

THE
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GLASS
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MAKER'S
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DAUGHTER
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V. BRICELAND



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Of all the quaint traditions of the southern lands, perhaps the sweetest is to be found in the city-state of Cassaforte, where nightly its horns are sounded in a tradition that has been unbroken for centuries.

—CELESTINE DU BARBARAY, TRADITIONS & VAGARIES OF THE
AZURE COAST: A GUIDE FOR THE HARDY TRAVELER



Sunset, on the balcony atop her family's home, was Risa Divetri's favorite time of day. Beyond the Bridge of Muro in the west, the sun tickled the horizon and set the city's canals aglow. Water and light rippled back to where Risa balanced on the balcony's wide stone rail, making it seem as if the setting sun were stretching its long fingers toward her. She thought of how molten glass had the same red-hot intensity when plucked from the heart of a furnace.

If someone could peer into her soul that night—her last at Caza Divetri—might they see how hotly it, too, burned?

In the twilight, the limestone balcony rail felt warm and comfortable where she sat. Just below her stretched the upper branches of a gnarled old olive tree. If Risa dangled her legs, she could tickle the soles of her feet with its leaves. Far below, the tree's roots twisted among the rocks of the slope that dropped down to the canal, where a gondolier sang a slow, sweet tune as he punted by. Beyond the lone figure lay the Piazza Divetri, and then the cream-colored buildings of Cassaforte.

Standing beside her, leaning on the rail, Risa's father caught the gondolier's tune and hummed it to himself while he watched the city. Her mother, deep in concentration, sat nearby, on a bench erected upon the red and black tiles. Giulia Divetri always seemed to be smiling. Her long, dark hair, tamed by a silk cord

woven through and around its length, fell like rope over her shoulder and down the front of her embroidered gown. In her hands she held her sketching board and a length of red chalk. Her fingers busily danced across the paper.

“Buonochio blood,” said Risa’s father, nodding at her mother’s drawing. He gave Risa a private wink. “Fiery and artistic!”

“You married me for my bold blood, Ero,” replied her mother, amused. She continued her sketching, capturing an image she later would render in one of her famed windows. “Would that I had more of it. See—I never capture the palace dome quite right.” She held out the sketch board. Her perfectly placed lines outlined the rounded roof of the palace’s throne room. A few more caught the two moons hovering above it, nestled squarely within two identical constellations.

“You have enough talent and fire for the both of us, love,” he murmured. “I recognized it the first day I saw you—when you leaned from that window and called to me!”

“I felt bold that day.”

“You were enchanting, my dear.”

“I knew a good man when I saw one.” Risa’s mother’s lips curved in recollection as she returned to her drawing. “Even if he did just happen to be a stranger passing on the street.” The familiar story made Risa smile; she was happy to hear it one last time.

No matter what hour of day or season, a hush always seemed to fall over the city as the time of the rite approached. Some nights, she swore she could see the king’s hornsman taking his place atop the palace dome, but her father said she was imagining things; although the dome was the city’s highest point, the palace was simply too far away for her to spy such details.

“Risa?” As the streets quieted in anticipation, her father extended his hand. “Would you?”

Her face lit up at the invitation, though she couldn’t trust herself to say anything. Not yet—not when she was trying to make her memory of this last evening perfect. Experience had proved, time and again, that opening her mouth only ruined things.

The dry heat of the tiles that seared her bare feet seemed to warm her heart as

well. She loved this still and expectant moment of the day more than any other. Beside her, Ero was loosening the ties that held the Cassaforte banner aloft. He handed her the taut ropes, and together they lowered the rippling streamer to the ground, keeping pace in the nightly rite with Caza Portello to the east and Caza Catarre to the west. Once it was in her hands, Risa folded the rich purple and brown silk into its box. With respect, she knelt and slid the banner into its space beneath the pedestal, within which lay the Divetri horn.

It was her final night, she told herself with excitement. It was the last time she would help her father with the daily rite of fealty. Where there could have been sadness, she felt only joy. It frolicked inside her like one of the sacred deer in the royal forest, making her want to leap up and sing out. Tomorrow evening she would have a new home and be hearing the horns from far across the city.

She would no longer be merely Ero and Giulia's child once she was declared a daughter of the moons. She would not be a child at all, once she was accepted at one of the insulas and started to learn things. *Important* things. She would finally be living her life, like her older brother and sisters, instead of merely waiting for it to begin.

Scarcely had she climbed to her feet when a blow from behind sent her reeling. She staggered into her father, dimly aware of the giggles echoing from across the courtyard. "*Petro!*" she shrieked at the top of her voice. "You maniac!"

Wild and sudden excitement propelled her back to her feet. With a scream of laughter she took off, bounding after her younger brother in crazy circles around the upper courtyard. She only had this one final night to play with him, she reminded herself. It might be her last chance. "Touch me again and I'll strip you bare and throw you to the canal buzzards and let them shred you to the bones!" Her brother yelped in mock terror.

Giulia laughed. "She takes after you, dear. A Divetri with a mission is fearful to behold."

With a wink at his wife, Ero proclaimed, "And thus our little lady transforms back into the lionkit we know and love so well."

Her father had called her a lionkit so often that Risa wore the title as a badge of pride. People often commented on the similarities between Ero and his

daughter. Her long chestnut hair, like his, seemed almost copper-colored in the sunlight. And while Giulia communicated her anger quietly, with flashing eyes and a dangerous tone to her voice, both father and daughter were known to shout their passions to the skies.

“Come back here, slimy wart!” she yelled after Petro.

“Never!” he caroled with defiance.

Around the balcony courtyard they chased each other. Petro dove headlong into Mattio, the chief craftsman of Ero’s workshop, just as the man was emerging into the cool evening air. “By Muro’s foal!” Mattio exclaimed, laughing in surprise.

“Sorry,” Risa huffed as she dodged around the large-framed foreman to snatch at her brother. Petro dashed behind the skirts of their housekeeper, Fita, but the old woman was too busy to notice, quietly scolding one of the maids for wearing a dirty apron to the rite.

