



A NOVEL

—
*A Cinderella tale of
deception and mystery*
—

What is Hidden

LAUREN SKIDMORE

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SWEETWATER
BOOKS

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ONE



“*I* CAN FEEL YOU STARING AT ME,” I said, not bothering to look up from my work. I was putting the finishing flourishes on a particularly complex design and didn’t want to lose my place. I’d been up since dawn working on this mask. The early morning sun provided the perfect lighting through my window, and hearing the soft cadence of the canal waters greeting its walls and the distant calls of the seagulls relaxed me. The mask—a doctor’s—was extremely intricate, and it wasn’t often that my father trusted me to do this kind of work, even if I was out of my apprenticeship. My father might be a well-respected artisan, but I still needed to prove myself. Our family didn’t have generations behind its name to rely on as other mask makers did.

I needed all the calm the early morning could afford to give me.

“You can’t feel a stare, Evie,” my intruder said. Aiden.

“I can feel yours,” I retorted.

My friend laughed, his voice filling the room. I sighed and put down the paintbrush, casting a forlorn look at the mask in front of me. I wasn’t going to get any more work done now. Although, as far as intruders went, they couldn’t get much better than Aiden. I felt like I’d known him forever, though it had been only a few years. After one fateful day by the canals when I’d saved him from being hopelessly lost, he wormed his way into becoming my best friend without me realizing it until it was too late. The scoundrel.

“Can I help you with something?” I asked, turning to him.

“It’s the first of the month,” he said.

“Why, yes it is. Congratulations,” I teased. “I’m glad to know some of you nobles are able to keep track of what day it is.”

“You said you would take me to the market,” he pleaded, ignoring my gibe and shifting from foot to foot like an excited puppy.

“What are you, twelve? You’ve been to the market before.”

“Yes, but I’ve been in so many never-ending lectures and meetings lately I feel like I’m going to die of boredom.”

“Are these educational lectures or have you been caught sneaking out at night again?”

His face was the picture of indignant innocence for only a few seconds before it split into a wide grin. “I might have stolen a few pies from the kitchen.”

“A few?”

“Fine. A half dozen and then eaten myself sick. That doesn’t really matter.” He waited patiently for me to finish laughing before continuing. “They were really good pies.”

“I should hope so.” I pushed away from my desk to hang up the mask to dry and clean my brushes. “Let me finish here and then we can go.”

A short while later, Aiden led the way to the part of town where the one-manned stall boats of the markets lined the canal waters on one side and the more permanent shops on the other, each one fighting to be more brightly colored than the last. Space was limited, and the narrow storefronts did what they could to get noticed. My favorite sweets shop had a giant dog statue I’d loved to climb on when I was a child, and it smelled like sugar and fried dough.

My own Akita dog, Hachi, trotted alongside us, tail wagging, seemingly glad we weren’t taking a water taxi. The little beast always cowered under my skirts anytime we set foot on a boat of any size. It was a bit inconvenient since Venesia was known for two things: the masks we were never seen without and its canals. The canals criss-crossed in a grid pattern across the city, and boats were the primary mode of transportation.

“Come on, Evie. Let’s cut through the Naked Square.” He tugged my arm, and I made a disgusted face at his nickname for the place where the criminals were punished. “What?” he asked. “That’s what it is. Why call it anything else?”

“I don’t know. I just don’t like that name.” It was a fitting enough name, true, but something about it always rubbed me the wrong way.

The official name was the Square of the Accused and the Punished, but most people just called it the Square or, like Aiden, the Naked Square. Its

nickname came from the most common form of punishment: a criminal would have his mask and clothes stripped from him and be chained to a wall or placed in the stocks in the middle of the square. Depending on the severity of the crime, he would also be Marked. For petty crimes, the scar from the hot iron brand could be easily covered with a mask or piece of clothing, but the especially serious cases were more painful in the branding method and more difficult to keep concealed by the masks we wear.

“So are we going or not?” Aiden prompted when he saw I wasn’t following him.

“You know I don’t like going that way.”

“I heard the prince is supposed to make an appearance,” he said slyly, as if that would tempt me at all.

“So? He’ll be covered from head to foot, as always.”

Aiden’s shoulders slumped. “Normally I’d be happy that you weren’t like the girls that fawn over him, but of course the one time it’d be easier for me if you were average, you have to be as contrary and stubborn as always.”

