

ROSA

As far as naked men went, Rosa Cellini supposed that this one was impressive. Muscular. Tall enough, certainly. Her neck hurt from craning. But no matter how long she stood by his feet, David's gaze did not creak down to meet hers.

That was alright. He was a statue, after all.

She fanned her skirts, settling comfortably against the statue's plinth. It was a careful maneuver—she had to be cautious not to disturb any of the flowers, the fruit, and the . . . less-savory offerings that had been strewn about the base. Despite her best efforts, a small roll of paper fluttered loose from where it had been pinned down by a pigeon-pecked roll. Rosa scooped it up, doing her best to ignore whatever pleas or prayers or dreams were scribbled on it in blotched ink—but as she did so, something on the cobbles caught her eye: a scrap of paper bearing a few fragments of printed words.

“REPPUBLICA FIORENTINA,” it read. The ink was smeared.

Rosa nudged it aside with her toe and managed to find an undisturbed seat. Fishing out a deck of well-worn cards, she began to shuffle, scanning the crowd with reserved interest.

The Piazza was clearing, the chaos of the last ten minutes quieting. Medici Guards were still making the rounds, interrogating bystanders, searching for whoever had been brave enough to lob what had looked to be a handful of pig shit at the head of the Church.

It had been a beautiful carriage. And that muddy projectile had hit smack in the middle of the triple fleur-de-lis Medici crest adorning the front door.

Rosa dealt out three cards and waited.

Florence, for all that it had been built on Roman ruins, had been brought to wealth and prominence by the money and machinations of the Medici bankers. For years upon years, men wearing a veneer of proletariat humility over deep, deep pockets of wealth had transformed the city from a huddle of hovels on the banks of the Arno river into the sprawling metropolis that it was today.

It was almost refreshing, Rosa thought, to see the gilding and the metalwork of the Pope's carriage. This particular Medici scion was not one who would pretend to be one of the common folk. He advertised his fortune. A palate-cleanser. And after six years of avoiding the city like the plague, Rosa had walked through the gates at nearly the same hour he had.

"What are you hanging around here for?"

Rosa smiled up at the two guards across the wooden board balanced on her knees. She could imagine the picture she presented. A short young woman with wild dark hair and dark eyes and a deceptive softness all over. Her red woolen kirtle was heavily travel-stained, and the leather satchel at her side was patched in some places and in need of patching in others.

Not a threat. Not remarkable in any way.

"Good afternoon!" she chirped, flipping the three playing cards to display their faces. *Knave. Six. Queen.* "What a blessed day! Can you believe our good fortune? To have such a man in our midst? Well, of course *you* can—you probably see him all the time—"

One guard was blushing. The other was not. These were odds Rosa could work with.

"Did you see a young girl?" the unblushing guard demanded. The other was fixated on the cards under Rosa's hands.

"A girl? I've seen plenty of girls today. Find the Lady?"

This last was directed to the fascinated guard, who met her eyes,

startled. He was younger than his partner, perhaps even of age to match Rosa's own seventeen years. Flustered by the sudden attention, he stammered, "I—uh—I don't—"

"I'll show you how to play," said Rosa. She flipped the cards over again and began to shuffle them, spinning them over and around each other on the board.

"She would be about this tall," the other guard said, ignoring this. He held his hand as high as his waist. "Filthy. Shabby clothes."

Rosa gasped. "Is this the person who attacked His Holiness?" Her hands were still moving, a blur that the younger guard watched, hypnotized. "I haven't seen anyone like that," she said. "But it was all so horrible. So *exciting*. Is His Holiness unharmed?"

"You're certain you haven't seen anyone who fits that description?" the terse guard said.

Rosa shook her head, lifting her hands. The cards lay in a razor-straight line. "On His Holiness's life, I swear I haven't seen *anyone* like that. Now. Can you find the Lady? Where is that queen hiding?"

Seemingly without thinking, the younger guard tapped the middle card. "Ricci," barked his partner, but Rosa was already turning it over to reveal the Queen of Cups' impassive face.

"Well done, signore," she said. "You're a natural."

