

The Secret Exhibition

Claudius Jaseph came to the island of Mnemosyne in the 14th year of the present Emperor's reign. He arrived in early June with the last fleet of summer migrants, borne by one of those freak tides of fashion that catch up the idle rich, albeit in a far more gentle manner than they afflict the slaves of the Muse. His advent was, however, anticipated for some days beforehand, the news of his intention having traveled ahead of him by courtesy of his champions and his agent.

Given that more than half the island's permanent population consisted by that time of writers, composers, players, painters, necromancers, mystics and similar recipients of unsteady aristocratic patronage, the last thing it required its seasonal visitors to bring was *more* writers, composers, players, painters, necromancers and mystics, but wealth inevitably nurtures an addiction to novelty. Were the rich ever to become content with what they already have, they would no longer be able to spend the dividends of their capital; the entire Imperial economy would then lurch towards collapse—or so the patient Physiocrats assure us. True artists know that true art is timeless, and that they are collaborators in a great endeavor rather than competitors for transient fame and fortune, but so-called patrons of the arts see things very differently.

I was not at all distressed by news of Jaseph's impending arrival, and found it very difficult to muster any sentiment but indifference—but others would not let me be content in my carelessness. Even some few of my friends and admirers probably thought me incandescent with envious anticipation, but artists often conceive of one another as uncontrollable whirlwinds of child-like emotion. Almost every one of us believes that he—or she—is clever enough to play the role without actually fitting it, although few of us actually are. I am, of course, the rarest of the rare exceptions, as befits a man who has been resident on Mnemosyne longer than anyone else can remember.

I suppose that I made a few acidic remarks in advance of Jaseph's arrival, but only because it was expected of me; appearances have to be kept up when our patrons are watching expectantly, no matter how wearisome the work becomes. Privately, I did not expect the fuss to last long. I had seen other portraitists sail in on a wayward tide with a thousand eyes watching, and become *passé* long before they moved on to some comfortable city full of aspirant burghers and desperate matrons. I had no reason to think, when June began, that Claudius Jaseph would be any different.

"This one will offer you real competition, Axel," Hecate Rain assured me, as we lounged on the terrace of the *Sprite* in the mid-day heat, looking out over the harbor. She was drinking absinthe but there was iced water in my own glass; I had work to do that afternoon. "They say that his brushwork is superb and his accuracy uncanny. More to the point, he makes a fetish of painting beautiful women, just as you have always done. They say that he plays them off against one another with consummate cruelty: the wives whose beauty is beginning to fade, anxious to be captured on canvas one last time, while they are still desirable; the daughters just coming into their inheritance of pulchritude, intoxicated and deranged by a magnetism they cannot yet control. Those have always been your favorite victims, have they not?"

"Victims?" I echoed, with ostentatious alarm. "Are my subjects *victims*? You have posed for me yourself, on more than one occasion. Did you feel victimized?"

"My vanity is less vulnerable than some," she told me, closing her eyes against the sunlight as she leaned backward languidly, "but even I have felt a certain sting in your analytical eye. There are others whose souls have been more deeply penetrated."

"There is all the difference in the world," I pointed out, "between a painter whose brush reaches tenderly into the soul of a sitter in order to bring something precious to the surface of his canvas, and an

assassin who puts away his palette when darkness falls in order to don a black domino and ply a gleaming dagger like some metropolitan bravo.”

“Your analogy is uncommonly poetic,” Hecate observed. She was a poet by vocation, although she had been given a necromantic name by a careless parent. “Do you really imagine your work as a kind of mining? Others might represent it quite differently. By day, they say, you regard your sitters with a cool and clinical eye, impassively noting their flaws and cleverly erasing them from the images that appear by degrees upon your canvas—but after dark, your face changes completely; your gaze becomes avid and your lips are reddened with lust. I do not speak for myself, of course, but the summer visitors do not see you as I do. Your reputation has its darker aspect.”

“Of course it does,” I told her, gesturing to the waiter as he passed by to request fresh ice. “I cultivate it very carefully.”

“But you cannot entirely control what others think. Rumor-mongers exaggerate. You may think of yourself as a gentle seducer, a lover whose artistry compensates more than adequately for your lack of attention to conventional morality, but there are some who say that, in your heart of hearts, you despise your subjects with a fervor you could never admit.”

“It is a silly slander,” I said. “You know it.”

