

THE BLOOD OF THE BULL
BEING THE THIRD PART OF THE MEMOIRS OF THE
BORGIA SIBYL



JO GRAHAM



PRAISE FOR JO GRAHAM

Praise for *The Blood of the Bull*

I love Jo Graham's Giulia Farnese and this is my favourite of the series yet! Graham's meticulous research not only sets the stage but shapes the story of a woman overlooked or reduced to a pope's bit of fluff in most historical accounts, despite the compelling contemporary evidence of her intellectual attainments and prominent role in the political world of early Renaissance Italy. Giulia's vivid personality, combined with Graham's blending of history and Renaissance magic, makes for a compelling story as the French king asserts his claim to Naples, bringing war to the Papal States on his march south. Giulia herself is in the thick of things, as historically she was, not merely reacting to events to survive but seizing control and shaping them, her dedication to the humanist side of the conflict with the Catholic hierarchy never wavering. Throughout this phase of her story we see her maturing, reassessing her choices and considering them from new angles, while finding a way to shape not only her own fate, but the course Rome will follow. I'm already impatient for the next installment in Giulia's saga. —K. V. Johansen, author of the *Gods of the Caravan Road* series and *The Wolf and the Wild King*

Exquisitely timely, Jo Graham's *The Blood of the Bull* continues this three-book historical fantasy centered around one of the most colorful and controversial popes in Renaissance history, as seen through the eyes of Giulia Farnese, concubine, and some say witch. This unputdownable novel is graceful, vivid, and passionate, infused with a kerygmatic hint of the numinous. —Sherwood Smith

Praise for *The Borgia Dove*

An insightful meditation on the rare alignment of true love and pure ambition—no one writes the Borgias like Jo Graham. —E. K. Johnston

The Borgia Dove is a very sensual and sensuous book, and readers of Graham before are not going to be surprised by this. Not just sexual and carnal pleasures, mind you, but the entire world is brought alive with all the senses in mind. We get to feel, to smell, to taste, to see and to touch the late 15th century Rome that Giulia Farnese inhabits. The charm of having breakfast with a friend, spreading soft cheese over bread. The deadly darkness of the streets of Rome at night. The elegant seductiveness of a dance and a party. And much more. Graham's *The Borgia Dove* brings us into Giulia's world, life, passions and desires in a fully immersive way. —Paul Weimer

The Borgia Dove is an intelligent, action-packed fantasy of vivid characters and well-researched history, filled with so much life I know I won't be able to read about Rome in this era now without hearing Giulia's voice and seeing it through her eyes; Graham's character has become the real Giulia Farnese for me. I'm looking forward to the next in the series. —K.V. Johansen

I relished every word of *Borgia Dove*. Jo Graham paints these larger-than-life characters in a gloriously dynamic mural with grace and wit. —Sherwood Smith

Passion, intrigue, politics, and a papal election, all portrayed with Graham's trademark historical flair. I was planning to read this one slowly to savor every beautifully-chosen detail, but ended up finishing it in two days - I couldn't put it down. —Melissa Scott

Praise for *A Blackened Mirror*

Ancient Greek and Roman rituals lie like a palimpsest beneath the streets of a Rome resplendent in full Catholic regalia in this tale of

ambition, desire, intrigue and enchantment. La Bella Farnese is a compelling heroine, and author Jo Graham casts her Renaissance spell with a deft hand. —Jacqueline Carey

Jo Graham's *A Blackened Mirror* showcases the breadth of her writing talents, taking her from her usual outer space writing haunts as of late to a quite different setting. The setting is a secret history of late 15th century Italy, and her heroine, La Belle Farnese herself, Giulia. In Graham's richly imagined secret history, Giulia's slow rise to the attention of her (eventual) most famous lover, the infamous Rodrigo Borgia, comes because of her abilities as a seer. Graham gives us a fresh and underappreciated perspective on the life and times of late 15th century Rome, with a strong heroine, rich worldbuilding and language clever, refined and immersibly readable. —Paul Weimer

