

## CHAPTER ONE

DEN BOSCH. 1490

Aleyt stands in the darkened room, hidden, as if in a long-ago childhood game with her older sister or her cousin. Inside her head is the same remembered sound: a surging rush, like liquid being poured away, over and over. Her blood, pumping.

Today it is the world outside that she hides from. But the noises and smells of that world are finding her out anyway, creeping cunningly through the gap in the heavy shutters: the stench of packed bodies and quick-fried sweetmeats; the tolling of a bell; the voices of the massed people of Den Bosch, a low *ruh-ruh-ruh* pierced occasionally by shriller cries. Drawn unwillingly by a horrid curiosity, she peeps out at the town square below.

The bearded man at the centre of it all draws her eyes at once. He is clad only in a loin cloth with his hands bound behind his back. Like Jesus in the images of the Passion, he is surrounded by a howling, jeering crowd that is gripped by lust for his death. But he doesn't wear Jesus's serene expression, the look that speaks of transcending all earthly torment. No, this bearded man's face is an open book of terror. His eyes dart from place to place, and his tongue works at his parched lips. The loin-cloth is soiled a filthy brown.

Aleyt's breath feels trapped in her throat. She moves slightly so that the narrow gap in the shutters lines up with a different part of the scene. There is a tall, thin figure, like an island of black-robed calm in the broiling bustle. Beneath his cowl, most of his face is hidden. On a lectern before him is a Bible, and only his mouth moves. Surely, no one will be able to hear him in the hubbub. This is her first sight of the man. For weeks his reputation has stalked the town. Even now that he has finally come out into the open, he is still partly concealed. In spite of her fear, she is curious to see his eyes.

Behind him, on the steps of the Stadhuis are ranged the monks and nuns of Den Bosch, a mass of brown and black cloth. Dotted amidst this loamy soil like the flowers of the year's early spring are the more colourful robes of the cathedral clergy. They all have the best view of the proceedings, and, in contrast to the Inquisitor's pious concentration, they are busy gossiping and eating nuts and haggling with the street vendors who offer cups of watered-down brandy from small barrels strapped to their backs.

Aleyt moves again, trying to free her breathing, her gaze skimming over the mob. *Ruh, ruh, ruh...* like the sound of an angry sea, surging even to the wall of their house directly below her. Thank God the cottage at Roedeken will soon be finished. If the future is to bring more such abominations to the market square, they will be able to lock up this house for the day and escape.

She is startled by the door opening behind her, and turns quickly to face it. Of course: it's Jerome. He has been back for more than a week from his long absence in Reims, but she still forgets that he is in the house. The silence in his studio is the same, whether he is there or not.

He remains standing in the doorway, peering uncertainly into the gloom of the shuttered room.

"Aleyt?"

"Yes, Jerome. I'm here by the window."

He moves forward carefully, eyes adjusting, irises opening. The pale oval of Aleyt's face forms itself in front of him, like one of the phantoms that any darkness conjures in his mind's eye.

"Why are the shutters closed?" he says, knowing why.

Aleyt begins to fumble with the catch, but Jerome is taken by an impulse of pity, which grows instantly to rebellion, and he steps forward again and puts his hand gently over hers.

"Well - let them stay closed, why not?" he says.

She feels now that she can draw on his strength to face what is out there.

"But you know we must watch."

"Perhaps they may not know we're at home," he says.

"Of course they know we're here. Where else would we be?"

She is right. He puts aside her hand and himself unhooks the heavy metal latch and lifts the crossbar. He pushes the shutters outwards and the hinges groan as if they too have a voice in this matter. Noise floods into the room, and the square below is framed by the opening like one of his paintings, teeming with vivid little figures. From all the other houses around the market place, the most prosperous citizens of Den Bosch look out from their windows. They will be seen by all now, the Master Painter and his wife, watching in approval, it might be, as God's soldiers go about their work.

"Come..." he says, making room for Aleyt beside him.

In the heart of the square, a wooden platform has been erected with a few steps leading up to it. Projecting upwards through the centre of the platform is a stake, the straight trunk of a felled pine stripped of its bark. Below and around the platform are heaped scraps of timber, trimmed tree branches, bundles of twigs, and gashed hay bales. Sometimes someone edges forward to throw on their own small fagot, buying remittance from time in purgatory. The bearded man is being dragged towards the platform by three of the town's tipstuffs, sweating and conspicuous in their bright red tunics. He fights them with every step, flinging his body backwards against their tugging, and they look angry, as if they feel he is making fools of them in public. One of them cuffs the man hard on the head, making him scream out something incomprehensible. *Speaking in the Devil's tongue* will be entered in the official record, since he has confessed to witchcraft. But Jerome and the rest of Den Bosch have known this harmless moon-witted beggar for years, since long before the arrival of Jacomo and his Inquisition. He'd always talked nonsense, and regularly had fits of screaming and shouting. You gave him a goat, from time to time, or a scrap of bread, and in bad weather the monks somewhere would take him in.

Aleyt moves closer to his side, and he senses her agitation from the catch in her breathing. He sets his jaw and tries to face with fortitude the scene outside. This poor loon in the square could be expected to act thus, but would any man do better? What if he himself were being dragged to a post to be burned? Wouldn't he be screaming and struggling, with a soiled loin cloth? And what about the Inquisitor himself, this Jacomo, who has now left his Bible and climbed onto the platform to wait beside the stake? How would *he* fare, if places were exchanged? Anger suddenly brings the blood up into his face.

The bearded man is finally heaved up to the platform, all flailing limbs, and the black-cloaked Dominicans on the front rank of the Stadhuis steps commence the slow sonorous chanting that will continue until all is done:

*Adoremus in aeternum sanctissimum Sacramentum.*

*Laudate Dominum omnes gentes: laudate eum omnes populi...*

For a few moments the townspeople fall quiet, and the chanting predominates, but then the mob resumes and even increases its noise. Women shriek like banshees and men whistle, roar and jeer. The calls of excited children twitter like marsh birds. Some of the onlookers have brought drums and crumhorns and bladder-pipes, and the cacophony bounces off the surrounding houses and blares up into the sky above.

"They make a noise like a farmyard," Jerome mutters. He squints so that his eyes go out of focus, and sees geese with human heads, blood-faced pigs hoisting their handkerchiefs in the air, and cows capering on hind legs with their calves on their shoulders.