“I do, and I defend you—but the summer visitors bring anxieties, jealousies and resentments to Mnemosyne that we permanent residents have long-since banished from our lives. There are some, even among your patrons, who believe that your habit of seducing your sitters is a kind of predation. They are not poetically inclined, for the most part, but they would not be unfavorable to the analogy of your driving a metaphorical dagger deep into the bodies of your clients’ wives and daughters, ripping their respectability to shreds.”

“It is because the rich have no souls to be ripped,” I opined, wearily, “that they speak of *respectability*. It is all nonsense. Why are we wasting our time with it?”

“Because it affects the way that your impending competition with Claudius Jaseph will be seen—and there will be a competition, no matter how you might try to avoid it. Everyone expects it: not merely the visitors but the permanent residents. You’ve ruled this little roost of ours for a long time, and there are a great many people who’d like to see you knocked off your perch, if only to stir things up a bit. Jaseph is the man who can do it, it’s said. He plays your game, but with the flair and fervor of a younger man.”

I looked around for the ice, but the waiter was nowhere to be seen. I shook my head, and looked out over the water instead, towards the Devil’s Rocks and Nicodemus Rham’s lighthouse, which stood guard over them.

Hecate knew perfectly well how insulting her reference to my “game” was, but she was not speaking for herself; she was trying to explain the curious excitement that had been generated on the island by the news of Claudius Jaseph’s impending arrival. I was not at all sure that I wanted to be bothered with it, not because I feared competition but because I was impatient with the popular misrepresentation of my character and ambition.

“As I understand it,” I said, “there has only been a single exhibition of this upstart’s work, in a gallery where my own work has been shown a dozen times.”

“In a gallery that you have never visited,” Hecate pointed out, “despite all of Myrica Mavor’s entreaties. I understand that your refusal to leave the island is the keystone of your carefully cultivated eccentricity, but there are people on the mainland who see it as simple rudeness. Claudius Jaseph is by no means a polite man, it’s said, let alone an unctuous one, but he’s willing to put in an appearance—and a single exhibition is more than enough to whip up a sensation nowadays. We’re approaching the Empire’s 20th century, after all. In ten years we’ll be celebrating the second millennium of Divine Caesar’s birth.”

“Yes,” I agreed, “but a further 56 will pass before those who come after us are forced to celebrate the actual inauguration of the Everlasting Empire. How different the world would be had Caesar’s would-be assassins succeeded! But I don’t understand why you’re so insistent on using the violent imagery of daggers and whips. Surely no one is expecting a competition between painters to extend as far as dueling?”

“Some might be hoping for that,” Hecate said, “but most seem to be anticipating a contest of metaphorical daggers, relishing the thought that as a much younger man, his might be a good deal straighter and more durable than yours. They say that he is one of those rare men who really does *love* women, although he never flatters them, by day or by night. He is honest, and he knows how precious they truly are. Myrica told me herself—so mournfully I had to believe her—that he would not lend her his very best work to show in his first public exhibition. There are those among his creations, it seems, which he adores so absolutely that he consigns them to a secret exhibition which none but he and a favored few may ever view.

He refuses to accept his fee in such cases, because he believes that the portraits have souls of their own, which ought never to be sold.”

I thought, on hearing this, that Jaseph seemed to have discovered an entirely new way of breaking hearts. What woman, hearing the rumor that Hecate had just quoted—even knowing that it came from the artist’s agent—could resist the temptation to commission a portrait, quietly hoping that it might acquire a soul of its own and thus prove worthy to be retained in the secret exhibition? What woman, in pursuit of that aim, would not offer herself to the artist with exceptional abandon, hoping to prove her worthiness by the luxury of her surrender? And what woman, told in the end that her portrait was, after all, to be shown in Myrica’s gallery or returned to her husband or father in exchange for the contracted price, would not suffer a disappointment far greater than any that I could ever have contrived to inflict?

Even so, I was not at all jealous of the newcomer. Hecate had misjudged me, as poets are so often wont to misjudge their one-time lovers. I never despised my sitters, and there was nothing cynical about the manner in which I flattered them with my art, when I did elect to flatter them. I did make love to those who were willing—and how many women sit for a portrait who are not willing, once they understand what his artistry can accomplish?—but I took nothing from them but trivial affection. No woman had ever killed herself for me.

That, alas, was the next rumor to reach Hecate’s avid ears and she spared no time in spreading it. By the time Claudius Jaseph actually stepped on to the shore, following Lady Hintermann and the Marquis of Caissot along the gangplank of Ramon Rabirio’s yacht, even the Sisters of Shalimar knew the record of his power, and certainly had not divined it in their skrying-glasses.

