

The Adoration of the Magi and Other Love Songs

By David Vickery

It was in the Year of Our Lord 1276 that I first met the *Maestro*. I was sitting on the grass, my father's sheep grazing around me. The clouds spilled waterfalls of sunshine, the sheep pulled at the grass and bleated and were content, and I was drawing one of them with a stone on a piece of rock. The drone of *moscerini* was in the air, but this was a sound I had heard for the ten years of my life and I hardly noted it.

Intent on my drawing, I realised that someone was standing behind me, looking over my shoulder. I thought it must be my father or someone else from the farmhouse. But when I turned I saw with a shock that it was a stranger who wore the clothes of a Creator. His eyes were on my picture. I dropped it at once, but it was too late. So now I would be punished.

I looked at the stranger and saw with surprise that he was smiling. There was something else in his face: delight, perhaps. The common people were not permitted to Create and a Creator had caught me in the act. But his expression did not say punishment or even warning. He looked about him.

"Is Vespignano nearby?" he said.

"Ten minutes along the road, *Maestro*," I answered, pointing.

"I have some business there. Is that where your family lives?"

"Yes, *Maestro*. The farmer Bondone is my father."

"Good day, then," he smiled again. I was too stupefied to reply.

As I sat at my supper late in the day I heard my father tell my mother that a Signor Gualtieri, a Creator, had spoken to him earlier, asking the way to a merchant's house and passing the time. There was the hush in his voice that came when speaking about the gifted. But again there was no word of admonition, nor did my father even glance in my direction.

It was in the Spring, two years later, that I came to the City of Flowers. The streets were full of colour and the air was full of sound: colours of robes, of horses and donkeys, of sunlight and shadow and sunlight again down the roadways; the sounds of quarrelling and laughter, of buying and selling, of braying and neighing. The smells, too, were everywhere: the animals sweating in the heat of the noon, the herbs and spices in the meat broiling inside the houses, and everywhere the bouquet of the blooms that gave the city its name.

A drone overhead grew in my ears until I was nearly deafened. I stood in the middle of the street, looking up: a *moscerino*, nearer than I'd ever seen one. It darted past like the gnat it was named after. Someone jostled me and I was caught up again in the flow, more people, more carts, more shops and more animals than I thought there were in

the world. And now this city was my world: a simple shepherd-boy no longer, I was *apprendista* in the wool trade, indentured to my father's cousin Calzino. I felt pride, both at my status and at the city which was now also mine.

Getting out of the press of people, I stood beside a shop watching the men and women, taking it all in. Then came cries of men in authority, telling everyone to get out of the way. The crowd, grunting and grumbling, obeyed. Several people backed up against me, but I climbed up the stonework of the shop until I had a view of the road.

First came the guards, still crying out for people to stay back. Behind them rolled a carriage: a carriage, but not pulled by horses. I had heard of such things. In the front was the coachman, directing the carriage by some means I did not understand. In the back sat a man, his eyes on the road. He was dressed as a Leader. And suddenly he turned and looked straight at me, as though he had known I was there. The intensity of his stare astonished me. Then he looked ahead once more and the carriage rolled onwards, with a noise inside it like a *moscerino* in the distance.

"He looked in our direction," said one of the men in front of me.

"A day of omen for us," said the other.

Over the next weeks and months I was kept busy in learning my trade. But there were still hours for myself, hours in which I would explore the city. The sights and bustle of the squares, and in particular the Piazza della Signoria, drew me constantly. I would stand there, out of the crowd, drawing in my head the images I saw. No one can punish me for that, I thought.

I also visited many of the city's churches, looking at the paintings on panels and on the walls. The colours sang inside me, but the pictures left me yearning. The figures had no *life*; where was the animation, the vibrancy I could see every day in the piazzas? Those who had painted them didn't know everything, even though they were Creators, I said to myself, wondering at my temerity even as I did so.

Then one day, Calzino took me to the Abbey of the Vallombrosan monks at Santa Trinità. The monks, he explained as we walked through the city, kept a flock whose wool was noted for its quality. I accompanied my master as we were shown around by several of the brothers, but then the negotiations began and I was left on my own. I walked into the Abbey to get out of the heat. Inside, there was no one to be seen and the air was cool and pleasant.

I looked around me. Here as usual were paintings done in the style I was now familiar with, and I stood in front of them imagining how they could be improved. The figures needed to take a breath, I thought: or to be breathed on from outside. Something, in any case, to fill them out.

Then I turned a corner to approach the altar: and there above it was a painting unlike any I had seen in my life. The subject of course I knew, the Madonna and Child surrounded by angels. But the figures, facing me, brimmed with life. They looked me in the eyes and seemed to know me, and their gazes were filled with serenity. What I had yearned for looking at the paintings in the Piazza della Signoria I now had, and tears streamed down my cheeks.

"My son -?" said a voice to my right, and I looked into the shadows to see the Abbot coming towards me. His face relaxed into a smile.

"Father, can you tell me who painted this?" I asked.

