



Immaculate

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Description: God rewards the pious, so I remain chaste.

God loves the meek, so I strive for obedience.

God forgives the repentant, so I atone for sins I have not committed.

But my knees have been sullied in worship to a vacant altar.

Everything I was taught is a lie.

There is no God here.

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Chapter One

Spiritually bared before God and his holy servants, I knelt. A womanchild bedecked in a gown paid for by my father—the Duke of Arermici—an Italian pure-blood, and devout defender of the Papal States in this time of war. Pinched by the stays which pushed my slight breasts high against an unforgiving collar, I knelt just as I had been trained to do from birth. I knelt and begged forgiveness as I had been ordered to.

It was imperative my soul be cleansed in this, the chapel of the living god.

The Holy See.

And here, once refreshed of spirit, I was to meet my godfather, Pope Heptus the IV, where he would bless my coming marriage to his supporter, the Doge of Venice.

Not once in my life had I laid eyes upon His Holiness. So I prayed all the harder to be worthy of his grace.

I sinned like all mortals. Often I was silently impatient with my mother. Other times, I bore loneliness and knew resentment when I saw other females of my age and was denied their company. They were corrupted, my mother would say, and her singular duty in life was to keep me pure.

These weaknesses of spirit had to be purged daily in private penance before sleep. Stripped to the waist, alone before god, silk cords would strike against my back—imparting a sting but leaving my soft skin beautiful so my future husband might be honored.

Those moments of solitude, of self-inflicted pain, I felt closer to God than even here, bowing at the feet of a cardinal and pouring out my wretched soul.

“It has been one day since my last confession.”

He smelled of rosewater and old incense absorbed into the silk of his cassock, when his hand came to rest upon my bent head. “Tell me your sins, child.”

The recounting was easy, unmentionable. My gravest sin that day was not dressing quickly enough or to my mother’s exacting standards.

The only member of my family to accompany me to the Holy City, my mother had a great responsibility in assuring my success. She had chosen the gown I was to be presented in. Ordered my dressing. Directed the styling of my hair, and pressed a slight brush of starch against my nose. It was she who fixed the priceless hand-made lace to my curls, so I might be in a fitting state before our Lord.

The final result was not to her liking.

Two maids had earned a slap when Mama grew impatient. I had been forced to curtsy and hold position until my leg fell asleep. But when I’d toppled face down into the rug, Mama had forgiven me. A new maid had been fetched, one who acted quickly upon my mother’s chirped orders to remove every layer I was wearing and start again.

Though all chosen females who came before our worldly king must be chaste, covered, their eyes downcast to the perfection of the Vatican’s marble floors, they must also be beautiful.

The honor was beyond my explanation, and I, in part, was to give those men a chance to see the Virgin Mary reflected in the physical.

After all, I was the pope's own goddaughter.

Once confession commenced and Eucharist was consumed, I would for the first time in my life kneel in supplication and kiss his ring. This moment could not even compare to my coming marriage. This was the moment I had been prepared for from birth.

The nuns who undertook my education had reminded me daily that I had to be more. That I had to work hard to be deserving.

I wanted to be, more than anything.

There was little for a female in this world.

Court was out of the question. Not with so devout a mother. I was raised amidst the olive trees of Chicari in the small stronghold of Berrice. The flagstones were cold. I know this, because for my earliest years I was denied socks and slippers. The pious learned to walk as Jesus walked to Calvary.

To be plain in desires. That was a point of my upbringing I upheld.

Yes, it was freezing some months of the year.

Yes, blisters made my soles rough.

But it was nothing to the burdens of my skeletal servants.

'Twas not the nuns who brought me my daily victuals or bathed me. The nuns were not responsible for my chamber pot or the combing of my hair. Slight girls, of my age, scurried in and out. Many, over those years spent in constant prayer, I knew died when their bird-like bones could no longer survive on my leftovers.

Wasted away like spent puffs of a dandelion.

Life, I knew, was given by our one true God and taken away.

My family was favored. I was gifted with great beauty.

Of course, we could not choose our fathers. We had no say in our education. Unless our mamas were kind, there was none to champion our future. Chattel. But I was beloved and grateful for the pains my parents had taken in my rearing.

With my mother as my keeper, a staunch guard of my instruction, and the woman who ordained my days, I knew I should be grateful. Just as I knew guilt for every mistake, big or small.

Like a good Catholic.

Like an obedient daughter.

Father was powerful, with male children younger than I, but he still gave me a kiss and smile each day those rare occasions I was summoned home. When he toyed with my nut brown curls, he told me I was lovely. When I recited Bible verses and knelt at his feet, he praised my piety and devotion.

And yes, I was devoted to him.

No woman could resist Arermici's charms, his wealth, or his power. But I? I loved him for his smile. Rarely did a papa adore his daughter as my father loved me.

This did not please my mother, though even she couldn't chastise me for it. And only once had she ever barked her disgust with my failings before him. That had not ended well for her.

I won't recount the things he yelled at her, or the ferocity in which he'd slapped her face. Like all good fathers, he thought I could do no wrong. It also made my infrequent visits home much more pleasant.

Do not misunderstand—my mother may have been harsh of word away from my father's ear, but she loved me. And Papa, he adored me more than any other pushed from my mama's loins. Brothers I had in spades, yet I was the only daughter of Arermici.

It was why, of all my siblings, Pope Heptus called for me to be his goddaughter.

It was why I was honored with an invitation to Rome.

Even my future husband would receive renown when I was presented bearing the weighty blessing of the living God. Great pleasure this thought gave me, for marriage was something I had long desired. To be a wife, to be free of Mama, to be beholden to a man both my parents and the church condoned. It was my singular thought.

Though I had never met my husband, I knew my place and r

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ejoyed in my upcoming wifely duties. All the solitary years of study, how to manage a household, etiquette, penmanship, conversation... I could hardly wait to impress him.

Of course, he would adore me as my father did.

So, when summoned home from the nuns, I did not balk or cast my eyes to the dirt. I grinned at my loving papa and thanked him for arranging a future for me that would give us all joy.

After all? Was that not a woman's place?

No expense was too much. My father, with great enthusiasm, kissed my cheeks and ordered gowns, chains, underthings... jewels.

I was his doll.

I won't pretend I did not enjoy it. Especially with my dour-faced mama casting scowls at me from the door. He purchased anything that caught my eye. The dressmakers sang his praises. And Mama... she narrowed her eyes until I remembered to kill my smiles and shrink as a good woman should.

Though Mama despised the praise, she never once raised objection to a single gown. Bedecked in silk from the Orient, in Venetian brocade gifted by my soon-to-be husband, in hand-darted lace painstakingly crafted by nuns, I was given a wardrobe any empress would envy.

Thus were the gifts of the Duchy of Arermici.

