



The Grotto

3 Years Before the Events of Disciple of Wrath

PORTIA

Dante gave her one of his roguish smiles.

A *peasant* girl. The daughter of an apothecary. She wasn't even that pretty, with those strange, mismatched eyes, and *Cece* was a preposterous name.

Bas often handed out those kinds of smiles, the ones that lived in the eyebrows and the dimples more than the lips, with the ease only an Alessandri could afford. But stoic, surly Dante held them carefully. Usually he only shared them with one person.

With *me*.

As soon as he flashed her that smile, I decided it.

Today is the day Dante Rossi kisses me for the first time.



CECE

My father would hate this.

My stomach crawled with guilt at the expectant look on Dante's face. Should I pretend to admire this newly built artificial grotto, carved with such cold, lifeless precision?

"Beautiful, isn't it?" Dante asked, smiling back at me.

The son of my father's new patron had invited me here not just to meet his friends, the dashing Alessandri heir and the icy Moretti girl, but also because as a sculptor's daughter, he thought I'd love the artisanship of this place.

It was impressive, I had to admit. The artisans had been masters of their craft. When I'd followed the noble trio into this cavern below the Moretti's sprawling gardens, I'd been surprised by the scale of it. A statue of Peace, at least ten metres tall, graced the middle of a shaded pool, pouring water from an ewer in a fountain cascade.

She was beautiful, yes. Her gentle shoulders, the careful curl of her hair. But she was stiff and lifeless in a way that cried of paralysis, not peace.

The arched ceiling far above our heads traced the story of mortality in carved relief: a young babe sleeping, a studious youth with quill and parchment, a young man wearing the emblems of war, an old man with the robes of the signoria, and the puckered fabric of a burial shroud. The phases of a man's life, circling above us.

It should move me, this journey through life and death. It should lift me, swallow me, challenge me, save me like my father's statues usually did, but it didn't. The faces were perfectly blank. The possibilities within my imagination were stifled in rigid, unyielding poses. The entire relief was there to impress, not inspire.

How could someone with such skill take something as unpredictable as water, as wild and ancient as stone, and make them feel so... hopeless?

"It's masterfully done," I finally answered Dante, hoping he mistook my hesitancy for awe.

"Her father's work is inspiring," Dante said to the others. "I know art is meant to honor balance, but his sculptures show the truth of it."

"If you're a lover of art," Portia said serenely, her gaze fixed on Rossi, "Bas should show you the painting of Humility up in the entry hall. It's breathtaking."

"Me?" the Alessandri heir asked, eyeing me with distaste. "It's your family's villa."

"I think that's a wonderful idea," Dante interjected, looking appraisingly at Portia. "Portia and I will stay down here for a bit."

Not exactly subtle, this Dante.

Bastian Alessandri gave his friends a withering look, but with a silent gesture at me to follow, he led the way back up out of the grotto. It was a relief to step back into the fresh air, alive with the scent of fragrant blooms.

"You seemed quite engrossed in the grandeur of the Moretti's grotto," Bastian said as we emerged, flashing me a flirtatious smile. "I, too, am an admirer of beauty."

He winked. How embarrassing for him. He was handsome, taller than Dante by far, but his features were *too* perfect. He would be abysmally boring to draw.

He smelled delightful, though, a mix of cinnamon and citrus.

"I find true admiration of beautiful things is accompanied by silence," I retorted.

The smile vanished from his face.

His pace increased, and I could barely keep up with his long legs as we entered the door from the garden back into the Moretti's villa. Our footsteps echoed hollowly against the terracotta tiles.

"I'm not sure what you hoped for, begging an invitation today," he said stiffly.

His footsteps remained steady, but mine stumbled with a staccato of surprised steps. The childish fiend! "I did no such thing. Your friend thought I'd like to see the grotto."

"Dante is kind but easily guided. You likely thought by coming here today you could win his admiration. A hope quenched by his eagerness to be rid of you just now, I'm sure. But still, an acquaintance with those of us from such noble families... it must be appealing to someone of your low birth."

I stopped walking, right there in the middle of the corridor. "You thought I came today with the intent to capture Dante's affections?"

He stopped too, turning back to me with the smirk of a boy who'd never been denied anything in his life. "Of course. He would have been easy prey, were he not already lovesick for Portia. But he is not for you, nor are any of us interested in befriending a poor merchant girl."

"Fortunately for me. I cannot imagine a more tragic fate than being friends with you."

The idiot had the gall to look surprised at my censure. "You expect me to believe you aren't interested in the connection?"

"I'm sure you can't imagine why I'm not falling at your feet."

He let out an offended laugh. "Do you think me arrogant?"

I shook my head. "Actually, *Signor Alessandri*, I think you're a coward."



BASTIAN

A coward. A *coward*!

This ridiculous girl thought that *I* was a coward! And after I condescended to escort a sculptor's daughter around as though she were a noblewoman. I'd even flirted a little!

This is what happened when you interacted with the merchant class. At least the beggars on the street *knew* their place.

