Agnolo

THE SECRET

by

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Introduction

In Florence, while in hiding, a holy young nun of French royal blood named Maria Josephine died mysteriously as she gave birth to a beautiful blonde, blue eyed boy she named Agnolo. After her arrival to Florence less than a year prior, because of her beauty and holiness, Sister Maria Josephine was chosen to work at Cardinal Carafa's residence where she served God and man. The infant was adopted by Benvenuto and Francisca Cellini, a loving but barren couple who had served as surrogate parents to Michelangelo during his mother's ailment and after her death. The Cellinis owned a marble quarry in Settignano, from which many artists acquired slabs for their statues.

When the unique light complexion Agnolo was three, Francisca Cellini gave birth to a beautiful dark headed girl named Chola. Agnolo and Chola were inseparable and Michelangelo was their loving brother. Agnolo, a compulsive and prolific artist with talents that made masters envious, was "different". In addition to his uncommon physical appearance, he was hearing impaired, his speech was unclear, his left arm was partially lame and shook involuntarily, and he communicated with doves that surrounded him since his infancy.

Through his childhood and adolescence, Agnolo was misunderstood, teased, ridiculed, and punished for well-intended infractions. Because of his light complexion, his cruel classmates nicknamed him "Mezzo Cotto" or Half Baked. But, Agnolo continued to bring life to the stone and create numerous marvelous statues while fulfilling his mission of expressing love to everyone. To the dismay of many church leaders, Agnolo quoted the Bible saying: "The spirit of the Lord is upon me because the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the afflicted; He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted; to proclaim liberty to captives and freedom to prisoners." It was not clear whether the boy was demon possessed or a holy angel. However, most people agreed that he was too compulsive, too erratic, and too strange. He just did not fit the mold of a normal adolescent his age. But, his innocence was his alibi and his holiness an excuse.

Chola was his great inspiration and the reason he continued to create. She loved him and everything he said and everything he made.

After an Easter celebration that went wrong, Agnolo was thought to be dead. When he reappeared, Cardinal Carafa sought to see him, show kindness towards the misunderstood lad, and compensate him for his suffering. Many resented Agnolo, blamed him for misfortune that others around him suffered, and never understood the cardinal's overwhelming concerns for the welfare of the lad.

After a series of attempts to harm Agnolo, who continued to feed the needy, heal the sick, and provide comfort to many, Cardinal Carafa insisted that Agnolo becomes the model for a massive art project that was awarded to Michelangelo – the statue of David. The idea of David was Agnolo's, but Michelangelo ultimately managed to covertly steal the idea and convince Agnolo to refuse Cardinal Carafa's offer to lead the project.

Michelangelo, who was in love with Chola, had to conceal his feelings because of societal taboos. He was also aware of the worrisome close relationship between Agnolo and Chola and how the two disappeared for long periods in a place that Agnolo had discovered – a place that he called the "palace". Despite his elaborate description of the heavenly beauty of the palace, no one believed him thinking that Agnolo, who had difficulty separating dreams from reality, was either describing a fictitious place or possibly an obscure or forsaken cave.

At the palace, Agnolo learned secret carving techniques and he created a heavenly family that awaited his visits to dance with him and fly in orbits while unimaginable beauty and peace surrounded the heavenlike place.

At the plaza, where Michelangelo carved David and Agnolo modeled, conflicts rose. Michelangelo's love for Chola, who had consummated her relationship with Agnolo at the palace, was a source of great pain. But with his worldly status, wealth, and fame, Michelangelo found a way to seduce Chola to his lavish apartment.

Michelangelo's inaccurate depiction of Agnolo's genital, as that of an uncircumcised heathen boy, and Agnolo's mastery of new secret carving techniques strained the already tense relationship between the two brothers.

Before her death, Sister Teresa felt obligated to reveal to Francisca that Cardinal Carafa was Agnolo's father. Chola, who was found with child, inadvertently learned that Agnolo was not her brother. Francisca and Chola had to decide whether to tell Agnolo that he was adopted and that Cardinal Carafa was his father.

When Cardinal Carafa was sacked, Agnolo became vulnerable. In alliance with the rebel forces and the consent of the Vatican, Agnolo was tried in absentia and was condemned to die for heresy and witchcraft. After a series of attempts on his life, Agnolo disappeared.

From a wide gap at the palace entrance, a large and mighty white dove flew over. It looked down and made eye contact with Chola and her mother before it was escorted by two large and majestic white doves. Where the three flew, bright light emanated. Francisca and Chola watched the three doves as they disappeared to join the many stars in the endless dark skies.

Beneath a large boulder at the blocked palace gate lay a blood-stained white dove. Under the wings of the slain dove, two unhatched eggs could barely be seen.

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The Blessings of the Saints

That year, in mid-winter sometime around Christmas, the earth opened its mouth and gave and took as it shook violently for a very short few moments. For a while, the sun in heaven was blocked from view till the evening came, when a bright star appeared in the red skies.

The ravens scattered as a flock of doves flew to claim the air and land around the Cathedral of the Living Saints in Florence. The church bells rang in agony as it announced that a living saint had died. But, out of the church came only a small band of monks carrying a body wrapped in white. They were followed by a handful of nuns. The procession moved from the cathedral to a graveyard that was a short distance west of the main sanctuary. A nun, a saintly and young nun, had died mysteriously!

In Florence, that day, the small world of a few seemed to be filled with sorrow while others' with unanticipated joy.

As the church bells rang, the holy soul of a gentle nun was greeted at the gates of heaven. She had come to Florence less than a year prior. Some say she was of royal blood and rumors of her love for the Lord had made her leave the French royal palaces of Charles VIII to enter the convent in Florence after a divine apparition from the holy lady herself. Others had traded unclean suspicions of her motives for leaving life with all that it had to offer in the French palaces to travel to Florence and enter the convent.

The church bells rang, and a small choir sang.

(Song 1: Castelli in Aria)

And when she found no resting place on earth to land her feet she went back home to paradise
And when the gates of heaven opened holy angels sang and filled the bright and joyful skies
And then they played the wedding march and Jesus said I do and gently kissed his holy bride
And wiped her tears of painful years and vowed that she will always reign right by his side.

Sister Maria Josephine was very young. She had disappeared from the abbey a few months prior. Most nuns loved her as a devout sister and her beauty, holiness, and diligence earned her a place to work at the home of the Cardinal himself. There, she found a comfortable place to serve the cardinal and the master of all creation, the Lord, the Christ! Now her tiny body lied dead of unknown causes.

Sister Maria's disappearance from her duties at the cardinal's house several months prior alarmed many of those around her, but rumor spread that she was chosen for an unplanned

visit to the Holy Land. To these rumors many wished that they had been the ones that were chosen for such a great and costly privilege. When the news of her death reached the covenant, some believed that she may have contracted a disease while on her alleged journey to the Holy Land. Others who made the journey themselves believed that the trip by land or by sea could weaken the very strong, much less a young and fragile nun who never made time to eat as she prayed most of her day.

What was not known to most was the fact that several months before, in late spring, Sister Maria Josephine sought shelter at Sister Teresa's home as she was found with a child. For months, Sister Maria received the help and gracious service of Sister Teresa.

Sister Teresa, a respected and pious nun and a midwife whose love for children and the desolate brought many smiles to the almighty and his servants, felt the joy and the sadness of a father as he gave his daughter a way at her wedding. With great devotion, Sister Teresa devoted her prime years to helping the distressed and providing a safe sanctuary for anyone who sought it.

Sister Maria was typically quiet, but her joy and sadness could not be hidden from her face. From time to time, her light blue eyes would spontaneously yield tears that flowed over her fair skinned cheeks and soaked the light blonde lockets of hair that did not seem to want to stay in one place for too long. Filled with the spirit of the Lord, she prayed and sang to the child within her. And when it moved within her, she gave thanks to the creator. The baby seemed to always know when it was time to pray and would appear to curl in a ball as if it were bowing within its mother's womb. From time to time, Sister Maria would speak of her life in the royal palaces of France. A few warm tears seemed to flow from her light blue eyes as she talked about her family and often she would reach for a gold locket around her neck and open it up with a sorrowful smile. Sister Maria always spoke with optimism. "The Lord will bless my child, despite all the circumstance," she was heard uttering from time to time. Sister Teresa never probed or inquired about the details of Sister Maria's conception, but she knew that it had to have happened shortly after Sister Maria's arrival to the convent in Florence.

Sister Teresa was certain that Sister Maria did not come to Florence to hide her pregnancy from the royal society of France. And in her sleep, Sister Maria talked; and Sister Teresa could not help but hear.

From her room at Sister Teresa's home, Sister Maria looked out the small window that brought in light to the room during the day. The humble home did not afford the stained-glass windows that were found in the homes of the wealthy, but the windows could be shut by shutters when needed. Daily, a flock of doves came and sat at the edge of the window. They sang and watched while Sister Maria prayed. When one left, another one was certain to take its place.

Even as the darkness set, no less than three doves were always found there. From time to time, they brought their young who with their own high pitch tried to join the adult chorus.

Two trusted nuns from the cathedral often came to visit. They seemed to care greatly about the health of Sister Maria and were very kind to bring in many gifts that included foods and spices. It was unclear how they found out that Sister Maria was a guest of Sister Teresa, but during these days, even in a large city like Florence the eyes of the mighty and the probe of the persistent could uncover practically all that is meant to be concealed. Every day, the two sisters dropped by to check on the health of Sister Maria and pray together for the forgiveness of all their sins. They lit candles that were prayed over by the Cardinal himself and burned incent that came from far away. They asked Sister Maria many questions about her life before she came to Florence and were very interested in whether Sister Maria was still in contact with any of her family in France. Their inquiry seemed more than curiosity and their kindness gradually appeared motivated. As a lamb before an altar, Sister Maria was helpless and without defense.

(Song 2: Lord of the Injured)

One morning, after she prayed, Sister Maria felt unusual pains. Sister Teresa rushed to inquire about the pain. It appeared to be birth pains. As Sister Teresa was heating water in a large pan in preparation for the delivery, there was a knock at the door and the two sisters from the cathedral allowed themselves into the room where Sister Maria was lying in pain. Sister Maria's pain seemed to increase in frequency and intensity. And when it was time to deliver the baby, the two sisters prayed as the baby breathed his first breath.

Sister Maria held her baby and tried to look into his unfocused and crying eyes as she prayed. "Oh, my precious baby. You are beautiful!" She whispered to him: "You my son are called Agnolo – you will be my little Agno," she said. And, as though the tiny infant understood what his mother had said, he breathed hard and found one of her fingers which he tightly grabbed with both hands and squeezed with the passion of a dove. The two nuns held Sister Maria's hand and kissed her forehead as they gave her some spices to ease her afterbirth pains and help her regain her strength. The pricy spices were a generous gesture sent by Father Bronzino who was the assistant to the presiding cardinal, Alessandro Carafa.

After Sister Teresa and the two nuns washed the baby with warm water and relieved his mother of the afterbirth, Sister Teresa carried the crying baby to his mother where he could suckle. The two nuns who were preoccupied with cleaning chores did not notice what had happened. When they saw the baby at his mother's breast, they dropped what they were doing. And in an obvious panic, they quickly pulled the infant away from his mother's breast and inspected him. Sister Maria submissively protested: "Could I just hold him for five minutes. Please, just five more minutes!" The nuns politely asserted that it was not healthy for either the

mother or the baby to allow the infant to nurse that soon. Sister Teresa, who had delivered many babies through her life, was perplexed but ultimately consented. She placed the tiny infant in his mother's bosom and covered both with clean linen cloths.

"Is he going to be OK?" asked the young nun.

"He better be. Or, we are both in deep trouble!" Noted the other.

Outside the room that held Sister Maria and her baby, loud noises were heard. A flock of ravens were engaged in a deadly fight with a lesser number of doves. As feathers disengaged and scattered from both sides, the sky began to rain lightly. The two foes settled on separate sides of the narrow street as they watched each other's move and waited for the rain to stop.

A few minutes after Sister Maria Josephina gave birth to her baby boy, she died quietly while holding him. Without a word, Sister Maria gave up her spirit while gazing at her newly born child.

When Sister Teresa realized what had happened, she was dumbfounded and speechless. With great sorrow in her eyes, she pulled the baby's hand which was still clinched around one of his dead mother's fingers. The baby convulsed violently while letting out a very loud cry. The two visiting nuns grabbed him in panic thinking that he might had died. They looked into his eyes and examined his breathing. In a few minutes, the infant resumed breathing and whimpering.

"He must have received his mother's departing spirit," said the older nun.

Despite her years of experience in delivering babies, Sister Teresa could not explain the cause of Sister Maria's death. She tried to recap what had happened and find an explanation for Sister Maria's unexplained death, but was unsuccessful. She could not deny that this delivery was somewhat complicated knowing that the baby's left hand came out first as if it were reaching for someone or something. But, Sister Teresa could not understand how that may had led to the young nun's death.

The events of the day were wearing on Sister Teresa. After a few minutes of being busy with the infant and his diseased mother, the two sisters departed Sister Teresa's home filled with some human sadness and unsatisfying joy.

Soon after Sister Maria was received by the Lord of heavens, Sister Teresa sent a messenger to Signora Francisca Cellini, a close friend of hers and a wet mother who lived in Settignano, a small and beautiful town near Florence to ask her to come and take care of the new born baby.

A few hours later that evening, while the funeral procession of Sister Maria was moving away from the cathedral, on a street corner, not too far from the cathedral, toiled a family to safely

bring a baby wrapped in white linen from Sister Teresa's home into a humble wagon. If it were not for the angelic yawns and few loud cries that the boy made, the scene of the family and the wrapped infant could have been mistaken for a small procession to burry a dead infant.

From his place, the infant looked all around at everything, inspecting every face and looking without ceasing into each set of eyes that he could find. His hair was light and clear as if it were not even there and his eyes were light blue. He stared with his available eyes at his new world and tightly hugged and hugged everything he could touch. He cried like no other child. It was as if he were talking in an unknown language, but in musical rhythm and perfect rhyme. When he suckled, he would stop and breathe hard, then without notice he would persistently and with vigor suckle again till with heavy eyes he whimpered in rhythm as if he were praying. His forehead damped with perspiration, so he slept while gazing into Francisca's eyes.

In his sleep, the infant convulsed a few times. He opened his eyes for a moment then closed them. Francisca was frightened and thought that he had died. But, in a few seconds, he began to breathe normally and entered into a long and deep sleep.

A host of doves, all in pairs, began to fly above with their young. They joyfully fluttered their wings. The doves and their young came to stare. And, wherever they found a place, they perched in peace all around. In a distance, a flock of ravens watched.

The Cellini's journey home was filled with song and praise. A new born has found a place to stay with them – even if only for a while. Sister Teresa waved good bye and stood at the door of her home until the procession of the family and the host of accompanying doves grew smaller and their voices broke up into a faint noise mixed with the sound of the wind.

As the Cellini's wagon found its way into the horizon, the shadow of two horsemen, likely monks or two church guards, appeared to follow them from street to street, between buildings, and above and below hills. Several blocks behind, two different cloaked horsemen followed the Cellinis and their stalkers. When the wind blew, it unveiled the heavy arms these cloaked men carried. All the arms and the Horses' side mounts were marked with the French monarchy's coat of arm. The cloaked men were apparently French knights from the royal court of the king of France.

After she shut her door, Sister Teresa knelt to pray. She prayed for the soul of Sister Maria and the life of her new born son. She cried in sadness and smiled as she remembered the baby. Her prayer was interrupted by the sound of firm knocking at her door. There, in their black habits, the two nuns from the cathedra stood. They wanted to know where the baby was taken and asked many questions about the family that adopted him. Sister Teresa explained that Signora and Signore Cellini is a devout couple who lives in Settignano where they own a marble quarry and manage other quarries owned by affluent Florentine families. The Cellinis have not

been blessed with children and despite years of prayers and supplications the couple was not able to have a baby. Because of her love for children and her pure heart, Signora Francisca decided to serve as a wet mother for children whose mothers were ill or had died. About eight years prior, Ludovico di Leonardo Buonarroti Simoni, learned about the piety and kindness of Signora Francisca and her husband through Sister Teresa and brought his young child named Michelangelo for Signora Francisca to tenderly take care of him while his mother Francesca di Neri del Miniato di Siena fought to regain her strength during a persisting ailment. The beloved Michelangelo spent most of his early childhood with Signore and Signora Cellini. In fact, it was only when he reached the age of ten, that his father Signore Ludovico, Michelangelo's father thought to bring the young lad back to Florence to study grammar under the famous known Humanist Francesco da Urbinoagainst. This was against the wishes and desires of young Michelangelo who could not image the idea of living away from the beauty that was Settignano with its marble quarries where he spent most of his day playing and climbing from rock to rock and hiding from cave to cave.

The Cellini family suffered greatly after Michelangelo was summoned to Florence. His departure was a shock to the loving Cellini couple. And the idea of seeing him in Florence was inconceivable since he was placed on a very strict schooling program that was more like a monastery than a school.

It was a week or so after Michelangelo's departure that Signora Francisca had an apparition. It was so real. There was no denial that it was divinely inspired. So real, in fact, that Signora Francisca could not separate it from reality. The apparition happened as she was laying down for an afternoon siesta. In it, it seemed as if her soul and body were separated. And, her soul floated over her body and looked down at it – her body still laying on the bed. In the same room, there was a wardrobe that held a statue of the Holy Mother on top of it. As Signora Francesca's soul glanced at the statue, she realized that the Holy Mother was crying. When Francisca asked the Holy Mother why she was crying, she replied with an answer that Francisca could not remember. Then the Holy Mother asked Francisca why she was crying. Francisca told her that they missed their adopted son Michlo and that she and her husband have not been able to have any children of their own. In the apparition, the Holy Mother instructed Signora Francisca to take a pilgrimage with her husband to a holy site where they would be blessed. After their return, the Holy Mother said, they will be blessed with children. Francisca gave thanks to the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Francisca bowed to the Holy Mother, who stopped her and told her to rejoice in the Lord. When Francisca's soul joined her body back, she was again laying on her bed, but still in transition between sleep and awakening. In her room, she saw a clothesline that extended from the door to the window. On the clothesline, there were three crosses pined to the middle of the rope. They were all beautiful, different, and their beauty changed and transformed constantly. As a gentle wind blew, the crosses

seemed to dance and slowly sway. Two of the three crosses became entangled together and formed a beautiful larger eight-pointed cross. Francisca woke up to the sound of a pair of doves singing at her room window. For a few minutes afterwards, Francisca was speechless. She did not know if she had died or if she was alive. When she was able to think or move, she gathered some food and began walking toward the quarry where her husband was working. The walk was short and in a few minutes Signore Benvenuto was walking towards her after he had heard her approaching. They hugged and sat down. "Venu," she said. "I saw the Holy Mother of God today!" "She told me that we will have a baby." "Franca," I can't believe what you are saying. I am absolutely stunned and frightened. Today, while I was asleep, the holy mother also came to me in a dream and told me …" Benvenuto could not finish his sentence when Francisca interrupted him saying, "We must take a pilgrimage to the holy site at ..." And, before Francisca could complete her sentence, Benvenuto uttered: "St. Francis!" The holy site of St. Francis happened to be the same site that the Holy Mother had told Francisca to visit. Indeed, it was exciting but a frightening experience for the couple. "No one would believe us, if we were to tell our miracle dreams!" The couple agreed.

After consulting with Bishop Fontana at the church in Settignano, the Cellini's went on a long pilgrimage that lasted for almost an entire year. It was an incredible time for the two of them. After going through so much and surviving the dangers of the journey, they became closer than they could imagine. Upon their return, they brought many gifts and holy relics from the places they had visited. Of the most valuable gifts, they spared three special rosaries – one for Sister Teresa, one for Michelangelo, and one for their trusted housekeeper, Tota.

Their return home was barely a week before they received the messenger from Sister Teresa that told them to come and take care of the infant.

When Benvenuto and Francisca traveled to Turin and St. Francis for their pilgrimage, they left a trusted lady named Tota in charge of maintaining the cottage. Tota tended to the cottage once or twice a week and lit candles and prayed for the safe return of her extended family. She anointed the home on weekly bases and burned incent every chance she could.

The sweet mannered middle age lady had not children of her own and she could see only out of her right eye. She was also hearing impaired. Her handicaps were said to be due to a childhood disease or injuries.

For two days after Benvenuto and Francisca returned, Tota did not know that they had returned. On the third day, Benvenuto rode his horse to the remote part of the quarry where Tota's small hut stood. He took some gifts that they had brought from the trip along with the holy rosary and told her that Francisca needed her help with their baby. The news of the baby were too much for the loyal and devoted Tota. Tota rejoiced and on her knees she cried and

gave thanks to the Lord who heard her prayers. Benvenuto held back his tears and he helped her up. He went on his way home to allow Tota a little time to gather some of her needed items. Shortly afterwards, Tota showed up on her donkey at the Cellini family cottage.

Tota was unaware of how the Cellinis got the infant child. Without even asking any questions, she assumed that he was conceived to the family while they were on their journey – in answer to prayers.

Three days prior, when the Cellini family got to their country home with the tiny infant who seemed to continuously suckle, they rushed to prepare a place for the new and unexpected addition to their family. Things were still dusty and despite Tota's diligent care of the property, dust from the quarry seemed to stubbornly ignore her efforts. Across from the room where the couple slept, there was another large room which was divided by several straw curtains into smaller sections. It was in that room that Michelangelo had slept and in another section the room there was another bed where Tota also slept. In that room, the Cellinis set a small crib as well as a stand on which they put a small statue of the Virgin Mary. They surrounded the statue with several candles. They called the baby, Agnolo. It was the name that Sister Teresa told them that the boy's mother had uttered when she first saw her child before she released her spirit.

On the edge of the large window frame in the room where the baby lay, several doves perched and watched. From time to time, the doves flew in and perched at the sides of the crib where the baby lay. They chanted, sang, and seemed to never want to leave the place. Whenever one flew off, others replaced it. Agnolo seemed aware of the company of the doves from his first day at home. Long before his eyes were able to focus, he always turned his head to follow the sound of his entertaining friends. His parents heard him giggle and laugh as the doves chattered and hummed. And in a unique way, he seemed to communicate with them.

In Settignano, nature declares the glory of God and angels sing while flowers dance at the tunes of mandolins and the beat of hammers stricking chisels. The Cellini family home in Settignano was a relatively large size cottage, compared to the other scattered rural homes in the area. It was made of unfinished stone and marble with several frescos wherever there was room on the walls, ceilings, or floor. This homey cottage was situated on several acres that accommodated the many hills which made up a large marble quarry. Long before Signore Benvenuto Cellini fell in love with Francesca Medici, his grandfather Domenico Cellini had bought the quarry and built a summer home on its marble base. With the rise in interest in the arts and the sweeping renaissance, Domenico was convinced that the purchase of the quarry was a great investment. Since his childhood, Benvenuto loved the place. Ultimately, after he married his beloved sweetheart, Francisca, they made the cottage their home and the quarry their business. There, where ever there was not marble and alabaster, there were trees, bushes, and flowers. Herbs

grew wild and birds of all types made a home in one part or another of this inviting paradise. Rosemary bushes and grape vines entangled and grew with vigor while the sound of hammers and chisels filled the air during the day.

Benvenuto came from a long line of a wealthy and respected family. Like his father, he was a successful artist and businessman who provided superb quality of marble for the rich and the church. From his quarry, the church bought several large slabs for the construction of several large statues to be carved by master artists to adorn cathedrals and public places throughout the region. In fact, among these slabs was a beautiful and colossal piece that Benvenuto's father had sold to the Guild of Wool forty years prior. The Guild intended to have it carved into a statue that would symbolize of Florentine freedom and be placed on the gable of the cathedral of the Living Saints in Florence.

The city of Florence, which was about fifteen miles from the Cellini family estate, was a magnet for the arts and the enlightened. Duke Lorenzo de' Medici, a blood relative of Francisca, ruled the Florence city state and was one of the greatest patrons of the Renaissance. There, the town council – the Signoria, the merchant guilds, and a host of wealthy bankers and art lovers sponsored many art projects over the years.

In this setting, the tiny baby grew. Even during his infancy, his intellect was notable and his expressions were very unique. Agnolo was full of energy. He always seemed to be moving, never to settle in one position for too long. In his crib, he moved from side to side, turned over and back again, and tried to lift his head to examine the world around him with relentless curiosity.

Long before he was able to walk, Agnolo began to speak with an unknown tongue. It was a combination of soft whispering, humming, and sighing. His parents struggled to understand him. After being around him and listening carefully to him, they learned to decode most of his mysterious language. The gentle and ever-present doves seemed to engage him in very lengthy conversations. They sang and swirled while he whispered, giggled, and tossed and curled. Many times, Agnolo seemed to be trying to translate to his parents what the doves were saying. It was as if he were trying to engage his parents and the doves in his conversation. Often, Francisca brought her mandolin and played it and sang her baby to sleep.

As he slept and when he suckled, he whispered and the doves fluttered while Francisca sang and prayed. And while Francisca spoke to him the words of man, the doves seemed to be teaching him the words of God.

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One night when Agnolo was about nine months old, the doves seemed very active. They sounded as if they were celebrating a celestial event. They brought with them many of their young and they all cooed and wooed while flying back and forth. It was a calm night with beautiful skies. The wind blew gently with a sound that added rhythm to the doves' chorus. Earlier, Agnolo seemed tired. When he fell asleep in his mother's arms, she laid him in his crib very gently hoping not to wake him up.

The doves sang all night!

In the morning, when Francisca woke up at the sound of Agnolo talking and singing in his own language, she put on some clothes and walked to her baby's room, as she did every morning. What she saw frightened her. Agnolo was laying in a pool of blood. He did not seem to be hurt. In fact, his singing got louder as his mother got closer and he tried to wiggle out of his covers and stand up. With his arms extended, he reached for his mother, as he always did when he saw her.

"Baby, what happened to you?" Shouted Francisca while, as much as possible, she tried to hide her fear from her infant child. Francisca reached to Agnolo and picked him up out of his crib. She hugged him tightly before she laid him back down in the crib to inspect his body. While Francisca was undressing him, Agnolo began his daily self-entertaining routine of giggling and humming. All his clothes were covered in blood – more so around his genitals. When Francisca uncovered his lower body, in addition to the usual urine stains, there was dried blood around his genital. In great fear, Francisca called for her husband. "Venu, please come here … I really need you," she shouted. Half-naked, Benvenuto rushed to Agnolo's room. When Agnolo saw his father, he tried to jump out of his position to hug him, but Francisca managed to keep him on his back. "Praise the Lord, Franca!" uttered Benvenuto. "I have heard of cases like that. The angels must have come at night and circumcised our precious baby. How special he must be!" Francisca looked at the baby's penis. Indeed, he was circumcised. Except for the dry blood, the wound seemed to have healed overnight.

That day, Benvenuto and Francisca carried their baby to the sanctuary and presented him to the bishop. Upon inspecting the child, Bishop Fontana marveled at such a miracle. He gave thanks to the Lord and noted that church history documents that many of the saints were circumcised by angels in such a manner. Bishop Fontana prayed over Agnolo and blessed him and his family before they departed back to their home.

On the way home, the doves followed the Cellini's. Agnolo's eyes followed them and they sang as they crossed paths in flight overhead.

The joy that the young toddler brought to the Cellini family was immeasurable. Daily, Benvenuto could not wait to get home from the quarry to hold his baby. He squeezed him

tightly as the baby wrapped his arms around his father's neck. Unintentionally, Benvenuto established a playing routine with his toddler that became expected of him daily. Daily, when

Benvenuto got home, he would throw his baby up in the air to the rhythm of made up songs and made up tunes. The thrilling exercise was repeated several times and young Agnolo full of energy never seemed to want to stop. Benvenuto also crawled on the floor chasing after Agnolo throughout the cottage in an exhausting game of hide-and-seek that was designed to suit an innocent toddler. Benvenuto joked that since Agnolo came to his life, his arms got much stronger from playing and carrying his baby, but his knees got weaker from crawling after him.

During the day, Francisca went around doing her house chores which she had divided with Tota while Agnolo followed them around the house. When Francisca sat down to rest, she played the mandolin and sang to Agnolo, often until the toddler's eyes got heavy and he went to sleep. Agnolo enjoyed his mother's singing and always joined her providing unexpected accompaniment to his mother's intended solos. Agnolo also loved to pretend that he was playing the mandolin, but after playing his short session, he invariably handed the mandolin as if to request an encore from his mother.

From time to time, Agnolo put on his own show. With his tiny hands and fingers, he stoked the strings and sang in his unknown language. And, although truly without a form, somehow it sounded beautiful. The doves, of course, seemed to be his ever-present audience and backup chorus.

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As lovable as he was and as great a blessing as he was, Agnolo was also a great consumer of his parents' time and energy. From his early days, his parents realized that their child was unlike other children. In fact, neither Agnolo nor the other children often found common ground to play or entertain one another. Agnolo seemed bored with the childish games that his peers played. So, he learned to find a place several feet away from the center of the games and observed and often sarcastically with an adult mannerism smiled or even loudly laughed. Other children his age found him unwelcoming and their persisting attempts to involve him in their activities were often thwarted and belittled.

Agnolo's uncommon light complexion, blonde hair, and light blue eyes made him standout and further promoted his isolation, however, he learned to be happy in his own distant world.

He played with dough and clay, and with his fingers he drew on wood and on the walls of his room and the kitchen. For hours, he squeezed the clay and over and over formed and reformed its character and appearance. More often than not, he was displeased with his own work and cried and in a fit, destroyed his creation. Francisca came to his aid from time to time and tried

to salvage the damaged project. It is as if Agnolo's tiny hands were unable to comply to some great thoughts within his head. While working on his projects, Agnolo sang. And, imitating his parents, he bowed and prayed to thank the Lord for his blessings before and after each event. Francisca watched him joyfully and encouraged him with words of praise and squealing joyous sounds.

When creating or playing, Agnolo never seemed to know when to stop. His energy was beyond that of a two-year-old. It was because of this overflowing energy that his parents were exhausted looking after him. The most dangerous time was when the parents were taking an afternoon siesta while Agnolo was awake playing in his room or watching the other children his age play.

It was during that time one afternoon that Agnolo decided to add texture to one of the beautiful frescos decorating the reception room in the little cottage where the Cellini lived. With dough and clay, Agnolo set out to enhance the expensive fresco. Where dough and clay would not stick, he used a small spoon to carve wherever he thought needed. When his parents woke up from their nap, they looked for Agnolo. When he heard their voices, he ran and hugged his mother and pulled her by the hand to the reception room to proudly show her what he thought to be his latest masterpiece. When his mother saw the damage that he had done to the expensive fresco, her eyes filled with tear. She kept on saying: "Oh, Agnolo … it is beautiful … it is beautiful!!" She hugged him and buried his head in her arms while the tears of frustration covered her cheeks. Unaware of his mother's agony, he squeezed his mother and uttered angelic words while trying to look at his mother's eyes with a proud smile. Francisca closed her eyes and silently prayed: "Lord bless my Agno and his talents. But, why baby, why do you do the things you do?"

One morning, before he left for work, Benvenuto kissed his wife and with a grateful smile asked her if she would bring Agnolo to the quarry that day. Francisca knew that her husband wanted to show off his precious son to all the workers at the quarry. It was his bragging right and he felt compelled to claim it. It had been several weeks since Francisca was able to bring the baby to the quarry.

When Francisca arrived at the quarry, Benvenuto was waiting for her. A flock of doves had followed Francisca and the baby in the short walk from the cottage to the quarry office. The doves glided their way before, above, and behind the mother and her child. As Benvenuto ran to hug his wife and child, Agnolo jumped from his mother's arms to embrace his father.

Benvenuto carried Agnolo throughout the entire quarry stopping from time to time to talk to his workers and introducing his beloved son. Agnolo's eyes were opened big, but he was quiet.

When the loud noise of the hammers unexpectedly reached his ears, he tightened his hold on his father's neck. He looked and looked, examining everyone and everything.

One of the foremen who worked for Benvenuto expressed more adoration for Benvenuto's young toddler. Lorenzo Baldovinetti, whose wife had given birth to twin boys named Giorgio and Domenico three years before, held Agnolo for a long time and kissed his cheeks and blessed him. He stared at the toddler's blonde hair and light blue eyes with intrigue and curiosity. "What a beautiful baby you have been blessed with Benvenuto!" He commented. "His eyes are like clear flawless topaz. May the Lord bless him … may these eyes see happiness and vitality," he continued. Benvenuto thanked Lorenzo and reciprocated by saying: "May the Lord bless your twins and use them as two strong arms for you and your wife." The two men shook hands and hugged while Francisca reached to hold her baby whose arms were extended towards her.

When it was time to leave, Francisca reached to take her baby from his father's arms. Agnolo, who did not seem to want to leave the place, latched into his father with one hand and to his mother with the other.

Finally, as Francisca convinced Agnolo to let go of his father, carrying Agnolo, she began walking home. But, only after taking a few steps, she shouted with a loud voice: "Michlo … Michlo … my baby, how are you?" Running towards her was a tall, handsome young man in his early teens. Michelangelo hugged Francesca while uttering: "Momma, oh, how have I missed you!" Two years prior, Michelangelo had to leave the Cellini family, who raised him since the death of the mother, to obey his father's wishes to study in Florence. During these two years, the Cellinis were gone on their holy pilgrimage and after their return he was able to come and visit them only once. At the time, Agnolo was barely a few weeks old.

"Oh, how precious. So, how is my little brother doing?" Said Michelangelo with great emotion. "Momma, you are going to stop feeding him so much. He is growing so fast!" said Michelangelo with an approving giggle while reaching for the tiny hand of the toddler. "Yes, your little brother is eating a lot. Just like you did when you were his age," commented Francisca. Agnolo was staring into the eyes of Michelangelo and wiggling out of his mother's arms launching himself into the arms of Michelangelo who grabbed him and kissed him over and over. "Mommy, I wanted to come to see you and the baby so bad, but they would not allow me. I even tried to sneak out one night and come to see you, the baby, and papa, but I was caught and punished," said Michelangelo while grasping for his breath. "It is OK, my son. It is OK … we knew that you would come as soon as they allowed you," answered Francisca.

Michelangelo asked: "Where is Papa?"

"He is at his office at the quarry … we were there a few minutes ago …"

The two walked towards the quarry while Michelangelo was carrying Agnolo who was playing with his brother's hair and the shadow of a young beard.

"Things are crazy in Florence Momma. And, the school is very boring and I don't like the other kids. They are so spoiled and shallow," said Michelangelo.

"Are you safe there, Michlo?"

"I guess, Momma. Sometimes I just wish I were back here helping papa around the quarry and learning all about the stone. Momma, I miss you, the smell of your cooking, the sound of the workers chiseling at the quarry. I just miss it here!" Michelangelo continued: "My father is negotiating for me to become a paid apprentice. It would be so wonderful to be able to get paid while I carve and sculptor! They keep on saying that I am too young to be paid."

With a big long hug, Francisca looked at Michelangelo's face and gave him a big kiss on his cheek saying: "Michlo, we are so proud of you. We miss you here, a lot. It is just not the same without you." "I remember when your father brought you here, you were just a bit bigger than Agnolo. We pray for you every day, Michlo," Francisca went on to say with misty eyes.

As they approached the stone structure where Benvenuto was, he heard the two talking and came running to embrace Michelangelo who was still holding Agnolo. Benvenuto wrapped his arms around the two and raised his head to heaven and shouted: "Lord of all, Holy Mother of Jesus, I thank you for my two boys and my family. I am so blessed!" Benvenuto was sincere.

The family began walking to the house followed by a flock of doves. Michelangelo noticed the presence of the doves and noted that he had never seen so many beautiful doves assembling in such beautiful aerial display. Francisca shared with Michelangelo that the doves seem to really like his brother. She went on to say: "In fact, they have provided much entertainment for Agno (lamb). He is constantly able to talk to them." To that, Michlo laughed. "It must be the language of little angels, Momma!"

When the family reached their home, Michelangelo could not help but comment on how different it looked compared to the last time that he was there. There seem to be more frescos on the walls, floors, and ceilings. The kitchen had a large cupboard filled with many spices rare and expensive. "Papa, the Lord has had favor on us, I see!" said Michelangelo. Benvenuto nodded and said, "Yes, my son. Indeed! Almost every week since we returned from the pilgrimage, we find many goods left at our door. It seems someone or maybe the angels leave these gifts for us." He continued, "Sometimes we hear the doves singing in the middle of the night. And, when we get up, we find gifts of all kinds. Some of these gifts even had some foreign inscription … I think it was French. One night, I heard something outside and I got up and ran to the foliar barefooted. When I opened the door, there was no one there. But, there

were several large baskets full of expensive spices and fresh bread and next them there were several large vessels full of wine and oil. We even receive silver, gold, and precious stones as well as much silk, linen, and wool. Since we were not able to use all the gifts, we have been sharing it with the needy workers at the quarry. But, we have not shared our story with too many people, for fear that they would not understand." Michelangelo smiled and responded: "Many many more blessings, papa. May the Lord continue to have favor on us. This tiny guy has indeed been a blessing since the Lord brought him into our lives. He is precious!"

Michelangelo's visit lasted a few weeks. During the day, he went to the quarry with his father where the two went on the business of evaluating the marble stones and examining each piece while workers cut the blocks and formed it into specified sizes and shapes. From time to time, Michelangelo expressed his love for a certain block and closing his eyes he would utter: "I could see the life within this stone. If only I have the time to bring it out! If I am only allowed to do so someday!"

"You will my son, you will. You are still young and you have many days left to bring life to many many stones. The several statues that you already made are quite impressive," replied Benvenuto.

During his stay, Michelangelo made several new small statues at the quarry and at home. The details of his work were marvelous, and he used available material for his sculptures such as wax and wood. He dreamed of the day that he would have his own fine carving tools and large slabs of marble to carve. While Benvenuto was very proud of his son and his incredible talents, it was unclear why he never committed to Michelangelo's desire to own a set of carving tools and a slab of marble to carve. It was not because Benvenuto was financially unable to fulfill such wishes, but it was possibly because Benvenuto was waiting for an appropriate time to give his eldest son such an expensive gift. Michelangelo, however, was allowed to use a set of carving tools that had been in the family for many years. And, there were many small pieces of beautiful marble that he was allowed to carve.

Every day, when Benvenuto and Michelangelo got home, the two men played with Agnolo while Francisca and Tota prepared the food for the large evening meal.

When it was time for Michelangelo to leave, it was very difficult for everyone especially little Agnolo who cried for hours saying: "Mello … Mello …," which was his way of pronouncing Michelangelo's nickname: Michlo.

2

The Fruit of My Own Loins

When it was winter, work at the quarry was slower. Benvenuto was able to spend more time with his family. And, whether it was the long cold nights, the shorter relaxing days, the winter wine, or simply the will of God, Francesca's womb was opened and she realized that she was bearing a baby. The Cellini couple had been trying for years to have their own baby, but the stars never seem to line up in their favor. But now, it was finally coming to pass.

When Francesca first suspected her pregnancy, she kept it a secret from her husband. She wanted to wait until she was certain. But now that it has been an undeniable reality, she could not wait to tell him.

Benvenuto's eyes filled with tears and he shouted, "Praise be to the name of the Lord who hears prayers!" Pulling a chair with one hand and Agnolo with the other, he asked his wife to sit down. "Momma, you need to take it easy and rest," said Benvenuto. He kissed his wife and Agnolo several times and bent down and kissed Francisca's tummy. Then, he knelt down and prayed next to his wife. Agnolo crawled towards his parents and found a place to squeeze between them. He settled on his knees imitating his parents and chanted softly what sounded like dove coos. Benvenuto got up and helped his wife off her knees then he picked up his little boy and squeezed him saying: "Agno, Momma has a baby in her tummy!" Little Agnolo squeezed his father's neck and giggled. Kneeling next to his wife, who had found the chair on which she sat, Benvenuto held her hand and whispered: "I hope it is a girl, Franca!"

"Praise the Lord. A girl would be a wonderful sister to Agno and Michlo. They would love her and she would be a warm shoulder for both. I have a feeling that if it is a girl, she would be very spoiled," said Francisca with a soft laughter.

"Yes, mommy. I will spoil her with so much love. We are truly blessed Franca! When Michlo suckled, Agnolo found your breast; and when Agnolo suckled, your womb was opened!" Commented Benvenuto.

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During his wife's pregnancy, Benvenuto cut down his work hours and decided to spend more time with his family.

As the weeks went by, Francisca's ability to move around was diminishing. The house chores that she divided with Tota were becoming more and more all Tota's responsibility. Since Francesca's mother had died several years prior, Signora Leonarda Medici, Francisca's aunt came to live with the Cellini family to help her niece during her months of pregnancy. Signora

Leonarda had also felt an obligation to take a part in her niece's life, especially knowing that because of the unstable political situation in Florence, she had been absent from Francisca's life and was preoccupied with her own children and immediate family's daily needs.

As soon as Signora Leonarda arrived at the Cellini home, she began inspecting her niece's belly like a fortune teller would a crystal ball. With her hand on Francisca's belly and her eyes closed, Signora Leonarda began to talk in a reverend voice: "You will have a healthy baby girl, she will arrive before the cold wind blows. She will capture the heart of many men and in her eyes they will see the sun."

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When Agnolo was a little over three years old, a beautiful dark headed baby girl was born to the Cellini family. Holding her in his hands after she was born, Benvenuto lifted her above his head as if an offering to the gods and called her "Chola".

For years Francisca could not have children, now after many prayers and supplication, the Lord opened her womb and she gave birth to Chola. Sister Teresa, the midwife who delivered Agnolo, delivered Chola – and Michelangelo fourteen years earlier.

In secret, Benvenuto shed many tears before, while praying for a baby that carried his own bloodline and his own genes. "A baby from my own loins," he prayed. But the tears he shed while holding Chola were different. Quietly, he uttered several words and as if he were holding a fragile precious porcelain vessel, he hugged and gently squeezed his tiny infant. For years, he had accepted that Michelangelo and Agnolo would be his only blessings. While Agnolo carried the family name, he truly believed that Michelangelo was still his very own – his first love. He smiled: "Chola opened Franca's womb, Michelangelo opened their heart, and Agnolo opened the gates of heaven!"

Chola was tiny. Her hair was thick and black and outlined her beautiful baby head. Francesca swore that she looked just like a darker version of Agnolo when he was her age. She yawned as she looked out of her secure hiding beneath her mother's cloak and bosom. Her lips were like tiny cherries and her eyes were very dark brown.

Benvenuto and Francisca were both dark headed and dark complicated, like most people who lived in that region of Italy during that period. Their bloodline, however, was a mix of many spices. The Medici family, from which Francisca came was a large and a ruling family and royal blood flavored her veins. The intermarriages among royals and commoners was neither frequent nor encouraged but was witnessed from time to time. Benvenuto's family, the Cellini family was a large family. Most of its members had moved away from the remote and rural Settignano to the culturally flourishing Florence many years earlier.

When Agnolo first saw his infant sister, he let out a loud cry. Francisca held his hand and brought him closer to the newly born baby. "Agno, this is your sister, Chola. She loves you very much and she will be a great friend for you all your life." Agnolo looked at his mother and stared at her eyes and uttered: "Lola?" Francisca smiled and said: "Yes, Chola. She loves you. Look at her, she is looking at you." Indeed, Chola was looking at Agnolo. He held her tiny hand as she was looking at him trying to focus her wide opened eyes. Although he was still a toddler, she seemed so much smaller to him. He kept on rubbing her head gently and stroking her cheeks with one of his fingers.

When it was time for Chola to nurse, Agnolo always sat next to his mother and rubbed his sister's tiny feet that were wrapped in knitted stocks that were a gift from one of the Cellini family members. Agnolo also sang his own created songs to Chola while she was in her crib – a crib that not too long was his and still has his and Michelangelo's teeth marks on its sides. Now, that same crib looked different as it was decorated in feminine bright pink and white lace.

From her crib, wherever Agnolo was, Chola's eyes followed him. At the sound of his voice, her head and often her entire body turned around to find him.

Several months before Chola was born, Agnolo helped his parents rearrange his toys and several statues that he had made in the room. With great care and precision unknown to many adults, and certainly impossible for a child his age, Agnolo found a suitable place for each of his toys and the statues that he had made of dough and wax. As for the many candles that he had all over his room, he arranged them in clusters. Each cluster contained either three or seven candles. Since he was able to stand on his own, Agnolo maintained the same arrangement and the same number of candles in his collection. There were eighty-four candles in the entire collection and Agnolo would not allow the inclusion of more candles. When one candle was completely burned, he replaced it with a new one. He told his inquiring mother that the clusters of seven candles made him happy and the clusters of three candles made him feel real happy.

The children's room was across the living room from the master bedroom where Benvenuto and Francisca slept. Although straw dividers separated Agnolo's bed from that of his infant sister's, from his bed, Agnolo could hear Chola cry and was often the first to get there to comfort her – even before Francisca was able to get there. For many nights, he slept at the foot of her crib. Chola always found comfort in his presence and as he sang to her, she went to sleep. Sometimes, she tried to join him in his singing till her eyes were so heavy that she could not keep them open. Some mornings, Francisca found Agnolo lying on the floor next Chola's crib. Gently, she carried him to his bed and covered him while the doves watched.

The doves continued to provide companionship for Agnolo night and day. On the window of his room, they were always there. And, they seem to increase in number. Among them, there were many youngsters who chirped with higher tones, sometimes totally out of sync and harmony from their parents. But they were cheerful and full of energy, sometimes clumsy as they land or take off. Agnolo got to recognize each one of them and seemed to know each by name. When he talked to them, with excitement his entire tiny body fluttered with joy and reached out to them as if he were asking them to pick him up and hold him. There were a few doves that appeared only on occasions, but there were others that were there all the time. Among those that visited often, was a beautiful and majestic dove that flew with authority and sang with absolute control. When he flew in, several doves came with him and when he departed, a group of doves accompanied him. He spoke to Agnolo and Agnolo spoke back to him. Before he was able to speak the words of men and before he uttered the word "Momma," Agnolo, looking at that dove whispered: "Lella." Agnolo's excitement could not be hidden when "Lella" appeared. Often, he would look among the doves to see if Lella was among them. Many times, Francisca asked him if he had seen Lella that day. And Agnolo would answer her nodding his head indicating a "Yes," or a "No".

Francisca was also very curious about that special dove that Agnolo called "Lella". So, she asked her son to point out Lella to her. And, one time, he did. And, she saw him.

When Francisca saw the dove her heart began to beat very fast, her face flushed, and she began to pray aloud. The dove opened its wings and gently fluttered. A sweet aroma filled the room and spread throughout the entire cottage. It was a smell that Francisca, Benvenuto, and Tota had noticed from time to time, but could not determine its source. Now, Francisca knew.

As the weeks and months went by, Agnolo tried to tell his parents more about "Lella". Sometimes, in his speech he called the dove "Rella". Francisca asked him if he is talking about the same friend. And Agnolo nodded "Yes". Francisca then realized that "Lella" and "Rella" was Agnolo's way of pronouncing the name of the same dove. The couple speculated what their son might be trying to say. Finally, they were convinced that he is trying to say: "Gabriela". The two had heard many stories about the mighty angel Gabriel, and practically all the cathedrals that they had visited had depictions of this might messenger of the Lord. They, however, could not understand why their toddler son was calling this spectacular dove that name. "He is way too young to have heard any stories about the mighty angel. How did he come up with such a name?" They discussed the matter together but could not reach a satisfactory conclusion.

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Agnolo spent most of his days at his mother's side. Francisca realized that she had to keep an eye on her precious but compulsive young adolescent who was full of energy. As he grew up, Agnolo's hair became even lighter, which separated him from the other children who were typically dark headed. His piercing light blue eyes never stopped examining his surroundings except when out of shyness, he looked down. During the day, Benvenuto took Agnolo with him to the quarry. It was a great break for Francisca and Tota, and Agnolo loved being at the quarry where he roamed and played within its allies and large boulders.

When his mother cooked dinner, Agnolo often chose the spices and with vigor he added much of it. Sometimes it was good, but usually too much. However, it was always unique and original! He often stood to watch. His eyes were wide open, his feet always moving to keep up with his rapid thoughts. When he lay down, he saw thing in the skies, on the walls, and when he closed his eyes to sleep, he was almost always awake. He spoke of love and hurt and what his day had left unknown. The few times he entered into deep sleep, his family thought that he had died as he had stopped breathing.

Agnolo rarely ate. "You are always fasting!" Tota and Francisca always commented. "You need to eat more so that you can grow to be a big man like papa!" When he ate, he never finished his food. He ate to live, and certainly not lived to eat. He only ate a portion of his food. The rest, he prayed over again. And, after he looked at it, covered it up and walked with it to feed the doves whispering: Man does not live by bread alone.

But, he loved wine of all its types and when he drank it, he drank it all day and all night. He looked at the rocks and the boulders with kind and inspecting eyes. And, laying on his back he gazed into the skies and the clouds for hours. In everything he saw God and as much as his speech enabled him, he told. The more he drank, the holier each and everything grew and became. To the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit he bowed and prayed for hours every day – more so than expected of a lad his age. In a different tongue he communicated with the doves and his own creations of wax, dough, and stone. They seemed to understand and respond to him. His face was foreign, and his heart was unique.

When it was time to eat, the family always ate together. It was a time when they talked about everything. Sometimes, Agnolo gave all his food to Chola, but always drank his wine. As much as she could, Chola followed him everywhere he went. And he crawled after her, the same way that his father used to crawl after him for hours before he learned to walk. When Benvenuto was at home, both Agnolo and his father crawled all over the floor of their cottage chasing after their precious little lady who giggled while Francisca and Tota watched and laughed in utter joy.

As they grew in their adolescent years, Chola and Agnolo were inseparable. He loved her as if she were a part of him. And when he was away, she was sad. Neither one of them enjoyed the company of children of their age. Chola was growing in beauty and in poise.

When the Cellini family had some of their friends visiting, usually they brought their children with them. Typically, it was an all-day affair that involved cooking and socializing for hours upon hours. While trying to be courteous, Chola was never interested in socializing with boys her age, while the girls in the group were certain to take advantage of the vacuum that Chola created. Many of these girls, if not all, were infatuated by Agnolo and his unique looks, but he was never focused enough neither interested in carrying out a meaningful conversation with any of them. He felt that they were shallow and pretentious. Chola on the other hand was truly his best friend. Since she was able to get out of her crib on her own, she followed him around the house. She was, no doubt, his cheerleader and most devoted fan. Chola idolized Agnolo; he was her hero. He made her smile and she laughed at everything he said. He told her about his dreams, feelings, and ideas and she always wanted to hear more. To the world, she was beautiful Chola, but to him she was “my Lola,” and he was her “Ano” – which was her way of emulating her parents who called Agnolo “Agno.”

3

The Church School

When Agnolo was around five years old, Benvenuto and Francisca discussed involving Agnolo at the sanctuary. There, he would learn to read and write and receive formal training in the biblical traditions as well as learn some of the classical literatures. They also thought he may serve as a young altar boy. They did, however, have some reservations as to how he would be able to conform to the strict rules of the monks and priests. They also wondered whether he would be accepted by his peers despite his unique blonde hair and light blue eyes and were concerned about Agnolo's ability to interact with other kids his age. After all, he had never really been very fond of their games which he perceived to be foolish and aimless. After much prayer, they brought up the idea before their son during dinner time. Benvenuto and Francisca expressed excitement while telling him how handsome he would look in the white robe that altar boys wear with all its gold decorations. While Agnolo seemed uncommitted, Chola who could barely understand the implications appeared unhappy. All she could gather was that her beloved brother would be gone from her sight longer than she could bear.

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The school section of the church was made of several rooms. The very high walls were covered with stucco that was pealing from moister and prolonged negligence. Its rooms were always cold and in the winter, they were typically unbearably uncomfortable. In each room, there were few crucifixes and icons that competed for the artistic attention of those who noticed the unintended designs that were created by fallen or peeling veneer. In these peelings, Agnolo saw many things – people, angels, demons, and sometimes life and death. To him, they seem to change constantly and from time to time, speak to him. In the absent of the doves, they inspired him.

A week before Agnolo began school, his father commissioned a known seamstress to embroider two large coat of arms emblems to go on Agnolo's church uniform. When they did not arrive on time, Benvenuto decided to let his son use one of his very own. The Cellini was predominately blue with two large gold stars on its shield – one symbolizing "power" and the other "beauty". Agnolo was overwhelmed with joy. Benvenuto described to his son the meaning of each symbol in this family icon and explained to him the honor that it carried, just like his father had done with him many years before. He told Agnolo the glorious history of the Cellini family and how they fought in honor for the Lord and for the Republic. Agnolo felt the great honor and the burden of being considered a man – not a child.

With pride, Agnolo lifted his head and shouted: "I am a proud Cellini. I will defend the honor of my family name and will never tarnish it, even unto death!"

When his father first walked him inside the school section of the church, Agnolo was afraid. He held his father's large hand tightly and would not let go. Although he tried to act maturely, he could not help clinging to his father's garment and burry his face into it when he could. After a few hours of waiting by his son's side, Benvenuto decided to walk around the church property. He also wanted to allow Agnolo time alone to get acquainted with his fellow students. The group consisted of around fifteen boys, mostly his age.

Benvenuto returned to the classroom in the right time, as one of the monks in charge was planning to escort Agnolo and his peers where they would cut his hair in the prescribed tradition. When Agnolo was placed on the barber's chair, he broke into tears. His father came to comfort him. It was a new experience for him and he was not prepared for it. Benvenuto sat by Agnolo's side and comforted him by pointing to the other boys whose hair was already cut.

On the floor of the room, Agnolo's blonde hair mixed with a sea of dark hair. Benvenuto bent down to the floor and picked a large locket of his son's hair and stashed away in his garment. When the barber was finished cutting Agnolo's hair, Benvenuto looked at his son and could not help but think he was a depiction of cupid. Benvenuto thought to himself: "I can't wait for Franca to see her baby."

The monk who escorted the children back from the room where they had their hair cut stopped with his entourage at a locked door. The children lined up in the hallway outside while the monk was joined by three other monks who entered the room and began distributing uniforms to the children. It was not an easy task for the monks who tried to find the right size for each child and consider allowing a little room for him to grow. Most uniforms looked awkwardly large on the children. Some cried, as they disliked the way they looked. Agnolo did not! He just stared in discomfort.

With pride, Agnolo reached for his coat of arms in his trouser pocket and tried to display it on his uniform.

Late that afternoon, Benvenuto picked up his son from school and the two walked home. By the time they reached the driveway that connected the main road to the family cottage, they had talked and discussed many things. At the sound of their voices, Chola came out of the cottage running down the terrain to meet her father and brother. Agnolo was back in his normal attire, but his new hair cut left Chola speechless. Nonetheless, after the initial shock, she began laughing with cheer and hugging her brother. "Ano, Ano!" She said while kissing her brother's cheeks and feeling his hair.

Francisca and Tota could not stop smiling, upon seeing Agnolo. Their eyes were dripping with tears.

That evening, Francisca spent over an hour sewing the Cellini family crest on Agnolo's church uniform.

Early the next morning, Agnolo began getting dressed in his new uniform. Chola wake up, when she heard her brother, and with the untrained skills of a toddler and the intrinsic determination of a young lady tried to help him getting dressed.

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At the school, most of the children had their new uniforms on. A few were still wearing their regular attire. In addition to Agnolo, three of the children had family crests sewn to their uniforms. Curiosity and envy ignited several adolescent conversations and the children with family crests began to boast and compare. Each was basically reciting what his parents had told him about their family history and the meaning behind symbols in the revered icons.

As they mingled and got more comfortable, the children talked without restrain. In innocence, one boy asked Agnolo: "Why do you look like that?" Another commented: "You look different!" At least three of the boys felt sorry for Agnolo and took it upon themselves to defend him. "He looks like that because he is an angel!" One boy said.

"Is this the coat of arms for angels?" Commented one of the boys with sarcasm. The conversation ended upon the arrival of the monk who was in charge for that period.

Church school was demanding and Agnolo had a difficult time adjusting to having to conform to the strict rules of the nuns and priests. The academics that challenged all the other students, did not seem to faze him. It was the fact that he had to sit still for a long period that made him the subject of many disciplinary actions. Most were mild and never deterred the youngster from falling into the same behavior again in no time at all.

Agnolo had to be constantly supervised. Not because of his lack of abilities, but because of his impulsive creativity. It was not earthly. Indeed, it was divine. When he set his mind to do something, he was like an angel on a mission. It was not that he was rebellious, it was that by nature he could not sit still.

His inability to follow orders and instructions was the source of additional grief. The school room was cold and the monks and nuns that played the role of instructors, were colder. They may have feared God, but they did not have much regard to his tiny creatures. Their cloaks and habits covered many insecurities and secrets. Watching these people of the cloth, one would think that they created their own amusing games in being harsh on their sensitive and relying pupils. Scholastically, Agnolo was a great distance ahead of his peers.

Long before any of them was able to read or write, Agnolo had mastered these skills with ease. The first few days the children learned to use the quill and ink, they made a great mess. Most of the children had ink all over their hands and smeared much of it on their uniforms. Agnolo, on the other hand, held the quill like an artist holds a brush and his manuscripts were like paintings. He never got his hands soiled and each of his writings was a work of art.

When the children were given an assignment, Agnolo was usually the first to complete it. He then stared into the ceiling and day dreamed. Often, he tapped on his desk with unconscious vigor, while his knees were moving vertically, a behavior that made the other students sometime laugh and the instructors angry. When asked a question, he sometimes paused for a long time before answering. And from time to time, when he spoke, his speech was unclear as if it were mixed with another language. While his peers found that behavior to be amusing, his instructors were frustrated. Not only was his speech confusing, but his ideas were often beyond interpretation, and his answers were unconventional and mostly unexpected. Perhaps it was most frustrating to his instructors when Agnolo answered their question with a question that they could not answer.

Neither the instructors nor the children at the church school recognized that Agnolo was hearing impaired. Some suspected it, but never verbalized it.

At the church school, Agnolo shared desk with a quiet boy named Cosimo Rosso. Cosimo was the only child to a wealthy family. He was polite and well mannered. Cosimo and Agnolo never socialized together outside the school setting, but the two built a very close relationship. Agnolo, who seldom opened up to any of his peers, often confided in Cosimo. Cosimo seemed to understand Agnolo's loneliness and feelings of isolation. When the teacher was not looking, the two drew figurines of Greek and Roman statues. One would start the drawing, and the other would add to it and pass the paper back. Often the work was just for aimless fun, but many times it was intended to provoke a smile or a laughter. Other times, it was to express a feeling, a thought, or an emotion and provoke inquiry. While Agnolo was not the best communicator with most people, aside from his family, with Cosimo he was different.

Agnolo also found trusted companionship in two boys his age. Giorgio and Domenico Baldovinetti were twins whose father, Signore Lorenzo, was a trusted foreman at the Cellini quarry. Benvenuto had left Lorenzo in charge of the marble quarry while he and his Francisca were on their holy pilgrimage. The twins were well behaved with an ever-present sense of humor. Agnolo had met the twins years before when they came to the quarry with their father. The three kids managed to play together while the parents talked and conducted business. The twins reached out to Agnolo who seemed separated by intellect and appearance from the other students. And when most of the group could not understand Agnolo's speech, they tried to speak for him. In fact, the twins and Cosimo ridiculed anyone who decided to challenge Agnolo

and his ideas. They were truly nurturing and warm. After school, Agnolo and the twins walked to the quarry and played for hours. They climbed the marble rocks and talked about everything and anything. Of the two boys, Domenico was the more artistic. He and Agnolo found common ground in talking about their dreams of carving large statues.

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Agnolo spent most of his classroom time daydreaming and he had a difficult time separating dreams from reality. He thought about the large boulders at the quarry and was convinced that each was alive. "Each just needs the help of a kind and understanding person to bring it to life," he reasoned innocently. He also thought about his sister, Chola. He greatly missed her. She was his shadow since she was able to walk. Agnolo often slipped into a trans-like state where he began to talk to himself loudly – unaware of the judging eyes of other children and certainly the fearful presiding teacher. Almost daily, Agnolo was punished for not paying attention when the teacher asked him a question. After calling his name several times to get his attention, invariably, the teacher had to repeat his question before Agnolo could answer him. Punishment was usually making Agnolo stand up for ten to fifteen minutes, which was believed to make the student wake up and pay attention, something that did not work well with Agnolo.

Frequently, he received permission to leave the classroom to go to the bathroom. There he disappeared for a long time and was found praying loudly unware of the presence of those who came looking for him.

Despite his peculiar behavior and the standing rule that children should not be allowed to leave their classroom except in extreme emergencies, teachers found it easier to allow Agnolo to leave the classroom than to put up with his erratic tapping on his desk with his hands and impulsive banging on his desk with his knees, especially after eating lunch.

During his time away from the classroom, Agnolo wandered the halls of the church unware of the world around him. Several times, the monks found him in the sanctuary praying on his knees.

Agnolo also frequented the church kitchen where he stood to watch the monks performing their specified chores.

Every chance they could, the children taunted Agnolo and teased him saying that he must had been adopted from a foreign land. And, because of his fair complexion, blonde hair, and light blue eyes, they went on to call him Pane Mezzo Cotto or half-baked bread. During and after lunch were prime times for the cruelty of the children towards the tongue tied Agnolo whose speech became more difficulty to understand the more upset he became. And, when they sat to eat, the unkind children made fun of Agnolo saying that he ate like a foreign prince, for

although he always drank all his wine, Agnolo ate very little and always gave most of his food to the doves. These same children were often filled with fear and respect as they watched Agnolo interact with the doves and the rival ravens. They certainly could not forget the time when a raven stole part of Agnolo's ration. With authority Agnolo spoke in an unknown tongue. The children watched as the raven came back with four times as much as it stole making several trips in the process. With fear they still taunted his heart and spirit and one shouted: "Mezzo Cotto (Half Baked), you are not from here ... you are not from here!"

After a few months at the church school, Agnolo's reputation for being "different" was established. He simply did not fit in. And, while some children found his unpredictable behavior amusing, others feared him, and many tried to avoid him. These views and sentiments were not limited to the children, but even the monks and friars who alternated teaching the class quickly realized that this child was quite different and indeed unique. Perhaps no one could forget the time when Agnolo finished his wine portion and reached for the water jog. After praying quietly, all those around him swore that they saw and smelled fermented wine in his goblet. While many dismissed the phenomenon as imagination, those who sat near Agnolo vehemently disagreed.

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One Saturday afternoon, Agnolo walked into the cathedral kitchen where the monks prepared the Holy Communion bread for the Sunday service. He gently pushed them aside and took several hands full of dough. In seconds, he massaged the dough into a statue of the crucified Lord and laid it near the hot stove then reached for a cup of wine. He spoke to the bread and raised it above his head. Some monks were convinced that they had heard the Christ speak back to him. Agnolo prayed, raised the bread over his head again, then broke the body of Christ and ate it. He prayed again and drank the wine. Among the monks, those that were not stunned and petrified with fear, were rejoiceful and amazed. "Madness," most monks protested, while a few believed that what they witnessed was deeply and spiritually touching. These few said little, but the rest revolted with righteous indignation and threw him out.

The news and rumors were sure to immediately reach the bishop and eventually reach Cardinal Carafa himself in Florence.

4

Creative Compulsion

For two years, Agnolo attended the church school. He never missed a day of school except when Chola hurt her finger one afternoon on a hot cooking pot. Agnolo stayed at home for a week and comforted his precious young sister. He cried when she cried and held his sister's hand saying: "I wish it were me, Lola. I wish it were me! I would expend my life for you my precious sister, I would expend my soul for you!" He prayed fervently while gently rubbing his sister's finger with goat butter mixed with the juices of aloe plants that he gathered from around the quarry. He blew lightly on it to cool off the burn while Francisca held her baby daughter and rocked her. Although the serious burn healed in a miraculously record time, Agnolo used his sister's injury as an excuse to be at home with her and his mother.

The difficulty of adjusting to the school life became the norm and never changed. And, despite his questionable inability to control his behavior, Agnolo was chosen to be the leading altar boy at the sanctuary. The decision surprised many monks and senior brothers and fathers, but they had to consent to it since it was made by the bishop himself.

It was inevitable that Agnolo's time at home with his beloved family and adoring sister was being cut short. And his play time with his few friends was sporadic. At home, Francisca had to keep a close eye on him to protect him from getting in trouble. And at school, his teachers gave up on complaining to the Cellini's about their son's uncontrollable behavior. The precious time he had to spend with his sister, he hugged her and carried her around as much as he could. On the floor of the kitchen while his mother was cooking, Agnolo played with his sister. Often, Francisca gave the two some wine to drink and allowed them to have some dough to play with. Invariably, Chola always offered to give her portions to her brother. Before gobbling his portion of wine, Agnolo held Chola's cup and helped her drink her portion. His request for more wine was seldom denied. And Francisca loved to see her children partake of the healthy potion. "It is good for your appetite, my precious dolls!" Francisca always noted.

On the floor of the kitchen, the two children sang and made up their own games which they played as they prayed. Usually, Agnolo created incredible figurines with dough and Francisca learned not to ask him what he was making, for the answer was always the same. "Something!" And if Francisca dared to ask what it was going to be, Agnolo answered with a childish temper: "Momma, I don't know. It has not told me what it wants to be yet. Before it can be something, it must tell me what it wants to be. But you will see. You will see!" "Indeed, I will my precious genius!" Francesca always said.

Even at an early age, Agnolo was a compulsive and prolific creator. He never seemed to know when to stop working on any project. Sometimes when Francisca asked: "Agno, is it finished?

It looks like it is finished. It is beautiful," Agnolo would look at her as if for a moment he were the adult. Then, he would hold one of her hands while reasoning like a wise Greek philosopher: "Momma, when did God ever stop creating? When does he stop improving his creation? He still continues to create … days and nights, flowers and people … moments and dreams … why should I stop? And, when should I stop? How do I know when to stop? It is all beautiful? But, can I make it even more beautiful?"

Other times, Francisca asked: "And, when are you going to finish it? When are you going to stop working on it, Agno?" To that, Agnolo would always say: "Mommy, I don't know. It will tell me when it is ready!"

"Ok, my precious, Ok!" Would often respond Francisca.

Whatever he made, Chola loved. Whatever he said, she thought it was funny. He made her laugh and made her happy. Most of his creations ended up in Chola's side of the room.

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At the sanctuary, Agnolo sought permission from the monks to collect the expended wax from the candles that are burned almost around the clock. Every few days, he carried the material home and placed it in an empty cooking container that his mother had abandoned. Over a period of several months, he was pleased to realize that he had enough wax to pursue a special project that he had planned all along. He had watched his brother Michelangelo melting the wax and creating a block from which he carved beautiful objects, many of which were highly guarded by Benvenuto and Francisca, while several prized pieces were carried by Benvenuto to the quarry and were displayed inside many of the caves around the quarry where the temperature was cool and regular throughout the year.

After melting the wax and creating a block large enough to meet the specifications dictated by the spirit within his mind, Agnolo allowed the block of wax to cool off. He carried the fashioned wax to his room where he covered it with a large sheet. He prayed over it time and again often while starring at it. He spoke to it in words unknown and touched it with his lips, fingers, and his whole hands. One evening after returning home from the church school, he brought to his room a large vessel of wine and knelt to pray. The doves watched and seemed intrigued. When he finished praying, he poured a large cup of wine and began to carve the block. When Chola sought his company, he escorted her to the kitchen and told her that he is preparing a surprise for her. "Ano, you are beautiful, and I love you so very much, my dear brother. I am so blessed to have you," whispered Chola while wrapping her arms around the back of his neck. "I love you my precious sister. You are my whole world. And I thank the Lord and momma and papa for bringing you into my life," replied Agnolo while holding his tiny sister's waist and lifting her up in the air.

Agnolo did not sleep hardly at all that evening. Chola tried to stay up with him, but finally fell asleep. From time to time, he very quietly walked to the kitchen and replenished the oil in the lantern and his reservoir of wine. And, when it was morning, he covered his creation with the large sheet that he had used before and fell asleep. When Francisca came looking for him, he opened his eyes reflecting his excessive drinking and lack of sleep. Francisca realized that he was in no shape to go to the church school that day. She came and sat by his side in the bed. She prayed over him and robbed his forehead until he went back to sleep.

Francisca quietly whispered as Agnolo slept: You have the power to speak, and make things strong or weak! You are what you are. You are beautifully unique. You are just what you are, a holy superstar. More than angels' might, your words can change and create. You're God in spirit. Create and bring forth light. Your words will bless or damn, you're one with the I am. So, speak, rejoice, and give thanks!

Some say he was inspired; some say he was possessed by a divine spirit. But many have agreed that he was likely not from "here"! His behavior was seldom understood. Those who loved him, made concession for his behavior – sometimes with reverent adoration; other times with suppressed frustration.

Even as a child, Chola, could never see how the world could not absolutely love her brother's personality and eccentricity. For her, the world was stupid and cruel; and Agno was the misunderstood lovable genius who is ahead of his day and time. He was funny, he was gentle, he was mysterious, and he loved her. She truly adored him and followed him everywhere she could. Like a little lamb following a shepherd, she loved his presence. And her approval gave him an incentive to live and create. She loved anything and everything he made. She was his cheerleader and the gentle storm that brought the blessed rain. She believed in him like a lover only can, and loved him like only a mother would. She understood the genius that he was and she always whispered in his ears saying: "Someday, you will be more famous than any sculptor in history. You will … you will."

When he carved his first Madonna, he was only five. Many criticized her excessive beauty and liveliness saying that Agnolo has created an idol for worship. But he was only thinking about his sister and how to dazzle her senses.

When Agnolo woke up, it was close to noon. Chola was outside with her mother collecting some herbs to use for cooking while watching the wind dry their laundered clothes. There were seven doves on the window and one inside the room. They were quiet and walked on the edges of the window as sentries guarding the entrance to a royal palace. Agnolo smiled and conversed with the doves while getting dressed. He walked outside and hugged his mother and sister expressing how different it felt to be home knowing that he should be at school. After a

short talk, he walked back to his room and resumed working on his creation and did not stop until it was dark.

When Benvenuto got home, Agnolo was still working on his new creation. Knowing not say anything about when to stop working on a project, Benvenuto and Francisca made sure not to ask their son if or when his project would be completed. They just simply commented about how long it had taken to work on the project and prophesied that it must be a great one. When it was close to bed time, Agnolo lit a large oil lantern and called for his sister. Before it was even completed, he could not wait for her to see it. Like an eager lover with a Christmas gift two weeks before Christmas. When she walked into his side of the room, Chola was speechless. Before her eyes, there was a smaller image of her in wax. The smell of sweet incense filled the room. When the light hit the face of the statue, she looked as if she were moving her lips and smiling.

“Chola do you like it?” Breathless, uttered Agnolo while starring at his sister with very large eyes.

“I love it, Agnolo! I love it!” With tears running on her cheeks said Chola.

“Do, you really love it Chola?” He asked.

“Oh, Agnolo. I love it. I love it!” Touching the face of his creation and glancing at Chola as he lowered his head he said: Chola, it is for you!

“Oh, Agnolo. I will hold it close to me forever. I will sleep with it in my arms.”

Benvenuto had taken several prized pieces that Agnolo and Michelangelo had created to the quarry to show off the talents of his sons. This one, he could not convince Chola to let go of even for a day. It was customary for Benvenuto and Signore Lorenzo, the twins’ father to brag about the work of their children and pray for a great and prosperous future for the four young lads.

(Song 3: The Quarry’s Song)

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From time to time, the Cellini family socialized with the Baldovinetti’s. In addition to the twins, Signore Lorenzo Baldovinetti and his wife Cecilia were blessed with a tall and beautiful daughter named Flora who was about the same age as Chola. The two families’ gatherings involved lots of food, praying, dancing, while wine flowed freely for everyone. The twins’ infatuation with Chola and their overt squabble for her affection could not be overlooked. Flora, on the other hand, could not hide her obsessive fondness of the light headed and blue eyed Agnolo. While

eating, Flora made sure to place herself somewhere near him and her constant blushing and bashful starring at him were often noticed by the adults, and certainly Chola who for many reasons did not find the behavior couth. Flora seemed to frequently and continuously inquired about Agnolo's art work and her compliments seemed to compete with those of Chola. Agnolo was always courteous but seemed oblivious to the special attention that Flora liberally expressed towards him. Often, Chola tried to change the subject of discussion away from focusing on Agnolo to something else. It was interesting to see how these youngsters interacted as if they were rival courting adults. It was as if their behavior were intuitive and primal. The parents seemed to find it amusing and after drinking their share of wine, they usually whispered about the courting games their children were playing.

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Daily, when Benvenuto got home from the quarry, the family of four played and prayed, then ate. They drank much wine, and Agnolo seemed always thirsty for more of the fruit of the vine.

One night, during the evening meal, Francisca told her children the story of a pious nun who lived for a short while and died mysteriously. Francisca said that Sister Maria Josephine was the most beautiful and the holiest of all the servants of the Lord that she had heard about. Francisca went to say that Sister Maria had gone to heaven a few years ago. While his mother was telling the story, Agnolo got up and poured more wine for his father and mother. He tried to give Chola more, but her cup was still full. Agnolo poured more wine into his cup and said: "Momma, you are the most beautiful. I can't imagine anyone being more beautiful than you are. I am the most blessed boy."

Francisca got up and hugged her growing young man, when Chola looked at Agnolo with her head leaning to the right and said: "Me? Lola?" The family laughed and Agnolo hugged his sister's head and said: "Yes, Lola is the prettiest of all the girls and momma is the prettiest of all the mommy in the whole world!"

(Song 4: Roses in a Dream)

That night, Agnolo did not sleep too much. The doves watched him toss and turn and despite their beautiful nightly chorus, Agnolo seemed to be experiencing something he had not experienced before. In the morning, Agnolo was the first out of bed and the first to the kitchen. Francisca followed him shortly and the two had a chance to talk. "Momma," he said, "what did Sister Maria look like?"

"Why do you ask, Agno?" asked Francisca.

“Momma, last night I dreamed that Sister Maria was alive and that she gave me a bouquet of roses. It was beautiful. The roses were glowing with colors that I had never seen before. But, in the middle of the bouquet there were two beautiful fragile eggs. They looked like the moon when it is full,” said Agnolo.

“Two eggs? That is very beautiful. Maybe you were just hungry.” Laughed Francisca and continued: “What did the lady in your dream look like?”

“She looked like you Momma and talked like you also … but her hair was blonde and her eyes were light blue like my eyes. She was also much younger,” said Agnolo gazing at the ceiling.

“That could have been her in the dream. She was blonde and had light blue eyes. She was also very young. What did the bouquet of roses look like?” asked Francisca.

“It was beautiful, Momma, but the roses had some thorns and tiny stickers. The lady in my dream told me that they will not hurt me. And as I was holding this bouquet, it got larger and larger until there were flowers everywhere. Their beautiful smell is still in my nose. The beautiful eggs fell in the middle of the flowers, but did not break,” said Agnolo.

Francisca did not know exactly what the dream meant. In fact, she was a bit concerned. She knew that thorns in a dream cannot be a great thing. She managed to hide her anxiety and say: “That is a beautiful dream, Agno. It is beautiful. It means that you will have a beautiful day!”

Benvenuto and Chola heard the two talking and Benvenuto appeared at the kitchen door carrying his little doll-like daughter.

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That day at school, Agnolo was more distant than usual. He could not wait to get home. On the way home, he decided to stop by the quarry to see his father. Benvenuto ran and lifted his son over his head, like he used to do for hours when Agnolo was an infant, and said: “How is the most handsome altar boy in the world doing today?” Agnolo giggled like a baby and when his feet were back on the ground, he said: “Papa, when can I start carving stone?”

“Agno, you will have plenty of time in your life to do that. I want you to concentrate on your studies now,” said Benvenuto.

“But I am bored with school and I already know the stuff they are trying to teach me. Plus, I could start on a small project now, if it is ok with you, papa!”

At school, Agnolo learned how to read and write, and of course he was taught the Bible. Since no one except the clergy had access to God’s written word, Agnolo made a point of writing many of his favorite scriptures to carry with him home. His depth of understanding of the

meaning and the spirit of the word of God astonished his peers and certainly his teachers. Although his speech was very difficult to understand, he made his points with accuracy that demanded his listeners' attentiveness and complete attention.

"You are only seven, Agno. Stone is too heavy and requires a lot of strength … but if you have your mind set on starting now, I will help you my strong little man!" Said Benvenuto.

Agnolo was excited. He could not wait to get home to tell his mother and break the new to his sister.

When Agnolo got home, Chola was taking a nap. Agnolo ran to the living room where Francisca was knitting a wool garment. He hugged her and told her that papa had allowed him to start carving a marble statue. Francisca hugged her son who had jumped into her lap not realizing that he is not the tiny baby that he used to be. Francisca prayed over Agnolo and thanked the Lord for His protection over Chola, Benvenuto, Agnolo, and Michelangelo. When she finished praying, Agnolo sat at her feet while she resumed he knitting and asked her: "Mommy why do people die? I love Sister Maria Josephine. She reminds me of you. No, no, she reminds me of Chola."

"My beloved son, you are so gentle. People die when their mission here on earth is complete," said Francisca with an unconvincing tone.

"But mommy, could the Lord not find them another mission here on earth? There are many people here that need help. And if everyone dies, who is to praise the Lord from this earth?" Asked Agnolo as if he were talking to himself.

"All creation praises the Lord and when people die, they find rest in the arms of Jesus. So, they are very happy there. It is the living who suffers by missing their company …" Said Francisca with sadness. She continued, "I guess people die when it is their time to go. Some day we will all have to die when it is our time to go."

Agnolo stared to the ceilings and murmured: "I hate time. Time is evil. I wonder who made time? It is the creation of darkness … and Satan … it is a tool of the devil? If it were not for time, we could all live forever. Before Adam ate the apple, there was no time, or was there? I wonder who made time? Agnolo paused before he continued: I wish I could make all people happy! In heaven all people are happy because there is no time! I am sure time exists in hell though!"

Francisca smiled and freed her right hand from the knitting yarn to rub her son's head. "You have incredible wisdom, my precious baby. I hope I live to see you share your love and wisdom with many many people!" Said Francisca in a prayerlike manner.

Agnolo paused for several moments. He looked at his mother in the eyes and whispered with emotion: “Mommy, I hope you, papa, and Chola all die before I do.”

Agnolo’s statement caught Francisca by surprise. Confused, she asked masking pain in her voice: “Baby, why do you say that? I would want you to live for a long long time after me and your daddy, but why would you want your sister to die before you? I knew you love her!”

“Mommy, if I die first, you, papa, and Chola would hurt on earth till you join me in heaven. But, if you, papa, and Chola die first I would be the one that aches here while you are in peach in heaven. Momma, it is not those who go that ache, but it those they leave behind …”

“Oh, my baby. You amaze me!” Said Francisca. “Let us stop talking about all that stuff. Let’s talk about something else,” she continued.

(Song 5: I Hate Time)

With that, Agnolo got up and hugged his mother. He felt two tiny arms squeezing his neck from the back. When he looked, Chola was smiling. He kissed her over and over and with his arms wrapped around her squeezed her tiny body for a long time.

Agnolo told Chola about papa allowing him to make a marble sculpture. He tried to explain to her that although it was a dangerous project, papa will be there to help him. Agnolo also told Chola that he would make the statue look like her and like Momma. Chola smiled showing her beautiful pearl-like teeth and said: “Agno, I will bring you food and wine every day at the quarry. I promise. I would love to see you making the big sculpture, Agno. You are so talented and strong.”

Agnolo rubbed his sister’s forehead down to her cheek while relocating long strands of her dark hair that seemed to always get between his eyes and hers. “You are beautiful my sister. You are my best friend in the whole world,” whispered Agnolo.

“You are my best friend too, Agno. You are my everything. I love you!” Whispered Chola.

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Agnolo’s time was divided between school, the quarry, home, and the provincial market. There, Agnolo walked and prayed. He carried much of his own food to give it to the weak and the lame who sought help on the corners, sidewalks, and outside the gates of the busy place. Since he did not eat much of his own food, there was plenty of it to give out. His presence at the market was noticed by many, including the monks, the Friars, and the nuns who managed many of the church shops. At the market, Agnolo washed the wounds and the feet of all who allowed him. He often prayed silently and sometimes with an unknown and mysterious tongue

while the doves surrounded him and sang. His visits were predictably welcomed and anxiously awaited by those whom he had helped in the past. Despite his young age, his heart was big, grown, and ached like that of a gentle old man.

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Agnolo's daily trip to the sanctuary was scenic and entertaining. With a ditch on one side and grape and olive orchards on both sides of the dirt road he walked six miles on his way there. On the way home, he tried to avoid the heat of the sun by taking a different route that was only five miles. That route, however, was through a known desolate forest. Flocks of doves always provided him with company and Agnolo carried on long conversations with the doves who seemed to appear everywhere he was.

In her heart, Francisca was convinced that her son was of holy descent but could not prove it. However, many who encountered him thought that he was inexplicably eccentric for his outlandish behavior such as conversing with the birds.

The long roundtrips to the church school allowed Agnolo time to think and question. From time to time to himself he thought and with a smile he uttered: "Six is the number of man. It is where the ten laws of God to man were enforced by man … and five is where grace and love abide."

The route that Agnolo typically used in going home was often compared to the "shadows of death" that was spoken of by David the Psalmist. The forest that extended on both sides of the road was a place where no man could venture and only beast could live. All who lived in the region knew that such a forest was not safe. This thick wooded area covered many many acres. It was made of swamps and tall large trees that blocked the heavens. The roaring of water was always heard mixed with the howling of wolves and the constant quaking of many dark large ravens. The forest was dark and always cold. Of its floor, what was not covered with falling leaves that decayed, was smothered with thick smelly stagnate layers of water. The invasive smell of sulfur and the sound of hissing creatures could not be ignored. Many swore that they had seen demons who dwelt there and heard the voices of many of their victims as they were being tormented. From time to time, clouds gather over the area and would not leave for days. There, when thunder shook the earth for miles, the lightening exposed a distant unknown ending to this desolate place, one that held many high peaks and colorful rocks. Passing by this area, all prayed and recited Psalm 23: "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for you are with me."

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One day, on the way home from school, Agnolo sought to find pieces of dried wood that may have fallen from the trees in orchards and vineyards surrounding the area. His parents had warned him not to deviate from the main road.

“You could get lost in the woods or be attacked by an unknown creature,” they instructed him. “And we do not want to lose our Agno. We have only one Agno and we love our Agno,” they went on to say.

But that day, he was distracted by a persisting drive and a throbbing impulse. He was aware of his parents’ warnings, desires, and instruction, but his priorities were arranged by an unseen controlling longing to create. Next to a brook, at the edge of the forbidden forest, he found two pieces that he really liked. Since the two pieces were too heavy to carry home by himself, he thought to carry the larger piece home that night and leave the other one by the roadside with the intention of coming back to pick it up the following day. The log was, indeed, beautiful. The moss that had grown from within it gave it a lively texture. Agnolo approached the log slowly while the doves were diving from their height to the ground in a frantic areal display. They were shouting and anxious. Hopping on the ground were several ravens. The ravens seemed to surround Agnolo, who pushed the large log with his right foot. It barely moved. But, he saw what looked like several live snails running away from their disturbed seclusion. So, he bent down and placed both of his hands under the log and lifted it up.

“Lord Jesus!” he screamed as two large vipers jumped from under the log.

They coiled up quickly then they stood on their tails, each poised to attack Agnolo from a different angle. They hissed and danced around him getting closer and waving back like flames of fire in a windy day. Several times, they tried to strike Agnolo and one almost thrusted its fangs into his left arm. He was shuffling his feet trying to avoid the hostile vipers while his shaking arms were still holding up the log. The doves were in utter madness and their noise and the squeaks of the excited ravens could be heard throughout the forest. Agnolo’s heart was racing and his head was filled with blood. In what seemed to be a physical reflex, he dropped the log. As it fell, it hit one of the snakes and bruised its head. Its tail spastically twitched for several moments then slowly stopped moving. The other viper wiggled its way on the floor of the forest and was soon shrouded completely by the thick layer of leaves.