Unlike simple suppers with the nuns, back home I dined on rabbit, lamb, milking calf, dove; I was served the most tender of meats. Over my supper I recited the most sacred of biblical passages.

Though I was home and my time was spent in pleasures, I was still unmarried. So in the evening, lying atop a soft mattress, my legs were bound together, my hands captured above my head. This was how the purest virgins slept.

But the nuns and servants, not once did they realize I had learned to pick the knots with my teeth. Nor did they realize the knots they unbound each morning were fresh.

Chapter Two

“Et ego te absolvo a peccatis tuis in nomine Patris, et Filii, et Spiritus Sancti.” A swish of red satin, and I lifted my eyes to look upon Cardinal Beluni.

Young to be chosen for such an important position in God’s church, teeth white and straight, a noble chin balanced by a strong nose. He smiled at me as if looking for... something more than a sinner kneeling in supplication for mercy.

Eyes that held a glint; an invitation

I had seen my brother Bartolomeo look at my former chambermaid in such a way. That same night while sneaking off to find my father for our customary secret game of cards, I’d spied him in the halls. The maid’s skirts were raised, the round flesh of her bottom on display. Behind her, my brother shunted forward and back.

Though he’d never laid eyes upon me in the halls that night, I had spied a great deal of him. And it had shocked me.

By the time I'd found my father, I felt utterly unclean. Weeping, I'd confessed the whole thing. And you know what Papa said? He'd said I had committed no sin.

Nor did he seem particularly angry with Bartolomeo.

With a pat on my head, Papa ordered me to put it out of my mind and never speak of it again. He slipped me a sweet and doled out the cards. Still unsettled, I'd lost the first round.

Sighing, he collected the cards and shared the secret of the bridal night. I would be expected to do as the maid had done. Wifely duties. And they were not to be feared in their newness or strangeness, but embraced. But only with my husband. And only after vows of marriage before God.

Satan's whores tempted men to ease their lusts outside of wedlock and rank. Bartolomeo had been a victim, he'd been used, my father said. All would be set right when the temptress was set from the house in the morning.

But I had seen the way my brother had held the maid's arms behind her back. I had seen the tears on her cheeks.

Her little pained grunts had not been pretend.

Confused all the more, I asked if my husband would hold me down. Would I cry?

This stumped the man I adored, and after a lengthy pause he offered a halfhearted murmur of, "You might."

I felt the flaws in this exchange. I knew the topic alone bordered on sin, but I could not help but feel as if my beloved papa anticipated that I'd cry a great deal on my wedding night. Eager to impress him, I swore, "I won't cry."

“The Doge of Venice will prefer that. Pleasing your husband in the early days is key to contentment in marriage.” The bitterness in his response told a story of my mother’s failure in that regard.

With a loving smile, Papa recited, “Honor thy husband.”

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Giggling, I responded with, “And honor thy Father and Mother.”

That earned me a pat on the head. “You will not speak of this to your mama. Do you understand?”

Nodding, only too happy to please him, I took up the cards and let the unease slip from my shoulders. We played until daybreak. The following morning, I may have looked tired, but I was perfectly happy to go through my day under the light burden of exhaustion.

As Papa had claimed, my chambermaid was cast out of the house. The excuse given was theft, but I knew the real reason. Bartolomeo pouted for a day or two, and then I noticed he had begun making eyes at the new girl.

She lasted a month.

“Are you forgetting something, Lady Agnese?” A strong Roman accent overpowered the softer lilt that made Italian the most exquisite of all languages. It clashed with the holy man’s beauty, but matched the hungry look in the Cardinal’s eyes.

I had been staring at him, rudely unsmiling as if he’d given me cause to be suspicious. Absolved one minute to be tainted again in the next; perfect fodder for tomorrow’s confession.

Clearing my expression with an embarrassed jerk, I fell into the deepest of curtsies, and set my lips to his ring. I kissed the gold, not wanting to think of maids, or lifted skirts, or tears, or pleas at the door for mercy. “Forgive me, Your Eminence. I am

overwhelmed by the power of this place.”

“Perhaps confession was not comfort enough. You look troubled.” Raising me, he took my chin as my father would have, turning my face up so he might see behind the veil. “Do you seek my favor, lady? Some private study, perhaps? I can think up soft penance to soothe a maiden’s troubled soul. Ask any renowned beauty from court. There are many paths to heaven.”

The lilt... was he teasing?

Cheeks heated for reasons beyond my comprehension, I muttered, “I have never been to court, Your Eminence.”

Changeful, that was the only way I could describe Cardinal Beluni’s expression. One moment dark eyes glowed like set to flame, and now they were mild and warm. Now they were the eyes of God’s disciple. The eyes of a calf, of innocence and purity, set in an angel’s face. “That is as your mother swore to us. But from your lips, child, tell me of the company you’ve kept. Who are your friends? Their names, at once.”

Friends? Ladies kept in convents were not permitted friends. “Sister Mary and Sister Giovanna have been kind to me. I was not permitted to speak with my servants.”

“And did you obey this rule?”

“To obey is to be close to God.” And there was honest truth in that. I might have been young, but I knew holiness came from simplicity. If something felt wrong, that was the Holy Spirit whispering its warning. And I had learned young that the strap and cane would correct what the Spirit could not.

“And what do you know of men?”

At this, a smile bloomed on my lips. “I love my papa very much.”

That was not the answer anticipated, and I earned a firmer pinch on my chin as the Cardinal led me to speak on a different male. “And the Doge of Venice, what are your thoughts of your future husband?”

This line of questioning was so unusual. No one had ever asked my opinion on... anything of consequence. “I was told he favored my portrait and sent a kind letter to my father when dowry was discussed.”

“Do you not desire a young husband? One who has not had two wives before you and an heir already born?”

It felt as if the polished ground under my feet cracked open to swallow me. Not once had Mama or Papa mentioned such things. Old? Two brides

before me? My heart twisted and I am ashamed to admit water collected in my eyes.

“You were not told?” My chin was set free, Beluni daring a chuckle as he lifted my veil and stroked a finger over my pallid cheek. “Shall I offer comfort? There is nothing I cannot forgive. To know my attentions is to know the touch of Christ, and I do so hate to see a young girl disappointed...”

Clammy hands reached for my veil, pulling it forward to shield my face from male beauty and disconcerting agendas. The nuns often tested me, and I knew the smell of it in the air. God tested us all.

“I trust my father’s judgment.” The same father who expected me to cry on my wedding night. Because the bridegroom was old, and I would not find him appealing... and he knew it.

And now, so did I. Now I could prepare.

“Old husbands lead to young widows; many ladies fail to consider what a few hard years will earn. Freedom. Furthermore, I imagine my cousin is very eager to adore his young, innocent bride. And you might find there is something to be said about experience. The old goat will treat you well. That is, if your godfather is willing to give you up. He will be taken the moment he sees your face.”