“A Creator called Cimabue.”

I had a moment of anguish that this Creator lived far away.

“Is he – does he work near here?”

“Indeed yes. His studio is here in Firenze.” The Abbot touched my head and moved on into the sunshine. I turned back to the panel above the altar. I was still standing before it when Calzino came looking for me an hour later.

After the day in the Abbey, I no longer felt pride in my trade. Once again, as in my childhood, I found myself needing to Create: not on stone or rocks any more but on parchment, wood or walls, and not with a line but with colour, the colours of the Madonna and Child. The desire burnt within me, and during my hours away from work I began to draw with my pen on scraps of parchment I found and hoarded. But far from appeasing the temptation, it grew with every stroke of my quill. And the guilt also grew; because what might have been forgiven in a child would be punished with severity in a youth. And one day I would become a man and my crime would be punishable by death.

I knew that seeing more of the works of the Creator Cimabue would only drive me to Create more myself, but I was helpless to do otherwise. I resisted for weeks, but I was helpless. So it was that I sought out his studio from passers-by, and discovered from them that Cimabue had his workplace in the Via del Cocomero. And one day on the way to Calzino’s house I found the studio and went inside.

The contrast of the sunlight outside and the gloom inside blinded me for a moment. Then as my eyes cleared I saw many panels of wood, some painted, some blank and some not yet prepared for painting, stacked up against each other. Even in the light from the lamps which smoked and stuttered, I could see majesty in these works: the majesty of the panel at Santa Trinità. I gasped and was filled with awe and contentment.

In the centre of the studio a boy painted on a panel which filled much of the space, referring to a parchment as he worked. His painting was not without ability, but I noticed that he worked only on the areas without detail.

“Is this the studio of the Creator Cimabue?” I asked, though I knew it was.

The boy looked round. “Yes, Signore,” he said.

“Is the Creator here?”

“He is in the City of Assisi in Umbria, working in the church of San Francesco. Can I help you?”

I was sorry to hear this news, but also emboldened.

“Who are you?” I asked, drawing myself up.

“I am Lucio, *apprendista* to Cimabue,” he said with pride.

“I represent Signor Calzino, who may wish to commission a painting from the Creator,” I said, surprising myself with my words. “Can you show me some of his paintings?”

Lucio put down his brush and took me over to the stack of panels. And there, for as long as I dared to linger, my urge to Create was stilled in the glow of such mastery.

For weeks, Cimabue remained in Assisi; and often on my way to work I would stop in at the studio and watch Lucio paint, or refresh my soul with a look at one of the panels awaiting completion by the master. Then one day when I sat before the stacks gazing in rapture, a man walked into the studio dressed in the garb of a Creator.

“So you have come!” he laughed.

I stumbled to my feet in confusion; I recognised the Creator who had watched me draw the sheep years ago. “*Maestro Cimabue?*” I dared ask.

“I am Giovanni Gualtieri, whom some call Cimabue,” he answered. “And what is your name?” he said, with a twinkle in his eye.

“I am Giotto of Vespignano, the son of Bondone,” I stammered.

“Then, Giotto di Bondone, how would you like to become one of my *apprendiste?*”

The matter was soon arranged. My father was honoured to have his son train as a Creator; and Calzino made no objection. I think, too, they both knew where my heart lay.

So I gave up the wool trade for ever and came to live over Cimabue’s studio. And at first I wondered about that name men called him, because I could not bring myself to ask him about it. And later on, when we became closer, I thought of him always as Cimabue anyway. But in the beginning it puzzled me, because in our Tuscan dialect *cima* means summit, or excellence, which makes sense, but *bue* means ox or dunce. So I satisfied myself it meant that, compared to my master, all other Creators were dunces. Which I knew to be true.

It was just after my fourteenth birthday and my life lay before me like countryside after the storm, and I thought that all my troubles were over. Now, I thought, I can paint without skulking in corners, without guilt, without fear of punishment, guided by the skill of Cimabue himself.

I soon learned how mistaken I was. It was not the first day, nor the next, nor the next week, nor the next month that I held a brush in my hand in Cimabue’s studio. Instead, I had to watch Lucio executing the designs of the master while I was given the task of mixing paint.

My disappointment must have showed; or perhaps my glances at Lucio and Cimabue’s work became too frequent. Finally, Cimabue put down his brush and came up to me.

“You do not like the work of an *apprendista?*” he asked.

“*Maestro*, I...” I did not know how to continue. I looked down at the pestles and mortars smeared with colour. Cimabue followed my eyes to the table.

“Giotto, listen to me,” he said. “You have talent. You have enthusiasm. Above all you have the fire inside that will not leave you in peace. All of these things a Creator needs. But there is something else you need which you do not yet have, and that is knowledge. Knowledge of your tools, knowledge of your craft. Can a writer write without a knowledge of words, or a sculptor sculpt without a knowledge of marble? And beyond knowledge you need a love of your craft. You must immerse yourself in it. You have talent, Giotto – but what do you know of paint? And how can you be a painter without such knowledge?”