She was too pretty for her own good, and it had clearly gone to her head. Her dark skin was creamy and smooth, her smile unburdened with irony, her one dark eye a perfect complement to the silver. She probably didn't even realize what a gift it was to hold the attention of an Alessandri. Pride above, maybe she didn't even know who my family *was*. It was almost enough to engender pity.

I bestowed my signature languid smile upon her, letting my eyes linger on her lips in a way intended to make her blush.

It worked.

“And what’s your definition of a coward, Cecelia?”

To her credit, she didn’t duck her head to cover the blush spreading across her cheeks. With her skin color, it brought the warmth out in her tone. She narrowed her eyes at me.

“I’d say a coward is someone who hurls insults at the barest hint of a slight. You’re afraid of appearing foolish, so you hide behind disdain.”

“And you feel that describes *me*? You think I, Bastian Alessandri, son of the head of the signoria and heir to the Alessandri House, is afraid of what a girl like you thinks of me?”

“I do.”

Not even the barest hint of hesitation.

This girl was *fun*. Irritating and far too confident for someone with nothing but insults to offer, but *fun*. In fact, I didn’t mind playing a few more rounds.

I tapped my chin thoughtfully. “You know, cowardice isn’t a vice. Not truly. The real vices are Envy, Sloth, Lust, Gluttony, Wrath, Greed... and then, of course, there’s Pride.” I gave her a weighted look. “A vice I think you’re far more familiar with than me.”

Her eyes widened. “You accuse *me* of pride?”

“I made no accusations. Perhaps it is your own conscience that tears at you so.”

“Me! You are the most arrogant boy I’ve ever known!”

I shrugged. “Pride is merely confidence if it’s well founded.”

She shook her head at me in disbelief, but then something strange happened. The way she pressed her lips together, it wasn’t as if she were fighting with disgust or anger, it was almost as if she were battling...

And then she burst out laughing. *Laughter*. She’d been battling the urge to giggle. She placed a hand in front of her mouth to hide her mirth, as though her eyes weren’t laughing right along with it and giving her away.

She had an enchanting, girlish laugh, and I couldn’t help but join her.

“You are the most arrogant boy I’ve ever known,” she repeated, but it sounded quite different than it had before.

Curse Dante for actually being right for once. Cece was going to be a rather welcome addition to our trio. Especially if Dante and Portia were determined to pair off.

“Well,” I said, crossing my arms as she continued to try to control her giggles, “I suppose you’ll just have to keep me humble, Cecilia di Umberto.”



DANTE

Curses, this place was gorgeous. It was why I'd brought Cece. As the daughter of an artist, she was in a unique position to appreciate it. Unlike a natural grotto, this place's whole purpose was to be beautiful. Maestro Moretti had raged against such an unnecessary expense, but his wife, as usual, had prevailed.

Portia's father might not understand the power of beauty, but her mother did. And it extended far beyond architectural splendor.

Signora Moretti hadn't planned and overseen the construction of Portia's beauty like this grotto, but she saw the power in it, and she had taught her daughter how to wield it well. Portia knew exactly what she was doing, fluttering her lashes at me in that way. I knew it too, but that didn't mean it wasn't effective.

Thank goodness Bas had understood my silent pleading to take Cece to view the painting. Bas was friendly and entertaining enough to get along with anyone, so our new friend would be fine, and now I had a blessed few unchaperoned minutes with Portia.

"What do you think of Cecilia?" I asked Portia, breathing in the air of the cavern. It didn't smell damp, like a real grotto would. It smelled like the eucalyptus leaves adorning vases throughout the space.

She took a few steps towards me, letting her hand skim against the wall. I found myself fascinated by the light touch of her dainty fingers on the rough stone.

"She's beautiful."

She was, and yet...

"Not as beautiful as you," I blurted out.

I reddened at my own pitiful response, but Portia's plump lips curled into a pleased smile.

"I should probably have kept her away from Bas," I added.

"Why? Jealous?"

I wrinkled my nose. "No, of course not. But he falls in love too quickly."

A gentle raise of her raven-dark eyebrows. "Some might say you're far too slow about it."

My face warmed. She'd stopped moving towards me, just a breath away now, but her hand was still resting lightly on the wall.

Hesitantly, *slowly*, I reached up and placed mine on hers.

Feather-light touch. Smooth, soft skin. A shudder raced through me.

I was so in love with this girl.

“On the contrary,” I said, then paused to swallow nervously. Every sound echoed in this place, and my gulp was as loud as thunder. “I think I’ve been in love for as long as I can remember.”

Her blue eyes were usually sharp as ice, but they melted at my words, liquid and deep as the pool around us.

Where our hands met on the wall, I wove my fingers through hers. They were soft as silk.

“And who was it that captured your heart so long ago?” she asked. A thrill shot through me at the waver in her voice.

Using our entwined hands, I pulled her gently toward me and took her other hand, too. She smelled like roses and a million tomorrows.

I was a soppy fool, and at that moment I didn’t care.

I rested my forehead against hers, resisting the impulse to close my eyes. Her lips were achingly close.

“I think, Portia Moretti,” I whispered, just before pressing my lips to hers, “that you might just break my heart one day.”

She smiled up at me, her blue eyes twinkling. “Sounds like fun.”