



AURUM
GROUP

ORRIS: THE INNER CIRCLE

A Backstory of Aurum and Imogen Morozova



Prologue – The Bottle in the Dark

Paris forgot how to sleep on nights like this.

Rain turned the cobbles to black glass, reflecting the façades of limestone buildings along Rue de la Paix. At the end of the street, a doorway glowed warm gold against the blue-black night: ORRIS, in quiet serif letters above a lacquered frame.

Inside, the music was low and expensive. Editors, investors and minor royals clustered in loose constellations, murmuring in half a dozen languages. They had all received the same message: a private presentation, strictly limited, no photographs. “A new language of luxury,” the embossed card had promised. None of them really knew what that meant, but no one in the room was in the habit of admitting ignorance.

Imogen Katya Morozova stood with her back to the floor-to-ceiling windows, the city’s reflections haloing her in glass. Black silk fell cleanly from her shoulders; a strand of jet pearls rested at her throat. She rarely wore jewellery that didn’t carry some form of leverage. Tonight, the pearls were both armour and signature.

On a pedestal beside her sat a single bottle.

Round, hand-blown glass, no two quite the same. The Orris compass – an eight-pointed star trapped in a circle – was etched faintly into the crystal, visible only when the light caught it. Atop the neck rested a sphere of polished black pearl, matte enough to drink the light, bright enough to hint at depth. It looked like a planet that had chosen to orbit no sun but its own.

The guests waited. Patience, after all, was a resource that belonged to poorer people.

Imogen did not clear her throat or tap a glass. She simply reached for the pearl, lifted it with a small twist and let the faintest, deliberate click carry through the room. Conversations thinned. A few people closer to the front swore they heard something under the scent that rose from the glass, some echo of ocean and storm and forest edge.

“Tasmania,” Imogen said, her accent threaded with traces of Russia, Switzerland, Oxford. “Leatherwood honey, cold-water botanicals. Sourced,” she paused, “from just past the end of the world.”

A ripple of appreciative laughter, small, hungry.

“This is Orris Reserve – Black Pearl. It is not a drink.” Her gaze moved slowly across the crowd, evaluating, weighing. “It is a key. To what, you will decide.”

Waiters appeared, their trays carrying only six crystal glasses. Not everyone received one. The ones who did tried to appear unimpressed, and failed.

The liquid caught the light and fractured it into arcs on the ceiling, as if someone had drawn invisible circles in the air. A woman in emerald silk lifted her glass, inhaled, and shut her eyes. Forest. Smoke. Rain on hot stone. Beneath it all, something that tasted like a dare.

By the door, a dark-suited man with a Slavic jawline watched his granddaughter work the room. Dimitri Ivanovich Morozov's cane was for theatre; his posture did not require it. Oligarch, investor, patron. The circle of people around him adjusted subtly, leaving space as if he were surrounded by something exotic and flammable.

He leaned on the cane anyway, amused.

"Solnyshko," he murmured in Russian, too soft for anyone else to hear. Little sun.

Imogen did not turn. She didn't need to. She felt his gaze the way sailors once felt the pull of a compass. She smiled for the room, not for him, and thought: Tonight they see Orris. They do not see Aurum . They must never see Aurum .

Outside, reflected in the glass, Paris glittered in infinite fragments. The world saw a bottle and called it genius. Imogen saw a map.

And maps always started long before someone drew the first line.



Chapter One – The Girl Who Learned Frost

Imogen's first memory of wealth was not the cars or the dachas or the living room large enough to lose an argument in. It was glass.

Her mother's conservatory in Saint Petersburg was a cathedral of it, panes meeting at sharp angles, framing a sky that stayed iron-grey half the year. Inside, the air smelled of damp soil and citrus leaves. Orchids clung to bark, ferns unfurled with slow arrogance. Frost licked the outside of the glass in fever-dream patterns.

"Not those," her mother would say in clipped Russian, every time Imogen's fingers strayed toward a blossom. "They bruise."

Imogen understood before she could spell that money was just another greenhouse: invisible glass between you and the weather. From the outside it looked like privilege; from the inside, it often felt like air that had already been breathed.

Her father believed in discipline, in schedules, in a child as project. Piano, English, French, etiquette lessons with a woman whose smile never reached her eyes. Emotion, in their apartment overlooking the Neva, was treated like spilt wine: something to be mopped up quickly and never spoken of again.

Only Dimitri disrupted the temperature.

He arrived without warning, usually late at night, the air outside knifing cold, his overcoat shedding snow onto the marble. Imogen would hear his voice before she saw him, low and amused, slipping through the walls like smoke.

"Where is my solnyshko?"

Her mother would tut about snow on the rugs. Her father would straighten his tie. Imogen would appear at the top of the stairs, plaits too tight, socks already slipping in her shoes, and see him there: the man they all deferred to, even if they pretended they did not.

