

Maria Divine

“Sister Maria Luisa,” the old man smiles, shaking his head ever so slightly, dismissively even, “you stand accused of false idolatry, adultery, and murder.” He adjusts his notes, glancing up at me. He’s already made his verdict. “Do you admit the sin you have committed against our Lord God while novice mistress at the convent of Saint’Ambrogio?” He’s judging me, aging eyes stripping me, objectifying me, and in their dreams: fucking me. They all are.

I exhale. They won’t need to rip my secrets from bloodied lips; I will hold my dignity, even now. Just like Firrao did... “I plead guilty, but please: while I do not beg for forgiveness—I ask for mercy—for I know that I have sinned. This sin, the root of our convent’s depravity, it is on my shoulders to bear. I had been tempted by the devil’s path, but I—”

There she is... I swear, by the stained glass. This isn’t her trial, not after she left us, left me... But Firrao’s there anyway. Her habit is down, long hair piling over her shoulder. She’s staring at me, boring holes into my skull with the single minded focus of her gaze. Judging me.

“M—Mother?” I pause, focus drifting through the soft light that filters through the stained glass to form miniature ecosystems of brilliance across the cold stone floor. Firrao’s gone—just like before—a trick of the light... Light that consumed her, just like the inquisitorial flames devoured her body, mind, and soul. This is my burden to carry, not hers. Mine. I can’t deny it any longer: Firrao is never coming back.

“I know that I cannot pay the convent dowry in full,” my eyes flit to the window, beyond which the sprawl of Rome unfolds, “but I have become enchanted with the grace of Saint’Ambrogio, it has stolen my heart, and it has affirmed my wish to take to the cloth.”

The father, Guiseppe Peters, laughs, reclining behind the wooden desk. I know that expression, he wants to fuck me. Men always do. “What is it exactly about this convent, Saint’Ambrogio, that has attracted you?”

I smile, ever so sweetly. Clutching my hands together, I hold them up tightly, the spitting image of nubile beauty. “When I was eleven, I met the abbess, Maria Agnese Fiarro, and from that point onward, I knew that I wished to take my vows. Is it true that she wears an iron mask studded with fifty nails to suffer in our stead? Now that I have the chance to serve under her, I must. Afterall, she’s the one who has inspired me on this holy path.”

Smiling, he leans in, almost conspiratorially. “How about I see what I can do?” They bend so easily when you kill them with kindness, even when it’s only skin deep. I hate myself, even as I slip back my habit.

“[...] And she told me, ‘Sister Sofia, lie on your back,’ and so I did.” Sister Sofia’s voice fills the court, and I can’t help but look away. I can still hear her. “Then she said, ‘Sister Sofia, raise your legs just so,’ and then—and then, I did. She entwined herself with me, and... She made movements and a sound that defies my ability to express in words, and she told me to position myself low, so that I may receive her bodily fluids, and I did.” Sister Sofia pauses, and as I look up, her eyes meet mine across the inquisitorial chamber. They are wet with tears. She always cried easily. I’d always liked the way she’d cried my name on my midnight visits in particular. It’s almost funny how those tears look the same as the crocodile tears she sheds now... Just like we all shed our love eventually.

I smirk. I won’t show weakness. I refuse.

Sister Sofia... She had come into the convent the same year as me, she had served Firrao just as I had, but her faith was weak. It wasn't like the heresy had started with me, I simply may have... Encouraged it, facilitated it--moreover I reinvented it, and I made it my own. But now she blames her harlotry on me? Pathetic! She'd called Firrao saintly without my prompting, and I know she's already missed my embrace, why else would she have named me prophet and told me I was divine? Then she goes and runs to pappa to tattle as soon as the tides have turned?

"I- I know I've succumbed to..." She pauses, uncertain—she should be—"the devil's influence," she stops, her lip trembling, "but I had thought that if Sister Maria Luisa had said it divine, she would not lie. Instead, I understand that I have lay with the serpent." She can call me the devil incarnate all she wants, but I know whose sins are whose.

Firrao smiles at me, even she presses the long blade of the knife into her palm, blood welling up within the wound. "Maria Luisa, this is the power women have." She twists the knife, rounding out the circular wound.