The other guardsman had reached the end of his patience. "She's a charlatan, you rube," he snapped. "Get your head on straight. We're wasting our time." Without another word, he turned and marched across the Piazza, headed for the lingering crowds inside the Loggia dei Lanzi. Ricci, suitably chastened, moved to follow.

"Signore," Rosa said, carefully removing the board and rising. "Here." She held out the Queen. "For you."

He had already taken it when his brain caught up. "Don't you need this?"

"Some things are worth a little sacrifice," she told him. The chilly

breeze off the Arno was whipping color into her cheeks. She winked at Ricci, plucked the card back from him, and tucked it into his belt. “Lovely to meet you,” she said.

Rosa may as well have axed him between the eyes. He blinked, empty-headed, until—

“Ricci!” The grumpy guard looked about ready to spit nails. With an anxious jolt, the young man turned on his heel and hurried after his partner, tripping over his feet in his haste to catch up. Rosa continued to shuffle her cards as she watched the two of them go, Ricci cowering from his partner’s scolding.

“Are they gone?”

The voice was muffled by layers of Rosa’s woolen skirts and the wooden board she had propped up against the statue’s plinth. Rosa didn’t chance a look at the girl crouched behind her. She could tell by the smell that the girl hadn’t taken advantage of Rosa’s waterskin to clean the mud and God-knew-what-else off her hands.

“Shh,” she said. Ricci had managed to distract his partner away from berating him and toward interrogating more of the throng thrumming through the Loggia dei Lanzi. Their sights set on some other poor bastard, they finally disappeared from view. “Yes,” she said. “But don’t you come back out here until you’ve washed those hands.” Water immediately began splashing onto the cobblestones, and Rosa bit back a smile.

It had been a matter of course to hide the girl when she’d darted out of the crowd, hands filthy and face wild with terror. She couldn’t have been more than eight years old, and Rosa had plenty of memories of similar scrapes at that age (though none that involved the Pope).

Now the girl emerged, empty waterskin in hand and a sheepish look on her face. She handed it back with a little bob of the head. “Thank you, signorina.”

“Don’t mention it,” Rosa said, wiping the skin discreetly on her skirts before fastening it once again to her bag. There was a commotion over by the Loggia dei Lanzi. *Someone*—perhaps a young guard in the uniform of one of Florence’s most preeminent noble houses—seemed to have mislaid his purse. Rosa shouldered her pack. “Come on,” she said. “Time to go.”

“Are you in trouble, signorina?” The girl followed on Rosa’s heels as she strode out onto one of the many side streets. “They didn’t see you hide me.”

“They didn’t see me lift that guard’s money either. But it will only be a matter of time before they decide to circle back.”

“You let him win that hand, didn’t you?”

The girl’s eyes were sharp as she watched Rosa, cleverness honed by necessity. “Of course,” Rosa told her. “You always let a mark win the first hand of Find the Lady. Maybe even the first few hands.”

“Why?”

“So they think they’re in control,” she told her. “When that happens, you can ask them to wager whatever you want, and they’ll say yes. Then all you have to do is take it from them.” She nudged the girl. “Wouldn’t you rather walk away with a gold florin than a single lire?”

“Hm,” the girl hummed. “But that man seemed nice.” She didn’t sound upset about it.

“Maybe he was,” Rosa said. “Now he’s nice and poor. At least he still has his job.”

“Nice people don’t last long with the Medici family.”

“Sounds like that will be very hard on him.” Rosa paused, looking around. Their hurried pace had taken them several streets away from the Piazza della Signoria, and the crowds had thinned to a more manageable stream of well-to-do pedestrians and shopkeepers. It was a good part of town, but most things this side of the Arno were the

good part of town. Rosa scanned the unfamiliar buildings and cursed herself for avoiding this city for so long.

She knew where she was. She *knew* that she knew where she was. Six years ago, she would have been able to walk these streets blindfolded. Florence had been a second home, a school, a place of business, *everything*. But now, Rosa squinted at the storefronts and the banks and the churches, frowning as they tripped at her memory.

“What’s your name?” she asked the girl, who was still lurking in her shadow, apparently unsure of whether or not she was allowed to leave. The girl hesitated, her street smarts showing. “Fine, then what do I call you?”

“You can—call me Cat,” she said.

“Cat. I’ll trade two lire for directions.”

