

DISCIPLE OF WRATH SNEAK PEEK

LENA

I never thought I'd miss my prison cell.

My hands shone ghostly white in the shadows of the tent, clean of their usual layer of grime. I picked at the dirt still wedged under my fingernails, wishing I felt as grand as they'd dressed me up to look. Despite my gown's layers of thick velvet and ruched sleeves, I felt naked as one of Gallo's marble sculptures. I'd been drenched in perfume somewhere along the way, too, and the flowery scent made my head hurt.

The crowd on the other side of the canvas buzzed with noise, eager to catch a glimpse of the newest Disciple of Wrath. They'd be looking for red-hot fury in my eyes when I emerged onto the stage. Violence and savagery, like a worthy disciple.

Maybe they thought I'd kill someone again.

I let out a deep breath, but it came out ragged with fear. The terror was sharp, piercing my stomach like a dagger.

I needed to convey anger when I got onto that stage. I needed to *be* anger. If anyone found out how ill-suited I was for this role, it would be prison again for me.

I wasn't going back to that cell.

Wrath means freedom, I reminded myself. Ten years on the High Court, and then I'm free.

The tent's flap opened behind me. I didn't turn my head, but I could see the bright patch of sunlight dance across the canvas in front of me, turning the shadowed material to warm brown.

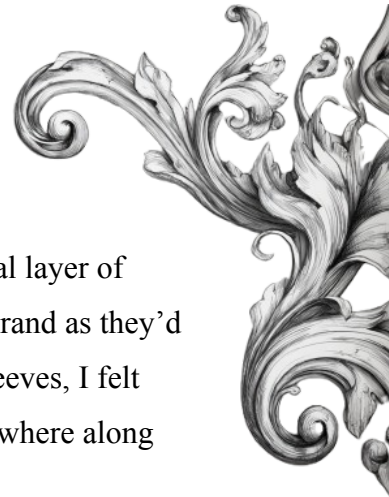
Someone entered, and then the flap fell again, plunging me and the newcomer back into shadow. Probably a cathedral priest or priestess, here to remind me of my role once my part in the ceremony began.

I turned to see a pair of green eyes looking right into mine.

"Wrath." I mumbled the greeting under my breath, my hands shaking.

"Not for long," he responded, his voice silky and furious. He took a step forward, moving to my side.

Tall and broad-shouldered, the previous Disciple of Wrath looked the part he'd played for the last ten years. Today he'd donned a long red cape over his blood-colored tunic, the color made rich and deep by the shadows.



He was refined, elegant, devastating... an expensive kind of anger, a luxury too rare for common consumption and all the more dangerous for it.

Not for the first time, I wondered what he'd done to be selected as Wrath. Rumor had it he'd once been a great artist, painting frescoes and chiseling marble sculptures, until he was arrested for burning down a rival's villa in a fit of rage.

The only other time I'd seen him was during my trial. The other disciples, particularly the seven virtues, had looked away as I pleaded for mercy. But Wrath had listened from his judgment seat on the High Court with a slight smile dusting his features. I'd felt his green eyes following me as they dragged me away.

They were on me again now, taking in the embroidered neckline of my garish crimson dress, the intricate maze of braids and curls in my red-brown hair. I forced myself to match his gaze. That naive girl who'd descended into the eternal night of Lucetto's dungeons a year ago was gone. She had to be.

Hopefully he thought my trembling was suppressed rage, not panic.

Through the tent now, I could hear the High Priest and Priestess giving a homily on the gospel of balance: man and woman, virtue and vice, wealth and poverty, joy and agony.

Feeling the ghost of shackles around my wrists, I added my own pair to the list: *captivity and liberty*.

"What will you do now that you're free?" I asked Wrath.

He sneered. "Now that you've stolen my position, you mean?" Tension vibrated through his words. "*Free* isn't exactly what I'd call it."

I took a step back as his voice rose, a reflex from years of watching my father's face for signs of danger.

Suddenly, the crowd in the piazza outside erupted. They must have uncovered the new marble statue of the god of Wrath. It would be my turn soon, and I still wasn't ready.

