

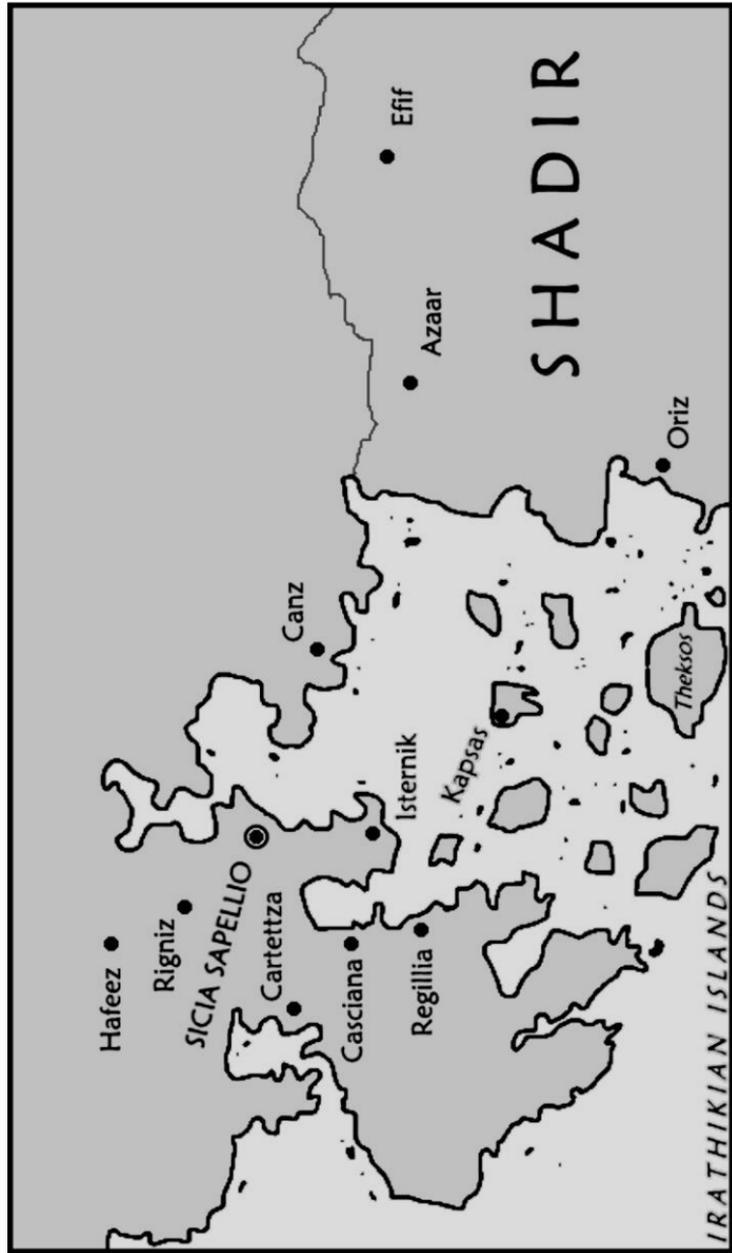
# The Maze Garden

A Divine Labyrinth Novel

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PART ONE

**ALL THE WAY DOWN**

Right – so, since it was my father who kicked off this whole nightmare by being a stuffy, short-sighted prick, let’s start with him.

He’s still in his olive-green academic gown when he comes into my bedroom, even though he has been home from work for nearly two hours. The light from my bedside gas-lamp is reflecting off his spectacles and hiding his eyes. Does this make him look untrustworthy? Not to a seven year old girl, perhaps. But looking back as an adult – oh yes, it most definitely does. He’s supposed to be here to tell me a bedtime story, but this bedtime story is like no bedtime story that I’ve ever heard before. It’s about the Hanging Tree. The Tree, my father tells me, grows in a secret garden, which can only be reached by finding your way through a maze. If you carve the name of the person that you hate most onto the Tree’s bark, the Tree will send out roots and shoots, and creepers and vines, and it will snatch that person from the street, and hang them from its crooked branches.

But if you try to use the Tree twice, the Tree will grow displeased, and it will take the person that you love the most instead.

Well, needless to say, this isn’t the *most* appropriate story to tell a seven year old child, and as a result I don’t sleep at all that night. Or the next night. In fact, I have nightmares

about being stalked by walking trees for several weeks afterwards.

My mother bans my father from ever telling me bedtime stories again.

But many years later, when I finally learnt the truth, I realised that my father's story hadn't simply been the inappropriate ramblings of a man who struggled to connect with his daughter.

