

The Silver Sea (The Golden Tower, #2)

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Chapter One

Nanna's Note

'*Salute,*' said Sophie to her opponent. She raised her sword from where it rested on the ground and held it in front of her face, in a formal gesture, before dropping the blunt point to the ground.

'*Salute,*' replied Nanna, her brown eyes twinkling, as she returned the courtesy with her own foil. Both pulled on their mesh face masks.

Nanna was teaching Sophie fencing in her cottage garden in Kent. It was a glorious summer's evening, the warm air scented with roses and elderflower.

'*En garde,*' said Nanna.

Sophie's thighs burned as she dropped into the en garde position, with knees bent and back foot turned out, like a ballet dancer's. Fencing was a vigorous sport and her muscles weren't used to the movements yet.

'*Allez,*' said Nanna, signalling the start of the bout.

Nanna and Sophie fought back and forth, lunging

and retreating with their foils. Sophie began to feel overwhelmed, trying to think of everything at once – her stance, her attack, her feet, her head, her hands.

Nanna lunged, touching Sophie on her padded jacket with the blunt tip of her foil. Sophie dropped her blade.

'Just focus on one step at a time, Sophie,' said Nanna, as though reading her mind. 'Focus on the next touch, don't get distracted by the whole bout.'

'I know,' said Sophie, rubbing her padded shoulder. She was wearing her fencing uniform which included white breeches and jacket, face mask, chest guard and one protective glove.

It was the school holidays and Sophie was staying with her nanna in England. Her brother Archie was attending a summer camp for young geniuses at Oxford University, with their mother.

Sophie had begun fencing lessons after her return from Tuscia two weeks ago. She was a beginner but enjoyed learning and practising.

It reminded her of Isabella and Leo, who were taught fencing by their nonna at Castello de Vorrone. She felt a wave of nostalgia for her time there with Isabella, Nicco, Bia and Leo. She missed her friends.

They started again, and this time Sophie concentrated on each individual move, visualising them in her head.

'Dig deep, darling,' encouraged Nanna. 'You can do it.'

Sophie saw an opening and took it, lunging quickly and striking Nanna on her padded vest.

'*Brava, Sophie,*' said Nanna. 'Let's call it a day. I think you're getting tired.'

'No,' said Sophie, pulling off her face mask. 'I want to keep going so I get better. Please, Nanna?'

Nanna stroked Sophie's sweaty hair off her forehead. 'Once you're tired, you can't help getting sloppy and I don't want you practising the movements unless they're perfect.'

Sophie pulled a face to show her disappointment, as she lay down her weapon. 'All right.'

'Why don't we practise some of the self-defence moves we've been working on?' suggested Nanna.

'Okay,' agreed Sophie. She stripped off her glove, jacket and chest guard, and tucked her gold medallion inside her T-shirt. Nonna had given her the medallion as a reminder of her adventures in Tuscia.

'Remember to look confident – head up, eyes alert, shoulders back,' instructed Nanna. 'Always show how brave you are. Attackers watch for weakness.'

Sophie did as Nanna bid.

'Beautiful,' said Nanna. 'If you feel like you are in danger, your first defence is your voice. Shout loudly. That often scares off an aggressor and shows them you're not a pushover.'

Nanna pretended to be a menacing ruffian coming towards her, wielding her silver Tuscan dagger. Sophie suppressed a smile at the slight form of her grey-haired grandmother, pretending to be a threat.

'*Back off,*' improvised Sophie, deepening her voice and tensing her muscles. 'Don't touch me.'

Nanna grabbed Sophie in a bear hug, trapping her arms by her side.

'Avoid confrontation if you can, but if you are attacked, you *must* fight back and fight *hard*,' said Nanna. 'The strongest giant can be defeated with some courage and cunning.'

Nanna had taught Sophie a choreographed series of evasive movements she could use to surprise and disarm her attacker, to free herself from an assailant's grasp.