He picked up one of the mortars and held it before me. “Make these colours your friends, Giotto, and they will serve you. I know each of them as a friend. Cadmium yellow, named for Cadmes, ruler of Thebes. Ochre. Raw umber. Burnt umber. Vermilion made by grinding cinnabar, a red to paint a Doge’s robes or the blood of Our Saviour under His crown of thorns. Lapis lazuli, a blue to adorn the mantle of Our Lady.”

I looked up, and saw that his eyes were shining; and I remembered then that his Madonna and Child at Santa Trinità had just such a hue.

“I think I see now, *Maestro*,” I said.

“I think so too, *apprendista*,” he answered. “Continue your work, then, and be content.”

And I continued my work and was content, and my disappointment changed to understanding. I ground minerals, I crushed flowers: rose, lilac, crocus, violet; I even made powders of insects for colours such as carmine. The air grew scented from my labours. And to these powders I added egg-white and other ingredients as Cimabue showed me, to mix and stir and blend into tempera that the master himself was content to use.

After a while, Cimabue would leaven my paint-making with other studies. I accompanied him on tours of the churches and abbeys to look at their art. He took me to the hospices and even to the houses of the dead, revealing matters of anatomy to me. At first I was reluctant, but he answered these objections as well.

“The paintings around us in the city are mostly the work of the Byzantines,” he told me. “Or the legacy, for the glory of Byzantium is dead and buried, but Creators still follow the style of centuries ago. Tell me, Giotto, what do these paintings lack?”

“Breath,” I answered. Cimabue smiled.

“Breath, yes. And depth. They lack the feel of people and of things. When I paint a book, I want it to *be* a book, not the symbol of a book. When I paint a man, I want him to be flesh and blood. But we must study flesh and blood in order to convey it.”

As my training continued, I progressed onto the cleaning and preparation of panels, which my master would paint according to commission; usually for some church or cathedral, but sometimes for a patron. Yet painting on wood was not the way Cimabue preferred to work.

One February morning he called Lucio and me, telling us to take his paints and brushes and follow him. He strode ahead while Lucio and I shivered as we hurried through the streets and squares, the sun peering through sky the colour of mist, stall-holders crying their wares, birds quarrelling above us. Our master brought us to the church of Santo Spirito where a priest awaited us. He led us to the cloister, where workmen were plastering three arches. Cimabue stood while the labourers trowelled and smoothed, sizing up the proportions of the arches.

“Here, the marriage at Cana; here, the entry into Jerusalem; and here, overturning the stalls of the money-lenders at the temple,” he decided. The workmen began to pack away their tools. “Quick! Brushes, paints!”

He sketched out the three scenes and their figures with a speed that left us breathless, and moved at once to paint in the figure of Our Lord in the centre. “Lucio, the money-lenders,” Lucio scampered over to the right. And then I found a brush thrust towards me. “Giotto! Paint the marriage couple!” I stood for a moment, dumbfounded. “Quick! Before the plaster dries! Move!”

“Yes, *Maestro*!”

I seized the brush and began to paint at once. I thought I saw something in Cimabue’s face: a test, perhaps. But there was no time to think. I followed the master’s outlines, painting as far as I could the love and gratitude the couple must have felt towards their guest. Even as I hurried I could feel my knowledge of anatomy gained at the master’s instruction helping me: and the smoothness of the paint on the plaster transported me. Cimabue was everywhere, painting over and under our arms, directing us

to add angels, haloes, shadows on clothing. Finally he stood back, straightened up and clapped us both on the shoulder with a laugh. To my astonishment, all three pictures were complete, glowing with colour in the sun.

He looked over at Lucio's work and praised him. And then he turned to my painting and examined it, and I saw it too, as though for the first time. At last he spoke.

"Flesh and blood, Giotto. Well done!"

"*Grazie, Maestro!*" I stammered.

After we returned to the studio, my apprenticeship continued as though nothing had happened at Santo Spirito. I mixed paint, I studied the art of other Creators in the city, I listened to Cimabue talking of art as he painted, I learned more anatomy, I prepared more panels. But some weeks later, Cimabue touched one of the panels I had finished and said to me, "I think it is time to see what you have learned, *apprendista*." And my heart gave a leap in my chest.

"Take as long as you like, and paint me a picture."

"What subject, *Maestro*?"

"Yes, what subject? Let's have the Annunciation. It's a pleasure to commission something myself for a change!"

So for some time every day I painted the Archangel Gabriel and Our Lady; and as Cimabue had said, the colours I had mixed myself now began to obey me. And finally I called my master over and showed him the finished painting. He looked at it for over a minute while the noise of the street outside seemed to die away to silence and I thought that time itself had come to an end. Then he smiled.

"You have learned, *apprendista*."

Lucio came up and looked at my work. For a second I saw annoyance, wonder, anger and yearning in his face, so that I didn't know whether he would fall at my knees or strike me. But of course he did neither.

