

## **VENUS**

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.

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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. Besides, 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 *fioraia*.”