I can't help but cringe as I see her open her palm. "Must you do harm to yourself? There must be another way."

Laughing, Firrao lifts the knife, transferring it to her slick hand before laying down her fresh, unmarred palm. "Beyond these walls, we are weak, powerless. We come from Adam, and so he believes we can have no thought—no determination—that is not his. It is because of this that we have strength though, child." she pushes the blade deep, wincing slightly as she gouges the flesh. "It is precisely that I have transcended fears of the flesh that I have power." She glances up to smile softly at me. "If a man were to show his stigmata, they would examine them, but they do not

consider us of the finer sex capable of such things. This is my real power Maria, and after I'm gone, it will be yours."

"Don't say such things mother." I flick my gaze away, uncomfortably, holding my hands tightly, because if I let go, even for a moment, I have an inexplicable fear I might lose something.

She laughs again. "What about your convent Maria? You've told me you covet the idea of forming your own order. We will have to part ways when you step out of my shadow."

I stare at the floor. "Perhaps."

Setting the knife aside, Firrao drifts over, her delicate fingertips brushing my face; leaving telltale crimson stains. "Come now. I have a miracle to perform."

The girls in the convent call him the Americano, because they hardly knew more than that about him--other than Sister Maria Francesca that is--all they knew was that he was a troubled man who needed my aid. They knew that I had exorcised his demons, even though the priests of the Vatican could not, and they knew that such a miracle had vastly improved the convent's coffers... The whispers surrounding the man that had come and left were staggering. Many suspected that the letters he still sent along with his donations were salacious in nature--after all, the Americano had been infected with the demons of lust--but I don't believe most know what he does on his visits to the convent. Not even Francesca knows the disgust I hold for the man, for his rough voice, his boorish ways. Men hold power though, and I cannot build my convent on gentle kisses and Firrao's memory. Guisseppe, the Americano, these men think that I'm theirs, and that their gifts can buy my soul like a sinner's contract with Lucifer. If man is the devil, and in exchange for my soul he'll grant me a wish, then I'll use that to banish him from my heaven. Let the devils fight over who can claim

my soul while I climb the stairs to heaven. In this world, we all have our sins... Firrao knew that more than anyone.

My sisters had spit curses and flung cobbles when they came for me, but now... Now that it's their necks on the line, they're all too eager to feed me to the wolves. I glance at Miriam Ricci, her blank face emotionless as she stands witness. I can't blame her, can I?

"After Sister Maria Luisa was made the novice mistress, those rites that we had forgotten were at once reborn, and acting in Maria Agnese's place, Sister Maria Luisa would administer those rites that had once been held by her holiness." Her holiness? Sister Miriam Ricci had always been devout. The rest had turned though... they had... I didn't doubt that she would be punished in this. Still, under such duress advocating for me? *For Maria Agnese Firrao's memory?*

"Maria Agnese Firrao," the man pauses, a harsh chuckle breaking his lips, "was a heretic, and your devotion was already found as false idolatry, and yet, you call her holy?"

"You're wrong!" Miriam flung her hands forwards to grip the stand. "She was sainted in her glory, and in burning her legacy you gave the mother her cross to bear. From her legacy stem miracles. Maria Luisa was wed to Christ in her visions, and the virgin's immaculate words were presented to her in holy documents written in a heavenly script! Her nightly visits, and the ways in which she cleansed our bodies, even with her own, were sanctified by the virgin mother herself, and sister Sofia should know this! Sister Maria Luisa is sacrosanct in her faith!"

I can't help but have a tear slip from my eye. Miriam's testimony will mean nothing, but to me, I can feel a knot of doubt growing cancerously in my stomach.

“Sister Maria Francesca, your beauty is enough to catch my gaze even juxtapose the Lord.” I smile at the somewhat mousy Sister Francesca fondly, “so why don’t you,” I run my fingers down her cheek--rosy in the candles that light the refectory--“come back with me,” before catching my grip on the neck of her vestment and tugging gently, “back to my cell?”

She smiles, though she seems rather tired. “I thought that you only invited us back to your room for initiation and holy communion. Do you have an excuse this time, or do you rather favor me?”

“Sister Francesca, how salacious!” I step away, half turning, like a dancer, “What if that is true?”

