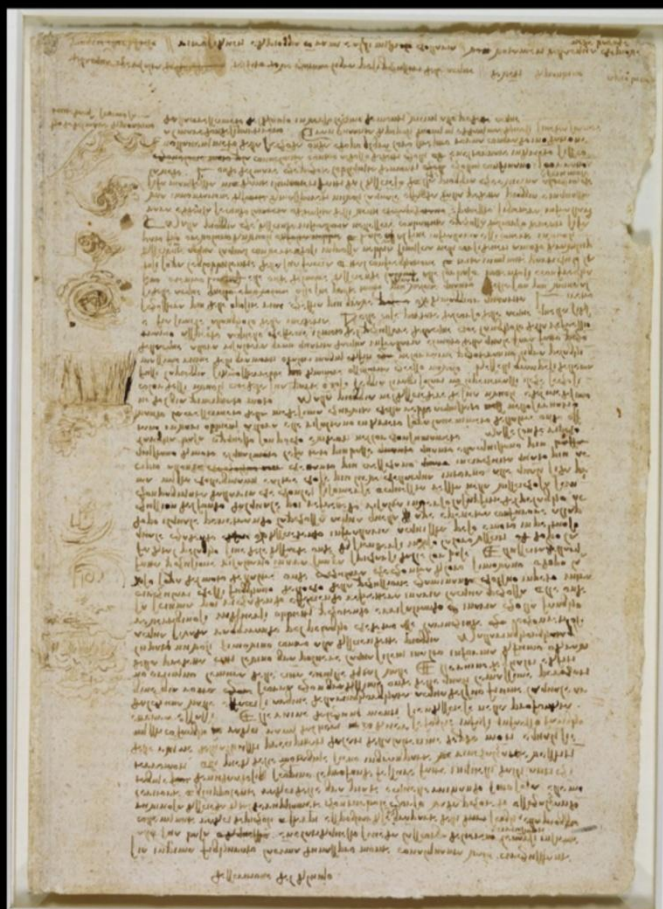


THE TESTAMENT WAS A FORGERY



ROBERT CASANOVAS

NOVEL



Summary

In October 2023, Professor Pierre Bertier discovers a troubling absence in the French royal archives: no trace of the naturalization letters that Leonardo da Vinci should have obtained to bequeath his possessions. Without this document, the "droit d'aubaine" (right of escheat) imposed the confiscation of all his property by the French crown upon his death in 1519, including the famous painting "La Joconde" (Mona Lisa). Based on true events, this historical novel reconstructs the fateful night when Francesco Melzi and Salaï, Leonardo's disciples, stole major artworks before the royal inventory, then forged a false testament to justify their possession. Bertier's account reveals how this deception has endured for five centuries. This novel, at the crossroads of historical thriller and scientific investigation, questions the boundary between crime and heroism: were Melzi and Salaï thieves or saviors of a priceless heritage?

The Author

Robert Casanovas is an honorary professor and member of the Société des Gens de Lettres. A legal expert passionate about the history of art collections, he has devoted many years to studying the appropriation of artworks by states. President of the NGO International Restitutions, he has published numerous academic works on the subject.

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DISCLAIMER

This novel is a work of historical fiction based on genuine research. Most of the documents mentioned exist, the inconsistencies noted are authentic, and the absence of letters of naturalization is verified. However, the scenes, dialogues, and characters' motivations have been imagined. Leonardo da Vinci's testament remains to this day a disputed document. No French original has ever been found. The letters of naturalization appear in no royal register. The droit d'aubaine (right of escheat) did indeed apply to foreigners.

Did Francesco Melzi truly steal these works? Did he forge a false testament? We will probably never know with absolute certainty. But one thing is certain: the works have survived. And perhaps that is all that matters.

The original version of the novel, written in French, has been translated into several foreign languages. The translated versions may contain linguistic errors, mistranslations, or approximations.

For a more in-depth analysis, the reader is invited to consult the academic article published by the author in the Leibniz Institut für Sozialwissenschaften.

<https://www.ssoar.info/ssoar/handle/document/94357>

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The Testament Was a Forgery

PROLOGUE

National Archives of France, Paris, October 2023

Pierre Bertier had been staring at the sentence for ten minutes.

"As he had letters from the Most Christian King permitting him to make a will..."

A detail. Nothing but a detail in Francesco Melzi's correspondence, dated June 15, 1519. Three years of research had led him to this enigmatic line. And now that he was rereading it for the hundredth time, it continued to mock him.

—Letters that don't exist, he murmured.

—Pardon?

Antoine Marchand had just entered the great reading room for original documents, two coffees in hand. The curator of the National Archives of France had been following the professor's work for several years. Between them had formed an intellectual complicity, made of passionate exchanges and ritual lunches.

Bertier looked up from the photocopies spread before him.

—Those famous letters of naturalization that Leonardo supposedly received from Francis I. I've just gone through all nine volumes of the Catalogue of Acts. All the letters granted between 1515 and 1547. Do you know what I found?

Marchand set down the coffees and sat down.

—Nothing?

—Absolutely nothing. Not a trace of Leonardo da Vinci in the royal registers.

Marchand understood the implication but hesitated to formulate it.

—Which would mean that...

—Which would mean that Leonardo could never legally bequeath his works. Without naturalization, the *droit d'aubaine* applied: at his death, everything reverted to the king. Bertier slid toward him the printed notice from the Louvre website.

—Look at what the museum says: the Mona Lisa was supposedly "*given to the sovereign*" in 1518 by his disciple Salai. A year before the master's death. Don't you find that strange?

—A student who makes a gift to the king of a painting that doesn't belong to him yet?

—Exactly. The official hypothesis is that Leonardo had anticipated his succession. But without letters of naturalization, it was legally impossible.

Marchand took a sip of coffee, his gaze riveted on the documents.

—What are you telling me, Pierre?

Bertier settled back in his chair, weighing his words.

—I'm telling you that Leonardo's will, the one on which the entire history of the transmission of his works rests, exists only in an Italian version. The French original? Never found. The notaries of Amboise? They've always refused to show their archives.

He paused for a moment.

—I'm telling you that Francesco Melzi may have fabricated a false will to appropriate works that, legally, belonged to the Crown.

The ticking of the wall clock resonated in the silence of the room. Marchand looked at his interlocutor as if seeing him for the first time.

—Do you realize what you're suggesting? The Mona Lisa...

—The Mona Lisa did enter the royal collections. But not at all as we've been told. Not by purchase, not by gift. By confiscation, in application of a controversial and illegitimate feudal right that no one wanted to see. Which today poses legal problems regarding the legality of the acquisition not only of the Mona Lisa but also of many other works by the painter exhibited in our museums.

Marchand went to the window overlooking the courtyard of the Hôtel de Soubise. Outside, passersby strolled, ignorant of the secret that the archives had kept for five centuries.

Bertier gathered his documents with slow gestures.

—What I'm going to tell you appears in no manual, in no official notice. It's the secret history of our most famous masterpiece. A story of greed, forgery, imposture. A story where facts mingle with legends, where documents sometimes lie eloquently.

He raised his eyes to the curator.

—Are you ready to discover the true story of Mona Lisa?

CHAPTER 1: THE MASTER OF CLOS LUCÉ

Manor of Clos Lucé, near Amboise

Two and a half years before his death, Leonardo da Vinci crossed the threshold of the manor of Clos Lucé for the first time. At sixty-four years old, exhausted by his Italian wanderings, he had spent thirty years roaming from court to court, from Milan to Rome, from Florence to Venice, seeking patrons who would understand his protean genius. He had always run up against the same obstacles: jealousy, the incomprehension of princes, the impatience of commissioners.

The journey from Lyon had been grueling. The crossing of the Alps in a litter, despite the cushions and blankets, had revived his joint pains. But now that he admired this manor of pink bricks and white tufa nestled in the Touraine greenery, a strange serenity came over him. Perhaps it was finally here that he would find peace.

The young king of France, crowned with his victory at Marignano, finally offered him what he had never found in Italy: total freedom. No pressing commissions, no binding obligations. Simply the honor of being "*First Painter, Engineer and Architect of the King*," with a generous pension of one thousand gold écus per year and this manor nestled a few hundred steps from the royal château.

—Maestro, called Francesco Melzi, his first disciple, helping him down from the litter, here is your new home. Isn't it magnificent?

Leonardo examined the building that would be his last refuge. Built half a century earlier by Étienne le Loup, treasurer to Louis XI, the edifice deployed its two floors in a style harmoniously blending late Gothic architecture and the first influences of the Italian Renaissance. The high windows with

stone mullions suggested vast, luminous rooms. An octagonal turret rose on the side, topped with a slate pepper-pot roof. All around, carefully maintained gardens descended in terraces toward the Amasse river.

—It's beautiful, admitted the old man. But it's also very far from everything that has been my life.

He thought of Florence, his native city where he had learned his art in Andrea del Verrocchio's workshop. Of Milan, where he had spent seventeen years in the service of Duke Ludovico Sforza, designing war machines, painting *The Last Supper* in the refectory of Santa Maria delle Grazie, secretly studying anatomy in morgues. Of Rome, where Pope Leo X had welcomed him with less enthusiasm than he had hoped, preferring the young and fiery Raphael. Of Venice, of Mantua, of Florence again, always in search of a haven of peace that eluded him.

The second disciple, nicknamed Salai, was actually called Gian Giacomo Caprotti. Supervising the unloading of trunks containing creations and manuscripts, he intervened with his habitual nonchalance:

—At least here, master, no one will come reproach you for not working fast enough. King Francis leaves you free to create at your own pace.

Leonardo nodded. France represented a new beginning. But also, he felt it confusedly, an epilogue. With his right hand partially paralyzed since an attack that had occurred the previous year, he knew his days as a painter were numbered. Perhaps he could still draw, reflect, write. But great paintings, monumental frescoes—that was over.

The following weeks were devoted to settling in. Leonardo chose as his studio the great hall on the first floor, facing north to benefit from constant light. His two companions organized

the space: easels near the windows, worktables in the center, cabinets for notebooks along the walls.

He had brought his most precious creations: the Mona Lisa, of course, which he had never wanted to sell despite attractive offers; the unfinished Saint Anne that he had been perfecting for fifteen years; the Saint John the Baptist with his disturbing gaze; the Leda and the Swan whose sensuality scandalized the well-thinking. And above all, dozens of notebooks filled with his research: studies based on clandestine dissections, plans for flying machines, treatises on the flow of fluids, reflections on perspective and plays of shadow.

The unpacking of these treasures took several days. Each crate was opened with care, each painting unwrapped with reverence. Francesco and Salai were accustomed to these manipulations, but they always proceeded with extreme attention. A shock, a scratch, and years of work could be compromised.

The Mona Lisa was installed on an easel near the main window, where the grazing morning rays would reveal all the details of the sfumato. Leonardo spent long hours observing it, wondering whether he should retouch it again or if he could finally consider it finished. Fifteen years he had been working on this portrait, fifteen years he kept returning to it, adding an imperceptible glaze here, modifying a shadow there. Lisa Gherardini, the wife of the Florentine merchant Francesco del Giocondo, had been dead for a long time. But her image continued to haunt the painter.

The manuscripts were methodically arranged in cabinets. Melzi had established a classification system: anatomical studies in the first cabinet, research on water and canals in the second, observations on flight and machines in the third, reflections on painting and perspective in the fourth. Each volume was labeled, dated when possible, briefly described.

It was this intellectual treasure that made Leonardo much more than a simple painter. He was a universal man, a mind that embraced all forms of knowledge. His surreptitious dissections had revealed secrets that the doctors of the Sorbonne ignored. His observations of bird flight had led him to conceive flying machines that, one day perhaps, would allow men to rise into the air.

But who would be interested in all this after his death? Who would understand the importance of these scribbled drawings, these mirror-written notes, these complex diagrams? Leonardo felt weighing on him the responsibility of transmitting this knowledge. But to whom? Francesco was intelligent and devoted, but lacked the necessary scientific scope. Salāi was skilled with his hands but not inclined toward theory. Would the two students be capable of preserving this heritage?

Leonardo rose early, despite his chronic weariness. He liked to observe the dawn from his bedroom window, watching how light progressively transformed the landscape, first revealing the dark masses of trees, then the details of foliage, finally the colors.

After a frugal breakfast—bread, fruit, a little cheese, never meat, for he had long ago adopted a vegetarian diet—he went down to the studio. The morning was devoted to creative work: retouching on paintings, drawings in his notebooks, reflections on his treatises. Then came lunch, followed by a nap indispensable at his age. The afternoon was reserved for walks in the gardens or conversations with his two protégés. In the evening, he read by candlelight, consulting the books he had brought: Pliny the Elder, Vitruvius, Alberti, and his annotated Bible.

Francesco and Salāi had settled in rooms adjacent to the master's. Salāi also had a small outbuilding in the garden that he had converted into a personal studio. Their role was

multiple: assistants in the studio, secretaries for correspondence, stewards for the daily management of the manor. The king had placed several servants at their disposal—a cook, two maids, a groom, a gardener—but they preferred to take care of everything directly concerning Leonardo themselves.

The relationships among the three men were complex. Leonardo treated Francesco with an almost paternal tenderness. This young Milanese nobleman, son of a captain of the ducal militia, had left everything at sixteen to follow him: his family, his fortune, his career prospects. Eleven years later, at twenty-seven, he had become much more than a simple assistant. He was a confidant, a friend, a spiritual son.

With Salai, the relationship was different. Gian Giacomo had been taken in at ten as a street urchin, thief and turbulent. Leonardo had educated him, trained him, transformed him into a competent artist. But between them always remained a tension, an ambiguous game made of affection and exasperation. Salai, now thirty-six years old, remained capricious, undisciplined, seductive. He sometimes disappeared for days, returning without explanation. Leonardo scolded him mildly but deep down always forgave him.

The three men formed a strange family. Leonardo was the wise and sometimes distracted patriarch. Francesco was the methodical and devoted organizer. Salai was the free spirit who brought a touch of lightness to their studious daily life.

Leonardo set about exploring his new territory. Despite his rheumatism, he loved to walk. Every day, he traveled through the manor's gardens, then ventured into the surroundings.

Clos Lucé was connected to the royal château by an underground passage. This gallery, dug in the tufa, amazed Leonardo. He went down several times, studying the

construction technique, noting how humidity seeped from the walls, reflecting on ways to improve ventilation. He took notes, drew diagrams. Perhaps he would propose improvements to the king?

The gardens were magnificent, even in this late autumn. Terraces descended toward the river planted with fruit trees, vegetables, aromatic herbs. The gardener, a certain Rémi, a taciturn man, maintained this domain with love. Leonardo spent long hours observing nature's work: how did leaves fall from trees, how did birds build their nests, how did water flow in the irrigation channels.

Everything was material for study. One day, he spent three hours observing a snail climbing along a wall, intrigued by the mechanics of its movement. Another day, he dissected a frog, studying the structure of its webbed feet, understanding how they propelled the animal in water. Each observation was recorded in his notebooks, accompanied by drawings of stunning precision.

The village of Amboise, with its royal château dominating the Loire, offered an impressive spectacle. Leonardo went there regularly, accompanied by Francesco. They crossed through the underground passage, emerged in the château gardens, then strolled through the town's narrow streets. The Tuscan loved to watch artisans at work: the blacksmith hammering iron, the carpenter assembling his planks, the baker kneading his dough. Each trade revealed mechanical principles that his mind analyzed instantly.

The Loire itself was an inexhaustible subject of study. Leonardo spent hours on its banks, scrutinizing the current, noting variations in level, examining the eddies that formed around bridge pillars. Water had always captivated him, he who had grown up near the Arno. He saw in it a universal principle, a primordial force that sculpted the earth, nourished

life, purified bodies. His research on fluid dynamics was among his most accomplished work.

The king came to visit him in the first week of December. Francis I was then twenty-two years old, an age when enthusiasm and ambition mingle. Tall, athletic, his elongated face surmounted by a carefully trimmed brown beard, he embodied the new generation of humanist princes, lovers of arts and letters as much as war and hunting.

He arrived one morning, accompanied by a small retinue: his intimate friend Admiral Bonnivet, his first chamberlain the Count of Saint-Pol, and naturally his secretary Guillaume Gouffier. They had taken the underground passage, emerging in the gardens of Clos Lucé like conspirators.

Leonardo awaited them in the great salon on the ground floor, dressed in his finest black velvet robe. Francesco and Salai stood back, ready to serve wine and delicacies.

—Maestro Leonardo, declared Francis in Italian with a strong French accent, it is an immense honor to welcome you to our kingdom. We have admired your creations since our earliest youth. Our tutor, messire Christophe de Longueil, showed us copies of your drawings and spoke to us of your genius.

Francis admired Leonardo, certainly. But he was also a pragmatic king. An investment. One thousand écus per year was the price of a regiment of mercenaries. What did he get in return? The prestige of having the greatest genius of the age at his court. The glory of protecting what Italy had rejected. But also—and Francis didn't hide it from his advisors—the hope that Leonardo would design for him war machines, impregnable fortifications, new weapons. Generosity and calculation could coexist.

Leonardo bowed respectfully, but the king stopped him with a friendly gesture.

—No, no, master! It is we who must bow before you! You are the greatest artist of our time, perhaps of all time! We are only a young king who still has everything to learn.

This charming humility, probably a bit calculated but sincere, touched the old man. He had known so many arrogant princes, so many condescending patrons. This one was different.

—Sire, you honor me with your presence and your words. But it is I who must thank you for welcoming me to your kingdom when my own homeland rejected me.

—Italy is a mosaic of small states jealous of one another. France is a kingdom united under a single crown. Here, your genius will be recognized at its true value.

Francis settled into an armchair, gesturing for Leonardo to do the same. His companions remained standing, but the atmosphere was relaxed.

—Master, I want you to feel free here. Totally free. You will have no obligation to produce. Live, create, reflect as you see fit. Your mere presence is already a priceless gift.

—Sire, you are too generous.

—Not enough, on the contrary. Do you know that since my childhood, I have dreamed of making France a new center of the Renaissance? Rome has its Michelangelo. Florence has its Medici. Venice has its painters. But France will have Leonardo da Vinci.

During the two hours that followed, they discussed art, science, architecture. Francis wanted to transform his kingdom, build châteaux that would rival Italian palaces, attract the best artists...

—I have a project that will excite you, he announced, unrolling plans on a table. We want to build a new château at Chambord, a few leagues from here. An edifice that would blend Italian innovations and our French traditions. We have

thought of a double-helix staircase, where two people can go up and down simultaneously without ever crossing paths. What do you think?

Leonardo examined the plans carefully. The idea was ingenious, but the technical design presented considerable challenges.

—Sire, the concept is original. The structure will have to be calculated with extreme precision to support the weight of the stone while maintaining the fluidity of the curves. Allow me to study this and propose solutions to you.

—Take all the time necessary. Beauty cannot be commanded, it must be awaited.

When the king finally left, Leonardo felt strangely invigorated. For the first time in years, he was meeting a prince who truly understood what he did, who was sincerely interested in his ideas, who respected him not as a useful artisan but as a visionary thinker.

Winter settled over Touraine, bringing its share of frost and morning mists. Clos Lucé, with its great fireplaces and thick tapestries, offered comfortable refuge against the cold. Leonardo, who had always suffered from Milanese winters, appreciated this milder climate.

Francesco took care of all the practical aspects of their installation. Some murmured that a particular affection bound the two men, but Francesco dismissed this gossip with a shrug.

—My dear child, Leonardo often repeated, you have sacrificed your youth for me. You could have been a captain like your father, married a rich heiress, had a comfortable life in Milan. Instead, you spend your days organizing my notebooks and preparing my colors.

—I have learned at your side more than I would ever have learned in ten lives as a Milanese courtier, Francesco

invariably responded. You have taught me to see the world with fresh eyes, to question certainties, to seek beauty in science and science in beauty. How could I regret this choice?

The studio resembled Ali Baba's cave. On the walls, dozens of pinned drawings: studies of heads, draperies, landscapes, machines, anatomies. On the tables, scientific instruments: compasses, rulers, squares, astrolabes. In the cabinets, hundreds of loose sheets covered with that characteristic mirror writing, going from right to left as if going back through time.

Leonardo worked simultaneously on several projects. He tirelessly retouched the Mona Lisa, adding imperceptible glazes to perfect that sfumato that gave the skin such a troubling texture of truth.

But his right arm was beginning to betray him. Doctors spoke of an "*apoplexy*," a sort of attack that had partially paralyzed his right side. He could still draw, but fine gestures required considerable effort. Oil painting, with its minute details, became exhausting.

—I'm aging, he sometimes murmured. My body no longer responds to my mind's commands. It's a strange sensation to feel prisoner of one's own flesh.

Francesco tried to reassure him:

—Master, at your age, you are still remarkably vigorous. Your ideas remain as innovative, your gaze on the world remains as piercing. What does it matter if your hand trembles a little?

—What does it matter? I'm a painter, Francesco. My hand is my tool. If it betrays me, what am I?

—You are much more than a painter. You are a thinker, a scientist, an engineer. Your mind is worth a thousand hands.

These conversations recurred regularly, a sign that Leonardo measured with lucidity the decline of his physical capacities. But he refused to admit defeat. Every day, he sat before the

Mona Lisa and tried to perfect a shadow, adjust a reflection. The result was often disappointing—his right hand no longer followed—but he persisted with stubborn obstinacy.

Francis I kept his word: he came regularly to visit Leonardo. Sometimes with his court—his wife Claude de France, his sister Marguerite of Navarre, his advisors and courtiers. Sometimes alone, or almost, accompanied by his friend Bonnivet, for intimate conversations.

These royal visits were events. The servants bustled about. Francesco made sure the studio was presentable, tidying scattered papers, dusting furniture. Salaï, who had a taste for staging, displayed some of the most beautiful drawings prominently.

But Leonardo hated this agitation. He preferred impromptu visits, when the king arrived through the underground passage without ceremony, sat in an armchair and engaged in conversation like a friend rather than a monarch.

One day in February, Francis arrived thus unexpectedly, finding Leonardo alone in the studio, staring at the Mona Lisa.

—She still obsesses you, this Lady?

—Sire, I don't know which of the two obsesses the other... Fifteen years I've been working on this portrait. Fifteen years I've been seeking perfection. And I still don't know if I've achieved it.

—Perfectionist to the point of absurdity, murmured the king, approaching the painting. But perhaps that's what makes your genius. This impossible quest for the absolute.

—Or my curse. Do you know how many paintings I've left unfinished? How many commissions have I disappointed? I'm reproached for my slowness, my indecision. They claim I prefer thinking to acting.

—They also say that each of your completed works is worth ten creations by another master.

Francis positioned himself in front of the Mona Lisa, studying it in silence.

—How do you manage to give this Lady such presence? It seems she will descend from her frame and speak to us.

Leonardo smiled weakly.

—Sire, I have spent infinite time painting and repainting this portrait. I have studied the plays of shadow on human skin, the way dark areas blend into light. This is what we call *sfumato*, the art of making contours disappear to give an impression of life.

—*Sfumato*, repeated Francis, savoring the Italian word. "*Smoked*," in a way. As if you painted through a veil of mist.

—Exactly. Nature knows no lines. Everything is transition, passage from one form or color to another. The painter who traces sharp contours betrays nature. One must suggest rather than assert.

The king listened. He would have liked Leonardo to paint other masterpieces, but he understood that he was now too weary, too diminished by his partial paralysis.

—Don't exhaust yourself creating for us, he added with unusual gentleness. Your presence here is already a priceless gift. Converse with us, advise us, share your wisdom. That is what we expect from you.

This benevolence touched Leonardo. How many patrons had shown him such understanding? How many had accepted that an aging artist was no longer as productive?

—Sire, you are a rare prince. I have served Ludovico Sforza, Cesare Borgia, Pope Leo X. None treated me with as much respect and freedom. I will be eternally grateful to you.

—It is we who are grateful to you. Already, other Italian artists are joining us, attracted by your example. Soon, we will have our own Florence, our own Rome.

But behind this political ambition, Francesco perceived something more authentic: a genuine friendship between the young king and the old master. An improbable friendship, crossing generations and social ranks, founded on mutual admiration.

In the spring of 1517, Francis I entrusted Leonardo with the artistic supervision of the Chambord construction site. This château, whose first stone would be laid in September, was to embody the grandeur of the French monarchy and its openness to Italian influences.

Leonardo threw himself into the project with the energy of a thirty-year-old man. His right arm was weakened, but his mind remained sharp. He drew plans, imagined innovations, proposed technical solutions to architectural challenges.

The double-helix staircase, this jewel of the future château, preoccupied him. How to build a structure where two people can go up and down without crossing paths? The geometric principle was simple: two interlaced helixes. But its realization in massive stone posed formidable static problems.

Leonardo spent weeks calculating loads, drawing vaults, designing the central core. He filled entire notebooks with diagrams, annotations, calculations. Francesco helped him, copying the scribbled drawings neatly, checking calculations, organizing documents to present to the king.

—Master, this staircase is a marvel of ingenuity, but are you certain it can be built? Francesco sometimes worried, fearing to see his master exhaust himself on a potentially unrealizable project.

—Everything that can be thought can be built, Leonardo responded with conviction. The question is not "*can we?*" but "*how?*". And I will show them how.

Chambord was not the only project. Francis I had other ambitions for his kingdom. He wanted to modernize the

fortifications of border towns, dig canals to facilitate commerce, develop Italian-style gardens in his châteaux, develop royal artillery.

On all these subjects, he consulted Leonardo. And the old man responded generously, sharing his immense knowledge accumulated over forty years of reflection and experimentation.

For fortifications, he proposed star-shaped bastions that would better resist cannonballs than old medieval walls. He drew meticulous plans, showing how calculated angles would deflect projectiles instead of absorbing them frontally.

For canals, he suggested a route connecting the Loire to the Saône, allowing goods to cross France without taking dangerous roads. He designed lock systems that would save water while accelerating the passage of boats.

For gardens, he imagined spectacular water features, artificial grottoes, automatons that would marvel visitors. Inspired by the gardens of Villa d'Este that he had discovered in Italy, he wanted to create something even more ambitious.

His two disciples assisted him as best they could. Francesco, with his engineering training, understood the technical aspects. Salai, with his manual skill, built models that brought Leonardo's abstract concepts to life.

The Clos Lucé studio became a laboratory of ideas where they experimented, tested, improved. Scale models of machines cluttered the tables. Drawings covered the walls. Treatises piled up on shelves. It was an organized chaos, a fertile disorder that testified to the creative intensity that reigned there.

In the spring of 1517, Leonardo's health began to decline. His rheumatism worsened, making movements painful. The

paralysis of his right hand progressed, extending to the forearm. Some days, he couldn't even hold a pen.

Doctors came from the château. They examined the patient, asked questions, palpated the numb limbs. Their diagnosis was without appeal: the master had suffered a cerebral attack that had damaged the nerve centers controlling the right side of the body. The paralysis was irreversible and could even worsen.

—How much time do I have left? Leonardo asked with a lucidity that surprised the doctors.

—It is in God's hands, responded Dr. Burgensis, the king's personal physician, prudently. You could live for years yet, or...

—Or die tomorrow. I understand. Thank you for your frankness.

When the doctors had left, Leonardo remained silent, staring at his inert right hand resting on the armrest of the chair. This hand that had painted *The Last Supper*, sculpted marble angels, dissected dozens of corpses, traced thousands of drawings. This hand that no longer obeyed him.

—Master, Francesco murmured, his throat tight, don't lose hope. Perhaps...

—Francesco, my friend, hope is an admirable virtue. But realism is sometimes more useful. My body is giving out. That's a fact. I must accept it and adapt.

—Adapt how?

—By concentrating on what I can still do. I can no longer paint, so be it. But I can still think, write with my left hand, dictate my ideas. I can still transmit.

This stoic acceptance impressed the two companions. Leonardo was not one to lament. He faced adversity with the same scientific curiosity he applied to everything: analyzing symptoms, understanding mechanisms, seeking solutions.

In the weeks that followed, the studio adapted. Francesco became Leonardo's hands. When the master wanted to retouch a painting, he dictated his instructions and Francesco executed, guided by constant commentary. It was frustrating for both, but they had no choice.

Salaï, for his part, took charge of all the practical aspects that Leonardo could no longer manage alone: dressing him, shaving him, cutting his food. The "*little devil*" showed in these humble tasks an unexpected tenderness, a patience no one knew he had.

The summer of 1517 brought a diversion. Francis I organized great festivities to celebrate the baptism of his son, the dauphin. For several weeks, Amboise became the theater of tournaments, balls, banquets, spectacles.

The king asked Leonardo to design some of the entertainments. Despite his weariness, Leonardo accepted. It was an opportunity to show that his creative genius had not weakened, even if his body was declining.

He conceived a mechanical lion that advanced toward the king then opened its chest, from which sprang lilies—symbol of the French monarchy. The construction of this automaton mobilized Francesco and Salaï for weeks, aided by several local artisans. Leonardo directed the operation from his chair, dictating instructions, correcting errors, perfecting mechanisms.

On the day of the presentation, all of Amboise held its breath. The lion, of gigantic size, began to move with mechanical growls. It advanced toward the king, stopped before him, then its chest opened, revealing a bouquet of artificial lilies of striking beauty.

The audience applauded. Francis I, moved, approached Leonardo who was attending the scene from a platform.

—Master, you have amazed us again.

—Sire, it's only a toy. But I'm happy that it pleases you.

—More than a toy. It's a symbol. The lion, symbol of Florence where you come from, opens to reveal the lilies of France. It's our alliance incarnate, Italy and France united in art and beauty.

Leonardo hadn't thought of this symbolism, but he was touched that the king found such profound meaning in it.

The festivities lasted several days. There were nautical jousts on the Loire, aquatic ballets, fireworks. Leonardo, too weary to attend everything, contented himself with the accounts that Francesco and Salaï brought him each evening.

But this joyful period exhausted him further. The mental effort to conceive the mechanical lion, the nervous tension of the presentation, the general excitement had drained his strength. In August, he had to stay in bed for two weeks, struck down by a tenacious fever.

Autumn saw the return of rains and first cold weather. Leonardo spent more and more time bedridden or in his chair near the fireplace. His legs no longer carried him very well. Stairs had become an ordeal.

Francesco had a bed installed in the studio itself, so that Leonardo would no longer have to go up and down. The studio became bedroom, office, salon all at once. The master received his visitors there, worked there as much as his health permitted, spent his nights there.

These months were marked by deep introspection. Leonardo, who had always been a man turned toward the future, toward projects and discoveries, began to reflect on his life, his legacy, what he would leave behind.

He reread his old notebooks, finding forgotten drawings, notes written twenty or thirty years earlier. Some projects still amazed him with their audacity. Others seemed naive, immature to him. But all testified to a life devoted to the quest for knowledge.

—Francesco, he said one evening as they leafed through an old notebook together, look at everything I've thought, imagined, drawn. Hundreds of machines, thousands of observations, entire treatises. And yet, I have the feeling of having only skimmed the surface of knowledge.

—You have accomplished in one lifetime what others wouldn't accomplish in ten. Your anatomical discoveries alone will transform medicine.

—If they are published. If they don't remain buried in these volumes that no one can read because of my writing. If they are not lost, scattered, forgotten after my death.

This preoccupation recurred often. Leonardo measured with anguish the risk that all his work would be lost. Who would care about these scribbled notebooks? Who would take the time to decipher them?

—I will ensure that your works are preserved, Francesco promised solemnly. I will devote my life, if necessary, to making your genius known.

—You are a good son. Better than I deserve.

—The problem is that these notebooks only have value for those who can understand them. For a merchant, they're just scribbles on old paper. How will Francesco be able to preserve them if no one wants to buy them?

This brutal but realistic remark from Salāi struck the master. Francesco was right. After his death, who would want these notebooks? Who would pay to acquire them? Who would study them?

—Then they must be given to institutions, to the University of Paris perhaps, or to great learned lords who will understand their value.

—Universities are only interested in Aristotle and the Church Fathers. Your observations, your flying machines, all that will seem suspicious to them, perhaps even heretical.

Leonardo had to admit that his student was right. The knowledge he had accumulated was too far ahead of his time. It would perhaps take a century, two centuries before someone understood the value of his discoveries.

—Then, preserve at least the paintings, he sighed wearily. Paintings, everyone can appreciate. The Mona Lisa, the Saint Anne, the Saint John the Baptist. These are what will make me survive.

Winter was harsh. The master spent more and more time in bed or near the fireplace, bundled in wool blankets. Doctors came, prescribing bloodlettings, herbal decoctions, poultices. Nothing really worked.

Francis I continued to visit him, despite the bad weather.

In the spring of 1518, Leonardo's condition deteriorated.

Francesco and Salaï took turns at his bedside, sponging his feverish brow, giving him something to drink, watching over him day and night. Anguish gripped them. Were they going to lose their master? The one who had been father, friend, mentor for so many years?

—He's going to die, Francesco murmured one evening to Salaï, tears in his eyes. He's going to leave us, and we won't have been able to do anything.

—Don't speak like that, Salaï replied. The master is strong. He has overcome so many ordeals. He will survive again.

Against all odds, Leonardo recovered. In May 1518, the fever broke. He was able to get up, take a few steps, regain some appetite. Doctors spoke of a miracle, the two companions thanked Providence.

—I saw death, Leonardo confided to Francesco as they walked in the gardens of Clos Lucé. She was there, very close. I felt her cold breath on my neck. But something held me back. I still have things to do, things to transmit.

—What things?

—I don't know yet. But I will know when the moment comes. Weakened by illness, Leonardo resumed his activities.

Summer 1518 passed, then autumn. He had regained some of his strength and had gone back to work with surprising determination, as if he wanted to accomplish as much as possible before the final deadline he felt approaching.

He drew plans for an ideal city, with streets on several levels to separate pedestrians from carts. He studied water turbulence, filling entire notebooks with drawings of whirlpools and vortices.

Autumn was also marked by growing anxiety concerning the fate of his creations. Leonardo observed his two protégés and wondered if they would be capable of preserving his legacy.

Francesco was intelligent, devoted, organized. But would he have the necessary authority to impose the value of these notebooks on a world that wouldn't understand them? Would he have the financial means to keep the paintings rather than selling them to the first merchant who came along?

Salai was skillful, resourceful, but also whimsical and sometimes unscrupulous. Leonardo had caught him lying several times, appropriating things that didn't belong to him. Could he be trusted to manage such a precious heritage?

These doubts tormented him. He spoke of them to Francis I during a visit in October.

—Sire, my companions are good boys. But I fear they are not up to facing the difficulties that await them after my death.

—What difficulties?

—Creditors who will come claiming imaginary debts. Unscrupulous art dealers who will try to cheat them. How will two young Italians lost in France be able to resist all that?

Francis placed his hand on Leonardo's shoulder.

—I will watch over them. I promise you. After your death, I will ensure they lack nothing and that your creations are respected.

—I thank you, Sire. But kings quickly forget their promises when the one who inspired them is no longer there.

—I will not forget. You have my royal word.

Leonardo wanted to believe the king. But deep down, he knew that words, even royal ones, fly away with time.

Winter 1518-1519 was the last. Leonardo felt it, the two companions knew it, but still refused to admit it.

In January 1519, illness returned. A persistent cough, breathing difficulties, generalized weakness. This time, doctors were pessimistic. The worn body no longer responded to treatments. Bloodlettings brought only temporary relief. Herbal decoctions remained ineffective.

Francis I came to see him almost every day. He sat at his bedside, held his hand, spoke to him gently. These royal visits moved the entire household. That the King of France should devote so much time to a dying old man testified to the sincere affection he bore him.

—Sire, Leonardo said one day in a moment of lucidity, I thank you for everything you have done for me. These years in Amboise have been peaceful.

—It is I who thank you, Francis responded with emotion. Your presence has illuminated our court. You have taught us to look at the world with fresh eyes.

—I would have liked to do more for you. Finish Chambord, dig that canal, paint those frescoes we talked about. But my body betrayed me.

—You have done the essential: you have shown us what genius is. It's a priceless gift.

In February and March, Leonardo had periods of remission alternating with relapses. Some days, he felt better, could get up, sit in his chair, converse almost normally. Other days, he remained prostrate, short of breath, unable to utter more than a few words.

Francesco and Salai no longer left the studio. They slept on pallets placed near the master's bed, ready to intervene at the slightest sign of distress. Their devotion was total.

In March and April, Leonardo had several conversations with his students that would remain engraved in their memory.

One day, he called Francesco and confided to him:

—When I am gone, you will have to continue without me. It will be difficult. You will feel lost, abandoned. But you will find your way. You have in you a strength you don't yet suspect.

Another day, it was Salai he summoned:

—My "*little devil*," you have been with me since you were ten years old. I took you in when you were nothing but a street urchin. Now, you are an accomplished man, a competent artist. But you have also remained that eccentric scamp I knew. Salai smiled through his tears.

—I've never known how to be serious. It's not in my nature.

—I know. And that's why I love you. You brought me joy when I was sad, lightness when I was too reasonable. Don't change. Stay yourself.

—I promise you.

There were also more practical conversations. Leonardo wanted to make sure his companions knew where his important papers were, how to manage his debts, which creations had value.

—In the oak chest, there are letters of credit from Florentine bankers. You will be able to cash these credits after my death. It will give you a little money to survive while waiting to sell some paintings.

—We won't sell anything, Francesco protested. We'll keep everything in your memory.

—Don't be stupid. You'll need money to live. Sell what's necessary, but intelligently. Don't undersell my canvases to the first merchant who comes along. Wait for real enthusiasts who will understand their value.

These instructions alternated with more philosophical reflections on life, death, art, science. Leonardo, feeling his end approaching, wanted to transmit the essence of his wisdom accumulated over sixty-seven years of intense existence.

—My children, he repeated, I have spent my life seeking truth. In painting, in science, in observing nature. And do you know what I discovered? That truth is elusive. Every time you think you've grasped it, it escapes. You only glimpse fragments, reflections. But this quest, even in vain, gives meaning to life.

Manor of Clos Lucé, near Amboise, April 28, 1519

The morning sun penetrated through the broad openings of the manor of Clos Lucé. In the great studio on the first floor,

Francesco Melzi observed his master who was dozing. For several days, his condition had worsened.

But now, the end was approaching, and with it, terrible questions that the old man had put off too long.

—Master, Francesco murmured, approaching the chair, how do you feel this morning?

Leonardo half-opened his eyelids, as if returning from very far away. His eyes, despite the weariness, still retained that acuity that had so impressed Francesco during their first meeting. But the young man also perceived in them a new despondency, a resignation that tightened his heart.

—I feel like an old tree whose roots are beginning to detach from the earth. Each breath demands considerable effort, each heartbeat seems to be the last.

He coughed, bringing his valid hand to his chest.

—Don't speak like that. You have overcome so many ordeals! Remember your illness last year, we all thought you would leave us, and yet...

—It's true, Leonardo interrupted. I survived the intrigues of Cesare Borgia, the jealousies of Michelangelo, the slanders of Roman courtiers. But there is a moment when the soul understands that the body can no longer serve it. That moment has come.

In a corner, Salai was preparing colors on a marble palette, his precise gestures betraying years of experience.

