

**MADDALENA**



Book One of *The Golden Tripolis* Trilogy

# MADDALENA



*An Illustrated Novel*

EVA JANA SIROKA



SEMELE  
BOOKS

*Princeton, NJ*

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*This book is in the memory of my father,  
the sun that would not set.*





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*She was a flower woman, but not an ordinary fioraia.*

*He wanted to become pope, like his grandfather.*

*Rome, the eighteenth of June in the year of Our Lord 1567.*

† † †



# LA FIORAIA



Monna Rebecca sat on her flower cart, waiting for the sunrise. For years, the men on Campo de' Fiori had desired her, struck by her perfect oval face and the rich, dark hair that framed it with flair—so heavy it pulled her chin up, giving her a dignified, imperious stance.

They called her *La Maddalena*, and one by one, Messer Ephraim sent them away.

“They’re not one of us, *Tochter*.”

The men in the ghetto came nearer her heart, but they were too common for her mind.

Monna Rebecca did not mind living with her parents. The hot Roman sun darkened her skin and her father’s library sharpened her thoughts, where she discussed Josephus’ history, argued Plato’s philosophy. But she was not proud and humbled herself to help every creature. No man had stirred her, and she resigned herself to live unwed.

With her *gamurra* tucked under, long legs dangling, she peered through the morning haze trying to recognize faces, wondering if Don Theophilos would send for more herbs. His Eminence Cardinal Farnese was ailing, and his physician kept her family busy.

Rome was waking up. Oxcarts rattled on the cobblestones. Farmers set up their stalls in Campo de' Fiori. Boatmen’s voices drifted from the Tiber.

Monna Rebecca heard a dry cough nearby.

“Would you like my wrap, signora?” she called to her neighbor. She could almost touch, but barely see, the old flower woman. The cough finally subsided, and a strange scent cut through the odor of fresh dung that dominated the farmers’ market each morning.

Monna Rebecca hopped down and reached for her oil lamp. A ring of light spread through the fog to the next stall and lit Monna Chiara’s face. Wrinkled by the elements, stooped from years of toil, with a clay pipe down the corner of her mouth, she looked like a sorceress.

“Are you well, signora?” the young woman asked, seeing dark stains on Monna Chiara’s *camicia*.

“It’s nothing,” Monna Chiara replied, quickly covering the spots on her blouse with a scarf. “Let’s talk about something important. Isn’t it your special birthday?”

Monna Rebecca nodded her agreement.

“Can you believe it? Today, I’m twenty-five.”

“Best wishes, signorina. Do you want me to cast your fortune again?”

Seeing the Tarot deck emerge, Monna Rebecca pinched her nose to stop laughing. “We can hardly see and my horoscope is always the same. Are your cards marked?”

“Folly.” Monna Chiara pointed to the sun rising above the hills. “Who knows. A new life may begin for you right now.”

Monna Rebecca trusted Aristotle. She valued Herodotus. But a reading on her birthday? Another fool’s journey into the world of shadows?

“Signora, you know how much I honor your judgment.”

“Sit over here”—Monna Chiara pointed to a wooden crate—“and set your lamp there. Right there. And this time, on your special birthday, I’ll let you shuffle.”

Monna Rebecca scrambled the cards all over the board, piled them high before cutting them. “The inverted cards don’t count!” she said, wagging a finger.

Monna Chiara nodded, closed her eyes, and mumbled a quick incantation.

“What do you really want?” she asked, surrounded a fresh puff of sweet scent. “Security? Wealth? Children? They all come with mar-

riage.” Her worn fingers, crooked from splitting hemp stalks and removing the tough fibre, slowly turned the first card.

The reading had hardly begun and Monna Rebecca already felt vexed.

“The Empress. Always the same song. Of course I want to be happy and make others happy. And I do love Mother Nature. We both do. Isn’t that why we sell flowers?”

“Be patient.” The finger pointed to the second card in the circle of her horoscope, but Monna Rebecca didn’t look. Instead, she listened to the cock-vendor across the lane bartering with his first customer, whose loud voice she recognized. A maid from Cardinal Farnese’s kitchen. Distracted, she looked at the card without thinking and reflected only on the fourth.

“The Ten of Pentacles. My past? A safe harbor. I am a *foraia*. I sell flowers and read my honorable father’s books. What else is there?” Monna Rebecca closed her eyes. An image she could not identify burst in her mind. Powerful, it overcame her.

“What do you truly desire?” Monna Chiara asked as she turned over the Nine of Cups.

“I want to enter a world beyond my wildest imagination. I’d like someone guiding me, wiser, stronger than my father, someone I could ...”

“But you have it. Right here, in this card. Your dream will come true. But I warn you, child, there’s no such thing as love ... Let’s see how you are going to get there.”

The sun rose vigorously, its warmth reassuring. Noticing her lamp flickering, Monna Rebecca extinguished it.

“The passage of light—human to divine,” she mumbled, focused on the next card. “Adonai, you are holy, and in you I trust. This is my very special day. Please, give me a sign.”

Monna Chiara turned over the Sun, but the card was inverted.

“That card doesn’t count.”

Suddenly pale, Monna Chiara closed her eyes and reached for the next card as another bout of coughing consumed her. The pipe fell from her mouth, spilling smoldering specks of hemp over the damp ground, and a small spattering of blood colored the board.

“*Signora!*”

“It’s nothing, my dear,” Monna Chiara wiped her mouth and hid that hand below. Staring in their face was a striding skeleton with a scythe over its shoulder.