'Much better,' said Nanna, as Sophie twisted and freed herself from the tight bear hug. 'You are getting the hang of it. Remember your opponent's weakest spots. Aim for the eyes, nose, knees or groin.'

Nanna stowed her dagger away in its leather sheath. Sophie couldn't imagine kicking someone in the knee or slamming them in their nose. Hopefully, she would never need to.

In the evening, Nanna and Sophie chatted as they prepared dinner together. The weather was gorgeous, so they sat at the table in the garden, enjoying the long twilight as they ate chicken-and-asparagus salad.

'Who taught you to fight, Nanna?' asked Sophie. Sophie had heard stories about the exploits of Nanna and her sister, Caterina, when they were younger.

Nanna had come to England from Tuscia, many years before, to marry Sophie's grandfather Tom. In doing so, she had left behind her home and family, including her beloved younger sister. Nanna had also given up her position as the Bella Rossellana, an honorary Tuscan title given to the eldest daughter in the Rossellana family.

'Caterina and I were raised at Castello de Vorrone by our grandmother Maddalena, the first Bella Rossellana,' began Nanna.

'Nicco told me the story of Maddalena calling the flying

horse from the top of the hunting tower to escape from the pirate attack,' said Sophie.

'Maddalena was a remarkable woman and very kind to us,' said Nanna. 'Our own mother died shortly after my brother Alessandro's birth, when I was three years old and Caterina was two. It was common in Tuscia for children to be raised by their grandparents in the country. It was thought to be safer – the water and air were purer than in the towns, so disease was less of a danger.'

'I didn't know you had a brother,' said Sophie.

A wave of sadness crossed Nanna's face. 'Sadly, Alessandro died from malaria when he was twelve. We didn't know what it was back then. We thought it was from the *mal aria* or bad air, but of course it was spread by the mosquitoes from the coastal swamps.'

'Up until then, Caterina and I had been educated together with our brother, as was the tradition with wealthy families,' explained Nanna. 'We learned Italian, French, Latin, Greek, philosophy, literature, music, as well as horse riding, military strategy, warcraft and

fighting. We had a brilliant fencing master who taught all three of us to fight with swords, daggers and crossbows from about the age of five.'

'Totally different to my school,' said Sophie. 'It sounds way more fun.'

'It was fun,' said Nanna. 'But it could be lonely. Caterina and I weren't allowed to play with the workers' children. Once Alessandro died, it was just the two of us, so we were everything to one another.'

Nanna looked melancholy.

'So, you haven't seen your sister, Caterina, since you came to England with Grandpa?' asked Sophie.

'No,' replied Nanna. 'You can't just cross over into Tuscia whenever you want to. I think you can only go when you are really needed.'

Sophie took a sip of her apple juice. 'Tell me a story about you and your sister when you were younger. Tell me about the time you fought off the pirates trying to steal your horses.'

Nanna laughed, throwing her head back. 'So, you heard about that, did you?'

'Isabella told me, but I don't know the details.'

Nanna gazed out over the cows grazing in the neighbouring field. Her face had a dreamy expression.

'Our family has bred horses for generations, which is perhaps why we also have an affinity with the *pegaso*,' said Nanna.

Sophie remembered her experience of riding the golden flying horse with Isabella, swooping over the olive groves and hayfields of the Tuscan countryside.

'Our Rossellana horses have a reputation for being brave, strong, fast, beautiful and extremely valuable,' continued Nanna. 'Especially the rare *cavalli bianchi*, or white horses. My grandmother specialised in breeding them.'

'Isabella rode a white mare,' said Sophie. 'I was told their horses were worth a *duca*'s ransom.'

'Absolutely,' Nanna agreed. 'So, you can imagine how devastated we were when, one moonless summer night when I was about sixteen, a band of pirates crept up from the coast to Castello de Vorrone, determined to steal our entire herd of fifty horses. Our nonna, Maddalena, was away in Bellomo on business, so we were home with a few servants.'