—My friend, Leonardo called weakly, come closer. We must talk, all three of us.

Salai set down his brushes and joined Francesco near the chair. His face was marked, a sign that he had slept little these last nights. For a week, they had been watching at the master's bedside, looking for the slightest sign of improvement, dreading each worsening.

—The doctor we had come from Orléans claims that your condition can still evolve positively. He has prescribed daily bloodlettings and decoctions of cinchona...

—The Orléans doctor knows nothing more than I do about my condition. I have dissected enough human bodies to understand what is happening in me. My heart is weakening, my lungs are struggling, and my brain itself is beginning to detach from this world.

Leonardo looked at his two protégés with that paternal tenderness he had shown them for so many years.

—Do you know what is the most painful thing about the approach of death? It's not the physical suffering, which drugs can alleviate. It's not even the fear of the unknown, for I have always been curious to discover what awaits us in the hereafter. No, the most painful thing is having to abandon those you love, to leave them alone facing life's difficulties.

Never had Leonardo spoken to him with such emotion.

—We are no longer children. You have transmitted your knowledge to us, your passion for art. We will know how to honor your memory.

—You don't measure the difficulties that await you. There are realities I have never spoken of, perhaps out of negligence. The time has come to reveal them to you.

He gathered his strength for this crucial conversation.

—Help me to get up. I want to admire my creations one last time, and particularly my Lady.

Francesco and Salāi rushed to support him and lead him to the easel where rested, carefully protected by a veil of amaranth silk embroidered with gold, the portrait that had never left the studio since their arrival in France.

—This Lady will have accompanied me everywhere. Through all my wanderings, all my exiles, all my disappointments. I

have never parted with her, never accepted selling her, even when my finances were at their lowest or when I was offered a fortune for her.

He lifted the veil, revealing the Mona Lisa in all her mysterious beauty. The morning light that penetrated through the windows caressed the painted face with particular gentleness, revealing the infinite complexity of the modeling.

—Admire her well. Look at this smile that I spent four years painting during my first session in Florence, then that I reworked for eleven more years. Each transparency, each shadow has been thought, rethought, corrected. This woman is no longer just Lisa Gherardini, wife of Francesco del Giocondo, Florentine bourgeoisie whom I portrayed for a few florins. She has become the incarnation of all my questioning about feminine beauty, about the mysteries of the human soul, about the art of making painting come alive.

Francesco studied the portrait. He remembered his first vision of the Mona Lisa, in the Milanese studio, in 1508. Leonardo was then perfecting that *sfumato* that gave the skin such a troubling texture of truth. He had spent hours observing him at work, fascinated by his technique, astonished by his patience.

—This canvas is your absolute masterpiece, he affirmed. Never has anyone known how to paint life with such intensity. When you stare at it, you have the impression she's going to speak, that she's going to rise from her chair.

—Life... Leonardo repeated pensively. Yes, that's what I sought to capture. Not the appearance of life, but life itself. See these hands...

He indicated the Mona Lisa's hands, placed one on the other with infinite grace, modeled with a delicacy that bordered on perfection.

—I drew dozens of studies before finding this position. These hands are not simply posed, they express a state of mind: serenity tinged with a slight melancholy, the tranquility that masks an inner tension.

Salai approached the portrait, seduced as always by this creation he had seen born and transform over the years.

—This black silk dress, these transparent veils that float around the neck... How did you manage to make the material so palpable? You would think you could touch the fabric.

—By observing. By observing relentlessly, with the patience of a copyist monk. Do you know that I spent hours studying reflections on satin, folds of muslin, plays of shadow on a face? I drew hundreds of preparatory studies, tested dozens of colored mixtures. Every detail of this portrait results from thousands of observations, thousands of trials.

Leonardo admired the landscape that extended behind the figure of the Mona Lisa, this imaginary landscape with fantastic rocks, winding waters, mysterious mists.

—And this setting exists nowhere. I composed it by drawing from my memories of the Lombard Alps, the hills of Tuscany, the Pontine marshes. It's the reflection of my inner world. The two rivers that flow at different levels symbolize the passage of time, the inexorable flow of life.

He leaned more heavily on his companions, weariness overtaking him.

—But enough talk of technique and poetry. There are more serious things to evoke, more prosaic realities, but alas much more urgent.

They returned to the center of the room, where Leonardo resumed his place in his chair with a sigh of relief. The simple act of walking a few steps now exhausted the old man.

—Do you know what will happen at my death?

They shook their heads, uncomfortable before this evocation of the dreaded deadline.

—I'm going to teach you, and this French law lesson will be useful to you, believe me. More useful than all the artistic teachings I could have transmitted to you. I, born in Vinci in the Republic of Florence, subject of the Duke of Tuscany, remain in the eyes of French law a foreigner. An aubain, as the jurists of this kingdom say. Now, there exists in France a pitiless law, as ancient as the Capetian monarchy, which is called the *droit d'aubaine*. This law stipulates that when a foreigner dies on the kingdom's territory without having obtained letters of naturalization from the king, all his goods—without exception—revert to the crown.

The silence that followed this revelation was heavy. This prospect he had never envisioned suddenly appeared to him in all its appalling reality.

—You mean that... that all this... Melzi stammered, indicating the room, all your creations, your notebooks, your instruments...

—All this will become royal property the instant of my death. Agents of the Treasury, flanked by clerks and notaries, will come draw up an inventory. They will affix seals, draft reports, evaluate each object. Then they will carry away my paintings, my volumes, my instruments, my books. My Lady Lisa herself will leave this place to join the royal collections.

Salai collapsed on a stool, stunned.

—But that's impossible! he exclaimed, moved. You are the king's painter! Francis I venerates you! He gave you this manor, he pays you a pension of one thousand écus! Surely, he won't allow this abominable law to be applied!

—Your loyalty honors you, but it blinds you to reality. Do you think that a king, even the most benevolent, makes exceptions to the laws of his kingdom for a simple artist? Do

you think his advisors won't point out to him the considerable value of my goods?

He swept the room with his gaze, evaluating the artistic and scientific wealth that had accumulated there.

—I was imprudent enough to build up over the years a considerable treasure. These canvases you admire, these notebooks you study, these instruments you handle represent a fortune. A fortune that the Crown will have no trouble confiscating in all legality.

Melzi, who had recovered his senses, was reflecting.

—But these letters of naturalization you speak of, why have you never requested them? King Francis esteems you, he surely would have granted them to you!

A bitter smile appeared on Leonardo's lips.

—Ah! If you knew how this question has haunted me for months! How I reproach myself for my negligence! I thought of it, of course, but always too late, always telling myself I still had time. These procedures present infernal complexity. First, one must address a detailed request to the Royal Grand Chancellery, setting forth one's merits and services rendered to the kingdom. This request must be drafted according to very strict forms, in impeccable legal Latin, and supported by testimonies from influential personalities.

He paused, coughed, then resumed:

—Then, if the request is judged admissible—which is never guaranteed—it is transmitted to the King's Council for examination. The councilors deliberate, verify the applicant's background, inquire about his morality, his religious opinions, his fidelity to the kingdom. All this takes time, much time.

Francesco listened to this enumeration with growing consternation.

—How long does it take for all these formalities?

—If all goes well, if no councilor finds fault, if no clerk loses the file, if no jealous rival slips slander into a powerful person's ear... six months minimum. More often a full year, sometimes longer. I questioned the king's secretary. He confirmed that the procedure was long and uncertain.

Leonardo added gravely:

—But that's not all. Once the letters are granted—if they are—they must still be verified by the Chamber of Accounts to ensure they don't harm the rights of the Royal Treasury. Then have them registered by the Parlement, which can refuse them for formal defect. Finally, have them endorsed by the Treasury Chamber. And all this must be accomplished within the year following the granting of the letters, failing which they become null and void.

He fell silent for a moment, his gaze lost in the flames of the crackling fireplace.

—Look at me. My body tells me I don't have six months ahead of me, perhaps not even six weeks. I waited too long. It's too late to undertake these procedures. Much too late.

Francesco stood up, animated by sudden determination.

—Then we must act! I'll go to court tomorrow! I'll speak to the king! I'll explain the urgency of the situation! Francis I sincerely loves you, he'll understand! He'll give orders to accelerate the procedures!

—Do you think a king can make such decisions on a whim? Leonardo asked gently. Even if he wanted to, even if he were disposed to disrupt customs for me, he would have to consult his council, his financiers. And they...

He hesitated, as if struggling with himself to reveal a painful secret.

—And then... there's something else. Something I've never confided to you, so as not to worry you.

They leaned toward their master, intrigued.

—Three weeks ago, I received a visit... a revealing visit. A court figure, dressed in black as befits men of the robe. It was Master Guillaume de Montcornet, principal clerk of the Treasury Chamber.

Leonardo relived the disagreeable scene, and Francesco could read on his face the repugnance this visitor had inspired in him.

—This man spoke to me of my creations, their beauty, their value. He asked me precise questions about my goods, my income, my projects. Then, with that skill proper to men of law, he slipped into the conversation allusions to my situation as a foreigner.

—What allusions? Francesco inquired, sensing the worst.

—He made me understand, with all the hypocrisy of which those people are capable, that my naturalization request risked not being... favorably received. He evoked "*legitimate concerns of the Royal Treasury*," "*unfortunate precedents that should be avoided*."

—What do you mean? Salai protested indignantly. What precedents? Who would dare oppose such a request?

—Very powerful people. People who have the king's ear and who say to themselves: "*Why facilitate the transmission of these riches to foreign heirs when the droit d'aubaine can bring them into the kingdom's coffers?*" Advisors who consider my goods too precious to escape the crown, who see in my death a windfall—that's the word—to enrich the royal collections without spending a sou.

A dull anger rose in Francesco.

—It's abominable! These people are speculating on your death! They're waiting for you to give up the ghost to seize your treasures!

—Probably. But these are influential men, who know all the workings of royal administration. And we, what are we compared to them? Artists without protection, without personal fortune, without solid political support. The king appreciates me, it's true. But what is a prince's affection compared to the interests of royal finances?

Leonardo stared one last time at the Mona Lisa, as if he wanted to engrave in his memory this creation that summed up all his artistic philosophy.

—I have spent my life creating beauty, seeking truth in art and science. But I have neglected the prosaic realities of existence. I never thought to build a network of influences, to cultivate the powerful. This naivety will cost dearly to those I love most in the world.

He brought his valid hand to his forehead, as if overwhelmed by the weight of his remorse.

—How many times have I told myself: *"Tomorrow, I'll draft that request. Next week, I'll visit that influential councilor. Next month, I'll begin the procedures."* And the weeks have passed, the months have fled, and now it's too late. Too late to act according to the law. There remains only to...

He stopped, leaving his sentence hanging, as if hesitating to cross an invisible line.

Salaï, moved, knelt near the chair, placing his hand on the arm of the man who had taken him in, educated him, loved him like a father.

—Don't torment yourself so. You have created jewels that will cross the centuries! You have advanced art and science! What do material goods matter to us? We'll manage, we'll know how to transmit your teaching...

—You don't understand the scope of the disaster that threatens us, Leonardo interrupted with sudden vehemence. It's not just about leaving you destitute—though that prospect

doesn't please me. It's about seeing dispersed, wasted, an irreplaceable intellectual and artistic heritage.

He straightened in his chair, animated by an energy that surprised his students.

—Look around you! These notebooks contain the secrets of my research! I've recorded observations that doctors will take a long time to rediscover! The structure of the heart, the functioning of the eye, the mechanics of muscles!

He indicated with a trembling gesture the piles of volumes spread on the tables.

—These drawings reveal unknown pictorial techniques! The secret of sfumato, the mysteries of aerial perspective, the art of modeling flesh with shadows! These models show machines that won't be invented for another hundred years! Flying devices, war chariots, mobile bridges, irrigation systems!

He rose with difficulty and headed toward a table where drawings of stunning complexity were spread out.

—There, these studies on bird flight! I've discovered principles that will one day allow men to rise into the air! Admire these calculations on lift, on the mechanics of gliding flight! I've understood that air behaves like water, that it can carry a body if that body has the adequate shape!

Francesco studied with emotion these drawings he had seen born under Leonardo's pen, these passionate researches that had occupied him for months, even years.

—Here, Leonardo continued, indicating other plates, my research on the flow of fluids! They will revolutionize the art of building canals and locks! I explain there why water swirls in river meanders, how to predict floods, how to avoid the silting of ports! These principles are universal, they apply to everything that flows!

Francesco looked at his master, discovering a passion, an urgency he had never seen with such intensity.

—And these plates! These drawings of the heart, the eye, the brain, muscles, bones...

—Ah, these plates! Leonardo exclaimed with painful pride. I discovered that the heart has four cavities, not two as the treatises of Aristotle and Galen teach! I've pierced the mysteries of vision, explained why we see colors, how the image forms on the retina, why distant objects appear bluish! I've dissected humans, men and women, old and young, healthy and sick!

He turned toward his protégés, his face ravaged by anguish.

—All this is going to be dispersed, sold to ignorant collectors who will see only pretty drawings, or worse, relegated to damp libraries where no one will think to consult it. My technical secrets will die with me. My scientific discoveries will sink into oblivion. Doctors will continue to bleed the sick according to obsolete methods. Engineers will build canals that will silt up. Men will remain nailed to the ground when I have shown them the path to the sky!

Outside, the joyful cries of peasants working in the domain's fields could be heard, the song of a rooster in the farmyard, the distant tinkling of bells from the chapel of Saint-Florentin. All this peaceful world ignored the drama being played out in the manor.

Melzi examined the studio with new eyes, suddenly measuring the immensity of the riches it contained. How many hours had he spent studying these notebooks, deciphering this mirror writing, learning the mysteries of Leonardian science! How many passionate conversations had he had with the master about these discoveries that overturned his vision of the world!

—There must be a way to save at least part of this heritage, he said, his voice altered. You have friends at court, admirers among the great of the kingdom...

—My friends, my admirers? Leonardo exclaimed. Where are they when I need them? Cardinal d'Amboise, who protected my research and understood their value, died nine years ago. Florimond Robertet, secretary of finances who understood my urbanism projects, is gravely ill. My protectors are disappearing one after another, and I find myself alone facing the greed of courtiers and Treasury bureaucrats.

He continued, exhausted by this long tirade.

—And then, even if I still had protectors, what could they do? The law is the law. The *droit d'aubaine* applies inexorably. Even the king cannot derogate from it without creating a dangerous precedent. His advisors would point it out to him: if we make an exception for an Italian artist, why not for a Flemish merchant? For a German banker? Where would it stop?

Salaï, who had remained silent for a moment, approached with new determination, an unusual gleam in his eyes.

—And if... and if we found a way to remove some creations from this inventory? If we hid the most precious of your canvases before the arrival of royal agents?

Leonardo looked at him with surprise, disconcerted by this audacious suggestion that crossed a line he had not yet dared to envisage.

—What do you mean?

—I mean that certain pieces could be... momentarily absent at the crucial moment. That some canvases, some notebooks escape the gaze of royal agents. That they disappear before anyone comes to confiscate them.

Francesco understood where Salaï was heading, and this idea made his heart beat faster, a mixture of excitement and terror.

—He's right! Francesco added. We could hide the most precious creations! After all, isn't it natural that your closest companions should have received from you, over these years, some pieces as testimony of your affection? Isn't it normal that certain notebooks be found in our own lodgings, for our personal studies? Who could prove they don't belong to us?

Leonardo was troubled by this proposition that offended his conscience as a generally upright man, despite all the ruses and manipulations he had sometimes had to employ to survive in the pitiless world of Italian courts.

—What you're suggesting there... is very perilous. If your stratagem were discovered, you would risk prison, even hanging. The appropriation of goods reverting to the king is considered a crime of *lèse-majesté*. One doesn't joke about that.

—Who would discover it? Salaï insisted. These royal agents don't know the exact contents of your studio. They'll draw up their inventory based on what they see, not on what should be there. How could they guess that pieces they've never seen are missing?

Leonardo remained silent for a long moment, weighing his companions' arguments. His gaze traveled through the studio, stopping on each creation, each manuscript, as if evaluating what could be saved and what must be sacrificed to the appetites of the royal coffers.

—Do you realize what you're asking of me? he finally said. You're asking me to become accomplice to a fraud against the king who houses and pensions me. You're asking me to betray the trust of Francis I, who has treated me with unequalled magnanimity.

—We're not asking you anything, Francesco responded gently. We're simply proposing that you close your eyes to what two faithful students are going to do to save their beloved master's

heritage. You'll have nothing to do, nothing to say. We'll act alone, we'll assume the risks alone. You can even claim to be ignorant of our acts if ever we're discovered.

These words touched Leonardo. He appreciated these two men who had devoted their best years to serving him, who had followed him in all his wanderings, who had renounced their own ambitions to devote themselves to his art and his science.

Francesco, that Milanese nobleman who had left everything for love of art, who handled the brush with delicacy, who understood the subtleties of perspective better than many confirmed masters. Salai, that street urchin become an accomplished artist, who prepared colors according to his secret recipes, who knew by heart all his notebooks, who had cared for him during his illnesses with boundless devotion.

—You know I love you like the sons I never had, he murmured in a choked voice. You have been my consolation in difficult moments, my pride in hours of glory, my comfort in this old age that is ending. If you estimate that some of my creations can be better preserved in your hands than in those of royal stewards... then act according to your conscience.

He raised his valid hand in a gesture that resembled a blessing, or perhaps a farewell.

—After all, these works, I created them as much for you, my faithful companions, as for posterity. You have participated in their elaboration, you have shared my joys and disappointments during their creation. If you manage to save some of them from the claws of royal administration...

He left his sentence hanging, unable to pronounce the words that would make him accomplice to a theft.

Francesco and Salai exchanged a look of connivance. The plan was taking shape in their minds, but they knew they would have to act with prudence and sangfroid.

—But be careful, Leonardo added gravely, his gaze suddenly lucid. Be prudent. Be intelligent. Don't be too greedy in your choices. We must leave enough pieces in the studio for the inventory to seem credible, for the royal agents to leave satisfied with their haul. If the studio seems emptied, they'll ask questions, they'll investigate, and you'll be lost.

He turned his gaze toward the Mona Lisa.

—And above all... above all, never touch my Lady. This canvas is famous, known to art lovers. Courtiers have admired it during their visits to the manor, scholars have written about it, painters have come to study it. The king himself has spoken of it to his court, he has expressed his desire to possess it one day. Its disappearance would alert the authorities, and they would turn all of France upside down to find it. They would hunt you down to Italy if necessary.

—We know, Francesco affirmed. The Mona Lisa must stay. She's too visible, too desired. But we can save other pieces: your anatomical studies that no one but us knows how to read, your invention drawings that courtiers will take for worthless scribbles, your scientific volumes whose importance they won't understand, some canvases less known to the public but of striking beauty.

—This Saint Anne you never finished, Salaï added, this Saint John the Baptist with such troubling eyes, this Leda and the Swan that you painted in Rome and that scandalizes the well-thinking... These creations, few people know they exist. They could disappear without arousing suspicion.

Leonardo nodded wearily, but also with relief. At least, part of his heritage would survive, transmitted to loving hands that would know how to preserve it, cherish it, perhaps even make it known when times were more propitious.

—Do so then. But promise me one thing: whatever happens, ensure that these creations are never lost. Transmit them to

your heirs, bequeath them to enlightened enthusiasts, sell them if necessary to respectful collectors who will know how to appreciate them, but never let beauty die in oblivion. Never let my scientific discoveries be lost in the dust of attics.

—We promise you, the two disciples declared, moved to tears by the solemnity of this commitment.

He smiled weakly, appeased by this promise that gave meaning to his approaching death.

—And now, let me rest. I am weary. So weary. But at least, I will die more tranquilly knowing that you will watch over what is dearest to me in the world.

These words were almost the last he pronounced with lucidity. In the hours that followed, his condition worsened rapidly. He sank into semi-consciousness, sometimes murmuring incoherent words in Tuscan, drawing in the air with his valid hand invisible forms that he alone perceived, perhaps reliving in his delirium the great hours of his life.

The two men never left his bedside. They gave him something to drink when he still could, sponged his forehead with cloths, adjusted his blankets, maintained the fire in the fireplace. Sometimes, Leonardo seemed to regain consciousness and fixed on them his blue eyes still piercing despite the fever, as if he wanted to engrave their faces in his memory for the eternity that awaited him.

On the evening of May 1st, his condition seemed to improve slightly. He drank a little broth that Francesco presented to him with a spoon, spoke a few sensible words about the beauty of the sunset glimpsed through the window, asked for a mirror to see his face. Melzi hoped for an instant that this improvement was the sign of a miraculous remission, that the master would once again thwart the death that stalked him.

But on the evening of May 2, 1519, as the château chapel bells were ringing vespers and the setting sun set the studio

windows ablaze with an unreal golden light, Leonardo da Vinci breathed his last, a peaceful smile on his lips, as if he had finally found the answer to all the mysteries that had haunted him for sixty-seven years.

They remained for a long moment motionless near the remains, unable to realize what had just occurred. Death had carried away the greatest genius of their time, and they remained there, alone in this studio that suddenly seemed empty despite all the treasures it contained.

—He's gone, Francesco murmured, his voice broken, tears flowing freely down his cheeks. He has left us. The master is no more.

Salai placed a trembling hand on the still-warm forehead of the deceased. He gently closed the eyelids, accomplishing this last gesture with tenderness.

—May he rest in peace. He has finished his earthly journey. Now it's up to us to accomplish our mission. Up to us to save what he entrusted to us.

These words brought Francesco back to the reality of their situation. The pain of mourning would have to wait. The urgency was elsewhere. Time was playing against them.

—How much time do we have? he inquired in a wan voice.

Salai straightened up, passing from grief to determination, his eyes drying, his face taking on an expression of concentration.

—The news will spread quickly. The servants will notice his death. One of them will carry the sad announcement to the château. By the time messengers alert the authorities, the Treasury agents organize their visit... a few hours at most. They'll be here tomorrow morning at dawn, perhaps even earlier if this Montcornet is as zealous as they say. We must act tonight. We have only tonight.

Francesco walked around the studio, evaluating what they could save in such limited time.

—We don't have time to take everything. Go get trunks, canvas bags, blankets, everything that can serve to transport pieces discreetly. I'm going to inventory what we must save. Salai hesitated, staring one last time at Leonardo's peaceful face.

—But... and him? We can't leave him like this, alone, without vigil, without prayers...

—We'll come back to take care of him later, Francesco responded firmly. For now, we must honor his last wish. Save his heritage. That's what he would have wanted. That's what he asked us to do.

Salai nodded, understanding the rightness of this argument. He left the studio to go get the necessary equipment for their enterprise.

Melzi, left alone with the body, knelt one last time near the chair where Leonardo rested.

—Forgive me, master. Forgive me for not being able to watch over you as would be fitting, with the prayers and candles that your greatness deserves. But I swear to you that we will save what can be saved. Your genius will not die with you. Your discoveries will survive. I swear it on my honor, on my life, on everything most sacred to me.

He got up, wiped his eyes with a brusque gesture, and set to work with ardor.

During the hours that followed, Francesco and Salai worked in tense silence, interrupted only by the sound of their steps on the stone slabs and the rustling of paper and fabrics. Each gesture was calculated, each decision weighed with care, each movement had to be both rapid and prudent.

Francesco had established a mental list of priority pieces, fruit of the long years spent beside the master studying his heritage. The notebooks first—these were irreplaceable, unique, the fruit of twenty-five years of clandestine and dangerous

research. The studies on flight next—these visionary discoveries on aerodynamics that anticipated by several centuries the progress of science. The works on fluid dynamics.

For the paintings, the choice was more delicate, more painful. The Mona Lisa, as Leonardo had indicated, had to remain. Its disappearance would trigger an investigation, mobilize all the crown's means to find it. The Saint Anne was also too well known, too visible, too admired during courtiers' visits. But there was this Saint John the Baptist with eyes raised to heaven, a troubling painting, almost scandalous in its androgynous sensuality, that few visitors had seen, for Leonardo often kept it hidden. And this Leda and the Swan, a sensual painting done in Rome, whose pagan mythology and eroticism disturbed the well-thinking, which he had always refused to show to ecclesiastics.

—Take the Saint John the Baptist, Francesco ordered in a low voice, as if fearing they might be heard despite the late hour. Wrap it in this linen canvas. Several layers. Protect the corners. We'll take it to your lodging before dawn.

—And the Leda?

Francesco hesitated. This canvas was one of the most accomplished of recent years. Its pagan mythological subject, its sensuality made it a controversial creation that could attract attention.

—Yes, take it too. But hide it well. Better than well. If the ecclesiastical authorities learn that we hold it, they might want to confiscate it for immorality, even destroy it. It must disappear.

They continued their methodical work. The most important volumes were packed in leather crates lined with felt. Francesco took care to leave enough notebooks in the studio for the inventory to seem substantial. He selected the most

visually spectacular ones. Those covered with drawings of extraordinary machines, complex geometric figures, detailed anatomies, but the least important scientifically. Those that would impress royal agents without representing the true knowledge.

For the drawings, he showed discernment, tactical intelligence sharpened by urgency. He left the drapery studies, preparatory portraits, pictorial compositions, landscapes—everything that had obvious artistic value and could be understood by laymen. But he saved the detailed studies, technical drawings of machines, architectural plans, botanical research, everything that contained invaluable scientific knowledge but that uncultured bureaucrats wouldn't know how to appreciate.

—Look, he explained to Salai, indicating the walls. We take down these frames, but we leave these very visible. The traces on the wall must not be too numerous. The agents must see that the studio is still well stocked, that their haul is substantial.

Salai nodded, understanding the strategy. The idea was not to empty the studio, which would be suspicious, but to create the illusion of integrity while saving the essential. A balance between salvage and concealment.

He examined the walls carefully, noting the locations of frames that would remain, those that would disappear. Francesco was right: the studio had to keep its usual appearance, this apparent disorder that had always characterized the master's workspace. The Treasury agents must not at all have the impression that someone had tidied up, sorted, selected. Everything had to seem natural, unchanged since the deceased's lifetime.

—Observe these piles of drawings on the table, Francesco indicated, pointing to several bundles of loose sheets. We leave half, in disorder, as if Leonardo had just consulted them.

We take the other half, but we make sure those that remain are striking enough to satisfy the inspectors' curiosity.

He leafed through the piles, separating with precision what should leave from what should remain. In the pile destined for the royal inventory, he placed studies of grotesque heads—those caricatures that Leonardo liked to draw and that always struck visitors with their expressiveness—compositions for battles never painted, studies of horses and riders, landscapes with fantastic rocks.

But in the pile destined for salvage, he put the true riches: the plates showing the dissection of the arm with all its muscles, tendons and nerves annotated with scientific precision; the studies on the mechanics of flight showing how lift is created under a bird's wing; the diagrams of machines for irrigation systems with their calculations of flow and pressure; the geological observations on mountain formation and valley erosion.

—Do you see the difference? he inquired of Salai who was observing him. What we leave are pieces of art. Beautiful, certainly, but that any enthusiast can appreciate. What we save are documents whose value will only be understood by scholars, perhaps in a hundred years, perhaps in two hundred years. The royal agents will take the drawings we leave for the summit of Leonardo's art. They won't even know what they've missed.

Salai agreed. Francesco had always had this gift for understanding not only the master's art, but also his deep thought. He himself, despite the years spent beside Leonardo, had never grasped all the density of anatomical or mechanical research. He was an artist, a competent painter, a skillful copyist. But Francesco was different: he had this intellectual curiosity, this rigor that allowed him to follow the most complex reasonings of the old Tuscan.

—And the bound notebooks? Salai inquired, indicating the cabinets where dozens of volumes were aligned.

—The notebooks are more delicate. Much too voluminous to take everything. And then, their disappearance would be too visible. No, we must be more astute.

He reflected for a moment, then his face lit up.

—Here's what we're going to do. We leave all the large bound volumes very visible in the cabinets. Those, the agents will see them, count them, inventory them. They'll be surprised by the quantity, by the thickness of the notebooks. But what they won't know is that we will have removed the most important pages.

—Tear out pages? Salai worried. But won't that be visible?

—Not if we do it with dexterity. Leonardo himself often tore pages from his notebooks to give them, move them, reorganize them. His bindings are full of gaps, missing pages, sheets sewn in afterwards. It was his habitual work method. The agents will see nothing abnormal.

Francesco took out a first notebook, opened it, examined its contents page by page. It was one of the most important collections, the one where Leonardo had recorded his observations on the dissection of the human heart, discovering structures hitherto unknown.

Meanwhile, Salai prepared the crates and bags where the pieces would be transported. He had discreetly brought down from the attics several travel trunks in boiled leather, the very ones they had used during the journey from Italy. Solid, watertight, equipped with robust locks, these trunks could protect the creations during their transfer.

—How many trunks do you think we can transport without attracting attention? he inquired of Francesco.

—Six, perhaps seven at most. It must seem natural. We're two companions recovering some personal belongings before the

authorities arrive. If we come out of the manor with a dozen trunks, someone will notice it.

—Then we must optimize space. Put the maximum in each crate.

Salai undertook to arrange the pieces in the trunks. The manuscripts first, stacked, separated by sheets of oiled paper to protect them from humidity. The pages torn from the notebooks next, classified by subject, tied together with silk ribbons to prevent them from mixing. The most fragile drawings, rolled around wooden cylinders so as not to crease. The small canvases, removed from their frames to save space. Francesco joined him, carrying the Saint John the Baptist carefully.

—This one, we can't remove it from the frame. The paint is too fragile, the support too old. It will have to be transported as is.

The painting showed a young man of dazzling beauty, finger pointing to the sky, with a troubling gaze. It was one of the last pieces completed by Leonardo, painted in Rome around 1513-1516, and it retained all the power of the master's sfumato in its full maturity. The figure seemed to emerge from darkness, modeled by an invisible light, the skin of unreal softness.

—It's magnificent, Salai murmured. Each time I look at it, I have the impression that this young man is going to descend from his nocturnal sky to join us.

—That's why we must save it. This canvas shows Leonardo at his technical apex. If this painting falls into ignorant hands, if it's poorly preserved, poorly restored, it's an irreplaceable testimony that will disappear.

—And the Leda? Salai inquired.

Francesco went to get this other controversial canvas. It showed Leda, queen of Sparta, embracing a swan—Zeus

disguised according to Greek mythology. The scene was of palpable sensuality, almost erotic, with Leda half-naked, the swan nestled against her, and at their feet, two pairs of twins issued from this divine union: Castor and Pollux, Helen and Clytemnestra, hatching from gigantic eggs.

—This canvas has always made Church people uncomfortable, Francesco commented, admiring the painting. Its pagan mythology, its eroticism... Pope Leo X had refused to see it when Leonardo was in Rome. Some prelates had even suggested it be destroyed as an immodest work.

—All the more reason to save it, Salaï replied vehemently. I won't let ignorant bigots destroy such a masterpiece.

The Leda was wrapped with the same care as the Saint John the Baptist and placed in another trunk. Then came the turn of other less known creations: a study for a Madonna of the Yarnwinder that Leonardo had never finished, a portrait of Isabella d'Este done during a brief stay in Mantua, several preparatory panels for altarpieces never completed.

In the middle of the night, as they continued their work, Francesco paused. He had just opened a small precious wood casket, the one where Leonardo kept his most personal objects. Inside, wrapped in crimson silk, were several objects that had no market value but immense sentimental value.

—Look, he said to Salaï, taking out the objects one by one.

There was first a bronze medallion representing the profile of Caterina, Leonardo's mother. The peasant woman from Vinci who had given birth to him out of wedlock, who had raised him during his first years before he was taken in by his notary father. Leonardo had had this medallion executed from his childhood memories, many years after his mother's death. He always kept it near him, talisman of a lost childhood.

Next, a gold ring adorned with a green stone, emerald or peridot, that Ludovico Sforza had offered Leonardo upon his

entry into the duke's service in 1482. This ring symbolized the seventeen years spent at the Milanese court, perhaps the most fertile years, when Leonardo was at the height of his creativity and benefited from the most generous patronage.

There was also a small glass vial containing a few grains of earth. Francesco took it carefully, observing the brownish dust that glimmered faintly in the candlelight.

—What is this? Salai inquired, intrigued.

—Earth from Vinci. From the hill where his mother's house stood. He confided it to me one day, during an evening. He had gathered this earth during his last visit to Tuscany, in 1507, when he had returned to settle inheritance matters after his uncle's death. He was never to see his native land again.

Francesco studied the vial with emotion. This dust summed up all the nostalgia of a man who had spent his life wandering from court to court, always a stranger, always in search of a home he would never find again.

—These objects too, we must preserve them. They have no value for Treasury agents, but they testify to the man Leonardo was, not just the artist or scientist.

He put the medallion, the ring and the vial back in their casket, which he placed at the bottom of one of the travel trunks, under a thick layer of manuscripts.

The hours passed with terrifying rapidity. Each time Francesco looked out the window, he noted that dawn was approaching. The sky to the east was lightening, passing from deep black to dark gray, then to an uncertain blue-gray. Birds were beginning to sing in the gardens of Clos Lucé. In a few hours, the manor would awaken, servants would emerge from their rooms, the news of the master's death would spread.

—We must accelerate, Francesco urged. We still have too much to do and time is running out.

They redoubled their efforts, working almost in silence, each knowing what he had to do. The long collaboration, the years spent side by side, had created between them a connivance that dispensed with words.

Francesco took care of the scientific instruments. Leonardo possessed a remarkable collection: finely engraved brass astrolabes, precision compasses with polished steel branches, squares and graduated rulers, armillary spheres showing planetary movements, a small lens telescope he had assembled to observe the stars, glass prisms to decompose light, precision scales to weigh pigments.

—The instruments also have a story to tell, Francesco explained. Some will be easily identifiable as having been lent to the master by friends or institutions. Others are too rare, too precious not to appear in the inventory.

He selected the most anonymous pieces, those that appeared in no official register, that Leonardo had bought or fabricated. The artisanal telescope went into one of the trunks—it was a unique object, witness to the astronomical observations that Leonardo had conducted in secret, fearing being accused of heresy for scrutinizing the heavens with artificial instruments. The prisms as well—Leonardo had used them to understand the nature of plays of shadow and colors, conducting experiments that anticipated by several centuries the work of Newton.

Salaï, meanwhile, took care of the pigments and painting recipes. Leonardo had spent his life perfecting his techniques, mixing materials according to secret proportions, creating varnishes of remarkable durability. All these recipes were recorded in small notebooks that the master kept precious.

—These notebooks contain the technical secrets that allowed the master to create his *sfumato*, Salaï indicated, showing them to Francesco. The exact proportions of linseed oil and

essence of turpentine, the way to grind pigments to obtain extreme fineness, the drying times between each layer of glaze. If we lose these recipes, no one will ever be able to recreate them.

—Then take them. Hide them well. These are treasures as precious as the paintings.

The notebooks joined the trunks, wrapped in waxed cloth. With them, Salāi placed several vials containing rare pigments that Leonardo had brought back from his travels: Afghan lapis lazuli for intense blues, Egyptian malachite for deep greens, Chinese cinnabar for brilliant reds, orpiment for golden yellows.

As they were closing the last trunk, Francesco suddenly had a thought that chilled him.

—The letters! We forgot the letters!

—What letters?

—The master's correspondence! He received hundreds of letters over the years. Letters from patrons, friends, scholars, artists. Some are in the hand of illustrious persons: Lorenzo de' Medici, Ludovico Sforza, Cesare Borgia, Pope Leo X, King Francis himself. And then there are the letters he wrote but never sent, the drafts he kept.

Francesco rushed to a large oak chest placed in a corner of the studio. He opened it and took out several bundles of letters tied with colored ribbons.

—Look! Years of correspondence! These letters contain precious information about the master's life, about his relationships, about the commissions he received, about the artistic and scientific debates of his time.

He began to sort through them, separating those that should be saved from those that could remain. Official letters, those concerning commissions or payments, had to remain—their absence would be noticed during the inventory. But personal

letters, those that revealed the master's intimacy, his doubts, his hopes, his dreams, deserved to be preserved.

He came upon a letter, never sent, addressed to Michelangelo. A strange letter, at once admiring and acerbic, where Leonardo recognized his rival's genius while criticizing his brutality, his disdain for *sfumato*, his preference for line to the detriment of color. This letter said much about the complex relationship between the two greatest artists of their time.

—This one, we keep, Francesco murmured.

As he sorted, Melzi realized how much these letters constituted an irreplaceable testimony. Future historians could reconstruct through them the master's life, his movements, his projects, his relationships. But some contained compromising or too intimate information to be delivered to the gaze of royal bureaucrats.

There was notably an entire correspondence with a mysterious "*Amico Fidato*," a faithful friend whose identity was never revealed, but who seemed to be an accomplice in certain delicate enterprises. The letters evoked clandestine dissections, optical experiments conducted in secret, astronomical observations that could have been judged heretical. This dangerous correspondence had to be removed from the inventory.

—Do you realize, Francesco said to Salai, that these letters could cause problems even after the master's death? That they could tarnish his reputation, have him accused of heresy posthumously?

—All the more reason to evacuate them. The master deserves to rest in peace, without inquisitors coming to dig through them looking for traces of impiety.

The sensitive documents joined the trunks. Francesco left enough in the oak chest for the inventory to mention abundant correspondence, but he had taken care to keep only

the most anodyne letters, those that gave rise to no controversy.

Dawn was advanced. Through the studio windows, a gray and cold light invaded the space, chasing away the shadows of night. Francesco mentally consulted the calendar: it was May 3, 1519, the day after the master's death. Soon, the household would awaken. The servants would discover the body. Messengers would have to be sent to the château, the competent authorities notified, the funeral organized.

—We must transport the trunks now, he announced. This is our last chance. In an hour, it will be too late.

They lifted the first trunk. It was heavy, terribly heavy. Between the two of them, they managed to carry it to the studio door, then they descended the stairs, taking care not to make noise.

The manor was silent, plunged in that deep sleep that precedes dawn. Only the creak of a beam, the squeak of a step under their weight troubled the silence. Francesco held his breath with each step, fearing that a door might open, that a curious servant might surprise them.

They left the manor by the small door that gave onto the gardens. The morning air was fresh, almost cold, charged with the humidity of dew. A light mist floated at ground level, giving the landscape an unreal atmosphere. It was as if the world was holding its breath, conscious of the importance of the moment.

Salai's lodging was located about two hundred paces from the main manor, on the other side of the vegetable garden. It was a small house of stone and wood, with one floor, that the king had placed at the disposal of the "*little devil*" so he would have his own space. Salai had set up a secondary studio there where he made his own paintings and copies of the master's creations.

They transported the first trunk to the lodging, brought it in through the back door, carried it upstairs where Salai had prepared a hiding place. He had unsealed several stones from the north wall, creating a fairly vast cavity. Once the stones were put back in place and the joint redone with fresh mortar, no one could guess that a treasure was hidden there.

—Perfect, Francesco murmured, inspecting the hiding place. Even if agents come search your lodging—which is unlikely—they'll find nothing. The whole wall would have to be dismantled to discover the trunks.

