

CHAPTER 1

When Maestra cuffed him for the seventh time that day, Corvo decided he wasn't cut out for the stage.

“Who has painted red the widows of the sun?” he tried hopefully.

Maestra's eyes glinted. ‘Windows. *Windows*, ragazzo. Whoever heard of painting widows red?’

Corvo hung his head.

‘What am I to do with you?’ Maestra was a gaunt woman; when her lips thinned like that, she looked like a ghoul of Poveglia. He shivered at the thought of the haunted isle, wished his mind hadn't conjured it. ‘You have lived in il teatro all your life, slept beneath its boards. Anyone else would be breathing Ariosto and Machiavelli, dreaming in verse. But you flounder in the shallowest soliloquy.’

Maestra was a natural. Even her rebukes emerged as poetry. What was he supposed to say, Corvo thought, when they both knew she was right? *I am universally hopeless.*

‘Che peccato.’ She seized his chin. ‘You must try harder, Corvo.’

Even his name fit poorly, Corvo thought. Blond hair – most *un* black – had escaped its tie again, forcing him to rake it back. The players of La Fenice had clearly thought it a marvellous joke when they'd plucked him off the streets as an infant. Crow, they'd called him, a bird like their beloved phoenix theatre, but the only thing he had in common with those raven-feathered thieves was his penchant for collecting things. Flotsam pages, a wig and mirror, empty phials, a bedraggled kitten paddling frantically in the canal... All found a home in the rafters of La Fenice.

A chime echoed across the stage and Corvo felt his stomach clench. ‘Please, Maestra. I have to be somewhere.’

‘Not until you have it right, boy.’

He thought of the marching minutes, of how the door would be locked if he didn’t reach it in time. Perhaps if he took a shortcut through Calle di Cristo –

‘Oh very well,’ Maestra let out a fiery breath. ‘I want you back before curtain up.’

Corvo tried for gratitude, but a grin elbowed its way onto his face. He seized his leather tunic, yanked it on, forgot the buttons. Scooping up bag and cloak, he ran.

‘Who is she?’ Maestra called after him. Corvo only shrugged.

He careened out the stage door and sent Pollonia’s poker hand flying. Leaving the mime cursing in cards, he took the steps three at a time, hearing the blood pound in his head. If they locked the door, he’d have to wait a week. He gripped his bag tighter. This afternoon, Calle di Cristo was fragrant with flower sellers; small boys and women, their open hands pollen-stained. He kept his eyes and stride fixed, so as not to be mistaken for a customer, but his trailing cloak whipped a tray from a seller’s hands. Leaving behind the soft patter of buds hitting stone, he yelled an apology and didn’t stay to hear the names he was called.

The tiny door was all but invisible to one who didn’t know to look. Set back from the canal in an alley that ran east to west across San Marco, it was a crumbling thing, more rot than wood. Corvo put his lips to it just as the last chime struck. ‘Quicksilver,’ he whispered.

For a few seconds, nothing happened. Corvo waited, coiled and fretting as the bells finished their hourly labour. Then a crack appeared in the door. Eyes peered out, flicked one way, flicked the other and a hand beckoned him inside.

Sighing audibly, Corvo slipped through the gap, catching his cuff on the splintered wood. Livia shut the door behind him. ‘Five more seconds and I’d not have opened,’ she informed him crisply.

‘Sorry.’

‘Do try to be earlier. You know how Maestro Bortolo is.’

‘I will,’ he promised absently, his eyes straying beyond her to the smooth steps creeping into the earth. He didn’t wait for her to take the lead, but set off down them, hearing the hushed murmur of voices, the chink of glass. Sulphur thickened the air, but it was a smell he’d grown used to.

Emerging into the circular workroom, he and Livia found themselves a space among the other initiates and began unpacking their bags.

‘Late again?’ cracked a voice: the alchemist, come to glower. For some reason, Maestro Bortolo had taken an instant dislike to him and a month had not in any way thawed his demeanour. But this illicit little haven was his idea and Corvo supposed he could be picky about who he admitted.

‘If you consider yourself so far above the rest of us, boy, perhaps you can remind your fellow apprentices of the three stages in the great work.’

They were all looking at him. *Merda*. He knew this. He’d recited it only last night. But unbidden Maestra’s voice rose in his head, saying, *Who has painted red the windows of the sun? The day is won yet my eyes see only blood –*

‘Well, boy?’

Why did everyone insist on calling him “boy”? Twenty winters surely earned him freedom from the word. ‘I...’

‘Your ignorance exhausts me,’ the old man declaimed in a manner Maestra would have been proud of. ‘If you do not study –’

‘I studied for hours –’

‘– then I will give your place to someone who takes our art seriously.’

Corvo ground his teeth, knowing that of everyone in the dungeon-like room, none wanted to learn as much as he did. He could not say why, but elements fascinated him; weighing them, combining them, using them to change a thing’s very nature. But no matter

how he tried, Bortolo's teaching wouldn't stick. He was as bad at learning alchemy as he was at learning lines. His mouth stung with bitterness.

The alchemist's robes whirled around him as he turned to point dramatically at a boy across the workroom. 'Perhaps Apprentice Stefano can tell us?'

Of course he could. Corvo listened as his smug voice said, 'Nigredo, Albedo, Rubedo,' and felt like pummelling something. His own head maybe. Il Consiglio dei Dieci, the Council of Ten, had outlawed alchemy in Venezia – why was he risking his life to gain knowledge he couldn't even remember?