“Ah-ah-ah. Gently, gently,” chided a middle-aged man behind Mattio. His nose was crooked from an old break. “This is a solemn part of the day.” Cousin Fredo’s expression was, as ever, pious and weary of their behavior.

“Indeed it is,” agreed the housekeeper. She turned to the red-faced maid. “Go change into something clean *immediately*.”

“Sorry, cousin,” called Petro, slowing down. “I’m sorry, Fita.”

“A-ha!” Risa cried in triumph. She seized him by the collar. Petro’s yap of protest was cut short as she dragged him backward. “I’ve got you now, you little bloody scab on a beggar’s behind!”

“Cazarrina,” begged Cousin Fredo with deep dismay, addressing Risa by her formal title. His hand shot toward her shoulder, but she managed to wriggle from his grasp before he could give her one of his vicious pinches. “Cazarrina! Please! My nerves ... !” He reached into the pocket of his surcoat to retrieve his little silver box of *tabbaco da fiuto*, with which he soothed himself. It was because of this creamy paste that their cousin’s approach was always preceded by the disagreeable scent of tobacco leaves, cloves, and pungent pine oil.

“My dears,” said Giulia from her bench, “it is nearly time. Grant your cousin’s nerves a small period of rest. You may yell yourselves hoarse later.”

Brother and sister exchanged glances. Cousin Fredo’s nerves were his favorite

topic of conversation. Smothering their amusement, they turned their gazes to the ground in an attempt to appear solemn. “We’re sorry, cousin,” they intoned. Fredo nodded stiffly and, using the tip of his little finger, dabbed *tabbaco da fiuto* onto his gums in the hollows over his two canine teeth. Seeming refreshed, he straightened his broad collar as they darted past him to the far end of the balcony.

“You’ve got something in your hand,” said Risa, still giggling at Fredo’s pomposity. “Give it to me.”

“You mean this?” Petro produced a ball of stitched and stuffed pigskin from his pocket. “Catch!” he yelled. He had obviously intended to throw it at his sister, but when Risa grabbed him by the collar and spun him around, the ball arced high into the air and landed with a sickening thud against a casement of leaded glass. Giulia frowned, but the enchantments had held, leaving the glass unbroken. Any other window would have shattered from such impact, but thanks to the blessings fortifying their structure, Divetri-made glass could withstand even the fiercest storms from the Azure Sea.

“Not that,” Risa said in a lower voice, while she tried to grab for the left fist Petro had kept clenched the entire time. “Your other hand.”

“It’s a letter,” taunted Petro. “A *private* letter for you ... from you know *who*.”

“Who?”

“*You* know,” said Petro. With meaning he looked over at the craftsmen gathering near the doorway. She followed the direction of his glance. Emil, the youngest of the men in her father’s workshop, stood behind Mattio and Fredo, his nose deep in a book. “He *looooooves* you. He wants to pay *court* to you.”

Risa stiffened, torn between screeching with horror and laughing outright. “He does not!” she finally hissed. Emil was fine enough as the craftsmen went, but the loves of his life were sewn into folios and bound with leather.

“Pardon *me*.” Petro pitched his voice up a half octave and pretended to toss imaginary hair over his shoulder. “I am Risa Divetri, Cazarrina. When I marry, my husband *must* be a man of the Thirty and Seven.”

“I am *not* like that!” With a deft snatch, Risa seized the folded paper that was clutched in her younger brother’s palm. “Hah!” she exulted, unfolding it. Though her brother had attempted to disguise his handwriting with the fancy

script of his elders, his authorship was painfully obvious from the blots and the bits of quill feather stuck to the ink.

Dearest—

*When I think of you I could
die, so deep are my feelings for you.*

*I love your eyes, the arc
of your brow, the quick
smile that comes to your lips when*

*I walk into the room. You are so
beautiful—a near goddess!*

Marry me, please, please, please!

—You know who

Risa let her eyes run over the letter. To anyone other than herself or her brother, the message might seem innocuous enough, but with Petro, she knew better. She scanned the note quickly for its buried message. Then, with a squawk of outrage and no courtesy for Cousin Fredo's nerves whatsoever, she yelled, "*Duck nose? You're calling me a duck nose, you little whelp?*"

Petro was giddy with glee. Before Risa could strangle him again, he dashed off in the direction of his parents, gaining enough of a head start to turn a triumphant cartwheel.

"Someone is going to have a *broken* nose!" Risa shouted. She was not really angry at all, of course. She just enjoyed the noise of the roar as it flew from her lungs. Admittedly, there was also a particular joy in the sight of Fredo instantly clapping his hands over his ears.

"Gently, gently," he pleaded as she passed. "My nerves ... Cazarra, please," he added, appealing to Giulia.

"Risa, what is this silliness?" her mother said as she approached. She held out her hand for the crumpled paper, then smoothed it out on her sketch board while restraining Risa's arm. "Your cousin is a sensitive man ... " Privately, Risa knew her mother no more believed in Fredo's nerves than did anyone else in the caza. Giulia was always polite to Fredo, however, even in the most trying of circumstances.

“That brat who is allegedly your son called me a duck nose,” Risa said, pointing to the letter.

“This note seems quite complimentary, though the script could stand improvement,” said Giulia. “Where does it call you a duck nose?”

Risa ran her finger along the right side of the paper, pointing at the last letter on each line.

d u c k n o s e

“It’s our secret code,” she said. “See?”

Her mother raised an eyebrow. Risa could tell she was trying not to laugh, which would give Fredo reason to complain. Though he could not overhear them at this distance, he was studying them closely. “Very clever,” said Giulia at last. “Quite ingenious. Aren’t you a mite old for this foolery, however?” Risa bowed her head slightly. She had intended to keep this evening perfect, after all. “As a courtesy to your father’s cousin and his ... nerves, if you could restrain from murdering your brother until *after* the rite, I would take it as a personal favor.” She folded the note and slipped it under her drawing, where neither of her children would be tempted to filch it.