I flashed him a wide grin. “I do what I can. Why do you want to go so badly, anyway?”

He groaned. “I just want to make sure no one I know is on the block.”

“Really? Is that a common concern of yours?” I asked, a little alarmed.

“No, but you never know who you’ll find. Maybe that idiot who keeps shortchanging my man on boots finally got caught.”

I sighed. “Fine. Have it your way. Just don’t let any recent release grab me or anything, okay?”

He snaked an arm around my waist, pulled me obnoxiously close, squared his shoulders, and winked at me. “Nobody would dare.”

I laughed and rolled my eyes as I pushed him a respectable distance away. “Get off me. Everyone knows your bark is worse than your bite. I’d be better off with just Hachi.”

The dog whined and looked up at me with big brown eyes. I dropped a kiss to his head and scratched behind his ears. “You’re a big, strong dog. You could protect me, couldn’t you?”

He wagged his plush tail and barked, appeased. I looked back at Aiden, my chin raised expectantly. He simply rolled his eyes.

“Fine,” he said, sighing. “I can see when my services aren’t wanted.”

As we crossed a canal on the bright red bridge leading to the Square, I could hear shouts and cheers amid the sounds of trumpets and the beat of

taiko drums. The prince was about to arrive.

We quickly scrambled closer to get a look; for all I protested and teased Aiden, I did want to catch a glimpse. I stood on my tiptoes when the crowd prevented us from moving any further, and I used Aiden's shoulder to keep my balance. I knew exactly when he spotted the prince, because I felt his muscles tense.

"There he is," he said through clenched teeth, pointing.

I wondered at his sudden change of attitude but was sidetracked by the display before us.

The prince was covered in white from head to toe. White was the symbol of royalty—no one else could afford to bleach the masks so pale or keep their clothes so spotless. His face was completely obscured by the snow-white mask and a piece of fabric was draped over the back of his head. The rest of his clothes were extravagant and covered every inch of his skin—it was forbidden for anyone outside of the royal family to see him. His name (as well as the names of the other members of the royal family) was kept secret. They were simply known as the king, queen, prince, or princess. If their names were ever revealed, I wasn't privy to such an occasion.

To even make a public appearance like this was unusual.

His mask, though, was beautiful. I couldn't call myself an artisan if I didn't notice the workmanship. It was a wonderfully delicate porcelain, with the purest white swan feathers at each eye, and lined with diamonds and pearls. I would give my right hand to watch something like that be created.

The royal family's masks were made in the palace by the finest artisans and with the finest materials. Even though I was a mask maker myself, it was extremely unlikely that I'd ever witness such a process.

I couldn't tell much about the prince himself. He carried himself aggressively and was tall and wiry, but I couldn't even tell the color of his eyes or hair because they were both covered. I wouldn't be able to pick him out of a crowd if he wore normal clothing.

"You think he ever dresses like a regular person and just walks around town?" I asked, my mind still admiring the workmanship of the mask.

"Don't be ridiculous," Aiden scoffed. "As if he'd have the time or the inclination. Would you ever want to leave that palace?" Venesia wasn't a poor nation by any means, but nothing of the city matched the luxury of the palace.

“I guess not,” I murmured, trying to get a better look. I wished I had a chance to wear masks like that. My own mask was predominately green, to match my trade and rank as an artisan, and made of simple mâché. Its intricate designs marketed my skills and flattered the oval shape of my face. It covered a modest amount, from my hairline to below my cheekbones.

Suddenly the crowd began shushing each other, and people shifted in front of me until I could see the prince as he raised his hands for silence. He didn’t speak, of course. The only ones to hear a member of the royal family speak were the royal family members themselves and one designated Speaker appointed from court.

The Speaker stood next to the prince. She wore a full mask as well, but her eyes were not shrouded like the prince’s. Pearls and crushed crystal formed a winding design around her dark eyes, and the sheer lavender fabric that secured her mask created a lovely contrast against her inky curls and brown skin.

As the crowd fell silent, the Speaker’s voice rang out strong and clear. This was a voice that possessed the commanding quality that demanded you drop everything and listen—and obey, if you knew what was good for you.