A lush, addictive, and utterly compulsive read. —Stephanie Burgis

Once again, Graham proves herself a master of historical fantasy—this time, the Italian Renaissance, portrayed in all its glorious complexity. Giulia Farnese is the ideal protagonist, ardent, ambitious, sharp of wit and tongue, willing to risk everything. I devoured the book, and cannot wait for the rest of the series. —Melissa Scott

Jo Graham returns to magical history with a fresh take on some of Rome's most notorious. Witty and loving, with sharp edges in all the right places. —EK Johnston

Jo Graham skillfully brings life in Renaissance Rome and Italy to life, her sense of world-building and character development allows us to sit on the shoulders of the Borgias and their contemporaries and to delve into the complexities and struggles of the Renaissance. It is a highly enjoyable read, perfect for those who want to get to grips with the skullduggery of life in Renaissance Rome and the Curia. —Dr. Katharine Fellows, Oxford University

Vivid characters, especially the charming and indomitable young Giulia Farnese herself, bring to life a story of conspiracy, intrigue, and Renaissance magic—Jo Graham's *A Blackened Mirror* is a wonderful adventure. —K.V. Johansen

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For information, address
Candlemark & Gleam LLC,
2523 Solstice Trail, Chapel Hill, NC 27516
mes@candlemarkandgleam.com

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The bull is wreathed for the sacrifice, and the slayer too is ready.
-the Oracle at Delphi to Philip of Macedon

CHAPTER 1



Stories tell us that while Proserpina reigned below as Death's Bride, her mother sought her through the withering world above, and at last pled with the king of the gods for her return. Thus Proserpina was restored to sun and sky, emerging as the spring maiden wreathed in flowers to live in bower and field. The poets speak as though this was a good thing. But then, I doubt they asked Proserpina.

I have walked her path, and my choices are my own. For good or ill I have made my life, and if it is the processional path of the great mysteries, I did not know it at the time. This story begins as it should, with a wedding.

The bride, of course, was Lucrezia. Suffice it to say that as soon as Rodrigo was elevated as His Holiness Pope Alexander VI, Lucrezia did not lack for noble suitors. Rodrigo decided on Giovanni Sforza, Lord of Pesaro. He was twenty-four, the age of my brother Alessandro, and cut a fine figure at the hunt, tall and dark haired and hairy and muscular. He was Cardinal Ascanio Sforza's cousin. Originally illegitimate, he had been legitimized and inherited the town and estate of Pesaro when his father had no other living issue. They were married by proxy, then in person in a grand ceremony that lacked for no pomp

or fine clothes, though because Lucrezia was just turning thirteen, Rodrigo stipulated in the contract that the marriage was not to be consummated until after her fourteenth birthday. In the meantime, Lucrezia would live with me, a respectable Orsini wife. Thus, there was a grand wedding and then Giovanni Sforza was sent back to Pesaro with the promise that he could collect his bride next year!

Of course I was not a respectable Orsini wife. I was the Pope's mistress. Our baby daughter, Laura, had never been seen by her purported father, my husband. And yet Laura never lacked for love or anything else. She knew her Papa. The house he had bought for us, Palazzo Santa Maria in Portico, backed up on the Vatican itself, accessible by an actual secret passage so that Rodrigo did not have to parade through the streets to visit us. Several times a week he would attend Vespers in St. Peter's Basilica and then excuse himself at the end of the service to the Choir Chapel, where he would slip into the robing room and through the hidden door. Divested of his grand vestments, he would take dinner in the pretty little sala with me, Lucrezia, and Donna Adriana, my mother-in-law and his cousin. As the months passed, Laura would often join us to her nurse's consternation, sitting up on Rodrigo's lap so that he could bounce her while we talked, or sitting on mine gnawing on a piece of bread from my plate. Lucrezia would attempt to shock us with some adventure she planned. I would bring up what I had learned from my various tutors, or the work of artists and writers that I stood as patron to, and Rodrigo would tell amusing stories of the foibles of various cardinals or the life of the Vatican. More serious conversations were saved for later, by the fire in my camera. They were not for Adriana's ears, and Lucrezia had no discretion.

