



Prologue: *The Merchant of Classe*

If she raised herself slightly from the stool she sat on, Flavia could see the masts of ships in the harbour. And that was a bonus of her position as senior trader in the market at Classe. Presiding over her stall in the square, Flavia was in the perfect place to see if a new ship had come in.

From the goods spread in front of her, you might not realise just how rich this merchant in the russet dress was. Certainly she had unusual spices – cardamom, ginger, pepper, cloves – and bales of cloth, and dyes to colour them any shade a customer wanted. But when she wasn't trading in the market square, Flavia had more wealthy patrons who called at her house to buy much more expensive merchandise – painted pottery from Western Europa beyond the

mountains, glass and marbled paper from the city of Bellezza, coral and sugar from the islands off the coast of Talia.

Some of Flavia's more exotic goods – the silks and rarer pigments, tapestries and woven carpets – came from further east, from the countries of Eastern Europa and the unexplored lands beyond the Middle Sea, including the lands of the powerful Gate people. She had a network of reliable contacts that brought goods to the eastern ports and loaded them on to her merchant ships, which called at Bellezza before sailing down the coast to Classe.

And that journey from Bellezza to Classe was the most dangerous stretch; the waters there were infested by pirates. Merchant ships offered rich pickings for those who lived beyond the law: not just the sort of goods that Flavia traded in but valuable jewels and gold coins. Every merchant ship was armed with guns and guards but it was hard to counter the recklessness and bravery of the Talian pirates.

Flavia sighed; she had her own reasons for unease when she thought of pirates and not just because they stole her goods. And now that the winter was nearly over, she had sent out her first ship of the year. She pulled her mind away from her cargo and concentrated on selling a bolt of cotton and some cinnabar to a haggling buyer.

But just then one of the ragged boys the merchants employed to watch down at the harbour came running up to the stall and tugged at Flavia's skirt. Her heart beat faster at the thought of what news he might bring but she calmly finished her business with the haggler and put the money away in the pouch at her waist

before hearing what the urchin had to say.

‘Pirates, Signora,’ he said. ‘Your ship the *Silver Lady* is back in port, but the Captain says they were boarded at sea.’

‘Boarded and yet the ship came back?’ asked Flavia.

‘Back but lacking some of her cargo, Signora,’ said the boy.

The merchant gave him a small coin. ‘Tell the Captain to come to my house,’ she said.

As he ran off back to the harbour, Flavia signalled to her assistant to start packing up; there would be no more trading today.

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Arianna was obliged to hear an embassy from the Admiral of her Bellezzan fleet. His visits to her had become more frequent over recent months and his news was never good.

The Duchessa of the lagoon city sighed, and then stretched. She was in her best formal costume: stiff, light blue taffeta embroidered with butterflies and a silver butterfly mask.

There were times when she felt ready to rule the city on her own as Duchessa in her own right. But at other moments, like now, when she needed to listen gravely to the Admiral’s news, she would have preferred to hand him over to the Regent, her father, Rodolfo Rossi, drag off her fine clothes and run through the piazza chasing pigeons.

Arianna was still only eighteen, and the cares of state sometimes weighed heavily on her. Her heart wasn’t in them; it was in Padavia where Luciano, the

man she was going to marry, was studying at the University. There was all the rest of this term and the next to live through until he came back to Bellezza and they could be together for ever.

She missed him every minute but she wasn't a lovesick island girl, mooning over her lover. She was Duchess of Bellezza and she had an admiral to receive.

Admiral Gambone was waiting in the elegant new Reception Room, which had replaced the Glass Room where the old Duchess was believed to have been assassinated. Arianna was glad that the hateful and deceptive room with its misleading reflections had gone for good. Her ways were more direct than her mother's and she wanted to see her petitioners and ambassadors face to face.

The Admiral's face was even longer than usual and seemed to say clearly that he too would rather be having this audience with the wise and grave Regent and could not take seriously this inexperienced girl who wore the ducal regalia. But he had perfect manners and pulled himself together before launching into his news.

'Your Grace,' he said, bowing and accepting the chair she indicated to him, 'I come with grave news from the east. The Gate people are not content with blockading the Silk Road or sending their pirates to our waters. They are amassing a huge fleet of warships.'