Still confounded by Cardinal Beluni’s revelation, I staggered on his arm when he turned us toward the gilded doors.

“Come, Lady Agnese. Let’s not keep His Holiness waiting.”

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Under the stiff layers of a pristine white cassock, under the embroidery, the gold, the jewels, and the majesty, was a man who stank of decay. Pinched jowls sagged over a collar, as if his jaw had melted slowly from the room's stifling heat.

A quantity of phlegm was caught in Pope Heptus's grumbled greeting. I could not make out a word of it, but the lesser priest at his side leaned down, put an ear to the pope's lips, and listened intently.

A great, hacking cough wrapped the pope's unheard soliloquy in disease before his priest announced, "Our holy father welcomes the daughter of our trusted friend, the Duke of Arermici. Lady Agnese, step forward to receive his blessing."

Eyes downturned, gaze flowing over the beauty of cold marble floors, the golden throne, the beautiful cloth wrapping the earthly body of God's highest servant, I approached. Measured steps, a flawless curtsy, and I tried not to cringe when a claw-like hand heavy with rings set itself upon my veiled curls.

"She is beautiful." His slurred praise... the roundness of the words... I was sure if I looked up I'd find spittle dangling from the corner of his holiness' mouth. "The very look of the Mary."

I should have been ashamed of my disgust, for God himself had chosen this man. But he stank of piss up close, he was greased with unguents and powders, a body already gone to decay preserved whilst somewhat alive.

Death hovered over his form and even the white of his cassock could not hide its shadow.

This great man I had prepared my whole life to meet, and all I wanted was to press a scented kerchief under my nose and rush from his presence before I gagged on the smell.

“Yes, Your Eminence.” Cardinal Beluni, now standing at the side of the Pope’s throne, declared to all gathered, “She is pure, as innocent as her mother claims. Venice will be greedy for the attention of such a bride, or I do not know my cousin at all.”

I was accustomed to others speaking over me as if I were a vase to appraise, or a painting one might purchase. I knew to remain docile and meek. But that was not why my eyes were downcast or the reason I shrank. It was the way some of these holy men laughed.

“And she is untouched? A virgin?” That question was not directed toward me, though I did flinch to hear it bandied about before a room of strangers.

Spanish accent, guttural and quick, another cardinal scurried forward to speak softly of something that left my cheeks flaming. “The devil will know what we are about. Women are unclean, vile sinners tainted by the snake. We cannot afford to make a mistake in this when there were two other noble ladies to consider for such a glorious honor. I say they should be brought here at once for the conclave to see with their own eyes.”

“Your niece, Lady Juanica, was tempted, Archbishop.” The coldness of Beluni’s tone struck me, and my eyes darted up under my brow to see him snarl. “I pierced her myself and there was no blood. She had had others before me.”

“So says Beluni! I demand Lady Juanica be examined.”

This bickering and snappish retorts... the room was full of vicious argument beyond

shocking in its implication. Already rising to my feet, backing away from the circling wolves dressed in red, I found no savior as the uproar increased.

Ladies names were shouted, demands were made, all while the pope wheezed and stared at me. I swear he licked his lips before raising his hand and silencing the room with one gesture.

“Your Eminence.” Again Cardinal Belini interjected his presence into the center of negotiation. Passionate in his announcement as if advocating not for me, but for himself. “The nuns have yet to confirm Lady Agnese’s virtue. Let us see that rectified immediately. In fact”—he gestured to the room—“I believe we will all be set at ease to witness the inspection so there can be no suspicion or lack of trust.”

“Here, here.” The red satin ribbon of ordained men skirting the room converged into a formation that encroached ever nearer to the throne. To where I stood. All in agreement.

They could not mean what I thought they meant! I knew husbands could demand that ladies of rank prove their purity before the wedding, but such things were private. Such things were not discussed by men in cassocks, who crowded about me as if I were a caught rabbit.

Beady eyes hard with dislike met my startled gaze, the Spanish Cardinal sneering. “She is trembling! You see that, Your Holiness. The sign of a sinner caught.”

Where was the blessing of a loving godfather to his dedicated goddaughter? Where was the holy presence of God?

Smiling as if gentling a lamb, Cardinal Beluni slithered down the dais to my side. His beauty beside the staring pope’s hideous form made greater by comparison. “You’re frightening her.”

“A virtuous woman has nothing to fear!” My arm was grabbed in a bruising grip. Yanked bodily away from the throne, the Spanish stranger barked, “Call the nuns and let’s have this done.”

Chapter Three

I didn’t know it was possible to cry so hard one couldn’t breathe. Choking on terror, tangled in limbs and the bruising clutch of cruel hands, it felt as if the world moved under me.

Ready to swallow me whole.

Shoved to polished marble before the throne of the Holy See when I refused to lift my skirts so all might witness, I was pinned down by relentless men. They worked in unison, as if they had done this before. Down I went, head smacking the floor, my skirts lifted. No matter how hard I’d kicked, my legs were restrained, painfully jerked apart, and bent so my knees kissed my ears. Voluminous skirts bunched under my chin, but not enough to spare me the view of two dozen men dressed in the raiment of high holy orders, shoulder to shoulder to stare between my legs.

An ancient nun had been summoned. The coarse stuff of her habit scratched at exposed flesh, the crone crouching forward, gnarled fingers dishing out a volley of stinging slaps to redden my inner thighs.

It wasn’t until she reached forward and pinched delicate, unseen skin that I ceased my struggles.

Frozen, gripped by a cold sweat, my labored breaths were louder than even the pope’s.

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With my skirts in the way, I couldn't see what she did, only feel. The two lips of flesh God designed to cover a woman's shame were stretched wide open, the old nun's forefinger manipulating the skin until it stung.

She pulled the tender area this way and that, opening me like an unready flower so the glinting eyes of godly men might see what set me apart.

Chastity.

When I began to keen from the tugs, when my bottom began to tuck as if to escape her, she hissed.

Again I stilled.

Prodding fingers nudged places I'd never explored. Pulled my flesh again, and cackled triumph. "The membrane is solid where a whore would be open. The girl is sealed off by an untorn maidenhead."

There was no mercy here, the only pair of eyes on mine were those of Cardinal Beluni. Not once through the ordeal had he gaped between my legs like the others. His hands never strove to hold me down. Instead he lorded over the swarm, unbent, and steady where the others were excitable and vicious.

As if to tell me he did not need proof of my innocence. As if to give me someone to scream for when I begged for help.

The angry Spanish Cardinal ground his teeth and put his ringed hand on the nun's

shoulder. “You declare her pure?”

