

EXTRACT FROM STRAVAGANZA - CITY OF SECRETS
by MARY HOFFMAN

Prologue: Cloak and Dagger

'I can't be apart from Luciano on my birthday,' Arianna told Barbara. 'You understand, surely? You wouldn't want to be separated from your Marco on such a day, would you?' Her maid Barbara was in an agony of indecision.

Her mistress, the Duchessa, was asking her to do something very dangerous indeed. Proud as Barbara was to be taken into the Duchessa's confidence, she knew she ought to tell Senator Rossi, the Regent, what his daughter was planning.

Still, the maid also thought the Duchessa's plan was desperately romantic and Barbara loved anything that smacked of romance. She was engaged, just like her mistress, only to a young footman called Marco, and the Duchessa had promised her an expensive dress and jewels to wear at her wedding. But this new scheme of the Duchessa's might mean Barbara lost her job long before her wedding day. And she'd be lucky if it was just her job she lost.

'Milady,' said Barbara cautiously, wondering how to dissuade her mistress without appearing disloyal.

'Forgive me but there are things an ordinary servingwoman like myself might be permitted to do that are not . . . fitting for a duchessa. And running off to Padavia to meet the s when there is a state celebration for you here might be one of them.'

'But what if you were here to take my place at the celebration? You've done it before.'

That was when the maid had started to feel really afraid.

It was true that Barbara had impersonated her mistress once before and, on that occasion, had only narrowly escaped being murdered. Arianna had once sworn never to use a double but the longer she continued as ruler of Bellezza, the better she understood her mother who had been Duchessa before her. Silvia had used doubles for some state appearances for years. And on the last occasion it had saved her life.

The same was true for Arianna. She was only too aware that the last impersonation of her had led to a wound that would scar her maid for life, and could have killed her. After all, it was she, Arianna, who had stabbed Barbara's assailant, with her Merlino-dagger, before he could finish his attack. It still bothered her sometimes that she had never known the man's name or family.

Both the mistress and the maid were absorbed in their thoughts remembering that dreadful day.

'That was different, Milady,' said Barbara at last. 'I didn't have to talk to anyone. I am sure the Regent and his wife would know in a moment that I was not Your Grace.'

Arianna decided not to press the point. She didn't really think that anyone would try to assassinate the Duchessa of Bellezza at her eighteenth birthday celebrations. Luciano — how she warmed just at the thought of him! — had told her that in his world eighteen was a very significant birthday and she had already planned to make his so for him, but it was not the case in Talia. Still, the city's ruler would have to have some kind of feast. And Rodolfo her father and Regent would be sure to make some very special

fireworks. It was a pity she wouldn't see them.

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It didn't look like a safe house for someone on the run but that's what it was. The house in Padavia had lost its mistress and acquired a new tenant. The widow Bellini had left for a new life in Bellezza with her new husband. And a tall slim young man, not yet eighteen, with black curly hair, now sat at the stone table in the garden, contemplating his future.

An elderly servant, rather flustered from the move to a new city, brought wine out to his master.

'Sit down a minute, Alfredo,' said the young man and the servant gratefully lowered his bulk on to a bench.

'Just for a minute then, Cavaliere,' said, Alfredo pouring the wine. 'There is so much to do. That housemaid Signora Bellini left behind has let the house go. It needs a thorough spring clean.'

'In October?' said his master, taking a deep draught of wine. 'I don't mind if it isn't spotless. I'm going to be spending most of my time at the University.'

Luciano smiled to himself, thinking about the kind of messy house-share or communal university hall he might have lived in if he had remained in his old life in his old world. By comparison, Silvia's house was a palace.

The smile turned to a sigh. It wasn't often now that he thought of might-have-beens but his move from Bellezza to university in Padavia was just the sort of rite of passage that brought his old life back to him with renewed vividness.

His mother Vicky and his father David would have pored over prospectuses with him, asking his views about where he wanted to go and what subject he wanted to study. He imagined them packing his belongings into the family car and driving him off to Brighton or York or Edinburgh, wherever he had got a place.

The application process had been quite different in the lagoon-city of Bellezza. For a start, he was a year younger than he would have been in England but that was normal for Talia; some students went to university at fifteen. Then again, he was engaged to the Duchessa. Thinking of Arianna brought the smile back to Luciano's lips.

There was no way he would ever have dreamed of asking a girl in his old world to marry him when they were both only seventeen but a lot was different about his new life. He was a Cavaliere, which his fosterfather had explained was something like a knight in Elizabethan England. And now that he was going to marry Arianna, he would soon be a duke.

That is, if he lived to see the day.

There was a warrant out for his arrest, signed by the Grand Duke of Tuschia. It accused him of killing the previous Grand Duke, Niccolò di Chimici. And it was true; he had done it. But it had been in a duel and Niccolò had played dirty, poisoning one of the foils. It wasn't Luciano's fault they had somehow been switched.

That had been nearly six months ago. He had escaped from the Grand Duke's city of Giglia, smuggled out in a crate with a marble statue of Arianna. And as soon as he had been released from the crate he had asked the subject of the sculpture to marry him.

There was something about life in Talia that speeded things up. Life expectancy was short: a phial of poison or a silent dagger could cut it off in its prime. People married young. Luciano had decided he just couldn't wait any longer to be with Arianna.