“As you have gathered”—she spoke without introductions, as they were completely unnecessary—“the Crown feels it must make the public aware of a precarious situation. They have chosen this location to announce it, because they feel it will travel quickest by the mouths and ears that pay attention to the execution of our laws, be it for moral reasons or other.” She gave no inflection to indicate that she meant the gossips and busybodies that had nothing better to do than hang about the Square in search of a scandal, but the whispers and giggles that coursed through the crowd made it quite clear that they caught the underlying message.

“The situation is thus: a criminal named the Chameleon is on the loose,” she continued, despite the whispers that sprung up again. “He has many masks to his name and uses them to assume the identities of victims or simple fraudulent characters. I am sure you can imagine the dangers in that alone, but there is more. He is not a mask maker gone rogue—he burns the houses of his victims and steals the masks and anything else of value. His preference leans toward full masks of respected ranks and positions. He then uses the stolen mask long enough to escape and then destroys it or uses it to plan his next attack.

“And so it is our duty to warn you and to urge you to warn everyone you know. Do not trust the masks alone. If you have any information, please take it to the authorities at once. You will know it is him by the Mark on his face.” She nodded toward the obsidian-faced militia that accompanied her. One man hung a poster on a wall on the east side of the Square filled with other posters and announcements, presumably with a drawing of the Mark and other details for those who could read. The poster was so large that it covered three others. “That is all. Long live the Crown.”

With that, she turned to the prince, ready to leave. The prince looked out at the crowd, nodded in our direction, and then disappeared from my view.

“Wow,” I said, turning to Aiden. “I’m glad I listened to you for once. What do you make of all that?”

His shoulders were still remarkably tense as he stared after the retreating forms of the prince and his party. “I suppose I’ll have to keep you even closer,” he finally said, the tension between us vanishing as he grinned down at me. “Can’t have someone trying to imitate my lady here.”



TWO



THE CARAVAN MARKET OF VENESIA was a kaleidoscope of color. Bright banners, sails, and flags burst from the large ships in the usually scarcely populated harbor set aside for trade, each doing its best to draw attention to itself and pull in the wandering eyes and purses. Each boat became a store and each dock a storefront as the merchants and townspeople descended upon the fresh merchandise. To advertise its wares, each boat used a flag—emerald green for the commercial goods and artistry, crimson red for farmed food from other islands, and cerulean blue for anything out of the sea. Our small island was famous for this market.

Each individual boat was decorated from front to back and top to bottom with more specific signs of what the seller had to offer. As I navigated through the canals and walked along the piers with Hachi trotting at my heels, we passed ships dedicated to foreign books, pets, fruits, and other delicacies. Unlike the smaller boats farther in the city that only sold a particular item or two, such as food or the odd trinket, these ships were stocked close to bursting with everything imaginable.

“So,” Aiden asked, sounding more upbeat. He seemed to have shaken off whatever had put him in a sour mood when he saw the prince. “What’s on the list today?”

“You’re not going to talk about the announcement?” Gossip was already washing over the crowd around us like a tsunami. I could hear snippets of conversation as we walked, each more paranoid than the last.

“No. There’s nothing we can do, and I came here to enjoy myself today,” he said, squaring his shoulders. “What’s on the list?” he repeated.

“Mostly pieces for the balls next month. You know, the usual—peacock feathers, ribbons, maybe some swan feathers. Anything sparkly. That sort of thing.”

He nodded. “My sister is all about the swan feathers right now. Makes the mask appear lighter than it is and all of that.”

“And we both know how people will do anything to make the color lighter.” The lighter the color, the more expensive the dye and, consequently, the higher the wearer’s rank.

“Yeah, she’s funny like that.” I thought he was about to go into a bit of a rant about her, but he didn’t say anything more. He found a stick alongside the road to throw for Hachi. He had one younger sister, who was only a few years his junior, but I’d never met her. It was clear he cared a lot about her, though; I could hear it in his voice. She might annoy him to death, but he’d do anything for her.

If I thought about it, that could describe our relationship as well. Not that we had a *relationship*, per se.

“All right, let’s get to shopping, then.” I led the way into the cluster of green-flagged shops dedicated to the fineries I was interested in seeing, to distract both myself and my eager companion.

Aiden hovered like he always did, watching me like a hawk as we entered the hull of a ship filled with spools upon spools of ribbon. Once the ships arrived in port, all the cargo was unloaded inside of the ship itself and displayed for customers there. The cargo hold was small and musky, but every inch was covered in fine ribbons from a city in the north famous for its fine weaving.