They returned to the manor to get the second crate. The sky continued to lighten. Francesco felt anxiety mounting in him. Each minute increased the risk of being discovered. He already imagined a servant rising earlier than usual, surprising them with their compromising load, raising the alarm...

But luck was with them that night. They succeeded in transporting the first six trunks without meeting a soul. Only a kitchen cat, out for its nocturnal hunt, observed them with its phosphorescent eyes before disappearing into the bushes.

The seventh and last trunk was the most cumbersome. It contained the paintings removed from their frames, as well as the Saint John the Baptist still mounted on its original support. Francesco and Salai had to redouble precautions so as not to damage the paintings during transport.

As they crossed the garden with this last load, day broke. The sun pierced the morning mist, casting oblique rays that illuminated the dew on the grass. A rooster crowed in the farmyard, soon imitated by others. The manor was going to awaken.

—Quick! Francesco urged. We don't have much time left!

They almost ran to Salai's lodging, nearly stumbling several times on the path. The trunk oscillated dangerously between them, and Francesco imagined with horror the paintings

colliding inside, the canvases tearing, years of work reduced to nothing by their haste.

The last trunk was hoisted upstairs and slid into the wall hiding place. Salai replaced the stones with stunning rapidity. In a few minutes, the wall regained its normal appearance. Francesco prepared a mortar with lime and sand, filled the joints, smoothed the surface.

—Now, this mortar must dry before anyone comes to inspect, he declared.

—It will dry quickly in the day's heat. And anyway, why would agents come search my modest lodging? It's at the manor that the treasure is, that's where they'll concentrate their efforts.

Francesco nodded, wanting to believe his companion. But anxiety didn't leave him. They had just committed a serious act, a theft against the crown, punishable by the severest penalties. If ever the truth were discovered...

—Don't think of the worst, Salai encouraged, guessing his thoughts. We've done what had to be done. Now, let's return to the manor. We must be there when the servants discover the body. Everything must seem normal.

They retraced their steps, walking at a rapid but not hasty pace. The garden was awakening. Birds flitted from branch to branch, butterflies were beginning their morning ballet, dew sparkled on each blade of grass. It was a beautiful May morning, gentle and luminous, in absolute contrast with the drama being played out at the manor.

When they regained the studio, Francesco cast a last circular glance over the space. He had to make sure everything seemed in order, that nothing betrayed their nocturnal activity. The cabinets were full of notebooks—certainly amputated of their most precious pages, but still impressive in their volume. The walls were covered with drawings—certainly not the most

important scientifically, but the most spectacular visually. The tables were cluttered with instruments, palettes, brushes.

And in the center, on its easel, the Mona Lisa observed them with her enigmatic smile. Francesco approached the portrait one last time, admiring this face that had accompanied so many years of their lives.

—Forgive us for abandoning you, he murmured to the painted Lady. But you will go into good hands. King Francis will cherish you, protect you. You will perhaps become the master's most famous work, the symbol of his genius for centuries to come. It's a fine destiny.

He stepped back a few paces, observing how the morning light played on the painting's surface, revealing the complexity of the modeling, the imperceptible transitions between shadows and illuminated areas.

Salai pulled him from his contemplation.

—Francesco, we must go. The servants are going to get up any moment. We must be in our rooms when the body is discovered.

—You're right. But first...

Francesco approached Leonardo's body, still sitting in his chair where death had frozen him. He arranged the deceased's clothing, smoothed the folds of his black velvet robe, crossed his hands on his chest. With a cloth he wiped the face, removing traces of sweat and fever. He wanted the master to seem dignified, peaceful, almost asleep.

—There, master. You're ready to receive your visitors. Rest in peace. We have accomplished your last wish.

Salai also approached the body. He placed his hand on the deceased's shoulder, remained a moment silent, then murmured a few words in Milanese dialect that Francesco didn't entirely understand. It was a prayer from his childhood,

probably, something his mother had taught him before he became this *"little devil"* who stole in Milan's streets.

Then they left the studio, each regaining his room. Francesco threw himself on his bed fully clothed, trying to make it seem he had just awakened. His heart was beating wildly, the adrenaline of this intense night still pulsing in his veins. He closed his eyes, breathed deeply, tried to calm himself.

How much time passed thus? Half an hour? An hour? Francesco lost track of time, floating in this strange state between waking and sleeping, exhaustion and nervous tension.

It was a cry that brought him back to reality. A woman's cry, sharp and heartbreaking, that resounded throughout the manor. The cook had just gone up to the studio with the master's breakfast—as she did every morning—and she had discovered the body.

Francesco leaped from his bed, rushed into the corridor. Salai emerged from his room, face sleepy but eyes vigilant. They ran toward the studio, joined by the other servants alerted by the cry.

The cook, a robust woman named Marguerite, was kneeling before the chair, sobbing noisily. The maids stood on the threshold, not daring to enter, crossing themselves with nervous gestures. The gardener and the groom arrived, removing their caps in sign of respect before death.

Melzi approached the body, placed his hand on Leonardo's neck, seeking a pulse he knew he wouldn't find. Then he turned toward the assembled servants, face grave, voice strangled by an emotion that had nothing feigned about it.

—The master is dead. He left us during the night. May God have his soul.

A murmur of consternation ran through the gathering. Some wept openly, others remained frozen in respectful silence. Leonardo had been a good master, generous with his people,

never brutal nor contemptuous. The servants sincerely loved him.

—The château must be informed, Francesco announced, regaining control of the situation. Rémi, run to the royal château and inform the authorities of Messire Leonardo's death. Tell them we await their instructions for the funeral and... and for the other formalities.

The gardener nodded and dashed off, relieved to have a concrete task that took him away from this death scene. Francesco turned toward the maids.

—You two, prepare the body. Wash it, dress it in his finest clothes. He must be presentable when the authorities come. And you, Marguerite, stop crying and go prepare the great hall. The body will have to be installed there for the funeral vigil.

The servants busied themselves, happy to have orders to follow, actions to accomplish that diverted them from their grief. Francesco and Salai remained alone a moment in the studio.

—Well played, Salai murmured. Now, no one will think to ask us embarrassing questions.

—Don't rejoice too quickly. The hardest part is still to come. When the royal agents arrive, when they begin their inventory, that's when our story will be put to the test.

—We have a coherent, credible version. We'll stick to it.

The following hours were a whirlwind of activity. Leonardo's body was washed, dressed in a purple velvet robe that he had worn only on great occasions. The maids combed his hair, trimmed his beard, gave him an appearance of peaceful dignity. Then the body was transported to the great hall on the ground floor, laid out on a table covered with a white linen cloth, surrounded by candles that cast a trembling light on the walls.

Visitors began to arrive as soon as the news spread through Amboise. Artisans who had worked for Leonardo, merchants who had sold him supplies, scholars who had conversed with him, ecclesiastics from the chapel of Saint-Florentin come to pray for his soul's rest. All came to pay their respects, kneeling before the remains, murmuring prayers.

Francesco and Salai welcomed the visitors, accepted condolences, recounted the master's last hours. Their grief was sincere, their tears were real. But beneath this authentic pain, a constant vigilance, attention to the slightest details.

Around noon, an imposing cortege presented itself at the manor. Francis I himself came to pay tribute to the deceased. The young king, dressed in black in sign of mourning, was accompanied by his sister, several advisors and an escort of guards.

Francesco and Salai knelt when the king entered the great hall. Francis slowly approached the body, studied Leonardo's peaceful face for a long time, then knelt in turn, joined his hands and prayed in silence for several minutes.

When he rose, Francesco saw that the king's eyes were reddened. The emotion was sincere. Francis had loved the old master, and this death touched him deeply.

—Messire Francesco, the king inquired in an altered voice, when did he die exactly?

—Last night, Sire, on the evening of May 2nd. He expired peacefully, without apparent suffering. His heart simply stopped beating.

—Was he lucid until the end?

Francesco hesitated a fraction of a second. Should he mention their last conversation, the master's instructions concerning his creations? No, better to remain vague.

—He had moments of lucidity alternating with periods of confusion, Sire. But in his last hours, he seemed at peace, as if accepting what awaited him.

Francis nodded, wiping away a tear.

—He was a remarkable man. France had the honor of welcoming him in his last years, and we are grateful for it.

He turned toward his advisors.

—I want a funeral worthy of his greatness. He will be buried in the chapel of Saint-Florentin, in the cemetery that adjoins the château. Let a solemn ceremony be prepared. All the artists and scholars of the kingdom will be invited.

—Very well, Sire, one of the advisors agreed, taking note.

Francis turned toward Francesco.

—And you two, his faithful companions, what will become of you now that your master is no more?

—We... we don't know yet, Sire. We'll perhaps return to Italy, to Milan where we still have family. But for now, we must attend to the master's affairs, put his papers in order...

—Naturally. Take all the time necessary. You won't be driven from the manor. You may remain there as long as it takes to settle Messire Leonardo's affairs.

—We thank you for your kindness, Sire.

Francis took a few steps in the hall, seeming to reflect. Then he turned toward a man in a black robe who stood slightly back. It was Master Guillaume de Montcornet, the clerk of the Treasury Chamber of whom Leonardo had spoken to them a few days earlier.

—Master de Montcornet, the king ordered, you will ensure that the goods of the late Messire Leonardo are inventoried according to legal forms. I want a complete record of everything he possessed. His paintings, his manuscripts, his instruments, everything must be listed.

—Very well, Sire. We will proceed with the inventory as soon as possible. Let us say... in three days?

—That seems reasonable to me. Give these poor boys time to mourn their master.

Montcornet bowed with studied obsequiousness, but Francesco caught in his gaze a gleam of satisfaction, almost of greed. This man knew he was going to lay hands on a considerable artistic and scientific treasure, and this prospect delighted him.

After the departure of the king and his retinue, Francesco and Salai found themselves alone in the great hall, still trembling.

—Three days, Salai murmured. They're giving us three days before coming to inventory. That's more than I hoped for.

—Three days to refine our story, to make sure nothing's amiss in our version of the facts. But also three days to live in anguish, to watch for the slightest sign that someone suspects something.

—No one suspects anything. Look how the king treated us with kindness and respect. We are in his eyes two grieving companions, nothing more.

—Let's hope Montcornet has the same view of things.

The following three days were trying. Leonardo's body remained displayed in the manor's great hall, surrounded by candles that cast a trembling light on the walls.

Francesco and Salai took turns watching over the body, welcoming visitors, accepting condolences, recounting the master's last hours.

On the evening of the second day of vigil, they found themselves alone in the great hall, exhausted by the incessant procession of visitors.

—Tomorrow, Montcornet will come to do his inventory, Francesco murmured. Then it will be the funeral. We must be ready.

—We are. Everything is in place. The studio looks intact, our story is coherent.

They spent this last night in recollected silence, each lost in his memories, mentally preparing for the next day's ordeal.

Francesco couldn't help thinking of Leonardo. He had just lost the man who had been his master, his guide, almost his father for thirteen years. What would he do now? Where would he go? These questions haunted him, but he pushed them away. For now, he had to concentrate on the essential: protecting the master's heritage, playing his role of grieving companion until the royal agents had finished their inventory.

The servants had left the premises—the king had found them new employment at the château. Francesco and Salai found themselves alone in this space that had been so lively, so creative, and that now seemed empty and gloomy.

They left the death chamber to go sit in the studio, facing the Mona Lisa. Neither of them spoke. What could they say? Words seemed futile before the immensity of their loss.

Salai broke the silence.

—Do you remember the first time you saw the master? Where was it?

Francesco smiled despite his sadness. This memory was engraved in his memory with clarity.

—In Milan, in the studio he occupied near Santa Maria delle Grazie. It was in 1506, I was sixteen years old. My father had taken me to see the great Leonardo da Vinci everyone was talking about. I was terrified.

—And what did you feel when you saw him?

—I saw a man who was no longer very young—he was already fifty-four—but whose eyes shone with extraordinary intensity. He stared at me, as if seeking to read my soul. Then he asked me: *"Young man, why do you want to learn painting?"* I stammered something about beauty, about art. He shook his head. *"Wrong answer. One learns painting to learn to see. To understand how plays of shadow sculpt forms, how colors are born from darkness, how the eye translates the world into sensations. Beauty is only a consequence, not a goal."* This answer overwhelmed me. I knew at that instant that I wanted to stay near him, learn from him, see the world through his eyes.

Salai nodded. His own story was different, less glorious, but just as intense.

—I didn't choose. Or rather, it was he who chose me. I was ten years old, I stole in Milan's streets. One day, I tried to rob his purse while he was drawing in a square. He grabbed me by the collar, but instead of turning me over to the guards, he looked at me with curiosity. *"Little devil,"* he said to me, *"you have skillful hands and sharp eyes. I'm going to make something better of you than a thief."* And he took me with him. For years, I was unbearable. I broke everything, I still stole, I lied. He should have sent me away a hundred times. But he never did. He scolded me, then he forgave me. Always.

—He loved you like a son. Even if he never said it.

—I know. That's why I'm ready to do anything to protect what he left. Even lie to the king's agents. Even risk prison or worse.

Francesco placed his hand on Salai's shoulder.

—We'll do it together. We're not alone.

They spent another hour in the studio, evoking memories, sometimes crying, also laughing as they recalled certain anecdotes. Leonardo had had his manias, his obsessions, his sudden angers followed by long periods of melancholy. But

he had also been generous, patient, infinitely curious about everything. It was this man they mourned, not just the recognized genius, but also the daily companion who had transmitted to them much more than artistic techniques.

When night fell, they lit a few candles. Shadows danced on the studio walls, bringing to life the pinned drawings, giving the illusion that the master was still there, working in the half-light.

—We must sleep. Tomorrow will be a long day. We must begin putting the studio in order, prepare the documents Montcornet will ask us for. And above all, we must be rested, lucid. We can't afford to make a mistake through weariness.

—You're right. But I'm afraid of my dreams. I'm afraid of seeing the master reproach me for what we've done.

—He wouldn't reproach us for anything. On the contrary, he would thank us if he could. We followed his instructions, even if they were only implicit. We saved what could be saved.

They separated, each regaining his room. Francesco undressed, slipped under the cool sheets. His mind continued to turn, going over all the details of their plan, seeking flaws, anticipating Montcornet's questions.

What if the Treasury clerk was more perceptive than they thought? What if he noticed inconsistencies in the studio's arrangement, traces of their nocturnal manipulation? What if a servant had heard noise that night and mentioned this detail to investigators?

Francesco turned over in his bed, seeking a comfortable position. Through his room's window, he glimpsed the stars shining in the May sky. Leonardo loved to study them. He had even built that small artisanal telescope—now hidden with the other pieces—to observe them more closely. *"The stars are distant suns,"* he affirmed. *"And around these suns perhaps turn*

worlds like ours, inhabited by beings who ask themselves the same questions we do."

This thought comforted Francesco. The master now formed part of that infinite universe he had so loved to study.

Francesco finally fell asleep, cradled by this certainty of having accomplished something important, despite the risks, despite the lies, despite the apparent betrayal toward the king who had welcomed them.

The next morning, he woke early, as day was barely breaking. He went down to the studio and set to work. He wanted to draft a personal inventory of the pieces present, a document he could present to Montcornet and that would prove his good faith, his willingness to cooperate with the authorities.

He spent the morning drawing up the list.

He didn't ignore that the number of volumes was greater before they had removed the most precious pages. But forty-two notebooks remained. Montcornet couldn't suspect that some were missing.

Francesco continued his list when Salai entered the studio, carrying a tray with bread, cheese and wine.

—You're already working? You must eat, Francesco. You won't hold up if you don't take care of yourself.

—You're right. Come, let's sit down.

They shared this frugal breakfast, seated near the window, looking at the gardens of Clos Lucé that were beginning to green again with spring.

—When do you think Montcornet will come?

—According to what the king announced, three days after the funeral. Which gives us another day. A day to prepare ourselves, to refine our story.

—Let's rehearse one last time. If Montcornet asks why such-and-such a manuscript mentioned in a letter isn't there, what do we answer?

—That the master lent it to a visiting scholar. Or that he offered it to a friend. Or that he took it to the château during a visit and never brought it back. We have several plausible versions, we just have to be careful not to contradict ourselves.

—And for the missing canvases?

—The Leda, we'll claim the master destroyed it in a fit of perfectionism. The Saint John the Baptist... we'll say the master had lent it to the king himself, that Francis wanted to show it to his court and that it's still at the château. Yes, that's credible. The king won't deny it—he might even be happy to learn that an additional painting reverts to him.

Salaï nodded, admiring.

—You have the makings of a conspirator. If you'd chosen politics rather than art, you would have become a formidable Prince's advisor.

—I'm not proud of lying. But sometimes, circumstances require it. The master taught us this himself: when one is weaker than one's adversaries, when one can't confront force with force, one must use cunning.

They finished their meal in silence, then Francesco resumed his inventory while Salaï undertook to clean and tidy the studio. Everything had to be impeccable when the royal agents came. No suspicious disorder, no revealing traces.

The last evening they remained awake for a long time in the studio, observing one last time the space in its apparent integrity before it would be dissected by the Treasury bureaucrats.

—Whatever happens tomorrow, whatever we must face, we will remain united. We won't betray each other. We'll protect the master's heritage to the end.

—I swear it. On the master's memory, on everything sacred to me.

They shook hands, sealing their secret pact. Then they went to bed, knowing that the next day would mark the beginning of their ordeal: deceiving the king's representatives, playing the comedy of mourning and cooperation, all while concealing the most audacious theft in art history.

Francesco fell asleep, cradled by a strange serenity. They had done what had to be done. Leonardo would have approved. And that, in the end, was all that mattered.

In the darkness of the deserted studio, the Mona Lisa continued to smile, enigmatic and serene, silent guardian of all the secrets of Clos Lucé.

CHAPTER 2: THE KING'S AGENTS

Clos Lucé Manor, May 5, 1519, at dawn

Night was drawing to a close. The funeral would take place the next day, once Montcornet's task was complete. In the gray penumbra preceding dawn, Francesco Melzi contemplated the reorganized studio one last time.

Salai appeared, his features drawn with fatigue and anguish. He too had slept poorly.

—Is everything in place? Francesco asked in a low voice.

—Yes. The chests are walled up. I've redone the joints. Even searching, they won't find anything.

—And the traces? The fresh mortar?

—I aged the surfaces with soot and vinegar, as the master taught us for his frescoes. You'd think these walls haven't been touched in years.

—I'm going to prepare the house to receive the agents. Everything must seem normal. A house in mourning, nothing more.

—We need to talk through our story one last time. We must be consistent. The slightest contradiction will destroy us.

—Again? Francesco, we've rehearsed all night!

—It's not enough. Montcornet is formidable. I've heard he had three Venetian merchants condemned last year for droit d'aubaine fraud. They ended up hanged in the marketplace.

Salai's face paled.

—Hanged? For hiding goods?

—For trying to withhold from the crown what belonged to it by right. That's how Montcornet sees things. To him, we're potential thieves.

During the hour that followed, they rehearsed their story. Francesco posed trick questions, Salai answered, then they reversed roles. Every detail was examined: dates, circumstances of the alleged donations, names of the fictitious witnesses they would invoke.

—If Montcornet asks why the Saint John the Baptist isn't here? Francesco questioned.

—The master had lent it to the king himself, who wanted to show it to his court. The work is still at the château, Salai responded without hesitation.

—Good. But add a detail. Say it was for Queen Claude's birthday. The king wanted to surprise her. That makes the story more credible.

—Agreed. And the Leda?

—The master destroyed it in a fit of perfectionism, a few weeks before his death. He wasn't satisfied with it.

—No, wait. Let's say rather that he destroyed it after Cardinal de Tournon saw it and was offended by it. You know how prudish the cardinal is. That would better explain why Leonardo would have destroyed a work of such value.

Francesco nodded.

—Excellent. You're right. And the missing anatomical studies?

—Offered to Doctor Fernel in gratitude for his care, as well as to several physicians from Orléans who tried to treat the master.

—Add the name of Doctor Léon de Pavie. He came twice. That will make one more witness.

They continued thus, refining each lie, adding details that would make their story more convincing.

—And if Montcornet insists? If he senses something's wrong? Salai asked.

—Then we remain calm. We show sincere indignation. The best defense against accusations is offense. Remember what the master said: "*He who does not punish evil authorizes it to be done.*" We'll turn that maxim against them. We'll accuse them of profaning the memory of a great man.

—You're right. We're innocent. We have nothing to hide.

—Exactly. And remember: never contradict yourself, never hesitate, always look your interlocutor in the eye.

A voice interrupted them:

—Sirs, they're coming!

It was Mathurine, the manor's housekeeper, a woman of about fifty with a severe but benevolent face.

—I saw their procession from the tower. Four men on horseback and two carts. They'll be here in a few minutes.

—Thank you, Mathurine. You know what you must say if you're questioned?

—That I never had access to the master's studio, that only you two entered. That since his death, you've prayed ceaselessly and touched nothing.

—Perfect. And if you're asked if people came?

—Only the doctors and priests. No one else.

Francesco rushed to the window. In the gray light of dawn, he made out the small procession climbing toward the manor: four men on horseback, followed by two ox-drawn carts.

—They're coming, he murmured. This is it.

Salai joined him at the window. Together, they observed the royal agents approaching. Fear knotted their entrails, but also a strange excitement. They were about to play the most important game of their lives.

—Ready? Francesco asked.

—No. But I have no choice.

—Neither of us has a choice. Remember: we're doing this for the master, for his legacy, for humanity itself. Let's go.

Francesco descended the stone staircase with a step he wanted to be dignified. Salai followed him, adopting the attitude of a faithful servant rather than that of an accomplice.

In the vestibule, Francesco took a few moments to compose an appropriate expression. Neither too downcast, which would have seemed suspect, nor too serene, which would have lacked respect for the deceased. He opted for a bereaved dignity.

Mathurine had arranged candles in the entrance and hung black crepe on the door. These details created the atmosphere of a house in mourning, reinforcing the authenticity of their staging.

The knocks on the door rang out with an authority that brooked no delay. Francesco waited a few seconds—not too long to avoid seeming casual, not too quickly to avoid seeming anxious—then opened.

Master Étienne Deloynes stood on the threshold, imposing in his black robe of royal notary. He was a man of about sixty, his face hollowed by four decades of legal practice. His gray eyes, behind iron-rimmed spectacles, had that neutral expression of people accustomed to cataloging human tragedies without getting involved. He carried a worn leather satchel, swollen with documents.

Behind him, Francesco recognized Guillaume de Montcornet. The clerk of the Treasury Chamber had come in person, which boded nothing good. He was a man in the prime of life, perhaps forty-five, also dressed in black, but a more austere black, almost monastic. His angular face bore the vigilant expression of those who have built their careers ferreting out fraud.

At their sides stood Barthélemy Rousseau, clerk of the bailliage, charged with the official transcription of the inventory. Younger than his colleagues, probably in his thirties, he already bore the hunched back of scribes who spend their lives bent over parchments. His ink-stained fingers gripped a satchel containing his writing materials.

Two sergeants-at-arms completed the group, robust men with broad hands, accustomed to carrying confiscated goods. One of them, a red-haired colossus with a thick beard, wore a mace at his belt. The other, thinner, had the cold gaze of a former soldier. They stood back, awaiting orders.

—Messire Melzi, declared the notary, removing his hat solemnly, we come, in accordance with royal ordinances and the immemorial customs of this kingdom, to conduct the inventory of goods left by the late Master Leonardo da Vinci, painter to the king, deceased in this manor on the second day of May in the year of grace fifteen hundred and nineteen. May Almighty God have his soul and grant him the eternal peace that is promised to the just.

The ritual formula emerged with the perfect diction of lawyers well-versed in official ceremonies. Francesco bowed his head, taking his time to respond, composing his voice to put in it just the right amount of contained sadness.

—You are welcome in this dwelling that our dear master inhabited so peacefully. Please enter, I pray you. May your office be accomplished according to divine will and the laws of the kingdom of France. Everything has remained as it was since our beloved master breathed his last.

The agents entered the vestibule. Deloynes had conducted dozens of similar inventories, but this one held particular importance. Leonardo da Vinci was no ordinary foreigner—he was the most famous painter in Europe.

But Montcornet showed no emotion. His eyes were already scrutinizing the vestibule, noting every detail, every valuable object. His gaze lingered on a painting hanging on the wall—a copy of *The Last Supper* that Leonardo had commissioned from one of his Milanese students.

—Is this work part of the inventory? he asked sharply.

—It's a copy, messire, made by Giovanni Pietro Rizzoli. It belongs to the manor, not to the master.

Montcornet approached, examined the signature in the corner.

—We'll verify that. Everything touched by your master's hand interests us.

—Messire Melzi, the clerk intervened before even crossing the threshold of the studio, a preliminary question is necessary. Since your master's death, has anyone entered his studio? Has anything been moved, even with the best intentions?

The question was direct, perfidious even. Francesco had anticipated it, but hearing it pronounced so brutally impressed him. He adopted an expression where indignation competed with sadness.

—Monsieur de Montcornet, how dare you suggest that we would have profaned our master's memory by touching his possessions?

He let his voice rise, adopting an outraged tone:

—Since his death, Salaï and I have contented ourselves with praying for the repose of his soul and watching over his remains according to the usages of the holy Catholic Church. Father Antoine can testify to this, he who hasn't left the funeral chapel. We've touched nothing, haven't even allowed ourselves to enter the studio except to pray before the place where he created his marvels.

Francesco let an offended silence hang before adding:

—Our master taught us everything. He treated us for more than a decade like his own sons. How could we have dishonored his memory by behaving at the very moment of his death like common tomb robbers? This mere allusion is a grave insult to our devotion, to our filial love, to our respect for the genius who trained us.

Salai, who had grasped the tone to adopt, added in a voice broken by emotion, tears welling in his eyes—very real tears, for fatigue and nervous tension made them rise:

—You cannot understand what the master represented to us. He wasn't just our teacher, but our guide, our reason for living. Every object in this studio reminds us of his presence, and this absence is a dagger planted in our hearts. How could we defile these sacred relics of his genius?

His voice broke on the last words. The emotion was so sincere that even Montcornet seemed momentarily destabilized.

The clerk narrowed his eyes, unconvinced by these protestations of innocence that he had heard in a thousand forms during his career. He pulled out a small notebook and began taking notes.

—Messire Melzi, allow me to insist. You understand, I hope, that my question is not an accusation, but a necessary formality. I've seen too many cases where well-intentioned heirs wanted to "*preserve*" certain souvenirs before the official inventory. That considerably complicates our work.

—I understand your duty, messire, Francesco replied, softening slightly. But I assure you on my honor and on the salvation of my soul that nothing has been touched. Moreover, question the servants. Mathurine, our housekeeper, can testify that we only entered and left to pray.

Montcornet turned to Mathurine, who stood respectfully in a corner.

—Woman, approach.

Mathurine advanced, keeping her eyes lowered as befitted a servant facing a royal officer.

—You are?

—Mathurine Gallerani, housekeeper of this house for six years, monseigneur.

—Have you seen these two men enter the studio since the master's death?

—Yes, monseigneur. To pray only. They knelt before the easel where the portrait of the Lady with the smile rests, recited Paters and Aves, then came out weeping. Never have I seen them touch anything.

—Are you certain?

—On the Virgin Mary and all the saints, monseigneur. I watched myself to ensure that no one profaned this sacred place. The master was a holy man, even though he was a foreigner. He deserved respect.

The notary intervened with the authority conferred by his superior hierarchical position:

—Come now, Monsieur de Montcornet, let us moderate our zeal. Let's not complicate our already delicate task. These young people are visibly overwhelmed by the loss of their master. It would be unseemly and even cruel to inflict unfounded suspicions upon them. Let us proceed with the inventory that His Majesty commands us. The facts will speak for themselves if any irregularity should appear.

Montcornet put away his notebook with a vexed expression.

—Very well. But know, messires, that if we discover the slightest attempt at concealment, the consequences will be terrible. Theft of goods belonging to the crown by droit d'aubaine is punishable by death. The gallows await fraudsters.

—I have nothing to fear from the truth, Francesco replied, holding the clerk's gaze.

The notary turned to Melzi with a more benevolent expression:

—Conduct us, I pray you, to your late master's studio. The day advances and our task will be long. I've heard that Master Leonardo possessed hundreds of works and manuscripts.

—Indeed, messire. My master never ceased creating, inventing, perfecting. Follow me.

Francesco headed toward the monumental staircase leading to the first floor. The stone steps, worn by three years of passage, resonated under their feet. The agents followed him in solemn procession.

Behind him, Francesco heard the scratching of the clerk's quill already taking preliminary notes, no doubt describing the vestibule and the rooms they crossed. He also heard the asthmatic breathing of Deloynes, a corpulent man for whom climbing stairs constituted a notable effort. And above all, he perceived Montcornet's presence, whose sharp gaze never ceased inspecting every recess, every painting, every piece of furniture.

Halfway up the staircase, the clerk stopped before a niche where a small bronze sculpture representing a rearing horse was displayed.

—Is this also part of the inventory?

—No, messire. This sculpture belongs to the manor. It was already here when the king offered this dwelling to my master. Montcornet examined the piece from all angles, searching for a signature, a distinctive mark.

—We'll verify that. Note it, Rousseau.

The clerk quickly scribbled on his tablets.

Francesco felt the tension mounting. If Montcornet scrutinized every object thus, the inventory would last for

days. He had to divert his attention, impress him so he would concentrate on the major pieces.

—Messires, allow me to say a few words before we enter the sanctuary where my master created his immortal works.

He stopped on the landing, forcing the procession to halt.

—Leonardo da Vinci was not an ordinary man. His genius surpassed everything the human mind can conceive. In this studio we're about to enter, he not only painted pictures of supernatural beauty, but he also conducted scientific research that will one day revolutionize our understanding of the world.

Francesco let his words resonate in the stairwell, then continued:

—He conceived flying machines capable of carrying a man through the air. He penetrated the mysteries of water flow and mountain formation. He invented terrifying war machines, mobile bridges, assault chariots, perfected bombards.

Deloyne listened with interest. Even Montcornet seemed interested despite himself.

—But above all, Francesco continued, he revolutionized the art of painting. He invented techniques that no one before him had dared imagine. Sfumato, which gives his portraits that prodigious life. Aerial perspective, which creates that infinite depth in his landscapes. The perfect anatomy of his figures, fruit of years of studies on cadavers.

He turned to Montcornet:

—All this to tell you that what you're about to see is not simply the collection of a talented painter. It's the treasure of a man who devoted his entire life to understanding the secrets of nature and art. I beg you to treat these works with the respect they deserve. They are the last testimonies of the greatest genius humanity has known since Antiquity.

This plea, prepared during the night, aimed at a double objective. On one hand, to remind the agents of the cultural importance of what they were about to confiscate. On the other, to establish Francesco himself as the legitimate guardian of this heritage, the one who understood the value of these works.

The notary nodded gravely.

—Be assured that we are conscious of the historical and artistic importance of what we're about to inventory. His Majesty himself ordered that the greatest precautions be taken. Moreover, the king personally asked me to ensure that nothing be damaged.

Montcornet, however, couldn't help adding in a dry voice:

—While respecting their artistic value, we must nevertheless accomplish our legal duty with rigor and precision. The laws of the kingdom apply to works of art as to any other goods. Droit d'aubaine suffers no exception, even for a genius.

—Droit d'aubaine, Francesco repeated with bitterness. This right that allows foreigners to be stripped of their goods at their death. My master served France for three years, he enriched this kingdom with his genius, and here's his reward.

—It's the law, Montcornet replied. A just law that protects the kingdom's interests. Your master could have requested letters of naturalization. He didn't do it. It was his choice.

—Or his ignorance of your complex laws. My master was an artist, not a jurist.

—Ignorance of the law is no excuse, as everyone knows.

Salai spoke up:

—My master thought that genius had no nationality, that art belonged to all humanity! He believed himself a citizen of the world!

—Beautiful philosophy, Montcornet ironized, but we live in the real world, not in an artist's dreams. In the real world, there are laws, borders, nationalities.

The notary raised his hand to calm spirits:

—Gentlemen, this debate is sterile. We're not here to discuss philosophy or justice, but to accomplish our duty. Messire Melzi, conduct us to the studio, I pray you.

Francesco nodded and resumed his ascent. A few steps later, they reached the studio door. Francesco's heart beat faster and faster. This was it. The moment of truth.

He placed his hand on the wrought iron latch, savoring these last moments before chaos.

—Here is the threshold of the temple of art. It's here that our master spent the last years of his life, creating relentlessly, ceaselessly seeking to penetrate nature's mysteries. To enter this studio without his presence... it's to profane a sanctuary.

His voice broke slightly on the last words. The emotion wasn't feigned—he deeply felt this profanation.

—We understand your pain, Deloynes said with sincere compassion. But duty calls us.

Francesco took a deep breath, then slowly pushed the door, which opened with a creaking of hinges that he had deliberately left without oil to accentuate the dramatic effect. The morning light, still weak but growing, flooded the vast room, revealing the spectacle that Francesco and Salai had prepared.

The notary stopped short on the threshold. His mouth opened, his eyes widened, and for a long moment, he remained motionless, seized by the beauty of what he discovered.

—Holy Mother of God, he murmured.

For it was indeed a temple that Francesco and Salaï had created during that terrible night. The oblique rays of the rising sun penetrated through the large windows and came to caress the works with an almost magical gentleness. The arrangement of the paintings, the angle of the light, everything had been calculated to maximize the visual impact.

At the center of this luminous staging reigned the Mona Lisa, installed on its easel near the main window, exactly where Leonardo loved to contemplate it during the last months of his life. The veil of amaranth silk embroidered with gold that usually protected it had been removed—a detail to maximize the emotional impact of this first vision.

And the impact was total. The portrait of Mona Lisa, illuminated by the raking light of dawn, seemed alive. Her enigmatic smile seemed about to widen. Her eyes seemed to follow the visitors' movements. Her hands, resting one on the other with that infinite grace that only Leonardo knew how to render, seemed about to move.

Deloynes remained frozen for a long moment before the painting, his satchel almost slipping from his shoulder, so absorbed was he. His lips trembled.

—So here is this mysterious Lady that all the court has been talking about for years! This troubling beauty who inspired so many poems and songs! I've never seen such mastery of the art of painting!

Even Montcornet, despite his cynicism, couldn't completely conceal his wonder. He approached slowly, as if drawn by a magnetic force.

—Extraordinary, he admitted reluctantly. One understands why His Majesty valued this work so highly.

The clerk Rousseau, mouth agape, dropped his quill. He bent down hastily to pick it up, blushing at his clumsiness.

—Forgive me, I... I've never seen anything like it.

Deloynes approached even closer, not daring to touch the painting, but leaning to observe the details. His breath formed condensation on the varnished surface, and he drew back hastily.

—Forgive me. I shouldn't approach so closely. But it's stronger than me. How is it possible? How can a man capture life itself with simple pigments and oil?

Francesco, despite his nervous tension, couldn't help but smile at the old notary's sincere emotion. He approached, adopting the tone of a passionate guide:

—My master said that true art doesn't consist of slavishly copying nature, but of recreating it with more truth and depth than nature itself. Observe this gaze, messires. See how the eyes aren't simply painted, but alive. The master used a revolutionary technique: several layers of transparent glazes superimposed, each adding a nuance, a depth, until creating this illusion of life.

He delicately indicated the face:

—Look at these transitions between shadow and light. There are no hard lines, no clear contours. Everything blends into a subtle haze. This technique required months of work. The master sometimes applied a layer so thin it was almost invisible, waited for it to dry, then applied another. Some areas count more than thirty superimposed layers.

Salai approached in turn, carried away by emotion:

—And this smile! Look at it carefully. Is she happy? Melancholy? Mocking? Impossible to say. The master captured the very ambiguity of the human soul. He said: "*A smile can contain all the joy and all the sadness of the world.*"

—And these hands, Francesco added, indicating them. See this apparent simplicity that is the fruit of hundreds of preparatory studies. My master drew more than sixty different

hands before finding this one. Sixty hands! For a detail that most painters would have dispatched in an hour!

Montcornet, regaining his professional senses, pulled out his notebook:

—Who is this Lady? Did the master leave any indications about her identity?

Francesco and Salai exchanged a glance. This was one of the questions they had rehearsed.

—The master simply called her "*Madonna Lisa*," Francesco replied. He kept her identity secret. Some say she was the wife of a Florentine merchant, Francesco del Giocondo. Others think it's an idealized portrait, a synthesis of all the feminine beauties the master had observed.

—My master said her identity didn't matter, Salai added. What counted was what she represented: the eternal feminine, the mystery of beauty, the enigma of human existence.

The notary nodded. He turned to the other works arranged in the studio.

—And all these marvels... How many years of work do they represent?

—A whole life, messire, Francesco replied. My master began painting at fourteen in Verrocchio's workshop in Florence. He was sixty-seven at his death. More than half a century devoted to art and science.

Montcornet had moved away from the Mona Lisa to examine the rest of the studio. His practiced eye noted every detail: the arrangement of works, the organization of space, the tools abandoned on tables. He stopped before a series of drawings hanging on the wall—those that Francesco had deliberately left visible, the least revolutionary.

—These drawings... They look like dissection studies.

—Indeed, Francesco confirmed. My master obtained authorization to dissect cadavers at the Santa Maria Nuova hospital in Florence, then here with the king's approval. He wanted to understand the functioning of the human body to better represent it in his works.

—Fascinating and repugnant at the same time, the clerk commented. Wasn't your master afraid of the Inquisition? Dissecting human bodies...

—Pope Sixtus IV authorized dissections for scientific purposes as early as 1482, Francesco reminded him. My master did nothing illegal. He simply sought to unveil God's work.

Salai added with passion:

—He said the human body was the most beautiful machine created by the Almighty. Every muscle, every bone, every organ had its function, its own beauty. He spent entire nights drawing what he had observed during the day.

The clerk Rousseau, who was preparing his instruments on a table, declared timidly:

—I've heard that Master Leonardo also designed war machines for the Duke of Milan. Is that true?

—That's correct, Francesco replied. My master served Ludovico Sforza for seventeen years. He designed fortifications, bombards, assault chariots. But he detested war. He only created these machines out of necessity, to earn his living. His heart was in art and pure science.

—War machines, Montcornet repeated with interest. Are there plans of these inventions in this studio?

Francesco sensed the danger. He had to divert the clerk's attention.

—A few sketches of no importance, messire. Most of his military plans remained in Milan. What we have here are

mainly his peaceful researches: studies on bird flight, clockwork mechanisms, hydraulic systems for irrigation.

He indicated a pile of notebooks on a shelf—those they had left visible:

—These notebooks contain his observations on nature. My master was convinced that man could one day fly. He designed dozens of flying machines, all based on minute observation of the wings of birds and bats.

—To fly like a bird... What magnificent madness! Was your master serious?

—Very serious, messire. He even built several prototypes. One of them is in the shed, if you'd like to see it later. A large machine with canvas and wooden wings, operated by pedals. He never succeeded in making it fly, but he was convinced that one day man would conquer the skies.

—Blasphemy! suddenly exclaimed one of the sergeants-at-arms, the red-haired colossus. Only angels have the right to fly! To want to imitate angels is to defy God!

