practising inside. She shifted her position for a better look.

A man and a woman were rehearsing a silent play, miming that they were trapped on different sides of an invisible wall. Next to them, another man wearing an enormous golden ruff was reciting words she couldn't hear from a script while making gestures with his arms. Two girls of about six hopped and skipped together, perfectly mirroring each other's movements.

Bianca gasped as a boy who looked about her own age crossed the room in a mad tumble of limbs. But then the

boy straightened his arms and legs and transformed his roll into a graceful cartwheel, leaping into a mid-air somersault right at the end and landing with a flourish. Bianca had to clench her fists in her skirt to stop herself from applauding.

The boy relaxed, brushing the back of his hand across his cheek to push back his hair.

'Marco!' A man with a long painted stick waved the boy over. He gave him a gentle tap on the head with the orb on the end of the stick. 'If you do that during a performance you'll smudge your make-up. Remember, if you can be seen by the public, you are on stage! Try to act like it.'

Bianca smiled at the familiar tone. Did all masters speak to their apprentices like this?

The boy gave the man a sheepish grin. 'Yes, Father.'

'Do you like harlequin plays, Bianca?'

Bianca jumped and felt her face go as red as her carmine paint. Duchess Catriona had risen from her couch and now stood beside her, and she'd clearly noticed that Bianca was distracted from her work. But she didn't seem angry – she was smiling again.

'I've never seen one, Your Highness,' Bianca mumbled.

'Is that so?'

'Not a proper one, anyway,' Bianca continued. 'There are jugglers in the Piazza del Fiero sometimes, but they're nothing like these.'

The Duchess's eyes twinkled. Bianca was beginning to wonder why she'd been so terrified the first time they'd met.

'Master Xavier's players are practising for my Ascension festivities,' the Duchess said. 'I just love this particular troupe, they'll be a large part of the four days of celebrations. There'll be a harlequin show along with the ball tonight, tomorrow we're holding a masque, then the troupe perform a play on the third night, and they'll be there to entertain the crowd at my coronation too.' She turned to di Lombardi and clapped her hands. 'Master di Lombardi, you must bring Bianca to the celebration tonight! In fact, bring *all* your apprentices.'

'The apprentices have work to do, Your Highness,' di Lombardi said gruffly.

'Nonsense,' said the Duchess, dismissing him with a flap of her brightly coloured fan. 'I'm sure they deserve a break, and what better time than my birthday? I should declare it a national holiday. Perhaps that will be my first act as ruler. Well, after building my new Royal College.' A dreamy look crossed her face. 'I'm going to make La Luminosa the centre of the civilised world. People will come thousands of miles to learn to be artists and doctors and great thinkers . . .'

'There are some who say you should be looking for a husband, not indulging your own whims,' said di Lombardi drily.

Bianca held her breath, but the Duchess folded her hands in her lap and pursed her lips challengingly. 'You are not one of them, though, are you, Master?'

Di Lombardi's bushy eyebrows twitched and he said nothing.

'I will marry, of course,' she continued, 'but not for a few years. The Baron has been a good Regent,' she said, though her voice sounded a little flat, as if she were reciting from a playscript. 'But he's so *stuffy*. I'm going to make some real changes.'

'Not until you officially turn fourteen,' said di Lombardi. 'And that's not for four days.' He glanced out through the arches at the sun-drenched world outside. Bianca followed his gaze. Beyond the courtyard she could see down into the city where the sparkling ribbons of the canals wound between the buildings, busy with gondolas going about their business. Di Lombardi seemed to stare out at the Duchess's subjects for some time before he turned back into the room. 'Your Highness, I would speak with you privately before we finish your lesson.'

'Ah . . .' Duchess Catriona's smile dimmed slightly. 'Yes, of course.' She stood and followed him into another antechamber.

Bianca got up and started to pack away the lesson. She collected the Duchess's sketching papers and piled them up neatly on a side table, and made sure di Lombardi's special chalk was safe in its compartment in his brush bag. She was just stacking her own pots when she heard a loud rustle of silk. The Duchess was running back towards her, in a distinctly un-Duchess-like fashion. She held her ruby-red skirts up with both hands, and strands of her hair fell loose around her face. For a moment Bianca thought she looked just like one of the market girls who fetched and carried across the Piazza del Fiero.

‘Here!’ she whispered, thrusting a soft handkerchief into Bianca’s paint-stained fingers. ‘Come tonight. Show this to the guards and they’ll let you in.’ She gave a wide grin that wrinkled the freckly birthmark on her right cheek, then turned and dashed back to the antechamber.