'A bigger fleet than ours, Admiral?' asked Arianna, more calmly than she felt.

'My information is that their ships outnumber ours by maybe as much as four to one, Your Grace,' said Gambone. 'We need allies – and quickly.'



Chapter 1

Imaginary Twin

Isabel Evans was feeling sick. She always did on results day. Not because she did badly; her results were usually quite respectable. But because Charlie always did better.

It wasn't his fault that he was brilliant at school subjects any more than it was his fault that he excelled at all sports and could play any wind instrument. Or that he was attractive to girls and got on well with teachers. It wasn't even their parents' fault that Isabel felt less favoured; they had always been scrupulously fair in their treatment of the twins.

Charlie was Isabel's twin brother and she had to love him. She *did* love him. But twins were supposed to have this almost magical closeness and Isabel didn't feel that at all. How she felt was jealous.

Her brother was the older by ten minutes and had been heavier at birth by a pound, which put Isabel in an incubator for a couple of days and left Charlie to breastfeed direct, while Isabel had to drink expressed milk. What a little thing to determine the course of the next sixteen, nearly seventeen, years! But it did. That accident of birth was something Isabel felt she had never caught up with: Charlie would always be older, stronger, in some way just more satisfactory than she was.

So she had invented a different twin for herself. Charlotte was a female version of Charlie but with the crucial difference that she had been born ten minutes *after* Isabel. This gave Isabel the chance to feel just a tiny bit superior and she knew that the imaginary Charlotte was a bit jealous of her. That made her feel special. If there was any magical twin-type closeness, it was with Charlotte rather than Charlie.

‘Hurry up, Bel!’ called Charlie from outside the bathroom door. ‘I need to brush my teeth.’

She wasn’t going to be sick after all, even though she had felt too nauseated to eat any breakfast. Isabel let Charlie in and he flashed her a look of concern. ‘You OK? You’re looking a bit washed out.’

‘Thanks for nothing,’ said Isabel, then realised she was being unreasonably touchy. ‘Really, I’m fine. Just a bit Monday-morningish.’

‘Tell me about it!’ said Charlie indistinctly through his toothpaste. ‘It’s the mocks results today, isn’t it?’

‘Yeah,’ said Isabel, and ran downstairs two at a time, trying to show how little she cared.

They didn’t walk to school together; that would have been taking twin-ness too far.

Isabel set off a regulation five minutes before Charlie but he always reached Barnsbury comp ahead of her, even though he picked up several mates on the way. Sometimes Isabel thought she could remember the sight of Charlie's heels as his kicked his way out of the womb before her with a cheery wave and a 'Seeya!'

Isabel's friends Laura and Ayesha usually waited for her at the school gates. They were there now, Laura looking nervous and Ayesha pretending to. Ayesha always got spectacular results.

'Hey, Bel,' they greeted her. And then Ayesha's boyfriend, Matt, came up and Isabel fell into step behind them with Laura.

Neither Isabel or Laura had a boyfriend but they didn't begrudge Ayesha hers, even though he was undeniably fit. Yesh was just so beautiful it was obvious she wouldn't be single. *Unlike us*, thought Isabel.

Laura was pretty in a thin, neurotic sort of way, with big eyes and dark brown curly hair. Isabel could have been pretty too. She had naturally blonde hair and dark brown eyes, but what was in Charlie a striking combination was in his sister easily overlooked. It had something to do with the way she did herself down, walking round with her shoulders hunched and her eyes on the ground, as if braced for bad news. She did her best not to be noticed and as a result she never was. The only person she felt more attractive than was Charlotte – and she wasn't real.

'Are you worried?' Laura asked, chewing the edge of her fingernail.

'Is the Pope a Catholic?' said Isabel. 'I can't wait for

today to be over. At least I'll know the worst.'

'You don't do so badly, do you?'

'Just not as well as Charlie,' said Isabel quietly.

Laura shot her a look. Isabel pulled herself together; she didn't talk about how she really felt about Charlie. Mostly she went along with how great it was to have a charismatic twin brother, and she knew Laura had a little bit of a thing for him.

'Take no notice of me,' Isabel said. 'It's probably just PMT.'