The burn as my pinched flesh was pulled even further apart had me squealing and fighting anew. It was ignored, so all in attendance might see to what the nun referred.

“Before God. She is intact.” Smacking her lips, the old woman wiped her fingers down the front of her habit and hobbled to her feet.

Not one of the men offered to assist her, nor did they pay her any heed now that her purpose had been served. As if aware of her dismissal, the crone hobbled off and left me alone in a room full of men.

“Your Eminence, do you wish to see the girl’s attributes for yourself?”

All was visible to the throne without the nun between my thighs, God’s highest servant leaning forward, eyes beady as he stared between my legs. “Bring her to me. I would see with my own eyes the vessel of our Lord.”

It was the first I’d heard his voice ring out. Ghastly in its intent. Horrid.

Not at all the voice of an angel.

Caught in the clutches of many, I was hoisted toward the sky, legs still spread, and carried like a kill for the fire. I was more afraid of that smacking mouth than I had been of the old nun’s jagged nails.

Such fear stole the fight from me. Limp, teeth chattering, I shivered.

Hovering, my legs obscenely spread by the hands of many, my private place was held just inches from the pope’s face. I felt something brush the fine ha

irs over my sex and jolted.

“She smells of youth.”

A smile in his voice, Cardinal Beluni stated, “Her mother was very fertile. Six children she bore. Five lived past ten. Not a single one was lost in the womb.”

“I feel a stirring...”

My tormentor with his beauty and sly smile, declared, “The spirit of God, your Holiness. His power shall fill your loins.”

I felt a cough of sick air across my sex, the pope waving me away. “Have her bathed and fed well.”

Glittering eyes still locked on mine, Cardinal Beluni reached out a hand as if I was capable of reaching back. “His Holiness is appeased. Rise, Lady Agnese, and accept your godfather’s blessing.”

Set to the floor at the base of the dais. Far past the point of hysterics, tears came anew. I would be bruised from this, and if the sting between my legs was any judge, also bleeding. Trying to vanish into the air-puffed pillow of my skirts, clinging to the torn silk, I hid my face in my knees and rocked.

Skittering noises, like the scampering of rats drifted away. But I knew them for what they were. The cardinals backing away, their stiff robes rubbing out a hiss of noise on that immaculate floor.

“Why?” I drawled out the sobbed word, sick, coiffed hair a tumble past my shoulders like a common harlot’s.

“Is she not the vision of purity?” I knew not which one of them spoke. “I would see her painted with just that look on her face.”

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“Commission Reviolldi.” Another of the faceless tyrants. “She can sit in the mornings. It would be my gift to you, Most Holy Father. A treasure to grace the Apostolic Palace walls.”

Under the murmurs and the sounds of a room ignoring my heartsick pleas for my mother, I heard the pope’s rattling breaths. He was muttering again, his fleshy lips no doubt pressed to the lesser priest’s ear.

The priest spoke. “Our Holy Father bids you come to him, child. He would see you comforted.”

Hands hitched under my arms and dragged me bodily from the floor. Rosewater and incense saturated my breaths. Cardinal Beluni... countenance serene, lay me at the feet of the Holy See, yanked my torso upright by a firm grip of my dress laces, and held me in a bow so an ancient hand might once again finger my curls.

I heard my godfather then, that death rattle of a voice crawling over my skin. “A lovely vessel of God’s will.”

The blessing that followed was lengthy, broken up by bouts of phlegmy coughing that left the aging pope breathless. All the while my head hung, tears running down my cheeks until a lifeless sort of apathy bloomed with the aches in my joints. And still Cardinal Beluni bore my weight, like I was some marionette and my laces were my strings.

The hand on my head slipped down the side of my face, caressing wet cheeks until my vision was full of age spots and raised blue veins. The pope’s hand, his sacred

ring. I was to take his fingers and kiss it reverently as I had practiced under the watchful eye of the nuns.

Trembling like a newborn goat, my muscles went through rote movements. It was beyond thought, the cold paper of his skin against the sweaty smoothness of my own. I took his hands, my quivering lips pressed to the gems of the papal ring.

This was the moment I had waited my whole life for.

And it was wretched.

My heart gave a lurch when I pressed my mouth all the harder to the Holy See's signet.

Chapter Four

“Mama!”

I rushed to my mother the instant the apartment doors were opened by the resolute Swiss Guard standing before them. She sat with perfect posture, a vision of elegance—well-dressed, demure, and still lovely. A duchess in every sense of the word.

The rooms offered to house us during our stay at the Vatican were filled with the warm glow of late afternoon light. Beautifully furnished, adorned with more finery than even my father's grand palace. When we'd first arrived I had marveled.

Now I recognized the guards at the door for what they were. Now I awaited the slap of my mother's hand when she took in my disheveled appearance and judged me an unclean strumpet.

I wanted her to slap me for the shame that traced down my face in rivulets of warm tears. More, I wanted her to hold me in her arms and whisper that I was safe. That I was loved, no matter what had happened.

To my infinite shock, the latter is exactly what took place.

Gathered in mother's embrace, she pulled me to her breast and shushed me. She smelled of ambergris and orchids. Of home. "My precious girl. I have never been more proud of you."

"You will be greatly rewarded, Lady Arermici. Our Holy Father was exceedingly pleased with her."

I gave a shriek to hear that Cardinal Beluni had followed me into the only slice of sanctuary I had.

The doors closed with a resolute click behind him, and I clung to my mama all the harder begging her to send him off and save me.

Again, my mother patted my curls, picking out the loosened pins as she cooed over me. But her words were for the intruder. "Our families will be united through the wedding to Venice, Cardinal Beluni. But more importantly, our immortal souls will be gathered up and held close by our Most Holy Father in heaven. Did I not promise to deliver virginity in perfection?"

When I felt a male touch settle on my head just where the pope had laid his hideous hand, I lashed out. The cardinal, in his prime and strong, was not to be moved by my panicked strikes.

Instead he was moved by my sorrow, his voice gentle as he stepped away. "You had to resist, child. The existence of your maidenhead was not enough. Only a true virgin

of mind and spirit would have fought those who encroached upon it. And now, now you shall receive great reward. Infinite blessing.”

The only blessing I craved was to be far from this horrible place. “Leave me be!”

That earned me the smack I had been expecting upon my arrival. Cheek stinging from the force of her hand, my mother expelled me from her arms. “You shall not address His Eminence thusly! Apologize.”

Could she not see the state I was in? What they had done to me? “But—”

“Peace.” The cardinal lifted his hands as if in benediction, face serene. “You faced a trial before God and were victorious. You cannot understand the glory your piety has earned. If you had not fought so hard, not one of them would have believed of your true innocence. You were perfect, and now shall serve as the chosen vessel of our almighty God.”

