

PROLOGUE

Antonius trailed his hand in the dark water, feeling its coolness between his fingers. As Nichola's paddle propelled their boat forward, the moon cast shimmering ribbons of light across the surface. Nichola's strong back barely moved from his labour, the paddle dipping in and out of the sea as if it were part of him.

Across from them in his own boat, Savinus paddled alone. His white hair glowed in the muted light.

Gazing into the distance, Antonius did not see the paddle as it swung in an arc towards his head, striking him on the back. The impact winded him and, for a brief instant, the sharp pain emptied his mind, before he tumbled over the side. Dragged down by his clothing, he flailed and gasped. Looking up, he saw Nichola sitting motionless in the boat, studying him with a blank face. The water in Antonius's ears blocked out most noise, but he could hear Savinus yelling at Nichola from the other boat. Sucking in a final breath, he hugged his knees and dropped to the murky depths. There was a splash, as the old man jumped overboard to try to save him.

Antonius plunged deeper. The currents were cold on his body, rushing past his ears as he swam. In the murky depths, tentacles of seaweed swayed beneath him, and small fish darted out of his path. He reached the shore near the cave, and waited in the shallows.

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Holding his breath, he tried to think of his family and Giulia, instead of his constricted lungs.

Finally, he raised his head and saw Savinus climb back into his boat. The two men paddled into the distance and it was as if he were watching his life departing. In a sense this was true. After spending the night in the depths of the caves, he would walk away from all that was familiar to begin his new life.

CHAPTER 1

One year before Pesaro 1585

Tomas Albizi had requested the reading for the next morning, yet Savinus did not hurry as his quill scratched numbers on the parchment. The additions and subtractions appeared haphazard, but were the result of a formula used since boyhood. Allowing his instinct to dictate the calculations was as familiar to him as the mannerisms of his daughter, Giulia. The scrawled numbers suggested symbols. These basic shapes foretold the success or failure of a crop, a love affair, or a battle.

His talents were well known in the town of Pesaro. From the age of ten, he had studied with a seer, Bartholomeus Giovari, who instructed him in both seeing and geomancy. The two men worked together for decades until, one winter, his mentor succumbed to the plague. Savinus found himself in charge of a thriving business, and soon gained the patronage of Conte Leonardo Valperga.

The numbers on the parchment blurred as his eyes watered. His eyesight had been unreliable for some time. This and other maladies were signs of his advancing years, reminding him of the need to find a successor. Giulia had begged him to allow her to take over, and he explained the danger to her reputation. The last time she had spoken

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about it, he patted her hand.

“You would deny me the pleasures of grandchildren, would you?”

“No, Papa, I just don’t understand why you would spend so much time teaching me about geomancy, and all the other skills, only to marry me off to some dull nobleman.”

“Giulia, do I really need to be blunt with you? If everyone knew what you were capable of, they would report you to religious authorities. In a man, what we have is a talent. In a woman, it is witchcraft or sorcery. I’m very sorry, my dear, but that’s how it is. You can use your abilities secretly—to help your children and your husband. That is all.”

As he worked, she sat near the fire at her loom, absorbed in her task. Her long fingers laboured, coaxing the multi-coloured silk threads. Her lips were pursed in concentration, and her auburn hair was loosely pinned. Wide-set green eyes were either tender or flashing with determination. Visiting suitors were taken aback by her outspokenness, and Savinus worried about her marriage prospects. At the same time, he realized her mother had a similar temperament, and it had not deterred him. In the months since Giulia reached maturity, he often missed the wisdom of his wife. Sitting alone at his desk, he would pretend she was nearby, and imagine conversing with her about their daughter.

Carmen, she will not budge on this. I have tried everything. She is spending too much time in her bedchamber; what on earth could she be doing in there? Give me a sign when it’s time to find her a husband. I’m worried I will do it too soon, or too late.

Later that day he would visit Conte Leonardo Valperga, who lived in a palazzo on the hill behind the town. His patronage was useful. It allowed him to employ the services of a housekeeper and a skilled tutor for Giulia. Although his ambitions for her were no more than to find her a kind and prosperous husband, he wanted her to have an understanding of the world. Knowledge of Latin verbs and Greek philosophy complemented her esoteric education. He knew wealthy men desired educated wives, skilled in conversation. It was

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essential for the garden parties and balls they attended. He had asked his patron for help in searching for a suitor, as the Conte knew many eligible young men through his eldest son Gianni. He responded with enthusiasm, and Savinus felt he could relax over the matter.

“Shouldn’t you be concentrating on your work?” Giulia was studying him—she knew his thoughts.

“I was distracted, yes.”

“Papa, can’t my marriage wait for a while? I want to learn more about mathematics and philosophy before I let my mind wither away.”

He smiled at her. “Yes, my dear. We haven’t yet found a suitable husband anyway. I suppose you know the Conte is looking for someone?”

She nodded and looked down at the floor, turning the comb in her hands. “I don’t have a lot of confidence in his choice. Every aristocrat I’ve met has been completely dull. I prefer shopkeepers, or perhaps a musician.”

Savinus concealed his amusement. “Yes, I’m sure they’re interesting, but would they be able to keep you at least as well as I have? I think not. Practicality is not one of your strengths, my dear.”

He turned away to indicate they should go back to their tasks. As well as the job at hand, the anxiety about his successor plagued him. For weeks he had mulled over the idea of a test. A basic method to assess psychic ability. The question was how it would be performed. He thought there should be a limit on how many youths were tested, as the exercise could become chaotic. As he searched for a solution, he realized the idea would not come unless he distracted himself. His mind needed to find an answer without pressure.

In the end, he placed his work aside. His thoughts were too scattered, and he knew this made for an unsatisfactory reading for Signor Albizi. Sighing, he laid down his quill and addressed Giulia.

“Would you please tell Agnese to go to the market and buy a small amount of pork, some polenta, and whatever vegetable is the freshest? Perhaps a good supper might help my mind with this reading.”

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Giulia jumped to her feet. “Yes, Papa, I think she’s in the courtyard.”

Savinus opened his book on hermetic alchemy. It was covered in a layer of dust. He blew it away, revealing gold lettering that decorated the deep blue cover. Opening it at random, his gaze fell on an illustration of a man in a black robe sitting under a tree, his eyes closed. On the opposite page, the same man was surrounded by a swirling wind, streaked with vivid colours. It concealed the lower half of his body. A third image on the next page was an eagle, its coal-black wings extended, its noble beak a flash of gold. Traces of the coloured wind still curled in front of the creature. Savinus had stared at the three illustrations before, without understanding their meaning. He now knew they depicted complete transformation.