



## *La Serenissima*

Sebastiano  
The Summer of 1578

I lean back in my chair. Neck stiff and shoulders tense, I let my head loll back and stare up at the ceiling. Lit only by a few flickering candles, the frescoes on my chamber ceiling leer at me. Directly above me, Venus, clutching her hard-won golden apple, smiles her crooked, knowing grin at me. Cupid, sporting his wings and quiver, steals a kiss from his own mother. The twisted tableau torments me. It mirrors, it amplifies my shame. From the far corner of the room, the bearded, balding figure of Father Time sweeps out his arm, as if trying to shield me from the transgressions of Venus and Cupid. All he succeeds in doing is to remind me of the fleeting nature of life. It may all be over tomorrow.

I glance down at the piles of papers and maps and scrolls strewn across my desk. The wax is finally ready. I slowly pour the sticky red syrup onto the parchment and roll my seal athwart. With a shaking hand, I scrawl my signature across the bottom of the decree I have just drafted; the decree that has kept me awake half the night, the decree that may yet keep Father Time at bay, the decree that could very well save *La Serenissima*.

The decree that has only come about because of Caterina.

All those months ago, I had ordered Francesco, one of my *Signoria*, to summon Caterina to court. I had heard talk of her beauty, her wit, her charm, and even her virtue. Her name cropped up in every story that every courtier told. Every song, every poem, every sonnet was dedicated in her name. The women of the court all lusted for her grace and beauty. The men of the court simply lusted after her. But it seemed that every time she called at court I was whisked away to deal with matters of state. It was infuriating. First I had attended the whims of the vain French ambassador, then feigned interest at the caterwauling of the Florentine Medicis and, most recently, endured a tiresome four hour lecture from the Duke of Milan on the absolute imperative that is naval strength. Each time I returned to *La Camera di Scarlatto*, it was only to find that Caterina had vanished, replaced only with whispers of her latest adventures and growing beauty. I was not used to being thwarted. It was not a feeling I liked.

When I mentioned this sorry state of affairs to Francesco, he counselled caution, warning me that it almost seemed as if fate was trying to keep me from Caterina. Not one to let fate obstruct my will; I immediately ordered that Francesco send for the woman. What harm could a *cortigiana onesta*, even the most expensive *cortigiana onesta* in Venice, possibly bring to the *Doge*?

Of course, Caterina did not refuse my invitation. When summoned by the *Doge*, there is but one answer. My spies watched Caterina's approach to the *Palazzo Ducale*, reported her arrival at the *Porta della Carta* where, contrary to all reports of her virtuous nature, she propositioned a scribe to hasten her entry. My informant was incredulous. He recounted how one moment she was staring skyward at the statues of the four virtues, the next she was nibbling on the scribe's ear, pressing her body against his. According to my spy, Caterina was the very antithesis of the four virtues, the embodiment of every vice. I did not share the spy's pious outrage. The world is not so black and white, and I am nothing if not a practical man. To succeed, every advantage must be exerted. Something in Caterina's seemingly cold-blooded manipulation of the scribe called to me. Her practicality called to me; perhaps we were cut of the same cloth.



I felt Caterina enter *La Camera di Scarlatto* long before I saw her. It was like the air shifted, like the room, and all its occupants, pulled a little towards her, wanting to be nearer. Conversations all around the room stuttered to a halt. I was warming my hands at the fireplace. The fire seemed to glow a little brighter, the sparks shooting up the chimney with more force than before. She stood in the doorway, waiting for her introduction, as custom demand.

Her white-blond hair fell in cascading curls to her waist. Her pale eyebrows arched delicately over sparkling emerald eyes, rimmed with dark lashes. Her pale complexion lightly kissed by blushing rose on each cheek. Her small, snubbed nose sprinkled lightly with freckles. Just the hint of a smile played at the corners of her full, red lips. She slowly licked her lips, clearly enjoying the effect she was having on every man, and even some of the women, in the room. She seemed to glide as she moved forward into the chamber, greeting courtiers and accepting compliments. The hem of her violet gown never seemed to brush the floor. Already my heart belonged to her.

In an instant I was across the chamber and by her side. Like a life-sized marionette, controlled by the master manipulator, I was hardly aware of what I was doing. Still today, I cannot recall what it was that I uttered to her, on that our first meeting. Caterina has told me many a time, but still I have no recollection. I will never forget her first words to me though: 'Sebastiano, I am *just* a woman'.

Never has a bigger lie crossed her lips. Caterina could never be *just* a woman. She is my confidant, my counsellor, my advisor. She had listened for hours while I mused over policies and alliances and declarations of war. Her views on history, politics and geography have helped shape the future of *La Serenissima*, much to the chagrin of my *Signoria*.

