

BEYOND MEASURE

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PROLOGUE

1552

THE SCAFFOLD HAS BEEN MOVED from the courtyard of the Palazzo del Podestà to the square outside, and there is not one rope but two. It is windy, and the rain is driving across the waiting crowd. There is no protection in the square from the buffets of this April day. Men and women cover their heads and stand like cattle with their backs to the weather. The pale stone of San Fiorenzo is streaked with dark ochre. A sudden gust lifts a long piece of canvas and slaps it back against the scaffold. The thin man who sells almond cakes at holy days and hangings is cursing his luck. There are fewer customers in the rain, everyone too intent on keeping covered, keeping dry. A door in the palazzo opens and an officer comes out accompanied by two orderlies bearing trays of little cakes, some stamped with the *palle*, some stamped with a lily.

The orderlies proceed to distribute these tokens of a liberal, loving justice among the crowd. At this, a dark, dishevelled man who has been watching from a doorway steps forward. The smugness of the official gesture, the patronizing intent and the assumption that those who eat will not question, provoke in him a rage that informs each nerve. He strides over to one of the orderlies. The thin man swings his own basket of now unsellable cakes to the ground to watch. The dark man clasps his hands together and, before anyone can stop him, brings them up sharply under the tray. The cakes fly up, flipping like coins before they land on the wet ground. In the distraction, the man has managed to upset the second tray, too, and is busy stamping as if he is trying to put out a fire, while all around men, women and children scramble to pick up the fancies before they are spoiled. The thin man picks up his basket of merchandise, his restored prospects, pleased at the way fortune, too, can flip and flip again. He will sell all his cakes.

Meanwhile the dark man, Matteo Tassi, has eluded everyone, and the officer is busy arresting an alarmed and protesting bystander. The confusion is so great the crowd almost misses the moment it has been waiting for: the bell in the *campanile* has begun to toll, the gates to the courtyard of the palazzo are opening, and the drummers are coming out, keeping their slow rhythm in time with the bell. As they come out onto the square, the shouting begins. Behind them comes the crier and six of the guard and then the hangman and then the priest. Six more guards come out; they are wearing black cloaks and black hoods that cover their faces. They walk in formation, in a block with the condemned in the centre, the two of them, in long white shifts, like ghosts of themselves. The shouting stops, leaving only a buzz and a murmur against the drums, like a fly against glass. The second condemned is a woman, just as Matteo Tassi had feared. It is the wife of the man who will hang. Such uncertainty in the air now. Is this something to cheer?

There is an eerie quiet. The ground under Tassi's feet has turned to water, and he is being carried closer on the back of a swiftly moving current. The woman, with her hands bound behind her back, trips on the long shift that tangles round her legs. She falls in two heavy movements, first to her knees and then forward, hitting her face on the ground as the crowd breaks into laughter. A matron shrieks at her, "Murderess! Poisoner! Murderess!" though no one recalls hearing that she was tried and found guilty or even that she was accused, and poison has never been mentioned in connection with the attempted murder of a profligate and well-connected cleric. The woman's husband stares down at her

but cannot help. She rolls awkwardly and pushes herself back onto her feet. There is a small private moment between husband and wife, as each inclines the head to the other, looks in the other's eyes, while their constricted universe expands within the block of guards. The woman catches the perfume of something forgotten, and the faces and the jeering crowd recede until they are faint tremors at the edge of knowing. For the husband there is only the sudden pity, a cloudburst in the desert of his heart and then he turns and is aware again of the press of people.

It is a small, merciful gift, this fall, for the woman in this her most terrible hour, for she is left now with only the pain, a vertical shaft of fire extending from her upper lip through the right side of her nose and her right eye. She cannot see the faces or hear the laughter. Nor does she see how her husband is having difficulty on the first step of the scaffold. He cannot make that step without dirtying himself.

Matteo Tassi does not see much more. The man and woman are placed very close together, almost touching, and the crowd is silent now in its unholy communion of expectation. Tassi is sick with it. He has difficulty turning in their direction. It is as if the light that passed between the pair has scorched his eyes. He has lain with this woman, has walked with her in a furnace of desire. From the line of half-remembered lovers, she has stepped forward and assumed a sacred vitality, more potent than any he has known. He will not stay to see her end.

The woman, in her cocoon of pain, does not hear the prayers of the priest, does not register the untying of her hands, the retying, this time in front of her so that she can climb the ladder. She does not see the guard or feel his breath on her face, but as he turns her in the direction of the priest, she sees for a moment her husband's face, her husband looking so startled, as if he is puzzled to see her here at all. The blood from her nose runs a little to one side and into her mouth, tracing the memory of a smile.

A guard takes her to the foot of the ladder. It is a complicated matter to get her onto it, lifting her shift, placing her foot, her hands, and then she is on the first rung. The hangman from his ladder, set at an angle to hers, is coaxing and she, with determination, begins to climb, lifting her hands together and grasping the next rung with a snatching motion before her weight can topple her backwards. She lifts and snatches, pulling herself up, her feet wide apart, kicking the shift away as she goes, first one side, then the other in an ungainly ascent, her whole body applying itself to this new task, this new achievement. The small clouds above her invite. Below, the crowd roars as she gains each new rung. The hangman climbs with her, staying abreast.

The woman and the crowd achieve a kind of rhythm, each awkward, violent movement on the ladder performed in silence and greeted on completion by a massed roar from the square. As she nears the top, she can feel every slight vibration of her body amplified by the ladder returned to her through the soles of her feet.

The hangman tells her to stop, and in less than a thought the noose is round her neck. The shouts of the crowd fly up like a flock of starlings at the sound of a gunshot. The hangman pulls the knot tight. Every movement is difficult. He unties her hands and ties them again behind her back. He says, "Leap with your knees or you'll fall." Below, her husband has started to climb and the crowd begins again, a chant this time, ragged.

She can feel a slight breeze in her hair. It seems all there is between her and her desire for this to be over.

Her husband climbs, leaning into his ladder, moving one foot up and placing the other on the same rung before he moves again. The top of the ladder creaks against the timber of the scaffold. The crowd

is jeering, led by those at the front who can see and smell his shame as he climbs. The hangman has moved his own ladder, has already ascended and is waiting at the top.

The husband considers leaning back, out, falling to break his neck. It is a possible dream; it lasts no longer than a breath. Someone is telling him to stop climbing, as if he could, or would want to. Nothing is real now, not the roughness of the rope around his neck, nor the hands fumbling with his own. The crowd calls from another place. His body now could be sliced open, cut apart for them to gawk at and finger, and it would be no more than meat displayed. He is not there. He is at the puddle where his wife fell. He is at the place where their eyes met, where he last tasted life — which is only love — after the long drought.