They walked into their first lesson and Isabel braced herself; at least she would do better than Charlotte.



The Captain of the *Silver Lady* was deeply embarrassed. Not only had he lost the most expensive silks in Flavia's cargo, but he had a horrible suspicion about the pirate who had relieved him of the goods.

'Describe him to me,' said the merchant, surprisingly calmly, pouring them two cups of Bellezzan red wine.

'Signora, he looked just like every other pirate I've had the misfortune to encounter,' said the Captain after he had drained his cup. 'Unkempt, rascally . . . but I must admit he was polite.'

'And he took just the silk?'

'He took the silk and then asked whose ship it was, Signora,' said the Captain uncomfortably.

Flavia sighed. 'And what did he say when you told him?'

'He . . . He smiled, Signora. And then he said something strange – "It's a new ship. She should have

told me.” Could it be . . . ?’ he hesitated. ‘Could it be that you know this brigand?’

Flavia did not answer. She weighed out the amount of silver due to the Captain for his entire cargo.

‘But I have not brought it all safely into harbour,’ he protested.

‘No matter,’ she said. ‘I think the silk will find its way to me.’

The Captain did not wait for her to change her mind.



‘Oh, well done, both of you!’ said the twins’ mother enthusiastically, when she got in from work.

Their father was equally encouraging and ordered an Indian takeaway to celebrate. Homework was abandoned and beer opened even though it was a school night.

Isabel painted a smile on her face and kept it from peeling off all evening, until she went to bed and let her face gratefully droop into its real expression. Their parents were always so *fair*! She couldn’t blame her problems on them. Or on Charlie, who – damn him – was actually a really nice brother.

It’s all my fault, she thought. I’m rubbish. If I’d been an only child, without comparisons, my results would have been genuinely good. It’s just that Charlie’s are always better. Everything about him is better. And I’m a rat for even thinking what it would have been like if he hadn’t been born!

The curry and beer sat heavily on her stomach as she tried to find a comfortable position and get to

sleep. She fell back into her usual habit of imagining Charlotte.

‘Oh, Bel, I wish I’d got your averages! A levels will be a doddle for you.’

Then suddenly the thought of what she was doing nauseated Isabel.

Give it a rest, she told herself. It’s pathetic that you can’t cope without an imaginary sister. What about your Art result?

It was true that her Related Study work on mosaics, which had been assessed as part of the mocks, had got a stunning Charlie-type grade. Isabel was so glad that Charlie didn’t do Art; it was the one area where she felt she had an edge on him and she couldn’t have borne it if he had chosen it for A level.



Flavia was at the mosaic-maker’s in the Via Bellezza. Fausto Ventura was the busiest mosaicist in Classe. His bottega employed a dozen people who were always busy cutting stone and coloured glass into tesserae. Others applied them to the designs and fitted them on walls and floors throughout the city. But only Fausto drew up the designs. His unique visions covered almost every important surface in modern Classe – every new church or villa.

And he was Flavia’s friend. Not just because she imported most of the coloured glass and silver ‘smalti’ from Bellezza used in his workshop, but because she loved art and had a good eye for mosaics. She spent her considerable wealth on adorning the walls and floors of her house with his work and he often visited

her there, reminding himself of the peacocks and lilies, leopards and dolphins he had created from chips of marble, glass and the silver smalti that were Classe's trademark.

But today she had come to visit him, and Fausto could see she was perturbed. He invited her into his private studio at the back of the bottega where he worked on his elaborate designs.

'What is it?' he asked.

Flavia hesitated then took the plunge. 'I have lost some of my cargo to pirates,' she said. 'The *Silver Lady* came back but lacking some of her silks.'

Fausto spread his hands in the universal gesture of pity mixed with resignation. 'It happens,' he said. 'Is the loss of money very great?'

'It is not so much that,' said Flavia. 'Although they were very fine silks. But my ships are subject to dangers on all sides now. I have heard a disturbing rumour that the Gate people have placed their own men on pirate ships along our coast.'

'So first they sell you the silk and then they rob it back off you before it even reaches Classe?' said Fausto. 'Twice the profit for them, or more, depending on how many merchants they can steal from in this way.'

