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512 pages

Extrait

THE LION AND THE ROSE Chapter One You are as wise as you are perfect.—Rodrigo Borgia to Giulia Farnese
GIULIA You'd think that the Holy Father would have an all-seeing gaze, wouldn't you? Being God's Vicar here on earth, surely he would be granted divine sight into the hearts and souls of men as soon as that silly papal hat everyone insisted on calling a tiara was lowered onto his brow. The truth is, most popes don't have divine insight into much of anything. If they did, they'd get on with the business of making saints and saving souls rather than pronouncing velvet gowns impious or persecuting the poor Jews. Blasphemy it may be, but most popes have no more insight into the minds of humanity than does any carter or candlestick maker walking the streets of Rome in wooden clogs. And my Pope was no exception. He was the cleverest man I knew in some ways—those dark eyes of his had only to pass benignly over his bowing cardinals to know exactly which ones were scheming against him, and certainly that despicable French King had learned not to cross wits or swords with Rodrigo Borgia over the past year and a half since I'd been ransomed. But when it came to his family, His Holiness Pope Alexander VI was as dense as a plank. At least at the moment he was a very happy plank. "Mi familia," he said thickly, and began to raise his goblet but put it down again to dash a heavy hand at the water standing in his eyes. "My children all together again. Cesare, Lucrezia, Joffre—Juan—"

The loathsome young Duke of Gandia preened, sitting at his father's right where Rodrigo could easily reach out to touch his favorite son's shoulder. Juan Borgia, twenty years old now and returned from his lands in Spain. Although he was a duke, a husband, even a father (Holy Virgin, fetch me a basin!)—that auburn-haired young lout looked no different to me, lolling in his chair fiddling with his dagger hilt, already halfway through his cup of wine and giving me the occasional leer over the rim. I'd heaved a great sigh that afternoon, watching him strike a pose before the cheering crowd as he disembarked from his Spanish ship. My lover's second son had been wearing silly stockings embroidered in rays and crowns, and I'd realized just how much I'd been hoping never to see Juan or his ridiculous clothes or his leer again. As soon as I heard Rodrigo had summoned Juan from Spain to take command of the papal forces against the French, I prayed so devoutly for a shipwreck. You'd think someone nicknamed the Bride of Christ could get the occasional prayer answered, wouldn't you? But if I wasn't exactly thrilled to see Juan or his silly stockings again, my Pope was—he had rushed from his elaborate sedan chair across the docks to embrace his son in a great sweep of embroidered papal robes, kissing both his cheeks and uttering a great many ecstatic things in Catalan which he saved for moments of high emotion. Nobody else had missed Juan when he departed Rome for Barcelona to take possession of the Spanish duchy and the Spanish bride my Pope had inveigled for his favorite son—but my Pope certainly had. And nothing would do but to gather the whole family together for an intimate evening cena in the Holy Father's private apartments at the Vatican. And what apartments! Just a modest little nest of rooms in the Vatican where the Holy Father could remove his jeweled cope (along with the weight of all Christendom) and relax at the end of the evening like any ordinary man. But Rodrigo Borgia would have nothing ordinary. He had declared he would have the papal apartments new-made, stamped and decorated with a flair that said nothing but Borgia. It had taken two years, but that little painter Maestro Pinturicchio had finally finished the frescoes that had been designed especially for the Holy Father's personal rooms, and the resulting splendor left all Rome gasping. Our small cena tonight had been set in the Sala dei Santi: the long table draped with sumptuous brocades and set with solid silver dishes and fragile Murano glass; the ceiling arched overhead painted in double crowns and the Borgia bull; the frescoes framed with geometric Moorish patterns in a blaze of colors, imported straight from Spain. Pinturicchio had used us all as models for his various scenes—Lucrezia dimpled and tossed her blond head under the beseeching figure of herself on the wall as Santa Caterina; inscrutable Cesare lounged under his own image as inscrutable Emperor Maximilian in a massive throne; fourteen-year-old Joffre pranced in the painted crowd as one of the background figures; and Juan cut a ridiculous figure on the wall in a silly Turkish mantle as a

