

## Prologue: *Darkening the Light*

Prince Jacopo of Fortezza was dying. However much his wife tried to pretend it wasn't happening and however much his daughters wished it wasn't true, the red-headed giant of the di Chimici family was close to breathing his last. His personal physician looked solemn and the Prince had called for his priest to hear his final confession and give him the last rites.

After Father Gregorio left the royal bedchamber, the women washed back in like the tide and found the Prince calmer than when they had left him.

'My dear,' said Princess Carolina, smoothing his no longer vivid hair from his forehead. 'Is there anything more I can do for you?'

'Stay with me,' said Jacopo. 'You and the girls.'

The 'girls' were their two daughters, Bianca, the

Duchessa of Volana, and Lucia, the widow of Prince Carlo di Chimici, a husband who had been murdered within an hour of their marriage. Bianca's marriage had taken place at the same time and her husband, the Duke of Volana, had been the only di Chimici bridegroom to escape injury that terrible day not much more than a year before.

Lucia had returned home to Fortezza to be tenderly looked after by her parents. Princess she might be, but she was neither married nor single: she was that rarest of women, a virgin widow. She was twenty-three years old and believed her life to be over.

Not that she was thinking of her own situation now; every feeling she had was caught up with her father. It was impossible to believe that his constant presence in her life might be gone within hours.

'Did Father Gregorio bring you peace, dearest?' asked Carolina.

The Prince had a long coughing fit and it was some time before he could answer.

'He gave me absolution,' wheezed Jacopo, 'and that is all I could ask. He has known my worst crime for many years.'

The women were silent. When Jacopo had been young, he had killed a man, a noble who had jilted his older sister, Eleanora, and this noble had been Donato Nucci. What had happened in that little piazza in Giglia so many years ago had been the first link in a chain of events that had led to the murder of Lucia's brand new husband and left many others dead or dying.

'Don't think of the Nucci now,' said Princess Bianca. 'They are nothing to us.'

'We can never forget them,' said her father, looking

at Lucia. 'What they have done to us and what we – I – have done to them.'

'You did what you had to for your sister's honour,' said Carolina.

'The Nucci would say the same, I expect,' said Lucia. She was sickened by the way that Talian nobles carried their vendettas from generation to generation.

Jacopo sought her hand with his.

'I don't mean to distress you, my dear, by bringing up the old feud.'

*But you do distress me,* she thought. *You are dying. How can I bear it?*

'It is an old grief, Papa,' she said, bending her head so he shouldn't see her tears at her new one.

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Not far from the Prince's castle, in the Street of the Swordsmiths, a man was looking into a mirror. But not from vanity. He was a Stravagante and he wanted to get in touch with the leaders of his Order in Bellezza. In that lagoon city lived Guglielmo Crinamorte, the English alchemist who, when he was still William Dethridge, had accidentally discovered the secret of travelling between worlds: the art of stravagation.

There too was Rodolfo Rossi, father to the young Duchessa of Bellezza, and his former apprentice Luciano, the young man from the other world who, like William Dethridge, had permanently translated to Talia. The swordsmith of Fortezza was in awe of these mysterious beings.

A lined, intelligent face, with dark hair almost all silver, appeared on the surface of the mirror.

*Fabio!* The image sent a message without speaking: *How do things stand in Fortezza?* Rodolfo looked serious.

*Badly, Maestro, Fabio thought-spoke. The Prince is really dying.*

*I am sorry to hear that. He was a good friend at the wedding massacre in Giglia.*

*His doctor says he has never been quite the same since then – something about catching a chill during the flood.*

*He was working with me to bring warmth and food to the victims. I should be sorry if he was now paying such a heavy price for that.*

*I am worried about what happens next, Maestro.*

*Princess Lucia will become ruler, will she not?*

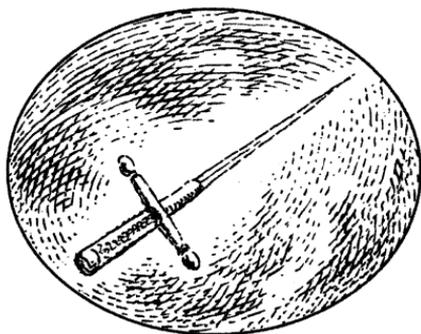
*She is the heir, said the swordsmith, but I am troubled by certain divinations I have made.*

The face in the mirror nodded; Rodolfo set great store by his own monthly divinations. *What have they told you?*

*There is much I don't understand, involving the goddess and battles. But I was thinking it was time for me to stragvagate to the other world.*

*It sounds as if you are right, agreed Rodolfo.*

And he looked very grave indeed.