Dimitri smelled faintly of tobacco and something else she could never place until much later: jet fuel and river mud and distant forests. On his wrist, above an immaculate cuff, he wore a narrow bracelet of black pearls. At his right hand, always, a silver pocket compass hung from a short chain, its lid etched with a star within a circle. He flicked it open and shut absently, as if measuring the magnetic field of every room he walked into.

He never spoke to her like a child.

"What do you see?" he asked once, when they stood together in the conservatory and the first frost of October crystallised on the glass.

"Cold," she said, seven years old and already wary of being wrong.

"Pattern," he corrected gently. "Cold is only energy. Pattern is intent. Remember that."

He tapped the compass once against the glass, leaving no mark.

When Imogen was ten, boarders from the Ministry began to appear in her father's study. Conversations stopped when she approached. Her mother's voice grew sharper, brittle at the edges. Her parents argued in banking jargon and diplomatic code, assuming she would not follow. She understood only one thing: whatever her father had aligned himself with, it was no longer safe.

The following year, Dimitri arrived with no tobacco scent on his coat, no easy smile. He spoke with her parents in the study for a long time, door shut. When the door opened, her mother's eyes were red-rimmed but dry.

"You are going abroad," she announced.

"Abroad where?" Imogen asked, because questions were still allowed, if carefully rationed.

"England." Her father's voice was flat. "Boarding school. It will be... better."

Better than what was not specified. Better than the investigations quietly closing in, better than having the name Morozova attached to whatever scandal was about to surface. They did not say exile. They called it opportunity.

That night, Dimitri climbed the stairs to her room. He was not a man who climbed for anyone.

"You will not like it," he said conversationally, sitting on the edge of her bed. "Cold country. Miserable food. The English believe emotion is a private vice."

"They will like me," she said, stubborn in a way she rarely allowed herself to be at home.

"Yes." He smiled, and this time it reached his eyes. "They will not know what to do with you, but they will like you."

He pressed something into her hand. A small circle of metal on a fine chain. When she opened her palm, a miniature compass stared back at her, its needle quivering.

"This is not for directions," he said. "You will not be lost. This is to remind you: glass can keep the cold out, but it can also show you where the cracks already are."

"Why England?" she asked, softer. "Why away?"

His eyes flicked away for a fraction of a second, as though consulting a map only he could see.

"Because sometimes, solnyshko, the safest place for a Morozova is somewhere no one expects her to thrive."

In the morning, the frost on the conservatory glass traced new patterns. Imogen traced them with her eyes and thought: pattern is intent.

She packed her life into two suitcases and left Russia in winter, stepping into a world of boarding schools, prefects and the slow, deliberate art of learning how to wear frost like armour.

Chapter Two – Lessons in Exile

England was grey, but its grey was different.

Russia's winter grey had been honest, brutal and sharp; it stripped the world down to bone and frost. England's was soft, damp, insinuating. It seeped into clothes, into hair, into the joints. It was a climate designed to punish flashiness, to reward understatement.

St. Bride's School for Girls squatted in the countryside like an old cat: aloof, comfortable, faintly disdainful of the outside world. Its stone walls had outstared three wars and several economic crises. The girls inside seemed bred from the same lineage as the hedges – clipped, controlled, quietly venomous when provoked.

Imogen arrived with a small suitcase, too-straight posture and an accent that made the housemistress blink.

"Where are you from, dear?"

"Saint Petersburg," she replied. Then, after a half-beat, because she had already learned something about the weight of words: "Russia."

The housemistress smiled a tight, approving smile usually reserved for difficult parents. "How exotic."

That was the word for the first two terms. Exotic. Not quite one of them, but interesting enough to invite to weekend parties when parents came down from London. Girls watched her with a mixture of suspicion and fascination as she navigated Latin declensions and hockey drills.

She learned quickly. Not the coursework – that was secondary, almost insultingly easy compared with the emotional calculus. She learned how long you could hold eye contact before it became a challenge. How self-deprecation could be a weapon if deployed with precision. Which teachers secretly drank, which girls secretly starved, which parents' donations kept which buildings heated.

She learned to speak in weather and understatement.

"I'm fine," in England, meant "I am barely holding myself together but would rather die than discuss it."

"It's interesting," meant "I hate it with every fibre of my being."

"Quite good," said in the right drawl, could crush someone's ambitions for a decade.

At night, when the dormitory finally stilled and the last whispers died, Imogen lay on her narrow bed, staring at the cracked plaster ceiling, listening to the rain on old glass. She

would take out the tiny compass from under her pillow, let the needle twitch in the dark and think of Dimitri's words.

Pattern is intent.

The patterns at St. Bride's emerged slowly. The daughters of old money were easy to spot – they moved through the school like they owned it, because in several cases their families literally did. The daughters of new money tried too hard with their hair, their jokes, their desperation to be invited to the right summer house in Cornwall.

Imogen realised, with a jolt that felt like betrayal, that she belonged to neither category. Her family's wealth was not centuries-old English land, nor was it the bright, vulgar surge of tech billions. It was something murkier, earned in the collisions of post-Soviet chaos and Western greed. Too clean for the tabloids, too dirty for the history books.