turbaned heathen. I was a Madonna in one of the other chambers, with my Laura on my lap for the Christ child. “Surely it’s blasphemous to have a girl sit as model for our Lord!” Maestro Pinturicchio had protested. “Any more blasphemous than to have a harlot sit for the Madonna?” I’d countered, the Holy Virgin’s blue veil swinging about my face like a joke. I’d never asked to be a notorious woman; I’d been raised for a husband and children like any other girl of noble birth, but here I was. I’d made my own choices, and I made no bones either about what it made me—but I’d been determined to have my Laura in the frescoes along with all the other Borgia children. Maestro Pinturicchio had taken one look at the set of my chin and begun sketching. A nice little man, ugly as the day was long, but skilled. His wife was the most notorious harpy in Rome, and I gave him a rose-quartz and crystal bracelet to give her in the hopes it would sweeten her temper. It hadn’t, but he thanked me anyway, and he made Laura look very pretty indeed in our Madonna-and-Child fresco. Though the halo certainly didn’t suit her; she was a full three years old now and a proper little imp! Rodrigo was still looking about the table with misty eyes, and I ceased my musing. “It’s not just Our own children here tonight,” he continued, beaming like any proud father despite the regal papal We. “Our new children as well. Sancha—” Young Joffre’s Neapolitan wife, Sancha of Aragon, was making doe eyes at Cesare through the candlelight, but she dropped her lashes demurely at her father-in-law. “—and of course Lucrezia’s Giovanni Sforza is here in our thoughts, if not the flesh. A pity he could not join Us—” Lucrezia giggled behind her hand, not looking very put out about that. My Pope had called her back from her husband’s home in Pesaro last winter for a long visit, declaring he could not do without his dear daughter any longer, and certainly I’d been delighted to see Lucrezia again, both of us chattering and gossiping in the Palazzo Santa Maria just like the old days when she’d been a little girl dreaming of marriage—but she had certainly not seemed inclined to go back to her new home now that she was married. I suppose Pesaro’s provincial pleasures had worn rather thin after two years. Lord Sforza had stamped off home this spring, muttering of duties that could not be put off, and he’d stamped off alone. “And a pity your beautiful Maria Enriques could not travel with you from Spain,” Rodrigo continued, giving Juan’s arm another pat. “We would have liked to see Our new daughter.” “She begged to come, but she’s breeding again.” Juan shrugged, rotating the silver stem of his wine goblet between restless fingers. “I’m happy enough to leave her behind. The cow is always weeping and praying.” “Now, now,” Rodrigo chuckled. “She’ll be mother to another Borgia prince soon!” He gave an indulgent shake of his head and raised his goblet. “No matter. All of us are together again. As it should be.” His children raised their goblets too, but I couldn’t help noticing that not everybody looked entirely pleased to see la familia Borgia reunited. Joffre was sulking, squashed in beside Juan and ignored by Sancha, and as for Cesare . . . “La familia,” said the Holy Father. “La familia,” everyone echoed, and the look Cesare sent his brother across the table could have kindled the napkins. “So,” I said brightly as a stream of papal servants entered with massive silver dishes, “how was the crossing from Spain? Did the waves stay smooth for the Duke of Gandia?” “Smooth enough,” Juan said, eyes flickering to my breasts. “I suppose your Duchess will be very much distressed to have you gone.” Myself, I’d have thrown a great party in celebration. Juan shrugged again, clearly not interested in his wife. His eyes went to Cesare as the first dishes were laid before us on the cena table. “So, brother. Hostage to the French, were you? I hear you ran away.” “Escaped,” said Cesare. He was a dark shadow among the candles—in his plain black velvets he seemed to eat the light and refuse to give it back again. “The Holy Father and I arranged it all. I escaped as a groom shortly after we set out from Rome.” “Ran,” Juan grinned. “He was ever so brave,” Sancha cooed in her milky-sweet voice. She and Joffre had been recalled from their official seat in Naples to Rome that May, and it hadn’t taken me more than a week to start despising that velvety purr of hers. I’d met Sancha only once, at her wedding to little Joffre when he was twelve and Sancha four years older, and that occasion had been quite enough to make me think we weren’t destined to be the best of friends. And when Sancha took an idle look at Leonello at her welcoming banquet and told me, “Your dwarf is a fine specimen; have you ever considered breeding him? I have the most cunning little juggling woman—” Well, after that I’d started calling her the Tart of Aragon, and I knew I’d happily watch her choke to death on a fish bone. “Try the carp, Sancha,” I suggested, but she was talking over me and toying with the pearl pendant about her neck to draw attention to her breasts. “Cesare left all his