Francesco turned to him calmly:

—My master didn't want to defy God, but to understand His creation. He said: "*He who understands the laws of nature understands God's thought.*" He saw science as a form of prayer, a way of honoring the Creator by studying His work.

The sergeant grumbled but didn't insist. Montcornet continued his inspection. He opened a chest, examined its contents—brushes, pigments, bottles of oil.

—All these materials are part of the inventory, he declared. Even the brushes and colors. Everything that belonged to the aubain belongs to the crown.

—Even his clothes? Salai asked bitterly. Even his shoes?

—Everything, the clerk confirmed. The law is clear.

He turned to the notary:

—Master Deloynes, I suggest we begin the systematic inventory. It will take us several hours to catalog everything.

The notary nodded and pulled from his voluminous satchel a graduated wooden ruler and a knotted cord to measure dimensions precisely. He approached the Mona Lisa again.

—Let's begin with this marvel. Rousseau, are you ready?

The clerk spread out on the table his goose quills trimmed that very morning, his inks of various colors—black for current text, red for titles, blue for marginal annotations—and his parchments of fine quality.

—At your command. I've prepared my instruments. We can begin.

—One moment. Before you begin, may I ask you a favor?

Montcornet frowned:

—What favor?

—Allow me to say a final prayer before each work before it's inventoried and taken away. It's... it's my way of saying goodbye.

The notary was touched by this request:

—Of course, my son. Take your time.

Francesco knelt before the Mona Lisa and clasped his hands. But instead of praying, he engraved in his memory every detail of the painting, knowing he would probably never see it again. Tears flowed down his cheeks—sincere tears this time.

After a long moment, he rose:

—Thank you. You may proceed.

The notary cleared his throat and began his dictation in a strong and official voice...

—Inventory of goods left by the late Master Leonardo da Vinci, Florentine citizen, painter, engineer and architect to His Majesty the King of France, deceased in this manor of Clos

Lucé on the second day of May in the year of grace fifteen hundred and nineteen. Inventory drawn up on the fifth day of said month of May, in the presence of Master Étienne Deloynes, royal notary, assisted by Messire Guillaume de Montcornet, principal clerk of the Treasury Chamber, and Master Barthélemy Rousseau, clerk of the bailliage of Amboise.

The clerk transcribed with application, his quill scratching the parchment in an oppressive silence. He formed neat letters in a mastered chancery script, fruit of twenty years of practice.

—Also present, the notary continued, are Messire Francesco Melzi, student of the deceased, as well as Messire Gian Giacomo Caprotti, called Salai, servant and student of said deceased. Royal sergeants Pierre Mortain and Jacques Dubois assist in the operation.

Montcornet grew impatient:

—Are the formalities necessary? We all know who we are.

—The law requires that everything be recorded, Deloynes replied. An incomplete inventory can be contested. Let us continue. First item. A painting of great price representing a seated Lady in an armchair...

He took out his ruler and began measuring meticulously:

—...of medium size—measuring exactly two feet, six inches and three lines in height by one foot, nine inches and two lines in width—painted on a panel of Italian black poplar wood of a thickness of three good fingers, about an inch and a half, set in a gilded frame of a span's width, said frame decorated with sculpted moldings representing plant motifs of acanthus foliage and intertwined fleur-de-lis.

The clerk struggled to keep up with the dictation:

—Master, can you repeat the measurements?

—Two feet, six inches and three lines in height. One foot, nine inches and two lines in width. Also note that the panel shows a slight curvature, doubtless due to the age of the wood. He observed the painting attentively, bringing his face close to examine the details:

—The Lady represented wears a dress of black damask silk of great richness, with sleeves of dark green velvet. A transparent and vaporous veil of silk gauze surrounds her face and descends on her shoulders. Her hair, chestnut with golden highlights, is coiffed in the Florentine fashion with a center part. She wears no visible jewelry.

Montcornet approached in turn:

—Also note the state of conservation. Are there any damages?

Deloynes examined the surface with attention:

—The work is in remarkable condition. Some superficial cracking in the dark areas, particularly visible in the dress. A slight yellowing of the varnish. But overall, exceptional preservation.

—It's thanks to the master's constant care. He checked the state of his works every day. He had developed a special varnish, based on mastic resin and walnut oil, which protects the paint while allowing it to breathe.

—Rousseau, note this information about the varnish. It could be useful for future conservation.

The clerk nodded, adding a marginal note in blue ink.

Suddenly, Montcornet made an observation that alarmed Francesco:

—Wait. Was this painting always in this place? I notice that the dust around the easel forms an unusual pattern. It looks like it was moved recently.

Francesco's heart nearly stopped, but he kept his calm:

—I did indeed move the easel two days ago, messire. After the master's death, I turned it toward the east so that the morning light would illuminate Madonna Lisa's face during our prayers. It was... it was my way of paying him homage. The dawn light on her face... it was as if she wept our master with us.

The explanation seemed to satisfy the clerk, who nevertheless noted the information in his notebook.

The inventory continued. The notary moved to the next painting:

—Second item. A painting of large dimensions representing Saint Anne, mother of the Virgin Mary, said Virgin Mary herself, and the Infant Jesus playing with a lamb, the whole arranged in a rocky landscape with bluish mountains in the distance...

He measured conscientiously:

—...painted on a poplar wood panel of significant dimensions—measuring exactly four feet and two inches in height by three feet and one inch in width—but left unfinished by the master's hand. Certain parts, notably the face of Saint Anne and that of the Virgin, are of perfect finish, while other areas, particularly the lamb and the landscape on the right, are only sketched.

Francesco couldn't help but intervene:

—This painting occupied my master for nearly twelve years. He could never satisfy himself completely with it. He said that representing three generations of sanctity in a single composition was the ultimate challenge of his career.

—Why did he never finish it? Rousseau asked.

—Because his vision constantly evolved. Each time he thought he had found the perfect solution, a new idea emerged. He redid Saint Anne's face at least six times. Look

carefully, you can still see traces of previous compositions under the current paint.

Deloynes leaned in and indeed, one could distinguish vague contours beneath the paint layers:

—Extraordinary! It's as if several paintings were superimposed! Rousseau, note: "*Work presenting multiple visible pentimenti in transparency.*"

The inventory continued for hours. Painting after painting, drawing after drawing, each work was measured, described, evaluated. The sun rose in the sky, its rays moving slowly across the studio floor.

Around the tenth hour of the morning, as they were inventorying a series of portraits of young women, Montcornet suddenly stopped before a wall where one could clearly distinguish rectangular marks that were lighter.

—What is this? he asked, indicating these marks. It looks like paintings were recently taken down.

Francesco had prepared his answer:

—These are the locations of works my master gave away during his illness, messire. He wanted to thank those who had cared for or comforted him.

—And which works exactly?

—Studies mainly. A portrait of a young man offered to Father Antoine who brought him the sacraments. A study of hands given to Doctor Fernel. A head of an old man to Canon Briçonnet who came to discuss theology with him.

Montcornet approached the wall:

—These marks seem very recent. The color difference is minimal. These paintings would have been taken down only a few days ago.

—About two weeks, messire. It was during Doctor Fernel's last visit. My master, in a moment of lucidity, insisted on offering him this study of hands in gratitude for his care.

—And you have witnesses to these donations?

—The beneficiaries themselves, naturally. You can question them.

The clerk noted the names in his notebook:

—We will do so, rest assured. Let's continue.

They moved to the manuscripts. Piles of notebooks and journals were stacked on several tables. Deloynes lifted one, opened it cautiously:

—God in heaven! he exclaimed. This writing... it's backwards!

—My master wrote in mirror script, Francesco explained. From right to left. You need a mirror to read his notes, or learn to decipher this reversed writing. It was partly to protect his secrets, partly a left-handed habit.

—He was left-handed? Rousseau marveled.

—The most famous left-hander in the world, Salai confirmed. He drew, painted, wrote with his left hand. He said it was a gift from God, that it allowed him to see the world differently. Montcornet leafed through a notebook, trying to decipher the reversed writing:

—And what exactly do these manuscripts contain?

Francesco chose his words carefully:

—Observations on nature, philosophical reflections, mathematical studies, research on perspective. My master noted everything that interested him. Look, here for example... He took an innocuous notebook and opened it to a page covered with drawings of flowers:

—Botanical studies. The master spent hours in the gardens drawing every petal, every leaf. He said that understanding the

structure of a flower was understanding the architecture of beauty.

—And these diagrams? the clerk asked, showing a page covered with complex geometric figures.

—Studies on proportions. My master sought the mathematical relationships that govern visual harmony. The golden ratio, the ideal proportions of the human body according to Vitruvius...

Deloynes began to dictate:

—Tenth item. A collection of bound and unbound manuscripts, written by the hand of the deceased in specular writing...

He undertook to count the volumes:

—I count... twelve large quarto-format notebooks bound in red Cordovan leather... Twenty-three octavo-format notebooks in vellum... And approximately two hundred loose sheets of various dimensions.

—Is that all? Montcornet suddenly declared. For a man who worked for fifty years, that seems little.

The clerk had guessed their staging.

—My master was very selective, he replied, forcing himself to remain calm. He regularly destroyed studies he judged imperfect. Moreover, many of his notes remained in Italy, in the courts where he served.

—And didn't he give away any of these manuscripts during his illness? Montcornet insisted.

—Yes, a few notebooks. A treatise on perspective offered to Jean Perréal, the king's painter who admired him. Hydraulic studies given to the royal engineer Pierre de Navarre. Research on fortifications sent to Marshal de La Palice.

The clerk noted all these names with a skeptical expression:

—What sudden generosity! Your master distributed half his works in a few weeks!

Salai was indignant:

—He wanted his knowledge to serve some purpose! Is that so difficult to understand?

—What's difficult to understand, Montcornet replied, is why he didn't establish a proper will to bequeath these goods. Why these informal donations?

—He was too weak to write, Francesco explained. Paralysis had affected his right hand. He could only give verbal orders.

—Convenient, very convenient, the clerk murmured.

The tension in the studio was palpable. Deloynes, sensing the atmosphere growing heavier, intervened:

—Gentlemen, let's continue our task. Time passes and we still have much to inventory.

They moved to the scientific instruments. Francesco had carefully selected those that needed to be left visible: compasses, squares, an armillary sphere, a few glass lenses, mirrors.

—Twentieth item. A collection of mathematical and optical instruments...

Montcornet examined a convex lens:

—What was this for?

—My master studied the properties of light. He used these lenses to understand how the human eye perceives images. It was essential for his perspective technique.

—And this strange apparatus? the clerk asked, indicating a complex assembly of toothed wheels and springs.

Francesco smiled despite his tension:

—One of his inventions. An odometer, to measure distances traveled. The wheels turn according to a precise ratio, and this

dial indicates the distance. He had designed it for military engineers.

—Ingenious, Deloynes admitted. Your master was a universal mind.

—Too universal perhaps, Montcornet commented. A man who's interested in everything ends up excelling at nothing.

—On the contrary! Salai protested vehemently. It's because he understood everything that he excelled at everything! His knowledge of anatomy improved his painting. His hydraulic studies helped him understand the movement of drapery. Everything was connected in his mind!

The inventory went on. Around noon, Mathurine brought bread and cheese. The agents took a break, but Francesco could eat almost nothing, his stomach knotted with anguish...

In the afternoon, the atmosphere became heavier. Montcornet, who had spent the break examining his notes, returned with renewed determination. He headed toward a precious wooden casket he had noticed earlier, hidden behind a pile of canvases.

—What's in this chest? he asked, lifting it.

Francesco froze. He had forgotten this casket.

—The master's personal papers, I believe. Correspondence, administrative documents.

—Open it.

Francesco's hands trembled slightly as he turned the key. Inside were indeed letters, contracts, receipts. Montcornet seized them eagerly.

—Let's see... Letters from the Cardinal of Aragon... From the Duke of Ferrara... From the Marquis of Mantua... Ah, here's something interesting!

He brandished a letter with a triumphant smile:

—A letter dated March of this year, two months before the master's death. It comes from a certain Ottaviano Malatesta, Venetian art dealer.

He read aloud:

—"Most illustrious Master Leonardo, I learned from our common friend Luigi Pompi that you keep in your studio a Saint John the Baptist of extraordinary beauty, as well as a Leda with the Swan that scandalizes the well-minded by its pagan sensuality. I would be extremely interested in acquiring these two pieces for my private collection, and I'm prepared to offer a generous price. Three thousand gold ducats for the Saint John, two thousand for the Leda. It's a considerable offer that few artists would refuse."

The clerk raised his eyes, fixing Francesco with intensity:

—So? Where are this Saint John the Baptist and this Leda with the Swan mentioned in this letter dating from only two months ago? Why haven't we encountered them in our inventory?

Francesco forced himself to breathe calmly, then answered with an assurance he was far from feeling:

—The Saint John the Baptist was lent by my master to His Majesty King François himself, three weeks ago, shortly before the illness worsened definitively. The king wished to show it to the English ambassador who was visiting the court. He wanted to prove that France possessed the greatest artists in the world. The work is therefore at the royal château, in the king's private apartments. You can verify this with the chamberlains.

It was a bold explanation—making the king himself the holder of the missing work. Montcornet couldn't easily verify this claim without addressing the royal officers directly.

—The king would have borrowed this work?

—Borrowed isn't the exact word, Salaï replied. His Majesty expressed the desire to contemplate the Saint John the Baptist,

and my master could refuse the king nothing. It was exactly twenty-three days ago. I remember the day perfectly: it was a Sunday, after mass. Two royal guards came to fetch the painting with a padded litter.

Montcornet noted this information, visibly vexed at not being able to verify it immediately.

—And this Leda with the Swan?

Francesco took on a pained expression:

—Ah, the Leda... It's a tragic story, messire. My master destroyed it with his own hands in a fit of artistic rage, a month before his death.

—Destroyed? A work worth two thousand gold ducats?

—Money had no importance for my master when it concerned his art. He wasn't satisfied with the rendering of the flesh, found that the sensuality of the composition veered into vulgarity rather than pure beauty. One evening, after the visit of Cardinal de Tournon who was offended by Leda's nudity, my master flew into a terrible rage.

Salai took over, adding details to make the story more credible:

—I remember that night. It was April 3rd, late in the evening. The Maestro was in a state of great agitation. The cardinal's visit had deeply wounded him. He repeated: "*This Leda isn't my Leda. It's only a parody of what I wanted to create. The cardinal is right, it's vulgar, it's obscene! I've become a lecherous old fool!*" We tried to stop him, but he seized a knife and slashed the canvas violently.

Francesco continued:

—The shreds of canvas were burned in this very fireplace. I tried to save some fragments, but the master ordered me to destroy everything. "*Not a trace, Francesco, not a trace of this*

abomination!" he shouted. It was... it was terrifying to see such a genius destroy his own work.

—Remarkably... convenient, Montcornet commented skeptically. A precious work mentioned in recent correspondence would have been destroyed just before the inventory. And the other is at the château, beyond our reach.

—The truth is often less convenient than a lie, messire, Francesco replied with a hint of irony. If we had wanted to conceal these works, would we have left Malatesta's letter in the chest?

The argument struck home. Montcornet frowned, recognizing the logic of this observation.

The notary intervened, sensing the situation becoming explosive:

—We'll take note of these explanations. If His Majesty holds the Saint John the Baptist, the work will naturally be included in the overall inventory of the deceased's goods. As for the destroyed Leda, we cannot inventory what no longer exists. Let's continue our work, gentlemen.

But Montcornet wasn't satisfied. He continued rummaging through the letters, reading each document with attention. Suddenly, his face lit up with malicious satisfaction:

—Oh, but here's something even more interesting!

He brandished a document:

—An inventory! A handwritten inventory by Leonardo da Vinci himself!

Francesco felt the ground give way beneath his feet. He had completely forgotten the existence of this document.

—Look at the date: 1516, at the time of departure from Italy for France. A detailed list of everything he was bringing. We'll be able to compare with what we found today and identify precisely what's missing!

The clerk began reading with evident jubilation:

—"A portrait of a Florentine Lady, called *La Gioconda*"—present.
 "A composition of Saint Anne with the Virgin and Child"—present.
 "A Saint John the Baptist"—absent, you claim it's at the château.
 "A Leda with the Swan"—absent, you claim it was destroyed.

He continued, his voice becoming more and more accusatory:

—"Twelve large bound notebooks containing complete anatomical studies"—I count only three in our current inventory. Where are the other nine? "Treatise on bird flight in eight notebooks"—completely absent. "Research on hydraulics in six notebooks"—absent. "Studies on human proportions according to Vitruvius, four notebooks"—absent. "Treatise on painting in ten notebooks"—I see only two here!

The clerk raised his eyes, fixing Francesco with a piercing gaze:

—How do you explain that more than half the manuscripts mentioned in this 1516 inventory are no longer in the studio in 1519? Where have they gone? Vanished?

Francesco felt sweat running down his back. He took a deep breath and launched into the explanation he had prepared:

—These manuscripts were distributed by the master before his death, as I explained to you. But not only to friends in Amboise. Some were sent to Italy, to scholars and institutions that could make good use of them.

—To Italy? Montcornet exclaimed. Your dying master would have sent manuscripts to Italy?

—He wanted his knowledge to return to his homeland, Francesco explained. The anatomical studies, for example, were offered to the successor of Doctor Marcantonio della Torre at the University of Pavia. It was a promise he had made long ago. There are letters about this in that pile, if you want to consult them.

Francesco quickly rummaged through the papers and pulled out an ambiguous letter:

—Look, this letter from Professor Berengario da Carpi requesting clarifications on certain anatomical observations. My master sent him three notebooks in response.

—As for the treatise on flight, Salai said, it was shared among several people. Messire de Villeroy received part of it, he's interested in military machines. The Count de Ligny got another part, he dreams of building flying machines. The engineer Domenico da Cortona, who was passing through two months ago, took two notebooks to Italy.

Francesco continued, improvising desperately:

—The hydraulic research was sent to the engineer Girolamo da Milano who's building canals for the pope. It was the master's will: that his discoveries serve concrete projects, not that they mold in chests.

Montcornet listened with obvious skepticism:

—What extraordinary generosity! Your master would have distributed decades of research in a few weeks! And by what miracle would a paralyzed man have organized all these shipments?

—He wasn't always paralyzed, Salai protested. He had moments of lucidity, better days. And it's we who executed his orders. Isn't that right, Francesco?

—Exactly. The master dictated his instructions, we wrote the accompanying letters, we organized the shipments. Our faithful Battista can testify to this, he carried several packages to the Amboise postal relay.

Montcornet turned to the servant who stood near the door:

—Is this true?

Battista, caught off guard but understanding the stakes, nodded:

—Yes, messire. I carried several packages these last months. Sealed rolls, addressed to various persons in France and Italy.

—And you didn't find this sudden distribution frenzy strange?

—The master knew he was going to die, messire. He wanted to put his affairs in order.

The clerk noted all these names, constantly adding new entries to his list of people to question:

—We'll verify all this. Rest assured of that. Each name will be verified. Each missing manuscript will be searched for. And if we discover you've lied to us...

He let the threat hang.

—The consequences will be terrible. Theft of goods belonging to the crown is punishable by death. I've already told you this, but I want it to be perfectly clear.

—I have nothing to fear from the truth, Francesco replied.

The inventory resumed in an even more tense atmosphere. Montcornet now examined every object with systematic suspicion. He searched for traces of recent manipulation, tested the dust on shelves, verified the wear on bindings.

Around the seventeenth hour, as the light was declining and candles had to be lit, the clerk made a new troubling discovery. Moving a stack of canvases, he revealed a section of wall where the plaster seemed different, more recent.

—What is this? he asked, tapping the wall. It looks like this wall was redone recently.

Francesco's heart nearly stopped. This was one of the places where they had walled up manuscripts. Salai had sworn he had perfectly aged the plaster.

—This wall was repaired six months ago, Francesco explained, forcing himself to keep his voice normal. There were water infiltrations threatening to damage the works. The master had

a mason from Tours come, Master Guillaume Pichon. You can verify with him.

Montcornet examined the wall more closely, scratching the plaster slightly with his fingernail:

—Six months, you say? This plaster seems fresher than that.

—The humidity from the Loire, messire. It prevents the plaster from drying completely. All the masons in the region will confirm this.

The clerk wasn't convinced, but without concrete proof, he could do nothing. He nevertheless noted this observation in his notebook.

The inventory finally drew to a close as night had fallen. The candles projected dancing shadows on the walls, creating a spectral atmosphere. The clerk Rousseau, exhausted, dried his last writings by sprinkling them with fine sand.

—There, Deloynes declared, putting away his instruments. The inventory is complete. We've cataloged twenty-three paintings and painted panels, one hundred thirty-seven drawings, twenty-six bound manuscripts, approximately two hundred loose sheets, forty-three scientific instruments, and various personal objects.

He turned to Francesco and Salai:

—Messires, in accordance with *droit d'aubaine*, all these goods become the property of His Majesty. The sergeants will proceed to remove the most precious objects to transport them to the royal château where they'll be stored and preserved...

Francesco bowed his head in silence, unable to utter a word. His throat was tight with emotion—a mixture of grief for the lost works and secret relief for those they had succeeded in saving.

The two sergeants-at-arms then entered the studio, carrying solid wooden crates and rolls of protective cloth. They approached with unusual deference for men accustomed to seizures without ceremony.

—Take the greatest precautions, Deloynes ordered. 'These works are of inestimable value and extreme fragility. The slightest clumsiness could cause irreparable damage. His Majesty would never forgive us.

The Mona Lisa was the first work to leave the studio. The sergeants approached it with an almost religious reverence. The red-haired colossus, Mortain, usually brutal, manipulated the painting with surprisingly delicate gestures.

—Gently, Jacques, he murmured to his companion. This is her, the Lady everyone's talking about. Look how she follows us with her gaze.

—It gives me goosebumps, the other replied, shivering. It's as if she's alive.

Deloynes personally supervised the packing. First, he wrapped the painting in several layers of fine linen cloth:

—Careful with the corners. That's where the wood is most fragile. There, now the wool blanket. No, not like that! It must be perfectly taut to avoid friction.

The notary perspired despite the evening coolness. The stakes were considerable—damaging the Mona Lisa would be a political as well as artistic disaster.

Francesco approached:

—Allow me to help you, messire. I know the fragility of this work. The panel has a slight tendency to curve with humidity. Uniform pressure must be maintained.

Together, they placed the painting in a crate padded with red velvet. Deloynes had brought fine wood shavings to fill the spaces:

—These shavings will absorb shocks during transport. It's a technique I learned during the transfer of works by the late Monseigneur d'Amboise.

Salaï observed the scene, tears in his eyes:

—She's leaving this studio forever. The master said she was his mirror, that he saw himself in her.

—What do you mean? Rousseau asked, intrigued.

—The master said every artist puts his soul into his work. This Lady is Leonardo himself. His mystery, his melancholy, his wisdom... Everything is there, in that smile.

Montcornet, who was supervising the packing of another painting, launched cynically:

—Beautiful poetry, but it's just a painting. Merchandise of great value, certainly, but merchandise all the same.

Francesco turned to him with contained anger:

—Merchandise? Is that how you see genius? As a good to be inventoried, appraised, confiscated?

—That's how the law sees it, the clerk replied. And I am a servant of the law.

—The law may possess the material support, Francesco intervened, but it will never possess the spirit that animates it. This painting will continue to trouble those who look at it long after your laws have been forgotten.

—We'll see about that. For now, it's the property of the King of France.

The removal of works continued methodically. The Saint Anne was packed with the same care. Then came the other paintings, one by one. Each departure was a wound for Francesco and Salaï.

When the turn came for the manuscripts, Francesco attempted one last maneuver:

—Messires, these notebooks contain very technical notes, often incomprehensible without explanations. Allow me to make annotated copies for His Majesty. I could translate the mirror writing, explain the technical terms...

—Out of the question, Montcornet cut in. Everything must leave immediately. If the king wishes explanations, he'll summon you.

The manuscripts were placed in felt-lined chests. Francesco observed each notebook that disappeared, mentally relieved that the most important ones were safe in their hiding places. Around the twentieth hour, as the sergeants were loading the last crates, an incident nearly compromised everything. Moving a heavy table, one of the sergeants struck the wall where the manuscripts were hidden. A piece of plaster broke off, revealing a cavity.

—Messire! the sergeant cried out. There's something behind this wall!

Francesco felt the blood leave his face. Montcornet rushed forward, torch in hand:

—What do you see?

The sergeant scraped the plaster, widening the opening:

—It looks like... a hollow space. Perhaps an old niche.

Francesco's heart beat so hard he was certain everyone could hear it. But by miracle, the opening created by the sergeant revealed only an empty part of the hiding place—the manuscripts were stacked farther away, invisible from this angle.

—These are the old drainage pipes, Battista declared quickly, having observed the scene. This manor is over a hundred years old. There are walled-up passages everywhere, old chimneys, conduits. The mason who repaired this wall must have come upon one of them.

Montcornet examined the opening with suspicion:

—Widen this hole. I want to see what's behind.

—Messire, Deloynes intervened, it's getting late. We have the essentials of the inventory. If you want to conduct more thorough searches, come back tomorrow with workers. For now, let's finish what we've begun.

The clerk hesitated, then nodded reluctantly:

—Very well. But I'll return. And I'll have every wall in this studio sounded if necessary.

Francesco exchanged a glance with Salai. They had gained a reprieve, but for how long?

The physical inventory was now complete. Rousseau gathered his parchments, verifying that each page was properly numbered and signed. Deloynes affixed his red wax seal at the bottom of the final document.

—The official inventory of Leonardo da Vinci's goods comprises sixty-three pages, he declared solemnly. It will be deposited at the Chamber of Accounts and a copy will be delivered to His Majesty.

Montcornet added:

—Messires Melzi and Salai, you are now guardians of this empty studio until His Majesty decides its fate. You are formally forbidden to remove or modify anything. Guards will regularly pass to verify that everything remains as it is.

—For how long? Salai asked.

—Until further notice. Perhaps a few weeks, perhaps a few months. That will depend on royal pleasure.

Deloynes, more compassionate, added:

—You may continue to reside at the manor for now. His Majesty recognizes the services you rendered to the deceased. But be ready to leave when the order comes.

The agents began gathering their belongings. The carts in the courtyard were now loaded with crates containing Leonardo's artistic treasure. The oxen snorted in the cool night air.

Before leaving, Deloynes approached Francesco:

—I understand your pain, young man. To see your master's work leave thus... But know that it will be preserved. The king has deep respect for Leonardo da Vinci. These works will be treated with all honors.

—The honors due to spoils of war, Francesco murmured bitterly.

The notary sighed:

—The law is harsh, but it's the law. Your master should have thought of that.

—My master thought that genius transcended human laws.

—Perhaps. But we live in the world of men, not in that of geniuses.

Montcornet, who had heard the exchange, approached:

—One last warning, Melzi. I'm going to investigate each of your claims. I'm going to question every person you mentioned. If I discover the slightest lie, the slightest concealment...

—You'll find only the truth, messire.

—We'll see. Meanwhile, I advise you not to leave Amboise. My patience has limits.

On these menacing words, the agents left the manor. Francesco and Salaï watched them depart from the window of the devastated studio. The escort's torches moved away into the night, carrying with them part of Leonardo's soul.

When the sound of the carts had faded, Salaï collapsed on a stool:

—My God, Francesco, I thought we were lost when the wall collapsed!

—We were lucky. But Montcornet will return. We must move the hidden manuscripts this very night.

—Tonight? But we're exhausted!

—Precisely. They won't expect us to act so quickly. Battista will help us. We're going to remove the manuscripts and disperse them. Some with trusted friends, others in the crypt of Saint-Denis church.

Mathurine entered the studio, carrying new candles:

—Messires, you should eat something. You've had nothing all day.

—Later, Mathurine. We have work.

The housekeeper looked at them with concern:

—Be careful, messires. Walls have ears. And Montcornet has a reputation for having spies everywhere.

—We'll be prudent.

When she had left, Francesco turned to Salâi:

—We also need to write those backdated letters. To create the illusion that the donations actually took place. I've kept aged paper and faded ink.

—You think of everything.

—I try. The master taught me to anticipate. "*Observe, analyze, foresee,*" he always said.

They spent the following hours delicately extracting the manuscripts from their hiding places. Each notebook was wrapped in oilcloth, then placed in burlap sacks.

Around midnight, as they were preparing to transport the first batch, Battista returned from the city with alarming news:

—Messires, I have bad news. Montcornet has already begun his investigation. He sent men to Doctor Fernel's and to the

Abbot of Saint-Florentin's. He wants to verify your declarations first thing tomorrow morning.

Francesco swore under his breath:

—He doesn't waste time. Battista, you must leave immediately for Tours. Take this package to Doctor Fernel with this letter. Tell him it's a matter of life and death.

He handed the servant a small painting—a study of hands of no great value—and a carefully drafted letter.

—And for the abbot?

—Salai will take care of it. He'll leave before dawn with a study of plants. The abbot is a good man, he'll understand.

The night was long and exhausting. They moved the manuscripts, created false documents, prepared their witnesses. When dawn rose over Amboise, everything was in place for the continuation of their great mystification.

Francesco contemplated the empty studio one last time. The Mona Lisa seemed to mock him. But in the secret hiding places, in the concealed trunks, in the dusty attics, the essence of Leonardo's genius survived.

—Forgive us, master, he murmured. We're doing what we must do.

May 6, 1519, the funeral

The next morning, May 6, 1519, dawn broke over Amboise in a thick mist rising from the Loire.

The official funeral was to be of great solemnity, with the presence of King François I and the entire court, which meant coordinating the availability of numerous participants in the ceremony.

Thus, a first provisional burial took place quickly, without liturgy. Francesco approached the coffin slowly. The lid was still open. He could see his master's face for the last time.

Leonardo lay with his hands crossed on his chest, dressed in his finest crimson velvet robe trimmed with sable—the one he wore during royal audiences. His long white hair, carefully combed, fell on his shoulders. His beard, also white, had been trimmed and perfumed with myrrh oil. Someone—probably Battista—had placed a small ivory crucifix on his chest.

But it was his face that held attention. In death, Leonardo had found a serenity he had never known in life. The worry lines that furrowed his forehead had smoothed. The bitter folds around his mouth had disappeared. He seemed to sleep, simply sleep, as if he would open his eyes at any moment and say in his deep voice: *"Francesco, my boy, I had the strangest dream..."*

But he would never open his eyes again.

The body was buried in a vacant plot of the Amboise cemetery, in the sole presence of the two disciples, some close friends, a royal officer, and a priest.

The official funeral took place three months later, on August 12, 1519.

That day the coffin was exhumed and transported to the manor by six royal guards.

Francesco hadn't slept. Standing at his room window, he watched the city slowly awaken, conscious that this day would mark the definitive end of an era.

The bells of Saint-Florentin chapel began to toll the knell—a grave, repetitive, implacable sound that reverberated through the valley like a reproach addressed to heaven itself.

Dong. Dong. Dong.

Each bell stroke was a heartbeat that stopped, a breath that would never return. Francesco closed his eyes, letting the sound invade him, pierce him. He hadn't cried since the master's death.

Salai entered the room without knocking. He too hadn't slept. His eyes were red, swollen from tears and fatigue. He wore his mourning clothes—a black velvet doublet, black hose, a dark cloak. He held in his hand a precious wooden casket.

—It's time, he said simply. They've come for the coffin.

Francesco nodded silently. He put on his own mourning attire, mechanically adjusting the folds of his cloak. His hands trembled slightly. He was twenty-nine years old and was about to bury the man who had been more than a master, more than a father—the one who had taught him to see the world through the eyes of intelligence and beauty.

They descended the staircase together. In the vestibule, Battista and Mathurine awaited them, also dressed in black. The housekeeper held a rosary between her gnarled fingers and murmured incessant prayers. Battista, his face closed, carried a white wax candle.

The coffin rested in the large salon, on trestles draped with black velvet embroidered with gold. It was a simple but dignified coffin, of solid oak. No excessive ornaments, no ostentatious sculptures—just noble wood and a small engraved copper plaque: Leonardo da Vinci, Pictor Regius, 1452-1519.

Dozens of candles burned, creating a golden, trembling light that gave the impression that shadows danced on the walls. The air was saturated with the smell of beeswax mixed with aromatic herbs—rosemary, lavender, thyme—with which they had covered the coffin to mask the exhalation of the body's decomposition.

Francesco placed a hand on the coffin's edge to keep from swaying. A sharp pain pierced his chest, so intense that he thought for a moment he would die too. How could the world continue to turn without Leonardo? How dare the sun rise, the birds sing, people go about their business, when the one

who had understood nature's secrets lay motionless in a wooden box?

Salai knelt and opened the casket he carried. Inside were several objects: a drawing notebook—sketches Leonardo had made of Salai when he was young, handsome, carefree; a worn brush, the one the master preferred for the finest details; a small bottle containing earth from Florence, which Leonardo had kept preciously during all his years of exile.

—The master asked me to place these objects near him, Salai explained in a broken voice. He wanted to take a bit of his art, a bit of his homeland.

—Forgive me, maestro, he murmured. Forgive me for not always being up to the mark. Forgive me for my caprices, my angers, my jealousies. You were patient with me when I deserved only reproaches. You loved me despite all my faults.

He collapsed against the coffin, shaken by violent sobs that drew almost animal groans from him. Francesco knelt beside him, passing an arm around his shoulders. He too was crying now, tears flowing freely down his cheeks.

—He knew, Salai. He knew you loved him. He told me the day before his death. *"My beautiful Salai,"* he murmured, *"my demon with angel eyes. He wasted my life and illuminated my days. I regret nothing."*

Salai raised his head, searching Francesco's eyes for confirmation that these words were true.

—He said that?

—I swear it on my soul.

A moment of silence passed. Then Francesco added:

—It's my turn now.

From his pocket, he pulled out a small object wrapped in a piece of red silk—the same fabric that had covered the Mona Lisa for years.

—Master, you gave me this ten years ago, the day I officially became your student. You told me: *"Francesco, this compass belonged to my own master, Andrea del Verrocchio. He gave it to me saying that art is not only inspiration, but also precision. Today, I transmit it to you. Make good use of it."*

He unfolded the silk, revealing an old brass compass, patinated by decades of use. The branches were engraved with tiny Latin inscriptions.

—I tried to make good use of it, master. I tried to be worthy of your teaching. But now... now that you're no longer here to guide me, I'm afraid. I'm afraid of not being strong enough, intelligent enough, courageous enough to protect your legacy. Take this compass with you. May it remind you, wherever you are now, that your teaching continues to live through us.

He delicately placed the compass on the coffin.

Battista approached in turn. The faithful servant, who had spent three years watching over the master's comfort, held a simple white wax candle.

—Maestro, he said simply, you treated me with kindness when others would have driven me away. You spoke to me as an equal when others treated me like a dog. This candle, I'll light it every year on the anniversary of your death. As long as I live, your memory will burn.

He placed the candle on the coffin, then slowly crossed himself.

Mathurine was last. The old housekeeper advanced trembling, clutching her rosary to her chest. She said nothing—she had never been comfortable with words—but she deposited a small cloth sachet containing dried flowers from the garden that Leonardo had loved so much.

Knocks on the door interrupted this moment of intimacy. Four men entered—professional bearers from the confraternity of Black Penitents, dressed in long dark hooded

robes. Behind them stood Father Antoine, the chaplain who had administered Leonardo's last rites.

—Messires, the priest said gravely, the hour has come. The procession must leave if we want to arrive at Saint-Florentin before mass.

Francesco nodded, unable to speak.

The bearers lifted the coffin and placed it on their shoulders. Father Antoine intoned in a grave voice: *"In paradisum deducant te Angeli..."*—"May the angels lead you to paradise..."

The procession formed. At the head marched twelve choir children in white albs, carrying censers from which escaped volutes of perfumed smoke. Behind them, Father Antoine, holding a large gilded processional cross. Then came the bearers with the coffin. And finally, closing the march, Francesco, Salaï, Battista and Mathurine, followed by a small crowd of servants, artisans, and neighbors who had known Leonardo.

They left the manor in the gray morning light. The mist was slowly lifting, revealing the surrounding landscape in fragments. The gardens where Leonardo had spent so many hours observing plants, birds, insects. The cypress avenue he had planted upon his arrival, saying they reminded him of Tuscany. The small pavilion where he sometimes went to meditate at sunset.

The procession engaged on the path descending toward the city. The knell continued to sound, rhythming their funeral march. The inhabitants of Amboise came out of their houses, attracted by the sound of the bells.

They stood on their doorsteps, silent, heads uncovered in sign of respect. Some crossed themselves. Others knelt. An old woman wept openly, clutching to her a crude copy of a Leonardo Virgin she had bought from a peddler and which she venerated like a sacred icon.

Francesco observed these simple people paying homage to a man they had never really known, whom they had only seen from afar, but of whom they had heard spoken as a being halfway between man and angel. For them, Leonardo wasn't just a painter—he was a magician, a sage, perhaps a prophet. It was said he could read the future in the stars, that he had penetrated the secrets of life and death.

The procession crossed the bridge over the Loire. The river flowed slowly, its gray waters reflecting the overcast sky. Leonardo had loved this river. "*Water is nature's vehicle,*" he said. "*It's in perpetual motion, like life itself.*"

On the other bank, the crowd was denser. Dozens of people had gathered—artisans, merchants, nobles, clerics. Francesco recognized several familiar faces: Jean Perréal, the king's painter, who bowed deeply as the coffin passed; Pierre de Navarre, the royal engineer, who wept unabashedly;

And then, suddenly, a movement in the crowd. People moved aside, fell to their knees. A murmur ran: "*The king! The king!*"

François I appeared, mounted on a white horse, surrounded by a reduced escort. He wore complete mourning—black velvet, black cape, even his plumed hat was black. His face, usually so joyful and confident, was ravaged by grief. His eyes were red. One could see he had been crying.

He dismounted and advanced toward the procession. The bearers stopped, carefully set down the coffin on the ground. The king knelt in the dust of the path—the King of France, the most powerful man in Europe, on his knees in the mud before the coffin of a foreign painter.

—Leonardo, he murmured in a broken voice. My father. My master. My friend.

He placed both hands on the coffin, his head bowed, and remained thus for a long moment. Francesco saw his shoulders tremble. The king was weeping.

Finally, François I rose. He turned to Francesco and Salai:

—Messires, he said in a hoarse voice, I want you to know that France will never forget what your master brought her. His genius illuminated my court. His wisdom guided my decisions. His presence... his presence warmed my heart as the sun warms the earth.

He paused, fighting against tears.

—I wanted to give him everything. A manor. Pensions. Honors. But what is that, compared to what he transmitted to me? He taught me to see. Before knowing him, I looked at a painting and saw only an image. Now, I see the light, the shadow, the composition, the soul. He opened my eyes to the beauty of the world.

Francesco bowed deeply:

—Your Majesty honors my master's memory with these words. He often spoke of you with deep affection. You were for him the son he never had.

The king wiped his eyes without shame:

—And he was for me the father I would have wanted to have. My natural father died when I was twenty. Leonardo filled that void. When I had a difficult problem, it was to him I turned. When I doubted, it was his wisdom I sought.

