

RIVEN
(an excerpt)**by Armand Constantine**Part 1:
The Saint

Chapter 1

There was a time long ago when Gregorio di Prieri had loved Rome. The eternal city had been his childhood home. But that had been before he watched a man murder his mother for her faith. It was before he learned the hypocrisy and evil of men who claimed to know God. And it was long before he first walked the miraculous streets of the dreamed city he had come to call his new home. Now -- in the year of our Lord sixteen hundred and two, more than two years since he first set foot in the dreamed city -- di Prieri knew better than to love Rome. Now when he returned to the Profanes, this world of his birth, he counted the minutes to his next departure. On occasion di Prieri enjoyed sharing a carafe of pomegranate wine with a grossly fat sculptor and resident of the dreamed city, Corpor syf'Seelix, who tended toward pontification. Corpor had once proclaimed through the green haze of an absinthe intoxication that the Profanes are the waif of creation, unwashed and lost and dangerous in their ignorance. Di Prieri could not agree more.

Gloom and the smell of mildew pervaded the confines of the little woodshed when di Prieri emerged from the hidden sewer entrance in the floor. He lowered the heavy paving stone back over the trapdoor, donned the musty smelling cloak hanging on the peg where he left it, and listened at the shed door. The shed stood in a shadowy alcove of the alley behind his house, well shielded from the pedestrians, horses and carts of the busy Via del Pellegrino. Even so, whenever it was daylight -- and the

gloomy light that shone through the chinks of the shed indicated it was -- he took great care. He heard only hoof beats and cartwheels in the distance and rain pattering on the shed's roof. No footsteps splashed through the muddy alley outside. He cautiously cracked the door and confirmed he was alone.

Wrapping the coarse cloak more tightly around him, he emerged from the shed and set off at a fast clip. His three-story palazzo stood on the corner where the Via del Pellegrino met the alleyway, a mere thirty paces away. If there was anything of the Profanes that di Prieri missed while he was away, it was this house. Its stones crumbled at the corners, its bubbled windows let through only scant, yellow-tinted daylight, and its furnishings looked fit for the scrap wagons that clattered through the streets on Mondays. It was roomy, however, and allowed for a sprawling studio in which to paint... and in which to conduct his more secretive pursuits.

He let himself in through the back entrance and paused in the kitchen. He smelled wood smoke, the soft scent of tea and spices in the larder, and even the faint tang of the pigments and solutions in his studio on the third floor.

"Lucretia," he called out as he hung a kettle over the fire. He heard no answer.

He found the drawing room empty and trotted up the stairs to the studio. The familiar pungent smells of paints and thinners thickened as he entered. What caught his attention, however, were the faint smells of violence beneath: the acrid stink of urine and the musk of blood. Beyond the three easels and countless canvases leaning against the walls, the hidden door to the safe room stood open.

"Lucretia," he called again.

He started toward the safe room but Giovanni appeared in the doorway, carrying a bundle wrapped in bed linens. The youth's face registered surprise and then an ill-hidden displeasure when he saw his master. His eyes were red, as if he had been weeping. And there was something else in his expression that di Prieri did not like: guilt.

"I didn't expect you back so soon, master," Giovanni said.

"She had another of her fits?" di Prieri asked.

Giovanni nodded, his expression miserable and guilty at once.

"Tell me."

"It was as it always is," Giovanni said. "I found her in bed with her eyes wide open, but it was as if she slept and couldn't hear a word I said. I put her in the safe room on the bed and then..." He trailed off for a few moments, his eyes unfocused.

"Yes?" di Prieri prompted.

"I fetched a child," he said softly. "An urchin from the street." As he spoke he gently placed the bundle on a worktable among the pots of pigment.

"And then?" di Prieri asked. "She grew violent?"

Giovani nodded. "She was very violent this time. Very violent." He toyed with a small palette knife. "She woke after the child was dead, but I hadn't had time to take away the body yet. She wept for so long when she saw him. She was calling out to God." He looked up at di Prieri, his expression becoming fearful. "She hated herself. It was terrible to see, I couldn't help telling her." The boy averted his gaze guiltily.

Di Prieri went cold. He struggled to maintain the appearance of an easy mood. He was afraid he already knew what the boy would say, but he asked anyway. He had to be sure. "Telling her what?"

The boy would not look at him. Di Prieri walked around the table and laid a comforting hand on his shoulder. "She woke without memory of what happened?" di Prieri asked.