Monna Rebecca froze. She’d seen the Fool in her readings. Does not everyone venture on the path of folly once in a while? The Tower made her humble. And while the Hanged Man gave her goose-bumps, she lived honorably, responsibly . . .

*The Death.* She’d never seen that card in her fortune. Was she to die? Soon? Terrified, she crossed her arms and locked her hands in her armpits to prevent them from shaking.

“*Sì. La morte.*” Monna Chiara continued after clearing a trickle of colored spit from her chin, staring directly into Monna Rebecca’s eyes. “The death is merely a transition to an eternal life, far better than most of us have here. You, at twenty-five, are still young and healthy. This card tells you that you must put your past behind for a new life here on earth.”

“And now, let’s see where your hopes lie.” She crossed the next card over the last.

“The Lovers,” Monna Rebecca broke in, relieved. “This is silly. I’ve seen that card in every one of your readings. It brings me nothing.”

“This time, since the Lovers’s card is coupled with Death, the outcome’s quite different,” Monna Chiara objected. “The pair is about neither love nor desire. It’s about a journey that will lift you to heights most of us will never know.”

Monna Rebecca hardly breathed. “A journey!?”

Amid the market’s raucous noise, the silence between the two grew unbearable as Monna Chiara turned her gaze back to the deck, almost as though she had not heard the question.

Monna Rebecca examined the old woman’s face. It was blank, but her voice gained strength as Monna Chiara topped the last pair with one, final card.

“You see? You’ll be like the Star, bright and serene as Venus, like the wondrous star of Bethlehem over the Christ child, born to release the fear in us. Believe in Him, and you will be blessed. This is an extraordinary reading, Rebecca. Your own dreams will seem like a trifle.”

Monna Rebecca stood tall, overwhelmed.

She knew. Like her father, she’ll help people.

She would be a healer.

# VENUS



Alessandro Farnese awoke late. He stretched in his huge four-poster bed with gilded columns, silk drapes, and embroidered bed linen, feeling lonely in his colossal palace staffed by hundreds. He lay in austere splendor, reflecting on the immortality of his soul.

The sun was already past the horizon, climbing through the haze and dappling the church steeples and palace roofs with warmth. Bright light shot into the cardinal's bedchamber through the shutters moving in the morning breeze, across his silvering beard, past a curio cabinet, to Titian's *Penitent Magdalen*, bathing the saint in her naked glory.

Every morning, Alessandro admired the beautiful woman in the painting and could do nothing about the arousal he felt. Every morning, Padre Carlo, a man made lean by a life of forced piety, dressed his master, little twitches around his eyes betraying his disapproval.

"Your Grace," the padre began, holding a large scroll, "have you a decision on *Il Gesù*?" The first Jesuit church in Rome had preoccupied Alessandro longer than the Vice Chancellor of the curia cared to remember.

"Look." Alessandro pushed the proffered plans aside. "Messer Tristano is a capable architect, but he's unoriginal. I promised Monsignor Borgia twenty-five thousand gold *scudi* for the construction, but the design must be more innovative."

Alessandro shifted his gaze back to the Magdalen, seeing her as if for the first time, wondering who had inspired such incredible beauty. Could she have been real, with her innocent eyes and creamy face, her lips open in prayer?

“But . . .” Padre Carlo began.

“No buts.”

“Will Your Grace see Monsignor Borgia?”

Alessandro’s head felt dense. Should he ask Don Theophilos to bleed him again? The man was a useless leech. He needed gentle hands, like those in the painting.

“Maddalena, are you still alive or did the master steal your image to let it live for me here in my bedroom?” In the brilliant light, everything was clear—the gentle face, the slim neck, the hair like a waterfall cascading in deep waves around the white promontory of breasts.

“Oh, Maddalena, you are lovelier than dawn,” Alessandro murmured, frustrated.

“Your Grace? Are you ill?” A wave of horror struck the faithful padre.

Alessandro shut his eyes. “I’m exhausted,” he muttered. “Lord, can’t I just be a man?”

At last he replied. “I’ll see Don Francisco. Tomorrow. Before vespers.”

+ + +

A swiftly passing thunderstorm painted the grass fresh green, and the torrential downpour left muddy pools. Alessandro stood above the Forum on the Palatine, cutting a tall figure over his architect with a giant head and gopher-like expression. Thick hair lay limp on the cardinal’s collar, slick from the humidity. Just for a moment his spine arched, protesting the weight of his water-drenched vestments.

Below, in the Campo Vaccino—the cows’ meadows—the Arch of Titus framed old temples and basilicas, and broken archways and columns hinted at their glorious past. But the air resounded with the sound of bells, pealing a melody of Christian Rome as men unloaded stone blocks for the ceremonial gate to the new casino. Alessandro’s litter-chair rested nearby, its attendants waiting, the master complaining about the slow progress on his casino.

“Your Grace,” replied Don Giacomo bluntly, “I need more money.”

The cardinal, a red pillar, stood silent, unimpressed.

“You spend more than you have—your church, villa, palace, Excellency.”

“So?” came the curt reply.

“So, Your Grace, until we get at least one project finished, both men and finances stay tight.” The architect inhaled sharply. He never won. Why did he even try?

Alessandro squinted in the oblique light and diverted the conversation.

“How are the foundations for my casino coming?”

Don Giacomo exhaled and pointed at two diggers on the hill.

“*Eccellenza*, you see what I do.” Curling his hand into a fist and lifting his index and little fingers above the others in the sign of horns, he nodded. “The men do what they can. The river’s back to its banks, and the ground is slowly drying out. The winds have been favorable.”

