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## The Garden of Earthly Delights

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The Garden Of Earthly Delights

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
University of New Orleans  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts  
In  
Film, Theatre and Communication Arts  
Creative Writing  
Fiction

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## Abstract

*The Garden of Earthly Delights* is a historical novel set in late 15<sup>th</sup> century Spain.

Prologue  
The Kingdom of Spain  
1492

The sound of screams echoed down the stark gray stone corridors of the dungeon. A heavy wooden door studded with iron nails slammed shut. The cries of some fortunate heretic whose torture would be continued tomorrow dwindled into mere sobs. The Church forbade more than one session of torture, but in Christ's holy name suspended and resumed the process indefinitely, until the necessary confession was obtained. Inquisitor General Fray Tomás de Torquemada sanctioned the practice in dutiful obedience to the Lord.

Torches flamed with a dark oily smoke. An open fire against one wall added smoke to the gloom; the feet of heretics were held above its flames. A pot of fat sat nearby that the victim's limbs might be greased to prolong the agony. Two hooded and robed public executioners were dragging a prisoner tied up with rope towards the fire as the Inquisitor General watched.

Torquemada had another prisoner, the heretic painter called variously Jeroen van Aken, El Bosco, or Heironymous Bosch, brought in to witness the tortures that might shortly be his own. This artist was a painter of monsters and chimeras, a purveyor of wild shocking images that branded him as an outcast, and worse, a lover of alchemy.

Torquemada devoutly prayed that the painter would shortly be brought to confession. The artist had been denounced by a Jew and condemned by his own works. With a few carefully wrought tortures, God's work and the priest's own would be done. It was Torquemada's selfless, industrious aim to bring all of the Jews and heretics back to a love of Jesus Christ and to further the aims of the Holy Church in Spain.

The Pope himself had commanded Fray Tomás de Torquemada to lay aside all fear and accept the office of Inquisitor "in remission of his sins and in the love of God" and "in a spirit of fortitude and in hope of eternal reward." This charge Torquemada embraced in the same industrious spirit as he met all the requirements of his Dominican priesthood.

The monk had prayed, kneeling in his bare cell at Segovia, and meditated on the idea that although Christ the Redeemer was merciful in all things, he also foretold in words of fire that the Jews would be punished for rejecting him, and spoke of Hell and a day of Judgement. Torquemada had looked beyond his monastery walls at the city of Segovia, where Don Juan Árias de Ávila had seventeen Jews killed for the murder of a Christian boy on Good Friday, and where Jews and *Conversos* rejected the Crucified Christ with mockery and blasphemy, and he had seen that a strong hand was needed to prevent the complete destruction of the Christian Church in Spain.

In Fray Tomás de Torquemada's time, Isabel was crowned Queen of Castile and unified Spain with her marriage to King Fernando of Aragon. The Queen was a stalwart soldier, a warrior for Christ, well able to use her authority to rule with justice and

wisdom. During her reign, the Moors met the final defeat of their 800 year crusade, the Spanish Inquisition was founded, and the Jews were ejected from Spain. She had taken Fray Tomás as her confessor, and together they fought against heretics and Jews.

For the painter Jeroen van Aken's edification, an accused was submitted to *garrucha*. The victim's wrists and arms were tied by a tight cord before he was pulled aloft. His legs kicked and flailed and his mouth hung open in one long scream. It took three men to hoist him but dropping him was simple: they let go the rope.

Another accused was tied prone to a wooden board, his hands and feet bound by cords twisted with iron bars to tighten them. An iron vise clamped his head. The agonized eyes of the prisoner bulged. His jaws had been forced open with a metal prong. His nostrils were plugged with cork, and water dripped onto a linen square that covered his mouth. Some prisoners confessed before they drowned.

Jeroen van Aken watched with gaping mouth and blinking eyes. He looked pallid in the wavering light of the torches. Torquemada watched as the man fumbled in his sleeve and brought forth ... nothing. What had he been seeking? A knife? A packet of poison? Had the accused been slipped a private means to suicide? Torquemada had his acolyte Fray José search the shabby paint-spattered tunic and jerkin. The Inquisitor General was pleased when nothing was found, because it would be an offense if a prisoner in his care was permitted the occasion of sin.

## The Garden of Earthly Delights

### Chapter One

“I am not a rational man!”

“This is not news,” Doña Teresa said. Jeroen’s landlady sat in front of the stone hearth of her mud-brick house where he lodged in Seville. Her deft fingers braided stems of flowering lavender into wands wrapped with a bit of wool. Perhaps it was the scent of the lavender that made him think of peace. For just a moment Jeroen forgot his grievances. Then he shook his head and blew out his breath in a snort. He didn’t want ease or forgetfulness or peace. He had to show mankind the folly of sin.

Teresa was a squat dark woman, all skirts and shawls, with her hair hidden by a black mantilla. She called herself an herbalist. “I pray to God that he deliver you from Satan,” she said.



“The devil be damned. All I want to do is paint my pictures. It’s not my fault I can’t draw sweet little cherubs or delicate and devout virgins.”

Jeroen’s craft of painting was part of the family tradition. He had left his family’s studio in the Netherlands to work in Spain to get some peace. His art didn’t match the pallid copies his father and uncles turned out. Babies with wings! They complained about his studies for monsters. The Brotherhood of Our Lady, his religious society, had rejected a painting they had commissioned. Did they even look to see the results of his careful under-painting, or did they admire his amazing sense of design? No. The extraordinary imagination he had put into the artwork was completely disregarded. Those hoary old men had muttered into their matted beards. Heresy, they had said. Witchcraft, devilry. They must have been jealous of his skill. He was the most skilled painter in the entire town of ‘s-Hertogenbosch.

He had heard his father say it. “I love how you paint, Jeroen.” Then his father’s face had contorted in fury. “I just can’t understand why you paint such utter putrefaction. You’ll be damned to the seven hells.”

Jeroen’s paint pots spewed carnation and terra verte as he thumped his fist on the landlady’s rough-hewn table at the memory. A wooden bench received a splotch of lead-tin yellow atop the yellow ochre of a previous temper, a pleasing effect. The painter dipped a horsehair brush into a potbellied ceramic jar that survived his ire and pulled up a mellow brown. He touched the brush thoughtfully to the large wooden panel propped on an upturned three-legged stool. The gross and lumpish body of a water-rat with the wings of a jay took on solid form; quickly Jeroen armed the figure with a long knife he scratched through the paint with a quill.

Now the painter chuckled with good humor. The rat had a stupid, drunken expression of pugnacity. The joke was that ratteken was Dutch slang for vulva. It was just as well Teresa didn't know that.

"You don't know anything about it. I'm painting the divine," he said to her. He made his voice as cheerful as the first light of day in the treetops. He gave himself credit for being as ready with a hearty spirit as he was quick to flare in anger.

"You don't think rationality would better serve?" Doña Teresa asked. "I've heard scholars say that men far gone in irrationality are prey to base passions." She laid two more lavender wands onto the tidy pile in her willow basket.

Maybe she did know about the rat. Jeroen thought uneasily that when women talked about base passions they meant sex. He had a strong sense it would be dangerous to try to talk about sex with Teresa. The landlady had a ripe figure under her fringed wool shawl. Her skirts swayed suggestively when she passed through the room. Neat ears held wire hoops threaded with the kind of molded beads made of rose petals, still faintly sweet-smelling near the warmth of the fire. When he had first come to Seville, sitting in front of the hearth of an evening, Jeroen had draped an arm suggestively close to her shoulder. Teresa had turned her head and pierced the offending limb with a look that could have nailed it to the church door like the severed hand of a thief. Jeroen had hastily put his hands in his lap and sat like a fat burgher the rest of the evening.

Where could Teresa have been listening to scholars talk about irrational men? Why would she be interested in philosophers? Maybe she had been lurking near the cathedral. Teresa had a strong sense of presence in her home, but Jeroen had seen her practically disappear going down the street in town or through the market. He wondered how women did that, displayed such changing aspects to the world. Seductress, mother, witch – he sensed that Teresa could be all three at once.

In his experience scholars talked more about their own importance and learning than they ever did about sin and damnation, which would at least be useful. Jeroen had most of his information about the fight between the Devil and God for men's souls from priests preaching sermons. Preaching was sometimes good theatre, all waving arms and booming voices, but woefully short on important details. Jeroen needed to know all about the hideous consequences of sin and folly. For this his imagination was his sharpest tool.

Doña Teresa rose and came to peer at the panel by the light of the candle stuck to one of the legs of the stool. The candle was leaning precipitously. Jeroen instantly blew out the flame. Molten wax splattered, but she failed to draw back. "This is the divine? That winged rat is holy? That pool of water looks stagnant and foul."

Teresa cocked her head. "Why does that crane striking at anything within its reach have three heads? Why are the two cockatrices fighting over a frog?" She pointed with a slim dark finger, the tattered fringes of her shawl falling back to reveal her sienna-colored arm. "What is that ant-like thing with wings crawling into the cave?"

"Sin and death entered the world with Eve and all of human depravity and damnation was set in motion," he said with a scowl. How dare Teresa question his work? Women were the very devil. How could any man put up with their constant carping? Of course Jeroen's paintings showed the divine. Every object he painted concealed a secret message. The eyes of the faithful would know. Even Saint Augustine said that it didn't matter that animals like three-headed cranes or ants with wings didn't exist. What mattered was what they meant.

Teresa sniffed. "Before you blame sin and depravity on Eve remember where she came from, Jeroen," she said.

Irritating, literal-minded woman.

“I will paint you in,” he said. Jeroen worked *alla prima*, a way of painting done in one session while the paint was still wet. He twirled a small brush in a pot of caput mortuum and painted a purple owl into the round base of a crab-like fountain that graced the sketch. Athena’s sacred owl was the bird of magicians and alchemists, suitable for an herb-woman, who was as close to a witch as Jeroen ever wanted to be. The bright wide bird eyes he dabbed made the owl stare out unblinking from its nest.

“Fool!” Teresa gasped.

“You don’t like your portrait?” he smirked. “Owls are symbolic of the Jews, who repulsed Our Savoir when he came to redeem them.”

“You call me a Jew when I eat *olla podrida*?” Teresa gestured to the pot simmering on the hearth. A stew of pork, sausage, ham, cabbage, carrots, garlic, pepper, and bacon sent out tempting smells. In truth there were more cabbage and squash than meats in Teresa’s pot, but quite enough to prove faith. Dipping a ladle and stirring briskly, she served herself a bowl.

His stomach rumbled. He had rushed to his painting as soon as he woke up, with only a hasty piss out the door and a brief morning prayer. Since he was always in a hurry to get to his work, he had learned to do both at the same time. He trusted the Madonna to pay attention to the prayer and ignore the other part. But he had no bread to break his fast and the wine from the previous night had soured in his beaker. The pottage smelled like heaven.

“I can help you eat that,” he said. It was part of his lodging that the landlady provide one meal a day; so, did it matter if it was dinner or supper?

“Jeroen, you should avoid foods that stagnate the system,” the herbalist said. “Your humors will curdle on pork or heavy red meats.”

He caught a glimpse of one cimmerian eye twinkling under the veil. She was laughing at him.

He threw down the brush, which splashed the whitewashed wall with purple spots, and pushed the yellow-splattered wooden bench aside. He strode across the room towards Teresa, who watched calmly. At the last moment, before he could quite decide if he dared take hold of her or not, she ducked beneath his arms and twirled away.

“I have it now,” he said. “You’ve left the stew on the hearth. I’ll take what I please.”

Doña Teresa gave a slight curtsey. “You’ll find I’ve seasoned it for you,” she said. Out the door she went, into the narrow twisting lane. The alley was all sharp flint cobbles, ditches and dirty places like most of the streets in Seville. He saw her flip her black cloak at a mule who was adding his filth to the stench, and then she turned the corner and was gone.

Now here was a problem and a problem indeed. Seasoned it how? Had the woman added something noxious to the food? Jeroen sniffed suspiciously. Vinegar, pepper, clove, garlic. He picked up the ladle and was about to touch the tip of his tongue to the brew when he had a better thought.

“Felipe!” The timbre of his voice rattled dried plants stuffed between rafters and roof. A few flakes drifted down and added themselves to the pot. Impatiently he stirred them in. “Felipe! Bring your tail-napkin!”

His apprentice peered warily around the edge of the door. The boy gave a cry when he saw the paints tipped about and scuttled in to try and save what remained in the jars. It would be his job to grind the minerals and add water and oils to replenish the supply. The apprentice was perhaps eight years of age, with big feet like a puppy. Old enough that he had received the sacrament of confirmation, but not yet old enough to

make his first confession, or so he had said. Like most pícaros, he scrounged and engaged in petty theft and stole scraps of food. Until he was fourteen years old the church wouldn't know his sins. Slight of figure and barefoot, the boy was dressed in ragged common cloth no doubt filched from some washerwoman's hedge.

"Leave that," the painter said. "Eat this!" He ladled a bowl about half full of the *olla podrida* and handed it down to him.

Astonished, the boy sat abruptly on the floor. "Oh, Don Jeroen, thank you!" he cried. "You are exceedingly generous to me. You have never ..."

"Enough!"

Greedily the boy scooped up a portion of the unctuous mass with grubby fingers. With his foul hand halfway to his mouth, he paused.

"What is it?" Jeroen cried.

"The blessing."

A short grace later the entire handful was crammed into his mouth. The painter watched alertly. The apprentice gulped, swallowed, added another fistful to his maw. All seemed well.

He snatched the bowl from the boy as he ran his tongue over the inner surface for the last of the sauce.

"You'll get splinters in your tongue doing that," he said.

"Yes, Don Jeroen. Thank you, Don Jeroen. Oh, I have never had so much warm food all at once. You are very good to me, El Bosco."

The boy called him by the name he signed to his paintings. Jeroen van Aken called himself Jheronimus Bosch. He took the word bosch, which meant woods, from the town where he was born and in Spain he became known as El Bosco. Truth said, by whatever name he was good to the apprentice, and the boy's small naked midsection

bulged out of his ragged pants, evidence of unusual keeping. “Yes, yes, that’s all well and good, but say nothing about it. Get on with the work.” He didn’t want a reputation for largesse lest every vagabond and beggar in Seville line up outside the door.

He dipped once more into the stewpot and filled the bowl to the brim. He took his carved wooden spoon from his pouch and plunged it into the stew. As he raised the spoon to his mouth, a passing fancy took him. Perhaps the food was harmless to the boy because he gave the blessing before he ate. As he did before he threw the dice in a brothel, Jeroen breathed a quick prayer. If it was not needed, no harm done. He had never heard that mankind was allotted only a finite number of blessings, and by the same token curses seemed to be unlimited in their application.

He settled on the bench before the fire and filled his belly. The only immediate consequence was that the seat of his pants stuck to the lead-tin yellow and when he made to rise the bench came with him. He thought he heard a small giggle from Felipe, but when he snarled back at him, the apprentice was industriously at work grinding the carnation primuersel.

Something was going on outside. A grand flow of people were making their way down the alley with their heads all craned leftward toward the great square. They thickened and bunched up at the end of the lane, all looking the same way. As Jeroen poked his head out the door, he could hear them saying excitedly, “The Queen. It’s Queen Isabel!”

Sounds of a large cortege passing in the great square reached him. He could just see the first horsemen come into view above the heads of the crowd. The horses were mostly out of sight behind the throng but the riders were plain enough in royal livery. When the Queen rode forth with her gaudy retinue, music and flying pennants, the royal guard and the entire Court accompanied her.

The nobility bought paintings. Jeroen would rather spend his time cataloging folly and sin, but to survive he had to sell the works. The ones he sent back to his father's workshop only brought in a pittance. An educated, literate audience had just as much faith as the masses and a lot more money. He decided to go and watch the procession in hopes of identifying wealthy patrons.

He approached through the alley and looked into the plaza. For no good reason the first person his eye went to was Doña Teresa, sitting on the steps of the cathedral as though she had the rights of a noblewoman. Dressed for the street in an enormous sleeveless black cape and veil, she was as anonymous as any woman of good birth, but he knew her by the set of her shoulders and the bright cock of her head. He shouldn't have painted her as an owl, because she always looks like a crow, he thought spitefully. Crows were symbols of illicit practices, and what if she was a witch? Just see how she pretended to be better than she was.

A long procession of Moorish slaves in glittery suits of yellow and green and red danced through the city gates ahead of the brilliant cortege of nobles. Rich Jews and *Conversos* mingled with the Spanish aristocrats in the crowded plaza, trying no doubt to show their loyalty to the Crown. Jeroen couldn't tell the one from the other. *Conversos* were Jews who had been persuaded to publicly convert to Christianity. Suspicious Christians said *Conversos* went to Mass on Sunday but secretly kept their own ways on the Jewish sabbath. Jeroen didn't know the truth of that but he thought the Jews were no more or less sinful than the general run of mankind. He painted them into his work when the wrongdoing matched his intent to show sin and folly.

Jeroen worked himself forward in the crowd, squeezing between Jew and hidalgo alike. The cortege was passing through a street canopied with rich tapestries stretching from one roof to another, over ground strewn with roses and jasmine. Queen Isabel



appeared on a pale Andalusian mule with a saddle cloth of gold. Jeroen marveled at the white and ermine gown the Queen wore, and at the sparkling jewels at her throat and on the delicate arch of her foot. She showed a fine and fair lady, and nodded to the people on each side as she passed by. Some of those swarthy or lean and yellow faces with skin drawn sharp over hungry bones would have put Jeroen off, not to mention the filthy rags they wore. The Queen showed gracious attention to everyone from beggar to priest, from peasant to Lord, and even cast her eyes across his own paint-spattered person. He hastily tugged his jerkin straight.

Isabel passed so close to him he could see that her eyes were a clear bluish-green with gold flecks, prettier than any of the gems she wore, and he resolved on the instant to have Felipe prepare some azurite. It would need a great deal of binder to stick to the panel because azurite couldn't be ground too finely lest it pale into insignificance, but if he must have it then he would.

Pulled by the azurite vision, Jeroen followed. The Queen went immediately to the cathedral. She dismounted and as she slowly ascended the steps the crowd swept Jeroen up with them. Bodies packed the church so that he couldn't move a finger's width in any direction. A heavy odor of incense nearly covered the stench. Peering over the shoulder of a crooked crone, he could see that Isabel went first to the ivory statue of Our Lady of Kings. It was her ancestor Saint Fernando who had always carried the statue on his saddlebow in battle. The crowd hushed to hear the Queen give thanks to God for all His mercies. Her clear voice carried well. Jeroen was transfixed by the image of her kneeling so gracefully at the alter. What a picture it would make!

He would love to use his skill in painting monsters, flames, and smoke to surround this paragon of Christian virtue in a dramatic piece. There was no one better than he at painting demons, and it was not, as Doña Teresa had said, because he harbored

a devil himself. The Queen with her comeliness and gracefulness attracted his eye. It would be marvelous to have a source of beauty to contrast with the weird curiosities, the strange and comical images, that his hand brought to life against all reason. What the Queen would think of thus being portrayed was another issue.

Jeroen followed the crowd willingly because he was so intrigued with the Queen. She went to the Alcázar, the home of many Spanish kings, where the gardens of palms and pomegranates and oranges seemed to welcome her. She sat in the judgement seat of San Fernando, in the Hall of the Ambassadors. Her lovely face became grave and pensive as she weighed the requirements of Seville.

“She is considering who she will have hanged,” Teresa said at his side.

He started. “What are you doing here? What do you mean?”

“Only murder, arson, rape, sodomy, blasphemy, theft, robbery, and all the kinds of moral laxity. She will be angry. Oh, the city will have feasts and banquets to lull her, but Isabel knows that Seville like Córdoba and Toledo is depraved. You’ll see the wicked flee the city.”

Hen, he thought, not owl. Teresa had all but cackled in satisfaction. What did she care about wickedness? It wasn’t her work to show the devilish brood contaminating mankind, the blind folly and excess and frightful retribution to come. That was his job.

He looked at the Queen sitting so quietly in the judgement seat. Her coloring was that of a delicate blonde. Copper and bronze highlights made multicolored ripples in her light auburn hair. Her features had a classic purity and her delicate hands made graceful and harmonious gestures. He thought he fell a little in love with her beauty.

“What a pity you are only a painter of monstrosities,” Teresa said.

Pestilent woman, reading his thought. “Why do you always rile me?” he retorted, but too loudly, so that a guard in the Queen’s service came and put him out with menaces

from his big sword. Jeroen took a long step backward and ducked outside. He wanted to get back to his paintings anyway. He had a spot in a demon's jaw for Teresa.

Teresa watched the guard hustle Jeroen away with no sign of her secret amusement showing on her face. Arms as thick and knotted as tree roots matched a head as hard as an oak trunk, she thought. Why did the very sight of him make her irritable? It must be because the lodger was mooning at Queen Isabel like a love-struck calf. The man had no sense. Most men didn't.

Jeroen looked like the sort of brute who should be wrestling teams of oxen behind an iron plough. He was all thick sinews and brawn. His curly hair, twinkling eyes and upturned mouth predicted a carefree disposition, an augury belied by the sticky panels of nightmare visions which leaned against every wall of her house. Cracked cups with dried-up oils littered her scrubbed plank table. The livery stable at the end of the block had shut up all the horses because the apprentice Felipe had been plucking the horse tails clean to make brushes for the painter, and the carriage drivers refused to rent beasts with bald tails like rats. The stench of stabled horses added to the miasma of the sewage in the streets. The lodger continuously made messes of paint, left his doublet hanging in front of the fire and stuffed his codpiece with moss from the basket she kept for the latrine. The little sapling he brought with him, Felipe, was a good boy who meant no harm, but the big log needed a few more whacks to fit into her house. She meant to hew the lodger into shape with a few skillful blows.

The painter's coins were welcome, however, and because his diet was so appalling it was easy to cheat and feed him on only sardines and bread. But in that case Felipe would only get bread and Teresa hoped she had enough Christian charity to do

better than that by an innocent child, or in any case a child who was no worse than many in the sinful city.

She shook her head in bad humor at the way her mind was wandering. It wasn't Jeroen or Felipe she was concerned with here. Teresa stood near the entrance to the great hall, directly opposite the recess which held the Queen's dazzling throne. The whole interior of the Hall of Ambassadors was cool and scented with incense. The great gilded dome with its circles, crowns, and stars shed a heavenly sparkle of light on the assembled Court. Teresa peeped around one of the pink marble columns, searching for a specific figure among the crowd.

Grandeess in embroidered black finery with plumed hats, cavaliers in doublets and hose, councilmen and other notables spread through the square hall. An archbishop in purple and gold vestments over a breastplate of Toledo steel strode about. Clerks and courtiers, attendants and acolytes milled in a constantly shifting mosaic of their own over the intricately tiled floor.

Teresa's eye found the slim, tall man she sought, a Jewish physician who was a *Converso*. He was the Court's physician and surgeon. Teresa's breath came a little faster as she watched him. The man was looking around alertly, scanning the room, although his dark eyes showed little expression. That was his way, always remote, always restrained. He would not be looking for her, who should not be in this company.

He was a thin, neat man with long dark hair held back by a gold clip. His olive skin color betrayed his Jewish ancestry. He wore a rich doublet and over it a full cloak trimmed in braid. He had the maturity of years to have studied for some years at Salamanca and then to have served nobles and high-born families; Benjamin Villalobos was a scholar and philosopher as well as doctor.

The *Converso* held himself aloof from the press of the crowd. One of the attendants approached him for a word, and he bent his head courteously to listen then clapped the man on the shoulder and sent him off with a coin. The physician methodically gathered his dark yellow cloak and tucked the ends under his leather belt before he moved away through one of the side archways. The cloak's color flattered his dark skin and thin beard, Teresa thought. He looked very professional, very poised, secure in his appointment to the Crown. She had heard that Isabel favored him.

The Queen perched on the throne in her lovely puffed and slashed gown. She sat with convent-trained good posture. Surrounded by opulent women of Seville dressed in clothes made of fine silk, satin, or velvet, she surpassed them in beauty. All the ladies' cloth was of the finest weave and embroidered with cunning designs in leaf green and scarlet. The noble women minced by with small steps. They seemed to sway from side to side, with their feet tucked beneath the hoop skirts of their gowns. Most of the women wore ceruse white lead paint to mask smallpox scars or other imperfections of the skin on shoulders, neck, face, and ears. Wax covered lips painted red and heavy rouge drew attention to their faces. Rose water and ambergris perfumed unclean skin.

Teresa knew that just as the sumptuous clothing covered unwashed bodies, the flashy life of Seville had its corrupt side. The streets she walked were crooked and dirty. The police were accomplices of thieves; murderers bribed judges; hired assassins and swindlers plied their trades. The Court of the Elms and the Court of the Oranges, cheek by jowl with the cathedral and within the chains that marked the ecclesiastical jurisdiction, served as sanctuaries for criminals. Teresa had mercy for all the poor thieves stealing bread only to live, but for the evil wealthy, Godspeed Isabel to judge and hang them.

The silversmiths, jewelers, woodcarvers, and silk and linen shopkeepers congregated in the quarter where her own small house lay. Trade was the life of Seville, and the ones who profited from dealing had a sumptuous social life with little grace or moral compass to recommend them. Teresa knew about those merchants. Greedy, conniving, venal. Shopkeepers from Italy, France, England, Portugal, Greece and nearly every other country in Europe thronged the streets, set on their own aggrandizement and at the expense of buyers.

It seemed like the more wealth a person had, the less sense. Did coin in the purse drain wit from the heart? It made no sense that some people had much and others none, and beggars were left to die of hunger when alms from the fortunate might have sustained them. Teresa wanted to save all the ill-starred, beggars and thieves, star-crossed and afflicted. Why save them? For pity, for love?

Saving thieves and beggars was an odd ambition for a woman trained by the Society of Eve to assassinate by poison. Teresa had been given by her mother to the Society of Eve, raised in it, trained and indoctrinated in its mysteries. Within the Society, the Domina identified enemies and her acolytes dispatched them. The Society was reviled by the Church as a conspiracy of witches and Jews.

Teresa had taken the lore and twisted it to her own ends, to great indignation. Because Teresa used medicinal alchemy to save instead of slay, she was hunted and condemned, and at the same time she was trapped by her sins. She dared not confess to any priest, and therefore she dared not marry. The Society still had hold on her, through her mother.

Now the Society sought her, to bring her back to the fold or to do away with her by its own venom? The Domina hated her, and cast her out or did Teresa simply escape? Her own motives were mixed. The Society was wonderful for its wisdom, but she

thought not wise at all in its use. Teresa sometimes felt she was like a moon-faced Eden child, simple of wit and full of tender sympathy for a flea-bitten three-legged dog.

Maybe that was why she tolerated Jeroen as an awkward lodger.

In her quarter of Seville, the wealthiest merchants constructed two story houses with balconies and other splendors on the façades. Each house had a central patio which served as an interior courtyard and was furnished with melodious fountains and lush grapevines. Corridors ran around the patios both upstairs and down, to which all the rooms had access. Interior floors were tiled in intricate mosaics, windows had filigreed shutters, and lanterns provided illumination for the lively social scene. Teresa had seen both the lovely facades and grimy cellars of the houses, cured wealthy grantees and pitiful serving wretches alike with her herbs and simples. She distrusted the rich and pitied the poor, but the healing herbs were the same in every draught she brewed regardless of the intended recipient. Bowels gripped and wind broke regardless of rank or riches.

Her own house was but one modest story, built of blocks of clay three hands square, studded with pebbles. The roof was made of wood beams and covered with thatch. She had one main room with a well-proportioned hearth, and also a small shed-roofed addition in the back that was rented to the painter. He furnished his own bedroll and mattress cover, which when stuffed with clean straw made him a bed. His bedcovers were stained with bright and dun paint which gave them a gay aspect despite their filth. Jeroen claimed the oily mixture kept the fleas away. Teresa preferred the herb pennyroyal, which she scattered among the rushes on the floor and rubbed on the cats.

When the Queen began to receive petitions, Teresa took her willow basket over her arm to go to market. There would be a delay while soldiers were sent to bring malefactors moneyed and poor from Seville and the surrounding countryside. Teresa

wished the soldiers good fortune in locating murderers and felons. Too bad they wouldn't also bring forth certain magistrates and members of the Municipal Council who controlled monopolies on certain goods and foods. But Teresa knew that fruits and vegetables were cheap enough if you knew who to go to, and that they were better for the body than scrawny chicken and wormy mutton.

At the Mercadillo de la Alameda, she sought out a friend. "A double handful of apples, if they be sound," she murmured to Mistress Mallaina.

"I've kept the best for you, Doña Teresa."

Mistress Mallaina was a destitute young woman with a baby at her breast and a small girl child clutching her frayed skirts. She went round the orchards culling windfalls while the landowners looked the other way, because charity to the deserving poor was a measure of God's grace. It seemed by the look of her swollen stomach that some vagabond had caught her again and she had paid for her life with the only coin she had.

"How soon will the new baby come?" Teresa asked. "Do you have a place to go?"

"I'll go to the fields like a beast," the young woman said. "I'm burdened like one."

Teresa looked down at the girl child at her mother's side. The waif was dirty round the mouth from eating apple cores but gave her a happy grin nonetheless.

"Look how pretty your girl is going to be. She's called Merry, isn't she? And the baby in your arms is a son? Surely you're blessed."

"I'm weighed down with stones. I can't go on. They'll find my corpse in the river one day."

"Don't think of it," Teresa said. She shook her head in worry. "Don't talk about that kind of sin. You know I'll help you if need be. Come to me any time."



“Too late now,” Mistress Mallaina said. She sounded bitter and sad at the same time. “If I had known before the quickening ...”

“You had better go to confession before the birth. Father Diego will give you a light penance and help you say the words.”

“Father Diego is the cause of this misery,” she said.

Teresa spit on the ground, an inadequate expression of contempt for the foul behaviors of corrupt men. The sins of church fathers were beyond her. That monks and priests foully transgressed incensed her beyond words or charity.

Immoral priests, venal merchants, closefisted lords, the whole world seemed bereft of any charity or kindness. Teresa heaved a great sigh. She could only do her own scant best to act kindly to everyone. It was just that most days everyone she met had such a great need of mercy that her own supply of pity and sympathy quickly ran out and were supplanted by a kind of ruthless ability to cope. The persons who experienced Teresa’s idea of overcoming their difficulties were sometimes left more shaken than soothed. But she spoke gently to Mistress Mallaina nonetheless.

“Father Henry, then.”

“Father Henry can’t absolve me if I’m not repentant,” the young woman said. Tears rolled slowly down her wind-reddened cheeks and dripped onto her baby’s downy head. The baby reached up with a hand that should have been chubby fat but which showed bones and thin blued skin. He brushed at his head as though the water were more of the flies which plagued him.

Teresa gave her two maravedís for the apples and pressed both her hands around the woman’s thin cold hand for a moment. Mistress Mallaina’s lot was no worse than most beggars. Destitute people swelled the city streets in Seville and Madrid because of the plague and famine. Licensed beggars who were blind had a monopoly on reciting

prayers to protect people from evil, but with two tiny children Mistress Mallaina could not fake being blind or crippled. The more credible but still fake purblind and deformed people who called out for alms as they crowded around the church doors would quickly drive her away.

In the market Teresa got a cabbage that wasn't too limp and some carrots that hadn't been completely eaten by weevil. They were cheap enough and Mistress Pérez down the lane would trade her milk for simples. Mistress Pérez suffered mightily from wind and Teresa made her infusion after infusion of dill-weed, which guaranteed the supply of milk. The cabbage and carrots and a turnip would go with the milk to make a vegetable pottage.

The dill weed in her garden was lush with gray-green feathery fronds and yellow seed heads. It smelled like parsley and caraway. Boiled in water it served for hiccough and to expel wind. Teresa took the water for her infusions from the river because the nearest well was hard by the graveyard. The graveyard was full to bursting with victims of the Great Pestilence. Priests said the pestilence was the anger of the Lord sent to torment the wicked. Teresa had no thought about that but did believe it seemly that the plague then struck at the thieves who preyed on the dead.

Soldier's wound wort, which some called yarrow, and angelica and rue with the dill also grew in her tidy garden plot. Angelica was said to help against the plague but the monk who told Teresa that went to confess the sick and fell himself to the fever. He grew a bubo in the groin where the thigh meets the trunk, and also a small swelling under the armpit. He began to spit blood and saliva, and his reason fled ahead of his soul. The stricken monk hung his body about with chains and flagellated himself with thorns as he ran through the town seeking Christ's mercy.

The contagion often seemed to spread in that way, from one panicked sufferer to others. When mothers perished, nursing babies died in droves and orphaned children wandered the streets. Carts were piled high with the dead. Physicians and surgeons swiftly followed their patients to the grave.

It was from the lack of doctors that Teresa had come to know the Jewish court physician, although she took great care to keep her knowledge of the man secret. While even the Queen had no prejudice against *Conversos* who sincerely practiced Christianity, in her times there had been massacres, one at Córdoba in the year of Our Lord 1473. In Seville the “New Christians” secretly organized and armed a militia of 5,000 men only to provoke a new massacre in which they were the victims.

So Teresa kept her friendship with the *Converso* Dr. Villalobos a great secret, especially from the painter who had only a tenuous grasp on the blood-spattered background of Seville. Jeroen came from the far north from a town with an unpronounceable name. She made him scratch it out for her on a bit of bark once, just to see the letters that emerged mangled from his snapping teeth. Like his Christian name Jeroen, the town name had no sense to it, s-Hertogenbosch. It lay in Brabant, in a place he called the Netherlands, which she believed was sited some considerable distance from civilization, out there on the corner of the map skin where the North Wind blew.

Jeroen and Felipe had burned rice and cabbage in sour wine for dinner. She tried to cut the spoiled bits out of the apples before passing them around but the painter still bit a worm in two when his teeth crunched through the shriveled flesh and he threw the apple at her with a curse. She ducked to one side and it went into the hearth.

“What’s happened to the food?” he bellowed. “This slop isn’t fit for pigs.”

Teresa had been sadly distracted. She had returned to the Hall of the Ambassadors to hear the Queen’s judgements. Purveyors of major crimes were given

time to confess and then sent to the hangman. Wrong-doers who had yet to be denounced fled the city. In the end the Bishop of Cádiz had begged Isabel for mercy, for surely so many people in Seville were guilty that if she continued to insist on absolute justice, the city would be depopulated and ruined.

“Where’s the fish, then?” he hollered. “How hard can it be to soak an end of salt cod? God’s teeth, I’ll be eating the glue for my canvas before long. The days of my years are numbered, woman. While they last I want to eat well, win at cards, fight bravely and take my share of pleasure.”

The apple nestled in the coals of the fire. Teresa’s gaze rested on it. The poor half-rotten, shriveled thing had been taken from the hands of a desperate beggar, carried home to an ungrateful lodger, and tossed contemptuously away. So would be many lives.

For Fray Alonzo de Ojeda, a Dominican, had advised the Queen to establish an Inquisition. So did Philip de Barberis, an Inquisitor from King Fernando’s kingdom of Sicily, who was then in Seville. The good fathers predicted that without such an instrument, Christianity would disappear from the land. Isabel had attended thoughtfully to the Bishop’s appeal and Teresa had listened as she proclaimed a general amnesty covering all offenses save one. Heresy. Teresa shuddered. She knew her *Converso* physician friend Benjamin Villalobos was always at risk of being accused of heresy.

Benjamin was dearer than a friend. Teresa’s hand went protectively to her belly, cradling a small flicker of new life they had made between them. Benjamin had insisted he didn’t want to get her with child. He had given her a little ceramic pot of alum in wax to put in her private parts before they lay together. The squat little vessel which was covered with a parchment lid tied round with a strip of green thread sat untouched in her medicine chest. Teresa wished she had given it to Mistress Mallaina. Too many lives were at risk for Teresa to refuse to nurture one.

Felipe snatched the apple out of the fire with the wooden end of a big paintbrush after the worm had sizzled to its death.

“Look, Don Jeroen,” the boy said cheerfully. “He burned in Hell.”