baggage behind, you know.” She left off the pendant long enough to hold her wine cup to be refilled again—she certainly could put it away! “And when King Charles went to look, he saw that all those chests that were supposed to be filled with coin and silver plate had nothing but stones under a top layer of ducats! You could hear the scream all the way in Rome.” Juan gave Sancha’s breasts an automatic glance, but his attention was all for his brother. “I expect I’ll do better than run when I see the French, brother.” Cesare toyed with his table knife. “You’ll send the French packing, boy!” my Pope said warmly. He’d left off his ecclesiastical robes, and in his embroidered doublet and linen shirtsleeves he could have been any merchant father or ducal paterfamilias: the proud and swarthy Spaniard surrounded by children who all looked like him. “We taught them a lesson at Fornovo; now you’ll finish them off.” Really, after all that fuss the French had made declaring they would annex all of Naples and the papal territories too before they were done, everything had petered out so embarrassingly. Well, embarrassing if you were French. After they got their poxy noses bloodied at Fornovo and had to flee back north, my Pope made me a present straight from the French King’s own abandoned baggage: a certain diary in execrable handwriting, detailing the ladies who had shared the royal bed on campaign, with descriptions of their skills. “No, thank you,” I’d said, wrinkling my nose. “Are you sure?” Rodrigo had turned the pages with great interest. “There are a few ideas here. Requiring a bit more flexibility than I’m capable of at my age, to be sure . . .” “Really, Rodrigo,” I’d scolded. “Dirty stories? Whatever happened to giving a woman flowers?” “Then flowers you shall have.” And I’d acquired a pretty little set of diamond roses to clip into my braided hair. Every time the Tart of Aragon looked at them I could see her little nose twitch with lust. Her little nose was usually twitching with lust of one kind or another. For the past two months it had been twitching for Cesare, in whose lap she appeared to be dandling her hand under cover of the damask tablecloth. She didn’t have a glance for poor little Joffre—he’d grown to a tall gangly youth, but he still seemed like a child to me, sulking in the shadow of his voluptuous wife and his taller, handsomer brothers. I tried to engage him in the conversation—“You’ll be next on the battlefield after your brothers, Joffre!”—but he pushed his lip out in sullen silence and I finally gave up and stabbed at my roast capon, which had been taken off the spit too soon and was now oozing red juice all over my plate like it had been wounded rather than cooked. You’d think the Pope would eat better than anyone else in the Holy City, but you’d be wrong. It wasn’t fair, this reputation he’d acquired for dissipation and luxury—my Pope was so indifferent to what he ate, he didn’t care if the Vatican cooks fed him or his guests on bread and water. Anyone who wanted a decent meal at the Pope’s table had better hope they were eating at the Palazzo Santa Maria, where I presided over the table and my fierce Carmelina Mangano held sway in the kitchens. Carmelina would have taken one look at this half-raw chicken and the burned focaccia and the salad with too many capers and gone down to the Vatican kitchens to whack off a few heads. I pushed my plate away. All this *la familia* tension was giving me a headache, and I always eat when I have a headache, but this food was past enjoying. Besides, I was starting to get just a bit plump again—some women might be able to stay wand-slim no matter what they ate, but my dresses got tight if I even looked at a plate of *tourtes*. So very unfair. At least food like this was easy to push away. “So you’re to be Gonfalonier?” Sancha was bubbling now at Juan. “Our bold leader against the French! I