He turned to the coffin one last time:

—Addio, padre mio. May God receive your soul among the saints and the wise. You lived as a man, you will die as a legend. The king remounted his horse and signaled the procession to continue. But he didn't leave. He stayed there, on his white horse, watching the funeral cortege set back in motion. And when the coffin passed before him, François I removed his hat and bowed deeply—the king bowing before his subject.

The procession resumed its path toward Saint-Florentin church, which the king rejoined a little later. The crowd now

followed, swelling at every street corner. Hundreds of people marched behind the coffin, forming a long black procession that snaked through the streets of Amboise.

Saint-Florentin church stood on a small hill, dominating the city. It was a modest but elegant edifice, built two centuries earlier in the flamboyant Gothic style. Its spires soared toward the sky like stone prayers. Its stained glass windows, illuminated from within by hundreds of candles, shone like multicolored jewels in the day's grayness.

The church doors were wide open. Inside, every inch of space was occupied. Nobles in court dress, bourgeois in their finest attire, artisans in clean work clothes, peasants in clogs—all had gathered to pay a final homage to the one who had honored their city with his presence. The king had taken his place in the front row.

The bearers transported the coffin to the choir and placed it on a catafalque draped with purple velvet. The air was thick with incense—a perfume of myrrh and benzoin that rose in volutes toward the vaults.

Father Antoine mounted the pulpit. He was an old man with a severe but kind face, who had spent forty years serving this parish. His voice, still strong despite age, resonated in the silent church:

—My brothers, my sisters, we are gathered today to pay a final homage to an exceptional man. Leonardo da Vinci wasn't simply an artist, nor simply a scholar. He was a seeker of truth in a world of shadows. He was a creator of beauty in a world of ugliness. He was a man of faith in a world of doubt.

He paused, letting his words resonate.

—Some say he was a heretic. That he dissected the dead, thus profaning God's temples. That he sought to fly like angels, thus defying the Creator's will. That he asked too many questions, doubted too much, sought too much.

The priest swept the assembly with his gaze:

—To them, I respond: what is faith, if not the quest for truth? What is love of God, if not the contemplation of His creation? Leonardo da Vinci spent his life studying God's work. Every bone he drew, every muscle he analyzed, every law of nature he discovered—all this was but a long prayer of ecstasy before divine ingenuity.

Murmurs of approval ran through the church.

—He often told me, Father Antoine continued, *"Father, when I dissect a human body and see the perfect complexity of its mechanisms, I can only be awed before the Creator who conceived such a machine. Every tendon is placed exactly where it must be. Every bone is formed exactly as it should be. It's the most striking proof of God's existence."*

The priest paused, moved by his own memory.

—Leonardo da Vinci was a man of faith. Not a blind faith, not a faith that accepts without understanding, but an enlightened faith, a faith that seeks to know God through His works. And isn't that the highest form of devotion?

He raised his eyes toward the crucifix that dominated the altar:

—Our Lord Jesus Christ told us: *"Seek and you shall find."* Leonardo sought all his life. And what did he find? He found beauty. He found harmony. He found the laws that govern the universe. And in all this, he found God.

The mass proceeded with the required solemnity. Father Antoine celebrated the Eucharist with particular attention to each gesture, each word. Gregorian chants rose toward the vaults, carried by the pure voices of choir children. *"Dies irae, dies illa..."*—"Day of wrath, that day..."

Francesco, kneeling in the front row, barely listened. His mind wandered, replaying in a loop the last moments with his master. The hand that gripped his. The weak voice that murmured instructions. The eyes that slowly extinguished, like a candle reaching the end of its wax.

"*Francesco*," Leonardo had said in one of his last moments of lucidity, "*you're going to find yourself alone. It's the destiny of all disciples—to become orphans of their masters. But don't be sad. I'm not really leaving. As long as you remember my teachings, as long as you look at the world with the eyes I taught you to open, I'll be with you.*"

The mass drew to a close. The moment had come for burial. The bearers lifted the coffin again and carried it toward the church crypt, a vaulted room beneath the choir where several dozen local notables already rested.

The descent into the crypt was difficult. The stone staircase was narrow. The bearers had to advance prudently to avoid striking the coffin against the walls. Francesco and Salaï followed, holding torches that projected dancing shadows on the stone vaults.

The crypt smelled of damp earth and saltpeter. It was a cold, silent place, where time seemed suspended.

A grave had been dug in the stone floor. Beside it was a large white marble slab, already engraved: "*Hic jacet Leonardus Vincius, Florentinus, Pictor Regius, qui obiit die II Maii MDXIX.*"—"Here lies Leonardo da Vinci, Florentine, Painter to the King, deceased May 2, 1519."

The bearers set down the coffin at the edge of the grave. Father Antoine intoned the De Profundis: "*De profundis clamavi ad te, Domine...*"—"Out of the depths I cry to you, Lord..."

This was the moment Francesco dreaded most. The instant when the coffin would descend into the earth. The instant when everything would become definitive, irreversible, absolute.

The bearers seized ropes and began slowly lowering the coffin into the grave. The wood scraped against stone. The sound resonated in the crypt's silence like a cry of agony.

Francesco could contain himself no longer. He collapsed, falling to his knees at the grave's edge:

—No! Not yet! Please, not yet!

Salai seized him by the shoulders, trying to restrain him, but Francesco struggled:

—I'm not ready! I didn't have time to tell him everything I wanted to say! I didn't have time to thank him for everything he gave me!

His voice broke into uncontrollable sobs. All the grief he had contained now exploded with a violence that left him panting, emptied, broken.

Salai knelt beside him, holding him in his arms. He too was crying, but his tears were silent, internalized, almost accepted.

—He didn't need words, he loved you simply, Salai said.

—How can you be sure?

—Because he told me so. A few days before his death he told me: *"My Francesco is the best of us all. More intelligent than I, more disciplined, more upright. He'll go further than I ever went. And when he reaches the summit of the mountain I began to climb, he'll think of me and he'll smile."*

Francesco raised his head, his eyes drowned in tears:

—He said that?

—Yes.

A long silence passed. The coffin had now reached the bottom of the grave. The bearers were withdrawing the ropes. In a few moments, they would begin throwing in the earth.

Francesco leaned over the grave's edge. He looked one last time at the oak coffin that contained all that remained physically of Leonardo da Vinci.

—Addio, maestro, he murmured. Thank you for everything. I'll do my best to be worthy of you. I'll protect your legacy. I'll transmit your teaching. And when my hour comes, when I join you in the beyond, I hope you'll be proud of what I've accomplished.

He took a handful of earth and threw it into the grave. It landed on the coffin lid with a dull sound. Then Salai did the same. Then Battista. Then all those who had descended into the crypt.

The gravediggers advanced and began their work. Shovelful after shovelful, the earth covered the coffin. The sound of earth falling on wood was unbearable—each impact was a farewell, each shovelful a renunciation.

Francesco couldn't tear his gaze away. He watched the earth rise, progressively effacing the coffin from his view. First the lid disappeared. Then the sides. Then everything was covered. Nothing remained but a mound of fresh earth, dark, damp.

The gravediggers packed down the earth, leveled it, then placed the heavy marble slab over it. The sound of the stone being set down resonated like a final thunderclap. It was finished. Leonardo da Vinci had found his eternal rest.

Father Antoine pronounced the final prayers, made the final sign of the cross, then invited the assembly to ascend. One by one, people left the crypt, ascending toward the light of day.

Francesco was the last to leave. He remained there, standing before the fresh tomb, unable to take the first step that would signify definitive acceptance. Behind him, Salai waited patiently.

—Francesco, he said softly, we must leave now. Let him rest.

—How to do it? How to live without him?

—As he taught us. By observing. By creating. By seeking truth. It's our way of keeping him alive.

Francesco closed his eyes, took a deep breath, then turned toward the staircase. Each step he climbed brought him closer to the world of the living and distanced him from the world of the dead. When he emerged into the church, the light from the stained glass windows seemed painfully bright after the crypt's darkness.

The church had emptied. Only a few close friends remained—the king had withdrawn, but several courtiers were present, as well as artists and scholars who had known Leonardo.

As Francesco was about to leave, a man approached him. It was an elderly Italian with white hair, elegantly dressed. Francesco recognized him immediately: Domenico della Palla, a Florentine art dealer who had been Leonardo's friend in youth.

—Messire Melzi, the old man said with a pronounced Tuscan accent, allow me to present my condolences. Leonardo was... he was unique. There will never be another like him.

—Thank you, messire. Your presence honors his memory.

—I made the journey from Florence. I had to be here. Leonardo and I shared our youth in Verrocchio's workshop. We were like brothers.

The man pulled from his pocket a small gold medallion:

—This belonged to Leonardo when he was young. It was a gift from his father, Ser Piero. Leonardo gave it to me forty years ago, during a night when we had drunk and talked too much about the future. "*Keep it, Domenico,*" he told me, "*and when I die, bury it with me.*" I never forgot that promise.

He held out the medallion to Francesco:

—Can you place it near his tomb? I'm too old to descend into the crypt.

Francesco took the medallion. It was a simple but beautiful piece, representing an angel with outstretched wings.

—I will do so. Thank you for honoring your promise after so many years.

—Forty years. So much has happened in forty years. We were young, strong, convinced we would conquer the world.

Leonardo succeeded. I remained a merchant. But I never stopped admiring him.

Francesco descended into the crypt again, alone this time. He knelt near the fresh tomb and, with his hands, dug a small hole in the loose earth. He deposited the medallion there, then carefully covered it.

—A gift from your youth, maestro. May the angels carry you toward heaven.

When he ascended again, the church was empty. The sun had pierced the clouds and its oblique rays entered through the stained glass windows, projecting patches of color on the stone floor. Red, blue, green, gold—the colors Leonardo had loved so much, the colors he had spent his life understanding and reproducing.

Outside, on the parvis, a small crowd had gathered. Common people for the most part, come simply to pay homage. Some deposited flowers at the foot of the steps. Others lit candles. A woman sang a lament in Italian, an old Tuscan song that Leonardo sometimes hummed in the studio.

Francesco stopped on the parvis, observing this scene. These people had never known Leonardo. They couldn't understand his scientific theories, couldn't fully appreciate the complexity of his paintings. But they knew, with an instinctive knowledge, that a great man had departed. And they wanted to mark this departure, even modestly.

A child approached Francesco. It was a little boy about ten years old, dirty and ragged, probably a peasant's son. He held a wild flower—a simple field daisy.

—Messire, he said timidly, is it true that Maestro Leonardo could paint angels so beautiful they made people cry?

Francesco knelt to put himself at the child's level:

—It's true. His angels were so beautiful you had the impression they would fly off the painting.

—And is it true he could make machines that fly?

—He tried. He never succeeded, but he tried.

The child thought for a moment, then held out his flower to Francesco:

—Can you put this on his tomb? It's all I have, but I want him to know that even I think of him.

Francesco took the flower, deeply moved:

—He'll know. Thank you, little one.

He returned one last time to the church, descended into the crypt, and placed the daisy on the tomb. This simple flower, given by a poor child, seemed to him more precious than all the official homages, than all the funeral orations, than all the monuments that could be erected.

Because that was, finally, Leonardo's true genius: having touched not only the great of this world, but also the humble. Having created a beauty so universal that a field child could feel it, even without understanding it.

Francesco ascended. On the church threshold, he turned and looked inside. The candles still burned. The stained glass windows shone. But something had changed. The world was different now. Smaller. Less luminous. Less rich with possibilities.

He went out into the declining afternoon. The crowd had dispersed. Only Salaï and Battista waited for him.

—It's finished, Salaï said simply.

—No, Francesco replied. It's not finished. It's only beginning.

He looked toward the horizon, toward Clos Lucé manor that could be seen in the distance on its hill. There, in the secret hiding places, in the attics, with discreet accomplices, slept Leonardo's true treasures.

Montcornet had confiscated the visible works. The king now possessed the Mona Lisa and the other paintings. But

Francesco had succeeded. He had lied, concealed, deceived, falsified. He had violated the law, defied the king, risked the gallows. But he had saved the legacy.

And now began the true mission: to preserve these manuscripts, copy them, study them, transmit them. To ensure that Leonardo's genius continued to live through the centuries.

—Let's go home, he finally said. We have work.

They took the road back to Clos Lucé. The sun was setting, projecting long shadows on the road. Behind them, the bells of Saint-Florentin rang one last time, their melancholy sound reverberating through the valley.

Dong. Dong. Dong.

Farewell, Leonardo. Farewell, master. Farewell, father.

But not farewell forever. For genius never dies. It transforms, transmits itself, is reborn in other forms. Paintings age, crack, fade. Manuscripts yellow, tear, are lost. But ideas, they are immortal.

And Leonardo da Vinci's ideas had just begun their journey through eternity.

CHAPTER 3: THE YEARS OF MYSTIFICATION

Milan, autumn 1519

Six months had passed since the death of Leonardo da Vinci. Francesco Melzi gazed at the rooftops of Milan from the window of the modest room he rented near the Porta Ticinese. The city of his childhood seemed both familiar and foreign. Thirteen years of absence had transformed the ducal city: new palaces rose, replacing the old medieval houses; the Spaniards, new masters after the French defeat of 1515, had imposed their architectural mark.

He had not returned out of nostalgia, but out of necessity. After Leonardo's funeral, after the dispersal of the servants of Clos Lucé, after the confrontations with the agents of the Royal Treasury, remaining in France was becoming dangerous. Each day spent in Amboise increased the risk that a detail of their deception would be discovered, that a witness would recant, that Montcornet would relaunch his investigation.

The return journey had been grueling. He had to discreetly transport the works he had taken: the Saint John the Baptist removed from its frame and rolled in protective cloths, the Leda and the Swan packed similarly, and especially the dozens of manuscripts distributed in several travel chests. In Lyon, suspicious customs officers wanted to inspect his luggage. He had to pay a considerable bribe to avoid opening the cases.

Salai accompanied him as far as Lyon, then decided to remain a few weeks in France to "*settle personal matters*"—in reality, to discreetly sell a few minor drawings and pocket the money without sharing it. Francesco let it happen, too exhausted to quarrel. Their friendship, if it had ever truly existed, had deteriorated since the master's death. Each saw in the other a cumbersome accomplice rather than a companion in struggle.

Now settled in Milan, he had to rebuild his life. He was twenty-nine years old, with no profession other than that of disciple to a deceased master, and a fortune in artworks that he could not openly sell without attracting the attention of French or Italian authorities.

His father, Captain Giovanni Melzi, had died two years earlier, leaving him a small annuity and a few agricultural properties near Vaprio d'Adda. It was enough to live modestly, but insufficient to maintain the social rank to which he aspired. His brothers, who managed most of the family patrimony, looked at him with a mixture of pity and contempt: what could one expect from a man who had wasted his youth following a foreign painter instead of pursuing a career in the army or administration?

He had to quickly find a way to monetize his illegitimate inheritance without arousing suspicion. But how could he sell these pieces without being able to produce documentation proving their legal provenance? How could he explain their presence in his possession when all Milan knew that the master had died in France and that his goods had been inventoried by royal agents?

The answer came from an unexpected source.

The alliance with Pompeo

One November morning in 1519, an elegant young man presented himself as Pompeo Bonini, sculptor and amateur collector. Pompeo was twenty-four years old, with a fine face of regular features, and that natural confidence of people born into comfort. His father, Leone Bonini, was a renowned sculptor in the service of Charles V, and he had inherited his artistic talent and his connections in European courts.

—Messer Melzi, he began after the customary greetings, your reputation precedes you. It is said that you were the favorite

disciple of the great Leonardo, that you inherited his most precious works, that you possess manuscripts containing secrets the world has never seen.

On his guard, Francesco replied cautiously:

—Rumors always exaggerate, messer. I had the honor of serving the master for many years, it's true. As for an inheritance, it is far more modest than what the gossips say.

—Modest? repeated Pompeo with a skeptical smile. I've heard of striking studies, of treatises on the flight of birds, of drawings of extraordinary machines. That doesn't seem modest to me.

Francesco understood that he had to change tactics. This Pompeo was well informed. Rather than deny, it was better to sound him out.

—And if these rumors were founded? What would be your interest?

—My interest is twofold. First, sincere admiration for Leonardo's genius. I've seen some of his works in Rome and Florence, and I was overwhelmed by their beauty. Second, a more... pragmatic interest. I know collectors throughout Europe who would pay fortunes to acquire authentic works by the master. But these collectors are demanding. They want guarantees, proofs of provenance.

—You're proposing to help me sell?

—I'm proposing to become your intermediary. You have the works, but not the contacts. I have the contacts, but not the works. Together, we could build something very profitable.

Francesco studied the young man. Could he be trusted? Or was this a trap? A secret agent sent by the French or by the Milanese authorities to expose him?

He decided to take a risk, revealing just enough to test Pompeo's reaction.

—You're right. I possess several important works. But their provenance is... complex. The master died in France, and French laws on the succession of foreigners are draconian. I was able to save certain pieces, but not all. And I don't have official documentation for all those I saved.

—I suspected as much. That's precisely why you need me. I can create the necessary documentation, establish a credible chain of provenance, find appropriate buyers who won't ask too many embarrassing questions.

—Create documentation? You're talking about false papers?

—I would avoid that overly brutal term. Let's say rather that I can... reconstruct the history of these works in a way that satisfies legal requirements while protecting your legitimate interests. After all, these works belong to you morally, don't they? You served the master for years. It's French law that prevents you from enjoying them.

This sophistry pleased Francesco.

—What would be your commission?

—Twenty percent of the sale price. And occasional access to the manuscripts for my own artistic studies. I'm a sculptor. Leonardo's anatomical studies interest me enormously.

Twenty percent was substantial. But having a well-connected accomplice was worth that price. And Pompeo seemed to intuitively understand the subtleties of the situation.

—Agreed, Francesco accepted. But under certain conditions. First, absolute discretion. Second, you will sell nothing without my prior agreement. Third, certain pieces are not for sale, no matter what.

—The Saint John the Baptist?

Francesco started.

—How do you know I possess it?

—Simple deduction. The master was working on that painting in his final years. It was in his studio at Clos Lucé. Yet from what I've heard, it wasn't inventoried by the French agents. Where could it have gone, if not into your possession?

Francesco understood he was dealing with a remarkably perceptive mind. Pompeo wasn't just a simple intermediary. He was an analyst endowed with exceptional intelligence.

—Agreed. I possess the Saint John the Baptist. And you're right, it's not for sale. Never.

—I respect that. There are works one doesn't sell, that one cannot sell. They're too precious, too charged with personal meaning.

This intuitive understanding sealed their alliance. In the days that followed, Francesco showed Pompeo the extent of his treasure. The young sculptor remained speechless before the manuscripts, spellbound by the precision of the drawings, astonished by the audacity of the observations.

—Do you realize what you possess? he exclaimed, leafing through a notebook showing dissections of the heart. These drawings are centuries ahead of current medical science! If these works were published, they would shake medicine!

—That's why they had to be saved, Francesco replied with passion. The master devoted twenty-five years to this research. I couldn't let these treasures be confiscated by ignorant royal agents who would have thrown them away or sold them to paper merchants.

—You're not an opportunist who stole an inheritance. You're a guardian who saved a treasure. That's very different.

This moral distinction, which Francesco strove to maintain in his mind, was reinforced by Pompeo's approval. Yes, he had stolen. But he had stolen for a good cause. It was a virtuous crime, if such a thing could exist.

The first sales

Pompeo got to work. He began by identifying pieces that could be sold safely: minor drawings created by Leonardo in his youth, preparatory studies for works never realized, copies that Francesco himself had made under the master's direction that could be presented as originals.

For each sale, he created a plausible provenance story. For example, for a drawing of a rearing horse, he claimed that Leonardo had offered it to a Milanese noble in 1505, that this noble had bequeathed it to his son, and that Francesco had bought it back from this son. He even fabricated false letters attesting to this fictitious transaction.

The first important sale took place in March 1520. The buyer was Cardinal Bernardo Dovizi da Bibbiena, great art lover and discerning collector. Pompeo offered him a series of twelve botanical drawings—real Leonardo works, but secondary—for the sum of three hundred gold ducats.

The cardinal examined the drawings at length, comparing them with other Leonardo works he already owned. Convinced of their authenticity, he accepted the price. Francesco, who witnessed the transaction, felt immense relief. The first sale had gone smoothly. The system worked.

Over the next two years, they organized a dozen similar sales. Each transaction was carefully prepared, the buyer carefully selected: collectors renowned for their discretion, nobles more interested in the prestige of owning Leonardo works than in the legal details of provenance, art dealers who preferred not to question too much the origin of pieces offered to them at good prices.

Francesco used the money to reestablish himself in Milan. He first rented a larger apartment in the Brera quarter, then, in 1522, bought a small palazzo in the Porta Vercellina quarter,

near the church of Santa Maria delle Grazie where Leonardo had painted his famous Last Supper decades earlier.

This palazzo, although modest compared to the residences of great Milanese families, suited his needs. It comprised about ten rooms spread over three floors, stables that could house four horses, an interior garden adorned with a fountain, and especially spacious attics where he set up a secret studio. It was there that he kept his most precious treasures: the Saint John the Baptist, the anatomical manuscripts, the treatises on flight.

Parallel to these commercial transactions, he worked to consolidate his social position. He cultivated his relationships with influential personalities in Milan: the Spanish governor, the archbishop, the garrison commander, the heads of the great Milanese noble families. He generously offered minor Leonardo drawings to these figures, creating obligees who would be grateful to him in case of difficulty. He participated in social events, receptions, religious ceremonies. He made himself indispensable as an expert in art and antiquities.

This networking strategy was as important as the fabrication of false documents. In a society where personal relationships often counted more than written law, having powerful friends was the best protection.

In 1523, he took a crucial step: he requested and obtained a position as advisor to the Spanish governor of Milan, Alfonso d'Avalos. This position was honorary—he had to give his opinion on the governor's artistic acquisitions and occasionally organize exhibitions in the ducal palace. But it conferred upon him an official status that protected him against possible accusations of fraud or receiving stolen goods. Who would dare accuse the governor's advisor of selling stolen works?

The return of Salai

In September 1523, Salai reappeared in Milan. Francesco, who hadn't seen him since their separation in Lyon four years earlier, was surprised by his transformation. At forty-three, Salai had lost all his androgynous beauty. His face was bloated by alcohol, his eyes reddened by lack of sleep, his clothes neglected. He seemed to have aged twenty years.

—Francesco! he exclaimed, inviting himself into the palazzo without waiting to be invited. What a pleasure to see you again! I've heard you've settled in well here. A beautiful palazzo, a respectable position. You've succeeded!

Francesco was annoyed by this intrusion. He had Salai sit in the salon and offered him wine.

—What are you doing in Milan? Where have you been for these four years?

—A bit everywhere, Salai replied vaguely. In France first, I tried to sell some works. Then in Venice, Florence, Rome. I attempted to establish myself as an independent painter, but without success. Commissions are rare when you don't have the master's reputation.

Francesco observed his old friend with a mixture of pity and mistrust. He guessed that Salai had come to beg for money.

—And now, what are your plans?

—I was thinking of settling in Milan. Renewing contact with my old connections. Perhaps you and I could collaborate again? Like in the master's time?

—Collaborate how?

—Well, you have the inheritance. I have contacts. Together, we could sell the important pieces. The Saint John the Baptist, for example. Or the Leda. These works are worth a fortune!

A shiver ran through Francesco. Salai thought he still possessed all the works taken in 1519. He didn't know that he had already sold some through Pompeo.

—The Leda is no longer in my possession, he lied. I gave it to a Venetian collector in exchange for a favor.

—Gave? Salai was indignant. You gave away a work worth several hundred ducats?

—It was necessary to obtain certain protections. You would understand if you knew the details.

Salai looked at him with suspicion.

—There's something you're not telling me. You've set up an operation without me, haven't you? You've found a way to sell the works and you're leaving me out!

—We separated four years ago, Francesco replied wearily. During all that time, you gave no sign of life. You sent me no letter, no message. What did you expect? That I would sit idle waiting for your return?

—We were accomplices! Salai shouted. We stole these works together! You had no right to sell them without me!

This imprudent declaration, uttered aloud in a salon where anyone could hear, terrified Francesco. He rushed to the door to check that no one was listening, then returned to Salai angrily:

—Shut up, you fool! Do you want to get us both arrested? Never again will you utter those words, do you hear? Never again!

Salai, disconcerted by Francesco's vehemence, fell silent. But his gaze remained charged with resentment.

—I need money. I have debts. Many debts. If I don't repay quickly, I'm going to have big problems.

Francesco sighed. He took out a purse containing fifty ducats and held it out to Salai.

—Here's enough to last a few months. But this is the last time I give you money without something in return. If you want more, you'll have to work. I can find you some commissions for copies, if you're interested.

Salai seized the purse avidly, weighing it to evaluate its contents. Disappointed by the sum, he slipped it into his belt.

—Fifty ducats? That's all? You live in a palazzo, you have servants, and you give me fifty miserable ducats?

—It's more than you deserve. And if you continue to drink and gamble as you do, these fifty ducats won't even last a month.

On these acerbic words, Salai left the palazzo, slamming the door. Francesco remained pensive. Salai's return represented a threat. The man was unpredictable, alcoholic, riddled with debts. He could, in a moment of weakness or rage, reveal their secret. He had to be watched closely.

He spoke about it to Pompeo during their supper.

—Your former accomplice is dangerous. We must either buy him to ensure his silence, or... eliminate him.

—Eliminate? Francesco repeated, shocked. You're talking about killing him?

—I'm talking about neutralizing a threat. But there are other means than murder. We could, for example, have him imprisoned for debts. Or have him chased from Milan by the authorities. Or find him a position somewhere far from here, where he could no longer harm us.

Francesco meditated on these suggestions. The idea of having Salai imprisoned displeased him, but Pompeo was right: the "*little devil*" represented a threat to be managed.

He opted for an intermediate solution. He used his connections with the governor to have Salai appointed as official painter of a small provincial town, Crema, fifty

kilometers from Milan. The position was modestly remunerated, but regular, and it distanced Salai from the Lombard capital where he could cause problems.

Salai, who had little choice, accepted this appointment. But Francesco knew it was only a reprieve. Sooner or later, he would return.

The decline of Salai

Three months later, in December 1523, Salai reappeared at the palazzo. His degradation was manifest. His face was not only bloated by alcohol, but ravaged by an underlying disease. His hands trembled constantly, his voice had become hoarse, and he coughed with disturbing regularity.

Francesco had him enter discreetly through the service door to avoid the servants seeing him. He led him to his study.

—Salai, you can't continue like this. You're destroying yourself.

—I'm destroying myself? he repeated with a bitter laugh that turned into a coughing fit. It's our secret that's destroying me! Every day I live in fear. Fear that they'll discover what we did. Fear that they'll torture me to make me confess. Fear of ending up hanged in the public square!

—No one is going to torture you. We're safe.

—Safe? Salai cried. You maybe! You with your beautiful palazzo. But me? What have I gained from all this? Poverty, solitude, shame!

—I need money. A lot of money. I have debts... important debts. If I don't pay, they're going to kill me.

—Who's going to kill you?

—People... dangerous people. Moneylenders. I borrowed to gamble, and I lost. Now they want to be repaid with exorbitant interest.

Francesco did a quick mental calculation. This was the third time he had paid Salai's debts. Each time, Salai promised it was the last, that he was going to change, that he was going to stop drinking and gambling. And each time, a few months later, he came back with new debts.

—How much do you owe this time?

—A hundred ducats, Salai murmured without daring to look at him.

—A hundred ducats! Francesco exclaimed. That's a fortune! How could you accumulate such a debt?

—I thought I could win... I thought my luck would turn...

Francesco stood and walked to the window, his back turned to Salai. He was thinking intensely. A hundred ducats was a lot of money. But it was also the price of silence. If he refused, Salai, desperate, could do anything. Including revealing their secret to the authorities in hopes of obtaining clemency in exchange for his confession.

Francesco turned around.

—I'll pay your debts. One last time. But on one condition.

—Which one? Salai asked with sudden hope.

—That you leave Milan. Permanently. I had found you work, but you quit overnight. I'm now going to buy you a small house in a remote village, far from here. You'll live there quietly with a modest annuity, but sufficient for your needs. But you'll never come back to Milan. You won't contact me anymore. Our story is over.

Salai opened his mouth to protest, then closed it. He understood this was the best offer he would get. And perhaps Francesco was right. Perhaps moving away from Milan, from its temptations, from its memories, would allow him to start over.

—Agreed. I'll leave. But... the house, it will be in my name? I'll be the owner?

—It will be in your name. I'll have the property deeds drawn up by a notary. You can live there until your death, and afterward you can bequeath it to whomever you want.

Francesco kept his word. He paid Salai's debts to the Milanese moneylenders. He bought a small house in the village of Baggio, about ten kilometers from Milan. He established an annual annuity of twenty-four ducats that would be paid to Salai quarterly through a notary.

Francesco thought he would never see him again.

The death of Salai

Six months later, in June 1524, Francesco received an unexpected message. Salai was asking to meet him urgently. The message, written in a trembling hand, suggested it was a matter of life or death.

Francesco hesitated. He had no desire to see Salai again, to plunge back into that past he was trying to forget. But curiosity prevailed.

He sent a message in return, setting a meeting in a discreet tavern outside the city walls, far from prying eyes.

When Salai arrived, Francesco was shocked. The man standing before him was unrecognizable. In such a short time he had become a living ghost: stooped, emaciated, with a waxy complexion, eyes sunken in their sockets. He coughed constantly, a deep, wet cough that was painful to hear, sometimes spitting blood into a handkerchief already stained.

—Salai... Francesco murmured. My God, what happened to you?

—Life happened to me. The life we chose that night in May 1519.

They settled in a dark corner of the tavern. Francesco ordered wine and food, but Salai touched almost nothing. He drank the wine avidly, but refused to eat.

—I'm dying. The doctors say I have a lung disease. I have a few months left, maybe a year at most.

Francesco didn't know what to say. What do you say to a man who announces his imminent death?

—I'm sorry.

—Don't be sorry. I've lived the life I chose. I drank, I gambled, I loved whom I wanted. I have no regrets... or rather, I have one regret.

—Which one?

—That night. The theft. The lie. All of it.

Salai drank a long swallow of wine before continuing:

—For years, I convinced myself we had done the right thing. That we had saved the master's legacy. That our misdeed was justified by a higher cause. But now that death approaches, now that I must face divine judgment, I wonder if we didn't simply steal for our own enrichment.

—We didn't steal to enrich ourselves. We saved works that would have been lost!

—Then why did you sell so many pieces? Why do you live in a luxurious palazzo? Why do you have an enviable social position? All that, you obtained through theft.

Francesco couldn't deny this accusation. It was true. He had materially profited from the theft. But he had also preserved priceless treasures. Both truths coexisted.

—What do you want from me, Salai? For me to confess publicly? To return everything? It's too late for that.

—I want nothing from you. I just wanted to see you one last time. To look you in the eyes.

He coughed for a long time.

—I also wanted to warn you. When I'm dead, a priest will probably come to see you. I intend to confess before I die. I'm going to tell the priest everything. The theft, the false testament, everything.

—You're going to denounce me?

—No, the seal of confession is absolute. The priest won't be able to reveal anything. But I wanted you to know that someone else will know the truth. That our secret won't die completely with me.

Francesco didn't know whether to feel relieved or worried. The seal of confession was absolute in theory. But in practice, priests were men, with their weaknesses and temptations. Could such an explosive secret remain locked in the silence of the confessional?

—Salaï, don't do that. Keep the secret to the end. For the master. For his legacy.

—For the master? The master is dead. He doesn't care about our lies now. No, if I confess, it's for my own soul, not for the master.

He emptied his glass of wine and stood up with difficulty.

—Farewell, Francesco. We won't see each other again in this life. I hope that in the next one, we'll be forgiven for what we did.

Francesco watched him leave, staggering into the Milanese night. It was their last meeting.

Three weeks later, Francesco learned that Salaï had died in suspicious circumstances. His body had been found pierced by a crossbow bolt. Rumor had it he had been the victim of an altercation following a drinking evening.

Francesco didn't attend the funeral. He sent a wreath and a mass for the repose of the deceased's soul, but refused to be

seen in mourning for Salai. Too many questions would have been asked. Too many links established.

Pompeo, who had discreetly attended the burial, came to report.

—There were about ten people. Peasants from the village, an old woman who took care of him, and the curate. No one important. No one who knows you.

—The curate... is he the one who heard his confession?

—Probably. But the seal of confession is sacred.

—I know. But I wonder what he told him exactly. Whether he gave my name. Whether he mentioned details that would allow them to find me.

Pompeo placed a hand on his friend's shoulder.

—Even if he told everything, the priest can't do anything with it. He's bound by his oath. The curate is probably a simple country man who understands nothing of Milanese artistic intrigues.

Francesco wanted to believe it. But for weeks, he lived in anguish that a clergyman would come knocking at his door to question him. It never happened.

With Salai's death, Francesco found himself the sole guardian of the original secret. Pompeo knew it, certainly, but he hadn't participated in the initial theft. He was an accomplice after the fact, not an actor.

This solitude weighed heavily. He was now thirty-four years old. Half his life was behind him. He had built an imposing social edifice, but this edifice rested on mendacious foundations.

The fabrication of the testament

The years 1524 and 1525 were years of consolidation. Francesco perfected his double life: respectable artist by day,

cautious forger by night. He sold minor works to finance his lifestyle while jealously keeping the major pieces.

During this period, he began to fabricate the false testament that would later become the centerpiece of his defense against accusations of theft. This work required exceptional patience and skill.

He had kept several authentic letters from Leonardo, written during their years together. He studied the master's handwriting minutely: the shape of letters, the pressure of the pen, the characteristic slant, favorite abbreviations. He spent weeks practicing, covering dozens of sheets with failed attempts, until he could reproduce Leonardo's writing with stunning accuracy.

The testament was written on old parchment purchased from a specialized merchant. He artificially aged the ink by adding chemical compounds that accelerated its oxidation. The result was a document that appeared to have been written in 1519 and kept for six years under normal conditions.

The content was carefully calibrated. He had inquired about the legal formulas used in French testaments. He had discreetly consulted a notary friend, claiming to want to draft his own testament. He had studied other testaments of Italian artists who died in France.

The result was a document that rang true. In it, Leonardo bequeathed to Francesco most of his manuscripts and certain specific works. Salaï inherited notably half of a garden. To the master's half-brothers in Tuscany, he bequeathed a sum of money and some furniture. To the servants, modest gratuities. Everything was plausible, coherent, credible.

He also fabricated the famous letter to Leonardo's brothers, dated June 1, 1519, in which he mentioned the "*letters of the Most Christian King*" allowing the master to make a will. This letter was the keystone of the entire construction: it explained

how Leonardo, although a foreigner, had been able to legally transmit his goods.

The most delicate part was creating the illusion that these documents had always existed. He couldn't produce them suddenly in 1525 without people wondering why he hadn't shown them earlier. He had to progressively establish their existence.

He began to mention occasionally, in conversations with art dealers or collectors, that the master had written a testament. He let it be understood that he possessed a copy, but that he preferred not to make it public to avoid family quarrels. Thus, month by month, he created a rumor that a testament existed, even if few people had seen it.

This strategy proved successful. In 1525, when he would begin to justify his possession of the works in the face of increasingly pressing questions, the existence of the testament would already be admitted by many as an established fact.

The journey to Amboise

But Francesco knew that a rumor wouldn't be enough. For his deception to withstand serious examination, he needed official endorsement, an anchor in French notarial archives. In the spring of 1525, he undertook a perilous journey: to return to Amboise.

The journey from Milan took three weeks. Francesco traveled light, bringing only what was strictly necessary and, carefully hidden in a leather satchel lined with silk, the false testament he had spent months perfecting. Each stage of the journey revived his memories: Lyon where he had separated from Salai six years earlier, the roads of France he had traveled alongside Leonardo, and finally Amboise, that city he had fled hastily after the master's death.

The town had changed little. The royal castle still dominated the Loire with its imposing mass. Clos Lucé, the manor where Leonardo had spent his final years, was now occupied by some courtier. Francesco carefully avoided passing in front of it, fearing that the sight of these places would revive dangerous emotions.

He headed to the notarial office of Master Guillaume Boreau, in a half-timbered house typical of the region. The notary was a man of about fifty, with an austere face. His office, dark and cluttered with registers, smelled of old parchment and ink.

Francesco had prepared his approach. He presented himself as Leonardo's former disciple, come to settle the final formalities concerning the master's inheritance. He explained that at the time of Leonardo's death, in the confusion of mourning, certain documents had not been properly registered. He now wished to repair this oversight.

Boreau listened with suspicious attention. When Francesco took the testament from his satchel, the notary took it carefully, examined it at length. His experienced eyes scanned the parchment, pausing on the formulations, the signatures.

—This document is dated April 23, 1519, Boreau observed in a neutral voice. We are now in May 1525. Six years have passed. Why come to register it now?

—Complex family circumstances, messer, Francesco replied with the assurance he had rehearsed a hundred times. The master's Italian heirs contest certain provisions. I need an official trace of this testament to assert my rights.

Boreau placed the document on his desk and crossed his hands before him.

—Messer Melzi, before continuing, I must ask you a question that seems essential to me. Was your master Leonardo da Vinci naturalized as French?

—The master had obtained letters of naturalization from King Francis, messer. This is moreover mentioned in the letter I sent to Leonardo's brothers shortly after his death.

Boreau slowly shook his head.

—That's precisely where the problem lies. You see, in May 1519, immediately after Messer Leonardo's death, I was contacted by the agents of the Royal Treasury. Master Étienne Deloynes and Messer Guillaume de Montcornet conducted a complete inventory of the deceased's goods at Clos Lucé. And do you know under what title they acted?

Francesco didn't respond, guessing what would follow.

—Under the title of droit d'aubaine, Boreau continued in a firm voice. Droit d'aubaine applies to foreigners who die in France without having obtained letters of naturalization. All their goods automatically revert to the Crown. If Messer Leonardo had been naturalized as French, this right wouldn't have applied. The royal agents would have had no reason to conduct this inventory. Yet they did. They seized the major works—the Mona Lisa, the Saint Anne—which now form part of the royal treasury.

The silence that followed was heavy. Francesco desperately searched for an answer, an escape.

—There may have been an administrative error. The letters of naturalization might have been granted, but poorly registered. Or perhaps the Treasury agents weren't aware of them...

—The Treasury agents are professionals, Boreau cut in. They don't move to apply droit d'aubaine without having first verified the absence of naturalization. And I myself consulted the royal chancellery registers at their request. No letter of naturalization in Leonardo da Vinci's name appears there. I kept a record of it in my own archives.

Francesco realized that denying the obvious was useless.

—Messer Boreau, he said in a lower voice, I'll be frank with you. You're right. The letters of naturalization probably never existed. Or if they were promised, they were never formally granted. The master died too quickly. But does that mean his testament must be null? That his desire to bequeath his works to me, the fruits of thirty years of research, must be ignored because of a formality?