No – that night, my father was trying to deliver a warning.

Unfortunately, I'd missed it.



My name is Hana Nazymah, and in order to appreciate why I've ended up the way that I am, you must first understand that I only had one friend as a child.

I'm not ashamed of this. What use is a tribe?

One friend was all I needed.

Her name was Lucia Tortinna, and we were inseparable. In those days, the Sumptuary Laws were still in force in Sicilia Sapellio, which meant that a lot of people with nothing better to do would get very worked up about who should wear what and when. As the daughter of an immigrant professor, I was not supposed to wear buttons on the front of my dress, or hats with a brim wider than three inches. Lucia, whose mother was an attorney, could have worn what she liked. It took me years to realise that she *didn't*. Instead, she was always careful to dress in a way that never upstaged me. That's the kind of friend she was: a friend who was considerably more thoughtful than myself. We sat next to each other at Signora Sciettza's Academy for Young Women, and passed notes to each other throughout lessons about matters that seemed vitally important at the time – like the rumour that Isabella's father had been expelled from the Property Guild for racketeering, or whether we

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could convince the teacher that we had ophthalmic inflammation by rubbing onions into our eyes. We spent our evenings in Lucia's bedroom, making jewellery that we never wore out of the red, gold, and blue shells of rainbow-snails. We even became vegetarians together – although that only lasted for about three days, before I caved into a chicken risotto, two servings of beef-stuffed agnolotti, and a salami and feta cheese sandwich. People thought of us as a pair. If one of us turned up at a birthday party or a class picnic without the other, somebody would always ask, 'Where's Lucia?' or 'Where's Hana?'

We didn't always get along. When we were eleven, we fell out after Lucia failed to save me a seat next to her on the long dining hall benches one lunchtime. I spent most of the subsequent fortnight getting into fights with anybody who dared talk to me, and refusing to eat any food that I thought Lucia might like. But because we worked so well together, we always made up. Lucia was the popular one, eager to be liked, always chatting with strangers. But she needed me to reassure her that Carmela Niore didn't think that she was a cow ('*Carmela* is the cow, Lu'), or that Signora Sciettza believed that she was a good student ('Let's be honest, Lu – the Signora despises all her pupils. Even you').

I, on the other hand, was the one who couldn't care less. Or at least, that's what I pretended. I'd long ago been hardened by the unfair Sumptuary Laws that visibly set me apart from my peers, and as a result I could laugh off other people's insults, and make jokes about being the only brown girl in the school. However, I needed Lucia to keep myself away from the bottom of the class' social pecking order. Because without Lucia, I would have been friendless. And the friendless get bullied.

I was also the brave one. Or at least that's what I told myself. I was the one who kicked Elyas Assaf's bodyball into the cistern when it hit Lucia in the face during one of the inter-guild matches that periodically took over the city's

streets. I was the one who chased off the drawing master's dog when it got into the Academy yard and tried to savage Lucia's knee.

And I was the one who convinced Lucia that we should break into the Villa Niore.

This is not the beginning of the story. I'm still not sure where the beginning of the story is. But what we saw at the Villa Niore is a convenient enough starting point to hang the rest of my tale around.

I say that we 'broke in' to the Villa, because that's what we called it. Actually, it was more a case of slipping through the doors in the main arcade during one of the Niore family's garden parties. Signor Niore had, after years of exhaustive bribery and sycophancy, finally managed to get himself onto the ballot for one of the Ceremonial Husband posts to the ruling Duchessa of Sicia Sapellio. Thanks to the support of the Guild of Bankers, he had narrowly won the Economics Chancellery. Now, I don't want to get too bogged down in the ins and outs of the Sicia Sapellio's messy political situation at this stage, but this much you probably need to know. In those days the most powerful chancellery was the Judicial Chancellery, and the most powerful guild was the Law Guild. It had been that way for nearly a century. However, in recent years the city had grown a little fed up with the Law Guild's reactionary laws dictating how much people could earn and who had to give way to who on a narrow pavement, and many people were starting to look for an alternative power to rally around. The Guild of Bankers was ostensibly neutral, more interested in international wealth than in internal politics. But there was a rumour that Signor Niore favoured taking a more pro-active role in the city, and judging by the lavish style in which he was celebrating his victory, it looked as if that rumour might indeed be true. Nothing canvasses political support like a big party. The front lawn of the Villa Niore was thus filled with guild leaders, lord-bankers,

