

THE MIRROR OF DIONYSIUS

I. A Farewell to Orpheus

I watched the cart carrying the carefully-padded crate containing the completed Orpheus triptych draw away slowly from the door of the house. Although it had more than an hour's journey to make before it reached the residence of the late Marquis de Mesmay, the triptych was now officially out of my hands. The Marquise de Mesmay's steward had taken possession of it, and it was his responsibility to see to its safe delivery—and, I presumed, its hanging.

I had been paid for the paintings, although the money had actually been handed over in Lutèce by the Marquise's man of confidence to my own agent, Myrica Mavor, who would bank the money there. There had been no quibble raised regarding the death of the Marquis, who had actually commissioned the painting; the Marquise had actually come to see me, dressed in full mourning, to see what progress I had made and inquire as to when I might finish. She had seemed enthusiastic to have it done, and although I had not been able to make any sense of her attitude throughout the visit, I was duly grateful for her assurance that she intended to honor all her late husband's debts and carry on his work as best she could.

The resolution to carry on his work might have been slightly ominous, but it was a point I had not dared to press, given that I was not supposed to know that the Marquis had been an important member of the Cult of Orpheus, at the heart of the Duc de Dellacrusca's tangled political conspiracies. It was difficult even to offer formal condolences for her loss, given that the cult were attempting to conceal, or at least to obscure, the circumstances of the multiple murder, even though there had been no other topic of conversation on the island since it had occurred.

Prior to that terrible occasion, I had always thought of the Marquise as a rather retiring figure, eccentric in her pursuit of communication with the dead, with the aid of Vashti Savage and other reputed wise women, and various other mystical concerns. The death of her husband seemed to have galvanized her, and provoked her to all kinds of resolute action, of which seeing to the completion of the triptych was presumably one more item to tick off on a long list of things to be done. I was certainly relieved to have it removed from mine.

The cart seemed to fade as well dwindle in size as it gradually vanished into the gray morning, which was still suffering the gloomy aftereffects of the recent explosion of Hekla, way out in the Northern Ocean. I couldn't help feeling a gnawing regret that I had ever accepted the commission to paint the triptych, and wondering whether there was any clue that I might have picked up capable of dissuading me, had my judgment been better.

I had not known, obviously, when the offer was made, that the Marquis of Mesmay was a member of the so-called Cult of Orpheus. Even if I had known, I would have had very little idea of what that membership implied. Obviously, I was party to the common knowledge that the secret society in question was nowadays merely a cover for political conspirators working within the framework of the Empire, although it still retained a tokenistic respect for the residual trappings of what had once been the Orphic religion, in the centuries preceding the birth of the Empire and the glorious era of the divine Julius. As an artist, I had always considered myself essentially divorced from political affairs, and had made it a deliberate policy to pay no attention to them, in an ostentatiously disdainful fashion.

Had that been a mistake, I wondered? If I had taken more interest in such matters, might I have realized, firstly that the Cult of Orpheus maintained a presence on Mnemosyne, because the influx of summer visitors from various parts of Gaul and even further afield provided a convenient cover for meetings of disparate conspirators? And if I had realized that, might I then have been able to jump to the conclusion—as some other people on the island undoubtedly had—that when the Marquis of Mesmay

commissioned me to paint a triptych representing phases in the life of the legendary Orpheus, he was not merely acting as a connoisseur of art, but as an agent of the so-called cult?

Even if I had jumped to that conclusion, I had to suppose, I would not have seen it as a reason for refusing the commission. I would have assumed—and still did assume, in fact—that Mesmay had approached me simply because of my reputation and talent as an artist, which made me, unarguably, the person resident in Mnemosyne best qualified to execute such a commission brilliantly. It was not my usual kind of work, of course, my reputation having been built almost entirely as a portraitist, but it had seemed a useful opportunity to broaden my endeavor, and an interesting challenge, in a purely artistic sense; it would not have seemed unreasonable then to think, even if I had suspected any further agenda on Mesmay's part, that any such hidden agenda was of no relevance to me.