The threat of the two vipers did not seem to deter Agnolo, whose mind was made. A force beyond his control seems to propel him and an unknown power dictated his moves. He walked to the smaller log and with his foot turned it over. There were several live snails that seemed disturbed by the movement. The ravens were delighted to partake of the unexpectedly exposed snails. Agnolo dragged the smaller log near the road and went back to get the larger one. It was heavy and dirty. He cleaned it with his hand and reminded himself of the heavy

cross that Jesus bore. "Not by might, not by power, but by your spirit, you have said, oh, Lord!" Repeated Agnolo as he dragged the large log all the way home and to his room. There, he found a place near his side of the room divider and covered it with a large cloth. He stared at it as it was covered and talked to it. The doves were amused and gathered to watch. "What will you be? There is life in you. Help me see what you want to be," looking at the covered large piece of wood he whispered. Agnolo reached under his bed and brought out an old set of carving tools that Michelangelo had left behind several weeks before. He unraveled the piece of soft leather that covered them and carefully handled each tool gently while starring at it. He placed the tools on his bed and walked to the kitchen and chose a few small knives and a couple of large ones. He also carried a mallet that his mother used in her cooking. As soon as he returned to his room, he unveiled the log and placed his right hand over its top and said: "You are Mary Jo. You are beautiful. And he breathed on it." When Francisca and Chola heard the unfamiliar sounds coming from Agnolo's room, they went to investigate. Francisca commented on the beauty of the log and Agnolo avoided revealing his ordeal in the forest. He knew that if he were to tell his mother, she may be worried about him travelling alone the distance to the church and back. As a child, Francisca herself remembers stories about children who were injured by wild beasts while others completely disappeared in the forbidden forest. She was certain that it was no place for a young man to be by himself.

Francisca brought the mandolin and played while Agnolo worked for hours on the statue. Chola was mesmerized by her brother's talents. He, practically every other minute, glanced at her and glanced at his mother to find the two smiling – and Chola as was her custom, tilting her head to the right while looking and smiling at him. Amazingly, in a few hours, the sculpture was taking shape. It was excitingly and frightening to see how it was transformed to look like Chola who was a young version of her mother. Agnolo continued to touch it up. Every time he came near it, he chiseled a small piece here or there. And with special rocks he sanded and filed its surface.

When Benvenuto came home, the three were waiting for him. Agnolo placed the cloth-covering over his new creation and waited for his father to enter the room. When Agnolo unveiled the sculpture, Benvenuto who had not seen the gradual transformation of the wood but could only see the magnificent final product was shocked. He shouted: "My dear Lord. You have blessed me as no one I know. It is as if this wood has come alive." Benvenuto inquired about the smell of sweet incense. Apparently Agnolo, Francisca, and Chola who were already in the room did not notice it, but Benvenuto who had just come in, could clearly tell the peaceful aroma that filled the room around the covered statue.

With the mannerisms of a magician, Agnolo waved his right hand in a circular motion while saying: "Papa, meet May Jo. Mary Jo, meet my papa!" Agnolo told Benvenuto that he brought

this piece of wood home that day and that he intended to bring another piece the following day to make several statues of the doves that he loved and a bouquet of flower like the one that the lady in his dream had given him. Agnolo also told his father that he would like to make a larger marble statue of Mary Jo.

Over his life time, Benvenuto had encountered many talented artists and sculptors, among them was his eldest son, Michelangelo, who before he was able to hold the spoon could carve lifelike figurines from wax, dough, and wood. Benvenuto, however, had never imagined that his younger son would be even more talented. Indeed, he had seen the dough figurines that Agnolo had created, and was impressed, but the large scale of his son's creation and its likeness to his wife and daughter were eerie. The statue seemed to be moving and conversing, her eyed seemed to move around to follow the onlookers. The statue also held many secrets: Those who came close to it, could smell sweet incense and if by accident a person bent down before it, the arms and the body lined up in a way that showed a crucified Messiah.

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The next day, on the way to school Agnolo looked for the other log that he had placed on the side of the road but could not find it. There were other pieces of wood, however, none attracted his attention. He had no interest in any other piece except in those two pieces that he had chosen the day before – or, maybe they may have chosen him. Agnolo was unhappy and when he got to school his isolation was more profound.

Giorgio and Domenico tried to talk to him, but he was disengaged. When he finally talked, he began to tell them about the events of the previous day and how he sculpted the lady that he had seen in his dream. He also told them how he intended to make other statues out of the smaller piece of wood that had disappeared. The twins quietly looked at each other without uttering a word. Domenico placed his arm around Agnolo and softly said: "We are so sorry! At least you have part of your dream come true." Agnolo was in such a state of isolation, he did not notice that Domenico's left hand was wrapped in white cloths.

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While Agnolo was at school, Benvenuto carried the statue that Agnolo had made to the quarry. He could not wait to show off the world his son's creation. He placed the statue near his shed where everyone could see it. Not knowing who made the statue, several people stopped to ask if Michelangelo had been back and if it was him that carved the Madonna like statue.

Others commented that it was the best work that Michelangelo had done. When Benvenuto revealed to them that it was the work of his young seven-year-old son, they marveled. Some did not believe Benvenuto and thought that the boy must had receive help from his older

brother. Among those who marveled over the wooden statue was Signore Lorenzo, the father of the twins. "I guess some people have it all," talking to Benvenuto he said. "I wish my boys would be able to do half as good as this. They are good kids, but they do not seem to be able to concentrate on what is important," he muttered with disappointment.

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When the evening came, Signore Lorenzo and his family were heard walking around the quarry. Lorenzo was showing his two boys what he called "real art". Flora, who did not need any additional reason to adore Agnolo, could not stop talking about how much she loved the statue. "She is looking at me here," she noted while moving to a different position around the statue "and she is look at me here too … wow!" She continued. When Gorgio attempted to touch the statue, his father forbade him. "Son, this is a masterpiece. Please do not get your hands on it!" gently dictated Lorenzo. "Yes, papa, I understand!" replied Gorgio.

On the way home, the twins were heard whispering to each other. While no one heard their conversation, it was evident that the two had found Agnolo's missing log. It was when they were removing the log that Domenico's left hand was barely struck by an angry viper. After seeing Agnolo's masterpiece, the two were eaten with jealousy and were determined to create a masterpiece of their own using Agnolo's log. But since the disparate boys also had no carving tools, their efforts were frustrated. It was clear that the two were seriously seeking their father's approval – a goal that was not easily attained knowing Lorenzo's low opinion of his two boys and their lack of real talent. While Lorenzo usually appeared to brag about his boys in public, sadly, he never seemed to find the words to encourage them in person.

5

Innocent Defiance

While school bored Agnolo, it may have also extenuated his desire to rebel. His rebellion was never malicious but was driven by a desire to create and please. And, whenever possible, to correct what he perceived to be unnatural and wrong.

The week after Agnolo brought to life his first Madonna, he was having many dreams. At school one day, Agnolo stared and day dreamed more than usual. In his dreams, he saw Mary Josephine. She spoke with him in an unknown tongue, only he could understand. Others in the dream were left baffled and inquiring.

His routine at school was becoming a necessary and a boring habit. One day, Agnolo stared and day dreamed more than usual. He looked down to read the scripture from the Holy Bible and to himself he whispered: "The spirit of the Lord is upon me because the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the afflicted; He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted; to proclaim liberty to captives and freedom to prisoners." He picked up his quill and on a large sheet of paper he carefully copied the scripture. "This, must go over my bed," he told himself as he folded the paper and stashed it his trouser pocket. In his trans-like condition, his right knee began to tap the bottom of the desk in a pulse-like rhythm while his right hand carried a different rhythm of tapping on the top of the desk. He fixed his eyes on a corner in the ceiling of the room and gazed for a long time without blinking until his eye crossed.

Brother Veneziano who was teaching the class at the time shouted: "Cellini … enough!" The children laughed and Agnolo was flustered and was tongue tied. He asked permission to leave the room. Brother Veneziano was glad to allow him to leave. Children were allowed to leave the classroom to go to the restrooms only in emergency cases. Once they were inside the classroom, they were expected to stay in until the next scheduled break. Part of the rigid behavioral disciplinary expectations of the children was that they should take care of all their physiological needs during the breaks. But, in this case, Agnolo was allowed to leave, likely to bring about calmness to the class setting.

Agnolo was gone for a long time. The church bells rang to announce the passing of over an hour. When he returned, a different monk had taken over the classroom and he did not realize that Agnolo was gone for over an hour. Cosimo Rosso who shared Agnolo's desk whispered to him: "Where have you been? Are you OK?"

"Yes! I just had to do some things. God's work always comes first," replied Agnolo.

"We were worried about you."

“I am ok. The harvest is great, but the workers are few.”

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Every day before lunch, the children were usually escorted to the sanctuary where all classes and the devout met to worship at noon. Girls’ classes remained separated from the boys’ and all worshiped at the sound of the pipe organ and often the trained choir that comprised an assortment of people, young and old, monks and nuns, and boys and girls. The lighting of the candles during the daily ritual was assigned to young monks who spent their day in prayer and fasting.

As the children approached the sanctuary, they could smell the burning incent.

That day, it smelled different. It was sweet and mellow. It was euphoric and inspiring. It seemed holy. As they entered the sanctuary, the smell was stronger and the children who lined up to quietly enter could not get enough of it. The candles looked differently. They were bright as a rising sun, but mellow as a moony sky. Something was different. Something was inviting and caused hearts to beat a bit faster and faces to flush.

Everyone also noticed that the young monk who was lighting the candles seemed a bit confused and perplexed. The candles were arranged in groups of threes and sevens. They were not in their traditional place, but they were placed in the shape of large menorah. The center collection of lamps made up a large crucifix.

All prayed and hated to leave the service. But slowly, all departed and Agnolo and his classmates were escorted back to their classroom. There was silence. Some of the children looked at Agnolo with suspicion. A few looked at each other and smiled. Agnolo felt the stares and with blank expressions common to infants he looked back.

It was not but a few minutes after the children returned from their lunch break that Bishop Fontana himself and a senior monk, Brother Gritti, came into the classroom where Agnolo was. All the children rose in respect and bowed their heads in reverence. Brother Veneziano who was leading the class politely walked towards Bishop Fontana and humbly bowed his head. Brother Gritti whispered into the bishop’s ears: “I think it is this one. The light headed one.” Pointing to Agnolo, he continued: “I am almost sure it was this one that I saw!”

Agnolo was asked to follow Bishop Fontana and his escort, Brother Gritti. There was silence in the classroom. Most of the children almost teared up while one or two thought it was funny. Agnolo walked out with his head low. His classmates knew it was not good. “What might happen to Mezzo Cotto? Is he going to be punished for something?” They thought to themselves. “And, is that related to what happened in the sanctuary earlier that day? Yes, it

was different, but it was beautiful. It was truly serene and if it were left to people to decide, they would break the old tradition and adopt something new like that which happened that day."

It was several hours later when Agnolo came back to the classroom.

He was silent. His left hand and part of his arm were wrapped with white gauze. He was sweaty and his eyes were red. Agnolo's left shoulder seemed to twitch involuntarily from time to time.

What they did to the young innocent lad was not clear, but it was obvious that they had severely punished him. In fact, his punishment was so severe that it left his left arm, which was already afflicted, permanently lame and he lost more of his capacity to hear and speak. Ignoring Agnolo's inability to clearly articulate and explain what had happened to defend himself, the cruel bishop and his authoritarian aide inflected undue and harsh punishment on Agnolo. There was no mercy for those who deviated from the precise directions of the leaders and Agnolo was not given any slack despite his suspected hearing impairment. It was likely that even if he had tried to defend himself, his inability to speak, which usually got worse when he was excited or felt cornered, circumvented his efforts.

From his infancy, Agnolo convulsed from time to time – sometimes very violently. Some said that he was constantly fighting unknown spirits and his parents, as much as they could, tried to hide his condition.

After his beating at the church that day, Agnolo's convulsions were alarmingly intense.

In the classroom, no one said a word and Brother Veneziano looked at Agnolo and turned his back to face the other children. Cosimo tried to glance at Agnolo without being noticed. He whispered: "What on earth had happened to you?" A bit of blood was seeping through the gauze around Agnolo's left hand. Agnolo kept on staring down as if he had not heard Cosimo. Cosimo asked him again: "Are you going to be OK, Mezzo?" Agnolo did not seem to hear him. During the break, Agnolo sat alone away from everyone. Giorgio and Domenico walked towards him and Domenico gently placed his right hand over Agnolo's gauze wrapped hand and looked down. The twins walked away without saying a word.

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When Agnolo got home, Chola was outside sweeping the area in front of the cottage. When she saw him from afar, she dropped her broom and ran into the wind towards him as she often did. As she approached closer, her heart began beating faster and faster. It was not because she was running; it was because she could see Agnolo's wrapped hand. She screamed: "No, no,

no, no … Ano, Ano, Ano …" Agnolo hugged her tightly with his right arm and kissed her forehead. He did not say a word as he was chocked with emotions. He had held his emotions all day, but mourning being a social event that requires sympathizers, he was ready to mourn. They walked towards the cottage and he managed to say: "Please don't worry about me. I am ok. I'll be ok!" Agnolo went straight to his side of the room. Lying in bed with his head covered under a pillow, he could hear his mother screaming and running towards his room. Francisca launched towards Agnolo and knelt at the side of the bed. "Agno, my baby, what happened?" Francisca slowly pulled the pillow off Agnolo's head. Agnolo looked into his mother's eyes and did not say anything. With his right hand, he reached to hold her left hand and kiss it.

"You must tell me … who would do this awful thing to you? Who?"

Chola was standing there whimpering. "I will hurt them … I will hurt those who hurt you!" Whispered Chola with the determined voice of a gentle angel.

(Song 6: If They Come to Know You)

Agnolo's eyes were filled with tears. And he looked away towards the wall to hide his tears.

A dove appeared on the window and the shadow of a flying raven flashed on the wall. The raven quacked twice. It sounded more like a hyena than a raven.

Agnolo turned towards his mother and sister and whispered: "I am ok. Please don't tell papa! Please promise me. I do not want him to worry or get too upset!"

"How could we hide this?" Said Francisca "He will surely find out! He needs to find out so that we can take revenge against these evil people!"

"Let's say it was an accident," said Agnolo. "It was an accident!"

"Where did it happen?" Asked Chola. "And who was kind enough to wrap your hand with gauze?" Agnolo did not answer. He closed his eyes and tried to go to sleep.

All night, twelve doves alternated position on Agnolo's room window. All night, they sang Psalm 23 with different tunes. It was beautiful. And Agnolo went to sleep.

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Benvenuto was very concerned about his son's hand but was not able to get enough information regarding what happened or where the "accident" took place. Agnolo was quieter than usual.

After his beating at the church, Agnolo was ill for forty days. Chola and Francisca were constantly by his side, while he went in and out of consciousness. The doves often talked to him, and he either could not hear them, or had nothing to say back.

When he returned to school, things were different. His isolation was more noticed and it was obvious to everyone that he had lost more of his hearing. Sometimes, his speech was more mumbled and more unclear. Even at home, his parents noticed that they had to talk louder to him.

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At the church school news traveled fast and children could always hear the adults talking. Two monks came by the classroom while Brother Veneziano was leading the class. The three monks stepped out while the children listened curiously.

When the cardinal in Florence found out about the incident, his anger could not be contained. Citing Jesus' love for children, "For the kingdom of God is for such angels as these," he kept on repeating as he issued his orders to punish those who hurt Agnolo. The Cardinal summoned Bishop Fontana and Father Gritti to Florence. Rumors circulated that the two were found guilty of lying and cruelty towards parishioners. Their fate was left to the Cardinal himself and they were never seen in Settignano again.

Bishop Fontana was replaced by Bishop Donato.

6

First Dance

One afternoon after school, when Agnolo was eleven, he stopped by the house and kissed his mother and Chola and after gobbling two cups of wine mixed with water, he began walking to the quarry. He did not eat, and the food that his mother insisted that he should eat, he closed his eyes, prayed over it and fed it to the doves that gently landed on his shoulders and escorted him everywhere. When he got to the quarry, his father was engaged in a serious conversation with two men that Agnolo had not met before. From their clothing and the wagon that awaited them, the men appeared to be of great wealth and esteem. They spoke with an unfamiliar accent and their attire was different. They smelled like French perfume and they acted as if they were hiding their identity. Benvenuto was not sure of the purpose of their visit, but he was courteous. The two men asked many questions – most were unrelated to marble and stone. It was not uncommon for visitors of unknown origin and intentions to drop by the quarry, however, these two seemed to stand out. They spoke with authority and conveyed nobility but failed to conceal that they had a hidden agenda. Their coat of armor was embroidered with silver and gold and their displayed sabers were adorned with colorful precious stones.

Not wanting to interrupt his father's business, Agnolo stepped aside, but Benvenuto turned around leaving his guests and grabbed his boy and kissed him. With his arms around Agnolo's neck, Benvenuto walked behind him to the where his guests were observing. "This is my son Agnolo the provider of life for the wooden Madonna outside," boasted Benvenuto. Shaking their heads with amazement, the men exclaimed: "You told us his age, but somehow we never realized that he is so young."

Although the two men pretended that their visit was about buying large marble slabs, when they saw Agnolo, it was clear that their goal was different. With scrutinizing eyes, they inspected Agnolo's body and conspicuously stared at his left arm. It was as if they were gathering information about the safety of the young lad.

Listening to the conversation between his father and the rich visitors, Agnolo conjectured that the men came to buy several slabs of marble when they saw his Madonna and fell in love with her. The men offered what seemed to be a great deal of money for the statue and kept on raising their offer. They expressed determination and frightening desire to own Agnolo's Madonna, but Benvenuto was polite and undeterred to keep it. Benvenuto told the men that Agnolo is soon to be working on a marble version of the statue. He walked the men several feet between several large slabs of beautiful marble and pointed to an eight-foot piece of beautiful white marble saying that that was the piece which he had chosen for his son's project. Agnolo resisted showing his excitement, but his heart was racing, and his ears were turning red.

Leaving his father's side, he walked with restraint and dignity towards the slab and touched it. It was almost twice his height. With his palms, he caressed it and put his cheeks next to it. He moved his fingers over it, as if he were writing or maybe drawing something, and uttered and whispered. When he realized that the men were watching him and that they had heard him whispering, Agnolo was embarrassed and giggled in a childish manner. But, then turned his face back towards the slab and with an actor's mannerisms he shook his head up and down expressing adult-like approval. Agnolo did not know that his father had already chosen a slab of marble for his large project. The two had discussed it, but Benvenuto had not shared with his boy his choice till that afternoon.

The two men walked away while Agnolo remained by the marble slab. "I can see you … I can feel you … I can hear you," talking to the marble he reflected.

The two men were mysteriously generous and before they departed they left gifts of perfumes and jars of rare spices.

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To carve the large marble, Benvenuto bought Agnolo a fine set of carving tools and chisels.

For the next several weeks, Agnolo followed a prescribed self-imposed schedule. Daily, after school, he stopped by the house and spent a few minutes with his mother and Chola before he aimed to the quarry. There, his father laid the carving tools in a manner that Agnolo liked and moved around several small tables and jars of water near the chosen marble slab. Benvenuto also moved the wooden Madonna near the slab whereby Agnolo could use it as his model.

Agnolo had been around marble all his short life. He had seen it cut and had seen his father and his brother bring it to life. But watching someone cutting the stone, and molding it and carving it himself, he realized, were two different things. However, the persistent and compulsive Agnolo found his way around the textures and the topography of his marble. Since the slab was very high, Agnolo had to use a ladder or sometimes a step stool to reach its high parts. Like a shark in a frenzy eating, he carved. It was as if he was divinely directed or as if the marble carved itself. From time to time, the perfectionist was temporarily satisfied, but never completely or permanently fulfilled. Whatever portion he completed usually impressed him, but his hands and fingers never stopped doing more.

While he chiseled, Agnolo spoke to the rock and gently hugged his creation. The marble seemed to form itself and obey his instructions!

Practically every night, Chola came to visit him at the quarry. Carrying a small lantern with one hand and a jug of wine with the other, she walked the short distance to the quarry to see her

brother whose company she always craved. Sometimes Francisca also accompanied her daughter, and from time to time one of them would bring in the mandolin.

Chola was learning to play and often created her own loving tones. They were full of innocent passion. It had been several months since Agnolo, who also loved to play the mandolin, could find the time to play or sing.

Laughing, Francisca recalled how one night when Agnolo was younger he decided to adjust the strings in the mandolin before he played it. In the processes, he went on and on to prefect the sound. It was very beautiful but was an entire octave higher than what it should have been. In fact, one of the strings broke and had to be replaced.

When it got late one night, and Agnolo had been drinking more than his share of wine alone, he heard music. It was not his mother or Chola playing. It was more beautiful than he had ever experienced. It was happy, very happy and luring. He was certain that it was not the wine he drank, for the music was real. When he looked towards the source of the sound, he saw his wooden Madonna moving and swaying. It was real! He blinked several times and stared and stared. She came nearer and nearer and floated in the air. She danced like a long reed of grass in a windy night. The moon was full and Agnolo could see Mary Jo smiling and extending her hand towards him. He whispered: "Mary Jo …" His feet moved in rhythm and his eyes got blurry. The music never stopped but changed from tune to tune. The Madonna's smiling and approving light blue eyes looked into his light blue eyes and never looked away. He tried to keep his eyes focused on hers, but could not help looking down. Their shadows twirled and swayed. At times, they looked as extensions of their bodies. The moonlight and his lantern doubled their shadows. When the wind blew, the light from the lantern flickered and the shadows seemed to dance to the rhythm of the wind. Few doves who were there watching him working on his marble statue lined up closely, one next to the other. He smelled her essence and her sweet aroma gave him peace. She whispered, and he whispered back. "Agno, I am teaching you life. Remember me … remember me, always," she sang and danced with him. Agnolo felt her love and warmth. She reminded him of Francisca his mother, but in the evening light, she looked as young as Chola. She was warm. She gently held his hands and whispered: "These hands will work for the Lord … they are of the Lord …" Like a mother dancing with her teenage son at a wedding she embraced him. She told him to be strong: "I will always be with you …" She promised him.

Then, holding his hand and teaching him how to dance, she sang softly:

"Agno, you're my precious angel that the Lord had blessed me with then soon they took you from my arms too soon too soon. Agno, Chola is your crown of roses that brings joy and tears, don't break the thread of light that ties you to the moon. And we're only separated through

eternity, if we choose a different path and final destiny. Agno, go and bring life to the stone and make it speak with joy unknown, together dance, rejoice, and sing a happy tune."

Slowly, Mary Jo stopped moving and Agnolo should have been tired. He had lost track of time and had no concept of how long they had been dancing. Questioning his reality, he sat down and thought to himself: "It was a dream. No, it was not a dream. This was the same voice that I had heard when the beautiful lady, Sister Maria, appeared to me in my dream. And, the song that she sang to me tonight, it was the same song that she sang to me in the dream. Indeed, that was the same beautiful lady – Mary Jo. She had come alive and she danced with me. No one would believe me."

Agnolo fell asleep while starring at the wooden statue of Mary Jo. When he woke up, his head was wet. All around him, there were butterflies of red, blue, purple, and white. Some had black spots. He felt his hands were warm and he was hungry for a change.

Agnolo contemplated what to say and do. He thought: "I know my family would believe me, but why should I burden them? It was beautiful. It was very beautiful. I wish momma, Chola, and papa were here. I wish they could have heard the music, seen how Mary Jo came to life, how well she sang, and how well she danced."

Agnolo got up and took several deep breaths. He slowly walked to the Madonna and kissed her forehead. He walked backward while starring into her eyes until his back touched the marble slab. He sat on the ground, placed his elbows on his bent knees, buried his head between his knees, and prayed.

When he got home, it was very early in the morning and Francisca was the only one awake. Agnolo greeted his mother and unaware that he had been gone all night, she asked him about the progress in his project. Agnolo was brief in his answers and Francisca reasoned that her son must have been very tired after a long day at school and at the quarry.

The following day at school, Agnolo spent almost the entire day daydreaming. All who knew him were aware of the fact that he existed in a state that is between awakened and asleep. But, that day he seemed to be in a happier place.

After school that night, Chola and Francisca came to visit Agnolo at the quarry. They were eager to see the progress. But, he was aloof. He was not cold, but more disengaged than his usual self.

For the next several weeks, Agnolo worked on the marble sculpture and his progress was pleasing to himself and certainly to his beloved sister. His inability to use his left hand properly may had slowed him down a bit, but he seemed determined to overlook the pain and indulge in

the process of creating. He talked to Mary Jo frequently and her company became an important part of his life. She watched him carving the stone and from time to time he heard her music, or at least he thought he did. He talked to her in a different tongue and the doves were his council.

Agnolo's time at the quarry seem to extend longer and longer until it involved days at a time. The quarry covered over 100 acres. The terrain was mountainous with valleys and massive marble and alabaster boulders that created allies and caves. Lilies, flowers, and vines of all sorts grew wild and protruded from every crevasse. The ground was no different. Small shrubs and a few large trees found enough soil to claim their territory and call it home. Blooms of many colors covered the copper-like ground. The aroma of the plants and stone filled the air.

At first, Agnolo's parents were concerned about their son's behavior and feared that he may get lost in the unchartered land and endless caves. Francisca often went looking for him at the quarry and loudly shouted his name until he answered her. Chola seemed to find him faster than her parents. It is as if she could smell his scent. Although since his childhood he was raised running around the quarry, its allies and between its boulders, he never seemed to get enough of it. However, being an obedient son, he never ventured into the many caves that filled its wide landscape.

Inside these caves, his parents had warned him, there were snakes, bats, ravens, and evil spirits. As he got older and under the influence of much wine, little sleep, and the absence of food, he gained courage and confidence to wander into these caves. Doves always guarded the entrance of the caves and often walked in pairs before him and behind him. There were a few caves that he preferred more than others. Within these hollow walls, he meditated and prayed often loudly until he fell asleep. Although he never shared his cave adventures with his parents, Chola knew about them. In fact, from time to time, she followed him to these caves to play a silly game of hide and seek. Their voices seem to reverberate and take different and amusing sounds. There, they pretended to be characters in Greek plays. The hollows echoed their voices and the echo imitated their conversation until it faded and died. Even when they whispered, their secrets were announced to the walls which they feared would remember. They were silly and they always laughed and giggled.

In the caves, when no one was there except Agnolo, Mary Jo appeared to him frequently. There, she talked to him and danced with him. To these occasions, Agnolo looked forward with a longing known to lovers.

7

The Secret of the Bell Tower

From the top of the bell tours, one could see for many miles. From there, when the sky was clear, the Fiume Arno river revealed some of its secrets. As it cut its way through the forest, it disappeared only to appear again behind many hills and mountains of colored stones. The view changed from moment to moment and the colors of the hills seemed to reflect the mood of the angels and the might of its creator. From the top of the bell tower, monks also saw constant patches of smoke rising at a distance from tens of places like demons even in the most beautiful days. At night, the columns of smoke illuminated with eerie and daring glow as they danced. Even from as far as the tower was from the forest, monks could smell the repulsive smell of burning sulfur and could hear the hissing of the unknown. There, lied the forbidden forest.

To the top of the bell tower, many a priest and monk intentionally wandered claiming to find serenity and closeness to the creator within the relatively small round space. The stone structure contained the massive bronze icon that communicated to many inhabitants for miles – the cathedral bell.

The charm and beauty of the view were complicated by the mysteries of the Fiume Arno river and the wicked woods. What lied beyond the edges of the forest, and what on the topographical map might one find in such a place was left to everyone's imagination. As cruel and wicked as was the forest, the beauty of the land beyond was left to the innocent or the very learned to fantasize.

8

The Passion of the Christ

Before Easter that year, the sanctuary was preparing for a large program to celebrate the death and resurrection of our Lord and his sufferings. His holiness, Cardinal Carafa had announced plans to visit the small church in Settignano and provide special blessings to its small community during the Easter holiday. His visit caused a great deal of stress to all who worked at the church, one that had not received much attention from the Church in Florence for years. In preparation for the cardinal's visit, all parts of the sanctuary were inspected, cleaned, and as much as possible restored. The Cardinal's interest in the music and the Eater program of the church, albeit unexpected, was welcomed. Everyone, however, understood that the visit demanded extra work and extra attention to details. Nothing could be left to chance and every move and every aspect of the cardinal's entire visit had to be perfectly choreographed according to rituals, ceremonies, and protocols.

When he was a few months younger, Agnolo's task as an alter boy was to place an exact amount of incense, in exact specified proportions, into the thurible whereby the priest would be able to swing it to incense a relic, a person, or an object according to tradition. While Agnolo never adhered to the specified instructions, the priests and the monks who used his concoction seemed to always be more than pleased with it. They were not aware of Agnolo's improvisation on the proportions and makeup of the mixture. The aroma may have been a bit unique, but it was absolutely desirable. It was rich, required no fanning, and lasted for a long time. One simple whiff was reported to send a person into a holy trans-like state of peace. Whether they were regular attendees of the sanctuary or visitors, when Agnolo's secret recipe was used all realized that things were different at that sanctuary and no one got used to it. It was good, pure, and brought man closer to God.

Now as the lead altar boy, Agnolo was responsible for arranging the candles at the main sanctuary. These candles represented the fourteen stations before, during, and after the Via Dolorosa, where our savior had fallen while carrying his cross to the place of death. It is not clear how Agnolo received such a promotion, bypassing all the other children – some who were older and more experienced than him. But, his parents welcomed the flattering gesture and believed that their son's behavior and talents must have impressed the leaders of the church. All children, including the Baldovinetti twins who were trusted by Agnolo, were very envious of him. Each wished that the glamourous role had been assigned to him.

Despite his open support of Agnolo, Bishop Donato was internally uncomfortable with his own choice. In great anxiety, he was heard praying and seeking divine guidance. For unknown reasons, Bishop Donato was unable to even criticize Agnolo's compulsive and erratic behavior openly.

Bishop Donato was heard cautiously discussing Agnolo's new assignment with one of his close aides: "Indeed, he is a wonderful and visually appealing young man. He does look like an angel. It is a shame that his left arm is disfigured and dead. As kind and bright as he is, he seems to have difficulty following directions though. It is as if he is hard of hearing."

"It may well be that, Father. The boy is either rebellious or hard of hearing. Who is to know. Only the Lord knows that truth," said the aide.

"The Lord knows the truth. May the Lord forgive those who hurt this child of God. I love this little lamb, however, it is because of all of these things, that I have some reservations about assigning this important role to him. But, I am an instrument of the Lord and I will obey the orders of his holy servants," said Donato.

"Father, the Lord understands your frustrations and anxiety. This young man's deformity may be an obstacle for him. I am not sure he could proceed with this task. But, it is the Lord's will.

Bishop Donato and tens of priests spent numerous hours instructing the tens of men and women who were involved in the Eater extravaganza, as well as the young men and girls whose role was just as vital. Each had a specific chore and prescribed task. Agnolo practiced his part and the arrangement of the candles over the many weeks. From time to time, he questioned the placement of one of the candles and despite his young age, was able to convincingly argue his point of view much to the discomfort and discontent of the senior priests and the bishop who from time to time inadvertently heard the conversation between the young inquiring lad and the learned priests. Agnolo insisted that there should be 33 candles, one for each year that our Lord had lived on earth. He argued that the road to Golgotha, the place of death where they crucified our Lord, was only one station, compared to the suffering of alienation, ridicule, and misunderstanding by all around him while on earth for 33 years.

As Easter came nearer, Agnolo's duties, simple yet full of ceremonial tradition and rigid boundaries, became a source of increasing discomfort for him. He was adamant about placing 33 candles instead of the 14 stations that the tradition mandated. The monks and the priests were convinced that the young lad will perform his duties properly, despite his expressed difference of opinion and often untamed behavior.

But, Agnolo was under the spirit and he planned to pursue his idea believing that the outcome will be more meaningful and ultimately loved. He reasoned to himself: "They loved my incense improvisation, they should like this as well." He did not know exactly how he would end up implementing his plan though. He just wanted to bring glory to the Lord.

"The suffering of the Lord," he kept on reminding himself, "was deep and lasted over His whole life. The rejection, the isolation, and the constant abuse."

Agnolo seemed to relate to all of that. He felt the pains of the Christ. To that end, he began to collect enough candles to pursue his creative plan. After each practice session, Agnolo kept a few unused candles until he had more than enough. Secretly, he placed his stash in a small room far from all the usual traffic in the small church complex. Giorgio and Domenico, to whom Agnolo had revealed the secret location of the stash, joked with him about the purpose of the stash. While with a small fist gently hitting Agnolo's shoulder, Domenico laughed: "Are you planning your own Easter program away from the church?" Giorgio also laughed and commenting while giggling: "Agnolo, you're going to start a big fire!"

This was an incredibly busy time in the life of Agnolo. School and the Easter program were taking much of his time and whatever time was left, he spent it at the quarry carving the larger version of the Madonna. Chola looked for every chance to see her brother and best friend. She could not get enough of him and he felt incomplete without her praise. For him, she was the wind that brought the mighty rain.

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Two days before Easter, Agnolo brought home his attire from the sanctuary. When he tried it on before his mother and Chola, he looked like a heavenly angel of light. His face and hair seemed to glow in the white cloak that was embroidered with gold and silver. Although a little too large for his body, it looked as if it were made specifically for him. Chola could not get enough of her brother and touching his hair and his cheeks she sighed: "Agno, you are so beautiful! You are not from here … you are not from here!"

The day before Easter, Michelangelo came home to Settignano. The typical work schedule and training was usually interrupted to celebrate the holidays. When Michelangelo arrived home, Francisca and Chola were outside in front of the cottage. Flora had come to visit with her mother and while the two adults were involved in picking lemons from the lemon trees, the two girls pretended to help.

Chola was the first to see Michelangelo. She ran towards him and jumped in his arms. He lifted her up and hugged her tightly while kissing her cheeks and her head and rubbing her hair. Chola was shouting: "Momma, Momma … Michlo is here, Michlo is here!" Francisca ran towards her beloved Michlo and wrapped her arms around him and Chola who was still glued to his chest. Flora and her mother watched and smiled warmly. They have heard and seen many of the works of Michelangelo but have not met him in person. Lorenzo had often spoken of Michelangelo and was very fond of his work. Francesca held Michelangelo's arm and walked him towards Signora Baldovinetti and her daughter. "Cicilia, this is my big son Michelangelo," Francesca proudly uttered. Chola spoke while pulling her face away a little from her brother's face as if to see him while she was talking: "And, this is my friend Flora … she is in love with

Agno!" Flora's face flushed and she hid her face in her mother's garment. The adults laughed uncontrollably at the innocence of the children. Cicilia commented: "So this is the creator of all the great work that my husband has spoken to me about. Talent definitely runs in the Cellini family. My husband told me about the statue that your brother had made. It was so beautiful, he thought that you had made it. It was hard to believe that your younger brother actually made that incredible statue. It is indeed a work of a master … it is unbelievable!" Michelangelo smiled big and nodded: "We drank the same milk. It must be momma's fault!" The three adults laughed and Michelangelo kissed his sister and put her slowly on the ground. He excused himself and began walking towards the quarry to see his father.

As Michelangelo approached the shed where Benvenuto was, Michelangelo saw two figures that appeared fuzzy. He squinted and walked faster towards the figurines. As he got closer, he began breathing hard and with perplexity rubbed his cheeks down to his chin. One of the two figurines was a completed wooden statue, while the other was being formed. The completed statue was a much smaller than the marble one that was being formed. It looked alive. It was a replicated smaller version of Francisca. Although unpainted, he could see color within it. The statue was affectionately smiling, and her eyes followed him everywhere he moved. "Oh, my praised Lord!" He gasped. Michelangelo took a second glance at the marble block that stood a few feet from the completed wooden statue. He walked slowly towards it with his eyebrows drawn close. "Yes, it is it," he mumbled to himself. "Yes, it is it!"

Benvenuto, who was walking out of the shed, saw Michelangelo and the two ran towards each other shouting. They embraced. It had been a while since Michelangelo was able to visit. Benvenuto was wondering if he would get see his beloved Michlo during the Easter holiday. Pointing to the wooden statue, Michelangelo asked: "Papa, did you help him do this?" Benvenuto giggled loudly saying: "You know your brother. No. He would not let anyone help him. He did it all on his own. In fact, he did it so fast, one hour it was a piece of wood and in no time, it became what you see. It is alive. Her eyes follow you everywhere you go, you know." Michelangelo was shaking his head from side to side while rubbing the hair sprouts on his chin. "It is amazing. I knew that he was blessed with special gifts and I have seen his small dough creatures, but this is astounding!" Exclaimed Michelangelo. "I am jealous!" He continued. To that, Benvenuto laughed saying: "He is your brother, after all. He must have been watching you closely. He is starting really early. It must be in the milk!" "Did you see the marble block he is beginning to carve?" Continued Benvenuto. Michelangelo put his head down for a moment and when he looked up he did not talk. He tried to smile, but it was difficult. "Yes, papa. I saw it. It is the same block that I had wanted to carve." Benvenuto could not hide his feelings of guilt and remorse. "Michlo, there are many other pieces. I know that you loved this piece and I wanted to keep it for you, but when your brother asked if he could have it, I did not think it mattered that much to you. Come, come! You chose any piece you want." Michelangelo

realized that his father was uncomfortable and hugged him. "It is ok papa. This one did not have my name on it, but I will make sure that the other ones will," he managed to draw a laugh and to change the subject, he asked: "So, what role is our precious little genius going to play in the event tomorrow?" Benvenuto proudly asserted that Agno was responsible for the placement of all the candles during the entire event. "He is to walk before all others and he will light the candles at the fourteen stations signifying the passion of our Lord," explained Benvenuto. "I am so proud of him … he will look beautiful in the customary white and gold trimmed attire," Michelangelo commented proudly.

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Easter day was beautiful. The church bells rang and there were those who never went to sleep the previous night awaiting the sunrise and the time that our Lord was resurrected from the grave. Many believed that in a certain hour, the faithful will see incredible light filling the eastern skies while hearing thunder-like eruption that is followed by angelic chorus singing.

The family got up early. Francisca who had stayed up sewing the Cellini coat of arms on Agnolo's attire was up before everyone else, except Tota who had been up getting the fire in the stove ready. There was hardly any noise at the main road near their home. Chola rushed to wear her white dress to show her brother how beautiful she was. She was truly like an angel. The white dress extenuated her features. Her eyes looked darker and her lips looked redder. She looked ten years older than her age. The entire family commented on how beautiful she was and it was not until Agnolo stopped kissing her that she left the room.

Shortly afterwards, Agnolo carried his attire and began the walk to the church. He stared at his coat of armor and smiled with pride. Instead of waiting to ride with his family their wagon to the church, he decided that he should get there early to implement his plan and impress the entire congregation with the more and dazzling extra candles. He was certain that when the crowd realized that there were 33 candles instead of the traditional 14, they would understand that the sufferings of Christ extended throughout his life on earth, and not just the days around his passion. He was excited and somewhat afraid but determined.

The church complex was adjacent to a monastery on the north side and a convent on the east side. To its west, lied a large cemetery that held the un-resurrected bodies of many saints who had lived in this region of Italy for the past several hundred years. The sanctuary itself was relatively large for such a small community. It was built over 80 years ago by the community of Christians who felt a need for such religious center to compete with other communities who had built their own sanctuaries. The floor was covered with white marble and held scores of large black columns that supported the very high and decorated ceilings. Christian icons and a few large stained glass windows adorned the holy structure.

Parts of the church complex were abandoned and other parts were used for the church school. Plans to renovate the church never materialized and there was some resistance from the community to implement any radical change to the structure that they grew to love and were accustomed to its mystique, albeit outdated and in need of major repairs.

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(Song 7: Segments from the Easter Cantata "Worthy is the Lamb")

When the family got to the church, there was hardly any room for anyone to enter. Benvenuto led his family and worked his way through the crowd followed by Chola, Francesca and Michelangelo. Chola, who because of her height was unable to see around, jumped into Michelangelo's arms who placed her on his right shoulder as they walked around. Across the crowded sanctuary Chola was able to spot Giorgio and Domenico who when they saw her could not stop glancing at her. They were very elegantly dressed in white robes and each carried a scroll. Chola looked around for Agnolo but could not see him. "Momma, where is Agno? I do not see him?" asked Chola. "He is here somewhere, baby. He will show up when they begin the last part of lighting the candles," with a smile replied Francesca loudly so that her daughter and everyone around could hear her. There was only standing room for the family and those who found seats, must had spent the night at the church.

Francisca fought tears as she thought of Sister Maria Josephine. "Oh, how proud she would have been of her little boy," she thought to herself. "Of course, she may be watching him right now with a heavenly smile! He is in good hands, Sister Maria … he is in good hands!" Whispered Francisca.

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Outside the church, a large squadron of doves and a large squadron of ravens perched on opposite sides of the street – the ravens on the western walls and the doves on the eastern walls. The doves flew gently as they exchanged positions while a few ravens hopped to the ground without daring to the violate the airspace that was claimed by the doves. Each side watched like two armies preparing for battle.

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In the back of the church, Agnolo was struggling to understand what happened to his stash of candles. Just the night before, he checked on it and it was all there. He had to think hard and fast about where he could find more candles at that moment. But, time was running out. He ran franticly everywhere he thought he could either find his misplaced stash or additional

candles. The idea of failing was not an option. He could hear the crowd and could hear the program about to start, but he had no way of accurately judging the time. He knew that when the church organ began to play, he should be at his first station.

In the hallway, one of the monks saw him. "Agnolo, where have you been. Everyone is looking for you. They are about to start the program," shouted the monk while dragging him toward the sanctuary. As the two were running, the organ began to play. It was majestic! The choir began to sing while the church bells rang. The church was filled with awe and the crowd spontaneously uttered: "Amen … Amen!" All stood up while the priests walked swinging the incense filled brass vessel. Cardinal Carafa was joined by Bishop Donato who seemed to have arrived to the stage late. The two holy men looked divinely animated and resembled marble icons.

Agnolo peeked. And far away, he was able to spot his family. He saw Chola's anxious eyes looking for him. But she could not see him. He was hidden behind one of the many large columns supporting the high ceilings.

The Cellini family was excited. Chola was about to lose control over her emotions. She was whispering "Agno, Agno … you will be so beautiful … you are so important …" A boy appeared at the far distance. He seemed to be followed by Christ carrying a bigger than life cross. The boy placed a candle and lit it. As the Lord approached the candle, he fell on his cross. The crowd cried: "Mercy … Mercy … Have mercy on us, Oh, Lord. Praise be to your name, oh, Lord … Mighty is your name, oh, Lord!" Large men dressed like Roman soldiers were flogging the Christ. It was very real. The boy with the candle was becoming nearer. "Agno, you look so different … you are so brave …" whispered Chola. "How could you bear being so close to Jesus while he is suffering so much?" She continued. The boy placed several candles as he drew nearer to the Cellinis. When he passed directly in front of the Cellinis, they realized that it was not their beloved Agnolo. It was Giorgio, who when came close enough, raised his head and stared directly at Chola who was still on Michelangelo's shoulder. One by one, the Cellinis gazed closely at the dark headed candle disbursing boy in disbelief. Is it their imagination? Did they misunderstand? And, why is Giorgio disbursing the candles? Where is Agnolo? Had they switched his role with another one?

Francisca was concerned and wanted to leave the church immediately to find her son, but Benvenuto insisted that things as such often happen, and the priests may have given Agnolo a different role at the last moment. Francisca agonized. In her heart, she could tell that things were not good and for the remainder of the program she was totally miserable. But, she managed to wait through it.

The choir sang and the Cardinal himself stood up to bless the congregation. The crowd was truly touched that his holiness would take this opportunity to come to Settignano from Florence. It was such an honor and a blessing that they greatly appreciated. Michelangelo recognized the Holy Father and briefly commented that he had met him once, a while back in Florence.

When it was over, Francisca fought the crowd to get out of the church to find her son. Carrying Chola she began to run towards home. She had no time to find the family wagon and fight its way among the other wagons and the pedestrians. Benvenuto and Michelangelo pushed their way against the crowd that was trying to leave the church and aimed for the front entrance of the church. Bishop Donato and the Holy Cardinal Carafa were engaged in a serious conversation. The bishop was looking down while the Holy Cardinal seemed to aggressively pursue an expression of dissatisfaction. The two walked away and disappeared behind the walls of the church before Benvenuto or Michelangelo were able to get to them.

When they were finally close to the very front of the church, there were many parents who were joining their children after the performance. Benvenuto spotted a monk that he recognized. It was very noisy at the church. Benvenuto forced a path towards the monk who could not hear Benvenuto shouting in an attempt to get his attention. When Benvenuto got close enough, he reached with his right hand and pulled the cloak covering the monk's back. When the monk turned around in discontent, Benvenuto shouted: "I am so sorry, I could not get your attention. Where is my son, Agnolo?" The monk shouted back: "I do not know. I was surprised not to see him in the program." Benvenuto and Michelangelo followed the monk through the halls behind the church where it got quieter and they were able to talk. The monk said that he heard that they looked for Agnolo before the program but could not find him. The monk added that he heard that at the last minute, Bishop Donato decided to give Agnolo's role to someone else instead of continuing to look for the missing lad. The monk also added that there were rumors circulating that Agnolo was planning to deviate from the prescribed tradition. "A few of the boys apparently heard him talking about it. So, in a way it was a blessing that he was eliminated from the program," noted the monk to the anger of Benvenuto and Michelangelo. Benvenuto kept on saying: "He's only eleven, he's only eleven!" As they were talking, another monk who was walking by heard a part of the conversation and stopped to insert: "Agnolo had stockpiled a number of candles within the church. We are not sure what he intended to do with it, but some of his peers believed that he had planned to divert from the tradition."

The monk's revelation left Benvenuto and Michelangelo very concerned and void of reason. They rushed out of the church and as fast as they could, tried to get home. They hastened to find their wagon and with little regard for others they pushed their way through. The family

had used their wagon to church rejoicing that morning. The trip home was different. Not only were they disappointed that their precious Agno was eliminated from the program, but they were concerned about his condition.

Both Benvenuto and Michelangelo had the same thought: “It must be devastating to their precious Agno. Yes, he is different, but he is innocent. His heart is pure and his actions cannot be counted against him. It was he that always reminded everyone that since Jesus bore our sins, we are righteous in God’s eyes. ‘When the Father looks down and see us, He sees his perfect Son who took our place!’” acknowledged Agnolo.

Now they must find him and talk to him. Benvenuto and Michelangelo wondered which rout to take going back home. They opted for the shorter five-mile route, in spite of how busy it was. Many thoughts ran through their mind. They talked to themselves and to one another. They wondered if they should continue on their way home, or maybe they should have looked more for Agnolo at the church.

Every minute that went by, they questioned if they should return to the church and look for Agnolo there, or should they even look for him in the forest. They realized that Agnolo must be humiliated and devastated.

“Agnolo never understood rejection although he should have been accustomed to it,” Benvenuto and Michelangelo lamented.

When Benvenuto and Michelangelo reached home, Francisca was on her knees crying and praying in Agnolo’s room. Tota was to her side comforting her. It was getting late in the afternoon and the day’s events had worn everyone. Francisca had been crying since she and Chola left the church. The two stopped at the cottage first and called for Agnolo and looked everywhere. When they could not find him at there, they ran to the quarry. They walked and ran, and ran then walked, while calling for him.

The ravens filled the skies and their squeaks and quacks filled the air. There were a few doves, maybe nine, that huddled over a high rock and quietly observed the defiant ravens.

When Benvenuto and Michelangelo did not find Agnolo at the cottage, they rushed towards the quarry. In frantic, they began shouting: “Agno, Agno, where are you?” There was no answer but the eco of their voices. It was truly eerie.

The doves that have been known to be all around, especially in Agnolo’s presence, were nowhere in sight. Not a single dove was flying. Several ravens roamed, subtly quaking from time to time, as if to remind everyone of their presence and reign.

Approaching the work shed, Michelangelo screamed in horror: “Oh my Lord, what has happened here?” Benvenuto’s eyes were opened wide with fear and anger: “Oh, my praised Lord. What the hell had happened here? Why would anyone do this? Who is hateful enough to destroy such a beautiful work?” Before them, the damaged wooden statue of Mary Jo lay on its back starring at the heavens. “Some demon filled monster must have come in last night and inflicted this awful abuse upon this beautiful lady,” said Benvenuto. The two men bent down to look at the broken statue. It was truly sad. Some of the fine details that Agnolo had carved were either badly scratched or broken off completely. Parts were laying scattered.

“Who would do such an awful thing? I would kill him if I find him … his deed is an act of murder … oh, my Lord, what would Agnolo do when he finds out? Oh, my Lord … he would be devastated,” screamed Benvenuto.

“Papa, where is the marble slab? Where is the other unfinished statue? It is gone …” said Michelangelo

Benvenuto lifted his head “Oh, Lord Jesus. Is there an end to this day?” He pulled off the scarf around his neck and threw it to the ground. The two men sat on a rock near the broken statue shaking their heads and fighting their tears.

“Who could have moved this large slab? It took four men several days to drag it to this place.” Said Benvenuto “I just do not understand what is going on!”

“My mind is overwhelmed at this point. It is actually beginning to frighten me. All of this can’t be the work of holy angels,” said Michelangelo.

“I know my boy. I know. I just do not want to think about it right now. We must go. We need to find your brother first. We will deal with this later,” said Benvenuto.

The two men got up and walked the alleys and tiny paths between the large marble boulders shouting: “Agno … Agno … where are you … Agno … Agno!”

The quarry was made of several sections and it stretched over tens of acres of hills and small mountains. Layers of beautiful marble and alabaster could be found all around. To climb all the way up to the top and reach the highest point, it took strength and time. Within its many layers, man and nature carved many allies and narrow passageways and within these walls many got lost. Of course, there were endless caves and pockets of hollow space beneath and above everywhere. Some vegetation sprang from within the cracks in the stone – some with flowers, some with aromatic herbs, and of course there were some erupting thistle and thorns.

From the highest known peak in the quarry, and on a clear day, a person could actually see the cathedral and its imposing bell tower. Somewhere between the quarry and the cathedral a

person could see the dark forest and the river-Fiume Arno and its branches as they twisted and turned without discipline.

For years, Agnolo and Chola played around these vast terrains and luring landscape. There, the boulders seemed the same to all who looked. There were many similar looking passages and allies. Some were fully covered by foliage. In this setting, the two children played hide-and-seek and many times they got lost but mysteriously found their way often by the assistance of the doves that seem to accompany them everywhere they went.

“He is not here, papa!” said Michelangelo “I just hope and pray that he did not go into the forest … “

“Why do you think that he would go there?” Said Benvenuto with fear.

“Well, as sensitive as he is … he may decide to hide from everyone thinking that we are disappointed in him. He must be feeling great shame and guilt,” said Michelangelo.

“Oh, I hope not. Surely, he knows how much we love him and that nothing he can do would change that,” said Benvenuto as if he were trying to convince himself.

“I do too, papa. But he is a very sensitive boy and his heart is as fragile as a mountain rose,” said Michelangelo with emotion. Benvenuto put his arm around Michelangelo’s shoulder and with their heads bowed they walked towards the house.

When Benvenuto and Michelangelo got to the house, the Baldovinetti family was all there along with many people from the church and the community. Lorenzo who was sitting at a chair near the door got up and hugged each of the two men. The home was filled with many people who were concerned. Some believed that they may never see the boy again but would not dare to share their gloomy belief. It was more like an anticipated funeral.

Chola heard her father’s voice. Her eyes were puffy and red from crying. She ran and threw herself in his arms. From time to time her entire body convulsed. Michelangelo found a chair and sat down next to Chola. He caressed her forehead and held her tiny hand between his two hands. Chola felt his kindness and love and turned around to hug him tightly. The two hugged for a long time and Chola buried her head in her brother’s bosom. As much as he hated to end the precious contact with his sister, Michelangelo got up and brought two large goblets filled with wine – one for his mother and one for Chola. It had been since early morning when any of them had eaten anything. They were becoming weak and the night was beginning to extend its dark arms to hide the light of the sun.

Chola left the living room and went to the kitchen. There, Flora and the twins were watching their mother helping Tota baking bread and preparing some food. At the time in Settignano,

boys and girls were separated by culture but certainly joined by rupturing hormones and reckless ambitions. Giorgio found courage to whisper: “I am so sorry, Chola,” he tried to engage her eyes, but she looked down fighting the tears. Flora put her arm around Chola’s shoulders and mumbled: “I will miss him!”

“He is not dead. He is alive. He will show up in a minute. I know he will,” said Chola with the authority of an adult.

“I know,” replied Flora unconvincingly.

“You need to get some rest, Chola,” said Domenico. “I hate to see you looking like that. I am so sorry.”

Chola wept. Domenico’s kindness may had appeared sincere, but she could not forget that it was his brother that ended up taking Agnolo’s place in the play. As far as she went, she did not like any of these people. Furthermore, this “lovely” little lady, Flora, had a crush on her lost brother and Chola was not quite happy with that. Chola did not know exactly why she disliked Flora’s obvious interest in her brother. She just knew that she did not like it.

Michelangelo called Chola and when she did not reply he went looking for her in the kitchen. “You need to wash your beautiful face my precious,” said Michelangelo. “Just this morning you looked like a beautiful juvenile young princess in her early prime, it saddens me to see you hurting so much,” he continued.

He hugged her and kissed her tiny hands. “You must eat something. Here …” He reached for some bread and began to feed her with one hand while rubbing her hair with the other. “Drink some wine, little princess,” he reached for a goblet filled with wine that sat on the kitchen table and began to help her drink.

The twins and Flora watched. “What a good brother you are Michlo,” said Flora in a flirty notion. Michelangelo was courteous towards his guests, but his body language did not indicate his openness to receive additional comments.

Chola’s eyes got heavy and for a moment she laid her head on Michelangelo’s bosom. He wrapped both of his arms around her tiny body before he laid her on her bed away from the noisy crowd.

While the chatter of the visiting community rose and fell, there was a knock at the door. There, stood a weary monk who was inquiring about the status of Agnolo. “I heard that he was excluded from the program and I thought to inquire about how he was dealing with such an embarrassing situation,” said the monk who was unfamiliar to any members of the family. “He

is gone!" Cried Francisca, "May God forgive those that caused him so much pain," she continued, "We looked everywhere."

Michelangelo added, "He is a very sensitive boy and such a rejection must have been devastating to him, especially knowing that he was falsely accused. Children sometimes lie. It is unfortunate, but the adults have to discern the truth and refrain from irrational behavior before they have all the facts," asserted Michelangelo.

"I am aware of the details," firmly declared the monk. "I am certain, what happened will not go unnoticed," convincingly declared the monk while starring straight into the Benvenuto's eyes. The monk turned his head towards Signore Lorenzo who was attempting to leave the room and paused for a moment. Addressing Benvenuto he resumed "You do not have to worry. We will find out all the details and your son will be exonerated," he concluded. "Now, we just have to find him. I pray that he is safe!"

With that, the monk escorted himself out. A very short while after the monk departed, Lorenzo gathered his family and began the departing ritual. "Benvenuto, I am so sorry for all that you are going through. My boys and I will continue doing everything we know to look for Agnolo." With that, he hugged Benvenuto and led his family out the door.

As the hours slowly passed, Benvenuto was pacing while Michelangelo sat looking down. Francisca knelt next Agnolo's bed and was whaling. From time to time, she got up and lit a small candle. After a very short nap, Chola woke up and appeared lost. She grabbed several of Agnolo's clothing and was hugging them while whaling: "My brother, my brother. How cruel are these people? Why, why, oh, Lord?" She lamented loudly in a heart-breaking tune.

"We must do something," said Michelangelo. "Maybe we should go back to the church."

"There is no need to do that. If Agnolo was at the church, the monk would have told us," answered Benvenuto.

Francisca interrupted: "We should go back to the church and seek their help in looking for him. Maybe he went in the forest."

Michelangelo thought it was a good idea, so he and Benvenuto mounted their horses and head towards the church. Francisca and Chola decided to stay at home, in case Agnolo showed up at the cottage.

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When Benvenuto and Michelangelo arrived at the church, it was getting dark. The atmosphere was very gloomy with little to indicate the celebration of the holy day. Monks were walking

everywhere and non-seemed to be tasked with any chores. Benvenuto approached one of the monks and asked where he would be able to find the Bishop. The monk explained to Benvenuto that it may not be a convenient time for anyone to see Bishop Donato at that moment. Benvenuto explained to the monk that his son, Agnolo, who was excluded from the program had been missing. The monk gazed into Benvenuto's eyes and said: "You are Agnolo's father?"

Benvenuto: "Yes, why?"

"Oh, your son's disappearance has caused quite a disturbance here. In fact, the exclusion of your son from the program alarmed the Holy Cardinal himself and caused him to alter his plans of returning to Florence. The Holy Cardinal expressed surprise that the boy did not appear in the program. Apparently, his holiness had seen the young lad during practice and took notice of his abilities. It is truly a shame what had happened. But the bishop is in discussion with the cardinal as we speak about the matter."

"I hate to bother the Holy Fathers, but this is becoming an urgent matter. It is getting dark and we have looked for our boy everywhere but are not able to find him. The only place we did not look was the forest and as you know, we do not have enough people or horses strong enough to go there, especially at night," said Benvenuto.

The monk sensed the anger and frustration in Benvenuto's voice.

"Wait here," said the monk who quickly disappeared in the long and cold halls of the cathedral.

"I hope they can do something," said Michelangelo who has been listening to the conversation. "I just do not know what."

"I do not know either, Michlo. I am just tired and very sad. But, if anyone could do anything, it would be these people here. After all, it was their fault that little Agno went through this horrible ordeal. I wonder who of his friends had made up such awful lies about Agno," said Benvenuto.

"I do not know papa, but boys are cruel to each other, especially if they are jealous of another kid's talents. Sometimes, they are just mean for the sake of being mean. As if there is no God to judge them. I guess they lack the wisdom that comes with years."

"My precious boy, as sad as it may be, it is the fallen nature of all man. Not just young lads. You see that even among the so called older and wiser. Envy and jealousy has no age boundaries. In fact, you will find it among the very holy. If it were not for the grace of God, we would all be screwed," said Benvenuto.

“Papa, you are right. You are tired. I hope this monk brings us some good news. If anyone could help, it is the church. They have the men, the horses, and all the capabilities to look in the forest. They definitely have the support of the angels and their protection to lead them through this frightening place. More so than any of us, I think.”

“You really think so, Michlo? I think priests are no holier than me or you. In fact, I think that being inside a monastery gives them less exposure to the temptations and trails that you and I face every day on the outside.”

The conversation was interrupted when the monk appeared at the end of the hallway. Walking with him there was another man. As they got closer, Benvenuto recognized him. “That is Bishop Donato,” he said.

Bishop Donato approached the two men and with his head down he began to talk: “The Lord’s blessings upon you. We are so sorry for the disappearance of Agnolo. I take full blame for all of this. At the time I made the decision to replace him with the other young lad, I had no idea that all of this would happen. I should have thought about it. Agnolo was a very promising young man. Since I became the bishop here after the sudden departure of Bishop Fontana, I heard great things about this lad. And I truly did not believe it when the Baldovinetti children began accusing him of stashing candles with the intention of modifying the program. None of us believe it. All the brothers could not conceive that such a large diversion of the program was planned. But, when they showed me the stash of candles, my mouth fell over. Even then, I was planning to let Agnolo perform his part, but I ordered a few brothers to keep an eye on him.”

“The Baldovinetti twins are the ones that betrayed my son? Are you sure, Father?” Asked Benvenuto.

“Yes, unfortunately. I know about the close friendship your families have. But although the behavior of the twins is not condoned, they may have circumvented a larger catastrophe. The holy Cardinal is extremely disappointed in the young boys and I am doing all I can to correct the wrong that I had done in his eyes and in the eyes of the Lord.”

“So, you rewarded the young devils with allowing one of them to take my son’s place in the ceremony …” His eyes wide open and chocking in anger and hurt said Benvenuto.

“Believe me it was not intended to be so. I know that is what it looks like to everyone – even the holy Cardinal. If I could only change all of that.” Uttered the Bishop Donato with his head down. “If it is any reconciliation to you, the Holy Cardinal has told me to let you know that he has ordered a large-scale search for this beloved son. Please go home and get some rest. We will begin the search immediately as soon as everyone is ready. We will let you know as soon as we find out something.”

While Benvenuto and Michelangelo were leaving the cathedral, they heard great noise of many horses and many men talking. When they opened the door to exit the church, it was as if the night had turned into day. There were over 200 horsemen and monks holding large lanterns. They were rushing towards the forest. Benvenuto and Michelangelo waited until most of the men had left before they mounted their horses to head back home.

On the way home, they passed by the forest. They could see how far the horsemen have penetrated into the woods. They could also hear some of them calling "Agnolo … Agnolo … may the Lord be with you … where are you?"

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The small community and the church mobilized to find Agnolo in the forest and everywhere they thought that he might had gone. Where else could he be? They looked in every part of the church but could not find him. They looked at the quarry and within its layered caves and at the cottage, but he was nowhere to be found.

It was like an extended funeral. It had no resolution. No one wanted to accept that Agnolo was gone forever. Just like that! Men and women whispered: "The wolves got the little angel. What a way to end a precious life." But, no one dared to share these thoughts with the Cellini family.

Francisca cried and prayed to the Lord: "You have brought this angel into our lives, you have protected him through many dangers, you Lord can bring him back." Chola also prayed. She made promises to the Lord that she knew in her heart that she could not keep. She just wanted her Agno back. She could not imagine life without him. It had been a day of hell. Who is going to love her like Agnolo? Who is going to fill her life with many joys like he did? She just wanted to die.

9

Monday

When the morning came, Michelangelo and Benvenuto who got no sleep all night mounted their horses and head towards the woods. The large number of horsemen and monks that they had seen the night before had dwindled to no more than about 30 men. These men too appeared exhausted.

In the middle of the night, it began to rain heavily. And the already wet swamps became more difficult to travel within and the hauling of wolves seemed to challenge the very brave. These creatures seemed to enjoy stalking and terrorizing. Their hauls seemed to get louder and they appeared to surround the search party from each direction.

For years, several bands of rebels of unknown goals and motivations, likely some Venetian, established garrisons in the woods and made the forest their refuge. Undocumented legends circulated claiming that many of these rebels had mated with the wild wolves while others had reportedly aligned themselves with the serpents and snakes. Screams of the tormented souls from the forest were often heard for miles and smoke from within the forest carried the stench of burning flesh over many tens of acres.

Michelangelo tried to engage some of the men in a conversation to learn what they had found out, but none was in a mood to talk. It was as if they were hiding a secret. The men were courteous to Benvenuto and Michelangelo, but they were reserved and said very little. This did not go very well with Michelangelo whose fears began to grow. However, Benvenuto was in denial. He rationalized the disengaged behavior of the men by saying that “they were just tired”.

For the rest of the day, the two men traveled back and forth from their home to the forest several times. In the afternoon, the rain stopped and a band of about 30 horsemen appeared on the site. The band was led by two men one of whom was carrying a pouch that he guarded carefully. The band of men bypassed Michelangelo and Benvenuto without saying anything and they swiftly marched through the wetland in a specific direction aiming for a specific spot. They disappeared in the woods amid the sporadic hauling of wolves. Overhead, a multitude of ravens covered the skies. They circled over a certain spot very far away – somewhere over where the men were going.

Michelangelo and Benvenuto tied their horses to a tree at the edge of the forest and squatted down with no plans in mind. They had exhausted all their ideas of finding Agnolo. It had been an entire day since he disappeared. Their concerns were evolving into fears, especially knowing that the church search party had not found any leads. While Benvenuto and Michelangelo

waited, they heard the noise of approaching horses. As the band of horsemen got closer, Benvenuto and Michelangelo recognized Lorenzo who was accompanied by five of the slaves that worked at the Cellini quarry. Michelangelo looked at his father and breathed hard. "Oh, the wicked devil is here!" He said.

Since the disappearance of Agnolo, Michelangelo thought to take action against the Baldovinetti family. He harbored covert evil, but honorable, thoughts of revenge and punishment. But, whom should he punish? The twins? Their father and mother? And, what would be an appropriate course of action that he should take to restore honor to his family and avenge the wrong that was inflicted upon his little brother?

Likewise, Benvenuto was thinking how to pour his wrath on those who caused him the loss of his son – these evil and irresponsible people. Through the years, he had shown the Baldovinetti great kindness and thought of them as part of his own extended family. Of all the people that he thought would betray his family, the Baldovinetti were not on his list. Lorenzo, he thought, was a close friend and in the absence of blood brothers or family nearby, a sincere ally. But, could he blame his children's behavior on him? After all, they are children. Thought Benvenuto.

Now Michelangelo and his father were coming face to face with the cause of their agony. Michelangelo was watching his father's face with caution and fear. He knew that at any moment his father may lose control and only God knows what he might do.

Sure enough, in a burst of anger, Benvenuto jumped up on his feet and ran towards Lorenzo and launched to grab him off his horse. "You, coward. You killed my son. I will kill you …" Shouted Benvenuto while punching Lorenzo. Lorenzo never punched back but tried to block Benvenuto's punches and, as much as he could, tried to stop him. Michelangelo ran after his father, along with the slaves who accompanied Lorenzo, and tried to spare Lorenzo from Benvenuto's emotional reaction. Each was shouting something different. Some were apologizing on Lorenzo's behalf while others were trying to convince Benvenuto that he had delivered enough punches. The noise of the squabble got mixed with the squawks of many ravens that perched on nearby trees and hopped on the wet ground. Lorenzo was crying: "Please Benvenuto, please. I am sorry, please forgive me. I came here to apologize and offer help."

What Lorenzo did not tell Benvenuto was that immediately after the church extravaganza, he was very surprised by the elevated role that Giorgio had played in the ceremony. Of course, he was very proud and pleased that his son was chosen for such a great and glamorous role, but he was also perplexed as to how all of that came to pass. He was also confused about why Agnolo was eliminated from the program and replaced by his son. When he questioned his two

boys, they admitted that they had told the bishop about a plot that Agnolo was planning – one that would have altered the entire program. The twins tried to explain to their father that they were concerned about the success of the ceremony which they knew it would be attended by the cardinal himself. They went on to explain to their father that they were also worried about Agnolo. They felt that if they did not say something and allowed Agnolo to proceed with his plans, Agnolo may have ended up being punished severely. It was a very difficult decision, they insisted. But, they decided that they had to say something. Furthermore, they went on to explain that they had little time to contemplate the consequences. "Things happened so fast," they justified.

Lorenzo was furious at his children. He grabbed them by the collar and slapped them hard and repeatedly. The boys put their heads down and said nothing for a long time. When they spoke, Domenico whispered: "Papa, I am sorry"

"How could you do such an evil thing? How could you betray your best friend?" Said Lorenzo with contempt.

"Papa, I am sorry. We had little time to think things over. It was an awful thing," said Giorgio in tears.

"We must find Agnolo and apologize to him," shouted Lorenzo.

Lorenzo kept these things to himself and did not tell Benvenuto. Lorenzo also decided not to tell Benvenuto that he and the boys spent several hours in the wet and dark forest looking for Agnolo.

It took a lot of effort to calm Benvenuto down and stop him from hitting Lorenzo, but when the two men were finally separated, Lorenzo sat on the wet ground several feet away with his head bowed down. One of the slaves sat next to him while the rest of the men squatted around Benvenuto. There was complete silence for a few minutes. One could only hear the hard breathing of all the men who were trying to recover from the violent physical encounter.

Some of the slaves broke the silence uttering comforting words to Benvenuto. "It will be OK. I am sure all will be OK," said one.

From his place, Lorenzo lifted his head and said: "Benvenuto, my brother, I hurt a lot for the loss of our boy. I know my pain is not as much as your pain, but please know that I ache like crazy. My boys will be severely punished. And they will learn their lesson not to betray a kind friend."

"None of that is going to bring my boy back. Even if we find him, only God knows what kind of condition he will be in," said Benvenuto in a sad voice.

“I wish things were different, but children often act against everything we teach them,” said Lorenzo.

These words somehow resonated with Benvenuto. He did not comment. He knew that what Lorenzo had said was true. In fact, he had been hearing a similar argument within his own head. And, he knew in his heart that the behavior of the twins, although awful, was neither a reflection of what they were taught, nor an indication of their future character.

10

The Search

From the woods, several horsemen appeared. Tied to the side of one of their horses was a large cloth pouch. From the way it was drooping, it was clear that it contained something heavy.

All the men got up to meet the horsemen who avoided their path and sped away towards the church.

Benvenuto and his company stared at each other but did not say anything. They quickly mounted their horses and soon they all disappeared in the cloud of dust that was made by the church horsemen.

When Benvenuto, Lorenzo, and those with them got to the church, the church horsemen had already dismounted their horses and vanished within the walls of the cathedral. Benvenuto and Michelangelo ran into the cathedral. Lorenzo was a few steps behind them and was followed by the other men. Benvenuto ran directly to the bishop's office. Without knocking he entered. The monk that maned the front desk was not in his seat. He was coming out of the bishop's office. Behind him came out several other monks and men who guarded the bishop and his office. Some of the guards appeared to be those who were guarding the cardinal himself.

Benvenuto began to tell the group of monks and guards who he was, when one interrupted: "Signore Cellini, you do not have to introduce yourself. We know who you are. But who are all these men?"

Benvenuto: "These are my friends, and this is my son, Michelangelo."

The guards turned their eyes towards Michelangelo who was unsure of the unexpected attention and one of the guards said: "Well, Signore Cellini, you saved us a trip to your house. Please wait here." The guard disappeared inside the bishop's office for several minutes. When he came back he ordered all the men to wait outside the church but invited Benvenuto and Michelangelo to the bishop's office. "Please follow me."

Neither Benvenuto nor Michelangelo had ever been in the bishop's office before. At one time, Michelangelo was invited to the cardinal's office in Florence, but he had never been to the bishop's office in Settignano. The large and very well-furnished room was full of rare artifacts and of course several large crucifixes were displayed everywhere. In this large room that had several couches and chairs, sat the bishop, one of the church horseman, and Cardinal Carafa himself. On the coffee table in front of one of the couches, the two men saw the large cloth

sack that they had seen earlier being carried by one of the church horsemen as he was leaving the forest. The bishop rose up to meet the two men who bowed their heads respectfully and walked with their heads bowed towards the cardinal who remained in his seat. They kissed the hand of the cardinal and the bishop asked them to have a seat.

“This has been an awful ordeal for you, Signore Cellini. We understand all the pain that you are going through,” Cardinal Carafa began speaking with a resonating voice.

There were a few quiet moments before Bishop Donato spoke: “The Holy Father has cancelled his trip back to Florence to ensure that all efforts were made to find your son. I take full blame for the awful pain that your son must have suffered. May the Lord forgive me and allow me the time to work out my salvation.”

Benvenuto and Michelangelo began to breathe hard. They had heard the bishop’s apology the day before. “Why was he apologizing again?” They wondered. Was it for the sake of the cardinal or does he have an additional reason to offer new apologies?

The bishop proceeded: “I am afraid we may not have good news for you at this time. In fact, our men found some alarming evidence while searching in the woods. We were going to contact you, but we are glad that you are here where we would be able to talk to you in person, instead of you hearing the news through a messenger.”

“What, what? Is he dead? Is my boy dead?” Gasped Benvenuto.

“We are not sure. We hope that we are wrong. My men found some foot prints in the woods. And … some of Agnolo’s clothing … including his coat of arm. They were all torn the pieces.”

“My boy!” screamed Benvenuto whose knees were shaking. He leaned on Michelangelo to avoid collapsing.

“We do not know for sure what that means. Your son is very dear to us. We will certainly continue looking and praying,” said the bishop.

Cardinal Carafa affirmed: “Your boy is very dear to us. Rest assured that we will do all we can to find him.”

Benvenuto unsuccessfully fought the tears. He lowered his head to hide his face. Chocking, Michelangelo said: “Thank you Father!”

With their heads bowed they walked out of the office in silence. It was all that Michelangelo could do to hold his father who was leaning on him and about to fall down and faint. The distance from the office to where they had left their horses seemed like many miles. When

Lorenzo saw Benvenuto approaching, he walked toward him and wrapped his arms around him: "Our Lord is kind. He will not take a flower before its time."

Lorenzo, who had apparently learned the alarming news through talking to the church horsemen while waiting outside the church, did not say anything. After Benvenuto and Michelangelo got on their horses, Lorenzo and the others got on their horses. All men head towards the Cellini family cottage. They moved slowly.

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At the cottage, despair and sadness sat over the place like a dark cloud that refused to dissipate. Tota was in the kitchen with Signora Cicilia, who had come back with her daughter earlier. Flora sat with Francisca and Chola. The twins were nowhere in sight. No word was spoken. Benvenuto and Michelangelo were followed by Lorenzo.

Benvenuto saw no need to tell the women what he had learned. Plus, he was too tired and exhausted. Tota brought in freshly cooked bread and leftover pastry that were made for the Easter celebration. She walked around the room and handed each person a plate and insisted that they should eat it. She went back into the kitchen and brought fresh herbs and walking around the room she placed some leaves on each plate. Cicilia carried a large pot filled with wine and filled the empty cups. "We must drink. The Lord will return, just like Agnolo will!" She reasoned.

The smell of the food was enticing. And, to stop hearing Tota from nagging, each ate a little. It was getting dark and all was exhausted. When they all fell asleep, in their seats, Tota picked up the plates and brought in some pillows. Benvenuto left the main reception room where everyone was and went into the bedroom where he lay down.

Francisca and Chola slept on the floor in Agnolo's room. They were surrounded by his statues and creations from when he was a toddler. So many memories and so many things were there. Each was like a knife widening an open wound. They could even smell him and feel his presence.

Whether it was that the squawking of the ravens outside was very loud or that she had a terrible dream, Chola woke up and began to weep. All who were in the house also woke up.

Outside, it began to rain again. The reality was beginning to set in. Agnolo was not coming back. Agnolo is gone. Although they did not talk, each was wondering the same thing. Would they be able to find his body? Or, did the wolves devour him entirely? There was even the possibility that the conspirators from Naples and Venice who have been threatening the republic may have found him and kidnapped him for ransom. Francisca was also haunted by a

terrible thought -- one that she did not want to share with anyone. Being from the Medici family, she thought maybe her son was targeted by remaining remanence of insurgents from the Pazzi family who caused trouble and political unrest in Florence for years. This group had tried to assassinate her cousin Duke Lorenzo Medici while he was worshiping at the Cathedral of the Living Saints in Florence. What a terrible end to such a kind a promising young man. Sure, Agnolo had many difficulties adjusting to life and society, and he certainly was unable to conform to the accepted norms, but who is perfect? And teen age boys are known to act in a very strange way.

11

Tuesday

Tuesday was a day of uncertainty and confusion. The church monks, nuns, and parishioners prayed and lit candles all day. The facts were not good and slowly the day became more like a funeral.

When Tuesday morning came, it was very slow. The prior night was a night of hell. Since Easter Sunday, the family had survived on hope, but that hope was dissipating rapidly. With no food or sleep, they all began to hallucinate. The few minutes of sleep that each had received were often interrupted by nightmares and awful thoughts

Late that morning, nuns from the church came to visit. They stayed for a long time. There were several. Some were known to the Cellini's, while others came for the first time. The nuns brought some holy bread that was prayed over by Bishop Donato and several candles. They prayed silently and in reverence. They had walked the distance from the cathedral to the Cellini home in the rain soaked muddy roads. Their usually immaculately kept habits were stained and muddy. The odor of their perspiration rose out from time to time and could not be masked by the smell of burning candles and incents. Outside, the ravens were flying with impunity. Visitors and friends strolled in all morning. There were those that had spent the night. They slept on the floor everywhere. Most of the women were dressed in black. The men wore black arm bands.

Around noon, the church bells rang three times. It was as if to announce the death of a saint.

Francisca, who had spent the night in Agnolo's room on the floor next to Agnolo's bed mourning and praying saw one dove that appeared for a few minutes then disappeared. The rain that had stopped for a short while resumed in full force.

In the early afternoon, the earth shook violently for a few seconds enough to rearrange the contents of the cottage and instill fear in the hearts of its inhabitants. All who were there, began to pray loudly. Women held their children and the men rushed outside to assess the damage. The tremor was sudden and strong but did not last except for a few seconds. In Italy, such events were not uncommon, but they were all viewed with respect and understanding of the awesome power of nature. No one could forget the devastation of the angry Vesuvius and how with little notice, tens of thousands lost their lives and were buried alive. Benvenuto rushed outside the people-filled-cottage. He was followed by Michelangelo and later by Lorenzo. Benvenuto was concerned that the tremor may had inflicted serious damage at the quarry. With its many soft marble beds, the quarry was vulnerable to the destructive force of any tremor.

The grief and sadness were soon turned into fear and concern. Will the earth shake again? Usually, earth quakes manifest in many tremors. Was that tremor a prelude to a much larger and destructive one? Benvenuto fought the urge to climb his way to the quarry to investigate. It is these quakes that cause rock to separate from rock, sometimes in a useful way – other times leading to great devastations. Caves and rivers are known to emerge after such events and entire cities have been known to disappear as well. The landscape undergoes a divine transformation and remodeling.

Sure enough, nearby, the earth opened its mouth and devoured many hills. The stench of burning sulfur spread, and the smoke was hard to ignore. At the quarry rocks shifted and cracked. The landscape was recognizable but different.

All the saints and some of the wicked prayed and lit candles. It seems that the anxiety of the unknown always leads to piety and it often accompanies such acts of natural terrorism. Saints and wicked alike search their hearts and seek the protection and help of God and his angels.

Some thought that it was a needed trail. They misquoted the Bible saying that God tries only whom he loves.

The earthquake was a distraction to the mourning community. Reality was setting in. It was an unofficial funeral. All were numb. They could not believe the events of the past few days. "My child cannot just disappear in thin air," Francisca mumbled to herself. No one was sure whether she was praying or if she was talking to herself.

Chola was weak. Her fragile body could not withstand her self-imposed fasting and grief.

"We should have never allowed him to take part of that ceremony. That was my fault," said Benvenuto. "That is too big a task for such a young man. Especially one who is so sensitive."

"We did not know it would end like this. No one knew," said Francisca.

Benvenuto did not respond. Michelangelo who was sitting a little further away uttered: "What good could come out of this? I know it is the will of God, but what good could come out of this?" He looked up as if he were praying and continued: "No, I do not believe the Lord who loves us would punish us. His love is unconditional, even if we were bad. Jesus took our place and was punished for our sins, so that we would not be punished."

Many awkward and incoherent words were spoken and people in the room shuffled from place to place and from position to position in each place. Chola walked towards her mother and sat at her feet. Francisca looked at Chola with pity and worry, but said nothing.

Chola lost hope and lost her desire to live. She stopped eating and lost several pounds in the last day alone. Francisca and Benvenuto who were fighting their own fights to stay sane, were seriously worried about her. Michelangelo tried to be strong. He emerged as the voice of reason. And logically and methodically tried to sort out things. No one ate much.

"You have lost so much weight my baby," whispered Francisca while rubbing Chola's hair with her right hand. "Chola, my baby, I used to have two eyes, now I only have one eye to see with. Please take care of yourself, my fragile child, I do not want to go totally blind."

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When the news reached Benvenuto's family in Florence, two wagons filled with relatives and at least ten horsemen, including Benvenuto's brother showed up at the Cellini cottage. With them, they brought much wine and food. Despite their might and desire to help, there was nothing they could do. With great remorse, they knew how terrible the loss of Agnolo, the miracle child, meant to their beloved Benvenuto.

Many of Francisca's Medici family members also made the trip from Florence to the Cellini family cottage in Settignano, upon hearing the devastating news.

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In the early evening, there was great commotion outside and the sound of many horses. No one cared to investigate. When the door opened, there were several horsemen from the church who politely and quietly entered. They were followed by Bishop Donato. It was totally unexpected visit from his holiness who did not often visit the flock as he was overwhelmed with his primary task of worshiping as well as overseeing the parish business. All who were in the house stood up. Those in the kitchen sensed the unusual activity in the main living space and came out. The few nuns who were still there bowed in respect. Everyone emulated the nun's gestures and whispered praises to the Lord. The Bishop walked to Benvenuto and hugged him. With his hand still in Benevento's hand, his voice broke up as he said: "We have come to believe ... Agnolo is dead!"

Francisca and Chola screamed: "No, no, no. This can't be. Father, you must be wrong." They wailed. The two fainted and fell on the floor. Other women rushed to render help. Some were fanning with their attire, others offered the two ladies a bit of wine.

Chocking on his speech, the bishop continued: "He is in the arms of our Lord. May our Holy Lady provide him and us with the comfort that we will need."

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Mourning is a social event. It is perpetuated and extenuated by the presence of those whom we perceive to empathize.

Together, Francisca and Chola cried until there were no more tears left to cry. Their eyes were dry and it was hard to even blink. They stared at each other from time to time then slowly lowered their heads looking at the floor. They mumbled a few words from time to time and gazed with an empty look at one another.

There were moments that seemed like hours when they all thought many thoughts and asked many questions all without uttering a single word: "What a terrible way to die. So young! Did he suffer much? What were his last words? Did he call for help? Did he pray? Where was God? Where were the angels? What happened to the Lord's promise for protection? How long did he agonize? Poor Agnolo! He never fit in. It may be a good thing. He is in a better place. Who knows what this cruel world would have done to him if he had lived? What is he doing in heaven now? I can see him flying with the angels ... And with the doves ... His sweet friends ..."

With his head bowed and his eyes full of tears, Lorenzo, his wife, and daughter left the Cellini home. None of them uttered a word.

When Lorenzo opened the door to leave, the noise of a thousand ravens were heard and several tried to enter the cottage. Michelangelo and several of the men mustered enough strength to rush towards the door and with their bare hands blocked these wicked creatures from sneaking their way into the inside.

The doves that surrounded Agnolo and accompanied him everywhere he went were nowhere in sight. In fact, it had been since Easter Sunday that any group of doves was seen. It was as if they had vanished together with Agnolo. In the midst of their torment, those who knew Agnolo and his closeness to the doves wondered: "The doves … oh, the doves! Where are the doves? Were they all together mourning their precious friend in a hidden place? And where were they when Agnolo needed them? They were always there all around him – often to protect him and warn him of upcoming danger."

The men passed time fighting their tears. They hugged each other. Michelangelo hugged his father. The fainting of Francisca and Chola attracted the concern of all, and in the process, the equally devastated Benvenuto was ignored. Michelangelo had to muster the courage and theatrical strength to support his heartbroken beloved family.

They all knew that it was unlikely that they would ever find Agnolo's body. After all, the forest was still the same dark and God forsaken place where the sound of howling wolves and hissing snakes of many types were heard. The smell of stagnant waters and buzzing mosquitos reminded all that it was a place where no man in his right mind should enter. Legends had it that during the political conflict between Florence and Venice many men from both sides were slaughtered in these forests including many holy guards. It was said that the tormented spirits of the dead roamed above and below these swamps by day and by night seeking revenge, justice, and blood. These forests were also the eternal home to many convicts and criminals who were shackled and left there to die slowly as they were eaten by the wolves, ravens, and insects. Wicked men and hostile enemies were also known to hide in these God forsaken swamps and woods. The conflict between the republic of Florence and Vince was never settled and hostile long feuds only brewed perpetual hatred and expanded circles of those who called for revenge on both sides. The perception of injustice was shared by both sides and forgiveness was neither considered nor viewed as an honorable solution for the proud and the boastful strong.

Everyone knew that it was a fact that a pack of wolves could devour a grown man in less than an hour. Their powerful jaws could crush the hardest bones. With their merciless sharp claws, they tore the flesh off, and their razor-sharp teeth dismembered the flesh off the bone. A small boy had no chance against a pack of wolves in an eating frenzy. What a terrible way to die.

In the forest, the doves were rarely seen – only ravens who flew with impunity. They ruled the skies and their noisy quacks infiltrated the air night and day.

Since Easter Sunday, for three days, the entire community agonized. Now it all came to a resolution, albeit a very sad one. Everyone wondered if there will be a funeral? And, if so, how could they have a funeral without a body?

****

When Lorenzo left the Cellini cottage, he went directly to his home. Giorgio and Domenico were in the kitchen. Both had laid their heads on the dining table almost asleep. The two had been arguing and fighting for a long time. Each blamed the other for the misfortune and disappearance of their friend. They tried to rationalize their behavior and several times they both broke up in tears. They prayed for forgiveness not believing that their prayers would be accepted.