I took my time, picking out a lovely shimmering pale blue ribbon that was sure to be popular among the older girls looking to catch a suitor’s eye. Aiden laughed when I explained my purchase and promptly found a similarly eye-catching spool of emerald green.

I tried not to look too excited as I accepted it and wondered, not for the first time, why he was hanging around. He told me once that he was going to take over his father’s business, though he never really got into specifics of what that business was exactly. Most sons followed their father’s trade. Even I followed my father’s, though I wasn’t a son. I also didn’t know why Aiden wasn’t already in that business; he had to be roughly eighteen, the same age as me, if not a little older. While his mask was predominately the purple of the nobility, it had green trim, so I knew his trade had to be artistry of some sort, but he always claimed talking about it bored him and would quickly change the subject. I could tell he was keeping something

from me, but I felt awkward pestering him about it, so I let him keep his secrets. He was nobility—he was born with secrets.

Regardless of who he was, I knew he enjoyed watching me barter for trinkets and materials and bemoaned the fact that he wouldn't have my "feminine wiles" to assist him when it was his turn to do the shopping.

"You're ridiculous," I told him as we left another boat shop with my purchases in my basket, which Aiden politely carried. His lips were pressed tightly together in a poor attempt not to laugh.

He surrendered and laughed loudly. "*I'm* ridiculous? You're the one who's all 'Please, sir, I'd really appreciate it,' and 'You'd do that for *me*, sir?' with your big green eyes, and being too pretty for your own good."

"I'm going to use every tool I have if it means getting a good deal!" I defended myself, feeling my face redden in embarrassment. "If you're just tailing me for a show, I'm not going to tell you when I'm going next time. You can go learn from someone else. Or not all, for all I care," I threatened.

He laughed again. "Right. Like you could ever hide from me."

I shoved his shoulder with mine and quickened my pace. That was another annoying thing about Aiden—he had this uncanny knack of being able to find anyone or anything. I once lost my favorite necklace—a small circular locket that I wore nearly every day—and searched for it for days before I enlisted his help. He turned up with it the very next day. A similar thing happened when the little boy down the street went missing; as soon as Aiden was alerted and joined in the search, the boy was found in a matter of hours.

"One of these days I'll elude you," I said. "And who'll be laughing then?"

"You'd do that? Hide from me and then laugh at me?" His dark eyes went into a full puppy-dog pout, and I shoved him away from me, giggling.

"I laugh at you every day. What makes you think I'd do anything else?" I grinned, and he couldn't help but chuckle.

"Fair enough," he conceded and draped an arm over my shoulder to steer me toward the fishing docks. "Now let's get some food. It's time for me to toughen up and get all this shopping out of my system."

"Yes, because nothing says 'toughen up' like shopping."

"Hush up. For that, *you* can pay. *And* carry everything. This basket isn't light, you know."

I rolled my eyes and took the basket from him. “It isn’t that heavy—you’re just pampered.” He made a sound of protest and immediately snatched the basket back. I grinned. “Besides, didn’t you already have something to eat?”

He chose to ignore me and, grabbing me by the wrist, dragged me toward a stall selling spiced nuts. While he tried to charm the old woman running it, I wandered off to look at some lace offered in other stalls. I liked using lace in my own masks; it added softness to a look that was often too severe.

“Hey, Evie!” Aiden’s voice broke through my internal designing, and I turned to see him jogging down the boardwalk.

“Hey,” I reluctantly said as he stopped to catch his breath, panting slightly. “A little out of shape there,” I teased.

He scowled at me. His attempt to express displeasure with me was somewhat lessened in severity when he couldn’t stop panting. “You were supposed to wait for me,” he accused.

I rolled my eyes. I might have wandered farther than I’d intended, but I was still perfectly safe. “I’m not going to be attacked in broad daylight, and Hachi will catch any cutpurses before they get too close.”

Aiden glared at the dog leaning against my skirts; Hachi simply wagged his brown and white brush of a tail and cocked his head. “Traitor,” Aiden muttered, ruffling the patch of hair between Hachi’s ears. Hachi closed his eyes and leaned against Aiden’s hand, his white face the picture of bliss, and I was struck by how envious I could be of the fur ball.