Events had proved otherwise, and catastrophically so, but I really had had no reason to suspect that they might at the time. I was still convinced that the Duc de Dellacrusca, even though he was Mesmay's supposed master within the context of the cult, had had nothing to do with the commissioning of the painting. It was, I still assumed, pure coincidence that the paintings of Orpheus, and my attempts, for purely artistic reasons, to find a imaginative key that would enable me to make sense of his legend and hence to paint him "accurately," had become entangled with Dellacrusca's discovery, in Lutèce, of the long-lost granddaughter for whom he had been searching for years, and his subsequent pursuit of the child to the island...

Except, of course, I reminded myself, that many people believe that there is no such thing as coincidence. The chain of coincidences that had led to the specific circumstances of Lord Dellacrusca's murder, and the corollary murder of the Marquis de Mesmay, certainly seemed so bizarre that it was hard not to imagine the hand of some evil fate being involved therein.

There was a third thread in the chain, which had become intricately entangled with the first two, and in thinking about that, my gaze inevitably wandered from the cart to the house beside the road along which the Orpheus triptych was traveling away, hopefully out of my life forever.

The house in question, which stood between my dwelling, isolated on the headland, and the main body of the island, had been occupied for many years by the reclusive Monsieur Toustain—the ideal neighbor, from my point of view, precisely because he was a recluse, and our relationship had been limited to occasional polite formalities, with absolutely no personal involvement at all. I had never had any reason to suspect, and nor had anyone else, until his death caused his secrets to begin to leak out, that Toustain had been a defector from the Cult of Dionysus, from which the Cult of Orpheus had split in some kind of schism lost in the mists of pre-Julian history, which had similarly endured through the ages, ever a rival to the evolving Cult of Orpheus.

Not had I had any reason to suspect that Toustain had had in his possession an ancient document that seemed to be regarded as a precious relic by the members of both cults, for symbolic reasons. Apparently intent on continuing to keep the document hidden, he had left the book in whose binding it was secreted, along with various other books, to me rather than including it with the rest of his possessions, which had been auctioned for the benefit of the poor. I, of course, had had no suspicion of the existence of the document, let alone that it had been surreptitiously delivered into my custody—but the Duc de Dellacrusca, the master of the Cult of Orpheus and the Gaulish Secret Police, had found out as soon as Toustain's real identity had come to light, and had taken steps to recover it in his customary sly fashion.

Had I known about that, too, I would not have cared, and it would not have occurred to me to think that there might be any mortal danger in the circumstance that members of each of the two rival cults, unknown to one another, had given me commissions of a sort relevant to the long-obsolete mythology of their organizations' supposed origins. Nor would I have seen any hidden significance in the circumstance that Toustain's house, through the intermediary of my agent, Myrica Mavor, had been sold to Charles Parenot, a Lutecian painter who was—not entirely by coincidence, this time—the adoptive father of Elise, the orphan that Dellacrusca, after being introduced to the family by Myrica, had recognized as his granddaughter.

And that, of course, was when things had become seriously complicated, and where the hand of fate, or magic, or Eurydice—however one cared to consider the matter—had become involved. From that point

on, events had moved with vertiginous speed and more than a little madness, to the concert after which Dellacrusca had determined, in his underhandedly scheming fashion, to take possession of his musically-gifted granddaughter, and in the course of which he had been hacked to death by maenads who had gained entry by masquerading as musiciennes supplied by the Sister of Shalimar to accompany the performance.

Mesmay's death had apparently been collateral damage, as well as the deaths of three other cult members who had tried to stop the murders, or at least avenge the principal murder. I had got out in the nick of time, with Parenot, after snatching Elise and Hecate Rain from the dangerous crossfire, along with Elise's adoptive mother Mariette, but...

And that *but* was the problem. To all intents and purposes, the affair was over. The Orpheans were, indeed, intent on pretending that it had never even happened, at last insofar as the Lutecian press and the official historical record were concerned, and claiming that their unbeloved leader had died somewhere else entirely, of some other cause. But that mask had to conceal some kind of plan for revenge, or at least for some kind of cathartic violence, of whose details and potential scope I had not the slightest idea.

