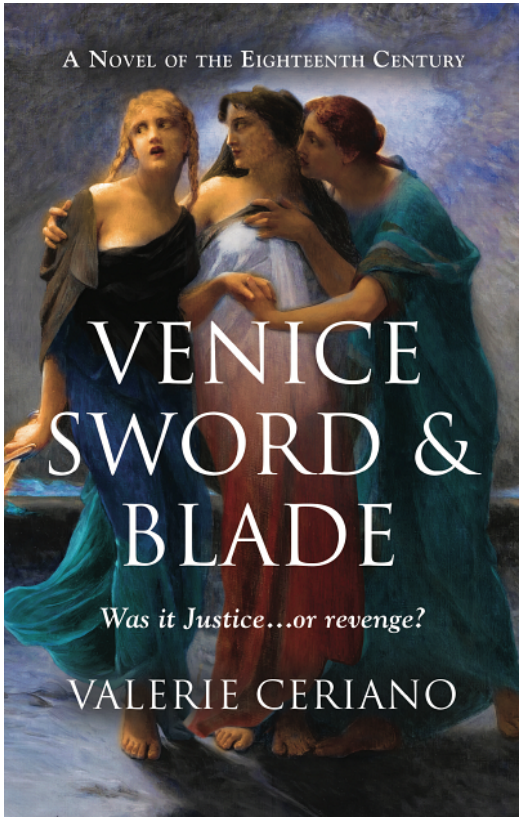

Venice in the eighteenth century: her ancient beauty lingers still. So too does Death, as Arsenale toughs war with artists, maskmakers, and Golden Book patricians. In their private struggles and bloody public clashes. no one is spared.

Venice Sword & Blade
By Valerie Ceriano

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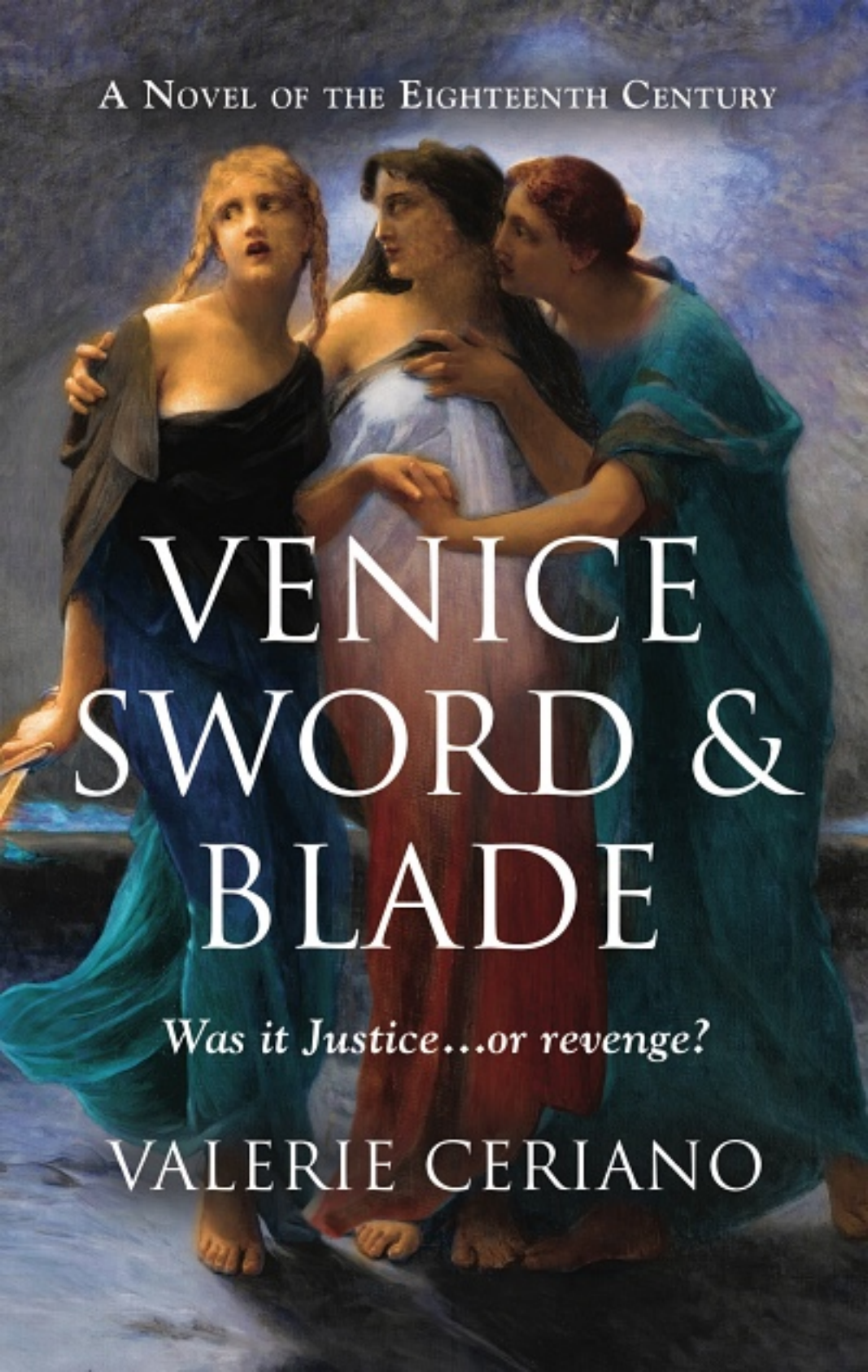

VENICE SWORD & BLADE

Was it Justice…or revenge?

VALERIE CERIANO

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1. Artisti & Arsenalotti

Seingalt looked up from his manuscript. Now I remember. Her name was Giulia. I was still at Padua then. Was I already gambling? Of course, and only sixteen. My final year in the noble study of law. I pretended to have trouble solving problems in mathematics to hide my malingering, and they brought her to tutor me. An odd choice for a tutor, I thought, a woman—an old one at that, quite plain. And she was a painter—also unusual, no?

She had come from Venice, Alessi told me, to fulfill a commission—a little altarpiece for a summer villa on the Brenta. Alessi, my professor, was a friend of hers and said she was a gifted mathematician. At least, that was what Conti had told him. The Abbè Conti, praising one woman in an effusive letter then shaming all women in a

discourse so preposterous one would laugh, had it not been accepted as scripture by so many of his associates. Like that imbecile Petronio Zecchini.

Poor Conti. What did he know of women?

And Giulia. I recall her voice, low but feminine, with an alluring timbre. I wanted to close my eyes and listen to her, forgetting her age, her face, forgetting that she had been duped into coming to 'teach' me solutions to problems I had easily solved. How quick to arousal and boundless were my appetites then, how urgent the need to satisfy and quell their insistence, which was driving me to madness.

Alessi was acquainted with her because each was a 'shepherd' or 'nymph' in one of the Arcadian societies begun in Rome in the last century and which, in Alessi's time, were beginning to admit women. (It was then *de riguer* to be inducted into these coteries and acquire a pastoral name. I myself belonged under the sobriquet Eupolemo Pantaxeno.) These academicians and natural philosophers would meet to read papers on the sciences, and under their Arcadian names, write poetry, often second-rate, for one another's delectation. Ah, look. Just as I said, like this one by Giulia, who was known as 'Lisalba':

And I have filled the heavens with anguished cries,
Nor from destiny nor desire did their fury
Ever fade; so that shores and valleys, and rivers
And peaks and hills know, and woods, and brambles—
How much, secretly, I screamed and cried, and raged:
But as I was wary of others I did not lament
That for me there was no pity...
It was for this: to languish, from the start I told myself,
And to suffer the torments of love,
That I did not ask for mercy with glances or words;
And instead of speaking I only wept,
So that my wound would never heal.

Seingalt put down the book, picked it up again, and reread the poem. He felt as though a soul had hurtled through the years and clutched at his heart, begging consolation. Who could have known such passion lay beneath so unremarkable a face, so quiet a demeanor? And what lover had spurred this passion then shunned it? He was a fool to spurn her ardor. Why, I—Seingalt gave himself over to the fantasies of youth, triggered whenever novelty and curiosity partnered to strike him. Even now, old and worn as he was, they roused soul and sinew. As ever more practiced and brittle his

amatory ministrations had grown, mystery and challenge still stirred a fire within. From this chance volume in Waldstein's library there arose an incendiary spark.

As he sat, eyes half closed, a much younger Giulia arched and swayed in his arms, the naughty murmurs he gave her to speak burnishing her voice. A much younger Seingalt whispered encouragement, and with a parting caress, he shed the roseate *braghe* that silk-sheathed his thighs.

A peremptory yip broke his reverie. One of the dogs had run into the library and was prancing about his feet. Seingalt cleared his throat. As he bent to pat the animal, a sharp pain seared his lower back. He resented age and glared at the creature. People kept presenting him with dogs because they had seen him with Lucrezia and Giove, and thought he must love the species. He really preferred felines—lovely, agile, sly. He recalled a white cat that had run from a door left carelessly ajar and accosted him on the street in Constantinople, balancing on her hind legs and rubbing her head against his calf. As he petted her she nipped him, but he fed her anyway, a bit of savory meat his host had provided to stave off hunger on his walk. For a moment he could hear her snuffling purr. She had followed him a short distance then vanished into another doorway

without a backward glance, leaving traces of her alabaster fur clinging to his knee.

The dog barked again and Seingalt patted its bony head. One must make do. He adjusted his garments and looked up at the towers of books and manuscripts looming over his head. As Joseph Karl von Waldstein's librarian, this was his domain, now his only one. From citizen of the world to lord of the library. One makes do.

He returned to the poem. He had come upon it by chance, in a volume compiled by that indefatigable Luisa Bergalli, or Irminda Partenide, as the Arcadians would have her. No, it was not enough for the woman to be a poet, a playwright, and a translator of French and classical texts. Why, she had even managed the Teatro Sant'Angelo for a season or two, just as he had. No, it was not enough. With all this, Bergalli still found time to orchestrate those unique anthologies that immortalized the work of her sister poets. And all the while married to that feckless Gasparo Gozzi, the playwright Carlo's older brother, a nonentity whose contribution to the match was to lead them into financial ruin.

Yes, Giulia's poem. The Bergalli volume containing it had been misshelved in a remote corner of the Waldstein collection, wedged between some treatises on alchemy that Seingalt

had been consulting. That was how he chanced to find it. The previous librarian was a dolt.

But now, something in that poem struck a chord. Was it Tasso, the *Gerusalemme Liberata*, the one illustrated by the divine Piazzetta? (He and Giulia had studied together, she told me. They were friends. Or more than that?) No, not Tasso, but Ariosto. It was similar to a verse in his *Orlando Furioso*. I remember such a verse. I read it aloud to Voltaire and his niece when we met in Geneva. That is why it is familiar. Yes, Giacomo, your back may be a crumbling ruin but your mind is a sound edifice still. (And thus will your *mémoire* please.)

The Orlando says:

When he can give his sorrow fuller rein,
Fleeing all others, in his room alone,
The tears run streaming down his cheeks like rain.
Sigh follows upon sigh and groan on groan.

Such is Orlando. And what was it that Giulia wrote?

...secretly, I screamed and cried, and raged:
But as I was wary of others...I did not ask for mercy...

Exactly. Like Orlando, she screamed alone, in pain, in secret, where no one could witness her shame. And like Orlando, she raged. But *he* could smash rocks with his axe and uproot oaks and elms, or so Ariosto tells us. Yes, she read the Ariosto and fashioned her lament after his. But how did she vent her rage? Or had she "only wept" and cherished her wound, as women do?

The seeds of obsession were swelling in the moist garden of Seingalt's dormant appetites. What happened to this Giulia? Who was her lover, this blockhead? Why did he renounce her? Was there more to this story, perhaps? (Of course. There is more to all stories—even my own. Especially my own.)

Had I only known her then, instead of when I was a boy and she an old woman.

A new thought drifted lazily by him. These Arcadian societies with their 'nymphs' and 'shepherds'? Satyrs was more like it. He snickered at the image: a shaggy creature balanced on scrawny legs, tiny hoofs beneath the hem of his robe, rigid little phallus poking its head from the front panels like a child at peekaboo. Why, it was reminiscent of one of those caricature drawings by Ghezzi, he thought. The one he made of the Abbé Conti, that moldering old goat, was brilliant, even chilling.

But who am I to talk? Would I brave Ghezzi's pen, all sunk-cheeked and beak-nosed, with this burgeoning belly? What say you, 'Eupolemo Pantaxeno'? Would you?

The dog barked again and Seingalt started. He slapped its bottom, lightly but impatiently. Contrite, he lifted the creature onto the table before him. The chastened pup lay a paw on his shoulder and gave him a wet kiss on the nose. Seingalt sighed. He who was Orlando is dead and gone. He who was Giacomo Girolamo Casanova is no more. Only the old Chevalier de Seingalt, the fusty librarian, remains.

Yet, *vixi*. I lived—past tense noted, though still I draw breath. Yes, one makes do. One survives.

As he removed the little dog from atop the rising pile of manuscript, a new edifice rose before him. This *Histoire*, he thought, a monument to myself, the deceased. Might it flourish in living memory for ages to come.

Thus, Giacomo Casanova: *Homo Resurrectus*.

"I am contemplating an alliance, sir," von Hoffmann confided to Frederick Augustus.

"Really, Franz? Well, you had better speak to Bruhl about it. He has all the money, you know, if he hasn't already spent it at Meissen's, or at his

tailor's. What is this 'alliance' by the way? No one told me something was brewing."

The elector looked at his councilor with mild interest. He liked the man but found him a bit too self-effacing, certainly not one given to contemplating alliances of his own volition. Besides, this was not done. Not in Saxony.

"No, there is nothing, uh—brewing, sir. This is of a personal nature. I am considering marriage, sir. That type of alliance."

"Oh? To whom?" the elector asked.

"To a beautiful young woman whose acquaintance I made through my friendship with Rosalba Carriera, the portraitist. I am often invited to her home when I am in Venice. This lady was one of Rosalba's students and is now a member of her workshop. She paints and makes copies of Rosalba's pastels in miniature, and does book engravings for Zanetti. As she is quite adept, I wished to request that she be given a position as an artist here at court were we to conclude this…alliance. She would be certain to enhance your legacy, sir."

The elector considered his councilor's petition. It was rather a pig in a poke, as he had little confidence in Hoffman's appraisal of either female accomplishment or pulchritude. Hoffman's strong suit was diplomacy of the most conciliatory type.

"Well, you should bring her here, Franz, so that we can meet her. But you must still consult with Bruhl. The purse strings, you know. And what is the young woman's name?"

"Felicità Sartori, sir, of Friuli—in the Veneto. She is from a family of artists."

"I do not know the name. And why should I? For heaven's sake, Hoffman, couldn't you have chosen someone from a family of substance rather than some artisan's issue? Venice, Franz. Some of the oldest families of Europe preside there."

Hoffman was silent for a moment. "Of course, sir. That would have been preferable. And more useful, as you suggest with your customary delicacy. But reason does not always govern the heart or, if I may say so, the 'predilections' of virile men, in these matters."

Frederick had to admit that Hoffman was shrewder than he appeared. He presented the one argument the elector could not refute. In a progeny of hundreds sired by the notoriously libidinous Augustus the Strong, King of Poland and former Saxon elector, Frederick Augustus II was the only legitimate son. The predilections of virile men were family lore to the current elector.

"Bring her to Dresden, Franz. We will see what can be arranged."

Franz von Hoffman was, not for naught, a diplomat.