Giovani nodded. Of course. Lucretia never remembered anything when she emerged from her fits. She was a mystic, a true savant, gifted with the power to heal. But she was also cursed with strange trances during which she would first become unresponsive and then violent. Only once before had she wakened to find a dead child at her feet. She had gone wild with grief. He had told her she had gone mad in her trance state and killed the child on the street, forcing him to rush her and child's body back to the house so that the Swiss Guard would not discover her crime and arrest her. For a time he was afraid she would kill herself. After that he had been careful to remove the bodies quickly before she had a chance to wake.

"Let's be true with one another, Giovanni," di Prieri said. "What exactly did you tell her?"

Giovani said something so softly di Prieri could not hear him. He gently lifted the youth's chin and met his eyes. "I told her it was you," Giovanni said. Defiance seeped into his expression. "I told her you lock her into the safe room when she has her fits and that you put children in with her so that she'll kill them without knowing it. I told her that you use the bodies for something foul and terrible, some dark magic I don't understand."

"I see," di Prieri said calmly.

"And do you know something?" He took di Prieri's hand off his shoulder. "I told

her she deserves more than you. That she should find a man to love who would not hurt her so."

"A man like you, perhaps?" di Prieri asked.

Giovani flushed but he remained defiant. "Why not like me?" he demanded. "Do you think I love her less than you? She deserves a better man than you. A king, even." His voice trembled but he squared his shoulders defiantly as he spoke. "I'm no king, but I would be truthful with her. And loyal."

Di Prieri paused thoughtfully for a moment. "Do you know why these children must die at her hands?" he asked. The boy did not, of course, but di Prieri waited for him to shake his head in answer. "Have a look."

Di Prieri pulled aside the bedding of the bundle on the table. The boy was perhaps seven years old, his peaceful features twisted by the battering he received at Lucretia's unwitting hands. Di Prieri bared the boy's abdomen and plucked up an old knife from the table. With a swift cut he opened the place beneath the boy's navel. Giovani gasped and took an involuntary step back.

"Feel," di Prieri commanded, taking Giovani's hand and forcing it onto the open wound. For a moment nothing happened. Then Giovani's eyes went wide, and he jerked his hand away.

"It moved," Giovani breathed.

"Lucretia is a true savant," di Prieri said. "Because this child died at her hands, the body will never become corrupted. The child has become a savant, of a kind, in death." Di Prieri breathed deeply and coaxed to life the center of power in his own abdomen, feeling the queer sensation of movement in that place beneath his navel. He felt the Furor surge up his body and out through his arms where it sprouted in tiny black filaments from his palms like miniature vines, growing and intertwining. With the tendrils, he drew a sigil in the air before his palms, a simple perfect circle that flared into a brilliant white light. The boy's abdomen quivered, and from it a moment later snaked the small organ. Six inches long, a coil of flesh like a pig's tail and alive with glints of light that sparkled through the blood and tissue like stars in the night sky, the quontilliax emerged from the cut. Di Prieri bared his own abdomen and the boy's quontilliax snaked forth, slipping into his flesh and vanishing like a worm slinking into its muddy bed. The pain flared bright but dissipated quickly, leaving di Prieri thrumming with only the delicious electricity of newfound strength, a jolt like sudden arousal that quickened him.

Giovani stared, mouthing something silently, his eyes wide with shock.

"The godeating," di Prieri explained. "You say Lucretia deserves a king. Then she's gotten one better. In me she will have a god, boy." Di Prieri advanced on him. "Now where has she gone?" Giovani backed away and did not answer. "No matter. I can guess easily enough. Now come here."

Giovani scrambled away. He dashed around the worktable, keeping out of reach and trying to make for the door. Di Prieri cut him off easily. In desperation the youth made for the safe room. Its door had been reinforced with heavy timbers to hold Lucretia securely during her violent fits. The heavy door slammed shut behind him. Irritated, di Prieri peered through the Judas hole. Giovani shoved the heavy bed against the door and wedged it against the far wall of the little room. Di Prieri tested his weight against the door. It would not budge. Giovani stared fearfully.