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equity-barons, prince-bishops, and pretty much every other important civic figure that could be pried away from their own dinner tables for an afternoon. They were all dressed in the archaic robes and feathered head-dresses of their offices, and as a result, it looked as if the gardens of the Villa Niore had been overrun by a flock of fat chickens. My father – who back then was still deluded enough to believe that he might one day be elected Ceremonial Husband to the Chancellery of Education – had dragged his family along to this interminable event, and the only silver lining that I had so far been able to find was the City Jester who ran about the crowd, making crude jokes at the expense of the guests. It didn't help my mood that Signore Niore's daughter (my classmate Carmela) had been insufferable all week, going on and on about how rich her family was going to be now that her father was an elected Ceremonial Husband to the Duchessa of Sicia Sapellio. By the time the speeches began, I could stand the party no longer, so I told Lucia that we should find Carmela's bedroom and see what embarrassing secrets she had hidden up there. I was hoping that we'd discover evidence that she had to shave her upper lip. Or that she'd grown a tail.

Lucia wasn't convinced.

'It's just going to get us into trouble again, Hana,' she said. 'Mamma's still uptight about the fact that we used her hair-curling tongs on the dog.'

'It wasn't our fault that the dog came out looking better than your mother,' I replied, shortly. 'Come on. Do you want to spend the rest of the afternoon listening to Carmela tell us about how many diamond-nippled boyfriends she's going to *buy* with her new fortune?'

So that's how the two of us ended up creeping through the shuttered rooms of the Villa Niore, looking for Carmela's bedroom.

We didn't find it.

Instead, we stumbled across something far stranger.

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For the most part, the Villa Niore was a fairly typical Sicii mansion. It had been many decades since inter-guild strife had necessitated that the homes of the city's political leaders be fortified, so the Villa was a sprawling, palatial complex of internal courtyards, rooftop terraces, filigree-walled sun rooms, and shady, interior living chambers cooled by young boys tugging at strings attached to the ceiling fans. But as I pushed back bead curtains on the first floor to peer into the music rooms and libraries beyond them, Lucia grabbed my arm.

'Do you hear that?' she asked.

I froze, expecting to be cornered by an approaching servant in their severe, black crêpe uniform. But instead, all my ears could pick out was a faint, misty sound, like distant rain.

'It's coming from the room at the end of the corridor,' I said.

'Hana – let's go back,' Lucia pleaded.

But, like I said, I thought of myself as the brave one, so I hurried down the tiled hall, past an avenue of umbrella-leaved plants growing in porcelain vases, towards the metal-studded door at the end.

I knew that we were about to witness something special the moment that I saw the dark pool of water creeping under the crack beneath the door. I broke a leaf off the plant growing in the nearest vase, and held it up over my head as I pushed open the door.

I found myself stood in a small, dim study, furnished with a polished oval table and six ladder-backed chairs. Bookshelves lined the walls – and it was a good job that they were glass-fronted, otherwise their contents would have been thoroughly soaked by now. Because somehow, the impossible was happening, and it was *raining* inside the room.

I don't mean that the water cistern on the roof had leaked or something.

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I mean actual rain, with thick, black clouds that roiled around the ceiling cornice and mouldings. Lucia and I stood hunched beneath the umbrella-leaf, staring up at them in disbelief. We were barely conscious of the shattered glass vivarium strewn across the wet floor at our feet.

‘What *is* that thing?’ asked Lucia.

I had no idea, so I edged over to the bookcases, hoping for a clue. Beyond the glass doors, I could see dusty tomes with impenetrable titles like ‘A Monograph on *Odontoglossum*’ and ‘Selected Treatises on Pomology’. Needless to say, these did nothing to enlighten me, so I made my way down the shelves until I arrived at a series of box files labelled, ‘Transactions of the Rimini Palace Horticultural Society’. The dates on their spines went back nearly a decade and a half.

‘It’s just some boring gardening club,’ I said, disappointed.

But that didn’t explain the cloud.

I peered up at it again, still incredulous – and suddenly a brief, baboon-like face appeared in the rain, scowling down at us. Lucia shrieked. Possibly I did as well. And we fled the room, tumbling along the corridor and down the atrium stairs. If any of the servants heard us pass, they didn’t have time to stop and shout at us, because we were out of Villa in an instant, and racing between party guests on the yellow, sun-stunned lawn.

When my mother saw us a few minutes later, still gasping for breath, she just shook her head and pursed her lips. ‘Whatever terrified you, I expect that you deserved it,’ she said.

I think that I get my warm and loving personality from my mother.

The following Monday, Lucia and I both wrote about what we’d seen in our ‘Moral Progress Diary’ for the Academy. Our efforts got us sent to Signora Sciettza’s

office for lying. The unfairness of this added another bond to our friendship.