So would all heretics, but first they would burn in the flames of the pyre.

## Chapter Two

“I call it the Temptation of Saint Anthony,” Jeroen said. He dusted a corner of the still wet painting with the hem of his jerkin, by chance adding a chicken feather to the butterfly in the lower left. Saint Anthony was shown huddled in a dead tree, with the figure of a drowning man in a pond before him. Wee armored figures dumped out a jug of wine. Tiny men pounded on an charming castle in the middle ground, using shields and rams and ladders. The saint was ringed by a funnel-headed beast wielding a maul, a complacent pig, one of the pint-size warriors aiming a crossbow at him, and a sort of armored catfish upon whose back rested the butterfly. The painter pursed his lips. No, the chicken feather did not add to the effect. Delicately he plucked it away and let it flutter to the dirt floor.

“What does it mean?” Teresa asked. A brown striped tabby cat pounced on the chicken feather like prey, sneezed and blew it onward. Teresa picked the chicken down up and tucked it tidily away in a small bag of similar fluff. She was a great one for saving bits and pieces of nonsense, Jeroen thought, but the advantage was that the herb woman could usually come up with a scrap of linen or speck of mastic when he needed it for his work.

Now she had something pink and wriggling in her hand, and the tabby cat was standing on its hind legs pawing at Teresa’s skirts.

“What’s that? A live fish?” Jeroen asked. “It’s pinker than your palm, what is it?”

Teresa opened her hand to show him some hairless live rats about half a digit in size. “They’re not for you, puss,” she told the cat. “You can go and catch your own. I got these from a nest in the stable down the street.”

Jeroen’s eyes got round. “They’re not for supper, are they?” he said. He thought he’d draw the line at eating rodents, at least midget ones like that. It was possible he’d eaten mature rats with bigger chunks of meat on them in some stewpot somewhere, but the babies Teresa had would be all tiny bones and slippery skin.

“Not your supper either,” she said. “They’re for my house snake.”

Jeroen blinked. “House snake,” he repeated.

“I’m training him to eat rodents. I don’t like rats in the house.”

“Where is this snake?” Jeroen looked around suspiciously. “Is it poisonous? What kind of a snake is it?”

Teresa laughed at him. “You needn’t worry. Felipe and I will take care of the snake.”

“What if it crawls into my bed?”

“Then Felipe will get it out,” Teresa said.

The apprentice looked up from the hearth where he was crushing seeds in a mortar. “It’s a very nice snake, Don Jeroen,” the boy said. “It tastes you with its tongue but it doesn’t bite.”

“Oh, good,” he said. That was just what he needed. A snake nosing him in the tender bits. “What are you going to bring home next? A lion?”

“Here, Felipe.” Teresa handed him the squirming rat pups. “I’ll finish the powder. You see to Serpens.”

“Serpens.” Jeroen concealed a shudder. “What is it you have my boy doing? He’s meant to be grinding my pigments, not your barks and roots.”

“What about Saint Anthony?” Teresa gestured to the panel. “Who is he?”

Jeroen promptly forgot about Felipe. “Saint Anthony is the patron saint of the poor and infirm.” Even Doña Teresa ought to know that much. “Look at how cleverly the colors are arranged. That blue-green color is azurite, darker and stronger of hue in the foreground, and St. Anthony is red ochre. See how the contrast draws your eye to the saint. Then yellow ochres in the middle ground and lighter azurite in the distance. Isn’t it stunning?”

“Why doesn’t the saint save the drowning man?”

“He must not be one of the blessed.” Jeroen shrugged his shoulders. “A demon is pulling him under the water.”

“What’s the pig for?”

“Come now, what would a pig represent? Gluttony, avarice, sloth. Hell’s fire, woman, do you expect me to paint the temptations of the sinful world or write you a treatise? Can’t you see from the picture?”



“I don’t banter with pigs! Jeroen, can’t you paint pictures of how things really are?”

“Who do you think I am, a tame printer like Aleman? A hundred copies of the same page? Bah.”

“Queen Isabel exempted him from taxation because he discovered the art of printing books and secretly brought it to Spain ...”

“... at great risk and expense, yes, I heard the proclamation,” he said. “Redounds to the honor and utility of them. Makes just as much sense as hauling King Fernando to the cathedral to pray for a male heir. That’s not how to make a son.”

“I daresay they worked it out,” Teresa said. “Her child is expected in the summer.”

“I wonder if she would like my Adoration of the Magi,” he mused. Scuffling around between panels tipped up to the walls, Jeroen hauled out the middle panel of the triptych.

Teresa gasped. “In the first place, the very idea of thinking of the Queen in the same breath as the Virgin is sacrilegious.”

“To which of them?” Jeroen asked.

She peered at the painting. “Second, that’s the scrawniest Christ child I’ve ever seen. It looks like a skeleton with transparent skin stretched tight on top of its tiny bones. Besides which, who’s that fourth king?”

Teresa knew very well that Caspar, the Moor, was from Africa and brought frankincense; Melchoir, a white man, brought the gold; and Balthazar, the yellow-humored man, came from the East with myrrh. That much of the painting made sense, but there wasn’t a fourth king in the story.

“You have four kings and that last one in the bright red robe is sticking his naked leg out at the Virgin. If you show this to the Queen she’ll ... why, she’ll have you hung, drawn and quartered.”

“That red color is carmine,” the painter said. “It’s very rare. I bought dyed cloth and wrung the dye out of the fabric.”

“You’re hopeless,” the herb woman said. “An ordinary beet will give you all the red color you want.”

“Oh.” He slumped onto a three-legged stool and rested his chin in his hand. Jeroen’s feelings were hurt. “It isn’t meant to be blasphemous, you know.”

Teresa put her small hand on his shoulder. “Go to the market and buy beets. I’ll show you how to get the color out and keep it from fading in the light with a mordant.”

Jeroen was surprised by Teresa’s touch on his shoulder, but made bold to take advantage. He put his broad hand on Teresa’s rump. Quick as could be the woman had a carving knife in her hand and was tickling his gizzard.

“No, no. Settle down. You mistake me. I want ... I must paint. You’ll see,” he said as he rapidly changed course. He pulled his hand back as if it has been burned by the fire. “Felipe. Bring me a clean panel. I will cast the sinners into hell. I’ll criticize folly in all its forms. Hanging, yes. A tree with a hanged man, I see it – people with spears. A pilgrim rests beneath a tree, a cripple and a blind person are harassed by a dog. There’s a cross and a bird, a magpie, in a barren tree. There. The pilgrim is being robbed, although he has nothing to steal. Felipe!”

Shouting caused Doña Teresa to draw back. Good. Jeroen was looking for the city of heaven to come – but not yet. His present frenzy persuaded the woman to lower her knife. Then he forgot about Teresa entirely: the hanged man, the pilgrim, the wild dog, yes, Jeroen saw the painting entire

Felipe came running in with a fresh panel and Jeroen seized it from him. His thoughts raced on ahead of himself into a lurid fantasy world. Transformations, flying limbs, insects, objects of abominable machination, violent actions and imagery flooded his head. An architecture of dreams began to take shape on the panel. He planned an image, then the picture space around it which would be filled with implements of persecution, swarms of fetishes, excreta, blood, putrefaction, charnal decomposition.

As Jeroen joyously embraced the chaos, he was only vaguely aware of Felipe pointing brushes between his lips for him, stirring paint in cups and beakers, bringing rags to wipe away excesses. He thought he heard Doña Teresa murmuring in the corner to some tall dark stranger, but the quick ecstasy of creation had him in its grasp. Painting fed his hunger for a new battlefield between good and evil.

Fervent prayers were said for Queen Isabel as she approached the birth of her first child. None of the women talked of anything else. Even Dr. Villalobos was caught up in the frenzy. You would think that women had not been bearing Eve's burden for thousands of years. While Teresa wouldn't go so far as to suggest the Queen squat in the field like a peasant, it did seem that a great deal was being made of the *accouchement*. Teresa supposed King Fernando had begun to see how useful children, even daughters, could be in the great marriage game of forging alliances among nations.

Bells rang and cannons fired when the Queen gave birth. It was a son. The King had commanded four male witnesses to be present at the birth along with the midwife, a woman of Seville called *la Herradera*. Queen Isabel had insisted that a silk square be fastened over her mouth. She knew how to suffer in silence but she did not want the men to see so much as a grimace twist her mouth.

The tiny prince was committed to the care of a noble wet nurse, Doña María de Guzman. Celebrations took three days and no work was done in the city for all that time. Teresa couldn't even find bread: the bakers were all drunk and the neglected yeast spoiled. It fermented in a great rush and flowed over the sides of the crocks. Teresa scooped some of the froth into a lettuce leaf and carried it home to mix with coarse flour to make pan cakes for the painter and his apprentice. Even a small fire in the hearth to heat a flat skillet had them all sweating in the summer heat.

The infant Prince Juan was taken to the cathedral for baptism on the ninth day of July. Teresa slipped in to watch. Brocades and gay silks draped the chapel, the baptismal font, and the marble pillars. The royal child entered on a pillow of red brocade carried by his nurse, followed by a great procession including the Court, foreign ambassadors, and the great prelates and nobles of the South. The Papal legate, the ambassador of Venice, the Constable of Castile, and the Count of Benavente trailed Cardinal Mendoza, who behind his back was called the third king of Spain. The Court physician attended the Queen respectfully. Dr. Villalobos was dressed in a long dark gown with a high-standing collar and buttons from neck to hem. He looked very professional, very well-qualified in dress and manner to carry out his duties to the Crown. He was safe in his position and with his aspect, Teresa hoped. Surely no one would denounce a *Converso* who faithfully served the Queen.

No one noticed Teresa in her somber black cape and veil. It was beastly hot beneath the wool. She was pushed to the side of the nave and well to the rear. Teresa was anxious for a sign not only that all was well with Benjamin Villalobos but also that the weary world was turning to a fresh start. She prayed that Benjamin would be safe. She prayed that she herself would slip like the tiniest silver fish through the net the Society of Eve cast to find her. Moreover, Teresa prayed the harvest would be good, the

tiny Prince would thrive, and that Isabel would rout the wicked from Seville. Once started, Teresa could equally well pray for an end to the Great Pestilence, victory over the infidels, and even a modest success for her painter lodger El Bosco. Was it too much to want all these goodly things?

Music cascaded through the cathedral from horns and all sorts of instruments with tones from the tiniest piccolo to the deepest basso profundo. Don Pedro de Stuniga guarded a great silver dish with the offering, a gold *excelente* made of 50 melted gold pieces and crowned by the baptismal candle. The dish was borne by a page so small he carried the dish on his head so everyone could see. Two brothers of noble birth bore the gilded pitcher and golden cup for the ceremony. Grandees and other caballeros and notables attended the wet nurse. Count Benavente's mule bore the godmother, the Duchess of Medina, who was followed by nine maidens clad in silk of different colors. Teresa wondered if Jeroen would have the colors to paint their finery. Then she shook her head in annoyance. Why fret about the painter?

On a Sunday in August, a month following the baptism, the Queen went to Mass to present the Prince at the temple, as the Infant Jesus had been presented in Jerusalem by His mother. On that occasion Teresa wondered if Jeroen's suggestion about his painting of the Adoration of the Magi wasn't far off the mark after all. Their Highnesses paraded through the streets: King Fernando first on a small silver-gray horse which wore trappings of gold on black velvet. The King had a sumptuous tabard trimmed with gold and a sombrero embroidered with gold thread. Queen Isabel sat a small white horse with a gilded saddle and wore a silk skirt with pearls woven into the fabric. The nurse came next, proudly carrying the Prince on a pillow in her arms. Mass was celebrated at the festive bright altar of the cathedral. Teresa was distressed that she didn't see Benjamin Villalobos anywhere in the entourage.

Teresa made haste to exchange signs with Inez who was in the Queen's train, and learned that the good physician was attending a knight with a festered sword wound. She wondered if she should take the doctor the poultice of her own design that she had found drew out poisons from wounds gone bad, or if he would think her too forward. She was anxious to see Benjamin. Her confidante Inez held out both hands and reversed one to its obverse, the sign for death, prophesying that the knight was beyond help. Teresa nodded acceptance. She would wait until the sting of losing a patient had faded before she approached Benjamin. Even the most renowned physicians surely felt a pang if they failed to cure what man disposed.

With the presentation of the Prince at Mass, Teresa hoped at last the tumult would recede and the city would return to its proper business. Only a day later she was rendering nettles of their stings to prepare a condiment when Jeroen gave a great roar from the street. Rushing into the house, he grabbed her by the arm and dragged her outside. A bright sunny summer day had faded to deep gloom and the cries of frightened people rang out.

"What is it?" Teresa asked irritably. She flung a wet wad of green stuff back towards the table. "I have work to do."

"Look!" He pointed skywards. A dark mass had obscured the sun, not a cloud, but a shape as round as its orb. As they watched, the black mass slid across the sun and blocked the light completely. The darkness was blacker than any storm. The heavens became as night and early stars winked into being. The birds in the dovecote tucked their heads under their wings to sleep. Sparrows went to roost under the roof beams. Teresa shivered in the sudden cold.

Down the street, Mistress Perez gave a shriek. Gabriel the woodcutter babbled a prayer. Groans and cries hammered Teresa's ears. People stampeded toward churches,

pushing children and donkeys and stake-sided carts aside. Jeroen stood looking upward with his jaw agape.

“Close your mouth before something flies in,” she said.

“Does nothing impress you, Doña Teresa? Are you not humbled by the might of God? Look how he makes His will manifest. It must be a deadly plague of ice and cold come to castigate us for our sins.” The painter sank to his knees and raised his arms in supplication.

“Get up, you fool. God is not about the business of destroying the world. Astrologers foretold this. The Dominicans at Salamanca expected it. Perhaps it is a good omen. It could be a sign of how mighty our King and Queen are. It could manifest the power the Prince will inherit.”

“You and your thrice damned scholars ... but what is it? I must paint it, but how, with all the world gone gray and no colors, it is like a grisaille.”

She dredged up the word that Dr. Villalobos had given her when they spoke after the birth of the Prince. “Eclipse,” she finally recalled. “It’s an eclipse of the sun. See there, where the edge begins to show light? The mask will slide away as it came. I was told this.”

“By what agent? Christian or Jew or Moor?”

It was not a question Teresa wanted to answer. Rich *Conversos* controlled Seville, *Moriscos* remained a barbarous people who barely recognized women as people, and the Christians were accustomed to all disorders and sins against every commandment. None of them were liable to be the agency of positive change. She expected it would take a major conclave of angels sounding the last trump for the world to be improved. What difference did it make what race a scholar was? Besides, it was dangerous to be a *Converso*, even in beautiful Seville.

“Look at how the light’s coming back. Objects have shadows. Soon everything will be back to its proper place,” Teresa said, as though to a small child.

“Felipe, Felipe!” Jeroen called. “Bring me a fresh panel. I must sketch the sense of it before it dwindles away to nothing. It’s a celestial attack, a siege of dark against light.”

Felipe crawled out from under a hay-rick. He yawned and scrubbed at his eyes. “What is it, Don Jeroen? Did you call?” The child had slept through the entire event, proof of his innocence if one were needed.

“I won’t have you painting out in the street. This is a respectable house,” Teresa said, and she hauled Jeroen in by the ear like an urchin.

Even so, the lodger was closer than he knew in calling the eclipse a siege of dark against light. The next evening Teresa met Dr. Villalobos. She wanted to hear more about the eclipse, for the astronomical signs played strongly into the alchemy that informed her herbal medicine, but instead Benjamin was full of foreboding. The Bishop of Cádiz had reported the results of his investigation to the Queen. The Bishop told Isabel that most of the *Conversos* were secret Jews, who had kept contact with the synagogues. He recommended that the Jews be confined in *juderias*, where they could not proselytize the *Conversos*, and the truly Christian be distinguished by a court of orthodoxy. Cardinal Bishop Mendoza was willing to write a clear and compelling catechism to decently instruct the *Conversos* in Christian doctrine. Their Highnesses had agreed to this. It was rumored, nonetheless, that the Queen had made application to Pope Sixtus for permission to organize an inquisitorial court at Seville.

“We can no longer meet,” the physician told Teresa.

“But ...” They barely saw one another. Much of the time Teresa caught glimpses of the physician at Court functions, or they met in obscure streets and poor lodgings for



hurried congress. It was a poor substitute for the relationship Teresa wanted with Benjamin, but better than nothing at all, she felt. Didn't he want to maintain their passion, their love? Was he trying to cast her off?

"It is too dangerous to you," he said. "You have to protect your good name. It's bad enough that you are known to use herbs and other simples to remedy illness, and it would be a short leap from that to alchemy, and from alchemy to witchcraft. Adding in a Jew ... would condemn you to the stake."

Not to mention her connection with the Society of Eve, she thought. Danger was all around her. But Teresa felt weak as a girl at the thought of not seeing her lover ever again.

"Benjamin ..." she ventured. "There may be a way to meet safely."

"Never." His thin lips set in his narrow face. He tugged hard on his beard. She thought she saw the glint of water in his eyes. She may have wanted to think that and saw what her heart desired instead of what was real.

She put her hand to her belly. "If I should bear a child?"

"Blame the lodger," he suggested.

"He hasn't the wit."

"The child would not be a Jew in any case, since it is not born of a Jewish mother," he said reasonably. "It won't increase your danger."

"Every Christian woman, wed or unwed, is the bride of Christ. Lying with a Jew is miscegenation and puts the horns on Christ, or so the priests say," Teresa answered. A theological answer for a scholar, and not to her real point, which was that she didn't want Benjamin to leave.

“Those same priests think that celibacy causes semen to collect in the buttocks and so excuse their buggery.” He made an impatient gesture of gathering up his satchel and dark yellow cape.

“And if I name the child Benjamin Villalobos?”

“That is not my name,” he said softly. He turned and walked away.

Teresa was momentarily startled that her lover had lied about his name. She had earlier no reason to doubt what he had told her. Easy enough to find out his true name, now that she knew the first was not. Were there other things she should doubt about him? He was truly a physician and scholar. She could trust herself to know that. Did he truly care for her? She could question that.

The next day she visited a friend who was the cousin to a woman who served the Queen as a scullery maid and learned that her Benjamin Villalobos was truly Dr. Joseph Vecinho. So he had deceived her right from the first time they met. Angry, Teresa settled the matter of the child with a strong dose of pennyroyal tea and some yeast from the brewery. She drank the tea in great gulps, impatient to get it down. She burped mint and sweated when it began to take effect. Jeroen caught her vomiting over the fence and she brushed him aside impatiently.

Teresa turned the house upside down, cleaning in a great frenzy. She swept cobwebs from all the corners, scrubbed the table, and shook out the bedding until straw flew from the ticking.

“I thought you liked cobwebs for wounds,” Jeroen protested. “What’s wrong with you? You’ve made a huge fire in the hearth and it’s hot as Hades outside.”

Teresa tore down dried herbs from the rafters and threw them into the fire. Choking smoke billowed out. She left the fire to rush to the latrine when the cramps became forceful, and she refused to look at the conceptus when it passed. She only felt

with her fingers to be sure the cord and the placenta passed with the fetus. She didn't want to know the sex of the almost-child, and she was worried she had left the matter until nearly too late. It was a mortal sin to abort a child after the quickening

"Here ... you look a mess. Are you all right? I've finished the house keeping," Jeroen said when she dragged back in from the latrine. "The fire's damped down. I've swept the floor. All my paintings are stacked neatly. Can I get you anything?"

Teresa almost wept. Leave it to the awkward lodger to turn kind just when she hated the whole world.

"Your skirts are soiled. There's a kettle of warm water on the hearth if you want to wash," Jeroen said. He motioned to his apprentice. "Felipe and I are going to the square to listen to the news. There was some cry earlier about a Papal Bull, my friend Juan stuck his head in to say about it, but I'm not sure what it was all about. We'll be out of your way. Do you need anything?"

Teresa shook her head. The motion made her stomach queasy again. The painter left. He tossed her one look backwards as he went out the door, his hand on Felipe's shoulder. Teresa ignored him and went to the hearth. In addition to the gently simmering kettle, there was another bucket of warmed water and a pail of cold well water on the floor. As she had taught him, Felipe had added a few sprigs of mint to the cold water. The sight of the fresh green herb floating in the clean cool water nearly broke her down again.

Teresa forced herself to drink three measures of the cool water before she set about cleaning herself up. Jeroen was right about her skirts, which had vomit at the top and blood at the hems. She undressed to her shift, then washed her body underneath with a rag and warm water and the strong soap she made from beef fat and wood ashes. By the time she rinsed the soap off the shift was thoroughly wet and its bloodstains were

spreading. Fresh blood was snaking down her thighs. Teresa searched in her boxes for the menstrual rags she hadn't needed the past few months. They were clean but stained with tan blotches from past use. She turned three of the rags into a tight roll and inserted it before she cleaned her legs.

Her other shift was ragged but it would have to do. Teresa shook it out. It had been stored with lavender blossoms and the faint sweet smell was soothing. She let it slide over her head and took a deep breath. Better. She wrapped a green shawl around her waist for a skirt, and tied an apron over the front to hide the gap. She bundled up the dirty clothes to wash in the river after dark, lest the entire town see the evidence of her shame.

Teresa was sad. She told herself it wasn't over the matter of the abortion. She had used the herbs before, to keep any daughter of hers from the Society of Eve. It wasn't the right time to bring a child of hers and Benjamin's – Joseph's, rather – into the cruel world, in any case. When it was safe for Joseph to come back back ... when it was safe for them to be together ... if she could make him see his wrong to her ... wouldn't the birth of her own son help the Queen to realize what she was doing to all Christendom?

It was easier for Teresa to think about the whole cruel world than one innocent child. To Isabel the world was locked in a titanic battle for men's souls. Catholicism was in conflict with the Jews within and the Moors without. Isabel had proclaimed that the fifteen centuries since the Crucifixion were no riddle if you accepted that Christ came not to send peace but the sword. Fine, Teresa thought, let the Queen combat the enemy as much as she pleased on the battle fields. Swing the sword, hurl the stones, impale the infidels, it was no matter in the engagement of armies.

The problem was that as Isabel made clear in her amnesty to the citizens of Seville, she counted heresy a sin worse than murder. Teresa feared greatly that the

Crown would soon include the folly and sin of ordinary people as heresy. Ordinary people like Joseph and Teresa.

When Jeroen and Felipe returned, she had already been to the river and her clean clothes were gently steaming by the small fire still burning on the hearth. “There you are,” Teresa said. The painter was somewhat worse for drink. She could smell the wine lees on his breath, and he staggered slightly as he lurched past the doorpost. Felipe gave him a shove to steer him safely down the middle of the room.

Jeroen peered drunkenly around the room. One of Teresa’s garments hanging near the hearth cast a writhing shadow on the floor. Jeroen jumped. “Is that the snake?”

“No, Jeroen.” Despite herself, Teresa nearly laughed aloud. Felipe did grin, his awe of his master overcome by the sight of the man leaping over shadows on the dirt floor. “The snake’s tucked up in a rafter somewhere.”

“You’re sure?”

“He’s sound asleep.”

“Belly full of those nasty little rats you feed him?” Jeroen lowered himself carefully onto the rough wooden bench. He let out a loud belch, well-fumed with wine.

“What was the news?”

Jeroen wobbled to a more or less upright position and looked towards her. He blinked. “It’s not good,” he said softly.

He suddenly seemed sober. The slur of his speech disappeared. “The bull issued by Pope Sixtus IV permits the appointment of three, or at least two, bishops or archbishops. They are granted the same authority and rights as law allows to Inquisitors of heretical perversity. The King and Queen Isabel published the bull as part of the edict that establishes the Inquisition in Castile.”

The Inquisition had come to Seville. Heresy would be punished by burning at the pyre, and who was to say what was heretical? Why, the appointed bishops and archbishops. For a start, Jews, and for an end, Teresa feared, ordinary people. Herself, for example. Herbwoman, what had Joseph called it, next door to alchemy? Down the road from witchcraft? If only they knew.

### Chapter Three

By the time winter drew in, the painter had sketched and schemed a large picture.

“Heresy, iniquity,” Jeroen said. “Monstrous, diabolical sin. Here we have a monk and a nun singing to each other, with a cake hanging between them. There’s a board between them with two with cherries on a platter, do you see? It’s an altar set with chalice and paten. The glutton is losing his dinner overboard. The robber is climbing the tree mast to steal a chicken. Naked swimmers disport in the water. The Devil always busies himself with such lusty companies. The world goes on skates, and it slides and skids helplessly to wickedness.”

“You have figured it on my table,” Doña Teresa pointed out.

She stood over his sketch as though it were tripe and turds smeared to muck on her simple plank stand. The pigments were still oily and damp, so Jeroen hastily took a position in front of the table to defend the art.

“It was you who inspired me,” he said. “The consequences of giving in to impulses and passions, you see? The intoxication of prodigality, sudden impetuosity, licentiousness and pleasure-seeking ...”

Jeroen was unable to finish the explanation because the woman had him by the balls and his voice went higher and higher into a shriek.

“I’ll trim you, flay you, and nail your parts to the door post,” Teresa threatened.

Dear Lord Jesus, may it be merely a fulmination, Jeroen prayed. He was most fond of the parts she was rough handling through the codpiece of his pantaloons. Bits of dried moss flew from her twisting fingers as she dug deeper. His tool popped forth like a pink worm from a rain-sodden burrow and she – he cringed to say it – she laughed at his piece.

“Let me find a portion of you worthy of my steel,” she said. “Your thick head will do. Bring it down to a convenient height.” She yanked downwards on his privy parts until he slid to the floor with a squeal like a stuck pig.

“Madam, you mistake me,” he managed to say. “Unhand my cock. This is the most forward of actions I have ever seen you make. Lust lies at the root of all sins but I had not thought to see it trap you.”

This went down a treat, or at least Doña Teresa snatched back her hand as though burned.

“The inspiration I spoke of came from your discourse on heresy,” he said as though his dignity had been offended. This was hard to bring off from an awkward position on the floor. First he sprawled at her feet, then rose to his knees. He tugged his



pants up and his jerkin down as best he could. “You told me about the writings of the blessed saint.”

“The saint compared the human soul to a mirror,” Teresa said. She peered over his shoulders as he kneeled on the dirt floor before her. Her skirts smelled like mint from the garden. “There’s no seeing glass in this business. It’s a boat, isn’t it?”

He sighed a great gust. The artist was continually misunderstood.

“It is the Ship of Fools. In heretics, the mirror is broken in pieces, and sinners do not see themselves. This is a way of showing them. I fail to understand why you always want the most literal sense of things. I dream of heaven and over and over I create hell. Don’t you see that sloth, pride, lust, and sacrilege meet their appointed justice?”

Jeroen judged it safe to rise. His knees were dented and dinged by hard contact with the solid earth, and he brushed at them tenderly. When the woman failed to respond he gave a small whimper. That drew her attention back from the painting, and she gave him a hasty glance.

“You’re not much ill-served,” she said. She scrutinized the painting further.

“Why is there an owl in this tree? Why does the fool have horns on his cap?”

“Why do you think? You have bruised my knees, herb woman. Is there no potion I can apply? You need not stir yourself, because I’ll have Felipe fetch it,” he said cunningly. He knew she wouldn’t want his apprentice rumbling her stores, and he was counting on her compulsion to physic the sick.

“I’ve a salve of arnica that will do,” she said. “I’ll fetch it. You figure out what we’re going to take supper on, since you have made a brew against sin out of my table. I want no sulfur or brimstone in my pottage.”

Despite Doña Teresa’s annoyance, supper was quite good. She had made a seymé of chicken: dry-plucked chicken with onions and soured wine, flavored by ginger, cloves,

and – she said – grains of paradise. He thought she probably used common long pepper. She called it a Moorish dish, because of its dark color.

“The chicken took no harm from being served on log-ends,” he said cheerfully. “That odd little woodcutter down the lane, Gabriel is his name, gave me the loan of them. If Felipe can get a plank somewhere we’ll be well done by.”

“I’m not eating dinner on my lap again, so Felipe had better turn his hand to what’s needed quick as may be,” the landlady said. She turned to the boy, who was lost in gazing at a piece of parchment by the light of the cooking fire. “What’s that, then? Don’t tell me you’re teaching Felipe to scratch out lunatics, too.”

“Oh, no, Mistress,” the boy said. “This is Don Jeroen’s bister and pen drawing.”

“Let me see it. Answer me, Jeroen. This fool with his arse hanging out, being beaten by a large wooden spoon, what does that mean?”

“He’s a bawler, bit player, ruffian, liar or cheat,” Jeroen said lovingly. “Fools violate the divine order. Look at the prig’s turned up nose, isn’t that delightful? Those fish-knights are reeling with lust for the mermaids.” Lust, well, not a good subject to discuss perhaps.

“Here’s a glutton being consumed by his stomach, a worthy end. A demon hellhound gnaws a naked soldier clutching a golden chalice pillaged from the church. Ah! Perhaps I’ll call the other Ship of Church, and do up this one as the Seven Deadly Sins.”

“What is this bit here that looks like a hen’s egg?”

“Eggs of course stand for sexual congress and birth,” he said uneasily, thinking that they had safely gotten away from sex.

“These clam shells snapping down on disporting lovers, what representation is this?” Incredulity in her tone.

“Clams, mussels, and oysters suggest the pungent and slippery secrecy of the bridal chamber.”

Jeroen swallowed hard. From all his experience with Doña Teresa, he didn't think she would take kindly to this exposition. Indeed he could feel his balls draw up tight to his belly in anticipation of her response. The woman had a glare on her that could smelt iron.

At that moment came a knock on the door.

“Who is that?” Doña Teresa called out. To him she hissed, “Remove your works from sight!”

At first Jeroen thought she meant his manly works, which were doing their best to hide as it were. Quick Felipe snatched back the drawing to sit upon. Jeroen's wits caught up with him and he took one end of the painted table and dragged it to the modest back chamber that held his hay-stuffed mattress. Doña Teresa scuffed over the marks with the cork heel of her clogs.

“Hail! Pure Mary!” The formula of a beggar, but in a tiny voice.

“Conceived without sin,” Teresa answered.

She went to the door and tugged it open by small advances. Why was the door sticking so? It was made of rough planks but had strong leather hinges and in the ordinary way of things swung freely. When she got the door half open Doña Teresa reached an arm out in the stygian dark of night and hauled in a ragged bundle of a woman. Two tiny forms clung to her seedy skirts.

Another little girl of about six years had made the greeting.

“Love of Christ!” Teresa whispered. “Mistress Mallaina.” She tugged the woman into the house by the shoulders. The babies still fisted tightly to her gown and

perforce were dragged along, and the little girl followed. Jeroen, looking worried, came and shut the door on the darkness.

“Is there anything to be done?” Jeroen asked. From the boneless crumple of the body and the absence of vital movement he rather thought not. The limp woman’s face was pale as parchment except for lips of a rather dusky indigo hue. Woad, Jeroen thought, would give a paint that color. The bosom wrapped roughly in her tattered linen tunic no longer rose and fell, and her limbs lay where Doña Teresa had let them fall.

Teresa signed the cross on the dead woman’s forehead. “Pray for her soul. And for mine.”

She turned to the little girl. “Merry, what happened, sweetling?”

The child ducked her chin and spoke to the floor. “Mama couldn’t walk right. The babies cried and she didn’t hear. I gave her your medicine. I think she wanted more because she came this way.”

Sinking to the dirt and flipping up the dead woman’s skirts, Teresa delved between the lower limbs. “God curse the man.”

Jeroen took a step forward and gathered the two babies, boys of different sizes, into his arms. “We’ll sit by the fire,” he said, in a voice that brooked no argument. “Felipe, help me. This lad has overflowed his loincloth. Find a dry rag. One of the old paint rags will do.”

He pulled off the smaller boy’s wet cloths and exchanged them with Felipe for a piece of linen stiff with dried oil and streaked with colors: smalt blue, terra verte, ochre. “There, my lad, you’re wearing festive clothes now.”

Jeroen cuddled both boys in his arms. They nestled close, trustingly. They smelled milky and sweet like puppies. Felipe took the girl child the herbalist called

Merry by the hand and led her close to the hearth. She shivered in the unaccustomed warmth.

“What’s to be done?” Jeroen asked Teresa.

No answer was forthcoming. He looked around. She was sitting on the dirt floor between the dead woman’s legs, eyes squeezed shut and tears plunging down her cheeks.

“What’s wrong now?” Jeroen thundered. “Dead is dead, whether by your hand or no, whether purposed or accidental, there’s a corpse to dispose of.” He handed off the tots one each to Felipe and Merry.

Doña Teresa stopped him when he went to grab the dead woman by the armpits. “Get her feet, damn you,” he cursed.

“Jeroen, you don’t understand.”

“The ground is frozen solid and the river is iced over, so we’ll have to dump the body somewhere. Any enemies you’d like to gift with it?”

“Don’t touch her.” That certain voice would stop maddened horses in their tracks.

“Why the devil not? Necrophilia is not one of my sins.”

“Look.”

He went round to the hind end of the dead woman and followed the tip of Doña Teresa’s finger. He expected to see an abortion dangling from a flaccid natal cord, but the truth was much worse.

Blue-black boils dotted the woman’s groin. Indigo, woad, and turnsole were the blue pigments he would use if he were to paint her swollen buboes. This woman had died of the plague.

\* \* \*

In the morning Teresa and Jeroen dragged Mistress Mallaina's stiffened body past a great bonfire salted with branches of rosemary and thyme. The fires had been set in public squares to purify the air. A long procession of men and women doing penance for their sins blocked the street. Hooded in black, the penitents flagellated themselves with knotted cords, carried heavy wooden crosses, and dragged heaps of iron chain in the hopes that their suffering would raise the curse of the pestilence from Seville. The procession groaned and clattered its way across the plaza, its members wailing and lamenting. Barefoot attendants with litters of corpses no one would bury followed the penitents. Some of the corpses had fallen dressed, others were naked and some few were wrapped in sheets.

"Do you think they'll take one more?" Jeroen asked her.

"There are two and three to a litter as it is," Teresa said. "There are so many dead now the church bells no longer ring for them. The priests fear the bells would never be silent again."

"Are they worried about wearing out the clappers?"

Despite her sadness, Teresa almost smiled.

A pitiful group of musicians wandered down the street next, sent by the city magistrates to keep up the good spirits of the populace. Their playing was feeble, their instruments cracked and worn. "They're supposed to forestall melancholy," she said.

"What causes it?"

"Melancholy?" Teresa asked.

"The Great Pestilence," Jeroen said.

"Besides the wrath of God, you mean?"

He nodded. "We'll take the wrath of God as a given. How does it happen?"

Teresa shrugged. "No one knows. The thieves who prey on the dead often get their death of the plague before they can be whipped or hanged. So you can get it from the dead. The Church says witches spread it."

Teresa especially hated that the Church considered the Society of Eve to be a malign conspiracy of witches and Jews who spread the plague to destroy Christian kingdoms. But why should she care what the authorities thought of the Society? She was done with their magics and poisons. She had hid successfully from their agents and superiors. There was no succor for her in their fellowship now.

"What help is there for this pestilence?"

"The doctors bleed their patients."

"Does that remedy?"

"No. Some doctors have faith in the curative power of precious stones, which they say are anodynes against poison in the system. They grind precious pearls, rubies, and emeralds to powder to medicine the rich. Apothecaries sell bezoar and mithridate. Moriscos sell amulets to ward off evil spirits, write Arabic letters on the patient's body, or inscribe passages from the Koran on pieces of paper for you to swallow."

"Do any of these charms help?"

Teresa sighed. The plague took Christian and Muslim, Jew and *Converso* impartially. A wave of death would sweep over the countryside and recede, only to be followed by another wave and another, as inexorably as the sea. This time so many had died that in beautiful Seville gaudy flowers went to seed uncut and oranges shriveled on the trees. Prayers rang out from churches at all hours of the day and night. The astrologers had hoped that the progress of the moon would diminish the epidemic, but the

full moon came and waned and more people fell victim to the Great Pestilence.

“Apparently not,” she said. Didn’t he think if she knew a cure she would use it?

