

MICHELLE LOVRIC

THE MOURNING EMPORIUM

Companion to The Unburied Child



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THE
MOURNING
EMPORIUM

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What is true, and what’s made up?

Acknowledgments

About the Author

Less than two years ago, eleven-year-old Teodora and her adoptive parents left their home in Naples to visit the exciting city of Venice. Soon after she arrived, Teo discovered *The Key to the Secret City*, an old book that revealed an ancient prophecy commanding Teo and a boy named Renzo to save Venice from Bajamonte Tiepolo, or *Il Traditore*, a murderous traitor who had come back to seek revenge centuries after his death. Teo also learned that the reason she felt so at home in Venice was because she had in fact been born there. Her natural parents had been killed by Bajamonte, and Teo had escaped the same fate only because she had been saved by mermaids.

With the help of some new friends and a bit of magic, Teo and Renzo *were* able to stop *Il Traditore* before he destroyed the city. But when it came time to say the part of the spell that would kill him once and for all, Teo's kind heart stopped her. As a result, *Il Traditore* was merely vanquished until the time when he would summon enough strength and baddene magic to return once more....



Venice, late afternoon, Christmas Day, 1900

A small girl stood on the ice that crusted the edge of the lagoon.

The storm was over. But the temperature was still falling. The girl shivered, wrapping her arms around her narrow body.

This was not the kind of cold that makes your nose glow, nor the kind that makes you look forward to sitting by the fire with a nice warm cup of something. It was that hopeless, heart-dragging kind of cold that makes you feel like an orphan.

Particularly if you are one.

Like this girl, Teodora Gasperin.

As far as the eye could see, way out on the islands of the lagoon, droplets of fog had frozen into a crystalline haze over the skeletal branches of the trees. It looked as if the leaves had been replaced by diamonds, glittering like angry teardrops. Ice strangled the shore; long white arabesques of it reached into the black water.

As she turned to trudge back home, Teo's eye snagged on something glinting just below her, embedded in the frozen water. She bent down, lifting her pinafore out of the way for a better look.

Then she screamed.

For what she had glimpsed was a white eel, thick and long as a young tree trunk, with red gills sprouting like coral from its muscular neck. At the sound of her cry, the creature slowly lowered one translucent eyelid and winked at her.

"Vampire Eels!" Teo shuddered. "They're back. And Venice all but drowned under the ice. It can only mean one thing.

"Renzo!" she whispered to herself. "I must tell Renzo! And the mermaids. And Professor Marin and the other Incogniti ..."

A black-backed gull flapped past, cawing "Ha! Ha! Ha!"

Teo winced at its mockery. Her nose pinkened, and she blinked rapidly. Then she stamped her foot.

"Yes, I know. I know. *I know*. If Bajamonte Tiepolo has come back, and brought all his vicious creatures with him, and baddened magic too, then there's only one person to blame."

The girl lifted her head and cried out over the icy tracts: "Me."



Osborne House, the Isle of Wight, Christmas Day, 1900

When the news of the disaster was brought to Queen Victoria, she did not lift her dimming eyes from the soft-boiled egg in her golden egg-cup.

“Venice?” She frowned.

“The island city, Ma’am. In Italy, Ma’am—it has been destroyed, they say.”

“Is this Ve ...?” The Queen stopped, her lip trembling.

“Venice, Ma’am,” the nurse reminded her gently.

“... a part of Our Empire?”

“No, Ma’am, Venice has never been one of ours. Won’t you try a little egg? It is exceedingly lightly done.”

A sudden shadow darkened the window. A cormorant stood motionless on the sill, its inky black wings spread out.

“Another one!” The nurse grimaced. “I do so hate those birds. Uncannily like bats, they are.” She turned back to her patient, “Now, Ma’am ...”

But the Queen had fallen asleep again, the teaspoon still clutched in her tiny, wrinkled hand.

Queen Victoria of England was very, very old. She had reigned for sixty-three years, six months and five days. She had outlived her husband, three of her children, several of her grandchildren and one hundred and thirty-eight of her dogs.

She was the most famous woman in the world.

Everyone knew her drooping round face, her toadish eyes, her pursed-up mouth, her sharp parrot-beak of a nose, her silver hair pulled back under a widow’s cap, her fussy dresses of dull black silk. Everybody knew that, even though she owned plum-sized diamonds, Queen Victoria preferred to wear just two items of jewelry: her wedding ring and a bracelet made from the hair of her beloved—but deceased—husband, Albert. She had been in deep mourning for him for almost forty years.

Albert’s death was only one of the many things that made Queen Victoria look as if she had just swallowed a long draft of something exceedingly nasty. She was famous for never smiling.

These are just a few of the things that Queen Victoria particularly disliked: jokes, war rooms, typewriting machines, bishops, weddings, magic, mysteries and, most of all, her own

distant cousin Lord Harold Hoskins.

Queen Victoria also disliked the general public, which is why she spent a great deal of time tucked away at Osborne, her vast private estate on the Isle of Wight. If she absolutely *had* to mingle with her subjects, then Queen Victoria carried a parasol lined with chain mail, and several of those subjects had shown a tendency to aim pistols at her at close range. Undoubtedly, most of these would-be assassins had been stirred up by Harold Hoskins, who had the gall to pretend he'd more right to rule Britain than Queen Victoria herself.

