

UNSEEN

A woman with long brown hair, wearing a white sleeveless dress with lace trim and a crown of colorful flowers, is walking away from the viewer down a dirt path in a lush, green forest. The scene is illuminated by soft, ethereal light, with small glowing particles floating in the air. The background shows dense foliage and trees, creating a sense of a hidden, magical world.

R.M. SCOTT

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Unseen

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Dedication

For all those who believe in the magic within.

Chapter One

I had to find a cure for Father. Even if they hang me for witchcraft.

A breeze from the Bay of Viskaya rustled the pine trees on the forest path, releasing their fresh scent. This morning I'd made pine needle tea to loosen Father's cough, but his lungs required more. I needed time to find the right remedy, and I prayed the physician could help me.

I arrived at the beach, leaving the lush mountains behind, and made my way toward a crowd of townspeople gathered for the Midsummer Festival. On tiptoes, I fought to see over women's headscarves and men's berets. No sign of the physician. I squeezed between people, brushing linen sleeves and wool skirts.

I broke through the front of the crowd. Fathers dressed in white trousers and loose tops hooked arms in a Viskayan cultural dance. Their bare feet brushed the sand as they formed one large circle. Daughters in red skirts and white headscarves frolicked around them, smiling and laughing, throwing rose petals at their feet.

All I wanted was to dance with my father like the other girls, but last night he'd taken the final drop of medicine from the physician. Yet, he worsened. Women without men in the home were the first to be accused of witchery. My pulse picked up. He couldn't leave Mother and me now. Not with the Inquisitor on his way here to Ea. To hang at sixteen...

"Topa!" the watching townspeople called.

The loud boom of a drum echoed against the rocky cliffs

surrounding the inlet. Its deep bass vibrated through my bones, making me tremble.

The dancers changed directions, one circle spinning within the other.

Onlookers cheered and clapped along.

I couldn't clap. A sick, hollow ache filled my chest. After the Inquisitor from neighboring Navarre found a branded scar on the spine of my teacher two years ago, he claimed Viskayan women were secretly witches. He hunted for more marks like hers. Hanged anyone with one. I didn't bear the scar, but if he discovered my herbal remedies, he'd torture me into confessing and hang me anyway.

I strode through the festival, passing a few makeshift tents full of artisan goods for sale. Spotting a short, gray-haired man, I took a shaky breath and altered my path. Ducking and scurrying through pockets of people, my anticipation swelled. The physician must have a better remedy than the last one.

"Physician," I called.

The man turned, but it wasn't him. The physician said he'd be here. He was at the festival every year. My worry grew into desperation.

Fishermen carrying wooden logs on their shoulders passed beside me, their raw timber filling the air with an aroma of sawdust and damp earth.

"Alaia, did you call for me?" The physician, wearing trousers and an untied shirt, emerged from the crowd. It had been years since I'd seen him without his smock and black apron.

I hurried to his side and began to relax at the sight of his tender smile. "Yes, do you have the new medicine?"

His lips pursed. "Have his fevers spiked?"

"I'm afraid he's dying." The words echoed distantly in my ears as if someone else had uttered them.

"I've seen a few other fishermen with Ocean Fever." Grimacing, he

rummaged in a leather bag hanging from his shoulder. He pulled out a violet glass bottle and tipped it upside down. Thick fluid dribbled toward the cork.

“This will help.” He offered me the concoction. “I still owe you for the last two and don’t have near enough silver to pay you.” I brushed a loose strand of dark hair under my headscarf.

He shrugged. “I understand. Pay me when you can.”

I accepted the slender bottle and slipped it into my satchel where it lay protected by batches of herbs. “I could pay you with a bundle of tea packets to cover at least some of the cost. You could sell them as your own.”

He raised his bushy gray eyebrows. “You do have a natural affinity with herbs. Your teas have really eased your father’s suffering.”

“Thank you, but they’re only simple combinations. Nothing like yours.”

But my teas housed power. When my fingers touched herbs, their properties seemed to strengthen. My lavender flower tea induced sleep better than most potions. Others recognized it too, but speaking of such things led to condemnation, so I denied any claim.

“I heard you wanted to be a healer, to learn the art of medicine. Before the witch hunts...”

I nodded quickly before anyone else would notice. “Yes, but now it’s too dangerous.”

Concern grew in his light-gray eyes. “Still, the knowledge of medicinal herbs is waning. If we worked together, if you were willing to apprentice, we might be able...”

A drum sounded, starting a new song. Hot blood rushed up my neck. “No, I can’t.”

“I understand, but bring me some of your teas. They will help the other fishermen suffering. We can call it a trade.”

The strain inside me eased, but a small ache gathered around my heart. I did want to be a healer, learn more, but I couldn’t risk it. I

tapped my satchel, feeling the bottle inside. “Will this heal him?”

The physician took a deep breath. “No, but it will dull the pain. I’m sorry.”

The horizon blurred until the white sails of the docked ships blended with the clouds. The music from the dance muted to a static hum in my ears. Without another word, he walked away.