It was no matter. Di Prieri coaxed to life the Furor again, but this time the sigil he painted cut back and forth with sharp angles and ended with a flourish. For a moment nothing happened. A slight buzzing sound grew audible, then louder. Insects spilled from chinks in the bed timbers, the exposed wall joists, the ceiling beams, every surface of wood through which termites, ants, spiders and lice could emerge. Giovani shrieked. In vain he clambered onto the chamber pot, but they were too many, swarming up over the porcelain bowl, dropping on him from the ceiling. They congregated at his eyes and mouth and nose, and many more slipped into his breeches, plumping them as they gathered at his anus and genitals. They invaded his body quickly. Many were borne out again by the flood of blood from his orifices, but more remained inside him, burrowing. His fell to the floor quickly, struggled a little with crooked arms and flailing legs, then fell still. Almost as quickly, the insects dissipated, leaving his misshapen body oddly shrunken.

"You shouldn't have said anything," di Prieri told him. Everything was happening too fast. He had come back today intending to see Lucretia, to see if there was another child available for the godeating, and then return to his dreamed city alone. But now everything had changed. Eventually he would have taken Lucretia with him. His plans demanded it. He needed the strength of her gift or he would never succeed in the great work he planned. But now that Giovani had surely sowed in her mind doubts about his intentions, he could not afford to leave Lucretia alone while he made his journeys. What if she believed Giovani? What if she went elsewhere to seek love and comfort in the

face of her affliction? No, di Prieri needed her at his side. It simply meant that he must put his plans into motion more quickly than he had anticipated.

He took a last look about at his studio. The big altarpiece commissioned by Monsignor Luchesi two years ago stood unfinished on three easels. Other pieces leaned against the walls, some complete and others in varying stages of progress. The paints, the palettes, the blank canvases promising discovery and wonders to be evoked by his hand... he would miss it, to be sure. Here was his art, the way he had learned to speak to the hearts of men and children.

But no matter, he thought. Soon enough he would have a new language with which to whisper wonders into the hearts of men. And next to that language his paints would be like the unsure scrawls of a child's hand.

He strode from the studio without a backward glance.

He found Lucretia where he knew her guilt would lead her, the quiet little convent and orphanage in the Trastevere district. She visited many orphanages in the city to surreptitiously heal their ailing children, but this one was special. A year ago, when she'd discovered the first child dead by her hand, she had come here. It was her first place of penance.

The children lay in long rows on pallets, sweating and coughing beneath coarse blankets of gray wool. The organic stink of unwashed bodies, sickness and shit saturated the moist air, and di Prieri covered his nose and mouth with distaste. Lucretia knelt beside the pallet of a boy of five or six in the far corner. She was weeping.

An old nun knelt among the beds praying and crossing herself. Her wrinkled face looked ashen, and her hands shook as she held on for dear life to some relic in her hands. He thought he might have seen her before, perhaps another time he'd had to rescue Lucretia from her own well-meaning deeds. When he drew nearer, he saw the thing in the nun's hand was a fistful of hair. He frowned.

"Ignore," the nun said when she saw him. She struggled to her feet against the creaking of aged joints. "Do you know the lady?"

Di Prieri nodded and tried to press past her, but the old woman clung to his arm.

"She is touched by God," she breathed feverishly. "She heals with the hands of Christ Himself. I saw it only moments ago. I saw it."

Di Prieri cursed silently, cursed Lucretia's kindness and her carelessness. He had told her a thousand times to keep her gift secret. These things drew attentions that

would only complicate matters. "You must be mistaken," di Prieri told the nun.

"No, I saw it with my own eyes," the nun said. "And she is unwell, signore. Look what she did to herself?" She held up the clumps of hair. There was blood on the nun's hands.

Di Prieri broke into a run. "Lucretia!" he called.

She was weeping, her face a crumbled ruin, and God above, she had cut off all her hair. Her scalp shone a dull white in the lamplight with patches of brown stubble and streaks of dried blood where she had cut too close.

"Gregorio," she wept. She held up her arms to him in supplication. For an instant he hated her, hated her for her foolish self-indulgence. She could barely hold herself up, she was so weak. But he could not bear to see her so pained. He went down on his knees and took her in his arms. At his touch, something in her broke, and her body sagged against his, heaving with sobs that would no longer be contained. The boy on the pallet slept with an easy peace. If he had been ill, Lucretia had chased the sickness from him. Lord knew how many she had healed already.

He gently stroked her. "My beautiful girl, what did you do to your hair?"

"I wanted to do worse," she said.

At first he did not know what she meant. Then he saw the barber's razor lying on the floor stones beside her.

"Did you hurt yourself?" he demanded. Immediately he regretted the harsh tone, but she only shook her head.

"What are you doing?" he asked her, softly this time. "We talked about how dangerous this is. The nun saw you, you know."