'It was about two in the morning. Everyone was

fast asleep. Most of the horses were grazing in the home paddock. The pirates caught a dozen of our best mares with their ropes and silently led them away, leaving the gates open. The rest of the herd followed.'

Sophie could see the scene playing out in her mind.

'What happened then?' asked Sophie.

'Our white stallion, Valoroso, was in a smaller yard near the stables and he became so distraught, he woke me. My dog, Luna, was whining and scratching at the door. I knew something must be wrong, so I woke Caterina and raced outside.'

'It was so dark we could barely see a few metres in front of us. Once my eyes adjusted, I could see the field gates were open and all our precious mares and foals were gone. Valoroso was galloping wildly up and down.'

Sophie could feel the fear of the pirate attack as though it were happening now.

'Caterina's mare was in the stable overnight, so we bridled her and woke the stableboys,' said Nanna. 'I took Valoroso.'

'Why didn't the pirates steal Valoroso?' asked Sophie. 'Surely he was one of the most valuable horses you had?'

Nanna nodded. 'I'm sure they tried, but Valoroso was half mad with fear for his herd and difficult to catch. He'd grown up with us handling him, so he trusted me more than a stranger.'

'We galloped after those barbarian pirates as though our lives depended upon it. Which, in fact, they did. It was our whole family fortune they were stealing.

'The pirates were jogging in the darkness, leading the horses down the track towards the coast. We took a short cut,

galloping across the fields and vineyards. We waited for them atop a hillock. As soon as we saw them come around the bend, we attacked.'

Sophie realised she was holding her breath. She slowly let it out. 'How many pirates were there?'

'A dozen,' said Nanna. 'All armed to the teeth with cutlasses and daggers. All their beards were dyed blue, except for their leader's, a young Roskayan prince.'

'You and Caterina attacked twelve armed pirates?' asked Sophie. 'By yourselves?'

Nanna's eyes sparkled at the memory.

'Weren't you terrified?' asked Sophie.

'Oh yes,' said Nanna. 'But we weren't alone. We had our horses and Luna. Plus, we knew our herd. The pirates were seafarers and didn't understand horses like we did.'

'What did you do?' asked Sophie.

Nanna turned to Sophie, unsheathing the Tuscan silver dagger that she had been playing with earlier. She ran her fingers over the flat of the blade.

'I made a plan with Caterina,' explained Nanna. 'Caterina and I galloped down into the herd, with Luna at our heels, aiming to cut free as many of the mares as we could, using our daggers. We took them completely by surprise.'

The silver dagger flashed in the air as Nanna pretended to thrust and cut.

'I freed our lead mare first, cutting the rope around her neck,' Nanna said. 'Then I turned her head for home. Caterina cut another mare free, then chased them back up the road towards Castello de Vorrone. As we hoped, the herd followed the leaders away from danger. I cut another four mares free. The pirates fought back,

but they couldn't hold the remaining horses and fight properly at the same time.

'Valoroso was rearing and slashing down with his sharp hooves. He broke the prince's leg. Luna was darting in, barking and biting. The mares that were still tied up panicked. The men had light canvas shoes on, so they had horses stomping on their toes, nipping them and breaking free. The men were screaming in pain, which made the horses more panicky.'

Sophie leaned forward, completely entranced. 'It sounds like chaos.'

'Normally we kept our horses calm and placid,' said Nanna. 'But on this night, we urged them into a frenzy. Even an experienced groom is no match for a fear-crazed horse. The pirates suffered several broken bones.'

This news filled Sophie with a wicked sense of glee.

'Finally, there were six injured pirates trying to hold the last captive mare, while the other six charged me with their cutlasses. I galloped straight at them, swinging my sword. I was determined they wouldn't take even one of our precious horses. I took a nasty sabre cut on the thigh and Luna was injured on the shoulder, but we freed the last mare, who galloped home as though chased by demons.