I stood alone, my world disintegrating. This couldn’t be Father’s end, but time was winning. I grew lightheaded, a daze overtaking my thoughts. Hurrying home didn’t matter anymore. Nothing did.

On the way back to the forest trail, I wandered past the festival tents. Townspeople sold handmade trinkets, scarves, and berets. None allured me to stop and look, but as my feet brushed the sand near the last artisan, a fuzzy tingle pricked the hairs on my arms.

A girl held a basket of silver thistle for sale. The shiny dried flower fought illness if hung by the entrance of the home. Some claimed it even guarded entrances against unwanted spirits.

She looked up at me with wide-set amber eyes, reminding me of myself when I was her age. “A thistle for one coin.”

I needed all the help I could get. My last two coins dropped into her small hand. “I know your father is ill like mine. Keep the extra coin.”

Her face clouded with sorrow. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” I picked up the silver thistle and heat ran up my spine. The sensation strengthened, coalescing right below my neck. I’d never felt that before.

“I also have a remedy...” My hand trembled as I gave her a few tea packets. It wouldn’t save my father anymore, but it might help hers.

“Alaia!” Mateo’s voice carried over the carefree music. The Novarrese outsider walked across the beach with one leather boot in hand, his brown trousers rolled up on one side. The other pant leg hung near the ground, covering his wooden leg.

I hid the thistle behind my back and blocked his view of the girl. I

couldn't let the nephew of the Inquisitor see my teas or the superstitious thistle. "Hello, Mateo."

As he neared, he tipped his black beret. A few dark brown curls peeked out from under the brim. "Are you planning to stay at the festival long?"

My heartbeat skipped into a new rhythm. I fumbled with the edge of my satchel until I'd made a hole big enough for the thistle to slip through. "Only a little while. You?"

The girl ducked behind me and disappeared into the crowds.

"I will if there's a good reason to." The hazelnut of his cheeks seemed to redden.

He stood close enough that I smelled the light musk on his white linen shirt. A brass button connected its trim collar. He looked different today, older than the static picture in my head from when he was thirteen and awkward. The others girls had noticed he'd grown handsome, but somehow I'd missed it. Mateo's body had changed from working in the craftsman's shop. Hard work made him look more like a native Viskayan and less like the men from the neighboring country that had invaded and taken over our lands.

"I thought your uncle banned you from our festivals."

His thin lips lifted in a mischievous grin. "He's not here yet."

My hand tightened around my satchel full of herbs and potions. "When will he arrive?"

"Does it matter? My luck has already proven good tonight." He gave a careless smirk.

A single butterfly fluttered in my belly.

He rested his weight on his good leg. "Aren't you going to dance?"

My face flushed. I folded my arms, pressing them against the buttons of my black vest. I stumbled to find an excuse. "No, I'm not very good."

He laughed. "I have a wooden leg and watch."

He hopped about, kicking his fake leg. As it rose, I caught a

glimpse of his wooden shin.

He nudged my side. "You can't be worse than me."

A smile tugged at my lips.

He straightened his thin wire glasses and offered his hand. "Would you do me the honor?"

"Mateo, do you even know how?"

The dancers broke into three circles behind him. They spun, laughing in whirlwinds of red and black. Seeing the physician among them, I felt my reserve weakening.

Mateo's grin widened as he waited patiently. "Viskayans are never afraid to dance."

The gold starbursts in his hazel eyes brightened and my stomach somersaulted.

"Etorra!" the physician called, breaking the circle for us.

The melodic tune of a pipe played. Mateo grabbed my hand, his grip strong and calloused, and pulled me toward the others. A shimmer of anticipation rushed through me.

"Mateo, I can't. I need to go."

"Why are you here if you don't want to dance?" he teased.

I didn't dare tell him the truth. That I only came to get a potion from the physician because my remedies weren't working.

But before I could fumble my way out, the physician took my other hand, uniting us with a couple of fishermen and their wives.

The group twirled around, giving quick, controlled kicks one way and then the other. My satchel bounced on my hip as I danced. I twisted toward Mateo, but he'd turned the wrong way and faced me. His booted foot hit mine.

"Mateo," I scolded.

He shrugged.

I let out a small laugh.

He didn't try to catch up, but grinned at me, waiting for the rest of the group to turn again.

I hopped around his misplaced feet, keeping to the beat as he stood still. He didn't know this Viskayan dance. He didn't know any of them.

"Follow me," I whispered, letting go of the physician's hand. We broke from the circle, dancing with one another. I pressed my palm against Mateo's. A sweet shiver rocked through me.

As we turned, facing each other, the bay sparkled behind him. The lowering sun sent bright rays between us. I twirled. My green skirt billowed. Again, my fingers reached for his, meeting palm to palm. The music slowed.

One step, his captivating gaze. Two steps, his contagious smile. Turn.

The onlooking crowd blended into colorful blurs. One step, I started to fall for him. Two steps...

But I couldn't. We were too different. From opposing worlds.

Pulling away from his touch, I skipped toward the next pair. One step, change partners. Two steps, I missed Mateo already. I continued the dance with a fisherman, and then another. As I met the physician's palm, I looked over my shoulder toward Mateo. His gait had grown slow and lopsided.