Aleyt has closed her own eyes completely. Let me not be haunted in dreams, she thinks. In her darkness, the proximity of her husband feels strange to her. Their elbows are touching. Why does he not take her hand, or put his arm protectively around her shoulders? Would that not be natural and affectionate? But, of course, it would not be appropriate. They should appear to be praying, at such a moment.

Jerome lets his eyes focus once again. The tipstuffs are tying the bearded man's hands behind the stake. His knees refuse to support him, and he slides down onto his haunches, his head bowed. The tipstuffs haul him up again, but as soon as they step away, he subsides once more. The crowd boos.

"Why do they do that?" Aleyt asks, not looking.

"They want to see his face when he burns," Jerome says.

"Why are they like this?" Aleyt whispers, as unwilling curiosity forces her eyes open once more. These are the people with whom they live side by side every day; the same ordinary people who have bakeries and breweries and do laundry and build walls and till the fields around Den Bosch and eat and drink and pray, just as they do. Now it is as if they have lost all their singularities, and become a composite, many-headed monster.

The Inquisitor, still dark and faceless beneath his cowl, briskly removes the waist cord from his black gown and grabs a handful of the man's thick unruly locks. He loops the cord tightly around the clump of hair and hands the end to one of the sweating tipstuffs. They force the man back to his feet, and lash his hair to the stake so that his neck strains backwards and he can't sink down. Then the Inquisitor makes the sign of the cross and begins praying, leaning in towards the condemned man's ear.

Jerome's gaze escapes down the steps of the platform, where a brazier of coals glows redly. The executioner, a fat carrion crow, thrusts a long stick wrapped in rags into the brazier and holds it there until bright flames lick upwards. Then he withdraws the firebrand and stands in readiness. The Inquisitor gathers his cassock up around his knees and picks his way carefully down the steps. When he is clear, the executioner thrusts the flaming brand into one of the bundles of hay at the base of the platform.

It catches light immediately, and the crow hops swiftly around the edges of

the pyre, touching the brand here and there until flames leap upwards on all sides of the platform. A solemn hush finally falls upon the crowd.

Aleyt, closing her eyes once again, hears beneath the chanting of the Dominicans the crackling and snapping of wood as it catches the fire from the hay. Closer to hand, she is surprised by the sudden cooing of some pigeons on their own rooftop, unperturbed by the scene below.

*"Jesus! Jesus! Jesus!"*

The cry jerks her eyes open, and she sees the flames climb higher around the bound man. Was he commending his soul at last to God? Or was *Jesus* just a word for unbearable pain? Now a long, high-pitched and wordless scream punctures the sky, and a dense pall of smoke obscures him from view. He makes no other sound.

Aleyt buries her face in her hands, sobbing.

"A sight to remind us of the torments of Hell," Jerome says. He feels sick inside, sullied by his mute, tacit approval of what has passed in the square. He is disgusted with himself and his fellow men. How far they have all fallen, together, since the original sin in the Garden of Eden.

The chanting of the Dominicans ceases, and for a long moment only the crackling of the burning pyre can be heard. Then the crowd comes vigorously back to life, as if each person experiences their own miraculous resurrection. The buzz of excited chatter grows louder and louder, until the market square seems filled with a swarm of bees.

These beasts and insects that we are, Jerome thinks, and turns back to face the comfortable room behind. The new tapestry from Arras, earliest fruit of the Reims commission, moves sinuously in the mild breeze that comes past them from the open window, and a whiff of acrid smoke is carried to his nostrils.

"Well, we haven't shirked our duty," he says. "No-one can say that the Master Painter and his wife are impious."

Aleyt feels suddenly exhausted. She goes to sit on the carved oak settle against the wall, her grandfather's wedding gift. Jerome remains standing, silhouetted against the window. She can't make out his expression.

She needs to clarify something. With a glance at the closed door of the room, she speaks very quietly.

"You don't believe that man was possessed by devils, as the tribunal decided, do you Jerome?"

Jerome looks at her in surprise.

"Need you ask? What do you think?"

"I think... I think that we must act as if we believe that. Even in front of Mary."

Now Jerome understands her. He nods.

"I agree."

"Not that Mary would ever say anything deliberately against us, but..."

"She's a goose," Jerome completes her thought, "and she could let slip any nonsense to anyone."

He sighs. Before Inquisitors came to the Duchy of Brabant, there had been little need to worry what tittle-tattle went about. Now, even a loose word from a servant could bring danger.

He gazes out of the window behind him again, and then comes to sit next to her. The lines on his forehead are drawn together, and his cheeks are slightly flushed.

"Half of the monks out there are drunk, and no one cares! The Church whips up this... this smoke of fear to hide its own vices."

Aleyt raises a hand, palm outwards.

"You mustn't speak such thoughts."

"I know, I know. Well, let my paintings speak for me."

"You must take care."

"I'm licensed to tell unpalatable truths, in my own way. My patrons inside the Church – they, at least, understand the need for that."

Aleyt cannot share this confidence, although she will not question it aloud. Her father, a great prophet of doom in political matters, mutters darkly of shifting sands in Den Bosch and the rest of the Duchy of Brabant. The big towns squabble for primacy, and no-one knows when or if the young Habsburg, Philip, will assume effective control of his lands. Meanwhile, unquestioned by civil authority, the Church powers flex their muscles and seek out new enemies, in all ranks of society. She wishes Jerome paid more heed to all of this, but he only accuses her of borrowing her father's unfounded anxieties.

She picks up her sewing basket from the floor beside the settle. There is a little time before supper. She needs to do something that will calm her down. Just now, she can't imagine having an appetite for food. She will just sit quietly in this room, avoiding the window. She suspects there will be noise and drunkenness in the square until nightfall, the celebrations of the unburnt. She pulls out from the basket the little lace cap she is working on.

"What's that?" Jerome asks.

"For my cousin Frida's baby. You remember? It's due any day. I'm making a little hat."

She holds it up. It's nearly finished, a sweet little white cap to keep the baby's head warm at night. Their eyes meet for a moment, and the unspoken thought they share is like a ghost passing through the room between them.

Aleyt decides to detain the ghost before it has dematerialized. She returns her eyes to Jerome's.

"It's eight days since you came home, Jerome..."

She lets the remark hang in the air and returns to her lacework.

Outside, the first bells of Den Bosch begin to call the monks and nuns to Vespers. Moments later, as always, the great bell in the cathedral tower joins in with its deep, measured, serious tone that seems to chide the other bells like unruly children. Jerome, uncomfortable after their exchange, sends his eyes wandering around the tidy room. He notices something he can't identify lying on the table and goes to look more closely.

