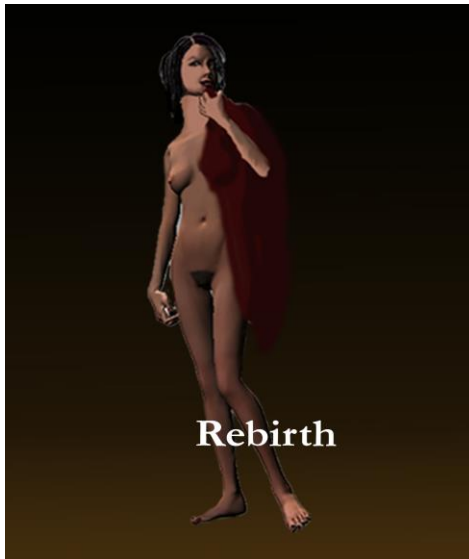


Rebirth

Summer, 1475 CE. Orabella, a once homeless young woman now apprenticed to the Studio of Verrocchio, paints a fresco for the home of Lorenzo de Medici in the hills above the Tuscan city of Florence. She has the help of Leonardo da Vinci in the design of the work.



She is an orphan, a girl of the streets living in a poor section of Florence, near the industrial docks along the Arno. She does not know her parents, nor can she say with any certainty the last time she felt close to a grown man or woman, other than the young woman, a prostitute catering to the upper classes, who took her in when she was barely more than a toddler.

Their paths had crossed early one morning on Florence's back streets, as the taverns closed and before the shop stalls opened. The orphan had suddenly appeared beside the prostitute and taken her hand. The orphan looked up into the eyes of the prostitute who was, at first, not sure what to do with this small child. As she walked to her small but clean room after a night of entertaining the guests of her most important client, she was not at all sure she had the energy to deal with this.

After succumbing to the charm and pathos and need for decent clothes and a meal in the orphan's eyes that morning, the prostitute — she was called Magdalene — cared for the girl, teaching her the alphabet and basic reading and writing. She often took her around to see the sights, including the statues along the major *piazzi* and the churches in the wealthier neighborhoods, though, thinking it wasn't her place, she never gave the child a name.

Unfortunately, after a few years, the young prostitute grew ill and died in the orphan's young and caring arms.

After being turned out of the comfort of the prostitute's chambers, the orphan did not know where to turn. She had to develop intelligence, wit, and the physical and mental strength needed to survive. For a long time, her closest friends were other children of the streets. Most had the skills and toughness of the orphan, but none had her powerful desire to rise above their squalid lives. The child dreamed of rising, transformed, into the beautiful world Magdalene had exposed her to in her earliest years.

The girl does not have a clear memory of her former life until, one day, she and her young friends are walking along the streets toward one of the city's cleaner public markets. She is impressed by all of the fine clothes and refined speaking of the shoppers out on this sunny day. Though it has been a few years, a vision of Magdalene crosses in front of her eyes. She has to turn away from her mates, her eyes suddenly flooded with tears.

Once she composes herself, the group goes back to the important business of lifting valuables from the purses and pockets of the wealthy.

In their frequent forays into the more well-to-do parts of the city, the knowledge the girl has gained from walking tours with her now-deceased mentor become a guide to the most crowded areas, where the pickings will be particularly fruitful for her tiny band of pickpockets and petty thieves.

After a few harrowing escapes across rooftops and through back alleys, with tradesmen, servants, and armed guards in pursuit, her young friends grow to respect all that she knows that is important to their independence and well-being. She knows the wealthy neighborhoods well, and she knows how to avoid the scrutiny of the many private security guards in them, who are constantly on the lookout for ragamuffins. The girl's friends soon begin to call her "Orabella," which means beautiful gold.

Other than the many sweet endearments from Magdalene, Orabella is the first name the girl has ever had that she can call her own. The young street tough who first gave her the name gave it with an attitude of friendliness that she did not understand. She had shown him no special favor. The tough — his name was Carlo — was overweight, dressed poorly, had pimples and a vulgar mouth.

Even so, Orabella could not ignore the fact that Carlo seemed to have the respect of the others. He was the one who collected the day's stolen goods and redistributed them to those who, in his judgment, had the greatest need for whichever item had been taken. Any leftovers were held by Carlo to be distributed on another day in response to a different and more urgent need.

Nobody argued about this for at least as long as Orabella had been with them.

Carlo protected her whenever any of the others tried to physically push her around or talk dirty to her or call her ugly names. When Carlo stepped into a situation involving Orabella, the others always stepped away.

Florentine artist and studio master Andrea del Verrocchio is working with a group of his apprentices on a commissioned work for Lorenzo de Medici.

The work, a large fresco to be installed on a great wall in one of the Medici estate houses in the hills north of Florence, is proving to be very troublesome, even at this early design stage.

As master of the workshop, Verrocchio, in the middle of his attempt to, once again, mediate the heated disagreements among his headstrong apprentices on how to proceed with the design work, is interrupted by a messenger from his client. The messenger, Adolfo Antonio, is observing the discussion from a corner of the workshop. He motions to the master to join him in a private conversation away from his apprentices.

"Greetings, my good friend," he says. "My master has become aware of the problems you are having with the design work on this project. He wishes to help in any way that he can."

"I believe our problems and disagreements are not out of the ordinary for a project of this importance," Verrocchio says, "but..." He pauses for a moment as he notices that the messenger has something specific in mind. "Please. I very much want to hear of any suggestions your master may wish to make to me, as well as any requests he may wish to make of me."

Adolfo responds. "My master has a young woman working as an assistant cook and maid in his household. In his mind, her real talents are greatly wasted chopping tomatoes, mashing eggplant, and scrubbing floors."

"I can't imagine your master even taking note of a household maid, unless she is a truly extraordinary person. What are these talents that can draw the attention of such a powerful and honorable man?" Verrocchio asks.

"Once she was cleaned up and given some clothes and basic manners, it turned out she is a very pretty girl, and very intelligent. She came to us an orphaned waif found on the streets by a friend who thought our family could help foster her innate talent and character. Thus, within the security of my master's household, our friend believes the

orphan can become a more useful citizen."

"Why does your master think she will be any help to me?" Verrocchio asks. "If she is as pretty as you say, she will, for that reason alone, cause far more problems in the workshop than she will be able to resolve no matter how talented she is. I have never allowed women into these studios no matter what their skills are. Among these headstrong male apprentices, who are often more interested in each other than any woman can hope for, she will either distract them from their work or she will trigger the kind of male competition that can result in violence and the destruction of my property. Has your master given thought to any of these things?"

Verrocchio, realizing that he is being rude, does not wait for Adolfo to answer.

"In any case, I cannot see how her presence can help resolve our artistic problems in the way of completing this fresco to your master's satisfaction. How long has she been working in the de Medici household?"

"She has been with us for over a year," Adolfo replies. "She learns very quickly. She progressed rapidly to making desserts, even designing the decorations on cakes. Her creations in the kitchen have been prized by my master. He has said he cannot get enough of them.

