

# THE LAURENTINE SPY

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**SOLARIS**

## PROLOGUE

THEY SMELLED THE *Dacha Gorge* before they reached it: *carrion*. “*Stay back from the edge,*” his uncle said as they dismounted.

*The stench of death filled his mouth and nose, choking. He saw mountains, dark fir trees, sheer walls of rock.*

*“This is what history looks like, boy.”*

*Soldiers’ bodies. Hundreds. Thousands. Too many to count. Corhonase, Marillaqan, lying like broken dolls at the bottom of the gorge.*

*Bile rose in his throat. He turned away.*

*“Don’t throw up on me, boy.” His uncle’s hand was on his shoulder, gripping strongly.*

*He clenched his eyes shut. He could still see the bodies, still smell them. “Why?”*

*“Corhona seeks to expand. They always do.” His uncle released his grip. “This time we won.”*

*He opened his eyes. “But those aren’t our soldiers, sir.”*

*“It doesn’t matter whether the battle was ours or not. Whenever Corhona loses, Laurent wins. Remember that, boy.”*

*“Yes, sir.”*

*His uncle turned and looked back into the gorge. “It doesn’t always have to be like this, boy. Sometimes it’s possible to win before it comes to fighting.”*

## CHAPTER ONE

SOMETHING MOVED AHEAD of her in the catacombs. Pebbles shifted against stone. The sound echoed through the dark galleries.

Saliel halted and reached for her knife.

Silence stretched for long seconds—black, cold, empty—while her heart thudded hard and fast beneath her breastbone and her ears strained to hear.

More pebbles rolled across the sandstone floor, a thin rattle of sound. There was a sudden scuffle of movement in the darkness. A rodent squealed.

Saliel inhaled a shallow breath. *It's only rats.*

But she didn't relax her tight grip on the knife. She waited, counting a hundred breaths, two hundred, three, until she was certain no one moved in the darkness. No soldiers. No thieves. No living person except herself.

The knife slid noiselessly back into its sheath. Saliel stepped forward. The brush of her gloved fingertips over the cold stone made a faint whisper of sound. Her eyes were useless; the dark was too dense, too absolute.

She descended another level, deeper into blackness and silence. The route through the labyrinth of passages and galleries was as familiar as her own face in the mirror. No candle was necessary; she knew every crook and turn, every fall of rock, every shrouded and disintegrating skeleton.

*Here.*

The alcove was shallow, an arch, a single step, nothing more.

Saliel paused to listen. Nothing moved in the darkness. She squeezed her eyes briefly shut—*please, let the guardian set me no task tonight*—and leaned her weight against the sandstone.

The wall pivoted with grudging slowness.

Her shoulders brushed rock on either side as she slipped through the narrow opening. The block of stone swung quietly back into place, shutting her in stale darkness.

She was no longer alone. She saw nothing, heard nothing—but she knew.

Saliel drew her knife. She gripped it tightly. “I saw three rings around the moon tonight.”

“I saw none.”

Saliel relaxed at the familiar voice. She sheathed her knife.

“You’re late.”

“Yes.” She’d left the ball as early as she dared, but it had taken the maid long minutes to unlace the gown, to unpin her hair and replait it in a single long braid, to bring hot water to wash her face and warm honeyed milk to drink. “I apologize.”

The guardian grunted. Saliel heard the rustle of cloth as he moved. Stone grated against stone and faint light leaked into the ancient storage room. For a moment the man was silhouetted in the doorway—bulky, hooded like an executioner—and then he stepped back to let her pass.

The chamber beyond was vast. Centuries ago it had been used to prepare the dead. Stone tables stood in the centre of the room, grooved and stained, and dark-lipped gutters dissected the floor. A single candle burned. Shadows towered in the corners and swallowed the ceiling.

One and Two were already seated. Their heads turned as she entered. Her eyes knew which was which. In daylight in the court she'd never recognize them; here, cloaked and hooded, she knew them.

The men rose, One tall and solid, Two slighter, narrow-shouldered.

"You had difficulty?" Two's voice was faintly anxious.

"I had difficulty leaving the ball. Nothing more." Saliel sat down on an upturned urn.

"It was a crush, wasn't it?" One sat beside her. His posture was relaxed, his voice calm.

"Yes." Saliel glanced at him. *Did I dance with you?* "There were many naval officers."

"And there are many warships in port," the guardian said, sitting. "Too many. I fear they're up to something."

"Admiral Veller was in unusually high spirits this evening," One said.

She nodded. The Admiral had been flushed with alcohol—and something more than that. There'd been an undercurrent in the vast ballroom, a soundless whisper that had prickled over her skin. She'd seen a gleam in men's eyes—the Admiral and his aides, the clusters of naval officers—and been unable to find a word to describe it. The word came to her now. *Anticipation*. She shivered and drew her cloak more closely to her. "He's excited about something."