A scroll of parchment.

"What's this?"

Aleyt looks up from her sewing.

"Oh – I'm sorry Jerome, I forgot. Mary came dashing in with that, while you were in your studio. She was afraid to disturb you, and she was in such a mad rush to get out to the square. A messenger gave it to her at the door."

Jerome turns the scroll so that he can see the seal. It is dull red, vesica-shaped: an ecclesiastical seal.

"This has come from Overmaas!" he exclaims.

Eagerly, he breaks the wax apart and unrolls the parchment to read it.

*To the Master Painter Jerome van Aachen, known as Hieronymus, of Den Bosch:*

*The Cathedral Chapter of Overmaas sends you greetings and good tidings. From the seven submissions received for the design of our new window at the north transept of the cathedral, your depiction of the nativity of Our Lord Jesus Christ has been chosen. Our bursar will visit you next week with the primus payment to secure your services, and to agree a date for completion of the drawings and colour plan, to be no later than the end of mensis Januarius the Year of Our Lord Fourteen Hundred and Ninety One. The assembly and installation of the window is to be completed by Easter of Fourteen Hundred and Ninety Two, and your supervisory services during the period of making and installation will be secured by a separate stipend to be agreed after the design work is accepted.*

*Benedictio Dei,*

*Sigismond,*

*Amanuensis to the Cathedral Chapter of Overmaas*

His head is bent over the parchment, but Aleyt can see the furrowed lines on his forehead gradually smoothing out, and when he lifts his face to her he is smiling.

"Well?" she says.

"The cathedral chapter at Overmaas has chosen my design for their window!"

In this moment she is suddenly reminded of how he looked at their wedding festivities, seven years ago. On an impulse she puts aside the cap, and all complications too, and stands up to hug him.

"God be thanked!" she says.

He smiled the whole day long, that day. In some unheeded moment during the intervening years, a different, more serious spirit crept into him. The spirit settled in gradually, scoring lines on the forehead, hollowing the cheeks a little and turning the mouth down at the corners. Jerome became a man of forty, and she has come to thirty, but just now she can discern the bridegroom again, and feels younger herself.

They step apart again, a little awkwardly. Jerome still has the parchment in his hand, and holds it up between them.

"My pleasure in this is the greater because it's unexpected."

"Oh? Weren't you confident?"

"I would have been confident but for what was whispered to me by the Dean at Overmaas when all the submissions were in."

"What, before you went away to Reims? Why didn't you tell me?"

"I promised to tell no-one. The Dean actually said *don't even tell your wife, Jerome.*"

An unnecessary injunction, Aleyt thinks. Is he going to tell her now? She looks at him with eyebrows raised, inviting more.

Jerome shrugs.

"Well, I suppose it doesn't matter any more. I've got the commission. But you'd still better keep what I tell you to yourself. There is no proof."

Aleyt nods. The bridegroom has retreated back into the past, and Jerome's brows are knitted crossly again.

"Apparently the Abbess Dominica secretly offered a large donation if the cathedral chapter preferred her candidate."

"Bribery?" Aleyt says. "So who was her candidate?"

"He didn't go as far as to tell me that."

Aleyt only knows the Abbess Dominica by sight, but she has a thorough knowledge of Jerome's views of her character.

"Well, I suppose it comes as no surprise that the Abbess would do such a thing?" she suggests.

"No. It's typical of the woman's devious ways."

He dwells for a moment on the animal images he reserves for the Abbess Dominica. A warty toad hopping. A fat worm tunnelling. A sow snouting in a trough. All in nuns' wimples.

"Well, it's a happy coincidence that I sent a message to Hameel yesterday and invited him to share our supper tonight," he goes on, dismissing the unpleasant creatures. "I didn't want to say anything until the chapter voted."

"Why is it of concern to... to Hameel?"

"I'm going to ask him to work as my assistant on this project."

"But... surely... he works as a Master in his own right?"

"Of course, but this is different. A commission with such prestige - he'll feel honoured to be asked, and it will be an opportunity to advance his craft. He's never worked on a window of such a scale. By the way, I thought he'd be here by now. I said to come at the Vespers bells."

Aleyt's left eyelid goes into its flutter, as if a butterfly has landed there. She stands, and turns that side of her face away from Jerome.

"I'll go and see if Mary's back yet. There's things to be done in the kitchen."

She's through the door and onto the landing, but Jerome calls out as she begins to descend the narrow wooden stairs.

"Oh, Aleyt! There's a cloth bag of dried mandrake fruits in the pantry."

She steps back to the door of their parlour.

"Where did you get those?" she says.

"Well, from my good friend Izaak the apothecary on Brugstraat of course. He got them from Spain two weeks ago, and he knew I was coming home soon, so he kept some back for me. Anyway, don't let Mary mistake them for something else and make a fruit pudding out of them!"

"You should keep them safe somewhere else," she chides him gently. "I expect your good friend Izaak charged a pretty price."

"I'll use them soon. I'll make up a new potion. You'll take some?"

Aleyt nods. She has tried to decline in the past, but then Jerome delivers a speech, and she must give way. For many hours - even as long as a day and a night - after taking the mandrake potion they will lie like broken dolls on their bed. The room will spin giddily around her like a spinning top losing momentum, and strange apparitions will fly through the air. Periodically, as the potion twists her guts, she will vomit violently into one of the wooden

buckets placed beside the bed.

"You know how I hate it," she says, anyway.

"It's a small price to pay, if it keeps Saint Anthony's Fire from our door," Jerome replies, as he always does.

These mandrake fruits, she knows, are supposed to be a powerful protection against the hideous plague that rages intermittently through the land, seizing rich and poor alike. But she feels that Jerome is overly zealous to use them. God sends him visions when he is sick with the potion, which he uses in his paintings. For her own part, it's mere misery. Even after the worst has passed, for days afterwards she feels as if the whole house bobs on a swelling sea.

No more to be said on the matter however. She turns and makes her way down towards the kitchen, thinking she must be sure to visit her cousin Frida with the finished baby's cap before the potion is ready.