"Even more importantly, she progressed into a supervisory position among the cooking staff without losing their support for her creative work. She had as much success with the household staff. She was even able to dissolve some tensions that built up over a period of months to everyone's satisfaction."

Verrocchio folds his arms. "You have given me reasons to further consider your master's suggestion, but I have one last question. Why would your master be willing to part with someone who is such an obvious asset to his household? Is there some problem you are not telling me about?"

"Whatever you may think of the motivations or intent of my master, you should know by now that he understands the careful development of natural talent, particularly if those talents emerge in members of his household. He recognizes the potential of this young girl, and he also recognizes that, with her abundant imagination, supervising a household will not hold her attention for long. He believes that the next step in her development is in your workshop. However, please understand that this is not a formal request. My master is well aware of the risks and difficulty of working with a headstrong young woman.

"He merely asks that you consider the idea. If you truly believe that her presence will so disturb your work on his commission that the work will suffer significant delays, he will not further pursue the idea with you."

"You and your master have given me much of interest to think about," Verrocchio says. "You have presented a strong case for my acceptance of this young girl even if she might make my life more difficult than it already is. By the way, what is her name?"

Adolfo replies. "She says a kindly old couple who took her in many years ago, now passed away, gave her the name Orabella; she does not know her surname. She has told me that she prefers to wait until she finds a surname she likes before taking one to keep for the rest of her life."

"A very wise choice. Does your master have a period of time in mind before I give my decision?"

"None that he has told me of but based on my overhearing your discussions with your apprentices, I should think it would be in your best interest to make a decision within the next two weeks."

Verrocchio nods. "I want to confer with my artistic associate Leonardo. If I decide to take this Orabella into my workshop, I will want to make sure that Leonardo is willing to share any risks of her presence, and will be at my side when I face the inevitable difficulties among my apprentices—even better, that he will be willing to give Orabella access to some of his own work to

help in the development of whatever talent she might have to share with the painters' guild. As she grows in her own work, she will be able to give us a better idea of her real value to the workshop. Can you return in a week?"

"Yes," Adolfo replies. "My compliments on the wisdom of your decision in this matter, Andrea. Until then." He touches the brim of his hat, turns, and leaves the studio.

Verrocchio turns at the sound of a piece of plaster in one of the test frescos breaking and crashing to the stone floor. One of the apprentices has just expressed his criticism of a design offered by a rival by throwing a hammer at it. Verrocchio does not speculate on whether the hammer-thrower might have overheard his conversation with Adolfo. He merely wishes for a glass of wine and the end of his working day to soothe his growing headache.

Verrocchio gives a lot of thought to what he will say to Leonardo about Lorenzo's suggestion. To survive in his workshop, the girl will have to be extraordinarily capable as well as very assured of whatever skills she feels she possesses. When the inevitable artistic conflicts arise between her and the other apprentices, she will have to be fast on her feet, and she will have to win any contest, even the purely physical ones.

Verrocchio rubs the side of his rather large nose with his index finger as he tries to think how such a physical contest between a male and a female contender might end up. He has almost succeeded in talking himself out of the whole idea of bringing the girl into his workshop. It is too risky, and Leonardo will never agree to take on any part of the risk anyway.

Verrocchio, a very successful painter, sculptor, and goldsmith, is the master of the most successful art studio and workshop in Florence. He is a successful businessman and an astute judge of character. He attracts the best and most talented painters, sculptors, and craftsmen from all of northern Italy to his apprenticeship program. Leonardo, son of Piero, born twenty-two miles west of Florence in Vinci, is one of these. Verrocchio recognized his genius early, when he came to the workshop in 1466 as no more than a lad of fourteen.

Since the worst effects of the Black Death abated, it has become obvious to some that the old ways of regulating the social and physical passions of the community under the guidance of the Catholic church have collapsed down to their foundations. From the wreckage of the old ways of institutional expression new ways of individual self-expression have begun to flourish and, in individuals like Leonardo and the very young but very promising Michelangelo, to bloom with great beauty.

Verrocchio believes that Leonardo will, among his achievements in many fields, change visual art forever.

In 1472, the two men began their working relationship by collaborating on a painting for the Church of St. Salvi in Santa Verdiana. The painting, *The Baptism of Christ*, began as Verrocchio's commission, and he was to have been the primary painter, but Verrocchio was happier sculpting than painting. Among the other apprentices who would work on the painting, the very young Leonardo, still barely more than a teenager, was to have helped with the background and one of two figures in the middle ground—an angel holding the cloak of Jesus.

On seeing Leonardo's work on the painting, though, Verrocchio was pleased to discover that he had absorbed all of the stylistic brilliance of Giotto, the visual artist of a hundred years before. Leonardo was now extending Giotto's hard-won knowledge into new directions in Verrocchio's very own workshop. From this early example of Leonardo's genius forward, Verrocchio has been delighted beyond all measure.

Leonardo is a relatively tall man and was very imposing, headstrong, and rude to subordinates even when he was young. Many of the apprentices were angered by his abrupt manner of pointing out

defects in their work. Fortunately for Verrocchio, they were able to mind their manners because they also recognized the precious gift of Leonardo's close scrutiny. A few carried grudges and sought revenge in ways that Verrocchio often found to be very disruptive and difficult to resolve if allowed to progress too far.

There is no question that Leonardo has many great insights and ideas. Following the introduction of Gutenberg's printing press in Germany several years before, Leonardo's use of now much cheaper and more commonly available paper for sketching in place of parchment is proving to be a godsend. These facts about the uses of paper are shown to be true, repeatedly, not only for Leonardo, but for the entire arts community in Florence.

After his meeting with Adolfo, Verrocchio is able to speak briefly with Leonardo a few times over the next several weeks. The two men are associated on several projects, and so there is a constant need for talk. When Verrocchio first mentions the young girl and the interests of their patron, Leonardo is dismissive, as though he does not want to be bothered.

Some days later, Leonardo himself brings up the subject. "The young woman you mentioned, Andrea. Have you decided to have her come here so that we can have a look at her?"

"I am surprised to hear this from you," Verrocchio says. "I thought you would reject the idea. The girl, Orabella, has impressed our patron with her skills both in the arts and in supervising the work of his household staff, but I have not met her, and I have not seen any of her sketches. Nor have I heard further from Lorenzo's messenger. I was prepared to send a message that we could not use her, but I delayed, waiting to hear your thoughts before I said anything at all. Shall I ask Adolfo to send her over with some of her artwork?"

"I doubt if fine clothes, artwork, and an introduction by a personal representative of the Medici will be a good introduction to our group here; or ours to her," Leonardo says. "Better, I think, if we introduce her as the daughter of an anonymous friend's family who would like to give her a chance to earn some money, and, maybe, learn something about drawing, painting, and sculpting. Introduce her as a kitchen helper and tell her she has a month to show her worth as a member of the staff."

Verrocchio realizes the political tact of this idea and flushes with gratitude. "I am amazed and pleased, Leonardo, that you have given this so much careful thought. I applaud your reasoning. In the spirit of getting her directly involved with our work here, I will propose to Adolfo that we send someone to escort her here by way of the marketplace so they can pick up some food for the household. That way we can get some idea of how she will work with our cooking staff, as well as how she will negotiate with some of the marketplace thieves who supply us."