A horn’s rich cry resonated from the palace. It seemed to shimmer through the air as it drowned out Cassaforte’s last few evening noises. The clop-clop of donkey hooves on the pavement, the cries of the gondoliers on the canals, and the friendly babble of the crowds all ceased at its musical tone. Risa’s playfulness halted as well. The rite of fealty had been set into motion; it was time once more to think of herself as a sober young citizen, not a child.

Each of the cazas belonging to Cassaforte’s seven great families had been built upon islands around the city’s coast, Risa knew. The complex of bridges and canals that united them to the mainland, however, made it difficult to tell where the seven cazas began and the capital city left off. The cazas were separate from Cassaforte, yet of it, all at once.

From the farthest caza east, well beyond sight, came the silvery answering cry of the oldest family of the Seven. “Sweet Caza Cassamagi,” breathed Risa, enchanted by the sound, as she was every night. Instinctively she reached for her younger brother’s hand. If it was the two gods’ will to separate her from Petro

during the ceremony the next day, it might be the last evening they spent together for years to come.

Caza Portello, just east of their own island, was the second oldest caza in all of Cassaforte. As the call of Cassamagi's horn swept across the darkening sky, Portello's red and white silks climbed the flagpole. Cassamagi was known for its research into the discipline of enchantments; Portello was known far and wide for its architecture. Its walls rose high and proud, and its enchantment-strengthened bridges and spires rivaled Cassaforte's royal palace in grace and delicacy. When its colors reached the top of the pole, an answering cry, from its tenor horn, poured from Portello's heights.

At the cue, Ero began pulling the rope that would take Divetri's blue and green banner into the skies. He grinned, as he always did, to see the family's colors flying against the deepening twilight and to hear the silks snapping crisply in the sea breezes. Then, with two strides of his muscular legs, he crossed to the pedestal. He removed the large domed lid, green-blue with patina, and placed it on the ground. A brass horn lay atop the purple cushion within. Like a hunting horn, its tube was coiled upon itself until, after three turns, it flared into a bell.

Ero grasped the instrument and pointed it up to the heavens. He faced toward King Alessandro's palace. Risa watched with admiration as he took in a massive breath. Chest enlarged and feet braced, Ero blew into the Divetri horn.

Though she had heard the same velvet peal every evening of her life, its beauty and force always astonished her. As the single note grew in volume, it seemed to cast out a cord, invisible yet sparkling, that tied together Caza Divetri's inhabitants. It tightened around them all, then flew out in the direction of the palace itself, over the city and its buildings. To Risa it was almost a tangible sensation, that cord. She wondered for the first time if anyone else ever felt it. The others, however, seemed merely attentive, not enchanted. Why was it so vivid for her?

The velvety sound faded, though everyone remained still for another moment. The ancient rite of fealty had been completed. For another night, as it had for centuries, Caza Divetri would stand.

They listened for horns to sound from Catarre and Buonochio, book makers and artists, then from Piratimare and Dioro, ship builders and crafters of

weapons. Seven cazas, united through this nightly rite with the country's most sacred relics and the symbols of the king—the Olive Crown and Scepter of Thorn.

After the cazas' loyalty had been proclaimed for all the city to hear, the palace hornsman played one last, long note. It lingered, then vanished into the sunset.

As the moment dissipated, everyone perceptibly relaxed. The craftsmen began to file out. The last to leave, of course, was Cousin Fredo, who lingered over his prayers to the god Muro and Muro's sister, the goddess Lena. Neither of the two moons adorning the night sky seemed to notice his muttered entreaties.

When the family was alone once more, Giulia ran her hand through her son's hair. "My youngest have grown up too swiftly," she sighed. Risa disagreed. She was not being allowed to grow up quickly enough.

"I'm not grown up," Petro asserted. "I'm only eleven. *Next* year, though!"

Ero laughed. "You're old enough, my boy. Old enough. Did you enjoy your last evening? Yes?"

"Papa." Petro suddenly sounded frightened. He was still so young, thought Risa. Perhaps he was only now realizing that tomorrow he would be taken from the caza to live with the Penitents or with the Children, depending upon whose blessing he received. "What would happen if you fell ill after tomorrow? Who would blow our horn at sunset?"

From behind, Risa pounced on him and tickled him lightly. Petro squealed. The solemnity of the rite had faded, and she once more felt playful. "No one!" she growled. "No one would blow the horn or raise the banners, and then demons would devour the caza and it would no longer be ours!"

As she and her brother laughed, her father shook his head. His curls glinted in the dancing light of the raised brazier, whose flames illuminated the family's banner every night. "That won't happen, Petro. You know very well that Romeldo would come from the insula to take over my duties until I felt better. He's the oldest, and heir to the caza. Remember how I had the sun sickness once when you were younger? He came then."

"And what if Romeldo is sick?"

"Are you worried that we'll fall to pieces when you leave tomorrow?"

Petro hesitated. "No. Well, maybe."

“When you are big enough,” said Ero affectionately, kneeling down and grabbing his son’s nose with his fingers, “*you* may perform the rite and keep us all safe in our caza.”

“I’m older than Petro!” Risa protested, not for the first time. “I could perform the rite!”

Without even looking at his wife, Ero replied just as Risa knew he would. “The protection of a caza is not the responsibility of women.”

“Now, Ero,” said Giulia, her gentle voice a contrast to his stubborn tones. It was an old argument between them. “You well know my good kinswoman Dana raises the flags as cazarra of Buonochio. Buonochio’s cazarra has always done so, since the house’s founding. In the past, Cassamagi ... ”

Ero raised a hand. “In Caza Divetri, the rite of fealty is the cazarro’s responsibility. It has always been so, and will always be.” He got to his feet and winked once more at his daughter. “Women are good for other things, eh? Bewitching men’s hearts, primarily. You’ll learn.”

He grinned broadly at his wife, who shook her head while returning the smile. “By Lena, you are an old-fashioned bull,” was her only retort. Still talking, they moved toward the door that led down into the residence.

