

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.

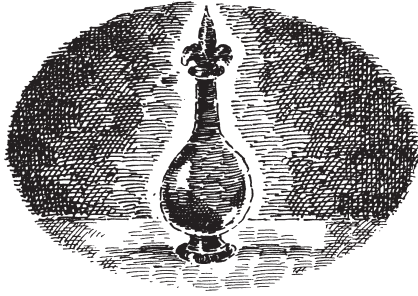
Now he gathered up the skirts of his robe and strode off to the Farmacia, as if he had come to a decision. He walked through the tranquil Lesser Cloister, with its series of chapels, and on to the Great Cloister, where a door opened into the first room, his laboratory.

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 *cafetière*. 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.



‘When Papa dies, I shall be Duke Fabrizio the Second,’ said the little prince to his tutor. He had been six years old at the time and had got a thorough spanking for it. That was how he first knew dying was a bad thing, though at the time he had only been repeating what his nurse had told him.

Now, as Prince Fabrizio walked along the gallery of his father’s palace, a tall and handsome twenty-three-year-old, he felt he had learned the lesson all too well. The walls were hung with portraits of di Chimici, the living and the dead, among the latter his mother, Benedetta, and his youngest brother, Falco, taken from them so cruelly only a matter of months ago. Fabrizio stood in front of this picture for a long time.

The likeness had been made before Falco’s accident and showed him standing straight and proud, very conscious of his lace collar and holding a sword that scraped slightly on the ground; he had been about eleven then.

Fabrizio was in no doubt that his brother’s death would hasten his father’s, though he was no longer in a hurry to become Duke Fabrizio di Chimici the Second. He felt much too young to be both head of the family and in charge of all the schemes his father had put in place. Now he wished he had been one of the younger sons and without such a weight of responsibility to look forward to.

But he squared his shoulders and resumed his walk. At least he could accede happily to one of his father’s plans. Fabrizio was to be married soon to his cousin

Caterina. And she was his favourite of all the cousins, from the time they had played games together as children at the summer palace in Santa Fina. A smile played round Fabrizio's fine mouth as he thought of Caterina.

That was the one good thing to come out of poor Falco's death – he refused to think of it as suicide – all the di Chemici weddings. His two remaining brothers were to be married at the same time and his cousin Alfonso, Duke of Volana, too. There would be hardly any unmarried di Chimici left – apart from fussy little cousin Rinaldo – and it was clear that his father Duke Niccolò wanted them all to get on with breeding his descendants as fast as possible. Well, Fabrizio was willing; Caterina was a pretty and lively girl and he had no doubt she would produce a superior crop of heirs.



Sky passed a day at school that felt almost normal. He was used to being in the sixth form now, but he had never quite felt part of the school and had no close friends there.

The trouble was, he looked the part of someone cool and trendy and he knew that lots of girls were initially attracted to him. He was tall for his age and he wore his gold-brown hair in dreadlocks. But he didn't listen to any kind of rock music. It reminded him too much of his father. Rosalind sometimes played the Warrior's CDs, which were the only ones she had that weren't classical or folk, and it made Sky almost literally sick.

He used not to care about his father but, ever since the singer had ignored Sky's letter, written from the heart of despair, he had begun to hate the very idea of him. He knew that the Warrior's music was having a fashionable revival at the time, because it had featured in a film that broke box office records, but Sky didn't see the film and he never told anyone of his connection with the singer.

If he could have been interested in football, he might have felt less of a fish out of water at school. He had the physique for it but just couldn't raise the enthusiasm. He supposed it was because he had more important things to think about. He probably wasn't the only student at his school looking after a sick parent; he'd read an article once about how many carers there were under the age of sixteen – really small kids like nine-year-olds, looking after parents in wheelchairs.

Well, he was better off than they were; he was seventeen, and his mother wasn't ill all the time. But he didn't know anyone else in his position and he felt set apart, somehow marked. And it showed. Gradually, the friendly overtures had tailed off and the girls wrote him off as useless too.

There was just one girl, though, quiet and fair, whom he really liked, and if she had ever shown any interest in him, things might have been different. But she was inseparable from her fierce friend with the dyed red hair and tattoo, so Sky never got up the courage to talk to her. Still, they were all doing English AS, so at least they were in some of the same classes.

