

August, 1609
Venice

Zaneta Lucia Zorzi ducked under the low doorway separating the kitchen and the alley. As she emerged into the sunlight, a wave of heat and a foul smell knocked her back.

This was a door that most people had forgotten. Only the scullery maid, Gianna, used it to throw out refuse. The narrow *calle* stank of rotting fish, with a mixture of fermenting vegetables and the ever-present tang of salt.

The odor was a selling point. Zaneta Lucia only used the door when she wanted to sneak out without being noticed. The stench drove everyone else in the household away. It was her secret—one of many that would cause significant problems if her father ever found out. Or, God forbid, her mother. A shudder passed through Zaneta Lucia's body as she considered the possibility. No, it wasn't even worth imagining. It was too terrible.

Zaneta Lucia held a cloth over her face to dampen the smell and pushed the tiny wooden door closed behind her.

She slunk down the pungent alley and hopped over a narrow rivulet of water and waste. Now she was behind the neighboring palazzo. For some reason this side smelled better, even in the middle of August. Maybe she would tell Gianna to throw some lemons into the alley. But that might draw undue attention. Why would the daughter of the illustrious Ser Zorzi care about the smell of the alley, where only rats scurried?

She pushed that thought, too, out of her head. Hugging the side of the building, she weaved her way toward the street.

Zaneta Lucia focused on her goal. She had to cross the city, all the way to the other end of the island, without being recognized. She tugged the cloak tight around her face. If anyone saw her, Zaneta Lucia's mother would certainly find out, and she would lose her tiny sliver of independence.

The cloak alone made her stand out in the shimmering heat. No one else was foolish enough to don a cloak in this weather. Drips of sweat were already running down her back, but she refused to disrobe.

Under the cloak, Zaneta Lucia was wearing pants. For the first time, her legs were unencumbered by the thick folds of fabric that Venetian girls wore. It had felt strange, sliding her legs into the pants. And now, on the streets, she could feel the eyes of a thousand strangers trained on her.

But what would they see? Not the daughter of a patrician. No, today she looked more like the son of a middling merchant or a tailor, some artisan boy out running errands.

Or at least she hoped.