He is still at that place when the ladders are pulled away. As his tongue comes out, the crowd screams its satisfaction.

Matteo Tassi is not among them. Matteo Tassi, the dark man, is already halfway to his house. In his mind he is halfway to Siena, where he will try to forget. In his heart he, too, is at the place the hanged man found, a place he has never known. He thinks he can hear the swifts circling the *campanile*, piping back at the bell that is still tolling.

OUT IN THE GULF of Genoa, a ship rears and plunges toward the shore. In her hold she carries one hundred and ninety-eight pieces of lead, fifty-one carpets, seventeen bales of pilgrims' robes and five barrels of gall-nuts, along with three men, nine women and eleven children purchased in Alexandria and another, listed in the bill of lading as a piebald child. The word "child" has been scored through and overwritten with the word "female."

The girl cannot remember how she came to be on board the boat. She has no memory of her family, nor of how she came to lose them. She does not even remember her own skin, which had saved her — just as it had so many times almost cost her her life. Perhaps the gods who turned away in her people's hour of need feel some compunction to atone, for she is spared the memory of the marauding soldiers who came upon her family. Perhaps that is her small, merciful gift. This is where her life begins, here on the boat that lurched out of nowhere to carry her toward the coast of Italy. This is her first memory: she is waking on a bed of scratchy straw. She tries to move her leg because of the thistles in the straw, but her feet are shackled. There are more than a dozen others with her in this narrow room where daylight enters from a square hole in the ceiling. There is a lantern. It seems to swing as if in a wind, sending long loops of light forward to one side, backward to the other. There is the noise of movement everywhere but no one is walking. And then, too, there is the sensation of movement although she is still. Her ankle is raw and her neck hurts; she has no idea where she is. She looks through the gloom and finds the space disproportionately long and narrow, the walls inexplicably curved, hugging great stacks and bales of stuff secured with planks and cords. It is a long time before she thinks "boat." At first, hearing the grating of chains, she thinks "prison" and cannot understand the tilt and fall of the floor, the hiss and roar of what she thinks is wind. Stiff from sleeping and awkward, she tries to get up. When she gets to her feet, still bent, arms spread for balance, blood flows from her, runs warm down her leg under her skirt. She wipes it away with her hand. There is more coming down. The man nearest to her spits in her direction, passes his hand over his mouth. She squats to see the blood still flowing. There is no one to tell her that her woman's sorrows have begun. Instead it seems a sign of something she knows but has forgotten. Something that would cause her own body to be weeping blood. It comes to her from a great distance, this knowledge of blood and its impatience to be out. It is about to burst like a dam behind her eyes. And then like a dream it vanishes. The man is cursing her. There is nowhere to go. She stands up again, balancing this time with the roll of the ship: the sharp tilt

as the floor on one side lifts, and the precipitous sliding fall as it returns. Tilt and fall, tilt and fall. She becomes aware of the smell of vomit, as pervasive as the shadows. She steps on someone lying nearby and the dream almost returns, but the body under her foot yelps and people begin to shout. Like a sky full of rocks aimed at her head — but still she does not remember her skin. A woman, her ankles shackled, shuffles over and presses a rag into her hands. It is already damp and sticky.

After that she remembers nothing more until a man's face against a blinding blue sky, loud as a shout up against her own. The man's eyes are blazing anger, his breath is hot on her face and he is spitting something at her, words she doesn't understand. The dark hold has become bright broad day. She is standing on a raised platform. A crowd of people look up at her. Between two buildings she can see shining water that reaches to the edge of the world. The man's hand is on her arm, shaking her, jolting her. She does not understand what he wants. He shoves her toward the faces and at the same time holds her back. What does he want her to do? She says in her own language that she doesn't understand and the man looks pleased. He is smiling now, satisfied and nodding to the crowd, gesturing with one hand up to his mouth and the other behind him waving in the direction of her own. He looks back at her and barks an order again. She repeats, "I don't understand," and he smiles again. He nods, "*Può parlare. Eccola che parla,*" tapping his mouth with both hands, flicking his fingers outward, toward the crowd. And now the people are calling, gesturing in her direction. The man beside her finally takes her arm and extends it. For the first time, she is conscious of her skin and the fact that she is naked. He holds her arm out to the side and runs his free hand up and down it as if he is trying to calm or soothe her, or as if he is gently wiping away the markings that cover her. He does the same on the other side. Then he opens both his hands to the crowd, who fall silent, waiting for whatever calamity must surely overtake him for this rash act. He passes his palms over his face and down his neck as if he is washing. The silence hangs a moment in the air before it is fractured; a lock has been turned, a door opened. People begin to talk again and call out. The man shouts back and finally a man with no hair at all to cover his brown scalp comes forward. He climbs up onto the platform and puts his hands on the girl's shoulders to turn her around. She closes her eyes. He runs his hands along the length of her body. The girl begins to shake. Someone in the crowd is baying the words of a song and people begin to laugh. The girl opens her eyes and a shift is pushed into her hands. She has barely time to put it on before she is taken by the arm and led away from the platform to a table where another man sits with ink and paper. The bald man is waiting.

The tiny noise of the broker's quill on the page of the ledger makes her skin crawl. She begins to shake again.

The men are engrossed. They all speak the same language as the barking man. Finally money passes between them and they shake hands. The bald man takes her by the wrist and leads her away.

He walks her to a wagon loaded with bulging sacks, a mule with a moth-eaten look about the face waiting between the shafts. A carter comes and she is made to climb up into the wagon. The carter follows, carrying a large fruit that she does not recognize. It is as big as a human head. He wedges it between two sacks, pulls others toward the front and arranges them so that he can half sit, half stand and drive in comfort. He makes a sharp clicking noise with his tongue and she has to grab the edge of the cart as the mule moves on. He looks at her and asks her a question. She says at once, "I don't understand," and the man seems pleased. He uses a switch on the mule, and they go creaking and swaying up the hill away from the wharf and on through the shade of narrow, crowded streets. The man glances in her direction once or twice and inhales as if he would speak, but she is careful to keep her eyes fixed on the road. In a little while they pass through a monumental stone arch out onto the open road. Two storks fly overhead, their slow wing beats like breath blown hard against the fist in

winter. The man turns and says, "*Cicogne. Primavera.*" She says at once, "I don't understand." He looks her way from time to time. Sometimes he speaks. Each time, she answers the same thing: "I don't understand."

IN A LOW STONE BUILDING that once was a byre, now a workshop, on a hillside overlooking the city of Firenze far below, an old man with grey hair to his shoulders and a full grey beard is making a sketch in a small notebook. It is nighttime and he has to peer closely. Ceccio, his boy, is preparing the room making sure they have everything they will need for their work. The old man, Paolo Pallavicino, bends over his drawing. In the centre of the page, a child dances, balanced for an instant on the ball of one foot, in his raised hand a lily, beneath his foot an egg.