Risa stared after them, defiance dancing in her heart. “I am good for many more things than bewitching men’s hearts,” she said, voicing the opinion she dared not utter in front of her father. “After tomorrow I’ll prove it.”

“I don’t think you could bewitch a toad, with your *duck nose!*” Petro cried gleefully. Before she could catch him, he dashed away after their parents, laughing at the top of his lungs.



It frustrates us to no end, my liege, to report that we are unable to replicate the enchantments of the barbarian city, Cassaforte.

A married couple imbibing wine from one of its goblets is likely to remain faithful until the end of days, and anyone reading from one of its conjured books—though why anyone should wish to is a mystery—retains the knowledge permanently.

Even their symbols of monarchy, the Olive Crown and the Scepter of Thorn, are enchanted in such a way that none but the true heir can lay hands upon them without dire consequence.

Sire, the people of Cassaforte are devils in human form.

—THE SPY GUSTOPHE WERNER, IN A PRIVATE LETTER TO
BARON FRIEDRICH VAN WIESTEL



Who do you think will grant you their blessing, the Children or the Penitents?” Petro asked. They lay upon the matted floor of Risa’s own chambers, staring out at the night sky.

“It’s the god or the goddess who grants the blessing during the Scrutiny, silly,” she said automatically. Every six years, during the alignment of the two moons with the twin constellations, every child of the Seven and Thirty between the ages of eleven and sixteen went through the Ritual of Scrutiny. There they were chosen by the moon goddess to study at the Insula of the Penitents of Lena, or by her brother, the moon god, for education at the Insula of the Children of Muro.

“You know what I mean! Which insula will I end up at?” Petro’s question had been on her own mind for some days now. The differences between the two insulas were, as far as she could tell, minimal. What mattered was that her life

would be completely new and wide open at either one of them. “Mama and Papa were trained by the goddess’ Penitents,” Petro continued. “So won’t we be blessed by them too?”

“Romeldo and Vesta are just as much their children as we are, and they were both chosen by the god,” Risa pointed out. Her older brother and the younger of her two older sisters had been highly studious, one of the defining traits of those chosen to study with the Children of Muro. Their oldest sister Mira, however, had followed in their parents’ footsteps; she was selected to join the insula of the Penitents of Lena, where she was now a master glass maker in its workshops. Many of the bright new colors of sheet glass that the caza had been using in its work were Mira’s artistic innovations.

From a plate of snacks between them, Petro plucked a cracker spread with fresh honey. “I’m going to miss Fita’s cooking.”

“I’m going to miss Mama and Papa.”

“I’m going to miss my room.”

“I’m going to miss my studio,” said Risa, thinking of her workroom next to her father’s workshop, far away from the furnaces and hot glass workers. “At the insula I’ll never have a private workspace until I’m a master craftsman.”

“You’re going to miss *Emil*,” Petro teased, licking honey from his fingers and reaching for another of Fita’s crackers.

“I am *not*.” Risa kicked her heels up into the air. “I think you’ll be chosen by the Penitents,” she said at last, popping a nut-stuffed fig into her mouth. “Don’t you?”

There was a long pause before Petro spoke again. “If I am, I hope you are too.”

“Oh, Petro.” Risa felt a sudden rush of affection for her little brother. He was only eleven. Though they often played and teased as equals, at times she knew that the five years between them made her an adult in his eyes. “I hope so too. Just remember, you have family at both insulas. Romeldo and Mira and Vesta love you too.”

“But I hardly know them,” Petro said in a very small voice. “They were gone when I was little. You’ve always been here.” He reached for the plate.

“That’s enough honey for you,” she told him, taking it away. “You’ll never

sleep.”

“I think you’ll be chosen by the Penitents, too. You’re artistic.” He gestured to the cabinet in which Risa kept the finest of her own works. The cabinet once displayed the mosaics Divetri children had created during their early training in the glass arts, but of late these had been replaced by a number of beautiful round bowls Risa had created in the Divetri furnaces. Unlike the other objects created in her father’s workshop, however, her bowls were not blown from hot glass. Nor were they pieced together bit by bit and held with cement or channeled lead, like the mosaics and windows for which her mother was famous. They were, in fact, altogether different from anything else the Divetri family had produced throughout the centuries. Some had geometric shapes in simple and colorful patterns; others were more complex renderings of glass cut into floral shapes and pieced together before being melted and fused in the furnaces. They were uniquely her own, and Risa was proud of it.

She smiled, now, at her brother. “Do you really think I’m artistic?” When he nodded, she hugged him tightly.

“All you need to do is learn the container enchantments and you’ll be a junior craftsman. I’ve got a lot more to learn than you,” he said.

“I want to learn a lot more than container enchantments,” Risa said, feeling the excitement build inside her once more. “More than protection enchantments, too.”

“But those are the skills the insulas teach glass workers.” Petro stretched his mouth wide in a yawn. “Bowls and goblets have container enchantments. Windows have protection enchantments. Even I know that.” Given that the natural purpose of a window is to protect people from the elements, Giulia’s creations of lead and glass were reinforced with insula-learned enchantments that protected those within the caza from outside harm. No Divetri window had ever been broken or broached since its creation, not by a hammer or crossbow bolt or even one of Petro’s many pigskin balls.

“Yes, you’re right,” Risa acknowledged. “But it’s just so *boring!* I can’t believe objects can only hold one kind of enchantment, that’s all.”

“Enchantments only work on an object’s primary purpose. That’s what Papa says.”

Slightly frustrated at not being able to explain what she meant, Risa struggled for words. “Catarre’s books are enchanted to aid learning, which is a book’s natural function, but if I used a book for, oh, I don’t know ... ”

“To hit me over the head! Then it would be a weapon and you could put a Dioro attack enchantment on it,” Petro offered.

“You are so very silly!” She tickled him until he screeched with laughter.

They lay there, side by side, until their quickened breath subsided. “Risa?” Petro’s voice was small and quiet. “I’m scared.”