Cat’s eyes bugged out of her face. “Directions to where?” she asked, still cautious.

“Do you know where the apothecary is?”

Her face twisted in confusion. “Apothe . . .”

“Agata de Rosso. Do you know where Agata de Rosso’s shop is?”

Cat brightened, all at once. “Oh!” she said. “You’re looking for the witch!”

Two lire was apparently overpaying for mere directions, so Cat took it upon herself to personally guide Rosa through the bustling streets of central Florence, chattering a tour guide’s monologue that, with any luck, was about half-accurate.

Rosa focused on tuning out Cat’s local flavor in favor of re-familiarizing herself with the patterns of streets and piazzas. It was a mental trick she’d done countless times—first as a tiresome exercise administered by her mother, and then later, once she’d struck out on her own, as a reflex. The map of the city sketched into view in her mind, coming together in rough strokes and finer details, the haze of memory infusing with the grime and grit of reality.

“It’s all about making the intangible *tangible*,” her mother had told her before she was old enough to understand what those words even meant. They had been leaning over a candle in the drafty attic, whispering in the depths of the night. There was no reason to keep quiet—they were painfully alone in the house, ever since Rosa’s father’s funeral. But neither of them had been all that good at sleeping, and so they had begun to find one another beneath the creaking beams of the attic when the sun was a distant memory, nowhere near either horizon.

She could still picture the way Lena Cellini’s dark eyes had sparkled in candlelight, wicked and sad. “We learn a place the same way we learn people,” she had said, and Rosa had nodded as though she knew what her mother was talking about. “When we first meet them, or when we first meet a place—it’s a chalk outline. Just a little paper cutout. Nothing to fill it inside the edges.” She’d grabbed her daughter and tickled her sides, and Rosa had squealed, forgetting to be quiet. “But then we get to know them, and those blank spaces get filled in with memories. Instead of just any person, you see the baker’s wife who laughs like a goose. Instead of just any street, you see the place where you skinned your knee. But there’s a trick to it.”

Rosa’s eyes must have been as wide as her entire face. “What’s the trick?”

Lena’s expression turned solemn, watching Rosa in their sanctuary. Alone together. “Would you like to learn?” she’d asked, but she’d meant more than that. She’d meant *everything*.

Now, following a little girl who was fool enough to throw shit at the Pope, Rosa filled in the edges of Florence. And what Florence was filled with was the Medici family.

For a century, the family’s wealth and influence had held Florence in its sway, sculpting it (sometimes literally) in their image. Sculptors, painters, architects—they could all credit their success to the patronage

of the Medici. Lorenzo de' Medici, one of the last patriarchs, had been especially prolific in this field, his generosity earning himself the title of Lorenzo il Magnifico—Lorenzo the Magnificent—and a legacy of cultural works that were known the world over.

Of course, that legacy could not protect the family forever. After Lorenzo's death, mounting military losses had resulted in the exiles of the nineteen-year-old Giovanni de' Medici, Lorenzo's son, and his sixteen-year-old cousin Giulio—two of the last scions of the Medici clan. For decades they had been barred from the city they saw as their birthright, their righteous indignation growing with every passing year. Meanwhile, Florence had found peace and prosperity without them, coming into its own as a free and democratic Repubblica Fiorentina. It turned out that the city did not need the Medici to be great.

But the banished Medici cousins had not been content to accept this new reality. Together, they had schemed up a way to retake the city in their family's name. By the time this plan had come into fruition, Giovanni had earned the scarlet vestments of a cardinal. And five years ago, with the might of the Church behind them, he and his cousin had gathered together an army and set out once again to bend Florence to their will.

It had not been a bloodless transition, though Florence itself had been spared the worst of it. The honor of setting a harsh and savage example for the city had fallen on . . . other luckless shoulders. Why, after all, would the Medici want to break the plaything they'd plotted so intricately to reclaim? And so Florence had been cowed into accepting their prodigal patriarchs back with open arms. Giovanni had shelved his Medici name in favor of the appropriately papal Pope Leo X, and Giulio had stepped into the cardinal role his cousin had vacated. But if the angry bills on the walls and the smear on the Pope's carriage were anything to go by, the Medici's return to power was far from universally welcome.