Jerome listens to the sound of his wife's feet descending. Each step on their staircase has its own distinctive creak. It's almost a musical scale – or an unmusical scale – as a person goes up or down through the heart of the house. When he hears the sharp *crack* of the final stair he goes to the little recess in the wall where their simple carved wooden crucifix hangs. He must thank God for what has just been bestowed upon him. Making the sign of the cross over his forehead and chest, he kneels. He gazes at the crucifix and then closes his eyes, making that image stay as if burned into his mind's eye like a glimpse of the sun, letting go of the sounds from outside the window, concentrating on God, who is always there, ready to listen to him. When he feels that the stillness in his heart is sufficient, when he feels that God has entered the room, he speaks aloud, letting phrases from the Psalms flow through him slowly. He lingers on the sounds and dwells on their meaning, so that God will know they are his own words, and that they come from his heart as well as from the Bible.

"Lord, by thy favour thou hast made my mountain to stand strong. To the end that my glory may sing praise to thee, and not be silent, O Lord my God, I will give thanks unto thee forever. I will walk within my house with a perfect heart. I will set no wicked thing before mine eyes. Whoso privily slanders his neighbour, him will I cut off. Him that hath a high look and a proud heart I will not suffer. Mine eyes shall be upon the faithful of the land, that they may dwell with me. He that worketh deceit shall not dwell within my house. He that telleth lies shall not tarry in my sight. Make a joyful noise unto the Lord, all ye lands. Serve the Lord with gladness, come before his presence with singing. So be it. Amen."

He finishes, but remains kneeling in his self-imposed darkness. The image of Abbess Dominica drifts into his mind's eye. She of the high look and the proud heart, the worker of deceit. He has a sudden pang that his prayer has been sullied by resentment. He hasn't chosen the most appropriate words to thank God for his good fortune. So he makes her image walk away along a long dark road, and when she has finally disappeared, he says a silent Lord's Prayer in atonement. He wants to appear grateful before God, not tainted by bitterness. He adds a prayer to Saint Gummarus, patron of the childless, whose tomb he visited in the chapel of the abbey at Lier, on the way home

from Reims. Should he have left a larger donation there? The monks at Lier seemed serious and pious, unlike so many in Den Bosch.

As he ends this prayer, he hears feet ascending the stair. It's Aleyt again – her tread is lighter than Mary's or Hameel's. He makes the sign of the cross once again, and gets back onto his feet as she opens the door and enters, closing it behind her.

"Mary's just come in from the square now," Aleyt says.

"We're too lax with her," Jerome replies, meaning that Aleyt is too lax.

"I know, but she's back now, and the supper will be ready soon."

Now comes the sound of wooden clogs striking the stairs, like an approaching hammer. Jerome and Aleyt share an amused look. There is a knock at the door, but before they can call out, the knock is followed by the door opening just enough to admit the flushed, pretty face of their maidservant.

"Yes, Mary?" Jerome says.

"Hameel has come, Master... and Mistress," Mary says breathlessly. "Shall I send him up?"

"Well, what else?" Jerome says.

Mary shuts the door. Immediately they hear her voice braying down the stairwell.

"You're to come straight up!"

There is the sharp crack of the bottom step as a measured tread begins its passage upwards. A moment later there is a cascade of noise as Mary's clogs begin their descent. Midway on the narrow stair there is a pause in both sets of steps, a shuffling of feet, and a giggle from Mary, then both the upward and downward movements resume.

"She goes down those stairs like a fall of crockery!" Jerome remarks.

Then Hameel's signature light triple rap sounds on the door, and Jerome calls out, "Come in!"

Hameel enters, taking off his cap and running a hand through the luxuriant dark curls on his head. His brown eyes, usually frank and fearless, seem to flicker across the room without focussing, and there is a look of unease on his handsome face.

"I'm so late! I'm embarrassed!" he says, looking at nothing.

Jerome holds out his arms.

"Hameel! At last I set eyes on you again! Where have you been since I came back from Reims?"

Hameel shrugs, his face inscrutable, and steps awkwardly into Jerome's arms. Inside the Master Painter's embrace, he seems to crumple a little. Then he breaks away quickly to take Aleyt's hand. She feels a tremble in his fingers as he takes hers, and a pressure just too strong as he presses his lips to her knuckles. She has given him the hand that bears her wedding ring.

"It'll be dark soon! Would you have us lighting expensive candles for you?" she chides the top of his bowed head.

Hameel steps back and sweeps an arm towards the window.

"I was coming directly here after the burning, but the Abbess Dominica caught me in a corner near the Stadhuis. There's no getting away from her when she's got a bee buzzing inside her head."

"What did she want?" Jerome asks, always on the alert for new stones to pelt her with in private. Hameel waves an arm dismissively.

"Oh, it was all about the costs of the stone font for the convent chapel. The usual things."

Jerome nods. Some years ago, when Dominica first became the abbess, he had been already in the midst of executing a commission for the convent's refectory at her predecessor's behest. Her carping and haggling over the price soon set the tone of mutual antipathy that had festered ever since.

"Abbess Dominica chisels down the costs of everything except her own robes and meals!" he says. "And then when it comes to paying up...! Do you know how long it took me to get the money out of her for my painting of the Passion?"

Hameel smiles wryly.

"Eight months..."

"...and three weeks!" Aleyt interjects.

They all laugh. The old joke seems to have eased the tension in Hameel's shoulders and face. Jerome turns to Aleyt.

"Am I such a bore?"

"Of course you are," she says, "and that's why Hameel has stayed away!"

She makes a smile and moves towards the door.

"I'm going to chivvy Mary. Hameel - you know it's just cold meats? We must use all up before Lent."

"Of course! I wouldn't expect a feast at night-time. I ate well at midday."

"Well - for now I'll leave you poor put-upon artists alone to discuss your grievances."

## CHAPTER TWO

"Hameel - make yourself comfortable."

Jerome gestures to Hameel to sit. Hameel takes the less comfortable of the two oak box-chairs, out of politeness, and listens to Aleyt's footsteps receding down the stairs. He runs his eye appreciatively around the familiar room. This room - indeed, the whole house - embodies the idea of a 'home' for him. His own lodgings, a cramped pair of rooms beside his workshop, are no more than a place to live in. Not that he should complain. His lodgings are a step up from the overcrowded kennels that cram his neighbourhood. But they feel bare and lifeless, and for five years he has lived in them as if he will move to something better in a few weeks' time.