It didn't take Sky long to reach home, since his flat was in a house right next to the school. He dawdled,

wondering what he would find there, whether his mother would still be feeling OK or back in bed unable to move. But he was quite unprepared for what he did find. On the doorstep to their flats stood a small blue glass bottle, with a silver stopper in the shape of a fleur-de-lys. It was empty and incredibly fragile, just sitting there on the step, where anyone might knock it over.

Instinctively, Sky picked it up and took out the stopper; a heavenly smell wafted out of it, more delicious than anything in his mother's store of oils and essences. Was it meant for her? There was no message attached to it.

He let himself in through the front door and then into their ground-floor flat. Rosalind had sold the one that the Warrior had paid for and bought this smaller one less than a year ago because she couldn't manage stairs any more. The newly converted house still smelt of fresh paint and plaster. That and the smell of flower essences greeted Sky's return.

'Mum,' he called, though she would have heard his key in the lock. 'I'm home!'

She wasn't in the living room or the tiny kitchen, and he knocked on her bedroom door with a sick feeling that something terrible had happened to her. But she wasn't there and when he went back to the kitchen, he found her note:

Gone to supermarket; there won't be any biscuits till I get back.

Sky smiled with relief; when had she last been well enough to go shopping on her own? That was usually

his job, every Wednesday afternoon after school, lugging plastic carrier bags on to the bus and then putting everything away. His mother must have taken the car, though; she couldn't have managed on the bus.

Sky took the damp wash out of the machine, put it in the tumble-dryer, washed up the breakfast things from the morning and looked in the cupboards to see what he could make for dinner. Normally, he would make a start on peeling potatoes or chopping onions, but he thought he'd better wait and see what his mother brought back with her; maybe she had planned something.

He fed Remedy, because the tabby rescue cat was in danger of tripping him up by twining round his legs, then made himself a cup of tea and sat down at the table, where the little blue glass bottle stood looking innocent and at the same time significant. Remedy leapt on to the chair beside him and started washing. Sky sighed and got out his school books and read a short story for French.



Sandro was delighted with his new master. Everyone knew about the Eel; he was becoming a figure to be reckoned with in Giglia. He now had dozens of spies working for him and bringing information back to the di Chimici palace from all over the city and beyond. It was just the kind of work Sandro enjoyed, following people and hanging about eavesdropping on their private conversations. He would have been happy to do it for nothing.

Sandro was small and quick-witted and completely inconspicuous, one of those many young boys, none too clean and a bit ragged, who hung about the busy places of the city, hoping for a few cents in return for running errands. But actually he had silver in his pockets, expenses paid to him by the Eel, because he might need to buy a drink for an informant or offer a small bribe for information.

Now Sandro was tailing one of the Nucci clan and it couldn't have been easier. Camillo Nucci was so obviously on his way to an assignation that Sandro had to stifle a chuckle; the young bravo in the red cap kept looking over his shoulder as he walked past the di Chimici's grand new building of Guild offices off the main piazza and across the stone structure that was still called the Ponte Nuovo, even though it had been built two hundred years before.

A lesser spy might have lost the Nucci on the bridge, with its crush of people, its butchers' shops and fishmongers and chandlers. But not Sandro. He had guessed where his quarry was headed, anyway – the half-built palazzo on the other side of the river. The Nucci family, the only one anywhere near close enough in wealth to rival the di Chimici, had started building their grand palazzo five years before and it was still not finished.

But, if it ever was, it would be much bigger than the Ducal palazzo on this side of the river, and that bothered Sandro; he was a di Chimici man through and through. It stood to reason that his masters must have the best, the biggest and the grandest of everything. Take the coming weddings; weren't the young princes and their cousins to be married in the

great cathedral by the Pope himself, their uncle Ferdinando, who was coming specially from Remora to conduct the most lavish ceremony the city had ever seen?

Camillo Nucci had reached the walls of his father's palazzo-to-be and was talking to his father and brothers. Sandro saw to his surprise that the second storey was nearly complete; it wouldn't be long before the Nucci palace was finished after all. But why was young Camillo making such a mystery of his evening stroll, since he was joined only by other members of his family? Nothing remarkable about that. But Sandro followed them into a nearby tavern anyway.