So many times, Queen Victoria would have liked to say, "Off with his head!" But Harold Hoskins was, after all, family, and these were, after all, modern times. So the Pretender to the British throne was now lord of the sand and flies on the island of Hooroo in the South Pacific, where he'd been conveniently dispatched as governor of a penal colony five years before.

And what did Queen Victoria like? She liked suet pudding very much indeed. Queen Victoria was partial to dining off gold plates, even at breakfast. She liked ruling an empire as wide as the world, even if it seemed to her that many of her subjects were savages, heathens, or even Australians. She heartily enjoyed ordering her family around and criticizing their personal habits—in spite of the fact that some of them had countries of their own to rule.

So there was a very big to-do when the news got out that, on December 25, 1900, Queen Victoria had not got out of bed, nor put on her black dress, nor read the dispatches from her ministers. For the first Christmas of her long reign, she had not criticized a single member of her household. Her memory wandered. She could not manage even a lightly boiled egg.

She wasn't sick; she had simply worn out.

"Not much longer," squawked the spy, flying away from the windowsill with ice in its black feathers. "Our time is coming. South, south!"



On a remote island off the Australian coast, where Her Majesty's convicts toiled in the pitiless sun, Harold Hoskins stroked his neat sandy beard as he watched the dark cloud of birds cruising into the belfry of Hooroo's bleak little stone church.

How convenient it was that his guest had taught him magical means of communicating with them.

"And what perfect timing," he gloated, after the birds had delivered their news. "The Venetian operation a complete triumph! And now *she* can't last much longer, the old bezzom!" Harold Hoskins, the Pretender to the British throne, could never bring himself to refer to his cousin Queen Victoria by name or title.

The spies had also brought happy news of their specially modified *Vampyroteuthis infernalis* recently dispatched to London on a mission for his guest.

"Nasty little creatures," thought Harold Hoskins fondly. They were, after all, his firstborn experiment in baddened magic. "I must tell him!"

He hurried carefully—for he could not risk a fall—down the passageway that led to the secret lagoon on the farthest and wildest edge of the island. He would be sure to find his birds there, gazing north as always. Anyway, it was time to check on their latest little project.

They had been testing certain spores on the local South Sea dolphins. Harold Hoskins did not

see the harm in the fish himself, but his guest was most insistent that they should be treated “like the traitorous vermin they are.”

The blackened corpses of five dolphins lay on the beach. They were being drained of the marrowfat by a select band of yet another *almost* perfectly successful experiment, the Ghost-Convicts.

Who’d have thought it would be so simple to resuscitate the corpses of two hundred convicts who’d tried to escape the island back in 1835? The men had promptly driven the boat straight into Hooroo’s deadly reef. All perished. Now their ghosts, unattractively sharp-nibbled, had been raised from the seabed and were turning into quite promising pirates. The Pretender’s faithful Lieutenant Rosebud had taught them all the villainous arts. The Ghost-Convicts were still slightly defective in function, however, with an inconvenient tendency to steal sheep.

Lately, the forces had been swelled by stripping the well-stocked graveyard on Hooroo for men who’d been hanged for bushranging or murder. Finally, there were the living criminals he’d bribed with pardons. Of course, the most dangerous—living and undead—had already been dispatched north on that satisfactory little mission to Venice, with Lieutenant Rosebud himself and *the lady*. His guest had insisted that she too be given a pardon, despite her crime. “She’ll be perfect for the work in hand,” he’d rasped.

Down on the beach, the Ghost-Convicts sang gruesome sea shanties as they drained the dolphins. The dreadful noise masked the baaing of several sheep they had hidden under an upturned dinghy.

“Nice to see them so jolly,” thought Harold Hoskins. “And they’ll be happier still to take revenge on the Old Country for years of subjugation and snobbery.”

Now the Pretender could start topping up their high spirits with mentions of the jewels that would be worn by the world’s royalty, who’d soon be gathering in London for Queen Victoria’s funeral.

What a shame that metal was in short supply on Hooroo, mused Harold Hoskins. They had to use bullets made from pollywaffle—pellets of compacted parrot dung.

A deep shadow of black glided along the distant foreshore. Harold Hoskins knew better than to call out. No, better to let him come in his own time.

The Pretender’s guest favored a long black cloak. It emphasized the deathly pallor of a face. Harold Hoskins still found it hard to look at for long—although *the lady* obviously hadn’t been able to drag her eyes away from it. Given that long black cloak and that upsetting face of his, it had been easy for Harold Hoskins and Lieutenant Rosebud to coin a code name for their guest when he was first washed ashore, all those months before.

“Signor Pipistrelly” was what leapt simultaneously to their lips.

“Signor Pipistrelly”—Mr. Bat.

Harold Hoskins was not entirely sorry to realize that Signor Pipistrelly would be rushing north too, just as soon as he heard the birds’ news. A barn had been prepared for him outside Calais, conveniently close to the English Channel.