After a few minutes praising the statue and extolling the sculptor, the Priest and Priestess began their introduction of my predecessor. Next to me, Wrath adjusted his robe and ran a hand through his oiled hair.

He pulled a jeweled knife out from under his cloak and handed it to me. "The Disciple of Wrath has wielded this knife for generations. I'm well aware you know how to use it."

My stomach turned at the sight of the blade. Fighting down the bitter taste surging up my throat, I took the knife and tucked it down my dress.

Another roar from the crowd. At the sound, Wrath grabbed hold of the tent flap and stepped through. I winced at the sudden blinding sunlight, throwing up my hand to block it, and by the time I opened my eyes again the flap had closed. I stood alone in the darkness.

I couldn't see what Wrath was doing, but I could hear the crowd's ebb and flow as they reacted to him. The High Priest called out some of the highlights of his service, detailing judgments in which he'd participated during his tenure. When he brought up my trial, the crowd went mad.

Too soon, I heard the words that were meant to signal my entrance. "And now it's time for us to meet our new Wrath: Madalena di Stefano!"

Lena. I wanted to say. And don't call me by my father's name.

I couldn't bring myself to reach out and lift the tent flap, but I didn't have to. Someone outside the tent must have pulled something, because the whole face of the tent in front of me swept up, revealing me to the crowd. I forced myself not to wince at the brightness of the summer day. Instead, I trained my features into a mask of anger and rushed forward.

The audience exploded into shouts and gasps as I raged onto the pavilion, trying to look savage and fearsome in my voluptuous red gown. Two behemoth men grabbed me from behind before I reached the front of the stage, holding me back from the crowd. I twisted in their grasp, screaming and clawing as though I wanted to get loose but making sure not to actually slip out of their grip.

The crowd's fear and excitement hit me like a physical force. There were at least two hundred people packed into the cobblestone Piazza degli Dei, shouting and cheering at the sight of me. Flashes of red and orange fabric could be seen among them, and many wore wooden masks painted with angry faces. Around the square, the red-tiled roofs of Lucetto shone in the hot sun, and the great dome of the signoria's meeting hall soared above the other buildings.

To the side of the crowd, huge tents covered the wealthy families of Lucetto, the members of the signoria, from the brutal sun. They weren't cheering like the peasants, but their gazes were keenly fixed on me as I flamed against my restraints.

My two captors dragged me back to stand between the High Priest and High Priestess, who were trying fruitlessly to continue their speech over my howls. I barely knew what I was shouting, just pretended to be my father, screaming and spitting profanities like a madwoman.

I am Wrath. I have to be Wrath.

The edge of the crowd was less than ten feet in front of us, so I had a clear view of the fear on the people's faces. These were the same people that had watched as I was led, shackled and caked with dried blood, from the entrance of the city to the prison.

My gaze caught the eye of a young child in a muddied tunic. "I'll rip off your fingers!" I shouted at him, jerking against the guard's hold on me as though trying to break free. "I'll serve them to my dogs. They'll feed on your bloody heart!"

The boy turned into his mother's skirts, hiding his face from me.

From the roiling unease bubbling from the crowd, it seemed safe to settle down a bit, glaring at them all with nostrils flaring. I'd proven myself a monster.

"The god of Wrath will be pleased with his new disciple," the High Priest shouted. "A fearsome woman sizzling with rage."

The Priestess took over the description as the crowd roared in excitement. "Picture the grisly scene. Our new acolyte of Wrath was only sixteen when she took a knife in hand, anger blazing in her eyes, and plunged it right into her own father's heart."

The crowd gasped and screamed, though they knew the story already. Or *thought* they knew it. I doubted any of them knew the slippery feel of blood and metal on my fingers that day, the angry clatter of the toolbox he'd been holding as it fell from his twitching hand and crashed into the ground, how quickly the look of surprise faded from his brutish face...

That wasn't the story of how I killed my father, though.

That was the truth of it.

The knife Wrath had given me dug into my skin as I pulled against the men holding me. I could still feel the weight of a different knife in my palm.