She watched the teachers as much as the students. She noticed which ones instinctively deferred to girls with certain surnames, which ones treated scholarship students as projects. She learned that power did not always look like shouting; often, it looked like the one person in the room who could afford to be silent.

The first time she lied about her family, it was almost an experiment.

A girl in her house – Charlotte, all angles and horse-girl enthusiasm – asked her over tepid tea, "So, is your father one of those oligarchs?"

The word tasted cheap on Charlotte's tongue, like supermarket vodka pretending to be premium.

"No," Imogen said calmly, meeting her eyes. "He is boring. He works in imports."

Technically, it was not untrue. The fact that those imports sometimes involved quietly moving entire industries across borders was irrelevant. She watched Charlotte's shoulders relax. Boring was acceptable. Dangerous was not.

Years later, she would see the same equation in investors' eyes when she presented projections for Aurum. Risk was fine, exciting even, as long as it looked boring on paper.

During holidays, she did not go "home" much. Russia receded into a place of frozen childhood and unanswered questions. Instead, Dimitri arranged for her to visit cousins in Geneva, "family friends" in London, a supposed godmother in Paris who spoke Russian like a language she'd taken off for the summer.

None of these people ever quite explained their connection to Dimitri. They didn't have to. His presence sat in their penthouses and townhouses like a fifth place setting at the table.

In Geneva, she discovered Swiss efficiency and discreet banking.

In London, she discovered how charming she could be when she chose, and how much men twice her age overestimated themselves when a beautiful girl laughed at their jokes.

In Paris, she discovered scent.

Her godmother – Elena? Elvira? The woman’s name shifted depending on who was asking – kept a dressing table lined with bottles from houses that had survived revolutions. Imogen stood before the mirror for long minutes, testing, discarding, cataloguing.

“Perfume is memory,” the woman said, watching her. “Men think it is seduction. They are idiots. It is a weapon. The right scent, in the right moment, will haunt someone for years.”

Imogen filed that away with the other lessons she was collecting: how to fold a napkin at state dinners, how to ask dangerous questions without ever making them sound like questions, how to leave a room without anyone realising you were taking the gravity with you.

By the time St. Bride’s handed her polished references and an offer from a finishing school in Switzerland, Imogen understood something fundamental: exile could be turned into leverage. If she no longer belonged anywhere, she could belong wherever she chose, for as long as she needed to.

It was not home. It was something sharper.

Home, she decided, could wait.

Chapter Three – Finishing School, Unfinished Edges

The finishing school in the Swiss Alps called itself an academy, as though that could disguise what it was: a place where the daughters of the global rich learned to become socially bulletproof.

From the outside, the building looked like a postcard cliché – shutters, balconies, the mountains rising behind it like scenery for an overfunded musical. Inside, the walls held a different kind of snow: immaculate, cold, engineered.

Classes covered the predictable – languages, international protocol, how not to insult a minor royal by misusing a fork. But there were other lessons, unscheduled, more valuable.

Here, girls experimented.

With clothes, with drugs, with each other.

Imogen watched, sometimes participated, always observed. Kissing a girl in a dark corridor told her as much about power as any economics textbook: who initiated, who followed, who needed it to be a secret, who wanted it to be known. The boundaries between friendship, seduction and competition blurred until they were simply tools in the same box.

She tried on personas like dresses. The icy Russian heir. The cosmopolitan neutral. The charming outsider. Men and women alike projected their fantasies onto her. She let them, as long as it cost her nothing she was unwilling to lose.

Underneath the play, another fascination took root.

In the school's basement – an afterthought, really, to make the academy sound modern – there was a small laboratory. Some prior benefactor had donated equipment: sterile benches, glassware, ageing spectrometers. Most students ignored it; chemistry did not photograph well for glossy magazines.

Imogen did not.

She had always been curious about what went into the creams and serums her mother's friends spent fortunes on. Ingredient lists read like incantations. Words like "cruelty-free" and "natural" were tossed around at charity galas, almost always by people whose handbags had required the flaying of several species.

In the lab, alone or with one equally bored Dutch girl who liked to synthesise perfume notes, Imogen began to experiment. Oils, clays, botanicals. She read about supply chains, about palm oil plantations erasing forests, about factories with windows painted so workers could not see the daylight they were missing.

She began to imagine another kind of beauty company. One that did not pretend ethics came in a recyclable box. One that built ethics into the bones of the business, into contracts and sourcing and the invisible decisions no marketing campaign ever mentioned.

The idea felt dangerously naïve. That made it interesting.

She needed data. She emailed small labs, posed as a student doing a research project, asked too many questions about sourcing. Most replies were bland or evasive. A few were honest enough to disgust her.

One January afternoon, as snow erased the mountains beyond the laboratory windows, the school's headmistress called her into the office.

"There is a complication with your fees," the woman said, in the tone of someone discussing a minor administrative nuisance rather than the possible collapse of a life plan. "Your parents are... delayed."