From my own viewpoint, of course, the whole matter was now concluded. I had finished the paintings to my own artistic satisfaction, assisted by Elise and Hecate, who might or might not have been acting under the influence of the shade of Eurydice, subjectively if not objectively. The triptych had now been officially delivered, and ought to be gone from my life and artistic consciousness forever. The document that Dellacrusca had recovered from me had allegedly been destroyed during the carnage of his murder, and the copies I had made of it immediately after its discovery had been distributed to various parties; I did not expect ever to see them again and did not want to, considering them devoid of any decipherable meaning. Nor did I want to have anything further to do with the rival cults, and would be glad if I never heard of either of them again.

But... would the other parties involved in the affair let me alone, now that I had become accidentally involved in their conflict? Could I be sure that the rival cults were not looking at me suspiciously, each suspecting me of being an agent for the other? And if they did, what might they do about it?

And in that respect, there were other loose ends...

As if on cue, while my gaze was still lingering on what I still thought of as the Toustain house, slightly hazy in the struggling morning light, a black dot emerged from the door that faced my dwelling, and began to move toward me at what I immediately judged to be a slow walking pace: a child's walking pace.

In spite of the poor light, I was soon able to see her quite clearly, and she could see me. I recognized her and she recognized me.

I waited for her.

"Good morning, Master Rathenius," she said to me, with scrupulous politeness, when she arrived a few paces away. "May I speak with you?"

As soon as I had first caught sight of Elise, a girl of twelve or thirteen on the threshold of acquiring the particular kind of beauty that pubescent girls begin to acquire, I had wanted to paint her. More than that, I had wanted to paint her in juxtaposition with her adoptive mother, as a study in contrasts—not merely because of the simple fact the Mariette was blonde, a descendant of Northerners, while Elise was raven-haired, testifying to a partial ancestry of what once had been Grecia Magna in pre-Imperial days, but because of the balanced opposition of the child's commencing adolescent beauty and Mariette's adult beauty, now ripened into its full brilliant maturity.

"Of course," I said to her. "Would you like to come into the studio?"

She smiled at that, because she knew it was a privilege of sorts, although, in recent times, circumstances had obliged me to receive rather too many guests in the studio rather than the drawing room, in a fashion that seemed to symbolize the apparent disintegration of the lifestyle that I had built up so carefully and maintained for so long... for too long.

"Thank you," she said, although she must have noticed that I had cast a rapid, slightly quizzical glance in the direction of the Toustain house, because she was quick to add: "Mariette knows I'm here, Master Rathenius. I have permission."

I nodded my head, taking note of the fact not only that she had called Mariette by her name rather than “Mother,” that she had not bothered to mention Charles at all, and that her tone clearly implied that she did not think that she needed anyone’s permission, being a free agent. She had grown up on Martyr’s Mount, where many of the female children of her own approximate age whom she had known since infancy would already have started what they would have called, and doubtless thought of as, “work.”

Mariette’s mother, if what Myrica had told me could be trusted, had been preserved from that profession until a later age, and had then had been rescued from it when she had taken joint responsibility for Elise with Charles Parenot. It was understandable that she did not see eye to eye with her adoptive daughter as to the extent that she still required protection, and permission to visit artists in their homes. I, of course, am entirely worthy of trust, and I hoped that Mariette had realized that on the basis of our admittedly-slight but eventful acquaintance, but I did have a reputation that might have given her cause for anxiety.

“You should not call me Master Rathenius,” I reminded Elise. “We have agreed, have we not, that to a fellow artist like yourself, I am simply Axel?”

She blushed slightly, but went past me in a slightly hasty manner in order to precede me to the studio, in the forlorn hope of concealing the unnecessary embarrassment.

Elise took the spare armchair by the fireplace without waiting to be invited. It was the same chair in which the Duc de Dellacrusca had waited, uninvited himself, prior to our last excruciating meeting.

“I fear that Jean-Jacques has taken the trap into town to renew our food-supplies, and that Luzon has gone with him,” I told her, “so I’m alone in the house at present, but if you would like me to make some tea I can do so.”

“No, thank you,” she said. “I saw the cart leave, carrying the triptych, and assumed that I wouldn’t be disturbing you.”

