

Sample Chapter - The Fiery Alphabet

Rome 1764

If I had not been raised to be a genius and if Pope Benedict had lived a few more years, my father would not have suffered a stroke on the afternoon of 14 April 1760, my thirteenth birthday. If not for the events of that day, we would not have cut ourselves off from the world, here behind these walls.

If Papa had been in good health four years later, when you first asked to be admitted to our home – a stranger, a Sicilian, without introductions or name – I suspect he would have said no. Instead, he heard your request and looked up for a moment. “Library?” he repeated. “Uh, yes,” and returned to his breakfast, a mush of bread and eggs.

If we had not been trying to save my father’s life and restore his lost youth, we would not have stood before one another naked. Perhaps I should never have reached the point of knowing I would do whatever you might ask.

“Give yourself to me,” you said, and it was as though one of Leibniz’s monads, independent and oblivious to every other monad moving through space – unaware that Pope Benedict and my father, the integral calculus, the deadly man in scarlet cap were all part of the harmony – should suddenly step back and see the entire pattern that brought you to me and made you my destiny. Balsamo.

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Give yourself to me, you said. But how is it done? I am willing, don’t you see? I stepped into your arms as easily as I would hand Fiammetta a shawl, and yet I saw you weren’t satisfied. How does one give?

You can give someone a plate of noodles, but then the noodles must be eaten. It is not enough for the gift to offer no resistance – I offer none to you – but it must be offered in a form in which it can be consumed.

The problem: I am not a serving of pasta, nor a pair of lace cuffs that I can give you and even help to fasten at your wrists, an ornament to accompany you in the world.

The solution: I give up my suspicions, I hold you first in my heart and in my mind. I have entertained your friends and I have trusted you with my father's life. Yet none of this is useful, none of it in the proper form. I have failed you.

This morning, I went to your room.

So much has happened in these short months since you first appeared. I remember you, a slight figure in threadbare clothes, a Southerner, and not quite civilized. Your dark curling beard, your hairy frame made me think of a malnourished satyr. I felt sorry for you then, you were so ugly.

This morning I sat on the edge of your bed. "I love you, Balsamo."

"Dani," you said, "you are so innocent."

"Ignorant."

"No. Innocent," you said. "Who are you, Daniela? I want to know you."

And I started to cry, because you *do* know me. No one knows me as well as you.

"You keep your secrets, Daniela."

I have no secrets. I stood before you naked. Not even I have seen myself as you have

seen me. I have looked at my arms, my thighs. I studied my breasts as they grew. But I have never seen myself whole. Only these fragments, this part, that. My face in the mirror. Balsamo, no one but you.

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No, this is all wrong. I sound like a silly girl and that, above all, is what I am not. Try again.

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God may not watch the world from on high, but I do. A third-story window leads onto the roof and I have scrambled over the tiles to my flat and secret hiding place and I have looked out over Rome. Here, from our house on the hill, while I look down on the church of Santa Francesca and the convent, the bell tower rises in the distance, almost on a level with my eyes. The ruined arch at the near end of the church seems to be getting higher, growing up to poke through the screen of trees. If the arch *means* something – and Balsamo says it does – I swear I know nothing about it.

Daniela Messo was my mother's name and what they called me at birth. But I have no mother. I am Minerva, sprung forth with a yell from my father's skull. He raised me to be a genius, though I have been called other things. Now, at seventeen, I cannot be counted a prodigy anymore, so what am I to be?

I am what I know. So put it all down, Daniela. Then mystery must yield to study, and fears to facts.

"When I think of all I tried to create in this world," my father once said, "your mind

is the one unqualified success.”

That mind has conquered Latin and Greek, chemistry, the integral and differential calculus. I have never before turned it to look at my life.