"I believe you are closer to healing your father than I am," the physician whispered.

We changed directions. Palms met.

"Don't give up just yet."

I found his deep-set eyes, crinkled at the edges, and a piece inside me broke as if I was made of the same glass as the potion in my satchel. "I can make him more remedies, but I fear they're not enough."

"Consider my offer for an apprenticeship. Together we might be able to find a cure. We're all here for you. Every one of us. Know this."

I wanted to accept, to feel safe, but almost all the men in the village

were leaving on a whaling excursion after the Midsummer Eve Finale this weekend. Our town would be left with mostly women and children. "I'll consider it."

The music stopped. Sweat rolled down my hairline. I yearned to stay and dance with Mateo until a silky sky, studded with diamonds covered us, but Father's sickness scratched at me like thorns.

Lowering to a knee, I rewound the black laces of my shoes, crisscrossing them over my wool socks and up my calf.

Mateo walked to my side and stood with all his weight on his good leg, his booted foot barely touching the sand. As I rose, I saw the pain behind his glasses, though he hid it well.

"Should we go?" I brushed off my skirt.

"I'll stay as long as you like." He smiled, but a part of it seemed forced.

Young men spread out on the beach behind us. High kicks reached toward the sky, each one an impressive show of skill.

My dead brother, Benin, had always championed that dance. My breath grew shallow, and the ache in my chest returned. Two years ago, at the same age as I was now, he had died as a mercenary for Novarre. "I'm ready to leave. I need to go home and check on my father."

Mateo took a step, but his leg gave out. He stumbled, catching himself on my shoulder. "I'm sorry, Alaia. I slipped, and this stupid leg went out from under me. I haven't had this happen in a long time."

Grabbing his hand, I helped right him. His lost leg saved his life by sending him to a sick bed instead of the battle that killed my brother, but it was still one more thing Novarre's wars cost us.

His jaw tensed, and the muscles in his neck stood out like ropes. His leg had to hurt horribly.

"Lean on me, Mateo. I'll help you home. I'm small but strong." Like threading a needle, I guided his hand through my arm.

He winced as he pushed on his thigh, readjusting the leg beneath him. “I don’t want to make you uncomfortable. I only wanted to make you smile.”

My heart pinched. “You did, Mateo. Made me smile more than I have in a while.”

“Even though you only got to dance with half a man?” He gestured to his missing leg.

“Seeing you was the nicest surprise. I...” My voice choked. “I needed a nice surprise.”

His grimace eased into a hint of a grin.

We walked across the beach to a cobblestone walkway that meandered through tall whitewashed buildings adorned with yellow and red shutters. Wrought-iron porches, overflowing with flowers, latched to their walls. The scent of wild roses weaved with the sea breeze.

Mateo slowed. “I admit I imagined walking you home, not the other way around.”

Adjusting our arms, I solidified my hold, then pressed on. “Don’t worry about it.”

His brow creased as he limped. “It hurts you know. Every day I push aside the pain, but every once in a while,” he grimaced, “it’s too much to pretend away.”

A breath of courage filled my lungs. I couldn’t let him hurt like this. Not when I knew how to mend it. I had to believe in my gift—that helping others brightened the world. “I’ll make you a salve and bring it to the shop in the morning.”

“Thank you, Alaia. I’ve heard about the remedies you used to make and how well they worked, especially your teas.”

My mouth turned dry. “You won’t say anything about them, will you?”

“No, Alaia. Never.” He put more weight on his fake leg, taking the pain.

“Because...” I choked on the words.

Mateo’s hazel eyes met mine. “I know nothing of remedies or teas. I work in a craftsman’s shop. I only know wood and saws. Plus, I’m an outsider. No one speaks to me.”

His innocuous promise barely eased my worries. One slip and it would be my end. But Mateo had never failed me. Even as children, he’d stood up for me when his mother said we couldn’t be friends. He was never afraid to fight for me. I had to trust him.

We crossed an old stone bridge over the river of Ea. The winding water bubbled through town, between buildings and groves of trees, making its way to the ocean. Three bridges crossed it as it snaked down the valley, and I’d walked over them all a thousand times.

We turned down a narrow street, and the fortified stone walls of Mateo’s home crept over us in shadows. Black curtains in a side window pulled back. Eyes watched us, and I hoped they weren’t his mother’s.

Mateo let go and took a few unsteady steps on his own. “I’ll see you on the morrow then?”

“Yes, I’ll stop by.”

He made his way around the corner to the front iron gate. As it swung open, he turned. “I wanted tonight to last longer. Maybe next time?”

I smiled. “You’ll have to work on your dancing.”

He laughed and limped through the gate. “Only if you’ll teach me.”

“Maybe tomorrow at the festival.” A warm blush crept up my cheeks.

He tapped his leg. “It might have to wait. Someday, though. See you soon, Alaia.”

“See you again.” As I walked away, my heartbeats picked up. This couldn’t be happening. A connection had grown between us—me and the nephew of the man who wanted all Viskayans dead.