'The pirates tried to capture us. Valoroso picked up the nearest man, shook him like a rat and tossed him in the air. He fell like a crumpled rag.'

'Did he die?' asked Sophie.

'No,' said Nanna. 'He was lucky. By the time a gang of our workers arrived on foot, most of the pirates had fled. We imprisoned four who were severely wounded and tended them.

The prisoners later confessed that their leader was

Prince Fiyat of Roskaya. He paid them to help him steal the horses and take them by ship to his port at Peramosh.'

Sophie sighed. 'That's a wonderful story, Nanna. You were so brave.'

'Just as you were so brave, my darling,' said Nanna. 'Standing up to Ginevre and saving Isabella and Bia from her terrible schemes.'

This compliment warmed Sophie's heart. She felt very proud of what she had achieved in Tuscia. Sophie stood up to clear the table, sending pain shooting through her thigh muscles. She winced.

'Why don't I wash up?' suggested Nanna, taking over. 'And you can have a long, hot soak in the tub. It looks like those fighting muscles are stiff and sore. I'll fetch you some rosemary and lavender oil for your bath water.'

'Thanks, Nanna, I do feel pretty stiff,' said Sophie. 'That sounds lovely.'

The next morning, Sophie yawned and stretched. Her dreams had been filled with locked towers, flying horses, and poisonous potions.

Sunshine seeped through the curtains, bathing her attic bedroom with gentle light. The whitewashed room looked the same, but Sophie felt uneasy. Something wasn't right.

It was the silence.

There were no cheery noises coming from the kitchen. No delicious smells. It was eerie. Sophie checked her watch. It was ten o'clock. She had slept in for hours. Something was definitely wrong.

'Nanna?' called Sophie, as she padded downstairs in her pyjamas. 'Are you here?'

She checked in Nanna's physiotherapy clinic, where she treated her patients. It was empty.

'Miaow,' called Juno, the white Persian cat. She wound around Sophie's leg, begging for breakfast. Sophie patted her.

The kitchen felt chilly. The Aga stove, which usually kept the house toasty warm, was unlit. There was no sign of her grandmother. *Strange. Where could Nanna be?*

A folded note on creamy paper leaned against the jug of wildflowers on the kitchen table.

Sophie opened it. As usual, her dyslexia made the letters dance and jiggle on the page before Sophie could read them.

My Dearest Sophie,

I am so sorry I wasn't here when you woke. Don't be concerned. Last night, I had a note from my sister asking for urgent help. I should be home soon. There are plenty of leftovers in the fridge. If I'm not back in a few days perhaps you should catch the train to your mother in Oxford.

All my love

Nanna

Her sister? thought Sophie. *Nanna must mean Caterina! Isabella's nonna. Does that mean that Nanna has gone through the Roman shrine into Tuscia?*

Sophie glanced up to the hook over the fireplace where Nanna hung her silver lantern with its intricate pattern of holes punched in the metal. It was missing. Sophie's own matching one hung on the other side. The silver dagger was also gone.

Nanna *must* have gone to Tuscia.

Thoughts whirled through her mind as Sophie wrangled the tricky Aga to life and put on the kettle.

In all these years, Nanna had never gone back to Tuscia. Why had she gone now? Something must be very wrong.

These worries gnawed at Sophie as she fed Juno, then made her own breakfast of tea and Vegemite toast. She had a shower, got dressed and made her bed. She tried sketching, but

couldn't concentrate. Her intuition was telling her something was wrong. She rambled from room to room, peering out the windows. Should she go for a walk? Perhaps wander down the narrow country lane towards the Roman ruins?

Her reverie was disturbed by a crash. Sophie's heart leaped to her mouth. Was someone in the kitchen?

'Nanna?' called Sophie, her voice quavering despite herself. 'Is that you?'

There was no reply. Sophie tiptoed into the kitchen.