'Perhaps,' said Flavia. 'Although I don't think it was the Gate people who took my silk this time. But that's not what really worries me.'

Fausto had known Flavia a long time and he was sure there was something more to the silk story than she was revealing, but he was prepared to let her tell him in her own time.

'I have heard from Rodolfo in Bellezza,' continued

Flavia. ‘His daughter has been told that the Gate people are amassing a war fleet. She’s coming here soon to talk to Duke Germano about an alliance between our cities.’

‘Well, that’s good, surely?’ said Fausto. ‘Germano is sure to say yes. We have always been on good terms with Bellezza.’

‘Indeed,’ said Flavia. ‘And who are we both on bad terms with?’

‘You mean besides the Gate people?’

‘Someone much closer to home than them.’

‘The di Chimici.’

It wasn’t a question. Classe was one of the few city-states that remained independent in the north of Talia. Fabrizio di Chimici, the young Duke of Giglia, was now also Grand Duke of Tuschia, and his family ruled in half the great cities of the peninsula. But there were fierce pockets of resistance to the family’s empire-building schemes, and here in the north-east Classe, Padavia and Bellezza made natural allies against the powerful di Chimici.

Two elected duchies, with Duke Germano and Duchess Arianna at their head, plus Antonio, the elected Governor of Padavia, had held out against all attempts to compromise their independence – from threats to marriage proposals, from diplomacy to assassinations. There was a natural free spirit among the people of these three cities that resisted any attempt to bring them into the di Chimici fold.

And they were linked by more than a spirit of independence. Classe and Bellezza were both on the sea and both maintained a fleet of ships to defend their coasts; Padavia was inland and did not need

ships but relied heavily on the other two cities to protect its trade routes. Antonio was willing to pay some of his city's dues to help with the upkeep of the two fleets.

'What exactly do you think they're up to?' asked Fausto, taking Flavia's silence for agreement.

'I think the di Chimici might have forged an alliance with the Gate people,' said Flavia slowly. 'Rodolfo thinks so too. He hasn't told the young Duchess of his suspicions yet but I know he fears the worst.'

'But wouldn't it be madness to combine with Talia's fiercest enemies?' asked Fausto.

'Some say the young Grand Duke *is* mad,' said Flavia. 'Whether it's true, I don't know. But if he has really done it, then those of us living on this coast are in terrible danger.'

'It's all very well for Fabrizio di Chimici, sitting safe inland in Giglia,' said Fausto, agitated himself now. He had a vision of fierce sea-warriors from the east overrunning Classe and destroying its great buildings full of mosaics.

'Those who lie down with dogs will rise with fleas,' said Flavia bitterly. 'He will pay a heavy price, but not before we do.'

'So what can we do?' asked Fausto. 'Is there anything the Brotherhood can do to stop them?'

Fausto knew that his friend was a member of a powerful and clandestine society of people who had secret gifts. She did not talk about it much but he was aware that she had a special way of communicating with the Regent of Bellezza and others in Talia who were also members of that small band known as Stravaganti.

‘We can certainly try,’ said Flavia. ‘And, as you know, we have allies far beyond Talia who might be able to help us. It has been done before.’



Isabel was rushing from the Art room to her next lesson when she nearly tripped over the little red pouch. She picked it up, fascinated; it looked like a prop from a school play.

It was made of soft crimson velvet, held together at the top with a drawstring – just the kind of purse full of coins that someone called Roderigo would toss across the stage to someone called Valentino or something in a Shakespeare play.

Isabel hefted it in her palm. It definitely did have something inside and she couldn’t resist opening the string to see what it was. But it wasn’t coins at all; it held tiny silver squares that she recognised straight away as mosaic tiles. ‘Tesserae’ they were called, and Isabel had thought she was the only person in the school who was interested in them. Who could it possibly belong to?

The only student who came to mind was Sky Meadows, the gorgeous butterscotch-coloured boy who sat next to her in Art and was going out with a girl called Alice. Isabel heaved a huge sigh. Sky hadn’t taken any more notice of her than anyone else at Barnsbury, but she had often thought it would be nice if he did.