Francesca leans back, staring at me. She debates a long moment, before scooting forwards in her seat once more--I’ve hooked her like a fish on the line--“Sister, if it weren’t for the virgin mother’s immaculate writing, and its shocking resemblance to mine, you wouldn’t spend a moment with me.”

I giggle. She loves it when I giggle. “Your divine hand, one would almost say, though I do have other uses for it in mind...” I flick my eyes up and down her form. It is rather exquisite. The most mundane of things hide miracles. “You wouldn’t want Saint Firrao’s legacy to die with us, hallowed be her divine corpse.”

“Well, I suppose, if the Virgin says it isn’t so wrong... And it is in Firrao’s name...” She takes up her quill before setting it to paper, “What does the Virgin say this time? Another excursion with Peters?”

“That you are beautiful.”

“And?”

“That I am divinely ordered to dispose of the Princess before the little bird sings her morning song for the whole world..”

“Hmmm, how unfortunate. I suppose the Lord works in mysterious ways. It is not to us to doubt his plan.” She begins to write in a compact but flowing hand, producing the most elegant script known to man. Most likely, because he discounts that of a woman.

“Well then, how shall we unearth his will? Shall it be the scourge, or something softer?”

“Maria,” she glances up, eye to eye, “you’ll fluster me.”

They were going to make me wait all day, weren’t they? I know this game. The inquisitor sighed, once again bringing the trial to order. They were saving the best for last; they knew they had to break everyone before me, and then... They’ll let me deliver my own coup de grace. It’s vicious really, having to watch everyone you love testify while you know the inevitable is still coming, I already know what I must say. It’s the waiting that’s killing me. “Guiseppe, please continue.” Sister Maria Luisa did this, Sister Maria Luisa did that, but Guiseppe? The priest had enough of his own skeletons in his closet to end him. Once again, the pervert is my only chance at salvation. The only hope here was that they would get too distracted looking at his affairs, his scandals, etc., that they would forget about a poor little nun like myself. After all, women do come from Adam’s rib, or so they say. It’s only fitting that he would be the source of my--

“Sister Maria Luisa... She’s so... Softly spoken, so gentle. When I first met her, I thought she was the image of the virgin mother herself.” Which is what he’d said when he asked me to strip for the first time, but I could hardly blame the man for that. I might have been stunning, or enthralling. Seductive. but that’s hardly an excuse for--“I don’t know how the devil can wear such a

perfect face.”--ah, there it is, the derision of the seductress. “When I took her confession, it was the usual transgressions at first. Then more intimate ones, and then... I don’t know when things changed. It was like she knew me, and then I started... telling her things. More than my confessor. She told me that the Lord would forgive, and then she kissed me...” He kissed me first, but it's hardly like they'd believe me. It shouldn't bother me, but it does.

“It was not a devil’s kiss however! While, yes, I lay with Sister Maria Luisa, it was as spiritual communion with the Lord! She possessed visions which she shared with me in a fine script not her own, which were granted to her by the virgin’s hand! Have Sister Maria Luisa produce them for you and see for yourself. They ordained everything I did for her, and requested all of those items I delivered to the convent!” Impressive... Even if it doesn’t save me, I’m resolved, Guisseppe is not going to survive this unscathed. It might be petty, but he’s going to suffer.

The trial has languished on and on so long, and the old man bows his head at the judge’s table, but as he lifts his head, there is a cruel sparkle in his eye... “Sister Maria Luisa, please tell me more about these notes?”

I suck a deep breath in, holding it for a long moment. “On the topic of divine writings, I would request that you call Joseph Kleutogen, as he is the prominent scholar on such in the eyes of his supreme pontiff Pius the Ninth.” If he dares to strike at me, I’ll cut him deeper.

Corpulent... It’s the only way I can describe her. The Princess. Her name is Kathrina von Hohenzollern-Sigmaringen, and she’s one of those types who uses her faith as an excuse to get away from the bustle of her everyday life, before returning once again to the same debauchery and sin that matches or exceeds those crimes she dares accuse us--no, me--of, but that are addressed as nobility

rather than carnal idolatry due to her cerulean ichor. I'd hated the princess from the moment I'd seen her, from the moment I'd smelled her, from the moment I'd heard her nasal voice.

