

**CUPID AND THE SILENT
GODDESS**

Other Novels by Alan Fisk

The Strange Things of the World

The Summer Stars

Forty Testoons

Lord of Silver

Under the pen name of John Raymond

Lightstorm

**CUPID AND THE SILENT
GODDESS**

By

Alan Fisk

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Cover: *An Allegory with Venus and Cupid* by Bronzino (1503-1572), painted about 1545 in oil on wood (146.5 x 116.8 cm) by kind permission of The National Gallery (Reference: NG 651).

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Alan Fisk, 2003.

CHAPTER ONE

When I was a young man, King François of France greatly admired my bare buttocks. I have that information only by hearsay, of course, because my buttocks were in the king's château of Chambord while I was here in Italy.

None of that would ever have happened if Duke Cosimo de' Medici of Florence had not caught me naked in my master's studio on the hot afternoon of Wednesday the 21st. of May, 1544.

I had been modelling for a study which my master was making. He was beginning to transform a vision in his mind into a painting on wood or canvas, and had made me stand in a contorted and painful pose for an hour after lunch. When my master decided to stop work and join the rest of the city in its heavy afternoon sleep, he did not give me leave to sleep as well. He let me relax from my painful Classical posture and stretch my twisted limbs, and then, once he had relieved me of the task of being a model, he sent me back to my tasks as his apprentice.

'The last layer of gesso should be dry by now, Giuseppe,' he told me. 'You may now apply the first layer of *gesso sottile*. Keep the door closed so that the smell doesn't wake me up.'

He turned his dark staring eyes away from me and strode off to his bedroom as stiffly and smartly as one of the Duke's soldiers marching in a parade. I heard him collapse onto his bed with a long sigh, and then he was silent. He could fall asleep instantly, like a cat. I took out the bucket and spatula, and began mixing the plaster with the glue to form more gesso. My job was to apply it to a rectangular wooden panel, upon which my master was going to paint his next picture. Because of the heat, and because I believed that I was the only human being still awake in all of Florence, I did not bother to dress again.

The smell of the liquid gesso beat back the smells of the city, which were trying to force their way in through the open window. As I began to apply the first layer of *gesso sottile* to the panel, I was nearly gagging from the stink of the glue. It is made by boiling down the coarsest parts of dead animals. One of the first lessons I had learnt as a painter's apprentice was that great art is often begun by handling low and humble substances. The sculptors must often feel this. They create the most elegant and graceful statues by hammering away in clouds of dust like common labourers, which, indeed, some painters consider them to be.

I was pondering these elevated matters while my aforementioned bare buttocks slowly heated up and moistened with sweat in a shaft of cruel sunlight that was shining upon them. Suddenly, I heard the street door on the floor below being wrenched open, taking the strong iron bolt with it. I then heard the sound of boots and men's voices coming up the stairs, at a time of day when neither footsteps nor voices should be heard.

Duke Cosimo believed in the sanctity of the afternoon siesta. He had been known to have a man publicly caned for tuning a lute at an open window during the hours set aside for the siesta, and quite rightly too, I say. Now the door to the studio opened. I found myself facing two of the Duke's personal guards in their distinctive uniforms and helmets, while they found themselves looking at a naked curly-haired youth holding a bucket of something white and stinking in one hand, and a spatula in the other. The two guards said nothing, so I spoke first, in a compulsion to explain myself.

'I'm applying a layer of gesso to this panel so my master can paint a picture on it,' I said.

'We don't care what you're doing,' one of the guards replied. 'The Duke has come to see Bronzino. Where is he?' Everyone called my master 'Bronzino', the little bronze man. He always used it himself, and had done so since he was a boy.

'My master is asleep,' I replied, putting down my bucket and spatula. 'I'll wake him.'

'No need,' said my master from inside his bedroom. He spoke the words wearily, as though he were continuing the long measured sigh with which he had abandoned himself to sleep. Bronzino came out into the studio looking as tidy and composed as if he had been waiting within for an hour for just such a call. They called him 'the little bronze man' because he was short, and had a dark, swarthy skin. I

had always suspected that he had Moorish or Jewish blood, but I had never dared to say so.

Now we heard two more men coming up the stairs. The first man of the pair was hurrying. I guessed that it was another ducal guard, and I was right. The guard snapped to attention as soon as he was inside the studio door, and, staring over our heads, announced:

‘His Grace Duke Cosimo of Florence!’