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My father, Don Michele Messo, is a very good looking man – slender, small and well-defined. His nose comes to a sharp point and his eyebrows form two straight silver lines. His eyes glinted like metal when we bent our heads together over the secrets of algebra and geometric forms, but now those eyes are nearsighted enough to be gentle and dim. My father has always been a non-conformist – perhaps because his only child is a daughter and not a son – yet his bearing is – was – that of, I imagine, a military man. Before his health failed, he had the most wonderful way of standing up from his chair. He never unfolded his body the way some, especially taller, men do. Counting on nothing but the strength of his thighs, he would push himself up, without effort or hurry, his back absolutely straight.

Even before his stroke, I can remember, now that I think back, his memory had become confused. One day, in the spirit of radicalism, he told us – the servants Carlo and Fiammetta, and me – that we were to call him “Michele” from that day forth. We were embarrassed, but he insisted and so we agreed.

“Michele,” I said, trying to get his attention. “Michele?” But perhaps he had not heard the word spoken without its preceding respectful *Don* since he was a boy. At any rate, he had forgotten the sound of it and no longer answered to his name. “Father,” I said at last, and then he looked up and scolded me for my formality.

Papa taught me at home. By the age of seven, I was fluent in Latin and French and could read and translate from Hebrew and Greek. I learned philosophy, and so I could have

reminded my father that matter is neither created nor destroyed. He has not made me – at most, he has recombined my elements.

In those early years, I wasn't kept here at home. I was free, or so I thought. I made my own choices though, now I see, all with the aim of pleasing *him*. My ignorance of Art is an echo of Papa's disdain. We agreed that busts of the Emperors glorified tyranny; graven images of saints, gods and angels sprang from disordered minds. In the old days, by which I mean before I was thirteen, my father would call for the carriage and we'd visit his friends – priests, mostly; most every man in Rome is either a beggar or a priest. To dress respectably, even my father often wore a black cassock, and we would go and visit somber homes and palaces, vast, ill-lit and dreary, with bloody crucifixes on every wall, tables covered with bric-à-brac and pretty clocks and stones, and prayer stools arranged so cunningly that a child couldn't help but trip over them in the dark.

Once, at a time when I could not have been more than two or three, I remember a room where murmurous women petted me and made me stand before the crucifix, looking up at the ragged, punished man upon the Cross. "And you know who He is, don't you?" they asked, as they kissed me and fussed. I'd had no religious education. The only Cross we had at home hung over our door so that men relieving themselves in the street would show respect and squat a little further down the road.

"She doesn't know." All around me, women's voices hummed. "She's a baby, just a tender babe."

Even at that age, I was used to being praised for giving answers and didn't like being treated as a child. "I do know!" I cried. "I do!", and guessed: "That's the dirty man who made caca on the floor."

I can remember quite clearly the women's shock and my own feelings of shame, but I only know the words themselves because my father loved the story and repeated it many times, but only to the most discreet and trusted friends.

For the most part, though, as I grew, I had nothing to do with women. Girls my own age never interested me. I was different. Sober, uncharming, I was admitted into the company of adult men when all I wanted was to be home with Papa. In those days, I would have happily given up the outside world of my own free will. All I wanted was to be home, seated with him, my father, sharing him only with the books we studied together, his face close to mine.

We prepared orations in Latin, presentations of debate. A crowd of men would assemble each year, priests and scholars and patrons, all my father's curious friends. Each year on my birthday they would come to measure my amazing progress, to meet me and listen to me, the miracle child.

And my mother, in all of this, what was she? She was dead. She was just dead.

I have her name but I never knew her face. It was not the fashion for Romans to sit for portraits in her day; we have no likeness of her in the house. Fiammetta tells me she was a great beauty, but I can't imagine Fiammetta telling me anything else. Once, when I pestered her with questions, she held me up before a high mirror.

"That's what she looked like," said Fiammetta. "Daniela Messo."

I looked into a pair of hazel eyes and a jam-smeared mouth and chin. I smelled in Fiammetta's scent: garlic, crushed herbs, wet powder, harsh soap.

"She didn't really die," said Fiammetta. "Not all the way. She lives in you."

Then she put me down again, the one time I remember Fiammetta holding me.

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I don't mean to sound sorry for myself. This is simply the way it is.