see bravery in the Borgias isn’t limited to just one brother!” “One might doubt that,” Cesare murmured. “My husband wanted to lead the papal forces, you know.” Lucrezia laughed. “Can you imagine? He has trouble enough with those Pesarese captains of his, and now he wants papal soldiers! He thinks he’s Alexander the Great, you know; too ridiculous—” Sancha tittered and Juan guffawed; even Rodrigo had a chuckle at his son-in-law’s expense, and I couldn’t blame him either because Lord Sforza had gotten very sour this past year and spent most of his last visit pestering my Pope for money. But I couldn’t help looking at Lucrezia—sixteen years old now but as poised as a woman of twice as many years, wearing a purple-and-crimson gown cut as low as Sancha’s, rubies in her ears and rouge patted on her cheeks and a ring on every finger. She looked eager and glittering, greedy for every eye to be on her, and I thought back to the gently glowing girl who had first blushed at her new husband over my *cena* table. Well, such girls grew up. And Lucrezia had acted alongside me as her father’s hostess this past winter, finally old enough to take her place as the star of the papal court—perhaps it had gone to her head just a little. It certainly would have gone to mine at her age. I had

only twenty-two years to my name, but sometimes I felt distinctly world-weary. They were talking of that mad priest Fra Savonarola now, the one preaching and frothing at the mouth in Florence and getting everyone to give up their cards and their fine clothes and all their other luxuries. "Only in Florence," Juan snickered. "That would never happen in Rome!" "My Giulia might give up cards," Rodrigo said, giving my cheek an affectionate tweak. "But never her pearls!" "As if anyone would go about in sackcloth just because one sour old man said puffed sleeves were heretical!" Lucrezia laughed. "I don't know about heretical," I said, sipping my sour wine. The vintage wasn't up to Carmelina's standards, either. "But puffed sleeves are certainly unflattering. And really, what's more heretical than that?" Sancha plucked at her puffed sleeves, shooting me a nasty look. "You'd be the only one safe under Savonarola, eh, brother?" Juan cast an eye over the unadorned black that Cesare usually wore instead of his red cardinal's robes. "Maybe you should have been a Dominican! I'll fight the French and you'll preach hellfire." "Careful, brother," said Cesare. "Or you might taste it." Juan just beckoned in invitation, laughing. The two brothers should have looked alike—both tall and lean, both auburn-haired, both handsome—but they didn't. Not at all, and Juan's jittering overbright eyes met Cesare's still, black-steel gaze like a cross of swords. Sancha looked between them with parted lips, and Lucrezia cast her eyes up to the ceiling and said, "Really, you're both such children!" But I felt a twinge of disquiet. "You'll have seen the new frescoes, Juan," I jumped in brightly. "But surely not examined them yet? Perhaps we can take a closer look, before the biscotti are brought in. Your figure shows to great advantage . . ." I took my wine cup in one hand, tucking the other into Rodrigo's broad arm, and we all rose from the cena table and flocked to the walls with our painted images. "I love me as Santa Caterina," Lucrezia sighed over her own beseeching golden-haired figure. "I still have that dress . . ." "I don't see why Joffre and I were just figures in the crowd," Sancha pouted. "I could have been a saint too, you know!" "Or Salome," Juan leered. "The Dance of the Seven Veils—we'd get to see what you look like under the last one, new sister—" "Juan!" Joffre burst out, flushing, but Sancha laughed and struck Juan a playful blow with her fan. One of those tiresome girls who is always doing something flirtatious with her fan. How I longed to smack her with it. "My likeness is to be in the Resurrection fresco," my Pope was saying, oblivious. "When I have time to sit for it, that is—" "And you really should make the time," I scolded. "Poor Maestro Pinturicchio has already finished everything else!" "I don't like being painted," Rodrigo complained. "An utter waste of time!" "But part of a pope's duty is to be preserved for posterity. You'll look magnificent, just wait and see." My pope was sixty-five now, and he had put on weight now that he had no more time for the hunting and riding that had long kept him lean. But his massive shoulders were imposing as ever, his swarthy hawk-nosed profile just as confident, his vigorous dark hair only threaded with gray. The papal bull at