## Chapter 1

# Messages on the Skin

‘Well, who do you think is going to be next?’

The Barnsbury Stravaganti were gathered in Nick’s attic room the first Saturday in May. Matt, Georgia, Sky, Isabel and Nick had all played dangerous parts in Talia. Isabel was almost back to normal after the harrowing experiences of the Sea Battle of Classe; her recovery had been greatly helped by Sky making it public that they were now an item.

So she had voiced something that she had been wondering about for some time. No one replied straight away. They could have pretended not to know what she meant, but in that room were four people who had already been ‘chosen’ by talismans to travel in time and space to the world where Talia was still in the sixteenth century.

And the fifth, Nick, had come from Talia to this world, dying out of one life to be re-born in another. All were students at Barnsbury Comprehensive, with Sky and Georgia in their last year there. And they all knew that Isabel meant that their task in Talia was not complete. A new Stravagante could be called by their talisman at any time.

‘I suppose,’ said Nick at last, ‘you could work it out by seeing what you lot have in common. I mean how you found your talismans and what was going on in your lives just before.’

‘You were working on that, weren’t you, Georgia?’ asked Matt.

Georgia drew out a scruffy piece of paper from her jeans pocket and passed it round the group.

‘I don’t know why I carry it round with me,’ she said. ‘It didn’t help in the end with the business of getting us to different cities. It was the Talian Stravaganti who cracked that. Doctor Dethridge really.’

This was what it said:

*Lucien Notebook Skip in Waverley Road. Ill with cancer*

*Georgia Flying horse Mortimer Goldsmith’s shop. Bullied*

*Sky Perfume bottle found on doorstep. Looking after sick mother*

*Matt Spell-book Mortimer Goldsmith’s. Dyslexic Isabel Bag of tesserae found at Barnsbury Comp.*

*Overshadowed by twin*

It was a bit stark for all of them, reading in such brief, blank terms what had made them unhappy. Except for

Lucien. He wasn't there, even though he had been the first from their school to stragavate. In a way his place in the group had been taken by Nick, who had once been Prince Falco di Chimici, the youngest son of the most powerful family in Talia.

Not long after Lucien had begun his new life in the other world, Falco had chosen to come to this one to cure his broken body and become Nick for ever. He lived in Lucien's old home, as the adopted son of Lucien's bereft parents.

The Stravaganti didn't need to talk about that; they all knew why Nick's talisman wasn't on the list and why Lucien's was. This was a list of magical objects that transported their owners from twenty-first-century England to a sixteenth-century version of Italy – not the other way.

Nick had a talisman to take him back to Talia, but he hadn't stumbled across it; he had been given it by Brother Sulien of Giglia. It was a black feathered quill pen and now his most treasured possession.

'What's the link?' asked Sky. 'Two came from Mortimer's shop; the other three are quite different.'

'Hang on,' said Georgia. 'Mortimer told me that my flying horse came from a house in Waverley Road that used to belong to an old lady that died, so that's another link.'

'We live in that house,' said Sky. 'It's next to the school. After the owner died it was turned into flats.'

'And both the school and that house are near where Doctor Dethridge's house and laboratory used to be,' said Isabel. 'In Elizabethan times.'

'You went there, didn't you?' asked Nick.

It was true and Isabel shuddered at the memory.

There had been one disastrous night – was it really only a month ago? – when her twin, Charlie, had taken her talisman and ended up not just in Talia but also in Elizabethan England in the middle of an earthquake.