Delayed, Imogen knew, could mean anything from "under investigation" to "bank accounts frozen." Her throat tightened.

Before she could speak, the headmistress slid a sheet of paper across the desk. "Fortunately, a foundation has agreed to sponsor the remainder of your tuition."

Imogen scanned the letter. The logo at the top was unfamiliar. AURUM EDUCATIONAL FUND. The wording vague in exactly the way serious money preferred.

"Do you know who they are?" she asked.

The headmistress' smile thinned. "I am told they are very respectable."

Respectable was code for: I didn't ask questions, and you would be unwise to.

Imogen traced the A of AURUM with her eyes. The design was subtle – a stylised compass point hidden within the crossbar.

That night, she lay awake with the small compass under her pillow and considered coincidence. Somewhere, Dimitri's lawyers were earning their retainer.

She could resent the interference. Or she could treat it as capital.

She chose the latter.

The experiments in the lab became more serious. She stopped mixing from curiosity and started formulating with intention. What did a day cream look like when you traced every ingredient back to its source and refused to exploit the hands that harvested it? What did lipstick look like when no animal had bled for its pigment?

Her notebooks filled with recipes and margins filled with numbers. Costs, margins, theoretical scalability. Business plans sketched between etiquette drills and ski instruction.

One evening, she caught her reflection in the lab's dark window: lab coat streaked with clay, pearls hidden under cotton, hair scraped back. Not the girl from St. Petersburg. Not the exotic boarder at St. Bride's. Someone new.

"You look dangerous," the Dutch girl said, passing behind her.

"I look tired," Imogen replied.

"Same thing, for men."

They laughed, but the comment lodged.

By the end of her time in Switzerland, AURUM had paid more than her fees. It had also funded a summer program at a small university lab in the US, where a professor specialising in sustainable chemistry had agreed to take on a promising foreign student.

"America?" Dimitri had said on the phone, voice crackling with satellite delay. "They will try to sell you everything. Do not let them sell you yourself."

"I will sell them something instead," she replied.

"For once," he said, "we agree."

Chapter Four – Building a Ghost, Naming a Crown

America was noisy, confident, perpetually caffeinated. The university Imogen attended on a partial scholarship and a quiet cheque from AURUM was considered “mid-tier” by the kind of people who measured status in league tables. That suited her. Ivy League schools were full of people who wanted to be seen. She preferred people who wanted to build.

Daylight hours were consumed by classes in chemistry, environmental policy, and business. Nights were spent in the campus lab, refining formulas that had begun in a Swiss basement. She watched other students build apps designed to harvest attention; she was building products designed not to harvest anything without consent.

Word spread in the small way that mattered. Friends of friends asked for samples. A lecturer’s wife used a serum and commented, off-hand, that her skin had never behaved so well. A local boutique asked, then begged, for a small run to sell under the counter.

“You need a name,” the boutique owner said, stacking cardboard boxes with the casual greed of a woman who saw trends months before they broke. “No one buys unlabelled miracles.”

Names circled her notebook margins for weeks. Some were clever, some too clever. None felt right.

One night, jet-lagged from a whirlwind trip to New York where she had watched older men in sharp suits explain venture capital to her as though mathematics had different rules for women, she sat alone with a cup of burnt coffee and a headache.

Her fingers found the small compass at her throat. The needle twitched, stubborn even when stationary.

Compass, she thought. Direction. Circles. Routes. Home that isn’t.

Her pen moved almost without her.

ORRIS.

Not iris, the obvious perfume reference. Orris: the root, the hidden part of the plant, dried and aged until it developed a scent that could anchor others. Expensive, rare, invisible in the final product yet essential.

The word sat on the page with quiet confidence. Eight letters, like the points on Dimitri’s compass star. The O at the beginning and end closed in on themselves, a circle within a circle.

She slept three hours and woke with the certainty still there.

Later, much later, ORRIS would become the crown jewel. At that moment, it was simply a logo she sketched in the margins: a compass rose inside a circle. Pattern and intent.

Aurum , on the other hand, insisted on staying in the background.

She discovered this when she tried to trace the educational foundation that had paid her fees. Searches led to holding companies that led to subsidiaries that led nowhere. Aurum appeared in footnotes and filings, never in headlines. It specialised in owning things that looked independent: labs, logistics firms, biotech start-ups. Everything that moved products from forest to face without ever being recognised in a shop window.

When she called Dimitri and asked, casually, if he knew anyone connected to Aurum , he chuckled.

“Some ghosts prefer to stay ghosts, solnyshko.”

“You control it,” she said, not a question.

“I influence it,” he corrected. “The difference is important. Influence can be denied.”

She stared at the phone, at the lab equipment that cost more than her entire dormitory floor.

“Why?” she asked. “Why this? Why me?”

“You are an investment,” he said. “Unlike certain governments, you give a return.”

It should have hurt. Somehow, phrased that way, it steadied her instead.

If she was an investment, she would be the kind that paid out on her terms.