"Congratulations, Giotto." He returned to his work of ornamenting his master's painting.

"I go the city of Padua next month," Cimabue told me. "You will accompany me there. When we return, I will show you the secret of the Creators. If you can master that, your apprenticeship will be over."

Outside the city a plain had been levelled and a square laid down; and to this place my master led me as Spring came again to the City of Flowers. Aside from my village, this was the only home I had known. Now I was to travel all the way to Padua to the north, and the thought unsettled me. But it was the thought of our transportation rather than our destination that made my stomach flutter. For Cimabue as a Creator travelling to a commission had the right to use a *moscerino*, and naturally I as his apprentice would be carried also.

Two women adorned in finery stood waiting as we approached, soon joined by a man dressed in the red of a Cardinal. Cimabue strode up to them and addressed them; but my feet slowed with every step and finally stopped altogether. There in front of me was the *moscerino*, the first I had ever seen on the ground and staggering in dimension. I saw now that its halo, as we had called it as children, was not a disk at all but two blades the length of lances. At its rear were two more blades, only on one side instead of the top. Instead of wheels like a carriage, the *moscerino* stood on bars of metal.

The absurdity of its popular name hit me. Some gnat! Albatross, or monster, I would have called it.

A man walked out of the building built on one side of the piazza and came over to us. His clothing was ornamented with obsidian, a style I had noticed before in the city but never close to. He greeted the passengers and opened a door on the side of the *moscerino*, helping the men and women aboard and finally beckoning me over. He gave me his hand and I took it without enthusiasm, seating myself next to my master in the seats behind the driver. Then he climbed into the vehicle and slid the door to.

I looked over his shoulder to see two levers, one to his left and one between his legs as he settled himself in his seat. Panic grew in me. Was it really possible to control this monster with just those levers? But as I thought about jumping out and the humiliation this would bring me, the driver composed himself as though for prayer, muttered a word I couldn't hear, and touched something underneath the top of the lever to his side.

The *moscerino* woke from its sleep, not with a yawn but with a bellow. The noise deafened me and I looked around in terror; surely something was wrong? Then the driver adjusted his legs and clasped both levers, and the blades above the monster began to turn: at first with grace, but soon with ferocity. The noise increased to a frenzy, overwhelming me, and my body trembled from head to toe with the shaking of the *moscerino*. Then with a lurch it slipped into the air. We hovered like a bird for a few seconds, and then we soared upwards.

After a while the sweat drenching my body dried as I realised we were all still alive. I opened my eyes, released the rail I had been gripping, and looked around me. Cimabue was chatting to the Cardinal as though nothing had happened. The ladies also seemed relaxed and even smiled, although I was relieved to see that one kept her eyes shut. Then I looked down.

The countryside around Firenze was spread out before me like a patchwork, perfection in miniature. Those ants were labourers in the fields, that beetle a carriage lumbering along the road – while the *moscerino* flew between heaven and earth like an angel of the Lord. And fly it did, faster than an arrow. My fear left me, swept away as I was transported by these sights. I wanted the journey to go on forever. But finally the city of Padua in all its grandeur came into view and the *moscerino* dipped down towards it.

The next day I stood looking down from the city wall at the river the Paduans called the Bacchiglione, glittering before me in the sun like a band of silver. I thought of how far above it I had been the day before when I first saw it sparkling; and I also thought of how such a colour might be used to form the border of some robe or cloak in a painting.

“*Buon giorno, Giotto di Bondone.*”

I turned, to see the man who had driven in procession through the streets of Firenze on my first day there. His clothing was decorated in gold, the sign of a Leader, and the intensity of his stare was as it had been on that day.

“You know me?” I was too surprised to give him a title.

“I know you by your works.” I was troubled at this, because I had as yet Created little – and nothing that such a Leader would be likely to have heard of. Could it be that he knew I had broken the law by Creating in my own time while still in the wool trade? But he changed the subject.

“How did you like flying?” He seemed to know everything.

“It took my breath away,” I replied. This appeared to please him; at any rate, a smile interrupted his brooding for a moment.

“You are visiting Padua too?” I ventured.

“I am a traveller,” he said. He gazed down at the city, lost in thought. “Those buildings will be the university: one of the oldest in Europe.” He recollected himself, as I pondered this remark. “Or so those who come after us will think of it.”

I nodded. “My master will be waiting for me to return.”

“My name is Hansen,” he said, as though I had not spoken. “When you become a Creator, come to me if there is anything you need, at any time. Ask for me at the Palace in Firenze and you will be admitted.”

I stared in astonishment: so this was not only a Leader but the ruler of all Firenze.

“Will you remember?”

“Yes, *Principe*,” I managed to say.

“I may not always be able to help; but on the other hand, I may assist you in ways you do not expect. So *arrivederci*, Giotto.”