"An important test. Who would you propose as an escort?" Leonardo asks.

"Vincenzo, the pigment grinder, has more experience in the market than anybody here. He is probably the best judge of the talents of a female buyer. He will probably want to pick up some pigments as well. A purchase of a small quantity of lapis lazuli will tell us something about her innate sense of the value of precious minerals.

"That will give us a lot of information to make our judgments on her suitability for the workshop, and for the apprentices' probable hostility toward her."

"Would you consider Amadeo as escort?" Leonardo asks.

"The plaster maker? What value do you see in that?"

"Listen, my very good friend. Since starting my own workshop, I have discovered that many of the commissions I receive include requests for a variety of small frescos. These are used as gifts, and for various household decorations.

"I know very little about frescos and have little interest in making them, but if your girl doesn't work well in your workshop, she may work very well in mine. She won't have to put up with the contending factions among the apprentices. If she is as fast a learner as you have suggested, then, within a month, she should have enough knowledge of plaster making, paint mixing, and fresco

design to produce some of these minor artworks. In that role, she could be enormously valuable to me."

Verrocchio thinks a moment. "I will be more than happy to lay out this opportunity with Adolfo. I am sure he will be discrete and will carry it to Lorenzo de' Medici with enthusiasm."

"Good. By the way, have Amadeo ask the girl—what did you say her name is?"

"Orabella."

"Ask her to pick up some sweets for the apprentices on her way over here. Maybe that will make them more receptive to her charms."

"Consider it done," Verrocchio says.

Amadeo the plaster maker is a little surprised to be assigned to escort a new kitchen helper to the workshop, even though she is to be escorted from the Medici household, perhaps the most prestigious address in all of Florence. He may have been insulted that he has to escort her through the food markets on a shopping trip, except that he is intensely loyal to Verrocchio and will do whatever he asks with all the talent and ability that he can bring to it.

"I'm told this is a very pretty and intelligent young woman," Andrea Verrocchio says to his long-time apprentice, "though still a bit coarse in her manners. Even so, when you present yourself at the door of the Medici, you will have a chance to actually see inside the home of the most powerful family in all of northern Italy, as well as the most important and generous of all the patrons who support our work."

"Yes, Andrea, but I am a little overwhelmed by it. You know that I am only one of the helpers here. I really have no training and no experience with this kind of work. Wouldn't Leonardo be a much better agent for you? I know he is a favorite of the Medici family."

"First of all, Amadeo, you are not just 'one of the helpers here.' I place great value in your experience and your work with plasters and paints. Without your work too many of our apprentices would be sitting around wondering what to do with all their pretty sketches and designs because they would have no materials with which to express themselves. In the situation with this young woman, you have more talent and interest to bring to this particular task than does Leonardo himself."

Amadeo waits, wide-eyed, so Verrocchio goes on. "As you know, Leonardo has learned a lot about fresco during the years he has been with us, but he has little interest in working with it. To be truthful, neither do I, but I do recognize that just about everyone in Florence with a piece of blank wall wants to own one of our plaster fresco panels. They will want the panel framed in wood with brightly colored images of the Virgin holding the baby Jesus, surrounded by cherubim and seraphim.

"A family wants a fresco that will last forever, that will hang on that wall in their home, covering up that blank space. I also know that we can create those panels, in quantity, in our workshop, under your supervision, but you will need more help.

"Now that Leonardo is trying to build business for his own studio, he and I agree that this girl may be able to learn enough fast enough to help us all produce more of these small frescos before our competitors recognize the value available in this new market."

"But if you and Leonardo are prepared to invest so much in a girl that you have never met, wouldn't you both want to escort the girl yourselves so as to get to know her better?" Amadeo asks. "She will have to be tested in some way, and quickly I assume, before her value can be judged at all."

Verrocchio pauses before answering. "You would think so, wouldn't you? The problem is that we want this girl to start out as a kitchen helper and maid, and we will have to avoid giving her any impression of special favor. If the girl is to be of any value to either of us, she will have to rise on her

own. I am assured by Lorenzo through his messenger Adolfo that she is fully capable of that if she has proper, and very subtle, encouragement and guidance.

"I would expect her to make herself available to you within a couple of months of starting her work here. When she does, you must be ready to assign your most disagreeable, dirty, and dangerous tasks. And you must be prepared to guide her through them so that she learns useful things without putting the health and safety of all of us, and the workshop itself, in great danger."

Verrocchio claps his hands together. "So, my friend, perhaps the most important part of your escort duty will be to impart the most interesting aspects of purchasing materials like limestone for plaster and other minerals for grinding into appropriate colors for fresco. If she seems worthy, let her work closely with you in the purchase of a quantity of lapis lazuli. I have a commission coming up that will require more than we presently have on hand.

"Perhaps you could let her actually select and purchase some mineral of lesser value. Your report of that, particularly on the quality, amount, and price of the actual purchase, will give us a greater understanding of Orabella's real talents than anything Leonardo or I can glean by talking with her."

"Didn't you also want me to take her to do some shopping for food supplies for the house?" Amadeo asks.

"Yes," Verrocchio responds. "Why don't you tell her that you have to buy some meat and vegetables for the evening meal, and that it will have to feed all of the household staff and apprentices — perhaps twenty-five people in all. Tell her that she is to decide what to purchase, and how to get the best price. If she does it to your satisfaction, give her the money to make the purchases. I will discuss all our plans with our cook, Giulietta. The cook will also be contributing her share of difficulties that will further test the mettle of this young girl. After all, she will have to survive the kitchen, before she will even get a glimpse of the workshop.

"I am relying on your judgment in all of this, Amadeo. You are a good man, and I believe you will do the right thing. Your work will make all of us proud. I now have other business to attend to. As soon as I have made arrangements with Adolfo for the date and time for you to appear at their door, I will alert you. Goodnight for now."

Several days later, Amadeo arrives at the Medici house. He straightens his shoulders, approaches the great wooden doors, and raps sharply. As the doors open, he feels his knees grow weak. He worries, briefly, that he might faint. The Medici are powerful beyond his wildest reckoning, and he wants so desperately to make a good impression. It is with a sigh of relief, then, that he greets the familiar figure of Adolfo, Lorenzo's personal messenger.

"Welcome, Amadeo," Adolfo says and waves him inside. "Wait here while I see if Orabella is ready. She does want to make a good impression on you."

Amadeo is a shy man. The idea that a pretty young girl would want to impress him is a little unsettling. The idea that she would accompany him through the very crowded and very public Florentine marketplace does not give him peace. Nevertheless, when Adolfo brings the girl in from another room, Amadeo stands taller and again straightens his shoulders the better to carry out his duties.

"Amadeo, may I present Orabella, a respected member of our household staff. We have very much enjoyed our time with her, and almost regret that she is leaving us. We take heart that the Verrocchio household is a great opportunity for her, and we wish her well."