Bianca unfolded the handkerchief and gasped at the intricate design embroidered on one corner in gold thread: a C for Catriona on top of the bright sun emblem of the city-state of La Luminosa. A royal invitation. Her head was spinning as she continued to pack away her things.

She was going to the Ascension Ball!

Chapter Two

As she crossed the bridge over the Grand Canal, Bianca hesitated, smoothing down her best dress. It was the only one she had that wasn't torn or covered in blotchy paint stains, but it was rather scratchy and uncomfortable – and *plain* compared to the glittering finery of all the people around her. A huge crowd streamed past, chattering and laughing, taking out their golden invitations ready to present them to the guards. Bianca swallowed and clutched the Duchess's handkerchief tightly as she joined the flow of people crossing the bridge. What if they still didn't let her in? What if they thought she'd stolen it?

She had barely felt worried at all when she'd been sneaking out of her bedroom in the attic of di Lombardi's studio. It had been easy, actually, pulling on her dress underneath her blanket, carefully stepping over the creaky floorboard to avoid waking her roommate Rosa, and creeping down the dark stairs past the servants' rooms.

Now she found herself gazing up at the palace. The

great white arched entrance blazed just like the sun that glimmered on its banners. Candles shone out of every window and crackling lamps lined the walls. The city of La Luminosa was a place of light and warmth even in the longest winter night, but tonight the palace gave off such brightness that the canal looked like a river of melted gold.

She stopped in front of a guard, and held out the handkerchief in a trembling hand.

'I, um, I haven't got an invitation,' she mumbled. 'But I have got this . . .'

The guard watched her unfold the handkerchief. Bianca felt foolish and prepared herself to be humiliated.

But to her relief, he gave her a courteous nod of his head then stepped aside, allowing her to enter.

'Thank you!' Bianca folded the handkerchief carefully and stuffed it back in her pocket. Walking past the guard, she had to suppress the urge to skip. Instead she tried to walk like a lady, with her nose in the air, looking the nobles in the eye. She had been officially invited, after all.

The palace courtyard was as bright as a piazza on a midsummer day, and just as crowded. Except, instead of street sellers hawking long strings of spiced meats and rolls of fabric and carved wooden pots, there were fire-jugglers and musicians all around the grand fountain and a group of people in ornate masks dancing a stately pavane.

Bianca stopped for a few minutes to watch the dance, entranced by the graceful sweep of the ladies' skirts and the bright rainbow colours of the men's coats, then followed the crowd inside. It felt very strange to be walking into

the palace with so many grand people. Would they guess she was a fraud?

Bianca found her way to the central ballroom where the Duchess would make her appearance. Her stomach rumbled at the sight of long tables laden with more food than she had ever seen in her life. She was just reaching out to take a glazed sugar ball from one of the tables when she heard someone cry out, 'Master di Lombardi, what an honour!'

She ducked behind a group of chattering ladies just in time as di Lombardi walked up to the table. He was trailed by a crowd of men and women, all open-mouthed with amazement at seeing the legendary artist in the flesh.

'Master di Lombardi, what is the secret of your magical paintings? I simply must know!'

'Master, I dabble in painting myself, if you'd like to see . . .'

'What can you tell us about the painting you're unveiling tonight? I hear it's simply divine . . .'

Di Lombardi grimaced at them. His balding head seemed to sink into the folds of his cloak, like a grumpy tortoise's, and he answered each question with a sombre grunt of disapproval. Di Lombardi didn't like people much at the best of times, but he detested praise, calling it 'empty-headed piffle'.

Bianca moved away, losing herself in the crowd. *He'll have me cleaning the brushes for a year if he sees me!*

Keeping to the back of the crowd, Bianca circled the room until she could get a good look at the main

entertainment – the troupe of players. They were right in the middle of a harlequin show, tumbling and singing to each other. The harlequin character in his red and black diamond costume was tricking the silly Baron into freeing his slaves. Bianca stifled a loud laugh when she realised the actor playing the Baron was dressed in a flowing black cloak with a deep blue trim, just like the one the Baron da Russo usually wore. She looked around, and sure enough there was the real Baron, wearing the same cloak, and glaring at the players. His round, red face was even redder than usual.

When the show ended, the players bowed to the guests and tumbled out of the room. After only a few seconds they came back – their faces were still painted with bright shapes and colours, but they'd changed out of their elaborate costumes and into red breeches and coats, and they carried bottles and glasses of wine.

Master Xavier raised his painted stick and called out to the crowd. 'My Lords and Ladies, if you will join us in the salon, Master di Lombardi will now reveal his birthday commemoration of the Duchess Catriona.'