“I hope we’re chosen together, by the Penitents. If we are, I’ll watch over you, I promise,” she whispered in his ear. She was rewarded by his tight and sticky embrace. “Now, off to bed. Lena will never bless us if you’re snoring on your feet!” Together they rose from the matting and wiped cracker crumbs from their clothing.

“It’s the last night we’ll be sleeping here,” Petro said, just before he left the room.

Risa already knew that. Though she loved the caza and all the people within its walls, she was anxious to begin her new, real life. With hands that were almost shaking from excitement, she opened the doors to her balcony and gazed out.

The scent of night jasmine, blooming on the opposite bank of the western canal, filled her lungs. As she twisted the key that extinguished the wall lantern, she caught a glimpse of herself reflected in one of her bowls. This was the last night she would see herself wearing her own comfortable clothes—a child’s clothes. Tomorrow night, she would be wearing the robes of an insula initiate.

After tomorrow, she thought with a glow, everything will be very different.



It is a nation of nobodies, this Cassaforte—hopped-up peasants and tradesmen who, for no discernible reason, have assumed the responsibilities of aristocracy while shedding none of the trappings of their less-than-humble beginnings.

—COMTE WILLIAM DEVANE, TRAVELS SUNDRY &
WIDE BEYOND THE AZURITE CHANNEL



The yawn that Risa let loose threatened to split her head wide open. So gaping was it that she wouldn't have been surprised if someone had attempted to chuck pistachios inside (as children would be doing with oversized Pulcinella heads at the street fairs later that day). "What time is it?" she asked, as Fita pulled and prodded her down the stairs outside their residence.

"Five o'clock." The housekeeper was as grim at this early hour as at any other, Risa noticed.

"In the *morning*?"

"The kitchen maids are awake and at work much earlier than this," Fita informed her charge, with another poke at her spine.

Risa was barely able to see the steps. The housekeeper had yanked her out of bed without any ceremony whatsoever—no sweet rolls, no early morning hot milk spiced with kaffè, not even enough time to wash her face, comb her hair, or make a quick use of the chamber pot. "I'm not a kitchen maid, though."

It was, as usual, completely the wrong thing to say. "That the day should come when a cazarrina should tell me to my face that she's better than me!" clucked Fita, fussing and fretting over Risa's nightgown as they descended.

"That's not what I—! No, never mind." Risa decided that mustering an argument would take too much effort. The sheer sensation of her bare feet

slapping against the stone was jarring her awake, bit by bit. Though the early morning sky was still the color of cobalt, it was light enough that Risa could see a few of the workshop laborers carrying tightly bound bundles of wood to the furnaces. Smoke from their chimneys drifted toward the skies. The moons that had nestled so closely the night before had now parted ways and were sinking into the horizon, disappearing beyond the canals and the Azure Sea, sliver by silver sliver.

The kitchen maids might already have been up, but the birds were not. Birds had more sense. “You’re right. I’m sorry,” Risa mumbled. “I’m no better than a kitchen maid.”

“I should say not!” agreed Fita, suddenly grabbing Risa’s hand and yanking her from the bottom of the stairs in the direction of the lower bridge. “With your hair flying out every which way, you’re more like a scullery wench!”

“You didn’t give me any time to comb—!” Again, Risa had to calm herself. She tried a different tack. “Where are we going?”

“The Cazarro and the Cazarrina have summoned you.”

“For what purpose?”

“I do not presume to know the business of the Cazarro and the Cazarrina.” Fita’s lips pressed into a prim and pious line. “But I believe it has to do with receiving the king’s blessing.”

“The king!” Risa was astonished. King Alessandro had been ill for longer than she could remember. When her brother and sisters had been inducted into the insulas six years ago, and the six years before that, they had received the king’s blessing on the day before the ceremony. The Divetris had assumed, however, that given the monarch’s infirmity, he wouldn’t be making an appearance for Risa and Petro.

She now saw where Fita was leading her. They had trekked to the top of the old stone stairs leading from the end of the lower bridge to the lowest point of Caza Divetri—a wooden dock jutting out into the sea, where tradesmen could deliver the consumables and goods necessary for the workshops and day-to-day functions of the household. Her parents were already down there, wandering about on the dock’s broad expanse.

“Risa, my darling, I’ve told you a hundred times not to run down those steps,”

her mother called before Risa's feet had even planted themselves on the wood. "You'll dash your brains out."

"She doesn't *have* any brains to dash out." Petro stood with his arms around Giulia, head buried against their mother's velvet gown. His heart wasn't in the jibe, as he was even more sleepy than Risa. Everyone seemed weary and worn at this early hour, Risa noticed. Though Giulia was as lovely as ever in soft maroons and yellows, Risa recognized the gown she wore as one of her morning garments, plush and comfortable and rarely seen outside her bedchambers. Petro had made some kind of effort to put on breeches and a shirt, but the latter was untucked and generous enough to come nearly to his knees.

"I'm too tired to kick you," Risa told her brother, joining him in hugging their mother, more for sheer physical support than affection. "Fita said the king was coming."

"Not the king. The prince."

"Prince Berto?" Risa opened her eyes fully. Some early morning mist remained hovering over the sea. "Really? So we're to have the royal blessing after all?"

"It was a surprise to us," said her mother. From the wry tone to her voice, Risa suddenly realized that Giulia was as inconvenienced as she was.

"Silly woman!" Ero was accustomed to being awake so early. He wore his daily work outfit—a plain shirt, heavy boots, sturdy thick trousers, and a massive gray apron tied multiple times around his substantial middle. "Complaining about a visit from the royal family! Wouldn't you like to see your children begin their education at the insulas with as much good fortune as the gods could shower down upon them?" The tart look that Giulia shot him was apparently reply enough. "I know you don't like Prince Berto ..."

"What I don't like," said Giulia, stroking Petro's hair, "is how he keeps everyone in the dark about his father's health. The Buonochios were always very close to Alessandro."

In her confusion and sleepiness, Risa had not noticed that Fredo had come down to the dock with everyone else. Unlike the rest of the family, he was dressed in his holiday best—almost as if he'd gone to bed in his shiniest boots and embroidered surcoat, the bow of his shirt neatly tied around his neck. He

stood at its far end, staring out and to the east, where the inkiness of the sky was lessening.