My *Signoria* cannot fathom why I place so much trust in her, why I confide in her, rather than them. At the outset of our dalliance, they counselled caution and restraint. As our relationship and the imminent threat of the plague grew, so did their complaints. Now, with the most devastating outbreak of plague that *La Serenissima* has seen, they are steadfast in their opposition. They claim that Caterina is a witch. That she casts enchantments to protect herself from the plague. That she has cast a spell over me. Like a rabbit in a trap, I am ensnared by her magic.

Gone are the days when Caterina toyed with courtiers. The courtiers will not as much as look in her direction, for fear of enchantment. The women of the court refuse to visit her, fearing accusation by association. The servants will not enter her chamber, inventing black magic tableaux of caldrons and covens, black cats and broomsticks.

I think on all the accusations and the universal opposition. The *Malleus Maleficarum* is steadfast in its proclamation. The source of all witchcraft is carnal lust. In women, carnal lust is insatiable. And Caterina is renowned for her insatiable appetite. She is, after all, a *cortigiana onesta*. It is common knowledge that witches defy convention; they overstep the lines of proper female decorum. Much as Caterina does. Surely her rapacious nature does not make her more disposed to sharing the secrets of the devil. Surely my love is not so completely misplaced.

Francesco comes across me reading the *Malleus Maleficarum*. He plays on my doubts. He, and my entire *Signoria*, begs me to set Caterina aside. They come to me with countless matches; the Duchess of Savoy, the daughter of the Duke of Ferrara, the princess of the two Sicilies, any of



the daughters of the Medici household, even the daughter of Mary, Queen of Scots. I refuse them all, despite the *Malleus Maleficarum* and its edicts. None of them is Caterina.

Caterina pretends not to notice the accusations, the averted eyes, her dwindling friends at court. Instead she keeps herself busy any way she can. I assume that is why she has taken to frequenting the orphanages. When I learned of Caterina's proclivity for visiting the children of *La Serenissima*, I must admit that I was, at first, concerned. The injuries done to children by witches are innumerable. Witches are known to offer children to the devil, like some sort of sacrificial lamb. Witches are taught by the devil to confect unguents from children's limbs to use in spells. I struggled to align the gentle, graceful, caring Caterina I have grown to love with such an abhorrent image. It simply could not be true. It was not true. I would not believe that she was anything other than my love.

I vowed to see for myself. So, for the first time, I accompanied Caterina this morning on her daily pilgrimage to the poorest areas of *La Serenissima*. With the protestations of my *Signoria* at my back, I wove my way through the canals in growing disbelief. Oftentimes we could not pass through the crushing throng of humanity. The people were sceptres, half-hidden by their death masks, dancing and dipping in a crazed plague-induced delirium. I could scarce believe the horrors. The foul stench of rotting, burning flesh seemed to burn my nasal passages, to claw at my eyes. I could taste it. Bodies were piled in the streets like little more than yesterday's food scraps, boats bobbed listlessly on the canals, as if abandoned in a desperate flee from the plague. Urchins, faces blackened with filth, clawed wildly at my pockets, desperate for a coin, for help, for any sign of kindness.

But the most horrifying aspect of all: Caterina seemed unafraid. A line from the *Malleus Maleficarum* echoed through my mind. *But there is no bodily infirmity, not even leprosy or epilepsy, which cannot be caused by witches.* Surely her fearlessness was not bourn of the knowledge that, as she was the cause of the plague, she was immune to its ravages? It is simply her courage, her fierceness that she wears like armour, in the battle against the plague.

A violent tug on my pocket watch snapped me out of my musing. A child, no more than ten years old, with weeping sores lining his cheeks, stared stonily upward. He accused me without uttering a word. What had I let happen to my city of gold and pleasure and intellect? Once a capital that hosted painters, sculptors, architects and authors: Titian, Tintoretto, Veronese, Galileo. A capital of cultural vivacity, of personal freedoms which offered so many persecuted foreign intellectuals a second home. It was now home to little more than death and disease and despair.

Sheltered in the *Palazzo Ducale*, blinded by the half-truths of my *Signoria*, I had not noticed the horror that had befallen my beloved *La Serenissima*.

But perhaps Caterina had.

She seemed to glide through the filth, like she had the first night I saw her in the *palazzo*, the hem of her violet gown never touching the mud. As I watched her float on ahead of me, I wondered. It is said that witches can be bodily transported, carried through the air by devils over long distances. Surely this was not the phenomenon before me. Surely it was her grace, her poise, her refinement playing tricks on my eyes.