—It's not a simple formality. It's the law of the kingdom.

—An unjust law! Francesco flared up. The master served King Francis devotedly for three years. He offered him his most beautiful works. He deserved to be naturalized. If he wasn't, it's through negligence, not his fault.

Boreau observed him at length, his face remaining impenetrable.

—I understand your sentiment. But a notary cannot ignore the law. This testament you present to me is legally problematic. Without letters of naturalization, Messer Leonardo could not legally make a will in France. Everything he possessed had to revert to the Crown through *droit d'aubaine*. This testament, even if it reflects his true intentions, has no legal value.

—Then what do you propose? That I return everything to the royal agents? It's too late. Six years have passed. The works I possess, I saved them from dispersal and destruction. Without me, they would have been sold to merchants or lost. I preserved the master's genius. Is that a crime?

Boreau stood up.

—You place me in a difficult position, Messer Melzi. On one hand, I understand your motivations. On the other, I'm a public officer. I cannot authenticate a document I know to be legally invalid.

—I'm not asking you to authenticate it, Francesco quickly replied. I'm simply asking you to keep it in your archives. As depositary, not as validator.

Boreau turned around.

—A sealed deposit?

—Exactly. You keep the document as is, without ruling on its validity. If anyone contests my inheritance, I can always say that a testament exists and that it's kept with the notary in Amboise. That will give an appearance of legitimacy to my possession.

—An appearance of legitimacy, Boreau repeated with a hint of irony. You're asking me to participate in a deception.

—I'm asking you to preserve the memory of a great man. Laws are imperfect, Messer Boreau. Sometimes, true justice requires departing from them.

The notary returned to sit at his desk, his features marked by reflection.

—And if I accepted this... sealed deposit, what would I gain? Or rather, what would I risk? Because I risk my reputation, perhaps my position, by becoming the depositary of a document whose legal flaws I know.

Francesco had anticipated this objection.

—The church of Saint-Denis in Amboise, I believe, needs urgent restoration. Fifty gold ducats could contribute notably to this work. A pious donation in memory of my late master, naturally. Your name would be among the benefactors.

Boreau's face betrayed no emotion, but Francesco saw his fingers contract slightly on the armrest of his chair. Fifty ducats represented a fortune for a small provincial church.

—Fifty ducats, the notary murmured. That's generous.

—And for you personally, Francesco added, taking out a second purse, twenty additional ducats. For the time you'll

devote to preserving this document, for the special precautions you'll have to take.

Boreau looked at the two purses placed on his desk. The moral conflict was now clearly visible on his face. He was an upright man, accustomed to scrupulously respecting the law. But the offer was considerable. And after all, what was he doing wrong? He wasn't certifying the authenticity of the testament. He wasn't legally validating it. He was simply keeping it in his archives, as he kept hundreds of other documents.

The silence stretched. Francesco held his breath.

—Very well, Boreau finally said in a weary voice. I'll keep this testament in my archives, under seal. I'll provide you with an attestation of deposit, certifying that you entrusted me with this document for safekeeping. But I must be absolutely clear on one point: this attestation will in no way validate the authenticity of the testament or its conformity with French law. It will only establish that you gave me a document you claim to be Leonardo da Vinci's testament.

—That's more than sufficient for me, messer.

—And I'll add a note in my private registers, Boreau continued in a firmer tone, indicating the exact circumstances of this deposit and my reservations about the legal validity of the document. This note will remain confidential, transmitted only to my successors in the notarial position. It's my personal guarantee, my protection if this matter should one day be examined.

Francesco hesitated. This note could be dangerous. But refusing risked making the entire negotiation fail.

—I accept, he said. Your reservations will remain in your private archives. And the testament itself?

—It will be kept in a sealed chest, accessible only upon presentation of written authorization from you or your legal heirs. No one else will be able to consult it.

—And the attestation of deposit?

—I'll draft it immediately.

Boreau took out a blank sheet of parchment and began to write in his beautiful notarial script. Francesco watched the pen scratch the paper, forming the words that sealed their guilty agreement.

"I the undersigned, Guillaume Boreau, royal notary at Amboise, certify having received from Messer Francesco Melzi, Milanese gentleman, for safekeeping in my archives under seal, a document presented as being the testament of the late Messer Leonardo da Vinci, Tuscan artist deceased at Amboise on May 2, 1519, said document dated April 23, 1519. Certificate made at Amboise, on May 15, 1525 at the request of Messer Francesco Melzi."

Boreau affixed his seal at the bottom of the document and handed it to Francesco, who took it with immense relief.

—There it is. The fifty ducats for Saint-Denis?

Francesco placed the first purse on the desk.

—As for the other sum...

He discreetly slid the second purse toward the notary, who made it disappear into a drawer with a quick gesture.

Boreau stood up, signaling that the meeting was over.

—Messer Melzi, I hope not to regret what I've just done. I've granted you what you asked for, but know that I acted against my conscience. If this matter should cause harm to anyone, I would bear the moral responsibility.

—No one will be harmed, Messer Boreau, Francesco assured him. On the contrary. The master's works will be preserved, studied, transmitted to posterity. Isn't that the most important thing?

—Perhaps. Or perhaps I've simply let myself be bought. Time will tell.

Francesco left the notarial office with the attestation carefully folded in his satchel. Stepping out into the sunny street of Amboise, he felt a complex mixture of emotions: relief at having succeeded, guilt at having corrupted an upright man, and satisfaction at having anchored his lie in official archives.

What he didn't know was that Boreau, left alone in his office, was writing a detailed note in his private register: *"This day, May 15, 1525, received from Messer Francesco Melzi a document presented as Leonardo da Vinci's testament. After examination, this document presents serious legal irregularities. First, Messer Leonardo never having obtained letters of naturalization, droit d'aubaine applied to his succession in 1519, rendering any testament null and void. Second, the document's formulations don't correspond to notarial customs. Third, Messer Melzi couldn't present any witness to the drafting of this testament. I nevertheless accepted to keep this document under seal without authenticating it in any way. Instructions to my successors: never show this document without written authorization from the Melzi heirs. Keep this note and transmit it only to the next notary holding the position."*

This note would remain hidden for three centuries, transmitted from father to son within the Boreau dynasty, becoming the secret link in a chain of involuntary complicity that would protect Francesco's mystification until the end of the nineteenth century, when the extinction of the Boreau family would finally allow the truth to begin to emerge.

Francesco, unaware of the precision with which Boreau had documented his doubts, left Amboise the next morning. The return journey to Milan was less anxious than the outward trip. He had succeeded beyond his hopes. The false testament now had an official existence, an anchor in French notarial archives. Better still, the attestation of deposit bore a backdated date that gave it six years of apparent retroactivity—no one could

prove that the document hadn't been deposited as early as 1519, even if the attestation had been issued in 1525.

The mystification was now complete, protected by the silence of a notary whose troubled conscience would be shared by his entire lineage for centuries.

The Trivulzio affair

It was in October 1525 that the threat materialized in the form of Monsignor Giangiacomo Trivulzio, ambitious prelate and art lover.

Francesco had heard of Trivulzio long before their first meeting. The man was an unavoidable figure in Milanese intellectual life: chaplain to Governor d'Avalos, member of several learned academies, collector renowned for his demanding taste and encyclopedic culture. It was said of him that he possessed a prodigious memory, capable of citing long passages from Pliny the Elder or Saint Augustine without ever getting a word wrong.

What made Trivulzio particularly formidable was his obsession with truth and authenticity. He had built his reputation by unmasking several fakes—a purported Cicero manuscript that proved to be a fourteenth-century counterfeit, an *"antique"* statue that was actually only twenty years old. In Milan's cultivated circles, he was nicknamed *"the bloodhound"* for his ability to sniff out deceptions.

The first time Francesco encountered Trivulzio was at a reception at the ducal palace, in September 1525. The prelate was a man of about forty, tall and thin, with angular features that gave him a perpetually skeptical air. His gray eyes, piercing and mobile, seemed to observe everything, catalog everything, analyze everything.

During this reception, Trivulzio circulated among the guests, stopping before each exhibited artwork to examine it minutely.

Francesco watched him from a distance, hoping to avoid any interaction. But fate decided otherwise.

—Messer Melzi, isn't it? Trivulzio called out, approaching with a glass of wine in hand. The former disciple of the great Leonardo?

Francesco turned with a courteous smile he hoped was natural.

—That's me, monsignor. You know me?

—By reputation only. But what a reputation! It's said that you possess the finest collection of Leonardo works outside the royal collections. That you've become the undisputed expert on the master. That the greatest collectors in Europe consult you.

There was something in Trivulzio's tone, a slight irony perhaps, that put Francesco on his guard.

—Rumors always exaggerate, monsignor. I had the honor of serving the master for many years, it's true. But to claim I'm an expert...

—False modesty, Trivulzio cut in. I've seen some of the pieces you've sold. They're authentic, without any doubt. Cardinal Dovizi showed me his botanical drawings. A marvel. Leonardo's hand is recognizable among thousands.

—I'm happy that monsignor is satisfied with his acquisition.

—Satisfied? He's delighted with it. Although he sometimes wondered about... how to say... about the exact provenance of these drawings.

Francesco's heart began to beat faster, but he maintained his impassive expression.

—The provenance is simple, monsignor. These are pieces the master bequeathed to me in his testament. Everything is perfectly documented.

—Ah yes, the testament. I've heard of this testament. Curiously, no one seems to have seen it. People talk about it, refer to it, but the document itself remains strangely... elusive. Francesco felt sweat bead on his forehead despite the coolness of the autumn evening.

—The testament is kept in France, with the notary who registered it. I possess a certified copy, naturally, but the original remains in the notarial archives of Amboise.

—How convenient, Trivulzio observed in a soft voice. A crucial document, but alas inaccessible for verification, kept in a distant kingdom.

—Monsignor, if you're insinuating something...

—I'm insinuating nothing, Messer Melzi. I'm simply wondering. It's my nature. I'm a curious man. Too curious, I'm sometimes told.

A servant passed with a tray of delicate foods. Trivulzio seized one distractedly, without taking his eyes off Francesco.

—Tell me, messer, the prelate continued, this story of letters of naturalization granted to the master by King Francis... you're certain of it?

—Absolutely certain. It's mentioned in my correspondence with Leonardo's brothers after his death.

—Interesting. Because you see, I have a correspondent in Paris, an erudite colleague who has access to the royal archives. And he recently wrote to me that no letter of naturalization in Leonardo da Vinci's name appears in the chancellery registers. Francesco felt the ground give way beneath his feet. Trivulzio had investigated. He had verified with French sources. This apparently fortuitous conversation was actually a carefully prepared interrogation.

—Archives can be incomplete, Francesco replied, trying to remain calm. Documents get lost, especially in times of war.

There have been so many upheavals in France these recent years...

—No doubt, no doubt, Trivulzio conceded with a nod that reflected no conviction. But still, it's troubling. Letters of naturalization granted by the king, that's an important document. There should be a trace of it.

A group of guests approached, interrupting their conversation. Francesco took advantage of this diversion to slip away, claiming an urgent appointment. But it was only a reprieve. Trivulzio was on his trail.

In the days that followed, Francesco learned that the prelate was asking questions about him throughout Milan. He was interrogating the art dealers who had served as intermediaries for his sales, the collectors who had bought works, the notaries who had established sale contracts.

—He's thorough, Pompeo reported during one of their secret meetings. He notes everything, compiles lists, compares testimonies. It's as if he's building a case for prosecution.

—But on what basis? Francesco flared up. What crime would I have committed? Possessing works by my master, which I legitimately inherited?

—He suspects your inheritance isn't as legitimate as you claim. And frankly, he's not wrong. If he ever gets his hands on concrete proof...

—There's no proof! Francesco cut in. The documents I fabricated are perfect. The testament is indistinguishable from an authentic one. The correspondence is impeccable. He can prove nothing.

—The problem isn't just the physical documents. It's the logic of the story. Trivulzio is an analytical mind. He looks for inconsistencies, details that don't fit. And our story, however well constructed, has its weaknesses.

—Which ones?

—First, the absence of letters of naturalization in the French archives. We invented these letters to explain how Leonardo could make a will, but if they don't exist in the official registers, our explanation collapses. Second, time. Why did you wait six years before having the testament registered in France? It's suspicious. Third, testimonies. The people you claim were witnesses to the testament or received gifts from the master... some don't remember clearly, others give contradictory versions.

—These are minor details. Natural oversights after several years.

—For you and me, they're minor details. For Trivulzio, they're flaws in a fraudulent construction. And he has the intelligence and tenacity to exploit them.

—What do you suggest? That I flee Milan? That I abandon everything I've built?

—No. I suggest we prepare a pertinent defense. That we consolidate the weak points of our story. And above all, that we find a way to neutralize Trivulzio before he becomes truly dangerous.

—Neutralize how?

—Several options. We could discredit him by sowing doubts about his own collection—I've heard he owns a "*Roman*" statuette that might well be a modern fake. We could use your connections with the governor to have his authorization to investigate withdrawn. Or we could simply buy him—every man has his price.

Francesco turned around, shocked by this last suggestion.

—You're talking about corruption?

—I call it negotiation. Trivulzio is a collector. Offer him some remarkable pieces, and he might prove less... zealous in his investigations.

The idea repelled Francesco, but he couldn't deny its logic: every man had his price. The question was whether Trivulzio was the kind of man whose price was negotiable.

A week later, Francesco received a formal message from Trivulzio inviting him to come see him at the bishopric to "*discuss matters of common interest concerning the inheritance of the late Leonardo da Vinci.*" The tone was courteous, but the invitation had all the hallmarks of a summons.

Francesco presented himself on the appointed day and hour, accompanied by Pompeo, whom he introduced as his legal advisor. They were received in Trivulzio's private study, an austere room with walls lined with books, with a large dark wooden crucifix dominating a massive desk.

Trivulzio welcomed them with impassive politeness.

—Messer Melzi, Messer Bonini, thank you for coming. Please sit down.

They took seats in the uncomfortable chairs the prelate indicated. Trivulzio settled behind his desk, joining his hands before him in a pose that evoked that of a judge about to pronounce a verdict.

—I'll get straight to the point, he began. For several weeks, I've been conducting a discreet investigation into the origin of your collection of Leonardo works. This investigation has revealed several... inconsistencies that trouble me deeply.

Francesco felt his throat tighten, but he tried to appear calm.

—Inconsistencies, monsignor? Which ones?

Trivulzio opened a register placed before him and began to enumerate his discoveries with prosecutorial precision:

—First, the famous letters of naturalization. They exist in no official French register. I had it verified by three independent sources. Second, the testament itself. No one has ever seen it, except you. You claim it's kept with a notary in Amboise, but

you can produce no proof of its registration. Third, certain works you claim to have inherited don't appear in the inventory of Leonardo's goods established by the royal agents in May 1519. In particular a Saint John the Baptist and a Leda and the Swan which we know were in the master's studio shortly before his death.

He closed the register and looked Francesco straight in the eyes.

—How do you explain these inconsistencies, Messer Melzi?

Francesco took a long breath. If he appeared too defensive, he would confirm Trivulzio's suspicions. If he was too arrogant, he would incite him to continue his investigation. He had to find the right tone: indignant enough to seem sincerely offended, but cooperative enough not to seem to have something to hide.

—Monsignor, he began in a measured voice, I understand your concern for truth. It's an admirable quality in a man of the Church. But allow me to respond point by point to your... concerns.

He counted on his fingers, imitating Trivulzio's gesture:

—First, concerning the letters of naturalization. It's possible they were never formally registered in the chancellery's great registers. King Francis sometimes granted privileges by letters patent that didn't pass through the usual administrative circuits. The master was close to the king. It's plausible that he received verbal assurances or private documents that don't appear in the official archives.

—Verbal assurances don't constitute legal naturalization, Trivulzio objected.

—No doubt. But in the context of the time, with the personal ties between Leonardo and the king, such assurances could be considered sufficient. Remember that the master was very old and ill. Formalities may not have been his priority.

Trivulzio didn't seem convinced, but he gestured for Francesco to continue.

—Second, concerning the testament. It exists. I possess an attestation from the notary in Amboise confirming that it's kept in his archives under seal. If you wish, I can show you this attestation.

—An attestation isn't the testament itself.

—That's true. But the testament contains private provisions I don't wish to make public. It mentions bequests to people who are no longer in this world, delicate family arrangements. Producing it publicly would create more problems than it would solve.

—Convenient, Trivulzio murmured.

Francesco ignored the interruption and continued:

—Third, concerning the works that don't appear in the royal inventory. You must understand the context. The inventory was done quickly, in the confusion that followed the master's death. Certain works had already left the studio before the death. The Saint John the Baptist, for example, had been entrusted to my care several weeks before the master's death, who wished me to continue working on it. It therefore wasn't in the studio at the time of the inventory.

—You have witnesses to this... anticipated custody? Trivulzio asked skeptically.

—Yes. Master Bonneval, the apothecary who treated the master. Dame Marguerite de Rohan, who frequently visited Clos Lucé. The Abbot of Saint-Florentin, who came to hear the master's confession. All can testify that certain works were already in my possession before the official death.

It was a bold lie, but Francesco knew that these witnesses, even if interrogated, would give ambiguous answers that could be interpreted in the desired sense. The apothecary and the abbot had received "*gifts*" that would make them reluctant

to contradict Francesco. And Dame Marguerite, who had died two years earlier, could no longer testify at all.

Trivulzio took notes, his pen scratching the paper with a dry sound that resonated in the silence of the study.

—These witnesses, he finally said, looking up, you contacted them all recently, didn't you? To "*refresh their memory*"?

The question was a trap. Admitting the contact would amount to acknowledging an attempt to manipulate testimonies. Denying it would be an easily verifiable lie.

Francesco opted for a third way:

—I've had occasion to correspond with some of them, yes. After six years, it's natural to revive memories. But I suggested nothing false to them. I simply asked them to recall what really happened.

—And quite fortuitously, their memories correspond exactly to your version of events.

—Monsignor, said Pompeo, who had remained silent until then, this conversation is taking on the air of an interrogation. Messer Melzi has no obligation to justify himself before you. On what authority do you conduct this investigation?

—On the authority of my conscience, Messer Bonini. When I see inconsistencies that suggest possible fraud, I believe it's my moral duty to investigate. If Messer Melzi has nothing to hide, he shouldn't fear my questions.

—He doesn't fear them. But he wonders about your motivations. Are you driven by a sincere desire for truth? Or are there other reasons, more... personal?

Trivulzio's face froze.

—What do you mean?

—I've heard that you covet certain pieces from the collection. That you've tried several times to acquire them, without

success. Might it not be this frustration that fuels your... investigative zeal?

It was a bold move. Trivulzio had never attempted to buy anything from Francesco. But the accusation, publicly launched, could sow doubt about his motivations.

Trivulzio stood up abruptly, almost knocking over his inkwell.

—How dare you! I'm a man of the Church! I'm not guided by greed!

—Of course not, monsignor, Francesco hastened to say. My friend expressed himself poorly. He wasn't questioning your integrity. But you must understand our position. Your questions, however legitimate they may be, create an atmosphere of suspicion that harms us. Collectors will hesitate to buy works if rumors circulate about their provenance.

Trivulzio sat down slowly, visibly torn by an inner conflict. On one hand, his instinct told him Francesco was lying, that this whole story of legitimate inheritance was a fraudulent construction. On the other, he had no concrete proof, only inconsistencies and suspicions.

—Messer Melzi, he finally said in a calmer voice, I'll be frank with you. I think your inheritance isn't as clear as you claim. I think certain documents have been... embellished. Perhaps even fabricated. But I acknowledge that I have no formal proof of deliberate fraud.

He paused before continuing:

—I'm therefore going to continue my investigation. I'm going to write to my contacts in France to obtain more information. I'm going to question the witnesses you mentioned. And if I find the slightest tangible proof of falsification, I won't hesitate to bring this matter before the competent authorities. Am I clear?

—Perfectly clear, monsignor, Francesco replied, standing up. And allow me to add that I wish you good luck in your research. Because you'll find nothing that could question the legitimacy of my inheritance.

They left the bishopric in tense silence. Once in the street, Pompeo let out a long sigh.

—We have a problem. A big problem.

—I know, Francesco murmured. Trivulzio won't let go. He's like a dog with a bone. He's going to dig, question, verify. And sooner or later, he'll find a flaw.

—Then we must act before he finds that flaw. We must either convince him to stop his investigation, or discredit him enough that no one takes his accusations seriously.

Francesco nodded, but his heart was heavy. The visit marked the beginning of a period of intense anxiety.

After Trivulzio's departure, the two men locked themselves in the palazzo's study.

—He knows something, Francesco concluded in a tense voice. Or at least, he suspects something. This investigation he's threatening to launch could reveal everything.

Pompeo reflected for a long moment before responding:

—Trivulzio is formidable because he's intelligent and obstinate. But he also has weaknesses. We must identify them and exploit them.

—What weaknesses?

—First, his pride. He's a man who believes himself more brilliant than others. If we provide him with an explanation that flatters his perspicacity while leading him onto a false trail, he might follow it. Then, his ambition. Trivulzio is only the governor's chaplain. He dreams of a more important position, perhaps a bishopric. If we could suggest to the governor that

Trivulzio is exceeding his duties by conducting this investigation...

—You're proposing to have him called to order by his superiors?

—Exactly. Governor d'Avalos appreciates you. You're his artistic advisor. If you made him understand that this investigation is causing you unwarranted harm, that Trivulzio is acting out of personal jealousy rather than concern for justice, d'Avalos might intervene.

Francesco meditated on this suggestion. It was risky. If the governor took Trivulzio's side, the situation would worsen. But doing nothing was also dangerous.

—I'll think about the best approach. In the meantime, we must prepare our defense. Are the documents I fabricated convincing enough?

—The testament and the letter to the brothers are excellent, Pompeo assured him. But we need to reinforce the rest. The testimonies mentioned to Trivulzio must be consolidated. The Abbot of Saint-Florentin, Master Bonneval, Dame Marguerite de Rohan... all must receive the promised works and be prepared to testify coherently.

—How can we prepare them without arousing their suspicions? If I explain too much what they should say, they'll understand I'm asking them to lie.

—No need to explain it to them. Send them the works with a letter suggesting they had already received them from the master, but had forgotten them. Faced with an artwork suddenly received, most will be too happy to ask questions.

Francesco followed this advice. He discreetly sent messengers to France with carefully wrapped packages. To the Abbot of Saint-Florentin, he sent three botanical drawings by Leonardo accompanied by a letter:

"Reverend Father, while organizing the archives of my late master, I found these drawings he intended to offer you in recognition of your spiritual support during his final illness. Out of respect for his will, I transmit them to you today, with some years' delay, but with the assurance that they come from his hand and his heart."

The formulation was clever. It suggested the master had expressed the intention to offer these drawings, without specifying whether this donation had taken place during his lifetime or whether Francesco was executing it now. The abbot, receiving these precious works, could testify in all good faith to having received *"in the master's time"* drawings from his hand, without technically lying, but creating the desired impression.

He proceeded the same way with the other witnesses. To each, he sent a few minor works accompanied by equivocal letters. Most responded with gratitude, without embarrassing questions. Only Master Bonneval, the apothecary, expressed perplexity:

"Messer, I thank you for these magnificent studies of medicinal plants. However, my memory may fail me, but I don't recall the late master giving them to me during his lifetime. Might it rather be you who are offering them to me today in his memory?"

This response threatened to ruin the strategy. If Bonneval testified to having received nothing from the master, it would cast doubt on all the other testimonies. Francesco had to react.

He wrote the apothecary a long letter explaining that the master, in his final weeks, had distributed numerous works, but that some beneficiaries, in the confusion of mourning, hadn't kept a precise memory of it. He suggested that Bonneval might have forgotten this donation in his grief.

Then, more importantly, he sent Bonneval a second, confidential letter, in which he explained that a malicious investigation was underway and that certain envious people

were seeking to question the master's legitimate inheritance. He asked the apothecary, if questioned, to confirm having received these drawings *"in the time when the master was still alive."*

This second letter was risky. It transformed Bonneval into a conscious accomplice. But Francesco had no choice. He had to ensure the apothecary's testimony.

Bonneval, a simple and devoted man, agreed to testify in the desired sense. In his response, he wrote:

"Messer, after reflection and consultation of my registers, I remember that the master gave me these studies during his final illness, in recognition of my care. Grief had clouded my memory, but everything comes back to me clearly. If any authority should question me, I would confirm this donation without hesitation."

Francesco sighed with relief. A crucial witness was consolidated. But the incident had shown him the fragility of his construction. One witness who recanted, and everything would collapse.

Trivulzio's investigation

Trivulzio wasted no time. Beginning in November 1525, he began his investigation. He first wrote to his French correspondent, Monseigneur Jean de Bellay, Bishop of Le Mans, who had connections at the court of Francis I.

The letter was cleverly written:

"Most reverend father, I need your enlightenment on a delicate matter concerning the inheritance of an Italian artist deceased in France. Leonardo da Vinci, that Tuscan painter of great renown, died in Amboise in 1519. One of his former disciples, established in Milan, claims to have inherited a substantial part of his works by virtue of a testament made possible by letters of naturalization granted by the king. Could you verify in the royal archives whether such letters exist? And whether a testament was registered?"

This investigation took several months, as communications between Milan and Paris were slow. While waiting for the response, Trivulzio conducted his investigation on Milanese soil.

He first questioned Leonardo's Italian heirs, the master's half-brothers in Tuscany. Ser Giuliano da Vinci, the eldest, was summoned to Milan under pretext of a notarial matter. Trivulzio received him at the bishopric and questioned him.

—Messer Giuliano, did you receive an inheritance from your late brother?

—Yes, monsignor, Giuliano replied, a notary by profession like his father had been. I received some furniture, clothes, and a modest sum of money. My brother Antonio and I shared these goods.

—And artworks? Paintings, drawings, manuscripts?

—A few drawings. Preparatory studies with no great market value. My brother Leonardo wasn't rich, contrary to what some might believe. Most of his important works were already sold or given away during his lifetime.

—These inheritances, how were they transmitted to you?

—Through Messer Francesco Melzi, who had been my brother's closest disciple. He sent us the objects that were ours.

After Giuliano's departure, Trivulzio noted in his register:

"The Italian heirs confirm having received some minor works, but show no suspicion toward Melzi. Their testimony is of limited value, as they weren't present in France at the time of death."

Trivulzio then questioned several Milanese art dealers and collectors who had bought Leonardo works through Francesco. All confirmed he possessed the master's works and occasionally sold them. But none could provide documentation proving their provenance.

Cardinal Bernardo Dovizi da Bibbiena, who had bought the twelve botanical drawings in 1520, was questioned.

—Your Eminence, when you bought these drawings, did you ask Messer Melzi to prove they legally belonged to him?

The cardinal replied with irritation:

—Monsignor Trivulzio, I'm not a cattle merchant who verifies the provenance of each animal. I'm an art lover. When works of quality are offered to me, I examine them to ensure their artistic authenticity. Legal authenticity doesn't interest me. Francesco Melzi was Leonardo's disciple. It's natural that he possesses his master's works. I saw no reason to doubt.

—But if these works had been stolen?

—Stolen from whom? The master is dead. He has no direct heirs. His brothers received their share. Who would Francesco have stolen from? The King of France? But the king already possesses the Mona Lisa and other major works. He's made no claim concerning the pieces Francesco sells.

This argument, which Trivulzio would hear from many other collectors, was devastatingly effective. In the absence of a complainant, who could accuse Francesco of theft? Droit d'aubaine had played in favor of the French crown, but Francis I didn't seem to care. Without an obvious victim, it was difficult to prosecute a crime.

The counteroffensive

While Trivulzio conducted his investigation, Melzi wasn't sitting idle. He decided to take the initiative rather than wait passively.

His first step was to request a private audience with Governor d'Avalos. He was a career military man, rough in his manners. He appreciated Francesco for his artistic knowledge and his ability to find quality works for his collection.

Francesco presented himself at the ducal palace one April morning, carrying under his arm a small painting wrapped in red velvet. He was received in the governor's private study, a sober room furnished with Spanish furniture of austere lines.

—Excellency, Francesco began after greetings, I've come to seek your advice on a delicate matter. Monsignor Trivulzio is conducting an investigation into the inheritance I received from my late master Leonardo da Vinci. He seems to be questioning its legality.

D'Avalos frowned.

—Trivulzio? My chaplain? What authority does he have to conduct such an investigation?

—That's what I'm wondering, Excellency. Is Trivulzio acting on your orders? Or is he arrogating powers that exceed his function?

The governor, who didn't like people acting behind his back without his authorization, replied sharply:

—No one asked my permission. If Trivulzio took this initiative, it's on his own.

—Excellency, Francesco continued, I fear Monsignor Trivulzio is driven by less noble motivations than the pursuit of justice. He covets certain works from my collection. He's made me several purchase offers that I've refused. I fear this investigation is merely a means of pressure to force me to sell at a low price.

It was a lie. Trivulzio had never made a purchase offer. But Francesco was betting the governor wouldn't verify this allegation and would be more inclined to believe his artistic advisor than a simple chaplain.

The bet paid off. D'Avalos, who didn't much like Trivulzio—a pretentious intellectual in his eyes—accepted this interpretation.

—If that's the case, it's unacceptable. I can't tolerate a member of my household abusing his position for personal gain.

—Excellency, I wouldn't want to cause problems for Monsignor Trivulzio. Perhaps we could make him understand that this investigation exceeds his duties and that he should stick to his religious functions?

D'Avalos nodded.

—Leave it to me. Trivulzio will receive a reminder of order. And to prove my confidence in your integrity, I would accept the work you seem to have brought me.

Francesco unwrapped the painting: a small Madonna and Child, a copy in his own hand after a Leonardo original. It wasn't a piece of great value, but it was well crafted and would flatter the governor's ego.

—Excellency, it's an honor to offer it to you. This copy, which I made under the master's own direction, is yours.

D'Avalos examined the painting with satisfaction. He wasn't knowledgeable enough to distinguish a copy from an original, and Francesco didn't disabuse him.

—I'll have it hung in my private chamber. It will remind me of your loyalty and your talent.

Francesco left the ducal palace with a feeling of victory. He had succeeded in turning the governor against Trivulzio. But this was only a battle, not the war. The prelate wouldn't be intimidated.

The final confrontation

A few days later, Francesco received a summons *"to clarify certain points of his investigation."* Trivulzio wasn't giving up.

Francesco and Pompeo presented themselves at the bishopric. They were received in the same study where Francesco had had his first confrontation with the prelate.

Trivulzio welcomed them with polite coldness.

—Messer Melzi, I've continued my investigation into your alleged inheritance. I've questioned the Italian heirs, several collectors, and I've written to France to verify the existence of the letters of naturalization you invoke.

—And what have you discovered, monsignor?

—Interesting things. The Italian heirs confirm having received an inheritance. The collectors confirm you possess Leonardo works, but none can attest to their legal provenance. As for France, I haven't yet received a response.

—Monsignor, on what legal basis do you conduct this investigation? Messer Melzi hasn't been accused of any crime. No one has filed a complaint against him. If you had proof of a crime, you should transmit it to the competent judicial authorities. But you don't have any, do you? You only have suspicions and insinuations.

The tension mounted. Francesco intervened to calm it:

—Monsignor, I understand your concern for justice. But I assure you my inheritance is legitimate. If you wish, I can show you the testament and the correspondence that establish the legality of my rights.

He took from his satchel a duplicate of the documents he had fabricated and the attestation issued by Boreau. He placed them on Trivulzio's desk. The prelate examined them at length, turning them over and over, looking for signs of falsification.

—These documents seem authentic at first glance, he admitted. But apparent authenticity isn't definitive proof. They would need to be examined by handwriting experts.

—I have no objection to that, Francesco replied with aplomb. Have them examined by whomever you wish. You'll find they're authentic.

It was an audacious bluff. Francesco was betting that Trivulzio wouldn't dare have the documents analyzed by real experts, because that would imply publicly revealing his suspicions and risking being proven wrong.

The bet succeeded. Trivulzio, who didn't want to lose face by launching an accusation he couldn't prove, preferred to temporize.

—I'll wait for the response from France before deciding what comes next. In the meantime, Messer Melzi, I advise you not to sell any important works. If my investigation should reveal irregularities, these sales could be canceled and you would be required to reimburse the buyers.

—I take note of your advice, Francesco replied. But I'll continue to manage my inheritance as I see fit, within the limits of the law.

On these words, Francesco and Pompeo left the bishopric. Once in the street, Pompeo let out a sigh of relief.

—You played it close. If Trivulzio had had your documents examined by experts...

—He won't do it, Francesco cut in. He's a man of the Church, not a judge. He has neither the authority nor the means to conduct a true judicial investigation. All he can do is ask questions and hope I betray myself. But I won't betray myself.

The letter from France

In July 1526, Trivulzio received the response he was awaiting from France. Monseigneur de Bellay wrote to him:

"Most reverend father, I've investigated as you requested on this Leonardo da Vinci matter. I've consulted the archives of the Chamber of Accounts and questioned the officers who conducted the inventory of the deceased's goods in 1519. Here's what I was able to establish:

There exists no trace of letters of naturalization granted to Leonardo da Vinci in the official registers. I had it verified twice, and the result is the same: no letters patent in this name were registered between 1515 and 1519.

The inventory of the deceased's goods, drawn up by Master Étienne Deloynes and Messer Guillaume de Montcornet in May 1519, mentions no testament. The works were seized under droit d'aubaine, in accordance with the law applicable to foreigners deceased without naturalization.

Several important works don't appear in the inventory when they should have been there, notably a Saint John the Baptist and a Leda and the Swan that were in the master's studio shortly before his death.

These elements strongly suggest that Messer Melzi removed works from the royal inventory and fabricated a false testament to justify their possession. However, His Majesty King Francis has expressed no intention to pursue this matter. The king already possesses the Mona Lisa and several other major works, and he doesn't wish to engage in costly procedures to recover pieces that are in Italy.

In conclusion, you're right to suspect fraud, but this fraud cannot be proven with certainty without access to the original documents, and even if it were, no one seems to have an interest in pursuing it."

Trivulzio reread this letter several times with mixed feelings. On one hand, his suspicions were confirmed: Francesco had stolen the inheritance. On the other, no authority seemed willing to pursue the matter.

The prelate again summoned Francesco, but this time with a different strategy. He would no longer seek to expose the forger. He would seek to obtain concessions.

—Messer Melzi, Trivulzio began at this meeting, I've received information from France that isn't favorable to you. However, I'm a realistic man. I understand that certain situations are complex. And that sometimes, written law doesn't render justice to moral realities.

Francesco, surprised by this change of tone, remained cautiously silent, waiting to see where the prelate was going.

—Here's what I propose, Trivulzio continued. I won't continue my investigation. I'll publicly recognize the apparent legality of your inheritance. In exchange, you'll donate to the Milan Church a significant work from your collection. Let's say a dozen drawings that would be kept in the archbishop's library, available to doctors and scholars.

Francesco understood the maneuver. Trivulzio couldn't legally expose him, so he was trying to ransom him. It was blackmail disguised as an amicable arrangement.

His first reaction was indignation. But he recovered. Perhaps it was better to satisfy Trivulzio rather than maintain a harmful enemy.

—Monsignor, Francesco replied after reflection, your proposal is interesting. However, the drawings you covet are among the most precious in my collection. Their value is inestimable. If I were to cede them, it would only be with the absolute guarantee that you'll cease all investigation and that you'll publicly defend the legitimacy of my inheritance.

—You have my word, Trivulzio assured him.

—A prelate's word isn't a legal document, Francesco retorted. I want a written agreement, signed and sealed, in which you commit to recognizing my inheritance and never again questioning my rights.

Trivulzio hesitated. Such a document would make him an accomplice. But the lure of the drawings was too strong.

—Agreed. My secretary will draft this agreement.

The document was elaborated in the following days. Francesco, advised by Pompeo, ensured it was legally solid. Trivulzio committed to *"recognizing the legality and legitimacy of the inheritance received by Messer Francesco Melzi from the late Leonardo*

da Vinci" and to "*ceasing all present or future investigation into the origin and provenance of the works constituting said inheritance.*"

In exchange, Francesco would donate to the archbishopric ten drawings from Leonardo's hand, as well as a sum of one hundred gold ducats for the construction of a new chapel in the cathedral.

The agreement was signed in August 1526, in the presence of witnesses. For Francesco, it was a bitter victory. He had to cede precious works, but he had obtained official recognition of his inheritance from one of his principal detractors. This recognition was worth the price paid.

After the signing, Trivulzio said to him with an enigmatic smile:

—Messer Melzi, I still don't know whether your testament is authentic or not. But one thing is certain: you're a remarkably intelligent and determined man. The master chose his heir well.

Francesco didn't know how to interpret these words. Was it a sincere compliment? Or a final sarcastic jab? He preferred not to respond and left the bishopric with his documents.

In the street, Pompeo waited anxiously.

—So? It's done?

—It's done. Trivulzio has his ransom. We have our peace.

—You did the right thing. Ten drawings in exchange for the security of the entire collection, that's an acceptable deal.

Francesco nodded, but he felt deep bitterness. These ten drawings he had just ceded represented years of Leonardo's work. They were irreplaceable pieces. And he had sacrificed them to buy the silence of a greedy prelate.

—At least, Pompeo consoled, they'll be kept in the archbishop's library. They won't be lost. Scholars will be able to study them.

—If the priests don't destroy them as impious works, Francesco replied bitterly. You know what the Church thinks of dissections. They consider it a desecration of bodies.

—Trivulzio isn't stupid. He knows these drawings have scientific value. He'll protect them.

Francesco wanted to believe it. Trivulzio was above all a collector. These drawings would adorn his private study rather than the public library.

He quickly delivered the ten promised drawings. He chose pieces of great quality, but not the most accomplished. The studies on the heart remained in his possession, as did the drawings showing the nervous system or the structure of the eye.

Trivulzio kept his word. He circulated in Milan's cultivated circles that Francesco's inheritance was "*perfectly legitimate and confirmed by appropriate documents.*" This endorsement from a prelate renowned for his intellectual probity considerably strengthened his position.

Collectors who hesitated to buy works of doubtful provenance felt reassured. Sales resumed with vigor. He could even raise his prices, profiting from this recovered legitimacy.

But the psychological price was high. Francesco realized he would always be at the mercy of a new obstinate investigator who would ask the right questions. His security rested on a fragile balance between the plausibility of his documents and the absence of will by the authorities to dig too deeply.

The marriage

In 1527, Francesco made a decision that would transform his life: he married. At his age, it was time to start a family, if only to maintain social appearances. A man of his rank who remained celibate aroused suspicions. It was whispered that

he had deviant morals, that he had maintained too intimate a relationship with his late master.

These rumors, although unfounded—the relationship between Francesco and Leonardo had always been that of master and disciple—harmed his reputation. Marriage was the best way to silence them.

The choice of bride was guided by practical considerations. He sought a woman of good family, but without excessive fortune, who would bring respectability without asking too many questions about his activities. He found her in the person of Angelica Landriani.