At the same moment, but half a world away, two men stood high up on the bell tower of Sa

Giorgio, gazing down on the ice floes in the lagoon. The older of the two drew respectful bows from the other Venetians who'd hurried up the terrace to behold the full scale of the disaster from the best vantage point in the city. Professor Marìn was the famous author of such excellent volumes as *The Best Ways with Wayward Ghosts* and *Lagoon Creatures—Nice or Nasty?*

The other man, quite unreasonably handsome, was nevertheless oblivious to the admiring glances of all the ladies. The circus-master Sargano Alicamoussa was too distressed: not just at the devastation of his beloved Venice, but at the news that schools of South Sea dolphins were perishing from a mysterious disease in the Pacific.

He lamented, "Is a hair-erecting horror! First the ice. Now this! Can it be coincidental that the dear dolphins that helped us in the battle are suffering so? Colder than goanna blood is a villain who destroys such noble beasts, yes."

Signor Alicamoussa was a native Venetian, but had passed much of his life roaming the Antipodes in search of rare Australian beasts. So his vocabulary was sometimes alarming and exotic.

Now he wiped a tear from his brilliant blue eye, causing three ladies to rush forward with their handkerchiefs. When they had retreated, the circus-master continued, "The brave dolphins perished too close to the island of Hooroo. Youse'll know I was there last year, Professor, for to collect some bare-eyed cockatoos. I don't trust that knock-kneed dingy Harold Hoskins any more than I'd trust a dog with a butcher's bucket. Is something crooked going on there, yes. My oath!"

He lowered his voice. "Reckon that Harold Hoskins has got himself a snoot of baddened magic."

"Impossible!" cried the professor. "Young Teodora put an end to all that for us."

Signor Alicamoussa confirmed joyfully, "And the sweet girl's safe from the ice, bless the beetles. And is surely sure that dearest Lorenzo ..."

An egret alighted on the railing and tiptoed on its star-shaped feet toward the two men. It bent its graceful neck toward them and chirped a few sad notes before it flew off.

"No! Poor Renzo!" breathed Professor Marìn.

"I'll be there"—Signor Alicamoussa was already striding toward the stairs—"quicker than three jumps of a fleck-eared flea."

"Godspeed, Sargano," called the professor. "You know where I'll be. I've got a ship to shape up."



Just across the water, at the Hotel Danieli, a lady with a row of kiss curls on her forehead sat at her dressing table, admiring her beautiful face in the mirror.

She'd had the luck—or the foresight—to insist on a room on the third floor, well above the ice flood. She'd just finished dabbing her wrists with perfume and was tucking a pistol into the belt that cinched her waist, when she was summoned to the window. A seagull was tapping on it with his yellow beak.

"You have news for me?" she asked, drawing on her gloves. Her voice was cold and clipped.

She opened the window and let the bird in. “Is there news of the insufferable Studio
Son?” she demanded. “And of the accursed and as yet Undrowned Child?”



what had happened the previous night

On the night before Christmas, the city had been caught by surprise: a brutal, murderous surprise.

Venice was used to floods. Fifty times a year, several feet of water tumbled into the great square of San Marco and other low parts of the city.

“So?” the Venetians asked, and shrugged. “What’s a bit of water?”

The next tide always pulled it out again. People usually managed to extract some fun from this practical joke played by Nature. Gondoliers would pole people straight into cafés and they’d drink a glass of wine at the bar, still standing in the boat.

But on Christmas Eve, 1900, the sea had risen swift and silent in the night. The hydrometers of the Brenta Canal were simply swept away, so they could warn no one. Columns of gray water snaked deep into the city. Venice had never seen floodwater like this, slithering on its cold belly through the streets, carrying on its back flotillas of cruelly sharp miniature icebergs and ice floes in jagged sheets.

Many Venetians had been to midnight Mass; others had sat up late, enjoying the Christmas Eve feast of fried fish and reminiscing over Christmases past. Everyone went to bed overfed, overtired and very happy.

So no one heard the poor tethered dogs of Venice barking until the water closed over them. As the sea crept up the walls, a few Venetians who lived on the ground floor woke. They were the unlucky ones. Alerted by a slapping noise, they innocently opened their doors. A mountain of water gushed in and swept them away.

The ice floes clanked as the waves surged higher. The snake of water lashed its tail. The ice nudged, scraped, rattled and finally shattered the windows of houses, shops and churches. Suddenly, the narrow streets were flowing with a shocking soup of food and furniture. Christmas wrappings and baubles, baby carriages and chamber pots, children’s toys and human beings. Rings and necklaces tumbled from the jewelers’ windows. Coffins floated out of funeral chapels to jostle among the icebergs. The jaws of the water snatched the dead fish from their baskets at the Rialto Market and bore them away in limp shoals down the Grand Canal.

The next people to be woken were the staff of the Accademia Galleries, home of Venice’s finest paintings. With the water rising over his knees, the night watchman telephoned for

help. Soon all the museum curators came sloshing through the city in the thigh-high boots a Venetians kept for flood times.

But it was too late to save the paintings of Venice herself: portraits of the city painted by Bellini, Carpaccio and Canaletto. The priceless masterpieces floated through the smashed windows to join the thickening soup.