the height of his powers. "This marks the beginning of everything." My Pope beamed all about him: his children painted on the wall, his children clustered around him. "La familia reunited! Let's drink to it again." His eyes were once more full of emotion, but I saw Cesare still glaring at Juan, saw Lucrezia biting her lips to make them redder, saw Sancha aiming hot looks at both her brothers-in-law, and Joffre staring vengefully at Sancha. I saw it all, and all I could think was a horribly, woefully inadequate Oh, dear. But Rodrigo was looking at me expectantly, so I raised my goblet. "La familia reunited," I echoed and drank in a prayer along with the wine. "Such gloom, Giulia!" Rodrigo leaned back on his elbows against the pillows with their papal crest embroidered in gold. "When did you turn doom-cryer?" "I'm only saying that it's vastly overrated, having all one's family together." I plucked the diamond roses out of my hair and began unlacing my moss-green velvet sleeves. "Holy Virgin knows, it's a disaster whenever my family are all in the same room. In no time my older brother is telling Sandro he's a prancing lightweight even if he is Cardinal Farnese now, and my sister is telling me I'm a harlot. And your children are even worse! Juan and Cesare looked ready to draw daggers over the biscotti." "Brothers compete. It's what they do." My Pope waved a careless hand, and his massive papal ring glinted in the soft light from the tapers. "It brings out the best in both of them." "I'll remind you of those words when the blood hits the walls," I said tartly, letting both my sleeves drop. "Why ever did you settle on Cesare for the Church? Anyone can see he's born to lead armies and swing swords—" "But he's cunning, and one needs that in the Church." Rodrigo poured out a cup of wine for the two of us to share. "To survive in the College of Cardinals, you have to be able to outplot a spider." "But he's

not suited for priestly vows. Not in the slightest!”Rodrigo laughed, gesturing around him. “Are any of us?” His private chamber was dim and rich, the walls hung in painted canvas that had been laid over in elaborate gilt designs, the bed elaborately curtained in crimson velvet embroidered with the papal crest again, silver brackets everywhere lighting the room with sweet-smelling beeswax tapers. My Pope used to visit me in my official domicile at the Palazzo Santa Maria, by way of a certain passage so very private that all Rome knew about it. But his wave of protectiveness after my return from the French army still hadn’t abated, and now I slept more than half my nights at the papal apartments here in the Vatican, where Rodrigo had the sheets scattered with petals from my favorite yellow climbing roses, which he claimed looked like me. I looked around at the silks, the rose petals, the gilt and the glass and the velvet, all overlaid by that somber papal crest, and had to concede that it was not really very papal at all. “Is your conscience bothering you?” Rodrigo made the sign of the cross over my forehead with his thumb. “Ego te absolvo a peccatis tuis in nomine Patris, et Filii, et Spiritus Sancti. There, you are washed clean of all your sins. Come kiss me.” I smiled and kissed him. The state of my soul had bothered me a great deal when I first became a harlot, a fallen woman, a foul adulteress, take your choice of epithets. But it’s difficult to worry about the fires of hell when I get my divine forgiveness expressly from the Holy Father whenever I want it. I kissed him again, and then turned my back so he could unlace my moss-green velvet gown with the gold vines embroidered about the bosom and hem. “So you chose Cesare for the Church—”Rodrigo groaned, his fingers deft on the laces down my back. “Let it be, Giulia!” I persisted. “—but why ever did you choose Juan for the military life?” “Because that’s how it always is.” Rodrigo tickled the back of my neck with one of my golden bodice ribbons, making me squeal. “One son for the Church, one for the battlefield.” “You men!” I couldn’t help saying. “Slotting your children into various spaces the moment they’re born, as if they were vases to be put into a niche! Just because you have two sons doesn’t make them automatically fit for the Church or the battlefield, you know.” “Juan’s full of fire. He’ll make a fine Gonfalonier.” “Juan is interested in nothing but carousing, drinking, and chasing after women. I know how you’ve missed him while he was in Spain, but I have to say I have not missed the way he ogles me.” Or the way Juan teased Lucrezia for the spot on her chin she had