“Will Felipe get it, do you think?” Jeroen asked.

“I don’t know,” Teresa said. “We put the body outside last night. He didn’t touch it.” She wondered why Jeroen hadn’t asked about his own chances of being struck. Did he care more for the apprentice than himself? Was he too frightened to ask?

“Why did you ask me for painter’s oil to get the pine pitch off your hands?” Jeroen asked. He looked around suspiciously. “Have you been hauling bundles of torches about when I wasn’t looking? Have you been caring for victims of this plague, Teresa?”

“Why are you asking me that?” She took another tug at the corpse beneath their feet. “Come on, we can leave her for the priests now.”

“I’m asking because I want to know,” Jeroen said. He planted his big foot on the dead woman’s apron and stood there like a stubborn mule.

“Yes, I’ve been taking care of people, trying to help,” she answered. Would he flee? Would he scrawl a white cross on the door of her house to warn of danger within and implore God’s mercy?

“Why haven’t you taken it?”

“I don’t know that, either,” Teresa said. She was exasperated. What did he want of her? What could she do that all the prelates of the church, that all the scholars, that the Crown itself could not? That her physician lover Joseph had not? “Probably I will get it. Does that make you feel better?”

“Well, I’d hate to be the last one left standing,” he said mildly. He bent down to take Mistress Mallaina’s body in his arms.



They dumped the stiffened corpse on the church steps. Grim carts piled high with the dead moved through the winding streets, one after another after another. Sooner or later one would stop to pick up one more sad carcass.

First Mistress Mallaina's youngest boy in his painted loincloth went to the death cart, then young Benito spit up his life in blood and saliva, then Miss Merry succumbed. Felipe worked willingly, running to fetch water and wood whenever they needed it. Jeroen wouldn't let him hold the children anymore. The apprentice sat on Jeroen's bed and petted one of Teresa's cats while they did what they could for the waifs.

They gave the children their prayers and clung to each other for comfort. They were dispirited, doleful. Their hearts were weighted as though with lead. Teresa's tears on Jeroen's shoulder had everything to do with sadness and fear and nothing to do with love. There was real rage and anger in her. What sort of God would slay the innocent with the guilty, the saintly with the sinful? If dying of the plague was her fate, then let it happen soon, before she went mad from watching everyone else fall around her. Nothing she did helped.

Jeroen was surprisingly gentle with her. After she came back from a futile attempt to save Beatriz García Ramírez who died not of plague at all but of rheum in the depths of the bitter cold winter, the painter sat her down in front of the fire and thrust a cup of warmed wine into her hand.

"Drink it," he said.

Teresa shook her head. "What use?" she murmured.

"You'll need it."

Her head came up. Her eyes went first to the back room, but Felipe was sprawled on a pallet playing a game with rocks and twigs, looking perfectly all right. Jeroen's bedroll was gone. No, she saw it had been moved near hers by the side of the hearth. She inspected the painter but he had no obvious ill. "Is something wrong?"

"Yes. Your despondency is as contagious as this damned plague. I haven't been able to paint for days."

It was true Jeroen's paintings were all bundled up instead of spread throughout the room. In her preoccupation, Teresa hadn't noticed the unusual tidiness, but now she saw that the usual litter of cracked cups and broken brush handles and shells of oils were gone.

"You've cleaned the house up."

Jeroen nestled another log onto the fire, which was already burning strongly.

"You'll use up all the wood at that rate. What are you doing?"

"Felipe will get more wood." Jeroen went over to the apprentice and whispered into his ear. Teresa saw him pass a coin into the boy's hand. Felipe skipped out the door looking happy.

While she was still puzzling about it, Jeroen came back to the hearth, took the wine cup out of her hand, and tipped her unceremoniously onto the bedrolls. He smothered her protest with a vigorous kiss. Teresa put up her hands to push him away but somehow her arms ended up around his neck pulling him closer instead. It felt wonderful to have a warm, live body next to hers.

The kiss was so different from Joseph's. Jeroen's kiss ignited a fire in her belly and the heat rose through her body like a flame.

"We're in trouble now," she said.

He laughed.

Jeroen made love to her at a leisurely pace. His big broad hands were surprisingly deft at peeling her out of her shawls and skirts. She was going to cling to her shift as she had always done but Jeroen just lifted it over her head slowly and somehow she let him do it. Her worry about the shift vanished as soon as his lips met her nipples, which were standing up from the cold, she thought. That must be why his lips felt so hot. His tousled hair tickled her neck, and she giggled like a girl.

It was the warmth of the fire that did it, she thought. Jeroen had taken off his jerkin and pantaloons. His skin felt rough against her softness, a contrast that stimulated. She felt so relaxed and warm, and well, hot in some places that she let the painter spread her legs and lie on top of her. Even then he didn't thrust himself into her. Teresa reached between his legs and found that his tool was hard as stone.

She took his cock in her hand and tugged it towards herself. Jeroen let her do it, but made no further move. Puzzled, she put the tip of it into her sex. He stayed there, occupying himself meanwhile nuzzling her breasts, kissing her neck and lips and eyelids, tickling the backs of her knees. With a sudden moan of frustration, Teresa impaled herself on his cock and then the matter was out of her hands.

When they had both shuddered to a halt and lay panting, stark naked in front of the hearth but wonderfully well-warmed, Jeroen reached over for the discarded wine cup. He offered her the first sip, then drained it to the dregs. Teresa looked him over. He was rough and hairy where Joseph was smooth and oiled. The painter's body was thick and had a livid scar along the ribs.

"What happened there?" Teresa ran her fingers along the scar.

"Would you believe I fell out of a tree?"

"No. That's a knife wound."

“Bandits treed me,” he said. “Then they shook the tree and down I came. I landed on the big one and broke his shoulder but one of the others jabbed me.”

“When you first came to Spain? You should have showed me the wound. I could have made a better mend of it than this ragged mess.”

Jeroen tugged his shirt on over it. Did he think she was annoyed with him? She had meant it to be an expression of tender concern. Still, the middle of winter was no time to be sitting around unclothed. She reached for her shift as well and dragged it on over her head. Her hair had come unknotted from her braids. Her skirt was neatly folded on the bench; had Jeroen done that? She slid the skirt up from her feet to her waist and tied the string. Suddenly she was very busy getting dressed and shaking out the bedrolls and looking everywhere except at Jeroen. She was afraid if she looked straight at him all the work would go for naught because she’d have him right back down on the floor again, this time with herself in an indecorous position riding his cock.

Over the next few days she told herself it was plain lust. It wasn’t love. She clung to Jeroen like a drowning woman on a wrecked ship. If the storm of plague was about to overcome them, what sin was there in the wan comfort they could give each other?

Teresa shuddered as she imagined the flare of torches, this time not at her feet for heresy but between herself and her confessor as she was given the last rites. Time enough then to repent.

“Jeroen, hang this around your neck.” Teresa handed him the fresh bundle of vervain and garlic she had tied with a strip of linen and signed with the cross. He gave an impatient tug at its twin which had near rotted away around his thick gullet.

“It smells like dust and rot,” he complained. “Enough is enough. I haven’t been bothered by so much as a hex since you started hanging this stuff on me. Surely the effect must linger?”

“So it’s working,” she retorted. “In case you haven’t noticed, we’re catapulting down a darkening gorge here. It’s amazing to me that you and I are still alive, and I’m beginning to have my doubts about you.” Jeroen’s production of mad paintings had fallen off. “What are you doing while I’m boiling up herbs and dosing sufferers with simples? I count on you for some light relief in the evenings.”

“Supplies are hard to find. All the linen in Seville has gone to make shrouds for the dead and the wood panels for coffins. I’m not about to start painting on walls like some damned fresco painter.”

Teresa stared about at her smudged walls. Once bright with whitewash, smoke and muck and grim use had dirtied them beyond recognition. There was now little difference between mud-block wall and hard-packed dirt floor. They were still eating on log ends: no rush to return them to Gabriel the woodcutter, because he was cutting kindling for the flames in Hell. Gabriel was burned at the stake in the first *auto de fe* held in Seville. A gentle man, a friend, harmless, who cared if he was a Jew? Gabriel was condemned as an apostate.

Six condemned in all had been led to the Campo de Tablada beyond the walls. Faggots were piled at the feet of their stakes. As the executioner approached, the black-robed Dominican priest had made a passionate appeal to the men to repent and be reconciled. From the tilt of Gabriel’s head, he had taken the strong wine laced with poppy syrup Teresa had smuggled to him with the connivance of one of the jailers. The damned were judged obdurate. As quickly as that, lighted torches flared against the weak winter sun. Soon flames flickered over the faggots and reached for the feet of the condemned. They screamed as the smoke curled around them. The smell of burning hair and flesh stayed in her nostrils for days and populated her nightmares for weeks.

Jeroen had watched the heretics burn with her, seemingly rapt with wonder at the contortions of fear the faces of the condemned displayed. The grimaces of the mouth, the hunch of the shoulders, the rolling eyes all seemed to have meaning for him. He measured the pace of the executioner and the stolid bearing of the priest who perfunctorily offered the damned a last chance to confess.

“Teresa, I’m preparing for a journey,” Jeroen said one night.

She raised her eyebrows. “You don’t strike me as the sort to go on pilgrimage, although no doubt it would do your soul no harm.”

“Not a pilgrimage,” he said. “God’s teeth, woman, you’re demented. My soul enjoys robust good health. My father, Anthonious van Aken, is a painter, as was his father before him. Since not all painters are as wanton and foolish as you think I am, he has arranged a marriage.”

“Your father is remarrying?” she asked politely.

“Nay, I never said so. He has arranged a marriage for me, to a woman called Aleyt van de Meervenne, the daughter of a merchant.”

Teresa sat back on her log-end, stunned by this news. She was used to Jeroen lodging with her. She had become accustomed to lying with him. They snuggled together in their nest of blankets and bedcovers at the side of the hearth even on nights when no sexual congress took place. She had taken no thought that anything other than the Great Pestilence personally experienced would shift him. In truth she had gotten rather familiar with the brangling bear of a man making mad smudges on canvases fit only for the grasp of lunatics.

“I’ll leave Felipe to help you,” Jeroen said.

“What would I do with an apprentice? Teach him to craft simples? My patients are women, and they would not admit him to their confidence.” That was unfair to Felipe, who had learned to make several infusions and poultices.

“Oh, I’ll be back shortly,” the painter said. He sounded as calm as a summer morn. “As the holy apostle Paul said, ‘They that have wives be as though they had none.’ As soon as the business is done I’ll be back.”

“Don’t quote scripture at me like some hairy hermit,” Teresa said. Men always had some justification for their mad convictions. What did it matter to her? Let him go and marry some shopkeeper’s girl. It was nothing to her. Nothing.

## Chapter Four

The boat smelled strongly of fish, rotted, stinking, corrupted fish. Jeroen hoped none of it had made it to the marketplace in Seville, and if it did, Teresa had the native wit not to buy the putrid stuff. The cargo had probably been salt cod and herring making its way from Antwerp to Spain. Clearly the idea of cleaning the hold in between cargoes had not occurred to the ship's owner. The stink permeated the very wood of the craft, stem to stern, and oozed upwards into the small cabin that rode perilously at the foredeck. This little shack was supposed to shelter Jeroen along with the captain and shipmaster. It probably wasn't a good sign that after the shipmaster's inspection, he had waved a cheerful goodbye and vanished landwards, never to return.



Seamen had loaded oak timbers for shipbuilding aboard, which would take no harm from the fishy stench, but after that sacks of grain and cereals. Perhaps the grain was destined for beer rather than bread, although neither would be greatly improved by the smell. At least the timbers would float in the event of shipwreck. Jeroen could be riding with a cargo of precious metal, which would take him quickly to the bottom of the sea, attract pirates or both.

The captain was the antithesis of the bluff, hearty type Jeroen would have liked to have steer the ship on its way through the Bay of Biscay. The man was a veritable weed. He was thin and short to boot. The first gentle zephyr would blow him overboard, let alone the usual gales and storms. Jeroen thought sailors ought to be sun-bronzed and muscled, capable of hauling huge sheets of canvas and propping up masts with one enormous hand, but this entire crew was pasty and wizened to a man. They wore sailors' slops of breeches and muslin shirts, well-caked with sweat and salt. Several of the men were already sprawled on the sacks of grain, arranging beds. A rat ran out from between the sacks, but one of the sailors caught it up quickly by the tail and bashed the squealing rodent against the deck. Brains and blood flew. The man stuck the creature to the mast by cramming its tail into a crack with a marlinespike.

"No need to waste 'im overboard," the sailor said to Jeroen's puzzled look. "Some voyages you'll be grateful for a bit o' meat, when the biscuit's gone to powder and naught but worms." The language was a little hard to follow, mangled by the sailor's missing teeth so it came hissing and spitting towards him, but Jeroen got the gist of it well enough. The rat was provisions. Jeroen preferred his rats well-stewed in the kind of pap found in low-class inns, but he knew ships sometimes went off the trade routes or were becalmed without wind for weeks or months, so any fresh food was valuable.

He nodded understanding. If another rat ran out, he'd give it a hearty stomp with his boot and hang it to season beside the first. The salt spray probably improved the taste. For himself, he had a sack of food Teresa had packed: hard sausage and well-aged cheese, some bitter winy apples she dug up from a barrel in the ground where they had been stored in straw, and a knobby cabbage likewise.

"What am I to do with that?" he had asked about the cabbage. What he meant was, did you peel it apart leaf by leaf or eat it by gnawing a hole in the side, but Teresa was annoyed with him for some reason.

"Use it to replace the head you should have had on your neck," she had said, and stomped the cover back onto the barrel with a series of vigorous kicks.

"Are you upset?"

With Teresa it was sometimes hard to tell, as she wasn't the cheerful simpering type of woman. Wary, more like. Not to say suspicious. She didn't give away many of her thoughts, and the way she held her mouth was if not unpleasant, not wholly welcoming either. Her snapping dark eyes were what attracted him. They mocked and ridiculed even where her outward words were patient and kind and her hands gentle on her patients. The contradiction drew him in, no matter that he was often the target of her wit. She wouldn't mock him if she didn't care for him.

"Of course not," she said. She threw a shovel of dirt onto the barrel head so forcefully half the clods bounced back out of the hole.

"Teresa, have you ever been married?"

She turned to face him, hands on her hips. The shovel clattered to the ground, a good thing. Jeroen had been half afraid she would use it to take a swing at him. He suspected the question was out of bounds. He knew very little of Teresa's life, nothing at all, really, not about her parents or where she grew up or how she came to have her herbal

skills or if she had a husband and sixteen children parked away in a village somewhere. In truth she knew little of his life, although as time went on he had prattled a bit about his family and told a few funny stories about his apprenticeship. He didn't want this matter of his marriage to come between himself and Teresa, so he had braced himself to broach the question.

Her dark eyes flashed now. Anger, he thought.

"Do I look like a nun?" she asked.

Her tone of voice was so mild that he knew she was incensed. There were basically two choices for women, to marry and have children, or to enter a nunnery and devote their lives to their heavenly bridegroom.

"With that head kerchief?" Her tangled dark hair showed all around the edges of a ragged yellow effort that had once been graced with embroidered green vines. Most of the stitches were unraveled and dangling like fringe. He dared to tuck a few errant strands of her hair beneath the cloth with a blunt forefinger. She didn't bite. A good sign. "A less likely nun I never saw. You don't suffer authority lightly, Teresa."

"A fine compliment," she had said, flashing a sudden smile, and that was the end of the discussion. She had never answered his question.

The sailors set to grunting and cursing as they raised the anchor chain. It flopped onto the deck in a sprawl of slime and weed.

"Next time you see 'at seawrack it'll be at the other shore," the spitting sailor told him. "We're for it now."

The large square sail on the main mast started to fill with wind and billowed into shape above Jeroen's head. Seamen heaved at ropes attached to trim sails on the two smaller masts, and the ship began to move off in a strong breeze. There was a worrying sound of water sloshing into the hold.

“She’s carvel built,” the sailor said. “Nay worry. The caulking between the planks will swell and seal her up after she leaks enough.”

Jeroen knew that Carvel built meant that the planks that formed the ship were sawn boards, and had to be stuffed between with pitch. He didn’t think pitch swelled up on contact with water, but after all, these men and this ship had been plying the sea route between Spain and the Netherlands repeatedly. Surely if the ship were going to sink it would be on the bottom of the brine already. Jeroen was glad he had shipped his finished paintings the long way around on the Spanish Road. It wouldn’t do to have his panels washing around in the hold. In fact, it might be for the best if the paintings didn’t arrive at his father’s workshop until Jeroen had been, wedded, and was safely gone again. Then both his person and his paintings would be unmolested.

Clouds arose and drizzled a dank cold water. Jeroen’s slick-soled boots slipped on the wet deck and nearly pitched him into the waves, which were becoming much larger. His stomach roiled like the swells. He clutched onto spars and ropes, and once onto a frigidly cold metal cannon, trying to make his way to the forward cabin.

“Hands off the ship’s guns,” a ghostly voice shouted.

Jeroen struggled onward. At least someone was watching him. But if he did slide overboard there was no chance of rescue, because these ships couldn’t just come about and sail back to pick up a passenger floundering in the water. No, they’d pocket the price of his passage and pick up speed. Better then he didn’t tempt fate. Jeroen sat down on the wet deck, pulled off his boots, lashed them by the strings to his pack, and trod barefoot to the cabin.

He clutched at the cabin entrance and pushed the door open. Inside it was dark as soot. He groped to each side of the doorway, feeling for a lantern or a candle stub and flint, but found nothing. Shuffling forward, he stubbed his toe on a wooden chest some

dolt had left in his path, full of rocks by the feel of it since it didn't shift when he put a hand to it. It must have taken two men to carry; indeed it had leather handles at each end and a large lock in the lid, fortunately missing the key or he might have impaled his palm on that as well. Jeroen groped beyond the sea chest and found a narrow bunk alongside a wall. As the ship lurched over the next swell, he fell into it. On the following wave, he pitched out of it.

Jeroen fumed and muttered at this sign of disfavor. Storms and tides in the Bay of Biscay and the North Sea were notorious for inimical behavior. Teresa had insisted he wear a bight of rope around his waist and now he reluctantly drew it forth. Climbing back into the bunk, he settled his sack beneath his head for a pillow and shoved the boots to one side. He used the rope around his waist to lash himself to a timber. His stomach promptly protested the supine position. He sat up abruptly. The rope tightened across his belly, and he struck his head on the low roof. "Ow!" He felt his head gingerly. That was probably rain, not blood in his hair. He sniffed his fingertips anyway. Just dirt.

Jeroen felt in the pillow sack for the ginger root Teresa had also insisted he bring. She had even made some of it up into little ginger biscuits.

"I'd do as much for a dung collector," she had assured him airily.

Leaving aside the fact that dung collectors rarely had appointments on seagoing vessels, since the whole of the ocean was available to receive waste, Jeroen had accepted the biscuits with manly protests about the strength of his stomach and the worth of his sea legs. Teresa had patted him fondly and shoved the packet well down among his provisions.

He was grateful for it now, if only he could find it in the jumble his sack had become. Had someone been messing about in his goods? That felt like the little parcel. Where was his spare pouch? Did that helpful if toothless sailor who hoisted the sack on

board while he inched his way up the gangplank have light fingers? Jeroen sighed. Most of his money was on his person, of course, in his arm purse. He'd check for the pouch in daylight. In the meantime, he had the ginger biscuits at last and chewed three of them. Teresa said two, but if a little was good, more was surely better.

After surely some leagues progress, Jeroen fell into an uneasy doze. It was the sudden lurch when waves began to pound against the side of the freighter that woke him. It felt like the whole ship was about to heel over in the water. What was the captain about, to let the vessel turn sideways to the thrust of the swells like that? Had they lost the sail? The mast? What other catastrophes could there be? The rope around his waist saved him from flying out of the bunk, but he unpicked the knot and sat up, bracing his feet against the sea chest.

The sound of the ship's guns discharging widened his eyes. Pirates? Who in Hades would plunder timbers and grain? His glance fell on the heavy sea chest.

"Shit!" Jeroen said. He was practically sitting on the swag.

Teresa saw Jeroen off with as much good-will as she could manage. What difference did it make to her if the painter went home and got married to some merchant's daughter? The bride was probably fish-belly pale and blonde and the approximate size of a Belgian horse. Or perhaps she was pallid and flaxen and the shape of a bean pole. Teresa was sure that northern women had light hair and skin, if she was a little unclear on the remainder of their anatomies. Would it matter to Jeroen? He put the marriage to her – her, what was her name? Alyet? He seemed to think the marriage to Alyet was a matter of course, a business arrangement of sorts. Did he even care what the woman looked like?

Teresa wondered if Jeroen had ever seen his affianced wife. Had he grown up with her as a child, as close as a sister? What would that have been like? Teresa had no sisters, except those imposed upon her in the Society of Eve. Or was Jeroen's venture into matrimony a new thing all untried, a complete unknown? That wouldn't stop the painter, who seemed to charge off into unexplored realms with great glee. Idiot to take a ship across the Bay of Biscay. What was he thinking? Like as not he'd have to swim to shore when the flimsy boat broke apart on its way out of the harbor, and he would reappear dripping on her doorstep momentarily.

Why had Jeroen asked her if she had ever been married? What use would the knowledge that Teresa dare not marry lest the Society of Eve retaliate be to him? None at all. Off to the Netherlands with him, and good riddance.

At five years of age, Teresa hadn't believed for a moment that her mother had cast her away, given her to the Society like the other girls in the clutch of novitiates. Teresa was sure she had been snatched away, somehow abducted from her beautiful and gentle mother. The other girls, snot-nosed and stupid, yes, she could see their mothers giving them into servitude and service in the Society of Eve, but Teresa's mother had surely been kind and warm and would never have given her up. Teresa was less certain about her father, but perhaps he had been a knight gone off on crusade, to win back a holy city and repel the Moors from Spain. She imagined he had gone off on a fine war horse wearing a silken scarf of her mother's as a token of her enduring love.

However, by age eight, when the Society's daughters were first initiated into the alchemical mysteries, Teresa had developed a healthy dose of skepticism. The regime laid down for initiates involved a great deal of drudgery, hauling water and cleaning, as well as restrictive behavior and conduct. Teresa especially hated laundry day. Domina Adelaida's robes were so big it took two small girls to haul them wet from the washtub

and wring them dry. Teresa and another girl competed to be second-most inept at laundry, dragging the clean robes in grass to stain them and muddying cowls. When the other girl lost the fine edge between bad and worse, she was sent to dig out the latrines. Teresa remained to redden her hands and forearms with strong lye soap and boiling hot water. When Doña Catalina, the teaching alchemist, gathered the girls around her to demonstrate her skill in poisons and their antidotes, Teresa was poised for rebellion.

The teacher had marched them out into a shady glen near the chapter house and led them towards a brook that trickled down to the river. Teresa had gone sideways into the brush in exploration. She was hauled back into line with burrs decorating her drab gown. She occupied herself rearranging the seed capsules into a pleasing pattern on her hems, which were coming unraveled again.

Doña Catalina stopped to point out a clump of leaves and flowers. “This plant you will recognize as *digitalis*, for the shape of its flowers resembles those of the fingers, which are *digitus* in Latin. The plant grows in waste areas alongside streams, in shady places for its preference.”

“It’s notable,” Inez had said. She was a serious child, older than Teresa, who always paid attention to her lessons. “The leaves are longer than the span of a man’s hand. They’re dull green on the upper aspect, and gray beneath. See how they’re wrinkled? They have more hairs below than above.”

“The flowers are pretty,” Teresa said. “They look like little bells.” Purple on the outside, and spotted inside.

“Pretty is as pretty does,” Doña Catalina said. “This plant makes a powerful poison. All its parts, leaves and flowers and seeds, can be seethed in water to extract the potion. Smell the leaves, so you will be sure to know it again.”



The teacher ran her gnarled fingers over a leaf to lightly bruise it and passed it around the circle of pupils. Teresa stuck out her tongue and touched it lightly to the leaf.

“Teresa, stop!” Doña Catalina said. “Are you simple-witted? I told you it was poison. Never put strange plants in your mouth.”

“What does it taste like?” Inez asked. It was a sensible question. Teresa liked Inez because she was always so practical. No reason for the older girl to take the risk that Teresa already had.

“Bitter,” Teresa said. “It’s very strong. It makes me feel sick to my stomach. I don’t see how this could be used as a poison without the person who took it knowing.”

“Of course it must be disguised,” Doña Catalina said. She rolled her eyes. “Half the point in our art is secrecy. How would you disguise a bitter substance, girls?”

“With a sweet one, like honey or mead,” Inez suggested.

“Can goats eat this plant?” Teresa asked. “Goats eat anything. Can we take some of the leaves and see if that nasty buck in the barnyard will eat them? How about birds? Could a chicken or a peasant eat the seeds and their flesh be tainted?”

The teacher’s mouth dropped open. “That might work,” she said, surprise in her tone. “What a clever girl you are.”

“If a man ate the bird that ate the seeds, what would happen then?” Teresa stuck a forefinger into one of the pretty purple flowers and waved it around like the fingertip of a glove.

“The victim vomits,” Doña Catalina said. “His head will ache, the beat of his heart will become disorderly and slow. He will fall into convulsions and die.”

“If God wills,” Inez said.

Teresa looked up from the pretty flower stalk. “Are there honest things that can be done with this plant?”

“Healers use it for dropsy, but we are not about the business of curing swollen limbs,” the teacher said. “Here we are learning about the assassin’s trade.”

Teresa knew that. Domina Adelaida had made the subject entirely clear as soon as Teresa had been hauled screeching and scratching into the chapter house. She had been torn from her mother’s arms and hauled horseback for two days somewhere far from her home. The women who had taken her from her mother bore the marks of her nails on their faces and arms, and when they reached the chapter house Teresa had been shoved so hastily towards the Domina that she nearly went into the fire.

The old woman had been casting the pentacle, standing dark and tall as a shadowed pine tree. It was a Fire pentacle, but somehow the leap and flare of the flames never illuminated the Domina’s face. Even her eyes were shadowed by the cowl she wore draped close around her head. There were pinpoints of glitter in great dark eye sockets that seemed to pierce and fix Teresa in her place, sprawled on the singed dirt at Domina Adelaida’s feet.

“I want to go to my mother!” Teresa had cried. “Make them take me back.”

“You will never see your mother again. You will obey me,” the old witch had said. “You are given by your mother to the Society of Eve to apprentice in the trade of assassination, as she did before you. If you fail me or my obedientaries in any way, your mother will die by our most painful poison. Stand up and make your reverence before me.”

Teresa had cast a quick glance around the room. The women who had grabbed her and thrust her into the room stood shoulder to shoulder blocking the door. Burning candles shone on an altar, and a three-legged iron cauldron steamed gently over the fire. Robed acolytes holding wooden chalices and carved oak wands ringed the circle. A small

bowl filled with sand held sweetly smoldering incense. The Domina held a double-edged knife with a black handle.

“I don’t believe you.” Teresa shook her head stubbornly. Her dark braids flapped with the force of her denial.

“Do you not?” The Domina shifted to the side. Behind her, a grotesque body of a dead man was exposed. The face was frozen in a rictus of horror, eyes wide and unseeing, mouth agape, tongue black and protruding. Tendons stood out in the scrawny neck. His hands were contracted into claws.

Teresa had risen slowly to her feet and backed away from the horrible dead man. She stood trembling for a long while, looking nowhere but at her own dirty feet. The Domina thought she was bowing her head, but Teresa knew she would never submit.

## Chapter Five

Dagger in hand, Jeroen burst through the cabin door onto the ship's slick deck. Vast amounts of thick smoke obscured the scene. There was another boat, smaller, closing fast to come alongside. Men swarmed on her deck, waving cutlasses and brandishing halberds. On his own ship, sailors were loading the cannon. A bag of gunpowder was rammed down the barrel and then a curious pair of notched round shot linked by a length of chain was stuffed in, followed by a wad. The captain of the gun lit the powder in the touch hole with a glowing coal.

The gun fired, recoiling violently back into the ship, which shuddered hard enough that Jeroen feared their own weapon would tear them apart. The breeching ropes attached to the gun carriage barely restrained the cannon's recoil. The shot burst across the gap towards the other boat and tore through its sail.

“I’ll have yours then!” the pirate captain yelled. The pirate had a lot more men than his trading vessel, Jeroen saw. They seemed to be organized into gun crews of half a dozen each, then boarding parties with halberds and half-pikes. Two of the sea robber’s cannon fired simultaneously.

Deadly splinters flew from the smashed mast as the shots hit home. Jeroen ducked. When he raised his head, choking on the dense gunpowder smoke that hung over the battle, he saw several sailors down. The pirate boat was close enough to touch hulls, and the crew threw grappling irons across to bind the ships together. The robber craft was lower in the sea but the boarding party swarmed up the side of Jeroen’s ship. Some men climbed by simply crashing holes in the wooden hull with their axes, and some came up hand over hand on the grapples. The first pirate to board waved his sword in victory.

“Stand fast!” this cutthroat ordered, but the captain and crew rushed him to try to throw him back over the side. A sailor took a pike in the gut. More pirates teemed aboard, six, a dozen, twice the number. Pistol shots, dagger thrusts, cutlasses and spears did for both friend and foe.

Jeroen backed himself into a defensible corner between a stack of grain sacks and a barrel of wine, dagger at the ready, but with no great hope of being able to throw the fight their way by the addition of one rather peaceful painter. He had great skill in painting human folly and arcane monsters, but little at all in warfare. He doubted too that there would be much market for naval battle scenes. There was little to see besides the clouds of choking smoke and the occasional disembodied arm brandishing a weapon.

Jeroen stumbled barefoot on one of the caltrops the pirates had tossed onto the deck and cursed. This attracted attention, and a spear hurtled towards him. Jeroen caught

it as it split the grain sack to his side, adding cereal to the muck on the deck, and balanced the spear with his meaty right hand.

“I’ll have that,” a sailor said, and snatched the spear to fling at the raiders, only to be felled in turn by a thrown knife. He clutched the knife in his ribs and slid slowly to the deck.

Jeroen crouched down to inspect the damage. “It’s none so bad,” he said.

The sailor was making a probe of his own, sticking a dirty forefinger into the wound alongside the blade. Blood trickled rather than spurted. “Aye,” he agreed.

“You could have it out,” Jeroen suggested. “Do you want me to pull?”

The bloodstained sailor cast a sharp eye at the chaos on the deck. “This fracas is about over,” he said. “We’ve lost and the next thing to come is simply the looting. Since I don’t want to have to carry the plunder for these bastards, I think I’ll stay wounded for the nonce.”

“Not the first of these affrays you’ve been in?”

“Very bad, these raiders,” the sailor said. “I’m thinking of joining up myself. When they seize gold and silver coin, they share it out among the crew. ‘A course, now the shippers melt the precious metal down so that’s not so easy. Still, there’s jewels and barrels of wine and fair rations to be had.”

The sailor groaned piteously when the pillagers came to seize them. He clutched the knife hilt in his side, holding it firmly in place. Jeroen was bound with a bit of line lashing his wrists together behind his back, his dagger confiscated, his arm purse ripped away, but the wounded sailor was just kicked a bit and shoved to the side. He winked at Jeroen behind their captors’ backs.

The pirates lauded the discovery of the sea chest and hauled it triumphantly from the cabin. They lowered it on a rope to their ship, where eager hands pulled it on board.

Without so much as asking for the key, the lock was shot off. When the lid was raised and the wrapping tugged back, a gleam of gold sparkled. Yells and cheers greeted this booty.

The pirates took the ship's sails, spare equipment, the carpenter's tools, the surgeon's supplies, and the anchor. Jeroen saw his sack of food and the boots still tied to it tossed overboard as well. When all was well-raided, the pirates slid down ropes and rejoined their craft. She hoisted sail and moved off to the sound of a raucous sea chanty.

The wounded sailor sat up and yanked the knife from his side. He courteously used it to slice Jeroen's bonds before he went around the deck freeing their remaining crew. The captain had been poorly used and needed cossetting but all the wine and even the fresh water had been pillaged. The man could barely stand, but he gave orders to limp the ship along to the closest port.

After some leagues slow progress, the battered ship followed the currents into the harbor at La Rochelle. She grounded herself on the gravel shoal, having no trim sails for steering, and the crew cobbled together a series of knots made of rope ends for use as a ladder. Jeroen slid down this excuse for a gangplank, plunged barefoot into the sea and waded ashore.

The port was humming. A merchant dressed in a viridian green velvet doublet checked a cargo of spices, allowing mingled smells of cinnamon and pepper to float on the salt air. A flock of prostitutes strutting their wares had staked out a good position at the end of the dock, their loosely-laced gowns showing worn-thin undergowns of nearly transparent rose linen. Jeroen looked twice to see if the girls were naked under their dresses of crimson and lake. The prostitutes were flanked by innkeepers' lackeys advertising their premises, so the weary traveler could make a deal for wench, bed and board at the same time.

A covey of little boys danced around Jeroen offering their services as guides, waving ragged caps and thrusting scraps of parchment at him, while trying to pick his pocket. Having nothing to pick, Jeroen let them be disappointed for themselves. They chattered like parrots in a patois of mixed languages. He clamped a heavy hand on the shoulder of the nearest one and told him to lead him to the street of the bankers. The hire of a horse, tolls, guards to bribe, the few inns along the road and bad food to come would all need money, and all Jeroen had to prove his worth was the paint-spattered jerkin and breeches he wore. He would need to find someone who would honor his father's name to get funds to continue his journey.

When Jeroen finally tottered into 's-Hertogenbosch he was saddle sore and weary of journeying. The city known as the 'Invincible Dragon of the Marshes' had never looked more welcoming behind her walls of earth ramparts and bastions. With an uplifted heart, Jeroen walked his horse over the wooden bridge that surmounted the city moat and through the gate into the triangular market square. The austere red brick buildings with their small-paned windows and stepped facades seemed to reach out with stony arms to welcome him.

"Trust you to be late to your wedding," his mother said. "Where have you been this entire time?" Flap of starched white apron. "The girl's family is furious. Your father blames me for failing to instill a sense of propriety in your lazy bones. You'll have to get out of those clothes before anyone sees you, just look at the shreds you've made of good cloth, and those paint stains, is that the best you could do to come to your bride?"

"Now, Ma ..."

He tried to peck her cheek with a kiss.

"Where's your traveling trunk? What took you so long?"



Recent experience with Teresa's abrasiveness stood him in good stead now. "I'll try and be late to my funeral as well."

"Don't talk back to me," she said sharply. "A crate of paintings came last week, and your father has it at the workshop. The day it arrived I thought he would perish of apoplexy he was that incensed. He came home with his face as red as a beet, and at first I thought he'd taken a fever but he was dry as a bone and so full of rage he couldn't get the words out of his mouth to tell me how angry he was at the work you'd sent."

Jeroen was relieved to hear that the crate of paintings had made it up the inland route without harm, and his father's reaction was only to be expected. It was good that the artwork had arrived safely, and too bad it hadn't been just a little later in the passage.

"How is it the cartload of goods could get here before you?" She stopped to peer closely into his face. "Stopped off in Antwerp did you, to roister in the flesh pits? I know your type, Jeroen, don't tell me you've been virtue and prudence in one."

"Too much cinnabar paint," he said. Jeroen remembered that his father was ever one for painting townscapes, and bricks he painted with cinnabar, which everyone knew is made from the same ore as mercury. At least Jeroen knew it now, because Teresa had told him, and that cinnabar came from Almaden in Spain where the people went mad with red faces and internal heat from mining the rock.

Cinnabar or not, his father's face was not pleasant to see when he arrived home along with Jeroen's brothers. "I can't sell that rot!" were the first words out of his mouth. "What were you thinking to waste panel and paint on monsters and madmen? I've half a mind to scrape those panels down to bare wood to get some use out of them. Did I teach

you nothing? No one in their right mind would wreak ruin of good materials like you've done. You've even signed them with some barbarous name."