The crowd began to move, jostling to get into a good position to see the famous painter's latest masterpiece. Bianca jostled too – she'd never even seen the cartoons for this painting. Di Lombardi had done all the work himself, in some secret place not even the apprentices knew about.

A boy in red with a blue lightning streak down his face called out, 'Master di Lombardi!' and stepped into di

Lombardi's path holding a thick blue bottle and a wine glass. Then he stumbled and fell and the crowd around him gasped. Bianca threw her hands up, thinking he was going to drop the bottle and hurt himself on the broken glass . . . but he turned his fall into a graceful roll, keeping the bottle and glass unharmed, and presented them both to di Lombardi. The crowd applauded. Bianca saw the boy raise his hand to wipe at his face, then pull it back again, and she grinned.

'Your favourite, Sir, from the vineyards in the northern hills,' the boy said, pouring a glass for di Lombardi.

Di Lombardi dipped his head at the boy, but did not thank him. When he looked up from his bow he saw Bianca. His expression turned frosty and he glared at her.

Oops.

A nobleman in a Prussian-blue coat took di Lombardi's arm and steered him towards the salon, and he went with a last piercing glance back at Bianca. She sighed, mentally lining up the jobs she was going to be doing for the next ten years: cleaning dirty pots, crusted-up paintbrushes, the dusty floor covered in wood-shavings . . .

Still, now he knew she was there, there was no harm in watching the unveiling before she left, was there? There wasn't much chance that she'd be able to attend the masque or the play celebrating the Duchess's Ascension over the next three nights, so Bianca might as well get all the pleasure she could now.

Keeping a prudent distance from di Lombardi, she followed the crowd into the chamber where a huge canvas

took up most of one wall of the room, covered by a velvet curtain. Bianca looked around, almost as excited to see Duchess Catriona's reaction to the painting as she was to see the painting itself.

'Ahem. Ladies and gentlemen,' growled di Lombardi, stifling a small cough. 'Due to unforeseen circumstances, the Duchess will not be joining us tonight.'

A groan of disappointment rippled through the crowd.

What a shame the Duchess couldn't come to her own party. I hope she's not unwell, thought Bianca. *She's due to be crowned in just three days.*

'Now,' said di Lombardi, silencing them with a raised hand, 'I have the greatest pleasure to present to you, my gift to Duchess Catriona on the occasion of Her Highness's fourteenth birthday . . .' he reached up and tugged on a golden tassled rope attached to the curtain.

The velvet fell away, and light flooded the room. Bianca's heart soared, and the crowd let out a sigh of appreciation. The painting was an almost lifesized picture of the room at the top of the White Tower, the Duchess's favourite room in the palace. Magical sunlight shone out from the canvas and lit up the real chamber and the stunned faces of the guests. The marble floor gleamed, beautiful textured tapestries hung on the wall, an inviting-looking cream-coloured couch sat under the wide windows, birds circled in the sky outside, and you could see the stunning view of La Luminosa far below.

'Dear di Lombardi,' said a voice. 'I certainly would not miss this.'

Duchess Catriona stood at the back of the room with Baron da Russo, a wide smile on her face. The crowd sighed with pleasure and dipped their heads at the sight of their Duchess.

Di Lombardi gasped, too, and choked on his wine. He looked from the painting to the Duchess, and carried on coughing. The glass of wine tumbled from his hand as he clutched at his throat and chest.

'Master? Master!' Bianca tried to push through the crowd to di Lombardi's side. Through the shifting gaps between the guests, she saw him drop to his knees, then collapse flat onto the floor. The crowd gasped and muttered, someone shouted for help. A lady stepped on Bianca's foot and a young man accidentally elbowed her in the nose, but she managed to squeeze between them to kneel beside her master.

'Fetch a doctor!' she cried.

Master di Lombardi choked again, and looked up at her. The flesh around his eyes was puffy and swollen. His gaze fixed on her and his mouth opened. She had to lean down, her hair trailing on the floor, to hear what he was trying to say.

'Duchess . . .'

Bianca looked up, about to fetch the Duchess, but she felt di Lombardi's wrinkled fingers close around her hand. He pressed something long and thin into her palm. She knew what it was from the touch alone: a paintbrush.

Di Lombardi coughed once more and his fingers tightened on Bianca's wrist as he pulled her even closer. 'Hidden . . .

rooms, secret passages . . . second city . . .' he whispered. 'Protect . . . the Duchess . . .'

'What?' she asked.

But di Lombardi's eyes rolled back until there was just a sliver of white between his swollen eyelids, and then his grip loosened and he fell back, unconscious.

'Master!' she cried.