Orabella is dressed in neat but plain clothes, suitable for a housemaid about to go outside on household business, but she carries herself with authority. She approaches Amadeo boldly with her hand outstretched, as if to shake hands. Amadeo has never heard of such a thing from a young

woman. His words of greeting almost stumble incoherently out of his mouth, but her bold approach so overwhelms him that he puts out his hand to hers and shakes it.

"I am pleased to make your acquaintance, Orabella," he says. "Are you ready to apply your skills to the House of Verrocchio?" Amadeo is pleased with the recovery of his dignity. Perhaps she didn't notice his initial discomfiture.

"And I am pleased to make yours," she says. "I am ready. May I call you Amadeo?"

"Yes. Of course."

Adolfo speaks up, obviously pleased by this initial encounter. "We will send a cart over to the workshop with Orabella's belongings later today. Is there anything more I can do for either of you?"

Amadeo bows, as does Orabella. Both offer a parting expression of warmth and gratitude, as virtually any Florentine would offer in response to an expression of favor by a senior member of the House of Medici.

Just as he is about to turn away, Amadeo thinks he sees the wife of Lorenzo, Clarice Orsini, looking on from a high balcony. Her interest is an obvious good omen.

He decides to start his tour with Orabella in one of the dockside shops along the Arno, where larger rocks from the distant quarries are broken down into smaller rocks suitable for specialized purposes, usually in the arts or other decorations. He can break these smaller rocks down further, crushing them for use as pigments when mixed in some kind of medium. These, he explains to Orabella, are also used in colored paints. Pigments made from minerals are very important in frescoes because minerals, unlike any plant or other biological material, will not degrade the bond between the dried plaster and the paint color. The degradation resulting from the use of plant and animal materials in paint will ruin a fresco over time.

Later that day, Amadeo and Orabella are in a butcher shop that sells pork and fowl, perusing the wares for that night's dinner. The shop is in the upper story of a building set into the Ponte Vecchio. Its windows look northeast along the river. Verrocchio is a prized client of his butchery, and so the shop's owner and principal butcher, Anselmo, greets Amadeo warmly.

"Greetings to you, Anselmo." Amadeo nods in return. "This is Orabella. She will be working with the kitchen staff in the Verrocchio household. I'm sure you will see more of her over the next several weeks. Please know that she will represent Signor Andrea as well as I do."

"I am very happy to meet you, Orabella." The butcher chooses this moment to wax poetic. "Bella, Bella Orabella. Amadeo, how do you rate the pleasure of the company of such a beautiful woman?"

Before Amadeo can answer, Orabella speaks on her own behalf. "I'm very happy to meet you, Anselmo. I can only hope that your meats are of the highest quality, as are your kind words, while preserving the most modest yet reasonable of prices."

Anselmo is dumbstruck by her words. In his world, no woman, and certainly no girl like this one, no matter how pretty, would talk this way on first meeting a gentleman shop owner. He looks in Amadeo's direction and winks. "Your young friend has a tongue, Anselmo. Should I always expect this kind of remark when she buys meat?"

Orabella immediately bows her head. "I am very sorry, sir, but I am new to this neighborhood. In my former neighborhood, I had to take a strident attitude when dealing with new shopkeepers, in order to establish the respect necessary to do my master's business. I can see that you are a different kind of person, a gentleman I can deal with." She turns to her escort. "I apologize to you as well, Amadeo. I did not mean to cause problems with one of the household's primary and most respected suppliers."

Amadeo cannot help smiling, though he does so discreetly, behind a hand, to avoid letting Anselmo see his enjoyment. "I'm sure we will all survive this encounter, Orabella. Let us find out if Anselmo can forgive your impertinence when you place an order for eight *libbre* of pork to be delivered this afternoon."

"Of course, Amadeo," the butcher says. "I will instruct my staff to wrap one of my best cuts of pork for delivery this afternoon, and I will instruct them to select and pluck only the plumpest of birds. Be assured that there are no hard feelings between myself and your young woman. Only a fool would feel anything but joy at the opportunity to work with such a pretty and forthright customer."

Orabella smiles broadly and shows all the charm she is capable of. In her imagination she once again offers thanks to those in the Medici household who instructed her in manners, dress, and presentation. "May I examine the meat before you begin cutting? I would like to see how you go about your business."

Anselmo rolls his eyes toward the ceiling, then to Amadeo, then back to Orabella, before giving in. "Of course, you may. Please come with me."

Finally, their business completed, Amadeo and Orabella bid Anselmo a warm goodbye. They go to their next stop on the docks along the Arno west of the Ponte Vecchio. Amadeo needs to order quantities of various rocks for the colored pigments used in the studio's frescos.

Orabella's shopping trip with Amadeo is the most interesting thing to happen on that wonderful day of new experiences. She is out from under the benign but firm grip of the Medici household for the first time in many weeks. She almost feels as free as she was with her ragamuffin friends.

Amadeo believes that the most important part of his job escorting Orabella, in the eyes of Verrocchio, is the knowledge he is able to impart to her in his negotiations with the masons and rock smiths. They are the ones who cut and price the relatively small quantities of rock he needs for pigments. His job, and thus, Orabella's job, is to assure that the work of these rough men working with these rough materials meets all of the workshop's requirements.

All rock smiths are big men who are used to dealing with other big men in very physical ways. By the look on Amadeo's face when he looks at Orabella and winks it becomes clear to the girl that she will do just fine in her dealings with them. She smiles back at him. It is clear to her that the butcher shop owner, Anselmo, was a pushover compared with these tough men.

One of them approaches the pair. He is bold, his eyes traveling up and down Orabella's body. Though her long skirt hides her feet and ankles, her face and upper body and waist under her coat display her body in ways that can attract the scrutiny of certain men. Though she allows herself to blush a little, she does not turn away from the man's lingering gaze. Finally, he says to Amadeo: "Yeah?"

Amadeo does not appear to recognize the man, though he has done business with this rock yard several times over the years. They always have the stock he needs, and the price is always acceptable. "I am with the House of Verrocchio," he tells the new vendor. "This is my apprentice, Orabella. We need to purchase several varieties of rock to crush up for colored pigments."

The smith looks toward the ground and scratches his cheek. When he looks up, he seems confused. "What kind of rock do you need?"

"We can start with sixty *libbre* of limestone, then I need to see your stocks of ochers, siennas, umbers, terre verte, and any compounds of iron, or of manganese and iron that you have available. I need some greens, so if you have malachite, we will want to see that."

The smith says, "My name is Alfredo. Come this way. It may be muddy. The girl can wait here if she wants."

"She is my apprentice. She will come with us," Amadeo says, though Alfredo is already walking away.

"I'm pleased to meet you, Alfredo," Orabella says to his back. "I hope we will soon be doing business with you."

Alfredo looks back over his shoulder but says nothing.

The raw limestone is rough, but of sufficient quality to satisfy their purposes. Amadeo and Orabella pick through the other minerals and compare them for purity and quality. Once they have gathered what they need they ask that their purchases be delivered to the House of Verrocchio sometime within the coming week.

Alfredo quotes a price for the entire order including delivery. Amadeo and Orabella confer for a moment, and then Orabella offers fifteen percent less than Alfredo's quote. "I'll pay you a quarter of the total now, and the remainder on delivery," she says.