Don Giacomo’s fingers shot up again to ward off evil, as a loud cry ended in a scream.

“Ay, Madonna, I’m falling!”

“What in hell? Begging your pardon, Your Grace ... What *is* the problem *now*?” Don Giacomo stared, horrified, as the diggers’ heads vanished below the surface.

Alessandro lunged forward.

“Your Grace, stay calm! I’ll see what happened,” Don Giacomo gasped, watching a cloud of dust rise. He scuttled on his short legs toward the muffled cries drifting down the hill. Alessandro followed, burdened by his wet cassock. Cautiously, they positioned themselves around the lip of a huge pit.

“Madonna, save my men,” gasped Don Giacomo, wiping the dust from his face as it belched up, volcano-like. He grabbed Alessandro’s arm. “Excellency, this isn’t a place for you!” he begged as the dust settled to reveal the hazy outlines of a deep stone chamber. Buried in rubble sat the older digger, Beltraffio, coughing and gasping for air, unaware that he and his friend had fallen through the earth into an ancient shrine.

“Marco, I think the Lord has punished us for prying! But I’ve got your hand, and I’ll pull you toward me. *Uno, due, tre!*” Beltraffio yanked hard and fell backwards, holding a beautifully carved stone

arm. “*Amico*, answer me! Where are you?” He stumbled around, looking for his friend. “Marco, answer me!”

Dust continued to rise. The men at the edge of the chasm looked at one another.

“Do you see what I see, Your Grace?” Don Giacomo asked, stunned by the sight below.

Alessandro nodded, shocked. He could not tear his eyes from the pit.

As a white arm with sensuous fingers appeared, his head began to spin.

“Excellency, no one must come near. I’ll get Archimede. He can be trusted.” The architect called down the hill for someone to fetch the giant stonemason and then turned back.

“*Venere pudica?*” he asked, peering through the dust and pointing to the hand still in Beltraffio’s grip, its marble fingers spread wide in the gesture well known in classical sculpture as concealing a figure’s breast or private parts.

“Yes. Chaste Venus.” Dumbstruck, Alessandro could only nod.

The huge Greek, a cubit taller than most Romans, but with wits the size of a grain of rice, jumped into the pit to clear fragments of blocks and tiles away from the half-buried Marco, before cobbling a makeshift staircase from the rubble. As he picked up his body, a few stones shifted, revealing first a woman’s breast and then the entire statue.

“St. Nicodemus! Mercy! The she-devil!” Archimede shook fiercely.

“Stop it!” Alessandro’s temper flared. But he too succumbed, as the statue swayed in the settling dust, calling him.

“Your Grace ... You are deathly pale.”

“It’s nothing. My humors, I think,” he whispered. “Don Giacomo, help me down the hill and then look after the men.”

Carefully, they walked the muddy slope, and the architect waited until the cardinal’s litter-chair left. Soon after, Archimede pushed the wounded Beltraffio up to the surface, and Marco’s dead body followed.

“Well, Beltraffio,” Don Giacomo calmed the poor digger who was dripping with blood. “I thank you in His Grace’s name for your service. We’ll get your back straightened and your head stitched up! As for your friend ... Archimede!” he yelled. “Get these men into the oxcart!”

As the cart bumped down the hill and work resumed, Don Giacomo turned his attention to what he knew best, serving his patron with devotion.

† † †

Long after the late evening bells of San Lorenzo stopped ringing, with his back to the Tiber, Alessandro presided over a banquet table covered in the finest damask, dreaming about his new Venus. Now as the excitement wore off, he began to feel a sinking sensation.

I have everything. Everything, *except* the papal tiara.

Grateful for a breeze, he watched his guests—young, old, rich and not so rich, the buffoons and drunks, the dwarfs, dogs, and cats—wondering how some of them managed to appear at his feasts.

A voice drifted in the mist from the river, through the open arches. “Alessandro,” it called, the sound sweeter than a mother’s lullaby.

He shook his head to erase the voice, but its echo persisted until a living Venus hovered above. Dazed, he raised himself to meet her, staring, until he was drenched in sweat.

“Oh, my Lord!” he whispered and crossed himself, finally seeing the image dissolve in the rising moon.

He wanted to eat, but only a few oysters remained on the golden platters. Seeing that the alabaster vessels were nearly empty of marinated sea creatures, he signaled for more food, but strangely, no one noticed. The silver candelabras needed new candles and the exotic flowers fresh water. Liveried servants stood at attention, too busy guarding the blazing torches transporting the lively company into a world of pantomime to notice the commanding hand.

Elegant young couples waited in the candle-lit loggia, ready to amuse the company with another dance. The musicians, armed with lutes, recorders, and violas de gamba, struck up a lilting tune. Alessandro, charmed by the dancers, exhilarated by their youthful energy, became envious. Even their lacquered manners could not disguise their mischief.

Across the floor, Berti Spranger bowed to his partner, bracing against her smile.

Alessandro studied him. He had first considered hiring the young artist when they met in San Oreste. With an alluring face framed by a shock of black curls, talented, personable, and obliging, he was certain to go far. All things beautiful moved the grand patron of the arts, and his Flemish servant cut a striking figure. Perhaps he should keep him.

More food appeared, until the banquet table was smothered with bowls, tureens, and platters, as if the evening had only started. Forgetting

his servant's corkscrew tresses and the apparition, Alessandro attacked the next course. Wild game lay stylishly arranged on silver platters. He chose one tender quail, a chunk of partridge, a roasted duck breast, and a stuffed pigeon for company, leaving room for sweets.