She dragged her mind back to the pouch of little tiles, her feet taking her in the direction of her next class without any conscious decision on her part. Sky

was interested in Italian art but Renaissance sculpture was his thing; his Related Study on Donatello had been the only one with a higher mark than Isabel's. There wasn't time to take the pouch back to the Art room now – she would ask him about it at break. And if it wasn't his . . . Isabel pushed the red velvet bag deep into her pocket. She supposed she'd have to show it to the Art teacher, but she found the pouch oddly appealing. It was nice just closing her hand over it in her pocket and feeling the little tesserae through the velvet. She didn't really want to hand it over to anyone else.

Sky's reaction to the pouch at break time was a definite improvement on past contact with him. He said it wasn't his, but he was certainly taking notice of Isabel now.

'You say you just found it lying near the Art room?' he said, almost caressing the velvet, as if he knew something about it.

'That's right,' said Isabel, feeling embarrassed now that those brown eyes were at last fully focused on her own. 'It's tesserae inside,' she added. 'I looked. You know – little pieces for making mosaics.'

'You're interested in mosaics, aren't you?' he said. So he *had* paid some attention to her before.

'Yes. I love them,' said Isabel, feeling stupid and uncool even as she said it. But Sky didn't seem to mind; he just nodded.

'I'm more into sculpture myself. Don't know much about mosaics. But don't you think this bag or purse or whatever it is looks sort of Italian? It's got a kind of Renaissance feel to it.'

'Well, it made me think of the sort of Italians you

get in Shakespeare plays,’ said Isabel. ‘But yes, I suppose that’s Renaissance in a way.’

She didn’t want this conversation ever to end. Sky reluctantly handed the red bag back to her. And Isabel just as reluctantly took it to the Art teacher in her dinner hour. But Ms Hellings didn’t know anything about it either. She suggested taking it to Lost Property. Isabel didn’t say she would, she just nodded as if agreeing it was a good idea. But she had already decided to keep it.



‘An alliance with the Gate people?’ said Arianna. ‘Are you sure?’

Her father shifted restlessly in his chair. ‘I would not have told you if I had not been sure,’ he said. ‘This is the most serious news we’ve had about the di Chimici since they introduced their anti-magic laws.’

They were both silent for a while, remembering how close to death by burning many of the Manoush had come in Padavia only four months ago. Since then Governor Antonio had repealed the anti-magic laws that the di Chimici had persuaded him to adopt and had abandoned that method of execution completely, believing now that it was unacceptably cruel.

‘Then what is Fabrizio thinking of?’ asked Arianna.

‘He is desperate to win over more city-states to his dead father’s idea of a republic,’ said Rodolfo. ‘If the Gate people come in force to this coast, he thinks they could overrun at least Bellezza and Classe.’

‘And then?’

‘Then he thinks that the King of the Gate people

will hand them over to the di Chimici.’

‘Just like that?’ said Arianna. ‘But what would be in it for the Gate people?’

‘I imagine Fabrizio has offered him a massive sum of money,’ said Rodolfo. ‘That’s the way these alliances usually work.’

‘But why now?’ asked Arianna.

‘The di Chimici have tried diplomacy, offers of marriage and assassination, all to no avail. Bellezza, Classe, Padavia and Montemurato stand firm in the north, Romula and Cittanuova in the south. Talia is evenly balanced between di Chimici rule and independence. The Grand Duke desperately needs at least one city-state to go over to him and shift that balance in his favour.’

‘So he will unleash the Gate people on the shores of his own country,’ said Arianna, but it was not a question. She could no longer doubt that war was coming to the lagoon city from the sea.

She wished that Luciano were there. He had gone back to Padavia to spend two more terms at the University and complete his education as a Bellezzan noble worthy to be her consort. But Arianna didn’t give a fig for all that. He was already worthy as far as she was concerned. She hadn’t been Duchessa of this great city for long; it was only two and a half years since she had been an ordinary island girl, whose highest ambition had been to scull one of the black mandolas that glided along that city’s canals.

And now she wanted his counsel as much as his company. Because he had come from another world, he often had a different viewpoint on Talian matters. Although three years earlier he had known nothing of

politics and diplomacy, even Rodolfo respected his opinion.