The other set of steps, slow and deliberate, approached the top of the stairs. The first two guards had also come to attention. Bronzino was standing in a civilian position of respect, with his arms clasped behind his back. As for myself, I, like our ancestor Adam after the Fall of Man, became unbearably aware of my nudity.

The Duke of Florence, disguised in the uniform of his own guards, stepped round the door and joined us in the now overcrowded room. He took off his helmet. As always whenever I saw him, I noticed the wart on his left cheek, and the way that every whisker in his beard was immaculately in place. He had all the manners and carriage of a natural ruler. He ignored the heat and smells of the room, he ignored his guards, and he ignored me as if he saw naked youths every day. There are men in Florence who do.

‘Bronzino,’ he said in that voice of his that somehow absorbed your attention entirely so that you forgot all other sounds, ‘I want you to paint me a picture. I know that you will have questions.’

‘It is not for me to question my Duke,’ Bronzino replied.

‘Then I will put your questions to myself on your behalf,’ Duke Cosimo declared. ‘First of all: why has the Duke come to your house instead of summoning you to the Palazzo della Signoria?’

‘It is a remarkable honour,’ Bronzino replied.

‘No, it isn’t,’ Duke Cosimo retorted. ‘I pay honour only to God, to the Pope, and to the Holy Roman Emperor. I am a duke, and I expect to receive honour, not to bestow it. I am here not to honour you but because this is a matter of secrecy.’

‘I am nevertheless glad that you should judge me reliable at keeping secrets,’ Bronzino replied. If indeed there was ever a man to whom you could entrust the most valuable and weighty of secrets, it was the silent and impassive Bronzino. I was one of only three citizens of Florence outside the Palazzo who knew that Bronzino had painted a nude picture of Duke Cosimo as Orpheus. I never found out why the Duke had commissioned that secret painting, and I was certainly not going to ask him.

‘You had better keep my secret,’ Duke Cosimo told him, ‘or I’ll have you flung alive into the river Arno without your skin.’ There could be no answer to that, so Bronzino said nothing, and the Duke continued. ‘I have decided to send a diplomatic gift to King François of France,’ he announced. ‘The gift is to be a painting, and I have chosen you to execute it.’

‘I am at your service,’ Bronzino replied.

‘No, you are *in* my service,’ the Duke corrected him, ‘as my court painter. If you please me in this task, I may consider formally appointing you to that title. You will finish this painting within the next four months.’

‘What is to be the subject?’ Bronzino asked. I had thought that the post of court painter which he held, although unofficially, was almost a title of nobility, but now I saw that Duke Cosimo regarded Bronzino as simply a particularly skilled servant, like a musician or a cook.

‘The subject?’ Duke Cosimo exclaimed. ‘I have not thought of one in detail. I leave that to you, but it is to be a Classical subject. I thought of a mythological scene, or perhaps one with Classical figures.’

The Duke looked at me. I became conscious of the sweat that was trickling all down my body. I could not have been the only one in that crowded studio who was sweating in the gloomy and breathless heat, but all the others were fully dressed. They must have been sweating more, but they were showing it less. Duke Cosimo looked powerful enough to stop his body from doing anything as gross as sweating. The three guards looked as though they would not sweat unless they were ordered to. Bronzino always looked as though he was too refined to put out any kind of body product whatsoever. Now the Duke turned his attention to me.

‘I may have a use for this creature. Who is he?’

My sweat seemed to turn into the rushing torrents that one sees plunging down the mountainsides around Lake Garda. Even the three guards could not prevent their eyes from widening. The Duke was a harsh man, but nobody had ever accused him of perversion: he had the sins of great men, not the mere vices of petty men. Bronzino answered him with his customary assured politeness.

‘This is my apprentice, Giuseppe. In what way may he serve you?’

Bronzino was such a dry man that I am still wondering whether his offer was meant as a lewd joke.

Then again, until I met Duke Cosimo, I had never grasped the real meaning of the expression ‘not a man to be trifled with.’

‘Does he model for you as well?’ Duke Cosimo demanded.

‘Why, yes,’ Bronzino replied. ‘In fact, he -’

‘Good. He’ll do,’ the Duke decided.