Yes, Lucia and I did everything together.

So when she vanished one day, just after her thirteenth birthday, I was devastated. It was like a gaping hole had opened up in my own personality. I could barely function without Lucia there to reflect back my thoughts and to shore up my weaknesses.

The shock of her disappearance blew apart our entire community. Within hours of the story going public, the journalists who wrote for the society pamphlets that spread gossip around the city were harassing the Tortinna family servants, badgering them for insights. A devastated Signor Tortinna organised for flyers to be posted up around the city's guildhalls and markets and cafes, promising a reward for news of his daughter. And the Duchessa's Guard, under a lot of pressure to make an arrest, took the Academy's caretaker in for questioning. They released him again two days later having failed to amass any actual evidence against him.

The Guard also conducted interviews with Lucia's classmates, and teachers, and family.

And of course, they interviewed me.

I'd never been a very good liar as a child.

But that day, I lied and lied and lied.

And I've been lying ever since.

According to the Duchessa's Guard, I was the last person to see Lucia before she vanished.

In those first hours after she was reported missing, there was a controlled urgency to their investigation, as the Guard knew that their chances of finding Lucia alive would rapidly decrease after the first couple of days. The fact that Lucia was the daughter of the one of the city's premier judicial dynasties probably focused their minds a bit as well. I found myself sat in a white-washed interview room at the old, crenallated Tower Post that served our school's district, with one of my Academy teachers and two Guard officers. All were eager that I give a good account of our final movements together.

The first bit was easy. I told them how we'd had health and gymnastics last period at the Academy, so we'd still been dressed in our sports uniform of black skirts and white polo-neck tops when we'd left the school gates. Lucia's old nanny was supposed to meet us in the Tortinna barouche. But she sometimes got delayed at her nephew's, so we'd crossed the street to buy a lollipop each from Signora Fienza's guild-recommended sweetshop. I told the Duchessa's Guard how we'd found Signora Fienza feeling unwell, so Lucia had been allowed into the back office to make her a cup of tea. I didn't add that I'd helped myself to

extra sweets whilst the Signora wasn't looking, but I'm fairly sure that this didn't prejudice their investigation. I then explained how Signor Rosto from the Guild of Letters and Correspondence had arrived, and how he'd told us that he'd look after Signora Fienza, so we'd gone back outside to see if Lucia's nanny had arrived. She hadn't. After a brief consultation, we'd decided to walk home ourselves, because we were big girls now, and *thirteen*. Together, we'd made our way up the Street of Floating Flowers, where hanging baskets spilled scarlet geraniums and lilac petunias down the facades of the city's Fraud and Embezzlement Courts, until we'd reached the gates of the abandoned Rimini Palace. Here we'd parted. I'd gone to the right of the Palace, down the hill, towards the shabbier end of town. Lucia had gone left, up the twisting track, to where the eye-squintingly white villas of the city's rich stood on the steep hillsides, amidst the olive groves and the vineyards and the terraced Paradise Gardens that only the wealthy were allowed to visit.

And that was the last I saw of her.

The Duchessa's Guards wrote this all down. They then asked me other questions.

I replied with the most convincing lies that I could think of.

I'd seen no strangers lurking around the town – not at the school gates, and not at the sweetshop. I was pretty sure that Lucia had never kept any secrets from her parents. And I had never seen her with any strange gifts or presents.

Then, because I felt as if I was getting the hang of this lying thing, I added that I didn't believe that plants could walk either.

The Guards frowned at me.

'Why would you say that?' one of them asked.

I realised that I'd made a mistake, so I pulled my polo-neck sports shirt up, over my mouth, and muttered, 'I just

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thought that it was something you should know,' into my collar.



They never did find Lucia.

Eventually the media fuss died down. The gossipmongers left to cover new scandals in other parts of the city. Signor and Signora Tortinna moved away. The stand-off between the Law Guild and the Guild of Bankers deteriorated. Life went callously on. People didn't *quite* forget. Because Lucia had been young and rich and pretty, the story would resurface every few years. 'New clue in the Lucia Tortinna case' the gossip pamphlets would declare. A man who did disgusting things to children would be arrested in a hinterland village, and for a few weeks there'd be speculation that he'd been involved. Or a grainy photograph of a girl spotted in the Irathikian islands would surface, and suddenly everybody would be momentarily convinced that Lucia was living a new life among the tuna fishermen and giant-lobster hunters of Theksos. But these stories never came to anything.