‘Don’t remind me,’ she said. ‘It was terrifying. I thought we wouldn’t get back here or even to Talia but just be stuck back there for ever.’

Sky reached out to take her hand. ‘But you did get back. And it wasn’t your fault – it was stupid of Charlie to take your talisman without knowing what it did.’

It was Georgia’s turn to shudder. Her brutal step-brother, Russell, had stolen her flying horse – twice. Only now did she wonder what would have happened if he’d fallen asleep holding it and ended up in the city she used to visit in Talia. Russell in Remora did not bear thinking of – though losing him for ever somewhere in the past was quite appealing.

‘What about the spell-book, Matt?’ asked Isabel. ‘Did Mortimer say where it came from?’

‘No,’ he said. ‘But it could have come from that same house, couldn’t it?’

‘Or your Stravagante in Talia might have brought it to Mortimer’s?’ said Georgia.

‘It’s a bit odd the way the talismans make their way there,’ said Nick. ‘Maybe Mortimer’s a Stravagante himself?’

The others looked at him as if he’d suggested the old antique dealer was from Mars.

‘Moving on,’ said Isabel. ‘All the talismans are connected with the school or the house on Waverley Road and/or Mortimer Goldsmith’s shop – is that right?’

No one disagreed.

‘So those places are where the next one will turn up, and I think we can rule out Sky’s flat as a one-off. There are no other teenagers there.’

‘And they are always teenagers,’ said Nick. ‘The new Stravaganti.’

‘And always miserable,’ said Georgia. It was now Nick who took her hand.

‘So,’ said Sky. ‘We need to be on the lookout for a potential talisman in school or in Mortimer’s shop and for a person our age, who is really miserable?’

‘Laura,’ said Isabel without thinking. Then, more confidently, ‘I think it will be Laura.’

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Laura was sitting alone in her room with the curtains drawn, even though it was mid-morning. Her door was locked and she had rolled up the long sleeves of her top, to get at her inner arm. It was already criss-crossed with scars, some faint and silver as snail trails, others still angry red.

Tears rolled down her cheeks as she took the razor blade from the jewellery box where several lay hidden under a tray full of rings and bracelets she hardly ever wore. She hated doing this, hated that she needed to do it, but every time it happened – and she always put it off for as long as she could – there was such a sweet relief that it made it all worthwhile.

No one would understand why she was so unhappy or even that she *was* unhappy. Even her best friends at school, like Isabel and Ayesha, rarely saw her outside the school day and she usually managed to put on a good enough front from nine till going-home time. But

there were things they didn't know. Things she had not shared with anyone in her new school.

At home, her parents, who should have realised, would have been appalled to think that their beloved child was so miserable she had to cut herself to relieve the pain.

Laura didn't completely understand it herself.

It had started with secondary school and she knew why but it got worse a year and a half ago when she was feeling the pressure of school exams, trying to keep up with work and envying girls who seemed naturally popular. Everything was just such a lot of effort. She would have liked a boyfriend but that had never happened and her two closest friends were now in a cosy foursome with Matt Wood and Sky Meadows, two of the best-looking boys in the sixth form.

The only boy she had ever really liked was Isabel's twin, Charlie, and he was one of what she thought of as the 'golden people'. Not a chance he would ever look twice at her.

She ran the edge of the blade across the surface of her skin as lightly as a whisper. It always took a while to summon up the courage to cut herself. The unhappiness would increase over a period of days and it was only at the weekend, as it stretched before her without any social life to distract her, that it would drive her to the point where the only way out was to inflict real physical pain.

Laura flicked the hair away from her face and wiped the tears from her cheeks with one of the tissues she had ready. Steeling herself against the initial pain, she dug deeper with the razor, but not deep enough to reach a vein, and scored a new red signature on the waiting page of her skin.



Fabio was in his workshop, still shaken by his stravagation to the other world. He had been there before, several times, but this time he had taken a talisman to be found by one of the mysterious beings from the future who had helped his Brotherhood before. He had never met one in Talia but he had heard of the heroic deeds of the young people who had fought the di Chimici in many encounters, bringing strength of purpose and great bravery to the task.