The sorrowful light of Christmas dawn revealed a drowned city. The ruins of gondolas lay like the skeletons of slender whales. In front of the shops, the remains of their wares, sodden and black with mud, were heaped in funeral pyres, waiting to dry out enough to burn. Venice looked like an enormous flea market, one that sold only pitiful damaged goods.

The first outsiders the Venetians saw were photographers and journalists, who called comfortably from their safe, dry boats, “Are you Venetians freezing and wretched? Have you lost your mothers? Any babies swept away?”

Mute with misery and cold, the Venetians stared back at them. The journalists jotted furiously while swigging hot whisky-and-orange from their flasks.

“Row on, man!” they ordered their boatmen. “This lot aren’t wretched enough. See if you can find a motherless child crying, will you?”

Everywhere Venetians were asking each other one question: “*Why?*”

After all, Venice was famous for her great seawalls, the *murazzi*. How had the *murazzi* failed the city, just when they were needed the most? A party of fishermen set off in salvage boats to see what had happened, and to forage on the islands where Venice grew her food. As they approached the Lido, the men paled. The *murazzi* had been flung around like toy building blocks. And the orchards of Sant’Erasmus were sad ghosts of themselves: bleached, flattened and poisoned with salt.

From a distance, the fishermen glimpsed swollen bodies on the shoreline of Pellestrina.

“More dead,” they sighed, unrolling blankets. “Will it never end?”

But as the fishermen approached, the bodies emitted loud honking sounds. Those icy beaches were now home to some new inhabitants. The ice storm had swept a colony of morse seals north from Croatia. The seals cried their fear and loneliness in the unfamiliar environment.

And now snow was falling in thick threads, weaving a white blanket over the town. Fragile roofs sagged under quilts of snow; churches were folded away in blank curtains of ice. It was as if the city had died, and now lay pale and otherworldly in a soft white shroud.



And so it was, on the afternoon of Christmas Day, that Teodora Gasperin came to be standing on the frozen water that jutted into the lagoon. Until the moment she’d encountered the Vampire Eel under the ice, Teo had been wondering about her adoptive parents, a mile away across the water.

While Venice froze and drowned, at least those two must have been safe at work in the beautiful new laboratory perched high on the island of the Lazzaretto Vecchio, where the

were the proud directors of the new Lagoon Museum. Knowing them—Teo smiled fondly—Leonora and Alberto Stampara probably hadn't noticed the icebergs sweeping past the island. Their eyes would have been glued to their microscopes.

"They didn't even come back for supper last night! Christmas Eve!" Teo grumbled. "I know they're on the verge of a breakthrough, but really, how can the locomotion of the common squid be so interesting that they forget to come home and watch me open my presents?"

She sighed indulgently. "Well, it's not the first time."

And when they did come home, she knew they'd be their usual affectionate selves, liberally laden with hugs and praise. She couldn't have asked for kinder adoptive parents. And a little absentmindedness on their parts meant that she and her friend Renzo were free to explore the city and islands to their hearts' content.

All was also dry and snug back at their third-floor apartment near the Fondamente Nuove, where the family's housekeeper, Anna, was boiling cauldrons of soup and roasting slices of pumpkin. Teo had spent her day trudging through the streets to deliver buckets of soup and trays of pumpkin to neighbors whose ground-floor rooms were still pitifully damp and whose ovens were clogged with mud. The hours had passed in a steamy haze of onions, hot water, and the grateful tears of the people Teo visited. She imagined Renzo doing something similar where he lived, over in Santa Croce, on the other side of town. Renzo's mother was just the sort of woman to tuck up her sleeves and throw herself into helping those less fortunate than herself. Teo pictured her busy in her blue shawl, bringing as much comfort to people with her lovely face as with her kind, swift hands.

"Of course Renzo's safe," she told herself. "*Of course* he is."

But she still asked everyone she met, "Do you have any news of Santa Croce?"

They shook their heads. Teo had glimpsed the lists of the dead on the walls. They were so miserably long that she could not bear to study them. In tiny Venice, everyone knew everyone else, or was related to someone who did. The names of people Teo knew and loved were bound to be written on those sheets of paper.

There was no doubt, fortunately, that their friend Maria was out of harm's way: the convent school where she boarded was on high ground over on the island of Giudecca. A neighbor told Teo that the nuns were taking in people made homeless by the flood. Maria would be in her element, sorting out warm clean clothes for everybody, choosing the prettiest dresses for the saddest girls who needed them the most.

And Teo too had tried to bury her own worries in hard work. All day, the sun had hardly dared to show its face, as if it knew that it was irrelevant to the desolate city. The orange glow of Teo's hot pumpkin was a cheering sight in the bitter mist and inside houses lit only by stubs of candles.

At last, when everyone possible had been comforted with soup and hugs, Teo had slipped away for a little time to herself. Standing on the lonely shore at the Fondamente Nuove, she finally allowed her shoulders to sag. She was tired to the marrow of her bones. She'd slept fitfully the previous night, tortured by a nightmare.

Some of it had already come true.