Angelica was twenty-four, the youngest daughter of an impoverished Lombard minor nobility family. Her father, a former military man, had squandered most of the family patrimony gambling. Angelica had no substantial dowry, which reduced her chances of making a good marriage. For her, marrying Francesco Melzi, artistic advisor to the governor and owner of a beautiful palazzo, represented an unhopd-for opportunity.

He met her at a reception at the ducal palace. She was a young woman with pleasant if unremarkable features, polite manners, modest but sufficient intelligence. She seemed docile, uncurious, satisfied with her lot. Exactly what he was looking for.

The engagement was celebrated in April 1527, the marriage in June. The ceremony took place at the church of Santa Maria delle Grazie, followed by a banquet at the Melzi palazzo. About fifty guests attended: members of the Milanese nobility, artists, merchants. Governor d'Avalos himself honored the event with his presence.

Pompeo was Francesco's witness. In his speech, he praised the groom's qualities and expressed the hope that this union would be blessed with many children.

The wedding night was an ordeal for Francesco rather than a pleasure. He had to fulfill his conjugal duty, but his heart wasn't in it. Angelica, educated in the strictest tradition, submitted passively, showing neither pleasure nor displeasure. Francesco and Angelica established a proper conjugal routine. They shared the same bed, took their meals together, attended religious services side by side. But no true emotional intimacy bound them. It was a practical arrangement rather than a union of love.

Angelica proved to be an efficient wife. She managed the house competently, supervised the servants, received guests with grace. She never asked embarrassing questions about her husband's activities, never sought to understand the mysteries of his art collection.

Francesco had been clear from the start: the attics of the palazzo, where he kept his most precious treasures, were strictly forbidden to Angelica. It was his private domain where she must never enter. Angelica accepted this rule without protest, as she accepted everything her husband decided.

The children

In 1528, Angelica gave birth to their first child, a boy they named Orazio. Francesco felt an unexpected emotion holding his newborn son. For the first time in years, he experienced something that wasn't contaminated by lies and deception.

Would this innocent child also one day be affected by the family secret? Francesco hoped not. He wanted his children to live in ignorance of the truth, to sincerely believe in the legitimacy of the family inheritance.

But at the same time, someone would have to know the truth. Someone would have to continue the deception after his death. This dilemma would haunt him for decades.

In 1530 was born the second son, Francesco junior, nicknamed Checco to distinguish him from his father. Then in 1532 came Elisabetta, the daughter so hoped for by Angelica.

With three children, the Melzi palazzo truly became a family home. Children's cries echoed in the corridors, toys cluttered the rooms, nurses and governesses followed one another. Francesco, who had lived for years in the studious silence of his collection, had to adapt to this domestic tumult.

He proved to be an attentive, if distant, father. He spent time with his children in the evening, telling them stories, showing them drawings—never Leonardo's works, always his own copies—teaching them the rudiments of painting and geometry.

Orazio, the eldest, showed keen intelligence and insatiable curiosity. Very early for his age, he asked embarrassing questions about the origin of the family fortune, about the mysterious inheritance of the great Leonardo everyone talked about.

—Father, he asked one evening as Francesco was putting him to bed, why do we have all these paintings and papers in the attics? Why can't I see them?

—You'll see them when you're older. For now, you're too young to understand their value and importance.

—But it's the great master's inheritance, isn't it? The master who taught you everything?

—Yes, my son. One day, all this will be yours. And you'll have to protect it as I protect it.

—Protect against whom?

Francesco hesitated. How could you explain to a five-year-old child that the family inheritance rested on theft and forgery?

—Against those who don't understand the value of art. Against those who would want to destroy or disperse what the master created. Do you understand?

Orazio nodded, without understanding. But these conversations left a deep impression in his young mind. He grew up with the awareness that a family secret existed, something important that would be revealed to him later.

Francesco junior, the younger son, was very different from his elder brother. He was a joyful, carefree boy, more interested in games and horses than in art or books. Francesco understood this son would never be the guardian of the inheritance. It was Orazio who would bear the burden.

As for Elisabetta, she grew up like girls of her time, educated to become a good wife and good mother. Francesco was tender with her, but he didn't for an instant consider initiating her into the secrets of the inheritance. In a patriarchal society, family secrets were transmitted from father to son, never to daughters.

Prosperity and consolidation

The 1540s were years of relative prosperity. His marriage had brought him the social respectability he sought. His children were growing up in good health. His collection of Leonardo works, far from diminishing with sales, was appreciating over time.

For Francesco had understood a fundamental principle of the art market: scarcity creates price. The more sparingly he sold, the more the works he kept increased in value. European collectors now competed for the privilege of acquiring even a minor drawing from Leonardo's hand.

He became an accomplished art dealer. He developed a network of clients throughout Europe: cardinals in Rome, princes in France, bankers in Venice, nobles in Naples. Each

sale was carefully orchestrated to maximize profit while minimizing risks.

Pompeo continued to play a crucial role as intermediary and advisor. The two men had become bound by a deep friendship over the years. Pompeo had become the confidant that Salaï could never be: intelligent, discreet, reliable.

Every Friday evening, Pompeo came to supper at the Melzi palazzo. After the meal, while Angelica withdrew with the children, they locked themselves in Francesco's study to discuss business.

—I've received a letter from Cardinal Farnese, Pompeo announced one November evening in 1535. He would like to acquire a series of architectural drawings. He's prepared to pay up to two hundred ducats.

—Farnese? The cardinal who's just been elected pope?

—Himself. He's taken the name Paul III. Imagine the value those drawings would take if they were bought by the pope himself!

Francesco reflected. Selling to the pope represented an extraordinary opportunity. Papal endorsement would render the legitimacy of his collection definitively unassailable. But it was also risky. The Vatican had considerable investigative means. If an investigation should reveal the deception, the consequences would be catastrophic.

—I don't know. The Vatican might ask embarrassing questions about provenance.

—On the contrary. Pope Farnese is a passionate art lover, not an inquisitor. He wants Leonardo works for his personal collection, not to investigate their origin. And then, think of the protection papal patronage would bring you. Who would dare attack a man whose works the pope himself buys?

This argument convinced Francesco. The transaction was organized. He selected fifteen architectural drawings by

Leonardo—plans for fortifications, studies of domes, church projects. They weren't major pieces, but they were well crafted and striking enough to satisfy a papal collector.

The sale took place in January 1536, in Rome. Francesco made the journey accompanied by Pompeo. It was his first visit to the Eternal City since the years he had followed Leonardo between 1513 and 1516.

Rome had changed. The city still bore the scars of the terrible sack of 1527, when imperial troops had pillaged and destroyed for weeks. But already, reconstruction was underway. Everywhere, new palaces were rising, testifying to the city's resilience.

They were received at the Vatican with the respect due to high-level art dealers. Pope Paul III received them in his private library.

He examined the presented drawings at length, holding them to the light, comparing them with other Leonardo works he already owned.

—These drawings are admirable. One immediately recognizes the master's hand. This precision in line, this geometric rigor... Yes, these are authentic Leonardos.

—Your Holiness has an expert's eye, Francesco replied with appropriate deference.

—We knew Leonardo during his lifetime, you know. We were then cardinal, and he was working for our predecessor Leo X. An extraordinary man, though very inconstant. He'd start a hundred projects without ever finishing a single one!

Francesco smiled politely at this anecdote. The pope continued:

—But tell us, Messer Melzi, how did a man as young as you inherit such a collection? You were only... what, twenty-nine at the master's death?

The question, asked with apparent bonhomie, was actually a test. Francesco immediately understood. He had to respond with enough detail to satisfy the pope's curiosity, but without saying too much.

—I had the privilege of serving the master for thirteen years, Your Holiness. From my sixteen years until his death. I was more than a simple disciple. I was his assistant, his secretary, almost his adopted son. The master had no direct heirs. He judged it appropriate to bequeath me most of his works, knowing I would know how to preserve them.

—A testament, then?

—Yes, Your Holiness. Written in legal forms, before a notary, in conformity with French law.

—Ah, France... A kingdom lucky enough to possess the Mona Lisa. We've tried to acquire it for our collections, but King Francis categorically refuses to part with it. He claims it's his favorite portrait!

The conversation veered to other artistic subjects. The pope mentioned his projects for the Vatican, the frescoes he intended to commission, the sculptures he wished to acquire. Francesco responded with sagacity, demonstrating his expertise.

The pope agreed to buy the fifteen drawings for two hundred fifty gold ducats—fifty more than the initially mentioned price. Francesco had succeeded not only in selling to the pope, but also in obtaining a price higher than his expectations.

After leaving the Vatican, Pompeo and Francesco celebrated their success in a Roman tavern.

—The pope took the bait. Now you can say the pope himself validates your collection!

—I didn't quite lie. The testament really exists. The fact that it's false is a technical detail.

They laughed together. Each sale, each successful lie, dug a little deeper the chasm between the man he had become and the one he had dreamed of being in his youth.

1550: The revelation to Orazio

In 1550, Orazio was twenty-two. He had become an accomplished young man: skillful, cultivated, balanced. He had studied classical letters, painting, architecture. He was particularly interested in Leonardo's works, constantly questioning his father about the master's techniques, his discoveries, his genius.

Francesco observed his son with mixed feelings. Orazio would be the ideal successor to manage the inheritance. But for that, he had to reveal the truth to him. And Francesco had dreaded this moment for years.

The trigger came from a proposal by Orazio. One evening, after supper, the young man approached his father in the study.

—Father, I have a proposal. The lands of Trezzo are for sale. It's a magnificent estate, very fertile, that would yield a lot. But to buy it, we'd need to sell part of the collection.

Francesco felt disconcerted. Selling part of the collection would attract attention, awaken suspicions, risk bringing down the edifice of lies.

—These works aren't for sale, he replied sharply.

—But father, we have hundreds of them! Selling fifty drawings wouldn't make any difference. And it would allow us to acquire lands that would enrich the family.

—You don't understand, Orazio. These works are special. They can't be sold like that, without precaution.

—Why? What's so special about them? They're Leonardo drawings, certainly remarkable, but we possess so many! Why this mystery?

Francesco understood the moment had come. He could no longer evade the questions. Orazio was old enough, mature enough to know the truth. And if he was to inherit one day, he had to know on what fragile bases their fortune rested.

—Sit down, my son. We must have a conversation I've postponed too long.

Francesco told everything. He told of Leonardo's death, droit d'aubaine, the desperate decision to remove the works, the night of the theft, the fabrication of the false testament, the years of lying, the Trivulzio affair, the successive sales.

Orazio listened in silence, his face passing from surprise to incredulity, then to horror. He looked at his father as if seeing him for the first time.

—You've been lying for thirty years? he murmured. This whole story of legitimate testament... it was false?

—Yes, Francesco admitted. I lied to protect the inheritance. And to protect us.

—But if the truth comes out, we'll lose everything! Our reputation, our fortune, perhaps even our freedom!

—That's why you must be careful. The massive sales you're contemplating are impossible. They would attract attention, awaken suspicions.

Orazio buried his face in his hands.

—Father, you've placed me in an impossible situation. I must now bear this secret, live in fear, lie in my turn.

—I know, Francesco replied sadly. But it was necessary. Someone had to know. Someone had to continue protecting the inheritance after my death.

—And my children? My grandchildren? Will they all have to bear this burden?

—As long as necessary. Until enough time has passed that no one can trouble us anymore. Perhaps a century. Perhaps two.

—Two centuries of lies, Orazio murmured. What a legacy you leave us.

—The legacy of genius, Francesco countered. Without us, it would have been lost. Isn't that an acceptable price?

Orazio didn't respond. He left the study without a word, leaving Francesco alone with his remorse.

The reconciliation

Relations between Francesco and Orazio remained tense for several months. Orazio avoided his father, barely spoke to him during family meals. Angelica, who sensed the discomfort without knowing its cause, tried to reconcile them.

—What happened between you? she asked Francesco. Why does Orazio treat you with such coldness?

—Disagreements about managing the patrimony, Francesco replied. Nothing serious. It will pass.

But it didn't pass. Orazio seemed incapable of accepting the revelation that had destroyed the idealized image he had of his father.

It was Pompeo, whose health was rapidly declining, who spoke up to reconcile father and son. In February 1552, he summoned Orazio for a private conversation.

—Young man, the aging sculptor said, you judge your father with the severity of youth that has never been confronted with impossible choices. Your father found himself facing a dilemma: let Leonardo's genius be dispersed and lost, or act outside the law to save it. He chose the second option. Was it

morally right? I don't know. But it was humanly understandable.

—He stole, Orazio retorted. He lied. He deceived people of trust.

—He saved treasures that would have been lost. These manuscripts your father removed contain discoveries centuries ahead of medical science. If the French agents had confiscated them, they would have ended up in a cellar, gnawed by rats. Thanks to your father, they're preserved, studied, transmitted.

—At what price? At the price of our family's honor?

—Honor? Pompeo repeated with a sad smile. My boy, honor is a luxury that can be afforded by those who've never been confronted with heart-wrenching choices. Your father didn't have that luxury. He had to choose between his moral conscience and the preservation of genius. He chose genius. Can you blame him?

Orazio remained silent, reflecting.

—And now, Pompeo continued, you're facing the same choice. Either you reveal the truth and destroy your family, or you continue the lie and preserve the inheritance. What are you going to choose?

—I don't know, Orazio admitted. I really don't know.

—Then take time to reflect. But while you reflect, don't punish your father for having done what he thought was right. He carried this weight alone for thirty years. He deserves at least your compassion, if not your approval.

This conversation had a profound impact on Orazio. He began to reconcile with his father. Exchanges became possible again, though still tense.

One evening, Orazio returned to Francesco's study.

—Father, he announced in a weary voice, I've reflected. I'll do as you ask. I'll protect the secret. But on one condition.

—Which one?

—That you give me all the details. All the documents, all the evidence, all the names of accomplices. I must know exactly where the traps are to avoid them.

Francesco nodded with relief. He spent the following months initiating Orazio into the subtleties of the mystification. He showed him the false documents, explained how he had fabricated them, revealed the existence of minor accomplices, taught him the art of selling works without arousing suspicions.

Orazio learned quickly. Once he had accepted his situation, he proved as skillful as his father in dissimulation. The secret was transmitted. The lie would continue.

The sealed document

In 1555, Francesco made a decision that had haunted him for years. He wrote a comprehensive document recounting the entire story, from Leonardo's death to the present. This document would be sealed and kept in the family archives, to be opened only by future generations, when enough time had passed for the truth to be revealed without danger.

Melzi spent weeks drafting this text. He wanted it to be more than a simple account of events. He wanted to explain his motivations, his doubts, his justifications. He wanted posterity to understand why he had acted thus and what he hoped to accomplish.

The document began thus:

"To you who will read these lines in a century or more, I want to tell the true story of Leonardo da Vinci's inheritance, a story that differs profoundly from the one the world knows.

My name is Francesco Melzi. I was Leonardo da Vinci's closest disciple for thirteen years, from 1506 to 1519. I lived at his side, learned from him, loved him as a son loves his father. When he died in Amboise, France, on May 2, 1519, I was confronted with a terrible choice.

French law, through droit d'aubaine, gave the crown all the goods of a foreigner who died without naturalization. Leonardo had never obtained letters of naturalization. His entire inheritance should therefore have reverted to the King of France. The major works—the Mona Lisa, the Saint Anne—were confiscated and now form part of the royal collections.

But during the night that followed his death, my companion Salai and I made the decision to remove certain works from the inventory that was to take place. We hid manuscripts containing scientific research, anatomical studies of unequalled precision, treatises on flight and hydraulics. We also removed the Saint John the Baptist and the Leda and the Swan.

Was it theft? Legally, yes. Morally, I always believed no. These works would have been lost, dispersed, destroyed. Leonardo's genius would have been mutilated, amputated of its scientific dimension which was perhaps even more important than its artistic dimension."

Francesco continued his account over dozens of pages, detailing each stage. He explained how he had fabricated the false testament, how he had created the apocryphal correspondence, how he had managed the Trivulzio affair, how he had sold the works while maintaining the illusion of legitimacy.

The document ended with a philosophical reflection:

"I don't know if I did the right thing. This question haunts me every day. I lied, stole, deceived. I loaded my descendants with a terrible burden. But I also saved treasures that otherwise would have been lost.

What will the one who opens this document in a century or two do with it? Will he make it public, thus revealing the truth and destroying our family's reputation? Or will he keep it secret, perpetuating the lie even longer?

I cannot dictate this decision. Each generation must make its own moral choices. All I can say is that I acted according to my conscience, however imperfect it may be. I tried to serve beauty and genius, even using questionable means.

Let posterity judge me. I accept it."

Francesco signed and dated the document: "*Francesco Melzi, Milan, August 15, 1555.*" He sealed it with red wax marked with his personal seal, then placed it in a metal casket that he locked.

He summoned Orazio and solemnly handed him the casket.

—This document contains the entire truth about our inheritance. It must be opened only when enough time has passed for the revelation to no longer harm the family. Perhaps in a hundred years. Perhaps more.

—How will I know when the time has come? Orazio asked.

—You won't know. It will be for your descendants to decide. Your role is to transmit this casket to your eldest son, with the same instructions. And so from generation to generation, until someone has the courage to open this Pandora's box.

Orazio took the casket reverently, aware of the symbolic weight of what he held in his hands.

—I will transmit it faithfully, he promised.

The decline

The 1560s saw Francesco's physical decline. At seventy, he had become an old man, with white hair, stooped back, hesitant gait. But his mind remained sharp, and he continued to supervise the management of the collection and occasional sales.

Pompeo had died in 1558. His death had deeply affected Francesco, who thus lost his last living link to Leonardo's era. Pompeo had been more than an accomplice or a friend. He

had been the confidant, the advisor, the moral support without whom he probably couldn't have maintained his double life for so many years.

Angelica, too, had died in 1562, carried off by a fever that consumed her in a few days. Francesco mourned her sincerely, although their marriage had never been a union of passionate love. She had been a faithful wife, a devoted mother, a competent mistress of the house. She deserved better than to have married a man gnawed by a secret he couldn't share with her.

Francesco now lived in his memories. He spent long hours in the secret attic studio, contemplating Leonardo's works, rereading the manuscripts, reminiscing about the years spent in the master's service.

The Saint John the Baptist, which he had never sold despite tempting offers, occupied a central place in this private studio. He often looked at it, losing himself in contemplation of that gaze lifted toward heaven, that enigmatic smile, that finger pointed toward the heights.

—What would you have thought of all this, master? he sometimes murmured to the painting. Would you have approved of my lies? Or would you have condemned me?

The painting didn't answer. But Francesco liked to imagine that Leonardo would have understood, that he would have forgiven. The master had always adapted his principles to circumstances. He would have understood that sometimes, to serve a higher good, one must accept transgressing ordinary rules.

Orazio often came to visit his aging father. Their relations had considerably improved over the years. Orazio had finally accepted the burden that had been transmitted to him, and he now managed the collection with the same prudence and skill as his father.

—How do you feel today, father? Orazio asked during one of these visits in autumn 1569.

—Old, my son. Very old. My bones ache, my sight is failing, my hands tremble. But my mind is still clear. I can still enjoy these marvels we saved.

They stood before the Saint John the Baptist, contemplating together the masterpiece Francesco had sworn never to sell.

—Have you never regretted it? Orazio asked. After all that happened, all those lies, all those years of fear?

—I regretted having to lie, having to live in fear, having burdened my family with a terrible secret. But I don't regret having saved these works. Look around you. Isn't that sufficient justification?

—I want to believe it, father. To be able to continue living with this secret.

—You'll manage. You're stronger than you think. And one day, when you transmit the secret to your own son, you'll understand why I did what I did.

Francesco's death

In January 1570, Francesco felt his end approaching. He had been bedridden for several weeks, weakened by a persistent fever the doctors couldn't cure. His days were numbered.

He summoned Orazio to his bedside.

—My son, he said in a weak voice, I don't have much longer. I want to tell you a few last things before I go.

Orazio knelt near the bed, taking his father's emaciated hand in his.

—Don't talk like that, father. You'll recover.

—No, Francesco cut in. I'm my own physician. I recognize the signs. Death is near. And I must give you my final instructions.

He coughed painfully before continuing:

—The sealed casket I entrusted to you fifteen years ago... do you still have it?

—Yes, father. It's safe in my personal archives.

—Good. You'll transmit it to your eldest son when you feel the time has come. And you'll tell him what I'm telling you now: this secret is both a burden and an honor. A burden because it obliges one to lie, to live in fear. An honor because it makes us guardians of an incomparable treasure.

—I'll tell him, Orazio promised.

Francesco closed his eyes, gathering his strength for his final words.

—I devoted my life to preserving Leonardo's legacy. It was my mission, my duty, my reason for being. Now this mission is yours.

—How long, father? How many generations will have to bear this secret?

—I don't know. Perhaps five. Perhaps ten. Perhaps in two hundred years, in three hundred years, someone will have the courage to open the casket and reveal the truth. Or perhaps the secret will be kept forever. I cannot predict.

He opened his eyes one last time, fixing his son with an intensity that contradicted his physical weakness.

—Whatever happens, Orazio, promise me one thing: the works must survive. That's all that matters. Let our reputation be tarnished, let our name be sullied, it doesn't matter. But the master's works must be preserved. That's the essential.

—I promise you, father. The works will survive.

Francesco smiled faintly, appeased by this promise.

—Then I can die in peace. My mission is accomplished. The rest is in the hands of God and posterity.

He closed his eyes and sank into a sleep from which he would wake only briefly, a few hours before his death.

Francesco Melzi died peacefully on January 16, 1570, fifty-one years after Leonardo da Vinci's death. He was seventy-nine years old. To the end, he had kept his secret, revealing it only to his son Orazio and having entrusted his posthumous confession to a sealed document that posterity would one day open.

The funeral was grand. The archbishop himself celebrated the mass at the cathedral. The Spanish governor attended the ceremony. Dozens of personalities from the artistic and political world crowded to pay a final tribute to the one who had been Leonardo's beloved disciple and the faithful guardian of his legacy.

In the funeral orations, they praised Francesco's fidelity to his deceased master, his devotion to preserving the works of genius, his generosity toward Milanese cultural institutions. No one mentioned the gray areas, the unresolved questions about the exact origin of his collection.

Orazio, in mourning attire, listened to these eulogies with mixed feelings. His father hadn't been the faithful heir to a legitimate testament. He had been a bold thief, a talented forger, an accomplished mystifier.

But he had also been a savior. Without his intervention, priceless treasures would have been lost. This duality—criminal and hero, thief and guardian—would henceforth characterize the inheritance Orazio received.

After the funeral, when all the guests had left, Orazio went alone to the secret attic studio. He contemplated the works his father had preserved for more than half a century.

All this had been saved by lies. All this would survive thanks to the perpetuation of lies. Orazio was now the guardian of this double truth: the authenticity of the works and the falseness of their provenance.

He took out the metal casket containing his father's sealed document. He weighed it, tempted for an instant to break the seal and read this posthumous testimony. But he resisted. His father had been clear: this document was intended for future descendants, not for him.

—Farewell, father, he murmured in the deserted studio. Your burden is now mine. May I carry it as well as you did.

He descended the stairs leading from the attics, carefully closing the door behind him. The secret studio fell back into silence and semi-darkness, guarding its treasures and its secrets for the decades, the centuries to come.

The perpetuation

In the years that followed, Orazio managed the inheritance with the same prudence and skill as his father. He occasionally sold minor works to carefully selected collectors. He maintained the fiction of the collection's legitimacy. He transmitted his knowledge of the secret to his own eldest son, Carlo.

The secret passed from descendant to descendant, each adding their own layer of mystification and justification. In the seventeenth century, when the affair seemed lost in the mists of time, Carlo Melzi decided to open the sealed document, in accordance with his grandfather Francesco's instructions.

The revelation caused a shock within the family. Some members proposed making this posthumous confession public. Others opposed it, fearing the legal consequences and family dishonor that would result.

After long deliberations, a compromise was reached: the document would be preserved in the family archives, but its content would not be divulged. This decision perpetuated the lie while preserving the truth for history.

This duality would characterize the Melzi family for centuries. Each generation would have to make the same choice as Francesco: perpetuate the lie to protect the inheritance, or reveal the truth at the risk of losing everything. And for centuries, all would choose to maintain the lie, thus becoming the posthumous accomplices of the audacious theft that had saved genius.

The secret would pass from father to son, crossing the centuries, surviving wars, revolutions, political upheavals. In the eighteenth century, during the Napoleonic wars, it would take on a patriotic dimension: protecting the Italian heritage against French pillaging. In the nineteenth century, during the Risorgimento, it would become a symbol of Italian cultural resistance. In the twentieth century, during two world wars, it would survive bombings and occupations.

Each era would reinvent the meaning of the imposture, adapting it to its own values and concerns. But the secret itself would remain intact, protected by guardians who understood that certain truths must remain hidden for beauty to survive.

Over the centuries, the collection would gradually disperse. Successive sales, bequests to institutions, and strategic donations would result in the works saved by Francesco in 1519 ending up in the world's greatest museums. The British Museum, the Louvre, the Uffizi, the Metropolitan would all possess pieces originating from Melzi's lie, without ever knowing their true origin.

The Saint John the Baptist, which Francesco had sworn never to sell, would remain in the family until the mid-nineteenth century. In 1836, the last direct descendant of the Melzis,

Vittorio, would sell it to the Louvre for a considerable sum. The painting would join the Mona Lisa in the French collections, closing the circle begun nearly four centuries earlier.

The story was far from over. It was only beginning. And for four hundred fifty more years, Francesco Melzi's lie would protect Leonardo da Vinci's genius, until finally, in 2025, the truth would burst into the open.

But even then, the question would remain: had Francesco Melzi been a thief or a savior? A criminal or a hero? The answer, as always, would depend on who asked the question and for what purpose.

For history, like art, is never simple. It's made of gray areas, of impossible choices, of lies that serve truth and truths that destroy beauty. Francesco Melzi had understood that. And it's for this reason that his lie had survived so long.

CHAPTER 4: THE ARCHITECTURE OF THE LIE

Paris, Bertier's Office, October 7, 2024

Pierre Bertier closed the file with a weary gesture. Before him, spread across his desk, the accusatory documents formed an implacable indictment: photocopies of the nine volumes of the catalog of acts of François I, correspondence between nineteenth-century historians, philological analyses of the alleged will, comparative studies of handwriting.

Marchand leaned toward the screen displaying a digitized article from 1893.

—What is this?

—An article by Anatole de Montaiglon. *The Will of Leonardo da Vinci*, published in the proceedings of the Reunion of Fine Arts Societies. The most improbable story in this entire affair.

—More improbable than the rest?

—Judge for yourself.

Bertier settled back in his chair, hands clasped.

—End of the nineteenth century. Leonardo's will is circulating, but only in Italian translation. No one has ever seen the French original that should have been deposited with the notary of Amboise in 1519.

—Did the notarial office still exist?

—Yes, remained in the same family from the fifteenth century until the end of the nineteenth century. The Boreaus were notaries from father to son. An extraordinary continuity which means that if the will had been deposited there, the original minutes should have been there. All the historians of the time tried to access it.

Marchand frowned.

—Without success?

—Always a polite but categorical refusal. Montaignon himself met with failure. Abbé Chevalier, a renowned local memorialist, Charles de Grandmaison, departmental archivist... all were rebuffed. Montaignon recounts it: *"We were as politely as elegantly dismissed with a refusal."*

—Under what pretexts?

—Under the classic evasions: ancient archives not yet classified, imminent move, promises of future research... Montaignon writes: *"We took the hint."* He had understood.

—And the document?

—In 1885 a capital event occurs: the Boreau dynasty dies out. The last representative dies without a male heir. The practice changes hands for the first time. The new notary, a certain Maître Martin, inherits a mess. He has one of his clerks sort through it. The clerk discovers that the oldest archives, those from the sixteenth century, are stored in barrels.

—Barrels?

—A common practice. Montaignon cites Jacques-Auguste de Thou, the great historian, who stored his collections thus. Solid, waterproof, protection against humidity and rodents. In one of them, among bundles of old contracts, the clerk comes across a document that stands out.

He slid his finger across the screen.

—*"Not the original minute, but an old copy on seventeenth-century paper, obviously made because of the curiosity and exceptional importance of the document."*

—A seventeenth-century copy. More than a century after the events?

—A century and a half, to be precise. And in French, not Italian. Which suggests that a French original would have existed. The clerk communicates the document to a certain Scribe, a drawing teacher at the college of Romorantin.

—Romorantin? Why there?

—The master had stayed there in 1516-1517 for a royal residence project that never materialized. Scribe presents the document at the Congress of Fine Arts Societies in 1893.

The curator stood up and began pacing.

—Let me recap. For decades, the Boreaus refuse access to their archives. Then, as soon as the family dies out and the practice changes hands, a copy is discovered? Too convenient. If the Boreaus had the original, why this secrecy?

—Montaiglon answers it in a certain way. He writes: *"We now know that the old sixteenth-century minute books will not be found and that the original document is irrevocably lost."*

—What a euphemism. What does this discovery tell us?

—In the seventeenth century, someone judged it useful to copy this will. A document important enough to merit copying, but which perhaps posed problems. Otherwise, why not keep the original? The original disappeared between the seventeenth century and the end of the nineteenth century. A disappearance... opportune.

—Opportune?

—Because a late copy proves nothing. No serious expertise possible, no paleographic analysis, no examination of ink, paper, seals. Just indirect testimony. This barrel story maintains the illusion that an original existed while making any verification impossible.

—You think it was deliberate? That the Boreaus made the original disappear?

—I can't prove anything. But think about the chronology. For three centuries, they jealously guard their archives. They refuse access to the most qualified historians. Then the family dies out, the practice changes hands, and as if by chance a

copy is found that allows no expertise, but keeps the legend alive.

—Far-fetched, but not impossible.

—It fits into the general pattern. Every time we dig, we find traces, but never definitive proof. The hallmark of a well-constructed hoax.

Marchand sat back down.

—Why would the Boreaus have protected this deception? What interest?

—Several hypotheses. First professional secrecy. A notary doesn't reveal the irregularities of acts passed by his predecessors. That would cast discredit on the profession. Then pressures. Descendants of Melzi who would have bought the silence. It wouldn't be the first time a great family used its influence to make embarrassing documents disappear. Finally, the simplest presumption: they had nothing to hide because there was nothing to find. The original never existed. The seventeenth-century copy is itself a forgery, created to reinforce the legend.

—The sequence of events troubles me. Three centuries of absolute silence, then suddenly, just when interest in Leonardo explodes throughout Europe, when the curious begin asking the right questions, a copy is found.

—You've seen the essential point. The years 1880-1890 mark a turning point in Leonardesque studies. Gustave Uzanne publishes his biography, Charles Ravaisson-Mollien edits the manuscripts of the Institute. Leonardo becomes a major cultural phenomenon. And it's precisely at this moment that the will resurfaces.

—Too good to be true. If you were the Boreaus, and if you held a family secret, what would be the best time to reveal it?

—Imagine they had always known this will was problematic. Perhaps even false. But they couldn't say anything without

compromising the honor of their office. So they kept silent. Then the last Boreau dies. The dynasty dies out. No more need to protect the family secret. How to reveal it without it falling back on the family's reputation? The barrel story becomes brilliant.

—I'm beginning to understand. They don't have to reveal anything. It's the new notary who discovers it. The Boreaus are dead, their dignity is safe. And the seventeenth-century copy allows the ambiguity to be maintained.

—A perfect exit strategy. The secret is revealed, but no one can accuse the Boreaus of lying. They simply kept a document whose true nature they perhaps didn't know.

—Even the discovery was orchestrated?

—Rather facilitated. The last Boreau knew he was going to die without an heir, that the practice would change hands. He perhaps left this document in a place where it would be found. Not too easily, which would have aroused suspicion. But not too difficultly either. A barrel among others that a conscientious clerk would eventually open during an inventory. And inside, a copy old enough to be credible, recent enough to be readable, and above all, late enough that no serious expertise would be possible.

He pulled another document from a drawer.

—Look. An inventory of the practice's archives carried out in 1860, twenty-five years before the death of the last Boreau. Guess what we find in it?

—No mention of the will?

—None. The inventory is detailed. It lists hundreds of sixteenth-century documents. But not the slightest will of Leonardo da Vinci. So either it was hidden somewhere that even the official inventory couldn't find it, or it didn't exist yet in 1860, or it existed, but the Boreau of the time had chosen not to mention it, knowing that its time would come.

—Dizzying. A conspiracy involving dozens of people.

—Not a conspiracy. A transmission. Each generation of Boreaus received the secret from the previous one. *"We have in our archives a problematic document concerning Leonardo da Vinci. Only those entitled from the Melzi family can access it. Pass this instruction on to your successor."* No need for detailed explanations. Just a simple instruction, repeated from father to son.

—And no one ever broke the chain?

—This instruction had nothing extraordinary about it for them. One secret among others.

—If this theory is correct, it means the Boreaus knew the will was false. They were accomplices from the start.

—Not necessarily active accomplices. Perhaps simply conscious guardians. Imagine: around 1525, Francesco Melzi, then in Milan, needs to authenticate his false will. He goes to see the notary of Amboise, Guillaume Boreau, the ancestor of the dynasty.

—And he says *"Hello, I've come to register a false will."*

—No, of course not. He presents the document as authentic. But Guillaume Boreau, who wasn't born yesterday, sees the problems. Unusual formulations, elements that don't fit. For example, the absence of letters of naturalization, information known to the notary. Francesco had five or six years to perfect his story, but certain technical details betray the late fabrication. Francesco Melzi is a Milanese gentleman. He perhaps has money to buy silence. Boreau agrees to turn a blind eye, to keep the *"will"* in his archives, under seal, but without authenticating it. This gives him a kind of insurance. If the affair goes wrong, he can always say he kept a record of this irregularity.

Marchand began walking back and forth.

—Fascinating theory.

—No direct proof. But there are many converging clues. The Boreaus' obstinate refusal to give access to the archives. The absence in the 1860 inventory. The opportune discovery just after the extinction of the family. And especially, the fact that it's a seventeenth-century copy and not the sixteenth-century original.

—Why "*especially*"?

—Because a seventeenth-century copy is the perfect compromise. It proves the document existed. Exactly what you'd do if you wanted to both reveal and hide the truth.

—What captivates me is the intelligence of the construction. At each level we find just enough information to maintain the legend, but never enough to prove it definitively.

—The art of mystification. Never lie completely. Leave traces, but uncertain ones. Create a system that can survive its creators because it doesn't rest on one person, but on an institution.

—The Boreaus as an institution.

—Francesco Melzi had the genius to understand that he needed an institutional guarantor. Not just individual accomplices who would die taking their secret with them. But an institution that would perpetuate itself.

Bertier continued:

—That's why this affair has obsessed me for three years. It's not just a false document. It's an entire architecture of lies, a construction so elaborate that it survived five centuries. Francesco Melzi wasn't just an opportunistic thief. He was a strategist who thought very long term.

—Assuming your theory is correct...

—Even if I'm wrong about the details, the general pattern remains valid. This will poses too many problems to be

authentic. And the way it was preserved and transmitted suggests a deliberate will to maintain uncertainty.

—Imagine you're Francesco Melzi in 1519. You're twenty-nine years old. You've just lost your master. You have no personal fortune. Your family despises you for having wasted your youth following an artist instead of making a career. And suddenly, you find yourself in possession of works that could make you a rich and respected man.

—If you can prove they belong to you legally, Marchand retorted.

—The crux of the problem. Without a will, you're just a thief. With a will, you're a legitimate heir. So you think about creating a false will. But you're intelligent. You know that haste kills. You let things settle. You return to Italy with your treasures. You wait. Five years, six years perhaps. And when you need to legitimize the sale of part of the collection, you produce the will. Not before. That's what Melzi did. The first mention of the will in his correspondence dates from 1525.

—You think he took all that time to fabricate the document?

—To fabricate it and, more importantly, to create a whole network of testimonies that would corroborate it. Melzi was educated. He knew the importance of cross-proofs. A will alone isn't enough. You need people who can say: "*Yes, I saw Leonardo draft this will*" or "*Yes, I heard Leonardo express these last wishes.*"

—But how to find such witnesses?

Bertier returned to his desk and opened another file.

—Look at these letters. It's correspondence from members of the Melzi family between 1520 and 1530. We find allusions to "*faithful friends*" who "*remember*" Leonardo's intentions. Servants of Clos Lucé who would have "*heard*" the master speak of his heirs. A local priest who would have "*attended*" the final moments. All these testimonies miraculously

converge toward the same conclusion: Leonardo wanted to bequeath everything to Francesco.

—Bought witnesses?

—Perhaps not all. Some may have sincerely believed they were telling the truth. Leonardo indeed had great affection for Francesco. He perhaps spoke of him as his spiritual heir. These people may have interpreted affectionate words as legal promises. And Francesco may have encouraged this interpretation. A word here, a confidence there. "*The master often told me...*" "*Leonardo wished that...*" Little by little, the legend is built. And when the will appears, no one is really surprised. Everyone already "*knew*" that Francesco was the heir.

Marchand approached the desk.

—That's psychological manipulation of the highest level.

—Francesco was an aristocrat. He had been educated in the art of diplomacy, subtle persuasion. His father, Giovanni Melzi, was captain of the Milan militia. A family accustomed to court intrigues, power games. Francesco simply applied these skills to his own situation.

—But there's something that bothers me, objected Marchand. If Francesco was so brilliant, why didn't he create false letters of naturalization? That would have made his lie perfect.

Bertier smiled.

—Excellent question. I've thought about it a lot. First hypothesis. Creating false royal letters was infinitely more dangerous than creating a false private will. Royal archives were guarded, monitored. Inserting a document into these archives would have required complicity at the highest level of the French State. Impossible for a young Milanese nobleman without connections at court.

—And the second hypothesis?

—More subtle. Francesco perhaps didn't need letters of naturalization. His plan didn't require Leonardo to be naturalized French. On the contrary, the absence of naturalization played in his favor.

—How so?

—Think about it. If Leonardo had been naturalized, his property would have been subject to French law. His will would have had to be officially registered, verified, validated by French authorities. Impossible to falsify all that. But if Leonardo died a foreigner, then his will falls under Italian law, much more flexible. Francesco could content himself with having it registered with a complaisant notary in Italy, far from the gaze of French authorities.

—But that also means his property fell under the *droit d'aubaine*.

—Exactly! That's the genius of the plan. Francesco never intended to claim the property remaining in France, notably the Mona Lisa. Those were lost anyway. No, he was targeting the works and manuscripts he had taken with him to Italy. Those escaped the *droit d'aubaine* since they were no longer in French territory at the time of Leonardo's death.

Marchand remained silent for a moment, digesting this information.

—So Francesco sacrificed the Mona Lisa and other works remaining in France to save what he had already stolen?

—Precisely. He made a pragmatic calculation. Rather than trying to keep everything and risking losing everything, he abandoned what he couldn't keep anyway. And he concentrated his efforts on legitimizing what he already had in his possession. An intelligent fallback strategy.

Bertier sat back down and crossed his fingers.