Felicità Sartori was indeed a beauty, with dark wide-set eyes and the dainty oval face of a type thought ideal. In a portrait, she wears an artist's turban, breached by bursts of chestnut hair, and a loose artist's dress. Rosalba Carriera has made these garments nearly diaphanous, then draped over them a floral coat suggesting the déshabillé of a dressing gown. Apart from her own sister Giovanna, with whom she shared the daily work of the studio, Felicità was Rosalba's favorite. Together they formed a triumvirate of rococo taste and sensibility that lured an international aristocratic following to Rosalba's home.

Felicità possessed ambition, a trait instilled by her maternal uncle, Antonio, her first teacher. It was Antonio who introduced the fourteen-year-old girl to the workshop of Rosalba, the most sought-after portraitist of the time. No person of means could leave Venice without one of her pastel portraits. It was a genre which the artist had invented nearly single-handedly, and which became the signature souvenir for the Grand Tour of Europe. Sartori learned quickly and became popular with Rosalba's clientele, accomplished women and cosmopolitan

gentlemen who frequented the painter's home and workshop.

The offer of marriage from Councilor von Hoffman was the supreme success for which Sartori had striven. Hoffman himself came of aristocratic roots and rose to his position at the Saxon court in Dresden, a man of wealth and respect. It seemed to Sartori that, married to him, she could maintain a place of her own in that elite milieu: she would pursue her profession as a court artist for the elector Frederick Augustus. This softened the blow of leaving Rosalba and her household, which had become Sartori's world. But as Antonio had taught her, bridges were meant to be crossed. Her uncle had taken pains to build her a bridge to Venice and Carriera's studio, and he expected her to traverse it to each new vista that rose on the horizon. Marriage to Franz Josef von Hoffman was the crowning prospect.

Many painters lived in the *sestiere* of Castello, neighboring the great Arsenale shipworks. Giulia Lama was among them. Rosalba Carriera, however, lived in Dorsoduro, on the Canal Grande.

Rosalba's home was squeezed between the Palazzo Venier dei Leoni on the left and the

Palazzo Morosini to the right. Though the building appeared small next to its more imposing neighbors, it housed, or hosted, a large extended family: Carriera and her sister Giovanna (the other sister, Angela, had left to marry the painter Antonio Pellegrini); apprentices and artisans, and the many titled visitors who came to Carriera's workshop to have their portraits made. As a prominent salon for the *letterati* of Venice, Carriera's home welcomed women who were gifted poets and playwrights, such as the writer Luisa Bergalli, or the painter Giulia Lama, also a poet.

Giulia gathered up her drawings, not those of figures for altarpieces, but another kind of drawing. From the portfolio propped against her easel she pulled a sheet with the diagram of a machine. On it were measurements and calculations. Lama glanced at them, corrected a number, and wrote a name on the sheet of paper: "Carriera." Would Rosalba think her idea useful? Was it practical to teach the women of her household to operate the device? Lama had been invited to Rosalba's and would bring the drawing. Someone was sure to offer a reasoned opinion of her work.

She decided to cross the Ponte dell'Accademia to Dorsoduro and continue walking to the Carriera palazzo. Mattio Fabrizzi,

a painter from her workshop, would accompany her, thus avoiding any complications that might confront a woman alone at evening. The attendance of a *cicisbeo*, that ubiquitous male escort, a source of protection and sometime scandal, was the privilege of aristocratic women. Usually, Lama ventured out alone for daytime errands or engagements, but now, at dusk, she preferred to have a companion. Or, she thought, she could hire a *portantina*, a sedan chair. But, with her bulky packet of drawings, she balked at the confinement.

"Mattio, are you free? Or are you busy preparing a feast for Il Perduto?" Il Perduto, the Lost One, was Mattio's dog.

Mattio looked up, a bit sheepish. He had indeed been feeding the dog, one of a series of canines he had cajoled Giulia into adopting. The dog later befriended a cat, who moved in with him. And Perduto was probably a son of Argo the Faithful, the first dog Mattio had insinuated into the workshop.

"No, I was just leaving to pick up the canvases you wanted."

"Come walk with me to Madame Rosalba's instead."

"Certainly, maestra. I would prefer to spend the time in your company."

"Oh, you've learned the arts of the courtier."

"I was inspired, madame, by you," Mattio replied, straight-faced.

Rosalba's drawing room was small and dark but well-appointed.

Like the collectors who kept cabinets of curios to delight their guests, Carriera displayed beautiful objects in the room where her visitors gathered: these were souvenirs from her travels and gifts from her portrait subjects. One was a violin from the composer Antonio Vivaldi, which she must remember to give to her sister Angela, who had learned to play. There was a coveted teapot from Meissen, the first porcelain factory in Europe, a gift from Franz Joseph von Hoffman, the diplomat; and a collection of snuff boxes, mementos of how she had first made her name, painting on the ivory linings of box lids tiny portraits of a beloved.

"Welcome back, abbé. How good to see you again." Rosalba greeted the prelate warmly. "We thought you had deserted us. And how is Paris? My, six years since last we met."

"That long, maestra? I recall our conversations with such pleasure that it seems like yesterday. And in Paris I spent so much time immersed in writing translations that I can barely tell you how 'it' was. I know you would wish a

report on the social goings-on of that congenial company. But I was working on Racine and—imagine!—the English writer, Pope, in Italian. As yet, my manuscript is in no state to be published. However, I have completed an original, and may I say, creditable drama about Giulio Cesare. It is my homage to William Shakespeare, whose tragedy on that personage is inimitable. But that is not what you wished to know, my dear."

"Naturally, I am interested in whatever you do, abbé. But how is Margaret de Caylus? I can never repay her kindness to me."

"Sadly, madame was in failing health last we met, but we continue to write. I will be sure to convey your concern."

"And will you continue your literary endeavors at Padua?"

"Ah, Padua. I am home again. But I have little time for the literary arts. I am here to advocate for the sciences. I wish to establish an academy, and will succeed, if only they stop censoring my work.

"And as you know, my dear, obligatory correspondence consumes a great deal of one's time. It was bad enough when, through my letters, I became embroiled in that fracas between messieurs Leibnitz and Newton. It seems that now everyone is engaged in vanquishing some enemy or other via an

epistolary onslaught—not only the mathematicians."

Rosalba turned to usher in a new arrival.

"Just in time, cara!" she greeted her. "I hope, abbé, that you have not sworn off mathematicians, because I have one right here whom you must meet. This is Maestra Giulia Lama, abbé, my fellow painter, and a poet. Among us she is a mathematician of no small repute. Giulia, the Abbé Antonio Conti. Certainly you know of him," Rosalba concluded.

"Of course." Giulia wondered if he recognized her from that chaotic day, five years ago, when the Accademia dei Coraggiosi met to decide on her inscription to their number. She certainly remembered him and every word he spoke. But afterward, his face did not appear in the audience as she addressed them. She had witnessed Conti's departure on the verge of the ensuing fracas. He could not have heard her rejoinder. No, he had not seen her, or even known she was present.

Indeed, Conti gave Giulia no hint of recognition now. He must, of course, have known her name and who she was, having held forth on her long enough. But then it dawned on her: what he did *not* know was that she had seen *him*, as he pontificated against her inscription. Well, there was no point in raising that now. And if he did

remember it, he too had chosen to ignore the contentious meeting, perhaps as a courtesy to Rosalba.

After a brief exchange of greetings, it appeared that Giulia and the abbé were deep in conversation. Rosalba considered her introduction a coup. They were still absorbed in one another's company when she heard Giulia say, "I brought these drawings for Rosalba to see, as she is an expert lacemaker. I thought she might tell me if the design is practical and if the lacemakers will easily learn to use it."

"What have you there, Giulia?" Rosalba asked. "May I see the drawings?"

Lama handed her a paper annotated with calculations.

"An invention," Conti remarked, also examining the page. "But what is it for, my dear?"

"It is a machine for making lace, not my design but Clelia Borromeo's. However, I have altered it in order that it be more feasible to build."

"Ah! The Contessa Clelia is my patroness, and a quite generous one. I have enlisted her aid in establishing the scientific academy I spoke of. As a matter of fact, this is not the first I have heard of such a machine. I believe Madame Clelia may have mentioned it to me in one of our conversations."

"She is a great lady. Her mathematical investigations are unique," Giulia said.

"And you are a lacemaker too? As well as a painter."

"Yes, abbé, I am. That is why I appreciate how much time and labor such a device would save the many women who earn their livelihood by the craft. As you know, we spend countless hours at it, much to the detriment of our eyesight and general health."

"How true, Maestra Giulia. I know the toll of lacemaking on my own eyes," Rosalba sighed. No one knew then that blindness would be the ultimate price she paid for her industry.

"Such devices are already in use for the manufacture of certain fabrics," the abbé told them, "and their speed and efficiency eliminate the need for so many workers. Without having to pay those extra hands the owners of such enterprises are making a great deal of money."

"We do not wish to take bread from the mouths of women who live by lacemaking," Giulia said, "only to remove the necessity of overwork and the harm it causes."

"Of course, maestra. I merely wished to point out there is profit to be made from this invention. There is no harm in that." The abbé paused for her assent.

"No," Giulia answered, "only that was not my purpose. I simply wished to save some of the many hours I spend lacemaking for other fruitful occupations. And to ease the burden of others."

Turning to Rosalba she said, "Would you look at the plan, maestra? I will explain how it works and you can tell me what you think of it. Abbé, I would value your opinion as well."

"Of course, my dear, though I have no expertise as a lacemaker."

"We would be shocked if you had," Rosalba said, drawing laughter. "But you will understand the mechanism, Antonio."

"Perhaps, perhaps. Please tell us about this contrivance, Maestra Giulia."

With Rosalba's assistance, Giulia laid out the rest of her drawings. "The device is intricate, as is all lacemaking, but not difficult to operate once the workings are understood," she told them

"Ah, amenable to Reason. Would that all men were like your machine."

"But we are not machines, abbé—we are a species of animal."

"With souls, Maestra Giulia?"

"And hearts. Or so one hopes."

As they were chatting, the Sartori sisters arrived. While Conti's attention never visibly

wavered from Giulia, her discourse on lacemaking was cut short by the entry of the two women. Giulia quashed her chagrin and yielded to the interruption, greeting them cordially. Felicità's dark eyes and graceful figure were difficult to ignore. At sixteen, Angioletta, the younger sister, was no less pretty but somehow less captivating. She lacked the magnetic sparkle that drew everyone to the eighteen-year-old Felicità. Angioletta would become one of Rosalba's expert, faithful copyists, helping to turn out the hundreds of reproductions of the artist's work demanded by her clients.

Now, with a nod, the abbé excused himself from Giulia.

"And how are Rosalba's industrious ladies today? Is Madame Rosalba working you mercilessly?"

Angioletta smiled politely but Felicità's laughter was a torrent of silver bells. "Oh, no, abbé," she chided, "Madame Rosalba never makes us work hard. Well, not too hard. And we learn everything from her."

"Thank you for your defense, my dear," Rosalba said. "Our abbé would make me out to be one of those tyrants well-known among the Turks, or the master of the condemned on one of our old galleys. Please tell the abbé what you are learning."

Felicità nodded. "Angioletta and I are learning to make copies of Madame Rosalba's little portraits on ivory using watercolor. We make them for the lids of snuff boxes or put them in oval frames. Madame is also teaching me how to draw with pastels."

"I am only copying now," Angioletta offered, in her soft voice. "It is what I like to do."

"And you do it well," Rosalba said, "an invaluable skill. What if no one had copied the paintings of Tiziano or Veronese? His bottega could not have functioned because the painters would have no record of the master's work from which to make new paintings for clients. The record of our work also guards against the sale of unauthorized copies, which devalue the bottega of origin. Veronese's workshop masters learned their craft by copying, just as you are doing, Angioletta. The custom was to emulate the master's hand as closely as possible. Such a practice sustained the high standards of the bottega. Now, you and my own sister, Giovanna, are my best copyists. You, Felicità, tend to be more—original."

Again the tinkling laughter. "Oh, no, madame. I always strive to imitate exactly what you have taught us." The winning smile.

"But what is your opinion of this statement, Maestra Giulia," the abbè interjected, "that the

artists of the workshop are morally obliged to subsume their style to that of the master—or maestra," he amended, with a nod to Rosalba and Giulia.

"Of course, abbé," Giulia responded, "we must subordinate our style to the master's. We work by his rule and are guided by his hand. How else could one learn the *mestiere*? That is how I was taught by my father, Agostino, and my *padrino*, Niccolò Cassana. I copied their work, and their methods. To this day I use Agostino's drawings.

"My father was more indulgent," Giulia continued, "but Niccolò would strike me if I failed to draw precisely as he wished. I am not cruel to my apprentices—Mattio Fabrizzi, who accompanied me here, began as one and I am sure he would confirm that I did not treat him or the others harshly. But he would tell you also that I expected him to abide precisely by my instructions. That is how he learned his craft. And now he has the skills of a master, whether with me or in his own shop. We have another young man now, Giorgio Renieri, following the same course."

"But Maestra Giulia, times change," the abbé countered. "Even your own Venetian master, Tiepolo, does not paint like the great Veronese—or as Tiziano did—though he is able to do so.

Tastes change as well. One need only look at Rosalba's portraits. Her style in pastels is born of her own ingenuity, not that of a master."

Conti stopped abruptly, as though suddenly abducted by a perpetually lurking captor who, from time to time, made off with him into thickets of nettles. "Consider, please, my own situation. Here am I, adjudicating between the warring minds of a German and an Englishman, meanwhile pilloried for my own ideas as I struggle to establish this aforementioned academy of science. No, maestra, nothing remains the same. It is all new terrain. 'And here there be monsters,' as the old maps say of uncharted seas. Even our own Arcadian academies were initiated by Crescimbeni to herald a new era for poets—a new century, it might be said."

Giulia smiled. "Certainly that is true, abbé, though Crescimbeni welcomed Arcadia by following the poets of an earlier age, like Petrarch, whom we now emulate. And though my admiration for Rosalba knows no bounds, I am not Rosalba. Nor do I recommend slavish attachments—I would then be like one of those tyrants to whom the maestra referred. But we must maintain the discipline of truth to the master. And if we do that, our own inclinations

and ideas will be expressed in our art according to the highest standards."

Conti nodded, and taking this as encouragement, Giulia continued. "I wish my colleague and friend Giovanni Piazzetta were here. His is a perfect example of one who dominates the old techniques of *disegno*, which we learned together in Molinari's workshop, yet has a style completely his own. Of course, he studied with Crespi in Bologna, where he developed a taste for painting men and women of the people. And you would certainly be able to tell my pictures from those of my father, Agostino. They carry my own stamp."

"You know Gianni Piazzetta, Maestra Giulia?" Felicità Sartori asked.

"Yes, I know—Gianni. We are childhood friends from Castello, where we both live. We studied together as well. And you?"

"Oh, yes, Angioletta. I know him, too. I met him only last week at Lovisa's bookstore with Maestra Rosalba's sister, Giovanna. He invited us to see his bottega. We watched him work didn't we, Angioletta? Watched *them*, I mean—his workshop. Gianni said he would teach me to make book engravings if I wished to learn. When I finish my work with Maestra Rosalba, I mean."

"I am sure he would be happy to teach you, Felicità," Giulia said. "In fact, people used to think

I was his pupil and not his colleague when we were together at Molinari's school. I would always correct them but he would only smile. We almost had a fight over it once."

"Really? I cannot imagine fighting with Gian—with signor Piazzetta, I mean," Felicità said. "He seems so good-natured."

"So you know him well."

"Oh, no. Angioletta and I visited his workshop just that once. But perhaps we will become friends. In time," she added.

Lama felt tired. She began to put away her drawings.

"But Giulia, you have not finished explaining your plans for the lacemaking machine," Rosalba said.

"Yes, Maestra Giulia, I would like to hear more," Conti added.

Then you should not have been so easily distracted, Giulia thought.

"Another time, please, abbé. It is getting late and I am expected home. There is work to be completed before tomorrow morning."

"Though you spurn our company, we will get you home," Rosalba said. "Danilo! Find a portantina for Maestra Giulia."

"Thank you, Rosalba, but Mattio will come for me."

"Must you go? I would love to hear more about your invention," the abbé said.

"I too am sorry you are leaving so soon, Maestra Giulia," Felicità added. "We had just begun to know each other. I would like to talk with you more."

About 'Gianni,' no doubt, Giulia thought, amused by the girl. She was less amused by the old twinge of jealousy that nibbled at her spirit. She had rescinded its rights and still it dared barge in on her like a presumptuous guest. This Sartori was an appealing and apt pupil. Had she expected Gianni to change? Truly, we are a species of animals with hearts.

"Until next time, cara," Giulia said, smiling at Felicità, "and you can tell me about your progress." Mattio had come. "But now I must go." The carriers lifted them easily into the portantina procured by Danilo, and headed to Castello.

The women on the Lido were repairing fishing nets and talking to their husbands. They felt the first drops of rain and thought, *Soon it will be over*. And indeed, for a time it was barely more than a drizzle.

Richa Zorzi sat weaving, deftly working her *linguetta* through the net's raveled holes. As she worked, she listened for her husband's voice to

rise above the other voices from the boats beyond the shore. In this way they conversed with one another, the fishermen and their wives, on the long days when the men were at sea. Like the gondoliers who plied the lagoon and its canals, the men of the sea would sing. And like the gondoliers, they knew by heart the cantos of Tasso and Ariosto, the tales of Christian knights and Saracen warriors woven into the fabric of the Serenissima and the tapestry of the Italic isles.

Sometimes the songs were of war and battle, declaimed in combative strophes of call and response. At other times they were lyrical and erotic, redolent of yearning and loneliness. The celebration of arms in Canto I of the *Gerusalemme Liberata* might give way to an evocation of the lush Garden of Armida and her passion for Rinaldo, or a dirge for the death of Clorinda.

The women were not solely an audience but singers in their own right, answering their men, matching them verse for verse. So they spoke together and loved one another—in song.

Richa listened for Ridolfo Zorzi's clear tenor. His voice was less strident than some, whose declamations might be harsh as a shout. Yet his honeyed tone held its own power and Richa thrilled to hear it.

There it is, she thought. At the same moment another woman said, "Richa! It is Ridolfo—I can

always tell his voice. He sounds like an angel who wakes and sees the sun."

"Maybe he should be *your* husband, Ravia," another woman teased.

"Oh, my husband," Ravia replied. "His voice is low, like an evil Turk's. But he has loved me for so long that I am used to it."

Ridolfo Zorzi sings of the enchantress Armida:

The veil upon her breast falls wide
Her hair fans out...

And Richa completes the line:
dishevelled by the summer wind.

Then Ridolfo, singing of the spellbound knight Rinaldo:

Idle games and trickling sweat
Quickly pale his flushing face...

Richa continues:

and like a sunbeam on the waves...

Then Ridolfo:

in her moist and gleaming eyes...

The women join in:

lascivious plays a smile.

And the men begin anew:

And she that moment feels him breathe
so deep that she would think...

To and fro, they sing to the last couplet:

his soul now flees and pilgrim-like
transports itself to thee.

Down it came. Lightning cleaved thunder. The women ran home, leaving their men to the sea spiking high beneath the deluge. Shards of rain roiled the deep. The sky grew dark then black with night.

By the next day most of the boats had come in and the men come home. The sky cleared and

the women rushed to the Lido for news of the ones who had not returned.

Richa sang out to sea:

The veil upon her breast falls wide
Her hair fans out...

She waited, then sang the reply herself:

disheveled by the summer wind.

Again she waited. Then wildly, screaming, urging him to remember:

O'er him she bends and tastes
The kisses sweet, that time and again
From his lips she steals...

Far beneath the waves, where body and soul have fled, Ridolfo Zorzi never hears, never answers.

Richa Zorzi, by birth Enrica, had come to Venice from a Veneto village where her family grew flax and made a living as weavers. They were among the many families selling their work to the Venetian shipbuilding enterprises, the

independent *squarci*—private shipyards—and that of the state, the Arsenale. But work slowed and many squarci closed down; flax cultivation failed—the climate was always too warm for the plant to flourish as it did in the North, and the grower-weavers could no longer produce the volume or quality of work demanded by the Arsenale's buyers.

At some point the Zorzi family moved to the Lista dei Bari, another enclave of weavers in sestiere Santa Croce, hoping to improve their prospects. But even in Bari the family struggled to eke out a living. Perhaps they were not welcomed by the Bariotti residents, a clannish tribe of weavers from the South. To survive, some of the Zorzi men began new lives as ropemakers in the huge Arsenale manufactory; others became *facchini*, lowly porters. But through their industry and astute submission to the powers that be, they managed to rise in the Arsenale's more lucrative trades. Forming the requisite connections, they became *arsenalotti,* members of the vast standing workforce belonging to the Venetian maritime machine.

At an early age, Richa had been married off to a cousin of like surname, one Ridolfo Zorzi, a fisherman from the parish of San Nicolò in Dorsoduro. Judging from her family's experience, Richa perceived the arsenalotti's

existence to be more profitable and less hazardous than Ridolfo's, a fisherman plying the waters for catch; she tried to persuade him to look for work at the Arsenale. Sadly, her insight proved correct: though Richa stood on the shore of the Lido for days, singing to him, wrenching her heart and voice with love-drenched cantos to lure him home, Ridolfo never answered. He was lost at sea less than six months after they were wed. His was not an uncommon fate. Richa was left to join the ranks of Venetian women made widows by their husbands' perilous livelihood.

As now she was expected to contribute to her own support and that of her family, her relatives employed by the Arsenale applied to find her work in its sailroom. It was the only place in the great shipworks where women were regularly employed. But the sailroom's workforce at the time numbered only about a hundred souls at most, and all the positions were filled; the family's petition was turned down. They tendered their exemplary history with the Arsenale, their family's long tradition as weavers and linen purveyors. They cited their expertise in sewing and sailmaking, their knowledge of the Arsenale's workroom practices, all to no avail. Finally, they solicited aid from their most highly-placed relation, Richa's uncle, Pietro Zorzi. A former theater designer and stage operative, he

was now foreman of the Arsenale's caulkers, who sealed ships' hulls with tar or pitch. Within days, Richa was employed in the sailroom.

Mattio Fabrizzi met Richa Zorzi long before he had become Giulia's principal assistant in the Lama workshop. He was still an apprentice then, hardworking, keen on learning his mestiere. At the same time, he had an easy manner that made him well-liked, and was fortunate to possess the athlete's build and fine-featured face of a desirable model. In the community of artists among whom he lived and worked, he willingly took on this task.

When the time came, Mattio used his good looks and a family tie to the Arsenale to pursue another end: he would win Richa Zorzi. With her striking features, she was not at a loss for suitors, but Mattio was not deterred. His emigre origins, like those of many Venetians, had made his life more complicated than mere looks could turn to advantage. Thus, he had also inherited his share of ingenuity from that long line of forest people who left Gorizia in the Venetian territory of Friuli to work in the Arsenale. When times were good for those workers in Venice, for those in Friuli they were miserable. By word of mouth, the arrivals from the forest had learned they

could parlay their intimate knowledge of trees and wood—how to choose a log, cut it, and work it with their arcane tools to make useful and beautiful things—into substantial and respected vocations in the Venetian shipbuilding powerhouse. Still, the family connection that mattered to Mattio was modest: a relation employed as a seamstress in the Arsenale's sailroom.

So it was not intended that Mattio become a painter, but a ship's carpenter, perhaps a shipwright foreman. He would design and build the merchant round ships that drove Venetian trade through the Mediterranean, or the armed sail-powered galleons and ships-of-the-line—warships that had supplanted oared fleets, and everywhere dominated the seas.

The Venetians had, in fact, decimated the forests of Mattio's region to build their ships, then seized the inhabitants' farms, abandoning them to penury. In Venice, with that expertise cultivated for generations in their own homeland, these arboreal folk recouped their losses, and more. The foresters were smart and quick to snatch up a way of life which far surpassed the meanness, tedium, and uncertainty of their woodland existence. They rose to become masters and *proti*, high-ranking foremen orchestrating the Arsenale's great workforce.

Thus, affluent and prominent, they were among the powerful of Venice, and so had the ear of the Arsenale's own *patroni,* the 'lords of the Arsenale,' and of the Consiglio dei Dieci, The Ten who ruled all.

But the wheel of fortune continued to spin and grind down each in turn as the Republic's ships entered competition with those of the North, England, and Spain. Employment at the Arenale ebbed. Even the *squarci*, which built commercial vessels and smaller boats for the canal trade instead of the Republic's remaining large ships of war, had slowed their production. The Fabrizzi decided to spread the family's financial risk to other nodes of the artisan community, ones outside the seafaring domain. One brother did well as a supplier of paper to the lucrative Venetian printing industry, and a daughter who was particularly adept at the craft was sent as a lacemaker to Burano. There she remained until she met and married a wealthy merchant from Padua. And the Serenissima would always need altarpieces for its churches, history paintings to vaunt its greatness, portraits of its signoria, and devotional images for its clergy—or so the elder Fabrizzi reasoned.

Thus Mattio, who had shown a talent for drawing in the Fabrizzi woodshop, was sent to apprentice with the painter Giulia Lama. Mattio

was a few years older than the typical apprentice; it had taken a special dispensation from the painters' company, the *fraglia*, to engage him because of rules governing apprentices' ages. But his maturity was worth the extra effort. He was conscientious and responsible. Giulia Lama grew to trust him.

Though his son would be trained by a woman, Mattio's father did not object: Agostino Lama, Giulia's father, still ran the bottega, and his was a prominent name among the Venetian painters of his generation. Franco Fabrizzi knew that Agostino's daughter had been trained in his mestiere and would perpetuate his legacy. Besides, Franco had an inkling that his son Mattio would do well with a woman, a gift, he thought, the boy must have inherited.

Some of the Fabrizzi family remained in the squarci, running their own enterprises. But most persisted at the Arsenale, and advanced by deploying the finely-honed skills passed for generations from forester fathers to shipwright sons. Though he became a painter, Mattio's life remained linked to that of the Venetian shipbuilders of the Arsenale.

For it was not only the men in his family who found a place in the Arsenale's manufacturing behemoth, rising in its ranks. Mattio's maternal aunt, Besina Trevisan, had found more modest

employment in the Arsenale' all-woman sailroom, as had Richa Zorzi. Mattio would go there to bring Besina a meal or run an errand for her. Because of this familial tie, he was allowed in without a lot of questions. This was despite the vigilance of the beak-nosed woman they called *La Zanna*, The Tusk, who guarded the virtue and ensured the productivity of the arsenalotte, the female workers who, like Besina Trevisan, were employed there.

On one of his errands for Besina, Mattio had spotted Richa. Thereafter he would stop at nothing to do 'favors' for his hardworking aunt. He was so polite—so guileless. Even the vigilant Tusk suspected him of nothing more than excess deference to a demanding aunt, nor did The Tusk show any sign she knew Richa Zorzi also had her eye on Mattio.

During their brief marriage, Richa hadn't time to know her husband well; though she was beset by grief at his loss and felt his absence deeply, the marriage was an arranged one. In truth, she had barely begun to love him. But she regretted he had not left her with a child. He could have done so, certainly in six months, for Richa was willing and passionate—Ridolfo eager to satisfy her. This was in part because he knew he must leave his young wife alone for months on end as he worked at sea; he was jealous *and*

pragmatic. Despite Ridolfo's apparently limitless alacrity and the couple's single-minded indulgence of every opportunity for lovemaking, no child was conceived. Richa was left alone and eager for a partner. That was when Mattio appeared in the sailroom.

After two visits he had conveyed to Richa the location of a remote and disused carpenter's storeroom, smelling sweetly of sawed wood and resin. The first time they remained there for two hours, and what he learned about her and from her would have impressed even the adept but now-departed Ridolfo. When Mattio tried to leave, Richa clasped him to her, a compliant prisoner, though it was clear he had satisfied her in more than a cursory fashion. When she finally released him, the little closet was steamy, and the sweet scent of cut ash and pine mingled with the pungent smells of musk and sweat.

After that first time, Mattio had returned to the Lama bottega to prepare gesso for a canvas that Giulia would use in a new commission. He entered the workshop with a mumbled "good morning" to Giulia and his fellow workers. At that moment it occurred to him he had said less than that to the girl in the carpenter's storeroom.

He recalled the odor of wood, then the others. He would ask Aunt Besina her name.

The Lama bottega fronted the street on the calle Lunga. Breaking light was streaming in and the workshop was already busy. A young apprentice stood on a high wooden box, arms outstretched, naked except for the perfunctory loincloth tucked over his hips. Facing the box, Giulia Lama sat at a table before a sheet of gray paper fastened on a wedge-shaped block, a stick of charcoal in hand. The figure of the boy on the box emerged from the charcoal lines as she worked. Lama sat back, compared model to drawing, and frowned. *He is tall enough, though much too thin for the Christ*, she thought. *I would have used Mattio instead had he not been perfect for the Beloved Apostle. He could do for both, but…*

I remember Tancredi, who posed as John the Baptist for Agostino. Perfect for this Christ. A bit shorter than the boy now, but muscular enough, and manly as Christ should be. I cannot give San Vidal a scrawny Christ for their main altar. It is a pity Tancredi left to open his own shop, but how could I blame him? He was well-prepared to become master of a bottega, and about to marry as well. He welcomed the money.

"I need to rest, maestra," the boy said, "or my arms will break." She regarded him critically as he jumped from the box.

"Go now and eat, Giorgio. Let's fatten you up."

Even now, it was sometimes difficult to find models who would pose willingly for a woman. When her father was alive there were plenty to choose from in addition to the *garzoni*, apprentices who took on the task as part of their work. It was lucky that Mattio was so well-suited. And with his perfectly proportioned frame, he was unfazed by a woman's appraising stare.

She turned to a half-finished picture propped against a wall. At the forefront, a woman's figure lay in a heap, so calculated that the dark ragged wound of her neck and her bare breast were thrust directly at the eye. In the shadows, a man in a white shirt dangled the woman's severed head from his upraised hand.

The man's face, one she knew by heart, was not so hard to paint, she thought. It belonged to her padrino, the volatile Niccolò Cassana, who was known to roll about on the floor in his tantrums. "Talk!" he would shout at a figure on canvas, "I want to see the blood flow in your veins!" He was tormented by a thirst for perfection, on fire with it, consumed by it. Was that why he took to drink (a less painful thirst), cutting short his life? Or was it his children dying young, one by one? Invited to London to paint

for Anne, he died there and never finished his portrait of the queen.

Giulia's father had sent her to apprentice with him because, like her first teacher Molinari, he was willing to have a girl. Agostino took her back the same day he heard about Niccolò's rages. But in Niccolò she had seen a soul bared, one for whom the work was all, the thing that conferred being and dignity despite his outrageous behavior. In Niccolò was limned for her an existence not dreamed of in the business-like shop of Agostino. And as she was young, this dream was etched on her character.

Niccolò and Agostino died within months of one another, separated by an ocean, and much more. One died alone, the other loved and lamented. It was true that in the struggle for the workshop Agostino's memory was tainted. *Still I strove to honor his legacy*, Giulia thought, *as a daughter, a painter. He was my father and I loved him. I lived by his rules. And by his rule, never fully revealing myself. So Gianni's portrait of me showed. But how my loyalty filled my life with unrest and darkness. Until* he...

Giorgio had returned.

Until he *stepped in, the Missier, because he liked the picture I made of him for Zucchi's engraving. And because I knew of Isaac Newton—and understood how he differed from a doge. And thus was I released to*

make my own portrait then, so unlike Gianni's. Yes, the Missier…

"Who is the woman in that picture, maestra? What happened to her head?"

Now was not the time to think of all this again.

"She is Santa Euphrosia, Giorgio. She was beheaded as a martyr. Some say she is the patron saint of those possessed by demons."

What might happen if she teased him? "Do you wish to leave her an offering? An imp like you is a sort of demon."

To her surprise, the boy was shocked. "Oh, no, I represent Our Lord. I cannot be possessed by demons." How earnest he was.

But then he looked at the painting again and giggled. "She looks like *you*, maestra."

Giulia smiled. "No, she is only a model, Giorgio. Like *you*. Now, up on the box!" What did he know of demons?

The bottega was crowded now, alive with the bustle of workmen. Despite the din, their demeanor was orderly and purposeful. The men worked side by side with Giulia and her model, each one employing his special skill. Two older artisans stood behind thick slab grindstones, crushing and blending mineral colors into the oil medium used for painting. They worked

expertly, easily turning with their wrists the egg-shaped stone mullers. They had cut and polished these themselves, even though now they could be bought at shops that sold mineral paints.

The procedure was to make just enough paint for the day's work, but if an excess were created, it was stored in glass jars and shelved, mixed with a little fresh oil when needed. Once, they would have stored the extra oils in animal bladders—those of sheep, or of the hogs which also supplied brush bristles. Giulia recalled how her father, Agostino Lama, would cut and scrape the membranous bags to size himself, almost ceremoniously, with a handsome blade he had acquired from Marco Frollo, a leather worker with a shop in the Giudecca. Giulia remembered Agostino's cache of these colors, but she preferred to keep hers in clean and translucent glass jars through which she could see the jewel tones of the minerals, rid of the coarseness and animal smell.

"Mattio, please put the dog out," Giulia called, for what seemed to her the hundredth time. "Don't let him follow you in—he is full of fleas. And that dish over there—get it off the floor. If Master Moro trips on it again..."

The animal was lapping water from a small basin. Mattio ceased his copying at the sound of Lama's voice, and pretended to kick out the dog. But when it looked at him piteously he repented, and instead shooed the animal to the shop's open front door with a perfunctory wave. It glanced at him with a look of regret and ran outside.

He walked to the shelf set above his head on the crumbling plaster wall and placed the basin beneath its ewer. The thick crockery shared space with small canvases on wooden stretchers and some plaster casts that, along with their human counterparts, were used as models for the bottega's pictures. Mattio carefully pushed aside a noble Roman head, a disembodied arm, and the miniature figure of a Classical male nude.

As he lifted the ewer to slip the basin beneath it, a carpenter's square hanging on a nail above it clattered to the floor. He glanced at Lama, but she was absorbed in consulting a worn book of paint recipes. She had pulled it from the volumes that lay scattered about the room next to sheaves and portfolios of preparatory drawings. These were to be studied, copied, and emulated, the shop's irreplaceable reference works, handed down through generations of artisans. Some contained the secrets of the mestiere and others the records of completed commissions, authenticating their origin in the Lama workshop.

Returning to his table, Mattio passed another shelf with jars of brushes and palettes stacked on end. He circumvented an easel with square-topped legs; underneath it was a stand which Giulia sometimes stood on to paint. The smell of turpentine strafed his nose as he grazed a rag left hanging to air out on the easel. Then he skirted the high bulky ladder topped by a platform where Lama and the shop worked on the large canvases they created for altarpieces. In his day, Agostino Lama had climbed the same ladder in order to execute the monumental history paintings that were his specialty.

Before the dog claimed his attention, Mattio was making an oil sketch. It was the record of a completed religious picture still in the shop, awaiting the client. He had worked there for several years now and was proficient at this task, and in drawing, that gift detected by his family when they sent him to apprentice in the Lama workshop.

Despite his facility, he had learned his craft in the traditional way, through the repeated copying, which allowed younger less experienced artists to practice and polish their skills. He also had received instruction from Giulia and the other workshop masters, honing his natural talent. Now he was entrusted, as were they, with this routine yet important copying

task, and much more: Mattio expertly transferred underdrawings to canvas from models segmented by a grid. He could paint settings and the minor figures or background details as skillfully as the shop's older masters, Girolamo Becchi and Giovanni Moro.

Now, he was prepared to become a master himself, to be inscribed in the fraglia; yet, he remained with Giulia in the Lama workshop. The style of painting practiced there, still linked to the great tradition of the older Venetian masters, not only suited his abilities but the depth of his character. He felt at home there, and most of all, he knew he was needed and valued by one worthy of his devotion. His loyalty and skill made Giulia glad for the trouble the workshop had taken to have him, persuading the fraglia to permit him to begin his apprenticeship when he was older than specified by the rules.

Mattio's oil sketch had multiple lives. The client might want a copy of his own painting to give as a gift, or it might be shown to a prospective buyer and commissioned, with alterations, as a full-sized work. Then again it could be submitted when one of the guilds or a church parish sponsored a competition to contract for a new work; or, the figures in it might serve as visual notes for another painting. Used as a source for a brand-new painting, the master's

style would be transmitted and a standard of quality be maintained. This last was crucially important to Giulia, who felt that she was the vessel through which tradition was preserved and transmitted: that of her family and of the great masters of Venice. Mattio shared her regard, which Giulia knew.

The table where he worked was set beneath a raking pipe that ran from the workshop stove. Although it usually radiated a welcome warmth, on this unseasonable day sweat ran down his back. He breathed the scent of his own body as it fused with the others permeating the shop: the linseed oil from the grindstones, the turpentine-soaked rags, the stove's remnants of burnt ivory used to produce the color black.

Lama had completed her drawing of the Christ for the San Vidal altarpiece. She told Giorgio to dress then sent him to help the others. But she was far from finished. The Christ's upper body, angled to the right of the painting, was exacting to render. There were to be more preparatory drawings before the painting could be initiated. This Christ was powerful, with muscled arms outspread in a spectacle of victory, the crossed knees jutting vigorously from the crucified form. Little remained that would remind anyone of reedy Giorgio, the picture's model, who was reborn to the heroic in

redeeming strokes of charcoal and chalk. The transformation was the fruit of years spent absorbing and emulating Agostino's mighty *figuri virili* in the common workshop mode of subsuming all styles to the master's. This dictum was observed no matter if working from an old sketch or from a live model, as Giulia often did. It was indeed the precept Giulia had defended to the Abbè Conti. It had served her well in creating this omnipotent Christ from the form provided by her puny apprentice. Lama examined the drawing. It was a good beginning.

The figures of disciples and saints at the foot of the cross were still to be executed. She made studies of their raised arms and beseeching hands, then drew a face in profile: the youthful St. John who knelt at the right of the cross, for whom she would employ Mattio. Last, there was the prone figure of the Virgin enveloped in the crumpled, tortuous white drapery that spoke her anguish. The entire composition would be delineated on a carefully primed support before she painted the scene: transparent oil glazes, one layer atop another, until the images rose in concert from the canvas for the glory of Christ.

But she had finished her work for now. Absently, she began to sketch again, on a sheet where she'd already drawn a disciple's arm. A familiar contour was taking shape. She smiled

when she recognized it, and pulled out fresh ochre-colored paper on which to transfer the figure. Its form was thin and angular, with an elongated nose and down-turned ears. It raised its lips, exposing needle-sharp teeth dripping saliva. It had long been the custom in the North to depict the Roman soldiers at the crucifixion as dog-faced brutes. Where Lama had drawn Mattio's innocuous stray, there was now a snarling cur who would join the gathering at the foot of the cross.

The shop was still at work as Lama restored her drawings to their folder and put away her white chalk and carboncino. Becchi turned his porphyry muller with his accustomed precision. The little mound of brilliant blue powder grew high on his grindstone. Next to him Moro was finishing up a batch of verdigris, carefully pouring oil on it from a round narrow-necked flask.

He mixed it with his palette knife, then scraped the stone and cleaned it with solvent to ready it for the next batch of color.

Giovanni Battista Piazzetta, 'Giambattista,' or even 'Zambatista,' as the Venetians would have it, was consumed by a restlessness he didn't understand. It depleted him yet drove him to

frantic bouts of activity he was helpless to rein in. He and Giulia, not even twenty then, were pupil-apprentices of Antonio Molinari, a Venetian painter wrought by the heroic swells rolling out of Naples. It was still many years before Piazzetta would marry Rosa Muzioli and have his own bottega, years before Giulia would face her own struggles for ascendency in her father's workshop.

On that morning Piazzetta rushed about Molinari's, barely able to begin tasks he had always completed without effort. As he pushed past the master's enormous painting of the Battle of the Lapiths and Centaurs, he stopped abruptly, seeing it as if for the first time. The heroic work towered over him, ranging the length of the workshop wall. Propped on its sturdy easel, it nearly grazed the ceiling. Though completed three years before, it was still housed in the workshop, where it awaited the completion of a pendant piece: an Orpheus and Bacchantes by the painter Gregorio Lazzarini.

"Do you remember which of those figures you drew on the grid, Gianni?" Giulia asked, coming up behind him. She had learned to sidestep the name "Zuanne" as he didn't like it; perhaps he cherished ambitions that made him think the Venetian usage provincial. "I remember mine."

Both had been studying with Molinari four years now. They had grown up under the tutelage of the Venetian master and absorbed all he had to teach: his dramatic figures, deep colors, and most of all, his reverence for the noble and heroic from antiquity — the proper subject of the artist. The painting depicted over a dozen combating forms ranged across the canvas: men, women, half-horse half-human centaurs, all engaged in furious strife.

Part of Lama's and Piazzetta's training had involved making underdrawings. Guided by one or another master in Molinari's bottega, they had limned out figures on the grid laid over the great canvas. They had watched Molinari sketch these figures from models in the studio, large muscular men who twisted themselves into convoluted poses, leaning on one arm only, the other raised to ward off a blow. In his drawings, their lower torsos were the equine nether parts of centaurs, splayed beneath them. At the forefront of the canvas, a soldier in a helmet and flying red cloak gestured toward a woman held aloft by one of the centaurs, her arms upraised in terror.

Piazzetta had been lost in thought. He was startled by Giulia's question and turned brusquely, but smiled when he saw her.

"Of course I remember," he answered. "I made the two figures on the right, one behind the

other. The one in front was impossible to draw. His arm almost jumps from the picture, doesn't it?"

"Yes," Giulia agreed. "I remember the sweat on your forehead— you were concentrating so hard. And when you finished you were trembling. I was waiting for you because I had to draw the two figures next to yours, the woman, and the man with his back to us. I was glad Agostino had forced me to copy all those drawings of a model in our shop—Iacopo Ioli, the broom seller!—or I would never have known how to make the musculature correctly. And the hours I spent drawing from life. He made me do that too.

"I also recall how Molinari would not let us draw the figures in the center," Lama continued, "the soldier and the centaur grasping the woman. He gave those to one of the masters, Sebastian Riva, I think. No one equaled him in drawing helmets and armor, and he is still a sorcerer for making drapery fly."

"A sorcerer. Just what I would like to be," Piazzetta said softly.

"Oh, but you can do what Riva does—not then—but now," Giulia encouraged him. "Just as I can paint those nude figures that I could barely draw when Molinari had me make them."

She paused. “Why do you wish to be a sorcerer?”

Piazzetta leaned back on the table behind him. “I wish to be a sorcerer, cara, because my father returned from Bologna yesterday. He had a commission for a statue of St. Joseph from a small church there—someone he knew had recommended him—and he decided to deliver it himself to be sure the client was satisfied, and to get the remainder of his fee immediately. While he was there he met the painter Crespi, and he brought me back some of his drawings because he thought I would like them. They are small pictures of ordinary people, but made with such understanding. They are almost noble. And that is why I wish I were a sorcerer.”

“Ah, you would fly to Bologna.”

“And go to Crespi. I would learn to make pictures of people like that, that all of us could live with. Giulia, I am tired of noble panoramas, of history paintings like this one here, making us feel small with their heroic sentiments that deny all our other human emotions. Sometimes we are sad, or amused or ridiculous, and sometimes we fall in love with the girl in a shawl who passes us by on the street every morning. We needn’t save her from centaurs. We simply want to talk with her or touch her hand. Perhaps love her.”

"And you have met this girl, Gianni?" Giulia asked.

Piazzetta looked at her. Was there more to the question than she revealed? He did not want to disappoint her. And then, with the quick change of mood that afflicted him of late, he felt suddenly that he could answer honestly. "Yes, I have met her."

"Really? And who is she?"

"It is someone you know, Giulia, someone you see every day."

"Someone I know. Is it Gaetana Moretti, who brings the brushes Molinari buys from her family's shop? She is very intelligent, and pretty, too. Oh—Molinari. It is his daughter, then. The older one, with the blond hair, who gives him dinner."

"No, neither one, although both are charming."

"Who then? Tell me!"

Piazzetta eased himself from the table where he had been leaning and placed his hands on Giulia's shoulders. He gently pulled her to him and kissed her softly on the lips. Then he drew her to him, and kissed her again, with passion.

"It is you," he murmured.

Later Giulia would think, *How like him, avowing in the moment and meaning it, not knowing or caring for the truth, a quality he reserved only for his work.*

Piazzetta weighed the coins in his hand, heavy and warm now. Three-hundred ducats, the fourth and final installment. This was not counting the gift of money he was given on Christmas Eve for the painting, The Vision of St. Philip Neri. It was about time he received the last payment—they had carried the piece to the church a year ago, to Santa Maria della Consolazione in Castello, his sestiere and Giulia's. And it had been two years since the baptism of his son, Giacomo, at San Lio. Rosa would be pregnant again. They could use the money.

But they were doing well. His sojourn in Bologna—over twenty years ago now—had been the best decision of his life. No, he did not devalue his studies in Venice with Molinari. But the two years spent under the tutelage of Giuseppe Maria Crespi had convinced him to take as models figures from the world around him. Enduring the whims of the mercurial Bolognese master had proved invaluable: the experience had transformed his work.

Of course, it was easier for him than for other painters to accept such change. Piazzetta's father was a sculptor, so the son had not grown up as a painter, with that workshop training he would be obliged to imitate. Unlike Giulia, he thought, who was taught to follow the style and techniques of her father so strictly. By contrast, Gianni's father had trained him in woodcarving. But when, at the age of fourteen, he had decided to become a painter, there was no objection. Without delay Giacomo Piazzetta had placed him in Molinari's workshop.

And there he had met Giulia, also sent by her father to the painter's school. Molinari had accepted her, a girl, because her father was a respected artist—and a friend. For six years, Gianni and Giulia worked together, learning the mestiere of painting, the preparation of color and canvas, the proper use of tools. Together they studied anatomy and perspective, drawing from the nude models that Molinari brought to pose for the school and for his own canvases.

The two became close. He saw that the serious, intelligent girl could hold her own among the artists in Molinari's workshop. She had a sharp eye but was generous with praise. And though she was four months older than he, she treated him with a regard that fed his confidence. Piazzetta's affection for her grew.

Her feelings for him warmed too, and like his they would endure. A period of resistance, then she surrendered to his pleading, and to her own ardor.

But she would not admit to love. That, she knew, was like craving the dappled waters that surrounded them. Created by shifting light, their sparkle left no trace, only darkness at nightfall.

No, she would not allow it. Until it broke within her unbidden, that revelation like a fierce summer shower, warming then chilling.

The same year that Gianni went to Bologna, Giulia left Molinari's school and returned to work in Agostino's bottega. A year later Molinari was dead, and the next year, when his own father died, Gianni had returned to Venice.

Yes, he would always love Giulia, but he knew his own nature to be inconstant. They remained friends and became colleagues but never were they the same as in the days at Molinari's. The breach was an occasional source of pain for Giulia and she chided him for it when, to her supreme annoyance, she felt a stab of jealousy as he toyed with other women. But she accepted him as he was. She knew that his time in Bologna had changed him, inflecting his style, raising his prospects and more, his ambitions. She understood the distance this journey had wrought and, for the most part, accepted it.

"Good morning, Giulia."

"Gianni. To what do I owe the pleasure?"

"I was on my way to Lovisa's and thought to stop and see you. Nothing more."

"You spend more time in the bookshop than in the workshop, caro."

Piazzetta smiled. "As a matter of fact, I do. The Zanetti are often there, the count and his young cousin, when they are not working on their book."

"Oh, that book of sculptures. Rosalba has mentioned it. She knows both the Zanetti."

"Yes, of course. It is to be a set, illustrating classical sculptures in the public collections of Venice. And I have a plan. I hear that Zanetti has said good things about me to the Cavaliere Gabburi, that Florentine diplomat. As Zanetti sees me in a favorable light, I would like him to look at my frontispiece design for the second volume. Perhaps he will consider it. And, I have a recommendation for an engraver."

It was Lama's turn to smile. "Oh? And I suppose this engraver is a master inscribed for decades in the fraglia."

"No, Giulia, she belongs to Rosalba's workshop, and to her household. You will remember when I instructed a few of her

painters in engraving some years ago. Rosalba still sends me pupils from time to time. This young woman and her sister happened to be at Lovisa's when I was there the other day. That is where we met. Giovanna, Rosalba's sister, was with them, and introduced us. Anyway, the older girl expressed an interest in a book of engravings and I offered to teach her, with Rosalba's permission, of course. Her name is Felicità Sartori. She and her sister are both with Rosalba. Perhaps you know them."

"Yes, I met them both at Rosalba's. Angioletta is the quiet one. And except for Giovanna, Felicità is the favorite in Rosalba's household. She mentioned to me that you had offered to teach her engraving."

"She has a quick mind. Her first teacher was an engraver—her uncle, Antonio dall Agata. She also has Rosalba's training. These are advantages."

"And she is pretty. That is an advantage too."

"Ah, Giulia, you know it is politic for me to be on the good side of Rosalba. She is on terms with everyone who might offer a commission. Zanetti, for example—especially Zanetti. It wouldn't hurt to have him engage her protégé."

"It's true, she does know everyone. That old Abbé Conti was there the last time I went to her home. I showed him my alterations to Clelia

Borromeo's lacemaking machine, which have made her invention viable to produce. Rosalba had mentioned to him that I knew mathematics, so I suppose he wasn't shocked when he learned I could adjust a machine."

"Hadn't you met him before? It seems to me…" Piazzetta faltered, trying to remember.

"Oh, yes. Well, not exactly 'met,' though we happened to be in the same room together. It was some years ago, at that farcical gathering of the Coraggiosi."

"And he argued against your inscription. I remember now. Did he mention that meeting at Rosalba's?"

"No. He apparently decided to ignore how insistent he had been over barring me from membership because I employ naked men as models. At the time he thought my behavior corrupt and unnatural. Or else he thought my face was too plain. Perhaps both. I do not recall which argument weighed more heavily with him. Nor, apparently, did he."

"Recall or care, I hope. You were inscribed in the Coraggiosi with or without his approval."

"Yes, officially I became the poet 'Lisalba' of Arcadia."

Piazzetta made a little bow. "Well, Maestra Lisalba, I am off to Lovisa's. Zanetti will be waiting for me."

"And Felicità Sartori?"

"Yes. Angioletta, too."

"Please give them my regards. Tell them I will see them at Rosalba's."

As Piazzetta walked out the door he heard Giulia laugh. He thought of Felicità's laughter, which he heard at Lovisa's when he offered to teach her. Nothing stirred in him now as he recalled it, but Giulia's laughter elicited a blush. It was a laugh that, without effort, pierced the invisible shell that kept others' incursions from that soft sweet matter within him. But not Giulia's incursions. That laugh made it easy for her to penetrate his being. Oh, she knew him well, and had for so long.

Since the sky was bright blue, he decided to make an outing of it. He would enjoy the day, meandering to the bookshop without hurry. As he passed the houses he knew to be secret *casinos* for lovers' trysts he might pause and wonder, did they simply want a private place to converse, flirt, and dine? Or, once inside, did they throw off their clothes and go at each other like weasels in a pen? And the ubiquitous confidantes to wealthy women of the signoria, the *cicisbei*: were they simply companions for rich wives, chosen by complaisant husbands to accompany them safely to the ceaseless round of social gatherings and theatrical performances the men were too busy

or bored to attend? Or were these companions safe and socially suitable escorts, hired by superannuated spouses to keep their young wives from going astray with real lovers. Such infatuations might prove inconvenient, even dangerous, no?

He articulated his own answers to these questions without benefit of Sismondo Sismondi's *Histoire,* which was not to come along until nearly a century later, and turn the gimlet eye of censure on the cicisbei and their kind. Sismondi deemed the practice a 'public calamity' and blamed it for the destruction of the Venetian family.

But Piazzetta was not of a censorious turn of mind and merely wandered where his musings took him. *What of the convents?* he thought. He wondered why this came to mind—not one convent, he realized, would mark his way to Lovisa's. No matter. Why shouldn't his mind meander as he did? Everyone knew, he thought, that most nuns had no real vocation, but were only unmarriageable daughters, safely cloistered. Except for their religious trappings, they lived like everyone else. And everyone knew these young women received visitors whose slim fingers breached the dividing grate, offering passage to realms of bliss.

He stopped to let a pottery vendor squeeze by him with an enormous basket load of bowls, lids, and crocks strapped to his back. *He could be no more than twelve*, Piazzetta thought, committing the boy's face and bent back to memory, mentally sketching his load of wares. Piazzetta had retreated to an open doorway to avoid the barrage of pots, and was whelmed by the stench of primordial filth and mold. He exited the doorway. The young pot vendor had passed. What of his own son, Giacomo? He was still only two. What did his future hold?

And what of himself, Giovanni Piazzetta. Had he taken Felicità Sartori as a pupil in order to please Rosalba, or because she was particularly gifted? Or was it because he saw the little oval face tipped up in rapt adoration, gazing at him as he listened to her laugh silver-bells, his eyes skimming the charming lines of her figure, deciding he would have her?

He did not know, and soon abandoned the question, as was his nature. As Giulia Lama knew.

Still, he could not escape that other laughter. Giulia's, unlike Sartori's, conjured no silver bells. It was a blade, silk-sheathed. And if that blade, bared, fell glinting into honeyed wine, it might feed then deliquesce to green, the tumbler

crystalline and faceted transfigured to a chalice of annihilating poison.

Piazzetta hurried on to Lovisa's.

Mattio Fabrizzi was late. As he was still an apprentice, such carelessness was frowned upon. Giulia looked up when he arrived but said nothing. He nodded a greeting and asked what she needed.

"Get me the sketches for the Magdalene in the Desert. On the shelf, the ones made by Bencovich and Piazzetta."

"Is that what you are working on now?"

"Yes. That is why I want to see *their* sketches again, to be sure the pictures are in harmony."

"But why are you making pictures with them?"

"Because Bencovich needed help. Remember, Mattio, when they were here a few months ago? And Piazzetta made the little drawing of you with the pilgrim's staff? Bencovich decided to share his commission with us because he was going to Dalmatia and was afraid he might not have time to finish the work. Piazzetta was given one picture and he asked me to make another. So there are three."

"And which one are you making, maestra?"

"Bencovich has a Penitent Magdalene and Piazzetta the Magdalene Praying. I was given the Magdalene in Ecstasy. It is the one I would have chosen myself."

"Oh?"

"Yes. The saint achieves ecstasy after penitence and prayer. It is a reward for her suffering and struggle."

"Oh."

"You ask too many questions, Mattio. And now I have one for you. Why did you come late this morning? Is something wrong?"

"No, nothing, maestra. My aunt Besina asked me to see her in the sailroom, at the Arsenale. She needed me for—something," Mattio ventured, then gave up. "I will get the drawings."

"The Magdalene in Ecstasy is the most beautiful of the three," Lama continued. "You can help me make the picture and I will show you some secrets for the colors. She has all that golden hair. And we will make her bare-breasted to show her white complexion."

An image of Richa Zorzi flashed through Mattio's mind. Instantly, he was burning to see her. He tried to think of a reason Aunt Besina might need him again soon.

"Mattio, why are you standing there?"

This time he would not be late returning to the bottega. He ran to find the drawings Lama asked for.

Very early the next morning Mattio went to the sailroom. On arriving, he saw a well-dressed man of impressive stature examining a length of sail, and questioning the seamstress working on it. “Repair it,” he ordered her. “It will hold until next time, when the new one is to be ready.”

“Yes, signore,” the seamstress answered. She was about to resume her task when Mattio caught her eye. Mouthing a discreet “no” she returned to work.

He knew then he would not be with Richa Zorzi that day. When his Aunt Besina saw him he greeted her and made excuses for his presence. As he did so, a strange, well-dressed woman entered the sailroom and strode purposefully toward the man talking to Richa. The man motioned her to wait and resumed his dialog. The woman stood stock still. After a moment, The Tusk caught her eye and beckoned her over.

Soon the two were deep in conversation. As the woman was not a sailroom worker, the situation was curious. Women not working there were customarily barred. The Tusk, whose word in the sailroom was law, considered them all a

distraction—a spur to gossip. Even the presence of a man, like Mattio, was a rare exception to the rule.

He was about to leave when he heard the exchange between the two women rise in volume, then quickly drop, as if they wished not to be heard. After a moment the unknown woman rose. She moved with new energy, Mattio thought, as though galvanized by her colloquy with The Tusk. Her mouth set, eyes gleaming, she approached the man speaking with Richa and whispered to him. Then she took his arm. *Her husband*, Mattio thought. The Tusk regarded them impassively and returned to her work. Without another word the couple departed. Mattio gave Richa a last hopeful glance, but when she shook her head, he left for the bottega, where Giulia immediately put him to work.

"Aah!" Lama heard a crash and a curse. This was followed by a cry of protest and a wail of pain.

"Maestra! Master Moro hit me with the scraper—but it was an accident!"

Moro appeared, red-faced and sweaty. "He was dancing around and knocked over my oil flask. Get him out of my sight before I thrash him, useless boy!" Moro was a beefy man who

brooked no nonsense. He knew he was essential to the workshop and expert at his job. He supported seven children who knew better than to cross him, and a wife who was equally severe.

"Giorgio, why are you disturbing Master Moro? Look what you've done. Clean up that oil now or we will never get it off the floor."

Lama felt her irritation rise, but accepted the need to maintain peace. She could not do without Moro and wanted to keep the boy as well. She recognized his ability despite the outbursts of immaturity that periodically shook his slight form, like seismic shifts in a miniature volcano. But he and young Mattio Fabrizzi were their future. Not her brother Simon—Giulia hated to think of the unrelenting disappointment and torment he had caused.

"No, *I* will clean it!" Moro insisted. "He is not fit to be working here. If he were *my* son I would—" Moro shook his head and bent to pick up the shards of his broken flask before grabbing a rag to wipe up the oil.

"Come here, Giorgio. I am going to make this picture with Master Mattio."

Giorgio went to her cautiously, trying to wipe a smear of orange-yellow pigment from his cheek.

"Giorgio, that is orpimento—wipe it off with oil right away then wash with soap. How did you

get it on your face? You know that it is poison. Be more careful, caro."

"Master Moro pushed me against that painting over there, the one that's blocked out with color. It wasn't dry yet. The yellow got on my face."

He looked bleak, disgraced and tainted all at once.

"Well, clean up and come back here. We need to start working."

Mattio had returned with the drawings. She examined each one.

Piazzetta's Magdalene was drawn on blue paper in black chalk. It showed a three-quarter-length image of a woman, her arms resting behind a skull set on an open book, her hands tented in prayer. Her shift had fallen from her shoulder and lay rumpled against her dark robe. Thick gold-tinged hair fanned her breast. Her eyes gazed heavenward, seeing no one but God.

Piazzetta's painting was of the same dimensions as Giulia's would be. But Giulia saw the one by Bencovich was to be larger, and unlike theirs, its shape a panorama. It was an oil sketch rather than a charcoal drawing, showing the colors the artist would use in his final painting. The Magdalene was seated on the ground in a long diagonal across the expanse of the canvas. She was backed by a high cave-like ledge that

ended in a circular cleft, revealing the blue sky behind her. Across the opening leaned the trunk of an old tree from which jutted a dead branch. It was fashioned into a cross with its crossbar lashed to the top.

Bencovich's Magdalene regarded this cross with rapt concentration. Her legs were enveloped in a long skirt that spread from her waist to a corner of the painting in a swathe of rose-colored folds. *No, not quite rose*, Lama thought. The words from the Song of Songs came to her: "My beloved is white and ruddy." That was the color, 'ruddy,' a color of healthy flesh. Above her skirt the figure's white shift lay disheveled like that in Piazzetta's drawing. In Bencovich's image the open book of Piazzetta's painting lay on a rock ledge next to a covered jar of myrrh, the same which the Magdalene brought to the tomb of Jesus. She held the skull on her lap in one hand; in the other, a penitent's flail whose leather lashes ended in star-shaped spurs.

"Piazzetta's and mine are the pendants," Giulia said. "Bencovich has made his painting the centerpiece."

"It is beautiful," Mattio said. "With her long legs and skirts the color of—" He stopped, unable to pinpoint the hue as Lama had.

"Yes, it is Bencovich's own shade of red, the color the Magdalene always wears to represent

her life as a harlot. And he has given her the penitent's skull as she meditates on death."

"And the cross? It is strange too."

Giulia nodded. "It is made from that dead tree, with the light of hope behind it."

Mattio picked up the canvas where Lama had drawn the charcoal sketch of her Magdalene.

"But you have given her only the cross, maestra, without the skull and jar."

Lama's Magdalene showed the reclining half-figure of a bare-breasted woman, a crucifix resting across her torso beneath her folded hands. Her eyes were turned up, and looking down on her from a corner of the painting were the faces of two winged cherubs.

"I don't need all her attributes, Mattio. They are shown in the other paintings and will be seen together. Everyone will know who she is."

"And the cherubs?"

"They bless her ecstasy and share her pleasure, like the angel of St. Teresa by the Cavaliere Bernini, in Rome."

"I have heard of it. Have you seen it, maestra?"

"No, but Maestro Molinari showed us an engraving of it, Piazzetta and me, when we studied with him. I have never forgotten it."

"Will you begin the painting now, maestra?" Mattio asked.

Giorgio had finally returned from his ablutions and looked at the canvas.

"Why is the gesso that color?" he asked.

"After I stretched the canvas and applied the gesso, I stained it with umber and some turpentine," Mattio told him. "Maestra Lama didn't want the white to come through. And it's difficult to paint on it."

"You did well, Mattio. It made the drawing easy."

"The angels look funny, maestra," Giorgio said.

"Would you like to model for me, Giorgio?" Giulia asked.

"Then one of them will look like you. And Master Moro can bring one of his children to pose for the other."

"And I thought it looked funny because Giorgio had posed for it," Mattio said, teasing.

Still smarting from his confrontation with Moro, Giorgio lashed out at Mattio, almost hitting him in the eye before the older youth ducked, laughing.

Lama resolved the dispute. "Remember where you are. You are not here to play, but to work. Mattio, you know better."

"I'm sorry, maestra," Mattio said, with a hint of irony in his voice. He knew the reprimand was intended for Giorgio and not for him. Lama

realized that Mattio was no longer a child and hardly treated him like one. He had earned his few privileges.

"You did well with the canvas, Mattio. The support is perfect and the ground and stain are evenly applied. Now the colors need to be blocked out."

"Shall I do it, maestra?" Mattio asked.

"No, I want to try out a few ideas first. And there is one more problem. I need a model for the Magdalene. Bencovich's model is with someone else now, no one knows anything about Piazzetta's model, and everyone I've asked is occupied doing something or other. The lacemakers have orders to fill, the maids are preparing for a feast. And the harlots always have enough work to keep them busy. Maybe they just do not want to pose for me. We will have to wait until someone is free."

Mattio looked at her complacently, as though reclaiming himself after her criticism.

"Well, Master Fabrizzi, you know someone?" Giulia asked him.

"Yes, I do. I know the perfect Magdalen."

"And who is that, Master Cat-with-the-Canary?"

"A woman named Richa Zorzi is your perfect Magdalene. I saw her in the sailroom when I visited my Aunt Besina."

"So *that* is why you were late," she murmured, laughing.

"Bring her here tomorrow."

Mattio blushed. He would bring her, he promised. He was happy to please Giulia, Giulia whose laughter flickered then flayed, like a razor-thin blade.

Mattio would bring Richa Zorzi to the Lama workshop early the next morning. Girolamo Becchi and Giovanni Moro were already at work: Moro deploying his expertise as a painter of trees and rocks to provide the setting for a mythological subject, Saturn Devouring His Son. As Moro painted, Becchi drew with a charcoal stick, transferring a sketch onto a canvas marked by a grid. Thus, the enlarged proportions of the smaller drawing remained true. Five figures ranged across the sketch: St. Anne with the Holy Family. When Becchi finished, Lama would paint the figures herself, sometimes bringing in models she had used for the original sketches to check musculature or proportion, or to see that a model's interesting quirk was captured in the painting. There were a thousand details to attend to, but like the masters before her, she entrusted work such as Moro's backdrop or Becchi's

underdrawing to the experienced practice of those master artisans.

While she waited for Mattio to bring the Magdalene model, Lama worked at the tombolo, streaming out an intricate ribbon of lace. This would be sold to merchants going to ports in the Mediterranean and beyond to Holland and Germany. Lama was adept at the work—even liked it. But she resented being compelled to do it in order to supplement her income as a painter. If only Agostino were to bequeath the workshop to her as he had always intended, before—before it all happened, and he had chosen instead her brother Simon. Then, she would be inscribed in the fraglia, even as Piazzetta had been for a number of years now, and like him be officially a master. Then, her work at the tombolo would take up a small part of her time, and not be the consuming chore it was now. Perhaps one day the lacemaking machine would free her, she thought, though her hope was dim.

Richa Zorzi stood calmly before Giulia Lama's professional eye, accustomed that appraisal of her physical attributes would be favorable.

"Yes, she is perfect," Lama said to Mattio, turning to the girl.

"Did Mattio tell you the subject of this painting, Richa?"

"Yes, maestra, he said it was the Magdalene."

"As I do not wish you to do penance—" Lama began, smiling.

"Oh, thank you, maestra," Richa broke in. "I have done nothing wrong."

"Good. You will be the Magdalene in Ecstasy. That is the one Maestro Bencovich asked me to make."

"Like the one in San Martino? Near the Arsenale. The caulkers have a chapel there, dedicated to their patron, San Fosco."

"Yes. How do you know it?" Giulia asked.

"My uncle Pietro is their foreman and he took me there once. A caulker of his came to see him after the mass and I wandered off while they were talking. The painting was on a small altar dedicated to the Magdalene, near San Fosco's chapel. Uncle Pietro told me about it afterward."

"Then this is the right Magdalene for you," Lama said, "certainly not the Penitent. We suffer penance enough, even when we are not at fault."

"I am only a sailmaker but I lead a good life. Just ask The Tusk. Maestra Giustina, I mean."

"I would rather ask Mattio," Lama said, looking directly at him, teasing.

He reddened, but maintained his composure. "Richa is—perfect."

"Now that we have met, Richa, I will make a new drawing," Lama told her. "Sit in the chair on the platform, with your feet on the box below it. Cross your ankles; you will be more comfortable that way. Now lower your shift, down from the shoulders. Good. Giorgio, bring the crucifix and put it on her lap. Now look up, as if you were looking at Heaven, but with your head turned slightly to the side. I want to see your profile against the drape behind you. You will have to remain like that for a while so find something you want to think about."

Lama seated herself at a table in front of Richa, who was slightly above her eye level. Some blue paper lay on the wedge-shaped block she used for drawing. Swiftly she sketched out a form, then the details and the shading. The proportions were sure from years of study and practice, yet they yielded to a calculated exaggeration which energized the model's figure. This was Lama's own stamp, rising from depths she would not plumb. Hallowed workshop tradition and years of ingrained training did not subdue it. There it was, and each time she saw it emerge on paper she felt alive and strong.

Richa Zorzi breathed in the air of the bottega. How different from the sailroom at the Arsenale.

The turpentine was oily and a little sweet. She liked that. But the woodstove smoke was acrid and made her eyes water. As she looked up she could see the shelf laden with clay pots and canvases and plaster casts. The carpenter's square that Mattio sent clattering to the floor still hung there, and the dog's dish with its ewer. The miniature cast of the male nude caught her eye, reminding her of her late husband's thick-set body—a sailor's body—that took her with its full force and weight; so unlike Mattio with his smooth muscled frame that turned her about like a dancer. She enjoyed thinking of Mattio. As Lama sketched her body, her white breast, and her face, she sat dreaming of that ecstasy given to mortals, those not penetrated by God. She thought of Mattio, her eyes turned to Heaven. *No, I am not the Penitent One*, she thought. *I am the Magdalene in Ecstasy.*

"Turn your head, Richa—slowly, before you step off the box, so you don't hurt yourself. Your neck will ache from looking up. Now come look at your drawing," Lama told her. "I think Heaven came to *you*, cara."

Richa saw the transfigured face Lama had drawn: the eyes other-worldly, the parted lips yearning for the Beloved. As if in supplication, she had raised one hand from the arm of the

chair in her trance. Her breast was hued a faint blush.

"You did well, Richa, swept up in your own visions. Fortunately, I did not have the Penitent Magdalene to paint. I do not think you could look with remorse on the crucifix and the skull she bears."

"No, maestra," Richa whispered. "I am too happy."

Mattio came in. "I thought you had finished by now," he said, stepping back.

"We have. And you were right, Mattio—Richa was perfect."

Encouraged, he ventured, "Can you use her for Delilah? I heard Maestro Moro mention it."

"If she is willing," Giulia said, looking at Richa.

"Oh, yes, maestra, thank you." She smiled at Mattio.

"Good. I have a contract with someone for the Samson. Now I just need a model for Delilah's attendant, the Old Woman in the background."

Mattio and Richa had only to look at each other.

Several days later a very different model sat for Giulia—an old woman with a craggy face and a body rawboned and straight. Giulia was so pleased by her that she asked the woman to share

a meal. “We will stop to rest now,” she said, “and finish later.” They ate together and were talking quietly when the woman said something that unsettled Giulia, who rose so quickly that she overturned her chair and began pacing in agitation. Suddenly, she left the workshop. Moments later she returned with a sheet of paper and placed it before the woman, who regarded Giulia coolly as she righted her chair and sat again. The woman read what was written on the paper, then placed a hand on Giulia’s arm. She spoke to her intently until Giulia nodded and grasped the woman’s hand.

Giorgio had come, belatedly, to investigate the disturbance from the capsized chair and only saw the two conversing with heads bowed close. When Giulia noticed him, she beckoned him over and gave him a task to silence his questions.

“Giorgio, before the maestra leaves today, I want to draw you with her as a parable of Youth and Age.” Giorgio nodded and returned to his tasks. “You will have it as a token of my thanks for your work today,” she told the woman. The two resumed their conversation.

Federico Bencovich had a hard face: his squarish forehead was creased, the eyes below were onyx beads. Only his cheeks were of a

heightened hue, the rest gaunt, the mouth thin. Yet when he smiled he warmed with his glance. A tall man, he dressed well and could be surprisingly kind.

At the Lama bottega, Giulia and Giovanni Piazzetta waited for him all morning long. They were meeting to discuss the final disposition of their three Magdalenes. Finally, Bencovich arrived.

He bowed formally to Giulia and took her hand in his, clasping it lightly. He engaged Piazzetta in a friendly embrace.

"I see you have changed since Crespi's studio," Bencovich said. "You are your own master now—without that harsh mentor."

"I was terrified of Crespi," Piazzetta admitted, "although we all realized he was a bit mad. So capricious. No one ever knew what to expect from him."

"He was merciless with me as well," Bencovich said, "and I was already a master. But he was especially quick-tempered with his pupils and apprentices."

"Yes," Piazzetta agreed. "But what I learned from him was invaluable. Perhaps more than what I learned from Molinari, though as I say this I know Giulia will not be happy with me." Piazzetta smiled as he looked at her.

"She's right. It is fitting to be loyal and grateful to one's first master, isn't it Giulia?" She was pleased that Bencovich took her side.

"Of course," Giulia answered. "It is an idea that Gianni finds convenient to ignore. Crespi gave you new ways to see, Gianni, but Molinari taught you to paint and to employ our traditions. You could not be who you are without him."

"So will Giulia forever argue against me." Piazzetta's smile was now for Bencovich.

"She forgets that I—we—must live in the present. And the future too. Crespi taught me that, not Molinari. Today our best work is not only in huge scenes from history. It is also in small paintings for pretty little rooms, pictures that amuse and delight because in them people see themselves."

"And people cannot see themselves in the heroic?" Giulia asked.

It was Bencovich's turn to smile. "Not our people, Giulia, our patrons and clients. Not in this day."

Piazzetta agreed. "Besides, we must make small pictures to decorate books. Even now I have a commission for the title page of a missal by Pezzana. And look at all the bookstores and publishers sprouting up like wildflowers. Zanetti the art dealer is also an engraver, and engravers like the Zucchi brothers have their own shops. All

are thriving in Venice. Luigi Pavini's bookstore is right here in the Calle Lunga, Giulia. He is your neighbor and everyone knows him. We could make our living doing only that, making pictures and having them engraved for books. Not only religious pictures, but antiquities and vistas, *vedute* of Venice. Or portraits of fashionable people like those of Maestra Rosalba."

"I prefer to paint for the churches, like my father, Agostino," Giulia said. "Our workshop has bid to make the altarpiece for Santa Maria Formosa, here in Castello. You know, Gianni, that our greatest honor is to decorate the church of our own parish. That is what we give to our people, just as the workers of the Arsenale give their lives to building our ships."

"Giulia, you cannot speak of us in the same breath as the arsenalotti," Piazzetta said. "Have you heard about the latest *frotta*? Another murderous rampage on the Ponte San Barnaba, to see who would 'win the bridge.' The Castellani and their Nicolotti 'friends' came out in droves to fight each other, using all the tools of their trade—completely illegal! The men sent by the local *capo sestiere* couldn't control them. And even though the Castellani were mostly from the Arsenale, their own *patron de guardia* refused to intervene because the bridge was not here in Castello, but in sestiere Dorsoduro. They had to

call in soldiers. Two arsenalotti were killed and almost a hundred others were arrested and taken to the public prisons. The *carceri* were filled to overflowing. It is hard to believe this is still going on."

"But the *battagliole* were outlawed by The Ten. It is already some years ago now," Giulia answered.

"Yes, and they are dying out, but there is always some dispute—"

"Or someone's sacred honor besmirched—"

"And all the old rivalries erupt again," Bencovich finished.

Piazzetta nodded in agreement. "And that, cara, is how these *malviventi* 'give their lives' to building our ships. Not even the *sbirri* get wind of these melees and prevent them, even with all their *confidenti* poking around 'discreetly' questioning everyone. They all take their orders from the *capitan grande*, and the police inspector is a serious man. So why does this state of affairs still exist? Because the Arsenale will not submit itself to any authority but its own."

"But your 'malviventi' are only boys, Piazzetta," Bencovich said. "Some start as apprentices at eight or nine years of age. They are trapped in the Arsenale all day long making nails or rope—no wonder they run riot once they see daylight."

"No, Bencovich—most are grown men. And anyway, you know that we started working at that age," Piazzetta reminded him. "You do not see painters rampaging on the bridges. My father was a stone sculptor. He would have taken his mallet to me."

"It's true, Federico," Giulia agreed. "I was at a tombolo making lace even before Agostino taught me to paint. I was ruining my eyes and my fingers working those tiny threads. My mother would have punished me had I but sighed in protest. Imagine those boys running wild on the *ponti*. And the men too. The mayhem persists because the *signoria* still patronize the battagliole when the traditional season comes, even now that they are banned. And the young *nobiluomi* are the biggest devotees of the bridge battles in all of Venice. They'll wager on a fighter in the *mostre* as they do on games of *bassetta* at the Ridotto."

"Oh well, they will wager on anything," Bencovich said. "The latest thing is the *regatta*, as though they had just invented it. All who can afford it are fitting out a racing boat."

Bencovich had more to say. "And the *forze d'ercole*. Imagine betting on the construction of a five-story pyramid formed of men. A child's game. But they wager on such nonsense."

Bencovich concluded his fulminations. "Better to have stuck with the *mostre*. One vice at a time is sufficient."

The mostre were the boxing matches held in the *arengo*, the ritual arena at the center of the embattled bridges. They took place each year during the wars for dominance over the Venetian bridges and their 'territories,' the local neighborhoods and parishes. These formal bouts had long served as ritual preludes to the free-for-all frotte decried by Piazzetta. Individual fighters were fiercely championed by their own factions of the public, and the mostre were universally popular; the enmity of the two rival factions, the Castellani and Nicolotti, was notoriously vicious, as murderous as Piazzetta claimed. At one time, the authorities might have hoped that the mostre would actually *replace* the frotte, but that hope had met a rueful demise.

The bridge battles, *battagliole sui ponti*, occurred in the fall season between mid-August and November, then in January, ending on the Feast of the Epiphany. As events sanctioned by the state, they were conducted with a nod to certain rules. These were intended to thwart the utter havoc that had reigned over the city's campos and bridges in more free-wheeling times. Such was the state of affairs until the battagliole were finally banned in their entirety.

In reality, though, they died out only when supplanted by less violent popular amusements, ones affording some of the same key features: competition, spectacle, and a conspicuous outlay of wealth by the patriciate. Accordingly, the regatta's races and the forze d'ercole's acrobatics were ideal pursuits. Thus, combat was gentled to contest and swordsmen to sportsmen, as the century's evolving story transformed its enthusiasms.

But people's resistance to restraint was as entrenched as their rivalry. For centuries, the Nicolotti, from the fishermen's community, had carried on this blood feud with the Castellani, artisans and arsenalotti from sestiere Castello, who returned the Nicolotti's odium in kind. Their passions played out in the battagliole, as opposing sides swarmed the campi, then the bridges, especially that of San Barnaba in Dorsoduro. By the thousands, armed partisans and stone-hurling spectators went at it with clubs, sharpened sticks, and daggers, vying for dominion over the riven bridge.

When the resultant maiming and murder finally proved an embarrassment for the authorities, they were compelled to police the confrontations. First, the battagliole were barred from the campi and limited to the bridges; then sticks and knives were banned and fists only

allowed. This restricted mode was the city's skittish foray into curbing civil disorder. It was not a bad effort, considering that the upheavals were rooted in primal rivalries and hoary resentments, yet ever-green in vitality, stuporous in sensibility, and lethal in yield. The pandemonium persisted.

But after a while the encounters evolved to the two-tiered performance familiar to Giulia and Piazzetta: the mostra, where a Nicolotti or Castellani fighter would score a win in a fistfight or boxing match. Then the frotta: hundreds (once thousands) of barefisted (once armed) participants, led by a *capo* in "squads" fifty strong, would converge on a bridge and pitch their rivals into the water to flounder amid the dense fleet of boat-borne spectators. The last combatants to retain their footing would "win the bridge" for their side. All Venice witnessed the spectacle: catching a glimpse from crowds overrunning the campos and canals if they were of the *popolani*; watching in pairs atop villa balconies, masked gentlemen with ladies screened by fans, from the signoria.

"Of course, the mostra and frotta are not the same," Giulia said. "One is only an excuse to brawl. But the mostra fighters are skilled and their rituals impart dignity to their contests, like

knights in the old tournaments. Perhaps they are *our* knights."

"Oh, our 'knights,'" Piazzetta said, not quite keeping the scorn from his voice. "That is why we call battagliole the *guerre di pugni*."

"'Wars of the fists, yes," Giulia confirmed, "because they no longer use sticks to fight in those mobs as they once did. Only their hands. Not exactly a tournament of knights, it's true. Still, I think the mostre are different. When two combatants fight one another as equals…" Giulia's idea was not fully formed.

She turned to Bencovich. "Federico, perhaps it is wrong to think that people today cannot see themselves in the heroic. I believe they *wish* to do so. The mostre require skills still proper to men, strength, a fighting spirit, and honor in combat. That is what my father celebrated all his life, in his battle scenes. I grew up with those images, and learned to paint the male figure from the bodies of warriors."

"So the fighter in the arengo is heroic," Piazzetta said, sighing. "*Our* hero."

"And why not?" Giulia answered. "That is why they call them *duelisti*. Swordsmen. It is a tribute to their valor."

"Ah yes, 'swordsmen'!"

"Better than gymnastic buffoons and toy boat captains!"

Bencovich smiled. “Maybe *they* are our knights and heroes now.”

“But even conferring knighthood on those arsenalotti ruffians cannot account for the impunity permitted the Castellani workers by the Arsenale,” Piazzetta broke in.

“Of course,” Giulia said, considering before she turned again to Piazzetta. “You know that the model for my Magdalene, Richa Zorzi, is a seamstress in the Arsenale sailroom. She says the workers feel privileged because the Arsenale has existed for over half a millenium, and they understand that Venice itself would not exist without them. Many of their families have been there for generations. They know and protect one another.”

“And they are shielded by the lords of the Arsenale,” Piazzetta added. “The protection of these patroni virtually guarantees that no one is ever guilty of anything.”

Giulia shrugged. “The power of the patroni. That never changes.”

“No, after this last frotta it may very well change. Everyone is weary of the disorder and the bloodshed. The battagliole were already banned by The Ten. Maybe now the ban will be taken seriously.”

“If those charged with enforcing it do so.”

"*If* they do," Piazzetta said, "the final battagliola of November will be the last we ever see."

"Good riddance!" Bencovich said, startling them with his vehemence. Perhaps his Dalmatian roots had inured him to the ingrained partisanship of those born in Venice proper.

Despite themselves, Giulia and Piazzetta felt a twinge of regret at the impending demise of the battagliole, though Piazzetta would never admit it.

Bencovich was looking at Giulia's Magdalene. In it he saw Richa Zorzi, her face flickering over the saint's image like a wraith, dark but translucent.

"I am glad that your Magdalene was not The Penitent, Giulia," he said, laughing now. "I believe this Magdalene could never feel penitent about anything, like her fellow arsenalotti."

"And why should she? She has done nothing wrong."

"*You* have done no wrong, Giulia. But if I painted your picture you would not look like that," Piazzetta said. "Her innocence may not be in question but—I don't know, perhaps it is her pride."

"And pride is a deadly sin, as Agostino is quick to remind me," Giulia said. "Not every woman

can be humble, caro. Humility is a luxury of those whose lives are in the hands of others."

She thought for a moment. "Why don't you paint my picture, Gianni? I am curious to know what you see."

"Then I will."

"Let us finish this Magdalene business," Bencovich said, with some impatience. "I leave for Vienna at the end of the year; and then Pommersfelden to meet with the Prince Bishop of Bamburg. I hear this Lothar Franz is a playful sort, yet not one to be played with. I will not keep him waiting. And there is much to prepare before I go."

With Bencovich gone, Giulia lent Piazzetta a carboncino and some ash-green paper. The drawings that emerged showed her as she looked on an ordinary day, working, painting, in a simple dress that would not hamper movement. Even the workshop dog joined in. Having colluded with Mattio to take up permanent residence, he was a fixture of their daily routine. Finally, Giulia picked him up. But before she could eject him, Piazzetta called to her then sketched her looking over her shoulder, the dog nuzzling her chin. He declined to show her his

sketches, saying he wished to surprise her with the portrait.

As he was about to leave, Piazzetta turned to Giulia and embraced her lightly. Sensing no resistance he placed his hand on her hair and turned her face to his. He kissed her mouth with a slow kiss that reminded her of long ago. When he released her he saw that unvarnished look. “I know you, caro, and this is of no consequence.” Yet there was more, something veiled and implacable she kept from him.

Instantly he realized that this was the picture he would make of her. Somewhere on the way home he stopped, impatient to be rid of his drawings. When he pulled them from his carrying case, the sketch with the little dog fell from his fingers. He felt a twinge of regret and picked it up, slipped it back in the case, then forgot it. He tore up the rest.

Shreds of ash-green paper floated, then darkened and disappeared beneath the waters of the rìo. He watched the last scrap waver and sink. Only that one indelible image of Giulia remained in his mind.

Some weeks later, Giulia was alone in the bottega. It was closed, having been deserted both by artisans and family, who had gone off to the

Church of San Luca. It was the feast day of the saint, the patron of artists. The campo would be decorated and there would be food and music, but Giulia had stayed behind to complete some work. Enjoying the solitude, she was startled by a tentative knock on the shop's closed doors. She opened up and Piazzetta appeared. He had come to ask something about the Magdalenes, just a detail. Giulia was surprised, knowing that Bencovich had left instructions with him on how they should proceed.

When they had finished discussing the paintings they sat companionably for a while. Giulia offered him a glass of wine and gave him some news. "Our workshop won the commission for the altarpiece at Santa Maria Formosa. We are just beginning to make the drawings."

"Congratulations, cara. What do you have in mind?"

"I proposed to show the Virgin and Child with St. Matthew and his Angel, with St. Magno on the right. I have included an image of Ecclesia the Church below, because our Church of the Formosa is so important to us."

"When will the work begin?"

"The church council still must approve the plan. They will come to meet with us soon."

"This commission is well-deserved, Giulia. If only I had the same," Piazzetta said. "But the

Church of San Lio here in Castello, where I was baptized, already has its altarpiece. However, at San Giovanni Battista at Bassano, they've approved the remodeling of the choir. We will make the decoration, and I am working on those drawings now. It is so much easier to find commissions since I was admitted to the fraglia. Giulia, you must keep trying to be inscribed. It is not necessary for you to struggle so. And it is not right."

"Well, at least now we can work without the fraglia," Giulia said. "Once the painters had to be inscribed or no one could commission them. Still, it is difficult for me because we receive fewer referrals and so have fewer opportunities to find patrons. I will keep applying to be inscribed, but meanwhile we must do the work we can get. And I must continue to make lace and teach some of the young lacemakers who come to the workshop for instruction." She stopped to reflect.

"It is exhausting, Gianni. But even Rosalba did it for years."

"Yes, I know," Piazzetta said. "I am beginning to have pupils in my shop as well. They sit copying drawings hour upon hour, just as we did at Molinari's, until we were good enough to participate in his work. Remember, Giulia? Now I spend more time looking after pupils than

painting. But some show promise. They will be masters one day." Piazzetta stopped, absorbed in his thoughts.

"Will you marry? Now that things are going well for you, I mean," Giulia asked suddenly.

The question surprised him. Still, he answered her. "I think of it often, but the bottega isn't secure yet. We do not have enough commissions. When I marry and have children I don't want to worry."

"Children! You are already thinking about children and not even married. How many?"

Piazzetta grinned. "Many."

"How many?"

"Fifty."

"Does your wife know? Oh—you have not found a wife yet."

He stopped smiling and said soberly, "No, I haven't."

"Well, then," she said, "you can't be unfaithful to her."

"No, never."

"So it is lucky for you that you haven't chosen her yet."

Giulia had been looking at her painting of the Magdalene while they talked. She turned from the easel where it rested, and kissed him gently. She was about to draw back but he pulled her close and rose with her, without disturbing the

kiss. They fell together in a storm of clothing and muffled cries until he curbed his need long enough to push her skirts aside and free his pressing flesh. He entered her abruptly and wildly. She grasped him, taking him deeper, until she cried out. Still he drove with a coarse untempered rhythm that shot her through with heat.

It seemed that hours passed before they dropped, all arms and legs in a heap, like linens piled by a maid gone mad.

"Who will you marry, Gianni?"

"Giulia. I...don't...know."

They were married, years later, on the twenty-fourth of November in the Church of San Lio, where Piazzetta was baptized. It was a stone's throw from San Vidal, where Giulia was born—both parishes in sestiere Castello.

They knelt before the priest as he blessed them, their hands joined beneath the cross embroidered on his white stole. He wore a dove-colored mantle, she a rose-hued dress that billowed about her kneeling figure. Her breast was sheathed in white lace rising to her chin. On her dark hair, and falling over her shoulders was an ivory *ninzioléto,* the long shawl which might envelop a Venetian woman's form. Hers only

fanned her dress like a fleeing wing, ebbing to a rustle-edged border of lace, where her blushing skirt welled to the floor.

Rosa Muzioli was her name, and she was from a family of hatmakers. They were married, in fact, at the altar of the *capelleri's* guild in San Lio. She was younger than Piazzetta, only twenty, and though she was not beautiful she had a fresh face that could turn pensive or playful, but without guile. That is what attracted him to her. She had a gift for expression that transmuted her appearance while she remained herself, steadfast and knowable. At first he thought he would love to paint her. And then, perhaps, that he would love her, in the manner of his inconstant heart.

Rosa took quickly to life in the artist's workshop. For her, it was not so different from that in the hatmaker's. She helped him when she could, sometimes modeling for him. Otherwise, she had her hands full with the accounts and running the household.

The next year Giacomo, named for Piazzetta's father, was born. The couple did not have much of their own. Piazzetta had never been able to turn the workshop into the lucrative affair he'd imagined for himself before having a family. His gift was in the work—brilliant, inventive, wistful—not in its management. Still, now that he had a son, he was utterly happy, and

so too was Rosa. He never once regretted the marriage. Giulia Lama was invited to the wedding and had attended.

Weeks after Piazzetta tossed the shredded drawings of Giulia to the water, he had come again to the Lama workshop. Out of breath and excited, again he asked, could he paint her picture.

"But you never painted the first one," she said, laughing.

"Remember? The one I asked you to make when Bencovich was here."

"The one you *challenged* me to make."

"So that is why you never finished it? Because I 'challenged' you?"

"No, I did not finish it because—I don't know why. I'm sorry."

"But why do you want to paint me now? Explain yourself, caro."

"Gladly. Luigi Pavini—"

"You mean my *neighbor* Luigi Pavini, with the bookstore right here in the calle Lunga?"

"Yes, yes. Luigi Pavini is printing a volume of poems illustrated with allegories of the arts—Music and Poetry, Architecture and Painting. He has given me the commission for the pictures,

which he will have engraved. I want you to be the Art of Painting. Do it for me, Giulia?"

Giulia paused. "Only if you promise to finish it this time."

"Thank you." He said this with some emotion. "You are the very soul of painting, cara. I could not imagine another model. And I could not imagine you as anything else."

With this comment Giulia felt a pang. What had he meant? That she was capable only of making pictures? But she set aside her qualms. It was an honor to represent the Art of Painting, an honor to be chosen by Piazzetta.

He had seen her disquiet and wished to ease it. "Oh, I meant to give you this. It was in that old leather case of mine. I thought you might like it." He handed her the sketch of herself, holding the dog with a backward glance.

Giulia brightened and thanked him. She wondered how the Art of Painting would turn out.

Then for months she heard nothing more. Finally, Piazzetta sent an assistant asking her to his bottega.

She was shocked by what she saw: a woman whose shadowed deep-set eyes shone with immense sadness.

Her face was slightly raised, gazing over her shoulder in a three-quarter turn. It seemed to Giulia that she looked directly at *him*, Piazzetta, though the heavy, hooded lids obscured the truth in her eyes. Perhaps he had not the courage to endure such truth. He had clothed her in a somber, red-purple robe, her white hands emerging awkwardly from the voluminous folds of the sleeves, like captives fleeing a plush but oppressive seraglio. Her right hand was tipped upward, a slender brush or pencil held hidden beneath it, the little finger curving upward in delicate protest. Her palette of paints, secured by a sturdy thumb, rested on her left hand.

A black ninzioléto, thickly decorated with gold embroidery and a glinting border of gold ribbon, covered her shoulders. A soft white collar rose to her throat, drawing the eye to her face. Piazzetta had made Giulia's hair a red-gold chestnut, pulled back, but framing her forehead with a curl on either side. He had allowed her those small symmetrical arcs of gold hair, recalling the goddess Diana's crescent moon diadem, and had rendered them in the mode fashionable for an earthly woman.

"Do I always look so sad to you?" she asked. It was the first thing she thought to say. "I have never looked like that."

"No, Giulia, but—"

"And others don't see me so, Gianni. Only you think me sad."

"No, not sad, Giulia—"

"Yes, melancholy. And harsh."

"Never! But you are serious. In your work. And with people."

"Yes, I am serious in my work, And with those I love. We should all be so," she chided him.

"Yes, we should. But we cannot if it is not our nature."

"And it is not yours?"

He paused as though considering. "I don't know."

"So you cannot be serious. With me."

"Giulia..."

"That is why you made the portrait so sad. It was a way to tell me how you felt. Without telling me."

"Don't be angry, Giulia, please."

"You should have told me—or not told me at all. Instead you leave me to divine why I look so miserable. *Had* you told me I would not have been so."

"Oh? And how would you have been? How should I have painted you?"

"I don't know. But 'angry' is how you should paint me now."

Piazzetta smiled. "I would not dare."

"Why am I not surprised?" she said, returning his smile.

"You are hopeless."

"You know that I am a coward, cara. And Molinari once said I was frivolous. I believe he meant I was weak. Then Crespi told me that, in my pictures, people were holding back tears even as they played in some Garden of Eden. Maybe the sadness in your face is not yours, Giulia, but mine."

"But why?"

He shrugged. "Life is short. The heroes and saints we honor in our work are dead. All that remains are tales and epics, and those are for the ages. But that girl on the street, picking a flea from her blouse? She is alive *now*. She is with us, Giulia, for us. Perhaps that is what I learned from Crespi, difficult as he was, that the life around me holds riches. Venice with her great galleys is no longer, Giulia, but she is still alive, as we are, and lives as we do, day by day."

Giulia shook her head impatiently. "Then why did you not paint *me* like that? As you can see, I am alive right now. As I am in your sketch with Argo." She nodded to the picture of herself with the little dog, propped up on an easel.

"I could not use that for—"

"You go out and sketch girls with fleas like your master Crespi, but when you paint me, you

decide that once again your master is Antonio Molinari—"

"As he was yours—"

"And that I must be as solemn as Sofonisba—"

"No!"

"About to drink her dead husband's ashes!"

He looked blank for a moment. "I am sorry that you do not like the picture."

"Oh, but I do. I asked you to paint what you saw and you did. You fulfilled the commission. What's more, it is a double portrait, of me *and* of you."

Then, "Though you might have made me prettier," she added wistfully.

"I did not think you vain, cara."

"But everyone who sees this picture will think I am ugly and gloomy. They will wonder why an allegory of painting is so plain and sorrowful, as though it were a burden to paint."

He shrugged and fixed her with the hapless look she knew well because it always melted her heart. That he knew too. Their quarrel ended, the discord smoothed over, as ever.

Softly, he said, "You will paint your own portrait, Giulia, and prove me wrong."

She raised her hand, cupped as in a toast, and smiled. "Wine, not ashes," she told him.

2. Assassini

He had gone to the Teatro Sant'Angelo to hear the new opera for Carnevale, then on to the calle del Caffettier with a girl from the theater. There, in addition to the caffè's excellent coffee, he had drunk a great deal of wine. But the girl had been less than compliant—she would part with nothing, only the black-velvet *moretta* held by a button between her teeth. The mask would prevent her eating or drinking, let alone speaking. Not that he deemed her silence a loss. The mask was not called *la servetta muta* for nothing. The silent servant girl. As it should be.

He left in rather a huff, annoyed by the girl's resistance. But intoxicated and tired, he had decided not to persist and had instead rushed headlong into the cold. No portantina was waiting. Swearing, he re-entered the caffè,

procured a small oil lamp from the owner and set out on foot.

He had lately come to disdain the use of masks as an affectation better left to the Venetians. He, a Brescian, wore no mask himself. Besides, he liked being seen when out and about, and only masked if de rigueur, as when he played bassetta at the Ridotto in San Moise. Masking for the ordinary citizen was requisite there, and though only by discretion for the signoria, most masked as well. Of course, when he deemed it advantageous to go incognito, he would acquiesce to convention and don the standard mask with the short cape atop the long one, the whole finished off by a tricorn.

He had, in fact, purchased a new mask a little more than a year ago, specifically for the Ridotto, and had worn it as well to that ill-considered engagement at the Sant Angelo. Before that, his old mask—a half-mask, he recalled—had been lost. He had worn it for something-or-other opera at San Giovanni Grisostomo. *Il Ratto delle Sabine*. Yes, that was it. Siface sang in it, and that singer who…no matter. It was long ago and the mask was gone. So too, thank God, was the singer.

Now, he had left the girl at the caffè chatting with acquaintances, and given instructions for the proprietor to find her a portantina when she wished to leave. Now that he had elected to walk

home, he would take the time to indulge a somewhat drunken itch to parse his frustration with the girl *and* the opera, which was a bore—a pedestrian trifle by a German he had barely heard of. Heinechen was his name. Heinechen the Hack. *Le passioni per troppo amore.* Even the title was annoying. How much love is too much? That little tart had decided for him: *none* was enough. Perhaps she thought it was not *per* troppo but *pur* troppo: *Unfortunately, signore, you are getting nothing from me*. The slut.

Perhaps he *should* have gone to San Giovanni Grisostomo for the new production of Scarlatti's *Mitridate Eupator*. It was only three acts now, instead of the original five, an improvement right there, eliminating at least an hour of tedious bombast. But no, it wasn't even worth the time left to it. And it would have required more cheek than even he possessed to show himself in that audience. After what he had written in his satire of the composer, he was decidedly *persona non grata*, even now (and forever) among Alessandro Scarlatti's admirers.

He made his way up the calle del Caffettier, glancing at a church to his right, the San Fantin. His mood lifted. He had to smile. What an inspiration it had been to suggest that Scarlatti had a "poor wretched girl" holed up in Campo San Fantin, near the theater, where the composer

was supervising his production of the *Mitridate.* And only to discover that it was Scarlatti's *own sister* the composer was innocently keeping there—a singer, as it happened—why it was exquisite. Ineffable, really. Well, not quite ineffable, as he was sufficiently articulate to insert that insinuating verse about the little waif in his satire: *Contro il Scarlatti Musico*—Numero XL, to be precise.

And his satires were circulated everywhere—in manuscript naturally, since no one would publish them. *Those weaklings. Not even from the Coraggiosi was there a word of encouragement or approbation—not one word from Crescimbeni, or word one from Apostolo Zeno. And I, with Zeno from the beginning, when he founded the Accademia dei Coraggiosi, before they were swallowed up by the Roman Arcadia. Unlike that arriviste Muratori, whom they smothered in praise for no good reason. I had, quite sensibly, hoped that my astute and (I must say) clever appraisal of poor old Scarlatti's* baroccherìa *would have validated my entree to Arcadia with no interrogation, so to speak, at the border checkpoint. And there was no interrogation. There was nothing.*

No matter. I did not need Zeno and the others—everyone read my satires. And still do. Everyone! Even that Lama woman in her squalid little bottega, one hand glistening with linseed oil and the other on her

lace maker's tombolo to make ends meet. She read them. One of them, anyway, or two. With a little help from her miscreant brother, who sniffed around all over Venice for copies just to kiss my... What did she say to me? Ah, who remembers. Something about rancor, she said. I was not certain what she meant. "Bartolomeo" she called me, as though I were a boy. How ever did I entangle myself with her? And with the scheming brother, who insisted on clinging to me like life itself.

The woman would have forgotten me by now, except for him.

Oh, and that satire I wrote about her, 'bespoke' as the English tailors say. Well, she dared me, the little con délabré.

All that after La Moceniga of the Pearls allowed me to become her cavalier servente. *The wife of a procurator! Of course, she was untouchable—Mocenigo stipulated that in our contract. It didn't matter. Simply being seen with her aroused as much as bedding her. Probably more.*

But Lama, what was it about her? How she challenged you, with that low voice, seductive, like a velvet sheath on a fine-honed blade. And she, merely an artigiana from Castello. How could I have had any use for her but the obvious one? Perhaps I was unfair to her. But that is my métier. I am "unfair" to everyone. As is everyone, as is life, unfair to me.

After Campo San Fantin the Caffettier became the calle de Verona. He crossed the

bridge over the Verona's rìo and pressed on to the calle de la Madonna, aching to reach Campo Sant'Angelo, and home. Staggering a bit, he rued the hasty decision to go on foot. Perhaps his incaution was prompted by the wine, which was wearing off and no longer inured him to the cold. Bitter cold. Like that other midwinter in Carnevale, nearly six years ago now. Yes, almost to the day. He had gone with Apostolo Zeno to see the *Mithridates* at San Giovanni Grisostomo, then had written the infamous satire about Scarlatti. Even then he had not seen eye to eye with Zeno, who was offended by his ridicule, appalled at his venom. Well, what did he expect? Zeno the librettist had leapt to the defense of Scarlatti the composer: Zeno and Scarlatti—*opera-matti*. Opera crazies. Dotti improvised the silly rhyme drunkenly. *Clever. Heh-heh, opera-matti.*

He shivered. The streets were nearly deserted, even now, during Carnevale. *Well, almost home*, he muttered through chattering teeth. Dared he relieve himself? After all that wine he felt the need and experienced no compunction about indulging himself publicly—everyone did it. But the thought of exposing himself to the icy air was daunting. He would wait.

Yes, he would wait. He was approaching the vicinity of the calle de la Madonna, which would take him to Campo Sant'Angelo. But to get *there*, to the Madonna, he must first negotiate a slithery nest of snaking calli he customarily avoided. To reach the Mandola, however, he would be obliged to walk by way of the Rìo Terrà, to which name was appended the caveat "dei Assassini," so infamous was it for thievery and bloodshed. The *cessendoli*, hanging oil lamps intended to discourage criminal activity, were not to be installed in the city streets for a score of years. No matter. Their glass globes, crafted in Murano, would mostly be broken by incommoded toughs and *sicarios,* cut-throats armed with paving stones. The rìo Terrà would be pitch black, impervious to the glimmer of his feeble lamp.

For a fleeting moment he regretted the protective amulet he had tried in vain to purchase two days before. For some reason the vendor had made excuses and refused him the item. You could never tell with such people. Other remedies had remained available, and were efficacious enough, like that aromatic tea and the amatory tonic. Not that he required it, of course, but such embellishments did add zest. Yes, he had obtained these with no difficulty. But not the amulet. He might have demanded it had he not been slightly ashamed, a man like himself,

a proponent of natural philosophy, prey to superstition, succumbing to antiquated notions. But his recent experience in Brescia had left him feeling vulnerable. Still, he did not insist.

And now there was the darkness.

As on other occasions, he debated which was the better route, the now-proximate Madonna, or the more distant yet direct Mandola. *Mandola…Madonna* he sing-songed, soothing himself in the glacial darkness. Yes, the Mandola was more direct, but he would take the Madonna and avoid the notorious Terrà. Cursing the fit of pique that had sent him on this frigid nocturnal jaunt, he would exercise prudence.

There it was. He swayed to the left and walked to the gentle curve where the street turned again to the right, then continued straight on. The next arcing turn went left again, directly into the campo. He stopped just before the turn. He could wait no longer. Bending stiffly, bladder bursting, he placed his lamp in the calle. It flickered and went dark. Sighing, he looked around, faced the nearest wall, and pushed aside his tabarro. He reached down and unbuttoned his braghe. The flap fell over his thighs. The shock of cold was paralyzing. His attention was fixated on his startled member, which emitted only a piddling dribble. He coaxed it, and as the drip grew to a

steaming stream, he 'aahed' with relief and gratification.

He never felt the first thrust, only a bump on the back, as of someone demanding attention with the tap of a finger. The Tapper had come from behind as Dotti was wrapt in the relief of urination. The steel had not gone in far and was quickly withdrawn. But before he could turn, another thrust, much harder this time, pushed him stumbling face-front to the wet wall. He saw his belabored emission run to a formless blot. The Tapper's second thrust had gone deep, neatly in then out, with only a thin trickle of blood threading down his buttocks.

He spun round, swaying, still a little inebriated. Instinctively bending to cover his groin and keep from wetting his clothes, he found himself facing a white-masked figure in tricorn and bauta over a tabarro that swept the ground. Before he could shield himself, White Mask drove a blade to his vitals with a force that made him scream.

He looked down, confused. *What…blood?* Then, *Oh—I am stabbed!*

He experienced a breathtaking jolt as the attacker retrieved the weapon, wrenching it rudely through gut, fat, and skin. He screamed again. The Tapper, obscured, stood motionless, watching the carnage, transfixed by the ferocity

of White Mask. A twist then a gout. The Tapper was drenched, and roused, fled.

White Mask was gone too. But through a pall of agony, he discerned yet another, black-masked figure who, like White Mask, loomed and brandished.

"Don't!" he gasped. "No!"

A guttural hiss: "Yes." Black Mask's stroke was hard and true. A liqueous jet leapt from the gash in his neck. An instant, and he was racked by a venomous heat.

He went down, groaning and clutching at his bloody neck, then at Black Mask's garments. His weight dragged aside the fabric, and before he fell, he saw a well-shod foot aimed at his face. The foot kicked in his mouth and rested fleetingly on his throat before it rose, smearing blood on his lips. Dotti gurgled and moaned, faintly registering the goings-on about his person. Lastly, he saw the phantasm, a rude charm dangling from its claw.

"Give…" he wheezed, trembling hand outstretched. The amulet was snatched away. Mirth like a fetid breath, low and warm. The creature's dentiled maw shone an instant, then vanished. His hand shrank back and sank to the ground.

Then perhaps someone brushed his *velada*, parted the pocket…gone.

Having shed the mask and bauta bloodied by White Mask's assault, The Tapper was more vulnerable to discovery in the campo. But the blood was too filthy, too intimate to remain close, and the safeguards were ripped off on the run to be sunk in the rìo. Thus exposed, The Tapper sought refuge in a doorway to weigh the flight ahead. But once on the threshold, an occult presence quickened in the murk. Instantly, The Tapper turned away, fixed a final eye on Dotti, then fled to chance the darkness.

Shadows were undulating in the side streets. From another doorway a big shadow emerged, then nearby, a small one. The small shadow poked out its head and quickly retreated. Big Shadow crept to where Dotti lay on his back in a freezing pool of blood and piss, his breeches rumpled round his knees. Did he still breathe? Big Shadow bent over him and in a moment yet another instrument penetrated the nunzio with surprising force, then again, leaving its distinctive signature. After the first jab Dotti was heard to groan faintly, or perhaps it was only gas escaping his belly. But after the second jab there was no mistaking it: the man was dead. Big Shadow breathed noisily from the exertion, or

perhaps from excitement. Big Shadow rooted about in Dotti's velada, grabbing at then cramming something into the big coat pocket, pulling out a purse and throwing it down with some coins dug from it, snorting in contempt. The coins landed in the pool of blood still congealing to ice. Soon they would look like gold buttons on a black velvet coat. Big Shadow fled.

Having seen enough, Small Shadow left the sheltering doorway and stole away, joining the other shadows in the obscurity that reigned till first light, terrified of what lurked in the darkness of the rìo Terrà dei Assassini.

It was not even close to dawn. Hardly anyone was up and about, even in that sestiere of early-rising artisans and arsenalotti. In about an hour, people would stir and step from their houses in the calle de la Madonna. But the Mandola and the rìo Terrà were stupidly quiet and still.

The nuncio lay on the street undisturbed, tricorn neat at his side, wig canted from his head like a peeled rind, baring ruddy hair. A verse on a creased white sheet jutted carelessly from the big pocket below his idle heart:

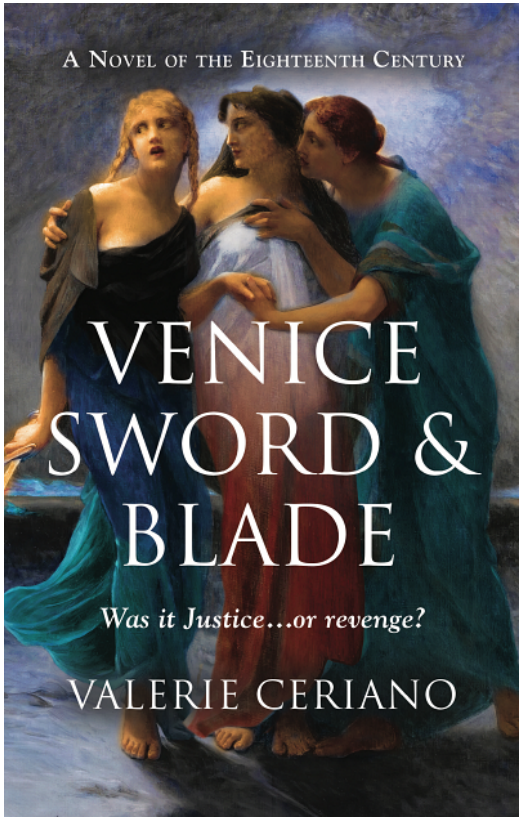
Di quel che lei scrive
Non possiam' ride.
Ma sangue e carne?
Lei potem' darne.

About the Author

Venice Sword & Blade is Valerie Ceriano's second novel drawing on a fascination with the eighteenth century—its art, its intellect, its inhabitants, its aura. Ceriano's first foray into that era was by way of her master's thesis, *The Banquet of Cleopatra as an Image of Magnanimity in Eighteenth-Century Venice*, which examined frescoes made in 1744 by Giambattista Tiepolo for the Palazzo Labia.

So, it should be no surprise that her present story transpires in the Venetian *settecento*, enticed as she was by that incandescent era, now swathed in the Serenissima's lurid sunset hues.

Valerie Ceriano lives and works in New York City.



Venice in the eighteenth century: her ancient beauty lingers still. So too does Death, as Arsenale toughs war with artists, maskmakers, and Golden Book patricians. In their private struggles and bloody public clashes. no one is spared.

Venice Sword & Blade
By Valerie Ceriano

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