“I can give you as much time as you wish,” I assured her. “Do you mind if I sketch you while we talk, though? Now that the triptych is off my hands, I hope that I can paint you and Mariette, as I suggested when we first met.”

“Feel free...” She left the *but* unspoken, but it had clearly been suppressed.

“Is there some problem with my painting you?” I asked, surprised.

“Oh, no,” she hastened to assure me.

I drew the logical conclusion. “Some problem with me painting Mariette, then?” I asked, perhaps a trifle indiscreetly.

Again, she blushed, and again she tried to hide it. I helped her out by turning away to reach for my sketch-pad and a stick of charcoal.

“Oh, no,” she said, again, but more hesitantly. “I’m sure that she’d like you to.” Deliberately or not, that let the cat out of the bag; if someone didn’t want me to, it had to be Charles. He didn’t know me very well either, and had probably heard far more about my reputation than Mariette or Elise. Myrica Mavor could, of course, have told him that I was completely trustworthy, but whether she would have done so was an entirely different matter. She had entirely commercial notions as to how an artist’s reputation and image ought to be managed and massaged, and she also had silly notions regarding the utility of stimulating rivalry between artists.

I didn’t take up the question. Instead, I started to sketch, and waited for Elise to tell me why she wanted to “speak with me.”

It was obviously something sensitive, as well as something she felt to be important, because she felt a need to work up to it gradually.

“You know that I’ve been working with Hecate Rain on possible musical accompaniments to her earlier work, since we improvised the... other piece,” she said.

“Yes, I know,” I said. “I’m glad. Sometimes, her enthusiasm requires a stimulating spark, and meeting you seems to have provided one.”

“She says that if I ask you to tell me the truth, and you say that you will, then you will.”

The hand holding the charcoal paused of its own accord, sensing potentially dangerous ground.

I looked her in the eye. “I won’t lie to you, Elise,” I promised.

She was an intelligent child; she knew the difference between promising to tell the truth and promising not to lie, but she accepted the gesture of good faith. She hadn't finished beating round the bush yet. Whatever she wanted me to tell her the truth about, she obviously felt that some groundwork needed to be laid first.

"Hecate says that you don't believe in magic," she said.

"That's putting it far more bluntly than the question requires," I said. "What I think is that much, if not all, of what people think of as magic not only can be explained naturally but needs to be explained naturally—but that there are aspects of nature that we don't yet understand, some of which are exceedingly peculiar."

"So that when Vashti Savage claims to be summoning the spirits of the dead," Elise elaborated, "the images she's conjuring up actually come from her own mind—from a part of it of which she isn't fully conscious and can't really control."

The hand holding the charcoal was briefly paralyzed again; the ground was definitely dangerous. Elise had been specifically excluded from the séance in which Charles, Mariette, Lord Dellacrusca and I had taken part, but the mere fact of her exclusion must have made her exceedingly curious about what had happened there. Hecate, not known for her discretion, might have told her—but Hecate didn't know the truth of what had happened any more than Mariette did, and I was far from certain that I knew it myself. Eurydice's shade had put in an appearance of sorts, but exactly what that appearance amounted to, or what it signified, I really didn't know.

I forced the hand to move, and to continue sketching.

"That's how I interpret what happens during her séances," I agreed, calmly. "Vashti disagrees, and resents my interpretation, even though I'm always careful to emphasize that I believe her to be perfectly sincere, and that her method produces results that are certainly interesting, and perhaps valuable. She is, in her own way, a genuine artist, with real talent."

"And when people say that you're a sorcerer, they're wrong. Your artist's eye allows you sometimes to see things, and to make guesses based on what you see, that people who aren't artists can't—but there's nothing magical about you?"

I practically had to grit my teeth to keep my hand moving, even though I knew that she probably had no idea why that particular ground seemed dangerous to me. I wanted to steer her back in the direction in which I assumed that she was trying to go.

"In the same way," I suggested, "that you have an exceedingly good ear, without your being a magician. Lots of people can learn to play musical instruments, and some of them become very good at it through learning—although some, like poor Hecate, find that their capacity is very limited—but others, like you, seem to be born with an innate talent that makes them exceptional almost as soon as they contrive to produce their first note. To many people, your musical ability, precocious as it is, seems magical, or supernatural."

