

The Face of Amore

Chapter One

The day I learned of the Good Fortune had been warm for so late in the season, and I'd taken the opportunity to teach Fenny and Gemma how to harvest tender sea lettuces from one of the shallower kelp ponds. Knee-deep in the seawater, I'd bent over their shoulders and guided their fingers to feel for the small nodes between the main plant and the branchlets, showing them how to snap the leaves off without damaging the nodes they grew from. We were the best part of done when I heard my name shouted from shore. I looked up and shaded my eyes, but the figure was lost in the glare. I lifted my hand in acknowledgment, then stretched and twisted, trying to work the kinks out of my back. There really wasn't much to harvesting the various types of kelp once you got the hang of it. It was an easy task to teach, but the chore itself was better suited for younger backs than mine, all that stooping and bending. An extra-long soak in the bathhouse that night would be my well-deserved reward, is what I remember thinking.

"Auntie!" Another shout from shore.

"Yes, yes, I'm coming." Couldn't whoever-it-was see that I was in the middle of something? Obviously whatever they wanted wasn't important enough to get their trousers wet. I grumbled as much to Fenny and Gemma, and they grinned in response, drops of sea water perched like glass beads on their eyelashes and atop their tightly twisted braids.

The voice came again, more urgent this time. "Auntie Aphra!"

"Oh, for heaven's sake." I waved again, then unhooked the sling of sea lettuce from its tether. I handed one end to Gemma and the other to Fenny, and we sloshed our way back to shore through the shallow pool that was warm, even at this time of year when the cold rains were

starting to come more and more frequently.

The figure materialized out of the glare. Neave, Dae's fifteen-year-old apprentice in Geomatics. She stood waiting for me on a flat-topped boulder alongside the spit of land that protects this side of the cove and its comma-shaped beach. The spit has always reminded me of a long, peninsular exclamation point, the way Benny's Lighthouse sits at the far end of it, a blinking punctuation mark.

Neave hurried toward me as soon as I reached the shore, but I turned away and instructed Gemma and Fenny to go to the kitchens first, where one of the cooks would wash and blanch the ruby-colored leaves, and then straight to the bathhouse to rinse their skin so the mineral-and-phytoplankton-rich seawater wouldn't make them itch.

Maybe by turning my back on Neave I was making a point that I hoped she would get. The point being, I'd been in the middle of doing something equally important to whatever-it-was she wanted, and she should recognize that and wait her turn.

"Well, what is it?" I said, finally giving her my attention.

Neave smiled as if uncertain how to proceed, then grasped my hand and bowed, bringing it to her forehead. "Mano, Grandmother," she said.

Such an age to be. Not a child but not fully an adult, either. Never knowing exactly how to behave or where you fit but desperately needing to fit somewhere. Well. I'd spoken to her as if she were a child and so she'd responded as one. I gave the blessing, then squeezed her fingers, patted her head, though she was as tall as I was.

"Lahat, lahat." She gave the traditional response, then straightened up with a shy smile.

"I'm sorry I interrupted you, but Auntie Dae sent me. She needs you up in the lab."

I raised my eyebrows in surprise. Jonas had tried to talk me into retiring and giving the lab

over to Dae for years before I'd actually done it. "You know Dae's ready," he used to say, as if I wasn't aware of the fact, and "You're doing her a disservice," as if I wasn't aware of that, either. But the thing he hadn't understood was that it wasn't about Dae's readiness to take over Geomatics, it was about my lack of readiness to let it go. Or maybe it wasn't even that. The Ark's interface is in the Geomatics lab, so maybe it was the Ark I wasn't ready to walk away from. But then Jonas got sick and took the decision out of my hands, and after he passed, how could I justify going back? To reclaim the lab would have been to say that I didn't trust Dae's ability or that I didn't believe she deserved the position or she hadn't earned it or wasn't capable, or that I'd failed as her mentor, or that I didn't want to fully step into the responsibilities of elderhood. And none of those were true.

I watched Fenny and Gemma reach the top of the stairs built into the rocky rise and head toward the village stretched out along the low headland, the hills with our terraced fields climbing beyond, and just for a moment, felt ridiculously pleased to be needed back where I belonged.

"What's going on up there?" I asked.

Neave hesitated before saying, "An emergency council meeting has been called. It's something to do with the Ark."

The Ark.

And just like that, the little thread of anguish that had lain dormant for so long, that for decades had been wound as tightly as the finest strand of hair around my pinky finger, began to unfurl.