“*Arrivederci, Principe.*”

I assisted Cimabue for two months in Padua. His commission was a series of frescoes for an Abbey. It was a time of serenity for me, working in the light strained through glass while the monks chanted as though with one voice. Yet it was also a time of work and learning. I helped Cimabue execute his designs: and often when I had completed my areas I had time to stand back and watch him paint with skill and diligence. It was soon clear to me how unusual the Santo Spirito fresco had been. The speed of that painting must indeed have been meant as a test for me. Because here Cimabue painted without haste, fresh plaster being applied again and yet again until he was satisfied with the result. And when he was finished his frescoes moved me as had his altarpiece in the Abbey of the Vallombrosans.

When the commissions were completed we returned to our studio in Firenze. Over the next months my master let me paint more of his pictures and even work on paintings of my own now and again. My confidence grew. Sometimes I thought back to my meeting with Hansen, his name itself a puzzle: for how was it that someone who by his name was not Tuscan or even Italian came to be a prince of Firenze?

But most of the time Cimabue kept me too busy for such musings. Then a day came when the master sent Lucio out into the city on an errand, and he took me aside and said “Now, Giotto, we come to the secret of the Creators. Are you ready?” I felt a shiver of excitement as I nodded. Cimabue led me into the darkness at the back of the studio.

“You already know,” he began, “that a painting has levels of meaning which others can interpret according to their skill. Where the Byzantines had only representations of people, we show a story, we show emotions. And as a viewer puts his own emotion in, he can become one with this emotion – as I have often seen you do, *apprendista.*”

I blushed to think that he had observed me in tears, but he had already begun again. “Then we include symbols to fill out the story even more. An olive branch for peace, a dove for the Holy Ghost, lilies for chastity, and so on. And in the same way we can indicate the saints by symbols: Peter with keys, James with a scallop shell, Simon

with a saw. So far, so good; anyone with the knowledge can interpret the story, and anyone could paint it.”

The heresy shocked me out of my silence. “But it would be a crime.”

“It would be a crime, ordained so by our prince. Nevertheless anyone could do it. But the secret can be understood only by Leaders, and painted by no one but Creators.”

Cimabue unlocked a cupboard hidden in the shadows and took out a jar as transparent as Venetian glass made by a craftsman. The jar was fastened in a way I had never seen before, a lid of metal over it which my master turned and turned until it came free. A smell of freshness, of the countryside, of flowers at sunset, filled the room.

“Look,” he said. I looked into the jar.

“Varnish?” I asked. “Resin?”

“In truth, I do not know what it is, except that it is a gift from the prince. With this substance we can paint over our paintings in a state of trance: and as we paint, we add another level of the story, a level to move the hearts of Leaders. Only the duennas of the Leader families can read the story we paint with our secret, and only a Creator can paint this level of the story.”

“Why, then this is magic,” I said.

There was sadness in Cimabue’s smile. “A little, perhaps: given to us by the courtesy of the prince. But ours is only a kind of magic. The real magic is reserved for the Magicians, those who drive the *moscerini* through the clouds and hold many other secrets of the prince. And only they can commission proposal pictures: the ones painted in trance.” He sighed and smiled again. “Tomorrow you go to the prince and receive the power of the secret.”

I was shocked. “But Lucio has been with you for – ”

“Lucio will never be a Creator. He is *apprendista*. There is no shame in that; Creators need assistants. But he will never have the ability to move people with painting. He can stay with me or go elsewhere, but I will never put him forward to be a Creator.”

So it was, in a kind of daze, that I went to the palace next day, asked for the prince and was admitted. He greeted me as before, as though he and I had always known each other. Then he took from his desk a crystal of jade and held it before my eyes, and my legs trembled under me. Then he gave me a word to say and dismissed me.

I returned to Cimabue’s studio to discover that Lucio was again away. Cimabue had set up the Annunciation that I had painted before we went to Padua. He bade me paint it again with the paint of the secret. I dipped my brush in the liquid, said the word the prince had taught me and began to paint. As my brush flowed under my hand, stars and colours and yearnings and joys whirled in my brain. Finally I had finished and the trance left me. I looked at the panel, and it seemed to me as it had been before. But Cimabue said the word and his eyes clouded over. He gazed at the painting for many minutes. Then his eyes cleared.

“You sing of love like a siren,” he said at last. “At present you are but a youth and your song lacks knowledge. But as you grow and know love, you will be a Creator without peer – both in the secret and outside it.”

I was moved by his sincerity. “*Grazie, Maestro*,” I said. But he shook his head.

“Call me Giovanni from today, Giotto,” he said. “I am your master no longer.” And he brought out a chain made from jade, the sign of a Creator, and put it around my neck.

The next few years passed in a wave of delight for me. I continued to share a studio with Cimabue but now I was working on my own, a Creator in my own right. Bishops, abbots, merchants, Leaders and sometimes Magicians would commission works from Cimabue. But as my name became known and my work admired, I began to win commissions of my own. Only the obsidian-ornamented Magicians would pass me by, continuing to give their orders for proposal pictures to Cimabue.