Sitting in a patch of sunlight on the bench was a massive ginger cat with a raggedy ear. He was licking his scruffy, tiger-striped fur.

'Baccio?' cried Sophie with delight. 'What are you doing here? How did you get in?'

She went to lift Baccio and hug him, but something about Baccio's manner stopped her.

The cat stretched and yawned. *About time you showed up*, he yowled. *I've been waiting for you at the ruins. If I'd known you were just lazing about, I'd have come here sooner.*

'Waiting for me?' asked Sophie. 'Why did you think I'd be at the ruins? Is something wrong?'

Obviously! Baccio sat up straight, looking both serious and regal. *You don't think I'd come all this way for a chat? You're needed.*

'What is it, Baccio?' begged Sophie. 'Stop talking in riddles.'

Last night, the Castello de Vorrone was attacked by thieves, he growled. *The contessa put up a hard fight, but she was outnumbered. She sent out swallows with messages calling for help but it was too late.*

'Is Nonna all right?' asked Sophie, her voice high-pitched with fright. 'And what about Bella, Nicco, Bia and Leo?'

They were safely in Bellomo with the duca. Baccio flicked his ear back and forth. *The contessa was taken.*

Sophie felt like she had been punched in the stomach. She clutched the edge of the bench for support.

'Taken where?' asked Sophie. 'Who would want to kidnap an old lady?'

Kidnap two old ladies, growled Baccio. *The contessa's swallow flew here through the shrine, bringing a note asking for help. Your grandmother arrived at Castello de Vorrone last night, in time to be captured by the thieves before they fled.*

'Nanna?' cried Sophie. 'They've taken Nanna? What will they do with them? Surely they wouldn't hurt them?'

Baccio swished his tail. *Simple thieves wouldn't kidnap two old women. The risk is too great! They must have a reason to abduct the Rossellana sisters. No good can come of it. You need to do something.*

'What should I do?' asked Sophie. Her mind was overwhelmed with the news. She felt paralysed with fear. 'How could I help?'

Stop gawping for a start, hissed Baccio. *Get ready to go to Tuscia. But fetch me some milk while I'm waiting. I'm rather parched.*

'Surely the duca is chasing after them?' asked Sophie. 'Surely he has soldiers who can rescue Nanna and Nonna?'

I wouldn't mind some bacon while you're at it, added Baccio. *Today would be good.*

Sophie poured milk into a bowl and dumped it on the kitchen bench, along with a saucer of shaved cheese. Her mind whirred trying to process all the information she'd been given.

She felt exasperated. *Baccio can be so annoying with his riddles and demands. What on earth does he think I can do? Tackle a troop of dangerous thieves single-handed? Yet how can I stay here and do nothing while Nanna and Nonna are in danger? I must go back.*

Upstairs, Sophie made a quick mental list of what she should take. Her silver lantern. A penknife. A lighter (she hated using a tinderbox). Clean underwear. Toiletries. A toothbrush and hairbrush. This time, she would be prepared.

Sophie changed out of her jeans and into black leggings, socks and boots. Over her top she wore the white linen *camicia* that Isabella had given her and the long, turquoise gown that laced up the front with satin ribbons. She twisted her hair half back and up into a simple Tuscan hairstyle. It felt good to be back in Isabella's familiar gown. It filled her with strength and purpose.

She packed her backpack and put out plenty of extra food and water for Juno. Then she slung the pack over her shoulder and picked up the lantern.

'Okay,' said Sophie. 'I'm ready.'

About time, hissed Baccio. *Those thieves will have several hours' start on us. Let's go.*

Sophie locked the kitchen door behind her and hid the key under a tub of lavender. Baccio trotted ahead, his tail straight in the air. Sophie paused at the gateway, glancing back at Nanna's thatched cottage, blooming with rambling roses. Would she ever see it again?

Sophie took a deep breath to give her courage and stepped into the narrow laneway. 'Lead on, Baccio.'