The scent of the Farnese lilies mixed with pungent sweat intoxicated everyone, even *il gran cardinale*, and the dancers' limbs became galvanized, despite the dignified pace of the *pavane*. Face after face, the men and women radiated their passion for life. When the lutanists varied the pace for the brisk *gaillarde*, Alessandro's tense fingers caught the beat.

One quick step, then another. Bow, bow again, turn, and another deeper bow.

The partners switched and repeated the steps to a grand finale. Bowing to his young lady, Berti withdrew to a table where people of his rank were seated. The hall grew hot. Restless, Alessandro rose and moved across the hall, bowing to his guests, until, suddenly, he stopped.

Berti wondered about the comely young woman near his patron. Perhaps they're friends.

Judging from his laughter, Alessandro had found his bright side. He stretched an arm draped in red silk and his hand, heavy with precious rings, waiting.

She straightened the string of pearls in her blond coiffure and smiled.

"Your Grace," she offered with a clear voice, "I'd be honored to see your gardens." As the musicians played the last notes, Berti mouthed Alessandro's answer. "Your servant."

"Ridiculous," Berti thought. He was the servant.

The Farnese gardens were unfinished—a web of paths and new shrubs—but the pair headed toward the grand staircase and the courtyard. Berti picked up a leg of pheasant, filled a clean goblet with wine, and strolled to the garden façade of the open loggia. Grateful for the fresh air, he watched the clouds skirt the rising full moon.

The couple passed Alessandro's famous Hercules, pausing by a small marble of Eros. For a few minutes, the moon's long fingers played mischievously with the androgynous god and the couple. Alessandro's laughter pierced the air as he stroked the curls of Venus' son.

The waxed torches blazed brightly in the loggia, but the path to the garden was unlit. Only a few sculptures and a small fountain stood

in the center. Guiltily, Berti slipped behind an arch and watched as Alessandro's arm curved around the woman's waist.

As mist began to rise from the river, they merged with it.

† † †

A large, yellow moon hung over the city, illuminating the river façade of the Farnese palace. As it rose, Venus reigned supreme over her pale sisters.

Alessandro sat in his study, far from the clamor of the banquet hall, his brown eyes cloudy, his hands fidgeting. Plush tapestries bordered with Farnese lilies covered the upper walls. Carved wainscoting accented the lower third. A frescoed chimney-piece divided the wall, lined with family portraits in ornate frames. Although the ensemble evoked a sense of extraordinary luxury, the cardinal, worried by the stalled construction of *Il Gesù*, could not appreciate it.

"Lord, give me a sign," he murmured to himself. "What kind of church would honor Your Son, Jesus Christ?"

He was thirsty, but the wine jug was empty. He thrust his fingers into the crystal bowl by him, grabbed a handful of sugared nuts, and finished them greedily. Spilling sugar crystals on the desk, he picked up the bowl and probed its ice-smooth surface with a lover's passion.

The candle sputtered as the knot collapsed into a pool of wax. In the shadows, the contours of the bowl swelled into alabaster breasts. Alessandro began to tremble, his mouth dry, breath short.

"Fie, devil, leave me alone!" he cried out. Groggily, he ran down the moonlit corridor into his bedchamber, his mind in the grip of Venus. Haunted by her voice, he fell into bed, forgetting to draw the curtains.

During the night, he tossed and turned until a sharp pain stabbed his head. He awoke, finally and fully, grabbed the bell, and pulled with the fury of a man who has hardly slept. The sound echoed urgently down the hall.

"How may I serve you, Your Grace?" Padre Carlo emerged, hastily straightening his cap, looking alarmed.

"Get my physician!"

"Immediately, Excellency!"

The petrified man bowed out. Alessandro faced the draft wafting through the wardrobe, his head an ugly knot of pain. Dragging himself to the washstand, he splashed water in his face.

“*Mater dolorosa!*” he said, looking at himself in the glass. “What’s that awful lump over my eye?” He braced himself on the stand.

Don Lodovico Tedeschi, his majordomo appeared, panting as usual. Not enough hours ever permitted the rotund man to serve to his master’s full satisfaction. With a forehead stained by sweat and a bulbous nose prone to excitement, he kept a large kerchief at hand and used it.

“Begging your pardon, Your Grace, Don Theophilos is not here. Don Clovio is unwell and . . . ”

Don Lodovico hesitated. He was sure the cardinal did not want to hear the details.

“Monsignor Borgia wants to speak to you about your new church; Don Giacomo must have your new instructions on the casino; and Monna Chiara wishes to know . . . Christ have mercy!” Don Lodovico choked as Alessandro dropped his arm.

“What evil has befallen Your Grace?” the majordomo cried, as his patron staggered back and crumpled into bed. A hairy spider hung from the baldacchino, not far from the cardinal’s head. Don Lodovico crossed himself and raced to the bed to pull on his master.

“Holiness! There’s a huge tarantula but five cubits above you!”

“Why should I move?” Alessandro demanded. “Some day, something else will get me.” He did not budge as Don Lodovico flung the covers over him and hit the insect with a pillow.

+ + +

The bells of San Lorenzo tolled nones. Confused, the cardinal squirmed in bed, rubbing his bandaged eye. He could feel cool air moving despite the summer heat, and his teeth began to chatter as a bout of shivering overcame him.

“Don Theophilos, where are you? Prop me up and uncover me! I’m not dying, not yet!” He groaned, one moment chilled to the bone and the next roasting with fever. “God knows why I keep him. I’m dying of agony, my eye is in a spasm, and the idiot tastes my urine! What does sugar in my urine have to do with this bite?”