A heavy block stands in the middle of the byre. Ceccio has hung the sharpened knives on hooks at its end, laid out the saws, placed the barrow nearby, and the two buckets, one containing a sponge, underneath. He has six lamps on the table and he is lighting them with a taper, careful not to burn himself or spill the oil. The lamps flare, casting their brilliance on the turn of his cheek, his long lashes. He stands on a stool to hang them from the hooks in the low roof beams and their light spills gold on his hair. In his concentration, his tongue protrudes slightly between his teeth, giving him a stupid look. Paolo Pallavicino does not see. He bends over his notebook. Under the foot of the dancing boy, the egg is upright and unbroken. On the page the boy's mouth smiles with secret intelligence. It is Ceccio's mouth but it smiles with a beauty all its own.

Paolo has drawn the boy many times before, rendering his head in pen, in silverpoint and in paint. He never tires of it, perhaps because the heads, though they are very beautiful, are not Ceccio. They have, to be sure, the same broad brow with eyebrows that lift to an angle and wing outward from the midpoint, and beneath them the same large and wide-set eyes. They have the same fine nose with its straight bridge and perfectly formed nostrils set a little wide. There are the same cheekbones and the same jawbone, the small cleft in the rounded chin, the lovely lips with the small bow above, the pout below. Lips to kiss. And yet none of it is Ceccio. On Paolo's page there is no greed or malice or cunning, only generous goodwill. The eyes are limpid. One gazes into the middle distance, the other wanders farther, lost in a dream. Every time Paolo takes up the challenge of Ceccio's face, his hand is bewitched by the beauty of the line, the set of the sturdy column of neck in its collar of bone, the sheen of ear... Paolo can reproduce a line with great accuracy, can render the finest degree of shading, but his hand, charmed into dawdling in the abundance of soft blond curls, betrays his eye and blinds it to the duplicity that clouds Ceccio's gaze, the stupidity that swells his lips.

IN AN UPPER ROOM of a house on Via del Cocomero a man, old before his time, lies on his side while his daughter rubs warm oil into his sore hip. She, Sofonisba, has put on a face of patience and fortitude. Her father, Orazio, is complaining loudly. The weather, he says, is the worst it has ever been. It will kill him. "My hips," he says, "my hips." Sofonisba says, "There, there, there," over and over. "My father," she says, "my poor father." If he had been working on the wall today it would have been, "My hands, my hands," but the rain has kept him inside and he has been sitting all day working on the panels for the Sisters of Sant' Anna. Sofonisba's stomach is in a knot with the effort it requires to maintain calm. Sofonisba Fabroni is not a patient person, except when she herself is painting. Then there is no Sofonisba to be patient or impatient; when she is painting, her body is simply a tool for the application of paint to wood or to plaster, and her mind is one with it. Time does not exist then; the question of patience is irrelevant.

Sofonisba's arms ache, and she stops rubbing her father's hip for a moment, closing her eyes

against him when he protests. “You’ve stopped? I need you to rub until it has gone.” He turns over heavily on the bed, so that she can rub the other side. The wind outside is gusting still, sending the rain in bursts of noise against the shutters and filling the dark streets with sudden, unearthly voices.

*For I understood, without any doubt, that life is twofold:
the material existence common to the beasts and the plants, and that
existence which is peculiar to a man eager for glory and high endeavour.*

— GIROLAMO CARDANO

PART I

PAOLO PALLAVICINO HAS BEEN INVITED today to view Giuliano's latest acquisition. Paolo is an artist, an inventor, a student of Nature, a fabricator of curiosities. He lives in a new house built especially for him by Giuliano, his patron, on the grounds of his country estate, *La Castagna*. The stuccoed house sits lower than Giuliano's villa on the hill, just beyond an old fieldstone byre. A former granary stands beside it. Giuliano has given both outbuildings over to Paolo's use. Paolo's house itself is new, built with good stone, finished with the same smooth stucco as the villa. The terra cotta tiles of its roof will long outlast both men. Although he is reluctant to part with coin that can be clutched in a fist, Giuliano has spared no expense to see that Paolo is comfortably established. Paolo is as much a chattel of his patron as the shrill peacock that perches on the roof.

Giuliano's own house sits comfortably where the incline of the hill eases away to a broad shelf before rising again to the summit. The estate is on good, productive land, cultivated by Dominicans for one hundred and seventy-six years before Giuliano arrived with his money. *La Castagna* is a fine house with a stark beauty all its own. The lines are severe, the yellow stucco of its walls unadorned; high windows are set in two even rows across the front, a tall door in their centre. A third storey projects above, its covered balcony running on all four sides under the exposed timbers of the eaves. Protected by the rise of the hill at its back from the north wind that sweeps down from the Mugello, it is open on the southwest to a view of the city spanning the river below. In summer, in a certain light, the dull gold of the Arno winds through the valley floor like a river of wheat.

Giuliano likes to use the Medici name after his own, although his connection with it through a series of marriages is tenuous. It is his only public pretension, a fancy easily accommodated by the rest of the family since he is wealthy, he is polished, and he has neither political aspirations nor heirs. The doors of *La Castagna* are open winter and summer in welcome to his many guests, for Giuliano lives all year up here on the hill with his wife Lucia, when she is not at her sister's washing down nostrums for a fruitful confinement. Giuliano enjoys his farm. He keeps an extensive vineyard and a productive olive grove, but his interests are more esoteric.

Paolo Pallavicino is doubly important to him. Not only does he have the discriminating eye necessary to discern the wonderful, and the skilled fingers to fabricate it, he is also something of a wonder himself. There is no artist quite like him and Giuliano gladly provides his living while he works.

A whole suite of rooms houses Giuliano's collection of antique curios, plate, and works of art. The table for viewing stands in the centre of the largest room. Eight chests contain the works in glass and gold and silver, medallions, antique bronzes and mirrors that Giuliano has amassed. Here too are precious gems and corals as well as an ossified tumour from a calf's skull and the third station of the cross carved on a peach stone. It is Giuliano's pleasure to visit this room, his *guardaroba*, in the evenings, either alone or with Paolo, and have the Master of these apartments, his valet Gaetano — with the white beard and the endless patience — present perhaps his latest acquisition, or perhaps some well-loved piece that he had almost forgotten he owned. One day it will be a set of firing pieces with silver handles, the next the horn of a sea creature mounted in silver and supported by dolphins of bronze. There is no end, he likes to say, to the ingenuity of the mind of man, nor to the delight that it can afford the cultivated man.