And was rewarded by seeing them joined by a couple of very disreputable-looking men. He couldn't get near enough to hear their talk, unfortunately, but he memorised every detail of their appearance to tell the Eel. His master was sure to be interested.



'Do you think this was left for you?' Sky asked his mother when he had unpacked the shopping for her.

Rosalind was looking tired again now and had flopped down on the sofa, kicking her shoes off as soon as she had got in. She looked at the little bottle in his hand.

'No idea,' she said. 'It's pretty though, isn't it?'

'But empty,' said Sky, still puzzled. 'Shall I put it with your other bottles?'

'No, it would outclass all my plastic refillables,' said Rosalind. 'Just put it on the mantelpiece – unless you want it?'

Sky hesitated. It seemed a girly thing to want a blue perfume bottle in his room, but the little phial seemed to speak to him in some way he didn't understand.

'OK,' he said, putting it temporarily on the living-room mantelpiece. 'What shall I cook tonight?'

'How about spag bol?' suggested his mother. 'That's nice and easy and we can eat it on our laps. It's *ER* tonight.'

Sky grinned. His mother loved hospital dramas but always closed her eyes during the gory scenes and operations. You would have thought she'd have had enough of doctors and nurses, but she lapped it all up.

He went away to chop onions and peppers. Later, after they had eaten and Rosalind had seen even less of *ER* than usual, because it had involved a multiple road traffic accident, Sky carried her to bed. She was very light, he realised, and she had fallen asleep before he had time to help her into her nightdress or to clean her teeth.

But Sky didn't have the heart to wake her; he left her on the bed and went to do the rest of his homework. Then he washed up, put out the wheelie bin, folded the dry washing for ironing the next day, changed the cat litter, hung his damp jeans in the airing cupboard, locked up and eventually got into bed at half past eleven.

He was exhausted. How long can I carry on like this? he wondered. True, his mother had been much better that day but he knew from experience that she would be even more wiped out than usual the next day. He started to calculate the ratio of good to bad days she had had recently. Time, the doctor had said,

but how long was enough time to make her well again?

If he looked ahead to the next few years, Sky could see nothing but difficulties. His mother wanted passionately for him to go to university and have the chances she had thrown away for herself, and he was just as keen. But how could he leave her, knowing that some days she wouldn't eat or be able to shower or even feed the cat? He envied other boys his age who could leave home in a year or two and go to Kathmandu if they wanted without worrying about their mothers. He'd probably have to settle for a college in London and living at home.

Remedy climbed on to Sky's chest to purr happily. He ruffled the cat's ears. 'Easy being you, isn't it?' he said. Then he remembered the bottle. Despite Remedy's protests, he got up again and fetched it from the living room. He lay in the dark, sniffing the wonderful scent that came from it and feeling strangely comforted. The cat had stalked off in protest; these were not the kind of smells he liked and there were far too many of them in the flat as it was – give him kipper any day.

I wonder where it can have come from? was Sky's last thought before drifting off into a deep sleep, the bottle in his hand.



When Sky woke, he was not in his bedroom but in somewhere that looked like a monk's cell. There was a cross on the whitewashed wall and a wooden prayer desk and he was lying on a sort of hard cot. The bottle

was still in Sky's hand and the room was filled with the wonderful smell of flowers, but he knew it wasn't coming from the bottle.

He got up and cautiously opened the door. He found himself in a dark, wood-panelled room like a laboratory, filled with glass vessels like those used in chemistry lessons. But it didn't smell like a lab; it smelled like his mother's collection of essences, only much stronger. Light was coming from a door at the side of the room and Sky could see into an enclosed garden. People in robes were digging in the beds and tending plants. What a peculiar dream, he thought. There was a lovely atmosphere of calm and freedom from pressure.

He stepped out into the sunshine, blinking, still holding the bottle, and a black man, robed like the others, took him by the arm and whispered, 'God be praised, it has found you!'

This is where I wake up, thought Sky, but he didn't.

Instead the man pushed him back into the laboratory and hurried into his cell, bending over a wooden chest.

'Put this on,' he said to Sky. 'You must look like the other novices. Then you can tell me who you are.'