“Don Fulvio. My favorite antiquarian.” He smiled at the newcomer, a short, rather gaunt man with thinning hair and dignified posture.

“Calm yourself, Excellency. Don’t let ill humors take hold of you!”

“How can I?” Alessandro muttered, still shaking. “I called that stupid quack. Where is he? Do you know that I actually had to *order* him to cut the carbuncle?”

Don Fulvio panicked. “Shouldn’t Your Grace rest?”

Instead, the patient fumbled for his robe and half-slipped off his bed. “Get me some spiced wine,” he demanded. “My *nonna* swore by it no matter what the malady. Damn all doctors!”

Don Fulvio rang for service, and the cardinal calmed somewhat. As always, he was glad to have his friend with him. If only he had some pleasant news to cheer him up. He looked across the room, his eyes widening in surprise. A bronze putto grinned at him in the candlelight.

“Where did he come from?” he demanded. “And where’s my Venus? I want to see her.”

“They found many little objects, but *two* large statues, Your Grace,” Don Fulvio explained. “I had them stored with your Farnese Bull. Then, on second thought, they were moved to the secret chamber.”

A full decanter appeared. The cardinal helped himself generously.

“Ah. The true ambrosia. I’m ready, my friend!”

Alessandro rose, dizzy from the laudanum. They made a strange sight, the cardinal anchored on his antiquarian’s arm, the white bandage drooping across his eye. Together they descended long staircases, until the vaulted ceilings began to hang low. After countless turns with only mice as occasional companions, they faced a dark corner. The air was distinctly musty.

“My friend, what *exactly* did you find?” Alessandro asked, a knot of excitement in his stomach.

“See for yourself, Your Grace.” Don Fulvio slowly inserted the large key until most of the shaft disappeared in the lock, turned it a full three turns, pushed on the heavy chamber door, and paused to light two oil lamps waiting by the door. Two rats scampered into the dark landing.

Across the small room littered with antique marbles, the statue of a nude woman lay on a pallet of straw, her face turned, one arm shielding her virginity, the other broken away. Holding his breath, Alessandro looked at her, straining his good eye. He could hear his heart thump-

ing. The lamp trembled in his hand and cast warm shadows over the immobile marble body, tickling it with soft nuances of gold and pink. The pale flesh looked alive.

Alessandro's knees shook, but not with weakness.

"Oh, I must touch it, feel it, love it." He knelt in reverence before the pagan idol, running his fingers down her dimpled shoulder, cupping it in his hand, the warmth growing within, sliding his palm down to the broken limb.

"Beautiful goddess," he murmured. "Mother earth cradled you in her arms." As he explored the budding breasts, he spilled his seed down his thighs.

"You fool," he told himself. "You should know better."

"Greek? Aphrodite?" he mumbled stupidly.

"Venus. A stunning first-century Roman copy."

The cardinal lifted the lamp higher. More figures lay on the straw, a drunken satyr and a boy with grapes.

"Look, Your Grace. The infant Bacchus with his tutor Silenus," Don Fulvio said, pointing to the group. "The goddess of love and the god of wine go hand in hand."

"Anything else?" Alessandro chattered in response. Exhausted and ill, he still wanted to make love to the statue. Never before had such a mysterious urge assaulted him.

Perhaps the goddess of love had spoken and confused his senses.

"Numerous small objects," Don Fulvio replied as he helped the cardinal back to his sleeping chamber. "We can see them later. Isn't that more to your comfort?" he added soothingly as he tucked the cardinal into bed. "And Excellency, there's something else. Don Lodovico extended Monna Chiara's contract. I think she's waiting in your *guardarobba*."

"Eh?" The feverish patient squinted through his good eye.

"Don Lodovico thought you might enjoy some flowers in your room."

"Fine," he acquiesced. "Send her in, but then let me rest!"

+ + +

A dress rustled. Suddenly Alessandro's room was filled with such a fragrance he imagined himself dead and in heaven. Focusing his good eye

on a graceful figure spreading clusters of jasmine at his bedside, he felt himself falling into an abyss, as the fear of final judgment gripped him.

“Man’s salvation rests on the grace of Jesus Christ,” he reminded himself. “But are we, weak human beings, also responsible? I’m no better than the rest! I’ve tried to follow His teaching but failed.”

The towers of Paris misted before him, as he contemplated his life as it was before the vows, when he was a young papal legate defending his grandfather Paul’s interests. But at night, over and over again, perfumed fingers enflamed his skin.

Women had always been his life—as his children proved.

“Your Grace!” A sonorous voice penetrated his drifting mind as his breathing grew laborious.

Maybe he was not dead after all. He struggled to stay alert, squinting at two dark eyes, each a sea of onyx and solid as if inner strength could flow out but nothing could penetrate.

The longer he gazed, the more the long legs shadowed through the *gamurra*, the face carved more exquisitely than the most precious cameos in his cabinet, mesmerized him. But what fascinated him was the woman’s patrician posture, the tilt of her head, weighed by the locks coiling defiantly from her coiffure like serpents.

“Are you a goddess?” he demanded, at the same time aware that the scent was unmistakably a woman’s. “Lord, don’t let me die. Don’t deny me this last pleasure!”

A cool hand rested on his forehead, as spiking fever overcame him.

Caught by an unexpected affection, the woman lingered, her eyes on Alessandro’s face, seeing only loneliness. Age had lifted the hairline, touching his forehead with nobility.

She stretched her fingers over the bandage, resettling the fabric, and fingered the proud bridge of the aquiline nose, resting momentarily on the exposed lid. Sickly and pallid, it was huge, like one of the all-seeing eyes of the pagan heads scattered in the Forum.