'You have your tasks. I suggest you get on with them,' barked the Maestro, jolting Corvo back to the workroom. Bortolo's robes swished across the stone, embroidered symbols winking. He played a perilous game. One glimpse of this cellar was enough to incriminate the old man; with its alembics and retorts, arcane symbols chalked on the walls, and the yellow haze that hung always in the air. The Council would have him removed. They'd have them all removed.

Perhaps alchemy offended God, Corvo mused. He'd only found this place because of Livia, whose troupe occasionally danced at La Fenice, and she'd taken a huge risk in telling him. As if she sensed herself in his thoughts, she flicked his ear. 'Concentrate. You want to be kicked out?'

'Of course not,' Corvo muttered and turned his attention to the worktable.

Maestro Bortolo walked amongst them as they weighed and measured, the only sound the seesaw of scales. If they wanted to learn the secrets of alchemy, he said, they had to earn both place and parts. So they made tonics and powders, which Maestro sold to apothecaries: clandestine transactions that took place in alleys or under bridges, anywhere there weren't Council spies, though no place was ever really safe from them. It was the only way he could afford to buy components, especially components that could be wasted on fumbling initiates.

Corvo frowned. He was supposed to be bottling a belladonna tincture so that the nobles could slowly blind themselves. Even Maestra used it. He'd tried to warn her, but all truth earned him was a cuff and an order to concentrate on learning his lines.

Beside him, tiny spoon in hand, Livia measured out a pale dust. 'I think you're using too much of that,' Corvo said before he could stop himself.

She didn't look up. 'Too much of what?'

'Whatever that powder is.'

'Algaroth,' she said with a roll of her eyes. 'Dai, Corvo. It's not hard.'

He ignored that. 'Look. You'll have whatever poor soul takes it shitting their guts out.'

Livia bristled. 'You can't even remember its name and now you're lecturing me on its uses? I've been doing this far longer.'

'I just –' Corvo stopped himself before the words "have a feeling" emerged. It sounded ridiculous.

'Anyway,' Livia said, flashing him a withering glance, 'while we're on the subject of criticising, your belladonna's too weak.'

'I know.'

'Not this again. It isn't your place to decide who uses it, Corvo.'

Corvo looked at her. 'Isn't it?' he said softly.

She met his gaze a few seconds before her eyes dropped to her purgative. Corvo turned back to the belladonna; it glistened faintly. Perhaps Livia was right. Why should he care who applied the poisonous tincture? But his stomach swirled uneasily.

He corked the bottle and set it aside, letting his gaze wander across the workroom. Beneath the symbols, its walls were green with damp, a damp that beaded the skin, weighed on the tongue. Corvo's fingers itched for the phials that gleamed invitingly from Stefano's

bench. He was Maestro's favourite, probably because he flattered the old man outrageously, slipped him caramelle pilfered from his father's shop.

Corvo blinked, focused again on the boy's hands. He was dripping clear fluid into a crucible half full of dark silvery powder. 'Stefano, what's that?'

'What's what?'

'The fluid you're adding to the silver.' His palms were tingling. Corvo scrunched them up, but the feeling persisted.

Finally, Stefano looked round and shook the phial at him. It sloshed. In Maestro's spidery hand, the label read, *Spirit of Hartshorn*.

It didn't mean anything to Corvo. He only knew that the hairs on his arms were trying to escape, lifting as if a storm brewed above them. 'Stefano,' he said, 'don't move.'

The warning came out harsher than he'd intended, snapping across the room. All eyes turned to him, including Maestro's. Surprise creased Stefano's face before it hardened into scorn. 'I won't be ordered around by a playhouse tramp,' he said, hand closing tight around the phial.

'And I won't cry when that crucible blows you to Poveglia.'

Corvo blinked as the words left his mouth. They had come out of nowhere, along with the dreadful certainty that whatever elements Stefano had combined had the power to annihilate half the room. Beside him, Livia drew a quick breath.

Stefano snatched a glance at the crucible. 'You think that's fulminating silver.'

Corvo hadn't heard the term before. 'I think –'

'Enough.' Bortolo strode over to Stefano's bench to peer at the substance. Something flickered across his mottled face before he turned a glare on Corvo. 'You. Get out.'

All feeling drained away, taking the storm with it. 'What?'

‘You heard me, boy. I’ve had enough disturbances from you. And don’t come back until you’re willing to behave yourself.’

Injustice choked him. ‘But all I –’

‘You make no effort to learn from the Maestri, but feel yourself in a position to dictate to others.’ Chest swelling, Bortolo planted meaty fists on his hips. ‘Alchemy is an art that demands a subtle application of principles. You are entirely without subtlety.’

He sounded so like Maestra that it would have been funny if Corvo’s heart wasn’t in freefall. ‘I want to learn,’ he said. ‘Please, Maestro Bortolo.’

They watched each other while the room watched them. The silence stretched. Then Bortolo said, almost kindly, ‘Perhaps you should stick to treading the boards, Corvo.’

It was too much. The use of his name was a door slamming shut in his face. Eyes smarting, Corvo grabbed his bag and, as he turned, one strap swept the belladonna off the bench. He left to the sound of breaking glass. It might as well have been his dreams.