No less than three of the sitters whose portraits had made their appearance on Myrica Mavor’s hallowed walls were now dead, it seemed. Naomi Lynhurst, daughter of the Marquis of Castelle, had thrown herself into the city’s least-known river, not even from a bridge but through an iron-capped manhole in the steel-sprung pavement that had reduced it to the status of a sewer. Sarah, Lady Generoix had hanged herself with a bell-rope in the Temple of Minerva. Worst of all, Roxane, the elder daughter of the Duke of Alectryon, had opened a vein in her arm with a barber’s surgical razor, cutting all the way from the shoulder to the wrist with a single imperious sweep.

I had painted Roxane myself, and might have made love to her had I not feared the wrath and malice of her father. Given time, I would probably have painted Naomi and Sarah had they lived to be a little older, for they would surely have come to visit Mnemosyne eventually.

Not one of the three had attained 20 years of age before dying; Naomi had been barely 17.

One such death might have been regarded as tragic happenstance, even two might have been dismissed as macabre coincidence, but three looked uncommonly like the Devil’s work, at least to everyone who believed in the Devil.

And what effect did this seeming Devil’s work have on Claudius Jaseph and his reputation? According to what Myrica had told Hecate, the man was devastated by grief, but relied upon the feverish expertise of his art to pull him through—and he had so many commissions impending that he was receiving bribes for preferential treatment higher than the price I usually asked for my paintings.

I suspected, even before Rabirio’s yacht set down its anchor, that the summer would be an unprecedentedly profitable season for the island’s magicians.

As chance would have it, it was at a séance rather than a party that I first met the man that my peers had appointed my arch-rival. I am not a necrophile by habit or inclination, but when Vashti Savage told me that Alectryon’s distraught wife had demanded that she summon the spirit of her dear departed daughter, and that she could not do it without a full coven of 13 persons who had some firm connection with the dead girl, I immediately agreed to lend my hands to the circle. How could I possibly have refused?

Perhaps it was disingenuous of me not to ask who else would be there, and stupid of me not to realize that Jaseph might still be regarded as a friend by the bereaved matron rather than the agent of the family’s misery. Suffice it to say that he was there, with Myrica Mavor dancing attendance on him. The only man who cast a hateful glance in his direction was the Duke—and even he was forced to be discreet, because Alectryon, for all that he had served as a general and won at least three battles, was always circumspect in the face of his wife’s determination.

Myrica, who made what attempt she could to serve as his shield, was the only woman not vying for Jaseph’s attention. Even Hecate—who must have known that she had several too many wrinkles by now to catch the eye of an accurate artist—was reduced to using her elbows on the opposition, to no avail whatever.

I was amazed by the brazen manner in which the opposition in question was led and effortlessly outclassed by Alectryon's surviving daughter Dian, but sibling rivalry can be a terrible thing.

Jaseph was everything that had been said of him: not merely handsome but boldly handsome. His hair was raven-black, but not in the least shiny; it seemed to soak up all the light that fell upon it. His eyes were so darkly violet as to be hardly less than black themselves, but his skin was remarkably pale. The island's summer Sun had not yet made the slightest impression upon his complexion, although I judged that the wide-brimmed hat he wore—also black, of course—would not protect him as fully as he expected, given the whiteness of our pavements and the tendency of light to reflect. His black silk shirt had all the gloss that his hair lacked, and seemed to have leaked more than a little to his leather trews, which were worn tight enough to exaggerate his leanness and display the sinuous movement of his hips as he swayed on the spot or crossed a room.

I was very glad that I had dressed myself in burgundy and twilight grey—mercifully, I never wear black to séances, because so many other people do—and could not possibly be thought by anyone there to have entered into a sartorial competition. I was not nearly so glad that Jaseph made unreasonable haste to brush off his admiring coterie—his brushwork was good—in order that he might introduce himself to me.

He seemed, as he crossed the room, to be deeply relieved to have shaken off his lovely admirers. Indeed, he seemed every inch the haunted man, too distracted by sorrow to pay attention to female wiles—but I assumed that it was an act, contrived to suit the occasion.

"I see your work everywhere I go in the capital, Master Rathenius," he said, after telling me what a privilege it was to meet me. "How is it that you are never there yourself?"