The face twitched. Startled, she drew back, took a deep breath, and left.

+ + +

His Most Reverend Excellency, the Cardinal Farnese, was delirious. Four days had passed since his visit to the secret chamber. His

Holiness Pius V dispatched his personal physician, but neither Don Mercati nor Don Theophilos could agree on a treatment, wasting hours in lofty exchanges, ignoring an unseen complication.

Gluttony, a privilege of the rich and powerful, was a sin, not an illness.

“Anyone who awakens in a stupor with his eyeballs tinted the color of honey,” Don Theophilos argued, “but manages to keep his private organ up must be under the influence of Venus.” The cardinal’s hunch-backed physician could hardly cure the fatty pustules on his own face, but still he was a devoted servant.

“Nonsense!” Don Mercati replied contemptuously. “What makes you think that?”

Don Theophilos snickered. “Why that powerful planet could have designs on our most reverend cardinal, I’m not sure. Not without consulting the patient!”

“An elixir of sweet musk, crushed coral, and gold, pulverized with lapis lazuli . . . ”

“But, Excellency, consider the potency of my physic in which rose water is prepared with no less than one hundred roses that have blossomed under the sign of Virgo.”

“*Signore*, please continue.”

“The heart and spleen of patients under the sway of Venus produce too much sweetness in their blood,” Don Theophilos protested, “but my medicine fights that exact malady, especially when made worse by a spider bite! When suspended in the extract of alcanet water, be it even the patient’s final moment, he’ll emerge young and healthy.”

Don Fulvio and Don Lodovico, in the background, felt lost.

“We must trust Don Theophilos,” the majordomo opined. “He might rub His Eminence the wrong way, but he knows infinitely more than Pius’ fool, too busy collecting minerals.”

But Don Fulvio was already on his knee, head bowed in salute to a frail, white-robed monk of the Dominican order, who came striding resolutely toward them. Figures around the two men sank in salutation to the pope and his retinue of cardinals, bishops, and acolytes.

Pius V paused by Don Fulvio and addressed him candidly. “We are troubled by Cardinal Farnese’s health. He has not confessed for three days! Only confession and absolution can open Our Lord’s way that looks favorably on the shrine in which the soul dwells with his blessing.”

The pontiff's words rang with kindness and conviction.

"Don Mercati, you are free until the patient confesses. *In nomine patri.*"

The pontiff began his prayer kneeling by the patient's bed, his long white beard caught in the folds of the cardinal's coverlet, his dirty feet exposed to his retinue.

"Amen," came the responses to the petition for Alessandro's soul.

But just as God once turned away from His son, Pius' prayers bore little fruit. Although the danger from the spider bite had passed, only rarely did the patient emerge from his stupor, poisoned by too much sugar and wine.

† † †

The city boiled, the heat penetrating even the thick palace walls.

"Water!" Alessandro propped himself on an elbow. The room whirled and filled with divine light, spinning like a kaleidoscope. He licked his parched lips.

"Your Grace." The hands that lifted his head were strong but softer than the petals of roses. "Open your mouth. Drink slowly," celestial voices coached him as drops settled on his tongue and moistened his throat.

"Water," Alessandro sighed gratefully.

Each hand pulled a blue flask, the glass more brilliant than lapis lazuli, and filled a spoon with a dark, aromatic liquid, gently trickling in the potion. He tried to focus. The hands merged.

"Your Grace"—the voices also became one—"a few more drops!"

Alessandro's face softened. His breathing strengthened. He opened his eyes for the first time in days, only to imagine himself on Olympus, for his Venus stood beside his bed.

The tall woman looked at him with a compassion absent in the women who flattered him and seduced him without sharing their hearts, their faces forgotten by him—had it not been for the children they bore.

"Who are you?" Alessandro demanded, examining a hint of Moorish blood in her face.

"My name is Monna Rebecca, Your Grace," the maiden replied and bowed. "I brought an elixir of life which has cured His Eminence."

She looked at him, suddenly timid before this man who ruled the church and Rome, confused, not in charge. That much she knew. Nothing else was clear, except for the cardinal staring at her, thinking that she must be the loveliest woman in the world.

A tinge of carmine stippled her cheeks.

“Apelles was said to have created the perfect image of woman,” Alessandro recalled. “He took the most beautiful features of many and fashioned them together on vellum, as God created Eve. But this woman is real.” Fully conscious now, he was drawn to the unknown maiden, who seemed so reluctant to meet his glance.

Rebecca sensed a new kind of fever as she straightened his covers. She stepped away and hid her hands behind her back. Never had she been truly interested in men, too plain, too tame, without spirit. She knew girls married for propriety and security, dying without knowing love. But, she refused to be one.

Then there was the prophecy at her birth. And Monna Chiara’s reading.

“Monna Rebecca. How can I thank you?” the cardinal asked and smiled encouragingly.

As her eyes finally met Alessandro’s, a wave of heat flushed down her breasts and left her disarmed. Stupidly she stared at the short, curly hair framing his neck, wanting to press her face against it. The indignity of such an urge threw her emotions under a spell.

She fought her fate, not knowing that he was fighting his as well.

Alessandro wondered what moved him. Her beauty? But beauty, as he knew too well, was transient. His smile broadened, filling his gaunt face with joy. Could it be the beauty of her soul?

She smiled back.

“Come closer, daughter.”

Rebecca’s knees buckled as he raised himself to see her better.

A blush darkened her face fully, and for the first time in his life he wondered whether the foolish emotions he called love were real.