In a long stone barn a little way off from the house he keeps a menagerie of uncommon beasts, which he calls his ark. It makes no difference to Giuliano whether a thing be an artefact or a freak of Nature. What matters is only that no other man possess it.

Giuliano can hardly wait to present his latest acquisition. He knows she is extraordinary — a little slave girl, no longer a child, nor yet a woman, not exactly a Moor, nor yet a fair-skinned Christian. She will be perfect for Lucia, who shares his love of the rare and the curious.

The markings on the little girl remind him of the drawings of the giraffe kept by one of his great-uncles. As a boy, he longed to see the creature in the flesh, to run his hand over the neck.

Today Lucia returns from a visit to her sister. He will give her the girl. She has asked for one constantly.

GIULIANO'S INVITATION — or summons, Paolo is not sure — is a source of anxiety. He has at this moment a new subject in the byre in readiness for an anatomical demonstration tonight.

Paolo's mind is a mercurial thing, fluid and swift. His interest has long since moved from the feathers that litter his *studio* like the sweepings from some celestial courtyard. He has, in the course of only two years, investigated lenses, seeds, flotation, mortars and glues, armour and fire, in the course of which he accidentally ignited Giuliano's grain shed and burned his own collection of notes on lenses. Of late his interest has alighted on the nature of the animal and the essence of life itself. He searches intently for the vital spark, the seat of life, hoping always to discover its exact location.

Giuliano condones, even encourages, these anatomical investigations. Sometimes, when there are guests to entertain, he himself will attend, but not tonight. Paolo can only think that he has had some sudden objection of conscience.

Although Paolo's guests are due to arrive at any moment, he cannot risk refusing Giuliano. He leaves his house and walks up past the byre to the villa.

It is a relief when Giuliano greets him at the door with open arms and a welcoming smile. He lets Paolo pause for breath after the climb and then he takes him straight to the stairs.

Paolo's value, for Giuliano, lies in his judgement. He is his most trusted adviser, able to assess the worth of things, at a glance, allowing him to sleep soundly in the knowledge that he has not been duped or led astray in the quicksands of artistic merit.

He has, he says, a marvel of Nature to show him. More pleasing by far than a dwarf, more mysterious than a hunchback, this child-woman is neither devil nor angel. Her skin is as pied as the spotted cow that stands in the meadow. The girl, he says, is called Caterina. Dressed in a grey shift, she is waiting by the long window in the *guardaroba* (she can steal nothing for she is wearing no pockets or sleeves). He has thrown open the shutters.

SOFONISBA FABRONI TURNED seventeen on the day her father, Orazio, announced that it was time to take her to Paolo Pallavicino's house to view an anatomical demonstration. Three weeks later, as soon as he received word that Paolo had a subject, Orazio closed up his shop and set out with his daughter early in the afternoon. At once he began to have misgivings. All the way through the narrow streets of the city, Orazio fretted about the security of his shop and whether he had remembered to tell the boy to put both bars across the shutters and whether he had remembered to lock the gold leaf in the strongbox as he had intended. Father and daughter left by the Porta San Gallo and turned westward on the steep road to San Domenico. They had not gone far before Orazio insisted on stopping and

changing mounts. The mare was too skittish for his bones. He gave it to Sofonisba and rode instead on the mule. For the rest of the journey Sofonisba enjoyed her elevated view from the mare's back and tried not to listen to her father's curses about the intractable nature of mules.

La Castagna is a fair climb from the town. When Sofonisba and Orazio arrive at Paolo's own house, there is no one about. Orazio calls out but Paolo does not appear. Instead, his boy Ceccio comes to take the mounts. He says Paolo is up at the villa and they are to make the house their own. Orazio takes him at his word and goes, grumbling and banging the dust out of the skirts of his mantle, up the stairs to find Paolo's bed. Sofonisba watches to make sure the boy stops with the mounts at the water butt before he takes them away. The boy is beautiful with the golden curls of an angel, but that does not mean he has any sense.

Upstairs Orazio pulls the shutters closed against the low sun and lies full length upon the bed, his nose to the ceiling, his arms out at his sides, like a corpse before it has had its boots removed and its hands folded on its breast. It is his favourite position. Sofonisba listens, holding her breath. She wonders how long it will be before her father calls out to her to come and rub his hands. Or his feet. Or his knees. She walks quietly away from the stairs.

Orazio sighs. His bones ache. He wishes they were instead over at the farm where his cousin Iacopo keeps Giuliano's vines. At least Iacopo has a wife who would look after them. The trouble he brings upon himself for the sake of his daughter. All this — this arduous journey, this tedious and revolting demonstration they are to attend — all for the advancement of her skill. And to silence his fellow painters once and for all. It has become tiresome for it to be known everywhere that his daughter executes parts of his work. The question is always being raised at the meetings of his Guild, the *Arte de' Medici e Speziali*. He hopes he has found a way to silence them.

At the last meeting of the *Arte*, Sofonisba's name came up two or three times in connection with Guild affairs. Once, when the question of eligibility was being discussed, Antonello Morelli had asked Orazio pointedly how his daughter was. Orazio had had a schoolboy impulse to strike him. Sofonisba's name came up again when they discussed the fulfilment of contracts and the regulations for subcontracting. Again there was only cowardly innuendo.

By the time the wine went round, Orazio was ready for a challenge. He banged his fist on the table. "It's time you listened to me." Which took everyone by surprise since the last item for discussion had been cleared amicably.

"I understand you well enough. Slanderers. Cowards," he said. "My Sofonisba is not good enough — though no one had said it — "for you. Well, let me tell you, she is as good as any of you."

There were faces round the table that were sheepish, but more for the fact that they felt themselves accused than that they had actually harboured such thoughts; it simply seemed appropriate to look that way. Orazio, after all, was mad enough. But there were others at the table who jolted awake, who could recognize from any distance — even through a haze of wine — the tones that made up the prelude to a fight. It was almost a duty on their part to cry "Never!"

"As skillful, as sure, as gifted, as expert as any of you," Orazio looked around accusingly. "And I know how to prove it. There!" He flung down the letter he had brought to the meeting. The seal was familiar. Some of the others had received the same letter. "The Arcivescovo Andrea is asking for proposals. For a wall in fresco at his country house and for a panel in oil. Well, never mind tenders. Let us propose an open contest. What do you say? I'll approach the Arcivescovo and he'll set the terms. Sofonisba shall enter."

Now here was something more interesting than the endless bickering among themselves.

“If she wins, you can stop up your baggy mouths and quit your slander once and for all.”

“And how shall we know if it is Sofonisba’s work?” asked Landucci, who loved to work in details and was already taking up ink and pen.