Then one day in my eighteenth year I was painting alone in the studio when its peace was shattered. A youth about my age, also dressed as a Creator, burst in on me.

“So, the famous Giotto! Let’s have a look,” he said, shouldering me aside to see my painting. “Ah, yes. They did not lie.” I didn’t know whether to be annoyed or amused.

“I don’t believe I’ve had the honour,” I said drily.

“Dante Alighieri: at your service!” he gave a flourish as he bowed.

“You are a painter?”

“Ah, my fame is not yet the equal of yours, I see,” he said wryly. “I am a writer. I want my portrait painted – but none of these Byzantines and their stiffness for me! You’re the man for the job. You paint me, I’ll put you into my poems – Young Firenze, eh? Let’s start right away – or better yet, let’s share a flask in the tavern!”

By the end of the day I knew Dante like a brother. He wrote in Tuscan instead of Latin, his family had adorned Firenze with its presence for generations, and he was not a Leader – but he intended to become one. In fact, to my confusion he already seemed to be a member of two factions.

“Don’t you know your history, Giotto?” he cried. “You should read up on it, like me! I’m a Guelf, and we were the ones who kicked out those Ghibellines after decades of strife – quite right, too. But now we’ve done that, who of us Guelfs will lead the city? And it’s not just Firenze, you know. We’re destined for greatness in Italy, I can feel it. We can unite the whole country, such as hasn’t happened since the fall of Rome to the barbarians. A united Italy!” He stopped, drained his goblet, lost himself in musing for a moment. “But which way is right? Hansen led the Guelfs before, and as I say he was right in opposing the Ghibellines. But I can’t agree with the way things are going now.” I suppressed a smile. “We need someone to stand up to him. So I’m a White, and he’s the leader of the Blacks.”

He would be. I thought of the prince, brooding over the city in his palace. Standing up to him seemed fraught with danger to me.

“Life is fraught with danger, Giotto! No, I was made for politics, just as I was made for literature. And I’ll transform them both before I’m through!”

Despite Dante’s speeches that night and on many other nights, politics failed to excite me. Creating was more than enough for me. But I enjoyed the company of Dante and often joined him and his White friends for a drink after painting. And I finished his portrait.

It was while I walked to the tavern to meet him one night several years later that my life was changed forever. A procession of a Leader was heralded and everyone was forced off the streets until it passed. I stood like everyone else, eager to be on my way. And then I saw her, and I forget all about Dante and taverns in a moment.

Her hair shone like gold in the sunset, her skin was nacre, her lips were rubies, her cheeks a dawn. And her eyes were closed. They looked as though they would never open again.

“Who is she?” I murmured to the man next to me.

“Giulia Medici,” he answered.

“Is she blind?”

“She is a Leader.”

Dante explained it to me in the tavern – in between his exclamations of incredulity.

“You, a Creator and a *pittore!* The eyes of Ladies are closed in childhood by the prince.”

“Why?”

“Better ask him. It’s just one of the many things we Whites are against.”

“Dante, I think I’m in love.”

I thought he, the romantic, would congratulate me and call for wine; but he only sighed.

“I know such love, Giotto. I fell under the spell of a Lady myself when we were only nine years old. Her name is Beatrice.” He paused in reverence. “But it cannot be. Only a Magician can open the eyes of a Lady, and only through a proposal work of a Creator: a painting, a sonnet, a statue.”

It was monstrous. Every part of me rebelled against it. Finally I spoke, my voice choking.

“Then I shall never paint a proposal work again.”

Dante held my shoulder. “Proposal works are our gifts. Can a Creator stop Creating because the world is unfair?”

He was right. I continued to Create, and my fame spread throughout Firenze. And one day when I was twenty-four a Magician entered the studio and looked me in the eyes: and he paid for me to paint a proposal.

I took a panel, prepared it, mixed my paints and began to Create. All my skill came to the fore. Then when it was done I said the word and painted it again, pouring out all the sweetness and all the bitterness of love.

Cimabue entered the studio and I showed him my painting, an Adoration of the Magi. He looked at it with wonder, and then he said the word himself and continued to look, tears streaming down his cheeks.

“*Maestro,*” he said.

I was filled with gratitude and set out that very night to tell Dante of the honour Cimabue had done me; but when I came to the tavern he was not in his usual seat, nor were his Whites in theirs. The innkeepers saw me and jerked his thumb towards the back room. I pushed through the curtain and found Dante with his head in his hands. He looked up as I entered?

“How are you, Dante?” I asked with concern.

“*Straziato,*” he said. “Beatrice is dead. Dead at twenty-three. Thanks to the prince her eyes were closed, and now they will never open in this world.”

Straziato. Heartbroken. I understood that feeling, which had hardly left me since I had set eyes on Giulia.

“What will you do?” I asked gently.

“I will write.”

“Write?”

“Yes, write. As a mere Creator I was forbidden to speak to her. But through my writing I will make myself worthy. I will speak to her for all eternity, and the world will listen.”