Alfredo's face grows red. He bends toward Orabella and speaks through clenched teeth: "I have offered you a good price. Do you think I am trying to cheat you?"

"No, Alfredo. Not at all. It is just that the rock samples you have shown us are of a lesser quality than I am used to. If you have samples of better quality, I will be happy to look at them, and will be happy to reconsider my offered price — if I believe they actually are of better quality, that is."

Alfredo looks toward Amadeo, but Amadeo has gone some distance away to look at different kinds of rock. "Wait here," Alfredo growls. He marches toward a small shed that might have been the rock yard owner's office. Shortly, he returns with another fellow who is not as big as Alfredo, but who does have a more commanding presence. "This is Matteo."

He owns the yard and will be happy to discuss better quality samples and prices with you."

"It is my pleasure to meet you, Orabella, I think that is your name, yes?" Matteo asks.

"It is my pleasure as well, Matteo. Do you have some better samples I can look at?" Orabella asks.

"Yes, I do, but you will need to come into my office to see them."

Orabella hesitates at the invitation. She learned long ago that men who invite girls into private spaces sometimes mean to cause them harm. Her hesitation lasts only for a moment. Amadeo is some distance away, but Matteo does not appear to have any other motives toward her than selling some of his products. She follows as Matteo walks toward his office a short distance away. Once there he goes into a back room and brings out a tray of small samples of more carefully selected stones for her inspection.

Satisfied with their quality compared to the samples shown her by Alfredo, Orabella has no problem arriving at a price for each, and a time for delivery. Matteo also expresses no concern with her proposal for an initial payment today and a final payment to complete the transaction on delivery. At the end of it, Orabella offers her hand to Matteo to seal the deal.

Amadeo has given some part of the purse for today's purchases to Orabella so she can complete the purchase of the minerals to be used for pigments. She makes the initial payment to Matteo, then goes looking for Amadeo.

One more purchase remains, that of the very precious lapis lazuli, only available as an import by camel caravan from the Hindu Kush mountains. Shipments of anything, whether stone, carpets, or rare spices, from Afghanistan take several months over deserts and mountains from the east to Florence. For studios like Verrocchio's lapis is very important in certain works by very desirable and very influential patrons. Lapis lazuli is ground into ultramarine pigment to be used in painting the ceremonial robes of kings, emperors, and the Virgin Mary.

Matteo does not have the security necessary to protect a stock of lapis. He refers Orabella to a jeweler near the Medici bank who might be able to provide her with the precious material.

Amadeo has been walking among some of the piles of materials while Orabella conducts the

business of the Verrocchio household. When she catches up to him, he has paused to feed some bread to a raven perched nearby. The raven puts a foot on the piece of bread and tears off a more edible chunk with his beak, then crouches and looks up from his eating to note her arrival. She notes a white feather on the upper right wing and asks Amadeo how long the raven has been with him.

"For several minutes now. The raven is a very intelligent animal, and this one seems to want to talk after each morsel of bread."

She tells Amadeo of her purchases, and her experiences with Matteo. "How did you learn to judge the quality and price of these lesser stones?" he asks.

"In the House of Medici, there are always people available who can examine and evaluate materials brought to the household for sale. Because they believe me to be nothing more than a curious girl, who might also have the favor of Lorenzo, these people would not hesitate to answer my innocent questions about their testing and evaluation methods.

"One of the Medici people knowledgeable about the price of lapis today says that the twelfth part of a libbra will have a current value of about eight florins, but you must check the daily price on the florins to be used for the transaction before agreeing on a price. As I am sure you know, the real problem in determining value in any sample of raw precious minerals is the inclusions that take away value, and the purity of what remains after the inclusions have been removed."

"We have dealt with the same dealer in lapis and other precious minerals for many years," Amadeo tells her. "I am sure he is trustworthy, but if you are able to test a sample of lapis for purity in a way that our dealer will agree with, we might be able to get a better price. That would please our master."

"I have never done such a test," she says. "If the need is urgent, we will have to buy the lapis today at the dealer's price. Once we are back at the workshop, I will try to find out more about how to do the testing to see if we are getting good value."

"Our jeweler's shop is near the studio," Amadeo says. "It is on our way back."

As they head to the jeweler's, a young man steps out of a doorway, onto the street, and almost bumps into Orabella. They both excuse themselves then continue on their way, but Orabella stops suddenly. She turns to look after the young man. Even from the back his purposeful walk is very familiar to her, but not his new and well-fitting clothes. "Pardon me, sir," she hails the young man. "Do I know you?"

He turns and looks toward her. "No, miss. I am sure not, and that is my great misfortune." He looks toward Amadeo then touches his forefinger to the brim of his hat. He gives Orabella a warm wink and broad smile then turns to continue on his way.

Orabella is momentarily puzzled. "I'm sorry, Amadeo. I thought I knew that man, but he is obviously a stranger to me. It is getting dark. We should keep going."

But the man's familiarity nags at her as they walk. Suddenly it occurs to her that the young man is taller, his voice deeper, than the last time they saw each other. He has lost some flesh and outgrown his pimply face, but she knows that it is surely Carlo. With that realization a new question nags at her: Where did he get the money to dress so well?

"Are you all right, Orabella?" Amadeo asks, unaware of any of this. "You've suddenly grown pensive."

"I am fine, thank you. I think the long day of work and meeting so many new people have made me tired. I'll be better when I have something to eat."

As they walked back to the studio, Orabella's mind wandered back to the early morning when Amadeo had arrived to take her from the house of Medici. Lorenzo's wife, Catherine Orsini, had appeared on her balcony briefly to offer a friendly but discrete wave to Orabella. The previous day Orabella had left a thumb-sized almost iridescent blue/violet stone on Catherine's dressing table. She had composed a note to Catherine expressing her humble thanks and her hoped for acceptance of

this modest symbol of her gratitude for the fine treatment she had received from the Medici family from her very first day in the house.

Orabella had debated whether or not to tell Catherine where the stone had come from; Orabella's early mentor, Magdalena, had received the stone from one of her regular visitors from the City of London. Finally, she had decided not to tell anyone where she had acquired the beautiful stone.

The two shoppers complete their list and are able to return to the House of Verrocchio before nightfall. Amadeo introduces Orabella to the main cook, Giulietta, and to the master of the household staff, then takes his leave. Giulietta gives Orabella a clean but worn dress and apron and shows her to her small bed in a corner of the large pantry. Once changed into the work clothes, Orabella is to help with cleaning and cutting the vegetables, and with cooking the evening meal.

Giulietta is quick to find fault with her work, but Orabella is not surprised by her treatment as a common kitchen helper. Though Adolfo had not told her what she would be doing in her first days and weeks in Verrocchio's household, he did say that she should do every assigned task with the same selfless enthusiasm she had when she was first brought into the House of the Medici almost two years ago.

"If you can do that with good cheer," Adolfo had said earlier that day, as he walked with her to the entryway where Amadeo waited, "I have no doubt that you will rise quickly to more important work in the House of Verrocchio."