The Priest waited for the crowd to settle before continuing. "When confronted with arrest for her heinous crime, she slaughtered four grown men before they finally got the shackles around her wrists. She gutted and skewered them with no remorse, just blind rage."

I barely managed to keep my face from revealing my surprise at *that*.

"In the prisons," he continued, "they called her the Lady of Death. She favors her knives, this one does, but her bare hands were weapon enough to throttle even the bravest of guards."

A ridiculous lie. Armed prison guards, scared of a single woman? And certainly the whole city would have heard of it if I'd killed *four guards*. But the people were lapping up the tale like spiced wine, cheering and whooping at the violence. I couldn't guess why the cathedral had chosen me for the High Court if they had to make up lies to convince people I was worthy, but whatever the reason, it meant my freedom. Or would, if I could maintain the facade long enough.

I elbowed one of the guards behind me, eliciting a grunt from him, and twisted around, ready to pretend I'd prove the High Priestess's words right here on the stage.

I was too quick for the two men, however, and without meaning to, I slipped out of their restraining hold.

One second, then two. My shock was mirrored back in the faces of the guards, my wrists hanging unbound at my sides.

Wrath. You have to convince them you're Wrath.

I recovered from the panicked pause first, my arm shooting out and my fingers curling around the second guard's throat. A flicker of fear flashed in his hazel eyes, but he didn't go for his weapon.

Stop me, you fool!

Thankfully, his fellow guard finally jolted into action and tried to push me off. I screamed something about Wrath's bloody vengeance into the first guard's face, spraying the poor man with spittle. Relief coursed through me as I let his companion shove me away. If the High Priest was going to claim I could best four guards with ease, the least he could do would be to provide more than two inept ones to hold me.

Apparently he felt the same, for I'd barely released the first guard's throat when several more men with the guardhouse sigil on their tunics raced forward and grabbed me. I threw my arms out to twist out of their grip, but these ones were prepared, and before long they'd thrown me to the stage and shackled my hands together behind my back. My chest heaved and my knee ached where I'd hit the ground, but I could see the apprehension in the guard's faces, feel the wild fear of the crowd below.

I repressed a victorious smile and instead scowled fiercely.

As the guards jerked me back to standing, the Priestess cleared her throat and started into her monologue again, eyeing me with an annoyed expression. "As monstrous as this woman is, wrath is an integral part of the balance within us. Righteous anger is the foundation of justice. Even this black-hearted soul has a place on the High Court. Where Peace sits at the right, its shadow, Wrath, sits at the left."

There were a few brave boos from the crowd, so I jumped against the men's hold on me again and shouted out a threat about murdering the whole crowd with my bone knife.

How long, exactly, would the ceremony last? I was running out of foul things to threaten the assembly with, and it was blazing hot in the direct sun, especially after my brief tussle with the guards. Sweat wetted the hair at the nape of my neck and dripped down the small of my back, and the heavy fabric of my dress clung to my damp skin. Frosino, the previous

Wrath, looked fresh and cool even in his heavy cloak as he stood at the side of the platform like a statue.

But apparently that was all the time the High Priest and Priestess wanted to spend with me, for the finished with a few more lines and signaled to the previous Wrath. He walked toward us, sweeping the cloak off his shoulders in a graceful swoop.

The crowd went silent, holding their breaths. The High Priest and Priestess stepped back as Wrath took his place in front of me, his back to the people of Lucetto. With my wrists bound behind me and seven guards in a stony clump around us, all I could do was watch him approach with wary eyes.

When he reached me, he leaned in to whisper in my ear. I could almost feel the audience straining to hear, but his words landed softly, only for me. "You're more powerful than any of them. And someday, they'll know it."

He solemnly laid the heavy cloak onto my shoulders, over my bound hands, and tied the clasp at my neck. It was heavier than I'd guessed. The crowd's silence broke as he stepped away, but I barely heard their shouts and cheers. My gaze followed Wrath, confused by his unexpected kindness.