It seemed the cardinal attempted to placate, but my noble mother was having none of it. Shoving me to my knees, she took my fallen hair in a tight fist and made me bow. “Apologize at once, Agnese. You insult a man of God with this whining and tears. How dare you sin in this place!”

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I could feel individual hairs tearing out of my scalp, her grip unforgiving. The sting, the pressure of pulled flesh, sent me reeling. The kind of terror that infused my body before the pope was different to this blanket of fear my mother's anger inspired.

I was innocent, and I begged her to see. "They tore my skirts, Mama! Shamed me."

"Of course they did! Did I not tell you to obey?"

"Madam, you will unhand her at once!" An enraged snarl came from the man whose feet my mother shoved my face into. "I forbid you from striking our vessel again!"

Never had my mother jumped away from my punishments so quickly. And not only did she jump, she fell to her knees, her hands pressed to the red silk of the cardinal's cassock as she begged for forgiveness.

Were those tears streaming down her cheeks? "She must be corrected, or her feminine willfulness will bloom into Eve's evil, Your Eminence."

The Beluni God-given beauty turned ugly in its rage. "You were the lady's custodian, madam, but that does not mean she belongs to you. This one was destined for the reigning pope from birth. And you would strike her?"

Voice small, chastened and weeping, my mother said, "She is still my daughter... 'tis my duty to correct her."

My confessor didn't seem the least bit forgiving. "Your duty

here, Duchess Arermici, is to guide and serve our vessel. Not to mark her pretty face. Our Holy Father will be disappointed.”

It was as if God himself had found her wanting, and that was all it took for my mother to crumple. “I will do as you say, however you wish. Forgive me, Father!”

I backed away from the tableau before me until my shoulders hit silk-draped walls. I backed away from the wrongness of what I sensed before me. Not even my father’s rare strikes had ever brought this woman to tears. They had cowed her yes, but never once made her cry.

Face red, the cardinal shoved her back. “If you cannot guide her to carry out this monumental duty, then you are of no use to us. There are other daughters who can be brought before the throne. Daughters from houses not connected to the majesty of Venice or Arermici. Houses that cannot be trusted! There is even talk of a Spanish foreigner being considered, should Agnese fail. As if our lord would be born to that heathen race!”

Sprawled on her bottom like a child, a calm swept over my mother, her slumped shoulders rolling back, her neck lifting like a high-born lady’s. “I swear it on the Virgin Mary. Agnese will perform as you wish. It is unthinkable for another to steal this honor from me.”

He cocked a brow at her use of me, issuing orders in a steady cadence. “She is to be bathed and fed. Give her wine, should she need it.”

With that, he turned, a rush of red satin, rosewater, and incense. The door slammed at his back, leaving my heart to lurch.

I stared at that portal, certain that it was not a cardinal at all who had been in my presence, but the fallen angel Lucifer in all his devious beauty.

“Stand, daughter. We have much to discuss. And though he told me I could not strike you, he failed to mention what would be your fate if you disobey or fail in your sacred purpose here.”

Chin quivering, I set wet eyes on the majesty of my assertive mother. She met my gaze, piercing me with the sharpness of that look, and stated, “You are to be filled with holy seed so that God’s son might be delivered into your womb. If you fail to conceive, I will see you drowned as any witch must be drowned.”

Not a word of this made sense. “Mama?”

At that she came to me, bending down to cup my cheek. Almost tender, she swore, “I have dedicated my life to assuring you are worthy of this honor. I, and my mother before me, took God’s seed, and did so with honor. Our line is sacred, holier than even the highest bride of Christ. But you must succeed where the rest of us have failed. You must bear a son. Do not fail me.”

Chapter Five

Gowned in gossamer, my scrubbed body oiled as if for my wedding night. I listened to my mother tell a tale that set my stomach churning.

I had been chosen, she’d said, to serve a great purpose.

Open for him, be a gracious hostess to his glory. Abide the pain, that pain I deserved for being born female.

When I cried and told her such honors belonged to my future husband... she laughed.

And yes, she struck me out of eyesight of the pope’s humble servant.

Both cheeks were left pink. My lips were left enticingly swollen. As if I had bitten them the way my serving girls had bitten them when trying to win the notice of the handsome stable hands.

No argument I might design swayed her.

She called me a coward, a heathen, and a whore.

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I said that fornication outside of marriage was a sin.

That earned a laugh.

“This will not be fornication. There will be no slathering lips upon your flesh or groping hands. All that will belong to your husband, who will be paid handsomely to never speak of your condition. Or, mayhaps it will be as with your father and he will be so drunk he cannot tell the difference between wine spilt on the sheets or blood.”

I was the oldest child, born in their first year of wedlock. I adored my father. And in one night learned that he never belonged to me.

He would not shelter me should I fail.

My mother would drown me.

I was to stop weeping at once. “You are the daughter of a holy pope. Immaculate in both conception and upbringing. Why weep that Duke Arermici did not father you? You know he keeps a whore, right? A mistress the same age as you. He buys her jewels. Already she’s fat with his bastard!”

No, my papa would never.

But my mother never lied.

When I looked upon her with pity, she raised her chin all the higher. “I am a daughter of God’s holy church. Above a duke in all ways. Just as you will be above the fat

Doge of Venice. You do not need man's love. God will sustain you."

In all the years this woman had reared me, she had never spoken so frankly.

A knock came to the door, her eyes widening just a touch. "Do not disappoint me, daughter. You know what will happen if you fail."

In the morning, I had admired the inlaid marble floors, the frescos, the glory of our holy church's wealth. Now, padding across those same floors barefoot, so terrified my bladder was begging to be emptied, I felt a ghost of my former self.

Dead was my joy. Dead was my anticipation.

A ghost indeed.

In the same ornate chapel I had confessed in only hours ago, I was told to kneel.

I did. I did because otherwise I would be stripped of my clothing and cast in the street to be rutted by vagrants.

I did because I was the coward my mother claimed.

It would hurt, she'd said. I would bleed.

I had even overheard her praying there would be a great deal of blood. A fragile smear was not enough. Not after her years laboring over me.

I'd paid little attention to the guard who had collected me. All I had noticed was the handsome Cardinal and his retinue were the ones awaiting my arrival.

Kneel, he had said.

Kneel I had done.

Head bowed, my rosary clutched between fingers gone white, I prayed for absolution.

A rich baritone bade, “Now is the time for confession.”

But I had only confessed hours ago.

“What are your sins, child?”

I had to be pure. Blameless. This my mother had said over and over.

But what was there to confess?

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In a moment of rebellion, I hissed, “I feel hatred toward my mother and disgust for the pope.”

“And your heart must be heavy...”

It was, it was so heavy my eyes overfilled. “I cannot help but think of the rape of Tamar, King David’s daughter.”