I, meanwhile, did my best to cobble together a life for myself, limping into the future like a girl who'd lost one of her legs.

And, despite what it cost me, I continued to keep my mouth shut.

### 3

It wasn't just Lucia who vanished.

The baboon-faced cloud vanished too.

Actually, it was the cloud rather than Lucia that I was thinking about one wet day, as I disembarked from an ocean liner onto the Sicia Sapellio docks. Rain was machine-gunning the gangway and streaming off the umbrellas in front of me, and I thought – what if the baboon-faced cloud had escaped into the wild? What if *this* downpour now was Baboon-Face, grown large with the passing years? I stepped off the gangway, onto the quay, and I peered briefly up at the sky, looking for a face. But all I could see amidst the ship-smoke and pennants and steamer-chimneys were ordinary cloud shapes and billowing raindrops – and anyway, my flight of fancy was swiftly curtailed by the fact that I'd left my umbrella in the ship's second class lounge. One of the perils of drinking at lunchtime. Turning up the collar of my mackintosh, I hurried on to the customs shed, whilst a gaggle of tourists gawked at Sicia Sapellio's famous blue flamingos, looking wet and forlorn and not-particularly-noteworthy in the Bay.

In case you haven't heard of the place (many people haven't), Sicia Sapellio is a tiny city-state trapped between the Mountains of Promise and the island-studded waters of the Irathikian Sea. It has survived four centuries of predatory empires partly because of its natural defences, but

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mainly because our banks help finance most of the continent's major armies. Once upon a time the city was a republic; but after the First Great Bank War the Cartettza-Mordini dynasty – who, famously, only give birth to women – seized control of the electoral system, and declared themselves Ruling Duchesses. Their power has waxed and waned over the years, and these days they are locked in a perpetual struggle for supremacy with the city's Seven Major Guilds. But even so, whenever the election for a new Duchessa comes up, the Cartettza-Mordinii still have enough influence to ensure that the twelve dynastic Electors vote to perpetuate their rule.

I was back in this particular hellhole because I'd made a mess of my life. Again. I'd split up with my fiancé of two days, and walked out of my job as a governess in Went. When things start going wrong in my life, I have a habit of destroying everything, because it's easier to begin again from scratch than it is to limp on through. I had two letters in my hand-luggage from a girl acquaintance of mine who probably thought that she was my friend, but whom I didn't really intend getting in contact with again. After navigating the impertinent questions of the immigration officer ('Is this going to take long?' I asked him. 'I wasted enough time trying to get my emotional baggage through customs.'), I dragged my portmanteau across the ferry port and over to the tram stop. It wasn't as if I *wanted* to be back. Not *here*, in Sicia Sapellio, where the banks look like palaces, and the palaces look like rundown town halls. I was only home because I'd run out of other options. I sat in the shelter, waiting for my tram, and I thought, God this is depressing, nothing's changed. The water-damaged horizon looked just as it had when I'd left it three years ago: a slope of limpet buildings, roofed with pan tiles and edged by wrought iron balconies, climbing towards the rocky hills that cradled the bay. It was the end of the financial year, and the Duchessa's tax-agents were out once again in their ceremonial sedan

chairs, gold batons of office glimmering dimly in the wet light as they travelled around the city's guildhalls and banking houses, negotiating how much tax the institutions were willing to pay. Footmen and maids, meanwhile, in dour, servant black, hurried to the State Treasuries to hire gold plates and silver candlesticks for the celebratory dinners and balls that their masters were planning – again, just as they did at this time every year. And musicians from the Entertainer's Guild were stood smoking cigarettes on the steps of the Municipal Opera House, trying to sell their services to passersby. They can't have been doing very well, I decided, because the Entertainer's Guild *still* hadn't repaired the Opera House's sign, so it continued to invite patrons to come and listen to the 'O era', which just sounded like somebody had forgotten how to end the sentence. It was like the last three years hadn't happened.

Eventually, an electric tram clattered into the stop, showering sparks into the gloom from its pantograph, and I climbed aboard with slightly more fluster than a sober person would have displayed. Soon we were shuddering off in the direction of my old neighbourhood, back towards the remnants of a childhood that I'd done all I could to forget.