One nodded. "Yes."

The guardian grunted. He pushed to his feet and began to pace. His footsteps echoed flatly.

Saliel looked down at her hands. She clenched her fingers together. *Please don't ask me to—*

The guardian halted in front of her. "The Admiral's wife may know something. Three, speak with her and see what you can find out."

Saliel swallowed. She raised her head and looked up at him. "I shall."

The guardian turned from her. "Two—"

"I'll have a word with his valet."

"Good." The guardian shifted his attention to One. "The Admiral should be in the courtesans' salon tonight."

"I hadn't planned on attending," One said. His voice was neutral, without inflection.

"I suggest that you do."

One shrugged his shoulders. "Very well."

Saliel looked down at her hands. She unclenched her fingers. *A simple task*, she told herself. *It will be all right.*

"Is there anything else?" the guardian asked.

"No," said Two, and she looked up to see One shake his head.

"Three?"

"No." She shook her head too. "Except... the Consort still speaks of an investigation. She's certain there are Laurentine spies in the citadel."

"Still? Curse the woman."

Across from her, Two shifted slightly. His tension was tight-shouldered and silent. The folds of his black cloak fell to the floor in sharp lines.

One spoke quietly: "Fortunately the Prince doesn't share her conviction."

Saliel watched as Two's shoulders relaxed.

"We must hope he never does," the guardian said. "Is that all?"

Saliel nodded. "Yes."

"Then we meet in two nights. Be very careful. All of you."

Saliel unclasped her hands and stood.

One rose to his feet. He bowed to her, hooded, faceless. "Goodnight."

“Goodnight.” She watched as he and Two crossed the chamber. They didn’t use the catacombs; their route lay through the ancient sewer system. Shadows swallowed their cloaked figures. She looked away and walked to where the guardian held the heavy stone door open for her.

“You’ll speak with the Admiral’s wife?”

*I would give anything not to.* “Yes.”

“Be careful.”

“Yes.” *Always.*

Saliel stepped into the darkness of the storage room. The door closed behind her. There was a moment when her eyes strained to see and her lungs told her there wasn’t enough air, but then it passed, as it always did.

“ENJOY THE SALON,” Two said, as they parted in the disused sewers. His voice held a note of envy.

“I shall,” Athan said. It was a lie; he didn’t think Two would believe the truth.

The ancient sewer tunnels were broad and low and as black as pitch. Athan ducked his head and walked with noiseless care, his gloved fingers barely touching the damp stone walls.

As a youth he’d fantasized about Corhona and its courtesans’ salons: salons filled with beautiful, eager women. Women schooled in the provision of physical pleasure and eager to perform any sexual act a man could desire. Women whose ardor was as legendary as their skill.

He grunted silently. *Idiot.*

He’d been a fool to fantasize about whores, just as he’d been a fool to agree to spy in the citadel. This was no adventure. It was a dangerous game, where one slip could mean death for himself and his fellow spies, for Three.

She hadn't spoken much during the meeting. Athan went over her words in his mind, remembering what she'd said, trying to reconcile her voice with those of the ladies of the court. It was impossible. Corhonase was a guttural language, as different from his native Laurentine as a battle chant from a lullaby. *Who are you, my lady?*

His hood brushed the ceiling. Black wool snagged on the rough stone, and he ducked his head lower. *I wish—*

He'd asked the guardian once, casually, who she was, and been told such knowledge was dangerous. The man was correct: to know there were other spies was one thing, to know their identities was something else entirely. *Still, I wish—*

There was no change in the darkness, but Athan's ears told him the sewer tunnel was widening. He stayed close to the wall, feeling with his hands. He pulled himself up on the stone ledge and then stooped to enter the service tunnel. The passage forked almost immediately. To the left a stone staircase led upward.

Athan hunched lower and began to climb the ancient stairs. The walls and the ceiling, the stale air, the darkness, crowded him. He counted the steps off in his head, concentrating on the numbers, disliking the cramped space, the tightness and the narrowness. The weight of the citadel pressed down on him. Fifty steps, and then a hundred. One hundred and fifty. Two hundred. Each step took him closer to the courtesans, to candlelight and wine and sex.

His pace slowed—part weariness, part reluctance. Athan stifled a laugh in his throat. *I used to enjoy it, and now...*

It wasn't that the whores were unwilling. On the contrary, there was keen competition for positions in the salon; the lifestyle was luxurious, decadent even.

But the legend was a lie. The courtesans weren't wanted; they were businesslike, bored.