“Cousin! I think I see the barca,” Fredo announced, commanding Ero’s attention. Her father crossed the dock to look.

Giulia, however, still appeared worried. “Oh, dear.” She forced Petro to stand on his own and attempted to smooth down his hair. Spotting a smudge of something, she withdrew a handkerchief from one of her pockets, licked it, and began to wipe off his face. Petro tolerated the attention with half-closed eyes.

When Giulia wheeled on her daughter with the self-moistened handkerchief outstretched, Risa had to put her foot down. “No thank you!” she insisted, backing away with both hands in the air. “I’ll fix myself.”

“Well, do what you can,” said her mother, vaguely.

“Which won’t be much,” muttered Fita as she finally reached the bottom of the steps and wandered up to them.

The insinuation wasn’t lost on Risa. She ran her fingers through her hair and attempted to gather it as neatly as she could in the back. Her nightgown would have to do; though not fancily trimmed or anywhere near as well-made as her more formal dresses, it was at least neat and plain and presentable, in that it covered her from neck to foot. Perhaps she could conceal most of herself behind Petro. The idea sounded good enough to her sleep-fogged brain, so she joined her family as they gathered at the end of the dock.

Fredo had been correct. Though she hadn’t seen it before in the darkness, the palace’s famous barcinoro was nearing at an astonishing rate. Its base was the length of perhaps ten to twelve gondolas. Unlike an ordinary barca, it had been gilded from its stern to the prow that curved up and out of the water; a fat cherub adorned the ferro projecting from its nose. Even in the dawn’s modest beginnings, it seemed to gleam and radiate its way along the shoreline. All but the very back of the boat was covered by a steeply pitched roof, painted in the city’s purples and browns. The city’s banner flew from a golden standard at the top. Instead of relying on a lone punter, like a gondola, the king’s barcinoro moved swiftly forward thanks to the work of twelve oarsmen hidden in the hold, six to each side, whose blades swiveled through the water in perfect unison.

It was so majestic and impressive a sight that the family waited in absolute

silence as the vessel neared. The oarsmen changed the motions of their blades without any individual variation or hesitation, as neatly as any mechanical toy. The barcinoro slowed and began to turn in a counter-clockwise motion until it was parallel with the dock. As hypnotic to Risa as the smooth operation was, Petro seemed to find it boring. He let out a loud and noisy yawn.

“Respect your king and country, boy!” Fredo’s voice was savage as he reached out to pinch Petro’s waist.

Risa’s eyebrows furrowed angrily as her brother let out a shrill squeal and accidentally stepped on her toe. “That hurt!” Petro complained.

“It’s only the prince,” Risa growled at Fredo, instinctively putting her hands around Petro’s shoulders. Giulia, too, was trying to comfort her son, shushing him.

“The prince who is to be king when his father is taken by the Brother and Sister.”

Risa had her cousin on that point, and she knew it. “Not until the king formally names him his heir. Until then, he is only a prince.”

“There is no *only* when it comes to royalty,” was Fredo’s pious answer. “Any family of the blood deserves the same respect as its head.”

Risa stared at him with dislike and wondered if he really was talking about the prince, or about his own position within the caza. “Pinch someone your own size,” she warned him, “but not Petro. Not ever again.”

Their eyes locked for a moment, both combatants fierce and unyielding. “Cazarra,” he at last implored, reaching for the metal box in his pocket. “My nerves ... ”

“It is *my* nerves that concern me most at this moment, Fredo,” said Giulia, bucking up Petro with a gentle caress at the back of his neck. Her lips quirked with displeasure in Ero’s direction, for he notoriously declined to participate in any of the family squabbles that involved his cousin.

Perhaps, though, he was too busy watching the barcinoro. Two palace guards were tying it to the dock, while another two hoisted out a ramp of burnished bronze to form a sturdy bridge between dock and vessel. The barcinoro’s surface was intricately etched, but Risa was too dazzled by the proximity of the golden boat to pick out the details. Then one of the palace guards, in his deep red

uniform and long cape, stood forth from the others, cleared his throat, and declaimed, “Prince Berto, son of Alessandro, requests an audience with the family Divetri, of the Seven, on this most auspicious day.”

In return, Ero bowed his head and replied, “My family would be humbled to enjoy an audience with the prince.”

That, apparently, was their cue. The guards who had erected the ramp stepped aside, arms outstretched, to welcome them aboard the barcinoro. Ero and Giulia went first. The guards held Risa and Petro’s hands when it was their turn. Risa was secretly happy that when Cousin Fredo tried to follow, the guard on the dock held up a hand. Fredo was not allowed on the golden barcinoro; like Fita, he would have to watch from the dock. As she boarded, Risa resisted the temptation to smirk in his direction, and instead turned toward the boat’s covered bulk and waited for what was to follow.

Fortunately, they did not have to wait long. The deep purple curtains parted, their gold fringe drifting across the smooth planks of the boat.

“Bow,” Ero instructed, quietly. Giulia’s hands, resting upon her shoulder, pressured Risa down into a low curtsy. With her head inclined, Risa saw first one black boot, and then another, which quickly disappeared as Prince Berto’s ceremonial robes were lowered over them. Pools of embroidered brown velvet puddled around the man’s ankles as he came to a stop.

“Rise, family Divetri.” Prince Berto’s voice was not as deep as Risa had imagined it would be. Nor was it as commanding or, well, royal. To her ears, his nasal intonation sounded much like one of the quarrelsome merchants who made Fita’s life an annoyance trying to wring extra lundri for a shipment of lemons. “Cazarro, I trust our visit did not incommode you all.”

“Not at all, Your Eminence.” Ero bowed once again.