Jerome takes the other seat. Hameel looks tired, he thinks, and he hasn't noticed him fidget like this with his fingers before, as if there is some substance clinging to them. He is fully seven years younger than himself, but he seems to have wrinkled slightly in the few weeks that they've been apart. How unlike Aleyt, who has bloomed like a flower while he was away, her skin gaining a beautiful peachy healthiness after the wan looks of the fruitless winter. He should have thought to say this to her - tonight, he will say this.

"So, Hameel, is it the Abbess I must blame for your absence from our house since I returned from Reims?"

"It is."

"I have to say - to be blunt - you look worn out, Hameel."

Hameel nods.

"She wants my nose at the grindstone day and night."

"Oh, yes. A tight deadline for you to work to, and then you can go dangling for payment."

"She's given me a good advance in fact."

Jerome hoists an eyebrow.

"You should consider yourself very favoured, Hameel! Well - you'll at least take time off for the Holy Company's Shrove Tuesday feast tomorrow?"

"I don't know, Jerome. There's the expense of it as well. I haven't put my name down."

"That's a pity, I'd have liked your company. Do you want me to ask Wiggers in the morning if there's still room? Let me make up a half of the subscription for you."

Patronising, as ever. But Hameel keeps his brow unfurrowed.

"That's a kind offer, Jerome, but no, you'd better not."

Jerome has observed the suppressed hint of a frown. Was he tactless to offer money? Surely he can do so much for a friend of such long standing? He sighs inwardly at the prospect of the feast. A day lost to his painting, and an unwanted flirtation with the sin of Gluttony.

"No doubt the Abbess will be there herself, feeding like the very picture of Gluttony!" he says, following the thought through to an image.

Hameel snorts and nods. The Abbess has the appetite of a horse. But he doesn't want to be drawn into this old topic.

"Did you eat well at the Abbey of Saint Denis in Reims?"

"In moderation, but well, yes."

"And your brother Goessens remains there?"

"He does. He's set up a studio there and will execute the figure of the saint, and incorporate my sketches for the background landscape, with the Abbey featuring prominently as the Abbot requires."

"But surely the Abbey of Saint Denis, by definition, only came into being after the saint's death?"

"That's not a matter that troubles the Abbot. He's more exercised by the dilemma of the saint's halo. Poor Goessens is driven around in circles by the matter."

"Why is that difficult?"

"Hameel - perhaps you're forgetting that Saint Denis was decapitated?"

"Ah..."

"And the painting for the abbey's chapel is to show his subsequent miraculous preaching, with the head cradled in his arms."

"So the halo..."

"Could be where the head used to be, or could be carried along with the head. In my view haloes are best dispensed with altogether."

"You never give your saints haloes."

"No. But these French monks are old-fashioned. The Abbot is determined upon a halo, but torn by doubts as to where it should be. I'm delighted to leave it all to Goessens. At least the Abbey of Saint Denis is prosperous, and

the Abbot will pay well for his halo. I doubt he's as rich as our Abbess Dominica, however."

There is a cheer from the square outside, where the buzz of excitement still persists. Perhaps some juggler or conjuror has started to entertain the crowd, Jerome thinks with distaste. Folly and levity springing up like mushrooms out of death.

"Since you've been away, perhaps you don't know about her latest source of income?" Hameel says.

"What's that?"

"The Inquisitor."

"What, the Spaniard?"

"Yes, Jacomo."

"How is she making money from him?"

"She's lured him from where he was staying, to lodge at the convent."

Jerome considers this. Her audacity can still surprise him.

"A man lodging in a convent!"

"It's of the Dominican order. Their nearest monastery is too far from Den Bosch for his convenience."

"But do neither of them have any care for propriety? And he's paying a good price, I expect?"

"Oh, Jacomo won't care about the price. Rome will foot the bill, as long as he un.masks his quota of heretics and witches."

A quota? Would the Papal authorities be so cynical? It's possible.

"You really think Rome sets a quota?" he says.

Hameel shrugs.

"Well, nothing would surprise me," he adds.

"You've not met Jacomo, have you?" Hameel says.

"No - I believe he arrived on the same day as I left for Reims. Have you?"

"The Abbess introduced us, the last time I was at the convent to discuss the chapel with her. That was when I found out he'd moved in there - he and another Dominican, who acts as his assistant. *Outriders*, Jacomo said, *Just a start*. Apparently he expects more inquisitors to follow him here in due course, once he's got established. Answerable to him."

"And how did you find him?"

"Terrifying. Do you know why he's come to Den Bosch?"

"Well, to hunt out witches I assume."

Hameel waves a hand expansively.

"He can find them anywhere in Brabant. No, it's because of our famous ironworkers."

"What - at the bell foundry do you mean?"

"That's right. As it happens, Master Diederik left Den Bosch just after you went to Reims. He's casting bells for churches up in Zwolle and Groningen. But Jacomo told me he's eagerly awaiting his return."

Jerome tries to put these elements together: bells and inquisitors. He gives up.

"I haven't a clue what this means, Hameel. Is he ordering new bells for Rome?"

Hameel shakes his head. If only he could shake out of it the images that

have plagued him since his conversation with the inquisitor.

"No. It seems he's spent years dreaming up new ideas for torture, and he wants our ironworkers to cast implements from his designs. What's worse, the Abbess put the suggestion to him that I could make precise drawings from his own sketches. She showed him some of my work on the font and the gargoyles. Now he's got hold of the idea that I might liaise between him and Diederik. Christ! You should have seen his eyes light up, Jerome, when he told me his idea for a device that would slowly twist a man's head until he was looking over the middle of his own back."

Jerome slaps a hand angrily on the arm of his chair.

"What right have such men to claim to represent God? God the just, God the merciful! The punishment of sinners in the next life is reserved to Him alone, and here in this imperfect world, we have civil authorities to punish crime."

He thinks of the Burgemeester, the thin-lipped Theofilus Piek. There is a man rigorous enough, and with powers enough, to keep Den Bosch as free of robbers and rapists and drunken brawlers as any city in Brabant.

"Does Theofilus Piek know of these intentions?" he says.

"I don't think it's likely. I think Jacomo is waiting for the return of Diederik before going any further."

"Well, our Burgemeester will be at the Feast tomorrow. I'll look for a moment to bring this up. Does he want Den Bosch to be known for such works? He shouldn't lie down and let these monks from Rome trample where they will!"

Hameel, as usual, is left between admiration and irritation. Jerome is so sure of himself. But why does he think it his business to interfere in matters of church and state? Why does he think the Burgemeester will heed the advice of a painter?