She pulled away and looked at him with eyes so wounded it was almost too much to bear. "It happened again," she said. "I swore it never would. I swore I would die before I hurt another child, and then I woke from another fit today, and there he was..." She broke off, unable to continue.

"I know," he said, holding her. "I know. Giovanni told me. It's all right."

"It's not all right," she said and detached herself from his embrace. "How can you say that? How is the death of a child by my hand all right?"

"You didn't mean it," di Prieri said. "It was an accident. No one can fault you for that, not man or God."

She searched his eyes, measuring him. "No, I didn't mean it. But Giovanni said

you did."

He smiled at her gently. "I know what Giovanni told you. He told me everything and begged me for forgiveness." She looked confused but beneath the surface he could see that she wanted to believe him.

"He said you put those children in the room with me when I have my fits because you want me to kill them," she whispered. It pained her even to speak those words, he saw. "He said you use the bodies of those children for something dark and terrible."

"He's a boy in love," di Prieri said. "He thought to steal you away from me with these fictions."

The wet coughing of a young girl a few beds away drew a concerned look from Lucretia. The girl could be no more than nine or ten. Her coughing racked her tiny body and bloody spittle and mucus bubbled from her mouth. Lucretia moved out of di Prieri's grip and made for the little girl. He gritted his teeth and followed her, taking her by the arm more forcefully this time.

"Lucretia, we must go."

The nun had hurried to the girl's side, lifting her back off the bed in a vain attempt to comfort her. "Please," she breathed at Lucretia. "Please help her."

Lucretia tried to pull away from di Prieri but he held her fast. "Please, Gregorio, just one more," she begged. "I have the strength for one more."

"You barely have the strength to stand," he whispered harshly. He lowered her voice so the nun would not hear. "Listen to me. The sister has seen your gift at work. She'll tell others. She won't mean harm by it, but you know what people will say about dark magic and the devil's touch. You're in danger now, we both are."

"No," she said. "They'll see my gift is good."

"They'll see dead children and black magic," he said. "Come away with me. I want to show you the country of dreams I've found. It's a place of marvels where you can know God and know why you are as you are."

She said nothing, but he could see he had caught her hopes.

"If you help me, we can find the answers together," he said. "There's a great work I mean to do that will capture the hearts of multitudes. You are stronger in the gifts you've been given than anyone I've seen. I need you. Only someone with your strength can help. But it must be now." He would drag her out bodily if need be, and if the nun interfered, he could make short work of her too. He did not relish the idea, but he would

do what he had to. He set his jaw and waited.

"Please, signora," the sister said again.

"Signorina," Lucretia corrected. "Lucretia of Siena, sister."

The little girl's eyes had gone wide with fright, and her breaths hitched in her lungs, wet and choked.

"Please," she said softly to di Prieri, still looking at the girl. "She'll die."

"If you love me, you'll come with me now," he said.

A small wooden horse painted pink by a child's unsteady hand lay on the little girl's bedclothes. Lucretia gently placed it back in her grasping hand. But when she straightened, she let him draw her toward the way out. The little girl's coughing followed them.

"Signorina Lucretia," the nun called after her. "Please, signorina!"

Lucretia hurried her steps, but she was weeping so hard she stumbled. Di Prieri caught her arm and guided her. As they reached the iron-bound door, the coughing and choking sounds ceased abruptly. Di Prieri steered Lucretia through the door before she could glance back and see the old nun covering the little girl with a sheet.

The lowering sky and rain hung on Rome like a sopping gray mantle. Horse and rider, beggar and whore, all shuffled with heads low, sodden and chilled. A pair of priests in black walked past a beggar woman squatting in the mouth of a muddy alley with her squalling infant; neither glanced at her. Di Prieri amused himself by imagining how unmoved they would remain as swarms of mites and beetles chewed their way into every orifice. He judged them, every one, with the grim satisfaction that when next he set foot in these Profanes, it would be as shepherd rather than sheep.

Lucretia walked in silence beside him, withdrawn, exhausted, troubled. Di Prieri kept a quick pace, but he was forced to slow for her often.

When they reached the alley that ran alongside his palazzo, Lucretia turned by habit towards the little kitchen door.

"This way," he said, guiding her past the house.

"What about my things?" she asked.

"Our journey will be much briefer than you might think."