Not that I wanted Aiden ruffling my black curls. Granted, he was good looking—all tall, dark, and handsome, with dark curly hair and deep brown eyes peeking out from behind his lavender mask, and with no shortage of girls lusting after him—but I felt like I didn’t know him sometimes. He had a peculiar way of disappearing for days at a time. He was like a stray cat that way, appearing for only a hot meal or some company and then disappearing into the night. Who knew when he would simply disappear forever?

Yet somehow he knew me better than anyone else.

I cleared my throat. “I thought you were looking for me, not my dog,” I said, trying to shake my mind from that train of thought.

“I don’t know. You’re being mean to me today. Hachi here always loves me.”

I rolled my eyes. “Then I’ll just leave you two alone and get on with my day.”

He gave Hachi a final scratch before falling into step beside me. “Nope, you can’t get rid of me that easily.” He crunched his way through a handful of spiced nuts and asked, “Any other errands to run today?”

“I need to go to the palace to visit Iniga,” I said, digging around in his hand for a chestnut that wasn’t half burnt.

“Is she going to attempt to teach you again?”

I laughed. “Not in the slightest. Her advice on that venture was to stick to my strengths with the ready-made materials and leave the glass-throwing and weaving to those more inclined to the trade.”

“Were you really that bad?”

“I burned myself at least twice. I still have a scar on my thumb. Look.” I held out my hand for him to inspect, turning it so he could see the pale sliver of a scar at the base of my thumb on my left hand.

“Poor thing,” he said. I could tell he was trying not to laugh at me, though, and I jerked my hand out of his.

“She said the maskers in the castle have been working with her on making something new for the harvest balls,” I said. “I wanted to see how that was going. I’ve been hearing rumors of masks made out of glass. Can you imagine?”

“I can imagine the scandal if that were true. No respectable nobleman is going to let his daughter out in a mask that doesn’t actually cover anything up!”

“Exactly . . . which is why I’m dying to know what she’s working on.”



THREE



DESPITE HACHI'S WHINES AT RIDING the water taxi, Aiden paid for one to take us to the market place by the palace. Once we arrived, it didn't take long to find our friend. Iniga had a nice stall by the entrance, a prized spot of land at the market where the nobles spent their time. The market by the pier might be more famous, and the small stall shops in the canals more accessible, but this was where the expensive luxuries were sold. It also smelled better. If I hadn't known Iniga since before she was a prized glass artisan to the king, I would never have been able to afford anything sold here. Even now I didn't like to take advantage of her generosity, and my purchases from her were few and far between.

Her stall was made of pale bamboo from the north, large enough to comfortably fit maybe ten men inside at once, and three sided with the opening facing the stone street between the canal and the other stall. Covered with a green cloth roof, the stall displayed her family's coat of arms—three plum blossoms inside of a circle—on a flag outside. She'd also painted the walls with elaborate designs, and her skill with a brush was obvious.

When we spotted her, Iniga was chatting with a well-dressed man with gray in his hair and purple in his mask—a nobleman. She laughed at something he said, tossing her sleek black hair over her shoulder. She was still young enough to wear her long hair down and wasn't afraid of using it to her advantage.

Unlike me, though, she genuinely liked mixing flirting with business. Her smile didn't look forced, and she touched the man's arm as she spoke emphatically.

"Now what is all this talk about glass masks I've been hearing?" I heard the man ask as Aiden and I approached. "My daughter speaks of nothing

else these days. Is it really true?"

Iniga grinned. "You know that foreigner from Saran? The one that was introduced in court last month? He's an amazing thrower and has been teaching me all these new tricks, and I think we've been putting them to good use. Come and see," she said as she ducked into her stall.

The man followed eagerly, and Aiden and I slipped in behind him, sharing an excited look. Hachi, bored with all the talking, ran off to bark at pigeons that fluttered around the canal's edge.

Inside, Iniga carefully lifted a mask from two pegs on the wall and placed it on a piece of velvet on the wooden counter. Then she announced, "This is what all the talk is about."

"Would you look at that," the man breathed, and I sucked in a breath as well once I got a good look at it.

The mask was pure, clear glass and looked like it was carved out of ice. Even as it sat on the velvet, it looked as if it would melt or shatter by the slightest touch.

"Now, this isn't a finished mask," Iniga was quick to explain. "Obviously we'll add colors to make it opaque or affix some kind of backing so the skin won't be bare. For now we're working on the form and shape of it, and looking to see what interest there is."

"I'm interested," I whispered to Aiden, who chuckled.