My mother. We still live on her, of course. Her family was very rich, so Fiammetta has told me, with investments and interests in many foreign cities and ports. We live on the income from the Tuscan estates my grandfather settled on her at the time of her marriage. As for my maternal heritage, that is all I know.

Papa always hated the thought of being a landowner and living off the labor of other men. He tried many ventures to earn his own way. There are books in the library that were printed on his seized and bankrupt press. We eat off dishes from the pottery works that failed. I like to think there is nothing under the sun my father hasn't tried. His hand is everywhere. And I, the only success. Or rather, my mind. But what difference has there ever been between my mind and my self?

There is no choice: we live on my mother's remains. Not in luxury, but in comfort, comfort being all my father's conscience will allow.

"I killed her," he said once, "getting her with child."

I killed her, I thought, being born.

She left us, she went off, not even waiting to know me. I am not her child. I have no mother. I am mind, shaped by my father's mind.

Sometimes, when I am hiding in my secret place on the roof, I hear my father pacing the floors below, calling "Daniela? Daniela! Where are you?" Then for a moment, I think that love for my mother, complete eternal love, has unhinged his mind, that he wanders the

halls like a madman, tearing his hair and trying to call her back from the grave. Oh, my mother! I think of her, perfect and beautiful. I think of her, ignorant, illiterate – for so she was – and bloody at my birth. Oh, my mother! I cry, knowing that *I* am Daniela, that my father is calling me, only me.

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On the morning of my thirteenth birthday, Papa gave me a thin golden chain so that I might wear, hanging around my neck, the diamond ring that Pope Benedict sent me shortly before his death.

I never met him, but Benedict XIV had heard about me. After each of my exhibitions, he would send his congratulations and some gift. And visitors who came to the house and noticed the old building falling into disrepair, told my father not to worry. As soon as I was old enough to take care of myself in the world, the Pope would surely see that I was named to some university faculty. In the meantime, we had his gifts. There was no need to worry. In recognition of my talents, his Holiness would provide.

Not that I was singled out. Pope Benedict supported many artists and scholars. And though, in public, my face was always calm and I, like the Pope, was seen to love scholarship for its own sake, sometimes, alone, I shook and trembled. Who were these others? I wondered. Did any compare with me? Were there other females among them? Was there anyone so young?

In spite of this connection with the Pope, we never went to church. My knowledge of religion was confined to practical matters. When Easter fell late, we had to postpone my birthday celebration till after the fast days of Lent. Once, Papa took me to St. Peter's at night to see thousands of lights suddenly flame up like stars in answer to the Easter bells.

“Miracle! Miracle!” cried the crowd, while Papa patiently explained how hundreds of lamplighters worked all at once to create the effect.

I was raised, then, to be a freethinker, taught to disdain metaphysical speculation and instead to reach only those conclusions that could be derived from the evidence of the senses or the equally firm base of reason.

Of all my studies, I loved mathematics best. Translation bored me. Doing it right being an impossibility, to succeed at distortion hardly seemed worth the try. The code of numbers and shapes, however, grew increasingly fascinating and complex the more I learned. We soon reached the point at which my father could no longer teach me. He brought me books and, once, a visit from a Bolognese scholar. I learned to reduce a fraction to an infinite series, to conjugate and transverse semi-axes. I could tell you whether the space between a cubical hyperboloid and its asymptotes was infinite or finite. I invented my own problems and lost myself in them, as though each equation opened up a landscape and I entered it and roamed around while time in the outer world came to a stop.

Was I happy in those days? I don't know. I was entranced, I had no consciousness of a self that could be happy or sad.

Sometimes I would awake in the middle of the night and find myself in the library, with no memory of having left my bed, and there I would be, pen in hand, and before me, written in my own script, the solution to some problem that had plagued me, insoluble, throughout the day.

Now, pen in hand, can I solve the puzzle of my life? Could that world we lived in have continued?