‘Do for what, Your Grace?’ Bronzino asked with a bluntness which was quite uncharacteristic of him.

‘For the painting, damn you!’ the Duke shouted. ‘Am I served only by idiots? You must use him as a model. He can model for Cupid.’

‘Cupid?’ Bronzino asked. ‘Do you not think him somewhat too old -’

‘Will you shut up and let me give you my orders without interruption?’ the Duke bellowed. ‘I leave the design of the painting up to you, but it must have something to do with Cupid. There you are. There’s your Cupid.’

‘Your Grace shall have his painting incorporating Cupid,’ Bronzino said. ‘Are there any other specifications?’

‘Just make it a fine and beautiful painting, fit to be presented to a king,’ the Duke told him. ‘This is to be kept a secret, do you understand? Make sure that your Cupid here understands that too, or he’ll be modelling for St. Sebastian, out in the piazza.’

‘I believe that Giuseppe understands,’ Bronzino replied, and Giuseppe certainly did. I had no doubt that Duke Cosimo really would have me shot full of arrows like St. Sebastian if he were to suspect me of giving away the secret of the painting.

‘My chamberlain will send for you when I have time to give you an appointment to discuss this further,’ the Duke informed Bronzino. The Duke beckoned to his guards. ‘Come on, I’m going back to the Palazzo. I’ve given up my siesta for this. So have you. So has Bronzino,’ the Duke added, as he stepped out and went down the stairs. As he was descending the staircase, we heard his voice again. ‘Only Cupid has not given up his siesta! Try to find the allegorical meaning of that, Bronzino!’

The street door slammed shut like a thunderclap, shaking the house. Obviously at least one of the guards had forgotten that they had smashed the bolt off it.

‘Cupid never sleeps,’ Bronzino said, apparently to himself. I looked at him, waiting for his orders. ‘Well?’ Bronzino responded. ‘Why are you staring at me? Mix up the *gesso sottile* again, and get back to what you were told to do. I’m going back to bed.’

By the time I had begun preparing the gesso again, Bronzino was already asleep once more. As I spread the *gesso sottile* slowly and carefully over the coarser earlier layers of gesso, I felt like someone awakening from a dream, still confused over whether the events of the dream are real or not. Had Duke Cosimo really come in person to Bronzino’s house, passing in and out like a storm?

As if the Duke had summoned it, a storm was in fact beginning to organise itself in the spring sky. I looked out through the window, which had been angled to direct light onto whatever painting Bronzino was working on. The wooden panel that was my task now seemed dark grey as the clouds built up over the valley of the Arno. Thousands of Florentines would be woken from their afternoon slumbers by the first clap of thunder, and I hoped that Bronzino would be, too. He slept through the storm, of course. I had to nearly close the window to stop the rain coming into the studio. That made the room even more hot and stuffy. The stink of the gesso mixture spread from wall to wall like a disease.

When I finished applying the bucket of gesso, the rain was just ending. I flung some clothes onto my wet and clammy body. I may have looked like Cupid, but must have smelt more like the goat-god Pan. I took advantage of Bronzino’s continuing unconsciousness to take the bucket down to the well out in the courtyard. There, I rinsed the bucket out, and then washed myself down. By the time I had drawn a final bucket of clean water and carried it upstairs, Bronzino had woken up. I found him inspecting my work on the wooden panel.

‘You’ve applied the gesso unevenly,’ he informed me. ‘Look, here and here. Remember, this is the *gesso sottile*, not the rough gesso foundation. You’ll have to plane down the rough spots before you apply the next layer tomorrow.’

I was astonished that he had said nothing about the Duke’s visit, or about the painting that he was going to execute for the king of France. ‘Master,’ I ventured, ‘why do you think the Duke wanted me to be the model for Cupid?’

‘Because he evidently thinks that you look like his idea of Cupid,’ Bronzino replied.

'I'm too old, Master,' I objected. 'You told him so yourself. I'm seventeen. Cupid is always represented as a small boy.'

'Yes,' Bronzino agreed, 'he is always represented as a small curly-haired boy. You have curly hair. If Cupid were ever to grow up, he would resemble you. You can be the first grown-up Cupid in art. You'll have to be. The Duke has insisted upon Cupid appearing in the painting, and he has insisted upon you being the model.'