Yes, I knew the unspoken story. Not only could I read, but my papa had gifted me with my own priceless copy of the scriptures. I had read them front to back, devouring the wisdom and trials of those who had lived long before me.

“Ahhh.” Cardinal Beluni nodded. “Raped by her prince half-brother and cast out by his hate once his lust was filled.”

As if to drive my statement home, I muttered Tamar’s own words, “Don’t force me. Such a thing should not be done in Israel! Don’t do this wicked thing.”

The cardinal countered, “For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality; that each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honor.”

“Yes!” I agreed with all my heart.

Hooded eyes glanced down upon me. “The pope will not rape you.”

I thought of the man, his wretched smell and hideous body. I thought of the lies, the

shame, my fear, and gagged. “My husband will not have me if you do this. God says, ‘And he shall take a wife in her virginity. A widow, or a divorced woman, or a woman who has been defiled, or a prostitute, these he shall not marry. But he shall take as his wife a virgin of his own people.’ You would send me to him ruined.”

“Blessed,” the cardinal countered. “Filled with God’s love.”

I wanted to die. To run screaming from the room. But I was the coward my mother had labeled me. Because more than anything, I was afraid I would already be sentenced to hell. “Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled, for God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterous.”

A voice soft as a feather poured over me. “There will be no fornication. What is to be done is outside blame for you and His Holiness. I swear to you, child, you will leave the room as pure as you entered it.”

Had the Virgin Mary wept as I did?

As if Beluni could read my thoughts, he urged, “We are not done with your confession.”

I wanted so dearly to feel clean. So dearly that I was willing to spill out my guts to anyone who might listen. “I am wicked, and feel hatred for holy men.”

“And...”

I began to cry, something my mama had made me swear on the lives of my brothers I would not do. “I am frightened.”

“Did Lady Arermici not give you wine?”

Beyond communion, I had never tasted it. “Wine is not permitted, Your Eminence.”

“It is tonight.” His voice had grown tight again, the drop in tone sending all my hairs to stand. “I offer you a goblet of the blood of Christ.”

“But I have not yet been forgiven for my sins.”

He spoke the Latin benediction quickly, failing to ascribe penance before thrusting a golden chalice into my hands. “Swallow it now. Every drop.”

I did as I was told, noting an astringent flavor that tasted as poisonous as the cardinal’s soul.

“Rise, my daughter.”

His drugs worked quickly, my legs too weighty to shift.

Chapter Six

I had never known such suffering.

Or such disgust.

But not one word of rejection could be voiced aloud. Not with Cardinal Beluni’s palm clamped over my screaming mouth.

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His hands were not the worst of them.

After carrying me to the pope's apartments, after the Swiss Guard shut the door and holy men tore robes from my flailing arms, I grasped what really was to be done.

How much my mother had left out.

Before I had a chance to hide my naked body, priests I had never seen before took me in hand. Around the room, every cardinal who

had seen my earlier disgrace waited.

Many openly prayed.

Watching.

Beady eyes under miters, for they were dressed in their most holy finery.

Upon the grandest bed I had ever beheld was the prostrate naked body of flabby infirmity. The pope had been prepared for me.

A youthful male who had yet to earn his priestly collar had taken a worm of flesh from between the pope's legs, pumping up and down that ragged flesh. I saw the gray mat of hair it was nestled in. Saw the way it twitched as soft hands stretched it higher.

One look at my bared body, and that rod of flesh jerked and plumped.

His Eminence was vile, and he was watching as my drugged limbs struggled vainly in the hands of many.

These priests, my captors, did not waver. Each knew their part in my degradation.

Legs forcibly spread wide over the Holy See's boney form, I was forced to straddle him. My secret sex bumping that rod of quickening flesh.

I had seen pigs rutting once, and still remembered the shame of viewing that male's appendage jerk into the female's oinking body.

And I knew why she'd shrilled.

Chanting crowded the air, the waft of freshly lit incense creating a cloud around our shamefully bared bodies.

Where the Holy Father lay still as a board, I writhed. I think it excited him, my fight to protect my virginity, for his eyes looked upon my small chest where brown nipples had puckered and red marks grew from clinging grips along my ribs.

Six men held me open, held me bent, exposed me to be ruined.

The young one pored oil upon the elder's shaft, pointing that glistening organ toward my thatch of dark hair.

"Push her down." That was Cardinal Beluni. That was the devil ordering this evil.

NO!

I lurched, but drugged and small, I was impaled in one horrid shove downward no matter my struggles. Flesh tore on that feeble member. A scream burst from my

throat, so piercing even Beluni's fist could not suppress my cry of pain.

Agony, a quantity of blood that would have impressed my mother, flowed from between my thighs, over the hairy stomach of a wide-eyed leper.

And leper he was.

The sores that had been hidden by that man's white cassock were numerous. Many were open and weeping, their puss smearing my skin where I was pressed down upon him.

And then I was lifted, salvation awaiting as the cause of my pain retreated from my womb. Beluni had promised me God's work would be quick.

Lies.

On a sob, I was pushed down again.

For ages this torture continued.

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The priests made me their puppet, used me upon the old man.

And the pope, blameless, they said—because he laid there and allowed his cock to be used in my cunt.

Yes, I knew those words. I had younger brothers up to all manner of mischief.

I thought of the chambermaid I'd spied in the halls long ago, of her tears.

I thought of my brother who had used her.

I thought of the mother who had brought me here so I might be torn upon the pope's staff.

I thought of my father and the whore he kept.

I thought of the servants I'd watched starve over the years.

All this while my eyes tracked over the old man licking his lips while he watched my tits bounce from my forced movements up and down his shaft. And then my eyes fell upon the golden crucifix over his bed.

My lord and savior suffering on the cross...

He too had been impaled by a spear and bled.

In that moment, I gave up.

Sagging in the hold of so many, I felt another pair of hands take my hips. My pelvis was rolled forward and back even as my whole torso was continuously raised up and down.

Lewd, my cunt on display, torn and full of a doddering ancient ready for the grave.

I gagged on vomit, and then heard a noise that would haunt me to death.

The pope, in a voice laden with sickness, called out for Jesus.

My hips were slammed down, the burn of his member jerking against my savaged walls.

Every last person in the room began to rejoice.

Except myself. In that moment my true innocence had died.

Lifted from his body, I was made to lie down beside my holy godfather. My legs held together, stinging warmth seeping out from where he had pumped me full of foulness.

For once, it was not Cardinal Beluni who gave me an order. It was the Spanish Cardinal, his face no longer hateful but passionate as he looked over my naked body. “Do not spill his seed. Our God in heaven must see his son reborn.”

The force of the cough that ripped from the pope’s throat brought several in the room to assist him. But after he’d coughed up what ailed him, he waved them off, then turned to me. Naked, the flesh of his chest hanging like empty breasts of an old woman, he pressed a kiss to my cheek.