In her dream, shadows had flitted through black water. There had been tails with jewel-like scales, and pale, slender arms bearing away flailing humans and tumbling paintings. A black ship with cobwebbed sails had cast nets down into the water where drowning souls thrashed

and screamed. There had been images of giant squid pushing children into their thorny maw and of a dead Venice trapped and perfectly preserved beneath a hundred feet of crystal ice. Over these scenes had floated a gray eminence, not quite man-shaped, not quite bat-shaped. It had swooped to whisper in Teodora's flinching ears: "Death, and worse, to all Venetians."

The distant honking of the lonely monk seals brought her back to the present.

"Poor seals," she thought, "swept away from everything they know."

And that was the moment when Teo had looked down and seen the red gills and the winking eye of the Vampire Eel, and known for certain that Venice herself, and not just the unfortunate seals, now stood in the loneliest and most terrifying kind of danger.

Under her knitted cap, the cold suddenly gripped her, as if wrenching the hair off her scalp. She whispered, "Oh, Renzo! Where are you?"



a dank and dismal Christmas Day afternoon, 1900

Renzo carried the bucket into the dark house and threw its contents over the terra-cotta floor his mother had always polished to a shine. Each pailful loosened a little more of the stinking mud that slimed up to his ankles. Renzo's mind was blank, but his feet automatically followed the path to and from the well in the courtyard. His numb hands sent the bucket plummeting down through the ice. Then his aching arms lifted the dripping pail and carried it into the ruined kitchen.

Upstairs, his mother's body had been laid out on her bed by two kind neighbors. The funeral gondolas were busy with dozens of victims of the ice flood. The rich and noble were buried first. Renzo's mother had to wait her turn. In this raw cold, the bodies of the dead remained perfectly preserved. Renzo's pretty mother looked as if she had fallen asleep. There was only a small cut under her hairline to show where the iceberg had struck as the swift rising waters lifted her up. Unconscious, she had drowned while Renzo flailed through the black water, screaming her name.

After every hundredth bucket, Renzo allowed himself to warm his hands by the brazier for the count of twenty, and to climb to his mother's bedroom and stroke her hair, pick another strand of wet tinsel from it and clasp her hand. Then he returned to sluicing out their home.

Against his will, a sweetly sad image invaded Renzo's mind: the cemetery on the island of San Michele. He saw the cypresses pointing to the heavens over the pink brick walls, just across the water from the cavern under the House of the Spirits, where the mermaids dwelled. Yes, he would bury his mother alongside his father, who had been taken from them by bronchitis. His friend Teo's real parents were buried at San Michele too. During this last hot summer—the mere *thought* of warmth comforted Renzo for a moment—he and Teo had rowed across in the gondola to take daisies to his father's grave and roses to her parents. Then they had shared a ferociously spicy piri-piri pea pie with the mermaids.

"We're both orphans now, Teo and I," Renzo realized.

Bajamonte Tiepolo, Orphan-Maker.

The words brushed across Renzo's brain for a second. Then he exclaimed, "No! I won't even think it. We got rid of him!"

But memory throbbed painfully in his ribs, two of which had been broken in single-handed combat with Bajamonte Tiepolo eighteen months before. And with that memory came

questions: How had the mermaids fared in the ice flood? Was Teo with them now?

The latest bucket of water had dislodged a tinkling object from the mud. Renzo knelt to pick it up. He cradled the small china money-box against his chest, even though it was clogged with dirt.

One corner had been smashed, and all the money had washed out. Renzo ignored the coins scattered underfoot. Tenderly, he wiped the mud off one side of the money-box, revealing PRESENT FROM LONDON stamped beneath an etching of Tower Bridge's Gothic ramparts. The money-box had been a gift from his father, a souvenir of a short visit to London made with Renzo's Uncle Tommaso, just after the splendid new bridge had opened on the Thames.

"I'll take you to London, for your thirteenth birthday," his father had promised six-year-old Renzo, handing him the china box. "You can use this to save your pocket-money for the trip!" And he had gone on to talk of London's narrow cobbled streets, the quaint bookshops on Paternoster Row and the graceful gray cupola of St. Paul's.

"And the Londoners!" Renzo's father had enthused. "Fuller of purpose than an egg is full of goodness!" But he coughed the last word. The coughing soon got worse.

Last summer Renzo and Teo had argued about London. Renzo couldn't wait to go there and Teo was saving hard.

"Imagine," Renzo said dreamily, "the attics full of scribbling poets, the historic London rain beating softly on their roofs—"

"Rain is not historic, Renzo," Teo had interrupted.

"And the picturesque London urchins ..."

"You mean poor children, Renzo?"

Renzo continued, "The cozy Inns of Court, where white-wigged lawyers ..."

"Strip people of their inheritances, according to Mr. Dickens," Teo pointed out.

"Teo, do try to understand. Remember how you felt about Venice before you even saw her? Well, that's how I feel about London. Just from seeing them in books, you loved the palaces and canals of Venice. Well, I already love the Houses of Parliament on the Thames and the flowerbeds of Kew Gardens ..."