But Jerome is looking to him for some response, so he raises an invisible cup into the air, making a wan smile.

"I'll drink to that!"

Jerome smiles back, letting go of his anger, for now.

"How remiss of me! Let me fetch you a goblet of red wine."

"Better still, could we go into your studio to drink our wine? I'm curious to see how your painting of Hell progresses. I haven't seen it since... what, the Feast of the Epiphany at least."

"Of course, yes - by all means come down and visit Hell with me! But first, Hameel, I have some news."

He gestures at the scroll still lying on the table.

"Hameel - the commission for the window at Overmaas is mine!"

Hameel has no place to hide from the beaming face of the Master Painter, whose eyes demand his approbation and admiration. He glances back to the scroll awkwardly, and feels a flush rising to his face. He summons the will to look back into Jerome's eyes, and sets his mouth into a smile.

"That's wonderful news, Jerome! Congratulations!"

His voice sounds toneless, like a flawed bell. But Jerome doesn't seem to notice his awkwardness. For an artist, Hameel thinks, a man with an acute eye on the world around him, Jerome can be surprisingly blind. Just now, his

gaze is blurred by excitement at his triumph.

"I'll be starting in the autumn, when I've finished my triptych for Saint John's. It's a big job, and I'll need help. Hameel - I want you to work on this as my assistant!"

He looks expectantly at Hameel.

In clumsy confusion, Hameel jumps out of his chair and walks to the window, where he feigns a sneeze. Surely Jerome cannot fail to see through the poor thin mask he is wearing over his feelings? He stares out of the window, trying to compose himself. Out in the square the crowd is diminishing now as the light begins to fail. The pyre has burned out, and tipstaves are throwing buckets of water on the embers, and at each other. They are drunk. At the stake, which is solid enough to have survived the flames, he can make out the warlock's skeleton hung with clinging fragments of charred flesh.

He turns his gaze back into the room, looking towards Jerome, but not at him.

"I'm...I'm not sure Jerome. This commission from the Abbess... the font, the gargoyles..."

"Small beer, Hameel, compared with this work!"

Small beer for him, Hameel thinks, but the biggest commission that's ever come *my* way. He takes a deep breath. Jerome's intentions are good, and it's entirely thanks to Jerome that he has become an artist himself. He must focus on that fact, remember the debt he owes to the Master Painter of Den Bosch. Still, in this instance, the morsel he has been thrown is too gristly to swallow easily.

"But I'm contracted... I'm contracted well into the autumn."

"Hurry it along, Hameel. The Abbess is an impatient, hasty woman anyway. You can have your job done by the start of the autumn."

Hameel turns away again and looks up at the sky above the square. Behind him, the Master Painter brings their agreement to a conclusion.

"You and me, Hameel! It'll be wonderful to work with you again. Come on, I'll get you that wine, and we'll go down to Hell together!"

### CHAPTER THREE

Jacomo, the Inquisitor, crossing the bridge towards the bell foundry, finds his attention caught by the enormous wheel being driven by the river's current. Coming to a halt, he glances in either direction out of habit. He has no enemies in Den Bosch yet, as far as he knows, but that will change. Since the early days in Seville under Father Torquemada, when once he was ambushed in a street in the Jewish quarter, he has preferred to have an armed man at his back. For now, in Den Bosch, where his inquisition has barely begun, he will depend on his concealed dagger and his sharp eyes and ears.

Satisfied that his surroundings are innocent, he leans his elbows on the stone parapet and gives his full attention to the wheel. Mechanical devices of all kinds fascinate him, and his eye savours the construction and shape of the massive wooden paddles as they dip into the hurrying green water and are

propelled upwards again, dripping copiously and glistening in the Spring sunlight like the scales of some extraordinary fish. The wheel's strong, inexorable movement speaks to him of the power that God has put at Man's disposal. He is himself such an engine of His will. It flows through him, like the surge of a river.

The large, stolid and unadorned brick building from which the mill wheel projects emits a loud panting noise, as if an enormous beast were stabled inside. Giacomo permits himself this fantasy for a moment, imagining some monstrous creature with horns and serpent tail straining at its chains. Behind its surfaces, the world is filled with the Devils' hidden works. But he is familiar with the interiors of foundries and forges, and knows the monster's breath is in reality the regular huffing of gigantic bellows driven by the power of the water. Other sporadic sounds ring out: metallic clangs and sharp impacts. The sweetish smell of burning charcoal is in the air. Giacomo feels a pleasant thrill of anticipation. The bell foundry of Den Bosch is famous throughout Brabant for the quality of its craftsmen, and he is confident that he will bend their master to his will. God's will.

Moving on from the bridge, he comes to the side of the brick building. There is a low archway. It doesn't look like the main entrance, which must permit the passage of a horse and cart at least. However, it appeals to Giacomo to make his way into the foundry unseen, and he slips under the arch into a passageway. He follows a sound of quietly clinking metal to an open door, and peers in at a small room with one barred embrasure. A man wearing a thick leather apron looks up startled from sorting through tools on a bench.

"I'm here to speak with the Master," Giacomo says. "Where is he?"

The man looks at him in a disconcerted way, and then puts a finger to his mouth and shakes his head, making a grunting noise. Giacomo surmises that he is mute. But presumably he isn't an idiot, or he wouldn't be working here. The man gestures with his palm in the air for Giacomo to wait, and goes out quickly through the door.

The room seems to be a store and workshop for tools. Giacomo enters and looks approvingly over the neat racks of tongs and hammers, pincers, pokers, and metal implements and contraptions of all kinds, some of whose functions are obscure to him. He picks up a small vice, and turns it a few times. The screw is well-greased, and it feels heavy and balanced in his hand, a good quality implement. He wonders if they make their own tools, and looks closely at the handle to see if there is any identifying mark.

Outside, he hears footsteps approaching, and he puts down the vice and turns to face the entrance. A powerful square-built figure fills the doorframe.

"Brother Giacomo? I was expecting you - but not here!"

The man smiles. Giacomo chooses not to.

"Master Diederik?" he says.

The man nods, and looks uncertain whether or not to offer Giacomo his hand, so he puts the matter out of doubt with a benedictory sign of the cross in the air between them. He prefers to avoid touching human flesh. Even the physicality of his own body and its functions is a matter for regret.