tried to cover up with powder, or jeered at Joffre for padding the shoulders of his doublet in an effort to look more the man for Sancha. Or aimed a kick at my little pet goat who trailed me on a gilt leather leash. I loved that goat, had loved him since I’d rescued him from ending up in one of Carmelina’s pies when he was just a floppy-eared baby kid, and Juan had put him bleating into the wall with one boot! “Juan’s just a boy,” my Pope was saying with all his usual tolerance, unknitting a tangled ribbon at my back. “Perhaps he ogles you, but he ogles every beautiful woman he sees! He doesn’t mean anything by it.” He’d cuckold you in a heartbeat, I thought, but didn’t say it. To some things Rodrigo was entirely blind, and when it came to his favorite son . . . he hadn’t even noticed this evening after cena when Juan flung an arm about my waist, looking at my likeness in Pinturicchio’s fresco. “Our family harlot as the Madonna,” he breathed hotly into my ear, and his fingers stole down to cup my hip. “How’s that for irony, eh?” I’d just smiled, giving his hand a good covert smack. “And this harlot will knock your ears around the back of your head if you touch her again, Juan Borgia.” I’d been able to intimidate him when he was sixteen, but not now. He’d just given me another lingering up-and-down look and swaggered ahead to join Lucrezia and Sancha as they studied the Annunciation fresco with its angels and arabesques. “Did you see Juan slavering over Sancha?” I said over my shoulder to Rodrigo, feeling the last of my tight laces come loose. “I thought poor Joffre was going to pop with outrage.” “She’s a flirt, that one.” Rodrigo chuckled, sliding the gown off my shoulders. “And now all three of your sons are competing for her!” I stepped out of the circle of my gown on the floor. “If that’s not a recipe for disaster—” “Bah,” Rodrigo said dismissively, and pressed his lips to my shoulder above the edge of my filmy shift. “Take your hair down, mi perla. It’s a sight I never tire of seeing—one of the great wonders of the world, your hair.” I attacked my pins, and he fell back on his elbows again, happily watching the first of my coiled plaits slither loose over my shoulder. My Pope clearly had no interest in hearing any more about the shortcomings of his sons. He had lost his eldest son, Pedro Luis, many years ago in Spain, a memory that still veiled his eyes in grief whenever he spoke of it, and after that old loss I suppose his indulgence to his surviving children was understandable. “A pity Lord Sforza couldn’t join us,” I said by way of changing the

subject. "I know he misses Lucrezia in Pesaro." "Let him miss her. He's a waffling fool, and more than that, he's turned out to be a mediocre condottiere who does nothing but ask me for money. I wish I'd known that when I was considering his offer for her hand!" My Pope reached out to catch a lock of my loosened hair and bring it to his nose, inhaling deeply. I had expensive perfumes by the dozen in glass vials, but part of me was still a country girl, the girl who grew up in a tiny town beside Lake Bolsena and boiled flowers to make perfume, and I still preferred my old homemade scents of honeysuckle and gillyflower to all those expensive mixtures of frankincense and bergamot. "I heard from another mediocre condottiere today, you know," my Pope went on, inhaling my hair again. "Who?" "Monoculus." "That's a cruel nickname, Rodrigo. He is not one-eyed; it's just a tiny squint." But I couldn't help a faint smile as I unraveled the last of my plaits. At least my Pope could joke now about my husband. Rodrigo was not jealous when other men looked at me—he just chuckled when envious archbishops ogled my bosom, or florid young lords paid me honeyed compliments. He liked being envied. But Orsino Orsini, he of the tiny squint, still worried my Pope sometimes. Orsino was my wedded husband, a man with the legal right to demand I return to his side, if he ever grew a spine and chose to exercise that right. Even the Holy Father could not really excommunicate a man for demanding that his wife cease committing adultery. "That chinless little snip can't even scrape up the courage to ask me himself when he wants money," Rodrigo continued with a snort. "Instead he applies to his mother and gets her to ask me. This time, it's to pay his soldiers. They don't listen to him unless their pay is current. Or even when it is current. There's one son who should not have been slated for the battlefield!" My husband's family, the Orsini, had been among those to side with the French upon their march