

*The*

SECRET OF THE GLASS

By

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**T**he scalding heat rose up before her, reaching deep inside her like a selfish lover grasping for her soul. The fiery vapors scorched her fragile facial skin; yellow-orange flames seared their impression upon her retinas. When she pulled away, when she finally turned her gaze from the fire, her vision in the dim light of the stone-walled factory would be nothing more than the ghostly specters of the flames' flickering tendrils.

Sophia Fiolario performed the next step in the glassmaking process in an instant of time, her instincts and years of practice leading the way, from the feel of the *borcella* in her hand, from the change in the odor and color of the molten material as it began to solidify. This was the most crucial moment, like the second of conception, when the glass was barely still a liquid, yet on the precipice of becoming a solid. Then, and only then, would she use her special tongs to conceive its ever-lasting form. If she didn't perform perfectly, if her ministrations were inelegant or slow in the tiny void in time, she would have to start again, reheating the glass and returning it to a shapeless blob.

The layers of clothing encasing her body trapped the energy thrown by the furnace. With a stab of envy, Sophia pictured the men of Murano who worked the glass clad in no more than thin linen shirts and lightweight breeches. As a woman, forbidden to work the furnaces, particularly during these prohibited hours following the evening vigils bells, she had no choice but to stand before the radiating heat clad in petticoat, kirtle, and gown. The sweat pooled beneath her full breasts and trickled down the small of her back. Within minutes of stepping into the circle of sweltering air thrown by the furnace, a heat in excess of two thousand degrees, she became drenched in a cloying layer of her body's fluid. Her own pungent odor vied for dominance over the caustic scent of the melting minerals and burning wood.

Sophia pulled the long, heavy metal blowpipe out of the rectangular door, the ball of volcanic material retreating last. With a mother's kiss, she put her lips to the tapered end of the

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*canna da soffio* and blew. The excitement lit deep within her as the ball of material expanded and changed, a thrill unlike any other she had ever known elsewhere in all of her nineteen years.

Now was the time; this was the moment. The glass came alive by her skill and her breath. The malleable substance glowed with internal energy, the once-clear material now a fiery amber, having absorbed the heat of the flames as well as its color. It waited for, longed for, her touch as the yearning lover awaits the final throes of passion. Quickly she spun to her *scagno*, the table designed uniquely for glassmaking. She sat on the hard bench in the u-shaped space created by the two slim metal arms running perpendicular to the bench on either side of her. Placing the long *ferro sbuso* across the braces, her left palm pushed and pulled against it, always spinning, always keeping gravity's pull on the fluid material equal. With her right hand, Sophia grabbed the *borcella* and reached for the still-pliable mass. For a quick moment, she closed her eyes, envisioning the graceful, distinctive shape she imagined for this piece. When she looked up, it was there on the end of her rod. She could see it, therefore she could make it, and she set to her work.

When the man moved out of the corner's shadows, Sophia flinched. He had been quiet for so long, she had forgotten him. As he stood to stoke the *crugioli*, she remembered his presence and was glad for it. Uncountable were the nights they had worked together like this. From her youngest days, he had indulged her unlawful interest in the glassmaking, teaching and encouraging her, until her skills matched those of his, Zeno Fiolario, one of Venice's glassmaking *maestri*, her papa.

Zeno moved from furnace to furnace, adding the alder wood wherever needed, checking the water in the plethora of buckets scattered throughout the factory. The glow of the flames rose and spread to the darkest corners of the stone *fabbrica*. The pervasive, sweet scent of burning alder tree permeated the warm air. For his daughter, Zeno often fulfilled the duties of the *stizzador*—the man whose sole function was to keep the fires of the furnaces blazing—and his old frayed work shirt, nearly worn out in spots, bore the small umber burn marks of the sparks that so frequently leapt out of the crucibles.

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His steps were slower than in years gone by, his shoulders permanently hunched from so many years over the glass, yet he jiggled from chore to chore with surprising agility. As he passed Sophia, Zeno brushed a long lock of her deep chestnut hair away from her face, thick and work-roughened fingers wrapping it behind her ear with graceful gentleness. The touch was a succor to her soul and a jolt to her muse. Her wide mouth curved in a soft smile but her large, slanted blue eyes remained staunchly focused upon the work before her.

“It was the Greeks you know...uh, no,” her father began, faltered, tilting his head to the side to think as he often did of late.

Sophia felt the urge to roll her eyes heavenward as young people are wont to do when their elders launched into an oft-repeated tale, but she stifled the impulse. She could have finished the sentence for him. She had heard this story so many times she knew it by heart, but she let him tell it at his own pace. She would work, he would talk, and though he feigned unconcern for her methodology, his narrow, pale eyes, fringed with thick gray lashes, followed each flick of her wrist, each squeeze of the pinchers. Her smile remained, undampened by the least twinge of impatience; she had learned too much, been loved too well by this man to begrudge him his rapt study of her work.

“The Phoenicians, that’s it.” Zeno’s voice rang out in triumph. “They had been merchants, traders of nitrum, taking refuge on the shore for the night. They could find no rocks to put in their fires, to hold their pots while they cooked, so they pilfered a few pieces of their own goods. You can imagine their surprise when the lumps began to glow. This was years and years before the birth of our Lord and these were simple, uneducated people. When the clumps liquefied and mixed with the sand, the beach flowed with tiny trickles of transparent fluid. They thought they were seeing a miracle, but they were seeing glass...the first glass.”