His name was just Frosino now, I reminded myself. *I was Wrath.*

The orchestra began to play again, the tabor pounding an angry rhythm and two more musicians slicing out a savage melody on gut-strung lutes.

The High Priestess put a hand to my elbow. Her fingertips barely skimmed the surface of my new cloak, as though my evil were contagious. "Well met, Wrath," she said, ever so gently pushing me to exit at the side of the platform. The curl of her lip betrayed her lie.

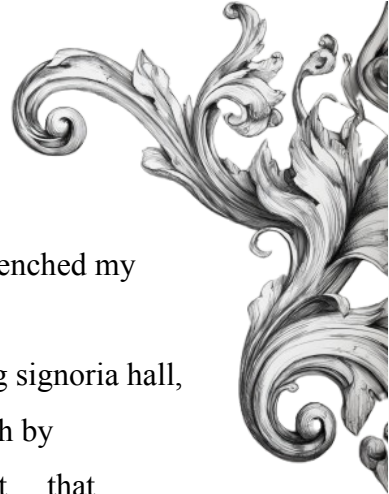
I didn't respond, not even to feign anger. At this point, the less I spoke the easier it was to mask my emotions. With my heart pounding and my eyes stinging with tears, I wasn't sure I even knew which emotions I was feeling. They all seemed to be hitting at once.

As we exited the platform, we moved closer to the noble families seated under the colorful canopies. Gathering my courage, I shouted out a nasty comment about what I was going to do to their children, eliciting a few gasps. My eye was drawn, however, to a dark-haired young woman seated in the shadows, about my age of twenty-one, wearing a stunning gold dress. She was the type of woman who drew one's gaze and knew exactly what to do with it. Like the others, she was staring at me, but she didn't look down at my feet, or at the heavy cloak draped on my shoulders.

Just like Wrath, this girl looked me dead in the eye.

When she saw me looking back, her lip curled into a smile

DANTE



“Dante Rossi, stop that leg from shaking. I feel like I’m in an earthquake.”

I glared at Lady Mancini next to me, but she glared right back. Sighing, I clenched my toes to keep both legs from shaking so wildly.

If only there really were an earthquake. How nice it would be if this echoing signoria hall, with its high dome and stuffy air, would come toppling down to bury me. Death by earthquake would be a delight compared to watching the girl I loved marry that... that...

My leg was shaking again. I let out a deep breath, but it didn’t seem to help.

The signoria hall was lifeless as a mausoleum compared to the wild excitement of the square during Wrath’s announcement. The new disciple, Madalena di Stefano, had been a sight to behold this morning, raging across the stage like that. I’d watched her from under the bright canopies with the other nobles, silently wishing the madwoman would slip her captors just long enough to punch our *honorable* High Priest in the face.

I knew from experience how satisfying the resulting crunch would have been.

But even in the midst of a cheering crowd, there’d been a buzz of tension in my chest. Seeing some foul-mouthed mountain girl put on the show of the century wasn’t enough to distract me from my dread.

Now, four hours later, the buzzing had heightened to an angry swarm of hornets. As the High Priestess droned on about promises and eternities, I could barely breathe.

Portia was actually going to go through with this. She was going to marry Domenico, and all I could do was sit here in a sea of pompous nobles, watching the girl I loved wed a man forty years her senior.

The hall was slathered in flowers and sculptures, and the dais itself was leafed with gold. Tall candles flickered along the central aisle, their tendrils of smoke snaking up toward the frescoed dome ceiling.

My fingers clenched around the edge of my chair as Portia and Domenico emerged from behind a soaring marble pillar and stepped onto the dais. A shaft of light illuminated the pair from above, as though the gods themselves were peering down to watch this farce.

Curses, she was beautiful. Drops of amber and topaz sparkled in Portia’s long midnight hair, and light from the high windows glittered off the jeweled clasps and intricate beading of her expensive golden gown. My stomach twisted at the sight of her.

Next to her, Domenico Alessandri looked like a stuffed peacock. His ruddy face peeked out from a mountain of lynx fur and blue velvet as he eyed his new bride. The thought of his meaty hands on her sent a spiral of anger through my whole body. The man who ran Lucetto could have chosen anyone for a wife, and he'd picked *her*.