By the time she graduated, the formulas were ready. A cleanser, a serum, a moisturiser, a single lipstick that adjusted slightly to the wearer’s chemistry. All cruelty-free. All sourced from supply chains she had bullied into transparency, threatening to publish contract clauses online if small farmers were short-changed.

Investors began to circle.

Most of them wanted control. Percentages that would turn her vision into their marketing angle. She smiled, accepted their drinks, listened to their advice and deleted their numbers.

One offered the exact amount she needed to scale, in exchange for just over half the company. “It’s standard,” he said smoothly. “You keep the creative control; we handle the boring parts.”

“Boring is where the power is,” she replied.

He laughed as though she’d made a joke. She walked away before he realised she hadn’t.

The money arrived instead through a series of transfers from an unremarkable Swiss account. No name, only a reference code.

A-U-R-U-M-01.

Imogen read the numbers, then the terms. No board seat. No voting rights beyond basic protections. Profit share, but no control. It was almost insultingly generous.

She called Dimitri.

“Are you trying to buy my company?” she asked in Russian.

“If I were buying it,” he replied mildly, “you would not be asking. Consider it seed capital. A favour.”

“I do not like favours.”

“Then pay it back, solnyshko. With interest. Build something that makes this look like a rounding error.”

The line went dead. The challenge hung in the air.

She signed.

Aurum became the invisible skeleton beneath her venture. She, in return, made sure no one ever saw the bones. Publicly, she was the face: the young woman from Russia building an ethical beauty brand across continents. Privately, she was building something sharper: a machine that would turn ethics into profit without allowing profit to dilute ethics.

It would have been easier to sell the story with romance. Investors loved narratives about founders driven by heartbreak, or saved by a partner’s faith. Imogen refused.

Business first, second and third. Relationships were distractions. Cute in interviews, lethal in contracts.

There would be time for complications later, she told herself.

Later arrived in Milan.

Chapter Five – Milan: The City of Reflections

Milan made its money from surfaces and the illusions behind them.

It was the logical place to build her empire.

The fashion houses had the ateliers, the manufacturers, the artisans who could take a sketch and turn it into something people would kill politely to own. More importantly, Milan understood that the real currency of luxury was not fabric or glass, but story.

Imogen arrived with a line of products, a modest but stable supply chain, and a war chest from Aurum disguised as the proceeds of a small family trust. She rented an apartment near Porta Venezia with ceilings high enough to make visitors feel slightly off-balance and turned the second bedroom into a command centre.

From there, she mapped the city as if it were a hostile market to be taken rather than a place to live.

She charmed the owner of a mid-range perfumery into giving her half a shelf. Within six weeks, her products outsold three established brands, purely by word of mouth. Within six months, she had her own flagship space – not on the most obvious street, but on a corner that fashion insiders used as a shortcut between two dimly lit bars that pretended not to court photographers.

The store did not shout. No neon, no oversize logos. The compass rose glowed discreetly on the glass, as if inviting only those prepared to notice.

Inside, everything was tactile: stone, wood, glass. No plastic. Staff were trained to say little and observe much. Imogen spent hours on the floor, listening. What did customers touch twice? Which products drew men in when they thought no one was looking? Which questions made people lower their voices, embarrassed to care about their own skin?

She learned as much about shame as she did about pores.

Aurum kept the cash flowing beneath the surface. It acquired a minority stake in a Tuscan glassworks just before she commissioned bottles. It took a quiet controlling interest in a logistics firm that specialised in cold-chain shipping, ensuring that temperature-sensitive botanicals arrived intact. On paper, Orris bought services from independent suppliers. In reality, the money circled in ever-tightening loops around the same invisible core.

Dimitri never interfered with product decisions. His influence came in different forms.

A customs officer who had been holding a shipment of Tasmanian essential oils for “inspection” suddenly discovered everything was in order.

A journalist digging a little too deeply into the origins of Aurum Education Funds received an urgent assignment covering unrest in another part of the world.

A competitor who had begun to flirt with the same cruelty-free messaging found their best investors quietly pulled. No explanation. Just absence.

Imogen was not naïve. The pattern was clear enough if you knew how to read frost for cracks.

She let him clear the path. She refused to let him choose the destination.

Life in Milan, for years, was work and motion. Flights to Tokyo, to São Paulo, to quietly wealthy pockets of the Middle East where women unveiled only among women and cared very much what they put on their skin. She became fluent in the language of airport lounges and boardrooms.

Relationships, when they happened, were compartmentalised. A designer in Paris. A consultant in New York whose cheekbones made headlines. A photographer in Berlin who never stopped texting. They came and went like seasons. She was generous, honest, and absent at the exact same time.

She told herself she preferred loyalty to intimacy. Loyalty could be contracted, measured, enforced. Intimacy required vulnerability, and she had learned early that vulnerability was best kept in bank vaults and safety deposit boxes.

Then, one humid evening in early summer, jet-lagged and restless, she walked through the Indro Montanelli Gardens and decided she was too tired to return emails.