We would lie in my big, curtained bed, my head on his left shoulder, while he sketched visions in the air above us, talking and talking and talking. Politics, gossip, art, history, ribald tales, theology, news from the cities of Italy and of the strange discoveries of Spanish explorers beyond the Ocean Sea – there were no boundaries to our conversations. Worlds were endless between us. We could be anyone for each other in the vessel of my bed. Merlin and Viviane, priest and

succubus, Pluto and Proserpina, divine or filthy – all doors open to endless invention. He was God's before he was mine, but he was mine quite a lot.

People said I profited handsomely, and it was true that there was a red hat for my brother. In the summer of 1493, a year after his election, Rodrigo raised his first group of cardinals to the College. To no one's surprise, one was his eldest son, Cesare, the Bishop of Valencia, to his own old seat in consistory. Another was my brother, Alessandro. The new Cardinal Farnese had been a very competent Vatican clerk the last three years, and he was certainly not the youngest cardinal, but it was undeniable that he would not have been elevated at this point if he were not my brother. It wasn't worth telling anyone that I hadn't begged Rodrigo for it in some intimate circumstance, but that Alessandro was a useful and loyal follower, and factions are built on members. Rodrigo needed votes he could count on in the College.

And yet Lucrezia's was not the only wedding. Her youngest brother, Gioffre, had been betrothed to King Ferrante of Naples's illegitimate granddaughter, Sancia, and a proxy wedding done in the fall. The entire business was rendered slightly ridiculous by the fact that while Sancia was a young woman of sixteen, Gioffre was only eleven and looked about eight! The idea that he would bed her, much less rule over her, was simply silly.

Of course there was nothing to do about it. I did bring it up to Rodrigo in the confines of our bed. "What in the world were you thinking?" I asked. "She'll run circles around him and she'll have a lover long before he's ready. Surely this could have waited a year or two."

"We don't have a year or two, my sweet," he said, flopping on his back amid the pillows. I came to his side, curling up against him. "King Ferrante is very sick. Tumors, I understand. He's ruled nearly forty years and been a holy terror the entire time, but I'd be shocked if he lived another year. He needs this alliance for his son."

"But Prince Alfonso is a grown man and a reasonable scholar," I said. "Surely there's no doubt he's the heir or that he's fit to rule. And

Sancia's half-brother, Prince Ferrandino, is twenty-five and quite the swordsman. Ferrante has a son and grandson in the wings."

Rodrigo played with a strand of my long hair. "True. But the French have made a claim to Naples for a long time. In Ferrante's day they have hesitated to press it. Ferrante is both canny and cruel, and the King of France was a child when he came to the throne. But now King Charles is a young man and fancies himself a warrior king. He'll press his claim to Naples the moment Ferrante dies. The more ties Prince Alfonso has, the more likely he is to keep his throne. Marrying his daughter to Gioffre is advantageous, especially now that he's a widower." He twined the strand around his finger. "His late wife was Ascanio and Ludovico's sister, but she's dead and he can't count on Sforza support."

"So a papal alliance, even illegitimate child to illegitimate child, is worth a great deal."

"Just so," he said. "She's a beautiful girl and seems clever and well-spoken. She'll make Gioffre a good wife when he's grown up a bit. And he will grow, my dear."

"Without a doubt," I said.

"And now that Juan is settled..." Rodrigo's second son, Juan, had just left for Spain to take up the dukedom that Queen Isabella had given his elder half-brother, Pedro Luis, who had died in her service. She had also arranged a marriage for him with a noblewoman who was her cousin – triply blessed with youth, beauty, and being related to a sovereign queen! One could hope that Juan would make the most of extraordinary good fortune.