Flowers! Renzo thrust the broken money-box into his pocket. How and where, in this deadly cold, would he find flowers for his mother's funeral? She loved violets. He had to salvage and wash her best dress for her to wear in the coffin. He must remind the priest of her favorite hymn. And above all, he had to clean the floor. His mother would have been horrified to see their spotless little house in such a filthy state.

What would happen to Renzo himself did not concern him at all. He seized the bucket and ran back to the well.

Unfortunately, just at that moment, someone else had Renzo's destiny right at the forefront of his not notably excellent mind.



the Town Hall, Venice, Christmas Day afternoon, 1900

The Mayor of Venice wriggled toes clad in silk socks in front of a cozy fire. His sumptuous second-floor office was cheerfully lit by a four-hundred-year-old candy-colored chandelier burning fifty candles at once. He dipped an almond biscuit into a glass of sweet Malvasia wine. You would never have guessed that a city lay broken and suffering outside his sparkling windows.

While Venice struggled with the flood's aftermath, the Mayor had passed happy hours designing a new form in triplicate for anyone who was homeless or needed blankets and food. That was when he wasn't on the streets, elbowing the firemen and policemen out of the way when photographs were taken.

For the Mayor of Venice had just two ambitions: to bring more rich tourists to the town and to get himself photographed in a smart top hat for as many newspapers as possible. True, the ice flood was a sore setback to tourism, but it had allowed the Mayor more photographic opportunities than ever. He'd already kissed a dozen muddy babies for the cameras that very day, making them cry with his stiffly greased mustache.

And now, by the glitter of his chandelier, the Mayor of Venice was signing a document that bore the name Lorenzo Antonello at the top. The Mayor's mustache twitched as he handed the paper to one of the police officers who always protected him. Since June 1899, when he misled the world about certain dangerous events in the town, the Mayor had not been the most popular person in Venice.

"See that it's done immediately!" the Mayor ordered Officer Gianni.

The officer read his orders and a queasy expression came over his face.

As the policeman went trudging down the stairs, an officer of the Carabinieri—the policeman's cousin, as it happened—hurtled past him toward the Mayor's luxurious office. Pausing, he panted, "Gianni, there's been a kidnap! The Lagoon Museum Director and his wife—snatched! Too clever for their own good, that pair. Knew too much about underwater loco-moco-thingy-you-know. Now they've got press-ganged into service for a foreign power, that's what they're saying!"

Officer Gianni showed his cousin the document he'd to deliver to Renzo. The water officer raised his eyebrows. "Did the Mayor eat an extra bowl of stupid this morning? Lorenzo Antonello? Isn't that the gondolier's widow's kid? Signora Antonello's on the drowned list."

—*che tragedia*, that was one sweet woman. Now, to send the boy away to a floating orphanage ...!”

Officer Gianni stammered, “The—the *Scilla*’s a kind place. They look after the boys, don’t they just?”

His cousin growled, “That old crock, in this weather? Have you seen the sky? Have you looked at the barometer?”

Gianni pulled his collar up and wrapped his scarf tightly around his neck. But he stopped at the act of donning his hat: “Those scientists kidnapped from the Lagoon Museum—don’t they have a daughter? Adopted, wasn’t she?”



Teo had been born in Venice. When her real family died in a mysterious shipwreck, only the infant Teo had survived, the Undrowned Child of an old Venetian Prophecy. The Mayor had not wanted journalists poking around, asking questions about why nine Venetian lives had been lost in the lagoon waters. For the Mayor, it would have been more convenient if the *entire* family had vanished without a trace. So he had the baby Teodora Gasperin sent away for adoption in a city in the south. For eleven years, Teo had lived in Naples without knowing who she really was.

Then the kind scientists who adopted Teo had brought her to a symposium in Venice. She had found *The Key to the Secret City*—or rather, the magical book had found *her*, by falling on her head. And Teo had gone “between-the-Linings,” becoming invisible to all but ghosts, magical beings and other children. The book had led her to Renzo, the Studious Son of the same prophecy that named her the Undrowned Child. Together, they’d befriended the Venetian mermaids, and the *Incogniti*, the Unknown Ones, a secret society that protected Venice from baddened magic. Teo’s real parents had been members. It had cost them their lives.

That baddened magic had been wielded by the spirit of Bajamonte Tiepolo, a noble Venetian who conspired to seize power in 1310. After his plot failed, he was secretly strangled by a state assassin. For nearly six hundred years, the restless spirit of *Traditore*—“the Traitor,” as he was known—had simmered hate and revenge. Finally, the summer before last, his ghost had grown strong enough to turn that hatred into deeds.

Had he but known it, the Mayor had every reason to be grateful to Teo and Renzo. The two of them had joined with the mermaids, raising an army of ghosts and good creatures against Bajamonte Tiepolo. Renzo had taken on Il Traditore’s own savage spirit in a fierce battle of wills. And finally, Teo, using ancient skills born into her family, had used his own Spell Almanac to curse Bajamonte Tiepolo back to death. A deep whirlpool in the lagoon had sucked him away.

That is, Teo had cursed him *almost* to death. To oblivion, anyway. There had been one last, unspeakably horrible imprecation that she’d not been able to force herself to utter.