"I'm sure you won't have any trouble finding buyers," the man said, his eyes wide. "My girl is sixteen and tells me that this new mask is what all the court is talking about."

"I'm honored." Iniga curtsied, smiling widely with a touch of blush in her flawless dark skin. "You'll have to meet Joch—he's the one responsible for the craze."

"I will indeed. Are you taking requests for the balls?"

"Unfortunately, we've already received more requests than we can handle," she said, her shoulders drooping. "Their majesties have been curious, as well as generous."

The man sighed. "I understand. I hope you'll think of me when the next season starts and you have an opening?" He slipped a silver coin into her palm as he kissed her hand in farewell.

She smiled. "I will do what I can, *signore*."

As he departed through the stall opening, Iniga cheerfully greeted us. "I assume you're here to learn about these masks as well?"

“Of course! Look at it!” I gushed. “How did you manage to make such a thing?”

She laughed. “I can’t go telling you all my secrets.”

Aiden and I laughed in return. “As if you could ever keep a secret. How long did it take before the whole island knew you had a new glass master to learn from?”

She blushed. “It’s not my fault. I was excited. And it wasn’t really a secret—everyone would have found out eventually.”

“I’m just teasing. Even if you did teach me your magic with glass, I wouldn’t be able to do anything with the knowledge.”

“Ah, I remember all too well,” she said with a sparkle in her eye. “How is your hand?”

“Just fine, thank you very much,” I snipped and glared at Aiden, who was laughing at me again.

“Any chance we’ll get to meet this mysterious foreigner?” I asked as Aiden sobered up.

“I’ve met him, actually,” he said. “Not a talkative fellow.”

“He’s just serious about his work,” Iniga said. “He’s also still adjusting to living here, I think. He seems a bit overwhelmed with court life.”

“That’s understandable,” Aiden said. “I’ve had enough fittings this past month to last me a lifetime.”

A trickle of jealousy ran through me. Both Aiden and Iniga were out in court, and I was not. They never seemed to mind the difference in stations between us, but times like this reminded me of my standing. I was just an artisan, even if I was a good one. Aiden was a nobleman’s son. Iniga was a nobleman’s daughter and a gifted artisan—possibly the best on the island—even though she was only a year older than me.

And she was observant too. She glanced nervously at Aiden as she noticed my silence. “Evie,” she said suddenly, “I have just the thing for you. I know you’re a lost cause when it comes to glass, but I have a few palace masks you might want to look at.”

“Oh?”

“Yes, they were given to me to try to repair or take to pieces if there was no saving them. I don’t have to return them for several days. Maybe you’d like to take a look at them?”

She knew I wouldn’t be able to resist. “Of course! What’s wrong with them?”

“Some maids were clumsy and spilled wine on the silk. I needed to either cover the stains or replace the fabric, and it looks like it’ll be the latter. Actually,” she said, brightening, “would you like to try your hand at that? I’ll pay you for your work, of course.”

“You know I’d do it for free for you.” I couldn’t help but smile. “And don’t pay me at all if you just have to do the work all over again.”

She waved that comment aside and assured me that I’d be fine. “They’re just serving masks, nothing too fancy. Come with me, and I’ll go get them right now. Aiden, do you mind watching my stall?”

“Not at all. I’d like to look at what else you’ve got in here anyway.” He’d drifted off to study a mask that looked like it was carved entirely out of mahogany and painted with a glossy finish of some sort.

“And keep an eye on Hachi. Make sure he doesn’t fall in the canal,” I said, scanning the crowd for my dog. He was still by the water’s edge, his tail wagging as he jumped around. He seemed to have attracted the affection of a small boy, who was cheering and clapping at him as his nurse haggled over a fine tunic.

Iniga took me by the wrist and led the way into the palace. The guards at the gate didn’t even give her a second glance. They already knew her mask and her business well enough, and her presence was enough to let me through as well. This part of the palace was the servants and artisans’ work quarters anyway, and guards were posted along the hallways and at the entrances to workrooms. If we’d gone by the main gate or even the gate that led to nobles’ housing, we probably would have been stopped or questioned.

Other maids and servants were milling around us. I had to nearly jog to keep up with Iniga’s quick pace. I had never been inside the palace before, and I felt like Iniga might be up to something.

She greeted a handful of maids gossiping outside her workroom and waved at the guard, who nodded in return.