"But you don't believe that it is?" she queried.

"I've seen a great many youthful prodigies of various kinds, ranging from the musical to the mathematical. Many of them seemed marvelous to me, but my inclination is to think that it's a natural, albeit rare, phenomenon." I cursed myself secretly for sounding so pretentious, but she had thrown me off my stride slightly.

We had, however, definitely got closer to the matter that was on her mind. "Sometimes," she said, "it seems to me that I'm as much an instrument as the one I'm playing, that I'm not playing so much as *being played*, especially when I'm improvising rather than playing from sheet music. It's as if the music is coming from outside me...beyond me. Hecate says that she feels the same way about her poetry."

"I know the feeling well," I said. "All artists do. When we're fully involved in what we're doing, it does seem to be happening of its own accord, just arriving, rather than being something we're consciously directing. We can sometimes be surprised by things in our own work—as when you saw something in the unfinished triptych that I'm not sure was really there, but which, once you had called attention to it, I immediately wanted to include, because it was what the work needed."

“In the same way, the music you play does come, at least sometimes, from outside your conscious mind, and sometimes takes you by surprise—but that doesn’t necessarily mean that it comes from some kind of supernatural *beyond*. There’s a part of your mind where all kinds of urges and impulses originate, which then surface in your thinking mind as feelings, desires and artistic inspirations. The ability to grasp and develop those inspirations is what makes us artists...and the cleverer we become in grasping and using them, the better we are, me as a painter, Hecate as a poet, and you as a musician.”

“But you don’t believe that music can work magic?”

I strongly suspected that it was a trick question, primed, deliberately or not, by Hecate. I paused, and deliberately removed the top sheet from my sketch-pad and set the sketch aside, to give me time to think. I had promised not to lie to her, and I knew that that might become a difficult promise to keep, especially if she was going where I now thought that she was going.

“I can’t say that,” I admitted. “I’ve seen too many strange things happen to the accompaniment of music, or as an apparent consequence of music, to deny it some kind of uncanny power in certain circumstances. What I don’t believe is that musicians can work musical magic deliberately. Whatever magic amounts to, in the great scheme of things, it’s not something that human beings have yet learned to master, control and direct. I’ve known people who firmly believed that they could, some of whom certainly weren’t liars, but I think that they might have been mistaken about the extent to which they were really producing the effects they observed.”

Again, that was overly pretentious, but she was an intelligent girl and she had presumably run through the argument before, with Hecate, although I could understand that she might have been reluctant to talk to Mariette and Charles about it.

After a pause for reflection, she got to the point.

“Do you remember that hideous discord that my viola produced before my grandfather’s murderers drew their knives?” he asked.

“Yes,” I said, refraining from adding that neither I nor anyone else who had heard it was likely to have forgotten the occurrence, even if they couldn’t reproduce the sound in their minds. “And I know that you didn’t play it deliberately.”

“No,” she agreed, “I didn’t.” She stressed the pronoun to emphasize that there was a sense in which it might nevertheless have been deliberate.

I put the sketch-book aside, in order to look as earnest and authoritative as any mere pose could make me seem. “I promised not to lie to you,” I said, “so I won’t tell you that I don’t think that that discord had nothing to do with what happened next, but I’m absolutely convinced that it had nothing to do with *causing* what happened. I think that it was a kind of reaction—a kind of scream of alarm. Subconsciously, I think, your sensitive mind had picked up on the fact that something was wrong, that the appearances around you were deceptive, and that something terrible was about to happen. I don’t know exactly what clues you picked up, and I assume that you don’t, either, but that seems to me to be the likeliest explanation of what happened.”

She nodded. She didn’t thank me, for which I was glad. If she’d thanked me, it might have meant that she thought I was trying to spare her feelings.

“I didn’t want him dead,” she said, baldly. Then she launched the dagger-thrust. “Did you?”

I met her gaze quite frankly. “No, I didn’t,” I said. “He was, I suspect, a very bad man, who probably had a lot of blood on his hands, and I didn’t like him any more than he liked me, but I wouldn’t have wished him dead.”