The bell master bobs his head downwards a little in acknowledgement of the blessing, and then makes the faintest sketch of a second smile, his closed

mouth like a bent pin on his fleshy face, which is flushed with the heat of the foundry. His brow is damp with the sheen of his disgusting sweat – could he not have wiped himself with a towel before appearing?

“I hope that your work in Groningen and the north went well,” Jacomo says. “I’ve been waiting eagerly for your return, and looking forward to seeing your foundry in operation.”

“And this is a good morning for you to call, as I said in my reply to your message. A bell for Saint Paul’s of Antwerp is in its casting pit, and we’ll be pouring the bronze within the hour. My foreman will come to tell me when the molten metal in the crucible is at the right heat. Would it interest you to see that process?”

“That would be most interesting, yes.”

Jacomo waits, and Diederik examines his hands for a moment.

“Your message said that you wished to discuss some business proposal with me, Brother Jacomo?”

Jacomo nods. He prefers to save words, when a gesture will do. Besides, a nod or a movement of the hand can hold more meanings than a word.

Diederik steps aside from the doorway.

“Come with me then, Brother. We’ll go to my office where we can be more comfortable.”

He follows Diederik’s broad back along the passage. When he was a boy, and still a foolish prey to Satan’s promptings, he delighted in goading boys of such dimensions into fighting him. His reputation grew with each one that he bloodied and humbled. Caught off guard by this memory, he suppresses the sinful pride that still accompanies it. He will don his hair shirt tonight, in penance.

They emerge into an ample yard filled with wooden frames of all kinds and sizes, broken ends of clay castings, and boxes piled with sand. Brick buildings enclose the yard on three sides. Smoke rises thickly from a wide chimney at the far end, and drifts in a curling dark plume into the blue sky above.

“The furnace,” Diederik says, glancing back at him and pointing towards it.

They pass through a doorway to a large, bright room. There are tables scattered with plans and papers, and more tool racks on the walls. The bell master gestures to a settle with an upholstered seat against one wall. Jacomo sits, and Diederik pours beer into two mugs from a pitcher that stands in a tub of water for coolness.

“I always drink beer, Brother, in preference to water, and I make sure my family does the same,” he says.

“You believe that the plague is carried in the water?” Jacomo says, drawing the most obvious conclusion.

“Yes. Thanks be to God – and beer – we are untouched as yet.”

“I think it’s God you should thank indeed,” Jacomo says. He has no time for such theories. Saint Anthony’s Fire is visited by God upon the sinful, and no-one can avoid it by any of the many measures touted about by the ignorant.

He takes the merest sip of the beer, and sets the mug down on the ground

beside him. He looks at the bell master without speaking. Most men will speak quickly, and sometimes rashly, faced with his stillness.

"Well..." Diederik says before long. "What exactly is it I can do for you, Brother Jacomo?"

"That depends on what you *can* do, Master Diederik. That's what I've come to find out. Your reputation is excellent. Your bells are considered the best in all Brabant. The bell that calls me to prayer at the convent of Saint Agnes is a most sonorous instrument."

The bell master looks pleased, and lowers his head a little to hide it.

"The first bell I had the overall charge of when my father had died. A lucky beginning. Is it a bell that you want us to make, Brother Jacomo?"

"No, it is not. What else than bells do you make here, Master Diederik?"

"Well, sometimes we cast bronze statues and effigies for the inside of churches and cathedrals. We've made hundreds of crosses of course - simple work - and sconces for candles. We also make large cauldrons and cooking vessels for the big kitchens of the nobility. And in our forge we make implements for our own foundry, and to sell to blacksmiths and other metal workers. We make quite a range of instruments - both standard ones and bespoke ones."

"So - both forging and casting - and from the largest of bells to the merest pair of pincers to pick up a hot piece of metal?"

"Yes, although of course we specialize in the larger work - the bell casting. Our biggest bells have to be cast in the location where they'll hang. We dig a casting pit at the base of the bell tower. But here in Den Bosch we cast all sizes of bells that can be transported on a cart. We have a special strong cart, which can be drawn by four donkeys."

Jacomo nods. This has all been reported to him, more or less, from the investigations of his assistant, Brother Bartelme. But he prefers to confirm anything that comes from Brother Bartelme, or any other source, with his own eyes and ears.

Diederik takes a good swig of his beer and wipes his mouth. Jacomo continues to wait.

"But what have you in mind, Brother Jacomo?"

Jacomo gives him a long look. Diederik puts down his beer mug, looking as if conscious of some unintended sin.

"You must be aware, Master Diederik, that torture is a necessary part of an Inquisitor's work. Those suspected of heresy, witchcraft, or other heinous crimes against God must often be tortured to extract confessions and information. And it is my own belief, and that of some of my brothers in this work, that torture can also be used to drive the possessing devils from the bodies of those who are confirmed in their wickedness."

He pauses, the better to observe the bell master. The sweaty sheen has dried out now, and his face is a cold white with blotches of redness on his cheeks and forehead. He wonders how much beer Diederik drinks, during his working day. But the man seems sober enough.

"We use, in God's work, a range of instruments," Jacomo goes on. "You might know some of their names, by repute. Some implements we can carry about with us from place to place - devices such as the heretic's fork and the

pear. Others are large and heavy things – the Judas chair, the Spanish donkey, or the stretching rack, for example – which are kept only at a few centres in the largest towns. Generally we have access to the dungeons of the civil authorities – as I have here in Den Bosch. But I have bigger plans for Den Bosch, Master Diederik. I would like to set up here an inquisitorial dungeon, wholly under the control of the Church of Rome, for the investigation and punishment of heresy and witchcraft. God knows I suspect enough such sinners abide in these parts. The Abbess Dominica, of the convent of Saint Agnes, owns a highly suitable building, with thick walls and an extensive cellar, used at present as a storehouse. It's conveniently adjacent to the gaol cells behind the Stadhuis. Den Bosch is the largest and most important town of all Brabant, and, by great good fortune, is home to the skilled workers with bronze and iron who will be needed for such an enterprise."

Diederik looks like a man about to vomit. His eyes are wide but sightless, as if focussed on something unpleasant inside himself.

"You want us to make torture devices for you here?" he says.

There is a suggestion of incredulity in his tone, but Jacomo treats it as a brisk statement of fact.

"Exactly – and, Master Diederik, they will be devices such as the world has never yet seen!"

He can see that Diederik has been surprised by his tone. He can't keep the enthusiasm out of his voice on this matter – but then, why should he?

"What do you mean, Brother?"