Minding Adolfo's advice, Orabella approaches her assigned kitchen tasks with great energy. Even on that first day, she can see some changes in the flow of kitchen work that she might suggest to the cook. She resolves to wait until the meal has been served, the diners satisfied, and the dishes cleaned to do so.

Or maybe, she thinks as a frustrated Giulietta clatters used plates into the water basin, I will wait for a few days before saying anything. She is sure the household staff will test her in some way, possibly many ways, and she will need to survive all their tests if she is to gain their respect. Until then, she decides it is better if she does not make any suggestions. She allows herself to become encouraged and hopeful about this testing period when she notices that Giulietta, in the midst of expressing a highly critical comment about the poor result of a particular task assigned to her, cannot quite suppress a smile.

Orabella works hard with the staff. They may have imposed tests on her, but the tests do not take away from her general cheerfulness. After several weeks both Giulietta and the staff supervisor look forward to working with her and seek her suggestions for how they might get more of their work done in less time. As good reports of her efforts are laid before Verrocchio, he begins to think it is time to bring his newest apprentice into the workshop.

A few days later he visits Amadeo's studio. "I am told that our new girl is working out very well with the household staff. Have you heard anything to the contrary?"

"No, master," Amadeo says. "She is everything Adolfo promised. If you want to bring her into the workshop, I have no objection. When the time is right for her reassignment, I think it will be best to have her start by cleaning up the fresco studio and organizing the paints and materials in there. That will bring her into contact with the apprentices. I will give her plenty of room to work out any problems with the apprentices in the way she thinks best. I am confident that she will do well.

"When it is time," he continues, "I will choose a well-qualified apprentice to work with me on the new fresco commission. Orabella will assist us. If she works as well with him as she has done with the household staff, she will have my highest recommendation and my full support."

"Do you feel confident that you can pass your skills in fresco along to Orabella sufficiently that she can finish a complex work on her own should I, for example, ask you to take another project that might not involve frescos?"

Amadeo paused, curious to know what his master might have in mind. "I have no doubt that I can pass my skills along to her," he said, finally.

"Good. Thank you, Amadeo. You are a good man. I will discuss all of this with Leonardo. I am sure he will agree to our plan." With a wave toward Amadeo, Verrocchio returns to his private studio elsewhere in the workshop.

A few weeks later Leonardo visits the studio. "I am very pleased to hear that the young girl is working out so well with your household staff," Leonardo says to Verrocchio. "If she is able to deal with Amadeo's randy apprentices, and actually starts working on a client fresco, I will want to see her work in progress. Make sure that Amadeo gives her significant work in the preparation and mixing of color pigments, and in the preparation of a cartoon that can be shown to the client. I will be interested in seeing the quality of her work in those most difficult of fresco problems, and I will criticize any work she does accordingly."

"I am very confident, Leonardo, that she will pass any test of her artistry that you may want to give her, though she has not claimed to be an artist," Verrocchio says. "We may find that she does have that kind of talent, or we may find that she does not. In either case the real question for our Orabella is whether she can use the resources of the studio to produce frescos that satisfy the customers who are willing to buy them from either of our studios."

With a wave of his hand Leonardo left the building.

A week later, Amadeo comes into the kitchen, begs Giulietta's forgiveness for taking Orabella away from her chores, and asks Orabella to walk with him to the fresco studio. The cook and her helpers all wish the girl well, hug her, and ask her to come back to the kitchen whenever she wishes to visit.

Before leaving with Amadeo, Orabella goes to her space in the pantry to change into the rough cloth pants, smock, and hair cover that he has given her to wear in the studio. For now, she will return to this space when her work is done for the day. Eventually, if things work out, she hopes she will have a more private space closer to the studio.

Amadeo is clearly embarrassed as he talks to Orabella about the general teasing and harassment he expects she will suffer from one or more of his five apprentices. "They are quite full of themselves," he says, "and their occasionally rude and offensive behavior is quite beyond any criticism in their eyes. But I want you to criticize them to their faces when they do not do their work. The only authority you will have is your femininity and your sexuality and your talent. That makes you different from them and may gain you some tolerance that you would not have if you were another male. Do you understand me?"

The blunt talk of sex and sexual temptation causes Orabella's mind to drift back to her chance meeting with Carlo a few weeks ago. She wonders what happened in his life to turn him from a chubby, pimply child into the self-assured young man with his warm and inviting wink.

Her early memories about her mentor Magdalene are usually vague. She remembers the many wonderful places they saw together, but not much of their time spent sitting and talking between lessons nor the times she spent waiting for the prostitute's return at odd hours of the day or night.

Orabella was certainly not ignorant of the grunting and sometimes naked coupling between men and women. It was not uncommon on the streets late at night, but it had not meant much to her until she saw Carlo again.

Her thoughts about Carlo's earlier protections, if left unchecked, often lead to a feeling of warmth in her torso, breasts, and deep in the pit of her stomach. These feelings give her a kind of soft pleasure that takes the edges off the uncertain things in her life that cause her to fear the future.

That night, after Amadeo's warnings, her mind wanders as if unchained, carried forward by her imagination. Her hands also wander, first, to her neck, where she lightly touches her throat, then her

collarbone, before traveling down the slope of her breast to rub and squeeze her hardening nipple. Her hand ghosts down her body and around her hip to grab hold of her left buttock as though Carlo were holding and squeezing her there.

The other hand moves down her belly to her sex as she spreads her legs and begins to move her fingers and hips in a beautiful synchrony. As she continues these rhythms her legs spread further as though someone, as though Carlo, is easing them apart. The pleasure of the movements through her lower body grow in intensity. A low moan escapes her lips, but she cannot stop and does not want to stop the quickening motions of her hands and fingers and legs. Suddenly in an intense burst of pleasure her body and legs tighten around her right hand, her fingers still moving in time with her bucking hips. Her left hand moves away from her buttock to grip the bed's sedge until the release seems to be complete. Eventually her hands fall away, and she lies back to catch her breath.

Orabella has never allowed these feelings to mature enough to cause this physical response. She wants to have them again, but the next time, she allows herself to imagine, she wants Carlo's hands in place of her own.

But how will that be possible? she wonders. She has only seen him briefly. She has no idea if he lives in the area, or if he was merely visiting. She clearly remembers the doorway and the building that Carlo emerged from when he almost knocked her down. She resolves to find out more about that place. If necessary, she will knock on the door and inquire if a young man lives there. If necessary, she will tell a small lie to the effect that she had seen him drop something while he was shopping, and the shopkeeper had directed her to this door.

For her part, Orabella takes extra care to button her studio clothes and wear them loosely, and to bind her breasts so as not to give any ideas to the apprentices.

She dealt with harassment before she was taken from the streets by the Medici, and she learned how to deal with most of it. When confronted with the possibility of violence, running quickly away usually took her out of harm's way. When this was not enough, she had no hesitation about using whatever stones, bricks, or heavy pieces of wood were at hand.

Amadeo tells her to report any threats made by any of the apprentices, but she knows that such threats can never be reported unless her life is in danger. Any such complaint that got back to the apprentices would mean the end of her gaining their trust and confidence. Even their tolerance for her continued presence in the studio could be at risk.