“Because if she wins,” Orazio had said, “then she will have to paint equally well. You will see for yourself. And if she loses,” he took the quill from Landucci’s hand and put it back down on the table, “well then, you shall not have to worry.” He raised his cup. There was a general raising of cups, which he took to mean assent.

“Good, then. I shall speak to the Arcivescovo on Thursday, right after Mass.”

Antonello belched and held out his glass.

That Sofonisba should be an artist was not surprising. From her earliest years she had lived in the company of painters, and was raised by Orazio’s model, who was also his mistress. Orazio’s work was much admired and his reputation kept him busy with commissions. In his younger days his circle of painter friends was wide. They came and went in his house at will. The day after his wife died in a fearsome miscarriage, Orazio moved his mistress into the household as nursemaid. When Orazio was working, Sofonisba played at her father’s feet. She made thick, red chalk marks on the plaster wall Orazio used for mapping out the images in his head. The nursemaid slept. When Orazio was not working he rolled with the nursemaid on the wide bed. When Orazio was neither working nor rolling he was carousing with his friends. There was always something to celebrate: a new commission, a feast day, the birth of a child, the death of an enemy, a successful vintage, the execution of a murderer, sun, rain.

Sofonisba grew to be bold and relaxed. She knew that if the guard came hammering at the door, and if the boy finally let them in, and if they thundered past her and bellowed at Orazio, and threw over the tables and chairs in their search for the felon he was supposed to be harbouring, she would not be harmed. She would sit placidly in the corner, playing with a piece of wax, laughing when one of them stumbled or tripped.

Later, she came to know that the leering men and their pawing hands were harmless if the smell of wine were only heavy enough. Then they could be rebuffed, if not with a remark that took them out at the ankles, then with a physical blow from her elbow jabbed into the diaphragm. She had used the trick enough times to know how to make the air come out of them in a squared off cough, and almost their breakfast, too. She knew, besides, that her father, whatever his shortcomings, was her protector; however vile and out of hand his companions might become after a meal, Orazio could be counted on to throw them out, with his own hands if he had to, if they made to harm so much as an eyelash of his daughter’s eye.

But there are fewer companions now for her father, who has fallen into old age like a drunk falling into a gorse bush. His bad temper and his petulant fretting have become customary, and coin is almost all he desires — that and renown. Those who still associate with him do so out of respect for his work, which does not mean that Sofonisba goes unnoticed. For men like Matteo Tassi, who career through life like boys in an orchard, she is one more fruit to snatch at. They are drawn to her for the movement of her breasts and hips, the sweet turning of her figure, and the softness of her skin, never giving a moment’s thought to how unlike she is to the fair-haired loveliness they paint on their panels: the delicate opalescent skin, the painted lips that offer half a smile and never open to show teeth.

There is nothing delicate about Sofonisba. She is a strong young woman, tall enough, somewhat

broad, and very dark with the burnished colouring of Naples or of Sicily. She does not fit the Florentine mould for beauty, nor does she care, for at fifteen she had had a revelation. She had been standing in front of one of her father's paintings eating a peach. The painted Saint Francis was beckoning to a courtly youth who was standing with his back to a table laid for a small but rich feast. The two figures were almost complete but the viands on the table were still suggestions. There was a pheasant with a twisted neck, there were grapes and there was bread, two round loaves, and there, roughed in on the very edge of the table as if about to fall out of the picture was the peach the young man had replaced, his hand still outstretched behind him, in the act of turning toward the saint. Sofonisba's mouth had come suddenly alive with the shock of sweetness. She glanced down at the peach in her hand, caught off guard by the sharpness of the contrast between the velvet of its skin and the slickness of its saturated flesh. Cupped in her palm it made its shape and its mass known to her so that in response she knew suddenly, intimately the cave of her palm and in knowing that she knew also her mouth's hollow and its own moist lining of flesh, contained behind the silky walls, her teeth smooth and strong against them. Everything inside of her and outside was known to her, was contained in that single moment, so that she was aware of the difference, the strangeness, the otherness of every part of creation and how every part had each its own hundred thousand qualities of roughness or darkness or breadth or tensility or moisture or fragility or luminescence or colour or ... She put her own peach on a corner of the table and then, risking her father's wrath, she reached for his mixing board.

Later that day Orazio had worked on for a while, trying to ignore the convincing peach — with a bite out of it! — that somehow had rolled onto the table in his painting. He knew of course that it was Sofonisba's work but it had unnerved him in the way he had been unnerved by the visions of the necromancer that his friend, the goldsmith, had taken him to see: the chimeras that he knew to be deceptions appearing and disappearing in the smoke and he, knowing it to be fakery, but at a loss to say how it was done. The peach was eerily lifelike, as if when he looked back again he would find it drier, discoloured at the bitten edge. Well, good then. He already had more work than he could handle. She would be very useful.

That same afternoon, Orazio looked out of the window to the courtyard and saw Sofonisba sewing caps for the *gettatelli* with the woman who did the cooking. He called her inside. He said the time had come for her to help him in his work. Sofonisba waited, expecting to be told to mix colours or to prepare a size.

“You can finish this fruit,” said Orazio. “Start here with the pomegranate.” Sofonisba took up the brush.

Sofonisba walks quietly through Paolo Pallavicino's study, his *studio*. It takes up almost all of the ground floor of the house. Only a small room with a hearth and a chimney is left for cooking and eating. An outside staircase leads to a covered balcony and the chambers above. Sofonisba assesses the size of the *studio* and the space at Paolo's disposal and compares it to the cramped conditions of her father's shop.

She looks in at a recess in the back wall. It forms a smaller room with its own window. It is lined with shelves like an apothecary's shop, its space almost entirely taken up by a small desk where Paolo prepares his colours. She tries the drawer but it is locked and she guesses this is where he keeps his paper and parchments and his silverpoints. The shelves are packed with jars of oil, tablets of wax, incising knives, ink pots, bowls. There are two pestles, two thick glass grinding plates, a plaster mould, a slab of marble, small copper pots of different sizes, an oil burner, knives and scrapers, rags, pens, sticks of chalk, chunks of pigment. There is enough material here to open a shop to

commissions. But Paolo has no need.

The *studio* itself is high-ceilinged and wide. There are two tables, one almost lost under a drift of feathers. Last year, at the *fiesta* of San Giovanni, Paolo Pallavicino's reputation as a master of spectacle was secured by the giant mechanical dove of his devising that opened its wings above the Piazza Santa Croce and let loose a thick flurry of white eider feathers to float about the heads of the spectators. The white down stayed aloft. It swirled and eddied against the blue sky. Snow in June. No one can forget it. Some said it was a taste of Paradise. In the town there are high expectations of a reprise in June of last year's *fiesta*.