"How could you even allow yourself to accept taking his place, after you betrayed him?" argued Domenico. "That is absolutely low. You are lower than Judas," he continued

“Are you suggesting that I should kill myself like he did?” Said Giorgio. “Would that make you happy? Would that vindicate me before the Lord and all the people? Would that change things and bring Agnolo back?”

Giorgio was blinking and squinting excessively, but Domenico did not notice his brother’s unprecedented behavior and went on to say: “Oh, shut up! I wonder who knows about what we did. And, if they do not know by now, how long it would be before they find out. And then all hell will break loose. We will be hated by everyone and our family will be shamed forever.”

Giorgio: “I know. And, I might as well forget about any future that I would have with Chola. All my dreams are shattered because of our stupidity.”

Domenico: “As if you had a chance with her anyway. She was never yours. I think I had more of a chance with her than you ever did.”

Giorgio: “You are full of rotted fish. As much as I love you, you always seem to say hurtful things …”

They glanced at each other and laid their heads back on the table.

Lorenzo rushed into the house looking for the twins. When they heard him coming they both stood up. Violently, he grabbed them by their necks saying: “Get your ass ready. We are going to find Agnolo. They say he is dead, but we must look for him. Dead or alive we must find him and bring him or his body to his family.”

The two boys mounted one horse and followed their father who was racing towards the forest. Instead of stopping there, he proceeded towards the church complex. Giorgio rode behind his brother. Holding to his brother’s waist, he buried his head down as the cold air hitting his eyes seemed to greatly blur his eye sight even more. By the time they got to the cathedral, Giorgio was almost entirely blind. His father and brother thought it was of his excessive crying.

****

At the cathedral, Cardinal Carafa and Bishop Donato were in the bishop’s office with the door locked. Those who guarded the entrance to the bishop’s office heard angry shouting and sounds of items breaking. They did not dare to enter or investigate. The two holy men exited the office in haste. The cardinal followed by the bishop. The cardinal waved to his guards who in formation ran towards the main entrance to the cathedral. A few disappeared and reappeared escorting the cardinal’s wagon. Silently and without looking at Bishop Donato, the cardinal entered the wagon and Bishop Donato followed him in. With the two men in the wagon, the wagon and the cardinal’s guards sped up away from the cathedral on the road to Florence.

At the church in Settignano, a small and unorganized mutiny began to form. Most of the monks and nuns blamed Bishop Donato for the death of Agnolo.

A serious discussion among the monks was heard: “The poor boy did not deserve to die. And, if he was somewhat rebellious and often did not follow instructions, it was certainly not done with malice. In fact, it may have been the result of his inability to hear clearly.”

“May God forgive us all, for we ignored his call. Agnolo may had been an angel.”

“I know, brother, angels are known to visit us in human form.”

“I heard that the Cardinal was very angry with Bishop Donato.”

“He was. The two walked out and jumped into the wagon as if they were rushing to burry someone.”

“Who is left in charge?”

“I do not know.”

“I guess we will find out.”

“Does anyone know when or if Bishop Donato will be back?”

“No, when he left, most of his guards were placed under the authority of the cardinal’s guards. The few that remained are hunkered in their quarters.”

“What a mess. Is anyone preparing for the funeral of the boy?”

“I think so. I heard that Father Fonte is leading the effort. After all, he is the senior person here now. They do not know what to do without the body, though.”

“It is like trying to have a burial ceremony for a saint who had ascended into heaven. An empty tomb.”

“How sad, yet how fitting for Easter.”

12

The Palace

When Agnolo fled the church, he ran and ran.

(Song 8: Agnolo Running)

“I have shamed my family. I have dishonored my father. I am not worthy. Only you Lord, know all of the truth.”

The doves surrounded him and tried to slow him down, but he would not relent. He shouted loudly in a different language and screamed in the open air. He had let his family down. His sister, Chola, who idolized him must be utterly disappointed. His plans to praise the Lord were thwarted.

“Why, why, oh Lord? It was for your glory!” The screams inside his head were manifested loudly in agonizing disparate cries.

He did not know which way to go, so he just ran. In a few minutes he was at the edge of the forest. He took off his shoes, ripped the coat of arms off his shirt, and tossed everything on the ground and without hesitation, he ran through the forest for a short distance hoping to die. It was nasty – the stench and the bugs, the noise and the unexpected. But, he was not afraid. Facing death was easier to bare than facing life.

Few doves tried to follow him into the forest but were chased out by a horde of large and viciously rabid ravens.

“Where are the snakes and the wolves? Why can’t they come and end it all for me now? It is indeed an awful place.”

He hurried outside of the forest and began to run towards the quarry. Jumping over rocks and kicking many with his bare feet, he continued to run. He knew that he could hide there – hopefully, just until the Lord takes his spirit, or he would have the courage to kill himself.

He ran and ran. A large host of doves flew over him. They tried to talk to him. They tried to comfort him. He would not answer, and his tormenter chose isolation as a means of delivery. The wind blew his tears where they covered the back of his head. From time to time a dove attempted to gently land on his naked shoulder, only to fly off disappointed. His bare feet were tormented by the rocks and stones that covered the dirt road.

“I know that my family will be worried about me. But soon, I hope they will realize that I am not worthy of their love and forget about me.”

“It could have been so beautiful, Lord. You know I love you, you know I love them. My precious mommy, my precious papa, my baby and my doll, Chola … oh, if I could hold her just once again. Oh, if I could see her eyes just once again.”

“Will they forgive me? I know that the Lord will forgive me. I think!”

When Agnolo finally got to the quarry, he ran directly to the small pavilion where he had been working on the large statue of Mary Jo. Because of his preparation for the Easter ceremony, he had little time to work on his creation for several weeks. Agnolo had used the smaller wooden statue that he had carved earlier as a model for the large one. Although she was made of wood, he knew she was alive. He heard her singing to him and he remembered that she taught him how to dance. And, yes, it was real. It was not the wine. There, he thought he would find refuge. Will Mary Jo accept him? Will she know about his failure and dishonor? And even if she did not know, would he pretend as if he were the same man that she knew? It was worth taking a chance.

He climbed the hill leading to the place where he knew he would find his beloved Mary Jo. He had to talk to her. He had to feel her touch and seek her comfort.

The doves that followed him to the quarry were met by a large host of ravens. They seemed to appear from all corners of the quarry. Some were hiding within the walls and caves of the quarry for such a time. The two foes settled on the tall rocks and boulders on opposite sides of the open pavilion where he had last left Mary Jo. They perched and waited. Each side sizing up the other with nervous eagerness.

As he approached his worksite, his eyes got bigger and bigger and his sadness and confusion were exacerbated to an almost fatal level. His wooden statue the he knew, loved, and befriended could not be seen. And from where he was, the large marble slab looked different and deformed. With his heart about to stop beating, he ran as fast as he could towards his statues. He was crying, screaming, and panting like a desolate animal.

The closer that he got to the pavilion the deeper his madness raged. He screamed and screamed!

When he was finally close enough to see her, his legs wobbled, and he fell on his face. He crawled on his knees and dragged his limp feet to where she was.

There, he found Mary Jo. She was broken. There, she lay on her back fragmented with her eyes staring into the heavens. Her heart was pierced and smashed.

“Who would do such a thing?” He creamed!

There was a large spot of blood on her chest. She was bleeding from her heart. There were fresh tears in her opened eyes and salty tracks of dried tears on her cheeks. Her hands were open, the right one pointing to the heavens and the left pointing to the ground. Her head was at rest and her mouth was open but silent.

He threw himself over her, he hugged her, and then wrapped his arms around her. He wailed and wailed. He tried to lift her up. "Dance with me please, dance with me …! Please, please, don't go … just five more minutes. Please, just five more minutes! Please, please, dance with me …!"

(Song 9: Mary Jo)

He buried her head into his bosom when he heard the hissing of a viper. He fell on his face holding Mary Jo and fainted!

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When he woke up, he found himself in a different place. He thought that he had died and that he was in heaven with the angels and the Lord. It was beautiful! It was full of joy!! It was like nothing anyone had ever seen or can describe. It was heaven. There, he felt peace. He lay on his side and opened one eye to see the source of the incredible majestic sounds that he was hearing. He gasped in awe and closed his eyes and held his breath. The sound of a thousand angels mixed with the soft roar of waterfalls and rushing waters engulfed him.

He slowly sat up and looked around. What he saw was indescribable: An endless open plaza that has the sky as its covering. There were trees of unknown origin and flowers of unseen beauty and color.

For miles above, transparent alabaster and marble layers extended endlessly to a bright and incredibly deep canopy above. There were many rivers and countless pools – some of pure water, some of wine, some of mist, and some of mercury-like matter. Vapor and mist filled the entire space with the aroma of unknown rejuvenating incent. Colors unseen, reflected from light sources of divine nature. Waterfalls, trees, and bushes splashed spheres of vapor, water, and wine. Crystal leaves of many colors and flowers of many unknown pigments, textures, and beauty arranged themselves and rearranged each other. Majestic white doves and bright fluorescent butterflies of unscripted designs sparkled, flew, swayed, and danced in choreographed routines. It was a place of peace where time had no control.

Agnolo blinked many times and took a deep breath. He was not afraid but overwhelmed. His heart was filled with gratitude and all he could say was: "Thank you, Lord!" He blinked again and took a deep breath. He inhaled the incent and the music remained in him.

“This is my palace. It is majestic and comprehensive. This is the city of God where I will dwell and thrive to worship with my family,” he whispered.

When Agnolo began to move, he realized that he could float and fly effortlessly. The doves and butterflies surrounded him.

From miles above came a sweet voice: “Agnolo, my beloved!” When he looked up to identify the source of the beautiful sound, he saw the wooden statue of Mary Jo flying softly towards him. She was alive and whole. She was encased in a large alabaster shell. And, he could see a heart of gold beating within her. She smiled as she floated towards him with her right hand extended to touch him. He recognized her touch and realized that the alabaster shell was the marble statue that he had begun carving. They were joined together and infused into one living and loving being. Agnolo opened his arms to hug her. They embraced. He felt at peace in her arms. She was beautiful and longing for his company. “My beloved son, the Lord is here, and he is within you,” she whispered. They flew together hand in hand. She wanted to show him hidden components of this magical palace. She wanted to make up for lost time.

****

It is not clear what miracle had happened, but even without realizing it, from that point on in his life, Agnolo was omnipresent and could levitate as well as become transparent.

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The Fiume Arno river ran through Florence, cut its way through the mountain rocks and fertile grounds, and mysterious branched and disappeared as it found its way to the Cellini quarry in Settignano! The vast and mountainous terrain hid many undiscovered caves with many mysterious contents and unexplained phenomena. In many, the marble was transparent as alabaster. Some caves even had glasslike alabaster whose design and colors rivaled that found in the stained-glass iconic cathedrals decorated by the most discriminate masters. There were colors that no one had ever seen before. And, whether it was night or day, its magnificence stole all the energy of those who reasoned while it gave insight to many whom after his own image the Lord had created.

13

Wednesday

Wednesday, in the early morning hours, Francisca snuck out of the house. As she was leaving she saw some additional large jars of wine and baskets of food at the door. At night, every night since Easter, there were two large vessels of wine and great quantities of food left at the Cellini family door.

Francisca glanced at the food and wine and perplexed shook her head. She stopped and yanked a couple of flowers off their roots and did the same with several branches of rosemary and basil. She continued walking towards the quarry. From far away, she could see the image of her daughter. Chola was walking slowly towards the quarry also. She too was picking flowers and herbs. With their heads bowed down, they walked towards each other. They did not speak. Slowly, they embraced. Francisca lifted her head and tried to make eye contact with her daughter who was still looking down. Pointing at the bouquet of flowers and herbs in Chola's hand, Francisca whispered with a broken smile: These are pretty.

Tears flew from their eyes and they wept.

(Song 10: Goodbye Agno, Goodbye!)

Chola nodded, with her eyes still looking down she nervously sniffled.

Their pain was different, but it was nonetheless enormous for each. Chola had lost her best friend – her hero and the love of her life. Agnolo was everything to her. She could not imagine life without him. He was kind, he was full of love, and sadly, he was misunderstood. And, as much as she needed him, he needed her. She gave him a reason to live and a cause to protect. Francisca, on the other hand, had lost the promised gift that the Lord had blessed her and her husband with. Agnolo, she felt, was the one who opened her womb. He was her first born. She remembered the night she brought him home, the doves, and the nightly gifts at the door of their cottage. Life will never be the same. What a mess this has turned into.

Francisca put her right arm over Chola's shoulder and held her closely. The two walked towards the site where the broken Mary Jo lay. Michelangelo had briefly described the devastation and the disappearance of the marble slab, but neither one had seen the broken lady. When they got close to the site, they could hear the squawking of the ravens. There were no doves in sight. The noise got louder and louder. Francisca held Chola tighter, whether it was to comfort her or to comfort herself. They continued to walk. Although they never discussed it, they both had thought that it would be a good idea to leave some flowers by Mary Jo. From far away they saw the broken lady. There she lay, with her eyes staring at the sky. When they were within a hundred feet from the statue, they both stopped. This was not the statue. There was

a pile of leaves, formed in a strange manner. They smelled something. It was like incents. Very expensive and sweet incents. The smell got stronger as they approached the pile of leaves. They stopped again. The pile of leaves seemed to be moving. The two were frightened. They were breathing hard and shaking. Chola was walking slower and somewhat hiding behind her mother. "What is it?" They internally wondered. Is it an injured animal, or maybe a large bird – a very large bird. The pile of leaves moved again.

(Song 11: The Palace Song)

(Song 12: Not from Here … Theme Song)

"Mommy, this is a person," said Chola.

"Boy, what are you?" Shouted Francisca, afraid, and with goosebumps running all over her body.

The pile of leaves moved again, slowly. It was in the form of a human. It was illuminating and covered with grape leaves. Some were transparent, and others were florescent green of several shades.

"Mommy, I am he, Agnolo!" The figure stood up. His face was radiant, and his blue eyes were calm. He extended his arms. He had a flower in his right hand, a type that Francisca had never seen before.

Francisca's knees wobbled and Chola stared at him. He was soaking wet. Not believing their eyes, they did not move.

"Mommy, I am sorry … Chola, ahhh …" he slowly moved towards them. They were afraid to touch him. But, they slowly took a step towards him.

"My Lord, it is you … my baby …" shouted Francisca and ran to hug him. Chola jumped on his back. He hugged them both and fell backwards almost choking. Francisca's tears covered her face and Chola buried her face in his chest: "Agnolo, Agnolo, oh I love you, I love you … I died," whaled Chola speaking over her mother who was sobbing loudly and kissing Agnolo's face over and over.

Francisca put her palms over his shoulders and pushed his body back a bit. She stared at him with wide eyes and screamed: "You … you … you … boy, where have you been? You have killed me …" She slapped his face hard over and over and hugged him before she pushed him again with her arms: "Don't you ever, ever, ever do this, ever again!"

"Mommy, I am sorry … I have let you down. Please, mommy forgive me … I have let you down," sobbed Agnolo.

Chola hanged on his neck and jumped as she kissed him over and over. Touching his face with her hand she cried hysterically: “Mommy, he is here … oh, I love you, I love you, please don’t leave me … please … again …” Chola choked and uttered, as if to herself: “Without you, I am nothing …”

Francisca threw herself on Agnolo and wrapped her arms around her two children and would not let go. She turned around quickly and began running towards the cottage shouting: “Venu, Venu! He is alive, he is alive! Venu, he is alive!”

She ran and ran, up and down the hills, shouting and waving. Her dress got in the way from time to time, so she pulled it up, not caring about the consequences of her exposure.

Agnolo carried his sister in his arms and struggled to keep her fragile body from slipping through his wet grape-leaves-covered arms. Like a groom carrying his bride, he kissed her over and over as she held onto his neck with her arms. She pulled his face towards hers with one hand from time to time to stare into his eyes. “I can’t believe it … Agno!” Her fingers found their way through the wet grape leaves that covered his face to find his cheeks. She pinched them and pulled her head up to kiss his forehead. “I love you!” She whispered.

He looked into her eyes and whispered: “I love you more!” He continued: “Chola, I found heaven.”

She asked: “What do you mean? Did you die?”

“No, I found heaven, here at the quarry”

“What do you mean?”

“I want to take you there. I have to show you.”

“Ok, let’s go there now. Just you and me.”

“No, we must see papa first. I want them to come with us.”

“No, let’s go there now alone. We can tell them later. I want you all to myself.”

“No, we can’t do that to them. They may think something happened to both of us. It would kill them.”

“Ok, but when can we go? I want to see. I want to see. What is it like?”

“Oh, Chola. It like nothing you have ever seem or ever imagined. It is really heaven.”

“Are there angels in this palace?”

“I do not know, but there are butterflies of all colors and things you cannot imagine.”

“Are you sure we cannot go there now. I really want to. Please!”

“I promise to take you there as soon as I can. I cannot wait for you to see it. It would be so great with you there. And, with momma, papa, Michlo, and Tota.”

“Hmmmmm, could we just go there alone. I have missed you.”

“Ok.”

“You promise?”

“I promise.” He kissed her on her forehead and continued walking towards the cottage.

****

When Francisca’s voice was heard inside the cottage, everyone stopped whatever they were doing. Those who were still asleep, got up. There were several nuns and several people from the church and the small community who made a bed out of every spot on the floor of the cottage that they could find. The men ended up sleeping near the door and in the living room, while the women slept in the bedrooms and the kitchen. Few slept in the courtyard by their horses.

Benvenuto recognized his wife’s voice. Michelangelo who had slept next his father, turned over and opened his eyes. “Is that momma?” The two men were already up, but found no reason to leave the floor until they heard Francisca’s voice. They sat up where they had laid all night and listened. No one could understand what she was saying. But, she was definitely screaming something very loudly.

Benvenuto and Michelangelo got up; other men who slept on the floor next them did as well. Bare footed, they all rushed towards the door to open it. Benvenuto squinted as his eyes adjusted to the bright light outside the cottage and saw his wife running with her arms up in the air. She was shouting something. “He is alive, he is alive!”

Benvenuto did not understand. “Easter was three days before and the message of the risen Christ cannot be denied, but why is she shouting that now? He could not explain. Surely … no, this can’t be” He whispered to himself.

Francisca continued, “He is alive, he is alive,” She was breathing hard as she was running and shouting at the same time. “Agnolo is alive, he is alive!”

Benvenuto stared with fully opened eyes at her approaching image and could not speak. His mouth was shut close and he grinded his teeth, in an attempt to block incoming tears. He stood still. Others came out. They moved and politely fought for a front view, right behind Benvenuto.

Francisca, who embarrassed by the crowd had put her dress down, changed her running into walking. She seemed exhausted. When she reached Benvenuto, she fell at his feet. He bent down and held her head. She looked at him and said: "Agnolo is alive. We found him at the quarry." And she passed out.

The nuns and Tota rushed to help her. Benvenuto kissed her forehead twice before he allowed the nuns to tend to her. "Let's go!" said Michelangelo. Barefooted, they began running towards the quarry, followed by several men.

It was not very far that they ran, before they saw a strange figure carrying Chola. It looked like a gorilla or a moving bush. But it was glowing and emanating very brightly. It was like many, many, candles or like many reflections of the sun.

"What on earth?" Uttered Michelangelo as he was running.

The closer they got to the moving object, the more they were able to identify the mysterious figure as a human. Or was it an angel? They were not sure. The figure was about the size of Agnolo and somehow it resembled the lost brother. Michelangelo wondered if his imagination was deceiving him. Was it a mirage? Maybe his mind was seeing things that he was hoping to see. And, if it were really Agnolo, what on earth was he doing with all that crystal-like foliage? And, why is he glowing like an angel?

"Papa … Papa!" Both Agnolo and Chola shouted at the same time. Their voice resonated with echo. It was as if it bounced off the clouds in the sky. Chola jumped out of Agnolo's arms and began running towards her father. She jumped into his arms while holding onto his neck. She kissed her father's cheeks over and over. "He is alive, papa … he is alive!"

Michelangelo grabbed his brother and lifted him up. "You rotten dog. You deserve a big whipping," said Michelangelo while kissing his brother. "Where …" he could not finish his sentence before Benvenuto who had put his daughter down had launched towards Agnolo to hug him.

"My boy, my boy. What happened to you? Are you OK?"

Agnolo hugged his father and with his head down, he repeated: "I am sorry papa. I have let you down. I have stained the family honor." Tears covered his cheeks.

“No, Agno, no. We had let you down. We all had let you down, my boy!”

Michelangelo carried his brother home while Chola was running in front of the crowd towards the cottage.

Francisca was sitting on the ground in front of the house surrounded by several nuns and women. When Benvenuto and those with him approached the women, they stood up. They gazed and gazed and their hearts raced as Agnolo got closer. The brightness of the foliage that covered Agnolo frighten them and his overall appearance mystified everyone.

“What had happened to that boy?” Uttered one of the nuns. “He looks transfigured. He is glowing. Is it safe to touch him?”

Another exclaimed, “Is it really him?”

“Of course, it is him. His parents would know.”

“And, we thought he was dead,” said another.

Among the nuns who were present, were two prominent nuns from Florence who represented the cardinal’s office and had for many years worked closely with Cardinal Carafa’s aide, Father Bronzino. Of the two, Sister Bandecca seemed to be in charge of her younger companion, Sister Fiametta.

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After an uncomfortable pause, the crowd burst into cries and happy cheers. “Praise the Lord, oh, praise the Lord who takes care of his children,” one woman started chanting and soon she was joined by the entire crowd. They all wanted to touch Agnolo and each searched for an original way to welcome him. Agnolo was moved by the attention but said very little. And, whatever he said, was not clear or understood. Nonetheless, the excitement of the guests from the entire community was not dampened.

The procession moved inside and the smell of the herbs that was transmitted by Agnolo filled the entire house. The grape leaves that covered Agnolo were in bright, florescent, and some transparent colors. They seemed to radiate. They were soft, yet when they rubbed together, they produced a heavenly metallic sound that resonated with many echoes.

The nuns took charge. They prayed and gave thanks to the Lord for the return of a lost son. They whispered within themselves and made eye contact with each other. They gazed as if they were buying time to figure out what to do next. And, one by one, they excused themselves and rushed out of the house.

Everyone was exhausted and full of emotion. The prayers of the saints did not go to waste.

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When the crowd left, the Cellini family was alone and complete for the first time since Easter Sunday. It was quiet for a change. Chola held Agnolo's left hand. He was rubbing her hair with the other. Benvenuto looked at his wife, she was weak. The very little food she had eaten, she likely was not able to keep down. Michelangelo sat close by gazing at the ceiling. They all knew that they should get some sleep and gather strength for what is to come. Just because Agnolo is home safe, that did not mean the end of trouble. Each had a concern and thoughts of revenge and vengeance – or, fear of revenge and vengeance.

Additionally, the behavior of the nuns as they were departing the cottage was unnerving. It was as if they were not very happy to see the boy. Sure, they prayed and thanked the Lord, but they did not seem to be sincere.

Agnolo interrupted the silence and said: "I have found heaven!"

"Yes, and he will take me there," said Chola.

Francisca continued looking down as if she had not heard him, but Benvenuto and Michelangelo turned their head towards him.

"What do you mean? Did you die?" Asked Michelangelo.

"No, I do not think so. And, I remember everything about it," said Agnolo.

"After I left the church, I went to the quarry and I passed out. And I don't know what happened, but a big and most beautiful dove – one like that I have never seen before except a few times in my life – showed me the way to heaven. It is like a palace … a big palace ... a huge and beautiful palace, where there are no ravens," he continued. "Only the doves knew how to get into the palace … the ravens knew not their way to it, and when one tried to sneak its way in, tree branches swayed to block its way and inflect painful blows to its wings that caused it to lose its feathers and fail to fly."

Agnolo's claim got everyone's attention. Even Tota who was in the kitchen boiling herbs for the family to drink walked to the door of the kitchen to hear better.

"That sounds like a beautiful dream," said Benvenuto who knew that his son had always had difficulty separating dreams from reality. In fact, to a serious extent, Agnolo's behavior had succeeded in convincing his family that he may be living in a trans-like state all the time.

“No, papa, it was not a dream. I could take you there now,” said Agnolo with excitement unexpected of a tired boy. “It is right behind where I was carving the large marble statue of Mary Jo. All the doves were there ... They sparkled and glowed like a thousand candles ... At the palace … I found the statues of Mary Jo. She was whole and alive. To go in, you must go through a very narrow gate that is guarded by many mighty doves. The gate is low, very low. I could go in without bowing, but I am sure adults would have to either bow or get on your knees and crawl to go through. But, oh, beyond that it is beautiful. Everything is made of gold, copper, and transparent alabaster. There are waterfalls and butterflies. There are flowers and spices of all colors known and ones you have never seen. The smell of sweet incents fills the entire place and everything is alive with beautiful music. It is so very peaceful. I do not know how long I was there … at the palace, there is no time. It is … it is a big palace … it is heaven …”

“Honey, you are tired. I wish you would eat something,” said Francisca.
“I am tired Momma, but I cannot eat …” Said Agnolo.

Tota brought in the hot spice drink that she was cooking and poured a cup for each. Francisca got up to help her.

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Although the leaves that covered Agnolo began to evaporate and disintegrate after a few hours leaving an incredibly pleasant scent of incent and herbs, Agnolo needed to change clothes and clean up as some of the leaves remained intact to his skin.

Even after falling off Agnolo’s cloths and skin, the grape leaves never lost their brilliance and transparency. And wherever they fell, they made a sound like that of silver bouncing on a marble rock. Usually, when the leaves touched the ground most melted away while a few clustered together to form small mounts. Within a few hours, however, they too evaporated and disintegrated leaving an incredibly pleasant scent of incent and herbs.

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Tota’s love for Agnolo was unnatural. She had never had a child of her own and she considered Michelangelo, Agnolo, and Chola as her own children. She had been serving the family for a very long time. When Francisca and Benvenuto were gone on their long pilgrimage, Tota looked after the cottage and maintained it. The Cellinis considered her a blood relative. Naïve and unpretentious, she was like a grown child. Aside from Chola, Tota was the only one who believed Agnolo’s story about the “palace”.

“I would love to go there sometime. It sounds like heaven,” said Tota with a big smile.

“I can take you there now,” said Agnolo.

“Honey, you are tired. We can talk about all that tomorrow,” said Francisca who was convinced that Agnolo may have been hallucinating from exhaustion.

It was only around noon, but the entire family was in desperate need for rest.

Benvenuto got up and walked to the bedroom. He was followed by Francisca. Michelangelo pulled a pillow and slept on the floor of the living room. There were several pillows left laying around from the night before. It was all quiet -- very quiet.

Agnolo got up and walked to his bedroom. It had been four days since he was there. On the floor next to his bed, he saw a handkerchief that belonged to his mother. She apparently had left it there when she spent the night at the foot of his bed crying. Chola followed him. She was insecure and afraid that he might be gone again.

Agnolo lay on his back on the bed and Chola sat on the floor next to the bed holding his hand. They were both filled with emotions in desperate need to erupt. So much to say and so much to discuss, but sometimes eyes converse in a more meaningful way than words could convey.

Two doves appeared at the window. They walked around quietly looking below at Agnolo and his sister. About fifteen to twenty minutes passed fast. Agnolo and Chola were about to slip into sleep when Chola began to whisper: “I wish I could see …” Before she finished her sentence, Agnolo interrupted her: “Let’s go now!”

The two got up and quietly walked out of the bedroom intending not to disturb their sleeping parents or big brother. Tota was awake. She was on her knees praying silently. When she was aware of the children’s presence, she crossed herself and opened her right eye, the one from which she saw. “We are going to heaven. I want to show Chola the palace. Please tell momma and papa that we will be back and not to worry,” whispered Agnolo.

“Wait, Agno, they would freak-out if they don’t know where you were. Please don’t go. Let’s wait until they wake up and we can all go. I really want to see this place,” whispered Tota back while gesturing with her body and hands.

“Hmmm … I … ” Agnolo looked at Chola

“We will be Ok. What is to be afraid of? It is at the quarry …. It is heaven in our backyard … at our feet,” Chola giggled.

“You kids be careful. I wish you did not have to do this,” whispered Tota who knew that she was not going to be able to stop the determined children from leaving.

“We will be OK. Make sure to tell momma and papa that we are safe … we are at the quarry,” said Agnolo. He kissed Tota’s forehead and walked quietly towards the door holding his sister’s hand.

Tota followed him and whispered in his ear: “Let me get you a small jar of wine and some bread to take with you.”

“No, no! There is plenty of incredible wine, grapes, and berries at the palace,” said Agnolo and kissed Tota’s forehead again.

14

Those Who Believe

Agnolo and Chola walked part of the way and ran a part towards the quarry. The two doves that were at the window followed them.

“I can’t wait, I can’t wait,” said Chola.

“I can’t wait for you to see it. It is so awesome!” Replied Agnolo.

(Song 13: Happiness Is Our Only Claim)

Up and around many passages and in-between many large boulders they walked. Near where Chola and her mother had found Agnolo earlier that day, the two doves were met by several other doves. Several perched on two large rosemary pushes. Some wild flowering vines sprouted from the large bolder that provided the background for the rosemary bushed.

“There,” said Agnolo. Behind these rosemary bushes.

“I’m scared,” said Chola.

“No, no, nothing to be afraid of. You’ll see.”

Chola got a bit behind her brother and clinched to his arm.

Looking up to the heavens, Agnolo spoke. It was more of a series of uncyphered words that somehow made a melodic sense. His voice seemed to echo and was too large for his age. Chola had heard him speaking in this unknown tongue before, but this time his voice seemed different. She called it the angels’ language. Whether it was angelic or not, the doves seemed to understand it and always responded back either with action or with song.

A large and absolutely majestic dove flew with authority over the two children and landed above the mighty boulder. The dove then spread its wings and flew in front Agnolo and his sister. Never touching the ground and never moving its wings, it glided three feet above the ground.

Agnolo held his sister’s left hand with his right and led her through the rosemary bushes. The green and lush leaves of the bush rubbed their bodies and skin as if they were anointing and cleansing them. The bush was exactly five feet in depth. Within another five feet of thick mint bush, followed by another five feet of dense bush of sage, they walked. The leaves of the bushes rubbing their bodies and clothes. At the end, there was a clear alabaster rock. It was transparent like clear glass or a large crystal, but because of its thickness, one could not see all the way through it. The thick alabaster gate was infused with copper veins. The gate refracted

an incredible light that was behind it. As they got closer to it, the alabaster became even clearer and clearer. It was exactly five feet high and twelve feet deep. Agnolo, still holding to his sister's hand, bowed down slightly while pulling his sister behind him. Chola who was barely five feet tall, did not have to bow. The two walked through the transparent rock. They could feel the rock closing up behind them. It was a strange feeling. It was as if they were walking through a wall of warm oil.

The closer they got to the end of the entrance, the faster their hearts raced. Agnolo who had been there before earlier that day, had forgotten how incredibly beautiful and different this place was. It was a combination of utter quietness and absolute angelic harmony. When they reached the end of the entrance way, the two became transparent and weightless.

They stared at each other for a short moment before they gasped with awe at what they saw. The ceiling opened to a sky-high canopy of trees, clear and colored marble and alabaster boulders, waterfalls, and flowers of magnificent colors and aroma. Everything and everyone was transparent like purely clear and bright colored glass of the articulate Venetian glass masters. The canopy was made of transparent very large crystal-like grape leaves. Each leave refracted light into many directions like pure diamonds. These grape leave filters also emitted light from within, each like a thousand soft candles. There were no shadows – just reflections. It was bright, very, very, bright – like thousands of candles. But, there was no evident source of the light. Everything seemed to emit light from within, even their bodies seemed to radiate. The entire place echoed with the sound of a multitude of many angels singing. They sang: Worthy is the Lamb, holy is the Lamb! The entire place vibrated as the large marble and alabaster boulders expanded and protruded only to shrink and withdraw in rhythm.

"Oh, Lord Jesus … Oh, mighty Father …" gasped Chola as she bowed to worship. Next to her, bowed Agnolo and held her hand as they prayed.

"Lord, oh, Lord, I do not want to leave here …" Said Chola as a large transparent butterfly flew before her eyes. It was followed by several other, some small, some large, ones. Each had a different and unique design and color, most were transparent.

All over, white and transparent doves glided from space to space. The place was huge with endless boundaries. When Agnolo and Chola finished their prayers, he carried her in his arms and floated around weightlessly. They said nothing. Except, from time to time, one of them would utter: "Lord Jesus … Praise your holy name …"

They walked, flew, and glided what seemed to be for hours. They had lost track of time, as there was no time. They glided over several hills that were covered with soft and luscious furlike plants. At the northern end of the palace, a water fall of wine could be reached passing through another waterfall of pure and fragrant water. The two waterfalls poured their contents

of water and wine into a large basin that extended for miles into the horizon. When Agnolo and Chola got into this large pool, they floated as if they were in a pool of mercury. When they got to the pool of reflection, they stopped for self-examination. There they saw their reflection to be perfect and unblemished.

The pool of purification provided clear, fresh, and perpetual grace and continued purification. There, florescent and transparent grape leaves clustered around them, rested on their bodies and clothes, and made their bed. They should have been tired, but they were not. In awe, they lay in the water and floated in the air looking up and around. The sounds and the smells were present everywhere. The water drifted them slowly from place to place, never to see the same thing twice.

They were conscious but mesmerized. They were in total peace. They sensed the presence of God.

Agnolo held Chola's hand and kissed it. She held his hand and kissed it. "I love you, Agnolo," she said with her eyes. "I love you with all my heart, Chola," with his eyes, he replied. "You are my church!"

15

The Invitation

A delegation of ten priests and several nuns knocked at the Cellini cottage door. Francisca who was about to wake up, walked passed Michelangelo who was still asleep, to open the door.

“May we come in?” Asked one of the priests.

“Yes, of course,” said Francisca inviting them into the home.

“Papa, papa, we have some holy men here to visit,” shouted Francisca as she was walking towards the bedroom.

Before Benvenuto got up, Michelangelo who was sleeping on the floor of the living room sat up and welcomed the group. None of the priests were familiar to Benvenuto. Furthermore, their attire revealed that they may have been from the main cathedral in Florence. Michelangelo did, however, recognize the nuns that accompanied the priests. In fact, at least three of these nuns, he was certain, were at his home earlier that morning.

“We came to inspect the boy and pray for his safety,” said one of the priests.

“You must be Michelangelo. We are pleased to meet you in person. We have heard great things about your talents as a young apprentice,” said another. “We have brought some gifts from Cardinal Carafa, who had been very concerned about the young lad. In fact, his holiness had asked us to invite you and your beloved brother to meet him this Friday,” he continued.

Michelangelo had met Cardinal Carafa before. And, just a few days ago he saw the cardinal in Bishop Donato’s office while he and his father were looking for Agnolo.

“I am honored, and we are very grateful for the gifts,” said Michelangelo looking down. The priest’s statement about Michelangelo somehow did not settle well with him. Michelangelo snuck a glance at the face of the priest as if he was trying to read what he had meant.

A few months before, Michelangelo was accused of falsifying the age of one of his statues to gain more money for it. Lured by the prevalent great craving for Greek antiquity, Michelangelo was said to have sold one of his statues for a large amount of money to a wealthy man claiming that it was an ancient Greek relic – sculptor. The matter was discovered, and the young and rising artist vehemently denied the accusation and fought to cleanse his reputation. Whether the priest was referring to this scandal which was perpetuated throughout Florence, was not clear to the ambitious and sensitive Michelangelo.

“Papa, papa …” Shouted Michelangelo after a brief moment in which he collected his thoughts.

Benvenuto entered the living room and greeted the group.

“Papa, Cardinal Carafa has invited us to visit him this weekend in his office at the cathedral in Florence. He is interested in Agnolo’s safety and has sent these gifts,” said Michelangelo. Benvenuto inspected the gifts and with a bow and a big smile thanked the priests.

One of the nuns interjected: “Indeed, these have been very difficult several days in everyone’s life around here.” Starring at the other nuns, she continued: “It is my understanding that here at the church, it was very difficult for everyone. And the loss of Bishop Donato was felt by everyone,” she commented, fully aware that Bishop Donato was never popular at the church and his lofty ambitious had earned him the enmity of most of his staff and a reputation as a self-serving monster. “Sure, he was not the most lovable person, but he was unjustifiably punished,” Sister Bandecca thought to herself.

Benvenuto and Michelangelo who had not heard the news about the removal of Bishop Donato were surprised and had many questions, but wisely opted to stay out of the church politics.

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The news of Agnolo’s appearance seemed to travel quickly within the church community and the local area. The initial excitement about the safety of the young boy gradually turned into resentment towards him for what they perceived to had been a hoax that precipitated a great deal of pain and sorrow for many – including Bishop Donato. While opinions and feelings on the matter varied, the general mood at the churches in Settignano and Florence was not favorable towards Agnolo and constraint anger grew below the surface.

Those who lived and worked around the church, however, were becoming more and more aware that Cardinal Carafa had a special interest in the young and compulsive lad. They knew that, for some reason, the holy man would go to a great extent to protect the compulsive and erratic boy from Settignano. For some mysterious reason, Agnolo seemed to had found a soft spot in the heart of the strong willed and typically emotionless holy man of God.

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Francisca, who had walked to the kitchen allowing the group to freely talk, heard the conversation in the living room between the church delegation and her husband. She tried to keep her composer and walked back to the living room. Tota was already there.

“Where are the kids,” Asked Francisca looking around. “Surely the noise in the living room should have waken them,” she thought to herself.

“I do not know, I guess they are still asleep recovering from exhaustion,” said Benvenuto.

“No, they both decided to go to the quarry,” interrupted Tota. “They left several hours ago.”

“As tired as they were, why would they want to go to the quarry?” Commented Benvenuto.

“Chola wanted to see ‘heaven’,” replied Tota with innocence known to young children.

A couple of the nuns chuckled and were embarrassed by their uncontrolled spontaneous gesture.

“Heaven, and we thought they were just brother and sister,” whispered Sister Fiametta under her breath causing other nuns near her to cover their mouths to contain their giggles.

“Apparently Agnolo had an apparition at the quarry. He described a place he calls heaven and he insists that it is at the quarry,” said Benvenuto.

“That is very interesting. The Bible talks about the ‘young’ having many dreams and seeing many visions,” commented one of the priests. The priest’s comment got no response from anyone and the nuns exhibited no reaction.

There was a period of silence that was interrupted by Michelangelo: “Momma, Cardinal Carafa has invited us to visit him tomorrow.” He added: “His holiness wants to inspect the young lad and bless him.”

Francisca, who through eavesdropping had already heard the news, pretended that she was just learning about the cardinal’s invitation. “Oh, how wonderful … what a privilege and a blessing,” she said with genuine excitement. “Praise the Lord who protects his children and looks after the feeble,” she continued as she knelt crossing herself and began to pray silently.

“Should we go look for the boy and bring him back?” Asked Benvenuto. But before anyone could answer, the front door opened and the bright light that was outside was broken by a radiant silhouette of Agnolo and Chola. They were covered with transparent and florescent grape leaves that seemed to encase them in blue and white halos and refracted the shining bright light behind them. They were so very bright that everyone was temporarily blinded. Looking at their aura was like gazing at the sun for several minutes. The breeze from the outside rushed their smell of precious incents to the living room. There, they stood for a moment as if they were adjusting their eyesight to the darker living room.

“My Lord,” shouted one of the priests as everyone jumped up. For a moment, the nuns and priests stood up and froze before they fell – some on their face and others backwards. It was as if they had seen two angels at the door. Everyone, including Benvenuto and Michelangelo who had seen Agnolo’s grape-leave covering before, gasped. Some hid their eyes with their open

hands and others just closed their eyes. They were all filled with fear and without uttering a word they were all convinced that it was a holy apparition. One as none had seen before. There was so much light behind Agnolo, and around him and within him, that his feet seem to disappear. Excited, those who were in the house believed that he was levitating.

"Lord of all, Holy Mother of God," muttered one of the nuns in fear. Others repeated while trembling.

"Peace be with you," said Agnolo in an unclear but resonating voice that seemed to echo from the outside into the inside of the room.

He walked slowly with Chola closely behind him.

"I saw heaven, mommy!" Chola said running to hug her mother.

"Praise the Lord, my daughter. I am glad you are safe," Francisca wrapped her arms around her tiny daughter causing the leaves to move. They sounded like many oriental charms blowing in gentle winds.

"We have seen the glory of the Lord, today," said one of the priests as he was gazing at Agnolo.

Afraid and confused, the group left the home.

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As the Cellini family was summoned to present themselves with the boy Agnolo to the church by noon the next day, they frantically rushed to prepare for the event. Being invited to meet with the cardinal was no ordinary matter. This man held enormous political and religious powers. He was almost considered divine. His authority was revered and feared.

"What should they wear and what should they say?" They, each, wondered and each had a different answer. They were all excited and had a deep desire to say and do the right thing. Even Chola, who was nine years old, knew the importance and significance of the event. The adults, however, had to wonder with some suspicion about the Cardinal's apparent interest in seeing Agnolo. Benvenuto and Francisca could not help but think that there must be an ulterior motive to the cardinal's behavior.

If Michelangelo had suspected the motives of Cardinal Carafa, that thought did not last too long in his mind. He had to quickly focus on how he could make the best of this situation to his advantage. This, he thought, may be a great opportunity to have positive exposure and present himself as a capable and worthy artist. He was aware that the church and many of the wealthy men in Florence were willing to spend large amounts of money for works of art. Art, it seemed, was a means to express power as well as communicate biblical or political teachings to the

generally illiterate population. Competition among artists was serious and sometimes it evolved into bloody and nasty contests. Indeed, this was a great opportunity for Michelangelo to promote himself and his work in person and win the heart and approval of this powerful man of God.

Agnolo was quiet. While everyone was walking around getting ready uttering few words, often more in the form of talking to themselves, Agnolo was quiet. He lay on his bed for a while and noticed that the room was illuminated with very soft light that his body was omitting. He looked at the ceiling and gazed for a long time. Then he got up and slowly walked to the living room to look at the gifts that the monks had brought. He did not find them there; so he walked to the kitchen where he found them. He opened the large sack and sorted through it and noted that the gifts were similar to those that were found at the door of the cottage every morning, but, this time there was more of a variety of it. He also found the coat of arm that he had torn off his blouse – the one that he threw on the wet ground near the forest on Easter Sunday. It was a bit damaged and moist.

He thought, "I should restore honor to this precious gift that my father had given me."

When he got rid of it, it was because he felt guilty about shaming his family and its honor. But, he reasoned, if it were not for the difficult time that he had experienced, he would have likely not found the palace. If God forgave me and blessed me, I must forgive myself. He held the coat of arm with his right hand and raised it above his head and prayed with his eyes open. Then he lowered it and kissed it before he brought it close to his heart and then stashed it in his pocket.

In addition to deciding on what to wear and getting their attire ready, the men had to get the horses and the wagon ready. Usually, the later task was assigned to men who worked at the quarry. But, because of the holidays and the events surrounding them, help was unorganized and the normal routine suffered. Nonetheless, Benvenuto and Michelangelo managed to get things ready. Although they were already sleep deprived, no one in the family could get much sleep that night. Francisca was overwhelmed with many tasks. She prayed with emotion as she moved around the cottage getting things ready for her children and her husband. In the early morning, Tota heated water and carried it to the back pavilion where the adults took turns taking a bath.

After Chola had finished her turn, Agnolo entered the back court where the bathing tub was. Chola was still dressing when Agnolo walked in. He stared at his sister and smiled. She smiled back and they both looked down. Throughout their lives, they had played together and up until a couple of years ago, they even bathed together. Although they were fascinated by the difference in their physical construction, aside from the expected glances of curiosity and the

few innocent inquiries, they never felt bashful or modest about their bodies. This time, it was different. Chola's heart beat faster than normal and she felt a strange feeling. And, Agnolo still covered with remanence of the divine foliage, seemed short of breath.

With a weak voice, Chola said as she was getting out of the tub and pulling a long cloth to dry her body and hair: "I am almost done. You may come in."

"It's ok, Lola, I will wait," replied Agnolo.

Agnolo stood there trying to muster enough theatrical talent to pretend that he was unmoved, unexcited, and that everything was normal. He knew that he could not leave, for it would be a sign that things were not normal, which may make his sister feel embarrassed and uncomfortable. So, he decided to embrace the moment and comfort his sister.

Chola wrapped herself with a drying-cloth and grabbed her dress and undergarment and walked towards the back door to the cottage where Agnolo stood. As she passed him, she gave him a kiss on the cheek and he gently caressed her shoulder resisting a strong and strange desire to hug her.

After Chola got inside the cottage, Agnolo slowly walked the few steps towards the tub. The water was covered with remanence of the divine foliage that Chola had embraced at the palace. Agnolo bent down and with his right hand scooped some foliage and rubbed it on his left arm, his shoulder, and his chest.

When Agnolo finished bathing, he walked back into the cottage. The family was all in the kitchen waiting for him. Tota and Francisca had prepared some warm milk and bread with honey and spices, some of which were brought by the priests the night before. Benvenuto prayed and gave thanks. Agnolo sat next to Chola. She was sitting by Michelangelo, who had his right arm around his sister.

"You look beautiful," said Michelangelo to Chola. "I am going to get a big stick to beat all the boys away from my little sister," he continued.

They all laughed and Chola blushed.

When it was time to dress up, Francisca and Chola went into the large bedroom that belonged to the parents. They were helped by Tota in fixing their hair and putting on the layers of attire that they wore. It was but few days ago that they had to prepare for the Easter celebration in the same way. This occasion, however, seemed to take a more formal and a different spirit. Now, they are the center of the attention. All the eyes will be upon them. They will be in the presence of the holy cardinal. Francisca took extra special care of Chola's hair as it seemed to have reminisces of the palace foliage. She did not mind as much the fact that, despite repeated

combing and brushing, Chola's hair seem to glow and emanate light in a seriously unique way. She did, however, have an issue with leaving fragments of the foliage. Although these fragments were beautiful and transparent, she feared that they may not be well received by those who are eager to criticize.

When Agnolo walked into his bedroom after breakfast, he found a clean and well pressed attire that apparently his mother had placed on his bed. In the window, two majestic doves stood to watch. He recognized them and smiled. One of them was from the flock of doves that guarded the entrance of the palace, and the other was from the flock that resided within the palace. They walked back and forth at the edge of the window singing. Agnolo stopped for a moment, turned towards the two doves, and uttered something to them. They replied.

He lifted his right hand and signaled to them, before he turned back towards the bed to get dressed. When he was completely dressed, he reached inside the pocket of the trouser that he had taken off and pulled the coat of arm. He wanted to place it on the blouse that he was wearing but did not have a way of securing it on his chest. He looked at it for a moment and with his right hand he placed it on his chest and uttered: "You will stay there." It did!

When it was close to noon, Francisca and Chola got inside the wagon, while Benvenuto, Michelangelo, and Agnolo sat in the front with Benvenuto leading the two horses that pulled the humble country carriage.

The doves led the way. A few ravens watched intently and with little sound they flew around and around.

16

Hail to the Saint

Not too long in their ride on the country road leading to the church, where they were summoned to meet Bishop Fonte and his men who would escort them to Florence, the family heard noise. From very far, they could see a huge gathering of people on both sides of the road. Some were on horses while others were standing. Francisca and Chola pulled the wagon cover to see the source of the noise. "Oh, Momma … who are all these people?" Gasped Chola with excitement. Chola was very impressed and filled with angelic excitement.

Apparently, the news of Agnolo's safe return and his story had reached many of the surrounding areas. The speed by which the news had travelled was truly amazing. Through means unknown, these parishioners somehow heard the legendary reappearance of the young lad who was hopelessly lost but then was found. The story of his reappearance was mixed with mythical and divine exaggerations as it bounced back and forth from many mouths to many ears. The multitude were shouting praises to the Lord and some even were shouting Agnolo's name. Some of the crowd were waving palm leaves that they had kept from Pam Sunday two weeks prior. Many laid their garments on the road for the wagon to treat on. They loudly chanted: "Praise be to the risen Christ, praise be to his angels."

The doves glided in the above skies and added their own voices to those chanting on earth.

They all had come to see the miracle boy on his way to Florence.

Agnolo was taken by the attention and his still glowing face was blushing. The wagon had to slow down as it cut through the mass of people, each wanted to get a glance of Agnolo. Many tried to touch the wagon, when they were not able to touch Agnolo himself, believing that they would receive a special blessing. Several times, Benvenuto had to completely stop the wagon. He and Michelangelo had taken their hats off to express gratitude towards the mass. Chola was overwhelmed with excitement and she could not stop giggling.

Among the crowd, Lorenzo Baldovinetti and his family were fighting their way to get close to the wagon and get the attention of the Cellinis by waving his hat and shouting: "Benvenuto, Benvenuto!"

Behind Lorenzo, his family followed. Giorgio who was partially blinded since the Easter incident, was led by his brother Domenico. Cicilia and Flora walked behind Giorgio. From time to time, one of them reached to touch Giorgio's shoulder possibly for assurance or guidance. With all the loud noise and the shouting crowd, Lorenzo's voice was barely detectable. But, Francisca who was looking through the crowd to see if she could recognize any one she knew, spotted the Baldovinettis and shouted at her husband to stop. "Look, Venu, it is Lorenzo and

his family. It had been a few days since the two families met and emotions were still raw on both sides. Slowly, the wagon stopped. Lorenzo fought his way towards the wagon and jumped to kiss the feet of Agnolo who violently and with anger pulled his feet away screaming: "May God forbid. I am not worthy … I am not worthy. I am but a human." His speech was not clear. It never was. But he spoke with the unquestioned authority of a Greek philosopher and all who heard him seem to understand what he meant to say.

Lorenzo jumped off the wagon and turned around looking for Giorgio. When he found him, he grabbed his right hand and quickly dragged him towards the wagon – so quickly in fact that the half blind boy stumbled several times and almost fell on his face. When Lorenzo was a few feet away from the wagon, he wrapped both of his hands around Giorgio's waist and pulled him up while shouting: "Please forgive my boy. I will pay penance to you and to the Lord for him to see again."

"Come near, my brother!" Shouted Agnolo to Giorgio who began to scream: "Pane, Pane! (Bread, Bread!)" The crowd thought that the blind boy was begging for bread, but Agnolo knew what he meant. Giorgio was calling him by the nickname, "Pane Mezzo Cotto (Half baked bread)", that the children at the church school had given him. Here, however, instead of calling him "Half baked bread," Giorgio was calling Agnolo "Bread"!

Filled with emotion, Agnolo jumped from the wagon and ran toward Giorgio. The two had not talked or seen each other since the Easter celebration. Last time Agnolo saw Giorgio was at the church. Agnolo remembered how at the church Giorgio was walking so proudly through the cheering worshipers carrying out the role that had been assigned to him – Agnolo.

Agnolo shouted: "Let him on his own feet." Lorenzo slowly lowered Giorgio down where he could stand on his own. Giorgio could barely see Agnolo, yet he could tell that Agnolo looked differently. Despite his limited vision, Giorgio could see an emanating glow from where Agnolo's voice came. Giorgio was afraid and mystified. "I am sorry, please forgive me … I have sinned against the Lord and against you. I will pay penance for my evil deeds."

Agnolo approached Giorgio slowly and the noisy crowd encouraged each other to hush. They could hear the resonating voice of Agnolo and the crying voice of Giorgio. When Agnolo was five feet away from the blind boy, Agnolo spoke: "The Lord has healed you. May your eyes be opened for the glory of the Lord. Freely I have received and freely I impart to you. You do not need to pay any penance. The Lord Jesus paid it all!" Agnolo covered Giorgio's eyes with remanence of grape leaves that were still attached to his body.

(Song 14: Finished)

Many of the multitude could not understand what was happening as they did not know that Giorgio was blinded after he betrayed his friend, Agnolo. But watching and hearing Agnolo, they began to shout praises to the Lord: "A miracle … a miracle … hail to the saint …" They shouted louder and louder as they saw Giorgio turn around, looking up to heaven, and jump up and down. Filled with excitement and motivated by his healing and the cheering of the crowd, Giorgio ran and jumped over Agnolo and hugged him and kissed him. "Praise the Lord, I can see. I can see! Pane, Pane (Bread, Bread)!"

A voice from within the crowd shouted: "He must pay penance for his sins … for his evil deeds."

Not able to discern the source of the voice, Agnolo looked around and shouted at the crowd, "No. Jesus paid it all. Penance is never needed. Penance is a direct insult to our Lord. If we require penance, then it is as if we are saying that what Jesus had done on the cross was not enough. His grace and forgiveness are free and sufficient. Jesus said that 'it is finished!'"

"Then he must pray or fast for several days," another person shouted. And, again, Agnolo looked to locate the source of the voice, but was not able to. So, he shouted at the mystified crowd: "Yes, he must pray and fast. But, he should do that to thank the Lord for the blessing of his healing – not to force the Lord and twist His arms to forgive him. Giorgio has already been forgiven fifteen hundred years ago! Jesus paid it all. We need to pay nothing. It is an insult to the Lord if we do. It is like saying that what He did on the cross was not enough."

No one really understood what Agnolo meant. They knew that it was different from what they had been taught, but their unsophisticated minds were not able to reason the implications of what they had heard. They were not sure of what to make of the "No penance needed" claim or the "Giorgio has already been forgiven fifteen hundred years ago" assertion. There were some limited rhetorical inquiries from the crowd, but they went unnoticed.

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It was difficult to get the wagon moving again towards the church. The Cellini family were filled with great fear and anxiety. They had never seen their very own Agnolo performing a miracle before. Who is this boy? Each thought internally. Benvenuto put his arm around his son and breathed hard, while Michelangelo who was greatly stunned held his brother's hand and squeezed it tightly. "Who would have thought that this compulsive, somewhat erratic brother of mine, would be divinely gifted," thought Michelangelo to himself.

Chola was also afraid. Despite her naive and limited understanding, she knew something wonderful had happened. She was very impressed and filled with excitement. She felt proud and wanted to hug her brother. This beloved brother was different. And, the enchanting

palace is real. It was not a dream. Yes, she was tired and had not slept well for many days, but all of this was real and it is really great. She comforted herself.

The crowd followed the wagon to the church for many miles. Those who were on horses proceeded the family wagon, surrounded it, and followed it. Those who were walking followed at a distance.

The unexpected excursion had delayed the family. They could hear the church bells announcing the noon prayers as they approached.

Waiting for them in front of the church was a large group of horsemen. Michelangelo and Benvenuto recognized their uniform to be the cardinal's own guards. A few were local church horsemen from Settignano. In front of the assembled procession of horsemen, sat one large wagon that was pulled by six horses. It looked lavish. Carved out of wood that was covered in parts by leather. It was painted crimson and black and adorned with gilded ornaments and statues. It looked like a large arch of the covenant that is described in the old testament of the Bible.

The wagon sat on six wheels, the spokes of each was gilded and the rim was painted black with a light gold trim. It was the cardinal's own wagon. He had sent it to Settignano to bring the boy and his family to Florence.

17

The Holy Father

Many of the parishioners who followed the Cellinis dismounted their horses as the Cellini wagon came to a stop near the entrance of the church in Settignano. They approached the mounted church guards and began to describe what they had seen and how Agnolo opened the eyes of an evil blind boy. The church guards were intrigued and asked many questions. During this short dialog, the large crowd that had followed the Cellinis on foot began to appear. They were shouting: "Glory to God for he has manifested himself! Glory to the Lord for we had seen a miracle today!" The Cellinis sat in their wagon not knowing what to do. Michelangelo jumped out of his seat in front of the family wagon and approached the church horsemen, when the large entrance to the church was opened and Bishop Fonte appeared. He was surrounded by a large number of priests and nuns. The bishop approached Michelangelo who shook his hand while bowing. "Where is the boy?" Asked the bishop. "Right here," replied Michelangelo pointing to the family wagon. The chanting of the crowd was getting louder and louder and the bishop felt obligated to acknowledge their presence and give credence to their message. So, with a smile, he looked around and knotting he raised his right hand to greet the multitude. The priests and the nuns that had visited the Cellinis the day before and the ones that were there when Agnolo came home had given detailed accounts of the apparition and described Agnolo's appearance. Now, Bishop Fonte realized that what he had heard was not an exaggeration. For a moment, he contemplated taking a few representatives from the crowd to accompany him and the Cellinis to see the Cardinal. He thought what a better way to give the Holy Father a good description of what was happening than let those who had seen the latest miracle describe it. However, for the lack of space, he opted not to do that.

While the crowd and the local flocks continued their shouting in front of the church, Bishop Fonte and the Cellini family entered the cardinal's large carriage. The bishop was accompanied by his own assistant. Members of the Cellini family refrained from gasping as they entered the large wagon. If the outside was impressive, the interior was magnificent. Michelangelo was truly charmed by the detailed craftsmanship and envious, while Chola's eyes opened widely and looked from side to side and up and down to inspect the velvet covered seats and gilded ornamentations. Agnolo sat between his father and Bishop Fonte on one seat and Francisca and Michelangelo sat facing them with Chola between them. The bishop's assistant sat to his side and the wagon glided smoothly and with a comfortable speed made possible by the six horses that pulled it.

It was not easy to start a conversation and the situation was awkward for everyone. The Bishop was, indeed, fascinated and full of inquiries, but refrained from asking too many questions thinking that he will hear the entire story when the group reached Florence. However, he

made a serious effort fighting an urge to ask Agnolo to perform a miracle. He would have liked to see for himself what the boy is capable of doing but did not know quite exactly how to get Agnolo to exhibit his divine talent.

During the ride from Settignano to Florence, Agnolo could not avoid the repeated stares of Bishop Fonte who sat to his right. Agnolo became uncomfortable and as if had entered a trans, he began to whisper. It was as if he were unaware that the others could hear him. His family had been used to hearing Agnolo speak in an unknown tongue, but the bishop and his assistant were mystified and somewhat afraid. Without drawing attention to their behavior, they tried to listen closely hoping to understand what the boy was saying.

Outside, everyone heard the sound of many doves. The doves seemed to be conversing with Agnolo. When he whispered, they were quiet, and when they talked, he listened. The bishop and his assistant looked at each other as if to make sure that the other was grasping the enormity of the event. No one said a word. However, such a behavior which was common to the Cellinis was certainly unique to the bishop and his assistant – neither of whom had witnessed its like before.

There were small talks that broke the silence, but the trip was dominated by an awkward silence. The conversation between Agnolo and the doves continued most of the trip to Florence and the smell of expensive and sweet incent mysteriously filled the carriage.

The procession, led by the Cardinal's horsemen, cut its way through the streets of Florence with majesty that accompany royalties. From the inside of the wagon, everyone could see the looks and hear the obligatory cheers of people who stood on both sides of the streets. Those inside the wagon looked outside to see the assembled crowd, while those on the streets tried to get a glimpse of those who were inside the wagon. It was a bidirectional fascination from a different emotional point of view.

When the entourage reached the large cathedral in Florence, it stopped in front of the main entrance. It was truly a breathtaking view. The arriving entourage consisted of over 100 horsemen and three carriages that carried several priests and nuns from Settignano, and of course the large lavishly decorated carriage that carried the Cellinis, and Bishop Fonte and his assistant. The large gates of the cathedral were opened and there, stood tens of priests, monks, and nuns in their formal attires lining up both sides of the entrance. They appeared to have been standing there for quite some time. There was also a small crowd that gathered. They had sensed that something important was about to happen and decided to wait and see what is to transpire. The cardinal's horsemen who led the procession divided themselves into two groups, each group lined up one side of the distance between the carriage and the cathedral. Indeed, it was a magnificent display of coordinated pageantry and pomp. Two

guards swiftly and with military grace and poise ran towards the main carriage and opened its doors. Chola held her mother's hand tightly and Benvenuto put his arms around Agnolo possibly to comfort himself more than to comfort the boy who was practically in a trans-like state.

The church bells rang many times. No one cared to count the number of rings, but everyone knew that something important was about to happen.

Bishop Fonte exited the wagon and was followed by his assistant. They both stood outside the carriage and waited for the rest to get out. Agnolo existed and was followed by his father and Michelangelo. Francisca and Chola were assisted by the two guards, as they stepped off the wagon holding their laced formal dresses. The Cellinis looked like royals. Ironically, they did not notice the glamour within them for the glamour around them.

A squad of doves circled over the space and selected parts of the massive cathedral structure on which they settled. Few ravens watched the events as they roamed the sky above quietly.

The attention that the Cellinis received was overwhelming and may have caused many priests and nuns to question its appropriateness. All had heard about the events of the previous few days, but some had discarded the news as rumors and exaggerated recounts. Opinions and feelings towards Agnolo were mixed. Some revered the boy as a saint and others resented him and considered him a trouble maker who brought burdens and calamities on many. However, no one was comfortable to reveal what brewed inside.

From the large cathedral gate, some noise was heard. It was the sound of many men. Soon, the cardinal emerged with a large entourage. To the right of Cardinal Alessandro Carafa, was his trusted aide, Father Piero Bronzino who was a bit shorter than the cardinal and could see only out of his left eye. It was said that he had lost his right eye while fighting an evil spirit. While most revered Father Bronzino, some were afraid of him.

The cardinal and his aide walked swiftly between the waves of monks, nuns, and guards that lined up their path, with their eyes looking straight at where the visiting party had just arrived. Father Bronzino had been the trusted aide to the cardinal for many years. His ties to the Vatican and loyalty, coupled with his lack of leadership and ambitions, made him a suitable front man for the leading religious icon of Florence – Cardinal Carafa.

Father Bronzino also knew things. Things that he could live with and others that he had to constantly fight with. For years, he was kept silent by fears of his own doubts. What might be true, he always assessed, is usually buried under the reality and mundane routine of daily demands. In fact, for years, Father Bronzino was responsible for fulfilling the cardinal's wishes to lavish the Cellinis with weekly gifts, while concealing their source.

Instead of waiting in front of the cathedral to welcome the visiting party, as was the custom, the cardinal rapidly walked directly towards the carriage and the Cellinis, while Father Bronzino was trying to keep pace with him. His entourage did not know what to make of the alteration to the conventional protocol and traditional ceremonies but were not about to question the behavior of the authoritative Holy Father.

The cardinal walked speedily towards Agnolo. He had never seen the boy before, but somehow was able to identify him. Most people were convinced that it was because Agnolo was the youngest male in the group. Agnolo, who was holding into his father's hand tightly was taken aback. With his arms open, the cardinal swiftly found his way to the boy and embraced him. Agnolo, who was planning to kiss the Holy Father's hand, had no chance to do so. The cardinal arched his back and looked into Agnolo's blue eyes and at his blonde hair. He paused for a moment as if had seen a ghost. The boy apparently reminded the Holy Father of someone in his past. "May the Lord bless you, my precious son!" Uttered the cardinal with undignified and quivering voice. "Let's go in," he continued. He held the boy's hand and led the way passing by the many priests, nuns, monks, and guards that lined up the way. They walked through the huge cathedral. Michelangelo had been inside the magnificent sanctuary before, but his renewed awe could not be contained. Francisca, Benvenuto, and Chola all walked on wobbly legs that were weakened by awe, reverence, and fear. The place was huge, and the ceilings seemed to reach the heavens. Every little sound was reverberated by the massive walls. And the frescos, oh, the frescos covered all the walls. "It must had taken thousands of hours by skilled and talented artists to do this," thought Benvenuto. The marble columns were massive, and the symmetry was unbelievable. Benvenuto looked around trying to determine the source of these large marble columns. "They must have come from the northern quarries. The quality of the marble was impeccable. We have as good a quality," he consoled himself. Michelangelo was scrutinizing the place. Every time he had been there, the cathedral was full of people. This was his first chance to see the entire walls without people blocking his view. The stain glass windows seemed more brilliant than he remembered. Church guards, who were dressed in formal attire, stood at each door that connected the main sanctuary to the adjacent offices. As the cardinal approached a door, the sentries opened and held its two sides. The group climbed a large marble staircase that was covered with blue thick rugs to the second floor. At the end of a long and wide hallway, that was decorated by paintings and frescos, stood a very large intricately carved double door that was guarded by four sentries. The cardinal led the way, as he was greeted by the sentries, into a very large room. "Praise the Lord," gasped Francisca who was overwhelmed. Benvenuto thought to himself: "This room is larger than our entire cottage!"

The cardinal's office was lavish. It was decorated with the vision of drunken monks and the desires of deprived nuns. This large room, which served as the cardinal's private office from

where he conducted his official business as a holy man and a political leader, was filled with many artifacts and relics, most of which hid more significance than their appearance allowed. There were large jars and many cloths. There were relics from many holy places including the Holy Land. Gold and silver goblets and scroll-containers were scattered in an artistic way throughout. And of course, there were many very very large Bibles and crucifixes. Some of the Bibles were opened and others were closed. There were several sitting areas with large couches and large chairs. The seats were made of crimson and purple velvet and silk. On the eastern wall, hanged a life size crucifix with the suffering Messiah expressing excruciating pain. It was almost real. At a glance, a person could easily be convinced that it was a living person hanging on that cross.

The cardinal sat on one of the couches and led Agnolo to sit by his right side. Benvenuto was directed to sit on Agnolo's other side. The ladies who were escorted by two nuns sat across on another couch while Bishop Fonte, his aide, and three other senior priests sat around in different places.

"You must be tired and hungry after this journey," smiled the cardinal while rubbing Agnolo's head. Benvenuto knotted with a smile as if the cardinal was talking to him.

Several well-groomed and well-dressed monks entered the room with large trays. They placed the trays on the tables before the guests and their hosts. In pure crystal goblets, they poured wine for everyone. Agnolo drank several glasses full. The others drank water as well as wine. The monks brought many trays of raisins and a variety of olives, nuts, and cheeses. All refrained from gorging and a polite and restrained behavior dominated the guests and their hosts. Chola, however, felt a little comfortable to get up and help herself to samples of each tray. Her behavior brought many smiles to the adult hosts, but Francisca whispered gently to her daughter with a stare that the young lady understood. Blushing, Chola bounced her way to where she sat next to her mother, while munching on her gathered feast. The Cellinis were nervous, but their polite and curious eyes moved around. Chola was taken by the moment and the place. Her head moved from side to side trying to grasp all that her adolescent mind can grasp. She was greatly impressed by the lavish large room and with a big smile whispered in her mother's ears: "I like it here. Could we move here?" Francisca looked at her daughter with a smile and did not answer.

Although in his mid-fifties, the strong minded and steel hearted cardinal showed signs of physical deterioration beyond his years. From time to time, he seemed absent minded and his stares, although unnerving, became part of his characteristic that were accepted because of his position. Most people contributed his physical frailty to prolonged and excessive fasting. "He fasts at least four days a week," noted several of his close aides. "It is as if he were fighting a determined demon who is set to taunt and torment him."

It was a bit awkward for everyone and no one wanted to be the first to talk. The cardinal himself was noticeably excited and uncomfortable. It is as if he were searching for a proper way to begin an important conversation. Benvenuto mustered enough poise to say: “Holy Father, we have brought with us a small gift.” Relieved of the responsibility of starting the conversation and intrigued, the Cardinal said: “May the Lord bless your efforts. It is totally unnecessary.”

“It is not much, Holy Father,” said Benvenuto as he stood up and began walking towards Francisca who held a large cloth sack of unknown contents. Benvenuto reached and firmly grabbed the sack from his wife’s laden arms and turned towards the cardinal saying: “It is one of Agnolo’s works.”

Anxiously, Benvenuto unveiled a beautifully carved wax Madonna that is about a foot and a half in height. The room echoed with the voices of all who were at awe with its beauty and delicate details. “Praise the Lord who gives untold talents to his children,” uttered the cardinal.

“Talent must run in your bloodline,” he continued with an innocent giggle while looking at Michelangelo, who despite his craving for some attention was caught off guard by the kind remark. But, with his head down, Agnolo softly whispered: “Talent is a holy gift that is cheaply treaded by humans for persistence, tenacity, and what they call luck – which are also holy gifts created so that no one would despair.”

The cardinal stretched his arms while holding the life-like figure. “What a truly incredible work of art. No one would believe that this is the work of a young man. It is truly a work of a master,” asserted the cardinal who was staring at the statue with intrigue and fear.

“It is Mary Jo,” said Chola while looking at Agnolo who was utterly embarrassed.

Chola’s remark seemed to catch the Cardinal by surprise. He looked at Chola and mustered a smile. “How interesting,” he said. Chola who was becoming comfortable in her temporary role as the focus of attention continued: “Agno saw her in a dream … he told me so … didn’t you Agno?”

Agnolo looked at his sister and felt obligated to answer. Instead, he nodded.

Benvenuto felt the need to intervene. “Agnolo had made several Madonnas. All after his mother had told him the story of the pious nun named Maria Josephine and after he had seen her in his dreams. In fact, the most beautiful Madonna that he had made was destroyed by an unknown vandal last week,” said Benvenuto. He continued: “That one was his favorite. He called it: My beloved Mother Mary, the Spirit Song of the Madonna”.

The cardinal looked at Benvenuto for a long moment. He may have been a man of God, but then he was certainly just a man. Something was festering within him. It was obvious.

“Who would do such an evil thing,” said the cardinal looking at Agnolo. “You will make many more, and the Lord will indeed lead your path, my son.”

He continued: “I have heard of your great sharing of the sufferings of Christ long before the wicked ones attacked your innocence and reassigned your role to another lad at the Easter Passion. I was excited about my trip to Settignano for many reasons, but mostly because I wanted to see you in person. Fate had it, it would be a difficult time for you. I am aware of many facts, but it is my delight to have you here with your family to know more about what had happened.”

The cardinal appeared regal, but a childish joy seemed to surface escaping his control. It was obvious that there were many furious spirits fighting within him. He glowed with the energy of a mother after giving birth to her child. Despite his age, at that moment, he did not seem to show signs of physical exhaustion. The cardinal who was standing up most this time, walked slowly towards the spot where he was initially sitting next to Agnolo. He placed the wax Madonna on the table before him and sat next the young boy.

“The evil lads said that you had planned to change the entire Easter Passion,” said the cardinal as he put his arm around Agnolo.

The room was quiet. Many of the monks and priests had heard several accounts of the story. Of course, those who were at the Easter Passion lived the incident and had a different version of the story than that known to those who were not there.

Agnolo blushed and gazed into the ceiling. He seemed to enter into a trans-like mode and slightly convulsed. Those who did not know him, thought that the excitement was overwhelming the young boy. When Agnolo opened his mouth, he spoke softly. It was not clear what he was saying. It was as if he were speaking in a different and unknown tongue. As he began to talk, the image of a large dove could be seen flying outside one of the very large windows that extended from the floor to the ceiling. The image of the dove was seen gliding from one glass panel to another colored glass panel of the large window.

Agnolo’s family was used to seeing and hearing Agnolo in that mode. It was the other adults who did not know him that were watching and listening with great interest and curiosity.

“I wanted to show that our Lord had suffered in all the 33 years of his life and not just at the 13 stations on the way to the cross,” said Agnolo while looking down.

Cardinal Carafa and his guests could not hide their amazement at the boy's understanding and depth of knowledge of the scripture and its meaning. With relief, Francisca and Benvenuto noticed. They looked at each other across the room. Since they received the invitation to meet the cardinal, they were uncomfortable with many thoughts. At first, they feared that Agnolo might say the wrong thing. They were also very apprehensive, knowing that their beloved son's speech was often garbled and could not be understood, although they never could bring themselves to openly admit that their precious boy had a speech impediment. In fact, they never discussed it.

Cardinal Carafa stared at Agnolo's light blue eyes with uncommon interest. He hid his glares and tried to conceal his urge to examine the boy with probing eyes. It was obvious that he did not want others to notice his strange stares. Yes, Agnolo had unique light blue eyes – incredibly rare in that region, and his light blonde hair added to his uniqueness, but Carafa's prolonged and probing looks made everyone uncomfortable. These stares were indeed strange. The cardinal stared at Agnolo the way a mother looked at her newly born baby for the first time. But to those in the room, his stares seemed akin to those of a crowd at a child in a freak show. The cardinal went on to rub Agnolo's head and caress his cheeks. For a while, he brought Agnolo's head to his chest and whispered: "My precious son … may the Lord bless you!"

The Holy Father seemed to have a definite special bond with young Agnolo.

The Cardinal's fascination and adoration of Agnolo should have been understood and somewhat justified after hearing all the rumors about the erratic young boy and his numerous mysterious oddities. No one could forget Agnolo's behavior at the church kitchen in Settignano or his continued impulsive behavior at the church school. All that was certain to make anyone curious. What was perplexing, however, was the exaggerated attention that the cardinal had given this boy. Father Bronzino was especially concerned that such attention may cause people to question its foundation. Bronzino knew that Cardinal Carafa's desire to attend the Easter celebration in Settignano was entirely motivated by a hidden craving to see Agnolo. Furthermore, Bronzino knew that when the cardinal invited the Cellinis to Florence, it was to fulfill that emotional desire to see the boy, which was not satisfied at Easter. To protect the cardinal, Bronzino masked the invitation as an opportunity for the Holy Father to hear Agnolo's side of the story and to compensate him for his terrible ordeal.

It was the cardinal's good fortune that his wishes to interview Agnolo were overwhelmingly supported by the desires of most of the priests in Florence who were also eager to see Agnolo. The motive of these priests to see Agnolo may have been divided, but it was no secret that many had even prayed and wished to see Agnolo performing a miracle. The entire community and the church have witnessed incredible events in such a short period of time. And, as

recounts of events and stories were told and retold, they were always certain to take legendary nature and receive expected embellishments and façade.

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The monks brought in more wine. Agnolo drank several goblets full, before he stood up and walked towards one of the very large windows that seemed to encase the very large room. Since he entered the room, he had been staring at an open Bible that was on a table in front of that window. The dove that was flying outside reappeared. It looked as if it were flying in a stationary position. Its wings were fully spread, but they were not moving.

Agnolo stood in front of the open Bible facing the window. Several doves joined the one that was there and they all began to chant. Agnolo also started to chant continuously. Although muffled, his chat was certainly not Latin. Some thought it may had been French, but it was not. Agnolo looked down to read the Bible, then he lifted his head and starring at the doves outside the window he uttered: "The spirit of the Lord is upon me, I should heal the sick and provide comfort to the needy. The spirit of the Lord is upon me, the spirit of the Lord is within me, the spirit of the Lord is with me!"

He convulsed uncontrollably for a few seconds with his eyes open, then he closed his eyes, bowed down, and kissed the Bible.

Sighs and murmurs were heard from almost all who were present.

"These were the words of Jesus. Who does this kid think he is?" Whispered one of the priests. The priest's comment was intentionally ignored by most who heard him, but he seemed oblivious to the message that they were sending him. The holy men definitely did not think that their colleague's remark was appropriate, although some had similar unkind thoughts about the young lad. More importantly, they certainly were not about to take on the honored guest who seem to be the target of the Holy Father's affection. Nonetheless, the same priest continued with another whisper: "That is heresy!"

It was not clear who heard these comments, but Agnolo's parents simultaneously began to excuse their son's behavior saying that he was tired. Agnolo's parents, who were familiar with their son's peculiar behavior tried to explain that the boy had had a very exhausting week. Michelangelo had a suitable chance to divert attention from Agnolo but did not say anything. Possibly motivated by normal human envy that exists even among loving and close brothers, he was tempted to say something, but for some reason, he just looked down quietly instead.

Several awkward moments went by, with everyone searching for a way to change the subject, when a large raven tried to crash into the window where Agnolo stood. It was overcome by a large

and mighty dove. The fight took a few seconds, but it was noisy and frightening. When it was finished the doves clearly dominated the scene. An immense light shined from the window where Agnolo stood and a very bright beam penetrated the clear part of the stained-glass window. The bright light engulfed Agnolo's young image and reduced it into a thin silhouette. He disappeared within the undefined boundaries of the bright light and his feet seemed to vanish. His whole body seemed to levitate as he turned around to face those in the room.

His family had seen him levitating before and at least two of the priests who came from Settignano had also seen Agnolo levitating when they were visiting the family the day before, but none the less, fear filled their senses. Everyone wondered if what they were seeing was real. And, if it were real, was it from the Lord? Chola clinched into Michelangelo's hand seeking comfort, but his hand was noticeably shaking, sweaty, and cold – and provided no comfort.

The nuns and priests mumbled different things. Some were praises, and others were incoherent expressions of apprehension and slight dismay.

Father Foscari, one of the priests that accompanied the bishop from Settignano, was heard uttering: "This boy is demon possessed." His remark was ignored, and everyone pretended as if they had not heard him.

The situation got even tenser when Agnolo slept into a trans-like state. His parents continued to defend him saying that the week's events with all its anxiety had left their son weak and incoherent.

Cardinal Carafa stood up and walked towards Agnolo. He was very intrigued and tried to listen carefully to the sounds that the lad was uttering. The cardinal held Agnolo closely and wrapped his arms around him and squeezed him.

Agnolo continued to speak in an unknown tongue and the chanting of the doves seemed to get louder. He convulsed a little again, enough to bring fear into the hearts of most of the guests and cause them to question his cleanliness. They all had their eyes focused on Cardinal Carafa and Agnolo, and spontaneously several stood up and began to speak to the air.

Chola, who had drunk more wine than she usually does, broke the tension and shouted: "Agnolo I love you. You are my angel!"

The guests broke into an uncomfortable nervous laughter. It was a seemingly awkward situation that needed the bright touch of an innocent girl. Francisca caressed her daughter's dark black hair as she said: "You are too. You are an angel as well!"

Chola, who was not willing to let go of the sudden attention that she had received, swung her dangling feet and went on to say: “I saw heaven … I went to heaven … I saw it with Agnolo …”

Francisca tried to change the subject, but the cardinal who had his right arm over Agnolo’s shoulder, walked towards her. He stood in front of her – with a table between them – and said: “Tell me about it, little angel.”

“After we found Agno, three days ago, he took me there,” said Chola. Francisca tried to make light of her daughter’s statement. “The children are really tired and the excitement of the past several days had clearly affected their perception and judgement,” she said knowing that she is not being forthcoming with the real story.

“No, Mommy. You saw the crystal grape leaves and you remember how we smelled like sweet incent when we got back. Don’t you remember?” Said Chola.

“Yes, my angel. Yes!”

“Mommy, don’t you remember how Agno used little bits of the grape leaves that were left on his body to make Giorgio’s eyes open? Remember? That’s when Agno said that Giorgio did not need to pay penance because Jesus paid it all?” Chola’s spontaneous comment certainly did not fit into the conversation, but the wine that she drank may had accounted for her incoherent behavior. After all, she was only nine years old and her little body could only tolerate so little wine.

Many men of God who were present sighed and hid their discontent with Chola’ unholy statement. As if he were talking to himself, one of the priests softly whispered: “If penance is not required, then everyone can just do all the wicked things he wants.”

Most of those present had heard about Agnolo’s heretic assertion. Even before Agnolo and his family arrived at Florence, the church’s imminently spying eyes and ears reported to the church authorities at the Cathedral of the Living Saints in Florence details of Agnolo’s act of healing Giorgio, as well as his derogatory statements against the faith.

Francisca was frustrated by her daughter’s innocent disclosure. She certainly did not want to explain the unexplainable. Benvenuto and Michelangelo held their breath as they felt the stares of all who were in the room. Bishop Fonte and those who accompanied the family from Settignano had certainly heard of what Chola was describing but dare not to interject. The cardinal on the other hand, did not seem to want to let go of the opportunity to learn more about Agnolo. “What was heaven like, little angel?” Asked the cardinal.

“Oh, it is a very happy place. I want to go there all the time,” said Chola.

“Does it have flowers?” asked the Cardinal.

“Yes, it has lots of flowers and it is very bright … it is so big and it has water everywhere … and, and there are colors and butterflies and angels flying everywhere. And, and, you can lay in the water and not get wet or sink. You will float from place to place and fly and fly and fly everywhere. And the angels sing, and the flowers sing, and the butterflies sing. It is really beautiful. I want to go there all the time. Agno said that he will take me there again. Right, Agno?” Embarrassed, Agnolo knotted.

“I would love to go there also, Agnolo. Would you take me there?” Asked the cardinal.

“Yes, my Father!” Said Agnolo. “But, you have to bow to go through the entrance. Chola can get there without bowing because she is little.”

“I would do the Lord’s will to get to heaven,” said the cardinal with a chuckle. The conversation seemed to evolve, and the cardinal quietly looked down in deep thought.

The large entrance door opened and monks carrying more food and wines entered. They replenished the food trays on the tables and filled the goblets of those present. Francisca made sure that Chola did not get anymore wine, instead she encouraged her to try more of the cheeses and the different nuts.

To much of her parents’ and Michelangelo’s discomfort, Chola felt more relaxed than she should, possibly because of her wine consumption. From the time they arrived at the cardinal’s office, her eyes seemed to be fixed on her brother, Agnolo. But, as time went on, something happened. She took her eyes off him and began to look around. She got off her place on the couch and walked towards one of the large stained-glass windows. From there, she walked around and examined many of the objects and touched several of the gold and silver artifacts on tables all over the room and on the walls. It was clear that she had a natural craving and appetite for the finer things in life. The looks and stares of all who were in the room did not seem to deter her. On her way back to her seat, she bumped one of the wine goblets and spelled wine on the priceless Persian rug that covered the entire large room. Francisca ran to clean the mess that her hyperactive daughter had made when she realized that the wine stain was permanent.

Monks who were serving the food ushered in other monks to take care of the matter. Benvenuto and Francisca went on to apologize frantically, but the cardinal assured them that everything was fine. Nonetheless, the large spot remained despite of the monks’ efforts to remove it. Agnolo noticed his parents’ predicament and with a piece of bread in his right hand he walked to where the spot was. He lifted the piece of bread over his head and then touched

the spot. His lips were moving, but no one could tell what he was saying. He again lifted the bread over his head then ate it.

Agnolo's strange behavior annoyed the priests, monks, and nuns present. "This child is undoubtedly demon possessed," thought most of them. "It is either that, or maybe he is insane … or, maybe he is an angel." Their thoughts were further complicated, when they realized that the large wine spot had disappeared. In fact, the tens of colors that decorated the entire carpet seemed to glow more vividly like the colors of a stained-glass window in midday. All who were present seemed to fight the urge to breathe hard. And, Michelangelo was fascinated by the colors. His heart was filled with warm and loving envy towards his younger brother.

The cardinal took a deep breath and opened his mouth to say something but seemed to abandon the idea.

For several minutes, silence dominated the room again. Slowly, the cardinal walked to his desk, sat on the thronelike chair behind it, and sorted through several stacks of papers that lay on top of the desk. His aides thought that he may have been looking for the notes that he had prepared for the evening mass. Then, he reached inside one of his desk drawers and got a small silver key, and from another drawer he pulled a large scissors. He, then, got up and walked towards a large case-table that stood against the east side of the office, where the large crucifix hung on the wall. The case-table had a clear glass top and contained one of the holiest relics of all times: The Shroud of Turin. The shroud was believed to be the burial cloths in which the holy body of the crucified Christ was wrapped, and it had convincing evidence of the brutal death of Jesus and his miraculous resurrection. The church had acquired the relic during the tenure of Cardinal Carafa. Negotiations regarding its placement were undergoing between the Vatican and the church officials in Florence.

When Cardinal Carafa was within a few feet of the glass-top case, he looked up to the large crucifix above it, crossed himself reverently, and bowed to his knees. He stood up and walked closer to the case and again bowed to his knees while crossing himself again. The cardinal got up and opened the glass top case, resting its glass top on the wall behind it. With the scissors, he cut a piece of the shroud while reciting Psalm 91. He carried the precious piece and walked back to his desk where he laid it next to the scissors. He walked back to the glass top case and locked it. He bowed and walked backwards for three steps before he turned around to face the room.

The cardinal reached inside his desk and got a small, but beautifully decorated silver box. The palm size container was adorned with gold threads and precious stones. It was heavy and was engraved with the words from Psalm 91 in Hebrew. He took the lid off the container. It was lined with red and purple velvet. He reverently placed the shroud fragment inside the box and

put the lid back on top of it to close it. The cardinal shut his eyes. His lips were seen to move as he raised the container over his head.

All who were in the room watched with intrigue and reverence. The Shroud of Turin was known to be of unspeakable value. A fragment of it was coveted by the mighty and the rich as well as all sanctuaries all over the known world. Indeed, such a relic could easily be sold for a very large amount of money. "Surly the cardinal was not going to give this precious object to this adolescent with questionable character and behavior," the monks, the priests, and the nuns wondered. "This little piece could bring enough money to feed thousands of starving children, especially during this time of war and uncertainty," they continued to think grudgingly.