I leaned forward, trying to read the emotion on her face. I wanted her to look reluctant. I *needed* her not to want this.

But not wanting *him* and not wanting his money were two very different things, and I knew Portia well enough to read the excitement in her flushed cheeks. She wasn't marrying Domenico today, she was marrying the Alessandri fortune.

I shook my head, looking away.

I wished I could have sat next to my best friend Bastian, but as the son of the groom, he had a place in the front row. Despite the summer heat, he was draped in an extravagant cloak like his father, his hat almost toppling under the weight of a massive white feather.

The ornate clothing and opulent decorations served an important purpose, a reminder to all of Lucetto's richest fools assembled for the *matrimonium* that the Alessandris owned Lucetto and everyone in it. No wonder Portia couldn't resist the appeal.

Maybe I was the fool. My father had told me for years that Portia would break my heart, and I hadn't listened. It was probably the only good advice he'd ever given me.

At the thought of my father, I suddenly noticed his absence. Turning back, I checked every corner of the hall, but I didn't see him. Lady Mancini next to me scowled as I swiveled even further, but I ignored her and her idiot husband. Where was he? He wouldn't miss this chance to preen in front of Domenico Alessandri for anything.

My attention snapped back to the dias when the High Priestess finished her droll sermon and turned to Domenico, asking if he would pledge his heart and loyalty to Portia.

This was it.

With a smug grin spread across his face, Bas's father winked at Portia and said, "I do."

I ground my teeth, my hands still clutching my chair's sides with white-knuckled intensity. The man in front of me shifted, and I leaned to the side to keep Portia in my sightline.

The High Priest turned to her and recited the same question the High Priestess had asked Alessandri.

Portia pulled her gaze away from Domenico and turned her head in my direction. She must have known all along where I was in the crowd, for her tracking eyes found me immediately. She looked me straight in the eye, and try as I might, I couldn't turn away from

her piercing gaze. She was the sun, I thought. Resplendent, but unfeeling. Searing through this mortal world without a second thought.

“I do,” she said, and then looked back up to Domenico with a sickly ardor on her face. It was a convincing act, and though I knew it for the pretense it was, my heart shattered into a thousand pieces.

When she’d looked at me like that, she’d meant it.

Suddenly the smell of smoke in the summer heat was suffocating. I had to get out of this place.

I was on the end of the row, so at least I didn’t have to climb over anyone to get out. I stumbled out of my chair, ignoring the glances of nearby nobles as I forced myself to walk calmly to the back of the chapel. A few people muttered in sympathy, and I knew my olive cheeks must be stained red. At the door, I turned back for one last glance at the happy couple as Domenico took Portia by the right hand. Her eyes flitted toward me.

I silently slipped out the back.

As I left the central hall of the signoria into the hallway, I tried not to think about the way Portia’s eyes used to light up when she saw my head pop up over her garden wall, about years of dreams and smiling whispers, the clasped hands and sun-soaked kisses now in ashes on the cold marble floor. But anger sizzled under my skin, and the image of them on that dias together consumed my vision.

I envied the new Wrath, allowed to act like a complete savage on the stage this morning in the name of her god. The rest of us had to hide our rage under polite conversation.

My mother used to worry at my temper, for good reason it would seem. I wanted to break something. To break *everything*, and the only reason the statues lining the corridor were safe from being smashed to bits is because I refused to give Portia the satisfaction of my rage.

I had no idea what scheming or seducing she’d done to win the hand of Bas’s father, but whatever it was, it had clearly worked. She’d told me she would find a way, and she had. The thought made me so angry I could barely breathe.

Maybe just one statue.

The signoria’s meeting hall was a public space, but it might as well have been owned by the Alessandris. The wide hallway around me was crowded with statues and paintings they’d commissioned from the city’s artisans, and a bust of Domenico’s father was just *pleading* to be thrown against the wall.