Like the rest of the city, the neighbourhood hadn't changed. It still had the same illegal, non-guild stores that the Duchessa's Guard chose to ignore because nobody important frequented them. It had the same seedy tenements. The same church-owned pawnshops. The same families crowded around the same courtyards – probably shouting the same arguments. When I finally disembarked from the tram, I saw faces that I recognised from childhood – Stefano Diomante, the shoe-seller's son, holding a newspaper over his head against the rain as he hurried into his father's shop; the Riolli boys, stocky, and violent, and with a finger in every dodgy deal going on in the neighbourhood. There was even our resident mad woman, Signora Pelaggosa, stood on the cobbles, trying to persuade

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a puddle to get out of her way so that she could cross the street without getting her feet wet. It was only a matter of time before a butcher's cart or farmer's wagon went past and soaked her. I was almost tempted to hang around, so that I could watch the misfortunes of one of the few people in a worse state than me. But, like I said, the rain was heavy and I didn't have an umbrella. So I hurried on. However, as I turned down a narrow side-street, thick with interlocking balconies, I briefly found myself wishing that *I* had the power that Signora Pelaggosa believed herself to possess – the power to push the rain back. Because perhaps if Lucia and I had succeeded in making the baboon-faced cloud *stop* when we'd stumbled across it, we wouldn't have been so scared. And perhaps if I hadn't been so scared, I wouldn't have been so determined to prove myself in the days that had followed.

And suddenly, the world was pressing in on me, and my heart was accelerating, and out of nowhere the panic attack consumed me.

When Lucia and I were kids, I used to think of myself as the brave one.

Not anymore.



I spent ten minutes lurking in the gloomy courtyard of our tenement, eating handfuls of palma violets to try and cover up the smell of alcohol on my breath.

I don't know why I bothered.

When I eventually mustered the courage to knock on our front door, it was my mother who answered – and her greeting was full of its usual warmth.

'What have you done this time, Hana?' she asked.

'Nothing,' I protested, as I stepped into hallway of our apartment – although, to be fair, it *is* true that I only ever

find my way home when my life is in freefall. 'I just thought that I'd come and wish father happy birthday,' I told her.

'His birthday was three weeks ago,' said my mother. 'And you don't travel all the way from Went just to do that. I suppose that you're expecting a room?'

I pretended not to notice how grudging she sounded.

'Not if it's any trouble,' I replied, mercilessly, knowing full well she wouldn't have it in her to turn me away; and I followed her into the gas-lit parlour.

Because my father was a professor of an 'uneconomical' subject (Natural Sciences), his stipend from the City University was small, and so our family lived in a crowded, third floor apartment in one of the poorest districts of Sicia Sapellio. Our neighbours were labourers and guild mercenaries and petty merchants. This did not mean, however, that my parents lacked dreams of something better, and as a result, the walls of our home were covered in cheap, knock-off tapestries that imitated the sort of hangings that you might find in the palaces further up the hill. We also somehow managed to find the money to employ a servant, Rosa, who had to sleep in the kitchen pantry because there was no bedroom for her – an indignity that she deigned to suffer only because she wasn't registered with the Guild of Domestic Staff. (Technically, this was illegal, so when the Guard came around we had to pretend that she was a distant cousin of my mother's). As a child, I'd been endless embarrassed by my family's poverty; these days, I was more embarrassed by my parents' sad pretensions of wealth.

My mother stopped in the middle of the tiled floor, fiddling with her paste-jewel necklace. 'Your father's bringing one of his students round this evening,' she told me. 'So please, Hana, play nicely – *and for heaven's sake, don't throw your wet coat on my chaise lounge like that!*'

Our conversation went downhill from there.

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By the time my father and his latest protégé arrived from the University, my mother and I weren't speaking to each other because an argument about what constituted 'sarcastic sighing' had suddenly escalated.

My father was visibly thrown by the sight of me, sulking on the settee that my mother insists on referring to as the 'chaise lounge'. He knows the dangers.

'Hana,' he said, warily. 'If you'd let us know you were coming to visit, I would have postponed my invitation to Elene.'

I gave him a smile of alcohol-edged brightness.

'Oh, I wouldn't dream of getting in the way of faculty bonding,' I said. 'I'm always so *delighted* to meet your students. Pleased to meet you *Elene*.'

I shook Elene's hand, and my smile grew still wider as the little fool started to babble about how happy she was to meet the daughter of the brilliant Professor Nazymah. She was clearly oblivious to the piranhas of tension that were circling around her. It was only a matter of time before she got eaten alive. I wondered what she had done to so mess up her university career that my father was the best mentor that she could find. Perhaps she had slept with the wrong faculty member, I thought maliciously. Perhaps she had slept with *my father* (I shuddered at that thought). Or perhaps her family had simply not been able to afford the fees that would have paid for a better patron at the University. Whatever the case, she was now almost certainly destined for mediocrity.