Father Bronzino had always been known to be a devout aide to Cardinal Carafa. By nature, he was a successful follower and a strong supporter of whom he stumbled upon to be his guide – in this case, Cardinal Carafa. Something, however, burned within Bronzino when he saw the excessive attention that Agnolo was receiving. Father Bronzino had never felt as agitated as when he saw the Holy Father lavishing Agnolo with a portion of the shroud. Maybe it was the events of the day, secrets that he had hidden with a heavy heart, or possibly a spirit within him that lied oppressed for years and now was revolting and demanding attention.

Francisca and Benvenuto were perplexed and Michelangelo's heart was racing. The Holy Father walked back to where the family and guests sat, carrying the silver container. He found his place next to Agnolo and sat to the lad's left side. "My son, may the spirit of the Lord always be with you," he said to where everyone could hear him. "You have shared the sufferings of the Lord greatly. This is to reward you for your suffering and to erase the mistakes that were made against you by those who were supposed to guide you." All who were in the room understood that he was referring to the Bishop Donato's behavior. With that, Cardinal Carafa placed the container in Agnolo's right hand.

The presentation was over generous, and the curiosity of the guests turned into envy and resentment. "How does this little lad earn such a favor?" The compensation seemed disproportional to the offense, they all independently believed. Furthermore, "How is this lad supposed to protect such a valuable relic? Thieves and robbers of various motives are certain to target this unprotected lad and his relic."

Agnolo held the container with both hands and his mother leaned over to take a closer look. "Holy Father, we are not worthy. We thank you for your very generous gift," Francisca and Benvenuto kept on saying while they were knotting their heads in gratitude.

In addition to the priceless relic, the cardinal gave the Cellinis three large leather pouches filled with silver and gold and a complete Bible. At the time, bibles were very rare, and they were

only found in large churches and cathedrals or the homes of the wealthy. Again, Cardinal Carafa emphasized that it was compensation for Agnolo's sharing in the suffering of the Lord.

"Let's get some fresh air," said the cardinal as he stood up, placed his right arm around Agnolo's neck, and slowly began walking towards the door.

All stood up without uttering a word. Some exchanged a few looks but continued to follow the cardinal and the Cellinis forming an entourage. Chola left her mother's side and ran to walk to Agnolo's right side while Michelangelo, Francisca, and Benvenuto walked behind the cardinal and the two children. Agnolo was quiet and totally oblivious to the cloaked resentment of those around him.

"I want to see, I want to see," Chola said while she was hopping to keep up pace with the adults and standing on her toes to see the gift in Agnolo's hand. Francisca firmly but softy shouted: "Not now, Lola, not now!" Embarrassed a little, Chola lowered her head and walked back to her mother's side.

18

Maria Josephine

The cardinal's office and his support staff occupied the administrative spaces to the east of the sanctuary. The west wing, was dedicated to the church staff of monks and priests. The entourage walked outside the west wing of the cathedral from a large gate through a courtyard that was framed from all sides by well-manicured shrubs and trees. The monks from the adjacent monastery that was built on the twenty-acres parish property made sure that every blade of grass and every flower was accounted for and pampered. In the middle of the court yard, a marble cut fountain delivered streams of water that danced in a choreographed routine.

The entourage slowly walked through this beautiful vast garden. No one notice that Father Bronzino had fallen behind a bit. While the cardinal was deeply immersed in his conversation with Agnolo, and while the Cellinis and the others were either enjoying the beautiful view or trying to eavesdrop on the cardinal's conversation, Father Bronzino was joined by two monks who came from Settignano. The three engaged in a quiet conversation and one of the monks slipped out of the group hoping to be unseen. A few minutes later, two additional priests from Settignano left the group. Although the departure of these men went largely unnoticed, those who noticed assumed that these men had chores to fulfill or a role to play in the preparations for the evening mass.

The entourage passed through one courtyard after another. In one courtyard near the monks' quarters lied a very large and damaged, but beautiful slab of marble. The beauty of the stone was convincing but the damage to one of its ends was sad. Everyone that walked by it wondered if there could be a way to repair the large deep hole that extended for several inches within it. Michelangelo had heard the history behind the untamed slab of marble and the failed attempts to bring it to life. Benvenuto also recognized it. The Signoria, the Florence town council, and the Merchant Guilds had bought the piece from his father about forty years before to erect a colossal monument. Agostino di Duccio who was commissioned to carve the marble piece and place the massive statue on the gable of the Cathedral of the Living Saints in Florence abandoned the project, because of the imperfection of the marble.

Agnolo left the side of the cardinal and still holding to his gift with his partially lame left arm jumped on the marble slab. "I love it," he said. "It is absolutely beautiful! She is perfect!" Michelangelo giggled and with a loving smile looked at his brother. "You have to perform a miracle on this slab. It is beautiful, but sadly unsalvageable," said Michelangelo. "This large hole makes it impossible to execute a successful product," he loudly assessed.

"No, Michlo … that is where the light comes from. The Lord does not make mistakes," said Agnolo. "This marble is majestic like the mighty David. Everyone is redeemable, and every

stone is beautiful!" Agnolo went on to talk about the slab as if it were a living person. From where he was on top of the slab, Agnolo went on to describe how it should look. He jumped off the marble piece, then he walked around it and with his finger drew an outline of his vision of what the statue should look like. While caressing it with the palms of his hands, he spoke to it. Then he laid his head where his right ear touched the marble as if he were listening to it.

The cardinal was filled with curiosity. Reviving the project of carving this marble was the last thing on his mind, but he knew that the Lord works in mysterious ways and that all things are directed by the divine. Cardinal Carafa really did not want to spend his time focusing on the potentials of the stone, but was somehow intrigued by Agnolo's enthusiasm. Cardinal Carafa has seen an example of the unexplained artistic capabilities of this youngster in the marvelous gift that the Cellinis had brought for him, but this was a much larger project that requires the skills and management of a master sculptor. Many capable and promising artists had seen the slab, and many had attempted to redeem it by forming it into one shape or another. But, all left it in disappointment, including an artist named Leonardo da Vinci, who had been gaining due notoriety.

"What would you do with it, Agnolo?" asked Cardinal Carafa.

"I don't know. I must wait until it tells me what it wants to be. But it is going to be happy and make everyone happy for hundreds of years," said Agnolo.

While everyone found humor in what Agnolo was saying, his family was embarrassed and hoped that Agnolo would stop talking so freely. They understood his enthusiasm and they knew what he meant, but they were not certain that others would.

Stroking his sprouting beard and smiling, Michelangelo commented: "This slab is four times as tall you are, my precious brother. You would have to have many ladders to reach its top, if it were to be set upright." Some laughed at the insight, but Michelangelo went on to say: "Plus, if it were left to you, when you finish with it, it would be tiny enough to fit in the palm of your hand." Except Agnolo's parents and Michelangelo, no one really knew what Michelangelo was talking about. Of course, Michelangelo was referring to Agnolo's compulsive propensity and his inability to stop working on a project thinking that it was not complete.

The comment received a few more laughs.

Cardinal Carafa who was amused with the conversation, turned to Michelangelo and said: "Michelangelo, what would you do with such a large slab?" Excited about the attention and the opportunity to sell his abilities, Michelangelo paused to think of a worthy answer. "Holy Father, I have many thoughts about it. Perhaps I could share them with you along with some sketches, albeit it that many obstacles must be overcome, mainly the faulty defect in the stone." To that,

the cardinal laughed and said: “Perhaps you can talk to your brother and get some ideas on how to overcome this problem.” The group laughed while Michelangelo hid his embarrassment. Francisca and Benvenuto were certainly relieved that the conversation had shifted away from Agnolo who was becoming more comfortable to talk freely, and with that, he was becoming unveiled and more misunderstood.

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Led by the spirit, Agnolo wandered through the garden passages towards the cemetery to the west of the main cathedral. Within these sacred grounds, the soil held the earthly remains of many holy saints awaiting the resurrection and the return of the mighty Lord.

There, the ravens seem to rule the sky and the land except for a small patch of land.

The group followed Agnolo and the cardinal tried to isolate Agnolo and talk to him privately. It was as if he still had many unanswered questions.

Agnolo was engaging and his walking seemed to pick up pace, as if he were directed by an unknown force. The cardinal, who had his right arm over the boy’s shoulders seemed to no longer be leading the way but was following the young lad and trying to keep pace with him as they conversed. While they strolled through the cemetery, Agnolo noticed a tomb that was guarded by two large doves.

The ravens scattered in the sky above, but seemed to hold position flying in a circular formation above that grave.

The grave had fresh flowers and much of it. It was small. It was marked with simple inscription: “Beloved Sister, Maria Josephine”.

Below her name, in small fonts, the tombstone was carved with scripture from the eighth chapter of Geneses which described the dove that Noah had sent out of the ark to look for a suitable place to call home. The inscription read: “And When She Found No Resting Place on Earth to Land Her Feet She Went Back Home to Paradise.”

When they saw the tombstone and the writing, Francisca and Benvenuto gasped and held their breath. This was where Agnolo’s blood mother lay. This was her earthly and temporary home. It was where her gentle body was contained.

“Does the cardinal know who she was to Agnolo?” They thought to themselves without uttering a word. “If Agnolo only knew. Oh, precious lady who gave us this precious gift.” They all stood handicapped – Francisca and Benvenuto by what they knew, and the others by what

they felt. Unable to move and void of energy, logic, and sense, they looked at each other hoping that one of them could find the strength to initiate their escape from their captivity.

Cardinal Carafa stared at the small tombstone and was about to speak but caught himself and resigned to silence.

Agnolo was mesmerized and short of breath. His usually difficult to understand speech seemed to be more uncyphered. "Mommy!" He said. Those around heard and understood that part. Although his back was to his mother as he stared at the tomb, those around him thought that he was addressing Francisca. But, then he turned around and this time he was definitely addressing his family: "The dream, the holy lady, is … is … is this her?" Francisca and Benvenuto were paralyzed by fear and confusion and could not speak at all. The story that Francisca had told her children about the young and holy nun who died mysteriously had indeed left a lasting impression on them, especially Agnolo. Since Francisca told her children that story, Agnolo told her that he had seen visions of this holy lady. He also portrayed her in his statues, and allegedly danced with her in an apparition, a dream, or possibly a perception of real life.

Next to Maria Josephine's grave, there were many unattended graves. The day was ending, and the collapsing sun was inviting the darkness to an early visit. The smell of the fresh flowers on the tomb mixed with the smell of the herbs that were planted all around. A few of the flowers were beginning to welt. The heat of the day had afflicted their radiance and inflected some untimely change on their beauty. The ravens continued to circle the air, and from moment to moment, the two giant white doves that were guarding the tomb spread their wings wooed to assert their presence.

Gazing at the flowers and taking several short breaths, Agnolo continued to mumble: "Why do flowers die? Why does time steal our joy from us? I hate time."

(Song 15: I Hate Time)

For a few moments that seemed like an eternity, everyone was looking down except for Agnolo whose eyes were looking at his parents searching for comfort or a word from them. The cardinal abruptly and unceremoniously lifted his head, took a loud deep breath, and quickly turned his back to the tomb. He pointed to the wild flowers and the wild herbs on the other side and noted that it was a beautiful, but quick sunset. "It may be time to return to the cathedral. We need to eat something before the evening mass."

19

Conspiracy

The stench of evil was rising in the air. The sound of the ravens outside and around the cathedral competed with the ever-present holy chanting of the saints within.

While the cardinal and his company were indulging at the cathedral gardens, Father Bronzino, several senior priests who accompanied the Cellinis from Settignano, and a hand full of monks and priests met in Father Bronzino's office. Their motives varied, but their ultimate goal was to put an end to what they termed "the boy's problem."

Each took a turn to cite Agnolo's history of causing problems. "After all, his behavior had precipitated the sacking of two bishops. He blasphemes … and although he appears to cite the Bible, that is no proof of his purity. Don't demons also know the Bible and believe it? Furthermore, how could he be 'clean' with such a strange inability to speak and strange appearance." It was not clear to any of them if the boy was demon possessed, or if he was a holy angel? However, they all agreed that he was too compulsive, too erratic, and too strange. He just did not fit the mold of a normal adolescent his age.

Within this band of conspirators, some were filled with hate and obligation to revenge the sacking of Bishop Donato and Bishop Fontana before him. Others were somewhat convinced that Agnolo was simply "demon possessed".

At Father Bronzino's office, murmurs turned into stares – probing stares that examined the loyalty and level of anger in each other's eyes. It was as if they all shared a common discontent, albeit for different reasons. They were not sure, however, what to do with these feelings and beliefs. After all, revolt and disobedience to the authority of the church was not a light matter. Many have lost their lives, and many have wished to die in the cold and brutal torture chambers set aside for those who were perceived to rebel. But, the attention that Agnolo was receiving and the lavish gifts with which he was showered evoked a monster within each of these restless monks and priests. And, Agnolo's behavior certainly did not help put these sentiments to rest. "The boy was doing crazy things. He undeniably possessed some unnatural powers of unknown and unverified origin." The conspirators further reasoned internally that Agnolo had brought about many calamities to too many people and had caused discourse within the church and the community, therefore, his power could not be of holy source.

Within this council of evil there was an internal squabble. The rebellion was divided into two camps. One side believed that the boy should be killed for blaspheme and heresy. They were resolved to expose Agnolo, capture him, and kill him. "The evil must be removed from among you," one of the priests quoted the Bible. "And, it is better that one person dies as a sacrifice than to allow the entire community to suffer for his sins," they were convinced.

The other camp saw that it would be better to imprison Agnolo and shut him up until they could decide if it was an evil spirit that operates within him or it was the Holy Spirit. They wanted to wait for a sign.

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When the Cardinal and his company returned to the main building, the cardinal disappeared for a short while. The Cellini family was tired and anxious for this exciting day to end. They clustered together in one of the reception halls while they were pampered by monks and nuns who brought in more wines and fresh fruits. The monks and nuns unconsciously formed a circle around Agnolo who was tired. With his partially lame left hand he continued to carry the precious gift that the cardinal had bestowed upon him and with his forehand he wiped his forehead from time to time. Chola alternated sitting and standing positions and moved between members of the family. From time to time, she jumped on her father's lap only to leave him to sit between Agnolo and Michelangelo dividing her two hands between her two brothers who held her hand with one hand and rubbed her flowing dark hair, forehead, and shoulders with the other hand. "I like it here, can we spend the night here, papa?" Asked Chola. Benvenuto smiled while Francisca replied: "No honey we have to go home and get some rest." Chola displayed a sign of a fake pout to which everyone smiled.

Between the large marble columns, several monks walked by. They did not seem to be in a hurry to cross the distance through the reception hall. Their behavior was unusual and unexplained. The presence of another group of monks could not be ignored. This band of monks seemed organized in a different and unique way that indicated a focus and commitment to an unknown mission. They projected different behavior and foreign mannerisms, although they wore the same type of attire that the other monks wore. From time to time, as they walked, a French coat of arm could be seen under their outer attire. It was the coat of arm of the Royal French ruling family. These knights followed and watched the movement and behavior of all the other monks, priests, and every living soul around. Somehow these knights had gained unfettered access, likely by an executive decree from the pope himself. When they were challenged by the cathedral guards, they produced papers with the seal of the Vatican. These secret knights were a part of a small delegation that had been in Florence for many years. Their presence had been sanctioned by the pope.

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As the Cellini family was waiting to find out what to do next, two monks drifted into the kitchen. They had a small talk with one of the monks who was assigned to the cooking details. He stared at them with examining eyes.

The two monks were watched by a contingency of the French knights.

After a very short time, a monk came by where the Cellinis were resting and announced that the cardinal was ready to receive them in the main dining hall.

The monk led the Cellinis to a very large room that was lit with many candles and decorating torches. The room seemed large enough to accommodate several hundred people. One side was dedicated to the nuns and was separated by a high partition from the section that held the men. The smell of the food made each of them hungrier than they thought they were and prompted them to salivate as their stomachs growled loudly. There were many many tables; and on each table there were many dishes and fresh flowers in crystal vases. The family was led to a table where they stood not knowing what to do next. One of the monks explained to them where each of them is to sit and told them to wait until the cardinal arrived to join the congregation. In silence, tens of monks were seen to enter the hall, each reached his assigned place and stood behind an empty plate. The table where the family was led seemed to be in the center and appeared to have received more attention and finishing details than the other tables. In about five minutes, the room was filled with monks, priests, Fathers, and unseen nuns. Despite its size and the high ceilings that were supported by very tall columns, the room emanated heat that was generated by the multitudes of living bodies that never ceased to exhale. In this total silence, the cardinal and his aide, Father Bronzino, and several of his staff walked in and found their way to the table where the Cellinis were standing.

Before the food was brought in, Father Bronzino announced: “Let’s pray”. All who were present began reciting the Lord’s prayer and the family found a way to enter into the ongoing chant. When all were finished, Cardinal Carafa raised his hands towards heaven and uttered a short prayer thanking the Lord for the food that would be consumed. He sat down, and the rest of the people followed his example.

Agnolo and his family were seated directly across from the cardinal, while Father Bronzino sat to his right, as it was customary.

The cardinal settled in his seat, looked across towards the Cellinis, and paused as if he were thinking. Then he ordered: “Precious son, you need to be by my side! Father Bronzino, why don’t you exchange place with our precious guest!” Perplexed by the unanticipated request, Father Bronzino stared for a moment. There was unexplained discomfort among some of those present. “The guest of honor should be near my bosom,” continued Cardinal Carafa with a smile. “In addition, Father Bronzino, you need to be near our honored family,” said the cardinal while looking at Father Bronzino.

Father Bronzino mustered a shallow smile, as he got up slowly to walk around the long table. His eyes were glazed, and he was not blinking. Most who dared to look were convinced that he was somewhat offended. Masked concern appeared on the faces of a few.

Half way around the table, Father Bronzino and Agnolo crossed path. Agnolo put his head down while stealing a glance with shy eyes. Father Bronzino patted the shoulder of the lad in a theatrical manner.

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The food was brought out in large vessels. It consisted of freshly baked bread, honey, beans, and grilled fish – all drowned in large amounts of spices and expensive herbs. The wine and water goblets were filled by attending monks.

Despite all the food that they ate since their arrival to Florence, the Cellinis were hungry and showed no attempts to hide it. The second meal of the day was typically the largest and it seemed like their stomachs were trained to expect fulfillment during the same time each day. The variety and quantity of food presented were impressive. Chola wanted to try everything that was in sight. Agnolo on the other hand, seemed to eat very little while drinking much of the wine. However, he did reach out to the bowl of honey with some bread from time to time. Cardinal Carafa was in a joyous mood and despite the long exhausting day, he did not seem to show signs of slowing down. Father Bronzino did not say too much. He acted with dignity while eating possibly less than was expected of a grown man. Large portions of fish were disbursed by the serving monks to all. Agnolo refused most of his food politely only to allow his mother a chance to reiterate what she had always said. In somewhat of a bragging manner she uttered: “You are always fasting my precious son. You never eat!” The cardinal petted Agnolo’s shoulder with his right hand saying: “You need to eat more my boy. Fish was our Lord’s favorite meal!”

The sound of squabbling birds was heard through the opened small windows. The quacks of the ravens and the coos of the doves alternated domination.

The eyes of many were focused on Agnolo, while the eyes of a few watched Father Bronzino with mysterious looks. Bishop Fonte, who sat on the same side with the Cellinis, had little to say. It was not that he lacked the ability or the will to talk, but it was possibly out of respect for the cardinal whom he admired and likely because he somewhat did not know exactly what to say. After all, he was just appointed to his new position as Bishop of the Settignano parish a couple of days prior – after the sacking of Bishop Donato as a punishment for his poor judgment in handling the Easter incident which resulted in Agnolo’s terrible ordeal.

The senior Fathers and monks who accompanied Bishop Fonte from Settignano also sat on the same side of the table where the Cellinis sat. This small congregation had kept its silence throughout the visit, except for a few whispers that they exchanged among themselves from time to time. Their reverence for the cardinal seemed to be in their genetic makeup, but among them, there were a few who continued to viciously fight their human feelings of

discontent with this man who had sacked Bishop Donato and Bishop Fontana. It is true that the two men may not have been perfect. But then, who is? And, these few holy men of Settignano, were convinced that the entire picture lacked rationale.

The additional attention that Agnolo was receiving, even while dinning, was certainly noted and greatly resented by this rebellious group.

Agnolo, who had drunk more than his share of wine was noticeably talkative. As usual, his speech was in sporadic short segments, and while often unclear, always revealed incredibly mature understanding and uncommon instantaneous naivety.

Somehow, Agnolo managed to lead the conversation back to what he saw at the palace, much to his parents' concerns. This mysterious place that he described may or may not exist, Francisca believed. But, her son's continued referencing to it, was certainly not good for his image or credibility as a sane young man. However, as expected, Cardinal Carafa wanted to hear more from Agnolo. "The wine at the palace is like no other," said Agnolo. "It is made to taste that changes in every sip," he continued. With that, he took a deep breath, turned around to face the monk who is holding the large vessel of wine, and slowly raised his right hand and spoke softly. Then, in another mysterious move, he looked around the entire dining hall.

"What is this boy saying? What is doing?" Uttered one of the senior priests from Settignano in a soft voice that was heard only by a few who sat near him.

"My precious child, you need to eat more food with your wine," whispered Francisca while looking at her son.

While the dialog between the inquisitive cardinal and the talkative Agnolo continued, the behavior of Father Bronzino began to change. A little sweat began to appear on his forehead. A few who were watching him noticed, but the rest of those present did not.

Conspicuously, however, the entire dining hall was filled with pleasant whispers and spontaneous chanting. The wine and the water were hard to distinguish. And each sip from either seemed pleasantly different as if it were specially designed. "These spices and herbs are incredible. They definitely have an effect on the wines and water," tried to explain one the senior priests from Settignano. "Indeed, it is something!" Added another.

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Eating was a social event and a celebration that usually lasted for a long time. This dinner, however, seemed to last longer than usual, especially for several who acted as if they were on the edge – and certainly for Father Bronzino who appeared to be in a deteriorating discomfort.

When all seemed to have their fill with the food and the wine, Cardinal Carafa stood up and announced that he had to leave and prepare for the evening mass.

As he departed, he was followed by his close aides who tried to wait for Father Bronzino who was moving slowly. The Cellinis were led to the waiting hall where they sat before dinner. And again, they were surrounded by a band of monks and nuns. Some of the monks were among those who spoke with a French accent.

In the dining hall, a few men remained. The group was made of the same band of conspirators who had met earlier. There was much gesturing and a serious discussion expressing concerns ensued.

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Before too long, the church bells rang, and a gust of cool fresh air filled all the spaces within the walls of the old cathedral when its doors were opened to allow the parishioners to enter. The sound of the large pipe organ provided harmony for the chanting of the doves – a few of whom had found their way into the inside of the cathedral.

The Cellinis were led to the main sanctuary and they were seated in the very front roll facing the pulpit. While Michelangelo was examining the art work that adorned the walls and ceilings, Benvenuto was examining the marble columns and flooring. All, while Chola was holding to her mother in a perpetual never tired smile.

A senior priest approached the Cellinis and asked Benvenuto if Agnolo would honor the congregation by serving as an altar boy. Without hesitation, Agnolo got up. He kissed his father's hand and kissed his mother's forehead and with a smile towards Chola and Michelangelo he walked away with the holy man.

The church was filling up very quickly and the sound of the organ was getting louder while more complicated music was being played. All stood up as the roll of the altar boys and many monks and nuns paraded in a sanctimonious order. Among the altar boys, walked Agnolo as if he had been trained for this role for years. The group sang and Agnolo was there waving the incent container. The Cellinis were filled with sadness and joy. The view of their beloved Agnolo reminded them of the Easter fiasco. It was a bitter sweet moment. Francisca's eyes were filled with tears and Michelangelo held his mother as Chola tried to hug her leg.

When the song ended, the organ began another song. It was to the sound of that majestic music that Cardinal Carafa appeared wearing a new attire and was proceeded by several high-ranking priests, nuns, and of course Father Bronzino. Father Bronzino's eyes were glossy and out of focus. He walked as if he were a robot relying on training and experience to sustain his

ability to keep on standing without falling. Slowly, a sweet aroma was beginning to fill the vast holy space of the sanctuary and a euphoric high came over all within it.

When the sound of the organ subsided, Father Bronzino approached the pulpit and tried to lead the mass. His words were mumbled and unclear. Those who were familiar with the cathedral and Father Bronzino knew that something was wrong. Ironically, a few of the holy men present seemed to have anticipated this calamity.

When Father Bronzino finished his unsatisfying role, he stepped aside for the Cardinal to approach the pulpit. Cardinal Carafa appeared inspired. His eyes were wide opened, and his lips tightly puckered as if he were fighting a host of furious spirits within. But his stature seemed to find no boundaries and when he began to speak, he closed his eyes for many long moments only to open them again widely.

The smell of the intoxicating incents continued to fill the space as if it were coming from a perpetual and never dying fire within an incent container. And, some of the intoxicated parishioners begin to chant unrehearsed praises to the Lord. They were spontaneously joined by nuns and priests.

More doves appeared to fly overhead inside the cathedral.

Cardinal Carafa opened the Bible and began to read: “This is my beloved son in whom I am well pleased …” He read the scripture with passion and eagerness. It was as if he had been waiting and preparing many decades for the chance to deliver this message which was more of a declaration and a confession than just a biblical reading. The doves seemed to congregate near the alter of the cathedral of the Living Saints. Their wings fluttered and moved the air throughout the large space and stirred the smoke of the incense.

Not all who were present at the cathedral were impressed. In fact, some priests found the reading to be untimely, especially considering that it was only a few days from Easter. Others grinded their teeth with envy and increasing hate for the wonder boy. Agnolo, who was standing among many altar boys, began to glow. From where he stood, an endless sweet and holy smell of incents emanated and continued to spread. It was sweet, unique, and mysteriously holy. The intoxicating order also seemed to be addictive. Just one full breath of it was sure to demand another and another. The sanctuary was filled with the presence of the Lord and the Holy Spirit was witnessed. The smell of the sweet incent clinched to the body, hair, and clothing of all who were there.

In this holy setting, Father Bronzino seemed to lose his balance. His eyes crossed, and he became violently sick puking uncontrollably all over and making an embarrassing mess. Out of his mouth and nostrils came a nasty black mucous. Two of the altar boys ran and covered the

repulsive display by throwing parts of their own garments on the contaminated floor. Before three strong monks rushed to assist Father Bronzino, Agnolo approached him with the incent container in his right hand. Agnolo whispered words in an unknown tongue and waved the incent near the ailing Bronzino. When the sweet aroma of the holy incents reached the nostrils of the deathly ill priest, he shook uncontrollably for several short moments then seemed to revive. Embarrassed and humiliated, the ailing priest, was rushed out of the scene while covering his face and mouth with his hands and his soiled attire. His pride was injured, but his body seemed to have been made whole.

(Song 16: Let me Be)

Several of the monks with the French accent unceremoniously found their way to where Agnolo was standing and formed a tight circle around him.

Meanwhile, like magic, the band of French knights who were cloaked in monks' attire were disbursed in every corner of the cathedral and its vicinity. They moved with impunity. Often challenged, but their motive was never explained. Their behavior was tolerated by the men and women of the cloth who moved around performing their daily life sustaining chores while praising and praying. The French knights' smell and mannerisms – and definitely their accent – always betrayed their intent to conceal their identity.

"Oh, my Lord, was he poisoned?" Whispered several monks, nuns, and priests. Benvenuto, Francisca, and Michelangelo entertained the same thought – each independently. "What was that all about? We all ate the same food," they silently pondered. "Are we all going to get ill?" They continued to think. To poison someone was easy. But to do it at the cardinal's table was beyond boldness and defies sane reality.

The events were more dramatic than a Greek play, and the intoxicating spirit that filled the congregation continued to thrive. To their discontent, however, Cardinal Carafa seemed to hurry through the sermon and abruptly ended the worship time. His mood changed from meditation and reflection to anger and contempt. Although he did not say anything to reflect his mood, those who knew him, realized that something big was about to happen.

As soon as he was able to leave the pulpit, the cardinal existed the sanctuary and was followed by some of his close aides – some of whom worked for Father Bronzino. Cardinal Carafa walked swiftly towards his office-wing while shouting orders at those around him. "In the name of God, I need to know what is going on here," he shouted in great anger. "In my presence? On my table?" He continued.

No one could utter anything, although each searched for a calming answer.

Cardinal Carafa hastened towards Father Bronzino's quarters and without knocking he entered the bedroom where the recovering priest was. As soon as he opened the door, several priests, about five, some of whom had accompanied the Cellinis from Settignano rushed out of the bedroom in a conspicuous manner. They avoided the cardinal in an un-ceremonially unacceptable way. Like grains of salt in a large cup of water, they disappeared out of sight.

"Father," said Father Bronzino as he jumped out of bed to greet the unexpected visitor.

"Piero, are you alright?" asked Cardinal Carafa.

"I am alright, Father. I just think it was bad fish," said Father Bronzino.

"If it were bad fish, why did no one get sick except you?"

"I am not sure Father. Maybe I was suffering from another ailment."

"You seemed fine all day!"

"I just don't think it is poisoning!"

"Piero, what are you hiding from me? No one has brought up the possibility of poisoning until you did just now."

The relationship between the two men went back to many years. The two had been together since their infancy, during their adolescent years, and though many orphanages and monasteries. Their story was different and sad. Bronzino was born to a wealthy and selfish couple who drank in excess and spent their days and nights in orgies and disgraceful bestiality. They did not fear God and sought the pleasures of life with disregard for anyone including their own son who was born with a deformed eye. Ashamed of their infant boy and trying to avoid the responsibility of taking care of him, they placed their infant in an orphanage many regions away from their lavish villa by the Mediterranean Sea. Carafa on the other hand was born out of wedlock to a young couple that adored their infant child, but fearing societal and church retribution and possible death, they consented to placing their beloved infant in an orphanage far away from their home with the intention of retrieving him after they were able to find the means to get married. The two infants were left at the door of the same orphanage one week apart.

The loyalty of Father Bronzino was never questioned or even challenged. Furthermore, Cardinal Carafa never forgot that Bronzino was more qualified than he was to take the cardinalship, but because of his physical appearance and the loss of his left eye, he was bypassed, and the honor was bestowed upon him instead. The Vatican believed that a more

physically appealing man, like Alessandro Carafa, was better fit to represent the almighty God in a prestigious cathedral such as that in Florence.

At the time, the bias against those with any physical oddities was deeply grounded in societal traditions and psyche, and certainly within the church itself. Ironically, while those with such physical imperfections were looked upon with great pity, and kindness was often extended to them, they somehow were guarded as "unblessed" or even "cursed".

The dichotomy between kindness and cruelty was justified with many biblical citations by the church which held the theocratic monopoly on the interpretation of the Holy Scripture. Even in the case of Father Bronzino, who most people had believed had lost his eye while fighting an unclean spirit, his deformity posed a serious dilemma for those that argued the sovereignty of God and His promises of protection and wholeness for His beloved.

"How could God allow the injury of His people? It must be that they were not protected. And, why were they not protected, if they were 'children' of the sovereign Lord?" Many pondered.

Typically, however, debate and free thought were muted and opposing views and ideas were ultimately crushed!

In the face of such covert questioning of the goodness of God, most kept their silence while agonizing to understand the meaning and source of such calamities. Even Agnolo, learned to keep his controversial views to himself and only share them with his trusted family. These views were indeed dangerous, as they could have led to his excommunication or even execution.

Agnolo held that God is not sovereign over all things on earth. He argued that if God is loving, and He is in control of everything, He would not allow calamities to fall on anyone, especially His own people. Neither would He allow infants to be born blind, for example. Agnolo asserted that when God gave Adam authority over all things on earth, He never took that authority back from Adam, even after Adam disobeyed and fell. Therefore, God cannot be blamed for the evil in the world. Without a doubt, if God were sovereign over all things on this earth He would not allow anything bad to happen to anyone – especially His own people – because He loves all people. God only has sovereignty over the lives of those who allow Him complete sovereignty over their lives. But, whenever anyone fails to completely surrender to God and allow for God's protection – even in one facet of his life – that person permits the forces of evil to operate with impunity in all the areas of his life. Thus, calamity!

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Father Bronzino was a devout and loyal ally of Cardinal Carafa. He was entrusted with many secrets and his loyalty to Cardinal Carafa may have exceeded his devotion to the Lord Himself. Cardinal Carafa was aware of his friend's sacrifices and never forgot that this man, who stood by his side, may have lost his eternal salvation because of him. The cardinal also knew that he must keep his devoted friend happy and quiet, as he fully realized that no one can cause more damage than a best friend who becomes an adversary.

Indeed, it was Father Bronzino who was present when Sister Maria Josephine worked at the cardinal's quarters about ten years prior. In fact, it was he that recommended her and had handpicked her for such a special duty. When she was found with a child, he oversaw her protection at Sister Teresa's home until she had her baby. Father Bronzino was also responsible for the continued delivery of gifts and spices first to Maria Josephine during her short stay at Sister Theresa, and then after her untimely departure from earth, to the Cellinis. It was his monks and church horsemen who delivered the unexplained large bales of goods to the Cellinis on weekly bases.

"Father," said Bronzino "You may have noticed; expressions of obvious discontent and hate for Agnolo had been growing. Some were based on jealousy, some were based on misunderstanding, and much were rooted in revenge for the sacking of Bishop Donato and Bishop Fontana."

Cardinal Carafa stared with fear and perplexity. "Why would they hate such an innocent boy?" Among many things, both the cardinal and Father Bronzino knew that Agnolo was the son that Sister Maria Josephine had died while given birth to, but as much as Carafa wanted to say "an orphan" boy, he could not because he knew that the walls may have many ears and unforgiving memory.

Father Bronzino was an intelligent, conning, and a learned man. However, intelligence it seems has a glass ceiling beyond which it becomes stupidity. One does not have to look too far. Satan, the Angel of Light and the most intelligent created being, when he broke that glass ceiling became stupid to think that he could defeat God!

"They accuse Agnolo of being demon processed. They are convinced that the miracles that he performs are unholy. They say that the boy aims to glorify himself and not the Lord. Some of them were present when he opened the eyes of the boy who betrayed him. They said that everyone heard Agnolo attacking the church by claiming that there is no need for penance and there is no need to pray or fast when one sins."

The cardinal was speechless and Father Bronzino continued:

“They cited his speech impediment and his partially lame left hand as evidences of uncleanliness.”

“What a sham. Did they not accuse our Lord of Lords of being demon possessed?” Shouted the cardinal.

Father Bronzino was uncontrollably defensive. His support for the insurgents was never meant to be an attack on the cardinal. His loyalty to his friend had never shifted. In fact, in his mind, he was convinced that what he was doing would ultimately be in the best interest of Cardinal Carafa – his longtime friend. It was becoming clear that Father Bronzino was trying to convince his friend that Agnolo was not worthy of all the attention that he was receiving. So, he went on to say: “Some of our brothers are convinced that Agnolo is half human and half spirit. They point out that he just does not fit here. He looks different. Some even go as far as to say that maybe he was born out of wedlock.”

“Enough of this insanity, Piero! I will be in my office and you will bring all those who have made such claims there to me immediately! I want to hear it from ‘them’,” screamed Cardinal Carafa pointing his finger at Father Bronzino. He walked away and slammed the door behind him while shouting: “Have they not accused our Holy Mother of having our Lord out of wedlock? What an insanity! I will not tolerate this!”

Cardinal Carafa was livid. His anger put fear into all who heard him including Father Bronzino who was wondering if he had crossed a line to a point of no return. He was fully aware of the strong hand of the cardinal and his unwavering will. He was also aware of the excruciating pain that torture chambers could provide before an agonizing death is reached. He had heard the pleas and screams of many as they begged and welcomed death.

The sad reality was that in a society where everyone knew everyone and where everyone looked the same, Agnolo was a suspect. Even those who had sympathy for the boy often questioned his origin and make up. “Why does a boy of a normal family like the Cellinis look like that?” They internally wondered.

Some began to reason: Even if Agnolo was born out of wedlock, what fault of his was that? Did they not accuse Jesus of being a bastard? And, oh, how our Holy Lady had suffered! Oh, how the Holy Mother of our Lord must had shed many tears because of such false accusations.

There were those with cynical hearts that went as far as to hypothize that Francisca may had had an unclean relationship with a demon spirit. Others thought it may had been a holy spirit. Such a weird off spring does not normally just happen, they were convinced.

The cardinal's voice bounced loudly off the tall walls of the hallways and reverberated from space to space. Literally in seconds, a band of the cathedral guards were on site, even before the cardinal reached his quarters. Other bands of the guard went to Father Bronzino's quarters. Their fast response and coordination was remarkable. In a few moments, they learned of the ongoing crisis. Their leaders took personal blame for not learning about the dining catastrophe and not foiling it. After all, it was their solemn duty to protect the cardinal, his staff, and all the inhabitants of the cathedral complex and maintain order and safety on the premises.

The leaders of the squads were heard giving orders upon which all elements were mobilized and disbursed to find the possible saboteurs.

The Cellinis could not avoid noticing the unusual and nervous movement of the armed cathedral guards and the sudden appearance of ten additional French knights that circled them did not provide the comfort that it was meant to provide. This band of French knights watched the movement of the cathedral guards while a few others shadowed the mobilized guards – possibly to either give support, learn of the details of the poisoning plot, or both.

The Cellinis were concerned and each reflected fear in a unique manner. They tried to listen to the whispers of the French knights but could not understand what they were hearing. "You will be fine. Just routine stuff!" Said one of the knights to Benvenuto. Chola was latched into her mother's leg. "Momma, I am afraid," said Chola. "It is OK baby. We are safe. The Lord will protect us!" Agnolo reached to his sister with his right hand and whispered: "Fear is not from the Lord! Do not be afraid, Lola!" He rubbed her forehead and moved the silver box containing the precious fragment of the shroud from his left hand to his right hand. He placed it above her head while uttering: "By His blood we are protected!" Chola, who always found comfort in anything that Agnolo did, smiled and kissed her brother on the cheeks with her arms crossing behind his neck in a deep hug.

Several minutes went by and the swiftly moving guards could be heard in hallways and staircases throughout that large structure. Their metal studded leather boots and their armors produced an intimidating noise akin to an army marching to battle.

In his office, Cardinal Carafa sat quietly surrounded by three close aides who were subordinates to Father Bronzino. Some stared into the ceiling while others looked down. No one said a word.

It was clear that Cardinal Carafa was heavy laden. Maybe there was a soft side to the ironman, or it could had been intellectual reasoning, but he was clearly fighting many thoughts and debating several options. At the core of his thoughts lied his sympathy for Agnolo. He was also surprised at the negative view that Father Bronzino had of the poor orphan boy. He thought to

himself: “The cruelty of humans is limited only by their wicked creativity.” He was aware of the fact that instead of feeling sorry for an orphan boy, many believed that these children may had caused the death of their parents. “The curse that these children had brought upon their family is an indication of their guilt,” many rationalized. “Some children are a blessing and others are a curse to their parents. The cursed ones, bring curses and the blessed ones bring in blessings. By their fruits we should judge them,” argued many of the learned.

The cardinal shook his head in denial as his thoughts were focused on his serious dilemma: What to do with Father Bronzino? What if it was revealed that he was a coconspirator? And, how much should be tolerated from this man? Cardinal Carafa knew his limitations. And, he never forgot that Father Bronzino could ruin his life, possibly even have him excommunicated or executed if he were to share what he knew. Simply, Father Bronzino knew too much!

Cardinal Carafa’s discomfort grew deeper as he wondered if tolerating his friend’s misbehavior and betrayal would be enough to keep him silent. Cardinal Carafa also realized that whether he mends relationships with his friend or not, their relationship could never be the same and that Father Bronzino may decide to act preemptively against him out of concern for his own life.

Cardinal Carafa’s thoughts were interrupted as there was a hard knock at his door. When the door was opened, Father Bronzino appeared. He was surrounded by several cathedral guards and inside this band of tall men a priest was being led into the office.

“Holy Father,” said Father Bronzino “They found this one. His name is Foscari!”

Captain Loredan, the Officer in Charge of the cathedral guard turned around to face the center of his band of guards and grabbed the implicated priest.

Father Foscari shuffled his feet as he was being dragged to the front. Unknown to the cardinal, he stood trembling. At the first sight, one could not but feel sorry for the repulsive looking man who was often called the Lame Monk. His clothes dripped with goo and smelled like the dirty shores of Venice. It was as if bathing water always repelled off his skin without cleansing him. He spread a nasty order and his clothes had the smell of an abandoned fishing dock after a heavy rain. Father Foscari was repulsive. How he was allowed to remain in the monastery was a mystery. His conception was likely not the result of the normal competition among millions of racing healthy sperms to reach a healthy egg, but rather the unfortunate accident of an unfertilized egg inadvertently rolling over a disabled sperm with a broken flagellum. Indeed, he presented a menacing argument against the belief that man was created in God’s own image, for in Foscari no one could aspire to claim that they could see God.

“We found him near the Settignano church wagon that was to carry the Cellinis back to their home,” said Captain Loredan. “My guards are in pursuit of others who were with him and tried

to get away on stolen church horses. I am certain we will get them soon as well!" He continued.

"What were these evil ones doing near the wagon!" Asked the cardinal.

"We are not sure, but we will find out!" Answered Captain Loredan.

"Father Foscari, what in God's name were you doing there?" Screamed the cardinal.

"We were trying to recover a serpent that had been placed there earlier … after the illness of Father Bronzino, we decided to recover the serpent," with a weak and frightened voice Father Foscari answered. He continued: "Some believed that the lad was evil and were convinced that the evil must be cut off from the congregation. While some of us sought to test the spirit. If the boy was from the Lord, we knew that he would survive any poison. When our attempt to test him by lacing his plate with poison failed, we thought to try placing a serpent in his carriage. We did not know that Father Bronzino would end up sitting in the place at the table where the lad was supposed to sit."

"What do you have against such an innocent boy?" Yelled Cardinal Carafa.

"Holy Father, we were just testing the spirit. It is true that some questioned the lad's origin and bloodline. After all, he does look different. His eyes are blue, and his hair is abnormally blonde. We simply wanted to know if he was holy or evil. After all, the Bible indicates that God's children would be protected … even if they stepped on serpents and scorpions, they would not be afflicted and no poison could harm them …"

The cardinal interrupted: "I know what the Bible says, you wicked and disgraceful one!"

"Holy Father, I for one believed that the lad was holy and to prove my point I agreed to test him and prove his purity," Father Foscari tried to interject. He continued looking down avoiding the scorching eyes of Cardinal Carafa who was breathing loudly in fuming anger. "Most of us, including Father Bronzino believed in the purity of the lad …" he continued.

"Stop! Who in God's name gave you the authority to do such a thing?" Shouted Cardinal Carafa at Father Foscari before he turned towards Captain Loredan: "Carry him out and examine him. I want to know all about this. How many are involved, who they are, their background, their motive, the origin of the plot, the extent of the rebellion, and their ultimate goal … Take him away!"

The guards dragged the implicated priest out of the room as he mourned in despair. Everyone knew what an "examination" of such a soul meant. The ordeal is lengthy and gruesome. The prisoners often beg to die, but are not afforded the relief of death. And, even if they insisted

on telling the truth, the torture at the hands of the professionals who truly enjoyed their job never stopped. In fact, the torturers often increased the severity of the torture, if that were possible, to punish their subjects for their evil deeds on the spot. It is not certain whether their overzealous approach was driven by a sense of duty or by the pleasure that it brought to their callused and ailing hearts.

20

Pious Hearts

After Captain Loredan and his guards existed, there was still a crowd in Cardinal Carafa's office. Senior aides, as well as a few from the Settignano delegation, stood there wondering what they should do. It was as if they were awaiting orders to breathe, much less move.

Cardinal Carafa was trying to regain his composure and project untarnished leadership image. He blinked a couple of times, wringed his hands, and broke a shallow smile. "May the Lord bless you all, this has been a difficult time for all of us," he said as he put his hands over one of the senior aides escorting him to the door. The rest of the people got the message and began walking towards the door, including Father Bronzino. "Father Bronzino, please stay with me for a moment. We need to pray and ask the Lord to provide peace for all of us," said Cardinal Carafa to the surprise of all, especially Father Bronzino himself who was wondering about the real reason for the cardinal's request.

All left the room and Cardinal Carafa shut the door politely.

"Sit down Piero," said Cardinal Carafa gently. "Sit down!"

"Thank you, Alessandro," said Father Bronzino. "Thank you!"

Cardinal Carafa sat to the left of Father Bronzino and put his right arm around his shoulder. As if it were choreographed, without planning, the two men accidentally looked up simultaneously only to be looking straight at the small statue of Maria Josephine that the Cellinis had brought as a gift to the cardinal. The two took deep breaths after which Cardinal Carafa refocused back to what they were discussing.

"I do not know what to say, Piero. I do not know! You and I have been through so much together through the years. And I am aware of your loyalty and the incredible sacrifices that you had made for my sake. I just cannot understand your dislike for this young boy. Piero, you know what no other person knows. And, you should know that this little lad is persecuted for no real reason. This orphan boy, whose mother had sadly died while giving birth to him, does not even know his real mother. It was only by the grace of God that he was accepted by the Cellinis who provided him with incredible love as if he were their very own. You have been there from the very beginning. And you know why this boy looks the way he looks. He is a male version of his beautiful mother ... Her long blonde hair and light blue eyes. She looked like an angel. And it was you who took care of her needs at Sister Teresa's home by providing all that she needed including pampering herbs and spices that aided her though her pregnancy until she joined our Lord in heaven." He paused and looked down with sadness.

“Alessandro, I do not have anything against the boy. And, the tie that you and I have with him has dominated our lives and our relationship and brought us closer together through the years. It may have actually given us a purpose to live … just to see that Agnolo is well taken care of and growing up upright to serve our Lord. What happened at the dining hall and beyond, may have been a misunderstanding that I was about to pay for with my own life. The poison that was used to lace Agnolo’s plate was indeed very potent. One drop of the potion is enough to kill several men. I am now convinced, more than ever that Agnolo is a saint. Not only did he survive the attempt on his life, but I am convinced that beyond any doubt that his prayers during church had revived me and saved my life. When he walked towards me, I heard him uttering a prayer in an unknow tongue. I took a whiff of the incent that he was disbursing, and it was as if I were brought alive. The excruciating pain in my abdomen and my throat disappeared. Alessandro, our boy has passed the test. So, let us rejoice. For a while, I doubted his purity. And deep inside, I wanted to prove that he is indeed holy – first to myself and then to the others. I am aware that many of these rebels are motivated by jealousy and hatred. I am sure you had guessed that some of them are loyalists to Bishop Fontana and Bishop Donato whom you sacked for their cruel treatment of Agnolo.”

Cardinal Carafa was listening intently. Not only did he want to learn about the plot against Agnolo, but he also wanted to know how this rebellion was to touch his reign. And of course, he wanted to know if his loyal aide is still being true to him.

“In a crazy way, I am glad you were involved in this fiasco, Piero. You were my agent within the group. I know these fools did not know how close we are together,” the cardinal’s patronizing remark was welcomed by Father Bronzino who about an hour prior thought that his life was on the line.

“We need to crush this rebellion and provide uninterrupted protection for the boy,” said Cardinal Carafa. “Piero, catch these evil doers and punish them severely. We cannot open another fighting front, especially an internal one. I do not need to tell you about the fragile state of stability that our land is in.”

Father Bronzino who was looking down while the cardinal was speaking, lifted his head and looked at his longtime friend to hug him. “Alessandro, my loyalty to you is unshaken. If you only knew!” He whispered with tears in his eyes.

“Thank you, my brother!” Said Cardinal Carafa as he continued to hug his lifelong friend and aide.

While the two men may have seemed to mend their relationship, they both knew that trust is a fragile two-way mirror, once cracked everything will look differently for everyone.

The two men got up and walked towards the office door. Cardinal Carafa asked one of the cathedral guards who manned the office door to lead them to where the Cellinis were. The two men walked through the halls of the second floor where the cardinal's office was and climbed down the main staircase to the first floor gathering followers – including some senior aides who were eager to find out the outcome of the discussion between the cardinal and his aide.

When they reached the lobby area where the Cellinis were, from far away Cardinal Carafa could see a band of French knights surrounding the Cellinis. He was satisfied to see the vigilant protection that Agnolo was receiving.

Slowly and reluctantly, the remaining senior priests from Settignano led by Bishop Fonte approached the cardinal's group. The remaining elements of the Settignano delegation had been clustered in the same main lobby where the Cellinis were. They were filled with fear and uncertainty. After all, some of their own colleagues had been implicated at the core of this awful rebellion.

Bishop Fonte found himself in a very awkward position and bore internal blame for what had happened. He was definitely grateful to Cardinal Carafa for bestowing on him the honor of leading the congregation in Settignano, after the sacking of Bishop Donato for his terrible mishandling of the Easter episode and the resulting trauma to Agnolo. However, he was saddened that he did not have the chance to show his gratitude and was embarrassed that his own flock had caused so much trouble. Furthermore, he was wondering if Cardinal Carafa could trust him after all that had happened on his watch – albeit that he was still very new on the job.

When Cardinal Carafa sensed the movement of the approaching group of priests from Settignano, he diverted from his path towards the Cellinis and head towards the Settignano delegation. Their hearts were beating fast for they knew not how they would be received. "Would they be placed under arrest and questioned," they wondered. Instead, Cardinal Carafa managed a light smile as he opened his arms to receive Bishop Fonte.

"You have your hands full, Brother, and you have a big job to do with your people," said Cardinal Carafa while approaching Bishop Fonte.

He continued with an innocent giggle: "Are you sure you want this job?"

The group nervously broke a muffled laughter.

"Yes, Father! I am honored to have your trust and confidence!" He went on to say: "I am ashamed, and we are all ashamed, of the ungodly behavior that our brothers have displayed. I take full blame for not knowing what was going on right under my nose."

“Brother Fonte, do not blame yourself. Even our Lord, the creator of all things, had one bad apple in his group of twelve. So bad in fact, that he delivered his Master to be crucified. I do, however, need your continued help in apprehending these rebels and protecting our flock, especially this young and persecuted lamb.”

“You have my solemn commitment, Father!” Bishop Fonte bowed politely and with a serious determination looked at the cardinal.

Cardinal Carafa, joined by Bishop Fonte and his group, walked towards the Cellinis. The French knights appeared distrusting of the Settignano bunch and displayed signs of exacerbated alertness.

“It has been an exhausting day for you, blessed family,” said the cardinal. “Indeed, it was a great opportunity for us to meet you precious lamb and be blessed with your presence,” he continued as he addressed Agnolo. The remark was possibly not the best choice of words as it may had extenuated some dormant feelings of resentments hiding within some of those around.

Cardinal Carafa led the family and the rest through the halls of the cathedral to the main entrance. There, they could see that three French knights were searching the wagon that the Cellinis were to ride. The French knights were assisted by two of the cathedral guards. They inspected the wheels and the horses and made certain that the carriage had no dangerous creatures that would harm the family.

Cardinal Carafa hugged Agnolo tightly for a long time. His eyes became a bit misty but he managed to swallow his mist back into his eyes. “Be blessed, my son!” He whispered in the boy’s ears. “I love you!”

“Thank you, Father!” Replied Agnolo looking up at Cardinal Carafa.

Michelangelo and Benvenuto thanked the cardinal again for his kindness and generosity.

“I hope to see some of your work and some of your brother’s work soon,” said the cardinal to Michelangelo who was delighted to know that the Holy Father was interested in his art work.

Each of the family members approached the cardinal and bowed as they kissed his right hand. Chola was led to the cardinal and she followed suit while saying: “I like it here. Can we stay here always! Please let’s spend the night here, it is really pretty here. When can we come back?”

The cardinal laughed saying: “This is the Lord’s house. You are welcome here any time, little angel!”

The Cellinis and Bishop Fonte got in their designated wagons and began their journey back to Settignano. Over twenty horsemen, mostly French knights with a compliment of church guards from Settignano and Florence, accompanied the caravan. Some led the way while others protected the rear and a few rode on the side of the wagons.

Doves were heard flying over the large procession.

This long day was finally coming to an end. And, the excitement of the week was taking its toll on everyone, especially Agnolo. The emotional peaks and low valleys were wearing him down physically and emotionally. So much had happened since he got dressed to take a part of the Easter ceremony the pervious Sunday.

While they all slept in the wagon during the two-hour ride to their home, they were passed by several groups of cathedral guards returning to the cathedral after their search for the escaped rebellious elements.

The moon was full and when the wagons reached the cathedral in Settignano Francisca looked out the wagon and saw Bishop Fonte and his aides departing their wagon as the Cellini wagon proceeded to the Cellini home. The wagon seemed to slow down a little as it passed by the forest. Francisca who could not go back to sleep saw several Florentine Cathedral guards scattered in the forest. They were talking loudly to one another. She could discern that they were after the rebellious priests who escaped.

21

Protecting Valuables

Late the same night, after the Cellinis left Florence, a large contingency numbered in about 50 knights from the French royal court led by seven Vatican guards found their way to the cathedral. The arrival of this delegation could not be overlooked by those who dwelt within the cathedral wings or those who went there to worship, despite the late hour of their arrival. The cardinal was in the midst of his review of the facts regarding the investigation of the attempted poisoning of Agnolo while eating as a guest at his table. The leaders of the French legation and the Vatican guards were ceremonially led with great respect to the cardinal's office. There, they declared their mission: We are here to protect Agnolo.

Cardinal Carafa never before fully understood the involvement of the French knights, but he was obligated to accommodate their presence which was based on a papal directive. But, the new arrival of knights from the French royal court, led by Vatican guards, raised his concern. "Who was this beautiful nun, after all, for the royal family to be so interested in protecting her son? And, what do the French royals know and how much do they know?" He thought to himself.

Father Bronzino, who was in the cardinal's office discussing matters regarding the rebellion when the Royal French knights and the Vatican guards arrived, was also alarmed and full of inquiry. Independently, they both reached the same comforting thought: It cannot be that serious. Years had passed since the death of Sister Maria Josephine. This must be a reaction to the Easter incident. The timeline of events supported their thoughts and provided a bit of comfort.

"The time that the news of the Easter incident took to reach Paris added to the time that it took those concerned to react by contacting the Vatican, seemed to logically amount to exactly the same length of time as had passed," the two men calculated.

What remained an uncomfortable mystery to both men was the rationale behind the deep involvement of the French royal family in this seemingly local affair.

After welcoming his dignitaries and offering blessings and prayers for all, Cardinal Carafa proceeded to say: "Indeed, it is greatly appreciated that you offer to help protecting the innocent. And, now that the young lad and his family possess a precious fragment of the holy Shroud of Turin, it is more of a reason that they need protection."

Cardinal Carafa did not want to ask many questions, for fear of conveying concern. He certainly did not want to expose his inner discomfort to anyone, not even to his close ally, Bronzino, with

whom he had just mended his relationship. Moreover, the group's request was in the form of a directive from the Vatican, and that was never subject to discussion.

When the French knights who were masked as monks appeared to play a role around the cathedral since the Cellinis' arrival a few days prior, Cardinal Carafa knew that this same group had been dwelling in Settignano and he tolerated their involvement and presence around the cathedral in Settignano based on a much earlier directive from the Vatican that went back to over ten years. While their number fluctuated, these knights had lived in Settignano since the birth of Agnolo. Not since that time, however, was there an overt involvement from the French royal family.

"Well, Father, tomorrow we will find our way to Settignano and establish residence there. We will inform the Cellinis that we are there to protect the priceless relic," said the leader of the Vatican guards.

The Vatican Guard leader and Captains Philippe and Nicolas, the two French Royal Captains, were escorted with ceremonial honors to the guests' quarters where they, their men, and their horses found shelter and lavish accommodations for the night.

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In the early morning hour, when the Cellinis got home, Tota was awake and waiting for them. She ran and hugged Chola who was the first to jump out of the luxurious wagon. Tears ran out of Tota's one functioning eye and she raised her hands to the sky to give praise for the safety of her family. "I could not sleep until I knew that you were back home safely," she shouted as the family was getting out of the carriage. She hugged each one individually while sobbing in joy.

The Cellinis entered their home and collapsed. Sleep was sweet and they all slept like they had never slept before. The French knights who escorted them from Florence seemed to know their way around the property and the adjacent quarry. They settled in the courtyard that lied in the back of the cottage. A few slept inside the Settignano church carriage.

When it was almost midday, the family was awakened by the sound of many people talking and the stumping of many horses. Michelangelo dragged his feet and walked to the door. Many more French knights seemed to be added to the already existing knights. The group was coordinating a movement. On the right side, not too far away, Michelangelo could see the Cellini carriage with its two horses standing near it. It was evident that someone had brought it back from the church. Two Settignano church guards appeared to be preparing to lead the church wagon away. The church guards exchanged a few words with one of the French knights and the church wagon moved away.

Peculiarly, for whatever reason, the Vatican forces never made it to Settignano. Whether it was that they were convinced that the French did not need their help in carrying out their mission of protecting Agnolo, or it was their belief that the overall mission could better be served without their visible involvement, their energy appeared redirected or changed.

“Good morning,” said Michelangelo to the group of French knights who had not noticed him. A few who heard him, responded as they continued doing what they were doing. One knight who seemed to convey authority walked towards Michelangelo and introduced himself simply as “Nicolas”.

“Michelangelo, we are here to provide security for the family and guard the sacred relic,” he said.

Michelangelo was uncomfortably surprised by the fact that a stranger knew his name, but went on to say: “You are very welcome. This is God’s land and there is plenty of space here for you, your men, and your horses. Please come in!”

Nicolas went inside the warm house and stood at the door. Michelangelo shouted, “Poppa, would you please come here!”

Benvenuto came to the entrance where the two men were. His hair was messy, and he was still in his undergarments. “Good morning,” said Benvenuto.

“Good morning Signore Benvenuto,” replied Nicolas. “I and my men would appreciate your hospitality as we are charged to provide protection for the sacred relic.”

“Of course, of course!” Said Benvenuto. “This is a very safe area anyway, albeit that the forest is not too far from here, and only God knows what goes on there! But, oh, yes! There is plenty of room here. You are welcome to use the court yard in the back or any place at the quarry that you like.”

“We truly appreciate your generosity and we will, indeed, keep a very low profile while here. Our goal is never to interrupt your life, but to provide safety,” said Nicolas.

Nicolas looked familiar to Benvenuto, but could not remember where they had met. He did not say anything, but the matter bothered him. “He may look like one of the many customers from all over the world who often dropped by the quarry to shop for a slab of marble,” he reasoned to himself.

Tota appeared and was listening to the conversation.

“This is Tota,” said Benvenuto introducing his family’s devoted helper. “She has been a part of our family and is the engine that keeps us moving,” continued Benvenuto with a grin. “Plus, she makes the best bread you had ever eaten.”

“I would love to taste that some time,” said Nicolas.

“This is your home,” said Tota. “You and your men are welcome here!”

After Nicholas left, Michelangelo and Benvenuto walked to where Agnolo was sleeping in his side of the large room. He was still sound asleep while holding the silver box that contained the priceless relic.

Two doves were at the window pacing on its edge.

Benvenuto and Michelangelo left Agnolo’s room and walked back to the entrance where they sat and whispered quietly.

“Michlo,” said Benvenuto “the Lord has blessed us with many things. Despite the incredible difficulties, He had protected us and provided for us abundantly. I do not know how much money is in the sacks that Cardinal Carafa had given us, but we will give a large portion to the poor and the church and the rest of the money, I want you, Agnolo, and Chola to have.”

With tears in his eyes, Michelangelo whispered: “No, Papa. You keep the money. It was given to you.”

“Son, what good is money sitting around. As you know, we have all our needs met. The Lord has always provided for us through the quarry and we have always had more than what we needed. The weekly gifts never stopped for all these years. I want you to take a good portion of this money and pursue your artistic ambitions in Florence. It takes money to make money, Michlo, and without an initial investment, your ability to execute large and impressive projects are limited,” Benvenuto went on to argue his case.

“Papa, you should keep this money for the future,” said Michelangelo who knew that nothing he said would weaken his father’s resolve.

In the kitchen, Tota had begun cooking the first meal of the day and the smell of the food woke up the rest of the family. Slowly, they all gathered in the kitchen and they were devouring the delicious cumin flavored beans-soup that was one of Tota’s specialties. The food tasted exceptionally good and even Agnolo ate more bread than he usually does.

Tota carried several large loaves in a large basket and was leaving the kitchen from its back door. “I will share this with our new guests,” she said.

“What new guests?” Asked Francisca. Benvenuto proceeded to tell her about the new arrangement that the church had provided to protect the holy relic. Although she could rationalize the need for protecting the relic, she somehow was not all that comfortable with the presence of so many armed guards in the premise. “Do we really know who these people are?” She asked.

Michelangelo answered: “Mom, these people are legitimate. I could tell from their behavior that they are of noble background. Plus, I am sure Cardinal Carafa would not entrust just anyone with such a serious task.”

“I guess maybe you are right, Michlo. It is that after all that had happened in the past few days, I can’t help but be skeptical,” said Francisca.

For the next few hours, Michelangelo and Benvenuto worked on digging a hole in the wall to hide the relic. They chose a spot in the master bedroom wall that was covered by a painting of Adam and Eve that Michelangelo had drawn many years ago. They removed several of the stones carefully and placed the silver box there. They put the stones back in their place and covered the spot with the large painting while Agnolo, Chola, and Francisca watched.

“Shouldn’t we tell Nicholas about where we hid the relic,” said Benvenuto as if he were talking to himself.

“Why should we?” Said Francisca. “If he wants to know, he would ask. He probably already knows where it is,” she continued with a laughter.

22

Creation

Very early the next morning, Agnolo rose up before anyone. That night he could not sleep thinking about the palace and how long it had been since he was there. Although it was only a few days, to him it seemed like a very long time. Too much had happened, and he missed the feeling that he experienced at the palace. He wondered to himself if his experience at the palace was real. The fast events of the week had left him somewhat confused. "Of course, it was real," he reminded himself of the transparent grape leaves, fragments of which remained stuck to his body for a long time. He remembered the intoxicating smells and sounds of the palace. He needed to go there sooner than later. It was as if he were an addict in need of a fix; he needed and craved the experience of being at the palace.

He quietly rushed out of the house. It was still dark. One of the knights who was on watch saw the boy's shadow moving. The knight was sluggish and half asleep but seemed to revive with concern. Quietly, he followed Agnolo from a distance through the allies and narrow passages of the quarry when suddenly the boy disappeared. All the knight heard was the noise of leaves and brushes rubbing against each other. He stood there not knowing what to do. He had no clue as to where to look and was burdened by his failure to keep an eye on the boy. To his relief, he knew that his comrades would not condemn him as they had understood the elusive nature of the boy through stories that they had heard as well as personal experiences.

When Agnolo was inside the palace, he noticed for the first time that every tree and every boulder seemed to take a different look and occupy a different place from moment to moment – all in a beautifully choreographed divine manner. The rivers flowed and swirled like graceful erotic dancers. The colors and the lights, the smells and the sounds, the flying butterflies and the doves, they all changed from moment to moment.

He flew in the air to see Mary Jo. His heart was beating with excitement and he was mesmerized by all the perpetual changes to the interior of the palace and the new sounds that filled all spaces and echoed from within him. When he saw the statue last time, it was after the Easter incident and his first experience at the palace. The second time he was at the palace, when Chola accompanied him, the two were distracted by the presence of each other and his focus was on Chola more so than looking for Mary Jo.

From within the large alabaster boulders to his right, he heard a voice that he recognized. The blood rushed to his head and he glided. Without touching the ground, he continued to fly. He did not need to move any part of his body; it was just that he went wherever he thought to go. At least 20 feet above the crystal river and the transparent grape leaves, he turned to where the sound came from. There she was! She was beautiful and tall. She danced and flew her

way towards him while he hovered in his place. Her right hand was extended towards him. She was beautiful! He could see through her transparent alabaster body the wooden statue that he had carved. It was just as he remembered it, but it seemed more beautiful. She looked as if she were filled with amber and honey. He flew to hug her. She was there. They held unto each other and danced. She whispered: "I never left you!" He replied: "I do not want to ever have to go! I wish I could bring my family to be with us here forever! I know that Chola would come, but I do not know about the rest of my family"

"Speak!" She said. "Speak to the stone!"

He understood. She did not have to explain. He could read her mind. The spoken words were only to affirm thoughts and deliver commands.

(Song 17: Creation)

Agnolo looked at one of the beautiful alabaster boulders and thought for a moment. Then he uttered: "Mommy, be!"

The alabaster boulder gracefully slipped into the crystal pool of purity to be completely immersed. There was a sound of many harps and the voice of many angels whispering. A cloud of thick mist and vapor hovered over the pool of purity. A consistent gust of wind blew over the water as parts of the newly created Francisca was being revealed. Slowly as the water receded, Francisca's body emerged one layer at a time as if it were being carved from a block of water. When she was completely exposed, a perfect image of Francisca appeared. She stood out of the water and looked up at the floating Agnolo and Mary Jo. Then, she detached from the pool and flew to where they were. In the air, she hovered next to Mary Jo facing Agnolo. Doves joined them. The three flew in orbits several hundred feet above. The air was thin and the transparent canopy seemed to extend endlessly above them. They prayed silently. And angels were heard rejoicing.

Agnolo left the two ladies and flew a few feet below. He looked at another beautiful alabaster boulder and prayed silently. Then he uttered: "Papa, be!" The alabaster boulder moved; and as if it were melting, in a moment it was transformed into an image of Benvenuto while the sound of flowing water was heard. Benvenuto stood erect as he looked up to where Agnolo was hovering. He detached from the ground and gently flew to where Agnolo was. He put his arm around his son and the two flew to join the two ladies.

What was happening was more than Agnolo could imagine. He thought: "Oh, how I wished that Chola could be here to enjoy all of this with us."

He heard the fluttering wings of the very large white dove that had guarded the entrance of the palace and looked there to investigate. There, stood Chola looking up. “Come up,” said Agnolo. She flew there. “Oh, my Lord, Agno, this is … this is incredible,” she gasped. He hugged her. “In my dream, I heard you calling my name and I was awakened by the doves who led me here and allowed me in. I thought that I was sleepwalking in my dream, but I realized that it was not a dream when I saw one of the French knights that papa was talking about following me.”

“You read my thought before I even considered it,” he whispered. He held her hand and the two flew to where the rest of the family was dancing to the Lord several hundred feet above. Without interruption, they made room for Agnolo and Chola. And, they danced!

Agnolo left the dancing and praising party for another moment. Chola flew to follow him. “Michlo,” she said. “Yes!” He answered. When the image of Michelangelo was forming, the two heard the sound of many people talking and moving as well as the sound of the crackling of stone. Michelangelo’s image slowly emerged out of the water as the water receded, one thin layer after one thin layer. He looked up and with a smile flew to join Agnolo and Chola. The three hugged but did not talk. Agnolo led the way to the rest of the family. Tota was there!

The family danced to heavenly tunes for what seemed to be hours.

Francisca looked at Agnolo. He understood and said: “We will go now, I do not wish to worry my earthly family.” He held Chola’s hand and glided his way with her down.

Agnolo and Chola ran all the way home. The sound of the leaves that covered them was echoed by the walls of the allies and narrow walkways of the quarry. They passed several minders; but these French knights did not seem to recognize them.

23

The Prolific Enigma

In a few weeks, the Cellini family life seemed to settle into a predictable routine. Agnolo resumed working with his father at the quarry. He assisted Benvenuto in the administrative part of his business, but was never good at dealing with people. He also assisted the workers in cutting the different size slabs of marble and made a name for himself by being able to choose the most beautifully suited pieces for the customers' requests.

Lorenzo brought the twins from time to time and Agnolo enjoyed seeing them, albeit things were different.

When he had time, Agnolo carved several statues. Some were large, but initially none of them were of people. Several were of lambs and horses; the rest were of flowers and roses. Eventually, as the weeks and months went on, he proceeded to transform all his statues from one from to another, then back again. He also replicated several of the statues that he had made in the past, notably the ones that he had made of Mary Jo, which he called "The Spirit Song of the Madonna," as well as a model that he had made of David, which he named "David the Valiant Shepherd Boy". The inspiration for David was Agnolo's encounter with the large slab of marble in the courtyard of the Cathedral of the Living Saints in Florence and his conversation with Cardinal Carafa.

In all his project, Agnolo used two methods for sculpturing: the first was the "Communication Technique". In this technique, Agnolo talked the stone into coming alive. He spoke to the stone and with his hands touched it and encouraged it to "become". The other technique was the "Baptism of the Stone" technique, which he had learned during the creation of his palace family. He learned that the model of a statue can be replicated by carving the statue one layer at a time as its model is laid in a trough full of water and that water is allowed to recede gradually.

Agnolo told his parents and Chola that he aimed to populate the earth as the Lord commanded. To this end, he set out to ensure that each of his creations had several different versions and many copies.

When Agnolo was too preoccupied helping his father, and had no time to sculpt, he discovered that his statues multiplied on their own.

In his room, Agnolo placed a small trough and in the back pavilion, he placed a large one. He often filled these troughs with sand, other times he filled them with water. After making a terracotta of a statue, often using the "communication technique," he placed that terracotta in one of the troughs and replicated it using the "Baptism" method. He spent hour and often days

forgetting to eat and rejecting any food, while Chola watched him and continued to supply him with wine.

When he ate, Agnolo ate very little. His diet was typically made of oats, fruits, honey, cheese, and herbs. He talked about the palace to his family. They were intrigued and asked many questions, but were convinced that it was an imaginary place or a forsaken cave.

Chola, on the other hand, spent her days assisting her mother and Tota doing house chores and for at least two hours a day, Chola received Biblical and literary training from her mother. Francisca, who was learned in biblical matters, opened the Bible that they had received from Cardinal Carafa every day. She used the Bible as a basis for teaching her daughter practically everything. Chola, also learned to play the mandolin and dabbled with weaving. When Agnolo was not working with his father, he was found in either the market place doing God's work or at the palace. His parents got accustomed to him disappearing for several hours and sometimes even a day or two at a time. They left his protection to the Lord and to the French knights, after given up all trust in their own ability to either follow him or effectively protect him.

Agnolo tried to avoid going to church. He was feared by monks, priests, and even Bishop Fonte. They revered his piety, and to a great extent, they had learned that it was not a good idea to attack this mysterious young lad, who seemed to be protected by forces from above and who has the admiration of the cardinalship. Although Agnolo tried to keep a low profile, dwellers of the church in Settignano were always anticipating his unannounced visits and were very leery of how much trouble he could potentially cause. When Agnolo did go to church, it was upon the insistence of his parents. And, of course, in the ever-presence of the French knights. He continued to argue against the ritualistic demand for worship. "I prefer to worship alone, with my Holy Father and Savior," he explained.

After a few weeks, it was clear that the French knights were there to do more than just protect the holy relic, for they had followed Agnolo everywhere he went. Although they tried to be stealthy and unnoticed, their presence could not be ignored.

The French knights' task was frustrating and often impossible for Agnolo was difficult to track and seemed to slip away magically. So many times, in fact, he was seen in two different places at the same time. The French knights were insecure and doubted their own reports. They even wondered if Agnolo had a twin brother, but they were sure that was not the case. They were certain that there was another explanation for his ability to translate himself from one place to another under the very trained and eager eyes of several knights.

Perhaps the most frustrating was when he disappeared for hours on end.

Through close ties to Tota, who had built a great rapport with the knights, they learned about the palace. However, no one was able to discover its location. They suspected that the lad had found a secret cave where he experienced peace and comfort. They also knew that asking him about the palace would not yield any information. And, although they maintained a close and warm relationship with the Cellinis, no one knew or even believed that such a place existed. Like the knights, Benvenuto and Francisca resigned themselves to believe that their son has found a comfortable cave to where he goes for solitude and meditation. They, clearly, had no objection to such a thought and the disappearance of Chola for hours from time to time was explained by the same reasoning. These suspicions were validated by Francisca who often noticed that Chola was covered with the same glowing particles Agnolo had and that she smelled like incense and fine herbs.

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Two weeks after their trip to Florence, Agnolo began to dream strange dreams. Since it had always been difficult for him to separate dreams from reality, he kept his mouth shut and tried not to share his experience, even with his own loving family. "They had been through enough as it is," he thought to himself. "And, the least they knew the better it is for them in the long run – that is if they are ever questioned and had to tell the truth about me," he rationalized to himself.

In his dreams, Agnolo flew high over vast areas and for many miles. His dreams were very vivid and revealed many things to him. He could describe aerial depiction of many places. In one of his dreams, he could see how the palace and the forest were joined. To remind himself of the details of the dreams, he tried to describe it in a diary, but was unable to verbally articulate what he saw. So, he drew maps and diagrams of what he had seen and hid these documents from everyone. Agnolo hoped that no one would find these drawings, believing that they could be used against him by potential foes.

Agnolo discovered that the evil forest and the holy palace met at a certain point. At a very distance, hardly visible, perhaps where the palace joined the forest there was a pool, a very large pool. It looked volcanic and was hissing like a thousand serpents. It spat volcanic material and yellow sulfur with a nasty smell. The river Arno twisted and turned and sometimes it disappeared within the woods only to appear again from within large boulders and huge rocks of marble and alabaster.

Depending on the direction that the water in the river flowed, the point where the forest and the palace met changed.

Agnolo also saw how some doves were transformed into ravens upon crossing over the large Vulcanic pool. Agnolo's night flights were often disturbing and unexplained – ravens were seen

sitting on the nest of eggs that belonged to the doves and dark spider eggs filled many empty honey cones.

He kept his dreams to himself!

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Michelangelo visited as frequently as possible. When it was time for him to return to Florence, it was very difficult for everyone to see him leaving. Chola cried and Agnolo stood silently fighting tears. After discussing the matter with his wife, Benvenuto put a large portion of the money that he had received from Cardinal Carafa in a leather sack and prayed over it. Benvenuto put the sack of money in Michelangelo's saddle bag and whispered in his ears: "Don't lose this bag. I put something special inside it for you." Michelangelo kissed his mother's forehead and his father's hand. He hugged Chola lifting her off the ground and tightly hugged his brother who would not let go.

A cloud of dust engulfed his image as his horse sped off downhill and away into the main road.

For the following five years, Agnolo was becoming more and more recluse. However, at least twice a week, Agnolo rode a mule to the common market where people from various corners of the region traveled to sell and buy goods of all types. He was welcomed by a few of the merchants and was asked to leave by most.

"Please leave, we do not want any trouble," said many shop owners. But, Agnolo, blessed them and walked to where he was accepted.

"Here he comes!" Shouted a girl running to the back of the small shop looking for her father. "It is him, it is him!"

The knights covertly followed Agnolo and saw him feeding the poor and praying for the lame and the ill. Most of the time, there was always a gathering of people around him. Some people were intrigued by his wisdom and his piety. Many were afraid of him as they did not know the source of his powers. They saw him performing many miracles. Some questioned the authenticity of these miracles, but those receiving the miracles had no doubt.

Many beggars and thieves filled the large trading post. It was difficult to tell who was who and the motive and background of most could be easily concealed under fake attire or pretentious limp. Agnolo helped everyone and had compassion for every soul. He usually saved his food for days and brought it to the market to give it away to anyone who came in contact with him without distinction – poor, rich, healthy, or ailing. He was convinced that everyone is in need and that any act of kindness done in the name of the Lord is worthy of doing. "How do we know that this person who is dressed in lavish clothing is not in need? Just because someone is

laughing or smiling, that does not mean that all his needs are met," he was convinced. Some attacked Agnolo's kindness towards the thieves and the degenerates. "You are enabling these outcasts to thrive and continue to do their evil deeds," they accused him. To that Agnolo would answer: "Who among you knows what is in the hearts of these men?" He reminded his accusers that Jesus loved everyone, ate with the undesirables of his time, and reclined with known prostitutes. "Have you not read that the Lord makes the sun shine on all – both those who do good and those who do evil. And, he sends His rain to the righteous and the wicked. It is not what we do that makes us acceptable to receive God's love and blessings. It is what Jesus had done. God loves all and blesses all, especially those that are His own!"

Agnolo attacked his critics and described them as hypocrites. Some asked him: "Why do you feed those who steal from others?" With fury, he told them that they are the thieves, because they were trying to steal the blessings from others. "You are supposed to help the orphans and the widows, not the degenerates and thieves," they said. He answered: "Who are the orphans and who are the widows? There are many orphans who have parents and there are many widows who have living husbands."

Agnolo gave his wine to anyone who was in his way, much to the dismay of many who accused him of encouraging the intoxication of degenerates. "I too drink much wine, so do you in excess," he argued. "What makes you think you deserve to indulge and they don't? Do you think you are better than they are?"

"We indulge in excess if we want to, because it is our money and we earned it. We can do with it whatever we please!" They said.

"All things belong to the Lord. You own nothing. And, if it were not for His kindness and grace, you would not be able to get up in the morning to go to work!" He asserted.

From time to time, he stopped what he was doing and with wine and water washed the feet of all who allowed him. "Every scar on the tusk of an elephant tells a story, and every callus on the foot of a man marks a rugged road that he travelled," he said.

When he got to the market, sometimes a crowd was there waiting for him. He appeared suddenly, and in an instant, he vanished. Because of his speech impediment, what he said was unclear and could not be fully understood. But, his kindness was felt by all!

Agnolo was always followed by a flock of doves and many harassing ravens. He fed the doves from his own hands and frequently one or two made his shoulders their perching place.

On more than one occasion, several onlookers watched him with anticipation ordering the ravens to bring him bread and meat. "This lad is crazy. Ravens steel food; they don't bring

food!" They said among themselves. But, to their surprise, the doves allowed a hole within their cluster from which ravens flew in to bring hot bread and freshly grilled meat.

Over the weeks and months, Agnolo's reputation was spreading and rumors about him flourished. Some people loved him, some hated him, others were jealous, but everyone was confused and did not know what to make of him. "Is he a saint or demon possessed?" They often asked only to receive the same answer that Jesus gave, when he was accused of the same: "Every kingdom divided against itself will be ruined, and every city or household divided against itself will not stand. You wicked and stupid ones, if I drive out demons and heal the sick, I cannot be a demon."

"You are defiled with disease," a few accused him. "You touch those who are contagious and eat with them, whenever you eat."

"Goodness is from the Lord and it is far stronger than any disease, which is not from the Lord. So, since wholeness is stronger than disease, the wholeness that I have through Jesus will be transmitted to the diseased persons and their disease is not transmitted to me. The Lord's wholeness that is within me is contagious," Agnolo softly explained.

With a multitude of people that included nuns and monks, Agnolo went on to assert: "You are wicked and full of pride and the Lord resists the proud. It is the original sin. Adam thought that by eating from the tree he would not need God anymore. Sadder than that was that he believed the lie that he could be like God. The lie was in the fact that he did not need to be like God, because he was already like God and he was God. You ask: 'How are we proud?' And you say: 'We try not be arrogant and we try not flaunter our successes'. But, you fail to realize that your perpetual lies and deceit are evidence of your pride. You lie because you think that by lying you can advance or protect yourselves without the need for God. In your evil hearts, you think that you can solve your problems on your own."

A few times the crowd rose against him and were about to inflict some serious harm upon him, but before his minders could intervene, he vanished like a drop of water in a large wine goblet and was not found among the crowd. It was as if he became transparent and invisible to those that wished him ill. He was then sighted elsewhere in another place far way by other minders.

The French minders were greatly worried about the fate of Agnolo. They could not forget that the rebels were still on the loose and all it took was one successful attempt from these evil ones to end the life of the lad. Their concerns were well founded, especially knowing that the conspirators were not yet identified, and that their motive remained unverified.

During the summer months, Agnolo's visits to the palace were frequent – if not every day, he tried to go there every other day. In the early morning hours, Agnolo would leave the house –

sometimes with his sister – long before the adults woke up. No matter what the minders tried to do, Agnolo disappeared in thin air only to appear again covered with glittering, transparent, and colorful grape leaves. He radiated light and smelled like bushels of fine herbs.

At the palace, he found refuge. He went there to pray, meditate, and get rejuvenated. When Chola joined him, they floated down the many rivers and with awe they coveted life and worshiped God and his majesty as they flew from space to space. They flew through the endless skies and danced with family members who longed to see them. When Agnolo showed up by himself, they understood that Chola must had been unable to join them. And, although they missed her, they never burdened Agnolo by asking him questions.

Upon arriving at the palace, Agnolo always served his family wines and refreshing water with his bare hands. From the different pools he ministered to all those present. The thirsty and patiently waiting family longed to his arrival.

The perpetual changes in the palace setting never ceased to amaze Agnolo. Every time he visited, things looked exciting and peacefully fulfilling. It was always fascinating with new and beautiful things to see and music to hear.

The grape leaves that covered great areas of the palace floor came in different shapes, sizes, and make up. Some were transparent, some were florescent, and others were reflective like mirrors.

There were many pools, but four pools dominated the landscape – each with its own character and promises. The pool of reflection was Agnolo's favorite pool. It was not condemning – none of the pools was. In it, Agnolo saw himself righteous and perfect. It was as if he were sanctified at the gate through divine grace. And although he was naked, he was always covered by crystal grape leaves of breathtaking colors.

At the palace, the Angel of Bread baked the bread and the Angel of Wine poured the wine, blessed by Mary Jo and the Lord the Christ, whom Agnolo called my Holy Brother. The magnificence of the palace and the peace that it provided were addictive, but the biggest lure to the palace was the fact that Agnolo realized that from the moment he entered this holy place his speech was clear. The few words that he had to ever utter there reflected absolute ability to talk. Furthermore, Agnolo realized that his tremors and seizures subsided.

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Over the weeks and months, Tota built a great rapport with the French guests. They loved her freshly baked bread and cherished her warmth and sincerity. From them, she learned the status of the search for the rebels. It was also beneficial to them. From her, they learned a lot about the family, the palace, and of course Agnolo.

The Cellinis did not mind Tota's generosity towards the French knights. There were enough blessings – more than they could use before it went bad. The weekly baskets full of gifts continued to flow as usual in two types – the unique type had all the characters of foreign origin, either Spanish or French. However, the Cellinis could not determine its exact origin, but they believed that the Lord was the source of all blessings and powers.

One morning, Agnolo opened the cottage door on his way to the quarry when he saw the ravens steeling a sack of barley from the basket that was left at the cottage door. Two ravens were carrying the sack while others were fighting to break it open in the air, hoping to get some of the lute. Angry, Agnolo shouted: "You bring back fivefold what you stole!" The ravens continued their flight with their stolen grain while Agnolo watched them. The doves fought bravely, but the determined ravens were able to fly off unharmed.

That afternoon, at dusk, the late Spring sky was yellow. Tota was spreading the contents of a large vessel of water on the ground in front of the cottage and in the back courtyard to provide for some relief of the rising temperature, when the sky began to rain barley grains. There was so much of it in some spots that small mounds were formed. High up in the sky, the ravens were seen dropping the grain while gliding in a circular pattern. They behaved as if they were hypnotized.

The Cellinis came out of the cottage to investigate, when they heard the excitement of the French knights. Tota was talking to the group while wondering at such a phenomenon. "Ravens are known to steel things, not to bring things like this," said one of the knights.

Agnolo and Chola put their hands out to fill them with the down pouring grains. "This is for the doves and for the poor," said Agnolo who ran inside to get several baskets and began to fill them with the barley that was accumulating.

Francisca and Benvenuto gave praises while holding their hands open to receive the falling grain. "The Lord is with us," said Francisca. "Yes, Franca. He is!" Said Benvenuto.

After Tota and Francisca went back inside, Nicholas left his excited comrades, approached Benvenuto, and greeted him. "Good afternoon, Signore Cellini," said Nicholas. "Good afternoon, Captain!" Replied Benvenuto.

"I was planning to drop by to give you an update on the status of the search for the rebels. We have learned that the conspiracy is more widespread than we had initially thought. After Father Fonte returned to Settignano, it was reported that several monks and priests had disappeared from the church compound without an explanation. When Bishop Fonte considered the matter, he realized that these men were supporters of Bishops Fontana and

Donato – the two bishops that were sacked from their position because of their harsh treatment of Agnolo."

"Do we know how many there are all together?" Asked Benvenuto.