"I mean that between us – with my ideas and your skills – we can create the finest array of implements that any inquisitor has yet had at their disposal."

"I don't understand – I thought that... well, I thought there was a fixed range of such...things."

"There is. But new things are added to God's world by the powers he has invested in Man. He has given us imagination, to seek and find new ways of serving him. This is my way – my own gift to God. You must understand that when we torture a witch or a heretic, it is not the human being, the child of God, whom we torture. It is the demons that possess him – or her. Those demons are tenacious. They will not yield their prey without a fight, and if they are not driven from the body they inhabit by the most excruciating pains, they will hold on and carry the soul away to Hell."

Jacomo pauses, and waits patiently for some response from Diederik.

The bell master reaches for his beer mug, and then changes his mind.

"What sort of things do you have in mind?" he says slowly and quietly, as if he would prefer the words unspoken.

"I have many ideas, but they are united by a single principle. I want the torment of these devils to be conducted in the most elegant and fitting way that is possible. The crushing of bones and gouging of eyes and ripping away of genitals – while all necessary and appropriate in many circumstances – are crude work, butcher's work. Let me give you a story that illustrates my intentions. Have you heard of the name of Perillos of Athens in ancient Greece?"

"I'm not a highly educated man, Brother," Diederik says apologetically. "I can read a piece of Latin, and make my measurements of course, but..."

"Oh, he's not a well-known figure," Jacomo says, waving a hand dismissively. "He was a brass founder, who worked for Phalaris, a tyrant king. He proposed a new means of executing criminals - the brazen bull. He cast a bull as large as a real bull from brass. It was hollow, with a door in its side. The condemned man was pushed into the interior through the door, which was then locked. A fire was set under the bull, and so the brass heated up until the man was slowly roasted inside. Phalaris would himself be feasting with his courtiers while this was in progress, and Perillos designed the bull in such a way that its smoke rose in scented plumes. Even more clever was a complex system of tubes that he devised in the head of the brass animal that made the prisoner's screams sound like the bellowing of a real bull."

"How horrible!" Diederik mutters.

"Yes, horrible," Jacomo agrees. "To inflict such torment merely for its own sake. And Perillos paid a heavy penalty for his imagination - when Phalaris was completely satisfied with the design and construction of the bull, he made sure that Perillos was the first man to suffer death within it."

Diederik pulls a face.

"And you wish to persuade *me* to make torture implements!"

Jacomo smiles.

"Of course, the fate of Perillos is hardly an encouragement. But those were ancient, heathen times, when Christ had not come among us to redeem our immortal souls. I only describe to you the device of the brazen bull to illustrate how imagination and elegance can be employed in such a matter. That is what I seek in the service of God. But a brazen bull would not suit my purposes at all. Do you know why?"

"Why?"

"Because if I am torturing a devil that has taken up residence in a man or a woman, then I must know that they have been driven away before death. Otherwise I have lost a soul to Satan. I must hear the words of renunciation on their lips. It is my duty to guide them to their final utterances. They must die commending their soul to God. The infuriated bellowing of a brass bull would be of no use to me."

Jacomo is watchful of the effect of his words on the bell master, who now picks up his mug of beer again and drains it. When Diederik speaks, avoiding his eyes, it is as he expects.

"We have as much work as we can handle in our own line of expertise, Brother Jacomo. I have orders for bells that will keep us busy the rest of the year."

Jacomo listens patiently. He will allow the worm to have its wriggle before impaling it on his fisherman's hook.

"So - although of course I appreciate the high opinion you have of our foundry, and the... the... high moral value of what you aim to do..."

Jacomo keeps his eyes on the bell master's face. A moist sheen is reappearing on his forehead.

"... I fear that I... we... must decline to branch out into a line of work that

is... is not really in our field."

The wriggling is over.

"So you *decline*, do you, Master Diederik?"

Diederik straightens his back a little, as if to draw strength from a good posture.

"Yes."

"You are a married man, I believe, Master Diederik?"

Now he has him. He looks completely perplexed. You can read in his face: *Married? What has that got to do with anything?*

"I am, Brother Jacomo."

"Your wife's name is Birgit?"

"It is..."

"But you also have a particular friend in the town, I believe?"

"A friend? I have many friends, I hope, in the town, Brother."

There is sweat beading now on his forehead. The fool begins to see where this is going.

"Your *particular* friend is called Catalyn. I had her brought to speak to my assistant, Brother Bartelme, yesterday. The Abbess Dominica knew where she was to be found."

Now Diederik flushes red to the roots of his sparse, curly hair.

"The acts you engage in with Catalyn - and I know all the details - are not sanctioned by God's laws, Diederik. Were they lies that she told to Brother Bartelme? I would deal harshly with a liar."

Diederik shakes his head, looking at his hands. His flush is so intense that Jacomo would not be surprised to see blood bursting out of his pores.

"So - you must think of your wife. Your good wife, Birgit. I hear nothing against this pious woman; a good church-goer, the mother of your children. You must renounce this sinful liaison henceforward. I imagine you can do this, and the matter can pass quietly into the past?"

Diederik's eyes are closed now, as if he could hide thus from the shame. He nods his agreement.

"Good. We must prefer that to a public denunciation and all the attendant unpleasantness for a man of your standing in the town. Dealing with common adultery does not fall within my own remit, of course, but I'm aware that the authorities in Brabant punish it harshly, when it raises its ugly lustful head. So - let me just say this: your new work will take precedence over your existing orders. You will be paid very well for your skills - and *enthusiasm*. I expect your fullest co-operation. God has chosen you for this Diederik, just as he has chosen me. Do not set yourself against the will of God."

He pauses. Diederik has opened his eyes again.

"Perhaps the idea of torture fills you with horror and repugnance?" Jacomo says.

Diederik nods mutely.

"That is a natural and understandable reaction. But remember what I've told you. It's the devils within that I torture, not the heretic. I have overcome my own horror and repugnance by prayer and meditation. I know that what I do is for the glory of God. That must be your own guiding principal, Bell Master."

There is a knock on the open door. A bearded face looks in.

"I believe our metal is ready to be poured, Master," the man says, and then, catching sight of Jacomo, he bobs a bow at him and crosses himself.

Jacomo stands up.

"Excellent. Now that our agreement is made, I look forward to learning much more about your working methods!"

Diederik stands too, and leads the way towards the casting pit. He trudges along with head bowed, as Jacomo has seen some men trudge towards their place of execution.