Her father’s voice became a cadence, like the rhythmic lapping of the lagoon waves upon the shore that surrounded them; its rhythmic vibrato paced her work. Her left hand twisted the *ferro sbuso* while the right manipulated the tongs, pinching here, shaping there.

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“Our family has always made the glass. Since Pietro Fiolario’s time four hundred years ago, we have guarded the secret.”

Sophia stole a quick glance up; the young eyes found the old and embraced in understanding. This secret had been the family’s blessing and its curse. It had brought them world renown and an abundance of fortune greater than many a Venetian noble family. And yet it had made them prisoners in their own homeland, and Sophia, a woman who knew the secret, an outlaw.

Time was running short; the glass was getting harder and harder to contort with gentle guidance. Already its form was a visual masterpiece, the delicate base, the long, fragile flute, the bowl a perfect symmetrical shape. Her hands flew, creating the waves on the rim, capturing the essence of fluidity to the rapidly solidifying form.

With a deep sigh, an exhalation of pure satisfaction, Sophia straightened her curled shoulders, bending her head from side to side to stretch the tense neck muscles, tight from so long in one position. She studied the piece before her, daring to peek at her father. In his glowing eyes, his shining pride, she saw confirmation of what she herself felt, already this was a remarkable piece...but it was not done yet.

“Now you will add our special touch, *sì?*” her father asked as he retrieved the special, smaller pinchers from another *scagno*.

Sophia smiled with indulgence. Keeping alive the delusion for her father was yet another small price to pay him. The technique she would do next, the *a morise*, to lay miniscule strands of colored glass in a pattern on this base blown piece, had made their *fabbrica* famous. Since its release to the public, her father had reveled in the accolades he received over its genius and beauty. Her father had never, *could* never, reveal that the invention had been Sophia’s.

“*Sì, Papà.*” Sophia lay down the larger tongs, flexing the tight muscles of her hands. She gathered the long abundance of brunette hair flowing without restraint around her shoulders, unbound from its usual pulled back style, and laid it neatly against her back and out of her way.

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Taking the more delicate pinchers from her father's hand, she rolled her shoulders once more and set to work.

Zeno hovered by her shoulder, leaning forward to watch as her long, slim hands worked their magic, as she wielded the pinchers to apply the threads of magenta glass, smaller than the size of a buttercup's stem, in perfect straight lines. Dipping the tip of the tweezer-like device into the bucket of water by her side, releasing the hiss and smoke into the air, Sophia secured each strand with a miniscule drop of cool moisture.

"A little more this way," Zeno whispered, as if to speak too loudly would be to disturb the fragile material.

"Yes, Father," Sophia answered reflexively, like a much said prayer's response.

"It's patience, having the patience to let the glass develop at its will, to cool and heat, cool and heat naturally." Zeno chanted close to her ear, his voice and words guiding her as they had done since she was young. His muted voice small in the cavernous chamber; their presence enveloped by the creative energy. "As the grape slowly turns to wine on the vine, the sand and silica and nitre become glass on the rod. Ah, you're getting it now—*bellissimo*."

"*Grazie, Papà*."

"Next you're going to--"

The bang, bang, bang of a fist upon wood shattered the quiet like glass crashing upon the stone; the heavy wooden door at the top of the winding stair jangled and rocked. Someone tried to enter, yet the bolted portal stymied their attempts. It was locked, as always when father and daughter shared these moments.

Zeno and Sophia stiffened in fright, bulging eyes locked.

"Are we discovered?" Sophia's whisper cracked, strangled with fear. She shoved the rod into her father's hands, dropping the slender metal pinchers on the hard stone floor below, wincing at the raucous clang that permeated the stillness.

"Can not be." Zeno shook his head. "It can n--"

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“Zeno, Zeno!” The urgent, distraught male voice slithered through the cracks of the door’s wooden planks. “Let me in.”

Parent and child recognized the timbre; Giacomo Mazzoni had worked at the Fiolario family’s glassworks since he was a young man, his relationship evolving into that of a dear and familiar friend. The terror in his recognizable voice sounded undeniable; the strangeness of his presence at such a late hour was nothing short of disturbing.

With an odd calmness, Zeno pointed toward the door. “Let him in, Phie.”

The door intent upon her father’s wrinkled countenance told her he would brook no argument. Gathering the front of her old, soiled gown, she sprint up the winding stairs, glancing back at the wizened man who stood stock still, rod and cooling piece still in hand.

Sophia pushed aside the bolt with a ragged, wrenching screech. The door gave way the instant it was free. Giacomo rushed through the portal, pushing past Sophia where she stood on the small platform by the door. Clad in his nightshirt, a pair of loosely tied knee breeches flapping around his legs, he looked a fright with his short hair sticking out at all angles, and his black eyes afire with burning intensity. Flying down the stairs, he ran to his friend and mentor, grabbing him by the shoulders.

“They’re dead, Zeno, dead.”

Befuddled, Zeno stared at his friend, pale eyes squinting beneath his furrowed brow.

“Who, Giacomo? Who is dead?”

“Clairomonti, Quirini, Giustinian, those who tried to get to France.”

“*Dio Santo.*” The words slipped from Zeno’s mouth through the lips of his falling jaw. His legs quivered. With a shaking hand he reached into empty air, groping for a stool. Rushing to his side, Sophia grabbed the wooden seat, yanking it forward and guiding her father into it by the arm.

Zeno looked to his beloved daughter’s face. Once more, their frightened gaze locked.

“They’ve killed them.”