The second table is empty and stands by the window, Paolo's own drawing desk with its easel top and its stool beside it. The drawing surface of the desk is raised and a piece of thick rag paper is tacked up ready, its surface primed the colour of plaster, cloudy white, like a blind eye.

A narrow shelf supported by iron brackets runs the length of one wall at shoulder height, opposite the door. It carries only a few books. The legend Paolo studies belongs to Nature. Her secrets, he likes to say, are everywhere transcribed, her notations inscribed on every leaf, on every bone, on every feather. A man has no need of school. A man has only to use the eyes God gave him. Besides the books, the shelf carries a row of stoppered jars, a stack of plaster tablets bearing the imprint of leaves, some drawing tools, several wax models, both human and animal figures, and a small bronze cast of the head of a cat. Paolo's notebooks flop untidily on the end.

Sofonisba would like to look but does not dare. No one has said when Paolo might return.

She runs her hand through the pile of wings and feathers on the table. They make a husky sound like wheat in summer. Here is every kind of feather, a confusion of lost flight, tools for sculpting air, inscribing sky. Curled swansdown lifts when the pile is stirred, daggers from the magpie's tail, notched flight feathers from the buzzard's wing slide to the floor.

Sofonisba picks up a gull's wing that Paolo has stretched on a reed and fixed with rabbit glue in a flightless arc. It has a faint smell of rotting fish at the base where it has not been cleaned, but its line is beautiful and invites the fingertip to trace. Gulls fly far inland on the blustery days of early spring, when they tumble and scream in the air above the ploughs outside the city. But here too are the wings of birds that have never taken flight, pairings of cuckoo with rooster, crane with goose, wings of Paolo's own creation, no sooner conceived than discarded. She sees the feathers now for what they are, the workings of Paolo's untidy mind, the underside of genius.

Sofonisba is hungry. She hopes Giuliano's fabled hospitality will extend down the hill and manifest itself in some form of sustenance before the night's work begins. Meanwhile, she is at a loss. Paolo is not the most attentive of hosts. Ceccio has said the subject is in the byre. It will require some courage. But she has come here to learn, after all.

PAOLO SENSES HIS PATRON'S EYES searching his face when he pauses at the door of the *guardaroba*.

A small figure dressed in a loose gown of grey wool stands by the window. Giuliano's brief and enigmatic description did not prepare Paolo for what he sees. Under her dark curls the girl's black brow is splashed with a curious white mark in the centre. On the left side the blackness flows round her eye to extend across her cheekbone and down in an irregular shape, tapering to the outside edge of her mouth. Here it picks up and begins to widen again, as it flows past her chin and winds down around her neck. The right side of her face is white and bears only a tracery of black, the shadowing of leaves on a limed wall. She keeps her eyes turned toward the window, her pied arms hanging loose at her sides, her darkly mottled feet planted squarely.

“She speaks?”

“Yes, she speaks. Vittorio had his wife teach her before he brought her here. The man knows how to wring the best price.”

“What’s your name, girl?”

“Caterina, sir.”

“And who is your master?”

“*Signor* Giuliano.”

“Are you a good girl?”

“I am.”

“Where do you come from?”

“I come from the boat.”

Paolo laughs. “But before that?”

The girl’s gaze slides back to the window.

“You’ll get no answer. *I don’t know. I don’t remember. I don’t understand.* You can ask whatever you like. Have you a mother or a father? A brother? A sister? *I don’t remember. I don’t understand.* She’s as stubborn as any of them.”

“And where is she from?”

“Alexandria. Taken from there to Genoa. But before Alexandria who can say? She’s not an Ethiopian, not a Tartar, yet she has something of the look of both. Sometimes it’s best not to delve.

“Do you want to draw her?”

Paolo hesitates.

“Ah, but you have work of your own to do. I had forgotten.”

But Paolo would like to draw this girl. Would like more than anything to see the whole of this strange skin that is so like the hide of a beast, yet smooth, hairless. He has seen this skin on pups that he removed from the belly of a bitch.

“I have no tools with me.”

“I have drawing tools, and a piece of velvet on the table here if you require it. I had them move the table close to the window for you. I’ve inspected every inch of her. She’s a marvel. The instruction you derive is yours but the drawing you make will be mine.”

“Of course. It will be an honour.”

“Take off the gown, Caterina.”

The girl’s eyelids open and she looks from one man to the other.

“Take off the gown. You will not come to any harm.”

The girl undoes a lace at the neck of the gown and pulls it from her shoulders. She wriggles out of it and snatches it up at once to cover herself. Paolo takes it gently and gives her the piece of velvet. She is shivering; it is a movement that begins not on the skin but in the belly.

Paolo pushes a chair into position and motions to her.

“Get up. Get up on the table.”

“Up on the table. Now, Caterina.”

Paolo sees how the shivering increases, sees how the girl’s attention turns in on herself, leaving her eyes blank.

“With respect, *Vossignoria*, I think we shall succeed with patience.”

Giuliano laughs. He puts his arm round Paolo and claps his shoulder amicably.

“I shall stay away,” he says. “I’ve seen all this. Just do whatever has to be done to make me a fine drawing.”

He turns to go.

“And don’t rush. Your subject has all the time in the world.”

PAOLO’S SUBJECT FOR TONIGHT is a pauper who died at the gates of the Stinche as if he were taking himself to the prison in the last hope of charity. It is not clear why he died. He is not an old man, is not perhaps yet forty, nor is his body entirely famished. Paolo’s agents brought it up to the house this morning, wrapped in sacking and hidden under bales of straw in the cart. They took it to the stone byre and laid it out on a heavy table in the centre and when Paolo had seen that all was in order he left it there with the doors locked. When Sofonisba’s knock comes, there is no one to answer it.

“The dead bastard’s in there.”

It is Ceccio, standing a little way off, the low sun making a halo of his unkempt curls.

“I know.”

“The maestro won’t let you in. Not till we’ve got him ready.”

Sofonisba thinks what a good subject this boy would make. He has a lightness about his figure, his neck and his wrists not yet thickened. She would show how the soft, blond curls seem to dance.

“But you can see him. Want me to show you?”

“If you will,” says Sofonisba. Almost before she has finished speaking, Ceccio is forcing a loose board in the door, prying it up and sideways so that it gapes at waist height. He holds it while Sofonisba bends down to look. She straightens up, shocked, then takes a breath and kneels down to peer once again into the crack in the boards. Ceccio giggles.

Light falls into the byre from the gaps in the stone under the eaves. The man’s body is lying on a heavy table. She is looking straight past the soles of its bare feet away down its length, past the male member curved in its nest of hair, past the cage of the standing ribs to its barrel chest with the minute nipples just breaking the line of sight and beyond them the scrawny neck and then the dark stubble of the chin. The man’s hands lie at his sides, the palms upturned. Her heart panics. The head is raised slightly on a block as if on a pillow and she can see the lovely lines of the mouth at rest, the closed eyes. There is no border between sleep and death.