The crushing mob cared not whether she flew or levitated or trudged. The people on every corner knew her, loved her, made way for her. One man walked on ahead, a self-appointed escort for our peculiar entourage. The women called out for blessings for their children, which Caterina bestowed willingly. She stopped to cradle babes in her arms, to hand out warm loaves of bread and small toy boats for the little boys. She played hopscotch with a giggling gaggle of sickly little girls, chess with a band of rough and ready-looking sailors and even stopped to kick a ball with half a dozen young squires.

When we reached the orphanage, it was as if the sun had appeared, burning away the cloying death shroud that covered the city. The children sang for Caterina and danced around her feet while she helped the nurses clean the linen, sweep the floors and prepare lunch. She spoke with the nurses at length, compiling detailed lists of urgent medicinal and food supplies, consoling the crones about the pointless deaths of four children overnight. She visited with the older men and drank tea with the women, bringing them stories of the world outside, the world they were now too ill to see for themselves.

She spent the afternoon teaching classes. First there was reading and writing, then arithmetic, history and geography. She insisted that all the children attend, boys and girls alike, much to the chagrin of the onlooking men. One decrepit patriarch took offence to her approach, interrupting her instruction with offensive bellowing, protesting that girls had no use for book learning. Our self-appointed escort quickly silenced the rant, manhandling the patriarch out into the street before I was even on my feet. She ended her lessons with fantastical stories of warriors and courtiers, mesmerising the children, transporting them, if only for a moment, to a world full of love and hope.

All the while, I looked on quietly, unable to comprehend. I had been so wrong. I had wondered at her nature. At worst, blinded by fear, I had silently accused her of witchcraft. At best, I had thought her like me: practical, self-serving. Caterina was nothing like me. She was my better in every way. Here was a woman, who despite being labelled a witch, a harlot, a whore, was risking her life every day to bring joy to the children, the future of *La Serenissima*.

I knew then that I had to do something.

I have to fix this gaping hole, this chasm, this floating funeral pyre that my once beautiful city had become. All the way back to the *palazzo*, I could not bear to even look at Caterina. I went to take her hand, from pure force of habit, but could not bring myself to wrap my hand round hers. I was too ashamed; ashamed of my ignorance, of my ineptitude, of my total disregard for my people, of my inaction. I, the most powerful man in all of *La Serenissima*, had done nothing to halt this rising crest of death, to provide succour and relief for my people. It had been left to Caterina. It could not continue. I would not let it continue.

That is why I now sit staring at the ceiling, transfixed by the leering frescoes. Awake for more than half the night, wrestling with how to make this right. Without Caterina, my usual confidant and counsellor, the night has been exacting. I have debated every inclusion, lamented every exclusion and poured over every word, until the decree was fitting, until it did justice to its namesake: Caterina's Law.



My beloved city's salvation is not one that will come quickly or readily. I am no fool. It will take time and money and regulation. Caterina's Law is but the first step in a long sojourn. The decree will see the founding of state-funded and run orphanages, hospitals with proper supplies and schools for the poor, even the little girls. Housing will be provided for those who cannot find a warm bed. Food will be given to those with empty bellies. Every man, woman and child who calls themselves a citizen of *La Serenissima* will have a proper burial. The streets, the canals, the laneways and the *palazzos* will be clean. This disease will be stopped. We will no longer be captives in our own city. *La Serenissima* will once again be the shimmering diamond in Neptune's crown.

And I owe it all to Caterina.

I glance over to where she lies, curled up in our bed. She perched on the window seat for hours, watching the bustle of the *Canal Grande*, trying to make me talk to her. She twittered for hours, competing with the birds outside our window, as the sun plunged below the skyline. Ultimately, she tired of the one-way conversation, retiring in a temper hours ago. But I could not talk to her. I could not find the words. How to explain my shame to her? How to make her see that she will be the muse for my city's rebirth? I could not explain until the way ahead, until my strategy was clear.

Caterina hugs a pillow to her chest, as if to protect herself from some imminent danger, some pending doom. A slight frown mars her beautiful countenance and a murmur escapes from her lips. Her golden curls are splayed across the pillow, across her face. I rise stiffly from my desk and creep across the room, careful not to wake her. Smoothing the hair from her face, I gently bend and kiss her lips.

My heart fills with joy and I know that my decision is made. As I slide in under the blankets next to Caterina and pull her close, I know that tomorrow I will ask her to marry me. She will be my queen. She will no longer be a *cortigiana onesta*, accused of witchcraft at every turn. She will be my wife.