With a careful study of the alley to make sure they were unobserved, di Prieri led them into the wood shed and shot the bolt. She uttered not a word of complaint when he lifted the stone and ushered her into the stinking sewer. They crouched low in the dark

tunnel and followed the flow of water toward the Via del Pellegrino. In the gap left by a missing brick, di Prieri fumbled for the familiar handhold and yanked at the hidden mechanism. The catch gave grudgingly, and a section of wall pulled away, revealing a dark causeway that led into the basement below his palazzo. He had long ago sealed the entrance from inside the house, fearing discovery by thieves or worse. Now he led Lucretia into the dirt floored cellar. He lit the candle he kept at the entrance with flint and tinder. The room was rectangular, lined with brick and with a low arched ceiling. In the center of the room stood a puddle of milky water shot with filaments of silver light, the very reason he had paid the outrageous fortune for the crumbling house years ago.

"The Vestibule," he said. "Step onto the water."

She looked at him, puzzled, but either she was too weak to argue or simply beyond caring. When the air about her shimmered and split like the fibrous rent in a stretched canvas, he caught a whiff of warm air perfumed with pollen and sweet grass. She cried out in pain then disappeared into the nebulous glow of bright daylight. For a moment he stood alone and smiled, knowing this was the beginning of a new time, a new age. And then he followed after her, bracing himself for the familiar pain. One moment he felt the cool clamminess of the dim cellar, and in the next, the excruciating pain that filled every nerve fiber to brimming dissipated and left him standing in the warm sunshine.

She stood absolutely still at the base of the limestone cliff, her expression slack and her fingers wiggling in that girlish way of hers when she felt awed or surprised. They stood on a rise beneath the high cliffs, and in every direction stood the proud peaks of snow-capped mountains, jagged range after range as far as they could see. Below, however, stretched an enormous valley of green meadows and copses of white-barked trees whose leaves shivered and flashed with the warm breeze. And amid this valley there lay a city so vast its outermost reaches crept against the mountain sentinels around it. Towers and domes and temples encrusted the land, and between them labyrinthine streets zigged and zagged. In the distance, jutting up from the center of the city stood a solitary mountain.

"It's beautiful," Lucretia breathed finally.

Di Prieri smiled. "And more," he said. "Wait and see."

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Many years ago when Lucretia had made the journey from her childhood home

of Siena to Rome, she had felt dwarfed and awed by the enormity of the place. The size of it, the vast numbers of people from the world over, the grandeur of the Vatican and its proud walls and basilica, all had bespoken a world like none she had known. Now, as they descended into this wondrous city, she felt again that she had seen nothing of significance before this moment. Here was a city beside which Rome appeared a dusty village.

They walked through a winding labyrinth of narrow streets flanked by palaces that climbed impossibly high, touching the brilliant sky with vertiginous ambition. No, not palaces, she realized, but churches and temples and mosques and obelisks and on and on, some structures of simple stone and others gilded and carved in intricate patterns and still others encrusted with mosaics of dazzling blues and greens, reds and golds. The sun shone on her with the warmth of springtime.

While the buildings around her inspired awe, she only had to look around at the people who shared the street with her, and she wanted to laugh and clap her hands like a child. The streets teemed with children at play. Men and women garbed in brilliant colors swarmed around hawker's carts selling spiced meats and pastries, copper wares and jars of pungent spices, knives and postcards of erotica of every imaginable type. The air stank of sweat and honey, peppers and feces. Dogs slunk among the food vendors searching for stray morsels, and quiet men stood in doorways watching everything with hard looks.

But even with such a wealth of sights and smells, Lucretia found small glimpses of the miraculous that made her gasp. An artist speaking in tongues applied thick gobs of blue pigment to a canvas with one hand, and with the other he wove threads of light from his fingertip into the paint, sewing his landscape with a busy white fire. A corpulent street performer naked above the waist conjured slash-like mouths on his great belly and sang through them in a chorus of lilting voices for an audience of old men smoking hookahs.

Some of the inhabitants looked as she and Gregorio did, which is to say they would not have appeared out of place on the streets of Rome. Others did not. There were men and women with the lithe bodies of dancers whose powder blue skin was hatched with crimson slashes as random as the ridges on a man's fingertips; there were men short and stocky with legs and arms like elephant's limbs and faces like deeply lined stone; there were others who walked sometimes on two legs and sometimes with

the assistance of their overlong arms, their bodies gray and hairless and enveloped in great folds of heavy flesh.

The sights were all so much, she thought she would burst with them. "Are they angels?" she asked after they had walked in silence for some time.