And in the next few years Dante wrote his vision of Beatrice in his book *Vita Nuova*, and as he had predicted his fame grew to equal mine. As for me, I was busier than ever and began to take pupils of my own: Taddeo Gaddi. Puccio Capanna, Ottaviano da Faenza and others, a growing number as the years passed. Because my name inspired men to become Creators and to study under me. I accepted commissions, I did portraits, I painted love songs for Magicians; but although years passed, the sharpness of my love for Giulia never dulled.

The Year of Our Lord 1302 was one of sadness for me – but also one of astonishment. Cimabue was by now over sixty and was painting less and less. One day as I worked on a fresco in a city church, Ottaviano rushed in and told me that Cimabue had collapsed. I ran back with him through the streets full of people, but we were too late. Cimabue was dead.

I mourned the man who was my master and my friend for many days. But life had to go on. The studio in the Via del Cocomero was now mine. I offered to keep Lucio on as *apprendista*, but he replied scornfully that he would find another Creator – one who would not keep him back.

So I began to work again, surrounded by my pupils but lonelier than ever before. I spent much time with Dante and his friends; and much time alone, thinking of Giulia and interlinking our initials in paint on scraps of parchment.

Then one night Dante burst in on me while I painted a Madonna and Child alone in my studio.

“The Magicians have caught Antonio. They’re holding him. Come with me and help, Giotto,” he cried.

“Of course,” I said, jumping up – but then I saw the sword he held out to me.

“What is this, Dante?”

“I’ll tell you as we go, but let’s hurry,” he said, tucking the sword under my cloak and bundling it and me out into the street. What he told me was that the Whites had decided to break into a Magicians’ stronghold and everything had gone wrong.

“But why did you do this?” I asked.

“Because the Magicians are the strength of Firenze, and they support the Blacks,” he said. “We thought that if we could find out their secrets we could have Magicians of our own: and finally, expel Hansen and all his followers from the city.”

“Your politics is leading you astray,” I began. But he cut me short, peering round a corner.

“There they are,” he hissed. I looked. Two men dressed as Magicians stood over another man, his hands tied behind him, whom I recognised as Antonio from the tavern. Dante crept round the corner and launched himself at the nearest Magician, drawing his sword as he did so. Taken unaware the Magician fell under Dante’s charge but the other drew his sword and pointed it at my friend. Light leaped from the sword’s point and

seared Dante's arm. He yelled in pain and dropped his sword, and the Magician raised his own weapon over his shoulder for a downward slash.

Without thinking, I pulled my cloak from the sword Dante had given me and hurled myself at the Magician. He collapsed without a word and when I looked down I saw him lying next to his dead colleague with the blade in his back. My limbs trembled and I felt sick.

"Well done, Giotto!" Dante gasped, grabbing his sword with a blistered and burnt arm. Then he released it and picked up the weapon of the Magician. He waved it gently and turned it in the air; and as he did so, a fireball roared from it and turned a nearby tree into an inferno. Dante looked at me, horror, shock and awe mingling in his face.

I picked up Dante's sword and cut through Antonio's ropes. "Throw it away, Dante, and go home!" I said.

"I'll go home, but I'll keep this. We can fight with prince with it. I'll see you tomorrow, Giotto!"

But he was wrong on both counts. They came for him in the hours of the morning: and by noon, everyone in the city knew that the Whites had been suppressed and Dante banished.

So it was that I went again to the palace and asked for the prince. And once again, I was admitted.

Hansen sat before his desk as though he had been expecting me.

"Greetings, *Principe*," I said.

"Giotto di Bondone, welcome," he said. I began my plea for Dante's sentence to be reduced, but he interrupted me. "Dante Alighieri is a rebel," he said. "That is good for writing, but bad for politics – at least in Firenze while I am its prince."

"But his writing. Can you treat the author of *Vita Nuova* like a criminal?"

"He may yet Create even better things," Hansen said. "Is there a law that a writer must stay in one place in order to Create? Besides, Dante is always banished in 1302."

That last remark meant nothing to me, but I was emboldened.

"May I speak on?"

"To the father of the renaissance, much is allowed."

I was surprised. "The renaissance of what?"

"Of painting. By evoking the illusion of depth in your works you have done something not seen for a thousand years."

"Then I would ask you these questions. Why is it forbidden for anyone but Creators to Create?"

"To protect art from charlatans."

I laughed. "How could a charlatan Create? And why would he want to?"

"I agree that such a thing is hard to imagine. But it could happen one day. Having Creators will prevent it."

"Why do we need Magicians?"

Hansen sat back in his chair. "As Dante would say, Giotto, you should read history. Two centuries ago, Firenze was engaged in wars with its rivals Siena and Pistoia. It would perhaps have won those wars, but at what cost? Think of the people, perhaps of genius, which the world would never have seen." He grew animated. "Waste, Giotto! War is always wasteful. Let me show you how it was instead, thanks to the prince of those days."

He picked up a crystal of obsidian and held it up to my vision.