"And perhaps he will give you grandchildren soon," I said. He certainly wouldn't be getting them from Lucrezia or Gioffre in the near future.

"All of my sons are extraordinarily virile," he said smugly.

"They take after the old bull," I said.

IN AUGUST the summer sickness came to Rome. Rodrigo was worried about Lucrezia and Laura, and so he decided the entire

papal court would go to the country, accompanying us to his estate at Nepi. The castle of Nepi was an older castle, perhaps as old as Montalto where I had been born, but it was larger and much more well-constructed, a fine and sturdy fortress. It had been Rodrigo's personal property for some years, and everything showed a good master's hand. The stables were airy and well-kept, and so too were the chambers, with furniture that was comfortable rather than grand. My chamber was on an upper floor with a small window that looked out on the countryside, designed for defense rather than beauty, but the appointments of the room were new and as lovely as anyone might wish, the bed draped in velvet curtains that happened to be Farnese blue. One would suspect it had been made ready for me. I laughed with delight when I saw it the first day, the big fireplace and standing candlestands, the blue velvet and the walls washed in pale gold.

A door gave onto a small private room, a toilet chair and a copper bathing tub put neatly away to bring out before the fire when it was called for, shelves holding bathing sheets with lavender sachets. There was a second door, and I opened it.

The room beyond was the mirror of mine, the fireplace on the opposite wall with a pair of carved chairs with scarlet cushions before it, window and bed curtains in the same scarlet velvet, the bed itself monstrous dark wood piled high with pillows. Rodrigo's room. Nepi followed the old style of having the lord and lady's room adjoining rather than in different wings. He had put me in the lady's chamber. Well, I thought, going back into my room and closing the door, that was clear enough. Here I would live as though I were his lady.

The first morning he wakened me with a kiss at the lightening of the sky. "Get up, little dove!" he said. "We have places to be!"

I groaned and put a pillow over my head. "It's dawn, Rodrigo." Surely on the first day in the country one could sleep past dawn!

"Up!" He took the pillow away, and I opened my eyes to see him grinning like a boy, unshaven and cheerful. "Come on, sweetness. I thought you were a country girl."

"I am," I said, and sat up. He looked as though he had some treat

planned, that infectious smile that no woman was immune to. "What am I dressing for?"

"Riding," he said, and helped me dress, doing up my hair in a snood as though he were my maid. I leaned back a moment against him. He was all but bursting with energy.

We rode the bounds of the estate, watching the sun rise from a copse on a hill that looked back toward the castle, the walls turning to gold in the new light as though the entire fortress had been dipped in gilt. Surrounded by fields and woods still in the deep, overripe colors of very late summer, it was the most beautiful thing imaginable. High above a hawk called. I glanced up, watching it dart through the light which did not touch us yet on the ground.

"I thought you would like to see this," Rodrigo said quietly.

"Yes," I said. We had paused stirrup to stirrup, and I reached across and took his hand.

We went back to his chamber, locked the door, and made love as the first light came in the windows. I dozed off after, barely aware that he got up and went about the day's business. When I woke again the sun was high and I reflected that it was an ideal beginning to a visit to the country.

Rodrigo unbent at Nepi. Of course the business of the Vatican followed him, and half of each day was given over to work, cloistered with secretary and clerk, various couriers coming and going twice daily to Rome. However, there was no need for vestments and miter in his own study, and certainly not about the grounds of Nepi. In a short coat over hose and doublet, velvet hat ornamented with a ruby brooch, he looked like a gentleman, not a cleric.

At nine months old, Laura had never been to the country before, but she was old enough to appreciate its beauties, at least garden and barns. She was fascinated by a calf who nosed at her curiously while she pulled up, holding onto my skirts. "It's a baby cow," I explained. "That's her mother, there. I'll wager she's the one who gives your milk every morning." The cow looked at me placidly, as though to say our babies could be friends.