But for now she had to decide what to do without him.

‘We must speak to the Duke of Classe,’ she said at last.

Rodolfo relaxed a little. He was relieved that his daughter was thinking in this way. At the beginning of her rule, she would have turned to him and asked what to do. That was why he had been appointed Regent. No one really expected a girl of sixteen, even one as gifted as Arianna, and with her lineage, to take on the full responsibility of running such an important city as Bellezza.

But he would not always be there to help her. He wanted her to be her own woman, not dependent on him or even on Luciano in future. The ruler of Bellezza must rule, just as her mother had done before her. And Rodolfo had helped Silvia too, he remembered. And as always when he thought of Silvia, his expression softened.

‘Shall we involve Silvia?’ Arianna asked, as if she had read his thoughts.

And as if equally telepathic, Silvia, Rodolfo’s wife and Arianna’s mother, was announced and entered Arianna’s private room. It had been hers until the assassination attempt which most Bellezzans believed to have succeeded. Only a few people knew that it was not Silvia who had died in the explosion in the Glass Room and that she still lived, under the guise of being the Regent’s second wife.

Now her gaze swept round the little parlour, resting briefly on the door to the secret passage that led to

Rodolfo's palazzo. She could have come that way herself but lately she had been seen as more of a public figure, accompanying her husband and the young Duchessa on more state occasions. Silvia wanted the people of Bellezza to get used to her presence.

'You two seem very serious,' she said.

Arianna took off the silk mask she had been wearing when the footman announced Signora Rossi. In her own family, she often abandoned the convention that all Bellezzan women over sixteen went masked until their marriage.

Silvia saw that her daughter's face was indeed drawn with worry. She glanced quickly at her husband.

'What is it?' she asked. 'Not bad news from Padavia?'

'No,' said Rodolfo. 'Luciano is well, as far as we know. The bad news comes from further afield.'



Isabel had often thought about going to Ravenna. It had played a big part in her mosaic research. Though she loved the Roman floors she had seen at Fishbourne and Verulamium, she longed to see the golden walls in the churches that she knew only from photographs. There was something about mosaic technique that spoke to her and she loved the way it could endure for thousands of years, unlike painting. Even sculpture was vulnerable, leaving statues missing noses, arms or anything else that stuck out.

Now she lay in her bed holding the mysterious little velvet bag with its silver tesserae and thought about seeing the real thing: the fishes, birds, flowers and

gorgeous clothes of the wall mosaics of Ravenna. But just as she was dropping off to sleep a thought wandered across her fading consciousness. Nobody made silver tesserae; they would tarnish. To get the silver effect you had to use white gold. And then she was lost to sleep.



Isabel woke up soaking wet. At least she thought she had and then she realised she must still be asleep. She was standing up to her waist in not very warm water in some sort of, well, some sort of bath, she supposed. It was eight-sided and marble-clad. Isabel recognised where she was: it was in the Baptistery of the cathedral in Ravenna. She looked up and saw the dome above her head but there was something not quite right about it.

There were the twelve apostles, and Jesus being baptised by Saint John, just as she had often seen them in reproductions, with the tiled water rippling blue and white across the lower half of Christ's body. But instead of having a gold background there and on all the walls surrounding the bath, it was all set against silver.

What an amazing thing the human mind is, thought Isabel, even as she believed herself to be asleep and dreaming. *I was thinking of silver tesserae and here I am surrounded by them.*

But then she began to feel uncomfortably wet and hitched herself up on to the flat side of the bath. Her loose pyjama bottoms clung unpleasantly to her legs. She had never had such a realistic dream and was

wondering how to get out of it when she heard a sound. Up till that moment she had believed the Baptistry to be empty apart from herself but now the wooden door swung open, letting more light into the room than the round arched windows had and illuminating the dazzling silver images.

A woman came in and stopped when she saw Isabel sitting wetly on the side of the bath. Then she said the oddest thing.

‘Ah, so you’ve arrived. We’d better find you a towel.’

‘Who are you?’ asked Isabel, getting the strangest feeling that this wasn’t a dream after all.

‘I’m your Stravagante,’ said the woman. ‘And I’m glad to say that you are mine. We really need you here in Classe.’