south—at least, the more illustrious and prosperous branches of the Orsini. Not Orsino, however, whose mother was cousin and firm friend to Rodrigo Borgia. Where his mother led, Orsino followed. "We don't need to discuss Orsino, do we?" I shook my hair down, rippling clear to the floor, and Rodrigo clapped a hand to his chest as though pierced through the heart by the sight. I climbed onto the vast bed, sitting cross-legged like a child, and pulled his feet into my lap. People think it's all jewels and gowns and keeping yourself pretty, being a mistress, but I've found it's a good deal more about peace. Powerful men, whether kings of vast nations or lords of uncounted wealth or fathers of the world's souls, are tired men. A thousand voices clamor every moment for their attention, their time, their favors; everyone wants something and they all want it now. When my Pope came to me at the end of the day, he could at least relax with the knowledge that I wanted nothing but him. "Your feet are hurting you again, aren't they?" I scolded softly, rubbing his toes. "Why can't you sit still when you're dictating letters to your secretaries, instead of pacing like a madman?" He gave a groan of pleasure, but his eyes were serious as they looked at me. "Does Orsino still write to you, Giulia?" "He does," I said. "What does he write?" Still a note of anxiety in my Pope's deep voice. "Nothing very much," I said, kneading my thumbs into the arch of his right foot. "Read the letters any time you wish." "Oh, I trust you. It's Monoculus I don't trust. He wants you back." "Always," I admitted. It had been a bargain my husband had made, or his mother Adriana da Mila had advised him to make: Take little Giulia Farnese for a wife, let Rodrigo Borgia have her for a concubine, and he will advance your career, my dear boy! Orsino had regretted that bargain since the day he saw me at our wedding, but he still took the rewards, didn't he? A condotta to give him soldiers, a hefty annuity, a castello in Carbognano and governorship over the town to go with it . . . My husband had been everything a girl could dream of: handsome, young, and he even said he loved me. I didn't know if I believed that, really—he didn't even know me. But he said he'd loved me since the moment he'd laid eyes on me, and he certainly had his heart in his eyes whenever he looked at me, and that would be enough for most girls. But it wasn't enough. What no one bothers to tell dreaming girls is that a handsome and adoring young husband isn't any use if he's gutless. Still, a gutless husband is better than a brutal one. I'd have to go back to him someday, when either my Pope died or his passion for me did, and I gave a little sigh at the thought. Hopefully the first of those fates wouldn't happen for many, many years—and maybe the second wouldn't happen at all. "That's enough about Monoculus, eh?" Rodrigo ran a hand over my shoulder, the edge of my shift sliding down my arm. "My children too. It's making you morose." "That batch of quarreling pups you fathered would make anybody morose!" I said lightly, and Rodrigo brightened just as I'd intended. "I'll have you know my children are perfect." He pulled me up into

his arms. "Shall we make another? A Borgia prince this time, a brother for Laura." "Juan won't be very happy about that," I murmured between kisses. "He went into such a sulk when I was carrying Laura . . ." Worried any child of mine would supplant him as the Pope's favorite. In truth Rodrigo had always been just a trifle veiled in his affection for Laura. She was his daughter, of that I was perfectly certain—you had only to look at the nose (though I did hope she wouldn't grow up with his bull shoulders). But she'd been christened under my husband's name, and in truth when I counted backward from nine months there had been a time when I was trying to persuade Orsino to show just a little courage, enough to fight for his wife if he truly wanted to keep her . . . But I couldn't think of Orsino, not with Rodrigo bending his dark head to plant unhurried kisses across my naked shoulders. "Come to me," he whispered in his Catalan Spanish, and I threaded my arms around his neck and slid myself over him, making my hair into a candlelit curtain shutting out the world. When I was a foolish virgin girl, I'd prayed very earnestly not to be married off to an old man as so many of my friends were. I dreamed of lean cavaliers and dashing poets, and what girl doesn't? But girls are fools. Poets aren't much good when it comes to love play, when you really think about it—all Dante ever