It was a heavy responsibility and he hoped he had chosen the right place, where it would be found by the right person. He had certainly made the talisman to the best of his ability.

Fabio had no doubt that his city was going to need outside help, and very soon. There was a restlessness in the air and a feeling that the very walls were waiting for Prince Jacopo to die.

There was a faction in Fortezza that did not believe that a woman should inherit the title and the leadership of the City of Swords. If Lucia's husband, Prince Carlo of Giglia, had lived, they would have accepted them as joint rulers. But the sad-faced young widow, only recently out of black, did not seem to them like the right successor.

Fabio did not doubt that if there had been another candidate a part of the citizenry and even some of the army would rise up in support. But they were also loyal to the di Chimici family so there were all kinds of tensions abroad on the streets.

It was always noisy in the workshop, with the clang of metal on metal or the hiss of new blades being

quenched. It didn't normally bother the swordsmith; it was as natural to him as the sound of his own breathing. But today he had a headache. Maybe the last stravagation had disturbed his equilibrium.

He stepped out into the street for a breath of fresh air and almost knocked over a tall figure. It was one of the wandering people known as Manoush, a young man dressed soberly for one of his kind, but Fabio remembered that the goddess-worshippers were in danger in any city with a di Chimici ruler. Prince Jacopo had enacted the laws against magic which outlawed the practice of the Manoush religion.

This one was polite enough, bowing to the swordsmith though it was Fabio who had crashed into him. There was much courteous brushing down of clothes and mutual apology. In the course of it, Fabio spotted a dagger at the young man's waist.

'May I see?' he asked.

The rusty-haired Manoush graciously offered it for Fabio's professional inspection.

'A fine blade,' was his verdict, after hefting it for weight and balance. 'May you rarely have need of it.'

'Is that a swordsmith's blessing?' asked the young man, smiling and revealing very pointed canine teeth, as he tucked the dagger back in his belt.

'Something like that,' said Fabio. 'I spend all day making weapons which are beautiful in themselves, but when I think of what they can do . . .'

'What they are made to do,' said the Manoush.



Mortimer Goldsmith made himself a pot of Earl Grey tea and poured himself a cup using some nice antique bone china. Over his drink he reread a letter from his new friend Eva. He had turned the sign on his door to CLOSED during his tea break but now he was aware of a girl looking in the shop window.

He sighed but the shop wasn't making so much money that he could afford to turn away custom. He peered closely at the girl through the glass before turning the sign and opening the door.

He didn't know this one, but he had a surprisingly large circle of teenage friends from the local comprehensive school. And he had a reason to be on the lookout for more.

'Can I help you, my dear?' he asked. 'I was just having a cup of tea but I'm open really.'

'Oh, I didn't mean to interrupt your break,' said the girl. 'I wasn't looking for anything in particular.'

She was a nervous thing, he thought.

'That's all right,' he said. 'You come in and have a browse and I'll finish my tea. I'm here if you need me.'

She drifted aimlessly round the shop, looking at antique jewellery and lace collars. Her arm was still stinging from what she'd done to it in the morning, but her long sleeves made sure no one else knew about it. It was going to be harder when summer came; Laura thrust that thought to the back of her mind.

And then she saw it. The most perfect little silver sword. Of course it must really be a paperknife, she supposed, but it was beautifully made, a real piece of craftsmanship. And although it was no longer than six inches, Laura knew instinctively it was a sword in miniature and not a dagger.

‘I wondered if you’d like that,’ said Mortimer Goldsmith.

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‘Right,’ said Georgia. ‘That’s agreed then. Bel and Yesh will keep an eye on Laura to see if she’s behaving strangely. Matt and Sky will look out for likely talismans in school, and Nick and I will go and see Mortimer.’

‘But what do you think about which city it will be?’ asked Nick.

They had all talked about it and made another list: cities that had already been visited by teenage Stravaganti from their world and ones that had not acquired a Stravagante yet. Five major city-states had been visited and five disasters averted but there were seven left and an infinite number of dangers, it seemed to them.

But they could not tell which of the seven would be likely to be next in need of a visitor from their world.