I think it must have been the fat that saved her; the excess she stole and devoured, that had marked her body with the sin of gluttony, but seemed to be permissible under so called divine law. Or at least, so the old men of the inquisitorial board think. The toxin would have quickened in a normal woman's body, but the evidence of her gluttony--her obesity--must have diluted the venom lurking in her morning gruel, slowing her death to a crawl... If that had been taken into account--if I had only had Guiseppe find me something stronger--maybe things would have turned out differently. But, it was too slow. Too slow to save Ferraro's convent, too slow to save my ascendance, too slow to stop her from running her mouth. I hope she chokes on her supper.

The priest was sweating... I winked at him when he tried to look at me across the court. Did he think that this would all just remain quiet? Remain buried? "You must understand, I know that this is awkward, however—" He's desperate.

"'Awkward' would hardly seem to describe the occasion, Mr. Kleutgen. Testimony has already been given by one Guiseppe Peters, but now that you are here, I see that you are..." The head of the inquisitorial committee pauses, a wry smile slipping over his thin, smug, and always hungry lips, "rather the same man, Mr. Kleutgen. This rather does place your previous testimony under scrutiny, doesn't it?"

"I promise," Guiseppe--Kleutgen's face is like a cornered animal, pathetic, "his Pontifex, Pius the Ninth will confirm that in the eyes of the Lord I have clean hands. I am on sabbatical, to observe our Lord's creation, and I could not travel in peace without adopting a name not my own."

He holds them up to emphasize his cleanliness, his mock passivity, “Maria Luisa seduced me with her demon’s tongue! Her chicanery--”

“Mr. Kleutgen, I have no doubt. However, let us continue this investigation, and we’ll leave you to do what you know best: appeasing the pontifex, and, aparently fornocating with nuns. Let us cut to the heart of this matter...”

“Sister Francesca,” I smile, sliding a hand around her waist, while my other wipes away the tears. “I will be gone soon, you may be moved from this convent, but the teachings of Maria Agnese Firrao, and those sacred covenants that we have formed will reside forever in both of our hearts.” I touch my hand to her breast.

“Luisa,” her fingers clutched at my vestments, “I can’t keep on without you, none of us can. Damn Firrao, let it all burn, we need you, I need you. At least let me--”

Tears are streaking down my cheeks as well now as I kiss her, pulling Francesca so close I can feel her warmth through our vestments. We’re still pressed together as I pull back my lips, letting my forehead, nose, rest against hers. “Francesca, you know that I hold you dearer than any of them, and I would hold you by my side if I could, but for all of us, this is my duty. I must take the burden onto myself in sacred martyrdom. It’s the last strength afforded to women. As much as it hurts, as much as you know the words you speak are lies, decry me Francesca. Without you, my legacy dies with me.”

Francesca sobs into my chest. “Tell me of the convent again Luisa.”

Softly, I fold my arms about her, and close my eyes. “It will be in the hills, not in Rome. A place far away, where we may indulge our teachings far from the watchful eyes of the Vatican, and

where we can find holy covenant with the Lord in one another.” I keep talking, though the words are already ashes on my tongue, a future that’s been killed.

They took her... The scream starts in my stomach before boiling upward, tearing at my lungs, and then exploding outward. It leaves me rattled, uncertain, wrung out and on the edge of broken. Slowly, but steadily, I calm myself, focusing my gaze on the evening light that filters through the high convent window. The thick night hangs over Rome, between us. If this is the father’s justice, there is no good God... They took our idol, our savior, and broke her. I shed my tears, silver drops splashing across the floor and vanishing into cool stone.

I unclench my fists, checking the crescent moon marks on my palms. Slow breaths, in, and then out. In, and out. My eyes flick shut and my body sags with the weight of the day. When I open my eyes again, I have to blink away the loss once more, but I know what I have to do.

Slowly, certainly, I cross the room before sliding my fingers, palms, down the cabinet front. Slowly, I open the doors, slipping my hands inside. Slowly, my fingertips walk across the iron surface, playing at the eye-holes, the subtle contours. It weighs heavily in my hands as I pull forth the mask of fifty barbs in its whole glory. “Mother, I am not you, and I...”