“Trance,” he said. Dizziness overwhelmed me for a moment, and then the room was swept away and I was seated in a *moscerino*. I realised I was driving the vehicle and fear surged through me: but even as I felt it I knew that my fear was needless. I knew how to fly. I knew as though remembering something long forgotten. I remembered other things, too: the strongholds of the Magicians where they made the *moscerini* and where *fuel* was distilled. Other secrets hovered close but just out of reach. But that was nothing to me.

I looked around me and the air swarmed with *moscerini*. We flew on, and down below us we saw Siennese mercenaries attacking an army of Firenze: infantry, cavalry and archers. Many panicked as we approached but some archers stayed to shoot at us. I moved my right hand up the lever between my legs until I found the *armament fire control switch*, and pressed it. The *moscerini* juddered violently and the Siennese were swept away like twigs in a storm.

I shook my head and found myself back in the palace.

“And now Firenze leads all of Tuscany. and Italy itself beckons,” the prince said. “But you have another question.”

“I do,” I answered. “Why can only Magicians commission proposals?”

“Because Magicians must become Leaders, and Leaders Magicians. In that way, the future for Firenze and for Italy is assured.”

I was bewildered by all that had happened and by everything that had been said. But I knew that Dante was still banished and that my love was hopeless, and that I was sickened by the prince.

“Now I have a question for you, Giotto. Will you let me be your patron? I could give you marvels to work with. Oil paints, for instance.”

“Oil paints?”

“Made by mixing linseed oil with your powders instead of egg-whites. They dry more slowly than tempera and give you more control.”

Part of me was beguiled: but I thought of Dante and Giulia and refused. Hansen turned away. “So be it. You will go to Padua in 1306 and there, at the Capella dell’ Arena, you will Create your greatest works.”

I cried out in fear and anger. “Do you control everything?”

He shrugged. “Some things I do not need to control. So you will go to Padua and achieve greatness. But who knows what you would have achieved if you had stayed with me?”

For the next four years I continued to work in Firenze, and my reputation spread beyond the city. My commissions took me further and further. Then in the Year of Our Lord 1306 the call came from Padua, as the prince had said it would. I frowned at the thought. But the commission was of such size that I could hardly refuse: no fewer than thirty-eight frescoes.

Once again I went to the piazza outside the city as I had done with Cimabue all those years before. This time my companions were a Lady, a bishop and a merchant. The Magician walked over to us and greeted us. I saw the glint of his obsidian chain as he moved.

Once we were seated, he started the *moscerino* and we lurched into the air, gaining height by the second until the clouds misted past the vehicle. All this was familiar. But halfway through the journey the driver gave a cry and clutched his hands to his chest, and then his head slumped forward.

Immediately the *moscerino* rolled to one side and fell spinning precipitously from the sky, its screaming matched by my fellow passengers. Something inside me wanted to scream too. But another part of me remained calm.

“Trance,” I said to myself: and at that, everything changed. Fear left me, sweat dried on my body. I clambered into the front of the vehicle and pulled the driver from his seat, the *moscerino* spinning even more crazily as his dead hands caught the levers. Then I was seated in his place looking down at the controls. The *cyclic*. The *collective* with its *throttle twist grip*. The *directional control pedals*. All was familiar to me, as familiar as when I’d flown against the Sienese mercenaries.

I pulled up the *collective*, twisting in more throttle and pushing left pedal as I did so. The *moscerino* gave a howl of protest and the levers strained against me; but soon the vehicle was level again. My head only cleared when we landed gently at Padua, the frenzied thanks of my fellow travellers still in my ears. And when I got out I was really not surprised at all to see Hansen there. He stepped over to me and put a chain of obsidian round my neck.

“Congratulations, Creator-Magician,” he said.

So it was that when I returned from Padua I carried with me a panel. It was wrapped in cloth to protect my greatest, my most personal work. The subject was the Garden of Eden but as well as tempera it was painted in the secret of the Creators.

Wearing my two chains and carrying my panel, I went to the house of the Medici and asked for Giulia. I seemed to be expected. At any rate, I was shown into a room where two women sat. One was old and was obviously the Medici duenna. The other was young, but the contrast was far more than that. She was light to darkness, laughter to grief. Giulia Medici.

My hands trembled as I unwrapped the panel and presented it to the duenna. She looked at it for a long time with a smile of pleasure, expressions of praise dropping from her lips. But finally she said the word and her look changed to one of intensity. She probed the picture, leaving nothing unseen. What she saw was the purity and rapture of love, my love, painted finally for myself instead of another. And when it seemed that I could bear to wait not a second longer for her verdict, she spoke to Giulia and said “Open.”

At that, those portcullises of eyes rose in Giulia’s face, revealing eyes of the remotest, gentlest blue. She moved her head as her vision focused after its long dream, then finally she looked at me. At me. At me.

With love and understanding and compassion and passion.

And as her eyes held mine I felt again the stab of pain. But this time it was the pain of ecstasy.