Giulietta has become a close friend and confidante, though, and she has an intimate knowledge of the internal politics among the staff and the apprentices. She can see that Orabella will need help in dealing with the hostile feelings between some of them.

Antonio Sforza has recently been brought into the House of Verrocchio as a favor to Lorenzo de Medici. Giulietta knows him to be serious trouble, and she knows that Orabella can get caught up in his manipulations if she is not made aware of what a bad person he is. Giulietta believes that Orabella can be an ally in easing Sforza out of the house sooner rather than later. That way the damage he might cause can be held to a minimum.

The apprentices' threat to Orabella comes within a few weeks and is as quickly resolved. It turns out that one of the apprentices in the fresco studio, Poldi, a helper in making plaster who has more looks and muscle than intelligence, took a bet offered by Antonio. Poldi, who often flaunts his good looks, said that he could persuade Orabella that she should have sex with him, and she would agree. Antonio bet that she would not do it, knowing that his challenge to Poldi's manhood would give Poldi added strength in actually convincing her to do it with him. Antonio promised to assist in the enterprise by persuading the other apprentices to leave the studio.

When the day arrives, Poldi tells Orabella that he needs her to help fire the kiln in order to render a

batch of limestone into quicklime. She is always eager to help with these kinds of tasks so that she can gain as much experience in as many aspects of the workshop as possible.

"I have to go back into the studio for some tools," Poldi says. "Then I'll go to get some wood to get the fire going. Use the wheelbarrow to start bringing the limestone over there and put it next to the kiln."

He goes into the studio and catches Antonio's eye. In a few moments, the studio is empty. Poldi returns to the wood pile, takes his shirt off, picks up an ax, and begins splitting the wood into pieces that will burn with a fierce flame. "Orabella!" he calls. "Come help me split the wood when you have finished moving the limestone."

She does not hear what he says, but she has heard him say something. She goes to the back of the woodshed where he is working. Since he often takes his shirt off when working with the kiln, she does not at first think further about it.

"This wood is still green," he says. "I need some help separating the ax from it, and some help getting the split wood out of my way. Can you do that?"

"Yes, of course. Stand out of the way, and I'll clear the wood behind you."

As she walks behind him, he turns and puts his hand on her shoulder. "You know I have had my eye on you, Orabella, since you came to work in the studio. I think under those loose clothes you are probably..."

That is as far as Poldi gets in making the proposal that he was sure would win him the bet with Antonio.

Orabella's mind goes blank. In the blink of an eye, she turns toward Poldi, and kicks him, hard, in the testicles with the solid toe of her shoe. Poldi screams and falls to the ground rolling, crying, and screaming. He pulls his knees to his chest while holding onto his painful private parts. She kneels beside him. She demands that he get up and stop blubbering.

Poldi is barely able to sit up. His crying turns into a whimpering moan. He continues to hold his testicles, and he cannot sit comfortably because he is in such pain. Tears are streaming down his face.

"You should consider yourself lucky, Poldi," Orabella says. "I could easily have put out one of your eyes. You made a mistake, but I will forgive you for the insult if you will promise me this: do not ever talk about this to anyone, and especially do not talk to Antonio. Do not try to claim that you won the bet. If he asks you, tell him he will need to talk to me directly to find out what happened. I will dispose of Antonio in my own way. If I ever hear that you have discussed this misbehavior of yours with anybody, the swelling in your balls might never go away, and you might never again find work in the city of Florence."

She begins to turn away but whips back to him in a way that causes Poldi to flinch. "There is one more thing. If any of the other apprentices ever approaches me with the same idea that you had a few moments ago, then you must walk over that person and hit him, hard, right in the face. Then walk away and go back to your work. Can you do that for me, Poldi?"

Poldi—still crouched over, moaning and sniffing—nods yes.

"I mean you no harm if you behave yourself, but if there are more of these challenges waiting for me anywhere in the workshop, I will need your help. Do we have a deal? If so, put out your hand." Poldi does so. Orabella shakes his outstretched, trembling hand. "All right. It is time to get up when you are ready. We have to finish preparing the limestone."

Amadeo had come into the studio to find out why all the apprentices were away. As he looks around, Poldi and Orabella walk into the studio from the Kiln. By the look on Poldi's red, teary face, and what Orabella hopes is her own calm demeanor, Amadeo knows exactly what happened. He is glad the apprentices got their sexual challenge out of their system, and that nobody was badly hurt. Poldi will

recover.

"Hopefully," Amadeo mutters, sotto voce, "we can now focus on the work."

Leonardo and Verrocchio are very pleased by the reports they have received about Orabella's confrontation with Poldi. When they think of the expression on Poldi's face when he first walked into the studio to face Amadeo, both break into laughter.

"I believe Orabella has earned the right to supervise the creation of a fresco under the watchful eye of a paying client," Leonardo says, wiping a tear from his eye.

Verrocchio agrees. "She still needs some training in design. Amadeo has not yet had an opportunity to see if she can work with the client to come up with an acceptable one. Once she has developed a design for the client's inspection, I think it will be important that you come in to inspect her work."

Leonardo nods. "Stay in touch with Amadeo as she prepares the plaster for the application of the design. I want to know if she has any particular problems developing any part of the fresco."

A few days later Amadeo gives Orabella the authority to supervise the apprentices in the creation of the new fresco. When he leaves the room, she asks them to gather round to discuss the course of the work. She first asks Poldi about the status of the current batch of quicklime, rendered shortly after the incident behind the woodshed. Antonio Sforza has been banished from the workshop, and Poldi has learned to be respectful and deferential around the female apprentice. She, in turn, has become courteous toward him in these kinds of meetings, and in her supervision of him.

"The quicklime will be ready for mixing whenever you are ready, miss," Poldi says. "If we need more, Fons will help me fire the kiln. We have plenty of limestone."

"Good. Thank you, Poldi. You are a good helper to me."

Orabella is already beginning to feel guilty about the way she dominated Poldi in the woodshed. She wonders if she perhaps misunderstood his intent. She knows that Sforza, the lazy troublemaker, had put him up to it, but she is beginning to doubt that Poldi would have gone through with it. She directs her next comment to Vincenzo, the mixer of pigments: "Are there any problems grinding any of the rocks we need for the pigments, Vincenzo?"

"No, miss. As soon as Fedele and I have the cartoon with the design and colors, we will be better able to judge the suitability and quantities of the materials we have on hand. Pardon me, miss, but who will be doing the design?"

"I am told by Amadeo that Leonardo, though he does not have a particular interest in working with fresco, has taken an interest in this one." As Orabella says this, the other apprentices sit up. "When the time is right, I am told, he will work with us on a design that our customer will find acceptable. In the meantime, I will need to work with Elia on the creation of the cartoons that express the artist's design. Elia will work directly with Leonardo as he always has, but Amadeo has asked that I learn something of the creation of them in anticipation of future commissions."