"I fear that I've been so long becalmed on the island that I've taken root," I lamented, trying hard to make my insincerity glaring. "I simply can't abide the bitter winters on the mainland, nor the awful stink that summer liberates from the culverts and alleys of cities. Fortunately, the island's summer visitors are kind enough to keep me busy, even though I'm so far away and generous enough to display my work on their walls. I fear that I have not seen any of your work, although I hear that Myrica is selling it as fast as she can lay her hands on it."

"I'm barely starting out," he told me. "I hardly dare to hope that my work will be as generously distributed as yours when I reach your age." In retrospect, I suppose he must have meant it as a mere observation, with no insult intended, but I had lived too long as a true artist among artists less than true. I construed the phrase "generously distributed" as a calculated euphemism for "commonplace," or even "cheap."

"Generosity has always been a fault of mine," I assured him. "It allows me to paint older women extraordinarily well, often favoring the cherished memory over the vulgar fact. I fear that I'm no longer capable of the brutality that determined accuracy demands." A shadow of anguish passed over his face as he glimpsed the cruel implication, but I was unrepentant.

"I have never been brutal in my art," he said, in a low tone. "Nor in my life, no matter what anyone may think."

"Existence itself is brutal to blossoms that emerge in the spring," I said, with a softness that could easily have been taken for consolation. "Delicate flowers too tender to bear the glare of maturity shrivel before their time. Parents always hold themselves responsible, but they should not seek solace in necromancy; forgiveness from beyond the grave is always hollow."

"You're not a believer, then?" Jaseph said, raising an eyebrow in faint surprise. "Does Madame Vashti know that you doubt her honesty?"

"She knows that I do not," I told him. "She forgives me my conviction that she is mistaken in her interpretation of what she sees with her mind's eye and hears with her inner ear."

"I firmly believe," he said—and if his sincerity was feigned, he was a consummate actor—"that the souls of the dead outlive the wasting of the flesh. I am convinced, too, that the survival of intelligence is not the whole of it. Either the ancient Egyptians were right to say that we have several souls, or..." He was interrupted then by the ever-efficient Vashti, calling us to order and demanding that we take our seats.

Like any unbeliever, I have little patience with the extravagance of folly, and I forgot what Claudius Jaseph had been saying as soon as I took my allotted place between Hecate Rain and the Lady Dian. Had I remembered it, and taken the trouble to pursue it when I had the chance, I might have gained access to the secret exhibition earlier than I did. No matter what the gossips were saying, Jaseph evidently reckoned me an artist, and he must have seen the merit in my own portrait of the Lady Roxane. He would surely have talked to me as one true artist to another had I only given him the chance—but my carelessness prevented me from realizing that.

As I took Dian's little hand in mine, I felt her shiver, but I am sure it was excitement rather than fear. Even at 17, she had no fear. She was not one of the tender ones, destined to shrivel early in the oppressive heat of maturity; she was one of those who would turn the brutality of the world back upon itself, hurting others at least as much as she herself was hurt.

I thought that a good thing while I held the girl's hand at Vashti's table—and I think so still, in spite of the fact that a little of her echoed brutality was to exact its pain from me.

Vashti never dressed her séances with overmuch trumpery. That is one of the reasons I considered her honest: an authentic artist rather than a shallow cheat. There was no shrieking and groaning about her performance. She did not wail, nor did she command; she simply slipped into her trance and waited for inspiration to come.

It came, in the beginning, in the form of a whole sequence of persons who impressed their own dubious individuality upon hers. They claimed, as they always did, to have lived in the pre-imperial era of Odysseus or Alexander, or in the turbulent times of the Empire's heroic victories against Attila, Theoderic and Saladin. They claimed to have been great captains, beautiful courtesans or the catamites of emperors. Every voice was eager to sell its secrets for an ounce of attention—which is, alas, less than the sum of their so-called secrets was worth.

The task of calling Lady Roxane had been delegated to Hecate, who executed the duty with all due dignity, although I was not certain at that time whether she really believed in the power of magic or not.

And in the end, it seemed, the Lady Roxane deigned to present herself.

Whether Alectryon's wife had come in search of reassurance as to the Lady Roxane's fate in the world beyond the world—as she was bound to pretend—or in search of some signal that she need not hold herself at all responsible for her daughter's suicide, she was to be disappointed.

"Do not mourn for me," said the girl's voice, emitted from the versatile throat of Vashti Savage. "I did what needed to be done, carefully and without impairment of my reason. I desired to be dead, and I am."