‘Fabrizio will be pretty mad that he lost the battle of Classe,’ Nick had said. ‘And that Beatrice married Filippo Nucci. That city is independent for the foreseeable future.’

‘But we never go back, do we?’ Sky had pointed out. ‘I mean we might visit “our” cities again but our tasks there are always finished. Where will the di Chimici strike next?’

‘There are just too many for us to guess,’ said Georgia. ‘Come on, I think Mortimer’s shop will still be open. We’ll go and call on him, and Bel – can you call Yesh and go round to Laura’s? It’s a long shot but worth a try.’

Sky didn't want to leave Isabel, and Matt hadn't seen Ayesha all day so they decided to join the call-on-Laura posse. The group split up not far from Nick's house and he and Georgia walked hand in hand to the antique shop.

'Ah,' said Mortimer, quite used to visits from these two. 'I think you are too late.'

'What can you mean?' asked Georgia.

'I mean, I think you have come to ask me either about a pale, sad girl from your school or a rather beautiful silver sword from goodness knows where,' he said. 'And in either case, it's too late. They have found each other.'

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Laura was thoroughly alarmed when her two best friends turned up at her house with their boyfriends in tow, but her mother was delighted; she thought Laura spent far too much time on her own.

'Someone to see you,' she called up the stairs.

Laura hastily opened her curtains and checked that there was no evidence of her earlier activity. Could she smell blood? Or was she being paranoid? She opened the window, to be on the safe side, and gave her room a squirt of air freshener.

So she was pink and flustered by the time four fellow-students from Barnsbury trooped in.

'Oh, hi,' she said. 'What's up? Is something going on?'

'Maybe,' said Isabel. 'How are things with you?'

But before Laura had time to think of an answer to that, Isabel's phone warbled and she read an incoming text.

‘Interesting,’ she said, showing it to Sky. ‘That was Georgia. And she says you bought something from Mortimer Goldsmith. Can we see?’

Laura’s heart was pounding. This was some sort of intervention. They had found out about the cutting and were going to tell her parents. For a moment she didn’t know if she was horrified or relieved.

While still in that numb limbo, she drew out a package from her desk drawer. It was wrapped in green tissue paper and held together by stickers with MG on them in curly writing. She hadn’t been home long enough even to unwrap it.

It seemed curiously intimate to open that package with four other pairs of eyes looking on.

‘That’s Talian all right,’ said Nick authoritatively.

‘Ouch,’ said Ayesha, who had tested the blade on her thumb. ‘I thought paperknives were supposed to be blunt?’

Isabel was watching Laura intently, seeing the fear in her eyes and the changes in her expression.

‘Why did you buy it?’ she asked abruptly. ‘Do you get a lot of letters?’

‘I don’t see what it has to do with you – with any of you,’ said Laura. ‘I liked it and I could afford it so I bought it. So what?’

‘So what were you going to do with it?’ asked Isabel.

And Laura knew the game was up.



Fabio was always first into his workshop every morning, stoking up the fire in the furnace and checking round the supplies of ore for the day’s work. His

apprentices slept at the back of the shop and were not awake yet.

The streets had been very quiet on his way to work, the city still holding its breath.

And then, while he sat at his bench, watching the sun rise through the open door, a young woman, not more than a slender girl, materialised on a stool opposite him.

He made the Hand of Fortune, the superstitious sign that all Talians used to ward off bad luck and the evil eye.

'*Dia,*' he said. 'You have come! You are from the other world!'

What Laura saw was a room full of metal and sharp blades. In her hand was the silver sword, held carefully by the hilt so that she didn't cut herself accidentally. She was fully aware how ironic this was.

In front of her was a man of middle height, broad-shouldered and brown-skinned. He had a kind face but he was looking at her as if he was afraid. And yet, if what her friends had told her was true, she was the one who had made a terrifying journey through time and space.

'I'm Laura,' she said simply.

'Low-ra,' said the man. 'Welcome to Fortezza.'

And then a bell started to toll in the distance, a single sad repeated note.

'You have not come a moment too soon,' he said. 'The old Prince is dead.'