“You are worthy of my love.”

Chapter Seven

No chances would be taken, assuring the blessed event.

Nightly I was dragged, no longer fortified with poisoned wine, to be mauled and manipulated over the hideous body of God's highest servant. It didn't matter if I fought back or screamed.

No higher power came to save me.

By the seventh day, I would no longer look at or speak with my mother. If she tried to approach, I tore at my hair.

Cardinal Beluni took note of this, blaming the duchess for not caring properly for me. In breadth of an hour, she was packed off back to my father, and I was given the peace of solitude in my rooms.

I'm ashamed to say I was grateful.

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Though it ached when hard male flesh invaded my soft body, it was nothing compared to the pain the first night, or even the shredded aches on the second or third.

Every morning I was roused by nuns, dressed in a fine gown, and sat to be painted by the most famed artist in Rome. My days were spent being captured in oil, the canvas that housed my sorrow large and dashed with soft colors.

The painter lied.

He showed me softly smiling, but I would never smile again.

No treats tempted me, no offerings from dressmakers or the jokes of clowns fetched to rouse me made a difference.

How could I smile knowing the truth?

There was no God.

All of this opulence was a falsehood, an act of pretender Pharisees who gathered suffering peoples' coin. I had wealth beyond measure, so they took my virtue instead.

By the passing of the first new moon, I could no longer count how many times the pope's crooked shaft had been forced inside me. For now, it was not only in the evenings I was taken to be seeded. The cardinals had to be sure a babe was planted in my womb, so I had been made to ride him like a horse upon his throne between meetings, in his study. And the three of the most horrible times, in my own rooms.

He always remained perfectly still until those last grunting moments where his hips thrust with the power of 'God's' release. It was the Holy Spirit, the priests claimed. I was not to resist but allow it.

That slithering man flesh could not be out of me fast enough. Nor did I care if his ejaculation leaked to splatter the bedding.

I would never be clean of it.

“Did you not care for His Holiness' gifts?”

The serpent himself had arrived. Always attending me. Always demanding I kneel and confess before I was to be raped.

Nothing I said shocked the cardinal. Not my desire to see them all dead, not my dreams of choking the pope until his eyes bled as he bludgeoned my internal organs with his cock. When Beluni came, it was always for the same purpose. I was to be taken to the old codger, stripped naked before the cardinals gathered to watch, grabbed by the hands of priests I was beginning to recognize, and bred.

Knees accustomed to the cold marble floors, I bowed my head and began the unavoidable ritual. “It has been four hours since my last confession.”

Beluni stroked my curl

s. “Let me ease your immortal soul.”

The place between my legs was still sore after this morning's session. And I hated that not even sunlight could save me from the old man's lusts now. He'd developed a taste for it. Calling for me at all hours. “I hate you, even more than I hate the pope.”

“And?”

“I wish to see you tormented in the fires of hell.”

His touch had grown bold over the weeks, the backs of Beluni’s manicured fingertips tracing my jaw. “You could not be more perfect. The enraged Madonna brimming with virtue.”

I would be carted off to my new husband so well used the pope’s seed would still leak down my thighs for months. An old rag in pretty lace trim. “What is to be my penance?”

My forward demand to end this farce made Beluni arch a sculpted brow. “Do you plead for the whip? I prefer softer penance for the mother of God’s son.”

He misunderstood my sigh. No amount of pain would wash this sin away. “If that is your will, Your Eminence.”

As if to offer some comfort, he cupped my cheek and swore, “Your work is almost done. God has told me so.”

Every word from this snake’s mouth was poison, yet I cast my eyes to his lips and licked my own.

Our eyes met and he murmured, “Et ego te absolvo a peccatis tuis in nomine Patris, et Filii, et Spiritus Sancti.”

I made the sign of the cross and rose.

“You have been summoned to his apartments. He ails and longs to see the Vessel of God at his side. Comfort your godfather.”

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More like bend over him, sweating from the exertion of not vomiting from the disgusting sight of his rotting body.

One would think a man so ill would die, but even wheezing between each breath, the vile creature managed to rise to the challenge of breeding his papal whore.

The guards collected me upon the cardinal's order. It had been weeks since they had been required to drag me.

And there he was, supine on his bed. Naked, hairy, oozing and foul.

The old man watched as I was stripped to my skin, manhandled and carried already spread wide so the waiting youth might stuff the old man's member in my dry slit. I dared just this once to look the geezer in the eye.

I hope he saw every last ounce of my hatred.

The pope had the audacity to smile. Yellow teeth in pale gums, a thick lolling tongue furred white from illness. A wracking cough shook him, a bit of spittle launched to land on my lips in the parody of a kiss. I ignored it, knowing my arm would not be set free from those who had already begun jacking me up and down his shaft to wipe myself clean.

For the first time, a wizened hand rose, setting itself over my womb as if in blessing.

Unlike the last weeks of my limp use, this jolted me. The jerk of my hips set him moaning, eyes rolling back as his bones answered with a lurch of their own. And

then, while he was still inside me, I heard it.

The exhalation of a corpse's final death rattle.

Not all the room noticed, not with so many eyes on my tits and cunt. But the youth charged with plumping the Pope's cock before it invaded my body gave a cry.

Beluni pressed forward, told them to continue as they were.

Fucking me upon a corpse.

He pressed his ears to the Pope's slack lips, moved a moment later to listen to his chest. What he found moved him to shout., "Milk the last drops of his precious seed out of him, NOW!"

That command was not for me; it was for the youth. The same youth whose hand Belini caught and forced toward my sex.

I thought I was past weeping, but as I felt another reach down where my body was mashed down against the pelvis of the dead, tears fell fresh. The wrinkled sack under the softening cock was kneaded; a grip starting at the base of the pope's cock and squeezing upward drawing out fluid I felt drench my insides.

It smelled of piss.

All near must have noticed, but they cheered all the same to see it weep out from where I was plugged with softening male flesh.

I was made to lay for an hour, to hold in his seed, by a corpse that already reeked of the grave.

Desecrated, I knew in those moments that I would fling my body from the first bridge I found.

Cardinal Beluni, Satan himself, knew my thoughts and put me under watch from that moment forward. Never once was I left alone. And when my courses never arrived and my stomach began to revolt at easy smells, I was deemed blessed.

At a private lunch between the two of us, Beluni took my hand, kissing my fingers as he said, “You carry Christ in your womb. Put the babe in harm’s way, and I will see your whole family crucified.”

It wasn’t a threat, not when his eyes were soft and full of adoration. It was a promise.

I married the Doge of Venice a week later. I laid with him already full of another man’s child. And yes, when free of the regular presence of the doge’s cardinal cousin again, I began to pray.