Bar Bianco glowed between the trees, all white furniture and fairy lights. Families, tourists, couples. Real people, she thought sourly. People with weekends.

She ordered a coffee instead of another drink. “You will never sleep,” the bartender warned in Italian.

“I never do,” she replied.

That was when she saw her.

The girl behind the counter of a small kiosk next to the bar, selling brochures and booking tours, did not belong in the background. Chestnut hair pulled back with a ribbon, dress modest enough not to compete with the fashion crowd, eyes that crinkled when she smiled at an elderly couple struggling with a map.

Imogen noticed the details first. The decent but not designer shoes, scuffed at the toes. The way she listened more than she spoke, head tilted slightly. The way customers left with itineraries that made sense for real life, not for Instagram.

Her badge read: CELESTINA BIANCHI.

Imogen ordered another coffee she didn't need just to ask a question.

"Do you book business travel as well, or only tourists?"

Celestina looked up, smile still warm but now threaded with professional caution. "We can book anything, signora. Though our office is small."

"Small is good," Imogen said. "Small remembers."

It should have been a transaction. Another line item in a day filled with them. Instead, something shifted. Maybe it was the way Celestina's eyes widened, just slightly, when she realised who she was speaking to. Not the fame, such as it was. The story.

"You are... Orris?" she asked, then flushed. "I mean, you are the owner of the brand. I have seen the articles."

"Sometimes," Imogen said. "Sometimes the brand owns me."

Celestina laughed, a quick, honest sound. No angle. No calculation.

Imogen felt something unfamiliar and irritating: interest that had nothing to do with leverage.

She left with a business card for Skorpion Travel, a neatly written note on the back in careful Italian suggesting alternative routes that might reduce jet-lag between Milan, Tokyo and São Paulo if she was willing to add a half-day in Lisbon.

No one in her operation had ever suggested Lisbon.

Back at her apartment, she pinned the card to the noticeboard above her desk. For weeks, she found excuses to glance at it. Eventually, she stopped pretending it was accidental.

Celestina became her exclusive travel agent. Not officially – that would have embarrassed the girl – but in practice. Flights appeared in her inbox with routes that made days slightly more humane. Hotel choices included small notes: "This one has quieter rooms at the back" or "The breakfast here is better for people who live on coffee."

The loyalty, once earned, was absolute and unshowy. Celestina refused tickets to fashion shows, gifts of handbags, invitations to parties. "I have my grandmother," she said once, almost apologetically. "I cannot leave her alone long."

Imogen told herself it was refreshing, dealing with someone who seemed immune to the gravitational pull of her world.

She did not quite admit it felt like something more dangerous than refreshing.

Business first, she reminded herself, booking another multi-country tour through Skorpion Travel.

Business first.

Then Aurum and Orris changed shape.

Chapter Six – Aurum : The Invisible Crown

Aurum existed in board minutes, in filings, in the memory of lawyers who billed by the quarter-hour. It did not throw parties. It had no logo on any building. Yet by the time Orris opened its flagship store in Paris, Aurum had woven itself through everything that made the brand possible.

It owned, via subsidiaries, the Tasmanian distillery that produced the base spirit for what would become Orris Reserve – Black Pearl. It owned the forest concession licence that ensured Leatherwood honey was harvested without erasing the ecosystem that made it. It owned a minority in a boutique Parisian gallery whose guest lists read like a who's who of the upper half percent.

Imogen understood that her empire sat on an invisible foundation she had not poured herself.

Sometimes she resented it. Sometimes she was grateful. Most of the time, she chose not to examine it too closely. Examining Aurum meant examining Dimitri, and examining Dimitri meant accepting that some of her ethics were made possible by a man whose morals were negotiable at scale.

He never pressured her overtly.

He visited Milan twice a year, sweeping into her apartment with bodyguards who pretended to care about the view. He toured her labs, asked pointed, intelligent questions about supply chains, raised an eyebrow when she turned down a lucrative licensing deal with a fast-fashion conglomerate known for treating workers like disposable components.

"You are not in the charity business," he said.

"Ethics is not charity," she replied. "It is insurance."

"Against what?"

"Against irrelevance."

He laughed, deep and delighted. "Then by all means, stay relevant. Aurum will keep the lights on."

If he ever doubted her strategy, he did not show it. He simply made sure that competitors who tried to copy her without the same conviction encountered inexplicable headwinds.

She knew there would be a price for this protection. Nothing in Dimitri's world came without one.

The invoice arrived in the form of an idea.

"You have built a company that tells people they are doing good by looking good," he said one evening, watching the city lights from her balcony. "That is clever. But you have not yet given them something to be afraid of losing."

"People do not own skincare," she pointed out. "They consume it."

"Exactly." He turned to her. "You need something that is not consumed. Something that can be owned. Displayed. Hoarded. Coveted."

"I am not building another watch brand," she said.

"God forbid," he agreed. "No. Something rarer. A token. A key."

The word lodged in her head: key.