Jeroen's brothers biffed him about the head and shoulders and shoved him into the marble mantle piece by way of greeting. His younger brother Goessens slipped him a flask of ale and the boys ducked out the door. Apparently his father's wrath was to be his alone. No, his mother came to watch. Defending her eldest? More likely adding fuel to the fire.

Jeroen's father, Anthonis, was a portly man with thinning hair swept back into a black ribbon. He was wearing his workaday jerkin and hosen but they were of good wool, deep-dyed a somber brown and entirely free of unbecoming paint splotches. His shoes had gilt buckles and all together he looked sober and prosperous, the successful head of the family and a well-known artist.

"You look like a gypsy," his father continued. "I've made a good marriage contract for you with a merchant's virtuous daughter and you've come to it looking like a vagabond. God grant you've sneaked into town like a thief and no one marked your passage." He flung up his well-tended hands. "Those daubs you sent in the crate with the outlandish name; tell me they're the work of some madman you're succoring and not the consummation of my proper training."

All this abuse was making Jeroen miss Teresa fiercely. No wonder he took to her tart comments and sharp reproaches. It was homelike. Teresa was much wittier, however. She could devastate him with a word.

"Nay, Father, I trumpeted my arrival in the town square to drum up business. I've paintings to sell to wealthy patrons, signed with a good Latin name, Hieronymous Bosch," Jeroen said. "I stopped off and made myself known to my bride's family the van

den Meervennes, although of course Aleyt herself, shy maiden, stayed modestly behind the curtains. I ...”

“Get on with you, you did no such thing,” his mother said. “I’ve heated water for a bath. The wedding mass will be on the Lord’s Day and we’d better all hope we can make the marriage before the Brotherhood of Our Lady gets a look at your work. Your father’s kept it safe for now, and perhaps you can hide it from your wife.”

“If that’s what you all think of it,” Jeroen said, finally nettled, “I’ll take it with me when I go.”

“That’s what I just said, son.”

“When I return to Spain,” he said.

Teresa could find no buckthorn berries, ripe or unripe. Seville would go spare of purgatives this winter, which was their use to Teresa. The buckthorns had been stripped of berries to make yellow dye. The Inquisitors, who had fled to Aracena while the plague raged in Seville, had returned and proclaimed a term of grace. For two months any heretic who came forward would be pardoned and made to do a penance. It was the *Conversos* who rushed forward to confess who required yellow garments with crimson crosses. Fifteen hundred yellow-garbed penitents were reconciled in one grand *auto de fe* alone. The dyers and fullers were happy.

Having confessed, the heretics dared not draw back lest they be considered relapsed and sent to the stake to burn. They had to tell everything they knew about other judaizers or apostates. In their fear, the penitents betrayed mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, sons and daughters. Teresa knew Dolores the midwife had renounced an entire family in her care, the new mother Oro, the husband Isaac, even unto the babe in arms.

Oro had pleaded with Dolores to take the baby and send it to a wet nurse, but no one dared give milk to a Jewish child so clearly marked by his circumcision.

Llorenco Rodriques, a bookbinder, was condemned by a tanner who had been supplying him leather for thirty years. The tanner made a bid for the business and Llorenco's wife as well, but the Rodriques took up their penitential gowns and marched barefoot to the church to do their atonement.

Teresa went to see her friend Inez who served the Queen to find that the *Converso* physician Joseph Vicinho was still in service to the Court. He had not been touched by the plague, nor the threat of heresy.

"Why are you checking on the Queen's physician? You asked me about him before," Inez smiled. "Is there something the Queen should know about this man? Or that I should?" Inez was as practical a woman as she had been a child, one of the most cheerful assassins Teresa had ever known in the Society of Eve, as plump and friendly-looking as she was deadly. She was even affectionate to Teresa, who was in disgrace and estranged from the Society.

The Society placed women in all the great families as spies, and of course as executioners, should the need arise. Inez had gone immediately to the royal family after the first successful test of her skills. Teresa's first test was a debacle of some proportions, talked of from Madrid to Venice, with the end result still in doubt. It was why she was an herbalist and not an assassin, which to her mind was all to the good.

"She should know he's a skillful physician," Teresa said.

"Something to you, then, is he? Putting yourself forward, are you?"

"No, of course not." Teresa forced a smile. "He's a learned man. We talked about medicine. He was interested. In my herbs."

"Is that what you call it?" Inez said.

Teresa wasn't sure what she called it, at this point. Why couldn't she leave off worrying about Joseph? He was no present danger to herself, unless he named all his associates under inquisitorial torture. That wasn't what was worrying her. Teresa resented Joseph lying to her, resenting him running out on her. The danger wasn't from him at all, but from her own unruly mind. If she was angered with the man, why did her thoughts return to him like a dog to its vomit?

Felipe brought home some rocks with an ochre cast and asked Teresa to hide them away for his Don Jeroen to use for yellow paint. The boy had been out on scavenging expeditions every day, bringing the odd bit of wood or metal. They had a table again, a wide wooden plank Felipe dragged home from somewhere, pegged into their log-ends. She longed for El Bosco to return and dash vivid paint on it

One day Teresa came back from the fields with her bundles of fennel gone to seed, and mint for women's complaints, to find a message delivered by a shabby street urchin of about ten years. Scrofula scabbed this boy's neck, and he shivered with fever as he huddled in the corner by the doorpost. Not the plague: they had all become experts at diagnosing that pestilence. The child was just unfed, tubercular and chilled, in the same poor condition as most of the survivors in Seville.

"What is it?" Teresa asked. Her voice was gentle. The child was pitiful.

"Felipe sent me to tell you he is in the *gallinería*," the little boy said. "He said you would give me some medicine if I came and told you."

Theresa rested the back of her wrist against the boy's filthy forehead briefly. "I have a simple for your fever. Come in and I will make it for you." She could get some ale and bread into the boy along with the herbs.

“No, Mistress,” he said, wide-eyed. “Medicine for my father. He is in the chapel at the prison. Tomorrow they hang him. He is very fearful of being cast for death. Felipe said you could ease his mind.”

She frowned at the waif. It seemed now that all her skills as an herbalist were spent easing the dying, instead of returning the sick to health. The resin she scraped from the poppy seed pods was perilously low in her stock as well. She could use peony leaf tea, she supposed. It was rather poisonous, but the line between sedation and death would be of little account to a man condemned to die the next morning.

“I’ll dose you both,” she said.

Teresa gave the boy willow bark in ale and set him to chewing on a crust of bread by the hearth while she measured out peony leaves and set the water to boil. While the water heated she went to her carved wooden chest and took out a few thin coins. When the infusion had brewed she poured it into a clay bottle and stoppered it with a twist of linen.

“Is it ready? I’ll run with it,” he volunteered.

“I’ll bring it myself. I need to deal for Felipe,” Teresa said. She damped the fire before she shrugged into her heavy black cloak and arranged her veil over her head. Dealing for Felipe was liable to be a long and expensive process.

“I’ll show you,” the urchin said. “My father’s been in the prison for months, I know all about it now.”

Teresa nodded understanding as the boy described the prison. Two big wards and the apartment for women and the cells for political prisoners and also the *capilla* where his father had been for three days.

“That’s how he knows he’ll be hanged tomorrow,” the boy said. “Father Diego says they only keep felons in the chapel for three days before they hang them.”

Felipe was in the *gallinería*, the ‘chicken coop,’ the part of the prison that housed wretched boys below the age of fourteen. Filthy, sick, ill-nourished, boys were shut up in a dark dungeon. No light or air reached the cell save for a bent grate in the door. Their common bed was the damp, cold ground. They were naked, the better to see the fleas and lice that infested their bodies. Rats and cockroaches skittered underfoot. The jailers were dense old rotters who confiscated the food brought in to prisoners by their families but were happy enough to look the other way for handsome bribes.

After Teresa had pulled her coins one at a time from her purse, and in the end signed that there were no more to be had, one of the guards agreed to release Felipe. The little messenger ran into the miasma of the cell and came out leading the prisoner, who had marks of the lash on his thin body and streaks of shit down his legs. Felipe fell to his knees and kissed the hem of her cloak.

“One thing more. I have an errand of mercy to the chapel,” Teresa said. Her voice was calm and quiet, as though she visited the condemned daily.

“One thing more, one thing more,” the guard exclaimed. “Women always want one thing more! Each boon is another coin.”

Sadly she took truly the last coin out of her purse and handed it over. It was the work of a moment to slip the bottle of tea in to the doomed man.

“Not all at once,” she warned him. “Small sips at intervals. It has a sedative effect on the mind.”

The little urchin darted into the cell and clung to his father, who nodded in response to her caution and drained the dose entire. Teresa saw him do it, but what was she supposed to do? Force the poison up with an emetic? To what end?

She wrapped Felipe in a fold of her cloak and they walked home arm-in-arm in the dismal night.

“You’ve lost your amulet,” Teresa said. “I’ll make you a new bundle of herbs, rub your gashes with woundwort, and I think a dose of bistort for the bowels.”

“Oh, no, Mistress. We have to save the bistort for Don Jeroen’s drawings,” Felipe said. “He’ll be back any time now.”

Felipe said that every day. He longed for the return of El Bosco with his whole heart.

“What were you imprisoned for?” Teresa asked. It was of little matter. “Picking pockets or snatching purses?”

“No, Mistress. There’s nothing left to steal from pockets and purses,” he answered, and that was true enough if her flat purse was anything to go by.

“What then?”

“You won’t tell him?”

“Jeroen? He’s not here to tell, is he?”

“I was taking linen,” Felipe confessed. “I can make fine canvases with bits of flat sticks and linen, and prime them with primusel. I looked for wood panels, too. It was because I was carrying a thick piece of wood that the soldier caught me. I couldn’t run as fast as I usually do.”

“Felipe, there’s only one place you could get linen and panel. Have you been going into houses that are nailed shut, abandoned? Ones with white crosses painted on the doors?”

“Oh, no, Mistress,” he said confidently. “I never go in a door with a white cross painted on it. I always break through a shutter and go in a window instead.”

Teresa’s jaw dropped. She was about to remonstrate with this bone-headed logic when she saw light in the window of her house. Wavering light bloomed in the room where no lantern had been lit when she left. She clutched Felipe to her.



“What is it?” the boy asked. He poked his head out of the fold of her cloak and wrestled free. “Don Jeroen! Don Jeroen! You’re back!”

So it proved. The peripatetic painter had returned, with a bulging chest tied up with a bit of frayed rope. Jeroen had a bag full of food over his shoulder and he spread the contents on the new table: sausages and cheeses, dried fruits, and some sort of flat bread or pancakes.

“Felipe! My boy, what’s become of you?” El Bosco took the squalid boy in his arms for a hug anyway, even though the extent of his naked filth was evident in the light of the lantern.

“Trim that wick, because you’re wasting oil,” were Teresa’s first words to Jeroen. “Felipe’s been in jail for thievery,” she added.

“Oh, Don Jeroen, I’m so happy to see you,” Felipe said, just before he bent at the middle like a hinge and opened his mouth. A vast gush of blood exploded from his gorge and splattered the floor and Jeroen’s boots.

Teresa grabbed the boy by one skinny arm to hold him upright. As she touched his armpit she could feel the boils. She dashed a stream of warm water from the kettle over his belly and realized he had painted himself with shit to conceal the pustules in his groin. His head sank towards his chest and his eyes rolled up.

“Don’t touch him,” she ordered. “No sense for us both to die.”

“Nonsense, Teresa,” Jeroen said. “If either of us was destined by God to die of the plague, we’d be dead time and time over. ‘Thou shalt not fear the terror of night; nor the arrow that flieth by day; nor the pestilence that walketh in darkness; nor the destruction that wasteth at noonday. A thousand may fall at thy side, and ten thousand at thy right hand; but it shall not come nigh thee.’”

He took the boy up in his arms and carried him to a pallet laid at the side of the room.

“Put him on his side,” Teresa said. “If he spews again he won’t choke.”

It didn’t matter. The boy never regained consciousness, and in the morning his meager flesh was cold and hard. Jeroen humped the corpse onto his back and Teresa threw a rag over it. He walked to the city gates and tipped the boy into the lime pit outside, and then walked home again. She was waiting for him by the hearth, naked under the thin blanket.

Jeroen untied his hosen and tugged his jerkin off, sat on the bedroll.

“How was your trip?”

“One laugh after another. Pirates.”

“Any new wounds?” Teresa ran her hands over his back and around under his arms, feeling his ribs.

“That tickles. No, nothing but saddle sores.”

She patted his ass. Thin joke.

“How was the wedding?”

“Worse than the pirates.”

“Come here,” she said, and then everything was all right for a little while.

## Chapter Six

One Saturday the agents of the Holy Office climbed the roofs near the Great Square and saw that the house of Teresa's neighbor Jacobo had no smoking chimney. If he was a good Christian he would be cooking as usual, but he was condemned as a secret Jew for observing the Sabbath. Jacobo was a bent old man, crippled from lifelong work in the tannery. He always smelled of dog dung, urine and rotten cowhides. Teresa brewed him willow bark for his aches and made goose grease salve to rub on his swollen joints. When the black-robed Familiars hauled him away he glanced aside at her and shook his head slightly, warning her not to make any complaint. Teresa clapped both hands to her mouth to still her protest. She breathed a silent prayer that Jacobo would not suffer long in the dungeon or on the pyre.

It was near the end of the year that Jeroen returned from Brabant that the heavy rains began in Andalusia and Castile. Once started, storms continued with cease or interruption. Seville had been set upon first by the Inquisition, then by the plague, and now in the last month of the year by the elements.

Teresa and Jeroen sloshed from place to place, their leather footgear grown hard and cracked on the one hand, and made soft and slimy on the other by repeated immersion. Teresa tried wearing her wooden *chopines*, clogs with tall cork soles, only to find that her feet slid out from under her and dumped her in the mud. She tried going out with naked feet, but her toes ached so from the cold she couldn't bear it. Teresa wore her cloak tucked up to her tunic to keep it from dragging in the waters that flowed through the streets like rivers.

"Why are you going out at all?" the painter asked. "Stay here by the fire. There's enough wood, and I'll mull some wine for you."

In the firelight Jeroen looked too big for the room, as through he would bump his head on the rafters if he stood up tall. As the fitful wind played the fire, his shadow flickered against the sketches he had scratched onto the mud-brick wall, populating first the outline of a fish which was swallowing a frog, then the cloud of lines he had said was meant to represent a cosmic furnace. Teresa had no idea what a cosmic furnace was. The painter was, of course, hunched over yet another panel. He had shipped a box of the phantasms to his father's workshop and immediately set out to make more.

"Isadora Ribera's husband took a bad blow to the leg from a soldier three days ago. The wound is festered and fevered. I promised to see to it again tonight."

She tucked a packet of strong herbs in her purse and donned her cloak. When she took up the kindling axe Jeroen's eyes widened.

"What are you carrying that for?"

“It may come to a choice of taking his leg or losing his life.”

“Santa Maria! The poor man. Here, give it to me and I’ll hone the edge. At least it’ll be quick if you chop forcefully.”

“No, Jeroen. The edge needs to be unsharpened. They bleed less that way, I don’t know why. I think it twists the ends of the body’s fibers, like spinning a strand of wool.”

Jeroen paled, and she saw his throat move in a vast swallow. Teresa didn’t like the thought herself. Isadora’s husband had commended his soul to divine providence last night, but his wife had begged and pleaded that Teresa try everything to save him. Since he was the husband she could not go against his wishes, but if he had lost consciousness things would be different.

“Do you ... dismember ... people often?”

“As few as possible,” Teresa said tartly. “Your limbs are safe with me. I promise not to sneak up on you in the middle of the night and start lopping bits off.”

The painter shuddered. “I thought I had nightmares before. You are delving into new pitches.”

Teresa trudged to Isadora’s hovel through rising water only to be greeted by wails of lamentation. Isadora’s husband had died an hour before when the rotten part of his leg fell away from his thigh and a great gout of foul matter and clotted blood exploded. She did what she could for the wife: some calming herbs in her ale, a quiet time letting her gush out all her fears, reassurance that she had done everything in accordance with his wishes. It was little enough, and Teresa didn’t begrudge the time, but when she stepped outside the water was up to her waist and she feared she would have to swim for it. She used the axe to swat off a strip of wood from the side of a white-crossed and abandoned house to make her way home, clinging to it like one stave from a boat.

When Teresa sloshed to the marketplace the next morning, she heard that the Guadalquivir had burst its banks and engulfed el Copero and the other bankside towns. The resultant flood surrounded the low flats of Seville so threateningly that for three days and nights they all, Christians, *Conversos*, and Jews, expected to perish together.

On Christmas day Jeroen proposed going to the cathedral to hear Mass celebrated. Teresa looked at him as though he had finally succumbed to galloping dementia.

“Felipe never made his first confession,” he explained, shuffling his giant feet as though embarrassed.

“He confessed to me,” she said. Their conversation on the way home from the prison would serve. She never told Jeroen what the boy had been doing.

“Did you absolve him?”

“Of course not. Do I look like I’m in holy orders?”

El Bosco’s face looked like he vehemently agreed that she did not act like it, but he pulled himself back. “Well, I thought to confess for him and do his penance,” he said simply.

“Then go.” Teresa sighed wearily. She couldn’t confess; the Society of Eve had made that impossible. In a simpler sense, there was no way she was going out in the driving rain and howling wind. She was tired of fighting the water above and below. Let the rain and the floods carry her off. Death haunted her. Death from the plague, death from the Inquisition, death from illness, she was full to bursting with memories of corpses bloated and blown, cadavers shriveled and bones scattered. Surely the Virgin Mary herself had abandoned them.

\* \* \*

“The sinner is tortured by being impaled on the strings of this gentle harp, then bitten by a black snake that curls around the edge of the instrument,” the painter said. “In heaven angels play on golden harps, but here I will gild the instrument of repentance. Two demons are stringing up this sinner atop a giant lute. Do you see the horrified expressions on the faces of the crowd? A little touch of justice for minstrels who pander to the unseemly lust of wanton merrymakers.” He hummed a little bit of some song, apparently well-pleased with himself.

“Jeroen, why is that naked man covering his ears?” Teresa asked.

“The sinner shouldering his crucifix, that enormous bassoon, has a flute sticking up his arse. He’s farting the foam off the piss. The music is odious, and it blares and blats. See the sinner trapped in the drum? That demon is having a fine time beating him to duple meter.”

“Is that a frog with fangs? Frogs don’t have teeth, Jeroen.”

“You’re being literal again, Teresa. It’s a frog-demon.” He gave her an exasperated look. “He’s terrorizing that round of choristers and making them read the music off those naked buttocks. The music is scored in drops of blood. See how I’ve got the look of anguish and desperation on their faces? It’s a dirge for the damned they’re singing. Here’s a clever touch.” Jeroen pointed. “Crushed under the outsize lute and tremendous music book, this sufferer points to the man I impaled on the harp strings. You’re meant to look there, Teresa, is that clear enough in its symbology for you?”

“Truthfully, Jeroen, I don’t want to look anywhere in the painting. I think I can hear the rasps and the groans when I look at this infernal concert. The damned ... is that a nun ringing that iron triangle? A geometer in the corner?”

“I’ve nearly run out of red ochre and lead-tin yellow. Is there aught you can do, with your herbage? It is necessarily a very hot-colored panel. Stir the shit bucket and see if you can come up with a bilious green for these damned in the background.”

“I don’t see the artistic merit of your suggestion,” she said.

Supplies of all kinds were scarce. Jeroen couldn’t get pigments, Teresa couldn’t get spices. The King and Queen taxed citizens heavily to support the costs of war and other pious works, and to pay the salaries of the Inquisitors. Teresa was particularly unhappy about the property tax she had to pay on her house. Better not to support Inquisitors, she felt.

“Miserable creature,” Teresa said.

“Who?” Jeroen was still rummaging about on her worktable, picking up flasks and rattling casks.

“Leave those alone. Torquemada, the Inquisitor General. He says the Inquisition has jurisdiction over witchcraft and necromancy, pretended saints and mystics, and mixers of love potions.”

“Not a present problem, is it? I grant you his list of the condemned runs into the thousands, but you should be pleased he’s putting bigamists and blasphemers on it.”

“Yes, and people who rob the church, priests who marry women by deception, priests who seduce women and induce them not to confess the sin, and usurers. That’s all to the good. Although any parish priest could see to the behavior of his flock without invoking the Inquisition.”

“The man has a positive talent for theater,” Jeroen said. “He cut Arbues’ assassin’s hands off and nailed them to the door of the House of Deputies before he had the man beheaded and quartered.”



The Inquisition was stronger than ever, and Teresa couldn't admire any of its results.

In the ordinary course of events, Teresa treated Dame Mariá Brunel, a washerwoman who scrubbed for the Queen. She gave her horehound for a cold in her head. White horehound, well-pounded, strained and doctored with honey, and taken warm was curative for head colds; it also served for lung disease and tape worms above the navel.

Teresa snatched up the bottle and a small broomcorn whisk and made her way through the mud and puddles. She examined her patient, who had chilblains on her hands and a great issue of snot from her nose, but was otherwise hearty from her work heaving great tubs of hot water and wet wash to and fro. Heating some dark red wine, she whisked in the contents of the horehound bottle, then administered the dose.

Teresa took advantage of the occasion to gossip with the royal servants. They shared out pieces of *búcaro*, a kind of clay which they chewed. It was imported from the Indies for making pots. The clay had an aromatic flavor, medicinal attributes, and was very popular. One common penance handed down by the good Fathers for venial sins was to abstain from *búcaro* for a day or two. These women evidently had a good source of supply and blameless lives.

Shortly thereafter Teresa noticed that her patient's nose had dried up nicely. But then The washerwoman commenced to thrust her tongue from her mouth, in and out like a snake. Teresa guessed she was trying to get the aromatic clay loose from her mouth. Finally she ripped at her lips with her hand and made a cawing sound. The herbalist went over to see if she could help. Mariá opened her vent for her and Teresa was astonished to see that her tongue was stuck to the roof of her mouth. She pulled the tongue free with a

ripping sound and found that it was as dry as dust. How could that be? The piece of clay Teresa was chewing wasn't drawing all the water out of her gut. Horehound made water: people sweated and peed because of it. Something was badly wrong.

She gave Dame Mariá a cup of well-watered wine, which she gulped down like a man dying of thirst on a desert sand. Another, and she was wet enough in the craw to be able to form words. This was a bad mistake, because what came out of her mouth was foul and fiendish.

She gave an ear-splitting scream and launched into a nearly incomprehensible series of words. "Yellow moss," Teresa thought she heard, and "Pierced by teeth."

Mariá took to loud singing and laughter by turns. "A head," she called. "Aiiee! It's turning into a mushroom. Now a skull! The Devil's cauldron!"

Servants scattered. "She sees the Devil!"

"Holy Mary, Mother of God! Saints preserve us," Teresa prayed. "Saint Anne, guide me."

Dame Mariá rotated her head on her neck like an owl, seeming to turn it completely around. "Moving wheels! Stars!"

The slowest of the servants to flee, an older seamstress named Luisa, flung back at her, "I'll call Father Diego."

Wonderful, Teresa thought. The most corrupt priest in the parish, and with one hand constantly held out for rewards for denouncing members of his flock. But as Dame Mariá flopped down onto the floor and began to make paddling motions like a fish, Teresa decided she'd be glad of his help. When fulminant foam frothed up out of her gorge, Teresa had to screw herself to the sticking point to wait around for him. As Dame Mariá began to convulse, Teresa was backing away and making the sign of the cross.

Fat old Father Diego came strolling in, folding his dinner napkin and patting his greasy lips. His cassock was stained with meat sauce, and his cross was buried somewhere in his vestments. “Saint Erasmus’ holy spear! What’s wrong with the woman?”

Since Dame Mariá could not, Teresa stammered out her history, the streaming head cold, the horehound, the dried tongue. Father Diego interrupted. “Dry tongue, she should lick the railings at the Shrine of Saint Martin.”

Teresa expected him to whip out a book of saintly restoratives but he just kept on gazing mildly at the convulsing woman. Luisa came bustling back into the room with a burly footman. “Get her up,” she ordered. “Make her walk. Doña Teresa, get it out of her.”

Luisa and the footman began to drag Mariá around the room. Upright, she drooled heavily and thrashed her feet. Teresa cast about. No mustard, no hellebore, no asarum ...

“Exorcism,” Father Diego said brightly. “That’s the thing. She’s possessed.”

Laundry soap would have to do. Teresa took a handful of the soft gelatinous soap waiting by the scrubbing board and mixed it hastily with water in a pottery cup. “Hold her nose,” she told the footman. “Close her nostrils and don’t let go.” She forced the poor woman’s jaw open and filled her mouth with soap mixture, then shoved her jowls shut so hard her teeth rattled. Clamping her hands around her head, Teresa held as tight as she could until the woman gave a tortured swallow. She let her fill her lungs with air, then did it again.

“I’ll send for the Bishop. It’s witchcraft, you see.” Father Diego was nodding happily to himself. Confident of his diagnosis, he approached the stricken woman and tried to see into her eyes. He stretched himself up on his toes and strained to behold.

Witches were known to use potions that made their eyes go completely black. Teresa could see that the centers of Mariá's eyes were huge and as dark as a raven's.

An enormous heave started in the depths of the stricken woman's stomach. Teresa watched in horror as the mammoth wave flowed upward towards her throat. The full force of her spew caught Father Diego right in the face, and he was instantly covered in soap film, vomit, stale wine, and, she trusted, the remains of the horehound. Just to be sure, she grabbed Mariá around the waist from behind and pulled her fists sharply backwards into her belly. Obediently, she spewed again. Father Diego took his second dose with grace: he swayed gently backwards and toppled over. A resounding thunk announced the arrival of his tonsured head on the stone flags of the floor.

As graceful as a matched team, Luisa and the footman stepped over him and continued to walk the patient. A few more turns around the room, and Mariá said, "Ow."

"Thank you, Saint Anne," Teresa whispered.

They helped Mariá into a chair, and she shook her head but stayed upright. Her curious gaze rested on Father Diego. "What happened to him?"

Luisa marshaled her forces again. The footman was discharged to assist the good Father to his monastery cell. As soon as it became clear that Dame Mariá had no memory of the event, Luisa jerked her head at Teresa to get out. Teresa was happy to go. Witchcraft was no light accusation, and she feared that Father Diego would not succumb to Mariá's convenient forgetfulness. Teresa ran home as quickly as she could and burst through the door of her house, panting and calling for Jeroen.

## Chapter Seven

Teresa flew through the door like the hounds of Hell were after her.

“We have to get out!” she gasped. “Hurry, Jeroen. Pack what you can’t abandon. I’ll go to Miguel and take his wagon. Go steal a horse.”

This was an odd set of directions and queer. “They hang horse thieves, don’t they?”

“They burn witches,” she shot back. “That old reprobate Father Diego is going to curse me for a sorceress and it’s your fault. What did you do with my horehound?”

“That honeyed concoction? Honey is a good binder for pigment. I needed bilious green for my legions of the damned in the infernal concert.”

“Jeroen.” She grabbed him by the jerkin and yanked his head down so he was on a level with her spitting fury. “For the love of God, what did you put in my horehound simple?”

Jeroen patted her on the shoulder and looked about. The contents of Teresa’s workshop were mixed cheek by jowl with the stock for his paintings. Their cups and bottles and pots mingled with mortar and pestle. Whisks, paintbrushes, scraps of linen rag, a hen’s egg, a flask of oil, rocks for grinding, sheaves of dried herbage, sour wine, and a small terra cotta statue of the Madonna were strewn on the table.

“Ah,” he said finally. “Here it is.”

Jeroen poked through the clutter and pulled up a small glass bottle with a carved wooden stopper. A sticky green dribbled down the dusty side.

Doña Teresa smote her forehead. “Ave Maria!”

“Where’s my paint?” he asked suddenly. “I hadn’t finished the off-side of the golden lute. I got distracted painting the spotted beetle.”

“Pray for us now and at the hour of our death.”

“Did you take my paint?”

“That’s stinkwort,” Teresa moaned.

“Perfect! I hadn’t thought about using pigments with fiendish names in my chorus of despair, but it casts another complete layer of interpretation. Magnificent idea!”

“Jeroen, you halfwit! Imbecile! I gave that dose to a woman and nearly killed her, and you and I will both be dancing at the pyre for it.”

“Jesus,” he said.

“Christ!” She threw up her hands.

“You fed someone my paint?”

“Even better for your layers of meaning, another name for stinkwort is the Devil’s Trumpet. It causes visions, disorientation, widening of the eyes, giddiness and delirium, mania, convulsions and death. You can imagine what that cack-headed Father Diego will make of it. It’s the fire for sure.”

Jeroen gazed at the bottle thoughtfully. Touched his finger to the stain. “Visions? Maybe I should try it.”

“Take the whole dose,” Teresa yelled.

He started flinging things into a sack. Lucky he had just shipped completed panels off to his father’s workshop. “If I’m choosing between burning now at the stake and burning later in Hell, I’ll take later. Why doesn’t Miguel have a horse to steal along with his cart?”

“We ate the horse in the last famine. It was all gristle and gut. Miguel still has the harness unless he boiled it for soup. Bring the horse you steal to the shed and I’ll make the lend of the cart right with Miguel.” She started selecting jars to take.

“Take it all,” he said. “Don’t leave any evidence.”

Next ensued twenty five leagues and four long days of staring at the back end of a wormy, misbegotten mule who would try the temper of a saint. The balky creature bucked loose of the horse harness every other milestone or so, and the straps and buckles had to be retied and cobbled together. His pace was slower than a spotted tortoise.

Teresa sat in the cart clutching at shifting piles of household goods and panel ends until at one of their mule-lashing stops she threw a bed cover over it all and fixed it down with an end of rope. After that she stomped along behind in the mud, her skirts dragging from the damp and her spirit querulous.

“Couldn’t you have found a slower beast?” she snapped.

He held up his hand, the one wrapped with leaves of plantain. “The only horse left in Seville bit me.”

“I’m tired of sleeping in gorse and broom on the side of this mountain. If the thickets weren’t full of prickles we’d roll off at night.”

“I thought you to wanted to take the scenic route.”

“I wanted to hide from the militia, not settle permanently in the hinterlands. I think we’ve crossed the same stream three times today. We’re lost.”

“We must be getting close. The land is drier, and there are holm-oaks and cork-oaks.”

“Don’t forget the oleanders. You tried to poison me with oleander sticks in the fire last night.”

“There’s a thought. We could make a good thing of supplying oleander for the *auto de fe*. Instead of burning to death, the heretics could die of poison a breath beforehand. That would irk the Inquisitors.”

“I’ll keep a special bundle for you,” Teresa muttered.

Somehow Jeroen doubted her choice of wood would be a gentle poison to relax him into an easy death. She’d probably supply pitch and pine, for a fast start to the fire. Well, Teresa’s patient Dame Mariá had escaped death. And he and Teresa escaped to Córdoba.

Córdoba was a magical city. Jeroen was awed by the Cathedral. Pillars! The cathedral was built in the midst of a forest of stone pillars: granite, onyx, marble and jasper. The pillars held up red and white striped arches which flowed in lovely waves to shadowed



corners. The stone smelled dusty and old. Jeroen craned his neck to stare at the delicately tinted cedar wood which was carved into a thousand interlocking shapes which made up the ceiling. The inner courtyard, walled off from the original mosque, wafted a lovely smell of orange blossoms from the graceful trees.

Jeroen was distracted by the sight of Queen Isabel in the elaborate sanctuary. The Queen knelt within the forest of lapis lazuli and jasper and porphyry and prayed at a morning Mass. Mosaics and trceries surrounded her. The pulpit was ivory and gold with inset gems, the pavement silver. Elaborate filigreed lanterns hung by the thousands. It was rich, overwhelming, opulent. Of course, nothing was too fine to lay at the feet of the Lord.

The Queen's retinue of admirals, dukes, cardinals, bishops, ambassadors, archbishops, marquises, cavaliers and counts kept shifting and stirring, sometimes blocking Jeroen's view. At thirty four, the Queen was still lovely and still resolute on victory against the Moors and the advance of the Inquisition. He couldn't imagine the steel that must lie beneath her delicate skin. She wore a long full gown in a dark brocade with a tight embroidered bodice and a girdle tied in a looped knot. Her cloak was gold and fell from her arms in long graceful folds. A thin veil covered her auburn hair and draped across her breast in small horizontal pleats.

Jeroen still wanted to paint Isabel, because beauty is the transient mask of decay. He made a quiet prayer for his dead apprentice Felipe who would never again grind pigments for him. Pigments, panels, oils, brushes ... he was in the midst of thinking of a great painting of a sensual paradise. It would be a lyrical, fantastic panel dazzling with color.

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Teresa found them a wretched dwelling in the southern section of Córdoba. The landlord was a barber-surgeon. Jeroen thought Teresa chose the barber as a source of leads for sufferers. Then perhaps she and the barber could trade the bedeviled back and forth between them, for cutting and potions, until they both had their pick of their purses.

Street porters and stall vendors, smugglers and housebreakers, ruffians and robbers were their neighbors. The hut itself must have been built by a guildless carpenter. No two boards met at a cusp, the doorpost was canted at an angle that grabbed his hip every time he went in or out, and the single room had recently been shared by pigs. A cobwebbed sack of acorns hung from the splintered roof beam, but they were too mealy and dry to eat.

Teresa made a great fuss with a broom she borrowed from a wet nurse, no doubt another source of referrals. When the broom came apart from the vigor of her brushing, she made Jeroen bind it back together with rabbit skin glue, then she bound it up with twine and returned it in better case than the one she had borrowed. Sweeping did for the pigshit and the cobwebs. Straight away he threw together a support for his panel and commenced to sketch with a piece of burnt wood, but Teresa came and took his burnt stick.

“I want a hearth,” she told him. “Go and gather stones, the flatter the better, and not from the riverbed, Jeroen.”

Dear God, she didn’t want oleander to burn, and now she didn’t want rocks from the river. “You want me to climb that damned mountain again?”

“I can’t be certain when the river rock explodes from the fire the shards will only hit you. Bring sparrow grass and any other foodstuff you can glean from the fields.

Here's a bucket I got from the village rubbish pile; see if you can cut some cork to mend it."

He left, holding his hands over his ears. In a minute he was back. "Where's the godforsaken mule?"

"I sold it. You'll have to pull the cart yourself."

"I'm a painter, not a draft animal!" Jeroen roared.

"You stink and bray, so how am I to tell the difference?"

Unwillingly the corners of his mouth curled up. In a minute they were both snorting with laughter. It was a release after their fretful flight and rickety landing, and a promise of better days to come.

Teresa built a rough hearth, fitting the stones together with chinks of clay dug from an abandoned potter's pit. There wasn't enough clay left in the ground for a set of plates, but slaked in her mended bucket, the clay became slip and the slip patched cracks. A chimney was beyond them: she didn't have the skill to build it to draw correctly, and Jeroen refused to haul any more rocks. Teresa slopped the rest of the slip bucket neatly around the edge of the hearth. They took a pleasant walk in the forest and scavenged deadfall for the fire. Coming home, they looked like peasants bent double under huge bags of twig and branch.

Jeroen brought back some straw to stuff the mattress cover, but the stable leavings were well-larded with donkey shit and she made him throw it outside to mulch her herb patch. She carried seeds and nips to plant her herbs. Teresa quickly dibbled in horsemint, fennel, tansy, sage, pennyroyal, borage, plantain and wound wort, and then she wove a wattle fence to keep large blundering animals like Jeroen off the garden beds.

Lesser wandering animals like chickens were welcome to dine on the bugs and insect eggs clinging to the plants.

“Where do you expect me to get straw that’s clean enough to suit you, your highness?” Jeroen asked petulantly. Like all men he took criticism badly.

“There’s a huge army camp over the river, so they must have straw for the archery butts and artillery practice.”

He gaped at her. “Come back filled with as many arrows as San Sebastian, is that what you want of me?”

“That’s the wrong holy helper. It’s Saint Barbara you’re after, the patron saint of the fire watch and bombardment. Do I have to do everything myself? I’ll give her a candle and go talk to the armorer. Maybe he can lend me a stalwart recruit to lug a bale here,” she teased him.