She gets up and looks at Ceccio. He makes a lewd gesture with his hand at his groin. Sofonisba brings the back of her hand smartly to his head and he stops smiling.

She is filled with confusion. What is it about the corpse? It lies on the table with its eyes closed — and she is at its feet. Why does she think of Christ? Why does she? She knows the Christ figure. It is vertical. Its arms are outstretched. Its mouth drawn down in pain. This man could be asleep after a

long and difficult journey. Or in Heaven.

“Want to see something else?”

“No. I want to eat. My father will too when he gets up.”

“I can get you something.”

“But first I will look again.”

THE GIRL IS NOT BEAUTIFUL. And she must know this, wherever she came from. She is an aberration. Against Nature. She is not beautiful and yet her face has a pleasing form and her eyes are lively. Her hair is abundant and tightly curled. Her cheek bones are too broad and too high perhaps, but not out of keeping. She is pleasingly proportioned. But her skin — the mark of Cain could be no worse. To live inside such skin is to be clothed in disgrace, to go about the world as a herald — the blasphemy will not be suppressed — of God’s cruel indifference. Paolo wonders how she came to be purchased at all. How she survived her birth. He pictures her on the dock at Genoa where the newly arrived captives are displayed on barrels. He wonders why she is not at the bottom of the harbour.

He pushes the chair closer to the table. The girl stares at her feet but cannot seem to move them. Paolo puts his arm behind her to help her, but still her shaking continues and her feet remain planted. Paolo sighs quietly, and bends toward her as if he will lift her up, drapery and all, and deposit her like a bundle of bed linen on the table. But he is not quick enough. She turns and steps back, leaving him stooped, his arms extended, like a farm boy trying to force a pig into a pen. Twice, three times he tries to get behind her and each time she turns, rotating her hips away from his reach in a strange dance of seduction and flight. Paolo laughs out loud, seeing their dance suddenly through Giuliano’s eyes. He straightens up and turns away with a shrug, folds his arms.

The girl senses this is a signal. She steps up carefully and climbs onto the table to kneel in the centre, facing the window, her back to him, her head bowed.

Paolo turns round. He tilts his head and wonders what she imagines will happen next. The shivering has stopped. Her attitude is one of abandonment. She has left her body, as the condemned do. He goes up behind her and lifts the velvet away. She does not resist. Paolo catches his breath. He wants only to look and to look.

Her mottled back is in shadow. The soles of her feet, upturned beneath her, are dusty and show white. He walks round and stands facing her with his back to the window. A second time he catches his breath, though he is careful not to let her see. What he had expected were dark blotches, disfigurations of uneven hue and texture, blemishes, perhaps some of them raised. What he sees draws his eye and fixes it. She is holding her arms in close, crossing them in front so that only the upper half of her breasts is exposed. The skin there is smooth. She is in the full light of the window and, though there is no tree outside to cast shadows, her body is dappled. The markings are irregular in shape, larger than oak leaves in places, and the colour of the blackest loam. They are dispersed over her pale skin. So smooth he wants to touch. Her thighs, too, are covered with the markings. He comes closer. The light striking her side obliquely shows the surface of her skin to be entirely without flaw. It is as sleek, he thinks, as the flank of a horse. A piebald colt. No wart or scab or boil upon it. He touches her waist, would have liked to stroke but instead reaches across to unclasp her fingers from her arms.

As he does so he catches the look in her eyes and he knows his own eyes are too greedy, too curious. He cannot see enough. He examines her closely, lifting her limbs to see the underside, peering under her hair at the nape of her neck, parting her legs. When he has seen every inch of her, he sits

down and closes his eyes. The girl waits a while, a while longer and then she makes a move toward the edge of the table.

Paolo opens his eyes. "No, don't get down," he says. "We shall begin." He takes up Giuliano's drawing board and a red chalk and begins with quick strokes to lay her figure on the page. His eyes travel her skin inch by inch, flick away to the page, return, inch by inch, measuring, noting every marking, noting more than the girl knows herself.

The girl keeps her eyes fixed on something outside, far away through the open shutters.

SOFONISBA AND HER FATHER sit on the benches in front of Paolo's house and watch the day seep into the west. The sky there is flooded with rose and lavender, marigold and violet. The distant hills darken and mass. In the valley the river turns first to gold, then copper; eastward it is already a deep Lenten purple. The guests have seen their host only briefly when he came down from the villa. Ceccio brought them onions and broth and pieces of salted fish. Orazio said that if he did not find them some wine he would have his master pull his ears off. He cannot wait for this night to be done, wonders why he ever suggested it. He grumbles to himself, cross that he expends his time and strength preparing Sofonisba for his trade when he would do better simply to marry her off. It is a thought Orazio entertains often, despite his fear of losing his most valuable assistant.

Sofonisba too would like the night to be over. She cannot stop thinking of the uncommon beauty of the bones of the man's face even in death, the humble patience of the cadaver, waiting in state to serve them. She gets up and goes into the house to light a lamp. It gives a feeble glow but will look brighter in a little while. In daylight the undertaking was nothing but education, an apprenticeship in anatomy but the approaching darkness gives the night's enterprise a flavour of sin that she did not taste before. They have torches by them, ready to light when Ceccio comes to tell them it is time.

Paolo Pallavicino insists on performing his demonstrations at night. The idle and the foolish, who might otherwise have a mind to peer in on what he does in the stone byre, will be deterred by the dark and by their own ungodly imaginations; for while it might be forward thinking and plumped with prestige to conduct an anatomical dissection in a public lecture hall in Padua, it is quite another thing — it is in fact tainted with criminality — to perform the same by the light of lamps in a disused cowshed at the dead of night. In this way, by throwing a cape of terror about his activities, Paolo seeks to preserve their sanctity.

The terror at first was almost too much for Ceccio. Once, when it was time to get up and assist Paolo, he tried pretending to be unable to rouse, lying there with his long-lashed eyes closed against the dark, moaning as if in sleep. But that only moved Maestro Paolo to anger. He had taken hold of him and shoved him to the corpse's side, made him kneel and there, by the dead man's face, make his apologies for his tardiness. "Poor shred of a lost soul," Paolo had said. "You're lucky I don't lock you in here to spend the whole night with him." But the moment that Ceccio fears most, the moment that gives him nightmares of the worst unwaking kind, is when Maestro Paolo asks him to carry the unwanted parts away. Because Ceccio has little wit and Paolo Pallavicino too much, neither of them would think to use the barrow. Maestro Paolo would be scribbling notes still with his hair singeing in the flame of his candle, while Ceccio would clasp to his chest some unnamed, unnameable mass wrapped in a damp and stained sheet and already smelling putrid. Tonight Ceccio stumbles once, the thing is so heavy, for Paolo Pallavicino has isolated the upper torso on the block, leaving the arms attached for ease of handling. The rest is almost more weight than Ceccio can manage in one trip.