Weeks later, walking along the Yarra River during a short, almost secret trip to Australia to inspect the Tasmanian operations Aurum had quietly acquired, she tasted a gin at a bar that made a point of listing provenance. It was pleasant, forgettable.

She found herself bored halfway through the glass, wishing it tasted more like the forests she'd driven through on the way there: damp, wild, edge-of-the-world.

"What would it take," she asked the bartender, "to make something people would treat like a sin to waste?"

He shrugged. "Better story."

Back in Milan, she called the distillery manager in Tasmania. "I want to build a spirit," she said, "that makes people feel like they have been allowed into somewhere they shouldn't be."

"You mean drunk?" he joked.

"I mean initiated."

The experiments that followed were as meticulous as any work she'd done on creams. Cold-water botanicals. Leatherwood honey in such small quantities that entire batches depended on a single hive's cooperation. Juniper that tasted of storms hitting cliff faces.

The result was clean, ruthless, unsettlingly beautiful.

Gin, technically. But only technically.

Orris Spirits was born as a division on a piece of paper in Aurum's offices in Zurich months before anyone tasted a drop.

Imogen insisted on the bottle being round, almost impossibly so, with a base that looked like a wave caught mid-break. She insisted on the compass etched so faintly into the glass

you could only see it if you already knew it was there. She insisted on the black pearl stopper, against every cost-conscious recommendation.

"This is not a fast-moving consumer good," she told her finance director. "This is a password."

The finance director, a practical woman who secretly adored her, rolled her eyes and found ways to make the numbers work.

There was one more element: access.

Dimitri proposed an inner circle.

"Cards," he said, tapping the balcony rail as if it were a boardroom table. "Metal. Not plastic. Black, of course. Subtle design – your compass, perhaps. No visible number. Serial codes microscopic. Unique."

"And what do they buy?" she asked.

"Nothing," he replied. "They admit."

The inner-circle card became a thing whispered about before it existed. Matte black metal, edges softened so it felt like a stone worn by water. On one side, the Orris compass, debossed so lightly it was almost a hallucination. At four o'clock on the circle, a single black pearl bead sat inset, cool under the thumb.

On the reverse, micro-text in two languages curled around the edge. "A circle does not open; it admits."

The cards were never advertised. They simply appeared in sleek black envelopes on the pillows of certain guests after certain events. No instructions. Only an embossed line.

THE WORLD BELONGS TO THOSE WHO DARE TO LIVE IT.

Imogen watched the first recipient turn the card over in Paris, thumb lingering on the pearl. In that small movement she saw recognition, greed, fear of exclusion. Dimitri had been right. People were more terrified of being left outside the circle than of anything they might have to do to stay in it.

The inner circle was small, at first. Collectors, editors, unsavoury men whose money smelled like oil and old blood but whose influence could shield her operations in volatile markets. Aurum monitored them; Orris seduced them; Imogen directed them.

It was not democracy. It was geometry.

Circles, as Dimitri liked to remind her, had no beginning and no end.

Until someone decided to draw a line through one.

That line appeared, unexpectedly, in the shape of a travel agent from Milan who still lived with her grandmother.

And in a kitchen where a bottle arrived without being asked for.

Chapter Seven – Glass Is Taken, Bottles Are Given

The night Orris Reserve – Black Pearl was unleashed in Paris, Celestina watched from a safe distance.

She had flown in under an arrangement she did not fully understand, her flights and hotel booked by a “partner agency” as part of some industry training program. She suspected, dimly, that Imogen had arranged it. She did not know for sure. Imogen was careful with gifts; nothing she gave felt like charity, only like rearranged fate.

Celestina had seen the emails about the Paris presentation. She had booked the flights for half the world to attend. Editors. Buyers. Investors. A few royals who travelled under other names. She had watched the puzzle assemble and never once assumed she was a piece of it.

When a black car arrived outside Skorpion Travel and a driver handed her an embossed invitation with her name spelled correctly, she almost told him there had been a mistake.

Inside the Orris store that night, she clung to the edges, more comfortable observing. Milan had taught her to appreciate beauty without believing she was part of it. She watched Imogen in her black dress, the way the crowd bent toward her without touching. She watched the pearl stopper lifted, heard the soft click that silenced a room full of people who did not know how to be quiet.

When the waiters began to circulate with their six glasses, she assumed – logically – that none were intended for her.

One stopped in front of her anyway.

“Signorina?”

The glass looked absurdly fragile in her hand. The liquid within caught the light, drawing faint lines on the ceiling like a compass trying to find true north.

Celestina hesitated. She did not usually drink at work events. She was not even sure what her role was tonight – guest, staff, lucky bystander.

From across the room, Imogen’s gaze found her. A question, and then, when Celestina raised the glass slightly in uncertain acknowledgement, an answer. The ghost of a smile. Permission granted. Inclusion confirmed.

The gin – though the word felt too ordinary – tasted of something she hadn’t realised she missed: wildness. Forest after rain. The first inhale stepping off a train in an unknown city. The edge between fear and excitement.