“Have as many recruits as you like,” he said. “You’ll be saving them from a bad end.”

“What end is that?”

“Cannon fodder. That army is on the move.”

Teresa looked across the river. Castilian army tents were lined up in groups and bunches. Banners and pennants flapped wildly. Big booming sounds issued from the heavy Italian lombard guns hurling their great stone bullets. There was a purposeful bustle among the soldiers that portended their readiness to march.

Queen Isabel had reorganized the army and engaged El Artillero, an engineer from Madrid, to develop its artillery. Expert smiths, powder-makers, and gunners had been imported from France, Germany, and Flanders. It was amazing to Teresa how many devious engines of war men had devised. The soldiers were finding ways of killing people far faster than physicians and surgeons could figure out how to heal the wounded.

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When the rains came to Córdoba it rained as continuously as it had in Seville. Teresa slopped through the rising waters. Jeroen cursed that his toes were going to drop off from rot. Their little hut dripped constantly, its roof being no better made than its walls. Teresa stuffed cracks with moss, weed, and strips of cork peeled from the trees, and still the water cascaded in. No relief was in sight.

“We’ve a floor full of clay, so let’s use it for mortar,” Jeroen suggested one day.

Before she could point out the inadvisability of the plan, he took a great handful of muck and plastered it onto the ceiling. Teresa ducked away. Now they had a rain of mud to contend with, plus a hole at his feet rapidly filling with groundwater.

“You might have mentioned that it wouldn’t be a good idea,” he said, wiping the rivulets off his face.

“A traveler in need of a purge told me that the Guadalquivir flooded the arsenals in Seville. The river covered Triana, and set the monastery of las Cuevas awash. The monks took to boats.”

“I don’t know how you hear these tales. I picture an awful network of women, hands touching, spread from Córdoba to Seville to Madrid, passing along tittle-tattle. Is that how it is?” Jeroen asked. He scuffled the mud back into the hole. “We’re in like case here. You’d better turn your hand to building an ark. A galley? A caravel? No?”

“Along with our prayers,” Teresa said. The network of women which was the Society of Eve certainly passed on information, most of it political, however, and prayers were not exactly the same as the orders that came down from the hierarchy. “Even the Queen fled Córdoba. Her physician told her to go north. She went to Cardinal Mendoza’s winter palace at Alcalá de Henares and brought a daughter into the world.”

Teresa was sitting cross-legged on a stool covered by a partially painted panel, this last upside down, so the paint wouldn't dirty her skirts. Of course she didn't want to smear Jeroen's work, either. She'd chosen to sit on one of the oldest pieces, a daub of an alchemical man he had begun when they first settled down in the city. It was a picture of a man in a tree, with cruel spines where branches should be, which went up and pierced the eggshell body. There was a moon-pale face that resembled Jeroen remarkably, with bowel-red bagpipes on his head, some blue boats and a millstone, and a number of other riddles. An innkeeper in the eggshell house knelt watching one of the damned with an arrow up his arse climb the ladder to the entrance. This painting Teresa privately called the Inn of Lost Souls, since she didn't know what the painter dubbed it. It was the driest of the available works and that was why she was using it to sit on and keep her feet out of the flood.

"I heard a tale as well," Jeroen said. He splashed another stream of mud off the end of his nose. "Curse this cloudburst. I no longer know if I'm on land or afloat. This half light is brown-green. It lies over objects like mold on a cheese. Disgusting. It almost makes me long for the natural scintillation of the light in Brabant."

Teresa cocked her head. Jeroen almost never talked about his homeland. She hadn't forgotten he had a wife, plus his father and brothers and uncles. He surely must have friends, patrons, teachers ... another life.

"What is it like?"

"The town is small and provincial. Very Dutch. Small-minded," he added.

"There is a great deal to do with the Brotherhood of Our Lady. They commission works for the chapel."

"Do you have a house?"

"Oh, Aleyt has a fine brick house in the best section of town," he said carelessly.

“Do you have an atelier? A workshop?”

“Nay! Aleyt is too fine to countenance my labors. She would never let me paint. Too low-class, she said, and makes a clutter, let alone the pessimism of the subject matter. Gruesome, she called it. It’s better here,” Jeroen concluded. He stretched his arms to encompass their soggy hovel and knocked over a cabbage. In grabbing for the vegetable, he banged against the corner of her perch. The cabbage splashed into the morass on the floor.

“Ow. What’s that you’re roosting on?”

“What was the tale you heard?” Teresa spread her skirts a little wider to hide the wood panel.

Jeroen rubbed his wrist.

“Were you at the *mentidero*? I didn’t think you were interested in gossip about the Court.”

“Those liars that infest their name-place have wonderful faces for my pictures of the damned,” Jeroen explained. “They get so angry with the government. There was a military fellow there lying about sea battles in the Indies. Pirates, he swears, both English and French. I can credit pirates. Loud voice, bad Spanish. Hooked, beaky nose. His hair was quite gray but he had the set of a man in his thirties. In unguarded moments he looked distinctly morose, but perhaps it was something he ate.”

Jeroen picked up the wet cabbage and tossed it into her lap. “Get up off my painting, lady. Here. I’ve already washed this fine vegetable for you, and the sooner we eat the quicker we can make our bed. I think we’re going to have to sleep on the table tonight lest whoever’s on the bottom drown while we frolic.”

“Frolic, is it?” she said in mock indignation.

“Trained to full nights, would you pass a night hardly touching?” He matched her light tone, then shifted down to seriousness. “Accustomed to leaning on you, I cannot lean on anyone else, Teresa.”



## Chapter Eight

Jeroen took the Guadalquivir river that flowed from Córdoba to Seville as his model. The river was murky green and deep: the water of death. The terrible watercourse had doomed young and old, man and woman, sinner and saved in the stormy winter. All the lost souls were reflected in his landscape.

A bearded giant with a forked staff strode across the foreground of the panel, his tunic lead white and his cloak vermilion red. Along the banks of the river a dragon leapt out from a ruined farmstead. A man strung up a bear on a gallows tree. A huge pitcher hanging in a tree was the dwelling of a Capuchin monk. The pitcher had a delicate ladder depending from the vessel's cracked crater. A Lenten fish clung from a twig of Saint Christopher-the-giant's staff and on his back the saint carried the Child. The Child weighed as heavy on his shoulders as the whole world.

“Why is the man climbing the tree? Is that a bee hive?” Teresa never left riddles alone.

“He’s raiding the bee hive, having decimated the dovecote. Can’t you tolerate concealment and suspense? How do you manage your catechism?”

“By rote and faith,” she said briskly. “Those draperies around Saint Ferryman make him look like he’s about to flap away. I thought the point of the legend was that the Christ child is heavy.”

“The legend is that in his youth Christopher served both a king and Satan in his search for a powerful and worthy patron, a search which ended when a hermit converted him to Christianity. Here -- the hermit stands by the edge of the water in the background. Are you satisfied now?”

“Then what happened to Christopher after that? Life of good works and toe-fungus from all that sloshing in the river?”

“Martyred and beheaded, what do you suppose? You know Christopher, the patron saint of travelers. That Cristoforo who’s been waiting around for the Queen probably took him as a name saint. Cristoforo Colombo wants to travel west to arrive at the east. Daft thought.”

“Ah, I’ve heard of that one. He’s bedding Beatriz Enríquez de Arana. He calls himself Cristobal Colón now. He’s sailing in fast trade winds. He even buttered up Prince Juan’s tutor and his noble nurse. The leading men in town seem to be supporting this grasping upstart.” Teresa was not fond of social climbers.

“Where did he come from?” Jeroen wondered aloud.

“I heard Genoa. He was a weaver until he took to sailing merchantmen. When his ship was attacked – those pesky pirates -- he took shelter in Lisbon. He has a wife and children in Portugal, but he left them behind to come to Spain. No, I tell a lie. He

brought his son Diego. Cristobal Colón's caravel was driven ashore by a storm at Palos, proving the point that he's a man in need of a supportive saint of travelers. The monastery at La Rabida gave him refuge and sent him forward on this mad passage to the Court and the Queen's councilors."

"A maritime discoverer, he dignifies himself," Jeroen said. "He has a good speaking voice, cadenced and reasonable. He'll make a good impression."

Jeroen heard from men he played cards with that the King and Queen received Cristobal Colón in the great hall of the Alcázar and asked him to explain his scheme to sail west and arrive in the east. A great deal of talk funneled itself down to few facts, but Jeroen gathered that the tall and strong navigator with the long face and beak spoke to the Court in such deliberate tones that at first no one understood his lively imagination.

"That Cristobal Colón said that the world to which we are born, live, and die is fixed in the sphere of the skies, stuck like a fig on the tree rooted into rock while the fig leaves wave in the wind. I've never heard such nonsense," the card player had said. He had wiped his oily hand on the skirt of his jerkin before he dealt the next hand of cards.

"The world is stuck to something?" Jeroen had asked.

"He says it touches naught but land and water, and floats freely within the heavens." The man frowned at his cards. He passed a small bowl of olives to Jeroen. "Is there any more wine in the pitcher?"

Jeroen sloshed the vessel from side to side. "No, we've swilled it all. You mean Colón is saying what that Greek geographer said? There's a fixed earth around which the sphere of the stars rotates every day?"

"I don't know about the Greek. According to Colón, following the stars would lead him to traverse the expanse of the heavens and go round by earth and water to find

much gold. Sailing west from the right of San Vicente would lead to the Indies and then by way of Jerusalem and Rome back to Seville,” the card player said.

“The Greek was called Ptolemy,” Jeroen said. “He had a lovely epigram, ‘Well do I know that I am mortal, a creature of one day. But if my mind follows the winding paths of the stars, then my feet no longer rest on earth, but standing by Zeus himself I take my fill of ambrosia, the divine dish.’”

“I doubt it’s ambrosia King Fernando wants if there’s gold to be had. He’s always in need of money.”

Jeroen nodded respectfully before he dealt the next hand of cards. “Who is not?”

“Colón was careful to mention the uses that could be made of eastern gold. He told Queen Isabel it could be used to crusade against the Moors. Plus there were all those heathen souls to convert to Christianity.”

“You’re well informed. What do you think the Queen will do?” Jeroen asked.

“You don’t think that King Fernando will have a say?” The man smirked.

“The Queen is as good a soldier, out there on the battlefield on a fine Barbary horse, breastplate, helmet and all.” What a picture that would make, Jeroen thought wistfully, if only I could paint anything but monsters.

“Isabel liked Cristobal Colón. She didn’t need to be convinced that the world was round.”

“So is she going to fund this idiot sailor?”

“Of course. Queen Isabel and King Fernando said that if he succeeded on his first voyage he would be knighted, appointed Admiral of the Ocean Sea, made the viceroy of any new lands, and awarded ten percent of any new wealth.”

Jeroen gave a whistle of admiration. “What a pledge.”

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The signs from the heavens, however, were not propitious. An earthquake rattled Córdoba on the eve of Palm Sunday, causing the church bells to ring before time and shaking part of the Alcázar to ruins. Since it was the Moorish palace that was damaged, wiser men than Jeroen interpreted this as a good omen rather than a bad portent. They probably found an optimism he was missing in the confusing news from the battlefield as well.

At Fernando's camp on the side of a mountain above Bentomiz, Moors had attacked while the king was dining. Waving only a cuirass and a lance, Fernando had rushed out of his tent and launched himself right into the swarm of Saracens. The enemy would have killed him except that two of his cavaliers hauled him bodily to a refuge. Then the Great Pestilence in the surrounding villages spread to the Christian camp and slew more soldiers than the infidels.

A Muslim *santon* from Tunis, a prophet called Ibrahim, declared that Allah had sent an angel to show him the way to deliver Malaga from the Christian dogs. He was taken prisoner but refused to reveal to anyone but the King and Queen how Malaga would be take; mistaking Doña Beatriz and Don Álvaro for their Highnesses, he pulled a scimitar out of his burnoose and fell on them. In retaliation, the prophet's hacked remains were catapulted over the walls into Malaga. In their turn the Moors mutilated a noble Christian prisoner and sent the body back to the camp fastened to a bowlegged mule.

The year ended in the usual floods, storms and pestilence, a dispiriting reprise. Once again the Guadalquivir ringed Seville and Córdoba.

"Fat lot of good eastern gold will do us," Teresa said.

“I don’t need gold. No halos to paint,” Jeroen said. He yawned and pulled Teresa closer.

“What about Saint Christopher?”

“Funny that he was searching for a patron. He’ll have one when I sell the painting...” Jeroen’s voice trailed off as he fell asleep.

## Chapter Nine

“You’re doing the Lord’s work,” Teresa assured the elderly nun. The nun’s nether skin was all wattle and offensive smell as she held up the skirts of her coarse brown habit and squatted over the chamber pot. “Just imagine how grateful *Doncella* Catalina de los Cobos will be when she conceives. She’ll give the church many altar gifts in thanksgiving.”

“I don’t see why you wanted me to eat horny goat weed yesterday. It’s not fitting for a bride of Christ.” Sister Joseph spat neatly between her feet.

The old nun had devoted her life to piety, or at least to guaranteed bread and wine supplied by the church and a modicum of respect. Religion was a way of earning a living, and people took to it as any other trade, regardless of spiritual values or genuine calling. Teresa had heard a churchman say there were nine thousand monasteries and a

like number of convents in the kingdom. Monks, lay clergy, priests and nuns served the spiritual needs of the people. Teresa thought they were no doubt better qualified to pray than she, who had taken a Jewish lover in defiance of edict and law. Did it count towards her spiritual credit that now she simply sinned with a painter of blasphemies?

Teresa sighed. Marriage to an earthly bridegroom or a heavenly one made no difference. Both paths were closed to her. The convent was a refuge, an asylum, and sometimes a prison for young daughters of the nobility. Families shut young women away without consent and very much against their will, but dowries were expensive and could only be managed for one or two daughters to marry in their own social class. Some cloistered women lived a life as hungry and full of manual labor as any peasant on the land. Other convents were noted for ease and ostentation, and their noble inhabitants created a world of sensual pleasures within the walls. The fortunate nuns had two or three maids, richly furnished rooms, frequent visitors of both sexes, and flirtations, festivities, plays, and literary events.

Sister Joseph complained that she had been given to God as a child of seven; now, in her sixtieth year behind the walls, she could no longer carry cauldrons of soup to the indigents or keep back the needy people crowding through the gates at noon for a morsel of bread, so she was reduced to wiping backsides in the *Inclusa*, the foundling home where abandoned babies were collected. Now she was peeing into a pot for a noble bride. “Do you think this is what the Lord intended for me?” she asked Teresa.

“It’s a two for one package,” Teresa told the old woman. “The goat weed gives *Doncella Catalina* enthusiasm for the process, and the urine of an old nun increases her fertility. With any luck she’ll only have to lie with the old beast once to give him a heir.”

“Slobbering, is he?”



“Cold body, pale color, ingrained filth, fierce aspect, harsh voice, squalid habits and terrible piles, but titled and wealthy and with the grace of God he won’t live long,” Teresa said.

“If he looks too likely to endure, I’m sure you have a remedy for that, too,” the old nun snorted. “I’ve done it,” she added. “Help me up.”

Teresa gave Sister Joseph her arm. The woman grabbed on with gnarled hands and hoisted herself to her feet. “The last thing the world needs is another baby,” she grumbled. “We’re over supplied with sucklings as it is. Born in sin, raised in privation, quick to corruption, dead in hell. Even Satan himself must be weary of the endless hoard. What’s to be done?”

“Catalina is marrying in the church, all right and proper. The nuptial mass is this Sunday, so you might count nine months and look out for yet another squalling infant to add to the store.”

“I’ll give it a rattle,” Sister Joseph said. “I’ve got a cartload of the things. Every mother that casts her newborn to the *Inclusa* tucks a fresh-carved rattle in the swaddling cloths. I don’t know what they’re thinking. They can plan ahead far enough to make a toy, but not to provide for the child.”

“Surely the man in the bedstead has something to do with the babe in the cradle,” Teresa said. She knew better. Men were not noted for taking responsibility in domestic matters any more than the ram in the flock or the bull in the herd.

“Men!” the old nun said contemptuously. “If there’s one saving grace to celibacy, it’s the absence of the opposite sex.”

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The bride was eighteen, finely proportioned, with hair such a deep brown as to be almost black. Her skin was only lightly pockmarked and a rather deep color with yellowish undertones. Catalina probably had Jewish ancestors somewhere down the line but was a practicing Catholic: baptised, confirmed, able to recite the Lord's Prayer in Latin.

Dramatic coloring and youth lent her prettiness that wasn't matched by her manners.

Teresa thought she lacked common sense but she did have a fine grasp of the advantages her marriage would bring her, enough, in any case, to outwardly submit to the will of Don Enrique. Chastity, obedience, and modesty were probably beyond her scope.

"You're sure this is the right time, Doña Teresa?" she whined.

"Yes, I'm sure. We calculated the best day for the banns to be cried so that the wedding night would be propitious for conception. Here's the potion." She handed the bride a pottery flask of urine, well-doctored with fragrant valerian and cinnamon to mask the odor.

"How will I ever get him to drink it?"

"It's not for Don Enrique," Teresa said patiently. "It's for you. What shall I mix with it? Do you like mead or wine?"

She should have known better than to confuse the child by offering her a choice. While she dithered Teresa heated some spiced wine and swirled the potion into it.

"Can't you take it for me?"

Maybe Catalina was just too bone lazy to live. One more snivel out of the empty-headed bride and Teresa would abandon her to her fate.

"Drink it right down, there's a good girl," Teresa urged. "That's the way of it. Just a little more."

“This better work,” Catalina said, sticking out her tongue in disgust.

“Drink it all. Very good! Now make your prayer to the Virgin Mary for a fine strong son.”

Catalina pouted. “You do that part, Doña Teresa. I’ve got to make sure my maids have perfumed my dress.”

Jeroen seemed vastly amused when Teresa described the difficulties she’d had with the girl. He declared that the gullibility of the groom was the true kernel at the heart of the matter, and immediately started yet another painting to illustrate his theme. He made letters surrounding the figures in the center, ‘my name is Tricked Cuckholded Impertinent Hound.’ The Hound was succored by a surgeon with a funnel on his head, a white-tonsured monk with a crafty look, and a nun with a closed book balanced on her head.

“Why is the nun looking so sullen and malicious?” Teresa asked. “Why does the monk have a pewter pitcher? What does he offer? That surgeon has a shifty look about him. What does the empty earthenware jug hanging from his belt signify?” She should have known better. Jeroen’s explanations never made sense. The fact that medicine with all its secrets makes for an easily perpetrated fraud was no way to mock gullibility, swindlers, and tricksters.

In the event, Don Enrique did his best by Catalina de los Cobos. The nuptial mass was celebrated by the Bishop. The wedding feast was complete from wine to nuts. After the household chaplain offered prayers of thanks, the bridal couple retired to the bedchamber. There, sometime in the night, Don Enrique’s cold flesh became icier still. When the simpering bride called for her maids in the morning and triumphantly exhibited

the blood between her thighs, several minutes passed before any of the foolish women realized the groom was inattentive.

More than simply oblivious, the man was dead. The young widow blamed Teresa.

“Not again!” Jeroen groaned. “Teresa, are all herbalists magnets for accusations? Why does anyone ever start in your business?” He clapped a hand to his head. “There should be only three root and weed suppliers left in the world, with all the rest of the witches burned at the stake over the ages. Can’t you choose a safer profession?”

Teresa was pallid with anxiety. Another disaster. She’d have both church and Society after her again. She rallied to argue with Jeroen, wan practice for the Inquisitor. “There are herbs in the Bible, how to grow them, how to use them. Mandrake, vetch, caraway, wheat, barley, and rye ...”

“Mandrake is Satan’s Apple,” he said. “I know that one. Another one of your poisons. They say the man-shaped root screams so horribly when you pull it from the ground that it drives people insane.” Jeroen made the forked shape with two spread fingers and looked at the shadow of his hand. “You’re supposed to tie it to the tail of a dog and when he runs off the mandrake will be pulled up without assaulting your precious senses. I’m not sure what happens to the dog. It would make a clever bit in a picture. What’s the aspect of the plant?”

“Mandrake remedies melancholy,” Teresa protested.

“Right. Dead people are notoriously sanguine.”

“The root branches, it looks like a man. It’s brown.”

“Brown! What color brown, Teresa? You have eyes to see. Is it the color brown of a chestnut, or an acorn? The skin of a doe or the fur of a fox? Terra cotta or nutmeg? Do you have a piece of the stuff here?”

She cast her eyes guiltily to a box tied up with string.

“Get rid of it!” he roared.

“It’s hard to come by,” Teresa said, sulking. “As you mentioned. The flowers are on little stalks and they’re purple. There’s not much stem to the thing and the leaves just flop out on the ground. The fruit is an orange berry. Orange like a pumpkin, not like an apricot.”

“Good, good.” Jeroen rubbed his hands gleefully. “Just the thing. Orange and purple. Very dramatic combination and will draw the eye to the passage. I like the idea. The herbs in the Bible, very fine. Wheat, you say. Very well, and hay, a great stack of it, in the middle of the work, a nice allegory, we’ll develop that. The dog with the branched root tied to its tail, red, I think, a nice vermilion. Another dog in terre verte behind him for contrast, and a dragon-tailed dog underfoot of a greedy man fleeing these mongrels of retribution. I can see it entire.”

“I would look forward to it save for the fact that I’m liable to be burnt through denunciation before you can slap the paint on the linen.” She buried her head in her palms. Her long dark hair slipped forward and covered her shaking hands.

“Now, now, you mustn’t despair. The Inquisitors won’t come for you, because they’re after money. You haven’t a *real* to confiscate. If they don’t burn people, they don’t eat. Being sensible men, they’ll target dioceses with big pickings.”

“It only takes the testimony of two witnesses. Catalina and Sister Joseph will do for a start,” she sobbed.

“Until you see a thug in black with Saint Dominic’s white cross on his cloak, I don’t think you need to fear.”

“By the time one of the Familiars comes for me, it’ll be too late to escape. Jeroen, I’ll have to run away.”

“What, and deprive me of a first person account of the interrogation chamber? The iron fork, chains, gags, the Question. The *garrucha*, the water torture, the rack, mice on the stomach under a heated bowl ... all perfect for a painting.” Jeroen walked about excitedly. “I knew a man who was released because the Inquisitors found he was the victim of a personal grudge, but he swore an oath to say nothing about the prison and the interrogation. What’s an artist to do?”

Jeroen could see that he was failing to cheer Teresa up. He looked about himself sadly. The hovel was rude but they had warmed it with their affection. Their trappings were spread about in familiar piles and heaps. He had worked well in Córdoba and had sent a shipment of completed paintings to the Netherlands. Well. The advantage of his business was that he could perform it anywhere, his stock in trade was all in his hands and eyes, and the subject matter was all in his mind.

“This time let’s choose a town that doesn’t flood every nativity,” he said briskly. “It’s your turn to steal the transport. Since you may as well be hung for a sheep as for a lamb, I suggest you filch something from Don Enrique’s stables.”

Teresa was a much better thief of horseflesh than Jeroen and came back with a sumptuous carriage drawn by two fine Spanish jennets. The pinto paso horses had a crisp smooth gait, brilliant colors, and flashy patterns. Their trim hooves went taca-taca-taca-taca in a very regular rhythm. His jaw dropped.

“That’s more than a little ostentatious,” Jeroen said.

“That’s right,” Teresa said. “Everyone will look at the horses and not at us.”

The coach had leather blinds that could be let down for the concealment of the fine lady who normally enjoyed its use. They packed the interior solidly with the household goods and lowered the curtains. Teresa filched a pair of Jeroen’s pantaloons to wear and put up her hair in a stiffened bonnet studded with gems stolen along with the rig. They sat side by side on the seat and Jeroen took the reins. They headed for Granada. Fernando and Isabel had ended the Moorish war with the conquest of Grenada, and two more apparent refugees returning would cause no comment.

The wheat fields around Córdoba gave way to open horizons and meadows of wildflowers. Every time they stopped Teresa went off in the field and came back with a bundle of goldenrod or tormentil or furze or some other plant. Around Jaèn there were endless rows of green-gray olive trees against orange-red earth. They stopped at a roadhouse, the better to keep up the deceit, and enjoyed an expensive night on the landlord’s fine feather bed. Teresa pulled the werewithal from a silk purse that must have belonged to the chap with the bonnet.

The next morning as they left town, Teresa asked wistfully, “Do you think it would be safe to go to the Arab baths?” She scratched at flea bites. The landlord kindly supplied vermin free of charge.

“You could get in like that,” Jeroen mused, “but once you took off your clothes you’d be hard done by. There are some bits that are impossible to conceal and others that are difficult to counterfeit.”

“Keep your eye out for pennyroyal, then. Lavender tubular flower,” she added, but they were leaving the meadows behind.

Past the vineyards of Montilla the track followed a mountain stream, cold water rushing clear as crystal, and then the grade became steeper. They passed through thick woods of oak, chestnut and poplar, flanked by impenetrable thickets of bramble and nettle.

“Look!” Teresa pointed out a wild horned goat perched on a pinnacle. A hoopoe gave its stark haunting cry. In the south they could see the jagged, forbidding spine of the Sierra Nevada mountain range.

He shaded his eyes with the flat of his hand. “There’s a settlement ahead. White chalk walls. That’s probably Zúheros. It was built to protect this road.”

Teresa looked around suspiciously, as if expecting bandits. “Does the town do a good job?”

“I’m sure they’re experts at diverting shipments of olive oil from Baena to deserving swindlers in Granada and in taking considerations from fleeing *Conversos*.”

“We’ve nothing to steal,” she said.

“Nay, but in this get-up we may look like it.”

Teresa hauled a short-barreled arquebus up from under the seat. He whistled in admiration. “You are going to be doing penance from matins to vespers when your Confessor hears your sins.”



## Chapter Ten

Jeroen and Teresa's admirable stolen horses and carriage moved at a trot along the winding streets of the Albayzén in Granada. The rhythm of the finely-shod hoofs echoed off stone. They had passed the city gate just as dawn was breaking, and the narrow streets were still dark where the high walls and heavy wooden doors threw long shadows. A few early workers scuttled down alleys, hooded and cloaked against the morning damp.

No matter how conspicuous the carriage or superb the horseflesh, the ensemble looked exactly right tied up outside the ostentatious Arab palace and fortress of the Alhambra. It was an amazing structure, Jeroen thought, its façade all stylized Arabic inscriptions and abstract ornamental stucco decorations. He craned his neck.

“Wa-la-ghaliba illa-Llah,” he said.

“You haven’t the faintest idea how to say those words,” Teresa said. “Are they words? It looks like a jumble of lines and dots and wiggles. Could stone get wood-worm?” She poked at the crumbling stone. “What are those little rocks stuck in the walls? Do they use them to fill up holes? Maybe the wind whistles through in the winter.”

“I sounded rather melodious, though, didn’t I?” Jeroen had heard about the Alhambra. “See how the letters of the phrase are woven in a single band? It’s supposed to represent the Arabic belief in the oneness of God. They call their god Al-lah. The Moors say he manifests himself in the center of every form and being.”

“Hush, Jeroen, before a priest hears you. God’s supposed to sit up there in heaven, not invade people like a cancer. What do those words on the palace say? Exactly? Where did you ever learn Arabic, anyway?”

“Teresa, you are a single-minded lump. Don’t you have any poetry? Literally it says that there is no Conquerer but God. But the rhythm ... it captures the eye, it leads it into an imagined world.” Deep sigh. “The flowing letters liberate the eye from all the preoccupations of mind, and mindfulness. The stylized text represents repose. Can’t you feel it?”

“No, I can’t. We don’t have time to gawk and repose. We have to find a place to stay and unload this flashy carriage in the dead of the night. If you’re coming with me, grab a set of peasant garments.” Teresa shed the top layer of her finery in a whirlwind of motion. She tossed the stiffened bonnet into the carriage. Her long black hair was visible for a second before she floated a lace mantilla over it. Multiple dingy black skirts went on and Jeroen’s spare striped pantaloons whipped from beneath. An indigo shawl wrapped around her waist, and another dyed in onion skin yellow settled over her

shoulders. The contents of the silk purse poured rattling into an old leather pouch cinched tight with thongs. The pouch disappeared into her garments.

She had been a very pretty young man in the stolen finery and bonnet. It had given Jeroen ideas about dressing her in satin and silk, with lace at her breasts and a ribbon at her trim waist, like one of the ladies at court. “You look like an old village dowager,” he complained.

“Excellent, just the thing. Well, get out of those clothes. You don’t want to pay patrician prices for provincial lodging, do you?”

Pushed to it, Jeroen changed his fair clothes for a tattered brown shirt, knee length pants and some hose with more moth holes than wool. Teresa dug into a sack and came up with a canvas poncho for him and a pair of hemp sandals. He stomped his too large feet into the tight sandals with a groan.

“They’ll stretch,” she said unsympathetically. “Find an urchin to watch the carriage while we inspect the local real estate.”

Teresa hurried him along. The gardens, patios, and fountains that had been provided by the architect of the sultan’s palace included a dark and secretive walled garden of sculpted junipers and a stone staircase with water flowing down the balustrades. She didn’t give him time to appreciate the proportions of the water staircase or the mellifluous sound. He barely had time to take a sniff of the trees in passing. Piney. Resinous.

They came out to an overlook that gave them a view of the old quarter. The streets below looked narrow and rambled in a confusing clot. This old section was bordered by the river, the Sacromonte hill, the old town walls and a winding road. Odd houses resembling caves hewn from hard compacted clay and some squat rock dwellings seemed to be what had attracted Teresa’s eye.

They descended the slope, Jeroen's sandals slipping on loose stones. He grabbed for a tumble of rock that scraped his knuckles. A mangy dog showed them his back teeth in a soundless growl. Jeroen would have pitched a stone at it but Teresa simply raised one eyebrow and the dog slunk away with its tail between its legs.

"I feel that way myself," Jeroen muttered to the cur.

Thick gray stone was molded into houses. Teresa rumbled up to a man with an unbuttoned coat gaping over a hairy belly who showed them a depressing dwelling. It was small, dark, and dirty even by Jeroen's loose standards. He could imagine what Teresa thought. The landlord touted the coolness of the thick walls in summer; Jeroen imagined the dank chill in winter. Huge wormy beams of chestnut and ash were laid from wall to wall, covered by a mat of canes, then overlaid with more flat stones for the roof. Atop the entire business a crumbly gray mica the man said was called *luana* was deposited. The landlord assured them the *luana* had been laid during the waning of the moon to settle properly and keep the rain out. That would be a novelty.

Grumbling, hissing, and spitting, Teresa negotiated the rent. Jeroen wandered about, thumping rafters, kicking doorposts, and admiring a set of rusted iron nails knocked into the walls at a convenient height. There was a stack of brushwood at the side of the house, inhabited by the usual mice and spiders, but dry under the top layer of moldy and leafy bits. This time he would make it his business to bring fresh straw back first when he went to stable the horses, and perhaps he could rig a rope bed out of some logs and cordage. The roadhouse feather bed had given him aspirations. Teresa was a very comfortable woman to live with, accepting and compatible of mind, but there was no denying his wife Aleyt was in softer circumstance. Well. Time enough for paradise in Heaven. He had work to do.

\* \* \*

The town of Granada was like a carnival. The Reconquest had become a joyful celebration. Walking through the market square towards the Cathedral, Jeroen overheard a group of hidalgos say that in celebration of the end of the Moorish war, Cardinal Borgia had staged a bullfight for the Roman people, a magnificent spectacle they had never seen. Jeroen wondered how a bullfight would bring the word of God to people. He imagined Teresa's snort of disbelief. All her sympathies would be with the bull, or possibly with the thought of the cowhide, roast haunch, and beef tallow to be had from the carcass.

Late in the afternoon, Jeroen had time to see that Granada was lovely. Fig and pistachio trees, cypresses, oranges, laurels, and roses unfolded in the town gardens. Arcades and arches of green sheltered pools and fountains. Birdsong filled the air with delicate cadences, and blossoms in brilliant colors offered their marvelous fragrances. Flowers of oleander, tamarisk, myrtle, acacia and white jasmine spread profusely. Blood-red pomegranates, fruits, vegetables, fields of sugar cane, orange groves, and meadows of saffron extended out all around the town of white-walled houses. The snow-topped crests of the Sierra Nevadas formed a perfect backdrop.

The town was full of news. The influx of returning refugees brought word that Cristóbal Colón had reappeared at Santa Fé shortly before the reconquest of Granada and renewed his supplications to their Highnesses. Colón was supported by the Marqués of Moya and Bishop Diego de Deza, and finally the royals had received him in audience. The Queen was impressed with his poetry and purported divine revelations. King Fernando wanted objective evidence.

"Well he should," Jeroen told his informant at the local inn yard. They were rattling dice in a cup, playing for only a few *maravedis*, because Jeroen wasn't sure of his new found friend or his carved ivory cubes just yet. The man said he traded luxury goods

like silk and amber. The wine was good at the inn, and the deep shade in the courtyard welcome. It was no sacrifice to spend an hour hearing the news.

“Fernando appointed a committee to judge the worth of the mission,” the trader said. “Of course Colón blamed everyone for ingratitude or a rascally nature instead of himself for his previous misfortunes. He told the King about Sir John Mandeville’s terrestrial paradise on a mountain so tall it almost touched the moon, and then assured him that Our Divine Lord had told him he would find land to the west within a thousand leagues.”

“I didn’t know Our Divine Lord was a geometer,” Jeroen said.

“Not only that, Colón said a miraculous voice whispered to him in the night, ‘God will cause thy name to be wonderfully resounded through the earth, and will give thee the keys of the gates of the ocean, which are closed with strong chains.’”

“Mysterious voices in the night are also difficult to verify.”

“The King sent *el judio Josepho*, the physician and astrologer Dr. Joseph Vecinho, to Guinea to measure the altitude of the sun. It was to check up on Colón’s theories. Dr. Vecinho reported against him and Colón left the court angry.”

“So is he sailing or not?”

The trader threw the dice. They rolled to a perfect six. He raised his brows. “Perhaps he will.”

The man had his back to a polished marble pillar. Jeroen had seen the slight of hand as the first pair of dice were slipped out of the cup and a second set substituted.

“Can you toss that six again?”

“Every time,” he laughed, and showed Jeroen how the ivory was cunningly weighted with lead spots on one face and tin on the others. “I knew you saw me switch

them. Your eyes widened. Come and play with me in the evening, and together we'll win a few skins of wine."

Jeroen was not surprised when that evening the *Converso* physician Joseph Vecinho appeared at the door of their new house. Teresa must have heard the same things he had. She got her news from the infernal network of women that seemed to exist everywhere. Lord deliver him from females with their webs. One of the spiders had spun a thread that drew the physician in.

But knowing a thing in the mind was not the same as knowing it with the body. The hair stood up on the back of his neck. Jeroen's eyes dilated. He puffed up like a fighting cock. He recognized the tall dark man on a primal level: enemy, rival, foe. On the side of reason, he had a very fair idea what had gone on with Teresa in Seville. Of course Teresa would never discuss it. She was the most infuriatingly independent woman Jeroen had ever known. Her problems were her own, and she didn't want his help, thank you very much. But why in heaven would she go back to the scoundrel?

He had entertained a fleeting thought that Teresa would relegate Joseph Vecinho to the past now that she had come to his own bed. Jeroen watched her face go pale with excitement. Wrong. Slowly, he unclenched his hands from the tight fists they had made. He let out his breath in a prolonged sigh. He had no claim on Teresa.

When Joseph Vecinho and Teresa went out walking in the dusk of the evening, her hand resting lightly on his arm, Jeroen lit candles and a lantern and attacked a new panel. He propped the wooden support up against a bucket, which was too low. Then he sat on the bench with the painting on his lap, which kept his arms from swinging freely as

he worked. Finally he turned the bucket upside down, sat on it, and put the panel on the bench.