'At least I'll be able to model for a real finished painting,' I said, 'instead of only for studies and sketches. I shall appear before a king. Well, the painted image of me will be presented to a king, anyway.'

'Your father told me that you were arrogant, Giuseppe,' Bronzino replied. 'Before you become too pleased with yourself, remember that you are still my apprentice.' I have to admit that Bronzino treated me no worse than any other Florentine painter or sculptor would have done, and far better than many that I had come to know of.

My father was a carpenter of rare skill. He had four sons of whom I was the youngest. I was a burden not only because of my need, like any other boy, for my father to provide me with food, drink, clothes, and beatings. My father judged, rightly, that I had no aptitude for carpentry, and he looked out for another calling to which I might be better suited. One day he overheard two of my brothers bullying me because of my liking for drawing. I had found a scrap of wood and a tiny stub of charcoal, and I had drawn a quick portrait of my father's bull-like face upon it. My father flung my two brothers aside in opposite directions, like a pair of quarrelling cats, and picked up the hopeful little drawing.

'Why, Giuseppe, this is me!' he exclaimed. 'Isn't it?' My father went to the ancient bronze mirror into which he never looked. It hung on a neglected wall in a particularly dark corner of our crude little house. My father squinted at the drawing in his hand, and then studied his face in the mirror. He looked back and forth from one of the images to the other, and then proclaimed his judgement. 'It is indeed me, Giuseppe. Would you like to work for a painter?'

'Yes, I would,' I said, although the idea had never occurred to me.

The next morning, my father dressed me in the suit of clothes that my oldest brother, then two years dead, had worn at his wedding. My father had made my brother's shattered widow give them back. Having dressed me in my brother's clothes, my father took me around the city in search of a painter who wanted an apprentice. I cannot remember how many studios and workshops we visited. Every artist that we called upon told us to try someone else. Even then, I suspected the each of them was giving us the name of someone against whom he held a grudge, in the way that artists and poets all do; except for Bronzino, that is, who never considered any man to be his enemy, or his friend.

All through that day my father kept producing my little wooden drawing to show to another prospect as evidence of my artistic bent. None of them was impressed. They were not seeking a juvenile assistant to train up. They wanted a servant to do the dirty jobs that make art possible. While my father and I were passed around Florence as hastily as two false coins discovered in a purse of ducats, I knew that I was living through a day that would always matter to me, and that I would never forget it.

I certainly never forgot the scene when my father knocked forcefully upon that very door through which Duke Cosimo would make his fateful entrance four years later. A thin, nervous old man opened the door and raised his wiry twitching eyebrows at my father, who responded with his now well-practised flourish of my portrait of him.

'My son drew this picture of me. Will you take him on as an apprentice?'

The old man shook his head. 'I'm not the owner of this studio.'

Another voice interrupted him from above. 'I'll talk to them, Master. I'm coming down.'

Master? If the old man was not the artist, then of whom was he the master? I could not ask him, because he had scuttled indoors, and a short, dark-complexioned man with great deep eyes came to the door. Although I did not know it at that moment, the ancient man who had first answered us was in fact then only forty-six years old.

'Are you Il Bronzino, the artist?' my father inquired.

'I am,' Bronzino replied. 'Is this the boy you are offering?'

'This is my son Giuseppe, Messer Bronzino. He is good at drawing. Look, here's a drawing that he made of me only yesterday.'

Bronzino took the scrap of wood. He held it up to his eyes and peered at it with interest. 'It is a surprisingly good likeness, and done in only a few lines,' he said, 'but I need to know what the boy

himself says. Do you really want to learn to be a painter, Giuseppe?’

‘Yes, sir, I do’ I replied, and by then it was true. I had had time to imagine the other alternatives which fate might choose to present to me, and the life of a painter sounded the most attractive of the possibilities.

Bronzino spotted that my interest was real. ‘It can be hard, you know,’ he warned me. ‘I shall require you to do all kinds of unpleasant jobs preparing materials for me. I shall also require you to help with all the domestic tasks, because there are no women in this house.’ That statement was another warning, of which I failed to grasp the meaning, because I was so eager to be accepted. Because I had no experience then of the life of an artist in Florence, I did not know that Bronzino should already have had other apprentices serving in his studio.

‘I would be glad to serve you, sir,’ I replied.