It was an act of desperation.

For as my belly grew, I knew the terrible truth.

The babe was a girl...

Just like me, my mother, and her mother before her.

The End

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Turn the page for a full chapter sneak peek of Branded Captive: Wren's Song Book 1.

WREN'S SONG

“Accept my seed, Omega.”

The breath wafting over her cheek was rancid, but it was the last thing Wren might take stock of when that thing was cracking her pelvis in half. She had done as she'd been instructed. Remained docile when the man had yanked her legs embarrassingly wide over his thighs. She had even ignored the thick thatch of coarse salt and pepper hair on his chest scratching her back when he hoisted her up.

He'd growled as her mother told her he would, and torn through her barrier with one impatient yank of her hips. Unable to scream, Wren had only arched her spine, head thrown back on his shoulder. The Alpha, either oblivious or uncaring for her comfort, grasped her hips, bobbing her up and down his veined cock three times. With the fourth rude shunt, he'd clawed at her softer places and driven her down until her ass cheeks slapped against his lap. Immediately something ballooned inside her aching guts. It pressed her bladder to the point Wren was certain she'd dribbled more than a little piss on her buyer, continuing to expand until squished bowels, organs, and jangled nerves all screamed for relief.

“Damn you, Omega. Take my seed!”

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Take what where? She didn't understand what she was supposed to do now.

At her back, the stranger panted, shifting beneath her as if he too were extremely uncomfortable. When she failed to perform, his irritation quickly translated into anger. The stink invaded Wren's nostrils, it made her skin buzz.

Angry Alphas killed.

Angry Alphas mu

st always be appeased.

Staring forward across the dimly lit, yet finely appointed space, Wren inhaled and exhaled on the count of three. There was nothing to be done about the stinging stretch where her legs were hooked over the man's spread thighs. He had not offered to take her to a bed or even asked to see her build a nest. No, the couch in his fine house's receiving room had suited his purpose well enough.

Examine and test the stock.

Fuck the virgin with her father on the other side of the cracked door.

The man who'd brought her to sell listening to this. To the Alpha's strained breaths, to his grunts and wheezing.

Her father was listening to her failure.

Wren forced herself to look down. She had not seen the Alpha's cock before he'd shunted it unexpectedly into her, or even had a good look at the male. Her eyes had been downcast when they arrived, lest her father strike her for insolence. She had disrobed for inspection. She had moved as commanded and not resisted when the Alpha yanked her to the nearest seat.

And her father had exited the room to listen so he might claim full payment for what transpired.

Payment for... this. Wren stared where only the root of an Alpha cock was visible stretching her labia beyond imagining. There was a little blood, far less than she'd anticipated considering the sting. The red spread with their fluids, matting the hair that peppered his swollen ball sack.

The knot in her belly gave an angry pulse, expanding again in a bid to ruin her completely. Gnashing his teeth, the Alpha almost whined against her neck, his balls thundering in twitching pulses. They too expanded, the skin under all that coarse hair growing shiny and white from the stretch.

"Fucking Omega..." A meaty hand left her hip, landing on her belly as if that might force her even further down his meat. But there was nowhere else to go. She was tied to him by that pulsating knot spreading agony in her guts. From the way he fought to speak, how his breath hitched in a whine with each breath, the Alpha was in as much pain as she. "You have one purpose. Milk my fucking cock!"

If that knot kept banging against her pubic bone, she was going to be sick all over his rug. Stalled, unsure what it was he wanted from her, Wren thought the wisest course was to remain still and wait.

It was the wrong choice.

“Your freak daughter is failing to comply!” The snarled shout was directed to the cracked door.

The meek response was never the tone Wren’s father took with her. “Have you... umm... stimulated her, sir?”

Wren’s new owner turned his head, yelling so sharply the girl flinched. “Of course I have! She belligerently refuses to bring me to orgasm. My fucking knot is full. Gah—” Slick with sweat, the Alpha squeezed her tighter, caught in a waving cramp of his own. “I’ll have your goddamn head for this, Carson!”

“Wren, honey.” Through the cracked door, her father sing-songed, “Relax and take his seed. Show this illustrious Alpha you wish to serve as his mate.”

She wanted to sign that she didn’t understand, to reach out for the man who’d brought her there to sell her. But he could not see.

The potential mate roared, “SEND IN HELENA!”

Another door in the chilly room opened, a woman in a vivid robe rushing forward. “How can I serve you, my Alpha?”

“Bend over the desk and wait for me!”

Wren watched the woman quickly strip, viewing another naked female body for the first time in her life. With no preamble, the pretty brunette bent at the waist, the globes of her ass presented, her cheek to the wood.

Beta female parts were on display.

Cruel fingers reached for Wren’s stretched labia, the Alpha yanking at the sensitive

flesh as he grunted and threw her forward with his weight. His ballooning testicles doubled in size, the man groaning with the worst sort of agony.

His pain was nothing to hers. The knot that was meant to tie them together in life was deformed by his tricks until it could be pulled free of her body. Wren was dumped on the floor, hand pressed between her trembling legs as she wailed.

From the corner of her eye, she watched the Alpha scythe his cock into the waiting female, wrecking her with the madness of his need to release. Unlike Wren, the Beta gave him immediate relief, the Alpha's cry earsplitting.

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Bowed over, curled in on herself, Wren shut her eyes to it all.

When her father was called forward, even then she refused to rise to meet his gaze. Naked and shamed on the floor of a stranger's house, she sniffed, wishing she couldn't hear the terrible things that were said about her.

“Was she not trained?”

“My wife took great pains to explain what would be expected, sir. You have my humblest apologies that she failed, but if you are not going to take her as your new mate, you still owe for the tearing of her hymen. She will be harder to sell intact.”

Of course her father would try to weasel credits from this man...

The Alpha gave an incredulous laugh. “Your mute albino freak might be pretty to look at, but she is the worst fuck imaginable. If you think I'd expose that cunt to another Alpha in this city, you're wrong.”

“You owe me one-thousand credits for her virginity!” Her father never once came to her defense, never offered her comfort, he only tried to squeeze what he could from a far richer man. “The contract was clear. No matter the outcome of the first mating, a fee will be paid!”

The sound of ice hitting the side of crystal, the pour of liquor. Far calmer, the Alpha took a long sip. “The contract,” a smile in his voice, the Alpha purred, “is null and void if the merchandise is defective. You get nothing, Carson. She will be tagged and dumped in the Warrens and you will leave here grateful to be breathing.”

No! Ignoring sore muscles and the screaming pain between her legs, Wren scampered to her father and wrapped her arm around his leg. Signing frantically, she begged him for mercy.

He looked down at his pale, violet-eyed child, deadpan as he said, “I should have had you euthanized at birth.”