"Have you found Paradise?" Hecate asked, as she had doubtless been instructed to do.

"I have not looked for it," replied the voice from beyond. "I did not die in the hope of finding bliss, any more than I feared to die for dread of eternal torment. In truth, I have not the capacity for either state. All warmth is in the flesh, be it love or pain; there is none in the soul. Do not grieve for me; I have left suffering far behind."

Had Hecate not been occupied I would have whispered in her ear, saying that this was not the news Vashti's spirits usually brought, and that it seemed to contradict the testimony of her other voices. As things were, however, I felt compelled to remain silent. Hecate's hand was quite steady within my own, but the Lady Dian's was still tremulous, and she had to clasp my fingers a little too hard in order to suppress the *frisson*.

"Why did you choose to depart when your life was hardly begun?" asked Hecate, with frank curiosity.

"I did not," said the other. "My life was finished. I had business elsewhere."

"Business! What business?" The interruption, inevitably, came from the Duke; I imagined the Duchess' painted and pointed fingernails digging into his hand by way of complaint.

"Something finer than commerce or the provincial court, father," the voice replied, as freely as any daughter might who was beyond the reach of parental displeasure. "Finer by far, and richer too—but not in any currency you would understand. There is metal more precious than gold, and light far brighter than the glow of Elysium."

I was interested by that, not as a revelation of what might await me beyond death, but as a revelation of hitherto unsuspected subtleties in Vashti Savage. Who, I wondered, could have put such heretical notions in her head?

I guessed the answer, of course: Claudius Jaseph. Vashti had been using her elbows too, in that undignified scrimmage for the man's attention, but she had already seen him privately, by way of preparation for her séance. Had she, I wondered, nursed the ludicrous hope that he might express the desire to paint her, even though she could not pay a twentieth of the kind of fee that the Duke of Alectryon could lay out, let alone the kind of bribe that would claim the artist's immediate attention? Was this strange performance for *his* sake?

The candlelight was far from bright, but my eyes were well enough adjusted to pick out the lines of Jaseph's pallid face. I could no longer believe that his haunted look was feigned; his eyes were wide with

anguish, and he was listening as if with avid terror, fearful to miss a single word and yet fearful of what each and every word might declare.

I expected the next question to be raised by the impatient Duchess, but it came instead from her impertinent daughter. "What can you tell me of my future, Roxane? What lies in store for us all?" I assumed that the second element was added by way of apology for the selfishness of the first.

"Your future is your own to make, little sister," said the voice. "You might make it with courage, or with love—but not, I think, with both."

Dian's hand tightened again when she heard that, but I judged the force as petulance rather than gratitude or anxiety.

"Why?" asked the Duchess, at last. "For the love of Heaven, Roxane, *why did you do it?*"

I wondered how many of the 13 people joined in Vashti's circle had already taken it for granted that the answer to the question was: *Not for love of Heaven but for love of Claudius Jaseph, who would not place my image in his secret exhibition, discarding all others.*

What the supposed spirit actually said was: "Because it was necessary, under the tyranny of reason."

My unbelief remained unshaken, but I thought it brave of Vashti Savage as well as cunning to place the word *tyranny* in the mouth of a lost soul. In a world like ours, where we must always speak of our *beloved* Emperor and the *nobility* of his myriad dukes and barons, *tyranny* is not a word that trips lightly from the tongues of the unentranced.

The Duchess felt that she had not had a proper answer to her question, but the spirit disagreed. The Lady Roxane, if she had indeed come to give account of herself, had no more to tell us.

When the circle had broken, the nine females present soon gravitated to their momentary Sun, leaving the remainder of the males a trifle bereft. Jaseph seemed even less grateful for their attentions now than he had before, but that only made them press in upon him all the harder, competing to soothe his evident distress with their kindness and sympathy.

In such circumstances as that, fate may make strange bedfellows. I am certain that the Duke of Alectryon acted on the spur of the moment, driven towards me by the sight of his wife and daughter dancing attendance on a man he had reason enough to hate.

"Master Rathenius," he said, as he set himself abruptly before me. They were the first words he had addressed to me since his steward had paid me for the portrait of Roxane I had completed 20 months before.

"Lord Alectryon," I replied, with a sober bow. "I am deeply sorry for your loss."

He was not interested in my condolences. "I want you to paint my daughter," he said, unceremoniously. "Whatever you have on your easel, put it away. You must start tomorrow. Take as long as you like."