Of course, the human population of Venice had remained entirely unaware of the true danger. Adults—including tender-hearted policemen and stupid, vain Mayors—simply could not see ghosts, mermaids or supernatural creatures.



The four-hundredth bucket came up with more ice than water.

Over the clatter of mop and bucket, Renzo did not hear Officer Gianni tapping at the open door. Nor did he see the stricken look on Gianni's face as he took in the boy's pitiful attempt at clean clothes, the chipped cups and saucers he had carefully washed and placed back on the dresser, his mother's best dress rinsed and fluttering in the thin column of warm air above the brazier. Tears came to the policeman's eyes when he saw the damp Christmas wrappings already carefully folded, the ruins of a cake lying in a bowl of mud, and a bunch of violets carved out of wood, Renzo's last present to his mother. The purple paint had not yet dried.

"What a Christmas for the lad!" Officer Gianni thought. "What a Christmas for Venice!"

At that moment, Renzo was thinking about Teo. Where was she? Surely she would know that his mother was among the drowned: new lists were fixed hourly to every wall in town. He could hardly bear to walk down the street, forced on every corner to confront his mother's name next to the word "dead." And below it, he'd just seen the name Tommaso Antonello, his beloved and only uncle. Renzo's classmate Augusto was also listed, next to "missing, presumed drowned," like dozens of other boys and girls.

So why had Teo still not come? Wasn't she supposed to be his best friend?

Renzo longed to see her, but he dreaded it as well. He had very bad news; the worst, in fact. There'd been another victim of the flood: his most precious possession, apart from the money-box. And it wasn't even really his: technically, it was merely on loan from Teo. No matter that Renzo had sluiced the entire house, he had to admit it was true: there was no trace of *The Key to the Secret City*. It must have floated out of the house along with all the other books in Renzo's collection.

"Lorenzo Antonello?" The policeman's voice was gentle.

Renzo spun around.

The officer repeated, "Lorenzo Antonello, I'm hereby ordered to conduct you to the *Scilla* where you shall be apprenticed for a sailor."

"My mother ..." Renzo's voice was as blank as his face. "She's not buried yet."

"That will be taken care of. The Mayor has already arranged it."

At the mention of the Mayor's name, Renzo scowled ferociously. "So you're that fool's lickicker's henchman? I'll have nothing to do with you."

"Boy has a cheek!" Officer Gianni marveled. He could not but sympathize, nevertheless. It was despicable to drag a grieving boy away from home without letting him attend to his dead mother.

"But orders is orders," Gianni thought regretfully. He reminded himself that he was lucky to have a safe job in these hard times.

He said, "It's out of your hands, son. You ain't of legal age. You're a ward of the state and you've got to go where the Mayor tells you. Come, put your things together, boy. The *Scilla* isn't bad. Not for an old warship, anyways. She's a proper boat, lad, painted wood and canvas sails! Your family's menfolk have been gondoliers and sailors for generations, haven't they? The Sea's in your blood."

"Lorenzo! Dearest chap! I just heard!" a melodious voice fluted from outside the door. A strikingly handsome man with piercing blue eyes hurried in. He gathered Renzo in a powerful

hug that smelled of warm hay and lemons. “My precious boy, my poor, poor child. Are you hurt, yourself? How’s every rib in your dear body?”

Then he held Renzo away from him and peered at the boy’s pinched white face. “What, no tears? Are youse entrapolated in your grief still? But Lorenzo, you must cry, let us weep together for your sweet mother, and for Venice too.”

At this Sargano Alicamoussa burst into noisy sobs. “An adorable woman!” he wept. “Our incomparable city! And the darling dolphins too! My heart’s dropping off in lumps with the sorrow of it.”

“I carved some violets for my mother,” said Renzo dully. “With my penknife.”

“What a skill you have, dearest boy! Now, I am quite decided—youse shall come live with me and my wife, Mercer. We shall adopterate youse, yes.”

Unheard, the policeman murmured, “Err, sir ...?”

Signor Alicamoussa looked deep into Renzo’s deadened eyes, whispering, “We Incogniti take care of our own.”

The policeman stepped forward, holding out the Mayor’s order. “Uncommon decent of you, sir, however the boy’s already signed over to the *Scilla*. The boat’s been notified. They’ll be expecting him aboard any minute.”

“Beg yours? The *Scilla*? Feather me, *there’s* a coincidence! Pearler! Wait till ... But no, no, no, no, dear Lorenzo has no need to be an orphan sailor. He shall have a loving home! My charming lady wife to cherish him! Lions and wildebeest as his pets! Signed over, you say? Without so much as a ‘Do you fancy a naval career?’ to the boy himself? Says who? Upon my word, what outrageous outrage is this? I shall frankly not permit it.”

“It’s too late, sir. Look—the Mayor’s signature.”

“The Mayor? That dilapidated dog! Only my wife, who is Irish and has the gift of the gabble to an amazing extent, can curse the fellow to my full satisfactioning, and do so quicker than a laxative through a koala bear.

“But of *course* the Mayor wants to hide dear Lorenzo away from the world. This boy’s heroism is too glorious a mirror for his own jellyfish heart! And no doubt he’ll be ravine after our little Teodora next. With her parents kidnabbed—I just heard the news. Reckon she looks in the altogether poorly for them.”