Gregorio had been leading her through the throng by the hand, his expression stern and businesslike. When she spoke, he glanced at her and laughed humorlessly. "Ask me again when the first one tries to make off with your purse. This is no heaven, dearest, but a city like any other with its share of thieves and scoundrels."

The city itself seemed to be alive. More than once she caught sight of a mosque or great pagoda remaking itself into something new in the slow and deliberate transformation of a flower opening in bloom. Invariably this evolution of orthodox church to Hindu temple or burial hillock to stupa attracted groups of children who clambered onto the structure and rode giggling and in tenuous balance on the gentle waves of shifting rock.

"The city is constantly remaking itself in the image of the dreams that drive its existence," Gregorio explained.

He led Lucretia to the mouth of an alley beside a towering structure of columns and steps whose stone had been lacquered a deep blue and filigreed with glimmering whorls of gold.

"Wait here," Gregorio told her.

She grudgingly let him go. The alley was narrow and cluttered with the jumble of detritus that clogged alleys everywhere. Deep shadows swallowed Gregorio when he stepped into an alcove and knocked at the door. The figure that emerged dwarfed him, a massive creature with a great cloak that billowed behind him. She could not make out details or hear what was being said, but she could see Gregorio nod after a time. When they had finished, the hulking figure stepped out into the alley and simply took flight, flapping great wings she had taken for a cloak and rising through the shadowy gap between the buildings until he emerged into the bright sunlight above. She sucked in her breath. He was beautiful, a man with a build like a Greek statue, and while his skin appeared gray and lifeless, his wings, oh! They beat at the air with powerful strokes, glimmering in the sunshine with rainbow luminescence.

"Oh, my," she breathed.

She heard an appreciative murmur from behind a stack of crates nearby and

noticed a blue-skinned man with a head of wild black hair standing the shadows. A woman knelt before him. He was watching the figure disappear against the sky.

"Did you see that?" she asked.

At first she was not sure he had heard her but he glanced her way and smiled silkily. "What, you mean the Kerub?"

She shrugged and smiled shyly.

"You don't want to cross a Kerub, love, not 'less'n you want your heart stolen away then ripped out when you least expect it." He grinned hungrily. "'Course if it's love you want, you needn't look any further."

"Fuck off, Horacio," the woman snapped at him. "You've got all you can afford as it is, and I'll not be sharing your coin with that bitch."

They were both shrouded in shadows, so at first Lucretia could not determine what they were doing. But then she noticed the man's engorged penis swaying before the woman's face, naked and wet with the woman's spit, and she gasped. The woman was also waving her hands like a conductor, orchestrating a dozen long needles suspended in the air that stabbed masochistic delights at his nipples and feet and neck. Lucretia turned away and felt her face flush hot. Horacio laughed.

Gregorio was right behind her when she emerged from the alley, taking her by the elbow and leading her away. He laughed at her embarrassment.

"Who was that you spoke to?" she asked.

"Just a man," he said distractedly as he peered over the heads of the crowd.

"Just a man?" she echoed. "Who flies like a bird?"

"A man who flies like a bird and who has agreed to assist me in my efforts," he explained. She opened her mouth to ask for clarification but he interrupted. "Everything will become clear once we reach the Mount."

"What Mount?"

He gave an "aha" of discovery as he found what he was looking for. He drew her through the thronging market square toward a man holding the reins of a giant white egret hitched to a red two-wheeled cart. The man was of the thick-limbed, gray-skinned race Gregorio called the Fentillox. The Fentillox gave them a thin-lipped smile as they approached.

"The Mount," Gregorio told the driver as he helped Lucretia onto the cart.

"What Mount?" she asked again.

"The only one," he said, climbing up beside her.

"Ombolo Mount it is," the driver replied in a slow, deep voice.

Once Gregorio climbed aboard, the Fentillox flicked the reins, and the egret set off on a loping trot that sent Lucretia tumbling back against the seat. The throngs cleared ahead of them for the screeching animal, but for a time a pack of feathered children ran alongside them, laughing and chasing a rolling hoop.

At last she pulled her eyes away from wonders around her. Gregorio looked distracted. She took his face in her hands and turned it to her. He looked at her puzzled, and she could only laugh with her exasperation. It felt good to laugh. "You lead me around as though there's nothing to see," she said. "What is this place, Gregorio? Where have you brought me?"

"The dreamed city, a place of temples and miracles," he said. And then he smiled too, and gestured at the city that passed all around them with a flourish. "Behold Golgotha."

To read the book in its entirety, watch for publication details and release dates at www.armandconstantine.com.