“I would so dislike inconveniencing so prominent a family of the Seven.” Now that she was upright again, Risa could see what the prince looked like. His nose was sharp and almost too large for his features; his brow was high and projected at a slant. There seemed to be almost no spare flesh on that face, so close was the bone beneath the skin. “But the illness of my father the king has prevented me from attending to many of my lesser, though not unimportant, duties.” The hollow caverns around his eyes made them look almost ghostly, or

as if he were the one who was sick.

“How fares your father?” asked Ero. Giulia tilted her head with interest.

The prince brought together the massive sleeves of his robes. For the first time, Risa noticed that they completely covered his hands. In fact, in those massive brown robes of state, Prince Berto looked a little like a scarecrow—a tiny, shriveled, apple-doll head stuck atop a farmer’s voluminous festival garb. Did he even have hands? There was no evidence for it.

“Sadly, I fear he is coming to the end of his days,” Berto said to Ero. His doll-head dangled forward for a moment, then rose again. “He allows only me to attend upon him, and refuses all others. As you can imagine,” he continued, addressing Risa’s mother, “it’s so very tiring.” Giulia murmured with appreciation. “What a lovely caza you keep, Cazarra,” he remarked again.

“Why, thank you, Your Eminence.” Giulia curtsied prettily once more. Risa, however, was studying Prince Berto. His unearthly eyes, dark as polished obsidian and glittering even more brightly, were looking not at her mother but at the caza above, as the slowly rising sun illuminated its walls and structures. His eyes seemed to dart from the workshop chimneys belching out their smoke, to the warm glow of the kitchen windows, to the stairs leading into the main residence, all plainly visible beyond the courtyard at the end of the lower bridge. Strangely, Risa thought she could see greed in that glance, almost as if he wanted to reach out with his hands—if he actually had hands beneath those billowing sleeves—and grab the buildings, then stow them away in the hold of his golden barcinoro.

Then his dark eyes met hers. Risa froze, suddenly aware of how intently she’d been staring at him. She felt like a mouse scavenging the storerooms, suddenly confronted by the hungry kitchen cat.

To Prince Berto, though, she was apparently nothing. He’d barely noticed her. His eyes flicked away and softened as his eyelids lowered. “Let us attend to business then, shall we?” He gestured for Risa and Petro to approach.

“Kneel down before the prince,” Giulia prompted, obviously pleased with their demure behavior so far.

Both Risa and her brother dropped to their knees, preparing to receive the blessing. Risa felt as if she were being smothered in velvet when the prince laid

his hands upon her head, but at last he stepped aside. The purple curtains parted again, and one of the palace priests stepped from inside the enclosure. While the circlet around the supplicant's head was more elaborate than the circlets of the ordinary, insula-trained priests, his blessing was definitely of the ordinary—the almost generic, mumbled sort. He seemed sleepier than anyone else.

In fact, the blessing was over so quickly that Risa was almost surprised that the prince had bothered at all. Fita lingered longer over breakfast prayers. Scarcely had their knees touched the deck than it seemed that the priest was urging them to stand once again, and the guards began ushering them all back over the shining bronze ramp onto the dock. “It has been a pleasure,” intoned the prince, “to see the family Divetri on the dawn of this special day.”

“The pleasure has been all ours, One Most High.” Cousin Fredo, reunited with the family, acted as if he'd been with them all along. “A most grand pleasure indeed.”

One of the guards undid the knot in the barcinoro's rope. “A thousand gratitudes for your visit, Your Eminence,” said Ero. Risa might have been mistaken, but she could have sworn that her father's face was as puzzled as her own at the brusqueness of their treatment. “Perhaps we will meet again soon.”

The prince's only reply was a smile. Tense and noncommittal, it seemed. Once again, however, his eyes seemed to gallop over the landscape of the caza, devouring the sight hungrily. Still holding his sleeves firmly together, he stepped back behind the curtains. A guard shouted a command. As one, the twelve invisible oarsmen dipped their blades into the water and the vessel slid away, propelling itself in the direction of Caza Catarre.

“Well!” said Giulia, once the barcinoro was out of earshot. “The cheek!”

“Now, love,” said Ero, already calming the tempest he knew was coming.

“I'm surprised he came at all, since he couldn't be bothered to give the children a blessing himself!”

“The prince is a busy man,” said Cousin Fredo, watching the Barcinoro disappear to the southwest.

“He does have other cazas to visit,” Ero added, still trying to placate his wife. He ruffled Risa's already messy hair. “Ours are not the only children receiving a scrutiny today. What did you think of the prince, little lionkit?”

Cousin Fredo sighed, his shoulders slumped. “A fine man, didn’t you think?” No. Risa didn’t think that at all. “He was interesting,” she admitted.

For a moment she thought about sharing her uneasy feelings, but she was distracted by the sight of her brother. He had pulled up the collar of his shirt until it covered his mouth and nose, and pulled his hands inside the cuffs. All she could see of him were his ears, bulging eyes, and hair. “Risa, look!” he said from underneath the fabric. “I’m Prince Berto!”

Risa’s special day might have started hours earlier than she’d intended, but now that it was here, she couldn’t help but be excited. Her mouth twitched at her brother’s clowning, and then she laughed. “For the love of Lena, don’t let Fredo see you!” she warned him, scampering in his direction.

Poor Cousin Fredo, still peering after the golden vessel. He seemed to be the only Divetri who had truly appreciated the royal visit.



As every object has its intended purpose, let the sons and daughters of the Seven and Thirty discover the purposes for which they were born within the walls of two insulas. Whether they learn the trades of their families, achieve scholarship, or pursue monastic lives, the end result will be civil stability and a blossoming of the arts.

—ALLYRIA CASSAMAGI TO KING NIVOLO OF
CASSAFORTE, FROM A PRIVATE LETTER IN THE
CASSAMAGI ARCHIVES



Blue and green banners flew from every window of Caza Divetri later that day. Leaning over the rail of her chamber balcony, Risa watched as servants decorated the tops of the canal walls with bunting. Gaily arrayed were the servant docks below, where bobbed a dozen gondolas. The day even smelled festive. From the kitchens wafted so many fragrances that it was difficult to identify one before it was replaced by another. Duck. Roast pork. Red snapper baked in lemon juice, its insides stuffed with sliced roast apples. Crushed olives. A fruit tart. Baked custards. A hundred delicacies for the feast to be served after the Scrutiny.