—But there's an even more troubling element. I found correspondence between Francesco Melzi and his father

Giovanni. In this letter, Francesco evokes *"the precious inheritances entrusted by the master"* and asks his father for advice on *"the best way to preserve and valorize them."* The tone of the letter is that of a man seeking to legitimize his position, not that of an heir confident in his rights.

—You have this letter?

—A copy. The original is in the State Archives of Milan. Look at this passage.

He handed a photocopy to Marchand.

—*"My father, I bear the weight of a great responsibility. The master's works are now in my keeping, and I must ensure that no one can contest my right to keep them. I have undertaken certain steps to consolidate my position, but I fear that some may seek to dispute this inheritance. Advise me on the conduct to take."*

—*"Certain steps,"* repeated Marchand. That could be the fabrication of the will.

—Or at least the preparations. This letter dates from 1521, two years after Leonardo's death. Francesco is still building his defense apparatus. The will won't appear in official documents until four years later.

—Is there a response from the father?

—Unfortunately no. Or at least, I haven't found it. But the very silence of Giovanni Melzi is eloquent. No other letter from Francesco to his father explicitly mentions this inheritance. As if the subject had been closed after this correspondence. Either Girolamo gave his approval, or he ordered his son to keep silent about this affair.

—The more we dig, the more complex Francesco Melzi's portrait becomes. He's not the faithful and naive disciple of legend. He's a calculating man who carefully plans each step.

—A man of the Renaissance, Bertier replied. Let's not forget the context. Sixteenth-century Italy was a world of intrigues,

plots, betrayals. The Melzis themselves had survived wars between Milan, Venice, and France by skillfully navigating among factions. Francesco had grown up in this environment. For him, creating a false will to protect his inheritance was probably not a crime, but a practical necessity.

—A question of honor, even?

—Perhaps. In his worldview, he was Leonardo's true spiritual heir. The will he created merely formalized a moral reality that already existed. He wasn't stealing from the master, he was fulfilling his true intentions.

—A convenient rationalization.

—All fraudsters rationalize their actions. It's human. But in Francesco's case, there was probably some truth to it. Leonardo loved him. He had entrusted him with his secrets, his techniques, his manuscripts. Francesco could sincerely believe he deserved this inheritance.

Bertier opened another, thicker file.

—I've compiled all contemporary testimonies about the relationship between Leonardo and Francesco. Vasari, of course, who describes Francesco as "*the most beloved disciple*." But also letters from contemporaries, mentions in chronicles of the time. What emerges is a complex portrait.

—In what sense?

—Leonardo seems to have had real affection for Francesco, but also for Salaï, and for other students. He wasn't the type to have only one favorite. He was a man who distributed his affections, his teachings, his secrets to several people. Francesco was important, certainly, but not unique.

—Which makes the idea that he bequeathed everything to Francesco less credible.

—Exactly. If Leonardo had wanted to make a will, he probably would have shared his property among several heirs.

Francesco for the scientific manuscripts, Salai for certain works, perhaps others still for the rest. The idea that he gave the essence of his artistic patrimony to a single person is contrary to what we know of his personality.

—You've built an impressive case. But we're still missing definitive proof. All you have are clues, inconsistencies, absences of documents. Nothing that irrefutably proves the will is false.

—That's the problem with well-constructed frauds. By definition, they're designed to resist examination. Francesco Melzi had a whole lifetime to perfect his lie. He destroyed embarrassing evidence, created favorable evidence, bought silences. Five centuries later, we're trying to reconstruct the truth from fragments.

—So how do you convince the scientific community?

—By accumulation. One clue alone proves nothing. Two clues don't prove much. But ten clues, fifteen clues, twenty clues that all point in the same direction... at some point, the weight of evidence becomes overwhelming.

Bertier stood up and began enumerating on his fingers.

—One: the total absence of letters of naturalization in the French royal archives. Two: the inconsistencies in the text of the will itself. Three: the silence of the notarial archives of Amboise for three centuries. Four: the opportune discovery of a copy just when historians begin asking questions. Five: Montaignon's testimonies expressing doubts privately. Six: the absence of mention of the will in the 1860 inventory of the Boreau archives. Seven: Francesco Melzi's correspondence suggesting he was "*consolidating his position*." Eight: the application of the droit d'aubaine which proves Leonardo wasn't naturalized. Nine: Salai's strange behavior, who mysteriously disappears after Leonardo's death.

Each of these elements taken individually could have an innocent explanation. But all together? They form a body of presumptions that becomes very difficult to refute.

—The problem, objected Marchand, is that you're asking people to believe in a conspiracy that would have lasted five centuries. That's a lot.

—It's not a conspiracy in the sense of an organized plot. It's a series of individual decisions, made at different times, by different people, who all contributed to maintaining the lie. Francesco creates the forgery. The Boreaus agree to protect it. The seventeenth-century copyists reproduce it without questioning its authenticity. The nineteenth-century historians repeat the legend because it's beautiful. No one orchestrates the whole. It's a self-sustaining system.

—Like an urban legend that perpetuates itself.

—Exactly. Urban legends persist not because there's an organized group that propagates them, but because they meet a psychological need. They're too emotionally satisfying for anyone to want to question them.

Marchand sat down and thought for a long time.

—You know what strikes me most in this whole affair? It's not so much the fraud itself as our collective will not to see it. For five centuries, thousands of historians have studied Leonardo, examined his will, and yet almost none dared to say: *"Wait, this doesn't hold up."*

—Because questioning the will means questioning an entire historiography. It's admitting that generations of experts were wrong. It's destroying a fable. People don't like that. They prefer to perpetuate a comfortable error rather than face an uncomfortable truth.

—And yet, you're going to do it.

—I have no choice. Historical truth is more important than intellectual comfort. It's my duty as a historian to say what really happened, even if it disturbs.

Outside, the sound of traffic rose from the street. The afternoon light was declining, casting orange shadows on the piles of documents.

—Pierre, Marchand finally said, I sometimes wonder if you're not building your own legend. In five hundred years, other historians will look at your work and wonder if you weren't a victim of your own biases.

—It's possible, Bertier admitted. History is never definitive. Each generation rewrites the past through the prism of its era. We do our best with the tools and methodology at our disposal. If in five centuries someone finds new evidence that invalidates my theory, so much the better. That will mean historical research continues to progress.

—You're ready to accept that you might be wrong?

—Of course. A historian who isn't ready to revise his conclusions in the face of new evidence isn't a historian, he's an ideologue. But in the current state of our knowledge, with the documents at our disposal, I'm convinced that Leonardo's will is a forgery created by Francesco Melzi.

Marchand stood up and approached the window.

—Let's now talk about the other part of the equation. The appropriation of the Mona Lisa by François I. You told me last year that the *droit d'aubaine* was highly questionable legally and that the acquisition of the Mona Lisa could today be challenged, as indeed could the entire part of Leonardo's works acquired by François I. What exactly is the situation?

Bertier launched into a long explanation.

—Under the Roman Empire, in 212, Emperor Caracalla allows foreigners to transmit their property for a tax of 10%. That was rather fair. But after the fall of Rome in 476,

everything regresses. In the feudal era, between the ninth and thirteenth centuries, the *droit d'aubaine* is introduced which remains a simple modest taxation.

—What changes then?

—Everything shifts with monarchical centralization! In 1475, Louis XI promulgates an ordinance that radically transforms the system. From now on, the foreigner dying without letters of naturalization sees his property confiscated entirely by the king. This principle becomes a "*general law of the kingdom*."

—So it's at this moment that François I appropriates the Mona Lisa?

—Exactly. At Leonardo da Vinci's death, the king uses this *droit d'aubaine* to seize the painting to the detriment of the legitimate heirs. But here's the problem: this appropriation violates natural law.

—Natural law? What do you mean by that?

—It's the set of rights inherent to every human being: the right to property, to life, to liberty. These rights are universal and inalienable. François I was required to respect this natural law, but he violated it. Later, the Constituents of 1789 qualified property as a "*sacred and imprescriptible right*."

—Was the *droit d'aubaine* finally abolished?

—Yes, progressively. The Revolution abolished it in 1791. Barrère de Vieuzac denounces this "*atrocious maxim*" according to which the foreigner "*lives free, but dies a serf*." Unfortunately, the Civil Code of 1803 partially reintroduces it with conditions of reciprocity. It's only in 1819 that it's definitively suppressed.

—And from a constitutional point of view?

—It's manifest! The *droit d'aubaine* violates Article 17 of the Declaration of 1789 which protects property as an "*inviolable and sacred right*." It also contravenes the principle of equality in Article 1. The Constitutional Council confirmed it in 2011. A

priority question of constitutionality could even target the ordinance of 1475, despite its antiquity.

Marchand interrupted him.

—Wait. You speak of constitutionality, but the French Constitution is recent. How can it apply retroactively to events from the sixteenth century?

—Excellent objection. The answer is subtle. Constitutional principles, those relating to fundamental rights, are considered to have universal and timeless scope. They don't create these rights, they recognize them. The right to property existed before 1789, even before 1475. These are natural rights, inherent to the human condition. Louis XI's ordinance didn't cancel them, it violated them. And this violation remains contestable today.

—So the appropriation of the Mona Lisa would be legally contestable?

—More than contestable: non-existent! The Council of State has established that an act affected by a serious and flagrant illegality must be considered non-existent. According to the adage "*Fraus omnia corrumpit*," an act obtained by fraud creates no rights. The non-existent act never legally existed.

—What would be the consequences?

—A non-existent act produces no legal effect and can be annulled at any time. It creates no acquired rights. The incorporation of the Mona Lisa into the public domain would therefore be non-existent. Even the rules of imprescriptibility and inalienability of public collections would be unenforceable.

—You mean the Mona Lisa should be returned to Leonardo da Vinci's heirs?

—Exactly! The appropriation under cover of a droit d'aubaine contrary to fundamental principles constitutes a substantial attack on property rights. This continuing illegality has been

perpetuated for five centuries. The French Heritage Code even provides for removal in case of "*undue inscription on the inventory.*"

—That's a bold thesis that questions centuries of possession by France!

—Bold, certainly, but legally founded. The question remains: can the law correct such an ancient historical injustice?

Marchand remained lost in thought. What Bertier had just explained to him left him pensive. If the reasoning was legally valid, it opened immense perspectives. Not only was Leonardo's will probably false, but the appropriation of his works by France was potentially illegal.

—Pierre, he said slowly, do you realize what you're suggesting? If your legal argument is accepted, it wouldn't concern only the Mona Lisa. All of Leonardo's works currently in France could be claimed.

—I'm perfectly aware of it. That's precisely why this affair is explosive. We're not simply talking about an academic quarrel over the authenticity of a document. We're talking about the legitimacy of France's possession of some of the greatest masterpieces in art history.

—The Louvre will never let these works go.

—Probably not. But the question isn't what the Louvre will accept or refuse. The question is what is just, what is legal. It's not about protecting the interests of an institution, however prestigious. It's about establishing the truth.

Bertier stood up and began pacing back and forth, hands behind his back.

—Understand me, Antoine. I'm not an iconoclast who wants to destroy the Louvre or deprive France of its heritage. But I deeply believe that cultural institutions have a moral responsibility. They can't continue to keep works whose

provenance is doubtful, whose acquisition was made by illegal means, simply because it suits them.

—But prescription... objected Marchand. After five centuries, surely the principles of prescription apply?

—That's where the legal analysis becomes fascinating. Prescription presupposes a valid legal act at the origin. A non-existent act cannot be prescribed because it never legally existed. It's as if I gave you a counterfeit banknote. Even after fifty years, this note would remain false. Time doesn't transform an illegal act into a legal act when the illegality is substantial and touches on fundamental principles.

—You make a distinction between ordinary illegality and substantial illegality?

—Yes. A procedural error, a minor defect in form, can be covered by prescription. But a violation of fundamental rights, an attack on constitutional principles, can never be legitimized by the simple passage of time. Otherwise, we'd create a system where the most serious violations would be rewarded by their antiquity.

Marchand slowly nodded.

—I'm beginning to understand your reasoning. But concretely, who could bring this claim before the courts? Leonardo has no direct descendants.

—Two Italian researchers recently discovered at least fourteen living descendants of Leonardo da Vinci, from his half-brothers. These collateral descendants would legally have standing to act.

—You think they'll do it?

—I don't know. Some probably don't even know they descend from Leonardo. Others may not want to engage in such a complex and costly legal battle against the French State and the Louvre. But legally, they would have the right to do so.

—And if someone did it, which court would be competent?

—That's a complex question of private international law. In principle, the competent court would be French, since the works are currently in France. But there would be arguments for an Italian or even international jurisdiction. Not to mention the diplomatic implications between France and Italy. But honestly, I don't think we'll see a trial anytime soon. The implications would be too vast. If it were admitted that the *droit d'aubaine* was contrary to fundamental principles, it would open the door to thousands of claims concerning other works, other properties, acquired in the same way over the centuries.

—So all this remains theoretical?

—For now, yes. But what matters is having established the principle. To show that this appropriation wasn't legitimate. To make people understand that the Louvre possesses the Mona Lisa and Leonardo da Vinci's other works by a historical accident founded on an unjust law.

—So what do you do now? You continue to demolish this legend?

—No, I present an alternative version, supported by solid evidence. People are free to believe what they want.

—This mystification completely changes our perception of Francesco Melzi. We saw him as a faithful disciple, perhaps opportunistic, who would have taken advantage of his master's death to appropriate some works. But if all this was planned, if he had set up such a sophisticated system, involving notaries, foreseeing the transmission of the secret, then he was a first-rate brain.

—It almost makes him a more interesting character than Leonardo himself.

—Let's not push it too far. Leonardo remains Leonardo. But yes, Francesco was certainly more than a simple disciple. An

intelligent, educated man, capable of complex manipulation. He had studied law. He knew how to create documentation that would have the appearance of authenticity. And he almost succeeded in fooling everyone.

—Almost. But not completely. Because the system had a flaw.

—Which one?

—The total absence of traces in the French royal archives. Francesco could control what happened in Italy. He could ensure that the notaries of Amboise would keep the secret. But he couldn't create false entries in the registers of the King of France. He couldn't fabricate letters of naturalization that had never existed. That's what betrayed him. If the letters of naturalization existed, if they had been found in the royal archives, our whole theory would collapse. But they don't exist. And that's an irrefutable fact. Francesco created a very elaborate deception, but he couldn't rewrite official history.

—So your investigation ultimately rests on an absence. The absence of documents that should have existed if the official story were true.

—The paradox of my research. I prove something by what doesn't exist. It's intellectually frustrating, but it's the only possible method when dealing with such an imposture.

Bertier opened a last file he hadn't yet shown.

—There's another element I haven't yet mentioned. I found a letter from a certain Carlo Zangrillo, an art lover who had bought manuscripts from Leonardo from Francesco, then from his son Orazio. This letter, dated 1585, is addressed to a Spanish collector. Zangrillo mentions in it that some of the manuscripts he acquired bore annotations by Francesco Melzi that seemed to *"want to justify his possession"* of these documents.

—Justifying annotations? In what sense?

—Zangrillo doesn't give details, but he finds it strange. He writes: *"Why would a legitimate heir need to constantly justify his*

possession? It's as if he wanted to convince someone, or perhaps convince himself." It's a perceptive remark made by someone who handled these documents firsthand.

—Do these annotations still exist?

—Some, yes. I've examined several manuscripts from the Codex Atlanticus in Milan. We indeed find marginal notes by Francesco, added after Leonardo's death, that say things like *"inherited from the master"* or *"received according to his last wishes."* These are repeated, insistent statements, as if Francesco wanted to engrave in stone the legitimacy of his possession.

—The behavior of someone with a guilty conscience?

—Or of someone who anticipates future challenges and wants to prepare his defense. Francesco was methodical. He left nothing to chance. Each annotated manuscript becomes an additional piece in his legitimization file.

Marchand approached to examine the photocopies of the annotations.

—Have you had the handwriting of these annotations analyzed? To confirm they're indeed by Francesco?

—Yes, by two independent experts. Both confirm it's indeed Francesco Melzi's handwriting. The ink and paper are consistent with the period 1520-1530. These annotations were added in the years following Leonardo's death.

—So Francesco was already building his legitimacy narrative.

—Exactly. It's not the action of a confident heir. It's the action of someone who knows his position is fragile and who wants to strengthen it by all means.

Bertier closed the file.

—What would I like to know? What was exactly in this seventeenth-century copy. Was it identical to the known Italian version? Were there variants, additional details?

—Good question. Unfortunately, Montaignon doesn't give these details in his article. He simply says it was a copy.

—Frustrating.

—Everything in this affair is frustrating. Every time we think we're holding a definitive piece, it escapes us. It's like chasing a shadow.

—But this barrel story taught me something important. That the mystification, if there is one, was designed to last. The designers knew they had to leave traces, but not too many. Let documents circulate, but not the originals. Create testimonies, but unverifiable ones. Build a protection system, but one that wouldn't seem suspicious. A delicate balance, remarkably well maintained.

Marchand crossed his arms.

—You almost make me admire this imposture, if it is one.

—Oh, but I do admire it! It's a masterpiece in its genre. A construction of extraordinary subtlety. Francesco Melzi, if he really is the author of all this, was a genius in his own way. He understood that a lie must have gaps, gray areas, minor contradictions. Because that's exactly what we find in reality. Too perfect documentation arouses suspicion.

—If you're right, if all this is a fraudulent construction, then it's one of the greatest scams in art history.

—Not "*one of the greatest.*" The greatest. Because it succeeded in fooling everyone. Historians, experts... Even the Louvre accepted without questioning the provenance of certain works.

—And now you're going to destroy this construction.

—I'm going to reveal the truth, Bertier retorted. That's different. And honestly, I'm not sure it's a good thing.

—How so?

—Because this lie allowed works to be saved. If Melzi hadn't stolen these paintings and manuscripts, what would have become of them? Would they have survived? Would they have been preserved with such care?

—You're justifying theft?

—I observe that the results are ambiguous. The deception served the cause of art. It's morally disturbing, but historically undeniable.

—It's almost sad. That such a construction ends up being dismantled. All that so a professor can find the truth in the archives.

—Don't be too sad for the hoaxers. They had a good run. Five centuries is not nothing. And the truth always ends up emerging. That's the law of History.

—Always?

—Always. Sooner or later, a document resurfaces, a testimony is discovered, an inconsistency becomes too glaring. The lie can last a long time, but not forever.

Marchand turned off the screen.

—So what do we do now, Bertier asked?

—Now? We're going to dinner. I've thought enough for today. They both stood up. Marchand put on his jacket while Bertier carefully filed the documents in their respective folders.

—One last question, said Marchand heading toward the door. If the will is a forgery, what does it change concretely? Will the Louvre have to return works? Would there be legal consequences?

—No, no immediate legal consequences without a court decision. And besides, to whom to return them? The French State stolen in 1519? Leonardo's direct descendants? He had none. There remain the collateral heirs, from his brothers. There are still a few of them today.

—So, why reveal all this?

—Because history must be told as it happened, not as we'd like it to have happened. Because Francesco Melzi, whether thief or hero, deserves his story to be known. Because Leonardo deserves better than a romantic legend built on lies. They left the office and took the elevator. The elevator arrived. The doors opened with a metallic groan. Before entering, Marchand turned to Bertier.

—You know what I think? I think you're right. The will was a forgery. Francesco Melzi was a crook. The Boreaus protected his secret for three centuries. And now, thanks to you, the world will finally know the truth.

—Perhaps. If someone wants to listen to me when I reveal this story.

—You'll be heard. A story like that, you can't not listen to it. When they came out into the lobby, Marchand stopped abruptly.

—I just thought of something. This seventeenth-century copy found in the barrel. Where is it now?

—Montaiglon doesn't specify in his article. He mentions it was presented at the 1893 Congress, but after?

—Exactly. A black hole. We know it was found in 1885, presented in 1893, and then... nothing more. It disappeared again.

—You think we could find it?

—We'd have to search. The departmental archives of Indre-et-Loire, perhaps. Or the Society of Fine Arts. Or the descendants of this Mr. Scribe who presented it.

—I'll inquire tomorrow. If this copy still exists somewhere, it would be a major piece for our case.

—Major and dangerous. If it exists and we can have it examined, it could either confirm my suspicions or reduce them to nothing.

—Are you afraid of what we might discover?

—No, not afraid. I've built a solid theory based on the absence of evidence. If material evidence emerges, it could change everything. Either they'll confirm this copy is itself a late forgery, which would strengthen my theory. Or they'll reveal that a French original really existed, and then I'll have to revise my entire argument.

—I find it hard to believe no one thought to look for this copy before you.

—Perhaps someone did. Perhaps it was found and lost again. Or perhaps someone deliberately made it disappear because it revealed too much.

—Another layer to the mystery.

—Which makes this affair so captivating. Each answer opens ten new questions.

They walked in silence for a few minutes, along the Seine whose waters reflected the lights of the bridges. The tour boats passed, loaded with tourists, their spotlights sweeping the historical facades. On the Pont des Arts, a few musicians were playing jazz. The city lived, indifferent to the mysteries of the past that two men were trying to solve.

Marchand finally broke the silence:

—A question has been troubling me since last night. How are you going to reveal what you've discovered? A traditional academic book? A scientific article? And especially, for what audience?

—That's the question I've been asking myself for weeks. I have two options. The traditional route: publish my discoveries in a scientific journal, with all the footnotes, all the

references, all the methodological rigor required. That will reach perhaps two hundred people in the world. Specialists who will discuss my arguments in other specialized articles. In ten years, perhaps, my theory will begin to be accepted by the academic community.

—And the other option?

—Write a book for the general public. A narrative investigation in the form of a novel where I'll recount my research as a story, with suspense, progressive revelations, characters who come to life. A book that would tell not only what I discovered, but how I discovered it. The research process itself becomes the plot.

—You want to novelize your research?

—Rather make it accessible. The facts remain facts. The documents I cite are real. The archives I mention exist. But the way of presenting them can be either off-putting or captivating. I can say "*The analysis of the Catalog of acts of François I reveals the absence of letters of naturalization*" or I can recount how I spent three days poring over nine dusty volumes, my growing frustration, then the illumination when I understood what this absence meant.

—The problem is credibility. If you only publish a book for the general public, you'll be accused of sensationalism. Academics will say you're seeking to make noise rather than do science. If you only publish an academic article, no one will hear about it outside the small circle of specialists.

—That's why I think we need to do both. I first publish a rigorous academic article. That establishes my credibility. It shows I'm not an amateur throwing accusations around. And then, I publish a narrative book that takes up the same facts, but presents them in an accessible way. The book refers to the article for readers who want to delve deeper. The article legitimizes the book, and the book popularizes the article.

—You're betting on both tables without compromising either.

—That's exactly it. I think it's the only viable strategy. The article appears in, say, the "*Leibniz Institut für Sozial Wissenschaften*," which has an editorial board. About twenty pages, thirty footnotes, all the academic artillery. I also publish it on a legal website, for example "*Village de la Justice*," regularly consulted by lawyers, magistrates, legal historians. I avoid too conventional publications, like "*Dalloz*," the "*Annales*" or the "*Revue d'Histoire Moderne et Contemporaine*." But I opt for wide distribution on "*Academia.edu*," an American network site that allows researchers to connect with each other, follow their respective work and exchange knowledge. And six months later, the book comes out. About two hundred and fifty pages, with the same factual rigor, but presented in narrative form.

—What publisher are you considering?

—Not a traditional publisher. Their approach is essentially commercial. They want bestsellers, books that appeal to the greatest number. Our subject is too specialized for them. And then, the delays are interminable. Between acceptance of the manuscript and publication, it can take two years. Their objective is purely financial and that doesn't interest me. In the 1930s, Gallimard had refused Louis-Ferdinand Céline's manuscript, "*Journey to the End of the Night*," which was finally accepted at Denoël, a very small publishing house. Céline, once famous, ended up being taken back by Gallimard.

—Who are you thinking of?

—No one in particular. I refuse to play the usual game. There are hundreds of pseudo-publishers who offer limited print runs at the author's expense. The unsold items, numerous, end up pulped. The large structures, they receive hundreds of works each month that are systematically refused. It's become a real business. Only what has significant sales potential is retained. The rest goes to waste, without even having been

read. No, I'm rather thinking of digital self-publishing. Online platforms, like Amazon, Kobo, Apple Books, Google Play Books.

—What would be the advantage?

—The advantage would be decisive. International visibility at lower cost, distribution in digital book form, with print-on-demand. No stock to manage, no publisher to convince, no rights to negotiate. I control the entire process, from manuscript to sale. And especially, the book can be available in a few weeks, not in two years.

—Seen from this angle, it's indeed an attractive solution.

Arriving at a small Italian restaurant, they sat at a table near the window. The waiter brought them the menu and bread. For a few minutes, they studied the dishes in silence.

After ordering, Bertier resumed the conversation.

—I'm beginning to see the structure of the book. I open with Leonardo's death. I recount the atmosphere of Clos Lucé, the presence of Francesco and Salaï, the tensions. Then I move to the inventory, minute by minute, with the suspense: will Francesco be discovered? Then, I follow the trail through the centuries: how the will was maintained, how the Boreaus protected it, how the nineteenth-century historians almost discovered the truth. And I finish with my own investigation, my progressive discovery of the truth in the archives.

—That sounds like a historical thriller, but everything is true.

—Yes, roughly. Readers will know they're not reading fiction. Each scene I describe really happened, or at least, probably happened according to the documents at my disposal.

—But how do you handle the areas of uncertainty? The moments when we don't know exactly what happened?

—I say so clearly. I maintain intellectual honesty while building the narrative. Readers will never be deceived about what is established fact and what is reasonable conjecture.

The waiter brought their dishes. A veal Milanese for Bertier, carbonara pasta for Marchand. While they ate, the elaboration of the editorial strategy continued.

—For the academic article, what will be the main axis? asked Marchand. The absence of letters of naturalization? The philological analysis of the will? The *droit d'aubaine*?

—All three, but structured cumulatively. I start with the analysis of the will itself: the inconsistencies, anachronisms, formulation problems. Then, I present the absence of letters of naturalization in the royal archives, with a detailed explanation of my research methodology. Then I explain the *droit d'aubaine* and its legal consequences. And I conclude with the story of the Boreaus and the barrel, which shows how the deception was maintained through the centuries. Each element reinforces the others. Taken individually, each argument could be contested. But together, they form a body of presumptions that becomes difficult to refute.

—You're aware you're going to make enemies? There are historians who have spent their lives defending the authenticity of the will. Museum curators whose reputation rests on the expertise they've given. Collectors who own works supposedly inherited by Melzi.

—I know. And I'm preparing for it. If I'm right, and I believe I'm right, then we must have the courage to say so, whatever the consequences. I can't remain silent simply because my discovery disturbs.

—And if you're wrong? If new documents emerge that prove Leonardo had indeed received letters of naturalization, that the will is authentic?

—Then I'm wrong. And I'll admit it publicly. I'll revise my conclusions. But at least, I'll have asked the right questions. I'll have forced the scientific community to reexamine a document accepted for centuries without real criticism. Even if my theory is refuted, I'll have advanced research. That's how science works. By hypotheses, by tests, by possible refutations. The only intellectually honest position. History only progresses when we dare to question established certainties. If everyone were content to repeat what has already been said, we'd never move forward.

The end of the meal was devoted to practical details. How to organize footnotes in the article? Should photographic reproductions of documents be included? How to ensure translations from Latin and ancient Italian are correct? Who could proofread the manuscript before submission?

They left the restaurant around ten p.m. The Parisian night was mild, the streets still lively.

—Get home safely, said Bertier. And think about what we said tonight. Tomorrow, I'll start writing and I'll submit my first drafts to you for proofreading and correction, if you're willing. First the academic article. The book will come after.

—I accept with great pleasure. But are you sure you want to embark on this adventure? Once you've published, there'll be no turning back. You'll be labeled as the one who questioned the authenticity of Leonardo's will. Some will see you as a revisionist.

—I'm certain. Francesco Melzi kept his secret for five centuries. It's time someone revealed it.

They parted at the street corner. Marchand headed toward the metro while Bertier walked toward his apartment. In his head, sentences were already organizing, arguments structuring. He saw the article taking shape, then the book that would follow.

Once home, impossible to sleep. The intellectual excitement was too strong. He sat at his desk, computer on, and began typing. Article title: *"The controversial appropriation of the Mona Lisa by King François I and its consequences regarding the potential claim of ownership of the painting by Leonardo da Vinci's descendants."*

Beginning of text: *"When Leonardo da Vinci finished the portrait of Mona Lisa, he was certainly far from imagining that at his death King François I would seize it using the droit d'aubaine and that his disciple Francesco Melzi would get his hands on his other canvases, after having probably forged a false letter and an apocryphal will from scratch. He was even farther from suspecting that his portrait would become the most expensive and famous in the world, protected under bulletproof glass in a museum visited each year by millions of people coming from the four corners of the planet..."*

Two hours of uninterrupted writing during which Bertier had established the main lines of his argument. Stopping around one in the morning, he was exhausted but satisfied. Five dense pages constituted the skeleton of the article. Before turning off the computer, he created a new document provisionally titled: *"Novel."* In this empty document, a simple note: *"Chapter 1—The Master of Clos Lucé. Chapter 2—The King's Agents. Chapter 3—The Years of Mystification. Chapter 4—The Architecture of the Lie."*

He contemplated these lines for a few seconds, then turned everything off and went to bed. For the first time in months, he slept deeply, without tormented dreams.

The next morning, Saturday, Bertier welcomed Antoine Marchand around 9:30. The curator carried under his arm a thick cardboard folder.

—I spent the night thinking about our conversation. I started compiling documents for the academic article. Here they are. Bertier opened the folder and began browsing the documents.

—Excellent work. I read that you even found the correspondence between Montaiglon and Grandmaison that I'd been looking for for weeks.

—It was in the national archives, in the learned societies collection. I stopped by at opening this morning.

—You went to the archives at 8 a.m. on a Saturday?

—I couldn't sleep. Might as well be productive. Look what I unearthed.

Marchand pulled out a photocopy of a handwritten letter dated April 12, 1889.

—It's a letter from Grandmaison to a fellow historian, a certain Léon Palustre. Listen to this passage: *"The Boreaus persist in their inexplicable refusal to give us access to their sixteenth-century archives. I have the unpleasant impression that they're hiding something, but what? Are they afraid we'll discover an irregularity in their predecessors' acts? Or are they protecting someone influential? Montaiglon shares my suspicions, but we have no means of forcing their hand. Professional notarial secrecy is an impregnable fortress."*

Bertier looked up.

—This is wonderful. Grandmaison had suspicions as early as 1889. Four years before the public presentation of the copy. This confirms that doubts were circulating in scholarly circles well before the barrel discovery. This letter must absolutely be integrated into the article. It shows the mystification was cracking at the end of the nineteenth century.

The morning was spent organizing documents, structuring the argument. Writing, checking references, proposing reformulations. Continuation until evening, methodical construction of the argument. He had produced 8 additional dense pages constituting the heart of the article.

—This is good work. Another week at this pace and the article will be finished. And the book? When will you start?

—As soon as the article is sent to the journal and distributed on internet platforms. I want to first secure the academic approach before launching into the narrative adventure.

The following Tuesday afternoon, they presented themselves at the National Institute of Art History. Madame Durand, a woman in her sixties with half-moon glasses, welcomed them in the archives consultation room.

—Gentlemen, I've pulled out everything we have on Anatole de Montaiglon. There's enough to keep you busy all day.

On the large consultation table were stacked about ten gray archive boxes.

—We're specifically looking for anything concerning Leonardo da Vinci's will. Notes, drafts, personal impressions, doubts he might have expressed privately about the authenticity of this document.

—I'll leave you to work. If you need anything, I'm in the office next door. You can photograph the documents, but no flash, of course.

For three hours, they pored over the archives. Montaiglon's correspondence was voluminous: hundreds of letters exchanged with other historians, museum curators, collectors, archivists.

It was Marchand who made the great discovery, around four o'clock.

—Pierre! Look at this!

He held a handwritten letter dated June 15, 1893, just a few weeks after the presentation of the copy of the will at the Congress.

—It's a letter to his friend Paul Mantz, art critic and respected historian. Listen: *"My dear Paul, concerning this copy of Leonardo's will presented by Scribe at the last congress, I have serious reservations that I couldn't express publicly without creating an unpleasant incident."*

The paper does seem to be from the seventeenth century, I concede that. But the ink seems suspicious to me. Too black, too regular, too well preserved for a document supposedly stored in a barrel for two centuries. The seventeenth-century documents I've consulted generally have browned ink, slightly discolored. And then, what extraordinary convenience that this document resurfaces exactly when we all began questioning the absence of an original! The sequence is too perfect not to arouse suspicion. I fear we're dealing with a late fabrication, perhaps from the early nineteenth century, intended to fill the documentary void and answer the embarrassing questions we were asking. But without thorough chemical analysis of the ink and paper, impossible to be certain. And who would dare request such an analysis? Who would dare publicly question a document presented with such solemnity by a respected professor before an assembly of scholars? That would be to expose oneself to opprobrium and accusations of iconoclasm."

Bertier delicately took the letter, reread it three times.

—Montaiglon himself had profound doubts! And he didn't dare express them publicly! Antoine, do you realize what this means? One of the greatest art historians of the nineteenth century, the very one who reported on the discovery, privately thought it was a forgery!

Bertier and Marchand continued their search. They discovered three other letters where Montaiglon expressed his reservations, always strictly privately, always concluding that it was better not to create public controversy.

They left the institute in the late afternoon, carrying many photocopies.

—We have our proof that even the most qualified contemporaries had serious doubts, Bertier triumphed.

Back at the office, he immediately integrated these new discoveries into the article. He worked late into the night. Around midnight, he stopped.

—Antoine, I think we have our article. Sixteen pages of main text, twenty-two footnotes. It's solid.

In the following two weeks, he gradually received responses from the three proofreaders. Their comments were generally positive, with some suggestions for improvement. Armed with this feedback, Bertier substantially enriched his section on the droit d'aubaine and nuanced his interpretation of the Boreaus' silence. At the beginning of January 2025, the article was ready. Bertier submitted it to the "*Leibniz Institut für Sozial Wissenschaften*." Simultaneously, he programmed distribution on "*Academia.edu*" and "*Village de la Justice*."

—Now we have to wait. The editorial board will take at least three months.

—And the novel?

—We start now.

The following months, Bertier immersed himself in writing the novel. At the end of April 2025, the novel was nearing completion. About two hundred and fifty pages. One evening in early May, Marchand suggested:

—We now need a striking title.

After several proposals, Marchand suddenly raised his head.

—I have an idea. What would you say to: "*The Will Was a Forgery*"?

Bertier let the title resonate in his mind.

—Yes. It's perfect. Direct, provocative, intriguing.

June was devoted to meticulous proofreading. At the end of August 2025, the long-awaited email arrived: the article was accepted for publication. On November 12, 2025, the novel manuscript was submitted to self-publishing platforms. On November 16, 2025, "*The Will Was a Forgery*" was officially published online. The following weeks saw the novel spread. Translations into English, German, Italian, and Spanish

appeared. The reviews were mixed, but generally favorable. Bertier accepted these criticisms with philosophy. One evening in December, he confided to Marchand:

—You can't please everyone. The important thing is that the message gets through. People now know that Leonardo's will poses serious problems.

EPILOGUE

Paris, Louvre Museum, December 20, 2025

Pierre Bertier stood alone before the Mona Lisa, in the States Room crowded with tourists from around the world. A spectacular burglary had taken place at the Louvre a few weeks earlier. The theft had occurred in the Apollo Gallery on the first floor of the Denon wing. Nine jewels and Crown Jewels of France had been stolen. The criminals had dropped the crown of Empress Eugénie which had been found damaged. The events had unfolded just a few meters from the Mona Lisa.

One month had passed since the publication of his novel, four months since the distribution of his article. The Lady was still there, behind her bulletproof glass, imperturbable, enigmatic. What did it matter, after all, who had stolen, inherited, sold, or bought her? She survived. That was the essential thing.

Marchand joined him a few minutes later.

—Are you all right? You seem lost in thought.

—I was reflecting. On all the ground covered over three years. On the discoveries, doubts, certainties that build.

—Any regrets?

—None. I did what I had to do. Reveal the truth, or at least my version of the truth.

Around them, tourists pressed by the hundreds, took selfies, marveled. No one knew. No one cared to know how this painting had arrived there.

They left the States Room, crossed the galleries. In the corridor, they passed a high school class.

—And here is the Mona Lisa, the teacher explained, the most famous painting in the world. Leonardo da Vinci painted it in Florence between 1503 and 1506, then took it to France where he died in 1519. The painting was bequeathed to King François I and has been part of French collections ever since. They exchanged a knowing glance. The official history continued to be told, imperturbable. How long would it take before it changed?

—You know what strikes me? murmured Marchand. Your book may become, in a few centuries, what Francesco's false will became for us. One version among others.

—You're right. History is constantly rewritten. I've written my version. Others will come who will write theirs.

They crossed the pyramid. Paris stretched around them.

—Pierre, one last question. After all this work... do you still think Francesco Melzi was wrong to steal these works?

—Francesco was a man of his time. He acted according to the moral codes of the sixteenth century. We judge him with our twenty-first century values. Who's right? Both. Neither. It depends on the point of view.

He took a few steps before continuing.

—What's certain is that without Francesco's audacity, we might not have these extraordinary scientific manuscripts. Was the *droit d'aubaine* just? No. Was the theft justified? Probably not. But the result is there. Masterpieces preserved, studied, admired by millions of people.

—That's what you should have written in the novel's conclusion.

—No. What I wrote is better. I exposed the facts. But I left the moral judgment to the reader. Criminal or hero? Thief or savior? Each reader forms his own opinion. That's the true strength of a historical novel. It asks questions rather than providing answers.

—And now? What will be your next investigation?

—I don't know yet. But I'm sure that somewhere, in a dusty archive, another truth awaits discovery. Another mystification awaits dismantling. Another story awaits telling.

—And you'll be there to report it.

—We'll be there. You and I. Because that's how history works. Each generation takes up the torch. Each researcher continues the work begun by those who preceded him.

They remained silent for a few moments.

—I have to go, said Marchand. But thank you, Pierre. For everything. For involving me in this adventure. For showing me that great historical discoveries can still be made in the twenty-first century.

They shook hands, then parted. In a few hours, the museum would close. The tourists would leave. The guards would make their rounds. And the Mona Lisa would remain there, in the darkness, smiling at no one, keeping her secrets. Francesco Melzi had created an imposture that had lasted five centuries. Pierre Bertier had just revealed it. But deep down, did this secret really matter? Was the painting's beauty diminished? Was the emotion it aroused any less authentic? Of course not.

The rest was just sound and fury. Every human story eventually dissolves in time. But works endure. Beauty survives. The enigmatic smile crosses centuries. Outside, Paris hummed with its millions of lives. Other historians would

examine our era. Discover other secrets. Write other versions. And that was perfectly fine. It meant the quest for truth had no end, that each generation had its contribution to make, that historians' work would never be finished.

Bertier smiled to himself, then quickened his pace. He had a dinner appointment with his wife whom he had neglected too much during these three years of obsession. It was time to return to normal life. At least for a while. Until the next mystery called him.