managed to do after years of mooning after Beatrice was fantasize that she might one day give him a guided tour of Paradise. And as for lean cavaliers, well, Orsino was the picture of a dashing young suitor, and our coupling had been awkward, clumsy, embarrassing, and brief. And afterward, he had stood back and given me away. My Pope savored me every time he took me in his arms, tasted my skin and inhaled my hair, kissed me and cradled me and found something new in me every time to caress. "The curve of your spine is like a string of pearls," he would muse, and trace his lips over my back until I was vibrating down to my toes. Or he would drop slow tantalizing kisses over every part of my face from my ears to my chin, everywhere but my lips, until I dragged his mouth down against mine. He liked me bold and never accused me of being wanton; he tossed me and teased me, made me laugh and made me cry out—and my husband might have given me to Rodrigo, but Rodrigo had never forced me. "I've never had a woman by force, and I don't intend to start now," he'd told me on our first meeting, and then stood back in utter confidence to let me choose. It's not often a woman has a chance to choose, let me tell you. And I'd considered my options: the handsome young husband with the clumsy hands, or the ecclesiastical lover of more than sixty years who could curl my whole body up in shudders of pleasure? Well. "My papal bull," I whispered, and felt the rumble of laughter deep in his chest above me. He slept afterward, his head heavy on my breast, my arms showing pale about his swarthy shoulders in the flickering candlelight, my hair coiling over us both. "Everything will be perfect now," he murmured, half-asleep. "You at my side, Juan returned, la familia reunited . . . the French defeated . . ." A yawn. "God has been kind, mi perla." Unease twinged at me again, and I didn't know why. Not until I rose and dressed and tiptoed out, back to the Palazzo Santa Maria so the Pope would be found alone in his bed in the morning by his entourage, as was proper (even if they all knew I'd been keeping him company there). I yawned as I trailed through the darkened papal apartments, and my feet slowed in the Sala dei Santi as I looked again at the finished frescoes all the Borgia family had admired last night at cena. I looked past the frescoes this time, Juan as proud Turk and Cesare as merciless emperor and Lucrezia as pleading saint, to the Borgia bull motif repeated over and over in the floors and the walls. Not the placid grazing ox that had been the family emblem when they were merely the lowly Borja of Spain, but a massive defiant beast gazing about with arrogant eyes. In public appearances Rodrigo displayed his papal emblem of the crossed keys, the keys to the kingdom of heaven. But here there were no keys and no heaven either. There were saints on every wall, but it was the Borgias who dominated—the Borgias and their pagan bull. "God has been kind," Rodrigo had said. La familia united again, as they had not been for years, and the French had been swindled and outplayed by my wily Pope who had played that spotty French King like a harp, vowing eternal friendship and whispering confidential promises, and all the while he had been piecing together a Holy League to oppose them. Rome, Spain, Milan, Venice: all allied against the French, who had found themselves outnumbered and surrounded in Naples. What a victory—and with the French fleeing their shattered campaign, what enemy was there to oppose my Pope and his family? And last night they had celebrated in these rooms, which might have an Annunciation and a Nativity and a Resurrection painted on the walls . . . but which glorified not God, but Borgia. *Revue de presse*

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Présentation de l'éditeur

De retour à Rome, Giulia Farnese, maîtresse officielle du pape et désormais mère d'une petite fille, doit faire face aux nouveaux dangers qui menacent son clan. Sa cuisinière et confidente, Carmelina, est rattrapée par son secret : le couvent dont elle s'est enfuie pourrait bientôt la retrouver et elle n'est plus en sécurité.

Son garde du corps Leonello est quant à lui bien décidé à mettre fin à la série de meurtres qui, étrangement, secoue de nouveau la ville depuis le retour des Borgia. Anna était sa seule amie et il refuse de laisser son crime impuni sous prétexte qu'elle était une simple servante.

L'étouffement se resserme autour de nos trois héros qui ne peuvent compter que les uns sur les autres.

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