"No, the number varies from about thirty to one hundred. Our forces have captured two of these unholy men and upon questioning, they confessed to different accounts and different facts."

Benvenuto understood what "Questioning" meant. The two unlucky rebels must had been tortured to the point of death. Their confessions were likely extracted. And, as was the case in most of these savage "questionings," these unfortunate subjects had likely admitted to anything their torturers demanded.

"What we know for certain, which is greatly alarming, is that these wicked men have joined forces with the Venetian outcasts who are trying to overthrow the ruling family in Florence. The two groups have made the forest a home base from where they plan to attack and cause chaos."

The dispute between the two city states of Florence and Vince had been ongoing for years. Although the Lombardy Wars had ended many years before, the competition for superiority and dominance between the two city states during the renaissance fueled national sentiments among many proud men, as well as many adrenalin-rush seekers without cause who thrived on creating turmoil and brewing havoc.

At the time, "constant conflict was the fate of these vigorous urban societies. In addition to the internal struggle, and the struggles for independence from emperor and pope, there was the constant fighting of the cities against one another. They fought for commercial supremacy, control of trade routes, access to seaports, territorial expansion, and possession of natural resources; like their internal conflicts, these intercity wars and rivalries were likely to be prolonged, bitter, and ruthless. … Florence fought for centuries for control of Pisa and was frequently engaged in war with other Tuscan neighbors and rivals, such as Lucca and Siena.

A convenient way to trace the long-term results of these changes is to compare the maps of Italy in the mid-fourteenth and early sixteenth centuries. Numerous cities that were independent at the earlier date have been absorbed into the territories of larger and more powerful neighbors. A few relatively small states, for example Ferrara, Mantua, and Siena, have retained their independent status. However, Italy has come to be dominated by five great states: Venice, Florence, and Milan, the Papal States, and the kingdom of Naples." (http://vlib.iue.it/carrie/texts/carrie_books/gilbert/03.html)

“What about Father Foscari,” asked Agnolo who was standing next to his father listening.

“He is still in prison. His physical condition is deteriorating as he went through some rigorous examination,” said Nicholas.

“Papa, could we go visit him? We are supposed to visit those who are not free,” said Agnolo.

But, before Benvenuto could answer, Nicholas interrupted: “It would not be a good idea. The man is like a rabid dog. He has no humanity left in him.”

“Papa, Jesus died for such people. He did not die for good people. If any of us were good, then Jesus would not have had to suffer,” muttered Agnolo as he looked at both men.

“I am going there tomorrow to touch base with Cardinal Carafa and exchange information, you pray about it and let me know tomorrow morning,” said Nicholas.

When inside the cottage, Agnolo hit straight for where the relic was hidden. He bowed and closed his eyes. “Lord, allow me to do your work. It is not your will that anyone should perish!”

When he opened his eyes, he saw his father standing behind him. Agnolo’s hard hearing had prevented him from noticing this father’s movement as he was praying.

“My precious boy, we will go tomorrow,” said Benvenuto.

“Papa, I want to take Father Foscari some honey and some wine.”

“I am not sure they will allow us to take him that.”

“We can try, papa. It is never too late for anyone. The thief on the cross had only a few hours to live, but his soul was saved.”

Benvenuto hugged his precious son and smiled: “You are way too much, my baby! This world is not made for angels like you!”

Agnolo ran out looking for Nicholas.

“Papa agreed that we can go tomorrow with you,” said Agnolo.

Nicholas was actually delighted for the opportunity to spend time with Agnolo. The distance between Settignano and Florence would definitely allow him enough time to engage the mysterious young man that he had been ordered to guard with his life.

24

Facing Satan

In the morning, Agnolo rose early and head to the kitchen. Tota who seemed to never sleep was there busy preparing the first of the two customary meals of each day. Although the food was not consumed until much later, it usually took several hours to prepare.

“Tota, would you please get me a large jar of honey and a large jar of wine,” said Agnolo.

“I was planning on it. Your mom had told me about your trip. I really do not want you to go to see that evil man, but I understand your sweet and kind intention,” said Tota.

“Tota, the honey and wine are not for me. It is for Father Foscari.”

“My dear son, I do not know if that is a good idea. They may not allow you to take that stuff to this condemned man. Plus, even if they did, such food may kill the man who may not have had anything to eat in many days.”

“We do what we can, Tota. And, the Lord will do the rest! The Lord can change a heart of stone.”

“Honey, you are so precious. This man had intended to poison you and kill you. May the Lord bless your kind heart!” Said Tota.

Instead of mounting horses, Nicholas who wanted to spend time talking to Agnolo, asked Benvenuto if they could take the family carriage. He reasoned, “I see that you are bringing a bit of food – too much to comfortably fit on our horse.”

“Yes,” said Benvenuto. “Agnolo wants to take honey and wine to Father Foscari”

“Why would he do that? This evil man had tried to poison him. He has no heart or feelings towards anyone.” Nicolas continued: “This beast has a greedy propensity for evil as if he were totally unaware of his mortality.”

Agnolo interrupted: “We are supposed to do good to everyone. What good are we if we are good only towards those who treat us with kindness. This poor man had been through enough already. He needs our love. Jesus had died for him, and if he is worthy of Jesus’ blood, he is worthy or my wine and honey!”

Nicholas did not know what to say. He had heard Agnolo speak in kindness and witnessed him expressing love and compassion towards all types of people at the market place, but he felt that Agnolo’s behavior has surpassed all expectations in trying to pamper a man who tried to kill him. “Ok!” He said carrying the jars of wine and honey to the carriage.

On the way to Florence, Nicholas tried to find out more about where Agnolo goes to meditate. He and his troops had been extremely frustrated with their inability to track the young lad. They often wondered what their fate would be if something awful were to happen to Agnolo. Not only would they feel unbearable guilt, but their honor and reputation would be destroyed, and their lives may well be asked of them. It was a serious and constant concern for all the French knights who were guarding the nephew of the queen of France. Her majesty had handpicked these brave men for their loyalty, courage, and incredible skills. The queen also made sure that all the men that she chose had dark hair and dark eyes so that their mission of blending in with the Florentines would succeed. Certainly, they were not about to let her down.

Agnolo was very friendly and polite but was reluctant to tell Nicholas about the palace. After all, every time he tried to bring it up, no one except Chola would believe him. "Cardinal Carafa's displayed interest may had been out of courtesy and not necessarily belief in the actual existence of the palace," thought Agnolo to himself.

It was not very long before Agnolo began to ask Nicholas questions about France. "Our king is a just and valiant king, and we are honored to serve him and our Lord!" Said Nicholas with pride.

From the time Princess Maria Josephine had left France the eyes of the French knights had followed her. However, despite this close watch, details about her pregnancy were sketchy and her sudden death remained a mystery – albeit that death while given birth was very common during these days.

The carriage was escorted by four knights and two knights maned the drivers' seats. On his horse, Captain Philippe, Nicholas' deputy, led the wagon and the six knights. Instead of visiting the cardinal, in the interest of time, Nicholas asked Philippe to take his place while he would accompany Benvenuto and Agnolo to the municipal prison where the implicated priest was questioned and held.

When the small caravan got to Florence, Philippe went on his way taking with him two of the accompanying knights, while Nicholas and the others proceeded to their destination to see Foscari.

The facility where Foscari was held was under extremely tight security. Municipal guards and cathedral guards were everywhere. Four of the guards who did not recognize the Cellini wagon, rushed to meet the approaching wagon before it reached the gate to the fenced facility. They seemed hostile and their personality projected brutality. Nicholas stopped the wagon and jumped out. When the guards saw him, their countenance changed as they recognized him.

“Captain Nicholas,” shouted one as he and his company halted their horses. “How are you, Sir?” He asked.

“I am well. I come to inspect Prisoner Foscari,” said Nicholas.

“Very well, Sir,” we will escort you to the gate.

Nicholas got back inside the carriage and when it got to the gate, the prison guards who led the way exchanged a few words with those on duty and they all assumed that Captain Nicholas was there to question the prisoner.

Nicholas jumped out of the carriage and Benvenuto and Agnolo followed him – Agnolo carrying the two jars, one with his right arm and the other with his partially lame left arm.

“Who are these people?” Asked a guard.

“These are people who have a serious interest in the case,” said Nicholas.

One of the guards, recognized Agnolo. He had seen the boy during his visit to the cardinal a few weeks ago. When the other guards saw Agnolo, they objected to him going inside the castle-like prison. “It would to traumatic for the young lad,” they explained. “Furthermore, it is definitely not very safe. This man is rabid and only the Lord knows what he would do. Of course, he is tied up very well, but demon possessed people have been witnessed to break even thick iron shackles.”

“I will be OK,” said Agnolo.

Benvenuto and Nicholas looked at each other for a moment. “I will not let anything bad happen to the young lad. I will be there the entire time,” said Nicholas.

“I have brought him some wine and some honey,” said Agnolo.

“Absolutely not,” said a guard who seemed to be in charge. “Not only is it against policy, but it is totally unwise. These degenerates do not deserve any kindness. They are animals. They were animals before they came here, and they become more beast-like after their first night.”

“But, Jesus died for people like that,” Agnolo wanted to reason politely. His comments were not accepted by the brutal men, and had it not been for their respect for Nicholas and his authority as well as their knowledge of the weight Agnolo had with the church, they would have ridiculed the young man and mocked him openly.

“Jesus died for humans, these are animal we are dealing with,” said the guard with a smile showing a few missing teeth.

The prison castle was built many years prior to be a home for a wealthy family. The fortified structure was three stories high with imposing corner towers that rose to six levels. The first floor allowed for small windows, but the second and third floors displayed many large stained-glass windows. Some vines climbed on one side of the coble stone structure. Since its construction, the building changed hands many times from private ownership to the public municipality that governed the city state of Florence. The imposing structure was built entirely out of cobblestone. There was no doubt that the massive walls were able to keep people out as well as keep people in. The smell in the cold and damp narrow halls and the molded staircases was intolerable. The human waste combined with insect and rodent infested standing water was enough to make anyone puke. With their eyes watering from their attempt to control their stomachs the three walked for several minutes climbing up and down many steps and passing by many screaming inmates, some of whom they could not see and other ones who were visibly shackled to the walls. Some were too weak to scream and those who did sounded delirious.

At the end of a hallway, the escorting guard opened a steel door that led to a small room with very high ceiling. In a steel cage that was suspended about six feet from the ground, they saw the image of a hairy naked man. The small cage did not allow the man to stand or move. It was only enough for him to lift his head. If Father Foscari's appearance and smell were terrible before, he was now unrecognizably repulsive. He looked and smelled more like a rabid injured animal than anything that is human. Father Foscari was shouting obscenity mixed with holy scripture. When he was able to see Agnolo, he screamed: "Cursed are the ground that you set foot on. God's wrath may come upon you. Did you come to destroy me? Jesus came to destroy you!" It was obvious that the man was hallucinating.

"I brought you honey and wine," said Agnolo. "I forgive you for what you tried to do to me."

The deranged man tried sticking his arms out of the cage and with all he could he tried to reach the visitors. "Oh, you are trying to poison me like I tried to poison you … give it to me anyway … If I could reach you, I will kill you! Oh, how I would love to hear you choke as your spirit departs you!" He was shouting.

"Jesus loves you no matter what you have done!"

"Jesus who? I am a dirty filthy son of God. I am not worthy of anything, but I am worthy of lots of honey and lots of wine. Ha … ha … ha ..." The man was totally incoherent.

"Jesus loves you no matter what you have done!" Repeated Agnolo who was getting too close to the cage with his right arm extended towards the deranged man. Father Foscari's movement got stronger and he arched his back pushing on the thick iron bars that made up the cage and caused it to bend. The sound of the bending iron alarmed everyone. "Was this man capable of breaking his thick iron cage?" They wondered with concern.

With his right hand, Nicholas felt his sword under his cloak.

“You are free. The Lord set you free!” Said Agnolo as if he were encouraging the man’s behavior.

“I am free. I would love to eat your flesh and poke your demon eyes,” said Foscari. “I will eat your flesh and drink your wine. Come here, little boy. oh, come here … let me touch your skin … please, come here … oh, pleeease ...”

He again pushed against the cage with his back and the metal was heard moving and seen bending again.

Nicholas held Agnolo who seemed naively seduced by sympathy for the aching man.

The escorting guard called for reinforcement. In seconds, the stumping sound of many guards on the cobblestone floor got louder as they came running. They entered the prison cell with their swords drawn. Swiftly, they pushed the visitors aside and got between them and the cage, which was swinging from the ceiling almost to approach Agnolo and his companions.

“You rotten son of a bitch,” screamed one of the guards at the prisoner. “You can’t break this cage. This costs too much money. More than you are worth to us!” He shouted with a condescending anger.

The room was filled with guards who tried to stabilize the cage while Foscari was trying to rock it and scratch or bite any of the guard’s hands that seemed exposed.

They lowered the cage where it settled on the ground. Agnolo put the jar of honey on the floor. He bowed down and with his right hand pushed it towards the cage. Foscari reached with his left hand and grabbed the jar. It was too large to fit through the cage openings. Instead of opening it, Foscari threw it as hard as he could at Agnolo. The jar hit the boy in the chest and caused him to scream in pain.

“I forgive you, Jesus loves you!” Shouted Agnolo.

“You need to leave now!” A voice from behind said. It was Cardinal Carafa himself who was escorted by Captain Loredan, the head of the Cathedral Guard.

“Your safety is in serious jeopardy. All of you, must leave. Let the professionals handle this animal.”

Agnolo laid the jar of wine on the floor before he was rushed out by the guards.

“You my boy are a very brave young man!” Said Cardinal Carafa, who had witnessed the final moments to Agnolo’s encounter with the demon-man. “Love has limits. Some animals deserve more kindness than this trash.”

Agnolo sobbed!

“Captain Philippe told me that you were coming here. He told me about Agnolo’s intention of delivering honey and wine to the wicked man, and I was led by the spirit to come here. What I have seen is a proof of the wickedness of this man and the purity of this young man.” Stated Cardinal Carafa as if he were preaching a sermon from the pulpit.

“Father, the spirit of the Lord is stronger than any evil. I will pray to the Lord that Father Foscari would be released,” said Agnolo to the cardinal.

“My dear son, you are too naive. Your heart of gold cannot be from here. This man’s fate had been already determined by the Lord. This man chose a wicked path and he even tried to kill you. Now the judgment of the Lord is upon him.”

“God’s grace and love is greater than any sin!” Said Agnolo.

“My precious son, let justice take its course. We need to find this degenerate’s coconspirators.”

Upon that remark, Cardinal Carafa petted Agnolo’s left cheek with his right hand. “You need to get some rest. This is not a place for humans. This dungeon is for animals!”

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On the way home to Settignano, as the carriage approached the forest, Agnolo went into convulsions. He was smitten by a seizure that necessitated that the carriage would stop. Nicholas who had not seen the boy in such a physical condition was greatly frightened. “What spirit could be causing such a torment on such an obviously holy child,” he thought to himself. Despite Agnolo’s alarming condition, the wagon sped up instead of stopping. For about a mile, it raced and shook violently examining its rigidity.

When the carriage got home, Nicholas was in serious need of rest and seclusion.

Francisca and Chola were bowing and praying before the sacred relic. They did not hear Benvenuto and Agnolo come in.

“I need to sleep, Momma!” With tears in his eyes, Agnolo walked to his bed and lay down. “I have failed!” He uttered to himself burying his head under a pillow. For hours before he finally drifted into a shallow sleep, he cried for Father Foscari’s soul and condemned the behavior of

the guards. “They are all misguided,” he muttered. “How frustrating, must have Jesus been when he lived on this earth and faced all the misguided people!”

Agnolo’s feelings of isolation intensified over the weeks and months that followed, but he still worked helping his father at the quarry and visited the market on regular bases.

Wherever he walked, a swarm of doves and a swarm of crows fought for dominance of the aura around him.

25

What is Love?

The family, as well as the French knights, resigned themselves to the fact that they cannot keep an eye on the seemingly omnipresent Agnolo. They all hoped for the best and feared the worst. After all, the news of the rebels was not very encouraging. The bandits who had sworn to inflict harm on Agnolo were operating from the woods with some impunity. These wicked men seemed out of reach from all who had tried to capture them. All it took was one successful attempt for them to achieve their sinister goal of capturing or killing Agnolo.

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Michelangelo visited regularly and stayed as long as he could. With the money that Benvenuto had given him, he was able to expand his art career. Moreover, Benvenuto allowed his precious Michlo to choose as many marble slabs as he wished. The lavish gifts that Cardinal Carafa had bestowed upon the Cellinis allowed Benvenuto to express great generosity. Most of all, Michelangelo was able to place himself among the elite artists of the day and with his newly introduced wealth he managed to project an image of success. On few occasions, and after much prayer, Agnolo was allowed to visit his brother in Florence. On at least two of these trips, Chola went with Agnolo.

Michelangelo's life in Florence was lavish. In addition to the gift that Benvenuto gave him, his blood parents were wealthy property owners and bankers. After the failure of their small bank, his father Ludovico di Leonardo di Buonarotto Simoni took a government job and when Michelangelo's mother, Francesca di Neri del Miniato di Siena, died Ludovico poured a great deal of wealth into his son's career and life. Maybe it was out of guilt for his cruelty towards Michelangelo, whom he used to beat because the boy spent all his time drawing instead of doing his lessons. For years, Ludovico did not want Michelangelo to become an artist as he considered the trade to be beneath the dignity of the known family, but when the boy began to gain respect and acclaim, Ludovico tried to be a part of the seemingly promising future of his son.

Earlier, when Michelangelo was about 14, Ludovico, who was a judicial administrator in Caprese, negotiate with the master artist Ghirlandaio to hire his son as paid apprentice. Typically, apprentices never got paid. Their reward was learning at the feet of the masters. But because of Michelangelo's obvious talents and potentials, as well as the persuasive abilities of his blood father, that tradition was broken. In fact, by the time Agnolo was 16, Michelangelo had established himself in Florence as a master painter and a sculptor. His ability to copy things

and his exceptional drawings impressed everyone and gave him a chance to make money from the commission of a few small projects.

While living for three years at the palace of the rich and powerful Duke Lorenzo de Medici, Michelangelo carved several marble statues and sat in classes with Lorenzo's sons. Duke Lorenzo, who was a second cousin to Francisca, invited Michelangelo to receive some formal training to sculpture at a school he had set up at this palace. At the duke's palace, Michelangelo was given a place at the duke's table and a violet robe to wear. In gratitude, Michelangelo surprised his host with a perfect stone copy of a Madonna.

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Competition for the favor of the church and the wealthy was intense. However, with art being in the eyes of the beholder, without the power of the tongue and cleaver selling techniques, no matter how talented an artist was, his work was never valued. The voice of the artist, as it always seems, spoke louder than his work and gained favor for its speaker. So was the case with Michelangelo whose mastery of words rivaled his artistic abilities. Agnolo on the other hand, while enormously artistically talented, was neither clever nor interested in gaining anyone's favor – except for the Lord's. His speech impediment also caused him to limit his desire to converse except with a specific audience and for a focused end.

Life in Florence was good and Chola was in love with the city life and all that Michelangelo seemed to offer. Invariably, when it was time to return to Settignano, Chola would try to make excuses to extend her visit. In Florence, art, music, culture, and all that the world had to offer was available for a price. With the right connections, the social life was truly enticing for anyone, especially a growing beautiful young lady who had propensity for exploration and a bit of mischief, like Chola.

As much as she loved the palace, Chola also enjoyed Florence. Each of the two places filled a special need in her life. For while the palace was her secret place with Agnolo – a place that no one believed that it even existed and everyone was convinced that it was fictional, Florence was open. Free thought and new ideas were introduced, debated, and to an unprecedented extent, encourage.

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When Agnolo was about fourteen, his voice began to change, and sprouts of hair began to appear on his face. His view of the world and all those around him took a different meaning. If during his adolescent years he saw things in a different way, he was now seeing things in a

different-different-way. His love for his family and his devotion to the Lord never changed, but he felt more and more of a stranger in a foreign land. He had many dreams about Chola. Some he did not understand. He often got up from a short sleep very tired only to go back to sleep again. His dreams of Chola were often accompanied by unexplained secretion in his undergarments. One night, he dreamed that he and Chola were growing flowers at the palace. There, they watered the flowers with wine that came from her breast and bellybutton. He drank the wine from Chola's breast and bellybutton but was never satisfied.

Agnolo also dreamed of Maria Josephine and his family at the palace. In his dreams they danced together. As beautiful as these dreams were, he knew that they were not as good as being there. If a couple of days went by and he did not sneak his way to the palace, he felt unfulfilled and empty. As a result, his visits to the palace were becoming more frequent and the time he spent there was becoming longer and longer. As he gained some height, Agnolo also lost some weight. He drank more wine and ate less. Francisca noticed the change in her son's behavior long before Chola inquired about the stains in Agnolo's underpants when she was helping with the laundry. Francisca offered no explanation. Agnolo's speech also got less clear. He talked less, even around his own family. He gazed into people's eyes a lot. He often looked down then, with a jerk, he looked up. From time to time, Agnolo, the typically mild-mannered boy, would have a burst of unexplained anger. Several times he was heard fighting with unknown entities. He walked alone for hours and talked to the doves who came by and settled on his right shoulder and on his open hands. Before they flew off, they gently touched his cheek with their wings. He closed his eyes and prayed for a short moment.

One day, Agnolo asked his mother: "Mommy, what is love?"

Without hesitation, Francisca replied: "Love is giving of yourself, it is beautiful!"

"I know it must be great, mommy, because Jesus is love and He loves us. But is there a difference between loving something or someone and being in love with someone?"

"Oh, yes, my dear. There is a big difference. And when you fall in love, you will know it."

"How would I know, mommy!"

"You will know!"

Francisca was getting uncomfortable not knowing how to explain to her growing son, who was obviously reaching puberty, how to tell if he was in love. The matter, she felt, could be better addressed by Benvenuto. "I am sure papa could explain these things much better than I can," she continued. Agnolo, however, was still full of many questions. And, although Francisca was welcoming the burst of social interaction that Agnolo was displaying, she was truly unable to

satisfy her boy's curiosity regarding matters that involved love, marriage, and male sexuality. These topics were taboos and women seldom talked about such things. And, when they did, it was in private conversations with selected few other women whom they deeply trusted.

"Mommy, how do you know if you love someone enough to marry them?"

"It is when you have feeling for someone."

"But are the feelings the same towards all people?"

So full of inquiry, Agnolo went on to ask his mother: "Mom, how did we all get here? Did Adam's sons marry their sisters? Where did Cain and Able get their wives?"

"I am not sure, my precious little man. But even if that is what happened, that was back then."

"How else could we have gotten here. And, when God created Adam and Eve and told them to multiply, He must have known that that would happen. Otherwise, He would have created little girls and little boys."

Francisca who was used to her son's knowledge and incredible ability to argue his point smiled. "Yes, baby, that is all true. But that was probably allowed back then."

"Mom, God is the same yesterday, today, and forever. If it were allowed then, why is it not allowed now?"

Francisca laughed: "That would be very confusing, if it happened."

In the back of her mind, she fought many thoughts. She, of course, knew that Agnolo is not the blood brother of Chola. She had a momentary fleeing thought: "Could Agnolo marry Chola?"

She immediately shrugged the thought. The church would certainly not allow that. In fact, the societal norms of the day condemned such a behavior. A boy and a girl who suckled from the same mother, even if they were not blood brother and sister were considered as if they were. Furthermore, she thought, no one, not even Agnolo knew that Chola was not his blood sister.

Only Benvenuto, and of course Sister Teresa who delivered all the children in the family – Michelangelo, Agnolo, and Chola – knew. Francisca broke a proud smile as she reminded herself that she had nursed all three children.

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Around Spring that year, additional changes were happening in the family. One day while helping Tota collecting some herbs for the evening meal, Chola felt a bit faint. As she was walking back inside, she felt a bit of warmth within her thigs. For weeks prior, her breast felt

tender and painful. She was alarmed thinking, “Surely I did not pee in my garment when I was fainting!” Chola rushed inside and began shouting for her mother. “Mom, I am bleeding! I must have hurt myself.”

“Oh, my precious baby. You will be fine!”

Francisca was much more comfortable talking with Chola about what was happening than answering her son’s inquiries. At least, with Chola’s condition, she could relate to her own experience.
“Am I going to live, Mommy?” Asked Chola in fear.

“Oh, yes, honey. And you will give birth to many beautiful children. You are just becoming a real lady,” said Francisca with a comforting voice.

“I don’t want to become a real lady. My tommy hurts, mommy! I feel weak!”

Francisca laid her daughter on the bed and hugged her. “You will be fine, baby. You will be fine. All women go through that.”

Tota walked into the cottage while Francisca was talking. “Chola, where are you, honey? I looked around and you were gone,” she announced while she was shutting the front door.

“Tota, please come here for a minute,” said Francisca. “Our little baby is becoming a lady.”

Tota paused for a moment and she understood. “I will go heat up some water!”

In a few minutes, Francisca and Tota helped Chola cleaning up and changing garments. They boiled some herbs and mixed it with wine and gave it to her to drink. Chola cried for Agnolo who was at the quarry. “Oh Agno, come help your little baby!” She sobbed until she went to sleep.

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“Our children are no longer children,” said Benvenuto to his wife. We have three growing young adults, our older boy is 26, the younger one is 16, and our baby girl is now 14,” he boasted. “The Lord has blessed us more than we could ever imagine, Francisca. Do you remember our trip to Turin and how upon our return, the Lord blessed us with Agnolo?”

“Yes, my love. We are very blessed!”

He held her hand and walked to their bedroom where the relic was hidden in the wall behind the painting of Adam and Eve. Benvenuto bowed and Francisca bowed next to him. They closed their eyes in tears and hugged one another.

The following day, Benvenuto surprised his wife with drawings to expand their cottage. “There is plenty of room in the back to build another room. I think Chola would enjoy some privacy,” said Benvenuto as he shared his plans with his wife.

The existing cottage had two bedrooms. In the back of the house, another very small room opened to the kitchen and the back courtyard often served as Tota’s accommodation. To the right of the cottage main entrance, which also served as the living room, was the parents’ room. A larger room to the left, and opposite from the parents’ bedroom, was a room that had four beds in it. In that room, Agnolo, Chola, and Tota slept, separated by a two-meter-high partition made from some of the silk that the Cellinis received in their baskets of weekly gifts. The fourth bed was kept for when Michelangelo visited. Years ago, this room only had two beds, one for Tota, and on the other side of the partition, another one for Michelangelo.

Francisca was excited and she liked the idea of having an additional room. The new addition was adjacent to the kitchen and Tota’s room and it opened to the back pavilion and courtyard where the bathing and water closets were.

The following week, five men carried stone blocks and marble and began to construct the new addition. They used mortar, stone, and marble to construct the walls, as well as hold together the hundreds of small baked clay pots that made up the insulation for the ceilings.

The children were excited about the new addition, but uncomfortable with the change. Since they opened their eyes after birth, they had slept in the same room. Now they were separated. Chola, who was becoming bashful about her body, was somewhat relieved to know that she would have a place that she could call her own. However, she knew very well that there would be no way on earth that she could stay away from her beloved brother.

Agnolo was also excited to have more privacy, but could not imagine the world and his room without his precious Chola. He remembered how for years he and his sister would have nightly slumber parties that lasted practically all night and how their parents and Tota would ask them to go to sleep. He remembered how, for years, Chola would hop in his bed and cuddle in his arms after having a bad dream.

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By that time in his life, Agnolo was accepted as an erratic but lovable young man. He had few friends, but those who came close to him knew the genius inside the madness within him. Many referred to him as the rebellious one for they saw the shocking and often insane behavior he displayed in defiance of all norms and accepted behavior.

The convulsions that he experienced from time to time were often very violent. Those who witnessed them said that he must be fighting evil spirits. His parents hid his condition, as much as they could, and learned to leave him alone during his seizures.

Since his childhood, he was considered different, unique, and never the same for two minutes. He was a compulsive and prolific creator who brought life to marble and was on a mission to express love to everyone. Throughout his childhood and adolescent years, the eyes of his mother never left him. When she attempted to sleep, she made sure to place one of her hands over his hands, not necessarily to restrain him, but to document to herself his presence while her eyes were closed.

Francisca knew of Agnolo's compulsive behavior and loved his creations but was constantly weary of what he might do if left unsupervised. His untamed compulsion was never stifled by his parents, sometimes with some great consequences. Agnolo was always unintentionally defiant and his creative urges led to sporadic disasters. His innocence was his alibi and his holiness an excuse. That, however, did not prevent him from receiving cruelty from those who did not appreciate him including holy men and women that served God and the church.

As rebellious as Agnolo was, he was gifted with divine talents. By this time in his life, his artistic perception and abilities captured the interest of many and amazed all. They also ignited the jealousy of those great masters who had seen some of the works of the unknown genius from Settignano.

Florence was a large cultural center that hustled with many new thoughts and different arts. And of course, all was controlled by the church. There and then, artists were loved and art flourished. But, it was also a time of uncertainty and questioning. Knowledge was expanding and the probe to unveil the unknown was often pursued – some, of course, at a great price.

For many years, when Agnolo saw Chola things happened to his body. Things that he could not understand and could not explain. His eyes would fill with glaze and he could hear and feel his heart pounding. When their eyes met across a room, Chola put her head down like a Madonna glancing at her baby.

Although he had difficulty hearing and speaking, he argued like a Greek philosopher. Agnolo's mischief was of sincere innocence and truly without malice. As he loved beauty, he loved wine. And of that he partook more than his share.

He looked at the rocks on the shores of the Fiume Arno river and stared at the clouds and the stars. And, the more he drank, the holier each became.

By this time in his life, his eating habits were predictable and synchronized. For when he ate, he seldom finished his food. He only ate a portion, the rest he prayed over again and then looked at it and with a whisper he covered it up and walked outside to feed the doves.

His features were Greek, his heart was divine, and his origin was questioned. Few things, if any, bothered him. But, unexplained spouts of rage surfaced in the face of what he perceived to be false or unjust. Falsehood, he articulated consistently and persistently, breeds injustice and evil. Whenever he encountered lies, his kind mannerism changed and he rose like an unexpected storm to fight it with all his might.

"God, Jesus, said 'I am the Truth. Therefore, a lie is 'antichrist' and it must be resisted," he frequently said to explain his stormy rage in the face of falsehood.

He went on to elaborately explain: "Lying is the alibi of injustice because it destroys everyone's ability to enjoy the Truth. When someone lies, the testimony of the victim is attacked and much time is wasted to correct the 'wrong'. In so many ways, lying leads to injustice. For example, since the Truth sets one free, lying is enslavement and bondage which are injustice as they deprive one of the freedom that is due him.

Since God is the Truth, the Way, and the Life, evil is the deception, the hopelessness, and the death. He who lies is the enemy of God because liars lie out of complex pride that is motivated by fear and greed. A liar believes that he on his own, without God's help, can protect himself or advance himself by lying. And, that is a terrible form of pride. By lying, he also expresses his lack of trust in God and His divine protection and abundant blessings. All of which brings about deprivation and injustice to everyone, including the liar!"

26

Family Matters

Michelangelo's visits to Settignano were becoming less frequent as he was struggling to advance his career and compete with the very talented pool of artists that flooded Florence. His absence from Florence was very costly, as every part of everyday required constant networking and posturing. Furthermore, it was apparent that both Agnolo and Chola liked visiting him in Florence which did not allow much of a chance for him to go to them.

One afternoon, with no notice, Michelangelo left all that was pending in Florence and head towards Settignano. For three days, he had been suffering from an excruciating headache – one that was not due to work pressure!

His visit was an unexpected and a pleasant surprise for his family. When he got there, the night was beginning to set and the Cellinis had begun to burn the lanterns for the evening. When he walked in the house, Chola heard his voice and came out to meet him. When she appeared before his eyes, he stared at her as if he did not recognize her. It was only when he heard her voice that he was sure that it was his sister. The light was reflecting on her beautiful rosy cheeks. Her lips were like red cherries and her jet-black hair was flowing like a horse's mane. Her body was no longer a child's body. The quick transformation from a child to a woman took Michelangelo by surprise. Although Chola tried to be her playful and affectionate self, Michelangelo could not help but notice her new shyness. She hugged him as she usually did, but her hugs seemed to have a different effect on him. They both realized that they were no longer the same.

When Francisca heard Michelangelo's voice, she jumped to greet him. "Michlo, my son, how are you?" She ran and hugged him. In a few moments, both Chola and her mother noticed that Michelangelo's nose looked differently. It was bruised badly and swollen. At first, they could not see the extent of the damage in the faint light, but when they looked closer they were horrified. In fact, it looked like some blood was coming out of their precious Michlo's nose.

"Oh, my Lord what happened, my baby?" Asked Francisca.

"Nothing, Momma. Some crazy people with narrow minds decided to attack me," said Michelangelo while touching his nose. "It is actually much better now. This happened about three days ago." He put his hand in his pocket and took out a handkerchief full of blood. "It is still bleeding a little."

"What a bunch of evil people they must have been," said Francisca while calming her daughter who was crying loudly as she covered her face. Tota and Benvenuto came in from the back

door. They were apparently tending to the animals and securing the premises for the night. Agnolo was a few steps behind them.

When Benvenuto and Tota came to the living room where Michelangelo was, they could not understand what was happening or why Chola was sobbing.

Benvenuto approached the group to investigate and to greet Michelangelo.

“Oh, my dear boy. What in the name of God happened to you?” Said Benvenuto looking at Michelangelo’s broken nose and the bloody handkerchief in his hand.

“I am OK, Papa! Just a little accident,” said Michelangelo.

“This is no little accident. What really happened?”

“I had a fight with some of the crazy guys in Florence. They don’t seem to know when to stop kidding and that some insults would not be tolerated.” He paused for a moment then quietly and as he were talking to himself: “I am just trying to figure out this thing called life!”

“You burden yourself with too many things, Michlo. Life is God and we cannot figure out God!”

It was evident that Michelangelo was trying to say as little as possible about what had happened.

Agnolo who had just walked into the conversation was filled with rage. They all stood there with Michelangelo in the middle.

“I will take revenge upon those who did that to you. I will cut their tongues off and maim them. May the Lord strike those who harm you, my brother,” said Agnolo. His statement surprised even his parents who knew him best. They did not understand Agnolo’s rage – he who is usually very forgiving and loving of everyone. Agnolo’s deep voice also surprised everyone, especially Michelangelo who was not there every day to witness his brother’s gradual transformation from adolescent to manhood.

“I forgive them for what they had done. I hope they forgive me for the damage I did to them,” said Michelangelo laughing.

“You may forgive them, and you should, but I will not rest until I take revenge for you,” said Agnolo.

Agnolo’s combative resolve to avenge his brother’s injury was greatly perplexing to his family. After all, they knew him to be mild mannered always forgiving young man. They never understood that it was Agnolo’s nature to always forgive those who sinned against him, but the

story was quite different when it came to attacks against his beloved ones. The tamed and kind lamb quickly transformed into a relentless and violent storm full of rage.

Both Francisca and Benvenuto realized that this matter could get out of hand and being the adults, the two tried to defuse the situation.

“I will investigate and find out what happened,” said Benvenuto with a calm voice.

“Papa, it is better to leave things alone,” said Michelangelo. “The boy that started the problem is from a very influential family in Florence. I do not want to mention his name.”

“That means nothing to me,” said Agnolo. “I am the son of the almighty! The Lord of David the valiant!”

“Agno, please let us leave this alone. I will be fine in a few days. Can we just sit and talk about other things? I am really thirsty,” said Michelangelo while walking to the kitchen.

Tota followed him: “Michlo, are you going to be ok?” Asked Tota.

“Oh, yes. These guys were attacking Agnolo’s behavior and attacking my family in general and I just could not put up with it. They were saying that I was raised by controversial parents in a questionable family setting. So, I hit one of them and bruised his eyes very badly.”

Michelangelo had to cut his sentence off as Francisca and Chola walked into the kitchen.

“Momma, I have a terrible headache! I have not been able to shake it off for three days. I thought the ride here and the fresh air would help me get rid of it!” Said Michelangelo with a whining voice, as if he were seeking his mother’s sympathy and assurance of love.

“You need to lay down, my baby,” said Francisca. “I will bring you some warm water. Go lay down, please, before you fall down.”

Michelangelo went to the bedroom and noticed that Chola’s bed was no longer there. In fact, neither was Tota’s bed. Only Agnolo’s bed and the bed that he usually used. He was too tired and in great pain to inquire too much. He figured that there will be plenty of time to learn all about the changes. Michelangelo also could not help but notice the large number of sculptures that his brother had created. He was greatly impressed, a little intimidated, and certainly jealous.

With only two beds in the room, Agnolo had been using the space as a studio. He had brought clay, small marble, and wood pieces – to Michelangelo’s surprise, most of which were in an early stage of development. “I have never known my compulsive brother to delay the completion of any statue,” thought Michelangelo to himself. What he failed to notice was that

all the statues were being transformed from one form to another and back. It was a perpetual, an ongoing process, that was never ending.

There were at least ten seemingly unfinished projects of animals and flowers, as well as several replicas of Agnolo's conception of the statue of David, whom Agnolo called "David the Valiant Shepherd Boy," and others of Mary Jo, whom Agnolo named the "Spirit Song of the Madonna". Despite his state of agony, Michelangelo could not help but think that "That is just not like Agnolo." The young brother was known to be compulsive creator who does not stop until he finished whichever project he started. "There were definitely some changes to his brother's behavior, that is not limited to the change in his voice," thought Michelangelo to himself as he sat in the bed and looked around before he reclined.

In a way, Michelangelo was growing concerned about his brother's increasingly inexplicable behavior, talents, and convictions.

In one corner of the room, Michelangelo could also see a wooden trough filled with water. He wondered about its function.

Chola walked into the bedroom where Michelangelo was laying down and sat at the edge of the bed. She bent down and hugged her brother. He felt her breath and she smelled differently. Her body was warm. "Michlo, I am so sad. I wish I could make you feel better," she said.

"I will be fine, Lola. I will be fine, precious!" He answered while he rubbed her forehead.

Agnolo also came in. He sat on the floor next to his brother's bed. Chola decided to join him on the floor. She put her head on his chest and he wrapped her body with his right arm.

"Michlo, I vow to avenge your pain," said Agnolo. "We are a tight family and what we had been through only makes us stronger. You bore my trouble when I was mistreated by everyone during the Easter holiday. How can I forget that? I learned a great lesson about how a family can be strong by sticking together."

"Please, Agno, you need to let this one go," said Michelangelo. "These people have no values and they are not worth your effort. Really, I do not know what drives them or motivates them," said Michelangelo. "Who knows, maybe they have joined the rebellion. This is a very crazy time in the political scene in Florence," he continued as if he were a wise expert in the political affairs of the city state.

Although Michelangelo was certainly not a stateman, anyone who lived in Florence felt the persisting tension that dominated the thriving city state. It did not take an expert to know that political adversaries and the church have shifting alliances and coalitions. Indeed, there were

no permanent friends or permanent enemies, but certainly permanent self-interest. Perhaps it was this political instability of Europe, Italy, the Vatican, and Florence that may have driven people to seek mental relief by indulging into the arts and fanning the fire of the renaissance. For a while Florence became a theocracy, but the political climate of the republic was shifting after the fall of anti-Renaissance church leaders. The dominance of the French, who invaded Naples and set out to occupy their way to Constantinople, was resisted by the Holy Roman Emperor and the Vatican.

Francisca, followed by Tota, came in carrying a pan filled with hot water and several clothes. Tota had also prepared a special concussion that was made of several herbs and brought a hot cup of this secret medicine for the suffering son.

Michelangelo went to sleep and did not wake up until noon the next day. Agnolo had woken up earlier and prayed next to his brother's bed before he left with his father to the quarry.

Several times, Chola and Francisca came to check on Michelangelo who was in deep sleep. When it was getting late, Chola went in to gently wake him up. She kissed his forehead gently and leaned over to hug him. Her hand accidentally touched him below the waist and she felt his erection. She did not know what it was. The years that she shared the room with her brothers, she noticed that in the morning, their lower garments looked swollen and protruding, but she never touched the body of either of her brothers to feel the cause of the swelling and protrusion. Michelangelo opened his eyes with a smile. "Good morning, Lola," he said while taking a deep breath, stretching, and yawning.
"Good morning, or it is really good afternoon," she laughed.

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In a few days, Michelangelo was feeling much better. The swelling in his nose and the bruises seemed to subside. To prove his point to Agnolo, who did not want his brother to leave until he was completely well, Michelangelo offered to arm wrestle with his younger brother. Michelangelo knew that Agnolo's right arm was indeed carrying the strength of both arms. The two laughed, not seeking to pursue Michelangelo's idea.

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Before he left Settignano, Michelangelo inquired about the purpose of the trough.

“I use it for replicating my statues, Michlo!” Said Agnolo. “I use two techniques to bring life to the stone. I call the first, the Communication Technique and the other the Baptism of the Stone. I learned both at the palace. With the second technique, I usually use water, but sometimes, if water is not available, I use sand. When the water recedes, it shows the part of the statue that should be carved first!”

Michelangelo was intrigued. To hide his feelings of inadequacy, he laughed. “You are full of surprises, my dear brother! And, how do these techniques work?”

The attention that Michelangelo expressed in learning his techniques excited Agnolo, who went on to describe details of how he alternates the use of his techniques and the steps he follows. Michelangelo who was trained to use calibrating apparatuses that had been used by all the masters for decades was greatly fascinated, but cleverly hid his emotions.

“I will have to discuss that with the other artists,” said Michelangelo with a big laugh.

“No, please, Michlo. Do not share this with anyone. It is my secret and I decided to only share it with you and my family for the time being.”

“Ok, Agno. I promise!”

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Late morning, after saying goodbye to his family, Michelangelo mounted his horse and hit back towards Florence. As he passed by the forest, he heard loud chanting and prayers mixed with the noise of many people and the rattle of many armors. He also saw the smoke rising from several spots in the skies above the forest.

Flocks of doves and raven glided in the sky.

27

Hearts and Hormones

The physical separation of Agnolo and Chola was making both miserable. Although each was fighting the battle of dealing with the physical and hormonal changes associated with their stage of puberty, and although each was consciously shy and felt awkward, they managed to spend time together. Chola seemed more emotional than usual. And many nights she woke up crying, left her new room as Tota slept, and went into Agnolo's room. There, she sat on the floor next to his bed looking at him. The ever-present doves cooed their nightly songs – soft and soothing. "Oh, how I love you, my brother. Oh, how I love you, my beautiful hero!" She whispered softly to herself.

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It was a few months before Agnolo adjusted to the new life. His energy level, although was never as high as it was during his adolescent years, was replaced with emotional energy and creativity. What has not changed was his prolific propensity and compulsion – it was intensified. He accumulated several marble and wood pieces as well as a large amount of clay. In the afternoons, he carved and molded statues in his room at a rate of one statue every two to three days. His room was filling with his creations and Francisca laughed saying: "This is like Noah's ark, now, baby!"

"Mommy, we should create and create and create with the luring promise of being loved. Just like God!" Reflected Agnolo.

Francisca and Chola brought the mandolin and played and sang, while Agnolo sculpted. No one statue was ever immune from an additional touch and multiple modifications. If Agnolo did not know when to stop carving as a child, he seemed to be unable to stop now. Usually, laying down in bed never meant that he would go to sleep. Invariably, he would end up getting up time and time over to touch up a place in one of his statues.

The statues that he carved at the quarry were larger than those he carved in his room. Workers often stopped their work to watch him carve and the French knights made it a daily hobby to observe his genius and marvel.

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Agnolo's dreams were becoming more frequent and more real. They were so beautiful that often he would not want to wake up. In his dreams, Chola came to him dressed in a thin linen cloth with her eyes half closed as if she had drunk much wine. She touched him and his heart beat so hard and so fast that his eyes became blurred. She talked to him: "Come fill me Agnolo, come fill me with your continents. Come drown me from within with your warm essence. I long to burn by your lava."

Agnolo hid his dreams from everyone.

Chola also had dreams. She dreamed of Agnolo holding her with both of his arms and raising her above his head. He lowered her slowly and lay next to her. He kissed her, and she felt pressure in her lower abdomen. It was warm and relieving. Her barking body throbbed and screamed for his touch. She refused to leave and refused to wake up, but when she did, her undergarments were soaked from within with warm secretion. In some dreams, an older man that looked like Michelangelo, rose from the ground. He was holding many flowers on large pure gold trays studded with many rubies. "I wish you liked my flowers, Chola," the man said. "Take, take all that you want. I will keep trying." Before the man disappeared, he always tried to take her with him to a place that she did not want to go. Sometimes she woke up screaming and calling for Agnolo to help her. Although Chola much preferred being alone with Agnolo in her dreams, when she got up, she was curious about what the man had to offer and was tempted to partake of his gifts.

Chola, who was usually very talkative, was becoming a little less open. She thought about sharing her dreams with either her mother or Tota but she was too embarrassed.

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Agnolo's time with Chola at the palace was becoming a daily routine. "They have a lot to discuss," commented Tota on the phenomenon. "They have a lot to talk about that we older people do not understand."

Ironically, except for Tota who was eager to learn more about the palace and wished that she had the time and opportunity to join the children on one of their trips, neither Benvenuto nor Francisca really believed everything they heard from Agnolo or Chola about the palace. "There are many caves and many unknown caverns in this blessed quarry of ours," said Benvenuto. "It

is not too far beyond imagination that our children had adopted one of these as a haven to meditate and rest."

Both Agnolo and Chola noticed the gradual change in the difficulty by which they were able to enter the palace. It seemed as if the bushes were growing closer. The two had to push themselves harder to get to through the entrance. As a result, their bodies seem to accumulate more of the essence of the herbal bushes than they used to. Moreover, as the two got to the gate, they both had to bow or crawl on their knees to get through. They had grown too tall to enter without bowing. Even the songs that they heard within the palace took a more romantic nature. Whether this music was there all along and they had just noticed it, or it was indeed new, they really could not tell. The palace family was always there waiting for them anxiously. They danced all over many spheres and hovered in many skies. They glided from one place to another holding hands and with peaceful smiles they sang.

On a Sunday, when Agnolo opened his eyes, Chola was sitting on the floor next to his bed. "Good morning, Agno," she said. "Beautiful morning, Lola!" He answered. I missed you last night, and I decided to come and sleep on the floor next to you. "Oh, precious, I always miss you!" She threw her body on his and he kissed her cheeks. She felt warm. And neither was satisfied. "There must be more to this," they were convinced with great internal frustration.

"Let us go to the palace," said Chola. Agnolo threw some cloths on while she tiptoed to her room. Tota heard her.

"Tota, we are going to the palace," said Chola.

"You two be careful. Don't you want something to eat first?" Asked Tota.

"No, there is plenty there!"

Chola kissed Tota's forehead and rushed back to Agnolo's room.

When the two quietly shut the front cottage door, the two French knights on duty saw them. Their orders were never to interfere with the activity of the family, just guard them and ensure their safety. The two knights, knew that it was likely that they would lose their targets. It was not the first time that they had experienced total failure in keeping up with the two.

Sure enough, within a few minutes, Chola and Agnolo vanished. The two knights looked at each other and smiled. "They did it again," said one. "I am not sure how this happens, but someday we may be able to figure it out," said the other. "I am so glad that Captain Philippe himself had experienced similar failure, otherwise, it would have been impossible to explain to him and to Captain Nicholas what happens or convince him of these miraculous disappearances," he continued.

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At the pool of reflection, Agnolo and Chola saw each other naked. Members of the family also looked differently. It was as if the pool were depicting other people or perhaps it was their true entity finally appearing. Mary Jo was always smiling. She looked sweet with a Madonna-like eyes and grace. She flew to where Agnolo was and danced with him. They twirled and glided in the air as the rest of the family formed a large sphere around them. Doves filled in the skies and lights of many colors flickered while new music surrounded the palace. Benvenuto looked like Cardinal Carafa and Mary Jo and Francisca were one and the same. Chola flew to the center of the sphere escorted by two large doves. When she reached Agnolo, Mary Jo stepped aside and Agnolo embraced Chola. Above them, Mary Jo placed a pure crystal heart filled with wine. Agnolo reached to it. He gave Chola to drink and then he drank. The family sang: "Eat the bread and drink the wine," then they withdrew but their singing continued. They clustered miles above with many many doves. They floated and glided in a heavenly display.

Agnolo looked into Chola's eyes. She looked differently. He could see her heart beating, her breasts rising and falling. She extended her hand and touched his body. "Touch me Agnolo … touch me. Come fill me Agnolo, come fill me with your continents … oh, please come drown me from within with your warm essence … oh, I long to burn by your lava," Chola did not open her mouth, but Agnolo heard her. She also sounded differently.

"Chola is that you?" He thought.

"Yes, my love. I am yours. Please, please, let me contain you!"

"Chola, Chola, oh Chola!" He kissed her and moved his hands all over her body. She was soft. When his hand touched her breast, she moaned. He slowly suckled her left breast and then moved to the right one. She was moving slowly and uncontrollably.

"Ah, ah, stay right there. Don't leave me," he heard her.

They were at least sixty feet up in the air. They floated as if they were in the mercury pool. They twirled and turned many ways. She kissed him all over – over and over. She was weak and made no effort in hiding her frailty.

“I can’t get enough of you,” although she did not utter any word, he knew all she thought. “Stay within me forever!”

They were entangled. His body braided her body. Several times, her singing got louder, and her body shook. Her shaking seemed to trigger him to do the same. In one of her climaxes, she instigated his. It was long lasting. He shook uncontrollably, and he loved giving and giving. Their ears were filled with many echoes and their eyes were misty and weak. They stayed engaged for a long time, floating. And they went to sleep holding to each other – he within her and she was engulfing him.

“I love you,” he heard her think.

“I love you,” she heard him think.

He held her tightly and they made a covenant with the Lord of heaven and with each other. There, they broke the bread and drank the wine.

Time had lost its chance and its curse. Hours and minutes were only measured by the sound of water drops falling.

When they opened their eyes, they were looking at each other. They giggled. They noticed that a new type of flowers began to grow all around them and throughout the palace. These flowers were beautiful white and red. Suddenly, everything seemed differently. The wine that was readily available and the fruits and the herbs, they all tasted and looked more beautiful than they had experienced them before.

“Lola, should we go home?” He whispered knowing the answer.

“Let’s stay her forever,” she said.

“Ok!”

With her, Agnolo felt immortal and indispensable. And in his presence, she felt secure and uninhibited. And the more wine they drank together, the stronger these senses became.

(Song 18: Song of Love)

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As Agnolo and Chola were leaving the palace, their palace family reappeared. They smiled and celebrated with intoxicating wine. They sang a simple but beautiful song: Drink of my blood that I shed for you, eat of my body broken in two, new covenant now I make with you!

Agnolo carried the crystal heart home. It shined like a large mirror in the sun with all the colors of the rainbow. Even when the two walked between boulders where the sun could not reach, the beautiful colors continued to emanate.

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On the way home, Chola was sore and raw. It was certainly not because of walking the short journey between home and the palace, but because of the journey she had within the palace. Covered in star dust and transparent glowing grape leaves, she smelled like sex and incense.

When they entered the cottage, no one was in the living room. Agnolo kissed Chola and uttered: “Keep your beauty all around me … soft and warm.” She replied: “I will … If you only stay generously inside of me.”

She turned her head back to glance at him, as she walked to her room. He watched her body move like a drifting boat on a mild sea.

She changed her cloths, then she fell asleep for hours.

Agnolo walked the few steps to his room and lay in his bed with the crystal heart in his bosom. He was still covered with grape leaves, but he did not care; he was spent! Dehydrated and hungry he went to sleep. When he woke up, with his arm he reached for Chola, but she was not there. A dove was there with her wings gently fluttering over his hands while another with her wings fluttered over his face as if to cool him off. Struggling, he opened his eyes weakly, smiled, and went back to sleep. In a very deep sleep he entered. He slept like he had never slept before.

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When Agnolo woke up, it was early afternoon and the sun was drifting towards the west, bright and crisp. The crystal heart was still in the bed with him. He palmed it with his right hand. It was beautiful! He kissed it, hugged it, and raised it above his head.

When he finally got up, out of the dresser in his room, he pulled a leather pouch made of lamb skin. In the pouch, he placed the heart before he placed it inside the top dresser drawer. Agnolo walked to the kitchen where Tota was tending to the hot oven. “There you are. Mom and I tried to wake you up, but you were dead tired,” said Tota.

“I am, Tota. I am,” he said as he walked to the back door that led to the pavilion and the courtyard where the bathing tub and water were. When he opened the door, it was extremely bright compared to the inside. He had to squint for a moment. Before his eyes were able to adjust, he heard Chola’s voice singing. She was naked; just a few remaining grape leaves glittered in the bright sun. “She was beautiful,” he thought. “How beautiful!” He was aroused and blushed.

“Hi Agno,” said Chola pretending to cover herself. “I will be finished in a few minutes!

“Ok,” he said with his eyes wide open and glued to her eyes.

He walked back in and shut the door.

“I am hungry,” said Agnolo to Tota.

“I have never heard you say that before,” she laughed. “You must have had a big day at the palace.”

“Yes, indeed.”

Tota brought in Agnolo’s favorite food: Honey, oats, and raisins. He ate like a pregnant woman and drank enough wine to drown a small ship. And, went back to his room to sleep.

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Agnolo’s trips to the palace were becoming even more frequent and the time he spent there was noticeably longer. Chola was also noticeably disengaged from her daily chores and biblical training as she spent time away from home. Although Francisca and Tota unofficially encouraged the time the two kids spend together, when discussing the matter with Benvenuto who expressed heartfelt desire to spend more time with his children, Francisca belayed some concerns. “I wish these two were children again, Venu,” said Francisca. “Then I would not have to worry about them as much. When Agno was small, I had to keep an eye on him all night and day, it was hard, but at least I knew what he was up to all the time … well, most of the time.” She laughed.

Francisca’s conversation with Tota was quite different. Once, she asked: “You don’t think they are …?”

“No, if that were happening, we would have known something by now,” said Tota pointing to the fact that the children’s disappearances have been ongoing for several months. The two

women sought comfort in the fact that Chola was not pregnant. "If the two were doing anything like that," the two women thought, "Chola would have been pregnant by now!"

Even with that logic, the two women were not completely comfortable. The implications of such a relationship would be absolutely detrimental to the Cellinis and certainly to Agnolo who had been subjected to abuse and scrutiny even without committing any sin. If it were found out, or even suspected, that he was having an intimate relationship with his sister, it would be difficult to find any support from any one at all. That is not to consider the implications for Chola. Women were frequently killed for such a behavior: Not only would she be pregnant out of wedlock, but the suspected father of the child would be her brother.

Francisca knew more than Tota did. Till that time, no one had revealed to Tota that Agnolo was adopted. All she knew was that when the Cellinis returned from their holy pilgrimage, they were nursing baby Agnolo. The two women, however, hosted a common and uncomfortable and unspoken thought: "What if Chola and Agnolo were indeed engaged in love making, but Chola was hard to conceive like Francisca was?" They further thought: "If that were the case, how long would it be before she does?"

Unconsciously, the adults decided to discard these ideas. In fact, somehow, they felt guilty for entertaining such thoughts about their precious children. "We are no better than other people that falsely accused Agno of all sort of things," they each thought independently.

The French knights who saw the frequent escapades of the young couple had no problem with their behavior as if they were in possession of relevant facts. Furthermore, they were familiar with many biblical references that would support their convictions. Indeed, they could cite many examples from the Bible to support the couple's possible intimate relationship.

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For weeks, Agnolo and Chola visited the palace at least three times a week – some weeks even every day.

Agnolo continued working with his father at the quarry and creating sculptures at home and at the quarry. Chola tried to reengage herself in her biblical and literary training and tend to her assigned house chores.

On the way home from the quarry, Agnolo stopped and picked flowers for Chola and for his mother – and from time to time, for Tota. The herbal flowers that he picked were different every time. The ladies did not know what to expect and Chola's flowers were very different from those that he usually picked for his mother and Tota. The floral herbs filled the house with a new and beautiful fragrances that seemed to change every day.

While working on his sculptures in the evenings, Chola brought the mandolin and practiced new songs. She sang and sometimes danced around Agnolo who often stopped what he was doing and lay in bed with his feet hanging off the side to watch her. He kissed her hands and she kissed his cheeks.

28

A Heart in the Way

In Florence, Michelangelo was fighting many battles. Although financially secure, his ambitions of reaching the pinnacle of the art society and make a name for himself became a relentless obsession. He shared a studio with other artists, not out of the need for money, but as a wise move for networking and exposure. The competition for the attention of the church and the wealthy was getting more and more intense. There was definitely money to be made, but to get it an artist had to endure many rejections and fight like a gladiator.

An artist's reputation and the reliability of his word were of unparalleled importance. Repairing one's reputation and restoring trust in his word were a serious challenge, one that Michelangelo had to endure. His past was haunting him and the memory of his sale of a statue that he made and sold to a wealthy and influential art lover as an ancient Greek relic seem to never go away. Despite of it all, he had big dreams and was thinking in a very large scale.

One afternoon, Michelangelo returned to the site where the large marble block lay near the cathedral in Florence. By then, the block was being handed out by the city governor. For years, it had been sitting there, deemed worthless because of the faulty hole in it. Michelangelo remembered the conversation that he had with Cardinal Carafa about the block. He also remembered Agnolo's design and plan to carve a statue of David the shepherd boy out of the that block. In many ways, he felt bad that he ridiculed his brother and denounced his idea. The terracotta that Agnolo had made in his room of David The Valiant Shepherd Boy also persisted in Michelangelo's memory and would not depart him.

Climbing over the faulty marble slab, he took many measurements of the twenty-two-foot-high block and applying Agnolo's idea, he drew a sketch for the large project on paper.

On his way back to his apartment, Michelangelo saw Torrigiano, the boy who had punched him and ruined his nose. Torrigiano, who had covered his face, was accompanied by two of his many brothers. They were assisting him in walking. It was as if he was plagued by a debilitating disease. Michelangelo did not seek to engage the boys in a conversation but felt sorry for his evil friend. Later, Michelangelo learned that Torrigiano was led by his brothers to the cathedral seeking the prayers of the priests to be healed.

The competition for any large-scale project was brutal. The politics of selling an idea often superseded talent and abilities in importance. Believing that he had an ally in Cardinal Carafa, Michelangelo sought to meet with him. Whether the cardinal was extremely busy, or he did not want to meet with Michelangelo immediately was not clear. Father Bronzino, who handled the scheduling for the cardinal promised Michelangelo an audience with the cardinal soon.

As expected, many artists competed for art projects. Two years prior, a rising star in the art scene named Leonardo da Vinci was among those who had their own concept and idea of what should be done with the abandoned marble slab.

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In addition to enduring the fights in his professional life, Michelangelo was fighting a larger battle within. For hours, night after night, after everyone had gone to sleep, he stayed up thinking and writing poetry. He was in love with Chola!

"How did this little angel come to steal my heart?" He had no answer. It was a few years ago when he used to carry her on his shoulders. Now he dreams about her at night and day dreams about her all day. Too many questions to answer and too many taboos to break. "Does she even know that I care about her," he wondered. "How would I approach her? How would papa and momma deal with this? How would the church view all of this? How would all of this affect my career, life, and future?" His head was about to explode. "It is wrong! I must stop this madness. There was absolutely no way out of it … there was no path! These feelings are certain to bring about utter destruction and possibly death to me and my family," Michelangelo asked, fought, and reasoned.

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It was late in the evening when Michelangelo decided to go home to Settignano. He rode fast. In his face, the wind was blowing the smell of smoke that came from the forest. As he passed the dreaded place, he could hear the chanting and the shouts of many as well as see the burning fires in the wet swamp.

By the time he finally climbed the long driveway that joined the main road to the cottage, he was tired. He had not slept well for many days.

At the cottage, everyone seemed to have settled in for the nights. The horses in the back were calm and except for two French knights who sat quietly in the cover of dark, everyone was asleep.

Michelangelo quietly entered the cottage and walked to the bedroom where his bed waited for him. It was cold. Around it, there were many more new sculptures that Agnolo had created. He could also smell a new smell. It was the flowers that Agnolo had brought for Chola. Agnolo was sound asleep. The light from the small window reflected on a unique object on the dresser. Despite his fatigue, he got up quietly to inspect. The object was wrapped in a pouch of lamb skin. It was the crystal heart. He pulled it out gently not knowing what it was and gasped. It was beautiful! He knew it was a heart, but "what was it made of?" He wondered. "What incredible material would reflect such an array of light even in the dark through a leather pouch? Is it a celestial rock? Did it fall from the sky? And how and why did it get in the shape of a heart? This, he thought, could be an incredible wedding gift to a wealthy monarch.

Michelangelo placed the crystal heart back in the pouch and lay in bed trying to get some sleep. He looked at the ceiling for a long time. "Just a few feet away in a different room lay a beautiful angel that he would love to hug and cuddle," he thought. "There, she is probably laying down not knowing how much I care about her, or how crazy this situation could get. I must stop this insanity. I must stop it now."

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He thought he was dreaming, but it was real. Chola walked into the room. It was as if she was sleepwalking. He could not see if her eyes were open. "Of course, her eyes would be open," he thought. "How else could she see?" Chola still had remanences of the colorful crystal grape leaves. She smelled like expensive perfume. "Oh, how I would love to touch her," he thought. "I rode all the way here from Florence for this. Just to see this angel! And, now here she is!"

Totally unware of Michelangelo's presence, Chola sat on the floor next to Agnolo's bed. She looked at him and got closer and closer to his head. Agnolo was breathing hard. The few hours of sleep that he manages to get every night, he spends in very deep comma-like state. She reached and touched his hand. In his sleep, he pulled her hand to his mouth and kissed it. "I love you," he whispered with his eyes closed. "I love you!" She replied. She put her head down on the bed, her body still on the floor and she went to sleep.

Michelangelo watched with agony. His heart was tearing, but he held his breath and did not move. "Oh, my Lord," he thought. "What a big mess! This can't be. This just can't be." He thought about getting up and hitting back to Florence but knew that Chola would hear him and would wake up. "So, what if she wakes up?" He thought. "Maybe it would be a good thing that she knew that he had seen her." For whatever reason, he decided not to move. He could not sleep.

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There was no way for him to tell how much time went by. It must have been several hours, just when he was about to fall asleep out of mental and physical exhaustion, that he heard Chola move. She got up quietly and kissed Agnolo's forehead and walked out. She seemed totally oblivious to Michelangelo's presence.

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The doves and the birds outside began to sing their morning songs when Agnolo opened his eyes and looked straight at where he had laid the crystal heart the night before. It was still there. He loved that thing. To him, it was as sacred as the holy relic from Turin. Its unparalleled astatic beauty was certainly appealing, but to him it was the holy grail from which he and Chola drank a new covenant to each other. "Oh, how beautiful that day was!" He thought.

"Michlo," shouted Agnolo. "When did you get in?" He jumped off his bed and bounced over his brother's body in bed. He rudely hugged Michelangelo and rubbed the stubs of his sprouting facial hair on Michelangelo's face. Michelangelo woke up laughing and reciprocating Agnolo's childish behavior.

"Did momma and papa see you yet?" Asked Agnolo.

"No, I just rode in real late last night."

"Are they up?"

"I don't know. If not, they should be up soon. The sun is coming up."

The two tried to lower their voice, but their whispering unintentionally got louder.

"Michlo, what do you think of my little herd?" Asked Agnolo referring to the flock of sheep that he had carved.

"I love it. It is definitely unique. But, why so many? Could a few not say all you want to say?"

"Michlo, we should create and create and create, just like our God does. We should create with the lure of potentially being loved and despite the assured promise of disappointment. I guess that's what happens when we imitate God. We suffer the same rejection that our loving creator suffers. Personally, if I were freed of my compulsions, I think would prefer to always be the creature that is loved. God loves His creation, you know. And, we are supposed to love Him back." Realizing that he is thinking out loud, Agnolo paused for a moment then continued: "I have not been carving people since I gave life to my family at the palace. But, I do not think I am finished with these. I think I will change them to look more like people."

Michelangelo had heard Agnolo often talk about the factious place that he called the palace, but he, as did everyone except for Chola who had been there and Tota who wished to go there, were convinced that the place was no more than a large cave that Agnolo had discovered. There, they thought, he goes to meditate and find seclusion. Initially, they all believed the place to be a segment of Agnolo's imagination, who was never able to separate reality from dreams. But, after seeing several strange phenomena related to this place, things like the glittering crystal grape leaves and the lasting incent smell, they became to believe that such a cave was rather unique.

"What family?" Asked Michelangelo.

"I gave life to an entire family of alabaster. They come alive and sing and dance with me."

"Oh, Agnolo. I love you and your great imagination."

"No, really, Michlo," said Agnolo as he walked to the dresser. "I got this from there." He reached for the crystal heart and got it out of the leather pouch.

Michelangelo had seen the heart at night when it was dark, but he had not seen it in the daylight. "Wow!" Shouted Michelangelo. The colors were spectacular, and several rainbows jumped out from the crystal heart.

"Has papa and momma seen this?" Asked Michelangelo.

"No, only Chola!"

Michelangelo's heart was breaking. Just the mention of Chola's name brought him many emotions.

"Do they have more of this stone at that 'palace'?" Asked Michelangelo.

"No, it was a gift that was made specially for me and Chola!"

Michelangelo did not ask any more questions, but his heart was filled with envy and sadness.

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Francisca, who had heard Michelangelo's voice from her bedroom across the living room, came to Agnolo's bedroom. Benvenuto followed her.

"Are you an angel, Michlo?" She ran to hug him. "Did you fly over here this morning?"

"No, Momma. I rode in last night."

"Are you OK, honey?" Asked Francisca as she gave way to her husband to hug their eldest son.

“Yes, mommy. Just a lot of stuff … lots of stuff. I will tell you about it in a while.”

“OK, let’s get something to eat and talk.”

“You can eat. I have no appetite.”

“Come on,” said Benvenuto. “You have to be hungry.”

“I will eat a little.”

The four walked to the kitchen. Tota had been up and had heated some milk for the family to drink.

“I need your prayers,” said Michelangelo. “And, I thought to come here and pray while touching the holy relic hoping that the Lord would grant me my wishes.”

Agnolo jumped in: “The Lord had already granted you the desires of your heart, my brother.”

Michelangelo looked at his brother for a moment. “Does Agnolo even know what I was praying for?” He thought to himself. Michelangelo was convinced that his brother’s prayers are always heard and that what he spoke, was always awarded by heaven.

“It is already granted, Michlo. The Lord will give you the desires of your heart!” Continued Agnolo. “In two days, you will hear great news and in two years the rest of your wishes will come true.”

Chola came in and heard the last part of the conversation. She was still half asleep. She walked to Michelangelo and kissed him with a hug. “When did you come in?” She asked, which confirmed to Michelangelo that she had not seen him the night before.

“I rode in late last night. You seem tired,” said Michelangelo to Chola.

“I am a little tired, Michlo. I don’t think I slept well.”

“You need your sleep my beautiful sister! What could be on the mind of a beautiful lady like you that would keep her from sleeping?”

Chola avoided Michelangelo’s question with a light laughter.

“What is going on Michlo?” Asked Benvenuto.

“Papa, I am competing for a very large project. Do you remember the large slab that we saw near the cathedral in Florence?”

“Yes,” smiled Benvenuto. “You know that this piece came from our quarry. It is a beautiful piece.”

“Yes, papa. I remember. Well, the city governor is handing it over to an artist that can implement a statue to adorn the cathedral facade ...”

“Well, I know two great sculptors that could do that project,” said Benvenuto hinting about his two boys. “And, if I am not mistaken, Agnolo had an idea of working around the hole in the slab. I believe that the two of you could do this project together. You have the expertise and the reputation and Agnolo has the talents and ideas. Together, the two of you make an unbeatable team.”

Michelangelo did not want to mention that the decision to commission this project would be made by Cardinal Carafa. He knew that if he were to mention that Cardinal Carafa was in charge of the project, his father would likely insist that Michelangelo would take Agnolo with him to negotiate with the cardinal – who has expressed great love for Agnolo. So, he remained quiet. Furthermore, Michelangelo certainly knew that he had to be careful not to offend his family, especially Agnolo who had just prophesied his success. Most of all, Michelangelo wanted the project to himself as an independent artist who was capable of working on his own without the assistance of any other artist. After all, he was older and he did not need the help of his impulsive brother.

Michelangelo’s feelings towards Agnolo were changing. He loved the crazy young guy and even feared him a little – as did most people – not because of his physical power, but because of his spiritual ones and the shroud of mystery that surrounded them. “This growing young lad, seem to have the one thing that I would love to have more than anything: Chola! But, no one knows about my feelings neither should they ever know,” thought Michelangelo to himself.

“Let’s walk to the quarry and talk while working,” proposed Benvenuto.

“Papa, I think I will wait here and get ready to head back. I just wanted your prayers and moral support. I felt alone in that crazy big city.”

“Well, if you change your mind, Agnolo and I will be there,” said Benvenuto and hugged his son. Michelangelo hugged his father and kissed his hand.

“Michlo, let me know the good news as soon as you hear them. You know I would love to work with you on any project,” said Agnolo while hugging his brother.

Benvenuto and Agnolo got up to leave and Chola ran to give each hugs and kisses. “I love you!” She said.

They both replied: “I love you, honey!”

As Benvenuto and Agnolo were about to open the door to exit the cottage, Michelangelo shouted: “Agno, please also pray for the healing of the boy who had broken my nose. He had apparently been stricken with an unknown ailment that immobilized him.”

Agnolo put his head down expressing sympathy for the wicked boy. “May the Lord tenderize his heart and heal his body,” said Agnolo softly.

****

Michelangelo also got up and walked towards the bedroom. He was planning to gather his belongings and ride back to Florence before the sun got too hot as the day progressed, but instead he lay down in his bed. “His trip did not solve anything,” he thought. “In fact, it brought more pain. I did get to see Chola, but not the way that I was hoping for.”

Francisca and Chola came in the room and sat on Agnolo’s bed. “Well, I wish you could stay a little longer,” said Francisca. “We miss you here. Your brother and sister seem to always be gone.”

“We go to the palace,” said Chola. “It is beautiful there. Jesus is there! And there is so much love … real love.”

Francisca smiled and gently robed her growing daughter’s forehead while staring at her eyes. “Someday, I may take you up on the invitation to go to that cave,” said Francisca.

“Momma, it is not a cave, it is a palace! I wish you believed me. I love Agnolo, mommy. He is the one that showed me where the palace was. I really love him mommy. He is everything to me. He is everything to me,” said Chola with great emotion.

“I know baby, I know. May God bless our love for each other!” Said Francisca as she got up. “I better go help Tota, she is getting old and I can’t leave all the chores to her anymore.”

Chola also got up, but instead of walking out with her mother, she walked towards the dresser. She reached for the crystal heart. Francisca was already out of the room by the time she got it out of the leather pouch. “This was a gift that our family at the palace had made especially for me and Agnolo. It is a symbol of our love and eternal covenant to one another. We drank wine from it and swore an oath,” she said not knowing how hurtful her words were received by Michelangelo.

“I know you love him, Chola. But, you are no longer a child. You are a young lady,” said Michelangelo searching for a way to deliver a message to Chola without crossing a sensitive line.

“I know, Michlo. In some ways I wish I were still a child, but in other ways I am glad I am growing.”

“What I am trying to tell you, baby, is that the world looks at you in a different way now. Most of the people are really stupid and cruel, Lola. They do not understand your relationship with Agno.”

“I don’t care. I love him. I love my brother!”

“I love him too, Chola, but he is your brother. This is a cruel world that we live in and no one would understand your love for Agnolo. Don’t forget how evil their thoughts could be. If they begin to spread crazy rumors, our family will no longer be safe, and our honor would be eternally tarnished. As much as I have feelings for you, it would be crazy for me to even entertain the idea of having a romantic relationship with you. Even though, as you know, I am not your blood brother. As much as I would love to hold you in my arms and would love to spoil you and cherish you forever, because we nursed from the same breasts, society and the church would have a big problem with that.”

Chola stared at Michelangelo and did not speak.

“Think about what I told you, please, please!”

“Michlo, I need to go help momma and Tota,” she rushed out. On her way, she softly touched his hand with a pet and with her eyes half closed and her head turning towards the door she briefly glanced into his craving eyes.

29

The Gate to Infamy

When Michelangelo got to his apartment studio in Florence he was more depressed than he was before he went to Settignano. It was about noon, but he anticipated the weight of the imminent lonely night. He sat up alone in his room and looked around. He really had everything that he needed and wanted, and everything else was within his reach – if not immediately, then soon. The one thing that was missing was a reciprocating lover. "There is no girl in all of Europe that could compete with the one that won my heart. In fact, there is no room for anyone else to even compete," thought Michelangelo to himself. He was smitten by his love for Chola!

He was hungry but did not want to eat. He sat at his desk and began writing more poetry. Very hurt and confused, he paced from his bed to his desk. Finally, he fell asleep.

****

When Michelangelo woke up, it was getting dark. He walked out his studio and loitered the streets. A few taverns were open. He walked into one that he had not been to before. On an empty stomach, he drank a large quantity of wine and topped it with some strong drinks.

He did not know or remember how he got home, but when he woke up, he was still wearing his street clothes. They were damp. He realized that it had rained on him the night before. He left the bed for a short while but stumbled back into it. He was terribly hung over and dehydrated – not to mention starving. His head was pounding as if with large boulders. He laid face down and wept. "I did not even get a chance to pray before the holy relic," he thought as he drifted into deep sleep.

In his sleep, Michelangelo heard knocking on his door. First, he thought it was a painful dream. The noise did not help his aching head. Then, he realized that it was someone at his door. "Whoever it was, was not going to take 'No' for an answer," he thought. Angry, he jumped out of the bed to put an end to the painful knocking. When he opened the door, there stood a monk with a small piece of paper in his hand. "Michelangelo, this message is from Father Bronzino. Cardinal Carafa will be able to see you tomorrow in his office in the early afternoon."

"Thank you, Father," said Michelangelo as he began to read the script on the small paper. "Signore Michelangelo, Cardinal Carafa invites you to discuss your proposal for the art project. It is imperative that you bring Signore Agnolo with you to the meeting to discuss the details."

"Tomorrow! Wow, that is just like Agnolo said … within two days!" Said Michelangelo in an audible voice. His joy was dampened, when he realized that he could not fulfill the cardinal's

request for having Agnolo present during the discussion. He was still tired, hungry, and hungover, but he mustered enough energy to look for his drawings and designs.

He knelt on his knees and prayed: “Father, use me for your glory and lead my way. You know my heart and you know that I am not the crooked man they think that I am. Give me your strength and your peace.”

In a few minutes, he received a sense of assurance and got up seeking a meal.

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Since Michelangelo did not want Agnolo’s involvement, he had to think fast of excuses that he could use to convince Cardinal Carafa that the project could succeed without his brother’s participation. That night, he slept very little. The harder that he tried to sleep, the harder it was to achieve his goal. With so many thoughts on his mind, from personal to professional, the angel of sleep was not available. Michelangelo got up several times and drank several glasses of wine. He ultimately fell asleep!

The loud noise outside Michelangelo’s window woke him up. His eyes were burning and red. He took a couple of deep breaths and reminded himself that fate and the Lord are on his side. All he had to do was just go through it without complications.

When the sun was up high in the sky, he heard the church bells ringing. It was noon.

He got dressed, gathered his sketches and drawings, and walked towards the cathedral. When he got there, he asked to see Father Bronzino as the protocol demanded.

A monk led Michelangelo to Father Bronzino’s office, where Michelangelo had to wait for an extended period. He was getting edgy and uncomfortable and felt demeaned by the intentional neglect. When Father Bronzino appeared, he had a big smile on his face and welcomed Michelangelo warmly. His behavior confused Michelangelo who was under the impression that he was being ignored.

“Where is your brother,” said Father Bronzino.

“Father, I had no time to notify him or be able to go get him. I received your invitation late yesterday.”

“Well, Cardinal Carafa will be deeply disappointed. I hope he understands.”

“Indeed, Father!”

Bronzino was really delighted that Agnolo was not able to participate. His delay to meet Michelangelo was intended to humble the aspiring artist and remind him of the authority that he, Bronzino, had in the matter.

Cardinal Carafa was in his office waiting for the visitors. He greeted Michelangelo with a big hug. Michelangelo bowed and kissed his hand.

“Where is your brother?” Immediately asked the cardinal.

“Holy Father, I had no time to inform him of your invitation. I was notified of the meeting only yesterday.”

“Only yesterday?” Cardinal Carafa looked at Father Bronzino, but did not say anything. The cardinal had requested the meeting with the two artists, Michelangelo and Agnolo, over a week prior.

Bronzino knew that his delay to invite the two artists was exposed, and he put his head down without making excuses for his sinister behavior.

“Well, Michelangelo, I would really like to meet with the two of you together to discuss the details of this project. As you may have predicted, a great deal of money is resting on the successful completion of this project. Since it was your brother who proposed a suitable design for this slab, I think it would be advisable to wait until your brother is here.”

“Holy Father, I understand your interest in involving Agnolo, but he actually may not be able to comply as he is extremely busy with many projects of his own in Settignano.”

The cardinal had been looking forward to seeing Agnolo and his disappointment could be detected in his conversation. Although he received accurate and daily report on the status of the uprising and rebellion which included a report on the safety of Agnolo, Cardinal Carafa had not seen the young lad in over a year.

“In what sort of projects is this young Angel involved that would keep him from taking a part of such a grand project such as this?”

“He is very young, Holy Father, and his world is very unique. As talented as he is, his compulsive behavior may be a determent to the success of this project. He is my brother and, of course, I love him. After all, we have been nursed by the same mother and breathed the same air for a long time, but our Lord has blessed my brother with so much energy that often he does not know when to stop working on a project. I have seen him taking a large slab and reducing it to a very small statue that could fit in the palm of his hand,” said Michelangelo as he mustered a smile.

“Michelangelo, I know you love your brother. But, why is it that you have no confidence in him?” Cardinal Carafa detected Michelangelo’s jealousy of his brother. He remembered how Michelangelo made light of Agnolo’s idea and design for the marble slab. “Michelangelo, you go get your brother and we will meet here again tomorrow at the same time,” asserted Cardinal Carafa as he stood up to politely indicate the end of the meeting.

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Michelangelo left the meeting disappointed. He was convinced that he had the deal locked in. Now, he must figure out what to do. The idea of allowing Agnolo to take a major part of this glamourous project was certainly not his favorite. “Indeed, the young lad is very talented. In fact, probably more talented than I am in many ways. But he is too compulsive, unpredictable, and inexperienced. Additionally, that is my project, not Agnolo’s. I need it more than does Agnolo. He has plenty of time to prove himself and get large projects like this one in the future. This is my chance to establish myself as a prominent master artist and purge my name. I need to prove that I am not a crook,” these thoughts and many others raced through Michelangelo’s head. Now, he had to figure out a way to keep Agnolo out of the picture and secure the contract for himself.

The temples on the sides of his head were pulsating rapidly. He had less than a day to get his thoughts together. “Lord, I need your help. I am not being selfish; I hope not. I just need this project. You have promised me through your devoted son Agnolo that you would give me the desires of my heart. I really want this one Lord!” He prayed as he walked back to his apartment.

When he got to where his apartment was, he did not even go in, but walked swiftly towards the stable where he kept his horse. He was still in his fine cloths that he had worn for his meeting with the cardinal. He mounted his horse head towards Settignano.

He arrived at the family estate in a record time. It was late afternoon and the hot sun was mercilessly pounding on him and his horse. Tota, who was outside gathering some berries, was the first to see him. She stopped what she was doing and stood up. Michelangelo had been there just a day ago and his reappearance alarmed her. His formal attire and fine closing also added to the mystery of his visit.

“Michlo, are you ok?” She ran towards the horse as he was dismounting. “Oh, yes, all is well. I just came to get Agnolo,” he said.

She walked towards him and they hugged as she answered: “He is in seclusion. He and Chola are likely at the palace meditating.”

That answer did not please Michelangelo. He was not in an emotional mood to deal with the fact that Chola and Agnolo were spending time together alone. He controlled his emotions and walked into the cottage. Francisca came out to greet him.

“Baby, it is so good to see you again. Is everything ok?”

“Oh, yes, mommy. The cardinal wants to meet Agnolo again. I just met with him this morning about the large project that I had mentioned to you yesterday. He is convinced that Agno should take a part of the project, but mommy I am not sure that my little brother is ready for all this craziness. Florence and the art scene there are no place for an angel like him. It is a defiled world filled with filth, lies, and sin. I must deal with it every day. And, if it were not for your prayers and papa’s, I would have killed myself a long time ago. It is evil, mommy, and I really do not want our angelic brother to be exposed to it. That is not to mention that he would be totally unsafe there. In fact, I heard rumors that the rebels intend to do him harm. They continue to blame him for the imprisonment of Father Foscari and the sacking of Bishops Fontana and Donato. I just do not know, mommy. What do you think?” He spoke with emotions and sincerity. It was a speech that he had prepared on his way from Florence.

“Oh, my child. You seem to have so much on you,” she said. “And, you look so very handsome in this outfit,” she added with a proud smile. “Talk to papa!”

“Ok!”

Michelangelo knew that he had no time to waste. If all goes according to plans, he would convince his father and Agnolo that it was not in the best interest of Agnolo to be involved in this project and lead Agnolo to turn down the cardinal’s offer when he meets with him. “It must come from Agnolo himself. That would be the only way to convince the cardinal to abandon his goal of involving Agnolo: If Agnolo himself tells the cardinal that he does not want to take a part in the project. This way, I would not be tainted as a jealous brother who blocked Agnolo’s artistic advancement,” thought Michelangelo to himself.

Michelangelo realized that for his plan to work, not only does he have to convince his father and Agnolo not to take part of the project, but he also has to get them to vocalize their newly adopted decision as if it were their own.

Michelangelo got out of the cottage and began walking towards the quarry office looking for his father.

Benvenuto was outside his office talking to one of the foremen with his back to the sloped hill and steps that joined the cottage with the quarry office. The foreman must have said something to him, because he turned around with a smile.

“Michlo, how are you? Are you OK?”

“All is well, papa. Finish your conversation and let us talk.”

Michelangelo walked inside the office and sat down waiting for his father. Benvenuto wrapped up his conversation with his worker and walked into his office.

“What is going on? Are you OK?”

“I am OK, papa. I had a meeting with Cardinal Carafa earlier today. He refused to talk to me without involving Agnolo in the project.” Michelangelo repeated the speech that he had presented to his mother a few minutes earlier. He added: “Papa, I am really torn about this. As much as I really want Agno to be next to me working on this project, I really do not think it is a good idea for the reasons that I have mentioned to you.”

“I really have not thought about throwing our young lamb into the lions of Florence. They would devour him and try to turn him into a monster like them. I do know what you mean, Michlo. I deal with these people every day. And, I know how naive and loving your brother is … they would surely hurt our Agnolo. On top of all of that, like you said, I am not sure that he would be safe there with all the threats that are mounting against him. Let us talk to him. He may not be interested in going there anyway. It would be quite a big change for him and I am not sure that he would want to leave his mother and Chola.”

“Chola, yes, Chola,” thought Michelangelo to himself. “Agnolo will not want to leave Chola behind. Of course, if he were to go to Florence, his relationship with Chola may cool off as well. He may find someone else that would attract his attention,” internalized Michelangelo. His thoughts were getting confused with competing interests. On one side, if Agnolo does not take part in the project, he, Michelangelo gets to do it by himself. But, if Agnolo does go to Florence, he, Michelangelo may have a chance with Chola after her relationship with Agnolo is strained by the separation and the geographical distance between them. Michelangelo lowered his head and robbed his forehead as he looked down. “There may be a silver lining to all this madness. In either case, I will be a winner!” He smiled while shaking his head as if he were discarding an insidious thought.

“Let us pray about this, my Michlo. Let us pray about it!”

Benvenuto stood up and grabbed his son’s hand and began walking towards the cottage. He opened the door and walked directly to his bedroom where the sacred shroud of Turin was hidden in the wall. Benvenuto removed the painting that hid the relic and reached into the wall and brought out the sacred relic. He raised it above his head with one hand, touched Michelangelo’s shoulder with the other hand, and whispered a quiet prayer.

“Thank you, papa,” said Michelangelo.

