

Riding at a gallop to the cobbler's shop, Santina and Trotula arrived to find Caterina beyond exhaustion, her skin pale and hair matted with sweat. Clearly, the woman was in terror of losing her unborn child as well as her own life. But even as her face contorted with the unbearable pain of another contraction, the beauty which had captivated Nastagio was apparent.

Trotula rushed immediately to the bedside and held Caterina's small, white hand in her strong, sturdy grip. "I've delivered hundreds of babies, Caterina. I'll do whatever I can do to help you."

As the old midwife examined Caterina, Santina noted the impossibly narrow breadth of the young woman's hips. Seeing Trotula frown, Santina began to suspect why the labor had ceased to progress and why the doctor had determined that nothing more could be done.

Trotula pulled the blanket over Caterina when she was through and ordered Fillipa and the maid out of the room,

"Your passage is fully open, Caterina," Trotula began after she and Santina were alone with the woman. "And I suspect it has been for some time. But the baby hasn't been able to descend into position so you can push it out."

Caterina was grimacing in pain, riding through another excruciating contraction. "*Che Santa Maria me salvi*. Please help me!" she pleaded. "*Madre di Dio*. What's wrong?"

“Your baby’s large, Caterina,” Trotula said softly, not wanting to alarm her further, and Santina guessed at once the alternative that remained open to them. “And your bones lie close together. The baby can’t fit through the passage.”

“Is there nothing you can do to save my baby? Nothing at all?” Caterina cried in despair.

When Trotula did not answer at once, Santina could not fathom why her teacher would remain silent when lives were at stake. But still nothing was said; it was as though Trotula was in some sort of reverie.

Impatient for Trotula’s reply, Santina spoke up. “We can cut through your womb, Caterina. Trotula knows how it’s done.”

Trotula threw her a cutting glance for speaking out of turn. But she said nothing to contradict Santina.

A glimmer of hope shone in Caterina’s eye as she looked up at the older midwife. “Is it true, Trotula? Can you help me?”

“It’s not a simple thing, Caterina,” Trotula answered slowly. “And normally, I would seek permission to do the procedure.”

“But there’s no time, Trotula!” Santina said in dismay. “She’s been waiting too long. And besides, we know Ferondo Palmerini would not have this child live,” Santina blurted out in disgust. She saw no cause for caution when the necessary course of action was clear as day, Fernando Palmerini be damned.

“Please do whatever you can, Trotula,” Caterina begged.

“You might not live,” Trotula told her.

Looking tearful, she whispered, “Just save Nastagio’s baby. Please.”

Trotula did not respond immediately. She remained silent as both Caterina and Santina awaited her answer. Then turning brusquely to Santina, Trotula barked, "Fetch the hemlock."

Startled by Trotula abrupt order, Santina did as she was told. She washed Caterina's round, white stomach while Trotula held the sponge soaked in the soporific over Caterina's nose and mouth. As Trotula waited for the hemlock's effect to take hold, she drew Santina aside and whispered into her ear.

"You'll do the cutting, Santina. I'll guide you."

Santina gasped in surprise. "What if I make a mistake, Trotula?" she said, feeling her heart race now that the chance she had long been waiting for was here. "You should be the one to do it."

"I'll guide you," Trotula repeated firmly.

Santina knew it was an opportunity that might never come again. If she wanted to learn, then she had to step forward. Besides, Trotula was telling her, not asking.

As Caterina grew heavy with sleep, Santina watched her closely, silently cursing the physician who abandoned her in such a state. She realized how the long hours of neglect had weakened Caterina, diminishing both her and the baby's chances of survival. It was difficult to understand how a man could leave a woman and baby to die unattended, without even bothering to send for the help that might save them.

Santina's indignation served to steady her trembling hand as she held the long, sharp knife over Caterina's round belly. Silently but feverishly, she prayed she would be skillful, exacting, and that she had not arrived too late.

The touch of Trotula's hand on her shoulder gave her the reassurance to proceed.
"There. Cut right there," Trotula said in a hushed voice.