I picked Laura up, and she leaned out of my arms to try to pat the calf on the head. "Baaa!" she chortled.

"That's a sheep," I said. "Cows say moo, not baa." She looked at me like I'd taken leave of my senses. "Cows say moo, sheep say baa, ducks say quack," I elaborated.

"And what does the bull say?" Rodrigo asked from the barn door.

"Usually that he has a lot of work to do," I said. He was smiling as though we were the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen.

"It's not easy being a bull," he said. He caught Laura out of my arms. "All that stomping around and snorting." He snorted for good measure, and Laura made a grab for his nose, giggling. She was a very wiggly baby.

"I can see it would be taxing," I said. He whispered something in Laura's ear and she giggled again. "What secrets are you telling her?"

"Asking if she's told you about the surprise," he said.

"She can't talk," I said.

"And therefore is ideal to keep secrets." He held her on his shoulder. "Come on, darling. Let's show your mama her surprise."

"I don't need a surprise," I said. Truly, the lovely rooms had been a lavish gift. I followed him and Laura out of the barn and around the corner to the stables.

"You need this one," he said. "You've been saying you wanted to hunt, so..."

I caught my breath. He'd stopped in front of a stall from which a head popped out, ears pricked forward curiously. It was a fine head, high crested, a light dapple-gray mare with intelligent eyes. She nickered a welcome. "Oh my goodness," I said. She was utterly lovely.

"Her name is Lilas," Rodrigo said. "She's a purebred Andalusian, acquired by my sister in Valencia just for you." He looked smug. "The hunting is excellent here. Your palfrey can't keep up with Memnon, but Lilas will."

"How utterly beautiful, Rodrigo!" I said, presenting my hand to Lilas for her to nose. "You are much too generous."

"It gives me pleasure to give you things," he shrugged. "And I can." Laura giggled again, reaching for Lilas. "No, Laura. Not a horse that

doesn't know us yet. She's your mother's horse. When you are bigger, you will have one of your own."

Like Lucrezia, I thought. But Lucrezia professed that she hated hunting, so I did not imagine she would accompany us. "Welcome, Lilas." She lipped my palm. "You are a lovely lady."

Needless to say, Laura stayed with her nurse while we tore around the hills. I had not hunted in several years, and Rodrigo was not as young as he thought he was, so both of us overdid it and moaned a great deal later in pain rather than passion, but we laughed about it together, tangled in my blue bed.

AUTUMN CAME IN TRUTH, cooler days and a soft rain that drifted into peaceful nights. While the pace of entertaining at Nepi was calmer than in Rome, Rodrigo had planned a revel for the tenth day of October to celebrate the vendemmia, the grape harvest. Of course the theme was the Bacchanalia.

Cesare came out from Rome and brought Fiammetta, who I was delighted to spend time with, as I counted her a true friend. I hadn't expected that they would still be going a year later, but it seemed that they suited one another. I couldn't see it and neither could Rodrigo, though his reason was rich. "Don't you think she's a bit old for him?" he'd commented to me once.

I had simply stared at him. "Cesare and I are the same age," I said, "And you have decades on Fiammetta."

"It's not the same thing," he'd said, but not really crossly. Perhaps he just couldn't imagine being with Fiammetta anymore than I could imagine Cesare!

Now that Lucrezia was theoretically a married woman, though not actually one, she was allowed to attend provided Adriana kept a close watch on her and she retired early. I was relieved that Adriana was doing it rather than me; I had not really been able to unbend at a party since well before Laura was born, and I was looking forward to a bit of wildness. I had a maenad costume made, a sleeveless camisa with a ragged hem as though I had run through the woods, long ribbons to

adorn my unbound hair which fell to my knees, and a little rod with a gilded pinecone on the end. It was quite racy. But then this was a party with friends, and it was not anywhere near the Vatican.

