

# MEMORY OF FLAMES

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## CHAPTER 1

As he advanced along the corridor an image rose before him. It was as if each of his steps was the ratchet of a cog setting in train other movements. He had prepared his plan with the precision of a watchmaker. That night he was finally starting up the complex mechanism. He heard a noise on the stairs. Someone was coming up. He had orientated himself in the dark by feeling along the wall and had already counted four doors. Now he went back, opened the third door and hid in the bedroom that had previously belonged to the colonel's only daughter. The room had been unoccupied since she had married. The yellowish-orange light of a candle filtered under the door before moving away. A heavy footstep, slow and uneven: Mejun, the oldest of the colonel's servants, a retired sergeant whose leg had been shattered by an Austrian cannonball at the Battle of Marengo. He was on his way to light the fire in the study as he did every evening; but he was half an hour early. The colonel must have hurried through his supper. Leaning against the door, the intruder steadied his nerves – he knew the layout and habits of the house inside out. Mejun went back along the corridor with no inkling that anything was amiss.

The intruder slipped out of the bedroom and finally reached the study, where he hid behind the long velvet curtains. All he had to do now was wait.

But almost immediately he was drawn out of his hiding

place. The hearth. The fire. The flames, like golden tongues licking the air, seemed to call to him. It was as if they recognised him and wanted to show him something. The way they bent and leapt, weaving themselves together and then separating, the dark interstices they created . . . Faces with flaming skin and sooty eyes appeared in the dancing tapestry. Pain contorted their features; their mouths opened wide in silent screams. They disappeared, to be replaced by others, coming towards him. In vain they shouted for help, until their unbearable suffering robbed them of consciousness. The presences were so real . . . the logs crackled and one of them split and burst into a shower of sparks. The frenzy of the victims increased. He saw nothing but the fire. It filled his thoughts; he was reduced to a human husk burning inside. The door creaked, bringing him back to reality, leaving him barely time to hide again.

Footsteps. The exhausted trudge of someone determined to work for a little longer before strength failed. The wood of the desk chair groaned. Only the colonel was allowed to sit there. A pen began to scratch hastily across the paper. The old officer did not notice the intruder coming up behind him.