“Let’s both go look for the kids. I want to see this cave where they go. That place they keep on calling the palace where they get all these crystal colored grape leaves and the incent smell. This is as good a time as any,” said Benvenuto who acted as if he was intrigued by his own spontaneous idea.

Benvenuto recalled that his father and grandfather spoke of a cave that they accidentally stumbled into from time to time where they had found quartzes of various colors. “I remember grandpa saying that this cave was guarded by thousands of rabid bats. He warned us kids not to ever go into caves that were not designated to be safe. A little boy, he said, had lost one of his eyes when the bats tried to take back a quartz that the boy was stealing from that cave,”

Michelangelo was not as excited about the idea of trying to find that mysterious cave. As much as he would have liked to know the source of the crystal heart and the secret place where his young siblings hide and play, he was not sure that he was ready to face what he might discover there. It is not the bats that were dampening his enthusiasm, but the fear that he and his father walk in while Agnolo and Chola were making love. Not only would that be devastating to his father and the family, but he was not sure that he was emotionally ready for such an exposure.

Before he could answer his father, the front door opened and Agnolo and Chola walked in. They did not have to say anything for all who were inside the cottage to know that it was them. The smell of incent proceeded them and the sound of the rattling crystal grape leaves announced their arrival. They were tired but refreshed.

“Michlo,” shouted Agnolo.

Chola was also excited to see Michelangelo. No one had expected him to visit so soon. While Michelangelo was inspecting the crystal attire of his brother and sister, Chola was impressed by Michelangelo’s formal attire.

“I should take several of these crystal grape leaves with me to Florence,” said Michelangelo.

“You can’t Michlo. These gorgeous things are perishable. There was a bunch of it in the backyard where we bathe. I had planned to collect a lot of it and make a large statue out of it, but I realized that these beautiful things disintegrate and evaporate after a day or two – albeit that they leave a scent of incent and herbs that lasts for a very long time,” said Agnolo who was excited that someone had valued his sacred mysterious leaves.

“Go clean up and let us talk. I have some great things that I want to talk to you about,” said Michelangelo.

Michelangelo and Benvenuto reclined in the living room and drank several goblets of wine while waiting for Agnolo. It was getting dark and Tota brought two lit lanterns to the living room where Benvenuto, Francisca, and Michelangelo were talking.

Agnolo came in carrying a wine goblet. Much of the crystal grape leaves were still attached to his body.

"You still have a lot of these crystals attached," said Francisca.

"I can't remove all of it, mommy. They will eventually evaporate on their own. Actually, I think I like a few around to remind me of where I was and where I could be. I wish you and papa would believe me and come with me to the palace someday," said Agnolo.

"Baby, I was just telling Michlo to walk with me there today," said Benvenuto.

"Oh, papa. You would love it. I would have to show you where it is though. Every time I go there, the entrance changes from place to place. Only the doves know where the gate is and only they can lead us there. Oh, papa, you would love it. It is heaven!" Said Agnolo with great enthusiasm.

Michelangelo interrupted: "It sounds like you really like this place. It really sounds like heaven ..."

"It is heaven, Michlo. I can't live without it. It gives me energy and hope!" Said Agnolo who did not realize that what he was saying was paving the way for what Michelangelo wanted to talk about.

"Sometimes, however, we must make some sacrifices and leave things that we love so much behind us to achieve other greater goals," said Michelangelo as Benvenuto and Francisca listened with admiration for how Michelangelo was able to cleverly reach his goal of making Agnolo refuse the idea of going to Florence to pursue the proposed project.

"Contentment is one of the greatest blessing!" Said Agnolo. "I love my life as it is, and I praise the Lord for everything I have. I only wish that I could help more people and get rid of all the hate many have."

"Agno, today, I had a meeting with Cardinal Carafa. He remembered your idea about the marble slab and …" before Michelangelo could finish his sentence, Agnolo interrupted:

"I have made a terracotta of my idea," said Agnolo who ran to his room and came back with a two-foot-high clay statue of David. This is David, the Valiant Shepherd Boy. While holding the terracotta, he extended his arms in front of his head – his partially lame left arm showing

difficulty in matching his right arm. “David is the symbol of Florence’s victory. It is God’s victory as was David’s,” he continued.

Agnolo’s enthusiasm slightly alarmed Michelangelo. “It is a great model. I see you have shown some incredible details and taken into consideration the hole in the slab. Agno, you have some amazing memory,” said Michelangelo.

Chola had just walked into the room. “I love David,” she said. “He is a hero!” She walked to Agnolo, took the statue from him, and sat down while starring at it.

“I think your idea would be very well received by the council and by the cardinal,” said Michelangelo. “Tomorrow, we will go to meet the cardinal. He is waiting for you. We can show him your model and explain to him the idea behind your design,” said Michelangelo.

Agnolo seemed excited, and with innocence continued: “I will bring life into that great marble. I will speak to it. Michlo you are going to be there with me, right? I mean when we do the statue?”

“Oh, yes, my brother. I will be there by your side for the two to three years that it would take to finish this project.”

Agnolo’s face froze. “Two to three years?”

“Well, maybe not that long. It all depends on the apprentices and their level of motivation. But, you will love life in Florence. I know it is not as serene as Settignano, but there is always something to do. I am sure you would love it there. The city life is very fulfilling. And, as a growing young man, I am sure you will find many attractive young ladies that would be more than happy to show you around.”

“Stop, Michlo, stop,” said Agnolo looking at his brother. “I did not think about all that.”

“Trust me the weeks and months will fly by and you will be a different man with new friends and new experiences,” continued Michelangelo who knew that he was reaching his goal.

“I don’t want you to go,” Chola began to sob! “Please don’t leave me. I can’t live without you!”

Francisca also began to cry.

“I am not going anywhere!” Said Agnolo. His parents felt like clapping for the incredible performance that Michelangelo had given – indeed an award worthy performance that led young Agnolo to resist a great temptation that anyone his age could not have dreamed of having.

“Agno, tomorrow, you come with me to Florence and tell Cardinal Carafa your decision and explain to him why you do not want to be involved in this project.”

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Michelangelo fell asleep early that evening. He was exhausted. So exhausted, in fact, that he did not even hear Chola who came in the room late at night. Whether she was sleepwalking or awake, it was not clear.

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The next morning, Michelangelo was the first one out of bed. He got up, got dressed, and went outside to get two horses ready. One for him and one for Agnolo. He did not try to be quiet with the hope that the noise would wake up Agnolo and his parents. His efforts were successful.

“Are you sure I can’t come with you?” Asked Benvenuto.

“Papa, the invitation was just for me and Agnolo. We will be fine. Please don’t worry!” Said Michelangelo.

“Leave this behind, you do not want to tease the cardinal and make him insist that you be involved in the project,” said Michelangelo to Agnolo who was attempting to carry his terracotta of David, the Valiant Shepherd Boy with him to Florence.

Chola ran into Agnolo’s bedroom and brought the leather pouch with its content. “Take this with you. And, bring it back safely. I am waiting for you,” she hugged her brothers and backed off as they set on their way to Florence.

Captain Nicholas led four of his French knights to accompany them. Two rode in front and two guarded the rear, while Nicholas rode next Agnolo. Philippe stayed at the Cellini estate with the rest of the knights.

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The Ambush

On the way to Florence, several miles before Agnolo and his company reached the forest, they were attacked by a mob of lightly armed rebellious monks. Their apparent goal was to kidnap Agnolo, likely to use him as a ransom to free prisoners and get the authorities to submit to their demands. The rebellious monks jumped out of nowhere and rushed directly towards Agnolo.

It was as if these rebels knew that Agnolo was going to be traveling to Florence that day!

The sky was filled with hundreds of doves that formed an upper shield over Agnolo. Antagonizing number of ravens tried to penetrate through the shield that that doves had formed above Agnolo to attack him. The French knights were caught by surprise and they were outnumbered at least three to one, but they fought valiantly: “For her majesty the Queen of France, for his Majesty the King of France, and for the royal house of Aragon,” they shouted. “For the honor of our country and our bloodline.” The four knights and their captain immediately circled Agnolo and with their long swords repelled the attackers who were armed mainly with clubs and maces. The well-trained knights smote half of the untrained rebels who began to carry their wounded and dead as they were retrieving.

Just when Nicholas and his knights thought that it was over, all hell broke loose. A large band of well-armed mercenary soldiers numbered in the sixties swarmed out of the lightly wooded area. They were joined by a large squadron of ravens that were successful in penetrating the shield of sky-filled doves. The ravens were transformed into beastlike humans with black feather and long claws.

With their halberds, the mercenaries tried to pull Agnolo off his horse, while the beastlike human ravens jumped around all over distracting the knights from their solemn task. Agnolo’s horse was struck by a mallet in his chest, as he lifted his front legs, and Agnolo’s right arm sustained a large cut as he was protecting the pouch that had the crystal heart from falling off his horse’s side. The situation looked hopeless and Agnolo and his guards seemed doomed. Michelangelo was separated from the group and one of the mercenaries pointed his sword at him saying: “It is not you that we want. I could kill you now, but I will not … I hope you join us someday!” Nicholas and his knights jumped off their horses and struggled to keep the attackers from grabbing Agnolo who was doing all he could to stay on top of his horse. One of the attackers found a hole in the knights’ defensive wall and with his long halberd caught Agnolo’s shirt when Agnolo shouted: “Freeze!” Incredibly, all the attackers and ravens froze in their motion. It took a few seconds before the busy arms of the knights realized that their enemies were not moving. Agnolo shouted again: “Reduce!” And, as fast as they appeared, the tall mighty mercenaries turned into serpents that swiftly wiggled their way under the grass and into

the swamp. The beastlike humans disappeared for a moment, when they reappeared, they were turned into small and confused blackbirds that had difficulty flying and collided with one another. The disoriented birds chased after the fleeing serpents and attacked them on the ground and from the air. The serpents fought back and devoured many of the black birds.

And, Agnolo vanished!

Things happened very fast, Nicholas thought that one of the attackers had managed to kidnap Agnolo and was about to fall on his sword to avenge his failure, but two of the knights confirmed that Agnolo levitated, ascended in a cloud of mist, and vanished in the air.

On the road, about five hundred paces away, in a hallo made of bright light and doves, Agnolo was sighted by Michelangelo who was visibly shaken.

“Agno! Are you alright?” Shouted Michelangelo.

“I am fine, Michlo. Join me!” Shouted Agnolo back.

Nicholas leaned on his horse while looking at his four comrades. He managed to speak: “Nothing is like a good brawl! But, this was truly a miracle.”

When Michelangelo and the knights reached Agnolo, they inspected the wound that Agnolo’s horse had sustained, but they could not find any evidence of it. Agnolo’s shirt was torn and it was covered with some blood stains from the injury that he had sustained to his right arm. However, his arm was no longer bleeding, although the place where he was lanced could still be seen.

The group resumed their journey towards Florence. They said nothing and were tongue tied. Just a few moments before, they all thought that they were doomed and that Agnolo would be in the hands of wicked men. Indeed, a miracle of great magnitude had taken place. Fear settled into the hearts of the knights. That fear was placed by heavenly peace as they individually realized that the Lord’s hand is there to protect them and Agnolo.

Michelangelo also had a lot to think about. He had known his brother to perform many miracles. He had seen him open Giorgio’s eyes, but like many who were there when that happened, he had doubts about whether Giorgio was really blind. However, what happened a few minutes ago, was no accident and left no doubt. The transformation of the ravens to beastlike humans then to small confused birds upon the demand of Agnolo was a frightening and an awesome experience. It was truly a major miracle. “I saw it with my own eyes, and I saw how the attackers froze upon Agnolo’s orders,” Michelangelo thought to himself.

“Do I really want to get the commission to this project? Maybe it is not the best thing for me!” He continued to ask himself. The events of that morning put great fear into Michelangelo’s heart and caused him to reexamine his attitude towards his brother. “This little guy is way too big to try to derail. He is, indeed, protected and is endowed with mighty powers. Do I really want to go against that?”

If Leonardo da Vinci was jealous of Michelangelo, Michelangelo was intimidated by Agnolo and envious of his talents. Michelangelo saw how, at a young age, his brother gave life to the stone. Michelangelo also witnesses firsthand how Agnolo saw the human in each stone and stone in each floating star. He heard him talk to his sculptures and swore that he had heard them talking back to him. “Often, they are my only friends,” said Agnolo. “They talk of love and hurt only known to our Holy Mother and our Lord and Savior.” Agnolo’s work was too brilliant to accept or understand.

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While Nicholas and his knights were fighting near the forest, a serious battle that involved tens of doves and tens of raven ensued over the cottage and around the quarry in Settignano. Several ravens were seen fallen to the ground not to move again. Other ravens scooped down and carried their dead to cannibalize them.

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When the group reached the Cathedral of the Living Saints in Florence, Agnolo dismounted his horse and reached for the pouch containing the crystal heart. He asked Captain Nicholas if he would keep the pouch in a safe place until after his meeting with cardinal Carafa. Nicholas laughed: “I am going with you and will not leave your side, blessed angel!” Nicholas handed the pouch to one of his knights: “Guard it with your life!” He ordered him.

Nicholas refused to leave the sight of Agnolo and insisted on accompanying him to meet Cardinal Carafa. Although he was not invited, for some reason he was convinced that Cardinal Carafa knew very well not to intervene with the authority that the Vatican had bestowed upon the French captain.

When Michelangelo was led to Father Bronzino’s office, Bronzino seemed surprised to see Michelangelo and his brother at his door. Pretending that he cared, he looked at Agnolo’s torn shirt and his cut arm and said: “My Lord, what had happened to you?”

“Nothing, Father. All is well. The Lord, my protector, revealed himself again today,” said Agnolo.

“Well, praise be the name of the Lord. What happened?”

“We were attacked by a large mob, but the Lord sent his angels and smote the evil ones.”

“My Lord. It is a dangerous world,” said Father Bronzino to Agnolo and turned to Nicholas to ask him: “Did your men catch any of the attackers?”

“No, they were reduced to snakes and tiny black birds.”

Father Bronzino stared at the French captain. Bronzino knew that Nicholas was not hallucinating, and neither was Nicholas someone whose word would be questioned. Bronzino also knew the authority that the French captain had. The French King, who had funded the presence of the knights and demanded their role to protect Agnolo, was advancing all over Europe, had occupied Naples and Vince, and threatened the Pope himself. Bronzino shook his head while rubbing his chin with his right hand but said nothing.

Bronzino led the group to the cardinal’s office. When the group entered, the cardinal stopped his conversation with some of his senior aides who were giving him a report on the status of the insurgency and results of the prisoner questioning. In his hand, he held a long list with many names. He put the list on his desk and stood up to greet his visitors.

His eyes went directly to Agnolo. With grief and concern, he asked as he was approaching the young lad: “What happened to you, my son?”

“Nothing, Holy Father. We were attacked, but the Lord sent his angels to deliver us,” answered Agnolo.

Nicholas proceeded to tell the cardinal the accounts of the battle that he and his knights had fought earlier that morning. When he got to the part where Agnolo spoke to freeze the attackers, he paused. Nicholas took a deep breath then said: “And, Agnolo ordered them to “freeze”. And, they did!”

He went on to tell how Agnolo ordered them to “reduce” and they were transformed into fleeing serpents and confused small blackbirds.

Agnolo was embarrassed by the attention and put his head down. “I did nothing. The Lord is our savior,” he softly whispered.

The cardinal noticed that Agnolo’s voice had changed. The young man had also acquired a little hair on his face and he got much taller. Although he received daily reports on the status of the rebellion which included a report on the safety of Agnolo, it had been quite a long time since Cardinal Carafa had seen the young man in person.

Cardinal Carafa was alarmed and concerned. The fresh news that he had just received from Captain Nicholas confirmed reports that he had been receiving. The insurgents are determined

to do harm to Agnolo – either kill him or kidnap him. Carafa walked towards Agnolo and hugged him. He took Agnolo's left hand and led him to sit to his right.

Each one found a suitable place to sit, with Michelangelo trying to get as close to the cardinal as possible. He had gotten this far. Should he abandon the project and inform the cardinal that he was no longer interested in the project? Wondered Michelangelo. What about Agnolo? Will the cardinal award the entire program to the young lad?

Cardinal Carafa ordered one of the tending monks to bring clean linen, water, and wine to wash Agnolo's arm. He sat quietly for a long time. No one dared to speak.

"Well, Michelangelo, I hope you had discussed the matter with your brother and told him what I wish for the two of you to do," said Cardinal Carafa. "Of course, with the situation as it is, extreme measures must be taken to protect Agnolo while the project was being implemented. This, I am sure, will make your job very much more difficult, Captain Nicholas!"

"We are here for the appeasement of our King and for the honor of our country," said Nicholas.

All this talk was very confusing to both Agnolo and Michelangelo who all the while understood that the French knights were there to guard the relic and provide protection for an innocent boy who was being targeted by wicked people.

"Father, I have discussed the matter with Agnolo and our parents and it is unfortunate that Agnolo is not interested in being my partner in this project," said Michelangelo. "Agnolo, please tell the Holy Father about what you have decided."

"Holy Father, I am busy with many projects at home and I am committed to continue doing the Lord's work at the market and everywhere in my home town. Many people expect me to be there to help them and I cannot let them down."

"My dear precious boy, the Lord will take care of his sheep. I know that you will be missed, but the Lord will provide a way for those in need. I need you here to implement this great project at any cost."

"Father, I have great trust in my brother's ability and I have shared with him some more ideas and concepts that I am sure he could implement with great success," said Agnolo. He proceeded to tell the cardinal details about the two techniques that he had learned and used at the palace – the Communication technique and the Baptism of the Stone technique. Cardinal Carafa, Father Bronzino, and Captain Nicholas marveled at the young boy's ingenuity and Cardinal Carafa reflected on the divine symbolism behind each technique.

“Agnolo, I want you involved in this project. In fact, after consideration and professional discussion with many, I have decided that I want you to be the model for that great statue that you designed.” The cardinal’s idea of using Agnolo as the model was his own. Contrary to what he said, he had not discussed the matter with anyone.

Michelangelo was shocked at such a proposal, but could not immediately calculate all the long-term implications of such a plan. Indeed, Agnolo would be a great model for the statue. Aside from his deformed left hand and unique coloration, the boy looked like a Greek god.

Things happen fast when a person of authority decides to take action.

“Michelangelo, it is my decision that you lead this project. Agnolo, you will work as an apprentice with your brother and provide artistic advice when he needs it. You will also serve as the model for this great work of art!” Cardinal Carafa made his demands and orders.

“My precious son, you need to tell your parents that I will personally see to your safety while you are here. With the help of our Lord, and the protection of our Holy Lady, Captain Nicholas and his devoted knights will repel any threat on your life.”

“Michelangelo, you will begin the work immediately as soon as Agnolo is able to make berthing arrangements here in Florence. Of course, he could always stay with the monks at their quarters.”

It happened so fast. Michelangelo’s heart was beating with excitement.

Three nuns carrying clean white linen, warm water, and wine entered the room. They washed Agnolo’s arm, but he refused to get it wrapped. “It has already been healed,” said Agnolo. “There is no need for the wrapping.”

The nuns brought a cup of warm soup made of boiled honey and herbs for Agnolo to drink. They said that it was to cleanse his system and prevent infection. Both Cardinal Carafa and Captain Nicholas swiftly objected and forbade Agnolo from drinking the herbs. Nicholas handed the cup back to Sister Bandecca. “You drink it,” he said. “It may cleanse your system!”

Cardinal Carafa greeted his guests to the door and hugged Agnolo tightly before he let the group go.

Michelangelo was elated! He had a lot to think about, but he remembered that Agnolo had told him that the Lord would grant him the desires of his heart in two days. “This was part one,” he thought to himself. “Oh, Agno! You are truly incredible. Would I really get the rest of my wishes in two years, as Agnolo said?”

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While walking home with Agnolo, Michelangelo saw Torrigiano, the boy who broke his nose. Torrigiano was walking on the other side of the street with several boys whom Michelangelo did not know. He seemed to be in excellent health.

Michelangelo remembered Agnolo's words regarding Torrigiano, but said nothing to his brother.

30

The Politics of Art

Michelangelo fought the urge to stay in Florence to prepare things for his upcoming major project, but yielded to the idea that he should accompany Agnolo back to Settignano to explain to his parents the cardinal's decision and plan. He was also sure that the news of the rebels' attack must had reached the Cellinis and he felt that he should give his parents his version of the events.

Furthermore, he certainly did not want to convey the impression that he abandoned Agnolo at a time when another attack by the rebels on the trip home was possible. Most of all, he wanted to see Chola!

Nicholas and his men chose the longer route back to the quarry, a route that did not go by the forest. The trip back to Settignano was uneventful.

When Agnolo and his brother got home, there were two monks from the Settignano church. They had been there for several hours and they had brought the news of the attack on Agnolo and his safe escape. Upon the arrival of Agnolo, they prayed and departed.

After calming his family down, Michelangelo proceeded to tell his parents the summary of the events of the day. The cardinal's decision was bitter sweet for all except Chola who saw nothing good in being apart from Agnolo. She listened tentatively to every word that Michelangelo said hoping that the story would have a happy ending – an ending that does not necessitate Agnolo's involvement in this project so far away from her.

She wailed and sobbed. "Where is my heart?" She asked Agnolo. "Here, Lola! I protected it with my own life," said Agnolo who had the crystal heart hidden under his outer garment.

Chola held it and closed her teary eyes and prayed. "Can we go to the palace now?" She whispered in Agnolo's ear.

He whispered back: "It is too late, and it is getting dark. Let us wait till tomorrow."

"Please Agno,"

As it was beginning to get dark, Francisca objected that her children leave the cottage. She understood that the two needed a little time to resolve the new issues and come to peace with the newly imposed arrangement. "They do feel rejuvenated after their visit to their secret cave," she thought. "But, with the night about to set in, it may not be safe."

"Mommy, we will be gone for just a short while," said Chola.

Michelangelo's heart was filling with sorrow and hurt as he listened to Chola. He had an exciting and a good day. "I will not let this temporary issue ruin my day. Soon, things will be different. Agnolo will be in Florence far from Chola and his eyes will be charmed by many of the beautiful and aggressive ladies of Florence. Soon, time and distance will separate these two and hopefully open Chola's eyes to my deep affection for her," thought Michelangelo to himself.

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Chola put her arm around Agnolo's neck and they disappeared into the winding allies of the quarry. The Gorges, chambers, and towering boulders that reached two hundred feet high rapidly engulfed the couple within their climbing and creeping herb shrubs and grape vines. Two French knights followed Agnolo on foot, but doves appeared above throwing grape leaves that caused the knights to slip and fall. Ultimately, the two knights accepted defeat as they lost their targets.

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As soon as they entered the palace, Chola broke into tears. "Swear to me that you will not leave me. Agno, I can't live without you. I will die without you," she sobbed. Her tears were genuine, but the serenity of the palace overcame her pain. Chola complained to the palace family with her earthly concerns. Her eyes stayed with Mary Jo's eyes for a long time. They had a lot to say to each other. And they spoke, then they smiled. The family formed a sphere around the two and all flew high and floated. Their song was new and their beauty ever unique. Then, in a cloud of mist Agnolo and Chola disappeared.

Chola pulled her dress revealing her legs and hugged Agnolo. And, he loved her. They breathed hard and with heavy eyes they spoke, although not a word was heard. "I will never leave you," they said.

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When they got home, only Francisca and Michelangelo were still up. They had been talking the entire time and Michelangelo had a chance to express some concerns about Chola's extreme emotional tie to Agnolo. "Mommy, I just worry about my little sister. That is not to mention that the wicked world around may not understand the deep and unique love we have for each other," he reasoned.

The Cellinis were excited about the involvement of their two sons in such a major project and they had to come to terms with the fact that their younger son is no longer a baby. At some point, they agreed, he must grow his own wings and they must let go of their little flock.

Michelangelo suggested a suitable and comforting solution for where Agnolo could stay in Florence. Although Agnolo was likely expected to stay with the monks at their quarters, Michelangelo and his parents agreed that such an option cannot be safe, even in the very scrutinizing and vigilant presence of Captains Nicholas and Philippe, and their knights. The monasteries, at the time, seemed to be volatile places that were infested with many monks who were descending to the ranks of the rebels. Agnolo could easily be killed or kidnapped in such an environment.

Michelangelo reminded his parents of his sustained tight relationship with Duke Lorenzo de Medici with whom he had found favor and had stayed at his palace for many years. The Duke, who was a second cousin to Francisca, was known to own many apartments within walking distance from the cathedral where the project was to be implemented. Michelangelo further explained that the Duke, who was the head of the city government, had a leading voice on the town council – the Signoria – that awards projects to artists of their liking. Michelangelo also added that he had suspected that the Duke had likely played a significant role in his receiving the commission for this large project. "To express my continued gratitude for his kind support, I have decided to include the talented Giulio, the youngest son of the duke in the short list of apprentices that I have chosen for the project," said Michelangelo.

Several years ago, Michelangelo and Duke Lorenzo Medici's eldest son, Cristoforo, had built a close relationship when Michelangelo lived at Duke Medici's palace. There, he lived for three years, carved several of his first marble works, was taught by great Florentine humanists, and was given a violet robe to wear.

"I think it would be a great idea that Agnolo would share an apartment with other apprentices who would be working on the project. I can honestly say that such an experience would be invaluable. I attest to that from my own career," said Michelangelo.

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Upon Michelangelo's advice, Benvenuto negotiated the rental of a second-floor apartment that was owned by Duke Medici. The apartment provided the security needed for the endangered lad as well as an environment for the exchange of ideas with three other lads his age, one of whom was Giulio, the youngest son of Duke Lorenzo. The French knights also managed to rent the entire first floor with its adjacent stables. They left four of their knights in Settignano and brought the rest of the company to Florence. Their presence was intentionally detected and visible at all times. They were involved in every aspect of Agnolo's life and even monitored the food that the inn keeper brought to him from time to time. Tota also accompanied Agnolo to

Florence and lived in a private room at one end of the large apartment. She maintained the orderly running of the place including cooking for the four young men and cleaning after them.

Life in Florence was very different from that to which Agnolo was accustomed in Settignano. The street noise lasted into the early hours of the morning and privacy was as rare a commodity as was honesty.

Like a developing pride of young lions, the four roommates were sorting their ranking in the group. Agnolo whose speech did not assist him, was first accepted as "Just a pretty face" whose relation to Michelangelo, and not his talents, was thought to had brought him to Florence and put him in the modeling seat. In many ways, Agnolo's roommates felt sorry for him. Within a few days at the apartment, two of his roommates, Allessio and Jacopo, heard Agnolo speak in an unknown tongue while he was alone in his room. It was as if he were conversing with someone. It was a warm conversation, only one side the two roommates were able to hear – Agnolo's side. The next day, while walking by his closed room door, Allessio and Jacopo heard many sounds. It was as if someone was moving pieces of furniture around. They did not bother to investigate and being new neighbors, they felt that it was inappropriate to invade Agnolo's private space. The noise from within Agnolo's room suddenly stopped and the two heard chocking sounds. Although they felt obligated to investigate, and they were definitely curious, they refrained from entering Agnolo's room.

Agnolo's strange behavior, however, did not stop the spoiled Giulio, Duke Lorenzo's youngest son who shared apartment with Agnolo, from bombarding Agnolo with many questions. Somehow, Giulio had the inherent belief that he was entitled to the attention of those around him. Although polite, his questions were certainly intrusive.

Agnolo was a loner in this new world. And, in his own and different way, so was Giulio. After a few days, Allessio and Jacopo convinced Giulio to join them in paying a visit to Agnolo in his room. When the three knocked at Agnolo's door, he was laying on his bed starring at the ceiling. In his bosom, he was holding the crystal heart.

When he opened the door, the three were greatly amazed at what they saw. It was like an art museum. There were many of the statues that Agnolo had made. It was then that they realized that there is more to that quiet boy with the mysterious background and reputation. Some became jealous and others cautious, but they were all curious about the presence of a company of French knights in the first floor of their building. Somehow, they detected that the presence of the knights had something to do with Agnolo. All three had heard of the strange things that were happening in Settignano and around the cathedral in Florence. There were many rumors and the line between the truth and imagination was faint and unclear. They all

had heard of a saint-like erratic boy who performed miracles, drank a lot of wine, and ate oat and honey. But, they never connected these stories to Agnolo.

When the three apprentices saw the clay model of the proposed statue of David that Agnolo had in his room they thought it was the work of Michelangelo. "No, I made that!" Said Agnolo. "This is the model that Master Michelangelo will use for the project," said Giulio with doubt. "You made that? My father was under the impression that the entire project and its idea was that of Master Michelangelo."

Agnolo did not comment.

The three uninvited apprentices found Agnolo's room fascinating. They walked around looking at the other statues and objects. Among those, they found a small statue of Mary Jo – the Madonna. Giulio looked with shock at the small statue. "Did you do this also?" He asked. Agnolo knotted. "A long time ago," said Agnolo. The statue was a replica of a large work that Michelangelo had carved and presented to Giulio's father many years prior. Giulio assumed that Agnolo had copied Michelangelo's work. But, he realized that Agnolo had not seen the statue that Michelangelo had made for his father since it was kept at the Medici palace where Agnolo had not been.

When one of the boys got close to the leather pouch that kept the crystal heart, Agnolo's mannerisms changed. "Don't touch that," he said firmly. The boy backed off not understanding the abrupt boundaries set forth.

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At the construction site, the number of doves quadrupled. The newly arriving doves looked and behaved quite differently from the indigenous Florentine ones.

In addition to the many doves, for two weeks, the construction site swarmed with many workers each with a specific task. Scaffolds were erected, and Michelangelo labored many hours without stopping to even get a drink of water, wine, or a bite of food. He meticulously measured and precisely marked and drew lines and drove pegs into the stone. His apprentices along with many hired hands watched and assisted when they were called upon. Agnolo kept his silence most of the time, but seemed frustrated from time to time for undisclosed reasons. With loving and respectful eyes, Agnolo watched his brother use his idea and get the glory for his design. It was as if he had felt ownership of the project, even though it was unofficial. After all, Michelangelo was his loving brother and his success was a reflection on the entire family. Agnolo's frustration, however, was likely because of the length of time that the planning stage was taking. "If it were left to me, I would just begin carving. I do not need to plan and draw

lines. The stone always tells me what to do. It always talks to me and let me know where to carve!" He likely internalized.

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In Settignano, things were very different and sad. Agnolo's voice was no longer echoed around. His humming and chiseling sounds were gone. Even the doves seemed to have disappeared or moved elsewhere. And, with Tota gone, the complete task of cooking and housekeeping fell on Francisca and Chola who had lost weight at an alarming rate.

Nightly, Chola walked into Agnolo's room and lay in his bed. She still could smell his scent and remembered his voice. She cried alone and her mother's concern for her health could not convince her to eat enough to sustain herself.

One afternoon, Chola started up the hill towards the palace. There, she thought, I could find rest with the holy family. She was weak and almost incoherent. For hours, she wandered around the quarry looking for the entrance to the palace, but there were no doves around to lead her and she could not find it. Out of exhaustion, she lay her head on a rock and fell asleep. When her parents noticed her disappearance, they were very alarmed. They had gotten used to her being gone for several hours with Agnolo, but they had never known her to be gone by herself. Francisca even thought that her daughter may have tried to find her way to Florence to see Agnolo.

While the family was helping Agnolo and Tota get set up in the new apartment in Florence, Chola accompanied them on two trips. But, in both times, she was riding inside the carriage and could not really see where the carriage was going. Both Benvenuto and Francisca were certain that Chola could not find her way to Agnolo on her own. Their hearts grew weary when they thought of the danger in which their young fragile daughter was, while riding by the forest alone, unprotected from the wicked ones who resided there. "My Lord, Venu, these evil whackos could kidnap her and hold her hostage in exchange for Agnolo whom they want."

On that thought, both Benvenuto and Francisca jumped and rushed out the door. Philippe and one of his knights were tending to their horses.

"Philippe, she is gone! We can't find her. It has been several hours," said Benvenuto.

"We did see her leaving about five hours ago and saw no reason to follow her. She was heading towards the quarry," said the French captain.

"Are you sure she did not leave the property?"

"Yes, we are certain. All the animals are here, and we are not missing any horses or mules."

Philippe disappeared inside his quarters for a few moments then came out.

“Let’s go find her before it gets too dark,” he said.

The night was quiet and aside from the sound of gentle wind and a few tardy honeybees, the silence was encompassing.

First, the Cellinis, and Philippe and two of his knights walked as a group when Philippe decided to split the search party. He ordered his knights to take a different route from that which he and the Cellinis were following. They shouted loudly: “Chola, Chola, where are you?”

It was not too long before, the voice of the two knights were heard: “We found her!”

The two knights appeared; one of them was carrying Chola like a child in his two arms. She was pale and unable to speak. There were tears in her eyes. When she opened her eyes, she looked at her mother and whispered: “Mommy, I have to see him!”

Francisca wept. “Yes, my baby. Yes, we all miss him. We will soon go to see him,” said Francisca.

Although it had been only two weeks since Agnolo and Tota set residence in Florence, it seemed like forever for everyone.

Philippe fought some tears. He too could relate to being away from people that he loved.

“Tomorrow, we are doing a rotation with the squad that is now in Florence. It is time that some of them come here and we go there. She could come with us,” said Philippe.

The rotation details were kept secret from everyone. No one knew the time or the number of knights that rotated between Florence and Settignano. For security reasons, only Philippe and Nicholas knew and refused to share these details with anyone even their very own trusted knights. It is not that the two captains did not trust their knights, but it was decided that it was prudent not to share these plans with the rest of the knights less they are captured and tortured for information.

Despite her weakness, Chola opened her eyes and whispered: “Papa, I want to go. I want to go. I could stay with Tota!”

“Yes, baby!” Said Benvenuto.

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The next day, in mid-morning, Philippe knocked at the cottage door. Chola and Francisca were still asleep. Benvenuto had quietly left the cottage earlier. On his way to his office at the

quarry, he stopped by and told Philippe that the two ladies were still asleep, but he can knock and wake them up in a few hours. He also asked Philippe to stop by before he left with Chola to Florence.

Francisca heard the knock at the door and knew it had to have been Philippe.

“Just a minute,” she replied. “She will be ready in a short while.”

Philippe left and walked to the back pavilion where his men were and the horses were being prepared for the trip to Florence. In addition to their weapons and a bit of wine, the men seemed to have packed much of their personal effects, indicating that they will be relocating for more than just a day or two.

In a short time, Chola appeared with a large smile on her thinning face. Despite her apparent weakness, she looked very happy and energetic. It must be true that if sadness dissolves the bones, hope brings life to the dead.

Francisca told Philippe that Chola wants to say “Bye” to her father before she left, and he decided to join them.

“When will you be back?” Asked Benvenuto.

“It will be a while before I return, but Nicholas and a number of the men will be here in the next couple of days,” answered Philippe. “The young lady could come back with Nicholas.”

“You take good care of my little angel. She is your responsibility!”

“Without a doubt!” Said Philippe.

Benvenuto walked with the others down the hill where the group of knights and their horses were waiting. With tears in her eyes, Chola kissed her parents: “I wish we were all together like we were before!”

Philippe helped Chola on his horse and he jumped in front of her and the group moved in at a slow running pace.

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Chola’s arrival to Florence was unexpected. Agnolo was at the construction site along with the other apprentices. Tota, who was at the apartment alone, greeted her as if she had not seen her for several years. She could not get enough of kissing her. “You do not look good, baby. You must be missing my good cooking,” she said while looking at Chola with worried eyes. “I will fatten you up while you are here!” They both smiled!

“Can we go to see Agnolo now?” Asked Chola.

“Yes, I have prepared some food for him and his friends. We can go. Let me finish my cooking first.”

“Who else lives here?”
Tota led Chola to the kitchen where she was moving around preparing food for Agnolo and his company.

“After you, mom, and dad brought Agnolo’s things here, three other boys moved in. They all work with your brother. They are all artists and Michlo is teaching all of them. Each of them has his own room. They are being paid by the Church and the Council. In fact, one of the boys is a distant family member. His father is Duke Medici, who is your mom’s cousin. So, I guess in a way we have found our long-lost cousin,” Tota laughed as she was moving around while carrying large pans and hot vessels.

“I will go to Agnolo’s room and wait for you there,” said Chola who was feeling weak after the trip from Settignano.

When Chola entered Agnolo’s room, she became emotional. She could smell his scent. She looked for the crystal heart, but could not find it. “Agnolo must be taking it with him to work!” She suspected and broke a smile. “Oh, how I miss him!”

When Tota was ready, she shouted: “Ola, are you ready, baby?”

“Yes”

Chola carried a light basket of freshly baked bread, while Tota carried the rest. The two walked the short distance from the apartment to the worksite near the cathedral.

The sun was bright and hot. Michelangelo, who was standing on a fifteen-foot-high scaffold, saw Tota entering the fenced-in space where the work was taken place. At first, he did not recognize Chola because of her weight loss. He stared at the approaching image of the two ladies while wiping the sweat off his face and eyes.

“Oh, my Lord. It is Chola!” His heart began to beat fast. Her looks alarmed him. It would be naïve to say that he loved her as a sister. He knew it, and he was almost sure that she did. But, his feelings towards her at that moment were more of a caring man than a lover. She looked so weak and so different. He jumped down and ran towards the entrance to the enclosed area. Agnolo and the other men did not understand the master’s sudden move. They watched where Michelangelo was running towards and realized that he was running to greet Tota and a young lady who was accompanying her.

Chola's eyes were looking for Agnolo. And she found him! She shouted: "Agno!" And ran towards him. Michelangelo slowed his pace and the three met at the same time. They hugged and kissed several times.

"Lola, you need to rest," said Agnolo.

"I brought food for everyone," said Tota to the approaching three young men who had been anticipating the food.

"Let's go to my apartment," said Michelangelo. "We can eat there and rest for a while."

Since the project started, Michelangelo had moved into a new apartment not too far from the work site. It was very large and lavish. There, he had a living-in maid and a servant. These two ensured that the posh residence of the master was presentable and fit for dignitaries and Florentine aristocrats.

Agnolo and Tota had been in Michelangelo's new apartment several times before, but neither Chola nor the other three apprentices, who stood far away watching, had been there.

Agnolo took the basket of bread from Chola with his left hand and surrounded her with his right arm. His whole body was hot and sweaty and he could feel her heart beat in throbbing rhythm. Michelangelo led the way, followed by Tota and Agnolo then Chola. A few steps behind, walked the other three apprentices quietly, as if in anticipation of an imminent great event.

Michelangelo was very proud of his new accommodations and he wanted his apprentices and family to witness his success. Indeed, the place was very imposing. Even Giulio who had lived in luxury all his life and had seen many breath-taking palaces was surprised and greatly impressed. "This is a small palace you have here, Master!" Said Giulio. "Indeed, it rivals many palaces including my parents'."

When he made that statement, Giulio noticed Chola's glance towards him.

At the large dining table, Michelangelo's maid helped Tota unveiling the food and placing it on the expensive plates that the living-in servant had brought. The flatware was of the finest quality silver known. One did not have to be an expert in snob-appeal to realize that these were no cheap utensils.

When the servant brought the crystal wine goblets, Chola who was sitting to Agnolo's right leaned over and whispered: "Where is it?"

He knew what she was talking about. He held her hand and put it near his chest where there was a pocket with protruding contents. It felt hot – very hot! She smiled.

“Eat, drink, and be merry!” Said Michelangelo, who sat at the head of the table, with a commanding voice.

Between bites and wine sips, Giulio’s eyes were guilty of many sins. And Chola, who felt his probe, unconsciously reciprocated.

“You did not tell us that you have a beautiful sister, Agnolo!” Said Jacopo.

Chola blushed and lifted her eyes only to meet Giulio’s eyes who was staring at her. Although Agnolo was oblivious to what was happening around him, Tota and Michelangelo noticed.

Tota who was sitting at the table next Chola interjected: “Giulio, I guess in these past few weeks, you got to meet relatives that you had never met before.” Tota was refereeing to Giulio’s meeting with Agnolo, and now Chola.

“Indeed,” he said. “I remember my father talking about our relatives in Settignano. In fact, years ago, when the Master lived with us in my parents’ palace, my father constantly remined him that we are a family.”

Michelangelo smiled. Giulio’s father had been more than family to him. In addition to his love and accommodation, Michelangelo could not forget that it was likely the duke’s support that tilted the balance in his favor and allowed him to get the commission for the pending project.

“How long are you staying in Florence, Chola?” Asked Giulio. “Tomorrow night, my parents are hosting a large gala. If you like to dance, you do not want to miss this event. And with your brother’s permission and Master Michelangelo, I would like for you to be my guest of honor.”

Michelangelo felt that he was being sided by Giulio, but did not know what to say. He had already announced to all the workers and the support crew that the work will cease the next day while waiting for tools and needed material. The initial preparations for any project always seemed to be the most tenuous and boring. Michelangelo certainly did not hope or expect competition from his young apprentice. And, if it was difficult to compete with Agnolo, it was certainly impossible to compete with the young, rich, and boisterous apprentice. Furthermore, if his argument against Agnolo was that he was Chola’s brother, what argument could he pose against this new threat.

Chola did not respond to Giulio’s invitation, but looked to Agnolo to say something.

Before Agnolo could speak, Michelangelo took a sip of wine, put his crystal goblet down and said: “I think it would be a wonderful idea for you to meet the Duke and his family and enjoy the evening at their palace.”

Tota could sense the tension and the conflicting flaring emotions, but did not feel that it was her place to interject.

“I think it would be a great idea if Agnolo could also go,” continued Michelangelo.

“Oh, of course. If I failed to say that, please forgive me, Agnolo. My parents and family would truly enjoy talking to you and learning about your art work and the models that you have built for the different projects,” said Giulio who by mentioning Agnolo’s models had inadvertently caused discomfort for Michelangelo.

“We forgot about some minor details. I am certain that Chola, being unaware that she would be invited to a gala in Florence, did not prepare an appropriate attire for the occasion. And, I know that applies to my young brother as well! Maybe it would be appropriate to wait to another more suitable time,” said Michelangelo.

“That should not be a problem, Master. We are taught to value people because the Lord had died for them and not because of the clothes they wear.”

Chola was deeply touched by Giulio’s remark.

“I think my sisters, Dianna and Dea, would absolutely love to learn about life at the quarry away from all the madness of the city,” noted Giulio.

Michelangelo smiled with unknown comfort and looked at Chola: “What do you think little princess?”

“I think it would be great! Right, Agno?”

“Yes,” said Agnolo.

“I do too. I think it will be a great chance for Agnolo to meet Giulio’s sisters. Their beauty is only paralleled by their poise and style,” said Michelangelo before he took a long sip of wine.

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Upon the insistence of Tota and Agnolo, Chola ate a large portion of food and drank her share of wine before the group separated – Michelangelo and his helpers went to the worksite and Tota and Chola back to their apartment.

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When they got to the apartment, Chola was so sleepy she could barely climb the steps to the second floor. She ran to Tota’s room and lay in her bed.

While Chola was in her deep sleep, Tota got one of the French knights to help her set up another bed in her room. One for her to sleep on.

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Chola woke up at the sound of Agnolo talking to his roommates. It was getting dark. She did not feel like engaging the group, so she remained until the noise subsided and slipped out of Tota's quarters and walked quietly but swiftly towards Agnolo's room, across the large living room and the dining room. Without knocking she opened the door and walked in.

On his bed, Agnolo was lying down, almost naked.

Chola quickly shut the door, locked it, and ran to hug him.

"Oh, how I missed you!" She said as she threw her limp body over his.

"Oh, Lola. I missed you terribly. I was lying down thinking about you. I am worried about you. You have lost so much weight," said Agnolo.

"Agno, I can't live without you. Please don't ever leave me. You are my life. You are everything and without you I am nothing."

They kissed, and he hugged her for a long time. She latched on to him, as he was trying to get up.

"Where are you going?" She asked.

"I am going to open both windows," he answered.

She knew what he meant. "Am I that loud that you have to open both windows to bring in the street noise to cover my moans," with the voice of a pampered kitten, she whispered with a smile.

Agnolo came back to bed. He slowly touched her. And, with their arms and lips locked, he found a comfortable place to enter and stay.

The hours went by and he slowly loved her while the street noise concealed their passion. From her lips he ate and was satisfied, but never full. And from his strength she drank until the two were expend.

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Tota did not look for Chola. She knew that she was with Agnolo and she was not going to interrupt their time together. But, as it was getting late, she had to think about preparing Agnolo and Chola for the upcoming event the following night.

In many ways, Tota wished that Chola and Agnolo were not going to the gala. Intuitively, she had a bad feeling about the entire setup. "These kids are going to feel so out of place. They will be like two monks in a brothel," she internalized. But, she had no authority to stop them from going. Tota had many thoughts on the matter, but she was not in a position to express these thoughts.

Her task, she acknowledged, would be to prepare Agnolo and Chola for the large party. Her duty involved getting them ready mentally as well as working with their limited attire in a short period of time to make it as suitable as possible for the formal event. Tota, who neither had experience in aristocratic protocol nor in cosmopolitan life, somehow knew that things could go wrong very fast in such an environment, whether through malice or just pure societal demands and expectations.

As Tota was tending to the lanterns in the living room, Agnolo's door opened and Chola stood at the door blocking the draft that emerged from the two open windows to the open door. Her hair was all over her body and she had an angelic smile on her face. She looked as if she had gained the weight that she had lost. She was calm and content.

"Tota, we need to get ready for tomorrow," said Chola.

"Yes, my dear. Yes!" Said Tota. "Is your brother awake?"

"Yes."

While they were talking, Allessio and Jacopo walked in. Along with Giulio, the two had left earlier that evening and walked to one of the many taverns that surrounded the area for an evening meal and wine. Upon finishing their meal, Giulio left the two and decided to go to his parents' palace to inform them about his invited guests.

"Chola, you have certainly gained the attention of our friend, Giulio," said Allessio. "All night, he could not stop talking about you."

Chola blushed. "He is a very nice young man," said Chola. "Plus, we are related to each other, after all. It would be great to finally meet this part of our family that we had not met before."

The conversation was short and courteous. The two apprentices wished Chola and Tota a pleasant evening and each disappeared into his room.

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Tota was overwhelmed with the task of preparing Agnolo and Chola for the gala.

“My dear child,” said Tota. “My advice to you is for you to be yourself and don’t let anyone cause you to forget that you are very very special!”

Chola hugged Tota. “Thank you, Tota! I am looking forwards to it, but I am very nervous and apprehensive about what to expect.”

“You will be fine. Just be yourself and always remember how precious you are!”

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While Chola went to sleep, Tota stayed up working on Chola’s dress and Agnolo’s attire. She had little to work with. The two young adults had never had a need for formal evening attires before, and in Chola’s case, she came to visit her brother literally with the cloth on her back.

Of course, the two young Cellinis had nice attires that they wore when they went to church, but evening attires, especially those which were worn at large galas, were quite different. In fact, the styles changed so rapidly that guests who wore last year’s fashion were pitied, looked down upon, and secretly mocked.

It is not that the Cellinis could not buy at least one nice attire for each of their children, but it was that they never thought that they would ever need it. Neither did they know what to purchase or where to have it made. Of course, Michelangelo could have provided great help in answering these questions, but he was too preoccupied with the project. In fact, he was so consumed by it that he did not even stop by the next day to help prepare his siblings for the gala!

“I wish Michelangelo could help,” thought Tota. “After all, he encouraged Chola to accept Giulio’s invitation and thought it would be a good idea.”

In addition to the limited choices of attire that Agnolo and Chola had, Tota really did not know the dress code for such events. She knew, however, that her kids did not have it.

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The next day went by very fast. Agnolo stayed in his room most of the day and Chola dropped by several times. He was happy to see her. He had missed her and felt the painful void that their separation had brought. It was as if they knew that they will soon be apart again, and they had to take all they could to save in a reservoir.

When it was early evening, Tota brought an outfit that she had chosen for Agnolo and laid it on his bed. She went back to her quarters and was there for a long time helping Chola getting

dressed and fixing her hair. In a creative whim, Tota had cut some fresh flowers and made a beautiful tiara of vines and flowers for Chola to wear. Tota also made a long matching necklace of the same flowers and vines. When she was finished, Chola looked like a glowing Greek goddess or a Roman princess.

Before long, a different noise was heard on the streets through open windows. A carriage led by six white horses was finding its way to the apartment where Chola and Agnolo waited. The noise attracted the attention of everyone around. Even windows that were shut, opened and all the neighbors went out to their balconies and their windows to investigate the event.

The French knights were also impressed by the royal looking carriage. The lavishly decorated carriage was gilded with pure gold and small glass windows that allowed those inside the choice to see or and be seen. Two well-dressed slaves a Mongolian named Luka and an Arab named Sukran drove the carriage and controlled its beautifully adorned and arrogantly bouncing horses.

The entire small world waited to see who was worthy of such a treatment. No one around imagined that such a carriage would ever be worthy of any of the neighborhood inhabitants. They all have heard of such elegance and pump, but seldom seen it. It was truly worthy of royalty.

Nicholas and four of his knights were designated to escort the carriage and provide security for Agnolo while at the Duke's palace.

When Agnolo and Chola emerged out of the front door of the building, they looked as if they were going to a costume party. Their peasant clothing was beautiful, but entirely unfitting for the carriage that awaited them. Chola was excited and giggled loudly!

The two slaves stood at the sides of the open carriage door and bowed. Sukran assisted Chola in climbing into the carriage and Agnolo jumped in right behind her. The large carriage was made to accommodate six people and Chola and Agnolo felt lost in its large and fancy interior. "This is as big as my room at home," said Chola while giggling uncontrollably. The two sat on one side next to one another. The slaves closed the carriage doors and the wagon proceeded through the streets of Florence guarded from the front and the rear by the French knights. Viewers on both sides of the streets gathered. Some cheered as if to hail royalty and many clapped while some even bowed.

It was a long ride before the carriage was led out of town to an open road. After a short and pleasant ride, the horizon defined a large and imposing construction that spread over a large landscape on the river Arno. Before long, the racing chariot approached a large gilded gate that allowed into a very large fenced-in palace. The sound of the carriage wheels changed as they

entered the gate and the road was transformed into a large and long mosaic of bright colored pebbles. The sound of music and noisy crowd could be heard. The carriage passed by three large marble fountains that spouted water in different shapes and from a multitude of different spouts. The water fountains were decorated by many statues and carvings – some were of marble and some of gilded bronze. Agnolo and Chola had little chance to admire the art work all around. It was too much for the senses to interpret and process. All around, there were trees and flowers and vines – well manicured and pampered. As the carriage approached a large pavilion that held many of the guests, it slowed down. There, many other carriages parked in front and near the large roman arched pavilion entrance. But when the carriage that held Agnolo and Chola arrived, all of those who stood around noticed and with curiosity and anticipation looked to see who would exist from it.

(Song 19: The Florence of Glory)

Among those standing near the entrance of the pavilion, stood Giulio with several of his friends – girls and boys. In his formal attire and adorned with many gold and precious stones, he looked very differently – possibly more mature – and definitely regel.

When Giulio saw the carriage, his heart jumped. He had sent it earlier to pick up Chola and Agnolo. Among those standing with Giulio were his two sisters, Dianna and Dea, and his older brother, Cristoforo.

The carriage came to a stop and the two slaves jumped to open its doors. Chola was extremely excited and when she was able to recognize Giulio her heart murmured.

Giulio rushed towards the carriage and before the slaves were able to carry their duties of assisting Chola off the wagon, he was there to hold her hand as she stepped off. He politely bowed and kissed her hand and waited as Agnolo jumped off behind her.

There was a period of silence as everyone watched the two peasanty dressed couple walk awkwardly towards the pavilion escorted by Giulio.

“You look beautiful, Chola!” Whispered Giulio in Chola’s ears. “You look like one of the goddesses that I had many dreams about!”

Chola blushed and giggled nervously.

“I love the flowers and the vines!” He continued.

Before Agnolo and Chola got to the staring crowd, they were able to hear some laughter.

“So, I see that our peasant guests are here. Or, are these a part of the hired entertainment?” Said Dianna with a voice that all could hear. Dianna’s comment caught Giulio by surprise. He

knew that his older sister would likely to be protective of him and would have the attitude that no girl is good enough for her young and talented brother, but such an overt insult was unexpected and beyond his imagination. He knew that she could be cruel, very cruel, but he thought that she would at least be courteous for the sake of the festive occasion.

Giulio had shared with both of his sisters, as well as his parents and his older brother, how he met Chola the day before. Giulio's family could not but notice the excitement in his voice and they all could not wait to see the lady that he had described. No one, not even Giulio, thought of how inadequately prepared Chola would be for her first formal event at their large palace. Neither did any of them think of how Chola and her brother would be viewed by the Medici's cosmopolitan aristocratic guests.

Dianna's snobbish behavior turned into an abusive and cruel misconduct. She was cruel and evil by nature – a compelling argument and sure vindication for mercy killing and a divine Justification for why some animals decide to eat their young. Often, her mother who knew her best lamented secretly that Dianna would be unchallenged in leading the Florentine Chapter of the "Fake and Bitter Sisters Society" if one were to be founded.

It was as if Dianna was ashamed of Giulio's guest and his choice for friends. "Where did you get this beautiful dress," said Dianna while covering her mouth to cover her laughter. "We were unprepared. I just came in to see my brother, yesterday. And I did not know that I would be invited to your beautiful party," said Chola trying to win understanding and sympathy for her unsophisticated peasant dress.

Indeed, of all God's creation, humans seem to be the most substantially cruel as they harbor profound internal hate. And while that, in itself, is confusing, it is even more perplexing that human cruelty usually increases when the recipient of the perpetration is vulnerable and un-defendable. Killing to survive is different from killing based on hate, unless we consider that hate itself is a survival mechanism that is unique to humans – which is obscene.

Out of nowhere, a maid and a slave carrying a large flask of perfume politely found their way to where Chola and Agnolo were clustered. The two did not know what to make of such induction and intrusion. They could not figure out if it was intended to honor them or to humiliate them? Dianna and some of her followers laughed loudly as the maid and the slave sprinkled the perfume on the peasant guests. "That should get rid of the country smell for a while," said Dianna as she gobbled her wine and laughed and laughed. "Perfume is supposed to introduce a new and pleasant fragrance. But, in this case it is hoped to mast a terrible odor," she continued while holding her nose with one shaking hand and her wineglass with the other.

There were many conversations and discussions among the young guests as they interacted with their hosting Medici children. Some of the remarks were plain nasty and direct, while others were sugar coated masked insults.

As the night wore off, the guests were divided into two camps. One camp, that was led by Dianna, thought the peasant couple were a disgrace to the party and took every chance to insult Chola and Agnolo. The other camp, which was led by Dea and Giulio, thought that the couple was adorable and that they presented the wholeness that seemed to have been replaced by the pretentious lifestyle of the rich and arrogant Florentines. In fact, Dea and several of her girlfriends appeared to adopt an admiration for Agnolo and began to compete for his attention. He was different: innocent, unpolished, and somehow holy.

While the guests mingled, Chola became more and more insecure and despite Giulio's efforts to make her relax, she slipped away from his company and hid next Agnolo who was fighting his own battles.

Giulio repeatedly apologized for his sister's behavior and discounted it as spoiled insecurities of a loose and drunk girl. To get his guests away from the hostile environment of his sister Dianna, Giulio led his two guests through the crowd to where his parents stood. Lorenzo and his wife were engaged in a conversation with some dignitaries, when Giulio approached them.

"Momma and Papa, please meet my guests of honor: Chola and Agnolo!" Said Giulio.

Lorenzo and his wife stared for a short second then simultaneously broke a genuinely courteous smile. Lorenzo opened his arms to give Chola a hug.

"How are you, Angel?" Said Lorenzo. "You look so much like your mother. It has been so many years since I saw her. It is really a shame. As children, we used to play at the quarry and through its caves," he chuckled with innocence.

"You must be the talented and enigmatic Agnolo," Duke Lorenzo went on to embrace the shy lad. "I have heard many stories about you two from your brother Michelangelo while he lived with us." Signora Medici was charming and gracious to the couple. Although she thought that the two certainly did not fit the high society event, as an educated lady of the aristocratic class, she was open minded to the diversity of cultures and had learned not to judge people by their appearance. "After all, if Socrates or Plato were to appear at the party tonight they would be considered unfit as well. In fact, if Jesus himself were to appear at the party with the Holy Lady, many would frown on their attire and belittle them," she thought.

"Come, come! I want to show you some of your brother's magnificent work," said Lorenzo who led the way and was followed by many of the curious guests that heard his invitation.

As they walked, Dea came to join them. She walked by Agnolo, intentionally leading her body to bump into his from time to time. He continued to hold his sister's hand to comfort her. Some of Dea's friends who had a crush on the peasant boy also followed the moving group to where Lorenzo was leading.

Chola's insecurities were being replaced by jealousy. The attention that Agnolo seemed to be receiving from Dea and her girlfriends made her very angry. Although she was mesmerized by Giulio and all his attention, she viewed that as a completely different matter. Possibly because she did not feel too comfortable around Giulio to consider him in a romantic way.

Lorenzo led his followers to a magnificently decorated huge dancehall within the palace. The large room was filled with several hundred guests. As they greeted their way through the room, Agnolo looked up to see a six-foot replica of the statue that he had made of Mary Jo many years past. "This is Mary Jo, The Spirit Song of the Madonna," he said.

"Isn't she absolutely magnificent?" Said Lorenzo.

Agnolo struggled to smile and knotted. Chola whispered: "Agnolo made that!"

Lorenzo looked at Chola and smiled: "Agnolo was a very young lad when his brother Michelangelo made that!"

"This is a large copy of the one that Agnolo had made," said Chola. "Cardinal Carafa has one just like that which Agnolo had made. My talented brother made several copies. He has a secret way of making lots of statues."

Duke Lorenzo was greatly intrigued by Chola's comment. "A secret way?" He asked. "Is it so secret that you cannot share it with us?"

Everyone laughed. Excited about the attention that he was receiving, Agnolo went on to describe his two secret techniques in detail. Some of the learned and several of the artists standing around were struck by Agnolo's proposal, especially the Baptism of the Stone technique which made great sense even to the laymen.

"I have shared my techniques with my brother and with Cardinal Carafa. My brother is going to use my techniques in carving David," said Agnolo.

"Papa, Agnolo also has another copy like this in his room in Florence!" Said Giulio. "I saw it the other day and was very surprised, because I know that Agnolo had not seen this statue. Papa, you have to see the model that Agnolo had proposed for our large project. I believe that Master Michelangelo is relying on it very heavily and will be using it to implement the project."

Among those who were present, were two members of the town council. The two took notice of what Chola, Agnolo, and Giulio said, but said nothing.

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To a great extent, Chola and Agnolo were either naïve to the criticism and the humiliating remarks from all around them, or they were intentionally ignoring them.

The dining experience was uncomfortable for both Chola and Agnolo. Chola held Agnolo's hand the entire time and aside from a little of food that she ate, neither one partook of the incredible variety of foods. They both, however, had their share of wine.

After dinner, it was time for formal dancing. Sadly, Dianna was there to ensure the continued humiliation of the two guests whom she abhorred for no rational reason. Since neither Agnolo nor Chola knew the protocol or the prescribed steps for the different dances, Dianna's task was easy.

Out of pure spite for Agnolo and Chola whom she had just met a few hours before, Dianna announced that the couple would be led by her brother Giulio and sister Dea in a solo dance. The entire crowd, stepped aside forming a large rectangle and waited for the two couples to take the center of the large dancehall. Chola's face was as red as a mountain rose and Agnolo almost slipped into convulsions.

The music played, and the crowd cheered and clapped, some innocently, and others maliciously.

"Agno, I want to go home!" Cried Chola in fear while holding her tears. The two had clustered together through the night and as much as possible managed to avoid the limelight. But, now they were being pushed over the edge by the merciless hostess.

Giulio approached Chola and bowed to kiss her hand, while Dea stood waiting for Agnolo to do the same. But he did not. He closed his eyes for a second, looked at Dianna, and spoke two unrecognized words followed by the words "May my loving God who forgave me, forgive you." Then, he walked slowly towards Dea to kiss her hand, not knowing what to do next.

Before he reached Dea, a loud scream broke the anticipation and it was followed by another louder scream. Everyone's attention was diverted and they looked to where the alarming screams originated. Dianna was jumping while hitting her face and swinging her arms.

From where Dianna stood hundreds of slimy frogs, large and small, began to jump all over the dancehall. The snot covered frogs were clearly concentrated around where Dianna was. She

was hysterical! The frogs continued to attack Dianna and the more she tried to dodge them the more of the them appeared.

In addition to the frogs, twenty seven ravens in groups of nines found their way into the dancehall. They swarmed over Dianna's head and with loud squawks they defecated all over her dress. The smell was intolerable. It was as if these ravens had gorged on rotted sardines and spoiled eggs for weeks.

Ironically, the frogs never came close to Agnolo, Chola, or their anticipated dance partners.

Filled with frogs everywhere, the dance hall was quickly abandoned and the panic-stricken crowd sought the open space at the outside pavilion.

Three well-dressed maids came to assist Dianna. They too were attacked by the frogs. It was impossible to even get close to her without stepping on these jumping creatures. While evacuating the dancehall, the fleeing crowd stopped to watch with amusement the sophisticated Dianna jumping and crying insanely like a demon possessed monkey. All could not help but laugh.

"I am so very sorry, Chola!" Said Giulio. "I really do not know what is going on. This has never happened here before! I am so very ashamed. Please forgive my sister for her shameful behavior!" Although he was referring to how Dianna behaved after being attacked by the frogs, Agnolo humbly responded: "Is there any doubt that she was forgiven for all sins. She is a precious child of God!"

Giulio and Dea looked at Agnolo thinking "This boy is either an angel or a stupid peasant for him to see good in our sister after she had mocked him and tried to humiliate him before hundreds of guests."

Agnolo read their thought!

As the party turned into chaos, many guests began to leave. Those who decided to stay and see how much worse things could get, loitered without direction in the surrounding gardens.

Chola grabbed her brother's hand and began to run to where the carriage was parked. Giulio and Dea followed them. "Agnolo, please forgive me. We are extremely ashamed of all that had happened tonight," he said.

"My dear brother, it was a pleasant evening. We thank you for your kind invitation," said Agnolo.

Chola and Dea exchanged courteous hugs. Giulio disappeared for a few moments while the couple was waiting for the slaves to prepare the horses. When Giulio reappeared, he was

walking fast towards Chola. With a large smile, he bowed, kissed her hand and handed her a rare rose that he had cut from the garden. "This is for you, Chola!"

"Oh, Giulio. This is beautiful. Thank you. I will cherish it!" Said Chola as she tightly hugged Giulio and kissed his cheek.

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On the way home, Chola put her head on Agnolo's bosom and fell asleep. Her eyes were heavy. "I think he is ok. His sisters are not very nice. But, I like him!" Said Chola as if talking to herself.

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While Agnolo and Chola were at the gala, Michelangelo sat in his room thinking about many things. He got up and began to write several new poems to Chola. To avoid violating the societal taboo that forbade him to have a relationship with his sister, he masked his writing and made his poems to sound as if they were written to one of his dear male friends. He prayed and cried for forgiveness. Without a doubt, he felt guilty for encouraging his sister and brother to attend the gala where he knew that they would suffer ridicule.

****

The next morning, the street noise did not wake Agnolo from his deep sleep. And, Chola did not wake up, despite the accidental noise that Tota had made while getting up and moving around the room.

When Michelangelo came by the apartment, he did not see anyone. Tota was apparently engaged in a conversation with the French knights who had arrived a few days ago from Settignano and did not notice Michelangelo's arrival. He crossed the living room, bypassing Agnolo's room and the other three rooms, and went straight to Tota's room where he knew that Chola would be.

He knocked: "Little Angel, are you awake?"

"Michlo, I am waking up. Give me just a minute," said Chola who was still in her light sleeping clothes.

Without notice, Michelangelo opened the door. Startled and embarrassed, Chola jumped back in the bed and covered herself with a blanket. Her clothes had hidden many secrets of her beautiful young body that were then being exposed. He laughed: "Not to worry, my sister. I have seen your beauty and watched you grow," said Michelangelo and he shut the door.

Chola laughed nervously.

“I just came to see how things went last night. I talked to some people that were there and they described the mayhem that took place.”

“It was terrible, Michlo. You should have told us not to go,” said Chola as she was getting dressed.

“I thought it would be a good experience for the two of you to witness the fake and pretentious life of the rich and powerful in this big city.”

“I like the palace, the food, and the music, but I don’t like the people. Well, except for Giulio,” she giggled. “He gave me this expensive rose. I wish it would live forever,” she continued while delicately caressing the red rose that Giulio had given her. As if she were daydreaming, Chola went on to say: “He looked so very good last night. I only wished that I had some nice clothes to match him.”

“Chola, I will design a fancy dress for you. No one will have a dress like yours and all the girls will be very envious of you. I promise!” Said Michelangelo.

“I love you Michlo. You can always make me feel good,” said Chola while planting a kiss on her brother’s cheek.

“Giulio is a nice boy,” said Michelangelo. “And, I owe a lot to his family. But, Lola these people are different from us. I just do not want you to be hurt. I do not want you to end up being a passion of someone who doesn’t appreciate you. Why don’t you finish getting dressed and let us walk to my apartment and talk for a while?”

“I can’t Michlo. I think I am leaving in a few hours with Nicholas and the others.”

“I really would like to spend time with you before you leave. It has been a while since we talked, and I do not know when I will see you again.” His voice quivered.

Chola was touched by Michelangelo’s emotions.

“You know where to find me,” she said with a smile and walked towards him to kiss his cheek. He turned his face and tried to kiss her lips. With his strong hands, he held her hands and uttered: “Oh, Lola!”

“Oh, please Michlo. Don’t …!” She was slightly aroused and uncomfortable. She was fully aware that Michelangelo was not her blood brother, but his progressing advances seemed to be coming at a time when she was emotionally charged with many conflicting feelings. She began to cry softly.

“I am sorry. I got carried away!” Said Michelangelo while lowering his head in shame and disappointment. He let go of her hands slowly and began to gently squeeze her shoulders. “I will go.” He said. “Please, don’t tell anyone. Please!”

She whispered in tears: “I can’t!”

He kissed her hand and walked out of the room with his head down. Slowly he shut the door behind him without looking back.

(Song 20: Stone Cold)

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Chola cried in her confusion. She sat at the edge of her bed for a few moments thinking. She prayed silently till she felt sharp pain in her buttock. Then she broke a muffled laughter when she realized that she had been sitting on the red rose that Giulio had given her. She stood up and held the rose and kissed it. It was not damaged. She took a deep breath and laid the rose on the dresser, before she walked to Agnolo’s room.

The entire apartment was empty and quiet.

She locked the door behind her, opened both windows, and jumped in bed with Agnolo who was still asleep.

“Oh, Lola!” He whispered as if he were dreaming.

“I can’t get enough of you. I have to leave soon,” she whispered while kissing him.

They were soon naked and engaged.

When the church bell charmed to announce the noon, Chola reluctantly separated from Agnolo. She was hungry and so was Agnolo. She got dressed first and kissed him again while crying warm tears.

“Please, don’t be sad, Lola!” Said Agnolo.

“I miss you already!”

Chola walked out of the room and shut the door. When she reached half way through the living room, she saw Allessio coming out of Jacopo’s room. It was not clear who was more startled, Chola or Allessio, but they both noticed the other’s discomfort.

“Hello, Chola,” said Allessio while clearing his throat. “Where is Agnolo?”

“Hello, Allessio. I believe he is still asleep, but he should be waking up soon. Where is Tota?”

“I believe she is still downstairs.”

Chola walked down the steps to look for Tota who was still engaged in a serious conversation with Nicholas and the other knights. The French knights who had escorted Agnolo and Chola to the gala the evening before were describing the havoc that ended up the event and how their horses were disturbed by the hostile and nasty frogs.

Chola walked slowly as she approached the group and politely waited till they noticed her.

“Mademoiselle Chola, how are you feeling today. You must have been very tired to sleep till now,” said Nicholas. “I did not want to wake you up, but we must leave fairly soon to avoid the afternoon heat.”

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Chola ate a fast bite with Agnolo and prepared to leave. As expected, it was brutal for both. She rode away behind Nicholas. With her, she took a wet cloth that hydrated the red rose that Giulio had given her.

Chola was filled with many opposing emotions. City life and the glamour it offers was certainly quite different from the serene life of Settignano. Although roughly only fifteen miles away from each other, Florence and Settignano were worlds apart and in each place love was offered in a different form and a various degree. Since all of that was personal and evolving, it was very confusing.

Giulio found in Chola the innocence that was seldom found in Florentine girls. On the other hand, Chola was intrigued and seduced by Giulio’s wealth, warmth, and attention – not to mention his carefree, spoiled, impulsive mannerisms.

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That same afternoon, Lorenzo arrived at the cathedral, accompanied by two City Council members. It was upon their request that he decided to pay a visit to Cardinal Carafa to discuss the project. After the conversation that the three had with Agnolo and Giulio the night before, the two City Council members wanted to understand the details of the project and its origins. Much money was invested in the endeavor and they felt that they needed to know all the facts. All three men were initially under the impression that the design and idea were those of Michelangelo. But, after their discussion with Agnolo and Giulio, they had acquired some serious doubts. They wanted to know why the project was awarded to Michelangelo and not to Agnolo. They agreed that, because of his age, Michelangelo was more experienced, but they argued that when a young genius is detected within their society, he should be promoted and given credit for his ideas and designs. Age, they contended, should have little impact on the

awarding of such a prestigious project. “It would be a gross injustice to cheat a young and talented artist of his work and claim that it was someone else’s,” they all consented.

Father Bronzino met the three men in his office. He refused to allow them time with Cardinal Carafa arguing that the decision has already been made and the actual carving was soon to begin once the large containers of water requested by Michelangelo were secured and delivered to the worksite. Bronzino acknowledged that the design and idea for the project were Agnolo’s, but he defended the choice for Michelangelo.

Bronzino’s dislike for Agnolo was growing beyond the boundaries of suspicions.

“What difference who made the design? Let us allow the master to proceed with his project. Ideas are nothing but thoughts until they are materialized and fashioned by a master,” vehemently, argued Bronzino.

Unsatisfied and somewhat angry, Duke Lorenzo and his companions left the cathedral without being able to talk to Cardinal Carafa, who was occupied with many issues and confronting many decisions regarding the uprising that was threatening to destroy the unity of the church and its sovereignty.

Soon after Duke Lorenzo and his companions left the cathedral, Bronzino sent a messenger to summon Michelangelo to his office.

When Michelangelo arrived at Father Bronzino’s office he was agitated and nervous. All the way from his apartment to the cathedral his mind raced trying to determine the cause of the summon. He knew that it could not be good news. He just could feel it but could not think of what it could be. Bronzino’s mood confirmed Michelangelo’s concerns.

“They are raising concerns, Michelangelo. And, they are very powerful, I have to admit. I just kept them sedated, but I am not sure for how long. Once they get the cardinal’s ears, it would be too late,” said Bronzino while Michelangelo stared silently. “They are asking questions about the origins of the design and idea. I took your side. I want you to know that! It is not that I have anything against your brother, but I certainly have great appreciation for your talent and experience and do not believe that the young lad is ready to handle such a massive project. Yes, his proposed techniques of using water seem purer and possibly more accurate, but they are untested. I am convinced that if there was any legitimacy to his techniques, our forefathers, the mighty Romans or the Greeks would have discovered them and used them. And, yes, Agnolo is very talented, probably more talented than you were at his age, but he is inexperienced, erratic, and seem to be followed by bad omens. I hate to say it; the boy is nothing but trouble! Lorenzo and the two council members even mentioned letting Leonardo da Vinci complete the work!”

Michelangelo did not know what to say. He felt somewhat insulted, but opted to bypass his resentments for the ultimate goal of completing his project.

“They know, Michelangelo, that the boy had designed the statue and that you had taken his ideas. They also know that he has developed new techniques that they think are better than the one that you had been taught … the one that everyone uses. I will stop them for as long as I can from taking this commission from you. Meanwhile, watch yourself. It is not clear how things will turnout and who will be on our side,” Bronzino continued.

“Thank you, Father! I will not let you down.”

Michelangelo left Bronzino’s office filled with fear and concern. He certainly did not want to lose his commission, neither was he able to shake off the heavy weight that was placed on him by allowing Agnolo to be near the project.

The matter was serious, so serious that if the truth were made public and the world knew that he was stealing his younger brother’s designs and ideas, his entire career could be ruined. Agnolo’s work was divinely inspired and had the fingerprints of holy angels all over it. Of more concern to Michelangelo was the fact that if the critics looked at the early works of Agnolo they would easily realize that Michelangelo was steeling Agnolo’s ideas, even when Agnolo was a child – the form and style, and the movement and the composition.

“It would have been much easier and better for everyone if Agnolo had stayed in Settignano and nowhere near the project,” thought Michelangelo. But, things being the way there were, Michelangelo had to think on his feet. “Indeed, Agnolo has become more of a serious liability than should be tolerated!”

A wicked thought entered Michelangelo’s mind: “I wish the rebels would kidnap him!” Michelangelo shook his head as if to repel such an evil idea. It is without a doubt that the boy was inspired and was guarded by divine forces. So, that scenario was very unlikely to materialize. Furthermore, Michelangelo certainly wanted to have no part of facilitating such calamity – if for no other reason than self-preservation. Michelangelo was certain that whoever does Agnolo harm will suffer. And he wanted no part of that.

“So, Bronzino’s advice was a sound one: I will temper myself and wait to see how things develop!” Thought Michelangelo to himself.

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In a few days, several very large containers of water and many large sand bags were delivered to the worksite upon the request of Master Michelangelo. The workers constructed a coffinlike box.

Following a prescribed procedure that had been refined by master artists over the years and passed on to their apprentices, an artist would typically make several rough sketches on paper or of clay, which is called a Bozzetto. Often a more refined model, a terracotta, was made and was presented to the patron for approval. From the terracotta, a wax model was made and was modified as needed to suit the project as it developed. After several sketches and models of the marble block being carved were made, instruments such as Pointing Machines, often called "definitors," were used to tabulate then replicate the wax model. While the process was laborious and time consuming, it was well tested and proven to work.

Agnolo's newly developed and proposed technique did away with all the complicated instrumentation. It replaced them with simple and natural elements, such as water or sand, and relied on talent more than a machine.

As all artists and creative beings, Michelangelo had an ego the cathedral bell-tower could not contain. While he internally loved his brother and his devotion to his family were well founded, his discontent with the entire situation was seriously eating away at that devotion. Indeed, it was becoming progressively evident that Agnolo was becoming more and more of a great liability and an obstruction to all Michelangelo's dreams. To add insult to injury, it was clear that Cardinal Carafa was sold on Agnolo's process and adamantly advocated his involvement in the execution of the procedure. So, as it stood, Agnolo was the one with the expert knowledge, and in a sense, Michelangelo was taking directions from him. All that did not go very well with the master artist or his large ego!

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For a few days after, the implementing stage of the project seemed to stall.

Among the many drawings and many partial models for the project, the terracotta of David that Agnolo had kept in his room found its place on the project site and was kept under a cloth. Michelangelo had convinced Agnolo to bring it to the worksite so that it could be used. The terracotta was kept covered up, but from time to time, Michelangelo was heard to refer to it as his terracotta. While Agnolo either did not hear his brother's remark, or he ignored it, the other three apprentices were perplexed. They did not dare to articulate their thoughts, but they wondered if the Master was lying, or was it Agnolo that was lying about who made the terracotta.

For several days, the apprentices were left with nothing to do, while Michelangelo was in another part of town busy with an unspecified matter.

With time on their hands, the young lads wandered around the shop and looked at the fine tools that were there for the master to use. They dreamed of the day that they would be

allowed to use such fine utensils. Agnolo, who had already had his own set of tools, ones that he had used to form many of the statues that he had created, took time to explain to them the history behind each tool. He also had names for each of these tools – names that were different from the professional trade names that they were called. For example, he called the toothed chisel the teaser; the rasp tickler and the riffler he called the pamperer. 'Where did you get these names?" Asked Jacopo while the others laughed loudly.

"It is not my idea, the stone told me what to call these tools," said Agnolo with a serious face.

The apprentices did not know whether to laugh or keep a straight face. And they all noticed that the terracotta had disappeared.

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When Michelangelo reappeared, a week later, he was carrying a wax replica of the terracotta that Agnolo had made. Michelangelo filled the coffinlike box with water and immersed the terracotta in it. "It is being baptized," commented Agnolo who stood by to ensure the proper administration of the process. As they scooped a little of the water out, the left hand of David appeared. It was Agnolo's weathered hand. "He is being born," whispered Agnolo.

Confined by the cardinal's directives and the lingering threat from the inquiring Council members and Duke Medici, Michelangelo tried to make light of the fact that Agnolo was directing the implementation stage of the project. Michelangelo's submission did not go unnoticed, but unexplained retaliatory spouts of lashing anger were witnessed from him. It was as if he needed to prove his dominance and reestablish his authority, to counter any notion that he was weak or that he was not in control.

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Slowly the stone was finally ready to be fashioned. The actual work of carving the stone was beginning. There were drawings and many tools laying around everywhere. It was exciting and noisy. Aside from when it rained and every Sunday, work resumed till the late hours of the day every day.

After a couple of weeks, an organized routine appeared to develop. The apprentices, including Agnolo, sat or stood to watch how the master lowered the water level in the coffinlike box a little at a time and replicated the newly exposed part first using the point chisel to rough out the statue. As much as possible, he tried to address the torso area of the large statue early on, then with the claw chisel he refined the shape and removed lines that were caused by the point chisel. The master talked as he worked explaining what he was doing and why he angled the chisel the way he did. Sometimes, he talked to the marble, and Agnolo smiled in contentment

while the others laughed out loud. Many hours of work by the master were required, and the use of several carving tools was necessary, before the apprentices were allowed to touch the stone and begin their agonizing task of sanding and polishing.

From time to time, Michelangelo asked Agnolo to abandon whatever he was doing and stand on a tall stand, as if to remind the master of how muscles should look like. Sometimes, Agnolo stood there for hours without any clothes except for a small cloth covering his genitals, while the master charted the marble slab with colored pencils and charcoal and carved. As the sun moved, Agnolo was asked to change position upon the request of the master.

In addition to posing as a live model, Agnolo was tasked with sanding and refining the crosshatching chisel marks made by the master.

The apprentices' task was delicate and physically demanding. Over sanding or polishing could change the intended result and could without a doubt ruin the entire project.

When working on his own projects, Agnolo had no problem with over-indulged carving or sanding. His compulsive nature never stood in his way to adapting the project and modifying it to accommodate the newly emerged figure. Agnolo just simply carved and carved and polished and polished. Explaining his behavior, he often asserted: "I do not know when to stop. The stone will tell me what it wants to be and when to stop!"

Working for someone else, as was the case here, was different. Creativity beyond the boundaries of the prescribed plans were not considered a positive thing. In fact, it was plain forbidden. Michelangelo was fully aware of his brother's compulsion and the dangerous potentials that he may pose. He had facetiously warned Cardinal Carafa about Agnolo's compulsive nature, but now that the project was on its way he had to consider serious measures to protect the large statue from being reduced to a small alter ornament.

Things being very sensitive between him and Agnolo, Michelangelo decided not to say anything that would further promote the notion that he was cruel towards his brother. So, he divided the four apprentices into two groups. Agnolo and Giulio as one team and Allessio and Jacopo on another team. Teams, he said "should work together and make sure that my instructions are followed precisely." "Team members," he added, "should check on each other and make sure that over sanding is not done. I prefer that it is less sanded than over sanded. We can always sand more, but making marble out of marble dust would require a miracle! Remember, you can't un-carve the stone," said Michelangelo with a laughter but a stern voice.

Michelangelo had labored greatly over that part and prayed many times seeking the direction of the Holy Lady as what to do. After talking to his crew, he felt better. The arrangement appeared to suit all parties, although they had no input in the decision.

31

The Ego of the Master

The plaza that was used as the worksite for the carving of David accommodated many onlookers from time to time. Uninvited monks and nuns, as well as worshipers, stopped by to witness the master at work. Of course, the vigilant eyes of the French knights were ever present guarding Agnolo.

The plaza was not Michelangelo's choice to carve the statue. For many reasons unrevealed to the masses, he tried to move the marble block to a more secluded place away from scrutinizing eyes of many. His desire for privacy may had been because of his attempt to conceal his use of Agnolo's Water Baptism method in his carvings.

Giulio, Allessio, and Jacopo slowly adapted to the work environment and they greatly enjoyed and appreciated the opportunity they had to work with the great Master, Michelangelo. They were, however, jealous of Agnolo and his exceeding talents. Furthermore, despite the obvious tension between Michelangelo and Agnolo, the fact that the Master, Michelangelo, was Agnolo's brother made them exceedingly envious.

As time went by, Michelangelo's stress over Agnolo's involvement manifested in frequent, sporadic, and unreasonable spouts. The other apprentices were baffled by the manner that Michelangelo used to treat Agnolo. On occasions, the three apprentices actually felt sorry for the oblivious Agnolo who went on to do his tasks ignoring hateful remarks from his brother. They all knew that Agnolo's hearing was not keen, and they thought that may had been a blessing.

When Agnolo walked the streets of Florence, he always carried a cross in his right hand. And, where he walked a flock of doves formed a white cloud above him. A few doves seemed to always find a peaceful place on his shoulder or on his palm. His world was changing and every day that went by without his sister, he counted a waste of a day.

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Another night, another day in the court yard of the cathedral! From different places, they toiled. Michelangelo as the master sculptor and Agnolo as the model for the monumental work of the giant and as an apprentice whose task was to polish what the master had carved. As Agnolo stood to show his awesome and carved body, Michelangelo cut the marble with jealousy and reverence. And, while Michelangelo was busy chiseling and carving, Agnolo prayed and drank more wine. When it was needed, Agnolo polished the carved stone, with the meticulousness and tenderness of a mother rubbing off the sweat off the forehead of her nursing infant child.

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Over a period of a year, the day and night fought for place in time. Day after day, the day grew shorter and colder while the night grew longer and unbearable.

The doves and the raven ate and fought in the air and while on land.

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Michelangelo diligently attempted to avoid conflict with his brother, however, his peaceful ambitions were seriously challenged on daily bases as he had to endure random artistic suggestions by Agnolo. It was clear that before too long, the tension and conflict between Michelangelo and Agnolo were likely to come to a head. Agnolo's suggestions, although very relevant and beneficial, appeared to be progressively bolder and took the form of demands – much to the discomfort and humiliation of the Master. Agnolo's suggestions evolved around two main procedural elements: the first promoted the use of the receding water to determine which part to carve next. Although Agnolo preferred the free style and intuitive meditation to work and develop his statues, he did not mind the use of the Baptism for its divine symbolism. He, however, was adamantly and violently opposed to the use of calibrating instruments, ones that he regarded as an insult to the talents of the artist and an artificial violation to the natural sanctity of the molded marble. "Such a process is a waste of time. An artist can do the work without such ungodly instruments," asserted Agnolo. Much to the unintended humiliation of Michelangelo, Agnolo often reminded his master that Cardinal Carafa was also an advocate of the use of Baptism technique. Michelangelo's occasional reliance on his calibrating instruments angered Agnolo who interpreted the gesture as a hostile and rebellious attack on the soundness of his Baptism technique.

The other point of contention between Agnolo and Michelangelo had nothing to do with the use of water. It was about the manner that the master was carving the stone which confined him and limited his mobility. Instead of confining himself like he did with several of his previous statues such as the "Giants," which looked more like wall reliefs or paintings than all around statues with three full dimensions, Agnolo suggested that the master allow himself room to work. Tolerating the presence of a large amount of uncarved excess stone was baffling to Agnolo. "Why doesn't Michlo give himself room to work by removing the un-needed stone?" Wondered Agnolo. Frequently, it was frustrating and perplexing to Agnolo to watched Michelangelo work himself into a confining trap like a clumsy trainee. It was apparent to all

who watched that Michelangelo created situations where there was barely room enough for a chisel and hardly enough room for his hand to maneuver.

"Beginners usually get themselves in confining fixes which cause them to physically hurt themselves as they twist around the stone to carve it, so why does Michlo, the master, act like a mere inexperienced apprentice?" Agnolo thought to himself.