Vincenzo speaks up again. "When he last spoke to us, Leonardo expressed some interest in exploring the use of linseed oil as a medium for the pigments rather than egg whites. He believes the oil—because it takes much longer to dry, weeks instead of minutes—will give him much more flexibility in composition. The problem is that we have been using egg tempura on parchment for at least a thousand years. We are very experienced with it, and I am a little concerned about Leonardo's wish that we break from these ancient traditions."

"Thank you for expressing your concern, Vincenzo," she says. "Have you done any work with

linseed oil as a color medium?"

"Yes, miss. I have mixed two batches of pigment using the oil because Leonardo requested it. If he is now asking to use oil for this commission, I guess he was satisfied with the earlier results."

"Has either Amadeo or our master expressed an opinion on it?"

"No, miss. My understanding from both those gentlemen is that they want to give Leonardo as much freedom as possible in experimenting with new techniques, materials, and methods. That is, of course, unless the client specifically forbids experimentation beyond traditional practice. To my best knowledge, that is not the case here."

"Do you know of any particular problem with the use of egg tempura that suggests we should fully embrace the use of linseed oil?"

"Some have suggested that frescos that have relied on any compounds using organic matter like eggs or plant materials lose their color and tend to grow mold in the part of the fresco where they are used. I have not observed these problems myself, but they do give me pause in advocating their use. Linseed oil is also made up of plant material, so I'm not sure what we will gain by using it in fresco. Use of it will, of course, be very agreeable to Leonardo in that it will give him more time to detail his design."

Orabella is thoughtful for a few moments. "I don't want to make a decision on this, but I do want to keep the discussion going at least until we can hear more from Amadeo. I will ask Amadeo to confer further with the master, and with Leonardo. Hopefully, I will have a better answer within a few days. For now, I would like to get to work. Vitale, when can you have the frame done for our new fresco?"

"The frame can be ready later today, miss."

"Good. Poldi let's meet early tomorrow morning to look at Vitale's work. If the frame is ready, I want to lay the first binder coat of plaster so it can begin to dry."

When Leonardo visits the studio, he comes in good spirits and leaves in even better ones. Amadeo tells Orabella that Leonardo is so pleased with her work on the cartoons that he offered to help with the actual design work for the fresco. When the client hears of Leonardo da Vinci's interest in the work, he offers to double the commission.

Verrocchio and Leonardo are so pleased with Amadeo's reports of Orabella's work that she is almost certain that she has a guaranteed spot in either man's workshop. Both men feel the need to discuss these very positive feelings about their experience with Orabella to Lorenzo's representative in his dealings with the Verrocchio studio. They invite Adolfo Antonio to join the two of them for a quiet dinner at the studio later that day. They tell Antonio that Orabella will also join them for dessert after the dinner.

Between bites of lamb Adolfo tells the two men that Lorenzo already knows of the progress that Orabella has made under the guidance of Verrocchio and Leonardo in working with the fresco process. "As a matter of fact," Adolfo notes, "Lorenzo has given me this interesting blue/violet stone which was presented to him a few months ago for one of his past good works. None of Lorenzo's appraisers have ever seen such a stone and, so, they have no idea of its value. He asks, Andrea, if you can find somebody who is qualified and willing to appraise the stone. If you can find such a person, he will be willing to share in any value realized with you."

"This is, in part, an acknowledgement by Lorenzo of his gratitude for the most excellent work you and Leonardo have done with Orabella," Adolfo said as he swirled a bit of bread in some lamb gravy on his plate and washed it down with a mouthful of red wine.

Verrocchio expressed his gratitude for Lorenzo's gift with the deepest possible humility, though, in truth, he had no idea where he could find a suitable appraiser.

As he had promised Adolfo Verrocchio asked Amadeo – who had been acting as sommelier at the dinner – to summon Orabella to join them for desserts. The three diners heaped such praise on her for her achievements that she had to excuse herself to wipe away her tears of gratitude on receiving such recognition from such distinguished Gentlemen of Florence. On her return to the table she sat down to a very fine cobbler drenched in sweet sauce sprinkled with pine nuts.

Orabella knows, now, that she must make amends to Poldi. She has already told Amadeo of her regret at the way she treated him like a common street harasser and the way the others treated him after the incident. She will apologize and make sure he can restore his good reputation among the other apprentices.

But, first, she will resolve the problem of finding Carlo. The nights since she saw him have been restless, relieved only by her own intense imaginings. She worries that she needs some resolution of these feelings if she is to have any lasting value to the House of Verrocchio. As to the nature of that resolution? She hopes it will include much more than sex, though she certainly hopes sex will be a major part.

The Blue/violet stone was not further mentioned at the dinner and Verrocchio was left to ponder the disposition of it. A few days later a Scottish gentleman who had recently become wealthy in the wool trade and, following that, a regular buyer of art works produced by the studio engaged Verrocchio in a discussion of gemstones. Andrea saw his opportunity to get the stone into the hands of an appraiser in London who would, no doubt, have knowledge of this stone and of the value that it might fetch. An arrangement was agreed to; the Scottish gentleman took the stone but said he could make no guarantees about when he might be able to find an appraiser and submit a report.

Andrea, though he could certainly appreciate the beauty of the stone had no way to determine its value or whether it had any value at all. Such mysteries do not occupy much of his time and attention, so he soon forgot about the stone.

On her next shopping trip Orabella is gone longer than usual, and Amadeo begins to worry about her. When she returns, he asks if she ran into any difficulties.

“No, Amadeo,” she says. “I appreciate your concern, but I needed to spend some time by myself. So much has been happening to me lately that I needed some time to think.”

“Is there anything I can do?”

She gives a weak smile. “No. Not now but thank you.”

“Well, if you feel concerns about things beyond the work, I can at least offer you an ear. In fact, I would be happy to. For now, though, I will let you get back to business. I will see you later at dinner.”

As Amadeo takes his leave, Orabella cannot believe her luck in joining the House of Verrocchio.

What she does not tell him is that her shopping trip had grown longer because she hoped to learn more about Carlo’s whereabouts. She is not ready to discuss anything about Carlo, or anything about her life before the Medici took her in. She went into the neighborhood where she had last seen Carlo but had no luck in finding him. She went up to the door he had come out of, paused for a moment, then boldly knocked.

The door opened slightly. An old man, skinny, wattled around the jaw and bald, looked out.

“What?” he asked bluntly.

“I’m looking for a young man who might have lost something in the market a couple of weeks ago. When I asked the shopkeeper about it, he suggested I come here, that you might know something about the man. Do you know of such a man?”

The old man opened the door wider and looked boldly over all of her body, from the top of her hat

to the tips of her shoes. "Do you have a name for this guy?"

Orabella hesitated. She became suspicious that there might be more to Carlo's situation than might have been apparent when she bumped into him. She decided to find out more before she allowed her name and the name of Verrocchio to be associated with Carlo. "No. I don't," she said.

"You are a good-looking woman searching a run-down neighborhood for a man whose name you don't know. I think you had better spend your time on a different project that doesn't involve this address. Go away." He slammed the door.

Orabella sets her parcels on the counter, where Giulietta will find them later. She decided on the stoop to take the old man's advice, but she knows, deep within herself, that she will be back there soon.

END