Rodrigo was Silenus, the tutor of Dionysos, to rule over prophetic ecstasy and drunken joy. He had a wreath of vine and a purple robe, a golden cup in his hand which he proclaimed must never be allowed to be empty. It was probably a good thing that Lucrezia was supposed to leave early. Cesare, in his leopardskin, certainly did not intend to. With his dark hair tangled and wild, he did look quite the Dionysos.

The gardens at Nepi were outside the curtain walls, and therefore were extensive. There were nooks and corners, bits of wall that enclosed kitchen gardens, an arbor and a fountain in a clipped herb knot, cedars that screened the gardens from fields and woods beyond, and a low ornamental wall to keep the livestock out of the gardens. The main refreshments and the musicians were set up in the French garden near the castle, but the party could wander about as it liked. I had no doubt that there would be plenty of wandering, even if the gardens were hardly a Thracian wilderness!

Rodrigo had invited so many people. I had expected thirty or so, but it seemed more like fifty as I greeted them. The steward would be frantic to make certain that important guests were appropriately housed. Or perhaps the costumes made it seem like more – there were satyrs everywhere and at least a dozen other maenads, including Fiammetta, in a daring tattered gown of blush-colored silk that seemed like she was wearing nothing at all at first glance, so transparent and clinging that her nipples showed dark beneath the drapery. I wouldn't have worn anything quite that sheer, though I did now wonder if the white linen showed more than I expected.

Well, if it did, it was too late, I thought, greeting Cardinal Riario and his Emanuela with a kiss. Riario was very much in favor with Rodrigo just now, having voted for him last year despite his cousin's objections. Emanuela had a daughter just two months younger than Laura, and she was very congenial company, though they had not brought little Isabella but left her in Rome with her nurse. Emanuela dragged me off immediately to tell me how worried she was, as she

hadn't been away from her overnight before, but Raffaele had said that she'd be fine and she'd hardly know they were gone and...

We were interrupted by some question about refreshments that the cook did not want to interrupt Rodrigo about. After six weeks, the servants deferred to me as the lady of the house. Was there supposed to be a meal for the grooms and ostlers who were staying in tents along the picket lines? Between riding horses and carriages, there were nearly a hundred horses in addition to approximately a hundred and fifty servants that came with number of guests, and even a great estate like Nepi could not add a hundred horses to the stables. Only the finest riding horses were accommodated. The rest were on picket lines in the field, attended to by their own grooms. It was a pleasant, dry autumn evening and they would take no harm. Yes, I replied, the grooms and ostlers should be fed a good plain dinner if they wished, though many of them had already made campfires and were planning to cook their own, but tomorrow's meals were their own responsibility. We were not planning to keep the entire crowd for a week!

By the time I was finished with the question, Emanuela had disappeared. Lit only by torches and lanterns, what was by day a pretty but ordinary place became mysterious. Shadows leaped in the garden, tall shapely cedars standing like spades, a serrated border behind which laughter and music welled. I went to the gap in the trees and paused a moment. It was an enchantment. Some danced on the lawn, figures turning in the firelight. Bright colors glowed like jewels. Fire glanced off gold – a ring on a man's hand, the net in a woman's hair, the goblet Rodrigo held. He looked up as though I had called his name, eyes meeting mine across the crowd, dark as the night between stars. His mouth quirked a little, not quite a smile. There was that strangeness in him, Rodrigo and something else, like shadows moving underwater. I answered to it like a child to her father's voice or a dog to his master's hand.

I lifted my head, lips parting in a smile that showed teeth, and his expression changed. Well I could believe he could woo one away from civilized places to revel on the mountain! He did not fear the dark. I did not either.

I made my way among the revelers to his side, his left arm going around my waist as he talked to a young man I did not know. "My dear, this is Giulio de Medici. He has recently come from the university at Pisa and hopes for a career in the Church."

"The pleasure is mine," he said, bending over my hand. "I have seen Madonna Giulia at a distance, but never stepped within the sphere of her light."