My hands were itching toward it when my father, the newest Disciple of Charity, slunk around the corner ahead of me, absorbed in conversation with Maso Conti. Immediately, I

ducked behind a statue and out of sight. The last thing my boiling temper needed right now was to be subjected to my father's pompous nonsense, and the last time I'd thrown something valuable and heavy at his head, he'd refused to speak to me for three months.

On the other hand, not a bad three months.

I narrowed my eyes, watching as Maso nodded at something my father said. Whatever their topic of conversation, it brought a dark glee to my father's face.

Maso was the worst guard our family's bank employed. He was also the best-paid. A bruise of a man, he was useful for any number of tasks too unsavory to soil the hands of the Rossi patriarch.

When I struck the corrupt High Priest during one of his visits to the bank, Maso was the one who convinced him not to send me before the court.

He'd returned from that "conversation" with bloody knuckles and a crooked grin. "I can see why you'd want to strike a face like that," he'd said.

Whether Maso's fists or the hefty sum Father paid toward the temple's new garden the next week was to thank, I never faced charges for the assault.

Whatever Father was talking to Maso about here in the signoria hall must be important. For Wrath's sake, he'd missed the entire wedding! He handed the guard one of the small bags for money we used at the bank. Maso weighed it expertly in his hand and then tucked it away inside his tunic and headed toward the exit.

"Maso," my father called out, and the man stopped, turning back.

"It must be tonight."

He nodded and slipped out.

My father lingered, his back to me as he looked after Maso's retreating form.

Curses, he was playing with fire, paying off his man for something right in the middle of the signoria hall! What if someone else had walked out early and seen the exchange?

And what was happening tonight?

If I wanted to know what in Pride's name my father was up to, now was my chance. In a few moments, as soon as the wedding ended, the doors would open and wedding guests would pour into the corridor.

"Father," I called out softly, stepping out from behind the statue.

He turned slowly, giving himself enough time to mask whatever expression had been on his face. He smoothed his hair with a careful hand. It was just as dark and curly as mine, but he kept his well-trimmed and compliant.

I studied his face, trying to guess at his dealings with Maso. Whatever his plans, he hadn't included me in them.

When he spoke, his voice was deep and low, a perfect imitation of the somber High Priest. "What a happy week for the Alessandris. First, Domenico is selected for the High Court as the Disciple of Humility, and now he weds a beautiful new wife. Portia is happier than I've ever seen her."

I narrowed my eyes, determined not to show how deeply his comment cut.

There was a time we'd been allies, my father and I. Or perhaps we'd both just been allies with my mother, and now that she was gone, there was nothing to hold us together.

"Bas's father wouldn't have been my first choice as *Humility* of all things," I said carefully, "but he's still better suited than other disciples I can think of."

My father's jaw tightened. "I'm Charity now, Dante," he huffed. "That title demands respect."

"Even if it was well paid for."

Like the other disciples of virtue and vice, Father had purportedly been chosen for adherence to his deity's defining characteristic. But I was a banking man, too, and I'd seen the accounts. Father gave far more to the priest's countinghouses each month than to the poor.

And it was the worst-kept secret in Lucetto that Father wasn't alone in his bribes. Maestro Mancini, the new Industry, had fingers in the slave trade, and everyone knew the newest Disciple of Virtue's wife was alone in her bedchambers more often than not. The peasants they chose for vices seemed authentic enough, but thinking about the disciples of virtue called for the next ten years, I could almost hear the clink of coins exchanging hands.

My father turned to go in a huff, but I called out to stop him. "I only hope that your new responsibilities will not pull you away from the bank. There's business to be done with the signoria today, and yet I find you here in the hallway, talking to Maso. What were you paying him for just now?"

Father's face paled, but he waved his hand as though tossing the question aside. "I'm encouraged to hear that at eighteen you're *finally* bothering to care about our family's holdings, but my business with Maso was routine. Now, if you will excuse me." He nodded once, eyes glinting, and then turned away in a sweep of his cloak just as the door to the hall opened and the first few guests trickled out.

As I watched him go, uneasiness settled in my chest.

Charity, indeed.