It all changed on my birthday, my thirteenth birthday, 14 April 1760. For the first time, I was dressed with hoops beneath my skirt and in a bodice stiff with bone. I arranged a green net over my curls – which Fiammetta replaced with a dark mesh so I'd look more Roman and not quite so fair.

Everything had to be right. I was a young lady, at last, not a child, and we guessed that the new Pope, Clement, was making plans for me. For the first time, he was sending a representative. His nephew, the Cardinal, was coming, in a black coach topped with fringes and plumes. The Cardinal who was going to decide our lives.

He seemed a friendly enough man when he arrived. He joked with my father and the other guests, and included Carlo when he passed his snuffbox round.

Then, in the narrow dining hall where our table was set with twenty places, I sat by my father while girls hired just for the night served Fiammetta's food: Jewish-style artichokes, new asparagus, broiled pigeons, soup, fresh noodles with wild mushrooms, joints of meat, hot breads, and bottle after bottle of wine.

I kept my eyes lowered and only picked at my food. Modesty always enhanced my performances; besides, before one of these events I was always overexcited. I was supposed to be a scholar, cerebral and dispassionate, and I was too aware of what other qualities people might read in my eyes. I did dare smile at the Cardinal. He did not smile back.

"It's not really a sign of intellect," he said to the gentleman beside him. "Any child with a good memory can be trained to parrot back all sorts of information."

So he was a skeptic. My excitement mounted. I should have remembered the murmurous women and my mistake with the crucifix, how easily I've gone wrong when

anxious to show how much I know. But I smiled at the Cardinal again, and thought how I would conquer him. By the time the evening was over, no one would be so impressed as he!

It seemed the meal would never end. All these men, I realized, came to eat and drink. I was not important. They filled their bellies and displayed their faces to one another, the scholars of Rome, the intellectuals.

We are here by right, their faces proclaimed. Bloated with meat, drowsy with wine, had they ever really listened to me, heard me at all? It was true, I remembered, in years past, I had occasionally made errors, and no one had ever seemed to notice. Each time I felt relieved and triumphant: I hadn't been caught. My mistakes had slipped by, and later, I returned to my work with even greater application, thankful for each lucky reprieve.

But this time, as the moment came closer, the time when I would speak, I couldn't stop remembering how easily I had always fooled them. *Wonderful!* they exclaimed. *Marvelous! Exquisite! A miracle!* They used the same words to describe the meal that Fiammetta prepared. They were pigs. I hated them. Now I kept my eyes lowered so that no one would read my contempt. Who were they, in their black cassocks, to judge me?

The dishes were cleared away. I stood before them with my slate propped on an easel. It was so easy. Draw diagrams, captivate them with magical words.

"Apollonian parabola," I said, and evoked a collective sigh. "The integral calculus is the method of reducing a differential or fluxional quantity to that quantity of which it is the difference or fluxion."

I could tell them that, but why one would need to reduce this fluxional quantity or why anyone would care was something I'd never learned. They didn't ask. I could tell them

the wisdom of the Greeks: the first principle is water. Creation is the separation of opposites. Man sprang from a fish which he first resembled. I had learned all of it, just as the Cardinal said, as easily as you could train a talking bird. The men pretended to be impressed. I pretended to be a genius. None of it meant anything.

We were playing, all of us, at being serious. It was a game, reached out of boredom, I suppose. We were children with nothing better to do. I could have been a parrot. A monkey. An animal can be trained to perform. A counting horse. A dancing bear. Problem after problem. My voice was sober. My hand, drawing on the slate, never shook. I was so angry, and so I acted shy, even gentle, to hide it.

“I have a problem for the young lady,” said the Cardinal.

Except for cries of praise and encouragement from the guests, he was the first man to speak.

“I give you the semicircle ADC,” he said.

He sat, playing with the stem of his glass between his heavily bearded fingers. He was watching me, but not head on, his face half-lowered over the table. The dead Pope had given me a diamond. This Cardinal gave me a semicircle, ADC.

“Out of it, a point M is required,” he continued, “such that, drawing MB perpendicular to the diameter AC, it shall cut the circle in D.”