The gaudy courtesans' salon no longer featured in his fantasies. Instead, his dreams were of private intimacy, and his fantasies were about one woman: Three. He didn't know who she was or what she looked like. It didn't matter. What mattered was that she didn't share her body with anyone but him and that no one else was present when they made love. Most often he imagined that they met in darkness and he never saw her face. He would undress her slowly and her body would be slim and soft and clean, and not smell of other men. And when he kissed her, her mouth was sweet and innocent, and when they made love, she was never bored.

Space opened out ahead of him. The ceiling lifted and the walls pulled back. It was dark still, but he could stand to his full height, could stretch out his arms if he wanted to.

Athan stifled a grunt of relief. The cellars on these lower levels were disused, but caution was an ingrained habit. His life depended on the care he took to avoid detection. And not only his life. Three's too, and the others. He stretched his spine and wished he could forgo the salon tonight.

SALIEL INHALED THE cold air of the catacombs. There was no scent of death or decay. The people who lay interred here were centuries dead, their bones dry and brittle.

Her path took her along twisting passageways and through wide galleries. Here lay the priests and priestesses of a long-dead empire, the warriors and the poets, the nobles and the courtiers. She couldn't see them, but she knew they were there, resting in their niches of cold stone. Hair rose at the nape of her neck

at the thought of bony fingers reaching out to pluck her cloak. She fought the urge to hurry, to get out of the darkness and silence as quickly as possible. It was always worse—the return journey—when her skin crawled with unease and it took a conscious effort to keep her pace slow.

It was foolish to be afraid of crumbling skeletons when there were more important things to fear: discovery and torture and death. Yet she had nightmares about this place. The dead woke in her dreams, angry that she disturbed their rest. They hunted her in the darkness and she'd stand still and hold her breath and hope they wouldn't find her. But they always did.

Saliel shivered and shook herself mentally. *It's the living I need to fear. Not the dead.*

Her path took her steadily upward, to the wall that sealed the catacombs from the citadel. Stones had been extracted from the crumbling mortar. She ducked her head and stepped through the low opening.

The beating of her heart slowed now that the dead no longer surrounded her. *I'm a fool to let my imagination frighten me so.* There was nothing to fear in the catacombs. It was here—within the walls of the citadel—that the greatest dangers lay. Saliel moved a short distance up the passageway and stopped and listened, her hand on the hilt of her knife. These passages had already been rediscovered once, by a Laurentine scholar. The details were there for those who knew where to look.

But tonight she had the secret pathways to herself. No candlelight flickered in the darkness, no cloth whispered against stone, no soldiers' boots trod cautiously. Saliel removed her hand from the knife and placed it on the wall to guide her. The stone was smoother than in the catacombs, the passage narrower and steeper. Stairs led upward and she grew warm as she climbed.

She was in the women's wing now. Drafts stirred the air and peepholes let in murmurs of sound and gave glimpses of candlelit rooms.

The secret passages didn't extend to the newer portions of the citadel—the men's wing and the royal chambers, the rooms where matters of military intelligence were discussed. If they did, there'd be no need to ask questions and draw attention to herself, no need to guide conversations to risky subjects. *The Admiral's wife, tomorrow.*

Dread sat beneath her breastbone, tight and familiar. Saliel ignored it. She placed one foot in front of the other, climbing higher and higher within the walls of the citadel, growing warmer. The passage became narrower, the stairs steeper.

Saliel stopped. Here was her bed chamber, high in the tower that housed the unmarried ladies of the court. She leaned close to the peephole and examined the scene. The candle had burned low and the fire was almost out. In the dim light she saw that her door was still bolted from the inside.

A few steps further up the passage was a niche, above her head. It had held candles once; now her nightgown lay folded there. Saliel pulled off the black hood and stripped off her gloves, then crouched to unfasten her soft leather boots. The stone floor was cold beneath her bare feet. Swiftly she removed the sheathed knife and her remaining clothes—cloak and breeches and shirt—and laid the items in the niche. Her nightgown was as cold as the stone it had lain on. She shook out the folds and pulled it over her head. Her skin shivered in protest.

Saliel closed her eyes and concentrated on fastening the long row of pearl buttons by touch. They were cool and smooth beneath her fingers and by the time she'd fastened the last one, high at her throat, the warmth she'd acquired while climbing was gone.

ATHAN PAUSED AS he entered the main salon. His nostrils flared at the mingled scents of alcohol and perfume, sweat and sex. The air was warm and heavy. It settled on his skin, faintly oily, and he tasted it on his tongue, overripe. Musicians played on the dais, but the music was almost lost beneath the clamor of drunken voices, male and female. A servant bearing wine glasses on a tray approached him.

“Lord Ivo,” the man said, bowing low. The crystal glasses and gilded tray gleamed in the light of the chandeliers.