He pointed a brush between his lips and dipped it into a bladder of vermillion paint. He painted three gluttonous men taking excessive pleasure in strawberries, one crouched over a berry, another mouthing one like a baby chewing on a rattle, the third holding succulent fruit before his parted lips. Little strawberries spilled from a larger. The colors were all pinks and reds, like sexual flesh. Leaves sprouting from the fellow who clutched his love to him showed he was losing his human form because he was so immersed in berry pleasure. The title of the painting would be the Strawberry Cult. In Dutch, to pluck fruit is to make love. The soul is easy to lose, he wanted to say. Whenever we abandon ourselves to possess, we become transformed by our own hunger.

He didn't think Teresa would understand the meaning of the painting.



## Chapter Eleven

“It’s been a long time since I saw you,” Joseph Vecinho said. “I went back to look for you in Seville but you had left the city. Are you safe here?”

“Is anyone truly safe?” Teresa answered. Did he really go back to look for her? Her attention was on the physician’s body, the physical warmth of his arm under her hand, the closeness of his hip and thigh to her own, the sweet smell of his dark skin. She cursed herself for a hundred kinds of fool. It was bad enough she had acted like a love-struck girl in Seville. She had no room for an unreliable *Converso* in her life. A Jew, really. She knew Joseph hadn’t actually accepted the sacraments. He was a heretic, just as the Queen said Jews were. Mortally dangerous. Had he really looked for her in Seville?

Joseph smiled down at her. “Of course no one is safe,” he said. “Therefore we must be very clever to survive. Moreover we should take every opportunity to eat our sweets before our meats, and our wine before our water, in the event we don’t survive the entire supper.”

“It has been a long time,” she said.

“Yes,” Joseph agreed.

He didn’t ask about the child they had started. It was just like a man to avoid the question: least seen, soonest mended. She resented his aversion but was unwilling on her own part to admit to the abortion. If the question arose, a miscarriage would serve as explanation. She sighed.

“What’s wrong?”

They had walked along the river to the Jewish quarter. The soft night muffled sounds. Everything seemed quiet and peaceful. Teresa turned to Joseph and looked him full in the face. His dark eyes sparkled with interest. He tilted his head a little to the side in inquiry. His black hair fell forward like that of a boy.

“I have a room near here,” he said.

“Do you want me to go there with you?” Teresa was always direct.

“I’m hungry with desire for you,” Joseph said. “Herbalist, is there a cure?”

“Yes,” she said, and embraced him. It was wrong to show such visible association in the public street. It was right for her to take him in her arms.

Morning light was visible beneath the shutter of Joseph’s window when they untangled their legs and sat up in the rumpled bed. Teresa tugged her shift down. She had forgotten how it was to make love with Joseph. No, not forgotten, but pushed the

memory down in the storehouse of her thoughts where it wouldn't trouble her. Now she was vividly aware of their congress and was beginning to think of its consequences. She shouldn't have started this again.

She had become pregnant by this man once before, therefore it could happen a second time. She hadn't used the alum in wax contraceptive he had given her, which had been left behind in one of her mad dashes from the accusations of witchcraft. Jeroen had said she seemed to attract accusations of sorcery, and maybe he was right. Besides her own actions, her unbreakable connection to the Society of Eve made that inevitable.

Worse, Teresa had been lying with Jeroen as well. If she did become pregnant, she wouldn't know for sure who had fathered the child until he became old enough to show a resemblance to one of the men. How had a single instance of lying with Joseph turned into a son in her mind? Better a son than a daughter. The Society of Eve would snatch a daughter away. They were everywhere. But even if the child was a son, the boy would be a bastard, in any case. Joseph would neither acknowledge nor support a child. Jeroen already had a wife.

Teresa's mind ran on like a waterwheel in a fast mill-race. Her head was spinning. When had she last needed her menstrual rags? Why had she never become pregnant by Jeroen? Was the painter incapable of fathering children? Did he know it? Was his wife Aleyt pregnant, back in the Netherlands? Jeroen had letters from his father now and again. He hadn't said. He never mentioned his wife to her. What was Joseph Vecinho doing in Granada? Would he stay? Would she?

Joseph handed her a cup of hot honey drink spiced with cinnamon. "I'm here because of that irascible navigator Colón," Joseph said. "He stormed off towards France, but he stopped at La Rádiba monastery again to complain to Father Juan Perez, the Queen's old confessor before Fray Torquemada. Fray Juan told Colón that going away

was ridiculous and that the Queen should not allow Spain to lose so much glory, so they sent a letter to Isabel. Colón turned back up with fashionable clothes and a showy mule, and there was another audience to hear his preposterous words.”

“Did you dispute his claims?” Teresa asked.

“His claims are all divine revelation, not science! Unproven hypotheses. Wild guesses!” Joseph dragged his hands through his rumpled hair.

“How frustrating,” Teresa murmured.

She loved the way Joseph was passionate about science and mortal man’s body of knowledge. He wanted to understand the order of the entire universe, why the stars moved as they did, and what their motions portended in their lives. Teresa remembered Jeroen standing in open-mouthed astonishment at the eclipse in Seville. Joseph had forewarned her that the sun would be obscured. Jeroen was so simple in his understanding and Joseph so complicated that they were like a savage child and a sophisticated scholar.

Only they were backwards in that Jeroen’s theology was complex and Joseph’s faith was simple. Jeroen questioned everything about his religion and Joseph just seemed to accept the faith of his Jewish ancestors. They were entirely different in bed as well. Jeroen was gentle for a big man, tender-hearted, comfortable to lie close with. Joseph was lean and sinewy and too bony to grasp for long, and he took his pleasure quickly. What puzzled Teresa was that her body responded instinctively to Jeroen, her knees trembled when he touched her, her nipples hardened when he looked at her. With Joseph, she had to work at her response. Once roused, her desire matched his, but it was not burning and quick as it was with Jeroen.

“The man got up in the Hall of the Ambassadors in the Alhambra and stood there telling their Highnesses that the mission was not only a question of three ships and

2,000,000 *maravedis*.” Joseph sounded indignant. “For himself of course he wanted only those titles and emoluments appropriate to his deeds: to be made Admiral of all the seas and countries he was about to discover, the title to descend to his sons. He was to be made Governor and Viceroy of all the continents and islands he was about to find. He would have a tenth part of all wealth – pearls, gold, merchandise – to be found, exported, or otherwise gained from his discoveries.”

“Only a tenth?” Teresa tried to imagine the wealth. What could one man do with so much money? Feed all the poor of Spain, if he wanted to. She didn’t suppose he would.

“Make an Italian weaver an Admiral?” Joseph snorted. “The King was speechless. Isabel was less annoyed. This so-called instrument of providence who wanted his share of the proceeds amused her. However, to give the man titles and rewards for something he hadn’t yet done was preposterous. So he rode his pretty mule back out of the gate.”

Teresa nodded. So Colón had thrown away the chance of help from Spain rather than compromise his demands. She could respect that.

“That wasn’t the end of the story,” Joseph said. “Luis de Santángel got the Queen to agree that if Colón tried and was lost at sea, no harm would be done by giving him a title. If he added new realms to Spain, well, then, he deserved to be an Admiral. Santángel also knew where to get money, and at the command of the Queen he took funds from the Holy Brotherhood to equip Colón’s expedition. The Admiral is now dignified by the title Don Cristóbal Colón, a grandee of Castile. He went to Palos to organize his expedition.”

“You didn’t go with him,” Teresa said. It was the important point, to her mind.

\* \* \*

She returned to the squat rock house in the Sacromonte near dark. Jeroen was snoring on the floor in front of a new panel. An empty wine pitcher was overturned at his side. She stepped over him and the wrack of paint pots, sticky brushes, and bits of multicolored stained rags that surrounded him like magpie trinkets. All the candles in the room had burned down to stubs, and the oil lantern was empty. Teresa stirred up the coals remaining in the fire and added some branches.

When the flickering light revealed the painting, she could see it was a cheerful piece, with nice bright colors and pleasing curved lines, and for once not a monster in sight. Huge strawberries, blackberries, grapes, cherries, and pomegranates gave a sense of fruity flesh bursting from the panel. The painting even seemed somehow to emit a sweet, fruity smell, although that could be due to the wine Jeroen had spilled on himself and the floor.

El Bosco's vermilion red signature fitted nicely in the curve of a darker man's arm. A bright red cherry nestled on this man's full, parted lips and another fruit perched on his head. In the faint firelight the set of the features looked somehow familiar. Perhaps in daylight she would recognize him.

Jeroen sat up slowly, stiff from lying on the floor. Sitting up was probably premature. His mouth tasted like a rat had died in it, quite some time ago, complete with fur and shit. His head felt like he had drowned in an entire vat of wine. His gut was twisted into a painful knot. If it ever untwisted, the contents were liable to splash out in both directions, up and down. Even the tips of his ears hurt. He winced and explored his throbbing body

carefully. Arms and legs were still attached, although shoulders felt like the joints had been stretched apart and badly replaced. Some of the stains on his pantaloons were wine and some were piss; beyond that, Jeroen wasn't willing to go.

A squint and he thought he could make out Teresa sitting across the room at the table, doing something deft with her hands, but the light of the single candle by her side was blinding.

"Lazarus," Teresa said cheerfully. "Rising from the grave."

"Has it been four days?" Jeroen croaked.

"It's the morning after the night before. What happened to you? You look like you've been attacked by a mania." She came towards the panel and cocked her head to gaze at it. "This whole painting is new, isn't it? It's notably lacking in demons and devils. I'd even call it pleasing. Whatever came over you? Unlike your usual work, I expect this sort of thing would be very marketable."

Teresa prattled on, oblivious to the fact that Jeroen was about to die.

"Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord." He thought he might as well keep on with the Lazarus theme, but Teresa wasn't picking up the gauntlet. Surely a gentle touch of her hand on his brow or a sip of cool water wasn't beyond her Christian charity? A herbalist ought to have something in her coffer to cure sore head. Couldn't the woman see he was sinking towards the final passage?

"Sort of like the birth of Aphrodite, born of the foam of the sea, only pink instead of green."

Teresa had no eye for color. Her grasp on myth was shaky to boot. Jeroen gave a heartfelt groan. This proved to be a mistake, because the rattle of his lungs released the twist in his bowels. He lurched to his feet and made it out to the gutter before his

stomach everted. The vomit was both pink and green, if pink meant an unpleasant maroon close to caput mortuum, and if green, soap green.

Several donkeys and a goat came by to sniff at the spew, but the donkeys hastily backed off. The painter rested, head down, bent over with his hands on his knees, before he gave a final heave. This spurt propelled the goat into reverse as well. It was a nice piebald goat, with a rope collar and a little bell. He could hear the tinkling for a long way as the goat fled.

A bucketful of water surprised him as it flowed around the islands of his feet. Teresa was washing the scum from the doorstep. “Can you dump another measure on my head?” Jeroen asked humbly.

This it pleased Teresa to do. She left him to his misery then, and he sank slowly to his knees in the street, where he remained to their disrepute for an hour or two. Maybe it was the disgrace that caused Teresa to come out and haul him up, but her strong hand on his shoulder was shaking when she heaved him to his feet and led him stumbling into the house.

“What’s wrong now?” He could perhaps be excused for sounding a little testy. They had just gotten to the blasted town. If Teresa needed to run off from Granada already she was setting a new record for getting in trouble.

Teresa had heard the news at the market. She had frozen in mid-stride at the fish stall, oblivious to the smell of the oily herring and over-ripe eel. Isabel was expelling the Jews. The Queen had declared that crimes and offenses of the Jews against the faith had increased daily and now nothing would do but to drive them from the kingdom. Queen Isabel had said it was ‘the greatest, most perilous and most contagious of crimes,’ to



subvert and draw away Christians from the Holy Catholic faith and attract them to wicked belief and practice.

The fishwife and an old woman with a thin starched wimple told Teresa how Queen Isabel had come to her declaration: that young Prince Don Juan had opened the gold ball that the King's personal physician, Maestre Ribas Altas, wore on a golden chain around his neck. He had found a tiny parchment inside.

The parchment bore a painting of the figure of a crucified Christ with one of the physician in an obscene and insulting posture. It was this offense which was the final blow to tolerance. The Prince Don Juan was so shocked and disgusted that he fell ill and could not recover until his father promised to expel all the Jews.

Fernando and Isabel had the physician Ribas Altas burned at the stake.

The proclamation commanded that all the Jews leave the realm and not come back under pain of death and confiscation. Anyone who received or sheltered the Jews would have all their goods confiscated. The Jews could not take out of Spain any gold, silver, or minted coin. When Teresa had run back to his lodging, Joseph Vecinho had said some Jews were swallowing *cruzados* and ducats to take in their bellies, as many as thirty ducats at a time. He had patted her on the hand and told her not to worry, but Teresa knew he was lying to her.

"We've got to get Joseph out," Teresa gasped to Jeroen.

"I thought the people of Israel had miraculous guides like Moses to lead them to the promised land," he said. His head was about to come off his neck. He prayed it would be soon. His vision throbbed with flashes of light. His right side under the bottom ribs pulsed with a fierce pain. "Why does he need our help?"

“They’re making all the children over age twelve marry, so the girls will travel under the protection of a husband. There are six or eight mothers begging Joseph to marry their children. He’s besieged. Please, Jeroen, can’t you do something?”

“I can’t marry any of the brats,” he said. “I have a wife.” At the moment, the thought of Aleyt was actually pleasant. His wife would probably put a cool hand on his brow and send for a serving girl with a jug of cooled wine. He could sink into a fine chair and put his feet up on a footstool in the elegant merchant’s house. The stable-boy would pull off his boots and take them away for a brush and polish.

Jeroen looked down sadly at his horny dirty toenails sticking out of the tight hemp sandals that had probably belonged to a leprous dwarf. He looked up at the claustrophobic stone walls and precarious ceiling of the dirty little house. He looked everywhere else he could until finally his eyes slid unwillingly towards Teresa.

Teresa’s eyes were sparkling. A rosy pink flush shaded her cheeks. Her long fall of her shiny dark hair swung back and forth as she clapped her hands.

“That’s it,” Teresa said eagerly. “Can’t you send a shipment of paintings to your father’s workshop? Joseph could take them by cart. If we went with him to the border, we could get him safely away. Oh, yes, Jeroen, that’s a wonderful idea. I’ll go and tell him.”

Teresa ran off. Jeroen slumped heavily on the wooden stool and cradled his pounding head in his hands. What the Devil had he just agreed to? Smuggle Teresa’s lover out of Spain to prevent his marriage to a co-religionist? Why, exactly, Jeroen would want to do this was slipping his grasp. Travel with the two of them in a small cart, looking at the hind end of yet another ass, for weeks? They were at the very bottom of Spain. It would take a month to slog to the northern border. If they were stopped, all his paintings would be confiscated.

Jeroen moaned. Last night's wine and paint debauchery was intended to put a thin veneer of grace on his feelings about Teresa's paramour. He had painted like a madman, as fast as his brushes could fly. The panel that Teresa thought pleasing was meant to show that the fruits of desire lured men and women into sinful acts of lust and foolish passion. Lucifer take him. Why was he cursed? No one ever understood even the plain and simple meaning of his works.

Clearly the one dose of art was not enough. Jeroen's hands trembled as he pulled parchment and pen towards himself. His lines had a reckless energy as he sketched out a cavalcade of animals around a pool of female nudes. Men galvanized by arousal rode horses, lions, panthers, griffins, and camels. The animals were not bridled, nor was the lust. This bestial love scene was anchored by a porcupine enclosed in a bubble. Porcupine spines were, he knew, as difficult to extract as evil ways were difficult to mend.

## Chapter Twelve

Teresa ran to Joseph to tell him the good news. As she raced through the narrow cobbled streets of the Sacromonte, she pictured his relief and gratitude. She had heard that some Jews were going south from Gibralter to the Mohammedan Kingdom of Fez, some to Portugal, and others to Navarre or even as far as the Balkans. They could do a lot better than that. They could get Joseph across the Pyrenees mountains into France. He could settle in Montpellier and have all the facilities of a university, almost as good as Salamanca. It would not, she thought, be impossible for her to journey from Barcelona to Girona, and perhaps for Joseph to meet her there on occasion.

There was a rabbi in his rooms when she burst in. The Hebrew elder was white-haired and long-bearded, with sharp dark eyes. He wore a black cloak over a long tunic

tied up with a twisted fabric belt. Teresa saw to her horror there was a Jewish woman with the rabbi, and she was holding a slip of a girl by the wrist. The mother wore a dark gown that covered her from head to foot and fell in great folds all around her. She wore a tan veil and head-covering, so there was little to be seen of her features save her large brown eyes and hooked nose. Jews were not allowed to wear fine clothes lest they place themselves above Christians, so the weave of her garments was coarse. The child was skinny and had long hair in braids. Dressed in a rough tunic and skirt, she couldn't have been more than ten years old.

"Teresa!" Joseph rose from his chair to greet her, but he frowned as if to warn her she was intruding.

"Dr. Vecinho," Teresa said formally. "I've come with a commission for you."

The rabbi glanced from her to Joseph. "A patient?" he asked. "Of course you must attend. *Rachmana liba bai*. The Merciful One desires the heart."

The child thrust her lower lip forward in a pout. The mother shook her by the arm into a semblance of order, and they and the rabbi made polite farewells to Joseph, promising to return soon. Teresa felt the woman staring at her as they left. The Jewish woman's gaze felt rancorous, hostile. Joseph shuffled objects around on his table, papers and a leather sack that clinked like coins, before he raised his eyes to Teresa's face.

"What is it, Teresa? You don't bring me patients. There's so much to do before the departure, I don't have time to waste. One of my cousins will keep valuables for me, and I will have to select a scholar to hold my library, and Rabbi Menahem has ceremonies to prepare, and ..."

“Joseph.” She moved to him and placed her hand on his arm. He stiffened into silence. “We can get you to Montpellier. You can teach. There are excellent physicians there.”

“Hummm.”

“We can carry some of your valuables in a crate of El Bosco’s paintings. If we move against the main flow of the Jews, we can pretend to be taking the panels to the Netherlands for sale in his father’s workshop. Jeroen’s made this trip before. There’s room for you and me in the cart, and with him to drive the beast, well, no one would take the painter for a Jew. You would be well and surely hidden.”

“The lodger has the body of a serf and the manners of a rustic,” Joseph agreed. “Very well. You’ll be ready to start tomorrow? Bring me the crate of paintings today and I’ll hide my personal property within.”

Teresa expected thanks, but Joseph’s face was drawn up thoughtfully and his mind must have been thousands of leagues ahead. It was understandable that he was concerned. The Jews of Spain had to put their glories behind them and go out on the road, old and young, on foot and on beasts. Much labor and many misfortunes might attend their travel.

Jeroen, Teresa, and Joseph Vecinho left Granada with the Jews on Thursday, the second of August. It was the same day Admiral Don Christopher Columbus was to set out from the harbor of Palos. The Admiral had three small vessels, caulked and ready for the western sea. The wind, which had been contrary, had shifted to the east and now blew toward the palaces of Kubla. Jeroen had a wagon, a mule with ideas of his own about

cartage, a besotted herbalist who had latterly been his lover, and a Jew. Jeroen wondered if he should have thrown in his lot with Columbus instead.

The old stake-sided wagon and a draft animal were loaned from a peddler who had retired from a life of selling ribbons and charms at traveling fairs. Teresa had hired one of the man's sons to surreptitiously return the fine carriage and horses they had used to flee from Córdoba. This flight was going to be inconspicuous.

To say that the peddler was retired was a polite way of saying he drooled and had regressed to the mind of a baby. His overworked daughter said she had four children, not three, and fed him on weaning gruel and mash. Teresa left the daughter a large bottle of extract of lemon balm for her father, which was supposed to strengthen the mind, but despite this remedy she failed to see any less idiocy in the man.

The cart doddered. The wheels were unevenly sized and no single one was round, the hubs were worn, and the whole contraption swayed sideways at the slightest motion. Teresa was flung into a heap of mule fodder on the one hand and off Joseph on the other. As soon as the picture crate was loaded, Joseph had rolled himself up in his cloak and fallen asleep. He was lumpier than the feed.

"Jeroen, are you making this wagon wobble on purpose?" Teresa called up to him.

The painter was slumped on the bench, reins loose, staring at the mangy back end of the elderly dark-dun mule. Teresa had dosed his sore head with willow bark and skullcap, to very little gratitude. You would have thought she'd been driving nails into his skull instead of the crate holding his finished panels when they hammered the container together. He winced and moaned and generally acted like a spoiled nursling while they packed for the journey. He took roughly forever to dab a bit more oil finish

on a very strange panel of a naked man lying on his back holding a red fruit up to a crow perched on his foot. This panel he said was called The Crow Kisses Back.

Teresa sent a pair of neighborhood *picaros* to Joseph's lodging with the crate. She tied up their traveling bundles, sorted bedding and put up the food stores before Jeroen ever found his spare pair of pantaloons.

"Yes. I'm intentionally steering from side to side, and hitting every rut in the road on purpose," he tossed back. "It makes my head throb and when I vomit the spew will be evenly distributed on both sides of the track. Did you want to drive? I'm sure a lady of your skills and interest would do well in the profession. Here, let me lend you a rag to use as a glove. Then I'll sleep in the back like the learned physician."

"Why do you have to go so fast?" She bounced off the fodder again as Jeroen applied a goad to the mule.

"You want to get over the Pyrenees before snow closes the passes, don't you? Tell me this journey has an actual destination at the end. If this is simply limbo, you can wake me up when the final and permanent bliss of the Messianic Kingdom is established."

The man was impossible.

Jeroen couldn't believe he was doing it. That supercilious physician lolled in the back of the cart and had a good nap snuggled up next to Teresa while he did all the work of loading, driving, unloading, making camp, hauling water and chopping firewood. Teresa, who was so reluctant to sleep by the side of the track on their way to Córdoba, now refused to consider stopping at an inn for fear of exposing the fleeing man. She prattled happily while she sliced sausages for their supper.

"I can't eat that," Joseph said. "It's pork."



“Oh, I’m so sorry!” Teresa’s hand flew to her mouth. “I’ll find you some cheese. When we get near the next town I’ll go to the market and find some dried beef for you. We’ll need more bread, too. This was touched by the sausage.”

Mother’s little housewife went on setting the best tidbits on Joseph’s trencher. Jeroen watched this scene with an enormous frown.

“I thought you were a *Converso*, but you’re an idiot,” he said. “You’re not going to follow Hebrew practices here, on the road with us. I’m not putting Teresa in danger for a crypto-Jew. The only question is whether I’ll stuff that sausage down your gullet or up your ass. Eat it and be damned!”

Joseph shrugged and said, “The Holy One, Blessed be His Name, allows a Jew to eat *trayfe* if there’s no alternative.” He ate the sausage. Jeroen’s fists were clenched so hard he had to uncurl his fingers one by one before he could take up the bread Teresa handed him.

“Stop that,” she whispered to Jeroen, looking worriedly at Joseph. “He needs our help. Don’t anger him.”

Don’t anger him? If he angered the slimy little bastard enough would he stalk off in a huff? It was a strategy worth considering. On the other hand, Teresa would probably follow him, and that Jeroen didn’t want. If he could just maintain his temper long enough, they could dump Joseph Vecinho down the far side of the Pyrenees and let him roll into France, from whence they would never see him again. Jeroen kicked a rock. Twice. In his honor.

They sat apart in silence. Teresa probably thought it was up to Jeroen to speak first, to apologize, although whether she wanted that with cream or honey was not clear to him. Apologize to that hateful hasid? He didn’t think so.

Psalm thirty-four came to mind. 'Who loves life and desires long years? Keep your tongue from evil, your lips from speaking falsehood, turn from wickedness and do good, seek peace and pursue it.'

No. The psalm, however worthy, wasn't going to do it. Jeroen heaved a deep sigh. He was going to be nice to the bastard if it killed him, not for him, and not for Christian charity, but for Teresa. If Teresa wanted him to swim the river Darro, he would. Jeroen couldn't swim, but he'd get over the river if he had to walk underwater the whole way. If she wanted him to feed her lover milk and honey the whole length of Spain, he would suffer the stings from swarms to rob every bee tree along the way and milk the cows to boot. Jeroen was crazy in love with Teresa. She didn't want to know it.

He had to live with the knowledge that her feelings for him were different from his emotions for her. Another deep sigh further relieved his soul. Jeroen turned to apologize, but the two of them had commingled their bedrolls and were snuggled down by the fire.

Hell and damnation.

He removed sketching materials from his pack and went to sit with his back against a rock. A few quick lines with a piece of charcoal stick from the fire established their shapes and positions. He built a pavilion around them in the drawing and set it in a pleasure park. Joseph lounged languidly on the hem of Teresa's robe. They shared a cup of wine. Teresa's eyes shone with desire. Jeroen sketched in a platter of ripe fruit, cherries, which would be bright red in the painting, a symbol of sexual passion, the pure pleasures of lovemaking, innocent sweetness. The painful side of lust, ah, that would come next. A fool with the ears of an ass was poised to whack the lovers with a long wooden spoon: that, he suspected, was himself. He drew in curly hair and a wretched expression for his self-portrait.

\* \* \*

Long days traipsing along narrow tracks through increasingly remote woods frayed Jeroen's disposition to tatters. Teresa, normally practical, seemed to have lost her mind. Her behavior was in all ways an amazing display and set him to wondering if men achieved the same level of nitwittery when struck by cupid's arrow. Teresa practically twined around Joseph.

Jeroen kept sketching ideas in his head: the naked lovers disporting by the side of the river (he wanted to tip them in to cool their ardor); Teresa with two bright cherries on her head (Joseph's balls, after Jeroen twisted them off); a naked man with a parchment on his lap being embraced by a pig wearing a nun's veil (Christianity kissing the ear of the Jew).

The technical requirements of art helped him distract himself from the subject matter. Perspective, placing the focus of interest at one of the Golden Mean points, the movement of the eye around the picture plane, dominance of light and dark in the entire panel, and negative spaces of different shapes and sizes almost blinded him to the emotional content of the images. Then Teresa's lecherous eyes shining from the focal point destroyed him all over again.

Days without end on the road took them through Murcia and into Valencia. The Court had passed this way before them, which helped to distract the occasional peasant or landowner who caught sight of the cart. They were small beans compared to the lord high steward who commandeered goods to feed and house the royal household and the grooms who organized the stabling and transportation. When they bought bread in the villages, they heard about the servants and staff which had made up an enormous entourage: cooks, dishwashers, pan scrubbers, wood and charcoal carriers, candle lighters, clockmakers, locksmiths, emptiers of the royal commodes, guards, courtiers,

physicians, clerics, justices, grandees, the Queen's matrons of honor, her ladies in waiting, ladies of the bedchamber, court jesters. It must have been an amazing troupe. The countryside seemed exhausted from supplying the Court's needs and worn out from staring at the spectacle, so their passage went nearly unregarded.

From Valencia they had a choice: a route Jeroen had followed before, inland towards Saragossa and then through the Kingdom of Navarre to cross the Pyrenees, or to hug the coast and follow the Court to Barcelona and go thence to Gerona, an easier and quicker passage. Rather than brook dissent, he turned towards Catalonia and the coast route. He wanted to get this journey over with, and if the way was unfamiliar, well, the Court had left spoor enough that they could follow in their tracks all the way into Barcelona.

Crossing into Catalonia they had the misfortune to run up upon a military guard post. Foot soldiers with pikes greeted them by pressing the pointed steel heads at their throats. A sergeant ambled up to see what the soldiers had netted. The sergeant had a fine leather hat with a plume and toted an arquebus as a badge of his superiority.

Teresa and Joseph Vecinho sat rigidly at the rear of the cart. Jeroen winked at the soldier menacing his gizzard and tied the reins to the seat so the mule wouldn't take it into his head to wander onward. He was frightened for Teresa, but truth to tell he was looking forward to seeing how the learned doctor was going to handle this event. If the military turned him up for a Jew who hadn't departed Spain by the deadline, well, Jeroen would do his best to console the grieving woman at the demise of her lover.

"Who's in charge?" the sergeant asked.

Jeroen did his gaping rustic act, scratched his balls, smacked his lips, shrugged his shoulders. The sergeant turned his attention to Joseph.

"You, then, what's your trade?"

Teresa spoke up before the physician could open his mouth. “He’s an artist,” she said smoothly. “The driver is his apprentice. We’re taking finished work to the atelier for sale.”

Jeroen’s mouth fell open without prompting at this piece of audacity. The soldiers guffawed.

“Art!” they hooted. “Saucy women, is it? Nude statues? Let’s have a look. Sergeant, make him show his wares.”

Joseph glanced in panic at the crate where his valuables were hidden. The man was totally useless. He might as well have lit it on fire to draw attention to it. Teresa intervened again.

“Jeroen, show the Sergeant the drawing.”

The wily woman must have peeped at his sketch. Oh, the things men do for love. Jeroen dug the rolled parchment out from his pack and with Teresa’s help stretched it out for the sergeant. Joseph came and peered at the work.

The physician cleared his throat, preparatory to lecturing. “Here we have a pavilion in a landscape. There’s a rather nice harp in the front, which is symbolic of feminine virtue, and here we have a flute, which is the masculine counterpart. The living creatures depicted are sketched with a conformity to the bones, which because they bend very little, will always occupy a determined position. Then sinews and muscles occur, and finally the whole is clothed in skin. As Alberti said, ‘Nature clearly and openly reveals all these proportions.’ We see represented here air, exercise and rest, food and drink, all components of the health of our bodies.”

“Are they fucking then?” a brash soldier asked loudly from his safe position at the rear of the rank.

“The monk Constantinus Africanus said, ‘The Creator, wishing the race of animals to remain firmly established and not perish, disposed that it would be renewed by coitus and by generation ... Therefore he shaped for the animals the natural members which are apt and proper for this work, and provided them with such wonderful virtue and lovable pleasure that there is no animal that does not excessively delight in coitus. Because if animals hated coitus, the race of animals would certainly perish.’”

That was Joseph all over, lecturing without an original thought in his head. Moreover, he’d missed the entire import of the sketch. Jeroen thought he had done an excellent job of capturing the disdainful look on his aristocratic snout.

Teresa gave a quick tap of her forefinger on Jeroen’s self-portrait and raised her brow at him. He shuffled his feet like a country yokel in the barnyard. Bashfully, he nodded. Her face pinked up and she hastily rolled the parchment away.

Teresa thought Joseph was actually disappointed when the soldiers let them go. The physician was winding up to lecture on the elements, complexions, humors, members, virtues, operations, and *spiritus* of the body. She had heard a great deal of this material from him on other occasions, some of which was not suitable to discourse about whether or not women were colder and moister in complexion than men. According to the authorities, the cold and moist quality of women explained both menstruation and timidity. Joseph leaned to the theory that the heart was always hot, or hotter at any rate than the brain, which was always cold, or in some degree colder than the heart. Anyone who slaughtered fowl or beast for the table, Teresa thought, could have told the learned physician that animal matter whether heart or brain or blood or bone is all the same heat.

Invoking Galen and Avicenna had the useful result of stupifying the sergeant into releasing them, however. Teresa rolled up the parchment sketch and tucked it under her

bundle in the cart. She rather thought she would keep the drawing for a longer period of contemplation later, preferably without either man peering over her shoulder while she studied it. She thought her expression had already given her away once.

Jeroen untied the reins and prodded the mule forward. There were no dramatics; the soldiers fell back, the wagon clinked onward, the track twisted away through a small wood smelling of jacaranda.

They stopped for the night in a glade, a little forest clearing. Jeroen unharnessed the mule and led him to a stream for a drink. The beast slobbered and sloshed water around in a great spray, much of which darkened Jeroen's pantaloons and dripped down onto his feet. Joseph stood at the back of the cart watching with a smirk on his face.

Thought it funny, did he? With his own lily white hands unsullied by work? Teresa snorted. If the Jew wanted dinner tonight he could unload the cart himself and help set up camp.

"I'll go with you to get wood for the fire," Teresa said to Jeroen.

He raised big bushy eyebrows at her in silent question. When she declined to be drawn, he shrugged and tied the mule to a nearby tree with a bit of rope. They strolled off together, moving upstream to an area where deadfall and brush were abundant. Jeroen picked up solid branches to arrange on a long piece of burlap that served as a sling, and she made a fold of her outer skirt to hold kindling. Shuffling through the forest floor duff, their feet kept cadence with each other. When they reached to grasp firewood, their hands moved together. She took a fancy that their breaths moved in the same rhythm.

Teresa admitted to herself that she had been so wrought up about Joseph that she had forgotten how comfortable it was to be with Jeroen. It was puzzling, nonetheless, that the painter had been completely calm and pleasant on this journey. He had a right to

be testy with her. Where were his quick rages and displays of temper, which were so much a part of the man? This unnatural forbearance surprised and dismayed her.

“The bit about you being the apprentice just popped out of my mouth like a melon seed,” she said. “I didn’t mean it to be degrading.”

Another stick or two went into her skirt, another branch or two into the sling, before Jeroen spoke.

“Apprenticeship is no disgrace,” he said. “In my father’s house each of us boys went through it in turn. It’s a way to learn useful skills; you have to know how to grind the pigments before you can mix the paints, and mix the paints before you can paint an image. Brushes don’t magically appear, the hairs have to be selected and trimmed and bound.” The painter smiled, recollecting his dutiful apprentice. “Remember Felipe plucking the horse tails naked at the stable?”

“It doesn’t pain you to think of him?” Poor Felipe, dead of the plague because of devotion to his Don Jeroen.

“Nay. He’s in a better place. Felipe was a wonder, careful and attentive to his duties. I can’t say the same for myself!” Jeroen laughed. “My uncle once sent me off to get eggs for the tempera. It suited my cousin Guillaume and myself to take the coins for ourselves and steal the eggs. We stopped at the first tap-house we came to. Not just any tap-house, mind you, it was reputed to be the oldest in the city, established in the thirteenth century by two men and a dog who drifted ashore on the banks of the river. The beer is very good in Brabant.” A wistful look crossed his face.

“You drank overmuch?” Teresa knew the ways of boys.

“There was a fine spirit of *gezelligheid*, the company was very pleasant. Other boys we knew arrived to help us down the tankards. We made a rollicking party when we finally set out towards the chicken coop. My cousin and I were somewhat the worse



taken by drink, being that we had started sooner. I staggered into him, he gave me a shove, I pushed back, he upended a bucket of swill on my head ... we were brawling through the barnyard. Pieter ran afoul of an old ram which punted him into the pigpen and we all had to run over there to pull him out before the sow took more than a few pieces of him. He was hopping up and down but was afraid to scream for the noise. When we opened the hatch to the poultry pen the goose flew up in our faces and honked fit to raise the dead, and that put paid to the notion of silent theft.”

Jeroen chuckled. His teeth flashed white in the shadow of the forest. Teresa realized it had been days and days again since she’d heard him laugh. She encouraged him with a smile, feeling her own tense expression relax.

“Bleeker was always the practical one,” Jeroen said. “He ducked the goose and started rummaging under hens for the eggs. He tossed the eggs out to me, the designated receiver, but my skills at catching them were somewhat impaired. Eggs splattered on the walls of the coop. The webbed feet of the angry goose trampled the ones that fell to the ground. Several eggs flew past me to land in the yard, and more were crushed by my frantic grabs. I managed to get one or two into my pockets, but they cracked in our mad dash to get away. My cousin and I slunk home but people had seen enough of our faces to know us. What an uproar! The Brotherhood of our Lady took these misdeeds seriously. I couldn’t sit down comfortably for days. To this day I don’t paint with egg tempera.”

“Oh, Jeroen. What a tale! You should be writing stories or songs like a troubadour.”

He gave her a friendly look. “My stories are all on panel, but thank you for the thought.”

The sling was full. He hoisted it to his broad back, she held the fold of her skirt close around the kindling, and they started back downstream.

“This reminds me of going out in the woods to fetch firewood when we first went to Córdoba,” Teresa said. “We lugged those enormous bundles of brushwood back at dusk and built the first fire in our new hearth.”