I let him kiss my hand. "He has come with his cousin, Cardinal de Medici," Rodrigo said, which meant he hadn't been invited but had to be welcomed. No wonder the guest list had swelled!

"I hope you will enjoy our little festival," I said.

"I was present on the happy event of His Holiness's coronation," de Medici said. "I profess myself an admirer of his reforms."

Very wise to profess oneself an admirer of the Pope when one wished to begin a career in the Church, I thought. Still, factions are built on followers. "Have you met my brother, Cardinal Farnese?" I asked. "He attended the university at Pisa as well, though he completed his studies several years ago."

"I have not had the honor, Madonna," he said prettily. He was a chubby youth probably no more than sixteen, but he had good manners and wasn't quaking in his shoes at talking to Rodrigo, so that was a score.

"I will have to introduce you." I glanced around. "I know Alessandro is here somewhere as I saw his party arrive, but I confess I have not yet spoken to him."

"Er," de Medici said, and I wondered if he thought I meant to recommend him to my brother in more ways than one. Medici was Florentine, and Alessandro was particular in his friendships but not overly discreet. The thought would occur to him. "I would be delighted," he said gamely if not enthusiastically. I could hardly say that wasn't what I'd meant! Alessandro would have to straighten that out himself.

Rodrigo was smirking at my dilemma. He handed me a glass of wine from a passing servant. "Drink, darling. It can only improve matters," he said as Medici vanished into the crowd.

I took a deep drink. It was sweet and cool, only watered by half if that, with no spices added. One does not need to gild the lily. Rodrigo served good wine that needed no embellishment. It was my second glass. "I've made a muddle," I said.

"Nonsense, sweet," he said, leaning close to my ear, his body along mine. "The children will have to work out their own arrangements."

"Aren't you supposed to remember that sodomy is a sin?" I murmured, taking another sip.

"So is fornication." He nuzzled my temple. "But we are not counting sins tonight."

"Ah," I said. There was that burr in his voice that made a thrill run through me, like answering to like. If he dreamed of ecstasy in its dangerous forms, I was a willing maenad waiting for the drums.

We danced a turn or two, though the golden goblet never left his hand, and I took my shoes off to dance on the grass, then stood under the trees to cool off. The nights were not chilly yet. I had another glass, feeling the world take on a bright haze of delight. So beautiful, so bright, my dear friends and family, everyone joyful and light. Dionysos's magic touched us all. I leaned on Silenus's arm, Rodrigo telling a story expansively, the wreath of vine a little askew on his head. I had not truly indulged at a party since months before Laura was born, and it was good to let go. I had been so conscious of appearances, so careful. People said enough as it was, calling me the Bride of Christ if they were being vicious and the Whore of Babylon if they were being worse. Well, let them! I twined my arm around Rodrigo's, my arms bare in the thin costume, and watched him smile.

Now it was Cesare and Fiammetta talking with us. Cesare had a few days' growth of beard which definitely went with his costume. The freckles on Fiammetta's neck looked like gold dust.

"What a lovely pair of maenads," Rodrigo said. There was a glint in his eye.

"Maybe you should have Pinturicchio paint them," Cesare said. "You've had him do Giulia as the Madonna. How about a maenad next?"

“Or a succubus,” Fiammetta said wickedly, licking her lower lip. “They run in packs too.”

“Succubi on the walls of the Vatican?” Rodrigo looked as though he took it as a challenge. I felt myself blushing. I had certainly not ever mentioned anything to Fiammetta about our game of the little succubus. And yet the idea of a pack of succubi was enticing.

“If anyone would, it’s you, Papa,” Cesare said.

“A group of them, perhaps. Being friendly,” Rodrigo said.

“How friendly?” Fiammetta asked. Her eyes met mine. There was a dare in them.

