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IMMORTAL SINS

Translation by Olivia Jung

Chapter 1

The Vatican

Being immortal is very easy. All animals manage to do it. All except for humans: they are the only ones that know they will have to die someday.

Cardinal Michelangelo Aldrovandi enjoyed patting himself on the back for these musings of his while he got ready in front of the mirror to go chase some tail.

And it wasn't just women he was after.

He always liked celebrating mass. Celebrating, not delivering it. Sermons bored him. Sure, he was good at them: he knew how to make people cry, laugh, think, and frighten them if he had to. But the essence of mass is the gesture, the vestment, the back turned to the faithful on their knees. Even better, the women who adored that tall, powerful, scornful prince of the Church, with the posture of someone who never spent a single night on a sofa bed. During the Council, the Communist bishops made the officiant face the crowd and turn his back to God; they never understood anything (one of the mottos the Cardinal used to shock good souls was that "poor people are a pain the ass").

In spite of this, Michelangelo Aldrovandi was the only one among the conservative leaders of the Church who managed to get in the good graces of the Pope. He came from one of the wealthiest families in Rome and the only squandering he dedicated himself to was of the moral variety. Every night, before going out, he would look at Caravaggio's original painting The Entombment of Christ, the one in which Michelangelo Merisi gave Nicodemus the face of Michelangelo Buonarroti.

Therefore, there were actually two Michelangelo. And with Aldrovandi, it made three. The Cardinal always thought condescendingly of the breathless visitors of the Vatican Museums, with all that bustling chaos they would never notice they were admiring a copy.

He took pleasure in smelling the gram of proteins that filtered into his urine due to his glomerulonephritis, a condition that was followed and treated by the best specialists in the world.

Then, he called out for Remedios.

Sister Remedios was the purest girl he had ever met, and purity gave the Cardinal a shiver of perversion. Remedios would blush every time he reminded her in a reprimanding tone that she hadn't given herself to him; when he saw how uncomfortable it made her, he would tell himself that he went too far sometimes, but exaggerating was the real luxury he took in life.

Sister Remedios helped him get dressed.

The Cardinal put on his civilian clothes, a personal gift from a fashion designer in Milan and longtime friend of his, and he left for his usual generous search for pleasure.

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Chapter 4

The Vatican

If you were already growing fond of Michelangelo Aldrovandi, too bad: his body was found by Porta Sant'Anna, lying in the backseat of his black Audi. Careful hands had considerately placed it a few yards from the Vatican's invisible national border, making sure that the case couldn't be touched by the Italian justice system.

For six entire minutes, the Audi stayed there with its door ajar as Romans walked by on their way to the pharmacy of the Holy See.

Someone thought something bad might have happened, but it wasn't their concern.

Someone just looked the other way.

An old woman walking her dog called the police.

Two Swiss Guards consulted each other in their ancient, Roman dialect.

"What do we do, