

An artist pursues his destiny through an empire's opulent courts.

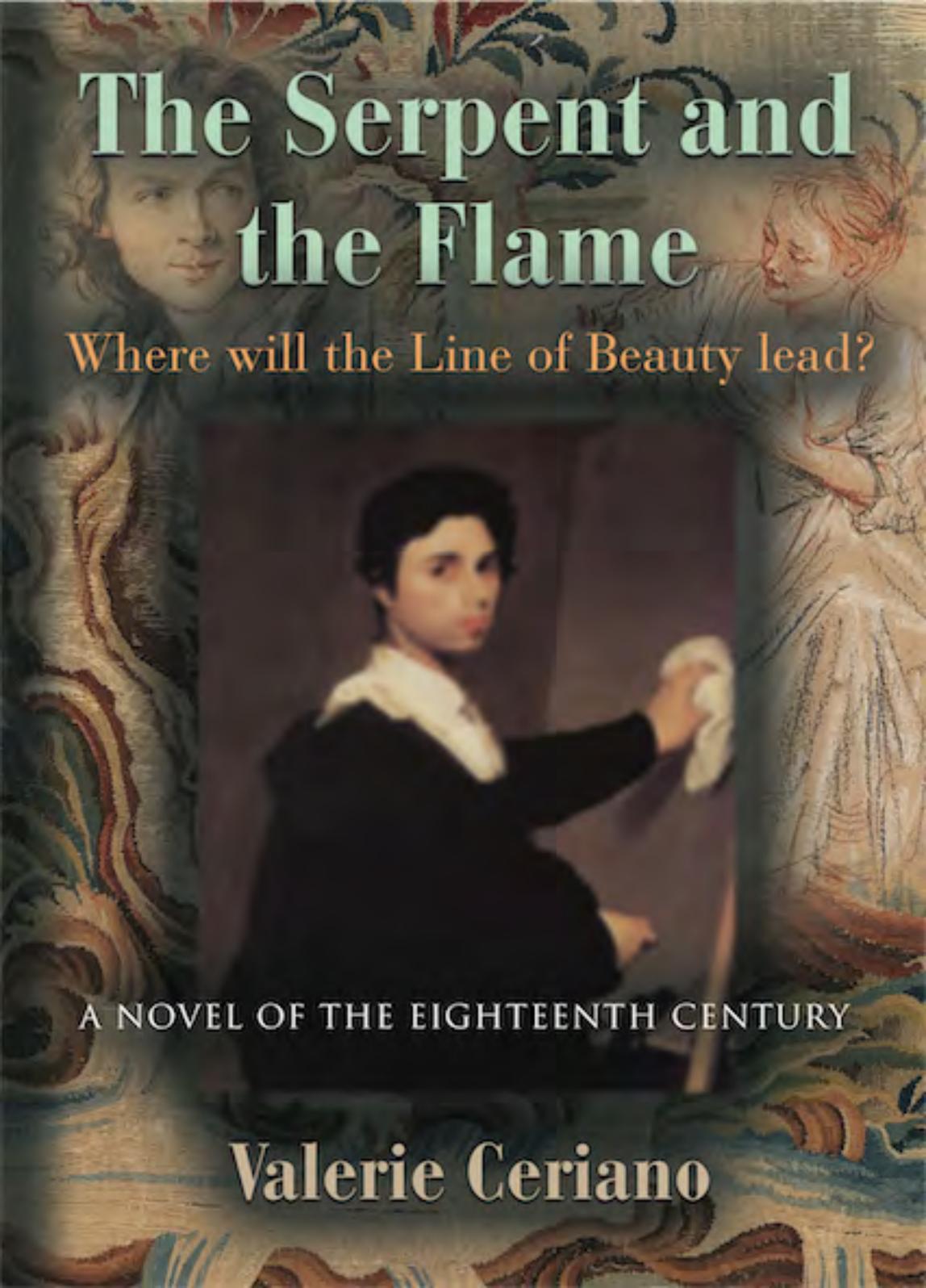
The Serpent and The Flame

by Valerie Ceriano

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The Serpent and the Flame

Where will the Line of Beauty lead?

A NOVEL OF THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

Valerie Ceriano

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Schloss Favorite

Von Hildebrandt's gorge rose whenever he heard mention of *Schloss Favorite*. It was not *his* favorite, not *his* darling, *his* pet edifice. Hildebrandt actively loathed the place. Nor was it von Welsch's design that prompted his disgust – the lively play of pavilions and gardens, the piquant orangerie now thronged by fashionably dressed strollers.

No, it was none of these things that he found insufferable. What galled him was the mere six months (*fifteen years ago now!*) that Welsch had spent working with Hildebrandt in Vienna. That brief stint had so transformed the sensibility of Welsch, the staid German military engineer, that he was able to turn out this *Louis Quatorzieme* confection with a mere flick of the wrist! (*How had he done it so quickly?*) With it, he had won the heart of prince bishop Lothar Franz von Schönborn, who appointed Welsch his own chief architect. Hildebrandt felt himself to be an innocent apple whose luscious flesh had harbored within itself a grubby greedy worm. Thus he despised *Schloss Favorite*.

And now the prince bishop had asked him to chaperone the new stuccoer – a protégé of Neumann's, no less – around the *Favorite*, to point out the niceties of Welsch's designs. Would indignities never cease? Meanwhile, Welsch was probably off in Würzburg, sipping coffee with Friedrich Karl, discussing the minutiae of a door frame. Or perhaps he was at Fulda, checking to see if *that* ugly orangerie were still standing – so flimsy, so wanting in decorative spirit. In the end, Hildebrandt observed with satisfaction, Welsch had never really understood the Viennese style. Hildebrandt felt better, less cheated, noting this, though he soon reverted to venting his spleen.

"*Bauwurm*," he growled, employing Lothar's light-hearted term for the 'construction bug', the worm that insinuated itself inside someone and induced the insatiable urge to build. "Welsch is a '*Bauwurm*,'" Hildebrandt repeated. Unlike Lothar, Hildebrandt muttered the word contemptuously, as one might call a worker a *myrmidon*, unthinking and ant-like.

"The man spent his time shoring up military fortifications until he was nearly fifty, for God's sake," Hildebrandt thought indignantly, ignoring that he too had begun his career as a military engineer.

"Has he even *been* to Italy?" he asked himself rhetorically. As one born in Genoa, Hildebrandt was proud of his Roman architectural training with the great Carlo Fontana, albeit the master's style was now outmoded. At that moment he felt Welsch had vicariously filched from him this privileged experience as well, adding it by stealth to his own credentials. "His drawings look like third-rate Roman engraving of *Il Gesù* made for tourists. That's precisely why the designs were never executed," he added smugly.

It was true that these designs of Welsch's were indebted to the sixteenth-century Roman church, and that they had never been realized. But the drawings themselves were

meticulously rendered and lovingly veiled in tinted washes. So prized was Welsch as a draftsman that his drawing instruments were preserved in Mainz like rare objects in one of Lothar's collector's cabinets.

But Hildebrandt, in thrall to his own fulminations, could not be fair-minded. He remembered his first great project in Vienna, where he had indeed put to use his military experience, infusing the open spaces he had traversed in Piedmont with Prince Eugene of Savoy into the noble spans of the garden palace Mansfeld-Fondi. The site had been ideal, luckily, outside the city walls. When his grand conception succeeded, it became the hallmark of his career. But Hildebrandt's pleasure in this remembered success was short-lived. With it came the memory of Fischer von Erlach's alterations to this same palace. His afflicted eye flicked savagely as he envisioned the double row of arched windows von Erlach had inserted in the central projection of the building. The top row had penetrated the entablature. "*Schändung*," he hissed, "violated."

In the end, Hildebrandt finally managed to free himself of von Erlach. He embarked upon the design of yet another palace in Vienna, the *Stadtpalais* Daun-Kinsky. This he had used to announce his own elevation to the rarified sphere where ornament was liege to brute utility, the same realm to be graced in music some dozen years later by Farinelli, with his incomparable limpid voice. Hildebrandt proceeded to abandon his fortresses, uproot the last unsightly weeds of his military stock, and begin cultivating bays graced by herms, nurturing them tenderly to yield his rightful place as a late-blooming scion of the aristocracy.

Hildebrandt's walls were to become vestigial carapaces fractured by the light of embedded windows. He learned to harmonize the large horizontal spaces he privileged with the vertical grandeur of giant pilasters. In an age where the theatrical and ceremonial was reality itself, he lavished consideration on that *sine qua non* of princely palace accessories, the grand staircase. Although his first staircase was modest, it was singularly dramatic, topped by a final unattainable storey and flooded by light whose source was an enigma. Finally, Hildebrandt's bold reversal of architectural principle was a direct slap in the face of Fischer von Erlach.

The debut staircase ushered in the defining moment when Friedrich Karl, the Schönborn nephew, commissioned Hildebrandt to design the central space at Pommersfelden. This was the setting for Lothar's much-vaunted staircase, of which he was so proud. While it was true that the prince bishop had contributed the idea of a staircase which was double-armed, it was the Viennese Hildebrandt who provided the brilliant stroke of surrounding it with a three-storey gallery and branching corridors; these he set within a triumphal framework of backlit tiers, which provided yet another spectacle for the delectation of guests ascending to the imperial hall. Hildebrandt was a decorative genius. Everyone knew it. Two years after the completion of Pommersfelden, he was ennobled, thereby fulfilling his ambition to become Lucas *von* Hildebrandt, architect and companion to princes.

Just as Erlach had been vanquished by Hildebrandt, so was Welsch deposed by Neumann soon after. Welsch had submitted a design for the court chapel of the Würzburg Residence to Philipp Franz von Schönborn, the prince who early-on laid the foundation stone inaugurating the project. But when the hated Philipp (the same one thought to have been poisoned) died suddenly four years later, he was replaced by an elector hostile to his legacy, who would outlive him five years more. By the time the gracious Friederich Karl became prince bishop of Würzburg, Welsch's designs were deemed "excessively Italianate" (Hildebrandt opined that this was due to the influence of von Erlach, not to any first-hand familiarity with Italy on the part of Welsch) and so, hopelessly out-of-date.

Balthasar Neumann, now the project architect, was sent at once by Friedrich Karl to Paris, where the most radical innovations in palace architecture were occurring. There he met with the French court architect Robert de Cotte. Unlike his predecessor, Germain Boffrand, who had visited Würzburg five years before and approved Welsch's plans, de Cotte supported Neumann, and Welsch's plan was scotched.

Now Prince Bishop Friedrich Karl considered the 'aristocratic' Hildebrandt to be the originator of the 'best architecture of the day.' But Neumann was in command at Würzburg, and the shadow of the most advanced French architects, whom Neumann had welcomed, loomed ominously over the Viennese. The French had, after all, dispensed with Welsch's mezzanines and pediments on the projections of the new building, and added the balconies overlooking the *cour d'honneur*. Still, this had allowed Hildebrandt only to apply his blithe Viennese manner and ornamental touch to the pediment motif, nothing more; the interventions of the French had hardly furthered Hildebrandt's cause. The greater advantage belonged to Neumann. Hildebrandt knew this and so was additionally annoyed by his obligatory presence at this blatantly Francophile *schloss*, which had been modeled by Welsch on Marley, the pleasure palace of Louis XIV.

Lothar Franz had requested that the meeting with Hildebrandt, and his own nephew Friedrich Karl, take place at *Favorite* in order that he might avoid travel to Vienna. (Lothar was inclined to indulge his own increasingly sedentary habits.) The younger Schönborn had not yet made permanent his move to Würzburg and he acceded to his uncle's wishes out of affection and a genuinely accommodating nature. But Friedrich also was aware that he would engage in other skirmishes with Lothar concerning the influence of his own preferred architect Hildebrandt. As vice-chancellor to the imperial throne, Friedrich Karl knew to choose his battles.

Besides, at *Favorite*, Friedrich realized that Lothar could visit with his nieces, the daughters of his brother Melchior Friedrich, and his grand-nieces, on whom he doted. The family adored the house and could more often be found visiting there than at the more formal residences of Pommersfelden and Gaibach. This would allow Friedrich to treat with Lothar in his soft, avuncular aspect, wherein he might prove more amenable to Friedrich's desires.

Hildebrandt knew that he himself would be back in his home territory of Vienna soon,

and that Friedrich Karl would dispatch the lowly Neumann to meet with him there, rather than send *him* on an errand to Neumann. But Hildebrandt did not realize that, while Neumann had in effect helped him to quash Welsch, in the end it would be Neumann's vision that would triumph: first, in the form of the *cour d'honneur*, for which Neumann held fast even against de Cotte; and second, in the siting of the court chapel which, finally, was situated in the south block of the Residence against the wishes not only of Hildebrandt, but against those of Friedrich Karl himself.

Ultimately, it would remain for Hildebrandt to deploy upon the Residence only some minor passages of ornament.

“Now where in God's name is this Rossi?” Hildebrandt wondered peevishly. “I must meet with Hoffman this morning before they take those *pietre dure* side tables away from the house. We absolutely must come to an agreement about paying for them or Maria will be furious. And the rugs. My wife adores those rugs. God, it never ends. Now where is that stuccoer?”

*

Marco caught sight of a tall figure with a walking stick pacing the *Favorite's* colonnaded gallerie entrance. Intent on his course, the man narrowly missed the promenaders gliding slowly through. As Marco neared him, he saw that the man was talking to himself, and that he suffered from a nervous tic in his left eye.

“Baron von Hildebrandt,” Marco said, “I am Marco Rossi. I'm sorry to have kept you waiting. The prince bishop was kind enough to show me Kleiner's engravings of the *schlosses* and it was difficult to take my leave discreetly.”

Hildebrandt's errant eye twitched at Marco a few times before he smirked resentfully.

“So his excellency has taken you up, or should I say ‘over.’ Well, allow me to accompany you through Welsch's, ah, *petit palais*. We shall be quick – I haven't time to waste on frippery. Besides, you have just been shown the key points in the Kleiner ‘Bible’ by Lothar Franz himself. My presence here is somewhat perfunctory, is it not?”

Without awaiting confirmation, the architect took off at a bound, nearly leaving Marco behind.

They continued down the broad open corridor at a brisk pace. The sun shone through the window panes to their left, where musicians clutching a variety of large brass horns were gathered, waiting to assemble for a concert atop the staircase leading to the colossal scrolled hedges of the garden below. Marco felt a welcome breeze through the open colonnade on the right, which looked onto the gardens. Otherwise, it was stifling.

As Hildebrandt held forth, Marco took in the topiary sculpture in the garden, rising in the shape of obelisks and ruined Roman arches. A spotted hound, lounging next to some pyramidal greenery, appraised the two as they went by, raising its nose to sniff the air.

Accompanying the hound was a man in a ruffled knee-length coat, one hand on his hip, the other on a slim beribboned walking stick. He was commenting on the animal to a woman at his side, who gazed down on it without bending her neck. She wore a small, sheer cap atop her head, and from a string of beads about her throat, a cross on a single beaded strand fell upon the pale expanse of her nearly bare breast. Below it she held, with a sheathed hand, the edge of a voluminous coat. The garment slipped fashionably to expose her shoulder, then muffled her to the hem of her heavily folded skirt. A closed fan and a delicate pouched bag dangled from her other gloved hand. Marco was riveted by the heavy concealment and frank disclosure twinned in the woman's costume. The couple was well aware of its own effect, he thought: smart courtiers in a practiced *fête galante*.

The man's white-stockinged calf narrowed to a slender ankle, perched on a tiny foot encased in a white satin slipper. A few feet away from him, another dog, a collared mastiff, barked once and looked hopefully at a servant carrying a large dish draped with a cloth. The fragrance of a pie filled with meat drifted through the hall. Two young women and an older one, all dressed in a fashion similar to that of the woman in the couple, stood chatting beneath the open arches of the garden side of the hall. Above them male and female herms, high atop the pilasters between the arches, twisted their arms in attitudes of mock alarm.

"Those are two of the the prince bishop's nieces and their mother," Hildebrandt whispered, "The girls are called Maria Barbara and Agatha Katerina. There is a younger one, Franziska Sophia, but they say she is considering the veil, and is presently away testing her vocation by living in a convent under the tutelage of her aunt, Rose Augustine, who is a cloistered nun."

Before they could reach the end of the gallerie, the spotted hound they had passed earlier broke free of the man in the ruffled coat. It ran up to Hildebrandt and was nuzzling him excitedly, licking his hand and whining. Hildebrandt tapped it lightly with his walking stick. The animal barked once and ran back to its master, who nodded almost imperceptibly, by way of apology, in Hildebrandt's direction. Then the man snapped his fingers, and instantly, the dog lay down at his feet.

Marco thought he heard Hildebrandt mutter, "Oh God, it knows. Not now please, not now."

They continued along the gallerie to the end, where Marco and Hildebrandt could look out on a narrow parade route where soldiers marched in formation. Beside the tight strip the waters of the Rhine spread before them, dotted with full-masted frigates and smaller utility boats going about their daily routine.

Hildebrandt suggested they reprise their walk through the gallerie to enter the gardens. Marco followed the architect's swift progression back through the hall, where everyone seemed frozen in the same position as before. They passed through a walled pathway that led them down a flight of steps to the grotto of Thetis, where statuary in a cave-like enclosure stood ringed by an enormous fountain. Water shot up in gravity-defying spurts in front of the grotto and fell in graceful layers over cone-shaped forms before the backing wall. Crowning the wall was a walkway that continued to the gardens and the orangerie on the opposite side of the main house.

Hildebrandt was finally becoming winded. They slowed as they strolled past the fountain, then back up the staircase, so that Marco could see the series of waterfall fountains known as the Cascade of the Rhine and the Main. The largest of the garden fountains, it stood before the residence, flanked by three pavilions on either side.

They continued along the wall path until they arrived at another garden. This was girded by extraordinary rectangular hedges that towered twenty feet above the heads of the figures walking the grounds, closing off all vistas except those within the massive blocks of greenery. Hildebrandt led Marco to a set of scalloped steps bordering a clever cascade fountain of overlapping oval basins. He was surprised to see a small group of superbly dressed men and women lounging casually on the curved stairs. Before them, a child frolicked with a puppy.

The puppy became alert as soon as Hildebrandt walked by. It trotted to him clumsily and rose on its stubby hind legs to grasp his stockinged calf with its forepaws, and gently nipped him. Hildebrandt nudged it away with his walking stick. The creature growled at Hildebrandt and scurried back to its companions.

Hildebrandt blanched and muttered, "Yes, now it will come."

Atop the stairs, workmen were sweeping and raking, or paired like oxen, pulling heavy rollers behind them, tamping down the gravel-covered grounds. Another pair of men stood high up on a scaffold, trimming a hedge with shears to maintain its razor-sharp green planes. Behind them, in a grotto nestled amid a grove of feathery trees, was the fountain of Persephone, capped by its cunning pediment.

"Let's return to the gallerie, Rossi," Hildebrandt said. "You've seen the most important features and I have an appointment to keep. Welsch's hedges always make me slightly giddy. Those cramped little spaces, you know, they remind me of the grave, where both he and I will rest soon enough."

Startled by the morbid remark, Marco glanced at Hildebrandt and realized that he looked unwell. His former light and rapid step had slowed to a shuffle. His face was yellow and his eyes unfocused.

Marco was taken aback by the change in the man.

“Hildebrandt, you must sit down. Let me go for someone to take you back in a cart.

“No! Don’t go, Rossi.”

Marco gestured for one of the gardeners to go for help, and for another to bring water. The man came running back and offered Hildebrandt a bottle. He took it and drank.

“I might begin to tremble very hard, Rossi, to convulse,” he said hoarsely to Marco. “The instant you see a sign of this –”

“But what is it, Hildebrandt? I don’t want to do something wrong.”

“The falling sickness, Rossi, epilepsy. I am cursed by it and I never know when the convulsions will come. You can’t imagine the pressures I endure. The heat today, having to parade through Welsch’s monstrosity and – God, I forgot Hoffman! Those damn *pietre dure* tables. My wife! There will be no living with her if I lose them.”

He took another drink of water. It had a strange pungent flavor, he thought, like woodsmoke. *What was wrong with it?* He wanted to give the bottle back to the man but he couldn’t decide in which hand he was holding it. *And what is a ‘bottle’?* he wondered.

Hildebrandt began to shake. “My God, that smell! It’s like wet fur. It’s those damned dogs that were sniffing around. They could sense that I was about to be ill. But listen, here is what you must do, Rossi.”

Two liveried servants had arrived. One of them rushed up to Hildebrandt and said, “I have brought a wooden spoon from the pastry chef, sir. It is small enough to put in your mouth. The doctor ordered me to hold it there so you will not swallow your tongue and choke.”

“No, don’t!” Hildebrandt snapped. “If you put anything in my mouth I shall bite it off and *that* is what I will choke on.”

Hildebrandt’s walking stick had fallen to the ground. He bent to get it, thinking he might use it to steady himself. But the stick had become impossibly heavy. He was barely able to lift it.

Finally, he picked up the stick and tried to hand it to Marco, saying, “Here, take this letter to the *Obristhofmeister*. He will know what to do.”

When Marco looked blank, Hildebrandt shouted, “Do it now!”

All Marco heard was, “It’s time for bed!”

Hildebrandt realized that he had said the wrong thing but did not know what it was. He knew he had not really given Marco a letter, and so began hunting around for one. Not finding one, he could think of nothing else to do.

Then he couldn't see.

Thunderous sounds reverberated in his brain. They got louder, until they enveloped him completely. He gripped the walking stick. Everything was shaking.

Hildebrandt's eyes rolled back in his head, and as a terrific shudder ran through his body, he arched his back above the curving steps, while the liveried servant tried to control the flailing body. "He will injure himself!" the man cried out.

"Quiet!" Marco ordered. "And hold him so that he doesn't hit his head on the steps." The spasms were violent and terrible. Hildebrandt turned the color of gruel before his tremors began to subside, and finally, to cease.

When his shaking stopped there was silence. Hildebrandt could hear nothing. He did not know where he was or what had happened.

Someone helped him to sit up. Hildebrandt rose, shook the man's hand and said, "I hear you've been buggered by his majesty in Vienna. And what of it?" Then he turned and walked away.

A gardener ran toward them with a cart to take Hildebrandt back to the main residence. Marco saw him and looked for Hildebrandt, who was striding away at a brisk pace. Marco sprinted over to him and lay a hand on his shoulder.

"You are safe now, Hildebrandt," Marco said. "I'm sorry if your malady was brought on by anything on my part but no one told me of your condition. This man will take you where you will be cared for."

Hildebrandt faced him dully with a quivering eye. Suddenly he was overcome by a terrible fatigue and allowed himself to be helped into the cart. They sped off, and Marco watched the cart disappear behind a monumental hedge.

*

Now the towering green barriers oppressed *him* and Marco understood why the architect found them repellent. They were grotesque, impenetrable but alive, these walls, like the attire of the young woman in the gallerie that morning. He imagined the little beaded cross accenting her bared breast. Yet she was swathed so heavily, as if in a shroud. What would happen if he touched her?

But as the thought stirred him it was tainted by the image of Hildebrandt's tortured writhing. He began to fear that one of his own fevered deliriums might strike him, with its strange aural and visual delusions. It suddenly occurred to him to ask why these stiff sentient facades didn't cry out and bleed as the gardeners pruned their stray twigs, shaping their living contours into artificial blocks of animate green. Tensing in anticipation he turned to listen, and heard nothing.

Then, there *was* a sound, a faint but discernible hum. Its volume steadily filled until the might of an unnatural and flawless voice glanced against the hard perfection of the leaf-faced walls. Farinelli! Marco breathed the name. The ideal of beauty borne of immolation and artifice, casting the singer beyond mortal flesh, was the same ideal that brought forth this verdant prison. But in place of subjugation it was given Farinelli to voice the strains of a pure and exalted freedom that returned the soul to its pristine nature, to God. His sublime monody breached the green bulwarks' menacing strictures.

It liberated Marco from their captivity.

Delicate yet invincible might was in the voice, was the voice. Damming by the knife the vital fluids at flood tide had made of the castrato's body a steely gorge of sinew and muscle, a chasm resonant with the voice's surging torrent. The flesh thus diverted, the artificial perfection and power of this voice yielded a refinement met only in seraphic dreams. Marco closed his eyes and blazing trails of ornament coursed illimitable vaulted expanses, lightly eluding symmetry, scattering to the winds the rigid portmanteaus of Hildebrandt and the others. He caressed a sleek and wayward arc with his mind. It laughed! A perfume of uncanny scent filled his nostrils. He tasted a capricious melting frond and its sweetness dribbled from his tongue. Ah, intoxication!

Swaying, he watched the workmen calmly clip till all imperfection was shorn, the *sopranista's* voice counterpoint to their *continuo* trimming. Anxiety and care ebbed. He felt himself weightless, a flickering rush of sparks blown aslant by whooshing drafts.

The walls that surrounded him were thriving, flawless, and impossibly light, their interstices brimming with air. And now the precisioned shoots sang with life, and deeply now he imbibed their fey quickness, a quickness kin to the serpent and the flame.

*

Marco walked slowly back through the labyrinth. He would begin to visit it daily as he awaited preparation of Lothar Franz's palace in Mainz. There had been delays in readying the building for Marco and the workshop. Some precious woods had taken longer than expected to procure, and the prince bishop had insisted upon them for his apartments. Then there was the accident in which the master stonemason in charge had injured his back. As Lothar Franz seemed willing to allow Marco to remain at *Favorite* until the Mainz residence was ready for them to begin work, he had a rare respite from the unceasing labor that was his usual daily fare.

Absorbed in thought and tired by the crisis with Hildebrandt, Marco took a wrong turn and found himself between the towering hedges of a long straight path that seemed to have no exit. As he continued to look toward its far end, an aperture hidden from view suddenly rose in the wall and he quickened his step to reach it. Ahead of him walked a woman in a russet silk coat that fell to her heels. Her large ruffled sleeves hung at her sides and the coat floated behind her as she glided to the outlet before them.

She is lost too, he thought. As he came closer to her he saw that the hair piled beneath her cap was a brilliant copper color, set off by the hue of her robe. She disappeared through the opening in the hedge. Marco followed her moments later only to discover that the path ended in a secluded boxed-in court. The woman, or the girl, for she was young, had seated herself on a wrought iron bench next to the hedge, and was reading a book that she had pulled from her reticule.

Marco stopped short, surprised to find himself alone with this beautiful and aristocratic young woman. But she did not appear to be alarmed at his presence. She nodded to him politely, then wished him a good afternoon.

“I thought this was a way out,” he explained. “I wanted to return to the residence and took the wrong path. Forgive me for intruding on you. I am the prince bishop’s stuccoer, *signorina*. I am new here and became lost.” He paused awkwardly then turned to go back to the path.

“Ah, yes, I too took the wrong path,” the girl said formally. “I was about to meet my sisters, but was happy to find this little courtyard where I could read and be alone. It is the only one with a bench. I dislike sitting on the steps of the fountain as others do.”

“Then I am doubly sorry to disturb you,” he said. The girl resembled the two women he had seen in the gallerie with Hildebrandt. He wondered whether they might not be the sisters she was going to meet.

“I believe I saw your sisters in the gallerie near the garden, *signorina*. But then, are you not the young lady who is supposed to be away?”

The girl frowned. “Does everyone know of this? Has this story been put about everywhere?” She made an impatient little sound. “Ah well, that has been the plan since I was a child, so I suppose everyone must know,” she continued almost to herself.

“Four of my sisters were to marry, and two of us were to become nuns. But after a brief assay at the novitiate, the mother abbess judged me unsuited to that life. I had no ‘calling’, she said. I concurred in her appraisal, although Sister Rose Augustine disagreed. She is my aunt, and acted as my chaperone and tutor at the convent. She thought that I could be schooled to submit to that life. As if I were a wild vine to be trained for a garden wall! She still insists that I would grow into it and tries to lure me back with pious books and such.”

The girl stopped, having realized that she had revealed more than decorum warranted. She looked abashed for a moment before recovering her hauteur. “There, now you know. I have told my secret to a court stuccoer, no less.” She smiled at him bitterly but imperiously and began to read again, as if he’d been dismissed.

Marco cursed Hildebrandt for providing him the gossip that led him to blunder into her affairs. “I apologize, *signorina*, I don’t wish to pry into anyone’s life.” He was irked that she had confided in him unbidden then disparaged him in the bargain. “But as you have noted, I am only a stuccoer, so you must not be surprised if my manners are wanting. Perhaps you should limit your confidences to those whom you deem to be more worthy of your – remarkable candor. Good day.” He turned on his heel to leave.

The girl shot up, furious. She had never been spoken to in such a manner. Her book had fallen to the ground. “Oh! Insolent! I will report you to the prince bishop!”

“And I will tell him that his niece is lurking about in out-of-the-way courtyards regaling with her life story any strange and lowly man who happens by!” He was beside himself, feeling not only that he had been tricked into this intimacy through no fault of his own, but then had spoken recklessly enough to disgrace himself with Lothar Franz. He stalked toward the opening in the hedge in the grip of a frustration and despair beyond proportion to the incident. As he walked out, his anger was quelled by a rush of loneliness, and he understood why he had reacted so violently to the girl.

He turned to look at her before passing under the green lintel and saw that she had collapsed in tears on the iron bench. He walked back to where her book lay on the ground.

“Your book,” he said in a low voice, standing above her. He looked down at her disheveled red hair. Thick curls, loosed from her cap, traced her creamy neck and brushed her nearly bare shoulders. He tried not to stare at the pale pink bud pressed above the low rim of her dress as she held herself in distress, and at the black cross now lying awry across the deep furrow parting her breasts. He picked up the book and turned away as she looked up, accepting from him the little volume.

She stood then, pulling her coat to her shoulders. He found that she was tall, almost as tall as he was. “Forgive my rudeness, sir,” she said softly. “I greatly admire your work at Ottobeuren, especially the figure of St. Francis. Oh yes, I know who you are. The prince bishop shows me the engravings for all his projects, and speaks to me of his artists. I have learned to esteem them as he does, and almost feel as though I know them. Since I have no one with whom to unburden my heart, I blurted my misery to you, then spoke discourteously because I was ashamed. I am very sorry, signor Rossi.”

She looked at him penitently with her green eyes, black lashes glistening with tears.

“You are forgiven, *signorina*. It was I who spoiled your solitude, so you must also pardon me. But we are both lost, no?”

He held her gaze before speaking again.

“I am Marco Rossi. It is my privilege to meet you, *signorina*.”

“And I am Franziska Sophia von Schönborn. Lothar Franz is my great uncle.

“What is it that you were reading, *signorina*?” he asked, looking at the book in her hand.

“It is a book of verses celebrating the marriage of my cousin, Ana Maria von Schönborn. She was wed last spring to the elder son of a ducal family in Venice, where it is the custom to give such books to the wedding guests. As I was unable to attend, she sent this one to me as a present. I think it’s a charming keepsake, don’t you?” She offered the book for him to see. He took it, admiring the prettily adorned paper covers and the *vignettes* and borders within, with their perfectly incised engraving.

“Yes, a lovely token of a joyous event.”

Franziska laughed. “Oh, they publish them also to mark the entry of daughters to the convent. I have uttered a prayer of thanks that they will *not* do so for me.”

“Do you pray, *signorina*?”

“Only at mass, sir. I no longer spend my days in prayer. And I read only to pass the time.

“Perhaps time will change things and there will be a clever book of poems to commemorate *your* wedding.”

Franziska gave him a wistful smile. “No, that cannot be,” she said.

He nodded and held her gaze again. “I must go, *signorina*. They are waiting for me at the residence. Good day, and please don’t be sad.” He walked toward the opening in the hedge and this time did not look back.

Franziska returned to her reading.

*

When Marco entered the *Spiegelkabinet* Hildebrandt was already there, pulling aside a drape to examine the decoration on a panel in the doorway.

“Not as fine as the stucco work in the Upper Belvedere,” he said with satisfaction, looking up. He was referring to the Vienna palace of his own design. “But the whole effect is not bad, don’t you think, Rossi?”

“Good morning, Hildebrandt,” he said. “How do you feel? His excellency wanted me to look at ideas for the new residence and he thought that I should begin here.”

“The distorting mirrors are vulgar, of course, but the prince bishop thinks them amusing,” Hildebrandt said. “He also likes the combination of porcelain and mirrors. We kept it relatively simple at the Belvedere, and at the Schönborn palace in Vienna, mirrors only. You should see Gaibach, the family manse – mirrored pilasters with gilt panels of grotesques *and* red and black *verre églomisé*.”

As they spoke, a door on the opposite side of the room opened. Two women, one behind the other, peeked in, then closed the door again. His attention drawn to the doors, Marco noticed that they were decorated with hunchbacked Pulcinelli from the *commedia dell’arte*. Each figure wore a mask with a huge beaked nose, carried a stick, and balanced his upper body on tiny stunted legs. Another figure sat dangling his legs over the door frame, supporting with his upraised arms a scalloped canopy topped by figurines and vases.

All manner of interlacing and latticework in framed compartments covered the walls of the room up to the moldings, where the ceiling began. At that point the trellis-like bands were interspersed with medallions encompassing mythological scenes. The carpets on the floor repeated the patterns of the walls and ceiling in an endless revolving scheme.

Looking down from the ceiling frescoes, Marco caught sight of his own image in one of distorting mirrors. He appeared to himself as a flat graceful curl of ribbon, as though he had been cranked out through rollers on a machine. He noticed that Hildebrandt looked the same. They turned to each other, warped and undulating, almost echoing the postures of the gilt Pulcinelli on the doors. They smiled ruefully at the same moment in the simultaneous recognition that the taste of Lothar Franz had literally bent them to his will.

“I will try to dissuade him from using these mirrors again,” Hildebrandt said. “They are truly unspeakable. We’ll give him his porcelains, but really, these are too much. He appreciates the integrity of the Belvedere. I’ll make him see that its purity is what he wants.”

After Hildebrandt had gone, Marco lingered in the *Spiegelkabinet*. He avoided seeing himself in the mirrors, which made him uneasy. Anyway, he was more concerned with how he might translate the elaborate scheme of decoration in this room to the one he was to work on. He could not imagine accommodating such an intricate set of motifs to the smaller room in Mainz. The thought of squeezing such order onto the much tinier space nearly made him gasp for breath, and he felt the need to go out for air. As he considered the pathways outside, constricted by the unremitting walls of greenery, he decided instead to visit the parade route, where he could walk beside the open expanse of the river.

The door opened again, and this time, Franziska von Schönborn peeked in. Seeing Marco, she nodded and entered the room, waving away a maid who had accompanied her. He controlled the impulse to walk past her out the door and greeted her politely instead.

This time the dress she wore was deep green. He thought he discerned the square corners of her book pushing at the soft contours of the reticule that dangled from her fingers. Her eyes were shining and she seemed far more animated than when he saw her last.

“You look well, *signorina*,” he said. “I hope you have overcome the distress you felt when last we met.” He paused, and when she said nothing, he inquired, “And you still read to pass the time?”

“Oh, yes, I *do*. And –” She paused dramatically then in a fervid tone announced, “And I have decided to return to the convent. I know that is where I can fulfill the destiny that Our Lord has meant for me.” She looked at him with eyes brimming tears of conviction. A tear fell from each eye to her breast, leaving small rivulets, which she demurely brushed away.

“I am happy for you.” Marco was rather at a loss for words. “But what has made you change your mind? Why, only a few days ago, you denied any – calling.”

“It was my book!” she exclaimed, looking up at him, and seeing him puzzled explained, “Oh, not my cousin’s gift, not the wedding poems, but another that was sent to me by my Aunt Rose Augustine. She wrote that it was among her favorite readings and thought it might inspire me to devote my life to the convent. And indeed! I wish to live in the joy and suffering of His love.”

She trembled now, and was looking at Marco with such frank intensity that he averted his eyes, just as he had with her before. But on doing so, he saw their bizarrely contorted bodies reflected in the gilt-framed looking glasses on either side of the room. These mirrors were directly opposite one another and repeated their crooked images to infinity. Franziska’s misshapen head seemed to loll in abandonment as she stared at him, mouth gaping lewdly. He reached to push her away and when he did the mirror arched his body at her in an obscene fashion.

“Why, what’s the matter?” she said. He gestured toward the mirrors.

“Oh!” she said, and put her hand to her lips. When she laughed, he was able to take his gaze from the mirror. She seemed normal now, and very beautiful.

“I’m sorry, but you looked so strange that I was almost frightened,” he said. “*We* looked strange, that is.” He moved closer to her and she stood very still. Her mouth looked innocent again, her lips full and moist.

The doors of the *Spiegelkabinet* were flung open. Marco and Franziska moved apart as if it were the next step in a masque.

“Lothar Franz!” the silver-liveried man shouted. “Lothar Franz is dead! The prince bishop is dead!”

When Lothar Franz von Schönborn ascended to the episcopate of Mainz, the city was crumbling. Its suburbs across the Rhine had been razed by fire as Louis XIV pursued his wars of empire, and French troops crouched on the outskirts of the archbishop's residence. The electoral territory was scarred by rutted fields, and where crops once flourished lay fallow pasture or vineyard. The incursions of the French, and the machinations of Bourbon and Habsburg armies had blighted the fledgling renewal begun after the devastation of the Thirty Years War.

The impulse to build, to reinvigorate the dead landscape with stone and substance and order, swelled the heart of Lothar Franz as his keen eye appraised the ruined vista of his territories. But the requisite for building was peace, and so he pursued peace for the entirety of his reign. In order to build, he proffered himself as elector and friend to the House of Habsburg and its allies of the Protestant persuasion, thereby helping to safeguard the ecclesiastical states and the Free Cities from the megalomania of the Sun King.

Lothar was a shrewd and politic man. Yet he aspired to a state of peace because it was the means to a cultivated life: one devoted to collecting, savoring and sheltering the finest fruit born of man's mind and fashioned by his hand. Such a life was an ablution conferred on man to lave the wounds sustained in depredation. It was the godly reason one should build. The *Bauworm* was a germ of redemption, a manifestation of the Divine Will.

Lothar Franz was consecrated archbishop owing to the wretched state of the electorate of Mainz. For two years, he had already held the episcopal throne of the city of Bamberg, which had been taken repeatedly by enemy forces during the war. Despite this captivity, and the pummeling endured by the entire region, Bamberg was spared the ruin endured by other municipalities. It remained well-run and prosperous, and in order to be confirmed to the Mainz episcopate, the new prince bishop would agree to spend some months of the year in Bamberg. This arrangement guaranteed that one-third the upkeep for the Mainz enterprise would be provided by the more well-to-do Bamberg diocese. Thus Lothar's installment was a boon to all concerned.

His candidacy was confirmed by the pope, Innocent XII, the emperor, and his coadjutor in Mainz, Anselm Franz von Ingelheim. When the French had invaded Mainz some five years earlier, Anselm Franz, with his court, had prudently retreated to a small and quiet town outside the fray. He refused to return to the capital while hostilities raged and was pleased that Lothar Franz might become his coadjutor. The new candidate had a reputation as a competent administrator and, furthermore, was not a member of the imperial hereditary line. Fortuitously, he happened to be distantly related to Anselm Franz himself.

Lothar's election to the episcopal seat of Bamberg had been unanimous, and this concensus was commemorated by panegyrics attributing the singular event to the beneficence of the Holy Spirit. The Jesuits, by whom Lothar had been educated, fêted his

election with a volume of poems holding forth upon the qualities of the good prince as expressed in signs of the zodiac.

Less than two years later, upon the death of Anselm, Lothar made his victorious entry into Mainz as archbishop, elector, and chancellor of the Holy Roman Empire. It was a bravura performance whose every nuance presaged the benevolent order, the virtuous munificence, and the nascent riches about to issue from the reign of Lothar Franz von Schönborn. So was it perceived by spectators and participants alike.

Indeed, the German-language pamphlets commemorating the day played joyfully with the new elector's name, celebrating the "*schöner Brunnen*", the 'lovely spring' that had surged up in Mainz. His Jesuits, their wordplay in Latin, exulted over how "*ex fonte specioso*", 'from a beautiful fountain,' a new age would stream forth.

It was a day of unbridled joy and promise.

Just so was the day of Lothar's funeral one of universal regret. He lay in state, flanked by his bishop's sword and crozier, the mitre of his episcopate and elector's cap at his feet. When the funeral cortege passed through the city over which he had presided for some thirty years, the procession was nearly a mirror image of that first triumphal day of entry. As canon fired salvos from the city's battlements, a phalanx of carriages filled with distinguished clergy led the way. The prince bishop's heavily decorated catafalque, imprinted with a death's head over the sun and the astrological signs, followed, drawn by matching white horses. On either side strode the dragoons of the electoral guard.

A host of carriages bearing the prince bishop's family members came next. Among them were the remaining three of Lothar's six sisters. They were seated with Franziska Sophia, who sat beside her mother. With them were her two sisters and Franziska's aunt, the cloistered nun Rose Augustine. The most numerous of the family members were the offspring of Lothar's elder brother Melchior Frederick, whose children had numbered fourteen. The surviving four of seven daughters were in attendance, as was Lothar's nephew Friedrich Karl. He would succeed Lothar as archbishop of Bamberg, just as he had recently replaced his unlamented younger brother Johann Philip as archbishop of Würzburg.

The household staff of the court followed, their brilliant silver-embroidered livery subdued by mourning emblems. A troop of horses from the elector's stables came after, led by grooms. As per the special instructions of Lothar himself, carriages were provided for his main designers and artists so that they might accompany him on his final journey. Thus it was that Marco was sharing a carriage with Rudolf Byss, who had frescoed the vaulted ceiling at Pommersfelden with images of the Four Continents, and with Hildebrandt and Neumann. The latter had returned to Mainz especially for the funeral, from Gossweinstein, where he had been inspecting the construction site of one of his churches. Members of the city's guilds took up the last place in the procession, holding aloft banners each inscribed with the insignia of their artisanal specialty. Finally, the citizens of Mainz joined the cortege as it approached the cathedral where their prince bishop would be laid to rest.

The tension in the carriage conveying Marco and his companions was like the crackling of a glazed vessel cooled too quickly. Only Byss, the old painter, seemed unaware of it. He was by nature a sweet man, devoted to his work, and largely innocent of the rivalries that infected the court's stable of artists. Hildebrandt, meanwhile, was incensed that he, an aristocrat, had been assigned a carriage with Rossi and Neumann, mere craftsmen, while the prince bishop's family rode ahead. Neumann, for his part, didn't much care, and had accustomed himself to Hildebrandt's airs. But the other architect's disgust and resentment was so palpable that, after a short stint in those close quarters, the usually even-tempered Neumann longed for the oppressive ride to be done.

"Rossi, you should learn to paint," Byss was saying. "Your drawing and your sculpture show that you have a gift. Why don't you study with me? I would be glad to teach such an apt pupil."

"Thank you, Byss, I would be honored to study with you. But now, none of us knows where he will be tomorrow," Marco said. "I had barely begun my work for the prince bishop. I don't know if I will be kept on to complete it."

"That will depend on the new elector, Rossi. I understand that it may be Franz Ludwig, of the Pfalz-Neubergs," Neumann said.

"Hah! Franz Ludwig was vying for that position when Lothar was elected. He didn't get it even though the emperor was his brother-in-law," Hildebrandt smirked.

"He didn't get it *because* the emperor was his brother-in-law, Hildebrandt," Neumann corrected him mildly. "Don't you recall? Anselm Franz von Ingelheim was archbishop at the time and the idea that yet another Pfalz-Neuberg would be his coadjutor and possible successor was unacceptable to him.

"All of Mainz remembers his ire at having to share the archbishop's seat with Anton, who was also a Neuburg. Besides, no one wanted someone with such close ties to the emperor. The episcopacy was to remain independent – or to become even more powerful, as it did under Lothar Franz. That is why when Anton died, Anselm Franz was delirious with joy to have Lothar as his coadjutor: the Schönborns are not of the imperial lineage, though I hear that they are somehow related to the house of Ingelheim, are they not?"

"I am familiar with their lineage, Neumann," Hildebrandt replied dryly, as if to say that he, as a person of 'lineage', knew such things. "And yes, they are related."

"Of course, Friedrich Karl will have a say in our future," Neumann continued, "as he is continuing the work on the Residence at Würzburg. The second episcopal apartments are about to be furnished and the court chapel – oh my, I began it nearly ten years ago now! – is proceeding. I will want your hand there, Rossi. And Byss – yours, too."

Hildebrandt looked pointedly out the window of the coach. The halting pace of the ride had made him nauseous. He was beginning to fear another bout of falling sickness and was trying to decide whether or not to take a dose of that noisome medicine he used to ward off the attack. They had arrived at the cathedral. He decided to wait.

From where he stood between Neumann and Byss, Marco looked at the catafalque resting in the transept. The strains of the funeral mass by Georg Philipp Telemann rose from the choir; the composer had been a close friend of the prince bishop's. As Marco's eyes wandered to the family seated in front to the right of the catafalque, the back of a tall figure shrouded in black stopped his gaze. He thought he discerned Franziska von Schönborn. She was standing beside two other young women, and an older woman in a nun's habit. That must be the aunt, he thought, and her sisters.

He shivered. It was early February and the church was unheated. He could see people's breath hanging in the air. Hildebrandt was trembling so hard that at first they thought he was having an attack. But it was only the icy temperatures in the nave, barely warmed by the crowd within it. He had finally swallowed a dose of his vile-tasting remedy, then shook even more violently as the noxious flavor hit him and settled in his squalling gut. Hildebrandt suppressed a belch. He tried to center his attention on the catafalque and allow himself to be soothed by the exquisite music. Instead, he found himself wishing he were in Vienna. Next to him, the frantically busy Neumann was wondering how soon he could decently take his leave for Gossweinstein.

Only Byss was thinking of the prince bishop. Tears came as the idea took hold that he would never see Lothar Franz again. I will meet him in heaven, Byss thought, but now it is over. He wasn't sure what he meant by 'over' – certainly, Lothar's life. But Byss recalled his younger self, laboring with his assistants on the fresco of the Four Continents. The archbishop had come one day and called up to him, "Byss, be careful! You don't want to fall off the edge of the world – we'll never find you! And I don't know of another artist who can make this ceiling for me!" Then Lothar had laughed heartily and walked away. *'Falling off the edge of the world'*, Byss mused, *that is what I am doing today. Yes, it is over, my time as well as yours, dear prince.*

Outside the cathedral the crowd milled about, waiting for coaches and trying to keep warm. It was Franziska. There she stood, her face framed by the black cap and mourning veil, with just a hint of the copper hair on her forehead. He wended toward her through the crowd until he caught her eye. She was without her sisters now, with only the nun behind her. The woman had a handsome face bearing a familial resemblance to Franziska's, save that her eyes were dark, while Franziska's were of that icy emerald hue. They were waiting for their carriage.

"The gardens must be cold at this time of year," she said to him softly, her breath a puff of vapor.

“Yes, there is no one in them, *signorina*. They are quite desolate,” Marco said.

She nodded and smiled, then stepped into a carriage which had just arrived.

“Who was that young man to whom you spoke of the gardens?” the aunt asked, as she got into the carriage with her.

“Why, he is...a stuccoer, madame. He helped me to find my way last summer when I was lost in the garden labyrinth at *Favorite*.”

“A stuccoer? Whatever is he doing here? And why on earth were you speaking with a stuccoer?”

“Oh, I suppose he is here because Uncle Lothar liked him, very much, in fact. I only spoke to him to be polite. He was really quite kind. In the labyrinth. I had dropped my book and – I was lost.”

Rose Augustine regarded Franziska appraisingly for a single beat. Then she rearranged her handsome face, resuming the amused and knowing facade that had served her long and well. “I see,” she said, bracing herself for the ride.

The carriage jolted to a start.

Maximilian von Welsch had been molded by the military and by the Jesuits. He never relinquished the order's penetrating and complex mode of thought, inculcated in him at the academy at Bamberg. Nor did he lose the stoicism and the bearing instilled in him as a young officer in the corps of engineers, which sustained him in campaigns throughout Europe.

Lothar Franz had engaged Welsch to direct military fortifications for Mainz, at which the architect excelled. Ten years later, Maximilian began to create for Lothar the lively gardens and pavilions of *Schloss Favorite*, and the vast gardens and grandiose stables of Pommerfelden. While the rival Hildebrandt attributed this *legerdemain* to Welsch's brief apprenticeship with himself, Welsch had already been well-prepared to design such backdrops for the grandeur of princes. This too been instilled in him by the Jesuits, for he had absorbed, along with grammar and rhetoric, their genius for theater in defense of the faith.

Welsch's final labor for Lothar Franz had been his participation in the design of the prince bishop's catafalque and the decoration of the courtege route to the cathedral in Mainz. Directing this project had kept him occupied until the end of the ceremonial rites and, mercifully, away from the coach shared by Marco with Hildebrandt and Neumann.

Now both Marco and Welsch had returned to *Favorite* in order to discuss the work to be done in the residence and the chapel which had called Marco to Mainz in the first place. Welsch wished to show off the *schloss* personally, despite Marco's earlier visit with Hildebrandt. Besides, a meeting in Mainz or at Pommersfelden was out of the question, as plans for the selection and installation of the new prince bishop had placed those residences in turmoil. *Schloss Favorite*, however, was uncharacteristically quiet and desolate, having lost its master in the dead of winter.

"The family wishes the buildings to be completed," Welsch told Marco. "Friedrich Karl has sent his approval from Vienna. So you are not to worry, Rossi, there will be plenty to do there for some time. And after that?" Welsch shrugged.

"Neumann has said that he would take me in Würzburg."

"Then hold him to his word. Present your *bozzetti* to him and to Byss formally and make your request to work with them. I shall be in Würzburg as well." Welsch had been responsible for the grand C-shaped form of the Residence begun under Johann Philipp, Friedrich's predecessor. "Now allow me to show you some of the features of this house that his excellency particularly liked. We will keep them in mind and use them in memory of our dear prince bishop, no?"

Welsch rose stiffly and nodded for Marco to follow him. Beneath the formal peruke that fell to his shoulders, Marco could see at the temples Welsch's own iron-gray hair. It matched the narrow creased face far better than did the white scalloped curls of his wig.

The older, black-clad man turned once more to be sure that the stuccoer was following, then walked off, perfectly erect, though his knees were shot with pain from old wounds and the cold.

Marco felt in Welsch's glance the weight of years, the blocks that built Pommersfelden, room upon room of curios and porcelain and paintings, and the suffering of frequent wars fought. These burdens were transmitted to Marco and pressed in upon him, as did the pervasive glumness brought on by Lothar's death. As he followed the sere stick-like figure through the dim, now sparsely populated pavilions of *Favorite*, Marco thought of the warm effervescent mien of Amigoni and Farinelli's pure bright voice, and in his mind he began to design the decoration for the house and chapel in Mainz that he would present to Byss.

It was late afternoon when he and Welsch finished their tour. In the slanting light, Marco walked to the parade ground and ambled leisurely around it until the wind blowing from the river stiffened his hands. He was returning to his rooms when he changed his mind and headed instead toward the orangerie. The high hedge walls were still leafy and green though no gardeners climbed ladders to tend them. He turned to the path that ended in the enclosed courtyard. As before, the aperture was hidden, then revealed as he drew closer. He went through it into the courtyard.

Franziska looked up the moment he entered. He knew that she had expected him.

"As you said, no one comes here in the cold." She was wrapped in a black mourning cloak edged with fur at the throat and wrists. She wore the little cap on her head as before, and from it her veil streamed over her shoulders. In her hand was a book bound in scarlet leather, held open by her black-gloved fingers. Except for the green hedge walls, the crimson volume provided the sole color in the winter-stricken garden.

Without invitation, he sat down next to her on the iron bench. "Ah, is this the book given to you by your aunt," he inquired, "the one which you've found so affecting? Tell me, of what did it speak to have inspired your change of heart?"

"It contains the writings of St. Theresa of Avila, who tells of being a spiritual bride of our Lord, and of how it fills her entire being."

"But you had renounced that life, *signorina*. Does it comfort you to read of it now?"

"Yes, very much. As you said, it has changed my heart."

"Then I should like to read it also. Or perhaps you would read it to me."

She blushed, and he decided she was more timid than she seemed. “Oh, I don’t think I could do that,” she said.

“Then I will read to you.” He gently wrested the volume from her hand and looked at the open page.

...the angel was not large but small; he was very beautiful, and his face was so aflame that he seemed to be one of those very sublime angels that appear to be all afire...I saw in his hands a large golden dart and at the end of the iron tip there appeared to be a little fire. It seemed to me this angel plunged the dart several times into my heart and that it reached deep within me...he left me all on fire with great love of God. The pain was so great that it made me moan, and the sweetness this greatest pain caused me was so superabundant that there is no desire capable of taking it away... joy soon enters in.

Marco knew this was the angel he had seen in Rome, Bernini’s angel, at Santa Maria della Vittoria. With a small leatherbound book like this one the great Gianlorenzo had, in the last century, patterned the sublime forms of Teresa and the blissfully smiling boy. The artist had read Teresa’s text and understood it perfectly.

But Marco did not say this to the girl. He saw that the same bright-eyed fervor excited by her reading was the same she had shown him in the mirrored room. The exaltation he had known in the hedge-walled garden the day of Hildebrandt’s illness came back to him as he read of angels dressed in fire, their flame-tipped arrow piercing the saint’s breast. But the flames that had shimmered in his mind, searing it with ornament, now licked at his body, igniting its ardor alone.

“I wish to taste that joy,” Franziska murmured, her face close to his. Together they looked down at the open book.

“And what is the nature of that love?” he challenged her now.

“Oh! It takes place in the transport of the soul. It says so here: ‘The Lord carries the soul away and places it in ecstasy.’” She sighed as she repeated the word, regarding him through half-closed eyes.

It had begun to snow. Marco riffled the pages and stopped at a passage that she had marked with a scrap of paper. He looked at Franziska and read in a hushed voice:

O true Lover, with how much compassion, with how much gentleness, with how much delight, You cure these wounds, which with the darts of this same love you have caused! Who is there to know how deep this wound goes...who will be able to separate and extinguish two fires so enkindled...for the two fires have become one.

She had closed her eyes as she listened to him. He could see her breath issuing in vaporous bursts from her parted lips. Indeed a guileless look of pleasure suffused her face,

and he was roused by it. His was not the innocent confusion of body and spirit, but the merciless demand of his own flesh coursing through him. He imagined the sting of a rippling snake, its fangs sunk to bone. It was the same which, with its deadly yet vital essence, drove pulsing lines of ornament quivering to his hand and through it to the black charcoal switch. But the dark tonic urged him now as it had long ago, in the stonecutter's hut in Ceresio. At all costs he would master her nascent flame with the all-consuming fire of his body.

She opened her eyes and whispered to him, “Who is there to know how deep this wound goes?” Do you not ask that, too?” she pressed him urgently.

The snow, which had begun as a few desultory flakes, was now whirling in the air and pelting them with frigid beads of ice. They could not remain in the courtyard.

“Come, we must find shelter,” He said gruffly. Without hesitation he lifted her into his arms and carried her from the courtyard to one of the abandoned cottages of the summer gardeners. Inside he laid her on the crude bed and lit a lamp.

“It is not an ecstasy of the soul you seek,” he murmured. She protested and he said, whispering, “Let us see how deep the wound.” When she moaned he touched her mouth with his and she met it hungrily. He pulled away her cap and veil then unfastened the black cloak. Unwilling to wait, he pushed away the voluminous dress and caressed her, touching his fingers to the cleft split by her own honeyed ripeness. When he entered her she cried out. He kissed the white breasts spilling from the confines of her dress and she arced in slow luxuriant spasms. Every atom of her skin was animate, tender, susceptible. At last his hands found the silken globes hidden from sight beneath the deep folds of her skirt, and he pressed her to him insistently. With a single thrust she swathed him in heat and relentlessly he pushed to her core until his burning furor was spent.

They did not sleep until light. Outside, the snow was almost to the sill of the cottage window. They could hear workers clearing the paths. Later Franziska explained to her mother that she had been reading and fell asleep in one of the cottages near the Orangerie, then couldn't come home until they had cleared the snow. She had even made a fire to keep warm, she said. Her frantic mother kept a watchful eye on her after that, as she brooded over how she would command her wild and errant daughter.

Mainz

In 1590, the grand duke of Tuscany, Ferdinand de Medici, presented sixteen pieces of Chinese porcelain to Christian I, elector of Saxony. Christian, unaware that it was an infectious gift, accepted it with requisite pomp and cordiality. By the time Marco Rossi arrived at Mainz, the Saxon elector Augustus II had amassed at his palace in Dresden over 20,000 porcelains of Chinese and Japanese manufacture. So acutely infected was Augustus by his *maladie de porcelaine* that he installed his own workshop at court. This was presided over by an alchemist named Böttger, hired by the elector originally to produce the alchemist's conventional lead-to-gold transmutation. Instead, from his wizardry there issued 'white gold' – the first true European porcelain, rime-white and hard as its Asian forebear. The manufactory was soon moved from its first home in the kingdom's dungeons and fortresses to a hilltop castle in nearby Meissen, from whence it would inundate Europe with priceless gifts for princes.

Though monarchs craved these native wares, prince bishop Lothar Franz was more enamoured of his own genuine Asiatic pieces, perhaps as much for their alluring foreignness as for their unassailable perfection. He had no desire to possess the domestic version from Meissen, though the secret of its manufacture intrigued him. While his collection was no rival to that of Augustus, it was more than respectable, and deserving of the *cabinet* especially made for it at Pommersfelden. Approached via a long corridor, the room dazzled the visitor with the sudden splendor of its treasures at the end.

When Lothar decided to build the smaller residence at Mainz (its 'coziness' perhaps a caprice of advancing age) he felt the need to have some of his beloved porcelains by his side. He found it comforting to recall the history of their acquisition, and as satisfying to hold and touch them as to savor a succulent roast or a sublimely sweet tokay. One of Marco's first undertakings for the prince bishop was to have been suitable decoration of the room for these pieces ('small but exquisite, my dear Rossi!'). But upon Lothar's death, the *cabinet's* future was rendered moot until the Schönborn might grant permission for the Mainz residence to be completed.

Meanwhile, the new prince bishop, Franz Ludwig von Pfalz-Neuberg, was content to keep a skilled stuccoer and his workshop in Mainz at the expense of his Schönborn predecessors. Franz Ludwig had recently initiated his signature project: the rebuilding of the *Deutschaus*, an old civic edifice meant to embody the city's history and greatness. The resident stuccoer's expertise could be called upon to enhance the *Deutschaus*, where old Roman coins and other antiquities had been dug up during the renovation. These might even merit a *cabinet* of their own. What better than to have a stuccoer at the ready who knew how to appoint such a place? Thus did Marco Rossi and his workshop earn a reprieve to pursue – posthumously – their efforts on behalf of Lothar Franz.

*

Finally, Lothar's *cabinet* at Mainz was ready for Marco's hand. Along with the fifteen stuccoers and assistants of his workshop – some local Germans and others Italian – Marco had insisted that Andrea be brought from Ottobeuren where, he had heard, work was slow. Not least among his reasons for bringing him to Mainz was the knowledge that Andrea had it in his nature to become wild and troublesome with little to do, as he had with the glazier Viel. Marco suspected this was still true despite Andrea's now happily married state.

Marco was in the *cabinet* conferring with Byss when Andrea finally arrived. They were examining the ceiling that the painter had frescoed with a figure representing Asia. She was enclosed within a palm-fringed space inhabited by the continent's animals, and persons in Chinese dress. The room's mirrored panels were interspaced by narrow alcoved windows. Later on, these windows would have scallop-shell hangings masking silk drapes adjusted by a pull cord. Above the mirrored panels, and within them, were little ledges and sconces for Lothar's precious ceramics.

Marco was describing for Byss a series of scalloped shelves with gilt lacework borders.

"They will be in front of these opposing mirror panels," he told the painter. "Lothar wanted them to display some of the more unusual pieces. He had seen an engraving of a glass *cabinet* at Rosenborg Castle in Denmark that used them, and he had to have them too. The Danish *cabinet* had a gilt stucco swag above the shelves that looked like skeins of gold wool. It reminded Lothar of spiderwebs and made the whole cabinet resemble a lost cache of riches, newly discovered after hundreds of years. So we decided on a similar effect here, for the stucco framing the walls and ceiling. Spiderwebs. What do you think, Byss?"

"Oh, that's very good, Rossi, charming and original. And – who's this?"

Andrea stepped into the room, seeming to dwarf everything with his presence. He was heavier than before, muscular and with shoulders turned powerful and broad. His hair was still a thick mane that grew to his shoulders, trained back only by his impatient hand.

"God, Marco! Did you bring me all the way here to work in this little crypt? We will suffocate in here. You should have gotten Nicola's girls instead – this is more their size!" As he grinned the old grin, Marco noticed the faint creases at the corners of his eyes. The beautiful boy was gone, and in his place was a man, vital and strong.

"Andrea, this is Herr Byss," he said after they had embraced. "The fresco up there is his. Fine, isn't it?"

Andrea looked up appraisingly at Byss's work. "Very fine. We will make a beautiful decoration for it, *signore*." Marco translated for Andrea, who had never learned to speak much German.

"How is Sabine?" Marco asked, inquiring after Andrea's wife.

Andrea grinned again. “She is pregnant with our third. She made me promise I would be back in Ottobeuren before she gave birth, so we have to work quickly, *caro* – like Amigoni!” He laughed at the memory of Amigoni’s lightning agility with the brush and Rupert’s ambivalence about paying him for the brilliant work that seemed to consume so little time and effort.

Marco looked grim. “We probably *should* work quickly because I don’t know how long the current elector will be of a mind to employ us here.” He was still worried that, under this Pfalz-Neuberg prince bishop, their position was uncertain.

“But Rossi, Neumann has told me that he wants you at Würzburg, as do I,” Byss interjected soothingly. “You will come, won’t you?”

“Würzburg?” Andrea said. “If I have to keep following you all over the Europe, *caro*, Sabine will leave me for one of the wool merchants who trades with the abbey. They hardly ever leave town. That’s what she wants – a man who doesn’t leave town. The woman could be on her sixth child with him instead of her third with me!” Andrea laughed his deep laugh, but he saw that Marco was troubled.

“Sabine is probably better off with me gone half the time anyway,” he offered, sensing Marco’s distress. “Everything will be fine, *caro*.” He put a brawny arm around his shoulders, comforting him as he always had.

Marco wanted to ask Andrea about Mariam but couldn’t with Byss there. Instead he turned to the painter and said, “We’ll begin tomorrow morning, Byss, now that Andrea has arrived. There’s no room in here so we’ll have to set up outside the cabinet. I’ll tell the boys to come early and raise the scaffolding. It’s a very tight fit but they’re good boys, they’ll know how to do it. Come, Andrea, let’s go. We have a lot to talk about.”

*

Early the next morning, Marco and Andrea walked down the major thoroughfare of the city, a wide straight avenue that was well-kept and graced by a fountain.

“It’s too quiet here,” Andrea said, yawning. “In Ottobeuren the whole town is awake by now. They’re out selling vegetables or hams –

“– or bread,” Marco broke in wistfully, then added hurriedly, “or saffron and Bamberg licorice, whatever they can manage to push.”

“But where is everybody here?” Andrea wondered.

“The market, same as in Ottobeuren. It’s at the edge of town,” Marco informed him, “but look, there are some people over there.”

As they passed the fountain, silent now in winter, they advanced toward three men gathered before a palatial home. One was speaking and with one hand, pointing to the façade of the building. In his other hand he held a pen and was making notes on paper fastened to a palette-like contraption suspended by a leather cord from his neck. The palette held an inkstand – a portable desk. He was well-dressed but inconspicuously so. His youngish companions, however, who appeared to be about fifteen, were decked out in generous capes and the brocade coats of aristocrats.

When the man with the desk noticed Marco and Andrea, he greeted them warmly.

“What a splendid house! The Dahlberg brothers have made quite a home for themselves, have they not? Oh – forgive me. These are my pupils, Friedrich and Albert, viscounts of Saxony. I am Johann George Keysler, their tutor. They call me Master George, when they deign to call me at all, that is.” Keysler smiled wryly at his self-inflicted slight.

Andrea and Marco introduced themselves and explained that they were stuccoers. At this, the young men’s eyes glazed over and their previous air of boredom became a caricature of itself, so theatrical was it. Keysler noticed and shot the two a dark glare, whereupon they nodded politely to their new acquaintances.

“That red sandstone is mightily effective in the buildings hereabouts. It looks like marble, with its white veining.”

“It is the local stone, Herr Keysler,” Marco told him. “The countryside here is filled with it.”

“Then they will employ it in the *Deutschhaus*, no doubt, which I see they are rebuilding. It promises to be a superb structure when it is finished. Will you be turning your art to it, *signori*?”

“His excellency Franz Ludwig has not yet asked us to do so, no. We are still in the employ of the Schönborn family, sir. I was brought here by the late prince bishop, Lothar Franz. At present we are making a porcelain *cabinet* for a residence he had expected to use before his untimely death.”

“Lothar’s reputation as a patron of architecture is well-known.” Keysler said. “You were fortunate to have partaken of his, ah, largesse. As you well know, his excellency had an altogether superior collection of Asiatic porcelain, as well as a few modern pieces from Dresden. We were honored to have seen his collection at Pommersfelden, and his library. Both are incomparable. And here in *this* very house I understand that the Dahlbergs have a *cabinet* of natural history that is worth seeing – seaweed enclosed in crystal, a pair of slippers carved from serpentine to ward off poisoning – that sort of thing.” He paused and whispered, “Lothar’s nephew Johann Philipp might have used a pair of those.” Keysler smiled roguishly and cleared his throat.

“Oh, and at Dresden,” he continued, “a certain Mr. Zwinger claimed to have a demon – what they call a ‘genius’ – confined in glass. What nonsense! It turned out to be an old piece of moss stuck in a chunk of that every-ready crystal. Still, it did look a bit like a little man. Then there were the usual objects, ostrich eggs in *ormolu* mounts, and shells. A great number of shells.”

Meanwhile, the young gentlemen, in a gesture of mutiny against the tedious conversation, had wandered off by themselves to the house across the street.

Keysler looked after them. “That is Mr. Ingelheim’s house. Large, but it can’t compare to the Dahlbergs’.

“The boys are usually quite courteous,” Keysler continued, “but it is difficult to keep them continually entertained. We have been touring for several months now and they are restless. The last time they seemed to be enjoying themselves was in Venice, where we went for Carnival and saw Broschi at the opera.”

Marco’s attention, which had wandered during Keysler’s recital of curios, was riveted on the tutor. “Broschi? You mean Farinelli, of course. We – the painter Amigoni and I – heard him at Carnival last year. He sang in a new opera by Vivaldi, the *Orlando Furioso*. He was – it is impossible to express one’s feelings for him.”

Keysler smiled. “Yes, Farinelli the ineffable. We saw him in a production of the *Rodelinda* by Herr Handel. They say that Handel is trying to lure Farinelli to England and that he went through some extremely convoluted intrigues in order to mount this production at La Fenice. It was made especially for the singer, in order that he might display his voice to capacity. He is only twenty-three, you know; presumably he will even surpass his present ability. At any rate, there are two *sopranistas* in *Rodelinda*, and the public could not wait to see the rivals outdo each other onstage. Of course, Farinelli was the favorite. ‘*Un Dio, un Farinelli,*’ as the woman said, ‘One God, one Farinelli.’”

Marco was taken aback by the irreverence of the declaration, but he nodded in agreement with the others. It was true, after all, that the singer was inimitable. And did he himself not imagine Farinelli more often, more passionately, than he imagined God? Was this not a greater sacrilege?

Keysler, meanwhile, still pursued his quarry. Like a highly intelligent dog with a tasty bone of contention, he refused to relinquish a well-seasoned question or a tasty dollop of information.

“But come now, signor Rossi, what do you really *think* of this Farinelli?” Keysler insisted. “I am interested in hearing the opinion of one who, by propinquity, toils in the vineyards of the Muses. Of course, the stuccoer and the sculptor are denied a separate muse of their own. Perhaps Euterpe, who presides over music, would take you under her wing as

you seem partial to her ministrations. What are your thoughts on the subject? Farinelli, I mean.”

“You have sensed my bond with the singer and his art, Herr Keysler. As I said, I don’t know if I can find the words to express it. But certainly it exists, and I believe it may have opened a grand vista for me.

“Oh? A vista.”

“Or ‘prospect’ is perhaps more precise. I have never put this into words before. But I think that such a prospect is to the eye what the voice is to the ear. As the voice is propelled by the velocity of the singer’s living breath, so should material embellishment be driven forth from deep within and emerge animate from the artist’s hand. Thus the cascading line of ornament enters the beholder’s eye as music does the ear. Both must possess agility and enter dancing, so to speak.”

“But Rossi, that is impossible. The eye is an organ that requires materiality for its work. Your ornament is static, it has mass. But the ornament produced for our ears by the voice is motile and without substance.”

“Yet we carry it with us like a precious substance: its impression endures. The ornament of the voice is like spume on the sea: it is buoyant with air and carried on the water of which it is also made. The voice is air, yet lighter than air, for it rises on its currents. I can in the same way release from my hand a living ornament. It can rival the agility of Farinelli’s voice, not with air, but with the earth and water of which it is made.”

“And how will you do this?”

“Well, not by calling upon the Muses, but as I have indicated, upon the Elements: Air, Water, Earth. The one remaining is Fire. Finally, I must risk the peril and venture into the flame.”

“Oh!” Keysler exclaimed.

“But that is the only way.”

Keysler looked alarmed so Marco retreated.

“I suppose it is difficult to grasp. ”

“Yes, somewhat, Rossi. But what is the ultimate aim of this endeavor?”

“Isn’t *that* apparent, Keysler? Why, pleasure, of course, delight.”

“And how will this ornament look?”

“Oh, I can’t predict exactly how it will look. That is part of the pleasure. Perhaps because it is like the voice of Farinelli...volatile, with unexpected joy.”

“And the nature of this joy?” Keysler persisted, unwittingly echoing Marco’s query to Franziska.

“Why, it embraces all of our yearnings, Keysler,” Marco said, “in body and spirit.”

Seeing Keysler’s discomfiture, he felt further the need to reassure him. So Marco grinned just as Andrea might have done when things became too serious.

“But then again, I am only a stuccoer,” he said, “subject more to the whims of princes and architects than to my own. It keeps my feet planted on the ground.”

“In light of your flights of fancy, that is a relief,” Keysler said smiling, indulgent yet glad that Marco had alighted on *terra firma*.

They were quiet for a while. Keysler amused himself by spying protectively on ‘his boys’, who had lingered across the street, while Marco reprised his words to the tutor, wondering if he might have explained himself better. Well, he had never thought out these ideas before.

“Amigoni is also in England now,” Marco said finally, “and Scarlatti has gone to Madrid. Soon there will be no one left in Italy.”

“Or in Germany,” muttered Andrea, who had also wandered off then reappeared just as Marco resumed speaking to Keysler. The thought of returning to what now seemed to him the backwaters of Ottobeuren did not please him. Only the thought of Sabine made the idea palatable.

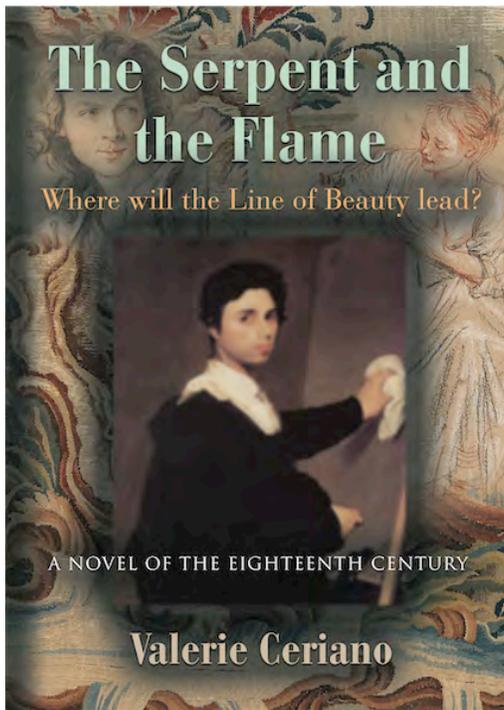
Keysler’s charges had also come back. As Andrea and Marco left them, they heard the tutor say, “My boys! Learn to speak with everyone. To be wise rulers, you must know your subjects. Peter, the great czar of Russia, traversed his realm in disguise to learn about his people. That you needn’t do, but take a lesson from him. And especially, learn of your artisans, for it is they and not you who commend your soul’s likeness to history. And above all, be kind to everyone. Learn to condescend, my boys, learn to...!”

Keysler’s voice faded. As Marco and Andrea were passing the church of St. Agnes (which was as elegant as Keysler had noted) two women in the costume of Augustine novitiate nuns stepped from the church doors. Marco and one of the novitiates halted abruptly, as their companions unwittingly walked on without them for a moment, so quickly had they been abandoned.

“Franziska,” Marco muttered. “When? Why did you not tell me?”

“I am forbidden to speak to you, Marco, or to anyone,” she whispered back. Her companion was indeed looking back at her nervously, wondering why she had stopped to talk with a stranger. “My mother sent me here after we – after I failed to return home that night. She never stopped watching over me. I must go or Sister Ursula will want to know why I have lingered. Goodbye.”

She took a step and looked up, having walked straight into Andrea. As Marco watched them, he realized that Andrea was looking at her fixedly, and his heart sank. He knew that look. It meant that he would take what he wanted. He would never contain himself when that deep hunger inside him rose. The insidious wound that drove him after he had found Rosalia’s contorted body so long ago would never heal. His face told the whole story. Franziska held Andrea’s gaze, her lips parting as if she were about to say something, but Marco knew it meant that she would be possessed. He wanted to shout at Andrea, but only said softly to him, “No, you can’t do this” and grabbed his arm. Then Marco pulled him roughly away toward the cramped green cubicle they were to ornament together.



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