“Quite friendly,” I said. “After all, they’re succubi.” I reached for Fiammetta with my other arm, hand on her bare shoulder, and she leaned in, smelling of orange flower water and smoke. Her lips, when I kissed them, tasted of new wine. I just brushed them with mine, feeling her smile, and then deepened it, Rodrigo’s arm tightening around my waist.

“Oh my,” he said.

Fiammetta’s lips opened, the tip of her tongue teasing mine, a pulse suddenly throbbing between my legs. Kissing her, Rodrigo’s arm around me, Cesare watching, where anyone could see.... She lifted her head, eyes bright with laughter. “Double treat?” she said to Cesare teasingly.

He looked at her smolderingly. “I’m not sure I’m sharing.” He glanced at Rodrigo. “Not with Papa.”

“I won’t steal her away,” Rodrigo said expansively. “But Giulia might. If she wants to.”

I’m not sure what I would have said. Would I have gone aside with Fiammetta? Probably not with Cesare, as that would have been strange, but Rodrigo and Fiammetta or Fiammetta alone? In another heartbeat or two, almost certainly.

There was a crash, a sudden murmur of voices, and a man came pushing through the revelers. “Beast! Anti-pope!” he shouted, shoving Fiammetta, who stumbled into Cesare. He was brandishing a dagger with which he flew at Rodrigo.

Rodrigo threw up a defensive hand instinctively, catching the

dagger on the golden cup, wine flying everywhere. The man shouted again, overbalancing and recovering for another thrust. I screamed, trying to get between them and instead catching an elbow in the ribs.

Cesare threw Fiammetta off and drew a knife. Of course he had one at a revel. Was Cesare ever unarmed? And yet he wasn't close enough. The man stabbed again for Rodrigo's chest.

Something hit him hard in the back of the knees and he fell forward, Rodrigo getting out of the way in an undignified scramble. Giulio de Medici had tackled him. They rolled on the ground. The man was armed, but Giulio was a big boy and a dogged wrestler. He got him down and Cesare stomped on the man's fingers, the dagger falling from his hand as he shrieked. In a moment they had him, a guard and two manservants running up belatedly.

The assassin was still yelling. "Beast! He is coming like the wind on the mountain! You will feel the wrath of the Lord!" They dragged him to his feet, an ordinary looking man in clothes that wouldn't be out of place on a servant. "The Hand of the Lord hangs over you! It hangs over us all. It will purify us with fire, and like the kings of Babylon you will fall before His wrath!"

Rodrigo had regained his composure and lost his vine wreath in the scuffle. "Who sent you?" he demanded.

"The Lord your God!" the man replied. "God sees you!" Another guard arrived, two of them holding his arms while Cesare stood by with knife in hand, Giulio de Medici getting to his feet and brushing himself off.

"What kind of assassin screams before he stabs?" Cesare asked. "You'd have had him if you'd come on quietly."

The man's eyes focused on Cesare. "Creature of darkness," he said. "Bastard demon son of the great beast."

"He's mad," Fiammetta said.

"Who sent you?" Rodrigo asked again.

The man's eyes fixed on me, staring as though he could look into my soul. Hazel eyes, wild and desperate. His voice was suddenly even. "The darkness is real."

I took a step closer, my feet bare on the grass. "So is the light," I said gently.

He spat at me, spittle landing on my skirts. "You will all burn and the sword of Cyrus will cleanse the land."

"Take him away," Rodrigo said to the guards, "and put him to the question." There was no Silenus, no lover limned with gold. He was a jowly middle-aged man in a preposterous costume stained with spilled wine, lines of cruelty around his mouth. "I'll know who sent him."

"I'll make sure of it," Cesare said, dark and lithe as a panther, the knife still in his hand, an unpleasant little smile on his face.

Around us the party had swirled to a stop, people staring and milling around, glasses in hand. The shifting shadows made them into goblins. We were all creatures of darkness, an unholy court. I closed my eyes, suddenly unsteady on my feet.