“I remember hauling all those rocks! Wood or rocks or stories, Teresa, if it’s within my power to get it for you, you shall have it.”

She blushed at this simple assertion. Jeroen was bedrock himself, solid, dependable and sure. Teresa was coming to see that while Joseph was flashy and exciting, he was also a little ostentatious and a bit of an egotist.

When they got back to the camp, of course nothing had been done. The physician was sitting like a bump on a log. “Where have you been?” he asked. “I’m hungry.”

Teresa let the kindling fall from her skirt into a neat pile on the ground and stood with her hands on her hips. “You’ll need to unpack the provisions,” she said briskly. “I’ve the fire to start and Jeroen has his work to do.”

“Work! Do you call daubing blotches on discolored panels work?”

“Bring out the wicker basket first, Joseph, then the withy.”

With simple, direct sentences she was able to coax some cooperation out of the man. Jeroen went off to the side with his drawing materials. He had some tiny dabs of paint in a cunning tin box made into diminutive receptacles. The dried paints were reconstituted with water or spit, and he used a little brush made of lamb’s wool that looked like a tiny mop.

After their meager supper of bread and cheese, she went over to see Jeroen’s painting. The firelight lent it an eerie quaver. A naked beautiful young woman was slumped numbly at the foot of a Devil’s chair. A repulsive toad squatted on her chest.

Toads were poisonous, and symbols of the Devil, Teresa knew. The woman appeared to have fallen into a stupor, poisoned by the toad, no doubt. A demon reached out and violated the woman with his black tentacles. A kneeling tree monster had a convenient mirror impaled in his arse so the sin was made manifest. The woman had Teresa's face. Of course!

## Chapter Thirteen

A joyful reconciliation of penitents to the Church of God was in progress as they entered the great port city of Barcelona. The stake-sided cart wobbled down the grand calle that ran from the plaza to the sea. Jeroen let the reins to the mule go slack as he gaped at the prisoners in their yellow *sanbenitos* embellished with Saint Andrew's blood red cross. Two heretics condemned to die at the stake wore the black *sanbenitos* and conical pasteboard hats. Dominican priests in white robes exhorted the damned men to save their souls through reconciliation, yet submission to the will of God would not save their lives. They were on their way to burn at the pyre.

Joseph Vecinho poked his head out once, blanched the color of whey, and dived back under the mule fodder to hide. Jeroen saw with amusement that the Jew had straw

in his ears. Teresa sat upright on the tail-piece of the cart, legs dangling, skirts flapping, looking about with all the enjoyment of a young girl going to a traveling fair.

Jeroen knew that Barcelona was rival to Venice and Genoa since much Italian trade had been destroyed by the Turks. Docks, arsenals, warehouses and ships with all the world's riches of spices and perfumes from the East jostled for space. The city's great glass workshops were said to surpass the Venetian. Commerce appeared brisk and success filled the air like the scent of orange blossoms. The streets were lively and the people seemed exuberant. Jeroen's father had spoken approvingly of the way finance was handled in the city, and had a connection to a banker at the one of the first banks in Europe which had been established in the twelfth century. It was in the back of Jeroen's mind that Our Lady of Hope, one of the mutual benefit societies, made interest free loans. A small influx of money into his personal arm purse wouldn't come amiss. He had hauled that blasted crate of paintings over the length of Spain and would be happy to ship it onwards to Brabant at the first chance.

Still, the Catalans were said to be great supporters of the arts. They gave a big poetry prize each year, just for words, Jeroen marveled. The entries were inscribed on specially-colored parchment, richly illuminated with gold and silver enamels, as pretty as a painting. The poets recited their work to public acclaim, and the winner was crowned with a golden wreath. Perhaps his paintings would find a ready audience in Barcelona, and he would save the cost of the shipping to boot.

However, here they couldn't just camp by the side of the road. Jeroen pulled into a gothic barrio, dark and close-built, with tall stone buildings cutting off all but a slice of sky. Teresa hopped off to harass an innkeeper for a room, and stabling for the mule. Her usual method was to browbeat some hosteler until he gave her a good price just to get

shut of her yammer; it must have worked this time as well because shortly she reappeared and announced that they had lodgings at the top of the house.

Joseph Vecinho scuttled up the stairs and disappeared. Did he carry anything with him? Of course not. “The stable is some way off. Unhitch the mule and I’ll take him,” Teresa said. She rubbed her hands together briskly.

Jeroen took Teresa by the waist and plopped her on the beast’s back. Off she rode looking like a Madonna with her blue head scarf, except that the Virgin probably didn’t ride astride.

That left Jeroen with the contents of the wagon to shift. He ran a bight of rope around the wooden crate of panels and with that aid hoisted it to his back. Steep wooden steps creaked and groaned under his weight as he lurched ever upwards in the narrow lodging place. A small room tucked itself under the slanted roof, and with a bit of sideways wiggling, Jeroen was able to get the crate diagonally through the short door. At least there was a door. It was a shame that a window wasn’t part of the amenities.

Somewhere in the caliginous dark Joseph was lurking. The painter could hear him breathing.

“There’s more of the load to come up,” Jeroen said. He tried to keep his voice neutral, the better to encourage the physician to lend a hand. They were all adults here, his tone implied, despite the fact that one of their party was a scurrilous, indolent, conniving person of an outlawed religious faith.

Jeroen tottered back down the protesting steps and out to the cart. A neighborhood ruffian Teresa had paid to keep watch loaded him up with assorted baskets and bundles. When the whole load completely obscured his vision, the urchin led him by the jerkin to the foot of the steps and gave him a helpful push. The slim darkness that

bumped him on his interminable upward climb must have been Joseph, because when Jeroen reached the attic the Jew was gone.

Teresa, ever sensible, brought a lighted taper with her upon her return. By the light of the single candle, they could see that Joseph had broken open the crate and taken his treasure. Odd too that only three panels were still cushioned within. Jeroen had packed a dozen of his newest paintings, some still in progress, so where were the rest? The Strawberry Cult remained, and a mild, conventional treatment of curious children in the garden that the painter thought puerile. The third was a fragment, a study for a larger work, of a monkey on the back of an elephant. Teresa helped him search to the walls of the room, which were in any case only a stride or two in any direction, but the remainder of the panels were missing.

They sorted bundles. Joseph had left them to provide all the bedding, food, and wherewithal for the journey, so there was nothing of his remaining. Jeroen had his painting kit, and he took bistort and parchment down to the courtyard. The empty cart made a fine table once he brushed out the remaining straw and a wandering hen that had clucked her way into comfort. A brace of pigeons startled into flight decorated his parchment, but pigeonshit would give the sketch some incidental texture.

He thought of the sketch as *The Cure of Folly*. It showed a charlatan pretending to extract madness by pulling a flower from a lunatic's skull. It may be that he had Joseph Vicinho in mind as his model, but whether as physician or lunatic he wouldn't commit. Perhaps both. Jeroen would be happy if they had seen the last of the *Converso*, but a stirring somewhere in his gut suggested there was misfortune from that source still to come. Of course the troublesome borygmus could simply be result of the meat pie he had purchased from a vendor selling his wares on the grand calle. The vendor had sold the pie as rabbit but if the forefoot Jeroen pulled out of the crust was any indication, the

beast must have been the size of a large cat. Some granny would have been was missing her mouser.

Teresa sat in the attic room and drew her knees to her chest. Her eyes were curiously dry. She expected to weep, but no tears came. Despite her feelings for Joseph, his flight left her not grieving but angry. In fact she was incensed, irate, enraged, and positively choleric. How dare he take Jeroen's paintings? Did Joseph mean to sell them to pay for his passage out of Spain? He had riches, because he had smuggled gold coins from Granada. How could the miscreant sneak away like a sinner caught in fornication? Did he think so little of her to simply abandon her without a backwards glance? Churl.

Resentful thoughts churned her up. Men! They were misbegotten creatures of the womb, worth nothing but trouble. Too bad the Society of Eve didn't snatch male babies instead and put them to hard labor. In fact, Teresa had half a mind to suggest it to the hierarchy.

Her thoughts ran on. There was nothing so useless as another male animal in the barnyard already supplied with one rooster, one ram, one boar and one bull. All of women's trials were spent in aid of their selfish needs, and to what reward?

In short, she whipped herself into a fine froth of exasperation. Much energized, Teresa ran down the creaky stairs to the courtyard and passed Jeroen with only a brief wave of her hand. Barcelona was a spirited city, very well. Let it enliven her spirits.

She went to the Plaza of the King. There was a lively crowd. Fernando had been hearing petitioners in criminal and civil court, where the poor might have justice without lining the purses of mendacious advocates, another worthy thought. At the hour of twelve noon the King walked down the flight of steps towards the plaza. As he reached



the last step and turned his head to talk to the royal treasurer, Gabriel Sanchez, an assassin leaped out and struck at the King with a cutlass.

Dramatic, Teresa thought coolly, but what a fuss where a simple poison would have sufficed. The crowd roared into pandemonium. She could see instantly that but for the grace of God in Fernando turning to talk to Sanchez, the blow would have severed his head from the neck. The King had deep wounds from the crown of his head to his ear, and down his neck to his shoulder. Great gouts of blood spouted upwards.

The King put his hands to his neck to stanch the blood. The retinue was too astonished to move. Teresa ran to him, unwrapping her blue scarf, and pressed it to the great slice down his skull. Together they wrapped the scarf, now crimson with gore, in place around his wound. She pressed hard on the saturated cloth.

“Santa María! Holy Mary, defend me!” the King said.

Cries of ‘Treason!’ ‘Oh dastardly treason,’ and ‘Traitor!’ rang out. The throng outside the palace began shouting ‘The King is dead! The King is dead! They have killed the King!’ Teresa feared for the Queen when she heard their cries. Despite the overall perfidy of men, she believed Isabel loved this one.

A dozen knights and their squires leaped on the assassin, and a noble drew his poignard to take the assassin’s life. King Fernando struggled under Teresa’s grasp and ordered, “Don’t kill that man.” White-faced, the guards drew back. The King also took thought for Prince Juan and the Queen, and dispatched couriers to tell them he was wounded but alive. He ordered them to galleys in the harbor in case the plot was also aimed at the lives of the Queen and her children.

Merchants, sailors, and townspeople armed themselves and began to run through the streets. “France is the traitor,” they cried, and ‘Navarre.’ ‘It was a Castilian’ said the Catalans. ‘A Jew!’

By habit of fear, Teresa looked up at this shout. She saw familiar flesh cringe with her: Joseph, staring out of the crush, watching her bloodied hands. Right. Now he was probably jealous that she had taken the prerogatives of a physician. Was he hovering because he wanted to advance himself with the King, but feared she would betray him? Teresa had many urgent questions for the damned man and willed him to hold his place while she gave her task over to a page.

When Teresa turned, the Jew was trying to press his way through the crowd. She skipped after him, darting under elbows, dancing around soldiers, gaining ground by lightness of foot and grace. In a side alley, she caught him up.

“Joseph!” Her gory hand seized his sleeve.

“Teresa, don’t. Let me go.” He twisted. She tightened her grip. “I don’t want to endanger you.”

“Nonsense,” she said. “That argument didn’t fly the last time you left me and it doesn’t now. The real question is whether I will menace you. What did you do with Jeroen’s paintings?”

“The lodger? Those cracked and flawed bits of wood? There was no room for all that tawdry jumble in the crate if I was going to put my valuables in. I left them behind. They’re safe enough,” he said carelessly. “It’s you I fear for. You mustn’t be seen with me. Go, and make yourself conspicuous at the cathedral or some other church. Go and seek a reward from the King for your aid.”

“I don’t need a reward for helping an injured man,” Teresa said. She spat her contempt at his feet.

Joseph’s dark eyes glittered with rage. He raised a hand to strike her, and this time she brought out her meat knife from her sleeve. She let him see it in her fist. She cocked her head inquiringly. Did he want to see the other face of a healer? The

assassin's face? Despite that a knife was a poor choice of weapon, used discreetly, it would do in a pinch.

Apparently Joseph didn't want to push it that far. His hand dropped back to his side. "I'll see that you regret this," he said.

Male bluster. He edged a foot away, then another, before he turned to run. Teresa watched him disappear down the narrow alley and shook her head regretfully. She had made a bad mistake there, and thought less of herself for it.

It was soon all over the city that the assassin, Juan de Canamas, was only a *loco imaginativo y malicioso*. He was acting on his own rather than as a part of some political plot. He was an ugly peasant with a warped body, a serf of the class King Fernando had freed. The Devil had whispered in his ear that he was King Juan, the rightful ruler of Aragon, and that he had to strike the usurper dead to regain his title.

Fernando was willing to release the lunatic, but the nobles of Barcelona were so incensed and mortified that the King's life had been attempted that they insisted on the full penalty for treason.

The grandees decreed that the lunatic be put in a cart and driven through the city for all to see, and then the hand with which he struck at the King be cut off. One nipple was to be plucked with tongs of red-hot iron, then one eye, then the other hand be cut off. Next the other eye was to be plucked, the other breast, and then the nostrils, and then his entire body caught up with burning tongs and his feet cut off. After all his members were cut off he would be stoned, burned, and his ashes cast to the wind.

Isabel sent a monk to absolve the condemned and commanded that he be strangled before the sentence was carried out.

\* \* \*

In their attic lodging, Jeroen was daubing away at a new panel. Clearly this one had been inspired by the day's events. Two executioners with bulging eyes grinned at a condemned man, this one already missing several essential bodily parts. A black Devil whispered in the truncated fellow's remaining ear. A ranting Dominican monk raged alongside. The painter must have re-used the elephant panel; the monkey's tail curled around the Devil. Was it madness to take pleasure in the sufferings of the condemned? Teresa shuddered to watch Jeroen delicately touch his pointed brush to the panel with every sign of love and tenderness.

Sticking his brush in a jar of oil, Jeroen turned to her. He didn't wait for her to come to him, guilty as she felt. He grabbed her up in a boisterous embrace, took her immediately to their bedrolls, and leaned up for a quick breath to blow out the lantern.

"Please forgive me for loving you," was all he said.

## Chapter Fourteen

The Familiars came for Jeroen at first light. Teresa and he were tumbled together like puppies in their bedrolls on the floor of the attic when they heard the thud of booted feet on the creaky steps. The door crashed back. In the dim light of the stairwell the figures in black with St. Domininc's white cross on their cloaks looked half demon, half priest. Jeroen gaped so at the spectacle that he was slow to rise and face the inquisitorial police.

Teresa popped up like a puppet whose strings were suddenly jerked.

"What's the meaning of this?" she said. Her voice was steady. Her expression was determined: brows lowered, lips tight. Her hands went to her hips. Jeroen's lips crinkled with amusement despite the danger when Teresa must have realized she was lightly clad in her shift. She reached down without taking her eyes off the Familiars to grasp a garment and pull it quickly over her head.

It was his tunic but it looked good on her. If this was to be Jeroen's last sight of the woman, he wanted to remember her this way, draped in his paint-splotched tunic and defying the Familiars.

"Get up," the lead figure said to Jeroen. "You need to come with us."

"You're looking at the wrong man," Teresa said. "There was a third member of our party – the landlord can tell you – it's him you want. He's a Jew."

Just like that Teresa gave up Dr. Joseph Vecinho. The painter blinked in surprise. The physician must have pissed her off mightily.

"Get up," the Familiar repeated. "It's this one we want. El Bosco, is that your name? The Jew gave a denunciation of you and provided evidence. It has your name on it in big red letters plain enough for the *comisarios* to read."

The evidence must be one of the paintings which had gone missing from the crate. He was doomed, then. The Holy Office could decide almost anything was heresy. Jeroen felt like a fish in murky water about to be yanked into the cooking pot.

"Are you his wife?" one of the police asked Teresa.

"No!" they both said. Jeroen knew why he was vehement. The Inquisition tossed whole families, children included, into the cells together. He was none so sure why Teresa was so sharp on the matter.

Jeroen kept his gaze on Teresa. She watched with stony eyes as the Familiars searched the room and their belongings for meat soaked and salted to remove blood and grease according to Jewish law. Since there was nothing in the way of foodstuff except a few crusts of bread and a moldy rind of cheese, that part of the process didn't take long. The three paintings were seized and passed out into the stairwell.

Jeroen shrugged into a spare tunic, assumed his pantaloons and jerkin, and turned to kiss Teresa goodbye. She maintained her composure; he wouldn't have expected

anything else. They embraced lightly. He kissed her brow. The scent of her fine dark hair was lovelier than any flower.

“I’ll see you soon,” she said.

“Yes,” he agreed. He hoped it wouldn’t be in a *saco bendito* of black sackcloth, in a procession led by the green cross of the Inquisition on the way to the pyre, but you never knew. “Have you my remedy?”

Her eyes widened. She knew instantly what he was asking for and just as quickly must have decided he was entitled to choose for himself if he wanted a more merciful death than torture. Teresa didn’t quibble overmuch about sin, albeit that suicide would be a mortal sin.

“Here is the herb,” she said casually, and passed him a small packet of powder in a folded paper. He slipped it up his sleeve. Jeroen did wonder why she had the means so readily to hand.

The Familiars led him to the prison and turned him over to the gaoler. The gaoler was proud of his facility and extolled its virtues to the despondent painter. The prison was separate from the rest of the city, exposed on all sides to the wind. It was spacious, well supplied with water, had a sewer system to serve the inmates, and was a stunning example of good sanitation and ventilation to preserve the health of prisoners. More was the pity, Jeroen thought.

“No noise,” a guard said. “No speaking aloud. None of the prisoners are allowed to talk. We have a *mordaza*, a gag, to remind you if you forget.”

Obedient to instruction, Jeroen shut his mouth. The guard took him to his cell, a room about eight feet by twelve, larger than the attic of their last night’s lodging by far. A door the thickness of the wall led from the passage. Two iron grates penetrated the door, and outside the grates a lesser wooden door stood; in the top of this was an opening

that borrowed light from the passage. The cell was arched above and the walls were stone; the floor was composed of thick bricks and the whole was damp. Inside the cell the bed was a wood frame without feet which boasted a straw mattress. A small water-pot and a chamber vessel completed the furnishings.

Left to his own devices, Jeroen paced. This was a pickle and a pickle indeed. He had the clothes on his back. He had a small purse with which to purchase food and wine. He had Teresa's final remedy. If his funds became totally exhausted, well, even paupers in the tribunals were given shirts, bread and water, paid for by the Inquisition. It was greatly depressing to think of how healthy he would be during his detention which would in the end permit him to endure greater tortures. Confession was out. As soon as Jeroen admitted guilt he'd be sent to trial and sentence pronounced. He had to stave that off as long as possible, in the hope that he could clear himself. He might even confess to the wrong crime for not knowing the charge. Jeroen took for granted the charge was heresy, but the Familiars refused to tell him why he had been arrested. He knew he was presumed guilty simply on the basis of the denunciation. If only he could prove that the evidence was false, he'd go free.

Jeroen's thoughts went around and around until they tightened a cord of agony around his head. When the cheerful little inquisitor popped into his cell, he almost welcomed the distraction.

The inquisitor was a short, fat man in clerical garb. He smiled happily as he introduced himself as Fray José. When he leaned Jeroen's painting against the wall he rubbed his hands briskly to clean them of the oils which had been transferred to his plump little fingers, seeming in no wise bothered about the stains remaining. Jeroen could tell from the yellow ochre and folium which painting it was before it was ever displayed to him.



“El Bosco, is it?” the inquisitor asked. “I’m pleased to make your acquaintance. Before we get started, I have to warn you to search your conscience, confess the truth, and trust in the mercy of the tribunal. The prosecutor intends to present an accusation, and it would be wisest to confess before the charges are laid. All right with that, are you?”

“Father, I’m bewildered. I have nothing to confess to the tribunal. My sins are venial.” Jeroen made sure his tone was respectful, face earnest, and speech low enough not to carry to the adjoining cells. He stood up straight. His father would have been proud of him. He felt like a boy of fourteen facing his first communion, but if that was the attitude he had to adopt to get himself out of this quagmire, adolescent he would be.

“Good, that’s one warning done. I have to warn you three times,” the inquisitor explained confidentially.

Three times. Great. Jeroen wondered what the interval was between warnings. Minutes? Years?

“Now, my son, I want you to tell me about this work. Is it yours?” Fray José turned the painting around to face them. “Recent, I take it?” he added as he scrubbed a bit of cinnabar off his wrist.

“Yes, Father, I painted the work. It is a representation of Christ carrying the cross. The opposition of light and dark skins in the crowd and the opposition of normal features and grotesque countenances serve to set off Christ and Saint Veronica from the spiritual evil that surrounds them.”

“Spiritual evil, you say?”

“Christ and the blessed Saint cast their eyes down, they withdraw into themselves, keeping themselves from the evil all around them. Do you see how the composition

draws you to the image of Christ at the center of the panel? These diagonal lines here and here? With all the faces seen in close focus, the eye goes immediately to the cross.”

“Yes, but what does it mean?”

Jeroen sighed. Another one who couldn’t see the nose on his face. This did not bode well. “Christ has escaped this mob already.”

“These evil-doers, what can you say about them?”

“They stare, they glare, their eyes burn with rage and madness. Here is the bad thief, who shows his executioners defiance and contempt. Here is the good thief who has paled with terror, caught between this hideous old Pharisee and a monk.”

“Godless wickedness of men,” the priest remarked. “Very well. Well, my son, I will present your case as best I can during your interrogation. If it proves necessary to put you to the Question, know that it is only to bring about your confession so that you may atone and that your soul may be saved. The *garrucha* would be very distressing for you, I expect, since you use your hands in your work.”

Jeroen gulped. The priest was right. He needed his hands. When the Inquisitors tortured prisoners, they bound the wrists behind the back and tied a rope tied to them. The rope was run through a pulley in the ceiling. Weights were attached to the accused’s feet, and the victim was then hoisted upwards, only to be let fall to the ground and brought to a sudden halt. The jerking of the apparatus tended to dislocate the structures of the arms and legs and leave the person crippled.

“Kneel and pray with me now and I will give what spiritual comfort I can,” the priest said.

Black drapes covered the windows of the interrogation chamber and black buntings hung on the walls. A few candles gave a feeble light. The Inquisitors in their white robes and

black hoods sat at a long table. A notary sat nearby and acted as secretary, writing down all that was said and also, it appeared, making notes of gestures and manners.

Jeroen looked about alertly despite his terror. If he ever got out of this fine mess, there was wonderful material here for a series of paintings. The vaulted chamber of stone, with a dense wooden door hung on iron hinges, spoke of solidity of purpose. The dim light and dark shadows in the corners of the room added to the sense of horror. There was unnerving silence except for the scratching of the notary's pen, a single sound that scraped on the ear as well as the parchment. He had been led to a position in front of the long table and left to stand isolated before these presences.

He composed himself in patience. That long row of parti-colored Inquisitors would be a design problem in a painting, too great in contrast between the values of white and black, which would draw the eye away from the center which must surely be the accused. The accused would have to be singled out in some fashion, by the close focus on his face and by lines within the work leading to him. If the line of questioners was the fifth part of eight then the third part of eight would place the point of convergence on the golden mean. Jeroen's hand itched for a pen and paper to make a sketch, but he could see the plan in his mind and he knew it would stay with him until he could render the painting. In this way he distracted himself and used the time spent waiting to his profit. He hoped.

"El Bosco." The tone was as ponderous and heavy as the surroundings. "I am Fray Tomás de Torquemada, the Inquisitor General for Castile, Leon, Aragon, Catalonia, and Valencia. Do you know why you have been brought before me?"

He didn't even know at first which one of the shrouded figures was speaking. He had missed any preliminary clearing of throat or shuffle of documents. The title alone was enough to strike him dead with fear, without needing to catch a glimpse of the priest

... institution ... Torquemada was the most feared man in the kingdom, the Queen's confessor and head of the Spanish Inquisition. He rode with two hundred and fifty armed Familiars and fifty horsemen, at the Queen's behest, because she feared for his life. Jeroen remembered Torquemada's austerity. An old man in his sixties, he wore no linen next to his body, ate no meat, slept on a bare plank. Could Jeroen expect an equal barrenness of the spirit? The man must have a dry, arid soul to carry the weight of the thousands of heretics he had caused to be burned.

"Sir, I would be glad to learn the cause from you," Jeroen said. He tried to sound responsible and forthright. By main force of will, he kept his voice from rising and squeaking like a boy's.

"You are accused as a heretic and that you believe and manifest your belief otherwise than the Holy Church believes."

"Sir, know that I am innocent of this. I am a true Christian and profess my faith to you and all."

"I will examine you." The Inquisitor General sounded a bit bored. Jeroen supposed if he did this sort of thing daily it would become a ritual to be got through by rote, but it was vitally important to Jeroen. He gave the process his complete attention.

"Do you believe in one God the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Ghost?"

"I believe."

"Do you believe in Christ born of the Virgin, suffered, risen, and ascended to heaven?"

"I believe."

"Do you believe the bread and wine in the mass performed by priests to be changed into the body and blood of Christ by divine virtue?"

"I believe it wholly."

“Say, then, do you believe the body of our Lord, Jesus Christ, to be in the altar?”

This sounded a bit confusing. “I believe that a body is there, and that all bodies are of Our Lord.”

“I ask whether the body there is of the Lord who was born of the Virgin, hung on the cross, arose from the dead, ascended and so on.”

“Do you believe this?” Jeroen asked.

“I believe it completely,” the deep voice said.

“I believe likewise, for you teach what is good to me.”

“Do you believe whatever doctors and priests accord?”

“Pray don’t catch me in my words,” Jeroen said. “I am a simple man.”

“If you are simple, answer without evasions.”

“Willingly.”

“Will you swear that you have never learned anything contrary to the faith which we hold to be true?”

Jeroen wondered if learning a bit of Arabic counted. He raised his hand and said, “Before God, I have never learned heresy or believed what is contrary to the true faith.”

“If you are found to have sworn falsely, I will abandon you to the secular arm of justice. They will execute you because the Church condemns taking a human life,” Fray Torquemada said.

“God help me that I am not a heretic. I plead to you that the accusation against me is false and was made by the malice of a Jew, who was hostile to me. He is no fair witness and stands in heresy himself because he pretended to be a *Converso* but kept Jewish practices.” Jeroen figured if Teresa could give Joseph Vecinho up, he could do no less.

“The tribunal does not need this witness for we have your own hand against you. The oil paintings on panel which you rendered condemn you heartily.”

“Nay,” Jeroen dared to say. “Divine retribution revealed from heaven falls upon the godless wickedness of men in each of my works, as the Bible says in Romans 1. ‘There is no possible defense of their conduct. God has given them up to the vileness of their own desires, and the consequent degradation of their bodies, because they have bartered away the true God for a false one. Because they have not seen fit to acknowledge God, he has given them up to their own depraved reason. This leads them to break all rules of conduct.’”

There was a leaden pause.

“You are not a simple man,” another hooded figure’s voice commented. It was Fray José. “Tell me then, if you can, how this obscene work affirms the beliefs of the Church.”

The notary yanked up a panel that had been sequestered beneath the table and set it on a rack facing the Inquisitors. Several hoods leaned forward for a better look. The notary brought a candle stand over and gave the work more light.

Of course it would be the hay kings on parade. The work was a triptych, with movement from left to right. It began with the Garden of Eden and moved through the world to the gates of Hell itself.

Jeroen hoped he didn’t sound as badly as Joseph did lecturing on paintings. “The theme of the Hay Wain is worldly avarice and deception. Here in the top left you see the rebellious angels cast out of heaven where they descend to earth.”

“Those are insects?”

“Noxious insects and other demonic shapes, yes, Father. They cast their shadows on the garden. Here at the beginning in Eden we see the creation of Eve and then the Fall

and the expulsion from the garden. The angel has driven Adam and Eve from a cavelike gate adorned with strange prickly stone fruits. In the central panel the theme is the grasping of hay. Hay stands for worldly goods and vanity. The hay is like gold, fool's gold. It means that earthly riches are simply vanity, they are all straw and dross."

"There is a pope here, in his robes. Do you say that the Holy Father is grasping at worldly goods and vanity?" Fray José asked.

Jeroen swallowed. This could be a tricky bit. "The rich and powerful dukes and emperors are shown on horse, and Levantines and lower classes go on foot. Conflicts and fights break out over scraps of hay. Sinners are stripped naked and marked with the sign of their vices. Demons are pulling the pole of the wagon. They are pulling the cart into Hell."

"There is a fat father superior sitting idly with a drink while laboring nuns fill his sack with hay. He ignores the nun who shows her rosary to him. Is this respectful of the Church?"

"The figure of Christ is at the very top and center of the image. Our Lord is a vision out of heaven, bathed in golden light, and the paint is lead-tin yellow. The royal red of his robe is carmine. See how he displays his wounds before the golden background. An angel kneels with his hands clasped in prayer and gazes upon Christ. Here there is a small blue devil to contrast with the lovely angel, to show the clear choice that men should make."

"There is here a figure inside the door of this shed that wears red robes like the Christ and has a crown of thorns, but this Magus is more naked than not. He bears a glass with holy relics over the wound on his leg, but he is yet alive. This mocks the Man of Sorrows." Another voice, the interest of more of the line having been engaged.

“The helmet has a border of toads. The sash with a bell is decorated with toads, which are a black parody of the celebration of the mass,” Fray José said.

This was not going well. Trust the priesthood’s eyes to go first to its own representatives. Jeroen had a strong temptation to close his eyes and dwell in the Lamb of God himself. That wouldn’t get him through this trial, however.

“Those shepherds are supposed to be adoring the Christ child, but they’re climbing on top of the shed and poking their noses through its walls.” Another critic.

“The peasants are adrift in a sea of temptations, deceptions, and corruptions,” Jeroen said. “They misstep, they mistake, false miracles tempt the gullible. If they do not learn to see sin clearly and make good choices, they will be pulled straight into the gates of Hell.”

“As you have seen, El Bosco? We will suspend this interrogation while we examine the records of this session. Compose yourself in silence and wait our pleasure,” Fray Torquemada intoned.

Jeroen clomped back to his cell under guard. The chamber vessel had been emptied in his absence: a boon.



## Chapter Fifteen

Teresa sought out Gabriel Sanchez, the King's treasurer who was at his side when the assassin struck. She had told Joseph that she didn't need any reward for helping an injured man, but that was before the Jew had denounced Jeroen as a heretic. Now she would seek a reward and ask Sanchez to intervene on the painter's behalf.

Sanchez was one of the most powerful *Conversos* at Court. Charges had been brought against him in the conspiracy that led to the murder of Pedro de Arbues. The allegations could not be proved, and Sanchez continued to have the support of King Ferdinand. Teresa thought that since he had survived the efforts of the Inquisition to brand him a heretic, he would have sympathy for her plea.

In Agnese's chamber in a grand house, Teresa dressed carefully for the audience with Sanchez. Agnese lent the clothes. The woman was overtly a wetnurse to a prominent Senora; in fact she was a sister in the Society of Eve, an adept in the poisons of the stomach.

"Will your mistress notice that her dress is missing?" Teresa wondered.

"She has so many she'll never mark it," Agnese said. "She'll just think the laundress took it to be cleaned, and when you're done with it that's just what we'll do."

Agnese had several acolytes working with her in the chamber, putting up packets of poisonous groundsel and elder, and corn cockle and daphne. One of the young women, Nelia, was introduced to Teresa as having a special interest in hallucinogens. Apparently word of Teresa's episode with Dame Mariá and the stinkwort had spread through the Society's network.

Nelia was a girl of about sixteen, who had long fair hair to the waist. She wore a neat gown in dark blue, made with a wide belled skirt. Nelia was stripping the wilted leaves from Devil's trumpet, her hands protected with a waxy salve, and greeted Teresa with a smile and nod. Devil's trumpet caused mania, delirium, weakening of the heart beat, convulsions, coma and death over a period of hours; a slow poison, as an assassination tool, but there was no known antidote. Teresa had used the smoke from burning leaves as an inhalant occasionally for sufferers whose breathing passages were constricted so they wheezed and gasped for breath.

Teresa thought that the tortures of the Inquisition could scarcely exceed those of the borrowed costume. A corset of whalebone pulled amazingly tight underlay the Senora's bodice, which was of black satin embroidered with gold,

and buttoned to the neck with red stones. Rubies or glass, Teresa couldn't tell. The bodice came down the neck like a doublet and ended in a point at the waist. It was lined with canvas edged with wire. The sleeves were tight and straight, with other sleeves hanging as low as the gown and with large wings about the shoulders. The gown fastened on the side with a rose made of stones, which Agnese said were diamonds. The skirt was belled out by a farthingale, a support of more whale bone in hoops worn under the petticoat. Nothing could have been more uncomfortable. It was impossible to sit down in the rig, and if the farthingale had permitted the action, the point of the bodice would have pierced her belly.

Agnese had provided pattens or little stilts covered with velvet, but those Teresa refused as her feet were considerably larger than the Senora's. Gloves were required, and also a lace handkerchief, and a great dollop of perfume. A fan was indispensable. Great ladies used fans to flirt, to dismiss, to condense their smiles, to tap for attention, to twist to display doubt, to close and display the folds to show eagerness, and for all manner of subtle communication. This magic wand Teresa carried by a string attached to her wrist, but it was dead certain if she dared to wield it she would fumble the language like a dung-collector mouthing Church Latin.

Teresa's audience with Gabriel Sanchez was enlivened by the fact that he had just received news from Christopher Columbus. She set out as bravely as the famous navigator.

"Your Grace, on the Friday of the vigil of the Immaculate Conception when King Fernando was struck and wounded by a lunatic, it pleased God to allow me to aid and succor His Majesty."

“Heed this, all of you” Sanchez said. “The Admiral of the Armada of the Ocean says that he has discovered many islands in the sea of India and that they are inhabited by innumerable people. At least I think that’s what this blotched scrawl says.”

A courtier with a pair of *quevedos* for the great man rushed by and nearly tipped Teresa on her side like a beetle. She wobbled on the hoops of the farthingale and recovered her balance.

“I took my shawl from my shoulders and with it stanching the blood from the King’s grievous wound.”

“Columbus has taken possession and named these islands San Salvador, Santa Maria de la Concepcion, Fernadina, Isabela, and Juana. ‘They are of beautiful appearance and present a great diversity of views.’”

The court jester, a dwarf with pronounced physical deformity emphasized by his awkward dress, chattered nonsense and capered for the amusement of the spectators. Functionaries and noblemen milled about.

“By the King’s mercy the lunatic was not struck down but was able to be absolved before his death, and I seek your mercy for another.” Wait, that sounded like she was calling Jeroen a lunatic, too. Mad the artist might be, but a lunatic he was not.

“He says the inhabitants are timid, peaceable people so generous ‘they would trade away their cotton and gold for broken hoofs, platters, and glass.’ They brought Columbus and his companions food and drink, and on the Island of Hispanola he built a fort and enjoyed the friendship of their king.”

“It is your friendship with King Fernando that I count upon to grant me a boon for my service, willingly undertaken,” Teresa said. Who gave a devil’s fart for Columbus’ Indians?

“I am obliged to promise the acquisition, by a trifling assistance from their Majesties, of any quantity of gold, drugs, cotton, and mastick ... also any quantity of aloe, and as many slaves for the service of the marine as their Majesties stand in need of.” Sanchez frowned over this last, which sounded to Teresa like another request for funds would be forthcoming. “He says he’s on his way from Lisbon to show off these splendors.”

“Sir, the boon I’m asking will cost you nothing. I seek only your goodwill on behalf of a painter of intense spirituality.” Teresa decided she shouldn’t mention that Jeroen was accused of heresy as unfairly as Sanchez had been. It was probably a sore point.

Having come to the end of Columbus’ missive, Sanchez finally focused on her. “Don Gaspar,” he called. “See to Senora, er, here, would you please?”

Don Gaspar hustled forward. Teresa hoped he would be eager to please the great man. “This way, please. Would you do me the honor?”

The courtier stuck out his elbow. She realized after a beat he expected her to place her hand on his arm, which she did.

The anteroom to which he took her was a utilitarian space, an office to receive supplicants, with a table, stools, and candle stands.