Neither had known such feelings, beyond a poet’s dream. Their emotions captured them instantly, completely. He wanted to reach out and touch her but hesitated, infected by her shyness. Instead, he pointed to the flask.

“And where do you take the authority to prepare such potions?”

She wanted to tell him about knowing Latin and Greek, but modesty ruled.

“Begging your pardon, Monsignor, but father reads books.”

Alessandro studied the color of her skin. “Who, pray, is your father, Monna Rebecca?”

“Ephraim Ben Shuham di Ferrara, an apothecary in *platea judea*. Our people live there.”

As she pointed, her body arched. He could not remember when a woman had ignited his loins so forcefully. So the old devil in him was still alive.

“*Platea judea?*” he asked, looking past her, taking the meaning in with a new breath.

“Yes, Your Grace. It is not far from the river and here. Your Grace . . .” She reached out but drew back quickly, resisting the urge to touch.

So she was just a pretty Jewess. Has he not heard of her father? The family must have gained special status under Pius V’s predecessor, since apparently they walked freely, unmarked by an ugly yellow badge. But Alessandro knew how Pius hated Jews.

He cleared his throat to regain command. “But your elixir is far from ordinary!”

“It is,” she replied, and having regained her strength, raised herself without permission. “Herodotus wrote that the mastic found in the stomachs of goats and sheep, kneaded and suspended in an extract of orchids and half a dram of musk and amber, produces a physic which cheers up ill humor and fortifies the brain.”

Why was she telling him that? Alessandro wondered.

“Your Grace, my elixir also instills the heart with love of life.”

She was so exquisite that Alessandro could not stop staring. Beside, he had never had a Jewish woman. He closed his eyes as her cool hand rested on his forehead and quickly opened them again. “Tell me,” he asked, “how did you come to be here, in the first place?”

“Monna Chiara’s ill.” She backed away, leaving the scent of jasmine lingering. “I’m your new *foraia*.”

† † †

The Farnese courtyard pulsed with activity.

A long row of ox carts shifted as each loaded wagon turned about, heading for the Via Recta and the papal town of Viterbo. The major-domo presided over the organized turmoil from the shade of the arcade.

He marked tasks completed on a scroll, sure that nothing was lacking at the cardinal's summer villa at Caprarola. Chests of tapestries, coverlets, blankets, and other household items weighed each wagon that joined the train.

Alessandro stood by his study window, absorbed in thought, gaunt, his robust frame barely filling the drooping robes, his olive complexion pale, marked by illness.

Duties of office prevented him from leaving at once for his summer residence. The entire day before he held a tiring audience to resolve the most pressing matters, ending the day in the asylum of his bed.

One further matter remained. For that he awaited the General of the Jesuit order, the proud Don Francisco de Borgia, Duke of Gandia and descendant of the powerful Borgia pope.

"I should treat him with respect," he reminded himself. "If *nonno's* sister hadn't slept with his great-grandfather, *nonno* would not have worn the papal tiara nor I my cardinal's biretta. I was fourteen and barely knew Latin and Greek!"

Side by side in his study hung the portraits of two beauties, Giulia Farnese, who slept with Pope Alexander VI Borgia, and the enchanting Silvia who kept his grandfather's bed warm. He stared at them as they changed into a single, immediate image, troubling his thoughts.

The door creaked, and he turned to face a visitor, wishing to get this over quickly.

"Don Francisco," he said stiffly, knowing precisely why the General came. "Money's not the issue. I've been disputing with Don Altieri about his land for four years. His stubbornness stands in the way of my ... ahem ... our grand vision of a new Jesuit church. Monsignore, are you listening to me?"

Don Francisco gazed at the portraits. "Lovely, wasn't she?" He pointed to Giulia Farnese.

The cardinal nodded agreement, bent on his course. "Where were we? Yes. If Padre Tristano is unable to follow my orders, I'll use my architect. God bless your cause."

"And yours. *Reverendissimo signor padrone mio, vester servus humilis,*" the Jesuit replied and bowed out, wondering how many more years before his vision would come true.

Alessandro sighed and rang. He was almost finished at last. An aide appeared.

“We wish to have a word with our new artist, the painter from Antwerp.”

“I saw him talking to Don Fulvio about half an hour ago, Excellency. I’ll find him. Immediately.” The padre understood his superior’s gesture.

Alessandro leaned out the window.

The heat was intolerable, yet he welcomed it, feeling the chill of the stone in his feet. The air was as insufferable as the city at times, but Rome was bound to his heart. Every summer he was glad to leave it and content to return in the fall, as he had done every year since he returned to Rome from exile twelve years ago. He hated to think about that time when his *nonno* died and the new pope confiscated all his benefices. He and his brother fled Rome as their family struggled to survive.

Calfskin shoes padded gently across the floor. Was it Rebecca? As he turned, a head of black curls briefly bowed over his hand.

“Bartolomeo.” Alessandro quickly revived in the presence of the painter to whom he was drawn on the night of the last banquet. Dark locks over chiseled brows framed the look of a person who demanded his way. Luminous eyes sparkled with life, like Lago di Bracciano at the height of a storm. But when the sun finally descended on the lake, painting it golden-green, the waters mellowed, just like the young man before him.

Alessandro cocked his head. “But for his Flemish nose, he could be Apollo’s twin,” he thought, amused.

“I’ve heard great praises from Padre Bernardo of your new fresco,” he said.

“I am deeply honored, Your Grace,” Berti replied humbly. Although he had been in Italy less than a year, his fine training helped introduce him to Don Giulio, Alessandro’s miniaturist who arranged for him to paint the *Last Supper* in the cardinal’s church in San Oreste.