She didn’t nod her head again, but I think she accepted it. It was true, after all. Even so, she said: “You reacted very quickly too, pushing my father toward me and pulling Hecate out of harm’s way. Perhaps you picked up a clue too?”

“Perhaps,” I agreed, “If so, it was subconscious—it wasn’t until I saw the knives that I acted.”

After a pause, she added: “It was all so *unnecessary*. Why didn’t he simply say something when he first recognized the viola? Why didn’t he just tell me who I was, tell Charles and Mariette, and then ask me what I wanted to do?”

“That simply wasn’t the kind of man he was,” I told her. “A lifetime of scheming and employing underhanded ruses to obtain his goals had corrupted him to the extent that he literally couldn’t think of any other way of going about anything. When he worked out that Toustain had passed the Orphic fragment on to me without my being aware of it, he could have just sent his sons to knock on my door, explain the situation and ask me to look for it. But that wasn’t his way. It probably never occurred to him to do anything but plan some ingenious way of tricking me into finding it for him. As for giving you any kind of choice or say in your own destiny...that probably never occurred to him either, although it would have been sane and reasonable as well as virtuous. Even if his plan had succeeded, he’d have lost by it, just as he lost by treating your mother as he did.”

“Did he have her killed, do you think?” she asked.

“I doubt it,” I said. “Again, that wasn’t the kind of man he was. He’d have wanted her alive, if he’s been able to find her, because he’d have wanted to shape her life as he wanted to shape yours, and doubtless felt entitled to do so. Given what happened to you, I think the probability is that your mother died in childbirth—but it’s only a guess.”

The way she nodded told me that she hadn’t finished yet, but she paused. She got up to look at the sketches I’d made. I was ashamed of them—I’d been horribly distracted.

“I can do better,” I told her.

She looked down at the first of them—the one that was supposedly complete—with the same interested intensity with which she’d looked at the Orpheus triptych, both before and after it was finished, and I had the uncomfortable impression that, once again, she could see secrets there that I wasn’t even conscious of having incorporated into the charcoal lines and smudges.

Then she sat down again.

“Are we in danger, Axel?” she asked, in a soft voice, but with telling bluntness.

I couldn’t simply say no; she would have been disappointed in me, and I didn’t want to disappoint her, not so much because she was a child, who really did still need a measure of protection, even though she wasn’t wrong in thinking herself wise beyond her years, but because she was an artist.

“Not one of the forty-odd people who heard that discord can possibly think that it contributed in any way to Dellacrusca’s death,” I said. “I honestly don’t know exactly how crazy the Orpheans are, but I can’t imagine that they’re crazy enough to hold any kind of grudge against you for what happened to your grandfather. They might be looking round for someone at whom to lash out at in anger, but they’re not the kind of men who’d lash out at a twelve-year-old girl...or are you thirteen?”

“I don’t know,” she admitted. “There’s some uncertainty about my birth date. Does it matter?”

“No,” I admitted. “The point is that they think more highly of themselves than that. I can’t believe that you have anything to fear from the Orpheans—or from the Dionysians, no matter what kind of garbled account gets back to them of what happened in that hall.”

She looked at me steadily. When I didn’t go on, she prompted me: “I said *we*.”

I felt oddly grateful for the fact that she cared. I shook my head. “I really don’t know about me. Unwittingly, I seem to have got caught in the middle of a dispute that has actually nothing to do with me—but none of the disputants know that, and I fear that what they don’t know might lead one or other of them to draw the wrong conclusions. I honestly have no idea whether I’m in danger or not, or what I ought to do about it if I am...but for what it’s worth, if Charles and Mariette took the view that they ought to try to distance themselves from me as much as possible, I couldn’t blame them. If Charles wants to return to Lutèce... well, to be honest, I think he might be wise.”

Again, she stood up and went to look at the sketch. This time, her body-language suggested that I’d guessed correctly: that Charles Parenot did want to get away from an island that had so far brought him nothing but anguish. As I’d told her, honestly, I thought he might be wise to want that.