We had to wait until my brother appeared before Rosa, could ring the bell for dinner. When Joram eventually came slouching in from his guild-sponsored Stamp Appreciation Club, he barely acknowledged my arrival. But that was fine with me. Finding common ground with a boy who likes to list the hundred most interesting coins currently in circulation is, quite frankly, exhausting. We traipsed, one after the other, into the candle-lit dining room, where

tapestries of feasting Usury Saints hung from the walls. I ended up seated next to Elene at our slightly battered, second-hand, ‘it once belonged to a count!’ dinner table.

To be fair to Elene, she really *tried* to make an effort with me. Unfortunately, all the stock questions that she had at her disposal, ‘Where do you work, Hana?’ – ‘Do you have any children?’, simply remind me that my life was in meltdown at the moment. It didn’t help that my father kept trying to change the topic of the conversation onto faculty business. I got unreasonably jealous when the two of them started having a passionate conversation about a rival professor’s latest research on diatoms, which is ridiculous, because I have absolutely no interest in phytoplankton whatsoever. A part of me felt genuinely sorry for this bright, fresh-faced girl, who was completely out of her depth, yet still trying to weather the currents of my destabilising presence. I got the impression that, just like my family, hers was a poor background – I think that she was the daughter of a draper who had made just enough money during his lifetime to push his children up to the next rung of society. I could have thus probably found quite a bit of common ground with her if I’d made the effort. But I’d been drinking all day, on an empty stomach – and although I’m well practised at being drunk at the reins on these family occasions, it was bringing out all my sarcasm.

So when *Elene* mentioned that she’d stumbled across a reference to something called the Rimini Palace Horticultural Society, I couldn’t resist pouncing on it.

‘Oh, *that* old gang,’ I said, triumphantly. ‘Father will tell you all about them, I’m sure. They used to meet up in a little study at the Villa Niore, and talk about the Maze Gardens.’

My father almost choked on his asparagus.

I helped myself to some more stuffed vine leaves and pretended not to notice. ‘They were always discussing

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exotic plants, and ways of making them grow in our soil. You should take a look for yourself.'

My father, panic in his eyes, said, 'I'm not sure that's a good idea, Hana.'

'Oh, I think the Maze Gardens are always worth a visit,' I said. 'They're just up the hill, Elene, behind the ruins of the Rimini Palace. You can't miss them.'

My father finally managed to recover himself.

'Yes, well, I'm sure that Elene has more important things to do than visit our local ruins,' he said, with as much dignity as he could muster. 'It's the Niore family's End of Year Ball tomorrow night, and –'

But I wasn't about to let him off the hook so easily.

'Oh, now isn't that a coincidence?' I said, brightly. 'If you're interested in the Rimini Palace gardens, Elene, you should get Signor Niore to show you the Efif Manuscript.'

My father glared at me furiously.

'The Efif Manuscript?' asked Elene.

'It's a fascinating document,' I said, not meeting my father's eyes. 'I'm sure that if you ask papa nicely, he'll tell you all about how he *heroically* saved the manuscript from the fires of Efif, when he and mama fled here from Shadir. It's now in Signor Niore's possession – he has the two-hundred and forty page text on display in his library. It's about six hundred years old, written on vellum, in a script that nobody can translate. It seems to reference the gardens of the Rimini Palace, but its illustrations are of no plants that anybody recognises. There's even a tree in it that appears to have dead bodies hanging from it in the place of fruit. Dear papa has dedicated his whole career to finding the missing pages of the manuscript – but sadly, he hasn't had much success.'

Elene glanced from me, to my father, then back again, clearly sensing the tension, but just as clearly unsure of its cause.

‘I’ve always had an interest in medieval herbariums,’ she said, carefully.

I smiled at my father in triumph.

‘Well, there you go then,’ I said – and I reached to refill my glass.

My mother got to the bottle first.

‘Perhaps you’ve had enough wine for tonight, Hana,’ she said.

She was probably right.

It was time to move onto something stronger.



After dinner, I left my parents to try and recover what was left of the family dignity with Elene, and made my way over to Rinaldo’s.

Like most of the profitable establishments in our neighbourhood, Rinaldo’s Bar was owned by the Riolli boys, who ran a local black market in goods and services for those people who couldn’t afford the guild tariffs. The place was thus probably a front for something illegal. But I didn’t care. As long as they served me limoncello, I was perfectly happy to ignore any scruples that had survived my lifetime of cynicism.