‘Good!’ Bronzino responded. ‘I myself served as an apprentice to the distinguished painter Iacopo di Pontormo. He is the gentleman who first appeared at the door to you. I therefore stand here as proof that a boy can survive his apprenticeship to a painter.’

My father, who probably did not care whether I survived or not, provided he got rid of me, was desperate to strike an agreement with Bronzino. ‘I commend my son to you, Messer Bronzino,’ he declared.

‘Then please come inside the house so that we can discuss the arrangements,’ Bronzino replied. ‘Giuseppe, please wait here until you are called for.’

Bronzino took my father into the house, and closed the door, leaving me in the sunlight of the street, hot and uncomfortable in my late brother’s heavy best clothes. I did not feel any nervousness about my apprenticeship. At that moment, I was more worried about my personal safety. I might be robbed and murdered only for my clothes. It has happened many times on the streets of Florence. I looked around for possible assailants, but I was alone. I wondered who lived in the houses nearby. It was obvious that some of the houses belonged to shopkeepers, because of the shutters that were pulled down over their counters. At least one of the houses was inhabited by lazy servants, because a collection of long-dry washing hung from the poles that must have been thrust out of the windows early that morning. I could see no other clues to who my new neighbours were to be.

Bronzino’s door opened again, and my father strode out happily into the sunshine. ‘Signor Bronzino has agreed to take you on, Giuseppe,’ he said. ‘You are very lucky. Be a good boy, and work hard.’

With that, my father turned from me without waiting for a reply, and strolled away, tossing up and catching my little wooden sketch which he still held in his hand. He walked off along the shady side of the street, tossing up and catching that little piece of wood over and over again. As it rose to the top of its trajectory, it escaped from the shade and caught the sunlight, so that it glistened for a moment like a star before it fell back again.

I wish I had kept that first crude drawing, because it was that last time that I ever saw my father, and I never heard from him or my brothers again. I could have found my way back to our house at any time, of course, and knocked on the door, but I never did. I would walk the long way round rather than pass down our street. One thing upon which my father and I were in complete agreement was that there was no bond between us.

My new family had already gathered to welcome me. Bronzino and Pontormo drew me inside, and led me up to the studio which was to be the very centre of my life for years to come. Bronzino began with a few basic instructions for me. ‘You are to call me Master. I will see that you are properly enrolled as an apprentice in the records of the Guild of St. Luke, to which all we painters are unfortunately forced to belong.’

Pontormo spoke to me for the first time. ‘Damn the Guild of St. Luke! Damn them all! Except for the painters, of course, but damn the physicians and the apothecaries!’

Bronzino interrupted him. ‘Those are the same curses that you made when you took me on as an apprentice, Master,’ Bronzino said. ‘I had no idea then what you were talking about.’

‘Pill rollers!’ Pontormo replied.

Bronzino ignored him, and gave me the explanation that Pontormo had obviously failed to give him when Bronzino had been a puzzled boy like myself. ‘The Guild of St. Luke comprises physicians, apothecaries, and painters, Giuseppe. The connection is that we all use the pestle and mortar. I hope you have had enough religious education to know that St. Luke is the patron saint of physicians.’

‘Damn them, too,’ commented Pontormo.

‘It is the dream shared by nearly all the painters in Florence,’ Bronzino continued, serenely ignoring Pontormo, ‘that one day we shall escape from the Guild. Being members of the Guild keeps us in the social status of craftsmen. We hope that one day we will be recognised as real artists.’

‘He’s a poet, too,’ Pontormo remarked, and I strained to work out what the point was of his telling me that. ‘He didn’t learn that from me. He taught poetry-writing to himself.’

‘Poets are recognised as artists,’ Bronzino explained. ‘Painters are not.’

Four years after that first, frightening, exciting, baffling day, I had indeed never forgotten that I was Bronzino’s apprentice, as Bronzino had been Pontormo’s apprentice. We had worked out a way of living together just as if we had been a real family. Indeed, Pontormo had eventually adopted Bronzino as his son. I learnt how to behave to my master, to Pontormo, and to all the important and fascinating guests who came to Bronzino’s house. I was taught how to prepare and serve food to painters, sculptors, philosophers, and poets. I was taught how to speak pleasingly when I was spoken to, and how to be agreeably still and silent otherwise. Bronzino kept his undertaking to have me enrolled as an apprentice in the Guild of St. Luke. He had also not been joking about the pestle and mortar, the use of which united us in unwilling brotherhood with the physicians and apothecaries.