After a further inspection, she said: “I’d like you to paint me. Not like that, but I would like you to do it.”

Again, I felt grateful, but it wasn’t a time to be self-indulgent. “If Charles wants to leave...,” I began.

“He’s talking about it,” Elise put in. “Marianne doesn’t want to go back. They’re arguing. If they put it to the vote...but they won’t include me if they do, will they? That’s not the way these things work. Even if they pretend to take what I want into account, they won’t let my vote tip the balance.”

“I don’t know,” I admitted. “I suppose it’s difficult for them, feeling responsible for you, and thinking that they know better than you do what’s in your best interests—but I can’t pretend to know how they feel. I’ve never had a child.”

She looked as if there was a comment or question on the tip of her tongue that she suppressed. In all probability, she was thinking that Charles and Marianne had never had a child either—but she looked at me in a way that was distinctly discomfiting, given the number of other things that she might have thought and asked, and given that she had obviously been encouraged to seek my advice by Hecate Rain. I was, at any rate, sufficiently discomfited to let my tongue run away with me.

“It might not come to that, anyway,” I said. “I’ve been thinking of leaving the island myself.”

That obviously startled her, although not as much as it would have startled many people who thought that they knew me a lot better than she did.

“But you want to paint me,” she reminded me. “And Marianne.”

“That’s true,” I said, contriving a smile. “But we can’t always get what we want, alas.”

“Is that a secret?” she asked me, then. “I can tell that it just slipped out, and that you didn’t really intend to tell me, but if I can tell Charles and Marianne, it might make a difference to their arguments.”

She really was wise beyond her years... or at least clever, which isn’t necessarily the same thing. I was ashamed, though, for thinking briefly that there might be a little of her grandfather in her, as well as her real mother.

“It’s not a secret,” I told her. “You can tell them... but I hope you won’t mind me advising you not to try to use it as a weapon in their dispute. You might do well to tread carefully there.”

She nodded, as if grateful for the advice, but she didn’t say anything about the likelihood of her following it, even though she hadn’t promised not to lie to me.

“Nothing I’ve said is secret, either,” she said, “but if someone were to ask...”

“I won’t lie to them,” I said, with a hint of irony, “but I can be discreet.”

“It would be a great pity if you left before painting me, though,” she said, pensively. “You’d miss out on seeing Hecate perform her work to my accompaniment as well.”

“That would be unfortunate,” I admitted, suspecting what was coming next.

It did.

“Have you told Hecate that you’re thinking of leaving?”

“Not yet,” I admitted, “and you’re right that she should have been the first person to hear it. I’d planned to call on her this afternoon anyway, now that the triptych’s out of the way. If you happen to see her before then...”

She shook her head. “We’re not due to meet until tomorrow,” she said. “But even if I were... I can be discreet too. Anyway, she’ll talk you out of it... unless you’re planning to take her with you...?”

She paused, watching me like a hawk, searching for the answer that I had no intention of giving her.

“No, you’re not, are you?” she concluded, correctly, although I was sure that I hadn’t given anything away. Immediately, though, she raised her hands and blushed again apologetically, this time. “I’m sorry,” she said. “None of my business.”

I suspected that it might become her business if I did make the decision. It was some time since Hecate and I had been lovers, but we were perhaps closer now than ever, and when the time came for me to desert her, as it would eventually, it would hit her hard. If Elise were going to become her regular accompanist, if only for a while, she might well have to cope with a certain amount of emotional fallout.

“No apology necessary,” I assured her.

The front door banged then, as Jean-Jacques opened it, presumably holding a box of supplies in his arms and unable to muffle its repercussion.

“I’d better go home,” Elise was quick to say, “or Marianne will start to worry. Thank you for answering my questions, Axel. When I’ve thought about the answers, I might have more, though.”

“You’re always welcome,” I assured her. “And let’s not give up on the possibility that I’ll have plenty of opportunity to paint you. Things are still a little overwrought at present, but perhaps they’ll calm down.”

I escorted her to the door. Then I watched Jean-Jacques finish unloading the trap. I wanted to talk to him as quickly as possible, about the other commission he’d gone into town to carry out.