I found Elyas Assaf (the boy whose bodyball I’d once kicked into the cistern – remember?) leant against the chrome-topped bar, amidst the fug of cigarette smoke and the sweaty fumes of labouring men. Elyas’ was a few years older than me. His family, like mine, had fled the war in Shadir, shortly before I was born – making the long, brutal trek along the ape-infested coast with thousands of other foot-sore, starving refugees. But unlike my family, Elyas’ parents hadn’t found sanctuary in Sicia Sapellio. Elyas’ mother had been killed in the anti-refugee riots shortly after they had arrived, whilst his father had vanished in murky circumstances around the same time. Elyas had instead

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been brought up by his grandparents, and then, when they had died, by himself. Back when we were children, Lucia and I'd both had a crush on him. But because I'd always known that, had either of us found the courage to tell him, Elyas would have chosen Lucia, I'd contented myself with declaring that I fancied Benedetto Marcolli instead. Later, after Lucia had vanished, Elyas and I had grown close for a while; whilst Elyas had obsessed over what had happened to his father, I'd obsessed over what had happened to my best friend. But it hadn't lasted, and we'd eventually gone our separate ways. These days, Elyas had grown into a fairly handsome man, his face touched up here and there with the eye-liner and lip-darkener that had become quite popular among fashionable young men since the Sumptuary Laws had been relaxed. I had some vague idea that he worked in property real estate now, but I suspected that, like the Riolli boys, he had his fingers in far more businesses than that.

The alcohol had made me fearless.

'Elyas!' I exclaimed, slapping him on the back. 'Still being dressed by the local rag-sellers, I see.'

It took him a moment to place me. 'Hana Nazymah,' he said. 'I heard that you'd left for Went. What the devil brings you back to the neighbourhood?'

I immediately launched into my tale of woe.

Now, I don't want you to get the wrong impression here. This wasn't some drunken, emotional girl spilling her guts out to an embarrassed childhood acquaintance who quickly comes to regret ever getting into a conversation with her. When I'm on form – and I was on form that night – I can turn my life story into a comic operetta. Whilst Elyas brought me a limoncello, I regaled him with stories of the two aristocratic brats that I'd looked after in Went. Soon, we'd retreated to a pair of seats by the window, and I had him laughing at my misfortunes, whilst he in turn told me about his increasingly desperate attempts to get a meeting with the Duchessa about some property deal that

he wanted sanctioning. His hands were a bit wayward, and had I been sober I'd have probably been annoyed by his presumption. But the alcohol was humming in my veins, my body was on fire, and I might have actually ended up sleeping with him – which would have been convenient, because I'd just realised that I'd left my parents' house without a key.

But then somehow the conversation stumbled onto Lucia.

I'm usually very good at avoiding this mistake. With strangers, it's easy. They have no reason to suspect that I lost my best friend at the age of thirteen; and, back in Went, most people couldn't even place Sicia Sapellio on a map, so there was no danger of them having heard about Lucia Tortinna and her tragic disappearance. But Elyas, of course, had been there when Lucia had dropped out of my life, and even after all these years he was still curious.

'I always wondered why the Duchessa's Guard never followed up on that man,' he said. 'You know – the one with the green face-paint, who cornered you and Lucia outside the Academy.' He took a swig of his beer. 'I mean, I tried to tell them myself, but I was already in trouble for stealing cigarettes from Arrenzio's shop, so I suppose that it isn't surprising that they didn't pay me much attention.'

I suddenly regretted being so drunk.

How should I respond? Should I deny the existence of the green-faced man? Make a joke about people in fancy dress? Pretend that I didn't understand what he was getting at?

In the end, I did none of these things.

I told Elyas that I needed a cigarette, even though I haven't smoked since Carmela gave me a cigarette behind the bicycle shed in my last year at the Academy. I then lurched off in the direction of the toilets, where I managed to drop my glasses down the bowl after a couple of minutes of dry-retching. After that, I decide that the most dignified

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thing to do would be to make a quick exit, so I left the bar – and only realised when I was halfway up the street that I'd forgotten to say goodbye to Elyas.

I then spent half an hour in the courtyard of our tenement, throwing stones at my parents' window, before my father finally opened the door.

It was good to be home.



Later, as my bedroom rotated sedately around me, I drifted off into an uncomfortable, broken sleep, where Lucia and I kept getting chased by different kinds of threat. These threats included (but were not confined to) a large dog, a man with a knife, one very irate immigration officer, and a baboon-faced cloud. Each time, as Lucia and I fled blindly through a cityscape of dead-ends and hidden pits, Lucia would begin to fall behind.

And each time, no matter how hard I shouted at her to *run faster*, Lucia would always get caught first.