How I ground that pestle against that mortar, hour after hour, day after day, year after year, grinding up pigments to produce the powder which we mix with oil to make paint. For some kinds of pigment, I had to grind one kind of stone upon another, kneeling as if in prayer. I suppose it helped to develop my muscles. Every painter in Florence made his paints himself, or, at least, his tired and perspiring apprentices did. The mortar had deep grooves like plough-banks, no doubt bored out by Bronzino when he had been Pontormo’s apprentice, and perhaps even by Pontormo when he had spent a brief and unhappy apprenticeship with Andrea del Sarto. The only colours that are bought ready-made are a few very rare and expensive ones, such as ultramarine blue. Ultramarine blue comes from somewhere in Asia far away along the Silk Road, and quite literally costs as much as gold.

Although Pontormo spent so much of his time at Bronzino’s house that he seemed to live there, he had a house of his own that I had never seen.

As my growth and education proceeded, I began to grasp my lost father’s reasoning in finding an apprenticeship for me. He knew that under the close tutoring of Bronzino, I would be trained fully in painting and sodomy; for, after all, as my father would have known, every man without private means should learn a trade that is universally recognised and always in demand. It was, I am sure, not with such thoughts in his mind that Bronzino looked me over as the model who had been forced upon him at Duke Cosimo’s command to represent Cupid. God knows, as did our corrupt parish priest, that Bronzino could not have been more familiar already with my body. It is almost a tradition in Florence that painters and sculptors used their apprentices so.

I had been shocked and terrified the first time that Bronzino had seized me in the night, with astonishing force and roughness for such a controlled and quiet man. I knew at once what he wanted, and that I would have to submit. When Bronzino had finished, he returned to his own bed and left me aching, bleeding, and appalled. When I became accustomed to his assaults, they no longer hurt me so much.

One thing never changed. Bronzino always left me on my own afterwards, to clean myself up while he fell asleep at once in that feline way of his. He never spent the whole night with me, but he often did so with Pontormo when he was staying with us. Bronzino also never spoke to me of what we did together. It was as if these shameful acts were no part of our life, but happened instead in a special separate realm of which we know nothing, just as sleepwalkers know nothing of where they are or what they are doing.

I always confessed to our priest. He listened in bored silence, and always prescribed light penances. He made the ritual demand of me that I should avoid that sin in future, and I always promised to try to do so, but we both knew that I would be back in confession again telling the same story. My sins against nature recurred as regularly and unstopably as the feast days of the saints. The priest was as lazy and slovenly as the servants in that house across the street, the ones who always hung the household linen up to dry late and brought it in again late.

Bronzino, in spite of his natural grace, was not a lazy man. He worked hard and incessantly, so that I did not greatly resent the way that he made me work long and hard as well. After he had given me his instructions on how I was to plane down the wooden panel in his studio, and re-apply the gesso where I had put it on too thickly, Bronzino stepped back across the room and gazed at the blank panel as

though there were already a picture painted on it.

‘Yes, Giuseppe,’ he murmured, ‘be sure to do a good job preparing this panel. You will appear on it, after all. Would you like the smoothness of your body to be disfigured by a lump of excess gesso somewhere?’

‘Will you be using this particular panel for the Duke’s painting, then?’ I asked. My reaction was not out of artistic interest in the project. I was frightened by the responsibility of preparing the panel for Bronzino’s painting. The Duke knew very well that it was I who was doing the job. If he found some blemish in the final painting which could be traced to my faulty application of the *gesso sottile*, I would be for it. I did not know what ‘it’ was, but it would certainly be painful. My body would certainly not be fit to represent Cupid after the Duke’s bullies and torturers had finished with me.

Bronzino continued to contemplate the blank panel. ‘Yes,’ he continued, ‘such a painting will make a splendid diplomatic gift. The Duke will want to impress King François.’

Down below, I heard the door swing open once more. Surely it could not be Duke Cosimo again? I knew who it was when I heard the sound of a body falling against the tread of the staircase, followed by breathless curses. Bronzino smiled like one of those court portraits he often painted: a subtle smile that was almost a threat. ‘That is my master Pontormo,’ he said. ‘No other man habitually falls up stairs instead of down them.’