He sat on my father’s right side, the flicker of a single taper lighting the faces of both men. Maybe there was more to the game this time. Maybe something serious would be required. My father’s finger moved over the table, as though he were taking notes, just as I scribbled notations on my slate. The Cardinal placed his hand suddenly over Papa’s. Did he

suspect my father was somehow signaling, and helping me?

“Further,” he said, “consider that $AB \cdot BD$ is to be equal to $AC \cdot BM$. Have you followed me thus far?”

I nodded, and though he seemed to expect more, disdained to repeat what he had given me. We waited a moment, he in his seat, I on my feet with my slate before him. “Very well,” he said at last. “An infinite number of points will satisfy the problem. From you, young lady, I require the locus of those points.”

My father’s friends applauded; they could not contain their delight at seeing the Prince of the Church proved such a man of learning.

“Your Eminence,” cried my father, “I myself would not know how to begin to work your problem.” The men murmured, realizing even as I did, that though my father told the truth, he spoke only to make my own work appear the more remarkable. I puzzled for a moment, in front of everyone, immobile at my easel.

“Let M be one such point. Let $AC=a$, $AB=x$, and $BM=y$.” I assigned these designations in a slow, painstaking voice and, as I expected, some of the men present began to cheer, fooled into thinking these simple preliminaries extraordinary. I tried to catch the Cardinal’s eye, to see if he was amused by the trap I’d set. I still had not made him smile.

“She may need time to work on it,” said my father.

But of course the equation itself was quite ordinary algebra. I looked out at the crowd. “The curve to be described is represented by the equation $y = \frac{a \cdot x}{\sqrt{x}}$, multiplied by the square root of $a \cdot x$, divided by the square root of x .” As I spoke, I could see the curve itself being born. With x greater than a , the quantity under the vinculum would

be negative, and the curve imaginary. Concave towards the axis AC. Yet also convex because of asymptote AQ. Scattered points turned to a flow of meaning, a translation from abstract to concrete in my mind. I turned to draw it in an instant on my slate. When I looked back, knowing that few scholars could have duplicated what I had just done, there was fear mixed with the pride in Papa's eyes.

Now the Cardinal regarded me squarely and I waited for him to acclaim my gift. He would send me to Bologna where I would study with those who had minds like my own. My youth would be no impediment. My future was assured. He would separate me from my father. I would spend my life with these hypnotizing, meaningless numbers and signs, puzzles that stole my soul from inside me, that came over me even in sleep, leaving Daniela, whoever she was, an empty shell. The dining hall felt more narrow than ever. Everything was closing in. What would become of me?

"The curve you've drawn," said the Cardinal, interrupting, and not with praise, "has a vulgar name. Do you know it?"

How vulgar could a term be, used only by higher mathematicians? I wanted to laugh. "No, your Eminence, I confess I do not know."

"It is called The Witch," he informed us all. There was silence. Then, more gently, he addressed me again. "Daniela, child, can you imagine, can you venture a guess? Why should this particular curve be known by such a name?"

This was my chance, then, to prove I was not a mere parrot. That I could imagine and reach an understanding of things I had not been taught. Everyone waited.

"I do not know, Eminence. However, I observe that the curve must be concave

towards the axis AC. But at the same time, given the information we have, it must also be convex. And so it is, with a contrary flexure, Eminence. The curve partakes of two opposing natures, and it is perhaps this *unnatural* aspect that has given rise to its vulgar name.”

The Cardinal nodded his head. He was so solemn. This was the deciding moment, I knew this was the most important moment in my life.

“Intellectual development,” he said slowly, “above all, the capacity for abstract thought, are characteristics of the mind of man. Do you agree?”

Of course, I agreed. I could hardly hide my elation. I had won him over. He would not compare my intellect again to that of a parrot or some trained beast. To our poor wild hound, Virgil, chained in the garden night and day, who could barely learn to obey the simplest commands. I had won. “Yes, your Eminence. While some animals may learn more than others, none can achieve the heights granted by our Creator to Man.”