I let my voice trail off, and spinning on the spot--vestments flowing, continuing the liquid motion through the air in an imitation of the ethereal--eyes searching for something, anything. I clutch the mask to my breast, wincing as I do so. Red runs through the black fabric, staining my chest with pinprick wounds from the nails driven through its graven form.

Suddenly, the rage hits. The iron mask clatters across the floor, ricocheting off the stone wall. I run for it, slamming my foot down on it, imagining Firrao’s countenance. The tears run freely

again, boiling down my face in a torrent. This is all she left? All that's left of our legacy? How could she? How?

In a daze, I stumble back. The iron mask is unharmed, while my foot is smeared with blood. It will have to do... I slump back, leaning against the walls of this convent--this home--she crafted with her own two hands. Is this how gods are born?

I knew that this moment had to come as I watched sister Maria Francesca take the stand. She's impossibly small in the court which seems to dwarf her fragile frame. Tears stain her rosy cheeks, and her messy hair has slipped from her habit in places. She was the only one I'd shared Agnese's secrets with, and now, she's free.

Her words cut sharply, even though she shook as she said them, her whole body resisting the words she knew she had to say, that I'd bestowed on her with lily soft kisses. For the first time, I felt the tears come freely as I heard her voice clearly echo throughout the chamber. "Sister Maria Luisa forced my hand to emulate that of the virgin. Through coercion, she made me forge the letters of divine providence that she had given to Padre Guiss--Mr. Kleutgen. She also used these letters to justify the eliminations of those within the convent that dissented, and he had me write such a letter to dispose of Princess Katharina von.. Ehm... Hohenzollern-Sigmaringen." She's visibly shaking, her knuckles white as she clenches her fists tightly. She locks eyes with me across the courtroom. "Sister Maria Luisa abused her position to indulge her own desires, and to imitate sainthood, but it was my pen that she used."

My heart was broken before, and even though I knew this was what had to happen, I had prepared for this, I feel something inside of me wilt and die.

“They’re coming Maria... I’ll be gone soon. I’m so sorry, and I know that you’re not ready—I would stay longer if I could.” Firrao’s voice cracks. It does frequently these days.

“Mother, please—” my fingers curl around the matron’s robes, playing at the fabric’s work, tearing at the weave further and further until my nails are red. “I can’t... I’m not ready yet.” She barely flinches.

Slowly, Matron Fiarro, the abbess of Saint‘Ambrogio--the woman that I...--she shushes me, a gentle finger against my lips; the softest pressure. “You’re strong Maria. I entrust unto you our ways to safeguard. The Lord has spoken to you, and you have proven yourself to him.” She smiles kindly and then shrugs. “We are all thrust into this world before we are ready, but you hold both the faith, and the means.” Her fingers cradle my chin, gently sliding along my jaw. “I love you as my own daughter Maria, and I have faith in you to maintain the ways of Saint‘Ambrogio, my legacy. As I have been their idol so too will you... Maria.”

She bends down, and gently kisses my lips. She tastes like roses.

Staccato tones rend the air, searching for an answer I’m loath to give. The judge sounds sardonic as he speaks, a single word cutting with vicious intent. “Mother?” The head of the inquisitorial committee smiles hungrily, “please do elaborate for the records.”

I’m shaking. I owe her... Nothing. She left me; I made Saint‘Ambrogio great, I was their godhead, I am the one who protected us, I am powerful, and now... “The founder of our order, Maria Agnese Firrao she...” I can’t, I... My mouth is full of ashes, and my tongue swollen with heresy as it begs me to extol Fierro’s virtues, her divinity, the warmth of her embrace. How I still

remember the taste of her lips. I desperately search for that place where the light had tricked my senses into seeing her divine body, immaculate in its imagination, only to find the judging jurists. She's long gone, burned away like that place in my heart that I cauterized when she left. I know all the words that are left to me, those words that are poison in my mind, that I want to reject with the whole of my being, but are crisp and clean as I say them. "She was the origin of Saint'Ambrogio's order, and her legacy was the seed of this sin. I have followed in her path. Forgive my temptation, for I have followed in the footsteps of Lucifer." It is like a candle in my heart is snuffed out, leaving nothing but cloying memories.