Yet it would never occur to him to leave Paolo's employ. There are, he knows, terrors greater than

this at large in the world. His Uncle Federigo is one of them. Federigo calls himself a necromancer. He does the work that Paolo can ask no other man to do. Ceccio thought once to return to this man who gave him away to Paolo for a price. He went with him up to the ruins above the villa. He cannot remember now what made him go. Promises? Threats? A memory of his mother's voice? There was not just Federigo but four, five more men with the smell of wine heavy on their breath. Ceccio remembers following the staggering path to the ruins, shivering with cold. So cold he was that when they finally stopped climbing he drank what was offered. His shaking hands made the neck of the wineskin jab at his lips. They wrapped a blanket over him, over his head. One man lit a fire, placed him near. The fire began to crackle and leap. When he felt its warmth he thought he could stay there and sleep with the voices all around. In a little while he did indeed begin to dream; yes, it was a dream, later he was sure. He dreamt of hands and legs about him, bare flesh on his, hot breath, his back parts exposed. Something unspeakable at his face, at his mouth, his eyes crying hot tears, fear and darkness welling from the centre of his being and leaking from every part of him. He remembers pain beyond words. He woke next day in the hay cart calling for Paolo, calling.

Ceccio does not think to go away again. Paolo has told him he will stay forever. He both fears and needs Paolo. He will stay with Paolo until he dies. He has the wits to direct his own way among the many artisans who could use a willing boy, but why should he? Paolo puts food in his mouth, gives him a warm bed and never beats him hard. And if Paolo himself is overtaken by sudden urges in the night, well, they are soon over. And this other thing he does, this meddling with the dead, it does not happen often.

Tonight Ceccio will keep the working table clean. He will keep the wick on the lamps trimmed and hold a candle near for Paolo if there is a difficulty. He will bring the laver whenever Maestro Paolo needs to rinse his hands.

Paolo has set the torso upright on the table. He sharpens the knife he will use for flaying. It is no good asking Ceccio to do it. It would not be done to Paolo's liking. Apart from fetching and carrying, Ceccio has only one real use. There was a time when Paolo thought of finding a more suitable lad to assist him in this demanding work but he kept Ceccio by him nevertheless, hoping perhaps that the beauty of the boy might serve as a charm against the defilement of the knife, as if the mere presence of beauty, like terror, could bestow sanctity. And Paolo now thanks God he did, for Ceccio has a prodigious memory, a talent so great, an ability so extraordinary it might be supernatural. He parrots back, without understanding but in perfect order, every word Paolo speaks during a dissection. The other man wonders sometimes to himself if this is diabolic possession, but the marvellous faculty is too useful to ignore. It is, when afterwards he is making notes, like being given the gift of reliving the night.

Tonight the work will be easy. He is going no deeper than the bed of muscle that lies like a smoothly undulating landscape beneath the skin.

UP AT THE VILLA, Giuliano is pacing the terrace in his stockinged feet. His wife, Lucia, is combing her hair in her bedroom and thinking of the sweet, cool linen of her bed. Caterina, the girl, lies like a dog in the passage, but with her eyes open against the night. Giuliano crosses his arms over his skinny ribs while he considers what to do. His long fingers clutch the embroidered silk of his vest and twist it. The fingers of his other hand run restlessly over his wispy beard, opening and closing like the ribs of a fan. How he wishes he had Paolo's attention tonight. He needs his advice. He hooks his fingers and plays them on his mouth as if to tap out words that would be of use. Lucia was not happy. He chose the wrong time, he knows it now. She was tired after her journey. The two grooms he had sent with her for

protection had ridden too hard. The cook's wife, who was supposed to provide company was about as entertaining as a piece of dough. It was a mistake presenting the girl to Lucia as soon as she returned. How could she show delight when she was tired and dusty?

He had had his wife wait in the reception room, had seated her square to the door so that he could see her face when he came in with the girl. She was astonished. She was certainly astonished. But he knew it was more than that. A small frown had gathered between her eyebrows and then her lower lip had pulled sharply down as her neck tensed. She drew back against her chair as if being tugged by an invisible attendant. Two, three times she opened her mouth to draw a breath and speak, each time looking to him and back at once to the girl.

"I cannot think what to say," she said at last. "Let her wait outside." Then, "Will she run away?"

"Of course not," said Giuliano. He closed the door. "Where would she go?"

Lucia stood up. She took the huge breaths of one released from great danger.

"I don't know what to say," she said again. "What is wrong with her? Is she clean? What is this affliction that covers her? What were you thinking?"

Giuliano did his best to calm her fears but Lucia simply closed her eyes and moved her head with tiny motion from side to side, as if stopping his words from finding the passage to her ears.

When he had said all he could possibly think of to reassure her, she opened her eyes.

"We will decide what to do with her in the morning. If there is no disease, let her sleep in the passage. And now I am very, very tired. God keep us, protect us from harm, and bring us safe to morning."

THE BYRE IS WELL LIT. It might be a chapel, the table an altar. The torches the guests brought with them burn in sconces on the walls. Four lamps hang from the rafters above the table. The table is rugged, constructed especially for this work. The knives and saws hang from hooks on the sides. Two buckets stand underneath and a short-handled axe lies beside them. Sofonisba's heart is pounding. Her gaze returns to the mound on the table, discretely covered with a sheet. She clutches her drawing board and her box of tools. She has two pages prepared for silverpoint. For the rest she will make sketches in chalk. Paolo has set two stools by. He invites Sofonisba and her father to make a drawing of the subject before he begins. Sofonisba sits down. While she is opening her box and taking out her silverpoint, she hears Paolo removing the sheet. It will require a conscious effort of will to bring her eyes back again to the table.

"There is no need," he is saying — for her benefit, she knows it — "to be afraid of the flesh. The flesh itself —" She looks up and there it is, the sad, comic stump of the man, his arms too long now for his truncated body, what is left of his neck angled slightly, suggesting the absent head to the struggling mind. "— gives no cause for fear. Only the spirit that informs the flesh in life has power to do us harm."

Ceccio is lighting candles at a small table to the side, where cloths are folded and a basin of water stands ready for washing. Sofonisba's eye is still denying what it sees on the table. Orazio reaches out and taps her arm.

"Begin."

Paolo continues to talk quietly about the nature of flesh, its affinity with earth, with clay, with stone, the importance of water. His voice is soft, as if he is trying to soothe a skittish horse. Sofonisba

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