“You are a girl,” said the Cardinal.

“Yes, your Eminence.” We watched one another. Our eyes only upon each other’s eyes. I should have turned to see my father. Was there any warning, I wonder, any moment when, if I had only realized, we could have called a halt, when it would not have been too late?

“Until I came here today,” said the Cardinal, and everyone sat silent, everyone sat still, “I thought you were perhaps the innocent victim of your father’s zeal. The feminine nature, we know, is designed for obedience. Your displays of learning, I thought, might have been innocuous, construed only as attempts to please. Yet, to my surprise, I find your performance entirely genuine. Authentic. You do, in fact, show true indicators of the

masculine nature, Daniela. Your powers of reasoning are highly developed. So tell me, child, remembering your curve, and partaking of two opposing natures as you do, what vulgar name shall we give you?"

My father moaned and blood gushed from his nose and lips. I ran to his side, upsetting the easel. I heard the crash of my slate while visitors reached to loosen Papa's clothing and wipe his mouth. The Cardinal, at my father's right, did not move.

One of our guests, a physician, took charge. "Don Michele has been taken ill," he announced, as though only he were qualified to state what we had seen. "You must leave. All of you. Now."

The blood was only red wine, exploding from Papa's nostrils and mouth. For a moment, I had the wonderful idea that he was only pretending illness in order to protect me. But the wine was not spit up voluntarily. His crooked mouth remained twisted. Carlo had to carry him. He could not move. He could not see. In spite of my many languages, I could not understand or translate his words.

By morning, my father could walk again, but with a limp. He speaks clear Italian, but prefers to hold silent conversations with himself. His vision returned, but with a difference. Though he does not seem to realize it, there are many things he can no longer see.

His memory is largely gone but he remembers many of the books he has read. The history of the Inquisition is vivid to him, accounts of witchcraft, people tortured, burned, hanged. He has not forgotten my thirteenth birthday or the Cardinal's final question to me.

Papa's stroke erased our future, but our present never really changed. My father

had always believed in natural law, and so, years ago, he established order here at home. Our household runs like clockwork, with fixed times and fixed orbits, a microcosmic solar system on earth, a system so logical and clear and everlasting, that once set in motion, it was no matter that my father sickened. Like the deist God, he is free to settle himself, heedless, in his favorite chair and let the system run on.

There have been changes, though. Fiammetta, turned tyrant, has closed our doors.

She used to take me with her to market, through dirty little alleys and out into great squares where she bought radishes and onions while I joined the crowd before the puppet stage. Statues of great men stood poised on tops of buildings, ready to jump or to fly. Goats ran free. Coffee vendors worked at the foot of a great column and we'd stop to smell their beans, roasting away on little stoves, and even that small enjoyment proved us different: in general, Romans detest all smells. (I remember once playing in a garden and someone coming to fetch me away, warning that the odor of the roses would make me faint.)

Now we stay home. No one enters. Except for Carlo, no one leaves.

Mornings, Fiammetta carries our trash across the courtyard to the high wide carriage doors set in the yellow stucco wall. Within the right-hand door is set still another door, just person-sized, which Fiammetta opens to throw our refuse to the street. Then she stands waiting. The boiled cabbage man stops by, and the vintner's wagon. Villagers come to sell jugs of new pressed oil or sacks of flour from the mill. The beggars that build their lean-to shelters against our walls will run commissions for Fiammetta's tips. So she directs our marketing now without ever venturing into the streets. She goes on cooking our meals, cleaning the house, and tending the garden and the chickens in the yard.

Carlo must finally do duty as my father's valet, helping Papa to dress and bathe,

taking care of those personal matters my democratic father always insisted on doing for himself.

Without the priest's blessing, Carlo and Fiammetta live together as man and wife. My father sits in his chair. I still read forbidden books. It no longer matters what people may say. There is no one here to see us except God in Heaven, and we have quite satisfied ourselves that He does not exist.