Predictably, although well intended, Agnolo's remarks were not well received by the master, who in retaliation ridiculed his brother and belittled his ideas. The entire arrangement put Michelangelo on the edge. He was being lectured by his student, Agnolo, and the student appeared to know more about the process than the Master.

From time to time, Giulio who was Agnolo's teammate, found himself in a very awkward position. He knew that Agnolo's suggestions were sound, but he refrained from saying anything at the worksite. However, when he was around his father, Duke Lorenzo Medici, Giulio elaborately expressed his amusement with the fact that Agnolo knew more about the process than did Michelangelo.

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Back at the apartment, all four apprentices seem to be losing much weight. That was despite the large amount of good food that they consumed under the caring eyes of Tota.

The curiosity of the group often took over the eating conversations as they were eager to find out how Agnolo learned about the Baptism technique for carving large stones. With the excitement of an innocent young lad, Agnolo told them the details of the process, but stopped short of telling them that he learned the process at the palace. Agnolo apparently had reached a point of disappointment with people that he no longer wanted to share his palace secrets with anyone, not even his parents. "No one believes me anyway. And, the Lord advised us not to cast our pearls before the swine," he comforted himself with these thoughts.

32

The Politics of Florence

From his office window on the second floor of the cathedral building, Cardinal Carafa could see the ongoing progress of carving David at the plaza below. However, he decided to allow the master Michelangelo to proceed without looking over his shoulder through frequent visits. "Michelangelo was under a great deal of pressure anyway, he should be left alone," Carafa reasoned. In addition, Carafa himself was too preoccupied with the persisting demands of combating new and growing threats from the rebellion and contending with ongoing decade-long conflicts.

Indeed, Cardinal Carafa was caught in a very prolonged struggle between the Pope, to whom he reported, and the city government, led by Duke Lorenzo Medici, where his parish lied.

Lorenzo Medici, who ruled since he was 20 years old after the death of his father, was liked by many and feared by a multitude. Carafa and Lorenzo maintained an amicable professional relationship based on fear and respect, as well as mutual interest and self-preservation. Many threats dominated their daily lives and alliances changed as often as the winter skies.

I addition to the internal threat to the stability of Lorenzo's authority, which flourished by discontent over the declining wool trade, external threat by the Turks who occupied Otranto for many years loomed until the death of Sultan Muhammad II.

Internal opposition to the Medici was fueled by the Pazzi family who resented Lorenzo's power. In this internal arena, the Pazzis were supported by Pope Sixtus IV, who years prior had joined them in a conspiracy to kill Lorenzo and his younger brother Giuliano during a Mass at the cathedral in Florence. The rebels were able to kill Giuliano, but Lorenzo escaped with minor wounds. Afterwards, Lorenzo apprehended and killed the conspirators and used the incident to strengthen his grip on the City State. Since the conspiracy, Lorenzo had justifiably developed an enduring vendetta against the Vatican and the Pazzis.

During these trying times, Lorenzo found a loyal ally in the King of France who despised the Pope and viewed him as corrupt and ineffective church leader. Of course, that put Lorenzo and his allies, known as the Ghibelline party, on a collision course with the local church, its representatives, and their supporters who were known as the Guelfs.

These internal and external conflicts gave rise to the hiring of mercenary troops to replace the citizens' army which in many cases after being defeated was forbidden by their victorious enemies to bear arm. The leaders of these hired troops were called condottieri, or condottiere in the singular. These mercenary forces also presented another power with whom all players had to contend. For, as asserted by Machiavelli who abhorred them, "if they lost, the city that

hired them was at the mercy of the enemy; but if they won, the city was at the mercy of the condottieri themselves." (http://vlib.iue.it/carrie/texts/carrie_books/gilbert/03.html)

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Despite his busy and hectic schedule, one Wednesday afternoon Cardinal Carafa decided to take time to visit Michelangelo at the worksite. He postponed all his afternoon meetings, and escorted by Father Bronzino and two close aides, he walked unexpectedly to the plaza where Michelangelo and his assistants were occupied.

The place was noisy and filled with many workers and uninvited onlookers, who when they saw the cardinal and his entourage either got out of the way but stood to watch, or left the scene altogether.

By nature, Michelangelo preferred to work in seclusion. But, this project was different and massive, and he learned to tolerate the expected exposure that it demanded.

At the plaza, Michelangelo who was too engrossed in his carving did not notice the incoming visitors until they were a few feet from the base of the unfinished statue. When Michelangelo noticed a change in the type and level of noise, he stopped to look. Quickly, he jumped down from where he was to greet his visiting dignitaries.

As Michelangelo approached the cardinal to pay him due respect, he realized that the cardinal's attention was elsewhere. A great smile crossed the leading holy man's face as he found where Agnolo was standing on a high stool to model.

"We are honored and blessed to have you visit," said Michelangelo as he was walking towards the cardinal to kiss his right hand.

"It is looking great, Master of Arts," replied Cardinal Carafa as he turned his face towards the approaching Michelangelo.

"Thank you, Father. I have a great team to support me," said Michelangelo looking at his assistants and the four apprentices who froze in their place not knowing how to behave.

For Agnolo and Giulio who had been in the presence of the cardinal several times before, it was still exciting to see the leading church head so closely, but for Allessio and Jacopo who had not met the cardinal before, it was a breathtaking moment.

"He looks so different from closeup," they thought to themselves. They had seen and heard the cardinal many times leading Mass at the cathedral while worshiping with their parents, but they had never seen him that close. They stood there paralyzed by the moment and waiting for instructions.

“We are almost finished with the torso and will be working on the limbs and removing unnecessary stone,” said Michelangelo.

“It looks alive, Michelangelo!” Said the cardinal as everyone smiled while Bronzino knotted with a very large smile.

“I am pleased to see that you have decided to “baptize” your new creation,” continued the cardinal as he broke a childish laughter while looking at the large water trough where the wax terracotta was immersed!

Michelangelo laughed nervously. “Yes, we like to keep our creatures holy and clean for the glory of the Lord.”

Michelangelo tried to lead the entourage towards the tool shed and away from the apprentices who were scattered near where Agnolo was still standing on his posing stand. But, cardinal Carafa turned away and walked towards the young apprentices.

As the sun shone on Agnolo’s face, his skin reflected a darker tone, possibly a new tan that he had acquired over the many weeks of standing in the sun. As everyone stared at cardinal Carafa and Agnolo, they were a bit perplexed. With his dark tan, Agnolo actually looked a great deal like Cardinal Carafa himself. Although the phenomenon intrigued everyone, no one dared to say anything. Bronzino, however, expressed a different demeanor. Grudgingly, he thought to himself: “Carafa may be immortalizing himself by making this boy pose for this statue.”

“How are you Agnolo?” Asked cardinal Carafa.

“I am well Father,” answered Agnolo. “I am working with Giulio as a team.”

“That is very pleasing to the Lord,” said Carafa. “And, how are you Giulio?

“I am well Father. We are learning a lot from Master Michelangelo and Agnolo,” said Giulio.

Giulio’s comment was not well received by Michelangelo or Father Bronzino whose mannerisms and facial expressions changed. Cardinal Carafa sensed the tension but said nothing. Carafa also assessed that Giulio was likely to be an unintended information conduit between his father and the worksite. Carafa wondered what Duke Lorenzo thought about this entire matter. He knew that Lorenzo’s support to Michelangelo was based on the Duke’s admiration for the uprising art master whom he watched mature and grow over many years. “But, does Lorenzo know how talented Agnolo is? Is he aware of the new technique for carving the stone that has been proposed by this young and unknown brother of Michelangelo? And, would Lorenzo still support Michelangelo’s leadership if he knew that Agnolo was much more talented than his brother?” Carafa’s mind was racing and questions continued to present themselves.

Bronzino broke the nervous moment: “You are a very talented group and you have a lot to learn and a great master!”

“This is what I had described to you, Father, when we met last time in your office. It is the technique that I had learned at the palace,” said Agnolo with surprising boldness.

“I remember, my son. It is absolutely incredible. Don’t you think so, Michelangelo?”

“Definitely, and I love the spiritual symbolism associated with the procedure,” said Michelangelo.

“This palace must be an incredible place,” noted the cardinal. “I would love to see this palace sometime. What else have you learned there?” Said cardinal Carafa not realizing that he had opened the door for a lengthy answer.

“Yes, Father. It is an incredible place. It is very hard to describe. It is where I learned how the river Arno cuts its way through the landscape. From high above the canopy of the palace I could see all the way to the bell tower.” Agnolo reached into his pocket and pulled a small piece of paper that he had kept there to use for sketching ideas. He leaned on the scaffold and began to draw an aerial map depicting the forest, the river, and the palace.

“This is what I saw from up in the air,” said Agnolo as he proceeded to explain his drawing.

“Very interesting,” said Bronzino. “If I did not know better, I would accuse you of heresy, young man!” He laughed a loud and threatening laughter. “Only the Lord and angels are able to fly, as far as I know. Of course, there are two types of angels, holy ones and fallen ones!” He continued to laugh as he folded the piece of paper and put it in his pocket.

One of the aides that accompanied the cardinal whispered: “Who does this boy think he is? No one except the Lord and the angels are able to see from high on the clouds. Is this boy demon possessed, or just a loose-tongue crazy?”

The cardinal who heard a glimpse of what the aide had said decided to change the conversation: “I am glad we chose you, Michelangelo, instead of da Vinci. He is great, but he is still using old techniques, not like the ones that your brother had invented.”

“Father, da Vinci is a fake. He is not reliable, and he never finishes his projects. Master, Michelangelo is a far superior artist than da Vinci!” Asserted Agnolo to the surprise and embarrassment of Michelangelo who had not expected such support from his rival young brother. Despite his speech impediment, Agnolo spoke with authority that demanded attention.

Michelangelo accompanied cardinal Carafa and his entourage in a short walk around the plaza where Michelangelo explained what lies ahead and his future plans and timeline.

“If you need anything, you know to let me know,” said the cardinal.

“Your kind support has always sustained me, Father,” said Michelangelo as he bowed and kissed the cardinal’s hand.

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What happened during the cardinal’s visit was a cause of serious discomfort to Michelangelo. He thought: “This time, not too much damage was done. But, what will happen next time if the cardinal learns about the escalating conflict between me and Agnolo? I know which side he would take. And, I am not sure how that would tip the balance of power between me and Agnolo!”

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Something about the cardinal’s visit affected Agnolo. He was not sure what to think or how to feel. Being a long distance from his family and their support was affecting his emotions. He missed Chola terribly; he missed his family at the cottage and at the palace. He also worried about those who relied on his help at the market. “I wonder if they are doing ok?” He thought to himself. “Of course, they are! The Lord will always provide a way for them. They are more valuable to the Lord than many sparrows who are fed daily by our Lord although they never plant of harvest. I still miss these people!”

That evening, Agnolo left the apartment and walked to the graveyard behind the cathedral. He found his way to Mary Jo’s grave. It was getting very dark. He got on his knees and kissed the ground. For some reason, tears came gushing out of his eyes. He was emotionally charged. He whispered and whispered. Some of what he said was in an unknown tongue. Some of his speech sounded like questions while others sounded like a prayer of gratitude and contentment. Through his tears, he saw Mary Jo’s image. She was real! She sat in front of him and rubbed his eyes dry. They looked at each other without saying anything. He could smell the wild flowers, the herbs, and several fresh flowers that had apparently been placed there recently. The sky was dark, and the stars were clearly identifiable. But, it was still too dark as the moon was nowhere in the sky.

“I am not here, Agno!”

“I know mommy!” He caught himself saying. He did not know why he called her that.

“You are not from here, Agno. You are not from here; you are a part of me my precious baby!” She muttered!

He heard a voice of many doves. They had been flying quietly in the sky. Not one raven was around.

He held her hand. It was warm and very soft. She put her other hand over his hand to encase it. He kissed her hand and her forehead. “I love you, mommy!” Again, he stopped and internally questioned what he had said.

“Proceed my baby. The Lord is with you. You are blessed and no weapon that is formed against you will prosper!” She said as his eyes were getting heavy and he fell asleep.

He had no idea how long he had slept. But, when he opened his eyes it was still dark. A host of doves had surrounded him silently. They began to sing in an escalating loudness as he moved around.

He bowed and kissed the ground then raised his hands to the sky, before he got up and walked home.

As dark as it was, the eyes of two French knights managed to see Agnolo’s ritual. They were touched, and they understood.

33

Two Roads

These days, when the rich got bored or anxious about some uncertainties they fled to the southern shores where roman baths remained functional and the salt water of the Mediterranean Sea seemed to bring life back into their disparate souls. But, when those with limited means faced life's challenges, they inadvertently sought the safety of their family home.

On a Saturday night, filled with loneliness and frustration that were complicated by his intense desire to see Chola, Agnolo got on his horse and began the two-hour trip to his home in Settignano.

Three knights followed not knowing where he was going. A small squadron of doves glided overhead quietly.

The night was dark and shortly after his departure, it began to rain heavily. Agnolo's horse cut its way through mud puddles and damp dirt and Agnolo was drenched with rain from above and dirt from below.

When he got home, his father was in the back preparing the animals for the night. Francisca and Chola were inside – Francisca praying before the relic in her bedroom and Chola in Agnolo's room sitting on the floor looking at his statues, an empty trough, and the chiseling tools that Benvenuto had given Agnolo as a gift many years ago. The tools were laid in a specific order that Agnolo had chosen and some had remanence of marble dust. The house was quiet, and except for the sound of animals moving outside, nothing could be heard but Francisca's muted prayers and her breathing.

The arrival of Agnolo and the three knights was announced by the noise they made as they approached. When Agnolo stopped to tie his horse, he saw his father who broke a wide smile and began giggling like a child at the sight of his son.

"Agno, we have missed you, my son. Now, things are really different here, without you and Tota. Everything is different!" Said Benvenuto.

The two hugged and Benvenuto held his son's hand and led him through the back door to the inside of the cottage.

"Look what I have brought you. I have a gift for everyone!" Shouted Benvenuto as he entered.

And as if Chola had felt Agnolo's presence, she came running out of his room.

"Agno?" She shouted before she could even see him.

She ran and hugged him and with his two hands wrapped around her waist, he lifted her up above his head as if she were a mere toddler. She had lost a lot of weight. Agnolo noticed and was concerned but made no comment. His rain-soaked clothes transmitted its moisture to all who hugged him.

“Lola, Lola, I have missed you!” He uttered.

“I was just praying for you,” said Francisca as she was coming out of the bedroom. “Things are not the same here without you, Agno.” The two hugged and Francisca wiped her teary eyes.

“Come, let me bring you some dry cloth and some food. Is everything alright?” Asked Francisca.

“Yes, mommy. Yes! I guess. Actually, no! Things are kind of crazy! Michlo is under a great deal of pressure and he is often unhappy with me. It is as if he is a different person.”

Chola was listening with interest as the family settled in the living room around a lantern. She did not say anything, but somehow everyone knew that she was fighting an urge to speak.

“It is a huge responsibility and I am sure that the project has unbearable demands,” said Benvenuto. “But, praise be to our Lord and our Holy Lady that at least you are there together to help one another and support one another.”

“Papa, so much is happening there. The place is really dangerous and I worry about the safety of Michlo. I know that many would love to see him fail and many would love to get someone else to complete the project. And, then there are rebels and politicians. I really do not understand it all, but it is really crazy. I just had to get away from it all and had to see you. And, although I trust that the Lord will provide for all his children as he provides even for the tiny sparrows, I feel a need to visit the market and do the Lord’s will there,” said Agnolo.

“My baby, this may not be a great idea. I know that the Lord protects you with his angels from above, and that the valiant knights are dedicated to your protection here on earth, but there is no need to try our Lord by placing ourselves in a dangerous situation,” said Benvenuto.

“I will be alright, papa! I will be alright!” Said Agnolo.

“So many times, we wanted to come and see you, but held ourselves back. We did not want to interrupt what you were doing. And, we wanted to allow you the chance to grow your wings!” Said Benvenuto.

Agnolo laughed. “My wings are growing alright, papa!”

Chola was not only thin, but she was also different. She seemed sad and resigned. She had begged her parents many times to go to Florence, but they advised her not to interrupt her brother's life. "Baby, you need to learn to be independent," said Francisca.

"I do not want to be independent, mommy! That would be a lie. I am completely dependent on the Lord and on my brother."

Benvenuto and Francisca retired for the night and Chola and Agnolo continued talking softly as they tried to allow their parents a chance to rest.

"Oh, how I missed you Agno!" Whispered Chola as she and Agnolo walked into his bedroom.

They sat at the edge of his bed and he hugged her tightly.

"You have lost so much weight, Lola. I am not happy. I worry about you all the time," said Agnolo.

"I can't eat, I can't sleep, Agno. I can't live without you!"

"You don't have to, Lola! I will always be with you. Even if I am not here physically, my soul always longs for you and is always with you!"

"I know. But, I worry about you too, Agno!" Said Chola and continued with reluctance: "He is jealous of you, Agno. I don't understand how he could allow such bad feelings to overcome him."

"Who?"

"Michlo!"

"No, Lola. He is my brother. He loves me. But, I know that he is under a great deal of pressure from every side. Maybe it is my fault that he acts the way he does. I should keep my ideas to myself and not talk too much. He is the master, after all, and the Lord has awarded him with this project not me."

"You are so naive, Agno! Your heart is gold. That is why the Lord loves you so much!"

"Well. I love Him too. And I love you, Lola! I have missed my family at the palace so terribly. Do you want to go there now?
"Of course, I do. I tried to go there without you but could not find my way. I will not bore you with the details. But, I caused everyone a lot of trouble that day!"

As much as Agnolo loved Michelangelo, the attention that Chola seemed to be receiving from him was a bit irritating. He could not understand why he felt that way, but he noticed that

Michelangelo's behavior towards Chola was increasingly flirty and his looks were uncommonly probing. Without Chola revealing to him that Michelangelo had tried to kiss her and seduce her, Agnolo sensed his brother's growing interest in Chola. Giulio's obvious interest in Chola, somehow, did not concern Agnolo too much. Just as Giorgio and Domenico Baldovinetti's constant flirtations with Chola never seemed to bother him in the past. So, why was Michelangelo's warming attitude towards Chola bothering him? He had no answer. Is it that he knew that Michelangelo had the power of persuasion and the earthly goods to employ the potent demons of seductions against his innocent sister? Or, is it that he knew how vulnerable his sister was against the temptations of the world, and the façade and the glamour that Florence had to offer? Maybe, he theorized, that with the twins and with Giulio he had the upper hand. Somehow, he felt superior to all others. But, with Michelangelo, it was different. Agnolo knew that he could not convince himself that he was more attractive than Michelangelo with all the fame that Michelangelo was then receiving.

Agnolo had no answer.

Agnolo was aware of the fact that although he and Michelangelo were nurtured from the same breast, they were not blood brothers. And of course, he knew that Chola was not a blood sister of Michelangelo. Agnolo was also aware of the fact that while societal boundaries that greatly frowned on a relationship between people like Michelangelo and Chola existed, it was a forbidden taboo for him to have a romantic relationship with his own sister. How he and Chola ended up so deeply in love and so immersed into an intimate relationship, he never understood, but had a great peace about it.

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Agnolo and Chola left the cottage and walked swiftly towards the palace. It was still storming, but the rain had slowed down.

When Agnolo and Chola got to the gate of the palace, they both had to bow down to pass through the five-foot shrub covered entrance. In fact, in one spot, Agnolo had to get on his knees.

When Agnolo and Chola entered the palace, they had to squint. It had been several weeks since either of them had been there and it was as if they had forgotten how bright it was. From the heavens, floated his family down with a mighty song. They were dancing and gliding in orbits around two newly born statues of pure crystal and alabaster. The two new statues, one was a large but divinely accurate representation of Agnolo and the other one was of Chola. Each of the two statues engulfed its respective visitor and wrapped itself around each. The statues with their human contents glided with divine presence among the other statues. They

radiated, and the crystal-encased alabaster shined like transparent pearls. And, red fiery light glowed, from where their hearts were.

“We had missed you,” said Mary Jo to Agnolo and Chola. “So, we decided to make statues of you to fill some of our void in your absence!”

(Song 21: I Have Waited Long)

The family drank the fermented holy wine that flowed gently into their mouths and fed each other bread that they found in their hands. They sang and danced in the air.

In the large space where they glided and danced, the family made room for Mary Jo in the center. “My son, please join me,” her angelic voice echoed.

Agnolo left Chola’s side and glided to the center.

“Mommy?” He asked.

“Yes!” She answered.

And he knew!

(Song 22: You’re Always Here for Me)

“Agno, recall what I had told you when we met on earth. Recall! Chola is your crown. Have no concern,” whispered Mary Jo.

Agnolo remembered Mary Jo’s words: “Chola is your crown of thorns and roses that brings joy and tears …” He looked Mary Jo in the eyes and knotted with a smile!

Mary Jo gave way to Chola who danced with him. They were joined together in holy love without shame. Agnolo and Chola loved one another. They prayed and meditated for hours as the family sang, and the doves and the butterflies played around them.

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On the way home, Agnolo and Chola were joined by two weary knights who had been looking for them. It was day break!

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As soon as they got home, Chola climbed into her bed and entered into a deep sleep. She was weak and tired, but satisfied. Inner peace and calmness filled her soul.

Agnolo, with all the clinging crystal grape leaves, mounted a young mule and head towards the market. He carried bread, wine, and honey to take to the poor. On the way, doves found refuge on his hands. From his hands, they ate bread and at his feet their young nestled.

At the market, a crowd gathered when they saw him. They had brought their afflicted and waited and prayed week after week for Agnolo to show up. He knew that they had missed him and that they needed him, and he had mercy on them. He prayed for all the sick and gave glory to the Lord as he healed their afflicted.

The knights that followed him kept close eyes on several suspicious characters of unknown threats who tried to isolate Agnolo in a corner of the market. It was not clear what their exact plan was, but based on intelligence that they had received, the threat of Agnolo being kidnapped was one of their main concern.

Oblivious to the danger around him, Agnolo went on to feed the hungry and heal the sick until it was close to dark. "May the Lord bless you and protect you, angel of the Lord!" shouted the gratefully healed and the fulfilled poor.

In a blink of an eye, a group of monks appeared out of nowhere. The mob covered Agnolo with a large sack and quickly carried him inside one of the fruit shops. Literally, in a flicker, the young lad disappeared. The French knights were terrified, and the crowd looked around into each other's faces, but Agnolo was gone. The owner of the fruit-stand took part of the play and pretended that he too was looking for Agnolo.

The evil monks dragged Agnolo into a waiting wagon behind the fruit shop where they covered him with fruits and leaves. As much as possible, they tried to remove what they could of the crystal grape leaves that covered Agnolo. These leaves did not only emanate light that could lead the French knights to Agnolo, but they also caused a distinctive noise that the monks were sure would be recognized by the French knights.

The French knights were frantic. They were petrified with the thought that they had failed in their sole mission of protecting Agnolo.

As the open produce and fruit wagon, with its secret cargo, slowly rolled away from the market, the monks began to chant and express agitation. When they reached a far destination from the market, they jumped on the back of the wagon and began beating Agnolo. He did not resist.

At the outer edge of the forest, they were met with another group. Together, they bound the boy and dragged him into the swampy woods while shouting: You will soon get a chance to receive your judgement from the Lord. They accused Agnolo of heresy and tied him to a tree. He was unable to defend himself and did not appear to be interested in doing that. The vicious

mob contemplated what to do with him. "Why kill him?" Said one. It would be difficult to get rid of the body in a speedy manner. We could sell him as a slave and receive much money for a fair headed boy. The money could go to the poor!" The idea appealed to the crowd. "We will have to load him back up on the wagon and head south with him. There, the opportunities are endless," they rationalized. One of the monks approached Agnolo and spat on his face while untying him from the tree. But, as they dragged him through the muddy swamp to put him back on the open wagon, doves filled the entire sky and the heavens begin to rain, snow, and sleet. Visibility became very poor and many of the rebels slipped on the forming ice and fell.

And in a short moment, Agnolo disappeared!

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At the market, the French knights accepted the offer of some friendly volunteers to join in thoroughly searching the market one store at a time. When, out of the thin air, Agnolo appeared standing next to his mule. He was uninjured; his clothes were a bit wet but immaculate.

The perplexed crowd screamed with joy: "The Lord had guarded His own! The Lord has protected his servant!" In their excitement, they carried Agnolo over their shoulders while many prayed and shouted with joy.

The knights politely but firmly pulled Agnolo and loaded him on one of their horses and sped off on their way back to the cottage, leaving Agnolo's mule in the care of a trusted man.

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When Agnolo got home, it was late afternoon. He made no mention of what happened, to his family. He went directly to the backcourt and began a long bath.

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Later that afternoon, as Agnolo was getting his horse ready to return to Florence, he heard the sound of his mule climbing the hill to the cottage. When he looked, there were actually two mules: His mule, which was ridden by Giorgio Baldovinetti, and Domenico was riding another mule.

When the twins saw Agnolo, they abandoned the animals and ran towards him. They hugged him and the three kissed each other many kisses. "We had heard that you were at the market, but before we could find you, you had disappeared," said Domenico. "We decided to bring back your mule and take the opportunity to see you," said Giorgio.

It had been several years since the three were together. They all had gotten taller and were looking more like men than the children they knew each other to be.

Agnolo was deeply touched by his friends' warmth and asked them to come and visit him in Florence. He invited them to the cottage, but as much as the twins wanted to see Chola, for whom their deep affection remained and grew to a fantasy over the years, they declined the invitation. "We have been out all day and before we see your parents and your lovely sister, we prefer to look more presentable," said Giorgio with some regrets.

The three hugged and made unrealistic promises of reuniting, before Agnolo excused himself noting that he had to depart to Florence momentarily.

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Agnolo rode his horse back to Florence accompanied by four knights. He had to be available the next morning at the worksite.

34

The Lie

As the weeks and months went by, the conflict between Agnolo and Michelangelo intensified, and their closeness was suffering. The damaged pride of the master founded many solid walls between him and his innocent but spontaneously erratic brother. Agnolo, who spoke his thoughts without filters, never actually realized that he was hurting his brother's feelings and pride. Moreover, he never understood Michelangelo's attacks on him, but blamed them on the great pressure that was imposed on his brother.

When Michelangelo was completely finished with the torso and was beginning to carve the limbs of David, he advised Agnolo and his teammate, Giulio, to stay home for two weeks. "You have been working very hard and you deserve a short break," he told the two.

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Agnolo did not like the idea of staying away from the project, but thought that he could return to Settignano to be with Chola and spend time at the palace, the market, and at the cottage carving, praying, and meditating. Although he took every chance to return home to Settignano, and despite the fact the he and Chola alternated visiting back and forth, he always craved more time with Chola who had missed him just as much.

Agnolo's stay in Settignano was rejuvenating and came at a good time. Work at the quarry was a little slower and Benvenuto took advantage of the situation to spend time with his beloved son.

Giulio also went home to his parent's palace where he spent much needed time with his family. Duke Lorenzo was very proud of his artistic son and despite his hectic schedule, he made sure to take advantage of his son's visit to spend quality time with the lad.

When the two weeks were spent, Agnolo and Giulio returned to their apartment in Florence. Giulio got there around noon and Agnolo was there later that afternoon. Tota was there to greet them and Allessio and Jacopo seemed excited to see their fellow apprentices. However, despite their welcoming mood, things seemed a bit different. Allessio and Jacopo appeared uncomfortable around Agnolo. And, in some cases Agnolo detected that the two were talking behind his back and hiding their laughter. Agnolo did not understand the reason for his friends' behavior but said nothing.

Later that evening, Agnolo decided to walk to the worksite to see the new developments to the project. He asked if anyone would like to join him. Only Giulio agreed.

During their walk from the apartment to the cathedral Agnolo and Giulio had a chance to catch up on what they had missed during their two-week separation. Giulio made no effort to hide his deep interest in knowing how Chola was. "You have a beautiful sister, Agnolo," commented Giulio. Agnolo was aware of Giulio's crush on his sister, but for some reason that did not bother him.

"How are your parents?" Asked Agnolo.

"They are doing well. They always ask about you and remember you with fondness. Daddy seems a bit busy lately. Foscari's interrogation does not appear to be leading to anything and the rebels seem to be growing in numbers. The Pope seems to be somewhat sympathetic to their cause," said Giulio to Agnolo who expressed little interest in the political environment around him.

When the two arrived at the plaza that was used as the worksite for the carving of David they were both greatly impressed. It was almost dark, but the two could see that the right arm of David was almost complete and both legs were practically free from the stone. It was beautiful! Giulio laughed with fondness: "How does it feel to see yourself carved in such a large scale!"

Agnolo blushed and said nothing.

In the approaching darkness, the two lads noticed that a large but plain linen cloth was placed to cover the lower abdomen of David. It was clear that the cloth was positioned there intentionally and for a purpose. Curiously drove the two to investigate. They shed off some of their clothes that limited their movement and the two raced to the scaffolds. Giulio got to the cloth first and pulled it up to see what it was concealing. "Oh, my Lord!" He shouted with a loud laughter.

"What?" Said Agnolo who was relying on his functioning right arm to climb the limbs of the scaffolds.

"You have to see this!" Continued Giulio.

"What?"

When Agnolo finally got to look his face was filled with many emotions, but mostly anger.

Beneath the large cloth, Michelangelo had carved the genitals of David. In addition to the disproportionately small size of David's genitals, it was uncircumcised.

In Anger, Agnolo pulled the cloth hoping to tip the entire statue over. But, instead of bringing the statue down, Agnolo's feet slipped on the scaffolds and he fell to the ground. The sack that

contained the crystal heart which Agnolo had constantly kept in one of his pockets almost fell out destroying its precious contents.

“Agnolo, you are crazy. Don’t do that!” shouted Giulio in horror. “Are you alright? Let us just leave. I am sure there is a good explanation for all of this”

“That is all false. It is all a lie. How could Michlo do that to me?” Agnolo was talking aloud to himself. “I must go see him now!”

“Agnolo, please calm down.”

“I am calm. This is absolutely a humiliating lie! I will destroy this lie,” shouted Agnolo as he ran out of the plaza towards Michelangelo’s apartment.

The wind blew Agnolo’s hair in all directions over his face and the stares of the crowds did not seem to faze him. He was enraged and hurt. “Michelangelo knew that this would make an eternal mockery of me,” he rationalized. “So, why did he do this awful thing?”

Agnolo ran most of the distance to Michelangelo’s apartment. When he got there, he bypassed the servants and did not return anyone’s greetings. “Before I take steps to correct this evil lie, I should find out what Michlo had to say,” he thought to himself.

Without knocking at the door to Michelangelo’s bedroom, where he suspected his brother to be, Agnolo rushed in. Michelangelo was at his desk writing. Agnolo could see that it was a poem. He could read parts of it. The title was: “Stone Cold”.

“Why Michlo, why?” Shouted Agnolo with pain in his voice. “You know this is a lie. You know that I am circumcised, and you know that your depiction of my penis is certain to cause me shame and heart ache. I just don’t understand, Michlo. I know that I may have said some things that may had upset you, but you know that I have good intentions and you know that my mission on this earth is to do the Lord’s will and love and love and love. But, how could I love while everyone is laughing at me …? I am circumcised!”

“Agno, Agno, please calm down. It is not that big a deal. Please do not misread what happened.”

“What could have happened to reduce me to the size of a toddler and depict me as an uncircumcised heathen?”

“Not at all, my dear brother. Not at all!”

“How are you going to fix it, Michlo? Just how? You are the one that repeatedly said that ‘you cannot make marble out of marble dust’.”

“Agno, it was a mistake. And, I should have listened to you. I seem to get excited and carried away not realizing that I confine myself inside the stone. You know that to be true! You know that I do that all the time. It just happened. My hands were wet, and the chisel slipped. The sun was in my eyes and my hand was confined. Please forgive me.”

“Michlo, I love you. And of course, I forgive you. Forget about me, forget about my feelings. But, this carving is a lie. How can I accept a lie? Michlo, you know how I feel about lies! If anything sets my internal organs into a violent rage it is lies and injustice … the two are the same to me. How could I allow this lie to prevail knowing that such an awful depiction could hinder my ministry? If I do nothing, I would be an accomplice to your deceit; I would be as guilty as you are! Not only that, but you are degrading David the holy man of God by depicting him as an uncircumcised heathen boy! This statue is supposed to symbolize the glory and victory of our state. Even our enemies will make fun of us and our lack of understanding! How could you do this awful thing and pursue a wicked lie! How could you, Michlo?”

“Agno, please don’t take it too seriously. Please, be open minded about this whole thing. It is in fact, a compliment.”

“How is that?”

“Agno, you know very well that all the Greek statues depicted their Gods with small and uncircumcised genitals. You can look for yourself and restudy the work of the masters.”

“The times are different Michlo. We are Christians and these Gods were heathen Gods. I belong to the Lord and I only serve Him. You have created a lie, Michlo. This statue is cursed, and it must be destroyed.”

“Agno, please don’t talk like that. Please! If anyone heard you saying such a thing, they would not be as understanding as I am – being your brother. If fact, they may have you arrested for threatening to destroy a church and public property. Please, Agno, please don’t bring about unnecessary pain to yourself. When people understand that it was my error, or that the depiction was intended to simulate Greek Gods they will have great appreciation for the meaning behind it. In many ways, it shows the God-like personality of David as well as minimize his uncontrolled sexuality which had led to many catastrophes.”

“I am not buying it Michlo. History is propagated perceptions and a lie collapses the integrity of history as it infects and distorts perceptions. Is that why you had me gone away from the project for two weeks? Did you plan this, Michlo? Listening to you now, I realize that you had full intention of humiliating me and have no intention of even fixing what can be fixed. You did not even offer or suggest circumcising David. David was a circumcised Jew, Michlo! I will take care of this! I will do God’s work here on earth!”

With that, Agnolo stormed out of Michelangelo's room and through the large rooms of the apartment to the street. He had no plan for implementing his desire to abolish the lie, but he was determined to correct it.

When he got home, his three roommates were all in the living room talking. As soon as he entered, they all stopped talking and alternated somber stares at him.

Agnolo went directly to his room and locked the door behind him. "How could Allessio and Jacopo allow this to happen? How could they consent to such a humiliation? Did they inquire? Did they protest? Maybe they thought that I am not circumcised," Agnolo thought to himself. "After all, how would they know. They must think that I am a heathen freak!"

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Michelangelo paced for a few minutes around his room and debated what he should do. Agnolo's anger was genuine and his threats could not be ignored. If he were to damage or destroy David, the loss of all the time, effort, and expense would not only be devastating but Michelangelo himself would be held responsible for not reporting such a serious threat to the project.

As it was getting late, Michelangelo debated whether to report the matter immediately or wait till the morning. He knew that the pending danger to the project would be best reported to Father Bronzino, and certainly not to cardinal Carafa who was likely to be sympathetic to Agnolo's hurts and his view point. Everyone had seen what happened to those who inflicted harm on Agnolo. All the way back to Bishop Fontana who disappeared after punishing Agnolo to Bishop Donato who was exiled to an unknown location after the Easter fiasco. "I certainly do not want to be another causality of my brother by involving Carafa," thought Michelangelo to himself.

Bronzino was not Michelangelo's best choice for an ally. Earlier, the man had argued against granting the project to Michelangelo and wanted da Vinci to carve a large horse instead. Michelangelo had seen the blue prints and the incredible sketches, but da Vinci's efforts failed because his project required investing more money in buying another slab of marble.

Despite all of that, Michelangelo felt the urgency to preempt any action that may be taken by Agnolo. So, he got dressed and walked fast to the cathedral. When he got to Bronzino's office, the aides to Bronzino realized that Michelangelo's visit at such a late hour of the night must be important and urgent.

Bronzino was praying in his bedroom, as he was preparing to go to bed.

"Come in Michelangelo. What is keeping you up this late at night?"

“Father I hate to alarm you. But, this a very urgent and serious matter.”

Michelangelo went on to tell Bronzino that Agnolo had made threats to destroy the statue because he felt that it humiliated him.

“He is a bit too sensitive, Father. But, I had to bring the matter to your attention lest he really tries to carry out his threats.”

Bronzino stared for a long time without saying anything. He realized that the matter cannot be brought up before Cardinal Carafa. “Cardinal Carafa would be furious,” said Bronzino. A frightening thought entered Michelangelo’s mind. Although Agnolo was posing for the statue, somehow the statue looked a lot like a younger version of Carafa himself. As an artist, Michelangelo noticed how closely Agnolo’s looks resembled Carafa’s. Of course, Agnolo’s hair was light blonde and his eyes were very light blue which was the exact opposite of what Carafa’s hair and eyes looked like. But, since the stone had no color, it only projected features. And, those were eerily similar in both Agnolo and Carafa.

“What a mess. Not a great legacy, Michelangelo, you are leaving these people with,” said Bronzino.

Michelangelo did not understand why Bronzino was talking in the plural. “What people?” He wondered. He thought it was only Agnolo that would be affected by his false depiction.

Bronzino contained a smile. “Some legacy! The boy must be watched! This is a public and church property. It must be protected, and all threats must be eliminated. I will have to address this matter first thing tomorrow, Michelangelo. Go now and make sure that your hand is dry and that your chisels are dry when you are working,” said Bronzino with a smile.

Michelangelo did not understand what Bronzino meant with “all threats must be eliminated,” but he shrugged his uncomfortable thoughts. “Surely Bronzino did not really mean to kill Agnolo. Or, did he?”

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After Michelangelo left Bronzino’s quarters, the senior one-eyed priest got dressed and disappeared in the darkness of the night. As usual, he had his damaged eye covered with the edge of his hood. When the darkness encased him, he shed off his outer garment and walked through the cemetery and the large orchard until he reached the monks’ Abby. There, he stood in the prevailing wind while he struggled to light a lantern that he had stashed within his cloak. Then, with his cloak he covered the lit lantern and exposed it several times and waited. Shortly, out of the darkness, emerged the stealthy figures of two monks. The three men whispered before they departed each to where he came from.

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That night, in Settignano, Francisca and Chola had a similar alarming dream about two angels fighting. In the dream, one of the angels turned into a raven and the other flew away into eternal skies.

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The following morning, Agnolo proceeded his fellow apprentices to the worksite. When he got there, he noticed the presence of at least ten-armed cathedral guards. They scattered within feet from the statue. There was another group resting in the shade away from the statue. The French knights who were guarding Agnolo exchanged uncomfortable looks with the cathedral guards.

Although the cathedral guards were servants of the cardinal and under his authority, Father Bronzino, by virtue of his position, was in direct command over their activities. Thus, he was able to command their protection of the statue, which he considered church property, without the need for the endorsement of the cardinal.

When Michelangelo arrived at the plaza, he pretended as if everything was normal. He asked Agnolo to get on the posing stand then jumped on the scaffolds and sited a short prayer from the Psalms as he was reaching for his tools. Once he had made a choice from all the chisels before him, he began chiseling David's left arm and refining the features on his face. The entire time, he made sure that David's genitals were concealed with a large cloth that wrapped around the statue's waist.

The situation was very tense and all who stood by knew that they could, in no time, find themselves transformed from spectators to participants in a great drama that was imminently awaiting to unfold.

The French knights were tense. While Agnolo was gone to Settignano for two weeks, they heard Allessio and Jacopo talking about the statue as they entered and exited their apartment and as they loitered around the building. When their curiosity reached an uncomfortable point, several decided to walk to the worksite, where they had not been since Agnolo's departure, and find out the source of the young apprentices' amusement. What they saw greatly upset them and prepared them for the tumult to come.

"A man would never demean his brother in such a way!" They consented.

They knew that Agnolo would be enraged when he found out what Michelangelo had done. And, they were right. They did not know, however, how this situation would unfold.

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“Go ahead, Master. Give his hand some claws like a devil,” shouted Agnolo from where he stood. “Why not, it is all a lie anyway! Oh, and give him a forked tongue also!”

At first, Michelangelo ignored Agnolo’s remarks and pretended that he did not understand his brother’s comments. But, when all those around began to laugh loudly Michelangelo threw his hammer and chisel to the ground and jumped off the scaffolds.

“Agnolo, please follow me. I want to have a word with you,” said Michelangelo

Agnolo jumped off his posing stand and boldly followed his brother to a shaded area in an adjacent shed. The two were followed by two French knights and the four were in full sight of everyone.

Michelangelo began his speech with a soft voice: “You are causing too much problems, Agno. I already explained to you what happened and why that it is not such a significant thing that you should make such a big issue of it. If you were not my brother, I would have fired you!”

“You cannot fire me. The cardinal is the one that hired me. I can forget about your intention of humiliating me, but I cannot promote a lie. It is a lie, Michlo. It is a lie. Why Michlo? Why? I am your brother and I love you! And, you know that all this will make a mockery out of our state among our enemies!”

The French knights witnessed the escalating dispute between Michelangelo and Agnolo but restrained themselves from intervening. As professionals, they opted to adhere to the core of their mission which was protecting the physical safety of Agnolo.

35

"The Boy" Problem

Despite Bronzino's all-out effort to keep the matter from reaching Cardinal Carafa, within two days the news was all over the cathedral. Rumors of the threats to the project also seeped into the public and ultimately reached Duke Lorenzo. Upon hearing the news, Lorenzo summoned his son to the palace and inquired about the situation.

"It is clear that Michelangelo intended to humiliate his little brother," said Giulio. "His threats should be taken seriously, dad. If it were me, I would not go to sleep until this statue is totally destroyed!"

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Upon hearing the news and the details about what Michelangelo had done to the statue, Carafa's anger could not be contained. He also became furious with Bronzino who kept him in the dark about what was going on and for aligning with Michelangelo whom Carafa was becoming more and more convinced should be relieved of his duties as the master in charge of the project.

In a loud rage, Cardinal Carafa ordered one of the standing aides to summon Father Bronzino to his office. Walking to Carafa's office, Bronzino felt humiliated and was filled with resentment.

Cardinal Carafa ordered everyone to leave the room.

"Sit down, Piero. We have to have a long talk!" Said Carafa. "What the hell is going on? What in the name of the Lord is happening?"

"Alessandro, the boy is nothing but trouble," Bronzino began to plead. "I am trying to protect all of us, as you know!"

"Stop, stop, Piero! Stop! I am aware of all of that, but, why is it that you cannot see that what Michelangelo had done is wrong?"

"Alessandro, Michelangelo convinced me that it was an error and that his wet hand had slept."

"Then why did he sent Agnolo away from the worksite while he was committing his awful deed? This will be a mockery for all of us and for our state. As you know, I am under pressure from the Council to complete this project in a timely manner and everyone is watching us. I am in a bad fix here. I cannot abandon the project … brining in another artist would take time and approval, and to proceed with things as they are would end up making us the laughing stock of everyone including our enemies."

Bronzino listened and knew that although Carafa did not emphatically mention it, the false depiction of David was also a personal issue for the reigning cardinal whose image closely resembled the statue.

“I am certain that Michelangelo had meant no personal insult to you or Agnolo,” inserted Bronzino. “I know that he is an artist, and that he is likely able to discern things that others don’t see, but I really think that it would be very difficult for him to connect the dots.”

Carafa pretended as if he did not understand what Bronzino said. He went on: “So, what else is going on Piero? Why did I have to hear these news from someone else and not from you? Why did you not tell me what is going on? What are you hiding, Piero?”

Bronzino’s one eye filled with tears: “Alessandro, please, please let me explain. You know that my loyalty towards you is unshaken. And, that I have put your interest above and before my own as I have tried to protect you and do what is good for the Lord and for our state. I have always done that! I know that you have your hands full with many issues. A few weeks ago, Lorenzo and two council members appeared out of nowhere and requested to meet with you,” Bronzino lowered his voice and began to whisper. He continued: “Knowing that the walls have ears and that the eyes of the Vatican are watching you to see where your loyalty lies in their conflict with Lorenzo, I blocked Lorenzo’s request to see you.”

“What did Lorenzo want? You know how I feel about him. I have to deal with many people and he is one of them. And, he has been nothing but gracious towards me personally and his generosity cannot be denied. Plus, the man is highly esteemed and has a strong following locally and abroad. I have to live with these people. And, he is one of us. He is local. Our Holy Father is very isolated and very insulated. I seriously doubt that he knows what is going on here in Florence. His issues are different from our issues. He has to deal with Philip, the king of France, and his demands. After all, it was Charles VIII who installed him and supported him. I know that their relationship is volatile and unclear. That is not to mention that our Holy Father has to deal with the Holy Roman Emperor, Maximilian I, as well as Muhammad II, the ambitious Turkish Sultan. People are watching us, Piero. They are all watching us. We do not know who is on our side anymore. This statue represents more than just a project. It represents our sovereignty and victory in the face of mounting adversities and evil. You know more than anyone, that I have a vested interest in its completion and its beauty and success!”

“I know Alessandro. I know!”

“So why are you not able to see Agnolo’s side? Why are you not able to see that this holy young orphan is fighting against the proliferation of an evil lie that has no bases or clean motives? Why are you allowing this lie to flourish and thrive? I know that it is too late to

reassign the project to someone else and I know that the statue is damaged beyond repair. What should we do, Piero?"

Bronzino did not comment, although he took notice that Carafa had referred to Agnolo as an orphan for the first time.

Carafa knew that his dilemma was deeper than what he described. His trust for Bronzino had been eroding. Evidence against the one-eyed high-ranking aide had been mounting, but Carafa could not forget that Bronzino knew enough to have him excommunicated and even killed. Furthermore, he knew that it was not wise to add another name to the long list of his enemies, especially one like Bronzino. After all, no one can do as much damage as a best friend who becomes an enemy. Thus, in such a fix, new strategies had to be considered!

"Piero, I fear for the safety of Agnolo. I know that the French are doing as good a job as possible, but I think it would be prudent to let them join force with Lorenzo and the Council. Their intelligence is invaluable as they are local, and their numbers are larger than those of the French. That is not to mention that they control the local prison and all the safe houses around. This is becoming much more serious than it had ever been. It is time to strengthen our alliances and promote a strong coalition between the French and the forces of the City Council. Meanwhile, Piero, you tell your goons to hold their horses and refrain from harassing this innocent young angel who is fighting for righteousness. He is too gentle to harm anything or anyone, much less a church property."

Carafa's political move to involve Bronzino in his decision to seek the formation of a coalition between the French and the City Council was not made out of naivety, but it was intended to sedate Bronzino and pretend that he still trusted him, when in reality he did not.

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After leaving Carafa's office, Bronzino sent a messenger to Duke Lorenzo's palace informing him that Cardinal Carafa wished to meet with him. Bronzino also sent a messenger to Philippe, whose squad happened to oversee guarding Agnolo in Florence at the time, to inform him of the cardinal's request for a meeting.

Overnight, Philippe coordinated with Nicolas, who was in Settignano, to join him in what appeared to be a sensitive meeting.

The next day, when Duke Lorenzo appeared for his meeting, he was accompanied by three City Councilmen. Philippe and Nicholas arrived a little later, as Nicholas had to travel from Settignano to Florence.

The two groups were greeted by Father Bronzino in his office who escorted them to the cardinal's office.

"Father, I am delighted that you had called this meeting. Things are very tense and many events had taken place, all of which require our joint cooperation and coordination," Lorenzo jump-started the conversation. "You may know that I had requested to see you a while back, but I was told that you were preoccupied with many issues. Since then, things appear to have deteriorated to an alarming level. My earlier concerns were regarding the direction that the project was taking. Since I had agreed to awarding the project to Michelangelo, I had learned many things of great importance. Among them, was the fact that Michelangelo's young brother, Agnolo, holds the key to the new sculpturing technique using the 'Water Baptism'. It was then that I wondered why Agnolo was not awarded the commission of the project instead of Michelangelo? I do realize that the lad is young and the project is very large, but who are we to tell our Lord which one of us holds the talents. We are all aware of many great rulers who ruled with wisdom and coy at a very young age, including the greatest and wisest of all kings, King Solomon who ruled at the ripe age of twelve. Age should have had absolutely no influence on the commissioning of this project."

What Lorenzo was saying was music to Carafa's ears, but was a pitchfork in the heart of Bronzino who saw nothing good about Agnolo and had for a longtime built increasing resentment against him.

Carafa denied himself a smile.

"I bring all this up now, because it appears that this matter is the root of the present contentious relationship that exists between the two brothers – so toxic a relationship that it is placing our project in jeopardy," continued Lorenzo.

The two French captains refrained from expressing their adamant support for Lorenzo's position.

"Now, I am told that we have a situation where Michelangelo had mutilated the statue in a likely effort to humiliate his brother. All of which, had caused the frustrated young and talented lad to make hasty threats against the project. Please remember that I hold a great deal of respect for Michelangelo who had spent three of his prime years in my palace and ate at my table and socialized with my own children as one of them. I, therefore, stated my position based on unbiased facts and fighting all temptations to follow unreasonable traditions and expectations. The world is watching us; and we cannot fail!" Lorenzo's oratory abilities were shining and if it is true that the person who begins the conversation, asks more questions, and talks the most, is likely to dominate the outcome of a meeting, then he did.

“Duke Lorenzo, your concerns are ours,” said cardinal Carafa. “It is, therefore, our solemn duty to join forces. We are now in a fix. First, we know that the damage to the statue cannot be reversed. Second, we all know that it would be unwise to withdraw the present commission from Michelangelo and award it to someone else as this would delay the project without correcting its damage. And third, we should never forget that the world is watching us. Our failure would have political, religious, and economic implications. I, therefore, propose that the cathedral guards, who are under my authority, the city forces who are under you, Duke, and the French element, under you two captains would be unified under one command. Their mission is to ensure the safe and successful completion of the project without delay and the safety of all who are involved. I further propose that this unified command would be under the City Council led by you, Duke! As for Agnolo, it is probably better for the young lad to stay away from the project for a while. It is for his safely and to allow things to cool off a little.”

After the cardinal made this proposal, a short and friendly discussion ensued. The discussion focused on the definitions and allocations of duties and the role that each should play. When the meeting was over, much had not been cleared, but everyone knew that the matter was receiving attention at the very highest level and that their harmonious collaboration was vital to the success, if not the survival, of their state.

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Unware of the meeting, Michelangelo left the project site and sought to see Father Bronzino. On his way to Bronzino’s office, he passed Philippe and Nicholas. They courteously greeted each other, and Michelangelo wondered about the coincidental appearance of both the French captains at the same time in Florence.

Michelangelo’s timing could not have been any worse. Bronzino had just finished the meeting and the attendees had just departed when Michelangelo entered Bronzino’s office requesting to see him. The senior aide who was managing Bronzino’s office that day knew that Michelangelo’s arrival was awkward and asked him to wait while he belayed his request to Father Bronzino. In a short moment, Bronzino appeared at his door and with his right hand waved Michelangelo in and quickly shut the door.

“What are you doing here?” Said Bronzino.

“Father, as you know, I like to work in privacy. At no time in my life have I allowed anyone to be around while I carved. It makes me uncomfortable and unable to create. I consented to allowing for the present set up hoping that it would not distract me from my mission, but I have to admit, it is becoming very difficult. I do not mind the cathedral guards’ presence, as I know that they are there to protect the statue from Agnolo, but the French knights appear to be more and more intruding. They are everywhere all the time. I do not feel that I have autonomy

and sovereignty even in my own workplace. They just make me feel uncomfortable. I just wish that they were not there!"

"Michelangelo, if you are asking for the removal of the French, you are asking for the impossible. I have done what I could to accommodate your needs, but please understand that I am under a great deal of pressure," said Bronzino then he began to whisper: "I am taking some steps that may solve all our problems. Just hold your place and do not make mistakes. Oh, and do not tell anyone about what I had just told you. I mean: no one!"

Michelangelo stared at Bronzino with confusion and some fear.

"The matter will be dealt with to your satisfaction. Just be patient and do not ask any questions. It is best that you know very little. Believe me, the less you know the better it is for you!"

"Thank you, Father!"

"Now leave and try to keep a low profile. Lots of things will happen in the next few days and weeks, but trust me, I am managing things and if all goes well, you will be pleased. Again, do not say anything to anyone and tolerate the seemingly uncomfortable new set up that you will see in a few days. It is all temporary until we prevail!"

Michelangelo left Bronzino's office not knowing what to do or think. He thought to himself: Whatever Bronzino is doing must be clandestine. But, from whom is he hiding his behavior and why did he have to whisper at his own office?"

Michelangelo walked back to the plaza where his apprentices and other workers were busy with their assigned tasks. The cathedral guards greeted Michelangelo as he approached the scaffolds. He returned their greetings.

To his surprise, Agnolo was nowhere around. Of course, since Agnolo whom they were guarding was not there, the French guards were not there either.

The work resumed with a somber cloud over the project. Everyone went through the motion lacking enthusiasm that seemed to have been lost to unconscious mysteries. They were disengaged, whether intentionally or unintentionally – for a reason or for no reason!

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While Michelangelo was at Bronzino's office, at the worksite Agnolo was approached by Captain Nicolas who told him that his family sends their best and that Chola sends her hugs and kisses. Nicholas' words fell on vulnerable ears. In Florence, Agnolo felt isolated and lonely. Being away from his family and being away from Chola were very difficult, especially during this

time when he felt that he was fighting for a right cause alone. It was very painful that his brother, whom he loved, was his adversary. What would his parents think? And, what would his family at the palace think. There, at the palace, he remembered, that he also had a statue of Michelangelo. What would his relationship with that statue be?

"I am coming with you!" Said Agnolo.

Nicholas was very pleased to hear these words from Agnolo. It was actually his intended goal to persuade Agnolo to leave Florence and go back to Settignano, but Agnolo did not seem to require any persuasion.

Without requesting permission from Michelangelo or saying goodbye to anyone, Agnolo left the worksite and ran all the way to the apartment. He looked for Tota, and when he found her he told her about his intention of going back to Settignano for a few days. Before he mounted his horse to accompany Nicholas and Philippe as well as all the knights that were in Florence except for two, Agnolo made one last stop. He went into his room and double wrapped his crystal heart and put it back where he had been keeping it in his garment pocket night and day.

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Agnolo's departure seemed to provide temporary peace for everyone in Florence. And, although it was self-directed, some of the parties involved misunderstood it to be a part of the plan and a permanent release of Agnolo from his duties. In fact, Michelangelo thought it was what Bronzino was talking about.

When Bronzino found out that Agnolo had departed to Settignano and that the rumor was that he was fired from his duties, he welcomed the gossip and promoted it.

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Agnolo's surprise return to Settignano was received with delight. His parents and Chola were elated. It was like Christmas and Easter meshed in one. However, when Agnolo began to vent his frustration and open his heart to his family about what Michelangelo had done to the statue, they were perplexed.

"Not only did he portray me as an uncircumcised heathen, but David's genitals were clearly disproportionate to his body," said Agnolo. "It is a lie and may be permanent! And, it is a disgrace and mockery to everyone in our state. Our enemies will have a great laughter with that. I told Michlo that he should at least have David circumcised and that if he did not do it, I will!"

Agnolo's blunt talk about genitals before Chola made his parents somewhat uncomfortable, but they said nothing as they convinced themselves that such a talk may be acceptable among family members. In addition, "it may be time for young Chola to learn some facts of life," they rationalized within themselves.

"I do not know why Michlo would do such a thing, Agnolo," said Benvenuto. "I can understand how he could make an irreversible mistake with a slippery hand, but the uncircumcision part makes the whole thing suspicious! I just don't know. I will have to talk to him when I see him."

"Papa, too many crazy things are happening in Florence. I am not sure that I would want to go back there anymore. I really don't like the place and I do not feel that I am serving the Lord as I should when I am there. It seems that there is constant strife in that place and my mission in life is derailed," said Agnolo.

"My precious son, life is full of obstacles and we simply have to learn to cope with these obstacles and go around them," said Benvenuto. "Evil is everywhere, but we are protected! I think you should take time off and stay here for a while, before you return to Florence. Too many people are counting on you, Agno! Too many people. Your contributions are badly needed for the success of the project. When it is completed, you and your brother will look back at all these troubles and laugh. Just take a little time and rest for a while, before you return."

Agnolo took advantage of his time at home to work on many statues that he had started and to start many new ones that he knew that he would likely never complete. His room was full of many statues, animals and people and several copies of David and Mary Jo.

He also spent a lot of time at the palace. Practically, daily, he and Chola went there. When they heard his voice, his palace family burst with joy unknown. They sparkled and drifted in many temporary orbits while singing.

It was evident that Agnolo's absence exacerbated Chola's need for him. While he seemed to be preoccupied with unresolved matters in Florence, she seemed focused on getting as much of him as she could. Her love for him appeared in constant growing need for his nourishment.

At the palace, she seduced him over and over.

While the family sang and flowers bloomed, the two were covered with mist as they expressed their love and exchanged warm passion. When Agnolo was exhausted and Chola was very sore, and just when he thought they were completely satisfied, Chola was sure to find a way to flirt with him again.

“Oh, this water looks so refreshing!” She entered one of the pools with one foot while holding up her gown exposing her body. They danced their way through the water and in the air, and floated for hours as one.

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While Agnolo was in Florence, one raven was reportedly able to penetrate to the palace. While he was chased by the doves and the palace family, the smell of its carnivorous droppings polluted a section of the palace for a short time.

With no sorrow, Agnolo noticed that the alabaster of Michelangelo was absent from the group.

36

Fragile Hearts

When ten days had passed, three messengers from Cardinal Carafa appeared at the cottage. They carried orders from the cardinal directing Agnolo to immediately return to Florence. Agnolo's departure without notice from Florence, although applauded by his adversaries, did not go very well with cardinal Carafa or Duke Lorenzo. Upon finding out and questioning Michelangelo and Bronzino it was clear that there was a misunderstanding based on perpetuated rumors whose source could not be identified. While other apprentices and workers were under the impression that Agnolo was barred from coming near the statue, Michelangelo and Father Bronzino insisted on their innocence and distanced themselves from the prevailing rumors. Michelangelo stated that he was surprised that Agnolo had departed without his permission and thought that his brother was released of his duties. Bronzino asserted that he had nothing to do with the young apprentice' decision to leave the work and he too was surprised to learn that Agnolo was no longer involved.

It was evident that communication among concerned parties was not fluid and sporadic at best. Even members of the consolidated force of the cathedral guards and the city militia, whose task was to protect the project and the safety of Agnolo were under the impression that Agnolo was forbidden from coming near the statue.

Complying with the Cardinal's orders, Agnolo returned to Florence escorted by Nicholas and a company of his knights. Chola found a way to convince her parents that it was good for her to accompany her brother, if for no other reason than just to provide moral support for him in the clearly hostile Florentine environment. Chola's parents also thought that her presence may cool off the tension between Agnolo and his brother.

Tota warmly received Agnolo and his sister, but Agnolo's appearance at the worksite was a surprise and source of confusion for all.

Although he was welcomed, he was closely watched, and his behavior was scrutinized by the cathedral guards, whose loyalty was unclear and did not seem to get along with the city militia or the French knights.

Chola's unannounced arrival made the hearts of many race with excitement.

That night, Giulio who had heard Chola's voice in Tota's room sat in the living room hoping to talk to her. When it got late, he left the apartment with the other two apprentices and went for a walk in the city.

They had invited Agnolo, but he graciously declined their invitation. They were curious to hear from him any news as well as share with him some of the prevalent gossip. When the three came back to the apartment, it was late at night. Chola was coming out of Agnolo's room. None of them had seen her since her return and Giulio's face flushed with affection.

"Chola, it is so good to see you back," said Allessio before Giulio could muster any words.

"Thank you, Allessio. I see things are a bit different here now," she said with some naivety.

"Yes, we are making great progress on the project. It will be absolutely wonderful when it is completed," commented Allessio in a politician's deceptive manner.

"That is good," said Chola who sensed the dishonesty of Allessio, but did not want to engage him.

Allessio and Jacopo excused themselves and each went into his bedroom, but Giulio made an excuse to remain as he pretended to be looking for something in the living room.

"What are you looking for, Giulio?" Said Chola.

"Oh, I could say that I am looking for my lost heart!" Said Giulio with a clever flirt.

Chola blushed!

"Oh, and what made you lose it here in the living room?" She replied with a giggle.

"How are you Chola?" Said Giulio with warmth in his voice.

"I am OK. I still have your rose! I planted it in front of our cottage in Settignano!"

Giulio was surprised and touched with the unexpected remark: "Wow, is it still beautiful? I think it is time to get you another one!"

"That is sweet, but, really totally unnecessary, Giulio. How are your parents?" Said Chola, trying to change the subject.
"They are well. They remember you with fondness. By the way, I am sorry about all the nonsense that is going on at the project. I wish I could do something to change the situation."

"That is kind of you, Giulio. You know it is a lie! It is just not true! That is not a true representation of Agnolo!"

Giulio did not probe into Chola's statement but was curious about what she meant and its implications. He thought to himself: "I was raised with two sisters and as far as I know, neither

one knows any private details about my body." Giulio paused for a moment, then discarded his thought as crazy imagination.

As the two were talking, Michelangelo came through the door.

"I heard that you were back. It is no wonder that the flowers are blooming and the birds are singing," said Michelangelo as he walked swiftly to embrace his sister.

"Michlo, how are you?" Chola hugged her brother. She had missed him. In the moment, the two seemed to forget their last awkward encounter. "You look so different. You must have been in the sun a lot."

"I have. So do you. Every time I see you, you look like you have matured ten years. You have grown so much!"

Chola blushed and did not comment but lowered her head.

"Tomorrow night, I want to take you around and show you the city like you have never seen it before. I also have something special for you. I think it will be ready tomorrow!"

"Michlo, I would love that! I have been here many times, but never really got to see too much!"

"Well, my little lady, tomorrow we will have to explore this great city together! Get some rest tonight and I will be by tomorrow night to pick you up."

Michelangelo left the apartment with new energy and excitement.

Not aware of the fact that Chola and Agnolo were not actually blood siblings, Michelangelo justified his behavior by thinking that his relationship with Chola may tame Agnolo affection and possibly circumvent a potential disastrous relationship between Agnolo and Chola. Whether Michelangelo's motive was genuinely sincere, he was able to convince himself of the nobility of his plan.

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When Agnolo got home from work the next day, Chola met him at the door. She hugged him and kissed him on the cheek.

"It is so good to have you here, Chola. Without you, my nights run into my days and my life is a boring routine with no one to talk to or to trust," whispered Agnolo as he escorted his sister to his room. He locked the door and opened the two windows.

When she woke up, she jumped out of his bed. “Agnolo, I have to get ready. Michlo is taking me around to show me the city tonight!”

Agnolo kissed her nose and did not comment. With weak and sad eyes, he just looked at her once and then looked down.

“I love you, Chola. You are my joy and my delight. Would you please stay just five more minutes? Please!” He said.

“I love you, Agno! But, I better go!” She answered with trembling lips.

As Chola was climbing out of the small bed, on its own, the pouch containing the crystal heart rolled off the top of the dresser and fell hard on the tile floor. They both heard a cracking noise, but despite their grief, neither of them dared to open the sack for fear of what they might find.

Chola left the room with tears in her eyes.

(Song 23: Truly Yours)

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Chola rushed into Tota’s room. She wiped her tears and began to dress up for the evening. She was excited about seeing the big city and all the glamour that it had to offer. The fact that Michelangelo had made serious advances towards her seemed to be drowned by her desire to experience what this new world had to offer. Her excitement was clearly not driven by a conscious decision but rather by immature impulsive propensity. Tota helped Chola with her hair and the cosmetics of the day. When they were through, the young lady was transformed into a model of royal likeness.

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In Settignano, the ravens fought with the doves who were guarding the palace. A few of the ravens were able to distract the doves and sneak their way into the holy place. There, before being driven out by the palace family and the host of the palace doves within, they left behind defiled droppings and hid a few contaminated eggs beneath the many crystal leaves.

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When Michelangelo showed up, he was holding a large bouquet of flowers that emanated sweet perfume throughout the entire building.

“My lady, are you ready?” Asked Michelangelo as he handed the flowers to his sister. He was noticeably subdued, and it was as if he had muted and deafened the entire world except for his voice. No one heard him, except for Chola – not even Tota who was helping Chola.

Michelangelo and Chola climbed down the steps from the second floor to the main entrance of the building unnoticed by anyone, except the French knights who saw Michelangelo’s extravagant carriage with its decorated horses.

When they got into the carriage, Michelangelo reached for a large wrapped gift and with theatrical eagerness smiled: “First, I want you to try on something,” he said while unwrapping the gift to reveal a beautiful silk and velvet cloak.

“I designed this especially for you and had it especially made. It is fit for a queen and it is studded with many jewels,” he bragged about the many semiprecious stones that he had imbedded into the lavish garment. “Let it be known, that Lady Chola has arrived!” He laughed as he placed the cloak on Chola.

“Oh, Michlo. Oh, my Lord, Michlo. Oh, Oh!” Chola was besides herself. She had tears in her eyes. “If only Dianna could see me now,” she thought! She hugged Michelangelo tightly and put her head down as the carriage began to move. The cloak was, indeed, worthy of a queen. The silver and gold threads encased and framed the colored semiprecious stones in a divine and artistic design. Chola moved her hand over the velvet and stared at the many glittering stones. Chola knew that such a cloak must have cost the equivalence of a man’s entire annual earnings. She was finding it difficult to breathe!

Within a couple of minutes, Michelangelo reached again to another small package. “Lady Chola, please accept this small gift from someone who really cares about you,” said Michelangelo as he pulled a crystal urn containing expensive perfume. When he opened the bottle, the exclusive and unique smell filled the entire carriage and the wind carried its scent in its departing path.

“Oh, Michlo. Oh, oh! Enough!” Gasped Chola. “I never expected all that!”

“My Lady, I’m known to love beauty and the weakness of a man is not his age, but his inability to control his desires,” chuckled Michelangelo while he brought Chola closer to him and squeezed her body with his right arm.

The street noise was stimulating. It was a reminder that things are happening all around and a subtle warning that if you don’t partake of its delight, you will be missing out on a great and vanishing opportunity.

The carriage slowly strolled through the streets of Florence, intentionally not taking the shortest possible route to its selected destination. It was Michelangelo's way of exposing his cherished guest to what life had to offer and what was available to those who place themselves around him. The carriage passed through areas that were known only to the rich and famous – where those who did not belong, were swiftly spotted and brutally removed. Like a tour guide, Michelangelo went on to tell Chola about where they were, inserting personal accounts of experiences and people that he knew at each location. With every turn, Chola swayed and found herself closer to her charming nobleman and sometimes in his very arms or in his lap. The city tour must had taken several hours, enough time for a seductive conversation, plenty of planned accidental body entanglements, and of course a good appetite. As it approached a large well-lit establishment, the carriage came to a complete stop.

The place was packed with many loud aristocrats. It seemed as if they were all waiting for the arrival of Michelangelo. When Michelangelo and Chola entered the special place, all heads turned around to see the lady who was the subject of Michelangelo's affection. They had seldom seen him with female companions in public. The private and reclusive master artist seemed to have managed to keep his private life very private. In fact, many wondered about the master's private life while many others let their imagination run wild with thoughts and ideas of what might Michelangelo's personal life was like.

Chola sparkled and her cloak competed with her own beauty for attention. Even those who were not turned around, were introduced to her recognizably expensive perfume that proceeded her and arrogantly presented her to all, including those who were visually distracted by her charm.

As they were led to a table in the middle of the fancy restaurant, the couple passed by many tables, each with its own snobbish party.
"Please meet my lady, Chola, the 'princess of hearts,' the most beautiful lady in the world!" Michelangelo went on to introduce his glowing lady as the men lusted in envy and the women hid their jealousy with commonly known fake but courteous smiles.

Throughout her life, even at a young age, Chola was always filled with unholy passion for life and unclean lust for worldly glamour.

Chola loved the attention and before long she managed to gain confidence and play her role of an aristocrat. The secret, she realized was to say very little, move slowly with arrogance, and display fake kindness as if she had to struggle to accommodate those who were beneath her social status. Michelangelo was, indeed, impressed by his sister's speedy assimilation to the pretentious life of the aristocrats and the character-void filthy rich. He kept a smile on his face and a prepared loud laughter in his chest.

Of course, the food was exotic and unusual. Some of the food items were clearly offered to create a reaction, but each came with a long explanation of its origin, health benefits, and the lengthy preparations it required. Chola learned that such an event was not about eating and the food, but it was about pretending, acting, and leaving a snobbish impression. She knew to take little bites and make critical but short remarks from time to time. This was definitely not a place to fill her stomach and nourish her body, but a place for show and pretentiousness.

Despite of it all, Chola certainly ate enough of many items presented and drank a great deal of the finest wines. It was obvious that Michelangelo wanted to pamper and impress his delicate and special lady.

“I have written you many poems, Lola,” said Michelangelo as he held Chola’s hand and caressed it with the other. His display of affection was measured as he knew that eventually the word would get out that Chola was his sister.

It is where you go and with whom you speak that usually defines the appropriateness of a behavior and the acceptable boundaries that govern a relationship such as the one between two people like Michelangelo and Chola. There are those who firmly believed that the relationship between the two was exactly like that between two blood siblings. While others disagreed and argued that blood siblings are bound by ties that are far stronger than those brought about by the internal ingestion of milk from the same provider. “So, if two unrelated toddlers eat from the same dish, does that make them tied with the same ties as blood siblings? Of course, not!” They logically contend.

In either case, societal values are often unspoken and expectations – albeit unclear – are cut in stone for each time and place. Deviations are frowned upon and sometimes punished. The nature and severity of that punishment is dependent on many variables. The relativity of all is always dangerous! The best way to avoid trouble is not to cross that imaginary and unclear line, as well as maintain a low profile and establish an amicable relationship with the mighty and the powerful. Furthermore, safety is always ensured through wisely revealing just enough of a person’s true might, leaving everyone to wonder how much remains uncovered.

Michelangelo’s decision to limit his display of affection was wise. That is not to say that the sparks of intimacy were flying.

“What do your poems say, Michlo?” Asked Chola playfully as she was taking another sip of her wine while keeping her eyes engaged to his.

“I will have to read some to you. Things that I can’t easily or usually say. We should go to my apartment and talk. I think I will not go to work tomorrow or go much later. There is much polishing for the apprentices to do before I can do anymore carving anyway.”

Michelangelo had written many letters and poems to Chola, but because of the social taboo associated with relationships such as theirs, he did not want to reveal his infatuation for her openly. So, he masked the letters and made them sound as if he were writing them to a close friend.

Chola was reluctant to accept Michelangelo's proposal. She was greatly enjoying the attention that she was receiving where they were and she certainly did not want that to end. She also remembered how things got out of hand when she and Michelangelo were alone in her room a while back. It was a difficult position. She knew that things may develop rapidly if she were to go with him to his apartment at this late hour of the night. But, she did not want to appear as if she were ungrateful for Michelangelo's lavish treatment. So, she argued with herself: "I do not know for sure that Michlo would misbehave. He may have learned from his last attempt to kiss me. In fact, I remember that he was apologetic, and asked me to forgive him and not to mention what had happened to anyone."

Chola looked down into her wine goblet and when her long black eyelashes uncovered her deerlike dark eyes, she looked at Michelangelo and said nothing. She just touched his hand with hers. They were both very warm and loaded with electric passion. He did not want to move her hand and she kept it there longer than she should.

After dinner, the couple walked out to the busy street that was filled with elegant and snobby people. It was as if each of these people had drunk an entire container of taxidermic fluid or mounting African glue. Their faces were emotionless, and their movements appeared robotic and controlled. Every step she and Michelangelo walked, Chola noticed the unusual glances and stares that they were receiving. First, these glances made her uncomfortable as she did not know their cause. Of course, everywhere they went people politely, respectfully, and with great admiration saluted the renowned master artist by name. But, what Chola realized quickly was that the attention that Michelangelo was receiving for his celebrated statue was clearly extenuated by her presence. It was as if everyone could not get enough of her and her peripheral vision allowed her to see that practically all who passed by them, turned around to get another look at her. It was her that they were mesmerized by. And, that made her feel unusual.

From time to time, Michelangelo and Chola both noticed the presence of many out of place cathedral guards. Although the guards pretended as if they were there for personal reasons, their distribution on the street, the late hour of the night, and their conspicuous looks argued otherwise. In addition to the recognizable cathedral guards, Michelangelo who was familiar with the location and its clientele, also noticed the presence of a large number of foreign men. None of them was escorting a woman. The presence of these foreigners made Michelangelo

uncomfortable. He was certain that they were hired mercenaries but was not sure who their employer was.

“Michlo, I am getting tired. I love it here and I really do not want to go. But, I think we better leave. I think maybe I drank too much wine. Please take me back,” said Chola whose steps were not steady and as she found out, neither were Michelangelo’s who had also drank a large portion of wine.

“Let us walk back to the carriage. I would like for you to stop by my apartment at least for a short while. I would like to read some of my poems to you and show you a statue that I had made of you.”

“You made a statue of me? When did you have time to do that, Michlo?” Chola was touched by Michelangelo’s additional expression of affection.

“When you are not near, I thought to have an image of you near!” Said Michelangelo as he took a quick glance at Chola before he lowered his head like a bashful teen.

Chola did not comment. The two walked quietly, each thinking different things. Chola debating whether to accept Michelangelo’s invitation, knowing the possible outcome. And, Michelangelo fighting an urge to say more to convince Chola to come with him. He decided that it was best not to say anymore and allow the devil to do his part in her head.

When they got to the carriage, the drivers automatically assumed that the couple was going to Michelangelo’s home. Chola was very intoxicated, so was Michelangelo. In the silence, Michelangelo wondered if tonight he would get the second of the two desires of his heart fulfilled, as Agnolo had prophesied. He smiled!

The night breeze was turning cold, taking advantage of the absence of the sun. The movement of the carriage, albeit slow, allowed for more air flow.

“I am cold,” said Chola.

“Maybe it is not a wise idea, but you are welcome to one more goblet of wine,” said Michelangelo who suspected that Chola must have consented to accompany him to his apartment.

He wrapped his arms around her and she put her head in his chest. He gently rubbed her head and her shoulders.

(Song 24: Go to Sleep My Angel Sleep)

When they got to Michelangelo's apartment, he ordered one of his servants to bring in a bottle of vintage wine and two glasses. The well-groomed servant disappeared for a few minutes. Michelangelo walked to one of the rooms and came back out with a three-foot beautiful gilded statue. Chola was awestruck. Despite the absence of color in the statue, it was as if she was looking in the mirror. It was eerie.

On a silver tray, the servant brought a bottle of wine and two crystal goblets. Despite the fact that Chola was by no means an expert on fine wines, she assessed that the bottle must have cost a large amount of money. She certainly did not want to pass the opportunity to try it. "Drink my angel, as if there is no tomorrow. Tomorrow is uncertain! Who knows what tomorrow holds!" whispered Michelangelo as he handed Chola a full goblet.

With his eyes, Michelangelo dismissed the two servants who disappeared for the night.

Whether it was the wine or pure sinful passion, there, under the cover of darkness, while the stray dogs howled and grunted in the street and other dogs that were trapped behind closed courtyard gates replied, something happened. The two were there and Satan was their companion.

Her internals barked and throbbed with the agonizing rhythm of unfulfilled sinful desires and heavy dark burning passion. Her face flushed and her body became limp with fever. Her heart raced, and she swam in perspiration and secretions. "I have the stars and the scars," said Michelangelo. "I am not too old for you, you are too old for me!" He laughed condescendingly.

Michelangelo gracefully found a place to sit closely next to Chola and he put his arm on her shoulder. She was melting and trembling.

"Michlo, I … I …, oh," she looked at him with weak eyes and kissed him. "No, I am not sure we should do this."

"Lola, I am in love with you. You are the most beautiful girl I have ever seen. I want to make you the happiest girl in the world," his voice quivered while his clumsy shaking hands struggled to undress her.

"Oh, Michlo, please take me home. I love you, but I am not yours," said Chola unconvincingly realizing quickly that the time to say "no" was not after her clothes were off. "Please, my heart belongs to someone else!"

He kissed her lips and kissed her neck and kissed each breast. He did not talk, and he was gentle. It was like a stealth massive invasion and the rules of engagement were undefined.

"Oh, love me Michlo, love me."

It was not quick; it was not beautiful.

When their lips had had enough of each other and their bodies were still joined but longed for a comfortable separation, Chola began to cry.

“Michlo, please take me home. Please!” She cried. He was confused and hurt. “I belong to someone else. May he forgive me for what I have done. May God forgive me for what I have done. I feel dirty. I feel awful!”

“Lola, please don’t say that. You are the most beautiful. Do you love me?”

“I do.” She paused and closed her eyes then she began to whimper: “I don’t know, Michlo. I am in love with someone else. My heart belongs to him. I have made him a vow. May God forgive me. Michlo, please take me home. Please!”

He had tears in his eyes, but before he wiped them, he turned his face so that Chola would not see him weak. He found parts of her garments that they had scattered all over the floor and brought them to her. He covered himself with his undergarment and helped her get dressed. It was painful to touch her, although he really wanted to hug her. He wanted to hold her forever and never let her go. He kissed her hand and shoulders gently several times.

When they got out of the building, it was cold. He wrapped his arms around her without saying anything. The drivers brought the carriage to the front door and he helped her climb into it. She sat next to him with her head on his chest, quietly sobbing. “What have I done?”

He rubbed her face and kissed her forehead.

(Song 25: She’ll Realize)

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It was very dark and cold when Chola got to Agnolo’s apartment. Tota was asleep and Chola tip toed quietly around the dark apartment avoiding running into a piece of furniture or knocking something down that would make any noise that would wake up everyone. She slowly opened Agnolo’s bedroom door and entered.

His windows were shut and he was not there. On his bed, the crystal heart lied broken. It sparked in a different way, but its core had not light. She held it to her heart and cried silently.

She was broken!

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Chola sat at the edge of Agnolo's bed and left the door open. "Where would he had gone this late hour of the night?" She wondered. "I certainly hope that he did not go the worksite. Oh, my Lord!" The thought of Agnolo going to the worksite that late at night sobered her very quickly, despite her shattered internals. "I hope he did not go there to do something irrational. I know he must have felt bad after I left him this afternoon. I hope my stupid cold behavior did not push him over the edge. They would kill my precious Agno. These evil people would kill him. I am to blame!" Chola sobbed and began to pray. She sobbed bitterly and prayed silently. Tears covered her body and soaked her new cloak.

It was still dark when Agnolo finally showed up. The wind accidentally pushed the apartment door shut. It was enough to wake Chola up, but not enough to wake others whose snoring could be heard competing with each other.

"Where have you been, Ano?"

"I had to go to discuss some things with a dear friend for a while! You smell good!" He said while rubbing her face and wiping her tears. "I have missed you terribly!"

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Earlier that afternoon, after Chola left his room, Agnolo quietly walked to the cemetery. He felt lonely and miserable. That night, he really needed Chola by his side. He needed her presence and her words to continue living. But, she was preoccupied and distracted. He was hurt.

Next to Maria Josephine's grave he found refuge for the night. There he fell asleep praying. His clothes were damp from the evening dew and his hair was wet.

"Agno, I have sinned!" Said Chola chocking on her words. "I … I … I have sinned, Agno!"

"Lola, we all have sinned. Jesus loves us despite of our sins. If we did not sin, we would not need Jesus."
"No, I mean I really really sinned, Agno! I have betrayed you with another man!"

Agnolo looked at her and began to weep.

"Would you forgive me? Please!" She whimpered.

(Song 26: Change Me)

He said nothing.

"Would you please forgive me. If you don't, I will understand! Please, I need to know that you still love me, but if you don't, I understand!"

Agnolo wrapped his arms around her. She put her head in his bosom. She was crying, and he was crying.

“Of course, I forgive you. I love you, Lola. It does not matter what you do. And, Jesus has already forgiven you. It is against him and against your body that you have sinned, not against me. I … I …, hurt only because you are hurting. Please, do not hurt, Lola! Please, do not hurt. I hurt because I love you. I love you with all my heart. I am still committed to you. Tomorrow and today, I die with you, but will live to love you, my Lola! I have been with you all this time, and you still do not know the real me? You know I will always love you with all my heart!”

His words were painful. She knew that he absolutely meant every word he said. She knew that he had forgiven her, and she knew that he would always forgive her and love her no matter what.

“I am awful, Agno. Did you make a mistake in loving me too much, Agno? I am dirty. Please, please, change me!”

“No Lola! Love is endless and you are precious, my Lola. No one compares to you. I love you no matter what. You are the love of my life. You are my life.”
“I am awful, Agno. I am dirty!” Her heart was tearing. “I wish I could die!”

“No, Lola. If you die, who would glorify that Lord in your place? I love you, Lola,” he continued to sob loudly. “Please, do not hurt. Please, do not hurt, my Lola!”

“You break my heart, Agno. Why do you love so much? You are truly and angel. Although you are here, I know you are not from here! You should hate me. I betrayed you. I have let the world and its glamour distract me from your love. How could you still love me? A sold my body cheaply. I broke my vows to you and to the Lord for a thrill and some goods. I am lowly. I am bad!”

“No, Lola. I hate the sin in you and in me, but you, I adore. It is that sin that caused God to die. But, you are the righteousness of God through Jesus Christ. God does not see Chola or Agnolo, he sees Jesus, the perfect Jesus, when he looks at us. He sees us perfect, even with our blood shot eyes,” he wanted her to laugh. He could not stand her pain.

She giggled while wiping her dripping nose on his sleeve.

(Song 27: Drunk on Love)

“Please, go get some sleep. Please, Lola! And, do not ever doubt my love for you!”

She knotted while whimpering. “Ok! You know I love you!”

“I know my Lola. I never had any doubts!”

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Chola quietly walked to Tota’s room and lay in bed still dressed in her formal gown. She was confused and filled with grief. Tears flowed from her eyes as she sniffled and mumbled to herself.

From the moment she opened her eyes at birth, Agnolo had always been there, but she seems to have never knew him.

Across the living room, in his room, Agnolo cried warm tears and prayed to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. For hours, he kneeled, bowed, and prayed. He prayed to be like everyone else, because he was not. “Why do I hurt so much for everyone? Why can’t I have a heart like everyone else?” It was a long time before he fell asleep.

Several doves appeared at his window to comfort him. They sang him to sleep!

At the quarry, the doves began collecting grape leaves to build a nest!

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The next day, at the worksite, the three apprentices and all the workers showed up. Agnolo, was not missed, since his work status changed from day to day. Michelangelo did not get there until it was almost noon. His eyes were red as if he had either been crying or drinking heavily. The truth was that he had been doing both. He did not attempt to resume carving for fear of damaging the statue while he was under the influence of too much alcohol. Most people around had not seen him like that before, but they assumed that the master had a fun evening the night before and that he is now paying the price for his indulging.

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Despite her desire to leave immediately to Settignano, Chola had to wait for two days till it was time for the knights to rotate from Florence to Settignano whereby she could be escorted by them. For the entire two days, Chola cried and did not eat anything.

“It is not good for you, baby,” begged Tota.

Chola also refused to see anyone, even Agnolo. Her guilt was enormous, despite her absolute conviction that Agnolo had forgiven her. For two whole days, she did not leave Tota’s room.

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Although Chola did not emphatically implicate Michelangelo as the perpetrator, Agnolo was almost certain it was him. The problems that the two experienced at the worksite could not be compared to this. This was a personal matter and Agnolo did not know how to ventilate his frustration. He was not clear whether Michelangelo had forced himself on Chola, or it was a mutual engagement. In either case, it was very painful. Forgiveness is easy, but dealing with the aftermath is always a torture.

Michelangelo also had many questions and wondered what Chola would do next. "Would she keep their secret or share it with others? If she did, whom would she tell and what would she say? Would she dare tell Agnolo? Of course, Agnolo is going to be angry and furious. He will undoubtedly forgive. He always forgives. But, would he in a moment of human weakness attack me? Furthermore, would Chola tell momma and papa? Even if momma understands, which is unlikely, papa may in anger kill me!" The weight of the world was bearing on Michelangelo's chest.

In a clever move, Michelangelo thought that if he were to smoothen things with Agnolo this may pave the way for an easier relationship with his parents. "Agnolo is not too complicated," he thought. "The boy always seeks peace and love." But, how to do that without compromising his elevated status or reveal his predicament to a world that seems to be constantly probing and seeking a gossip story?

Michelangelo left the worksite and walked the short distance to Agnolo's apartment. Before he left the plaza, he assigned new taskings to the three apprentices and the support workers. He knew that it would not be a good idea to try to see Chola, as much as he had craved her presence. "That certainly would not be a wise move," he thought. "In fact, the entire matter could explode if not handled very delicately," he was keenly convinced.