“Here we are,” she announced, pushing the heavy door open for me.

Her workroom was clean, though clearly well used. Large containers and bags were everywhere, though I didn’t know what was in them. Two large furnaces were also there with piles of coal and stacks of wood nearby. I spied several long wooden tools that I knew were used for throwing glass to make bowls and vases. Some tools I didn’t recognize.

“Are those used to make the glass masks?” I asked, pointing them out as Iniga looked for the soiled server masks.

“Hmm? Sort of. We’re still trying out a few different methods. Maybe if you’re good, I’ll let you watch next time,” she teased.

“Aren’t those supposed to be trade secrets?” I asked wryly.

She giggled. “Oops. You’re probably right. Promise not to tell anyone?”

“Of course.” I rolled my eyes.

“Here you go.” She handed me a small satchel, and I peeked inside. Two masks were inside, and I could see the bright crimson stain on the silver silk of one immediately.

“You weren’t kidding,” I said. “Any tips before I work myself to the bone for you?”

Laughing, she shook her head. “I’m sure you’ll figure something out.”

As we started to leave, I noticed that there was only one stool in the room, near the furnaces. “Do you work in here alone? What about that foreigner?”

“I usually have the place to myself. Isn’t that nice? Although it can be lonely sometimes, so I’ll occasionally get a few others in here to keep me company and do odd jobs. But, yes, Joch has his own workroom as well. He doesn’t like distractions when he works.”

“Do you work in there or here when he teaches you?”

“He used to come in here, but he’s been too busy lately. We’ve both been working on our own projects and will talk over dinner.” She glanced at me sidelong. “You know, you’re awfully curious about this guy. He’s good looking, if you were wondering. Excellent shoulders.”

“Iniga!” I blushed horribly, glad the heat usually stayed high in my cheeks and didn’t spread to my neck or chest where she could see.

She sighed dramatically. “It’s a shame I’m already betrothed. There are far too many handsome men in this place, let me tell you. Anytime you find yourself looking for a new beau, let me know, and I’ll point you in the right direction.”

“You—you’re being ridiculous,” I stammered. “Let’s go. We shouldn’t leave Aiden for so long.”

“Ah,” she said knowingly. “Yes, we mustn’t keep Aiden waiting.” She winked at me.

“Don’t look at me like that.”

“Why not? I certainly wouldn’t fault you if Aiden’s your choice of beau.”

“I don’t have a beau. End of discussion.”

She pouted but let it pass as we went out to the hallway. She probably would have continued to hound me about it, but those maids were still hanging around. They weren’t gossiping so much as staring at a young man walking away from us. He walked with his shoulders back, proud, and he had shaggy jet-black hair cut just above his ears.

“Speak of the devil and he appears,” Iniga remarked as giggles and whispers broke out among the cluster of girls. “That was Joch. You can see how popular he is. If you ever change your mind”—she nudged my shoulder, and I gave her a warning look—“you’ll have a bit of competition.”

“Let’s just go, Signorina Matchmaker.”

Thanks to Iniga’s words, I had trouble meeting Aiden’s eyes for the rest of the night without my face growing warm. To further my embarrassment, he’d even stayed for supper with father and me (with minimal ribbing about my cooking) and then bid me farewell, though not without an extra cautionary warning to keep an eye out. After rolling my eyes at him, I told him I would keep Hachi outside for the night so he could keep watch.

Our dog had only two charges—my father and I—but he was a dear part of my little family. My mother had been of fisherfolk stock and couldn’t bear to be stranded ashore for so long. I was so young when she’d left us for the sea that I couldn’t remember her anymore. Which was fine by me. You can’t miss what you don’t remember. I knew Father missed her, though. He threw his heart into his work and nothing else for a long time after she left. He’d pull himself together for brief periods, making sure I was fed and cared for. We were well enough off that I’d even attended school until I was twelve. Then I convinced him to take me as an apprentice by reminding him that even if she were gone, I was still here, and if he didn’t take me on, I would have to find someone else who could. He was better after that, almost as if nothing was ever wrong, but I still caught him staring out to sea from time to time.

I quickly got ready for bed and let my mind wander as I tried to fall asleep. It had been a good day, and I fell into bed with a satisfied smile on my lips. All my days with Aiden tended to be good ones.

If I’d known what was coming next, I might have relished that feeling of contentment just a bit more.

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