Athan took a glass and motioned the servant away.

The salons opened out from one another, full of noise and heat. He moved slowly through the rooms, sipping the wine, his gaze sliding from one face to the next. The Prince and his cronies were in one of the smaller salons. Athan turned away, searching for easier prey.

Admiral Veller was in a far alcove with two courtesans. Athan watched for a moment and then shifted his attention to Lord Seldo. The man was on the military council—and a self-important rambler when drunk. “Seldo,” he said. “Mind if I join you?”

Lord Seldo looked up from where he reclined on a couch. He focused his eyes with obvious effort. “Donkey? Of course, of course.”

Athan sat, arranging his limbs in a careless sprawl. “Admiral Veller is in high spirits tonight.”

Seldo followed the direction of his gaze. He sniggered.

“I wonder why?” Athan said idly.

Seldo sniggered again. “Thought of action excites the Admiral.”

“Action?” Athan raised his glass and drank. The wine was smooth on his tongue. It tasted of dark plums and spice.

Seldo hiccupped. "More wine," he said loudly.

Athan waited until a servant had refilled Seldo's glass. "A campaign?"

"More of an acquisition." Seldo reached out to grab the skirts of a passing courtesan. Wine slopped from his glass. "Here." He thrust the woman at Athan. "This one's for you, Donkey. I don't like redheads."

*I don't want her.* "My thanks," he said, while the whore settled beside him.

Seldo had hold of another woman, who leaned obligingly into his embrace. She bit his earlobe lightly, then licked where she'd bitten. Seldo hiccupped again.

Fingers stroked up Athan's thigh. He ignored them. "An acquisition?" He raised his glass again and swallowed. Dark plums. Spice. "You're too cryptic for me, Seldo."

Seldo turned a flushed face to him, drunk, eager to display his knowledge. "They shall give us what we want." The words slurred together as he spoke.

"Oh?" Athan took care to make his tone desultory, almost bored. He yawned. "Why?"

Seldo leaned close. "A little trickery," he whispered. He raised his glass to Athan and drank greedily.

A little trickery? What did that mean? Athan looked at the redheaded whore. Plump white flesh spilled out of her scanty costume, but he had no desire to touch her. He smelled alcohol and sweat on her, and the scent of other men's pleasures. Her fingers were busy unfastening his breeches and her pretty, painted face wore a look of false excitement.

*We're both bored by this, you and I.*

Athan leaned his head back against one of the brocade cushions. He closed his eyes and groped for a fantasy, something that would arouse him and enable him to perform as expected.

His imagination came to his rescue. It was no bored courtesan who touched him. It was the prim and noble Petra, her red hair coiled neatly on top of her head. Never mind that Lady Petra didn't like him, the fingers that stroked him were hers, as were the skilled mouth and tongue.

Thoughts of Lady Petra pleasuring him aroused him very nicely.

THE BLOCK OF stone swung aside. Saliel ducked her head and stepped down into her bed chamber. The secret door pivoted shut with a touch of her hand. She leaned against it. *Safe.*

No. The light and warmth gave an illusion of safety, but she was no safer here than she'd been in the passageways. Less, perhaps.

She sighed and straightened and looked around the bed chamber, reassuring herself that everything was as she'd left it. Black stone walls, dark tapestries. The furnishings were sumptuous and the bed narrow, as befitted a virgin of noble birth.

Saliel shivered, less from cold than from the bleakness of the room, and went to sit beside the fire. She caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror and halted. It was an unnerving sight. She looked ghostly, her face pale above the stark white of her high-necked nightgown. The only color was the long plait of red hair that hung over her shoulder. Her image looked trapped inside the ornate and heavy frame of the mirror, caught in some terrible place. *Which, in truth, I am.*

Saliel turned away from her reflection and sat on the rug before the fire. She drew her knees up and hugged them, shivering. Sometimes it was hard to remember why she'd chosen this life. There were moments when the fear and the loneliness seemed beyond all

proportion to the prize at the end. But the prize was worth it. It *was*.

“A cottage,” she whispered. There was no one to hear her, but she spoke in Corhonase because in this room she was Lady Petra. The guttural words roughened her voice. “By the sea.”

She stared at the glowing embers, imagining it. A *home of my own*.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Emily** has a Bachelor of Science (Geology) and a Post Graduate Diploma (Rehabilitation). She has lived and studied in Sweden, backpacked in Europe, and travelled overland in the Middle East, China, and North Africa. Her varied career includes stints as a field assistant in Antarctica, a waitress on the Isle of Skye, and a rehabilitation instructor in New Zealand. She currently works in the wine industry in Marlborough, New Zealand. Her first novel, *Thief With No Shadow*, has been shortlisted twice for the Romance Writers of America RITA Awards.