By the glow of an oil lamp, he sketched local men as he remembered them at the long table in the tavern—discussing politics, new crops, family life, exclaiming and gesticulating—perfect models for his apostles. Awed, the people of San Oreste knelt before the powerful fresco in which the apostles, men like themselves, came to life.

“Come closer.” The command was sharp, but the eyes welcoming.

Why was he so frightened? After all, Archbishop Massimi liked his work.

Before he crossed the Alps, Berti had never made a big decision in his nineteen years. He could have come to Rome as the son of a flourishing merchant and the gentleman he was, but he was still naive. More than once he found his money pouch empty because he trusted people. Then his luck changed, and he could hardly believe he stood before the great art patron.

“Tell me something, for I like your work. Why do your apostles look so real?”

“Eminence, they are but the men in the town—the blacksmith, the shoemaker, and . . . ”

“Son, do you realize that your method may be seen as blasphemous?” the cardinal exclaimed, surprised. A hedonist at heart, he followed norms.

“A thousand pardons, but Peter was a fisherman, Paul a soldier, and Matthew a tax-monger. As for the figure of Our Lord—he came from my heart, as only he could inspire me.”

“But how can you be certain you painted the true Christ?”

“God moves my hand. That’s how it is, Your Grace. I spent days praying for your recovery, but I also made some sketches for you.” He pulled sheets from a folder, charcoal drawings, sketches, and finished studies.

“Where did you learn to draw so well?” his patron asked him, studying with pleasure the familiar road to San Oreste and to Caprarola, the site of his new country villa, the walled town propped high in the background of one of the drawings. “You did this so clearly and precisely from memory? That’s extraordinary.”

He turned to another sketch. In it stenciled brows crowned a boy’s delicate face.

“And this, is it also from memory?” the cardinal asked, staring at the face of his son.

“Yes, Your Grace,” Berti responded unassumingly.

The cardinal then asked, “Do you know?”

Berti’s entire career rested on his answer.

It seemed as if he had first met Alessandro Farnese only the day before. It was in Caprarola, and his new patron was standing in his

winter garden, bathed in light. Berti bowed, but Alessandro ignored him and turned toward Don Alfonso, the little boy from the sacristy at San Oreste where Berti had painted frescoes in the church, meeting him half-way, his cape trailing in the thawing snow. Picking the boy up, the cardinal threw the boy high into the air.

“*Padre zio!* Father Uncle!” the boy addressed the cardinal confusingly, the *father* referring both to his clerical title and, unwittingly, to his paternity. He screamed with delight, rubbing his nose into the silvering beard. “Look, Berti made this horse for me, and he’s my best friend!” he shrieked into Alessandro’s ear with the urgency of a child receiving rare attention.

Standing there, watching the two, Berti compared their faces and two sets of penciled brows and vibrant eyes. Astounded, he solved the riddle that puzzled him since he first came to San Oreste and befriended the seemingly fatherless boy.

“Do I know?” Berti nodded in response, afraid to look up. “I believe so, Eminence.”

Alessandro was impressed. He cupped Berti’s chin in his hand and raised his face.

“Virtue is a gift from heaven,” he said, “being also endowed by the Grace. How would you like to enter my service, signor *pittore*, serving me and Our Lord as I see fit? You’ll live in the Cancelleria or wherever I choose and have a monthly stipend of four *scudi*. Agreed?”

Trembling with excitement, Berti could barely answer. Such fortune appeared too good for anyone, much less an unknown foreigner. But had he not slaved for meager wages, painting frescoes in Parma and decorating Archbishop Massimi’s bathroom in Rome? Had he not been poor for too long? Now he had proved himself. He had earned the trust.

“Most Reverend Excellency, I beg you to keep my drawings as a meager and truly insignificant token of my boundless gratitude.” Having found the right words, he spilled forth superlatives which surprised him and satisfied his new patron.

“*Il flammingo.*” Alessandro caught him backing toward the door. “See Don Fulvio about a contract! Tomorrow we leave for Caprarola.” And having already heard about Berti’s love for his son and his fatherly role, Alessandro whispered, “My boy’s honorary *papà.*”

When Berti first came to San Oreste, he met Monna Brunella, the boy's nanny with a bosom like the Milky Way. But she did not understand why Don Alfonso became ill after she weaned him. Only when Berti fed him a mush of grains and boiled water sweetened with honey did the child begin to trot again around the yard with rosy cheeks, riding his new stick pony that Berti made from *papier mâché*. With a mane and tail of sheep yarn, it looked real, scaring all the chickens and the sacristan's dog.

Berti recalled the boy's chatter. "Totti, tell me about Ercole. I want to be big and strong like him. No, I want to be like you. You are my *papà*, aren't you? Every boy has a father."

Don Alfonso won Berti's heart quickly. He loved Berti's stories and his affectionate embrace. Berti shuddered now, remembering how he nearly died, like Brunella's baby. Had it not been for the red berries that old Cecchino gave him to prepare an elixir ...

"*Ave Maria, gratia plena*. Mother of God, protect the little boy, now and forever. Amen."

Berti finished his rosary, for the memory still conjured fear. And Berti owed much more to the old plasterer who taught him how to lay the daily base for a fresco without making it flower and crack. Each day the three of them met in the church while Berti worked and Cecchino talked about the great Titian whom he knew when he was young in Venice.

Now Berti was to see them both again, as soon as he could settle into the servants' quarters of the cardinal's villa in Caprarola. He was ecstatic.