Michelangelo quickly climbed the steps to Agnolo's apartment, opened the door, and went straight to Agnolo's room. Agnolo who had seen Michelangelo from his window was surprised. He did not know the purpose of Michelangelo's unannounced visit. Agnolo wondered if Michelangelo was coming to see Chola. Agnolo's heart began to beat fast. "Not in here!" He thought. "My little sister is already heart broken and remorseful. Another encounter with Michlo, could completely destroy her."

Before Michelangelo had a chance to knock at Agnolo's door, Agnolo opened the door only to find his brother standing before him.

"You startled me," said Michelangelo with a soft voice and a smile. "May I come in?"

Agnolo did not say anything, but gave way to his brother to walk in. Michelangelo pulled the door shut behind him and pulled a chair to sit on while Agnolo sat at the edge of his bed.

“Agno,” said Michelangelo with his eyes alternating focus from the floor to Agnolo’s eyes. “I wanted to come and talk to you for a few minutes. I know things have not been very smooth between us and I should have done this a long time ago. We should have talked privately instead of exposing our family matters before the world.”

Agnolo did not say anything but stared at his brother with questioning yet kind eyes. His body convulsed a little and his left lame arm shook involuntarily.

“We are a family, Agno. And we should stick together as we have always done in the past. I know that I have been arrogant and unaccommodating to your ideas and suggestions. I did not see you at the worksite today and decided to come here and ask you to forgive me. I was wrong.”

Agnolo was filled with many emotions. The human in him fought within him with the Holy Spirit that dominated his life. When he was able to speak, his words were unclear. It was not certain whether he was talking to himself or to another unseen entity, although he was looking at Michelangelo. Then, with sad eyes he whispered: “Of course, I forgive you, Michlo. It is your soul that is important to me. What you had done was awful. But, that is between you and the Lord. I do not have all the facts.”

Agnolo’s words frightened Michelangelo, as they had somewhat implied that Chola had talked to Agnolo about her awful transgression with Michelangelo.

“Michlo, the Lord forgives all of us. Although I am deeply hurt; that is a different issue.”

“How can I make it up to you, Agno? I just want peace between us.”

Agnolo did not answer. He knew that if Michelangelo wanted to mend their relationship he would begin by correcting his misrepresentation at the project. The easiest way to begin doing that would be to circumcise David.

“You know what to do, Michlo. You and I know that some things are easier to patch up and correct than other things. In fact, some things cannot be humanly repaired and require a divine intervention. As for the statue, if you do not do it, it will be done without you. The Lord will not tolerate an eternal lie!”

“I will do what I can. I promise, Agno!”

Michelangelo left Agnolo’s room quietly and in a hurray. He realized that his plan did not work as well as he had hoped. Agnolo was loving and was very forgiving, but he was also human. And it was Agnolo’s humanity that worried Michelangelo.

37

Which Part of my Heart?

The next day, Agnolo returned to work. He was quieter than usual. He was filled with pain and seemed to expand his personal space to accommodate his self-imposed public isolation. His teammate, Giulio was happy to see him back. He had been working on his own, while Allessio and Jacopo were still working as a team. A very soft side of the aristocratic and spoiled young man seemed to merge out. He knew just the right things to say. As they worked, he talked to Agnolo about love, pain, and loyalty.

When Agnolo got home from work, he longed to see Chola. But she was in her room with the door locked. Agnolo really wanted to see her. He was worried about her and could not stop thinking about everything, even at work. Of course, Michelangelo's presence did not help matters.

When it was time for Chola to depart to Settignano, Agnolo was at work. Chola denied herself the chance to say goodbye to Agnolo. She was filled with guilt and sorrow. Even though Agnolo had forgiven her, she did not forgive herself.

When she got back to Settignano, her parents noticed her depression. She was different. She was changed. Chola spent much time meditating and praying in her parents' bedroom where the sacred relic was kept. She prayed silently with warm tears running down her cheeks.

Both Francisca and Benvenuto tried to find out the cause of her depression, but she did not divulge any information to anyone. Her parents finally accepted their own explanation for her depression as caused by her separation from her beloved brother. They tried all they could to cheer her up. Francisca even proposed to accompany Chola to the "palace," although deep in her heart she never believed that such a place existed and along with her husband were convinced that the place was no more than a cave that the children frequented for meditation or youthful exploration. Chola expressed no interest in following through with her mother's proposal. She just wanted to be alone. A trip to the palace was certainly nothing that appealed to her pounding head. How could she face her palace family? How could she go to the place where she and Agnolo had made their vows and talked about their forever love and life together? There, she opened her eyes and closed them many times, to dream of what could be. There, she smiled and said: "Yes, yes, yes Agnolo, I can see that! You are more than what they see, you are truly not from here. You are my church!"

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Although for weeks Chola hardly ate anything, she appeared to be gaining a little weight. She was also sick with stomach ailment frequently. Her parents attributed her vomiting to her mental condition and the lack of regulated food intake.

Even she, herself, noticed that her cloths were getting tighter. She cried constantly, and her mood changed like an April sky. It got to the point that she could only fit into a very loose house dress. Although it looked odd and peculiar, she began to wear the large and fancy cloak that Michelangelo had given her over her house cloths. Her parents' fascination and inquiry about the cloak received short answers.

"Michlo gave it to me. He had promised to make it for me after I was humiliated for not having a worthy dress at the duke's gala," she summarized.

A mood of sadness and gloom dominated the days and nights of the Cellinis! Benvenuto did not discuss his concerns with any of his close friends at work, but he asked Francisca if she thought that it was time to ask the clergy for special prayers.

"Perhaps the Lord expects us to do something, Franca! I know that Agno would not approve of it and I understand his conviction that we do not need to do anything more than accept what Jesus had done, but, I would feel better if we could do something."

"Prayer is OK, but, I really believe that what Agno said is true. If we have to pay penance, it is as if we are saying that what Jesus had done was not enough. It is an insult to our Lord. It is like saying, Jesus, your death and suffering on my behalf were not enough and that I must do some more for my own salvation. That is not grace, Venu! I think we should pray, ask others to join with us in prayer, then we should trust the Lord. We do not necessarily need the cleric to pray for us. They are no different from us. They do not have mediating powers. The only intercessor we need is Jesus, and He is already in heaven mediating on our behalf!"

Some frightening thoughts entered Francisca's mind: "What if Chola was pregnant? Her little girl is definitely exhibiting all the symptoms. Could it be that she had met someone during her stay in Florence?" Francisca discarded the idea that Chola could be carrying Agnolo's baby. "It is true that the two had been spending a lot of time together in seclusion, but if it were Agnolo, Chola should have been pregnant many months ago. Not unless she is like me, and her womb was not easily opened for a long time," Francisca thought to herself. These thoughts were so frightening that she got up and prayed for a long time.

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On a Saturday evening while the city noise filled the streets of Florence, Agnolo walked alone to the cathedral cemetery and found his way to Sister Maria Josephine's grave. He was filled with grief and his isolation was taking its toll on him.

"All I need is you, Lord. You are my constant companion and you supply all my needs according to your riches in your glory," he repeated to himself. But, his spiritual fulfilment went against his carnal being and he felt separated and in need of reaffirmation. At the grave, he prayed and talked.

On his way home, he passed by the cathedral kitchen and his nose was filled with the enticing smell of freshly cooked bread. He followed his nose to the cathedral kitchen. His appearance startled the monks that were busy preparing the bread and the wine for the church service the following day. The monks, who were drinking a great deal of wine while working, recognized Agnolo and were fearful. They had heard many things about the young lad and many of them had heard what he had done many years ago at the church kitchen in Settignano. Furthermore, they we all aware of the ongoing conflict that the boy had caused at the church and the slew of allegations against him. While a few were intrigued to see Agnolo walking into the kitchen unafraid of being captured or attacked by possible rebel sympathizers, all were uncomfortable and did not know what to expect from this angel – fallen or holy!

No one dared to speak!

Agnolo waved his right hand peacefully greeting those who had his attention and he smiled gently. "This is where the sacraments are prepared. This is where the body and the blood of Jesus are made for our remembrance, salvation, and grace," he acknowledged. He was already pre-primed with heavy emotions and the thought of Jesus' death and sufferings fell on a tender and aching heart. He fought the tears. Just as he was about to turn around to leave he noticed that the monks were beating the dough with their fists and slapping it with their hands instead of gently kneading it. His heart fell! "This is the body of Christ!" A voice screamed within him. His face filled with blood, but he contained himself. "The Lord said, 'This is my body'"

On the opposite side of the kitchen, other monks were mixing old wine with new wine. His rage was about to explode. "That is mixing the old covenant of the Law of Moses with the new covenant of Grace," he screamed and extended his right hand out and pointed his finger at involved monks. "You evil doers!" He shouted then swiftly walked towards the monks. He pushed them away from the dough and grabbed others away from the wine barrels.

"This is the body of our Lord that you are beating. You evil doers. And, how could you mix old wine with new wine? We are no longer under the old covenant! You know not to mix the old covenant of the law of Moses with the new covenant of Grace!" The monks understood the

frightening meanings of what this layman boy was saying, and at first, they backed off and tried to get out of Agnolo's way.

"The Lord said to do this in remembrance of his suffering, not to beat his body again and again and cause his suffering!" He shouted while he continued to push many of the monks to the ground and away from the dough and the wine.

As they were falling, some monks argued: "It is no difference …"

"Yes, there is a big difference. When God told Moses to speak to the rock which is the church, Moses beat it with his rod in anger and frustration. For that, he was punished by not getting to enter the promised land!"

Agnolo's rage was escalating. When the monks realized that he was consumed with unstoppable anger, they feared for their lives and without coordination attacked him.

"You should be turned over for heresy. We have heard about you and your heretic teachings. Now we know why you deserve to die. You are demon possessed!"

The monks gathered around him and began to beat him with their bare hands. When they looked, they realized that they were beating one another.

From the open kitchen door, two doves were sighted in the sky. They were joined by another one and Agnolo was translated away from the monks' hands.

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They were all filled with great fear!

While frustrated, French knights continued searching for Agnolo all around the kitchen and the cathedral grounds. The senior monk in charge of the kitchen, along with three witnesses, left the kitchen abruptly and walked to Father Bronzino's office to complain and report the incident.

The monks' report did not alarm Bronzino. In fact, he viewed the incident as valued evidence to condemn the thorn in his flesh, Agnolo.

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Despite all the obstacles and the tumult, the statue was near completion. It was truly magnificent. Agnolo's threats against the statue were not forgotten and necessitated the constant presence of the cathedral guards who were still under the direct command of Father Bronzino. These guards reported to Bronzino every move that Agnolo made and every word he

uttered. Indeed, if it were not for the constant presence and ever vigilant eyes of the French knights, Agnolo would have been easily eliminated.

Bronzino had a dubious plan and his orders were to kidnap, or preferably kill Agnolo. His plan was also to eliminate all the cathedral guards who were directly involved in that operation, immediately after they complete their task and return to their quarters. The slaughtered guards would then be accused of becoming overzealous and not adhering to his limited orders of just guarding the statue. The official news would indicate that the slaughtered cathedral guards were implicated in Agnolo's murder and their subsequent elimination would be explained as a justifiable necessary evil.

Bronzino also had a plan to kidnap Chola and use her as a ransom to entice Agnolo to come to her rescue, where he would be either captured or killed. To execute this plan, he secretly contacted his two reliable and trusted servants, Sister Fiametta and her older mentor Sister Bandecca. The two had been in his service for almost fifteen years and they distinguished themselves for their loyalty and sobering brutality beneath an uncanny soft and gentle presence. The two carried their orders in exchange for favors and lighter duties at the abbey. While Cardinal Carafa knew of their loyalty and support services, the two received their orders directly from Father Bronzino.

Fiametta and Bandecca were the same two nuns that daily went to sister Teresa's home to check on Sister Maria Josephine. They were also the ones that brought her herbs to drink after she had given birth to Agnolo. Furthermore, Fiametta and Bandecca were at the cardinal's office after the attempted assassination on Agnolo by the rebels while on his way to Florence. There, they had brought clean bandages and an herbal mix for Agnolo to drink, one that cardinal Carafa blocked. By now, Bandecca was near fifty and Fiametta was thirty-five.

At his office, the two nuns appeared upon Bronzino's request. Bronzino had not seen them since they came to Cardinal Carafa's office to tend to Agnolo needs after the attempted assassination on his life. The two were curious as to what new tasking Father Bronzino would assign to them.

"My angels!" Father Bronzino greeted the two nuns with a chuckle.

They took turns kissing his hand, an overly gesture that is usually reserved for cardinals and the Pope.

"There are two types of angels, we know, Father," said Bandecca with a sobering laughter.

"We are your angels of death. She is Azrael and I am her helper," added Fiametta with the giggle of a victimized child.

“This is a complicated matter. I am not sure I should burden you with all the details. But, it is of the utmost importance that it would be carried out in complete secrecy,” said Bronzino.

“Father, we have always done all that you had asked us to do, with gratitude for allowing us the opportunity to serve you and our cardinal. We are ready to do whatever you ask us to do,” said Bandecca.

Bronzino went on to share his plan to ambush Chola, kidnap her, and hide her in a remote location with the intention of enticing Agnolo to come looking for her, which would ultimately allow for his elimination through kidnapping or murder.

“The boy has become a serious problem for us,” said Bronzino.

“Father we are ready and willing to do anything. We had sold our souls for your service!” Said Bandecca. “Our hands are already dripping with blood. Another bucket of it will not make a difference in our eternal condemnation.”

The sound of that did not go well with Father Bronzino. He and the two nuns had never discussed things in terms of rights and wrongs. The guilt associated with their deeds was assumed and never plainly articulated by either side.

“If you do not feel good about doing this, I understand. I could get someone else to help us,” said Bronzino with apparent discontent. Deep in his heart, he was convinced that it was the duty of the subordinates to blindly obey. There was no doubt that the two nuns had been very helpful in the past, but it was also certain that the two had received their share of earthly rewards, he internally contended.

“Father, we are ready to do anything that you ask. I just hope that the Lord understands. Another operation will not sway our souls. That issue has long been settled and our sins are beyond purging. I have resigned myself to my eternal fate. I would be more than happy to do all that you require of me,” continued Bandecca to the dismay of Bronzino who was becoming seriously alarmed with the sudden revival of the nun’s conscious.

The conversation between Father Bronzino and the two nuns went from bad to worse. When it was over, the two sides completely distrusted their counterpart.

Bronzino’s choice to use the two nuns brought more trouble than he had planned for and created another threat to his very own survival. The two nuns knew too much with too many details. Indeed, they could easily blackmail him. To confine their threat, Bronzino realized that they would have to either be eliminated or appeased. That later option seemed more appealing, at least for the time being. Before the angels of death left Father Bronzino’s office, he tried to steer the conversation into a more positive tone.

“Your loyalty and services will never be forgotten. You will indeed be justly rewarded immediately and continuously,” said Bronzino to the fallen nuns.

The two nuns left Bronzino’s office frightened. His promises of rewards fell on distrusting ears. They knew that their lives were in jeopardy. “The wicked man,” they agreed, “would not stop at anything. Now that they are of no use to him, now that they are a liability with no potential utility, they are dispensable. Their usefulness has ended, and it was time for them to be eliminated.” In great fear, the two agreed.

In haste, the two nuns disappeared in the crowded streets of Florence and knocked at Sister Teresa’s door. Without telling her details, they asked the old and ailing holy lady for shelter and protection. Without hesitation, Sister Teresa consented, and the three women prayed on their knees. Teresa for strength and health, and the two nuns for forgiveness and protection.

The three hardly talked, but sister Teresa’s declining health was becoming a concern for the two nuns, not necessarily because they cared about her, but because they needed to use her home to hide from Bronzino’s anticipated wrath. “If she died,” they reasoned “We would have to find another place to hide from the imminent wrath of the ruthless priest and his hired hands.”

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At the worksite, Michelangelo’s promise to appease Agnolo did not last for too long. When Michelangelo realized that the danger from his encounter with Chola was dying out and that Agnolo had no role to play in supporting him, he went back to kindling hate against Agnolo. Michelangelo knew that he no longer had any need for Agnolo and that Agnolo’s presence was a potential source of much more calamities than blessings.

In secret, Michelangelo gathered the support of many people who were motivated by different interests, but they all held contempt for Agnolo. He also learned to disappear in the shadows and flea the entire city for a few days at a time, to protect himself through plausible deniability from being implicated in what he perceived to be an imminent demise of his unruly enigmatic brother.

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Late morning one day, a silhouette of a mule appeared in the horizon. The mule struggled as it climbed the steep narrow road leading to the Cellini home. It was carrying an old lady whose face was concealed under a white headgear. It was Sister Teresa.

Sister Teresa’s unannounced visit was a pleasant surprise to Francisca who met the holy lady at the door. Francisca immediately realized that Sister Teresa’s health was in serious trouble. The

two ladies kissed and hugged warmly. Their tight relationship and mutual love had lasted through many decades and knew only to grow healthily. Despite their closeness, the two women had exchanged visits only on rare occasions. The two women crossed paths many times, typically in settings where there were many people around, where the two had never had a chance to talk privately.
"How are you, my very dear Sister? You are looking well," said Francisca knowing that her kind gesture was totally untrue.

"I am not too well, Francisca! I am nearing my Lord. And, that is good,"

"No. Don't talk like that. You have the health and the stamina of a young lady."

"I am far from that my dear sister. I have done the Lord's work and I am nearing the end of my mission," Sister Teresa coughed uncontrollably. Francisca ran to get her some water from a vessel in the kitchen. She brought it to the living room where the two had decided to recline and talk.

(Song 28: That is Wrong … Vero Peccato)

Chola who was in her room in the back of the cottage heard the voice of a guest but did not recognize who it was. In her depression, she had stayed in her room most of the days and all the nights. Her limited interaction with her parents worried them greatly, but after trying to break her cycle of depression and after praying for days, they gave up and resigned themselves to despair.

"Francisca, I do not know how long I will be around. If I do not die of my illnesses, I am sure they will kill me," said Sister Teresa with a weak and trembling voice while Francisca's interest was rising. I made the trip because I have to get these things off my chest, before I go to meet our Lord."

"Don't say that, my dear sister. May the Lord bless you with many happy and healthy years to come."

"Thank you, Francisca. May He bless you and your family with many blessings. Does Agnolo know?" Teresa coughed uncontrollably.

"No, we have decided that it was better to leave things the way they were. It would do him no good to find out. As far as he knows, and everyone knows, even Michelangelo, I gave birth to him days before Benvenuto and I returned from our pilgrimage. Even his sister, Chola, does not know. No one knows the secret except the three of us: You, I, and Benvenuto," said Francesca as she lowered her voice and looked towards the kitchen.

“That may be a good thing.”

“Despite all the expected behavior of teenagers, he has been nothing but a blessing. It is true that he is unique in many blessed ways, but so was our Lord during his early years. There is no doubt that the Lord has blessed us in many miraculous ways since his birth,” Francisca went on to tell sister Teresa about the weekly gifts that they mysteriously received at their door. “Some looked like they came from a faraway place, they seemed regal, while others had the scent of the church,” she elaborated.

“That is explainable,” said sister Teresa. “In her sleep, Sister Maria Josephine was known to talk. Although she had heavenly peace, her soul was fighting a tormenting spirit. She felt guilty and in need of penance. She had too much on her precious heart to bear and refused to share it, but in her sleep her spirit found an outlet to ventilate what was within her.” Sister Teresa put her hand in her pocket and pulled a prominent gold locket. “Sister Maria Josephine always wore this locket under her humble habit. After her death, I kept it.” Sister Teresa handed the heavy gold locket to Francisca. The locket had a unique coat of arm. It was clearly one that Francisca was totally unfamiliar with. But, it was uniquely similar to the ones that the French knights wore.

“In my trip here, the wicked ravens tried to steal this precious locket. If it were not for the appearance of mighty doves, I would have been severely hurt and the locket would have been gone,” said Sister Teresa as she began to point to the locket in Francisca’s hand: “This is the coat of Arm for the French Monarchy. Sister Maria Josephine was the sister of the queen of France. And, that accounts for her light blue eyes, light blonde hair, and light complexion.”

“You are describing Agnolo,” said Francisca.

“Yes, yes, I predicted that and when I saw him a while back at the cathedral I recognized him without anyone telling me that it was him. Indeed, his hair, eyes, complexion are male versions of his beautiful mother,” Francisca smiled while trying to give the locket back to sister Teresa.

“No, no. You keep this. Agnolo must have it. At some point, he must know the secret.”

Francisca did not know what to say.

“He must also know that his father is Cardinal Carafa,” Sister Teresa dropped this bombshell as she chocked and coughed until her eyes filled with tear.

Francisca handed sister Teresa the water goblet with trembling hands. Her eyes blinked and she was overwhelmed with fear. Francisca was digesting what Sister Teresa had just said to her and its implications: Her son’s very existence was a living evidence of the wickedness of the

powerful cardinal who held the highest seat in the church for hundreds of miles. Francisca sat down and took several deep breaths.

“It was not all that bad. This evil man, despite his wickedness, was fond of his blood son and had all the intentions of protecting him, while of course hiding his blood relationship to our precious boy,” thought Francisca. The two women just looked at each other and said nothing.

Teresa seemed to get a burst of strength to say: “The situation is rapidly changing, however, and Father Carafa’s very life is in great jeopardy. As you may have heard, the rebels are gaining strength and their numbers are multiplying. Carafa’s grip on power is not what it used to be and soon he may be outset, killed, or exiled. In his absence, the life of our precious boy will be in great danger. I do not know exactly the hidden alliances, but once Carafa is gone, the protection that Agnolo had been receiving will be gone and will be replaced with contempt and vengeance from those who know the blood relationship between the cardinal and our baby.”

Listening to Sister Teresa, Francisca was shaking.

Teresa continued: “Last week, Sisters Bandecca and Fiametta sought shelter at my home. I had not been told what threat they are hiding from, but I am certain it had to do with the church leadership. The two had been in the service of the cardinal and his aide, Father Bronzino, for many years. They were there when Agnolo was born. And, before that, during Maria Josephine’s nine months of pregnancy. They came to check on her at my house daily.”

“Where is our beautiful young lady. I have not seen her in many years. I am certain she is adorable and full of grace,” asked Sister Teresa.

“I am here, holy mother,” replied Chola who had been standing out of sight in the kitchen the entire time.

“Oh, my dear Lord. What a beautiful lady you have become,” said Sister Teresa as she struggled to stand up to hug Chola. When the two hugged, Sister Teresa felt Chola’s slightly protruding stomach but said nothing.

Sister Teresa had delivered Chola and the holy lady who had no children of her own regarded all the children whom she delivered as her very own children.

“My precious lady you are full of grace. He who is within you is mighty!” Said Sister Teresa.

“Holy mother, I have not been feeling very well!” Said Chola to Sister Teresa while looking at Francisca.

“My precious lady, you are full of grace. He who is within you is mighty!” Teresa repeated what she had said.

Chola held her mother's hand and burst into tear. "The holy lady must had discerned my condition," she was convinced. "What else does she know?" She worried.

"Mom, I do not know what is going on. My tommy is growing and I am hungry all the time, but when I eat, I get sick," said Chola as if she was in a confession. Chola appeared ignorant of the facts of life. Of course, she had witnessed the birth of many animals around her parents' home, and she had some knowledge of the reproduction process, but this knowledge was raw and naive. "I have done things that I should not have done. The lust of the world has lured me and weakened my resolve. I take responsibility for my sins. I have sinned against the Lord and against the man that I love." In tears and while all three sobbed, Chola divulged how she had let Satan lure her into violating her vows. She did not mention names, but her mother knew whom she was referencing to while Sister Teresa entered into a long and continuous prayer.

"No condemnation to you, my precious child. Your sorrows will be turned into joy," said Teresa while she anointed Chola's head with her right hand. And, as if she could read Francisca's mind, Teresa went on to say: "We do not need to know who the father is. The Lord is the Father. I need your company at my home during my last days. I need you help!" Said Teresa to Chola as she looked at Francisca seeking her approval.

Francisca sat down and was quiet for a long time. She had not experienced such an eventful day in a very long time. She had many questions but knew that it was not the right time to ask them. The idea of Chola going Florence seemed a great solution, albeit a temporary one, to hide Chola's pregnancy. Francisca did not know how much to tell her husband. Of course, she did not have to tell him too much: Just that Sister Teresa's health was declining and that she needed Chola's help in her last days. Her kindhearted husband would never object to letting his daughter help a dear friend in need, especially Sister Teresa.

Francisca knew that Benvenuto, who of course knew that Chola and Agnolo were not blood siblings, might not have too much trouble with the romantic relationship between the two. He would, without a doubt, have a serious problem with the way Michelangelo seduced his little and innocent daughter. In fact, despite his absolute kindness, he may kill Michelangelo in haste and anger. After all, Chola was the only true fruit of his loins.

Francisca also realized that she and Chola are facing a serious dilemma. They must debate what they could tell Agnolo, if anything. Revealing that he was not a Cellini may open old wounds that she had hoped were healed. Francisca remembered how during his school years at the church children constantly harassed and mocked Agnolo calling him "half baked bread or Pane Mezzo Cotto" because of his light complexion. She could not forget how many of these cruel children taunted Agnolo saying that he was adopted and that he was "not from here". To tell Agnolo that these children were correct and that he was not a blood son to the Cellinis

would devastate him and cause irreparable damage to his soul. In addition to the deep scar that such revelation would cause, the fact that he was conceived out of wedlock would make him a bastard. Not only would that further depress Agnolo's soul, but the entire society would condemn the innocent boy, at no fault of his own. For the rest of his life, Agnolo would be marked as an outcast – and in some circles stigmatized as unclean and unholy.

The two ladies had to also think of what Agnolo would do if he were to find out that Cardinal Carafa was his father. Agnolo was sure to blame the cardinal for his mother's misfortune and death. Would he, in anger, expose the cardinal? And, if he did, what would such a revelation precipitate?

Keeping his bloodline a secret, on the other hand, would mean that the child that Chola is carrying was a result of an incestual relationship, which was a serious offense punishable by excommunication and possible death for the couple, especially in the light of the political situation and the questionable protective cover that the cardinal can provide at that time. Sure, there may be some frowning and social taboos to accompany a relationship between two who had suckled from the same mother, but that is nothing compared to incest.

Francisca was also keenly aware of the fact that pregnancy, because of its nine months duration, was more difficult to conceal than even a large boulder on a flat sandy beach – visible to everyone from land and sea. She, however, decided to leave the details to the Lord and to allow time to work things out. For now, she decided, she will tell her husband that the ailing precious holy lady came to visit to reveal the fact that Agnolo's mother was the sister of the queen of France and that Cardinal Carafa was his father.

38

Confessions

Teresa spent the night with the Cellinis and in the morning she and Chola prepared to return to Florence. That day happened to coincide with the two-week rotational cycle of the French knights, who because of her weakness were gracious to escort her and Chola to Florence.

As the French knights were helping Sister Teresa into the Cellini wagon, Francisca pulled the golden locket and handed it to Chola. "I do not want to keep this. It belongs to Agnolo. Give it to him when you see him. Tell him to wear it at all times," said Francisca. Captain Nicolas looked with reverence as he recognized the coat of arm on the locket!

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When Chola and Teresa arrived at Teresa's home in Florence, the stench of death was in the air.

Teresa opened the locked door with a large key that she had kept within the folds of her white habit. When they entered, they could hear the whaling of Sister Fiametta who was sitting on the floor looking up at the dangling body of her lifelong companion and partner.

"I was asleep and when I woke up, there she was!" Whaled Fiametta. "I guess she had had enough of this life of sin and murder."

Fiametta went on to confess to all the evil that she and her culprit had committed. She told that upon the orders of Bronzino, they poisoned Sister Maria Josephine. Captain Nicholas's fury was mounting. Fiametta, who did not know that Maria Josephine was the sister of the queen of France and did not connect the French knights to the matter, went on to implicate herself and her dead partner.

"We were told to make sure that the boy would not nurse from his mother, otherwise he too would die. It was a close call! The tiny infant had only begun to suckle, when we were able to grab him from his mother's breast before she gave up the spirit. We were afraid that what he had suckled may cause him some physical damage. It was a close call! We learned later how poisonous the mushrooms that we used were. Just a tiny bit of that stuff could cause permanent deafness," Fiametta went on to look into the eyes of each member of her audience trying to find out who, if anyone, would be sympathetic to her. "After getting her pregnant, Cardinal Carafa wanted to give up his position in the church and marry Sister Maria Josephine, but Bronzino convinced him that he can keep his position at the church and from his high place, and with the abundant church funds, provide comfort to the mother and child. I really don't think that Carafa knew that Bronzino had decided to shut up Sister Maria Josephine for good by killing her. When he found out that she died, Cardinal Carafa was in great pain and sorrow."

Nicholas was quiet and did not want to interrupt the flow of information. He decided to allow Fiametta to spill her guts first, before he would begin his interrogation.

“Bronzino wanted us to poison Agnolo with slow poison, after the assassination attempt on the boy’s life near the forest failed. At Carafa’s office, he had instructed us to lace the herbs that we brought him with a slow and undetectable poison. He told us where to find the poisonous mushrooms and how to prepare the poison. He said that the boy had to be eliminated. And that the poison will slowly kill him and everyone would think that the boy’s death was the result of his wounds. But, we had enough. Bandecca and I had sold our souls to the devil in service of this evil man. Last week he wanted us to ambush Chola and help kidnap her to use her as a ransom to get Agnolo. We refused. We did not want more blood on our hands. When we tried to get out of it, Bronzino got angry and we decided to flea and seek shelter here.”

The king of France and his queen had suspected that Carafa was Agnolo’s father but were mystified by why and how Maria Josephine died. They thought that the fragile and naïve Maria Josephine had fallen in love with the holy cardinal. However, they never imagined that Carafa had selfishly violated their precious lady. They convinced themselves that it was love that brought in Agnolo to life. Eventually, in their sorrow, they accepted that the holy and gentle lady must had died, as many women did, during child birth. After grieving for many weeks, they decided to leave Maria Josephine’s earthly remains in Florence, near her beloved son and those to whom she had devoted her life to serve.

While Cardinal Carafa’s zealous protection of his son received great admiration from the French, they never imagined that a holy man such as Father Bronzino would take a life. Their rage against Bronzino was enormous.

Nicholas paused for a moment trying to control his rage, then he ordered two of his knights to carry the dead evil woman’s body to the carriage and dispose of it. “Take this wicked trash out of here and let the ravens of hell devour her defiled remains!” He said in anger. Looking at Fiametta, Nicholas shouted: “As for you, you get out of here. Your fate, you will find on the streets with the stray dogs and Bronzino’s ghouls!”

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Within minutes from her appearance on the street, Fiametta was picked up by two cathedral guards who were hunting for her and her accomplice, upon the orders of Father Bronzino. They informed her that she was being charged with “uncleanliness,” which is a charge that could mean anything from entertaining bad thoughts to committing grievant sins – a charge that could carry the death penalty. Before she was swiftly transferred to one of the “Holding Catacombs” that existed under the cathedral for interrogations, she asked to talk to Cardinal

Carafa. "Tell the Holy Father that I have something very important to tell him." The arresting guards, whose loyalty lied with Father Bronzino, never passed the information to the cardinal, but told Bronzino instead. Bronzino suspected that Fiametta intended to blackmail him or expose his role to the entire world. Her expedited elimination was an absolute necessity, he assessed.

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After sending a messenger to Philippe informing him of the new developments, Nicholas left Teresa's home. Accompanied by the rest of his knights they rode their horses swiftly towards Duke Lorenzo's palace. Nicholas had also asked Philippe to muster as many knights as he could, without compromising their mission of guarding Agnolo, and meet him at the cathedral. Nicholas assessed that his duties were to immediately inform his majesty the King of France of Bronzino's role in Her Highness Maria Josephine's death and to facilitate the expedite arrest of Bronzino. To achieve the later, he decided to seek the assistance of Duke Lorenzo. The alliance between the French and the City Council was still strong.

Upon hearing the latest news and Fiametta's confession, accompanied by a dozen of the city guards, Lorenzo mounted his horse and followed the French to the cathedral. When Nicholas and Lorenzo got to the cathedral, Philippe and most of his knights were waiting for them. Instead of going to Cardinal Carafa's office and seek his permission to arrest Bronzino, Lorenzo went in first to see the cardinal, and during the commotion and confusion of the event, the French led by Nicholas and Philippe overcame the guards at Bronzino's quarters and arrested the wicked priest. The incident went with very little resistance from the cathedral guards who were outnumbered and were taken by surprise, not to mention that they had no moral motivation to fight for the protection of Bronzino. Bronzino who usually covered his missing eye with his headgear, exposed his entire face. He was defiant and walked slowly like a crab on a rocky beach or a goat on a thorny bougainvillea bush.

After the arrest of Bronzino, two French knights received the cooperation of cathedral guards who led them to where Fiametta was kept.

The confused fallen angel did not know whether to rejoice with joy or pray for a merciful death. She quickly realized that her predicament may not be as bad as she thought and saw a beam of hope. The French, she realized, needed her as a witness against Bronzino.

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When Lorenzo stormed into Carafa's office, the senior priest panicked. His anxiety was exacerbated by the noise of the invading French knights and city guards. Lorenzo was not

seeking Carafa's blessings to arrest Bronzino; his visit was to notify the local head of the church of the latest developments and the allegations that Fiametta had raised against Bronzino. Carafa was concerned, knowing that Bronzino was likely to divulge damning information. It was clear that the two men, Carafa and Lorenzo, had mutual interest in putting Bronzino away.

"Piero," said Cardinal Carafa, "had made some bad choices and I regret losing him. But, he constantly lies. I would not trust anything that he says!"

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After his arrest, Piero Bronzino was transferred to the municipal prison under the control of the City Council and Duke Lorenzo, where he was to be interrogated by the professionals.

In the beginning, Bronzino refused to divulge any details and appeared surprisingly protective of Cardinal Carafa as well as Sisters Bandecca and Fiametta.

The French, who were indirectly assisting in the interrogation, allowed Bronzino to drink a great deal of strong wine. The anxiety of the moment caused his sight in his one functioning eye to deteriorate in a matter of hours. Yet, the evil priest was defiant and constantly quoted scriptures from the Bible as he shouted loud praises and sometimes profanity. When the matter was left to the professional integrators, whose persuasive interrogating techniques were tested and verified, he broke down and began to talk and elaborately implicate everyone but himself.

"I was just following the orders of Cardinal Carafa. Because of my loyalty to him, I did everything that he asked me with blind faith. Carafa is the source of all the trouble. All I sought to do was to protect the position of the cardinal. When Alessandro violated this young nun's 'holy place,' he did not know that she was of royal blood. One night, after he finished his evil deed in the dark, he noticed a shining gold locket on her chest with the French Royal coat of arm. He was terrified and asked her about it, but she was too distraught to respond. He did not know what to do, so he ordered me to poison her. Her existence posed a serious dilemma for Alessandro and threatened the continuation and stability of his rule and authority. At the time, he did not realize that the poisonous herbs that killed the young nun could possibly cause her infant baby to lose his hearing and cause him to have convulsions. After the young nun died, he felt guilty and ordered me to secretly leave expensive gifts at the door of the home of the couple who adopted the boy. When the boy became a problem, Alessandro tried to poison him at dinner."

The French knights interrupted Bronzino. "Why would cardinal Carafa try to poison his own son?"

“He had lost touch with holiness and wanted to eliminate any and all potential threats. Before the boy was born, he contemplated, then decided to leave the boy alone. As long as no one knew the real father or questioned the boy’s heredity, all was well, he thought. The secret was buried with the young nun, he was convinced. However, Agnolo’s physical appearance posed a serious problem for Alessandro. It was becoming clear that the boy looked exactly like Alessandro, except for his blonde hair, light blue eyes, and light complexion. Carafa was afraid that people would notice and begin to question things.”

Although Bronzino’s claims may have been logical, for some reason the French did not buy them. “Who ordered Bandecca and Fiametta to poison Agnolo at the cardinal’s office after the failed assassination attempt on his life near the forest?” Asked one of the French knights.

“Carafa did. He wanted the boy dead!”

“You are a liar. One of these two evil nuns had already confessed that it was you that ordered the poisoning of the young man. In fact, she gave details that you had ordered a specific herb that would cause a slow death to the innocent lad.”

The French knights left the scene convinced that it may be easier to get a serpent to walk upright than to get Bronzino to do so.

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Carafa’s alliance with Lorenzo did not seem to go very well with the Vatican. When the news of Bronzino’s arrest and the confession of Fiametta reached the Pope, he was displeased. Furthermore, Carafa’s involvement with a young nun, albeit something that had happened several years ago, evoked a righteous rage against the high-ranking priest. The pope began to examine options to get rid of Cardinal Carafa and find a suitable replacement. To execute his plan, the Vatican contacted an old ally of theirs, the Pazzi family as well as the leaders of the rebel forces, and proposed forming a coalition to include the rebels, Vatican guards, and cathedral guards that were still loyal to Bronzino. “Too much has been happening in the great city lately,” the Pope assessed. Stability must be reestablished to avoid occupation by many looming threats.

The Pazzi family’s hate for Duke Lorenzo was deeply rooted and never subsided. Killing his brother years ago, with the cooperation of the Vatican, was not enough for them. They so greatly wanted to get rid of Lorenzo that they would have made a pact with the devil himself.

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Chola’s days at Teresa’s home were filled with uncertainty and depression. Despite the great peace that Chola felt for helping the ailing holy lady, her separation from Agnolo and her guilt

usually kept her in despair that dominated her day. She had missed Agnolo so very much that she could feel her heart shrink within her chest. She had missed her kind lover's touch, his warm gazes into her eyes, and his voice that was always full of love. But, she refused to burden him by letting him know that she was pregnant. Neither one of them really knew the facts of life, and except for the teenage boy-talk that boys at the church school had traded, Agnolo did not know too much.

Oh, how she would give anything to be in his arms again. Oh, how she craved to be in his presence. But, she denied her needs. She refused to allow him to suffer and be tormented with her.

At first, Agnolo did not know that Chola was in Florence. When he found out from the French knights, he was torn between going to see her and allowing her time for herself. It had been several weeks since the two were together. And, Chola's hurt and feelings of guilt greatly bothered him. He had forgiven her and was worried about her but did not want to invade her space. He had missed her terribly and was miserable without her in his life. It was she who provided all the reasons for him to be creative and to continue giving life to the stone. She was his biggest fan and the renewing sap in his blooming vines. But, things have changed. He was convinced that he was alone. He knew that Chola loved him with all her heart. But, he also knew that betrayal leaves lives damaged and that innocence and purity had fled their bed. He was confused and hurt, yet deeply in love with her and had completely forgiven her. "If she wanted to see me, she would have contacted me," he thought sadly. "She may be needing a little time to heal."

When Tota came to visit at Sister Teresa's home, Chola was excited. Tota did not comment on Chola's pregnancy and did not ask any questions. She had known that the relationship between Chola and Agnolo will sooner or later lead to that. But, she loved them both and trusted that the Lord of love would provide a way for his beloved creatures.

Tota brought freshly baked bread and tended to both Chola and Sister Teresa, giving Chola a short break from taking care of Sister Teresa.

"Please do not tell him about what you saw," said Chola pointing to her stomach. Take this locket and give it to him. Tell him it is who he is and that he should wear it at all times," she chocked. "Tell him that I love him and that I will be seeing him soon."

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While at the worksite, the church bells announced a funeral procession. There was also a great commotion all around the cathedral where a large mob had gathered. Some were masked with

black masks that covered only their faces and others had masks that covered their entire heads. They were shouting unclear, but seemingly hostile, slogans.

When Giulio inquired, he was told by one of the French knights standing by that the criminal Foscari had died in prison. When the mob got closer, their chant became a bit clearer: “The blood of the saint shall not be wasted. The blood of the saint is on the lad!”

The French knights quickly rounded up Agnolo. They covered his face with a dark cloth and rushed him to an undisclosed location.

The French captains had been anticipating such a disaster. With the consent and cooperation of Duke Lorenzo, they had managed to secure safe quarters near the prison castle. There, they established a safe house for Agnolo where their large footprint was not questioned because of the close proximity of the safehouse to the municipal prison, where the French frequented.

In anticipation of future trouble, the two captains sent an urgent message to the palace in France requesting reinforcement. They explained the situation and described the threat to Agnolo’s life as “credible and imminent”.

The death of Foscari troubled Agnolo greatly. Agnolo had been praying for the salvation of the doomed priest and made many plans to intervene for his release. Agnolo cried. He mourned for three days and refrained from eating or drinking.

Although the event was sudden and the funeral was not advertised, thousands attended the funeral of the fallen priest. It was clear that practically all those who were there blamed Agnolo for the cruel death of Foscari. Sporadically, the uncontrolled mobs shouted hostility against Agnolo in surprising unisons.

Agnolo wanted to attend the funeral, but Nicola adamantly forbade him. “That is a nightmare. We need to get you out of here as soon as possible before the situation deteriorates and we would be unable to guarantee your safety. The mob would kill you or kidnap you,” said Nicholas.

Before they laid Foscari’s body to rest, the multitude, led by many monks, carried his body all over the city gathering more crowd. Many called him a martyr and a saint.

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Within a week from the death of Foscari, Michelangelo was putting the final touches to the statue and was planning a small celebration for his crew and supporters. He sent messengers to both Cardinal Carafa and Duke Lorenzo to announce the completion of the statue and requesting that the two would inform him of the planned unveiling celebration.

Together, Carafa and Lorenzo arrived to view the statue the following day. It was truly impressive. The size of the work was breathtaking, and the marble spoke with authority and a mandate.

“Michelangelo, it is magnificent. It is divine. Therefore, you are from now on, Michelangelo ‘the divine’!” Said Duke Lorenzo while marveling.

“I agree. It is quite impressive; however, I take issue with the fact that David, the king of the Jews is not circumcised! This is a glaring imperfection. Don’t you agree, Michelangelo?” said Carafa.

“Father, it is a testimony to the humanity of King David,” answered Michelangelo with a smile.

The two dignitaries left the plaza and went back to the Cardinal’s office to discuss many issues, not the least of which the planning of a large gala to celebrate the unveiling of the statue. Dignitaries and commoners from hundreds of miles were to be invited to witness the marvel and the splendid of Florence.

“At the Sunday mass, I will announce to the congregation that the statue was complete and that the unveiling party would be the following week,” said Carafa. “I will also send messengers to all who are worthy, to invite them to witness our progress and elevated status.”

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Michelangelo’s private celebration with his apprentices and work-crew was watched and guarded by cathedral guards who protected the statue from Agnolo’s threats, and a large number of French knights who protected Agnolo, who arrived late, from the cathedral guard and rebel elements.

While fine wines flowed and a small group of nuns and monks sang, Michelangelo walked around greeting everyone and not taking two steps without looking at his creation and smiling.

“Michlo, the statue is not complete. It is a complete lie. David was circumcised; he was a circumcised Jew. If you do not correct it, the Lord will! The Lord hates liars and lies!” Said Agnolo who refused to take part in the festivities and left the plaza minutes after his arrival.

39

The Way Home

When it was Sunday, Cardinal Carafa prepared a great sermon in which he read scripture that pointed out David's divine victory over the forces of evil – forces that seemed larger than he could conquer.

The sanctuary was filled to capacity and in anticipation of trouble, especially after the great revolt that followed the death of Foscari, Lorenzo coordinated with the French knights the maintenance of peace as well as the protection of Agnolo and Cardinal Carafa.

Rumors had also spread that the Guelfs had recruited tens of young men from villages all around the region to cause chaos during the Sunday mass. It was said that these young men were brainwashed and transformed to subjugated zealots who were convinced that they were fighting for the Lord's cause. Among them, there were many of formal colleagues of Agnolo from the Settignano church school.

These young zealots appeared at the mass with their heads, and most of their faces, covered like monastery monks. They were instructed to kill Cardinal Carafa and if they locate Agnolo to kill him as well.

After the cardinal finished his sermon, while in the middle of his announcement regarding the upcoming celebration of the statue's unveiling, these young zealots stood up and revealed their small weapons which consisted of daggers and short swords. With their faces still covered, they shouted: "Death to the angels of Satan!" and ran towards the pulpit where the cardinal was standing. They tried to set the cardinal on fire and swarmed towards him in an unorganized fashion. Agnolo, who was hoping to hear Cardinal Carafa announcing that the statue was not complete and that celebrations would be announced upon minor modifications to the statue would be made, was also at the church.

For fear of being recognized by hostile elements, Agnolo hid his face. But while praying, Agnolo's distinctive voice was recognized by one of the young zealots. When the young zealot moved his face within his headgear, it was nonother than Giorgio.

When the zealots, supported by one-third of the priests, began to execute their plot to assassinate Carafa, they were met with the newly arrived reinforcement of the French knights, who began to slaughter the untrained and inexperienced zealots. The plot seemed to have the Pope's fingerprints all over it. The blood bath was ignited in seconds and in the excitement of the battle, the French knights almost killed Agnolo by mistake. But, just as one of the knights swung his large sword to smite the veiled Agnolo, he spotted the gold locket under Agnolo's blouse.

The French knights tried to round up Agnolo and remove him from the scene. But, a demon filled voice shouted loudly: “Mezzo Cotto (Half Baked)! I heard your voice praying. I knew it was you. Now I will carve you!” Giorgio, who was armed with a hammer and a large chisel, snuck under the arms of two French knights and launched at Agnolo.

Agnolo seemed unaware of the screaming mad Giorgio. It was as if he had not heard the loud threat, but the movement of the crowd and the knights gave him a hint to look. “Giorgio, why?” Shouted Agnolo. “You were healed!”

The poorly armed young zealots outnumbered the French knights. Because of their large number, several were able to sneak their way towards Agnolo and join Giorgio. However, their poor training precipitated confusion which led them to swing and strike each other.

Giorgio was struck by his own comrades and was mortally injured. There he lay, his body bleeding from several places on the blood covered marble floor of the cathedral. The French knights did not finish him up, thinking that he was already dead.

Agnolo slipped away, unrecognized. It was not his time! Before he dissipated, with tears in his eyes, Agnolo gently touched the forehead of a smitten hesitant insurgent and whispered: “Not you … “

It was his own desk mate from the church school in Settignano, Cosimo Rosso.

When it was all over, the bodies of tens of priests and young zealots lay on the church floor bleeding or dead. When it was over, none were saved and the congregation left in fear for their lives.

It was clear that Cardinal Carafa was in great trouble!

The municipal guards and the French knights quickly rounded up Cardinal Carafa and carried him to his office. Lorenzo who was also at the mass, followed the knights to the cardinal’s office. Both Cardinal Carafa and Duke Lorenzo were covered with blood. Neither was touched by the attackers, but the magnitude of the slaughter left everyone at the church stained with blood.

“Lorenzo, this is more than I was ever prepared for. Nothing could have prepared me for this. The situation is very serious,” said the trembling cardinal.

“This opens old wounds. It reminds me of how a few years ago the Pope’s guards slaughtered my brother during the Sunday mass and tried to kill me,” said Lorenzo. “It is a miracle that I survived that assassination attempt.”

With a somber look, Cardinal Carafa asserted: “Things are worse now. Here is what we have: You control the City Council, the city guards, and the city prison, while I have the loyalty of some of the cathedral guards and the support of the King of France who despises the Pope and had expressed admiration for my role in protecting Agnolo. We face the Vatican, Bronzino’s supporters among the cathedral guards, and the rebellious monks who are organized by the Pazzi family and seek revenge for my role in deposing Bishops Fontana and Donato. Some of these rebellious monks believe that Agnolo is unholy and must be eliminated, while some are motivated by jealousy for the attention that this orphan boy had received. Of course, many have found the endeavor exciting and thrilling and a source of an adrenaline rush. Within these rebellious monks there are many factions and splinter groups, some are more militant than others. Estimates of their numbers fluctuate and their alliances and their demands vacillate.”

After a short discussion, Carafa left his office with a few of his belongings and took shelter at Duke Lorenzo’s palace. There, the two set their headquarters to fight the forces of evil while trying to maintain order in the city and at the church. They were protected by the newly arrived battalion of French knights, as well as municipal guards and some cathedral guards who remained loyal to Cardinal Carafa. This coalition called themselves the Ghibelline who opposed the forces of evil, the Guelfs.

Despite their superior training and the mighty weapons of the Ghibellines, the following days proved that scoring a decisive fast victory against the Guelfs, who were fighting an asymmetric type of guerilla warfare, was not easy. The Guelfs, who set their headquarters in the forest, attacked brutally at all hours of the night and day. They slaughtered their captives and just to prove their brutality and merciless convictions, they slaughtered many who were known to be innocent. They used decapitation as a favored means of execution and the heads of their slaughtered victims were displayed on stakes all over the roadside with frightening banners threatening to kill anyone who would be found collaborating with their enemies.

Despite many ferocious campaigns, the Ghibellines failed to inflict any notable damage on the Guelfs.

At the church, there was great confusion and the masses, as well as the priests and nuns, wondered who was in charge. In addition to a large reinforcement battalion, the Vatican also sent two senior cardinals to oversee the situation. The Pope in Rome, who had the religious authority of Moses and the heavy hand of Pharaoh, sent a newly appointed cardinal who was elevated from a Bishop to a cardinal that week. Cardinal Donato was no strange to the area. He had been the Bishop of Settignano, until his relief from duty by Cardinal Carafa, after the Easter incident and the fiasco that followed.

Within hours of his arrival, Cardinal Donato was greeted by Michelangelo.

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With most of the Ghibellines forces fighting the Guelfs at the forest, Carafa and Lorenzo were vulnerable and poorly protected at the Duke's palace.

One evening, in a surprise attack, while a heated battle ensued at the forest, a band of Guelfs managed to attack the palace. Carafa surrendered and Lorenzo was allowed to escape in exchange for a deal that ensured the safety of his family.

Quietly, the transfer of power was taking place – bloodless and in the pitch darkness of the night. Carafa was loaded up in a carriage that sped on its way to Rome.

When the morning came, the church bells rang announcing the inauguration of a new cardinal. The masses gathered at the church to find out the news.

"The Holy Father sends his blessings and greetings of peace to all of you. His message to all of you is: Let not your hearts be troubled. Our dear friend and Holy Father, Cardinal Carafa, was selected to lead many holy pilgrims in a highly coveted journey to the Holy Land. With the blessings of our Pious Father and your help, I will be here to serve as your Cardinal," announced Cardinal Donato. "It is my intention and duty to maintain peace in this prosperous region. With that, I now announce the upcoming celebration for the unveiling of the marvelous work of our people to all friends and foes. The hand of the Lord has blessed our city and the world will envy our progress. Let this statue stand as a symbol of the triumph of good over evil and the vindication of the oppressed!"

The sudden appearance of the new cardinal and the vacuum created by the unanticipated departure of Duke Lorenzo left the multitude speechless and afraid. No one was certain who was really in charge and everyone kept his mouth shut for fear of being arrested.

The tense and uncertain environment provided an excellent reason for the creation of an outlet. Such an outlet was the celebration of the unveiling of David.

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Within two days of his inauguration, Donato sought the release of Father Bronzino. The French adamantly refused to hand the wicked man to Donato who sought a ceasefire between the fighting factions.

Like a polished politician, Donato also made it a priority to appease his followers and strengthen his base of supporters. Quickly, he formed a Church Tribunal to examine charges against Agnolo. Donato's plan was to gain political support through involving as many factions as possible. Although their role was merely political, he needed the appearance of unity to

avoid future criticism. "When many people are involved," he reasoned, "blame is spread thin!" Donato summoned Bishop Fonte, the presiding Bishop over the church in Settignano to testify that Agnolo had challenged the authority of the church and claimed that no penance was needed for salvation. Although Fonte was not there during the healing of Giorgio, he heard many accounts from many of those who were there and heard Agnolo saying that no penance was needed for salvation. Fonte was afraid. He, however, never grasped the entire picture. He was justifiably confused and afraid for his life, like most people around. Survival seemed to be the goal of the day for everyone. Often when that happens, people become afraid to talk and distrust dominates even the closest of relationships. Fonte's confusion was well founded. There were too many factions and interest groups. Furthermore, splinter groups sprouted daily within each of these factions.

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The Church Tribunal tried Agnolo in absentia. His accusers used the sketch of the forest that Agnolo had shared with Father Bronzino at the worksite and the diagrams that Agnolo had made earlier depicting what he had seen in his dreams as evidence against him. They also subpoenaed the monks who were working at the church kitchen to show that the boy was unholy. Michelangelo refused to testify and Cardinal Donato excused him on the basis that his judgement was skewed because of his close relationship to Agnolo.

Michelangelo remembered Agnolo's views on human justice and how he often lamented: "Of all things that I fear, human justice is the most frightening – and much more so those who were granted the power to mandate it, interpret it, and administer it!"

The tribunal allowed a short testimony by a few rebels who admitted that they had found the aerial drawing of the forest and the river in Agnolo's home in Settignano. "We went there a few days ago to recover the holy relic, while the Cellinis were at church. While looking for the relic, we found this map and we thought that it would lead us to the relic, when we realized that it must had been the work of demons," one testified.

During the short trial that lasted less than an hour, they erected a small post with a depiction of Foscari that was drawn by an amateur artist. The depiction radiated a nasty order and whether intentionally or accidentally Foscari's face looked disfigured. The tribunal found Agnolo guilty of heresy, witchcraft, and threats against church property.

Agnolo was sentenced to death!

During the evening mass, Cardinal Donato announced the verdict: "It is the wish of our Lord and our Holy Father that the evil would be eliminated from amongst us. I, therefore, order the immediate arrest and execution of the condemned heretic." Cardinal Donato also announced

that the Vatican would award thirty Silver Florins to anyone who is accredited with the elimination of the “Demon possessed heretic”.

The crowd, whether out of fear or ignorance, shouted: “Death to the heretic!”

It was truly sad. Man’s memory is usually short and limited. And as is the case even with most profound and well documented miracles and unnatural phenomena, the immediate fascination and awe that accompany the event is often replaced with doubt and questioning in a matter of weeks. The undeniable miracles that Agnolo had performed were no different. They were soon dismissed as unexplained phenomena and questioned coincidents.

Furthermore, incredibly, all Agnolo’s good deeds were forgotten by the assembled crowd. Not a person stood up to object to his death. They forgot his kindness! They forgot his love!

Upon hearing the news, the French placed practically all their resources to guard Agnolo at the safehouse, the location of which was kept a secret. The task of the French was complicated by Agnolo’s mysterious disappearances from the safehouse for hours at a time. The frustrated valiant knights did all they could to keep a minute by minute watch on the convicted innocent lad. But time and again, Agnolo disappeared in thin air only to reappear as mysteriously as he disappeared.

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Dignitaries from all over arrived the night before the unveiling celebration. Some arrived several days prior to network with the cultural icons of the City State and meet those in power. The political climate of the day was tense with many safety concerns to locals and visitors, but the hype of the great event overshadowed all these concerns. A mood of jolliness dominated, perhaps an escape from the gloomy encompassing reality.

The Cellinis made the trip to Florence the day of the unveiling and their wagon fought its way through the crowd bloated streets of the celebrating city. They were accompanied by Captain Philippe and his knights. The large number of the French knights drew the attention of a Vatican guard, who waved two other guards to follow the French covertly with the hope that they would lead them to Agnolo.

Instead of stopping by Sister Teresa’s home, Benvenuto asked the French captain to lead them directly to the safehouse. Their plan was to visit Agnolo first, then Chola, before they went to their assigned place in the stands at the plaza – one that was dedicated to the elite, to view the unveiling events and the gala to follow.

Francisca had hidden Chola’s pregnancy from her husband, dropping small hints from time to time to prepare him for the fact that his daughter was about to have a baby.

Francisca repeated an argument that Agnolo had raised several times: “If God is the same yesterday, today, and forever, why are we not allowed to marry our sisters? Adam’s children must have married their sisters, he pointed out! The Bible is full of examples where siblings married each other with the blessings of the Lord.” Although Benvenuto never understood the relevance of his wife’s conversation, he seemed to agree that societal norms and church made rules that do not seem to reflect biblical teachings.

When the Cellinis arrived at the safehouse, they found the usually well-mannered highly disciplined French knights in utter frustration and behaving in a nontypical un-noble manner. Agnolo had mysteriously disappeared again leaving these professional mighty men wondering about his safety and their ability to protect him. It was clear that the latest orders from the church left Agnolo as a hunted man and marked as dead.

A few hours earlier, Agnolo left the safe house undetected and sought to find Michelangelo. Michelangelo was in his apartment busy with last minute preparation of a speech that he was to deliver during the ceremony.

“Agno, what are you doing here? Don’t you know that it is not safe for you to be so exposed. Everyone is hunting you. You are a marked man, my brother,” said Michelangelo with somewhat a convincingly caring tone.

“Michlo, my safety is of no concern. I ask you to promise that you will correct the lie, please …” “My dear brother, please do not threaten me. I love you and I do not want any harm to come to you or your dear family.”

“Michlo, you need to correct the lie.”

“Agno, it is too late. You need to accept reality.”

“Michlo, you have changed. Or, maybe you were like that all along and we just did not see it. You are of this world, and you can have David and the world. I choose eternal life. You know that with one word, I could summon ten thousand angels that would destroy this lie and vindicate you of your responsibility. But, because of the hardness of your heart, I will let it stand through the ages as a testimony to my unshaken love for you. Let the stone forever say: Agnolo could have destroyed me, but despite my imperfection, he gave me life. From now on, you will not see me for I will go to where I belong … ”

“I think your angels are going to be too busy protecting you. You are already a marked man and once the world finds out that you got your sister pregnant everyone will realize that you are unclean. Papa would be the first to slit your throat … I doubt that any angels would have

anything to do with you, and I know that they will definitely not have time to deal with me," Michelangelo let out an evil laughter.

Agnolo was stunned. He had not seen Chola since her encounter with Michelangelo and was unaware that she was pregnant. His mind was racing. "That is why she refused to see me." He was going crazy. The weight of the world was on his shoulders. Several doves appeared in the skies above to comfort him.

Agnolo left Michelangelo's apartment the same way he entered it: undetected.

Despite the widescale manhunt for Agnolo, no one could confirm any sighting of him. The frustrated knights were growing more and more concerned, especially with the arrival of additional Vatican guards who were sent to solidify the stability of the newly appointed cardinal, Donato.

When the Cellinis did not find Agnolo at the safehouse, they turned their wagon towards Teresa's home. Upon their arrival, the Guelfs were mounting simultaneous surprise attacks on Teresa's home and the safehouse. The Guelfs were able to infiltrate the safehouse from a tunnel beneath. The French knights and the Florentine guards, who knew that Agnolo was not within, did not resist the incoming infiltrators and decided to trap them inside the facility. The safe house was joined to the prison with several underground passageways and secret subterranean compartments. When the Guelfs did not find Agnolo in the safehouse, their mission was modified to free Father Bronzino and execute Sister Fiametta.

At Teresa's house, Francisca was rushed inside while the French knights fought the overwhelming number of Guelf forces that surrounded the home. Benvenuto remained outside, and as much as he could, tried to aid the outnumbered French knights.

A multitude of ravens and doves filled the skies above and blocked the sun.

Francisca ran to hold her daughter and pray for the safety of Benvenuto and the French. Suddenly, the room was filled with light and Agnolo appeared before them. The two ladies ran to hugged him, but he gently stopped them. He was wearing a white robe stained with fresh blood and had tears in his eyes. The two women were tongue tied. They were eager to reveal to him the secret that Chola was not his sister and that Cardinal Carafa was his father, but they were stunned. They thought: "He may already know." But, they really wanted to make sure that he did.

With tears running down his cheeks Agnolo whispered: "I love you Chola, I love you mommy. Please remember me. It is painful for the victim to try to prove his innocence. I must go to where I can find peace. It is finished. My work is complete."

As Agnolo mysteriously appeared, he was mysteriously translated and disappeared.

With complete disregard to their own safety, in madness, the two women ran out of the house. "He must be going to the palace," said Chola. "That is where he usually found peace!" With the urgency of hungry lionesses, they set out to find Agnolo.

The ongoing battle outside was exacerbated by the arrival of troops from both sides. Francisca was concerned about the safety of her pregnant daughter, but that did not stop Chola from running as fast as she could towards the wagon followed by her mother who jumped on the driver's seat and violently urged the horses to speed away.

As Chola was getting into the wagon, a spear broke the air and whistled its way directly towards Chola's protruding stomach. Francisca screamed, while two of the nights attempted to block it. The spear flew its way pass the knights, but when it got within five feet from Chola, it shattered on its own. It was as if it had been blocked by a mighty invisible shield.

The wagon was followed by a couple of Guelf horsemen and several French knights who tried to block the Guelfs' access to the wagon.

While the wagon sped its way towards Settignano, the sky was turning dark and a storm could be seen and heard from a distance. The massive number of the ravens and doves that circled the skies above Teresa's home, followed the wagon with the two groups skirmishing for position.

In Florence, the skies of the plaza where the festivities were to take place were dominated by ravens. A band of these ravens broke windows in suicidal maneuvers and entered the sanctuary of the cathedral and the cardinal's office.

As Chola and Francisca neared their home, a violent earthquake shook the earth for several minutes and darkness covered the entire land. Ravens and doves engaged in bloody combat in the dark skies above.

At the quarry, Francisca and Chola jumped from the wagon and began to run towards the palace. Chola led the way and Francisca was screaming: "Agno, there is no condemnation for those who love the Lord," while Chola was screaming: "Agno, come make me your wife, please do not leave us! Five more minutes, Agno. Please, just five more minutes! I am your wife … please … this is your baby!"

The sound of thunder filled the land for miles and the large boulders echoed the storm's anger. When they got to the palace, the ground entrance was sealed, but the top was split open for miles to the sky. When the lightning struck, it exposed the palace's inner beauty and reflected crystal-like statues of many people. They were transparent but not moving.

From the lofty wide gap at the entrance of the palace, a large and mighty white dove flew over. It looked down and made eye contact with Chola and Francisca before it was escorted by two other large and majestic white doves. Where the three flew, bright light emanated. Francisca and Chola watched the three doves as they disappeared to join the many stars in the endless dark skies.

Still starring at the heavens and tears blocking her view, Chola whispered with a broken voice: “Five more minutes …. Please!”

Beneath a large boulder at the blocked gate of the palace, lay a blood stained white dove. Beneath the wings of the slain dove, parts of Agnolo’s locket, the damaged crystal heart, and two unhatched eggs could barely be seen.

The end!

(Song 29: Finally Home … Theme Song)

Songs

Song 1

Lord of the Injured
(Maria Josephine … Prayer)

V1. Lord of the injured and the oppressed
Lord of the feeble who failed the test

V2. Please don't remember the shame of my youth
For only you know all of the truth

He who's within me this sweet unknown
Is mighty angel who frees the stone

V3. Lord of the innocent, Lord of the prey
My stained white garment, please cleanse today

Reading: Lord of the innocent and the oppressed
Come lift me now Lord, from the abyss!

Amen!

Song 2

Castelli in Aria
(Funeral March)

(Fa freddo qui)[3] … Dov'e il sole? …… *[(It's cold in here)[3] … Where is the sun?]*
('E buio qui)[3] … Dov'e la luna? …….. *[(It's dark in here)[3] …Where is the moon?]*

(Solo altri)[3] cinque minuti …….. [*(Just only)[3] five more minutes]*
(Per favore)[2] solo altri cinque minuti ……. *[Please, please, just five more minutes]*

Castelli in Aria …… *(Castle in the sky)*
Un luogo sacro ……. *(A holy place)*
Solo per te …… *(Just for you)*
E me …… *(And me)*

Chorus –

Campi di fiori di grazia e pace eterna ……..….. *(Fields of flowers of grace and eternal peace)*
Sempre per sempre nella gioia senza dolore ……..…… *(Always forever in joy without pain)*

Chorus –

And when she found no resting place on earth to land her feet she went back home to paradise
And when the gates of heaven opened holy angels sang and filled bright joyful skies

And then they played the wedding march and Jesus said I do and gently kissed his holy bride
And wiped her tears of painful years and vowed that she will always reign right by his side.

Where time has no control, over her soul

Song 3

The Quarry's Song
(Workers at the quarry)

Bit by bit chip chip come alive
I hope you soon could come alive
And speak of love unknown
A heart of gold within the stone

Touch me
Touch me with your words
Touch me with your eyes
Touch me with your love

See me and hold me with your words
Hold me in your eyes
Hold me with your love

And I will give you the world
Melody and long love song-
And love you like you never knew
And then I'll fall in love with you

I am growing up slowly slowly and I'm learning from you
Is it all good? I really don't know
All I know is that I'm growing up … slowly slowly and that I'm learning from you
I wanna be just like you
I will be just like you

Raised from the Dead
If you could raise someone from the dead ... Who would it be?
How many people would you save? How many would you bring back to life?
Some day they all will be dead and gone
Some day you too will die … Some day you'll be the one

Could we just care now while we're still alive ...
Could we just give Life a simple chance?

Song 4

Roses in a Dream
(Maria Josephine to Agnolo)

Agno you're my precious little angel that the Lord had blessed me with, then soon they took you from my arms too soon too soon.

Agno Chola is your crown of thorns and roses that brings joy and tears, don't break the thread of light that ties you to the moon

C. And we're only separated through eternity
If we choose a different path and final destiny

Agno go and bring life to the stone and make it speak with joy unknown, together dance, rejoice and sing a happy tune

Song 5

I Hate Time
(Agnolo)

Talking …
Agnolo: Mommy, why do people die
Francisca: Because it is their time

Agnolo –
Why do good times always end in goodbye?
Why does love vanish and why flowers die?
Why does time steal our joy from us why?
I hate time!

Song 6

If They Come to Know You
(Chola and Francesca)

V1. It's cold and lonely here
No love, no hope just fear
And I cry out for you
For all they put you through
And all that they might do

V2. I shun reality
To keep my sanity
I just can't see their side
When love had lived and died
With a broken heart inside

Chorus –
Oh if they come to know you and give your love a chance
Oh if they ever feel for you and once give love a glance

V3. They just don't realize
I see pain in their eyes
'cause all the thorns they sow
And all the walls they grow
Will choke their souls with lies

Song 7

Worthy is the Lamb

Segment from the cantata “Worthy is the Lamb”

Song 8

Agnolo Running
(Agnolo)

I have let you down I hate myself I wish I'd die
Lord you know my heart is pure this world is built on lies
Lord, you know I cannot change so would you bring me through
When will I stop hurting why can't I be like them too

Why, why, why?
No no no no

Chola mom and dad I love you please forgive me please
I sure meant to hurt no one my heart is full of love
Lord forgive them for they don't know what they do is wrong
All I sought was to spread love and worship God above

Only you can give a light so bright that can shine through
How can I bend the sun rays so it shines on them too

Song 9

Mary Jo
(Agnolo)

Oh, Mary Jo
Pain doesn't go
I still recall how well you dance
Oh, now you'll never have a chance

Why Mary Jo
They hurt you so
They don't know what you mean to me
They are so cruel too blind to see

Oh how cruel, they think you're a fool
They cheat and lie and smile as you die

Oh, Mary Jo
I need to go
But now that I can clearly see
I realize you're really me

Bye Mary Jo

Song 10

Goodbye Agno, Goodbye
(Chola and Francisca)

V1. Goodbye Agno, goodbye
Your home is in the skies
Where there's no fear or lies

V2. Goodbye Agno, Goodbye
Angels are meant to fly
So, fly my angel fly

C. So fly my angel fly
Angels are meant to fly

V3. So fly with angels fly
While I wither and die
And plead with God and die

C. So fly my angel fly
Angels are meant to fly

B1 Too kind to live too young to die
If angels walk, they soon will fly

So, fly Agno, just fly
Angels are meant to fly

B2. If for a moment I could hold you once again
Ricordo ancora le tue parole
If for a moment I could see your eyes again
Solo altri cinque minuti
I'll make it last till now[3]

(I still remember your words, just five more minutes, just five more minutes)

Goodbye Agno, goodbye

Song 11

The Palace Song –
(Francisca and Chola)

I Don't Understand

(Agno, where are you?)[2]

Are you with us or you're gone?
We looked for you everywhere
If you left can I join you?
Without you I'm in despair

Giorgio could not take your place
I know you thought he's your friend
But he's rotten like the rest
He's a traitor with glass face

How could they kill love, oh, how cruel?
They killed Mary Jo, did they kill you?
The worst sin is lack of gratitude
How could they shun love that's so true?

(Ohhhhh)[5] I don't understand
(Nooooo)[5] I don't understand

Song 12

Not from Here
(Theme Song … Chola, Francisca, and Agnolo)

V. Angels are meant to fly
Immortals never die

V. You're gentle you're a storm
Angel in human form

C. Yes, you my dear you're not from here
Your soul belongs in a different sphere

V. Just when they thought you're through
And broke your wings in two

V. You rose to prove them wrong
And sing a sweet new song

C. 'Cause you my dear you're not from here
Although you're here you're not from here

V. Come bring life to the stone
With gentle touch atone

V. Your love conquered their hate
Your innocence frustrates

C. 'Cause you my dear you're not from here
Although you're here you're not from here

B. (Agnolo)

I pay the price for mercy
For sins I never knew
The ones I'm known to practice
Are gross yet just a few

And when my world was cold and dark
So dark my shadow was not found
There in its place it left a space
Colder than all the ground

Why can't I be like everyone
Why do I hurt for all who fall?
Why do I care? When will I learn?
The winner takes it all

Non sei di qui ***(You are not from here)***
Sei del sole ***(You are of the sun)***

Song 13

I love you
(Chola to Agnolo)

I love to dance I love to sing
I love church bells that always ring
Most of all I love your voice
Lord knows you're my ordained choice

Bring me flowers sing me a song
That's just how I can get along
Some seek wealth and some seek fame
We have burning love to claim

Hold on to me love and pray
And help me through my day
I need no fancy play
It's you I need it's you

I do I care for you
My love is bright and true
And everything I do
Is just for you just you

Ti amo, ti amo, ti amo, ti amo, oh, I do *(I love you)*
Ti voglio, ti voglio, ti voglio, so bad my love is true *(I want you)*

Believe in me that makes me strong
When you're with me none goes wrong
You and I can make life spin
As we go out and as we come in

What you give we're thankful for
Lord we can never ask for more
Let them seek their wealth and fame
We have happiness through your name

Song 14

E' Finito (*It is Finished)*
(The crowd and Agnolo)

The crowd –
What he did was evil
He must never get away

Heavy penance he must pay
For his sins without delay

(He must pay)[4]

Agnolo –
No[5]

Open your eyes
Feely receive
E' Finito

Open your eyes
No penance due
E' Finito

Let him he who's without sin
Cast the very first stone

For you cannot purge your sins
Not with penance on your own

Open your eyes
Feely receive
E' Finito

Come receive the morning light
Come and touch the stars at night

Leave it all behind
Lift your heart and mind

Come receive for free
Grace for you and me

Jesus paid it all
He redeemed your soul

Open your eyes
Love resides here
E' Finito

Penance means what Jesus did, lacks and incomplete
That's a lie and great deceit
E' Finito

By His stripes we were all healed once and forever
Our atonement is complete
E' Finito, e' Finito

Not a thing more you should do
Nothing is required of you

Come receive for free
Just believe with glee

Come and greet tomorrow
Shed your guilt and sorrow

Come receive free grace
Jesus took your place

Love and grace are feet away
Reach, receive for free today

Song 15

I Hate Time
(Agnolo and Cardinal Carafa)

Agnolo –
Why do good times always end in goodbye?
Why does love vanish and why flowers die?
Why does time steal our joy from us why?
I hate time!

Cardinal Carafa –
Agno, this is where sweet Mary Jo
Left her body time ago
Like a flower in mid-Spring
She was plucked so demons sing

Agnolo –
Why do good times always end in goodbye?
Why does love vanish and why flowers die?
Why does time steal our joy from us why?
I hate time!

Cardinal Carafa –
Agno, it's not those who go that ache
But it's those they leave behind
Time will separate us all
Time will steal joy from mankind

Agnolo –
Why do good times always end in goodbye?
Why does love vanish and why flowers die?
Why does time steal our joy from us why?
I hate time! I hate time!

Cardinal Carafa –
Agno, everybody makes mistakes
Everyone lives with regrets

Some mistakes we can't recall
But a few we can't forget

Agno, time will dim the brightest stars
Time will bring rust and decay
And between the bright light and dark shadow
Often stands a broken man who'd seen some evil days

Agnolo –
Why do good times always end in goodbye?
Why does love vanish and why flowers die?
Why does time steal our joy from us why?
I hate time, I hate, I hate time
I hate time, time is evil, it's so evil, evil, evil, I hate time!

C'e' un posto dove non c'e' tempo *(There is a place where there is no time)*

Song 16

Let Me Be
(Agnolo, friendly crowd, unfriendly crowd, family)

The Crowd –

Sei strano (You're strange)
Tu chi seo (Who are you?)

So tell us who you are
And why your love is true
Yes, tell us who you are
Show us the real you

And why you love so much
Even when love's undue

Just tell us where you're from
And why your eyes are blue

Are you demon possessed
Or angel passing through

Yes, tell us where you're from
Just what's inside of you

Is your love just a front?
For evil within you?

Just tell us who you are
Show us the real you

Just teach us what you know
Who shines who speaks for you?

What makes you what you are?

Why do the things you do?

And tell us why you care
What spirit dwells in you

Who is the real you
Show us the real you

Oh surely you would know
You just don't want to say

'Cause if that's really true
Then who would know who's you

Agnolo –
I am who I am
And I don't know me

I am what I am
And I don't know me

I am what I am
So please let me be

I am what I am
And I can't change me

I am what I am

And all I know to do is love and love and love
And give and give and do the will of God above

And though my tongue is tied and though my speech ain't clear
The stone I bring to life will speak for all to hear

And though I am here
It's perfectly clear
That I'm not from here

$(I\ am\ what\ I\ am)^2$
So please let me be

Song 17

Creation –
(Agnolo)

Essere *(Be)*

Song 18

I Can't Get Enough of You
(Agnolo to Chola)

This song of love I sing just for you
'cause Chola I love you
For long I've known you as we together grew
Today you showed me a side of you that's new
And now I know I can't get enough of you

Come gently whisper in my ears
And dry away my tears
Tell me you love me, tell me you'll be right here
Always and always, ever and ever for years
Whisper sweet nothings and sing them to me dear

All I do and all that I say
I do it all to brighten your day

You're a flower fruit of love
You're my star and gift from above

'Cause you know just what to do
I can't get enough of you

Darling you deserve the best of things
And baby you've got me (ha)
They have their silver and fight for all they see
They pay to be loved still have no guarantee
We have free deep love and I have you and you me

Song 19

The Florence of Glory
(The guests to the gala as they danced)

Dance and be merry and rejoice
Let all creation hear your voice

Dance for tomorrow
Is free from all sorrow
So dance here and now and rejoice and be merry and sing

Come let us play like we used to play, bring your toys and let us play all day and be happy and rejoice while we sing

Let flowers bloom, let angels sing
Come let us fly on mighty wings
Come let us fly and fill all the sky with hope and join our hands in true deep love and rejoice while we sing

This is your hour, and this is your day
Oh, and this is the story of Florence of glory
And this is the day that the Lord has made for you and this is your crown so rejoice and be merry and sing

Song 20

Stone Cold
(Michelangelo to Chola)

Stone cold, what will I gain back in return
I never learn, I never learn

Stone cold, yours is a hard, hard act to follow
I should have known gold can be hollow

Stone cold, Stone cold, I'm too old to play the waiting game
Stone cold, Stone cold, oh, what a name (I'm to blame)

Oh, I know you know ^{3} that isn't fair
Oh, you've got to know ^{3} how much I care

Stone cold, you're such a tease you're filled with sin
And I'm your fool, I've always been

Song 21

I Have Waited Long
(The palace family of statues to Agnolo)

V1. When you're away I'm cold and lonely
But when you're near I come alive
Your touch brings life to withered dry stone
while you bear pain with grace unknown

So please come stay and never leave me
Oh, visit me just once to stay
please stay within me through eternity
Would you forever dance with me

V2. For you have made me who I am
I am defined by who you are
Entirely on you I'm dependent
I'm needy you're my shining star

So please come stay and never leave me
Oh, visit me just once to stay
Please stay within me through enternity
Would you forever dance with me

Chorus –
I have waited long
Just to hear your song
Now I'll sing along, eternally
Distant lovers know
Soon warm love will flow
Everywhere they go, they have the key

Song 22

You're Always Here for Me
(Agnolo's song to his palace family)

Thank you for all that've done
Your song filled my heart
With sweet joy, real peace, and deep love for everyone

Dance dance and drink as you do
To love that is true
To my health, to today, for we're all just passing through

You're my love you'll always be
You're my life my sanity
And you're always here for me, here for me

You're my love you're made for me
You're my life my family
And you're always here for me, here for me

Only true love ever lasts
And Lord ours is true
We still have love to share, songs to sing, and good to do

Song 23

Truly yours

No one can ever ease my pain
And it seems I lose again
I don't know why
I even try
Hell in disguise

No I can't pretend or lie
It hurts so bad I want to die
My heart just tears
And no one cares
My cross not theirs

Apologies with such an ease it's over
A dreadful cause, you know it was a massacre

(How could you ever do that to me?)^2
Why would you ever do that to me?
I am yours, always your, truly yours

I just want to hurt no more
Like I have many times before
I must live alone
All by my own
And die unknown

Song 24

Go to Sleep My Angel Sleep
(Michelangelo and Chola)

Michelangelo –
You're a jewel and precious stone
And I want you for my own
Loving you has such a taste I never knew
So reside and be the queen
In a heart that's never seen
Anyone that was so worthy or like you

Chola –
I adore you, I adore you
Come and let me hug and hold you
Loving you is all I ever want to do

Michelangelo –
So close your eyes and dream big dreams of a life on easy street
Tomorrow I'll be sure that you have it at your feet

Oh, go to sleep, sleep, sleep my angel sleep
And dream of all, all, all that you can keep
Tomorrow I'll be sure, that you have it at your feet

Michelangelo –
Your wishes are my commands
And I'm all just heart and hands
All you ever lay an eye on can be yours
I will give you love and things
Many things and ruby rings
And my body that has always longed for yours

Chola –
Oh, I tremble with desire
Come and help put out the fire
Don't you own the right to love that kills and cures

Michelangelo –
So close your eyes and dream big dreams of a life on easy street
Tomorrow I'll be sure that you have it at your feet

Oh, go to sleep, sleep, sleep my angel sleep
And dream of all, all, all that you can keep
Tomorrow I'll be sure, that you have it at your feet

Whispering during the instrumental part

Chola: You're all I want … you are my dream

Michelangelo: You are my dream that I wanna keep … do you miss me when I'm gone?

Chola: More than you know, more than you know … you're my delight … fashion me like you do the stone … mold to fit your arms

Michelangelo: Oh, you … oh … I will … I will …

Chola at the very end: Thank you Michlo … thank you …. (Yawn)

Trovo conforto qui con te 8 ***(I find comfort here with you)***
E delizioso qui 7 ***(It is delightful here)***

Song 25

She'll realize
(Michelangelo alone … to Chola)

She'll realize
Once it's too late
Right when regret becomes a useless plea
That what she had
Right in her hand
Was truly love but she just couldn't see
She'll realize [3] and cry and cry for me

She may break another heart
Then she'll break another heart [3]

It may tear her heart apart
So, she'll break her heart [3]

When she'll realize
That what she had
Was truly love but she just couldn't see
And that it's too late
To change her fate
'Cause she no longer has the sacred key
She'll realize [3] she really needed me

Song 26

Change me
(Chola to Agnolo)

Change me, and never ask me where I've been
I'm just a lonely girl who's filled with sin
And a hungry love and needs within
Please, take me in

Change me, as does the sun to every night
And bring me closer, closer to your light
My needs are great and time is right
Please, help me win

Chorus – I'm ready for change, I'm ready for you
I'm ready to spend my life with you
I'm looking forward to much more
More, more, more

Change me, come be my king I'll be your queen
You soon will know exactly what I mean
And a million things you'd never seen
Three days in one

Chorus – I'm ready for change, I'm ready for you
I'm ready to spend my life with you
I'm looking forward to much more
More, more, more with you love

Bridge. Now I know, only you, make the sun come shine through

So, cleanse me and change me and hold me forever I'm yours
Come love me three ways, oh come fill me with lava that cures

There's no one here, there's no one there, (just you)^3 my dear

Change me

Song 27

Drunk on love
(Chola to Agnolo)

This life might be so meaningless as far as they can see
But I can hold you babe and say you mean the world to me

Your love has made me drunk and it has made me wanting to
Just make the world a happy place and start right here with you

'cause every morning when I rise
And see love fills your eyes
I pause and thank the Lord and promise to be good to you 2

I'm drunk on love and want you to be mine
And love's stronger than the strongest wine
And I will promise to be good to you

((I'm yours forever yours and I'm drunk on loving you))

Forgive me darling for the things I once have said and done
I guess sometimes I just forget that you're my chosen one

((Please don't apologize, for my temple is your eyes))

Now I'm a different girl and not the same one that you knew
And I can show you good time and erase the sad past too

((I'm addicted to you love and I shouldn't worship you))

'cause every morning when I rise and see love fills your eyes
I realize I'm a part of you and I'll be good to you

((You're always good to me))

I'm drunk on love and want you to be mine
((I'm yours forever yours))

And love's stronger than the strongest wine
((I'm drunk on loving you))

And I will promise to be good to you
((You're always good to me))

Song 28

That Is Wrong …. Vero Peccato *(Real Sin)*
(Sister Teresa)

While in her sleep this fragile angel's silence broke
And in her womb the unborn baby loudly spoke

She said "I vowed to serve God and humanity
I left a lavish life for sake of charity"

"The man of cloth is guilty and is full of sin
He plucked a holy flower that was just blooming"

"The filthy rat betrayed his oath and pleased Satan
He didn't fear God and he bowed to lusts within"

And Just because he's strong
He knew just how to make her weak
And that is wrong, real wrong

He said "Before an arrow soars it's painfully restrained
And if released it will inflect pain un-ordained"

"There at my feet lay joy but all was forbidden
My hunger roared while luscious apples were ripening"

"Water filled oceans that's not fit for my drinking
And man can fall but till he's broken keeps standing"

"A monk is made of holy blood and filthy seeds
He is part angel two-part demon with dark needs"

And just because he's strong
He knew she couldn't speak
So he used her holy place
As urn for pus to reek
And that is wrong
Real wrong, wrong, wrong, wrong

She cried “Please don’t violate what I had pledged to God above
She cried please please shelter me please don’t defile my holy love”
“She cried please have mercy on my broken wings and weary eyes
She cried Father please protect me from this Satan in disguise”

She cried and cried and cried
And begged him on her knees
But just because he’s strong
He wouldn’t hear her pleas

And that is wrong
Real wrong
Vero peccato

Song 29

Finally Home
(Theme Song – Finale. Chola, palace family, Francisca, Chola, Agnolo)

V. Your home is in the sky
Where angels dwell and fly

V. Immortals never die
Angels just simply fly

C. But now you found your way back home
I have no reason to go home

V. May God forgive us all
For we refused your call

V. Within us you will live
To teach us how to give

C. But now you found your way back home
I lost my reason to go home

V. Is that you flying by?
Are you waving goodbye?

V. How could it end like this
Without even a kiss

C. But now you're finally back home
I have no reason to go home

B1. I paid the price for mercy
For sins I never knew
The ones I used to practice
Were gross yet just a few

And when my world was cold and dark
So dark my shadow was not found
And in its place it left a space
Colder than all the ground

And by the victor who survives
The story's told in lost archives
And truth will seldom find its way
While those who lose for mercy pay

V. No one can hurt you now
No one can reach you now

V. You're finally set free
While I'm here chained debris

C. You finally found your way home
I am the one without a home

Yes, now you're finally back home
I am with child and without home

B2. I spoke the words of love for all
I cried in pain to see them fall
But their deceitful conscious, Oh
Could build hate wall within hate wall

Agnolo –

Don't be afraid, you're not alone
For I'll with you night and day
Till I return to take you home
Where in my arms you'll always stay

Sono sono *(I am I am)*
E' finito *(It is finished)*

Sono sono *(I am I am)*
Non sei solo *(You are not alone)*