Around her, the room recalibrated. A few people noticed who had been given a glass and who had not. Celestina saw none of this. She simply knew she was shaking, just a little, with something bigger than alcohol.

In a gilded room across town later that week, Dimitri accepted a bottle of Orris from Imogen as if it were a crown and she a queen anointing him. The auction crowd witnessed the gesture and drew their conclusions. Most of them were wrong, but that did not matter. Perception was its own currency.

At roughly the same hour, in a kitchen in Milan, another bottle arrived.

Celestina's grandmother's flat smelled of tomato sauce and laundry powder. The table was scarred wood, polished by years of elbows and stories. Celestina had barely finished describing the Paris night to Nonna when there was a knock at the door.

A courier, polite, anonymous, handed over a parcel.

Inside, swaddled in tissue, sat a bottle identical to the one she had seen under lights in Paris. Round. Compass etched faintly. Black pearl stopper drinking the kitchen's weak light, making it look somehow glamorous.

Celestina stared.

"They have accepted me," she whispered. "Not just as an agent. As... something else."

Nonna, who had lived long enough to know that gifts from the powerful were rarely free, rested a heavy hand on her wrist.

"The glass is for envy," she said quietly. "The bottle is for ownership. Once you belong, you cannot pretend you do not."

Celestina smiled, full and bright. "Maybe belonging is not so bad, Nonna."

Nonna looked at the pearl, at the compass, at the silent weight of intent in the room, and said nothing.

Across the city, Imogen sat at her own table, the lights of Milan flickering outside. Her phone buzzed with messages from people whose approval filled newspapers. She ignored them, watching instead for a simple notification: package delivered.

When the confirmation came through, she exhaled.

She had told herself the bottle was a reward for loyalty. For competence. For the countless times Celestina had untangled flight chaos without complaint, rerouted her across continents while balancing her own small life.

But somewhere beneath that rationale, she knew it was something riskier.

The inner circle cards, the Orris glasses, the Paris launch – all of that was theatre. Calculated, controlled. She knew exactly what she was doing when she made men and women compete for scarcity.

Sending a bottle into a modest kitchen in a working-class Milanese neighbourhood was something else. It was a line. A choice to let the geometry of her world bleed into someone who had never asked for it.

Business first, second and third.

She poured herself a measure of Black Pearl, watched the light fracture in her own glass, and admitted, privately, that the order might be changing.

Not because she was lonely. She had been lonely in rooms full of people since childhood.

Because for the first time, loyalty did not feel like a contract.

It felt like an anchor thrown from a different ship entirely.

Epilogue – Circles and Lines

Aurum remained what it had always been: a ghost in financial systems, a skeleton beneath the visible body of the brands it controlled. It expanded quietly into hospitality, into data, into whatever sector would give it more influence over how people moved, what they bought, what they believed was possible.

Orris became the visible crown. Fragrance, skincare, spirits. A compass rose on glass and paper and metal. An eight-point star for a girl who had learned early to navigate by patterns rather than promises.

Imogen lived in circles.

Circles of influence, of trust, of access. Circles of boardrooms, of gala tables, of airport lounges where the same faces appeared in different countries with the same expressions.

Sometimes, late, when the world finally left her alone, she would take off the day's armour – the heels, the dress, the pearls – and stand barefoot on the cool floor of her Milan apartment. The city hummed outside. Her phone, face down on the table, pulsed occasionally with unanswered demands.

On the sideboard, an Orris bottle caught the streetlight. The compass etched in the glass threw a faint, fractured star onto the wall.

She would turn the black pearl stopper in her fingers and think of Saint Petersburg frost, of English rain on glass, of Swiss laboratories and American classrooms, of Tasmanian forests and Parisian nights.

She would think of Dimitri, somewhere between Moscow and Monaco, still pulling strings, still believing he was the puppeteer when in reality he had created something even he could not fully control.

She would think of Celestina, asleep a few kilometres away, alarm set for another early shift, grandmother snoring gently in the next room, Orris bottle tucked carefully out of sight but never out of mind.

Circles did not open; they admitted.

But sometimes, quietly, a line appeared. A line that connected rather than divided. From a conservatory in Saint Petersburg to a kitchen in Milan. From a girl who learned to wear frost like armour to a woman who was slowly, cautiously, considering the possibility of warmth.

Imogen had built an empire where business came first, second and third. Where relationships were acceptable only when they could be translated into strategy.

And yet.

When she finally switched her phone off for the night, more often now, there was one message she checked before all others. An updated itinerary. A suggestion to add a day in Lisbon. A note about a hotel with better coffee.

Small things. Lines, not circles.

The world belonged to those who dared to live it, Orris promised.

One day, perhaps, she would decide that dared to live it included herself.

For now, she tightened her grip on the pearl, set it back atop the bottle, and turned toward sleep, dreams tracing new routes across a map only she and a handful of ghosts could read.

The compass on the sideboard needle quivered, as if somewhere, unseen, the magnetic field had shifted by a fraction.

Small change. Invisible.

The kind that, over time, rewrites whole worlds.