Renzo turned to Signor Alicamoussa. For the first time, a spark flickered in his eyes. “Teodora? What’s happened to her?”



Venice Town Hall, late afternoon, Christmas Day, 1900

Teo hadn't even made it home after she saw the Vampire Eel. The policemen were waiting for her on the shore. Dragging her through the ruined streets to the Mayor's office, they had not wasted any tact when describing the state of Leonora and Alberto Stampara's laboratory in the lagoon: the smashed pipettes, the crabs and shrimps left gasping in shattered tanks, the diagrams ripped off the walls. Of her adoptive parents there had been no sign at all, except a fragment of a silk dress and her father's pipe, still fragrant and faintly warm.

Now a tearful Teo paced up and down the Town Hall's grand vestibule. The two policemen had not been amused by the teeth-marks she'd left in their wrists. Their eyes followed her back and forth, their arms folded over their barrels of chests.

Despite being fully twelve and a half years old, Teo could not resist sticking out her tongue at her captors.

"After all," she reasoned, "they work for that perditioned rat, the Mayor. What's he up to in that office? Certainly nothing to help my parents. He's making a baffle of everything again!"

Step by step, Teo paced her thoughts into order.

The last thing the Mayor would want, she realized, was the publicity that would follow an announcement that a young girl called Teodora Gasperin had for the second time been left without parents, and under the most dramatic circumstances.

"He's going to send me away again!" A bitter chill coursed down the back of Teo's neck. "That's what he's going to do, the dismal cockroach!"

The Mayor's voice now fussed from inside his office, "Blotting paper! My signature smeared!"

As the Undrowned Child of the old Prophecy, Teo was the lucky—or sometimes unlucky—owner of a number of unusual gifts. One of these was that when people talked, she could see their words in their own handwriting in the air. The style of that handwriting revealed a great deal about them. As the Mayor's voice boomed out of his office, Teo saw smug lettering with absurd flourishes in gushing purple ink floating down the corridor.

"All done!" the Mayor said with a triumphant smirk. "A good day's work. Got that Antonello boy off my hands, and now we'll not be troubled by *that* young lady again. Fortunately, there's a shortage of children in Norway."

“You potato-witted absurdity!” yelled Teo at the top of her voice. It should also be mentioned at this point that Teo, like Renzo, was a rabid bookworm and consequently endowed with a vocabulary that could sever a steel cable. The policemen tried in vain to suppress smiles.

The Mayor’s curled head appeared around the door, wafting perfumed pomade into the hall. Even though he’d stolen her life not just once, but twice, the Mayor, by careful calculation, had never actually laid eyes on Teo herself. Now their eyes—hers, an unusual sea-green and his, moist and puppy-brown—met for a single quivering second.

Teo couldn’t help it; the words leapt out of her mouth: “Poor Venice, stuck with a futile fool for a mayor! Your mustache has more brains than your head! Don’t you understand? You can send me away now! This is just when you and Venice need me the *most*.”

The Mayor took a step backward, as if someone had punched him on the nose. It was evident that in the flesh Teodora Gasperin was everything he’d been afraid she would be. His face grew greasy with an awkward emotion that jiggled between fear and shame.

Teo took the opportunity to crouch down and bolt between the legs of the policemen now doubled over in helpless mirth. Then she hurtled down the stairs, three at a time, as if she was flying.



Teo skidded through the muddy streets toward the one place where she’d surely find the answer to the question she could hardly bear to voice.

A sob tore from her throat. “It was *him* who sent the ice storm, wasn’t it? *He* kidnapped my parents, didn’t he?”

It was not the Mayor’s mustachioed face Teo carried in her mind as she virtually skated on her heels through Campo San Bartolomeo. The Mayor’s foolish vanity made him nothing more than an unwitting tool of the real enemy. That was how it had been last time: the Mayor putting all Venice at risk, without the least idea of what was really happening. No, as she pounded over the Ponte dell’Olio, what Teo was recalling was the pointed face shimmering like half-boiled egg white, the pale lizard eyes and the sharklike nose of Bajamonte Tiepolo, Il Traditore, staring down at her with a centuries-old hatred. She remembered him striking a sickening blow to Renzo’s cheek. Renzo! Surely he was thinking the same thing she was? Perhaps he was with the mermaids already?

Never had the House of the Spirits seemed so far: it felt as if someone had moved it two miles away from its original location at the Misericordia. A stitch clamped Teo’s side and she stumbled over a pile of sodden postcards. All the gaily colored photographs of Venice had turned black.

“Even the pictures of Venice—ruined!” she mourned breathlessly.

By San Felice she had shrugged off her heavy-footed pursuers, who were still forced to pause and laugh every so often, remembering what she’d shouted at the Mayor. Finally, Teo stopped, sniffed the air and looked around her.

“Strange,” she muttered. “It doesn’t *feel* as if ...”

At the basin of the Misericordia, she threw herself into a boat, clambered over four more and then grabbed a drainpipe to lever herself on to an ornate gate. This she scaled with h

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