“Will it please you to sit?” Don Gaspar wondered.

“Thank you, no. I wish a boon for a friend who is wrongly accused. He is a painter of gigantic worth whose entire body of work serves to point out the wages of sin.”

“Wages, yes.” The courtier rubbed his thin fingers suggestively.

“He makes it plain to anyone who looks at the panels that lust, avarice, gluttony, and luxury will suffer divine retribution.”

“I would be happy to draft a document from the Treasurer in support of this virtuous artisan,” Don Gaspar said. “How will you be paying?”

Teresa blinked. “Excuse me?”

“Gold coin, jewels, precious silk? Inheritance, deeds to property?”

“Ah, no.”

The man’s mouth turned down. Then he snapped his fingers as if an idea had just occurred to him. “That clasp will do.” He pointed to the diamond rose holding the gown closed.

No use; she couldn’t get Agnese imprisoned for theft even to free Jeroen for heresy. The Court was mocking her.

It next gratified the Inquisitors to show Jeroen the instruments of torture that would be his lot if he failed to satisfy the Question. They stripped him of his clothes and took him barefoot like a penitent. The chamber to which they escorted him surpassed anything he had ever painted of Hell. Where Jeroen had rewarded human folly with punishment, faulty judgement with chastisement, sins with fire and brimstone, his work fell short of the scene that now met his horrified eyes.

The walls were blocks of stark gray stone and rose to vaulted arches. Torches flamed with a dark oily smoke. An open fire against one wall served for holding the feet of heretics above the flames. A pot of fat sat nearby that the limbs might be greased to prolong the agony. Two hooded and robed public

executioners were dragging a prisoner tied up with rope towards the fire as Jeroen watched.

An accused was hoisted on the *garrucha* by the wrists. His legs kicked and flailed and his mouth hung open in one long scream. Excrement dripped from his arse.

A wooden frame with moveable bars at each end served as a stretching rack. Another prisoner was tied by the ankles and wrists, and the bars were moved in opposite directions by levers. The bones separated as the body elongated. To Jeroen's amazement he saw that this prisoner was a woman, indeed an old woman, who had fainted from the pain. A bucket of water thrown in her face revived her for the racking to begin again.

Fray José was at some pains to point out the *taca* to Jeroen.

"This water torture usually gets good results," the plump Father said. "The accused is tied prone to this wooden board. See how the cords are twisted with iron bars to tighten them? Also the head is secured by this iron clamp."

The agonized eyes of the prisoner bulged. His head was tilted downward and his jaws had been forced open with a metal prong. His nostrils were plugged with scraps of cork.

"The *taca* is this piece of linen cloth placed across his open mouth. As water is dripped onto it, it sinks deeper and deeper into the throat. It slowly suffocates the accused who will be thinking much about atoning for his sins. From time to time we can remove the cloth so that an Inquisitor can hear the confession."

"Here also we have heated this metal bowl in the fire, and you see it has a depression in the base so when inverted onto the accused's stomach, coals can be

heaped atop to fire the contents. We have a steady supply of mice from the stables. Imprisoned within the bowl, they burrow inward to escape their roasting.”

“*Cave, cave, domin us videt.* Beware, beware, God sees,” Jeroen murmured. He felt faint. Teresa’s herbs were back in his cell. Too late. He should have swallowed them already.

Clapping him familiarly about his naked shoulders, the good Father guided Jeroen out of the vault. The damp cool of the passageway made Jeroen shiver after the hot, smoky torture chamber. The air flowed sweetly and he took a deep breath. His bare feet stumbled on the hard stone because of the water standing in his eyes. He clamped his jaws shut to prevent a sob from escaping.

Back in the cell, Fray José sat down with him and took both Jeroen’s hands in his. “Now my son, here I am going to warn you for the second time. Search your conscience, confess the truth, and trust in the mercy of the tribunal. The prosecutor intends to present an accusation to the Inquisitor General, and it would be wisest to confess all before the charges are laid. Do you understand me?”

“Father, I hear your words but there can be no confession where there is no wrongdoing. I’m innocent of heresy, as I told the panel of Inquisitors.”

“You did yourself no good there,” the priest remarked. “The paintings themselves condemn you.”

“Nay, Father, the work absolves me, for I love the Lord and show Jesus Christ in all his mercy. If only ... Father, if I could have my art materials with which to work, I could paint you such a masterpiece that I would be wholly



vindicated. ‘For now we see as in a mirror dimly ... now I know in part; then I shall understand fully, even as I have been fully understood,’” Jeroen quoted.

“You could hardly make matters worse,” the priest said with his odd cheerfulness.

That was depressing, but probably quite true. Whatever the consequence, Jeroen would go on in the way that he had begun, to show human striving and sad delusion, to show that man can cause destruction and decay beyond reason, with a monstrous and terrifying result. His phantasms were all allegories of the violence that mankind inflicts on itself, his work intended to be a mirror held up to men’s souls. If few had understood the portrayal before, it was up to him to make sure the world understood it now. The demonic which tempts had to be made to show itself, to betray itself. Giving in to temptation is a spiritual ill which represents opposition and resistance to the reality of God’s grace. He could paint it entire.

“Can you do me a nice Annunciation?” the priest asked hopefully.

“I’ll do you a fantastic Garden of Earthy Delights,” Jeroen promised. “I will build for you a reborn Eden and show that the garden’s dazzling colors and delighted appearance trap the beholder in his own desires, just as it has trapped those who dwell within.”

He knew that everything he had worked on in his whole life would contribute to this magnificent panel. It would be a triptych of the usual progression, heaven through the world to hell. The wild cavalcade, the strawberry cult, the infernal concert, The Hay Wain, Christ Carrying the Cross ... all would play a part in this triumphal figuration.

“I must begin with a sketch,” Jeroen told Fray José. “May I be granted paper and pen? Gall ink will do and a mere handful of sticks if there are no good

pens to be found. I'll scrape the backs of old scrolls if that's all there is to be had."

"Your zeal commends you. I'll send the clerk along with the supplies he can spare. As for the rest, I'll send someone to find the woman and have her fetch your werewithal."

Jeroen nearly blacked out at the rush of feelings that resulted from this simple statement. He was by no means sure whether it was the thought of being able to paint himself out of prison or the thought of seeing Teresa again that caused his weak knees. He sank to the floor in a position of prayer and gave his thanks to God in any case.

## Chapter Sixteen

Agnese's acolyte Nelia helped Teresa to strip off her borrowed finery. The young woman laid the embroidered black satin dress aside and supported Teresa to step free of the foundation hoops. As Nelia tugged harder on the corset strings to get enough slack to untie them, Teresa let out a groan.

"Blow out," Nelia said. "Just for a moment. There, I've got the knot unpicked."

"Thank you." Teresa took a long, eased breath as the corset ties sprang open. "Goodness. The Senora must be as tiny as a child to fit into that dress; however did she come by a baby for Agnese to nurse?"

Nelia smiled. "There's no shortage of babies, without all the bother of bearing them, for a woman of her class. Her lord wanted a son. That was easy enough to arrange, with a little padding towards the end of her confinement." She snatched up a

little pillow and held it to her waist. “While the Society is used to seizing daughters there’s naught to say we can’t pick out a nice lusty male infant if we’re paid well enough. Indeed we went to some trouble to fetch one that should grow into the very image of the lord in question. He was a bit bigger than the usual newborn but we didn’t want to go to all the trouble and then have him fail to nurse or fall ill of the birth-fever. Agnese suckled him for a couple of days beforehand to be sure he’d do.”

“You were thorough in your preparations.”

“As we try always to be. Doña Teresa, Agnese suggested that you might be able to guide me in my studies. Her craft is in poisons affecting the viscera, yet I would like to learn more about the subtle effects of poison on the mind. I know a bit about henbane and foxglove and the corn cockle Agnese favors. Do you know herb Christopher?”

“I’ve heard baneberry called herb Christopher. A man who ate the berries from the hedgerow, thinking they were fit food, told me he saw blue spots changing to dancing sparks of fire before he died of the bloody flux. But Nelia, you mistake my craft. I heal people, not harm them. I gave him milk and the whites of eggs to try to counteract the poison. I work against the Society of Eve’s aims, not towards them.”

“Say rather that you work with the same materials for different ends,” Nelia said. She tilted her head. “I have heard that you have always done so.”

Teresa shrugged her own wheat-colored linen shift over her head and tied on her dobby-loomed green skirt. Jeroen had called it Verona green. Would she ever see him again? Perhaps on the way to the pyre. She bowed her head in a moment of piercing pain. Not now. Now was not the time. Teresa raised her head proudly. Nelia handed her a comb and she ran it through her dark hair to bring it into order. Together they folded the Senora’s dress and undergarments.

“Yes.” A smile, as she responded to Nelia. “When I was given my assassin’s test at fifteen, the thing did not go as Domina had planned. The victim was an elderly cavalier who held a castle the patron had in mind to acquire by inheritance. I was asked to select an appropriate potion. Since the patron had a mind to be seen to have traveled on after he saw the dose given, it was necessary that it not have an immediate effect.”

“What did you choose?” Nelia asked. “There are so many poisons that take days to bring on death. Some take weeks, but not from a single dose.”

“Oh, to be sure. But I chose a simple thing, Paternoster pea. Do you know it?”

“Yes, the climbing plant, and the poison is in the seed. The seeds are two-toned, red for two thirds of their length and then black at the narrower end. Surely the cavalier didn’t think they were healthy food?”

“Well, one of the other properties of the plant is that it’s known to arouse carnal lusts,” Teresa said. “At the dinner, I introduced a young woman of some repute to the victim and explained in a loud voice that I had a wonderful new food that would rouse his passionate appetite. I whispered into his ear that the seeds must on no account be chewed; they must be swallowed whole, for the desired effect to occur. Of course, the old boy had barely a tooth in his mouth in any case and I made sure that the meal served was heavy with bread and pottage, to serve as cushion for the peas.”

“Did it work?” Nelia asked.

“The heir apparent enjoyed his dinner with the old man and rode off well-satisfied. The elderly party had swallowed his Paternoster peas whole, so they had no effect, not even, alas, on his manly parts, but the young woman was well-primed to play her part and slipped him some poppy juice in his wine. He dreamt the sleep of the blessed and when he woke the harlot went into transports of gladness, describing the

wonderful sport they had. The old man was happy to believe he had such a lark as never before.”

“But he didn’t die?”

“Indeed he did not. The patron, however, who heard me describe the aphrodisiac qualities of the beans, had secretly taken a greedy dose for himself. He chewed, swallowed, and three days later succumbed to the diarrhea, nausea, vomiting, convulsions coma, and death that he had wanted for the cavalier. This I did not cause, but Domina was angry.”

Choleric was more like it. Domina had raged at Teresa, but Teresa had protested her innocence. Perhaps she was eventually believed. Perhaps she eventually believed it herself.

Nelia clapped both hands to her mouth. “Domina let you live?”

Teresa nodded. “She cast me out of the chapter house. I hadn’t completed the assassin’s test, so I was not an acolyte, but neither was I still a novice. We’ve kept an uneasy relationship since.”

“I can’t believe you defied Domina. I never would,” Nelia said in wonder.

“Don’t you know – you must know that she would take revenge on your family.”

“So she would, but when I left the chapter house I went immediately home to warn my mother, walking all the way. It took me weeks to find my way home, passing from village to town to hamlet. When I finally got there, the villagers said my mother had died of the plague years before, along with many others. I don’t think even the Society would spread the pestilence to whole populations to kill a single person, nor was there need of it at the time, when I was still a biddable novice. So I was free.”

Except that Teresa did not feel that she would ever be free. Ten years of her childhood had been consumed by the Society of Eve, part hard service and part enthralled

learning. She still had contacts within the sisterhood despite knowing what they did. Her own sins were all she could bear, Teresa thought, and the wrongdoings of her sisters would have to remain their own responsibilities. She couldn't heal the world, despite that she wished she could.

Returning to the things she could do something about, Teresa turned to Nelia. "Who do we have across the border? Does Agnese have a contact in New Rochelle?"

Jeroen was chewing a bit of mastic to stick another sketch to the stone walls of his cell when the heavy wooden outer door swung open. Teresa strolled in like she was returning from the market, carrying a wicker basket on her arm covered with a checkered cloth. She was followed by two porters hauling larger stocks of goods: wood panels, a tub of carnation primusel, an armload of smooth wood sticks, enough horsehair to stuff a couch, a packet of fine wax candles, and a set of scrolls he recognized as his sketches for various works.

"Piracy on the high seas or did you pawn the family jewels?" Jeroen inquired. Teresa had tipped him a wink as she entered, warning him that the porters were spies. He could almost have figured that out for himself if he wasn't so thrilled to see her.

"Gifts from a friend," Teresa said airily.

"Thank him for me."

"Her. Aleyt sends her love."

"You told my wife?" This stopped him in his tracks. Jeroen shook his head like a badly stunned bull who aimed for a matador but crashed into a ring wall.

"Your father had to know; besides he thought that the notoriety would send the price of your paintings soaring," Teresa explained.

“I don’t need to burn as a heretic to sell paintings,” Jeroen said. His exasperation brought small grins to the faces of the porters, who thought they understood now how things were between Teresa and himself.

She parked her basket, directed the porters in placing the supplies and handed over some coins. As they exited into the passageway she reached out and pulled the wooden door shut behind them, locking them in. Alone at last.

“Teresa!” he breathed. “Will they let you go?”

“Don’t fret. I’ll be your apprentice now. You once told me it was no disgrace,” she teased.

Jeroen grabbed up her hands and held her close. Her fingers were scraped and stained carnation from primusel. “It looks like you’ve already begun.”

“I primed some panels for you. Oh, Jeroen, how I’ve missed you!” She hugged him tight.

“I prayed for you every night,” he said. “I thought you would have gone back to Seville. I was glad you wouldn’t be here to see me burn.”

“I wouldn’t miss it,” Teresa told him. This enthusiasm seemed entirely misplaced. First she saw heresy as an advertisement and now the *auto de fe* as a sales floor?

“Teresa.” He saw she was grinning at him, and he could never resist her in that mood. He grappled with her and tossed her onto the bed. When he threw himself down next to her, she already had her arms spread wide to receive him. He buried his nose in the cloud of her sweet-scented dark hair and collapsed onto her bosom. He let out a great sign of satisfaction and hope and happiness.

Their days became a routine. Teresa had coins enough to send out for better food, so they picnicked on bread, bacon, and chocolate in the morning. They worked next on



The Garden of Earthly Delights. Jeroen transferred his sketches to three large panels that would comprise the tritypch. Teresa spread primusel. She had a deft hand at binding up brushes, of which she made a great quantity from small to large. He muttered and grumbled about perspective lines and eye passages and the golden mean.

At dinner they had meat stew, or thin slices of chicken stewed in a milk sauce with flour and sugar. Teresa kept up a constant commerce with vendors and porters, washerwomen and weavers, bakers and bookbinders. He never knew prisons had such porous walls. The world came and went. One young woman Teresa introduced as Nelia, who she said had become her apprentice. Nelia asked advice about patients with flux, with fevers, with spots.

“There are no rosey rings around the spots?” Teresa murmured low.

Nelia shook her head.

“Mesels, then,” Teresa nodded. “Not plague rash.”

Jeroen shuddered. Give him an honest cartload of dung to shift any day before he’d touch a child sick with the spotted fever or clean up after an old woman with the bloody flux. He didn’t know how the women could stand it.

After their midday meal Jeroen and Teresa had a siesta, and then he leaped out of the bed and back to the painting which was beginning to take shape on the wooden rack Teresa had caused to be supplied. This rack had a suspicious resemblance to the one in the torture chamber turned on end but it did make a handy way to suspend the work in progress and raise or lower it for convenience in getting at parts.

Jeroen had never worked so slowly, or with such concentration before. The work was worth his life.

“Make a pattern of shapes, big, middle and pint-size,” he said. “The exterior in grisaille has this tiny figure of God the Father in a sphere of heaven in the upper left. ‘He

spoke, and it came to be; he commanded, and it stood forth.’ We’ll use Psalm 33 instead of Genesis this time.”

“I’ll make some more lampblack,” Teresa said. She had a metal plate she held over a candle flame to collect soot.

“The exterior of the triptych will be the earliest moment of the narrative. Here is the earth, a crystal sphere, an island surrounded by water, growing giant gaudy flowers. This is the third day of creation, when God separated the land from the water. All these trees, plants yielding seed, how does it go?”

“‘Fruit trees bearing fruit which is their seed, each according to its kind, upon the earth,’” Teresa said.

“Yes, and on the interior these same trees will manifest themselves in Eden. Fruit, seed, fecundity of every kind will dominate the garden and the world. See how the curving stalks of the cherries repeat a pattern that moves? We must be able to move the eye through the light shapes. The eye travels easily through overlapped shapes.”

In the left wing of the interior of the painting he placed a close visage of God the Father intervening between Adam and Eve in paradise. The Holy figure stared straight out at the viewer. Adam looked at God, Eve showed downcast eyes and a demure aspect.

“Already there are warnings of the Fall. A cat at the lower left has caught a mouse, a lion at the top right has slain an antelope. Multi-headed creatures manifest themselves, a bird with three heads above a fetid pond, a three-headed frog. Toads, worms, serpents, and crows are harbingers of evil. Here in the center of the garden is our favorite symbol of mystery and diablerie, the owl.”

“You drew me as an owl once,” Teresa said tartly. He guessed she hadn’t forgiven him the slur.

“Where’s that Bernhard von Breydebach illustrated guide to the Holy Land? I can do up an elephant without him, all block and tackle, but I need the giraffe and kangaroo.”

“Now you think I’m a kangaroo?”

Jeroen gave up the day’s work, chortling. Teresa was irresistible when she pretended to pout, and it was near enough to supper anyway. With supper came darkness, and with darkness bed.

## Chapter Seventeen

That fat little priest Fray José showed up sometimes to nod knowingly over Jeroen's painting. His comments were generally not helpful. The middle panel of the garden of delights was full of giant birds and fish, overripe and oversized fruit, and Fray José kept grouching that God said man was supposed to fill the earth and subdue it, not let it be run riot by flora and fauna. The Father fretted that the beasts were no longer confined to their proper element, where birds fly above the earth and sea creatures swim in the waters, since there were fish on the ground or in flight, giant birds in water, and two enormous owls facing the viewer and being embraced by nude figures at the lower left and right.

What was it about Jeroen and owls anyway? Here Teresa could have agreed with Fray José to leave them out.

In any wise the smaller humans seemed to have lost control of the animal kingdom and become dependent on animals and giant berries and other fruits. Some of the humans crawling around in the foreground wore fruits on their heads or clambered through crystal growths or leaves, as though turning into a bit of plant or animal matter themselves. The rocklike structures in the background had been extended from the grisaille and they seemed to be blending the vegetable and mineral worlds. Plants grew transparent crystal globes from pink stalks and rocks sprouted pods.

At the horizon of the garden, humans climbed the pinnacles of the tower of vanity and stretched their arms to the sky. Jeroen said those arms were pointing the viewer's eye to where it should go next, in this case, a griffin and a red bird. Teresa got that part: the human who flies with their help would never know the true flight in heaven. Two figures with wings floated dreamily in the air, one ascending with a giant red balloon or perhaps another of the ubiquitous cherries.

In the right middle ground nudes plucked strawberries and cherries from a grove, as though collectively performing the original sin. Men rode all manner of animals in a frenzy around women in the Pool of Female Enticement. Lust is the passion from which all the other evils in the garden were cultivated. The women were attended by white spoonbills, crows, and peacocks. Even Teresa knew that the peacock was a symbol of vanity and sensual enjoyment.

Fray José got thoroughly distracted by that peacock. "Such a sauce we had with peacock." He licked his lips. "Bacon and onion, chicken broth, minced almonds, lemon juice, pomegranates, sugar and honey, walnuts, cinnamon, cloves, and ginger, all mixed with the fat from the roasted bird."

Yes, and it all went from his fleshy lips to his fat hips. Still, except for the good Father's excesses of gluttony and limitations of artistic vision, Teresa couldn't fault him. He was doing his best for Jeroen, even as he warned him again about the trial.

"Now my son, here I am going to warn you for the third and last time. Search your conscience, confess the truth, and trust in the mercy of the tribunal. The prosecutor intends to present an accusation to the Inquisitor General, and it would be wisest to confess all before the charges are laid out before the tribunal."

"Father, this painting is the truth," Jeroen had said simply. "I will let it answer the accusation against me. I have done the grisaille, the Fall, the World, and have only the Judgement left to finish. 'For the work of the Lord is done in faithfulness.' Ask the prosecutor to set the audience with the *consulta de fe*." The *consulta de fe* would vote on the case. There were three possible outcomes. Jeroen could be acquitted, punished by penance or reconciliation, or burnt.

Fray José pottered off and Jeroen went on painting the very negation of righteous behavior happily. He said he had in mind the way the perverse descendents of Adam and Eve would find their punishments fitted crime by crime and sin by sin in Hell, but that sketch he hadn't shown Teresa.

It was as well he did not. If she had seen what he purposed before he told Fray José to go forward with the trial, Teresa would have bound up his hands and sat on him until he came to his senses.

In the garden natural objects like fruit and flowers were oversized; in Hell humans were dwarfed by common man-made goods. Knives, chairs, dice and game boards, passkeys and bagpipes haunted the sinners. The damned no longer rushed into erotic berry patches. They ran from monstrous cleavers and combustion. Nudes who romped in the Pond of Lust stood shivering at its frozen counterpart. Hideous chimeras were part

animal, part vegetable, part human. Some of those demons took insect form, with gauzy wings and the faces of flies. A table was covered with game boards, and a mandolin and a wine jug were overturned and set on fire, as a way to burn sinful possessions.

A strange device of a knife riding between two enormous human ears pieced by a thin arrow had Jeroen quoting Richard Rolle, who wrote *The Prickle of Conscience*. ‘As a warlike machine strikes the walls of a city, so shall devils strike the souls and bodies of the wicked.’ Teresa had to laugh. The man was full of odd enthusiasms and obscure learnings.

Jeroen covered the painting with a linen sheet to keep off the dust, because the oils were still wet. Teresa was dreadfully proud of him. He had stayed true to his own ideals, but she was terrified that she would have to watch him parade through the streets in the *auto de fe* in a black *sanbenitito* painted with devils and flames, wearing the conical hat of the condemned. After Mass and a lengthy sermon, he would be strapped to the back of a mule and taken to the stake. Bundles of wood tied with green ribbons would be on hand for any of the royal family to add to the pyre. The church bells would toll.

A sob escaped her.

“Stop that nonsense, Teresa. I can see you over there building a catastrophe in your mind. It’ll all come right in the end.”

“Oh, Jeroen. Are you certain?”

“The Lord looks down from heaven; he sees all the sons of men. Besides, Teresa, in the last remove I’ve your final remedy.” He patted his jerkin. She heard the crinkle of paper, which must have been that little envelope of powder she’d given him the morning the Familiars came and dragged him away.

“Jeroen, that isn’t poison.”

He raised bushy eyebrows. “Teresa, what did you send me off with then?”

“Just hope, Jeroen. Only hope.”

The Inquisitor General Fray Tomàs de Torquemada had sharp features and fierce eyes. His tonsure was curled neatly around his shaven head; his robes were thick and heavy and rich with embroidery. His lips were pursed; they were surprisingly delicate for a man of his prodigious reputation for cruelty. The Inquisitors represented both Pope and King; ecclesiastical and secular authority, a stance that caused conflict when one of the Inquisition’s familiars was accused. Jeroen, alas, feared his was a more clear cut case. Denounced by a Jew, accused of heresy, off to the pyre with him and good riddance. Pray God it wouldn’t be that simple.

At the Inquisitor General’s side sat Fray José de Seguenza, the familiar round form sporting a stained robe and a black hooded cloak half a foot too long for him. Clerks and notaries sharpened pens, shook bottles of ink, and unrolled parchments ready to record the works of the tribunal. The court room was all dark woods, almost organic in its carvings and flourishes, as though they were trapped within one of Jeroen’s painted twisted tree boles.

The Garden of Earthly Delights was displayed on a gilded easel next to a tall window whose shutters had been thrown open to admit light and air. From a distance the design held up well: strong, visually linked lights and darks, variety among shapes, repetition and variation, line extensions forming subtle vertical and horizontal threads like a tapestry. Color emphasized different aspects of the subjects, essential in a composition with several focal points. All the same, there was unity among the various



parts, devices flowed from the grisalle to the left wing, from the wing to the center, from the center to the Gates of Hell, from which deliver me, O My Lord, Jeroen thought.

Teresa plucked the folds of his doublet into good order. Her apprentice Nelia had shown up in good time that morning to help them both into borrowed finery. Teresa's blue scarf was still splotched red rust in places but she insisted on wearing it along with the borrowed dress, which was a deep malachite green edged in orpiment yellow. The room was filling with spectators and while Jeroen composed himself in silence, she was darting back and forth greeting everyone from servants to nobility. Women waved their hands in a complicated series of gestures to her. Teresa bobbed up and down in curtsies like a grackle pecking seed from the threshing floor.

At last the Hounds of the Lord were pleased to begin. A few more personages entered and took the best seats along the side, with a good view of the exhibit. Jeroen focused his attention wholly on the tribunal, where the prosecutor was reading the accusation. The first witness was Fray José, who immediately made reference to the panels seized with Jeroen at his arrest, and then pointed with some drama to The Garden of Earthly Delights.

"The accused has offered this work in his own defense. The painting was completed from start to end under my supervision while the accused was imprisoned, and I attest that it is his own work and entirely the result of his doing. It is consistent in iconographic style with the earlier works, which is to say, it represents a didactic and pessimistic vision of human nature."

"Fallen human nature and the need for Grace," Teresa corrected loudly.

Jeroen stepped on her foot. Never argue with a critic, because it annoys the carper and unformed views don't amount to a hill of beans.

Fray José promptly threw Jeroen, poor rabbit, to the hounds. “The universe of moral choice is presented here. It is the apotheosis of sin. Pray show the tribunal how this work informs the viewer otherwise.”

Teresa poked him in the back, as though he was a lagging actor who had missed his cue. He slapped at her hand irritably.

Facing the tribunal, Jeroen took up a slender rod and used it to tap at the painting. Teresa had counseled him to skip over the grisaille with the tiny and distant figure of God the Father and to go instantly to the drama of the Garden of Eden. He had argued for an orderly exposition. She won, by unfairly reminding him of Joseph Vecinho’s impromptu lecture to the militia and the lack of interest it elicited. Nobody ever understood his work. It was his most constant trial. The other problem is that viewers were threatened by mere thought. He had to plead his way to both thought and understanding here.

“Here in the Garden of Eden the viewer can make a choice of three trees: a date palm in the upper right, an apple tree behind the figures, and a dragon tree next to Adam. ‘And out of the ground the Lord God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.’ This is a fundamental element of the life choice and consequent fall of Adam and Eve, who eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil and are expelled from the garden before they can eat of the remaining tree.”

“Behold,” Fray José said plummily, “the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil; and now, lest he put forth his hand and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live for ever ...”

This was getting to be a contest of biblical quotations. “Therefore the Lord God sent him forth from the Garden of Eden,” Jeroen finished hastily.

“True sight ...” Teresa was prompting again. He was sorry he had rehearsed the presentation with her, because he was about to depart the script.

“The carnal world is spread out here for all to see,” Jeroen said simply. “Original sin is multiplied by the size and number of these decadent fruits, the opulent vegetable life, the copious animal life. The human figures take form for substance, sight for spirit. There are skulls beneath the skin, decay beneath beauty, and even innocence is the Devil’s lure. The people who dwell within are trapped by their desires, by lust and gluttony and avarice; by anger and pride. Men and women have failed to conquer nature just as their own sinful natures conquer them, leading them to damnation.”

“The flourishing of lust,” Fray José commented. He rubbed fat fingers together as though this was a delicious thought.

“Birds dwarf the fragile humans. Here a man rides bareback on a goldfinch, smiling. The bird feeds a juicy berry to three men with open mouths of greed. These birds wait with sharp eyes and beaks for the time when they will turn and attack, allies of the Devil, here as a hawk-headed beast. This assemblage of men worships a huge strawberry, a symbol of earthly passions. They have lost all their individuality in their quest for sensuality.”

“A thousand fantasies and observations that serve as warnings,” Fray José said. Jeroen followed his glance. The fat priest was playing to a royal audience: Queen Isabel and her entourage. Jeroen’s wonder at the gist of the good Father’s remarks becoming favorable was satisfied. But why would the Queen want a favorable interpretation of his work?

“Humanity ... or the soul ... is dreadfully easy to lose. We become what we abandon ourselves to possess,” Jeroen said. His voice faltered, because his belief in this thesis was very strong and it was not a message many worthies wished to receive. “Here

is the Fountain of Worldly Allure in the middle of the Pond of Lust. The base of the tower is a cracked and hollow globe of the earth. Men and women frolic along the equator, reaching out to grasp other sinners and haul them aboard. Here a pair of lovers balance on their heads, as topsy-turvy as their sense of virtue. In the hollow underworld of the earth adulterers lurk. Pink cuckold's horns sprout from the top of the tower."

Solemn nod from Fray José. "A work of deep wisdom worthy of close study."

"Only by leaving the garden can the viewer receive the true epiphany, that we are in the perpetual view of God, and that we can remain righteous by turning the inner eye of faith to God himself." This sounded very pretentious, and Teresa was making 'wind it up' motions with a hand held down by the side of her skirt.

"To alert the living and persecute the damned, here there are demons, mutating, taking on disguises, feigning virtue. Their fiends torment the vain with their own images, cause the glutton to vomit eternally, force the miser to shit gold. In Hell men fill musical instruments as music once filled their ears, and their bodies are filled or pierced by them. These damned served Satan. They bear the image of the crescent moon, emblem of the infidel East. Brigands who sacked cities and robbed and raped towns are attacked by demons and hellhounds."

Jeroen bowed his head to the tribunal. "Everywhere in the painting, wild hungers drive men and women to thoughtless, self-destructive actions. These drives are the Devil in us. Thus we are warned that there are demons that feed on human suffering, and the world is in a state of evil and corruption. But 'He loves righteousness and justice; the earth is full of the steadfast love of the Lord ...'"

Teresa had insisted he end with a reference to justice. Jeroen hoped she was right. He placed his pointer neatly at the side of the easel. From the corner of his eye he saw another flourish of hand signals fly around the crowded courtroom. With all those priests

in the room he hoped some of them were praying for him. He wanted to look at Teresa, and was afraid of what he would see in her face. He drew in his breath as the Queen gave an imperial nod to Fray Tomàs de Torquemada. Before he could even chase the thought the Inquisitor General was speaking.

“We absolve the accused, declare him free and acquitted, and reaffirm his good reputation.”

## Chapter Eighteen

Still dazed by Jeroen's release, Teresa and the painter gawked as Columbus entered Barcelona in a burst of splendor that same afternoon. Columbus had been six hundred miles on the road from the harbor of Palos, and moved like a conqueror through Seville, Córdoba, and the other great cities that lay on the route to Barcelona. Cavaliers, merchants, courtiers, notaries, and much of the common folk like Teresa and Jeroen came to the city gates to receive him.

Six painted and feathered Indians from the land of Kubla Khan entered first. They were shivering from the cold. Sailors walked after them carrying live parrots, stuffed birds and animals from the Indies. Then came the Admiral of the Ocean Seas on horse, magnificently arrayed in a silk doublet and hose, velvet bonnet, and a splendid cloak flung back over his shoulders.

The King and Queen's throne had been placed in front of the cathedral and covered with a canopy of gold brocade. The Crown, Prince Juan, and the Cardinal of Spain received Columbus in public, to thus show him honor. The Admiral knelt to kiss their hands, and they raised him up.

"They're standing up," Teresa marveled. "You'd think old Colón was a ranker."

"Shush. Let's hear what he has to say."

"Yes, there could be a painting in it for you. Those parrots would sell well, all bright color and flash."

Jeroen swallowed his retort. It was too wonderful a day for exasperation; besides, he had spent the entire morning preaching against sin. It would hardly do to embrace the sin of anger so quickly, although he had another one in mind for the evening.

Columbus gave his log to their Majesties, and gave a brief summary of the things he had discovered. Despite, he said, the naysayer *el judeo* Joseph Vecinho, who he had encountered on the road to Barcelona a few weeks ago.

"He was wrong about his tables," the Admiral said, "and I told him so. He was headed back across Spain to Lisbon. I knew he was a Jew and had been expelled and so I denounced him to the Inquisition in Toledo."

Jeroen carefully avoided looking at Teresa. The subject of Joseph was never going to be discussed again if he had anything to do with it. Joseph had denounced him, but he wouldn't wish the Inquisition on any man even before his recent personal experience with it. He just hoped Teresa wasn't planning to take up a career freeing boyfriends from its clutches.

He had to know.

He looked into Teresa's sparkling dark eyes. She was waving to a friend in the crowd, her apprentice Nelia. She spared him a flashing smile.

“What about Joseph Vecinho?” Jeroen asked.

“Nelia will see to him.”

Jeroen wondered how. “Your apprentice will ... do what? Poison him?”

“No, of course not. Nelia’s specialty is the mind, man’s reason, or unreason as the case may be.”

“Will she cloud his mind?” So much for not mentioning the man ever again.

“Teresa, do you still care for Joseph?”

“Jeroen, I’d never harm anyone or cause suffering, nor should Nelia. Her potion will enhance the clarity of mind, not dull it.”

Jeroen had an instant, completely visceral sensation of Joseph Vicinho apprehending everything that was done to him in the torture chamber without surcease, without release. He shuddered.

Columbus resumed his narrative to say that naked savages gazed with wonder and delight as the men landed on San Salvador. The Admiral bore a royal standard and the Pinzons carried a banner of the Green Cross. The Indians swam out to the ships, and were very friendly. They all went completely naked, even the women. Some painted themselves with black or white or red.

“Another good possibility,” Teresa mused. “How are you on nude Indians?”

“Not Indians,” he murmured back. “I could go a feather or two.”

“No more damned owls, Jeroen. Also, you need to quit tweaking the clergy. Luckily there weren’t any Church fathers in the Garden of Earthly Delights.”

“I’d point out a few to you, but Duke Phillip’s man carried off the triptych. He has a great art collection, the Duke. I hope he pays as fast as he procures.”

Moreover, Columbus’ imagination conjured up wonders yet unseen: gold and pearls, great cities, mighty empires. When he finished, Fernando, the young Prince, and



Isabel knelt to pray and give thanks to heaven. Columbus, his sailors, and the Court also knelt. Jeroen yanked Teresa to her knees while the choir of the royal chapel sang the *Te Deum Laudamus*, and then everyone rose to form a spirited procession through Barcelona.

The gaiety and laughter infected them, and they followed along until they reached the barrio where yet another of Teresa's many confederates had arranged lodging for them. All of the painting supplies had been moved from the prison to the rooms. Jeroen looked about with a great deal of satisfaction. There was a main room and a bedchamber – he had his eye on the bedchamber – and a brazier with charcoal to warm the wine Teresa was pouring.

She handed him the cup with a twinkle in her eye.

"I have good news," she said.

He looked hastily at her middle, which was shrouded in shawls and skirts and didn't answer his first thought. In his experience when women announce good news in that tone of voice it presaged paternity.

She put her hands on her hips in exasperation. "No, Jeroen," she said. "Not that. Why do men only think of women as breeding stock?"

"Nay," he denied. "I'm not used to thinking of women as breeding stock nor gallery managers of art commissions either."

"That's what this is," she crowed. She waved a bit of parchment. "Aleyt wrote to say you've a wonderful commission from the Confraternity of the Blessed Virgin in s-Hertogenbosch. They want you to paint a cartoon for a stained glass window for the new chapel and on this purpose they will provide provided a pair of old bed linens."

“A generous wage, is it?” A slow smile spread across his face. “Lucky I can do the cartoon here and dispatch it to their care. I’ll do them a rondel: the Homecoming of the Soul. Tell Aleyt to send the bed linens here.”

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## Vita

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The End