If she leaned out and peered around the corner, Risa could see Caza Divetri's two bridges to the mainland. The higher one was the grander of the two; it stretched from a piazza in Cassaforte to the gracious formal courtyard of the caza. The lower bridge was usually used by merchants and craftsmen, for it traveled more directly to the stable yard. Bell-arrayed vendors marched along the bridges and canal walls selling pomegranates and sugared apples, or comic broadsides printed with songs and poems.

Everywhere Risa looked, she saw that the capital city had donned its finest for the Festival of the Two Moons. Caza Catarre flew their red and green family colors as well as the purple and brown banners of the city. From the windows of the less wealthy homes and tiny shops that lined the canals and streets flew colorful streamers and paper flags. The Sorrendi family had gone to elaborate extremes for the occasion, arranging enormous displays of summer flora in boxes hanging from each window. The Sorrendis were of the Thirty—the most elite families in all of Cassaforte, save for the Seven of the Cazas—and thus were allowed to display the family arms above their door. Even now, Sorrendi servants hung out of an upper-story window, polishing the impressive brass crest. When the midday sun streamed into the piazza, it would shine proudly.

A servant squawked, pressing herself against the wall as Risa dashed down the stairs into the pillared room where the family was eating a late breakfast. Her feet slapped over the cool black and white marble. “It’s here!” she sang at the top of her lungs. The wild animal inside her burst free of confinement, and she leapt with joy alongside it. “It’s finally here!” she cried.

Her mother, who was laughing as she used a tiny spoon to put grape pits on a flat glass plate, held out an arm. “Restrain yourself, my love. We have company.”

Not the prince again, surely. Whirling, Risa found herself facing a large, handsome stranger wearing a silvery helmet. He grinned at her. “Romeldo!” she yelled, as the man’s features resolved into familiarity.

“By Muro, is that little Risa?” her oldest brother exclaimed. “Bare feet and all?”

With sudden self-consciousness, Risa looked down at her uncovered feet and legs. Only when he began to chuckle did she realize he was joking. Relaxed once more, she launched herself at him with a mighty hug, knocking her brow against his ceremonial headdress. “What are you doing here?”

Romeldo had been chosen by the moon god twelve years before, when he was fifteen. Though he still lived at the insula, soon he would be coming back to the caza daily to begin assuming his duties as heir. Risa had only been four years old when he left. She scarcely remembered a time when her brother had not worn the yellow robes of the Children of Muro.

“Why, I’m to scrutinize my brother. And you as well, you imp,” Romeldo answered her. “It would be a neat trick if Mira is the scrutineer for the Penitents, this festival. Is she coming?”

“She will be here, but not to scrutinize.” Ero bit into his toasted bread. “One of the Settecordi family will be performing the ritual.”

“Renaldo Settecordi of the upper Thirty? I know him.”

Ero snapped his fingers. “The very one.”

Romeldo wrinkled his nose at Risa. “We had a rivalry at bocce. Of course, I won. Why are you still here, devil girl? Shouldn’t you be busy dressing in your festival finery, Lady Barefoot Nightgown?”

Risa grinned at her new title. “But I’ve barely seen you!”

“You’ll see plenty of me at the feast. And don’t you *dare* make me laugh during the ceremony, young miss!” Romeldo winked at her. He reminded Risa of Ero in so many ways, from the long red-brown curls covering his head to his broad shoulders and confident nature. “What news is there of the king?” he asked his mother.

“I’m fashioning a new window for one of his chambers,” Giulia said, sweeping her long dark hair back over her shoulder. “But though I’ve been given the dimensions, I’ve not been allowed in the room to see where it’s to go.”

“It has been over a year since anyone has seen King Alessandro!” Ero shook his head.

“We saw the prince this morning,” Risa told Romeldo. He looked at her with surprise.

“For the blessing. He was not very forthcoming with details of his father’s health.” Giulia sniffed, obviously still put out by their abrupt treatment earlier that morning.

Risa reached up to her brother’s head to adjust the headdress she’d made crooked. Romeldo spared her a friendly grin and fixed it himself before returning to the conversation at hand. “He has ailed for too long! Can no physicians heal him?”

“Not if he refuses to see them,” said Giulia. “Or if the prince refuses to admit them.”

“Now, Giulia.” Ero might have been trying to shush his wife before her

speculations grew out of hand, but Risa privately agreed with her mother. The prince did seem shifty. “The Olive Crown has granted Alessandro a long and prosperous life. It may be that he is simply ready to step into Muro’s chariot and join his forefathers on the plains of the ascended. Now, child,” he added to Risa, “run along, lest someone suspect you of trying to sway the opinion of our scrutineer.”

“Only Cousin Fredo would suspect that,” said Risa, not bothering to hide her scorn.

Her father’s smile faded. “Our cousin is a good man. It’s not his fault my uncle’s ill-chosen marriage caused Fredo to be born outside the Seven and Thirty. He is still a competent craftsman and a Divetri, and as such demands your respect.”

Her mother looked at the fruits on her plate. Romeldo averted his eyes to gaze through the pillars at the fountain splashing quietly in the sunlight. With a certainty she dared not speak, Risa knew they did not share her father’s high opinion of nerve-wracked Fredo. Still, she lowered her head. “I’m sorry, Papa,” she growled, trying to sound as if she actually meant the apology.

A sigh escaped from Ero’s lips. “When you were born, I thought I would have my little girl forever.” He gave her an impulsive hug that squeezed the breath from her. “Today is the day I lose you, little lionkit. You’ll forget all about us once you’re gone, I warrant.”

All her excitement of the last week and all the anticipation for her new life could never erase the knowledge that she was leaving her parents. “You’ll never lose me,” she promised in a whisper. Moisture began to wick at the corners of her eyes. “Not ever. I’ll make you proud, I swear. I’ll always be a Divetri.”

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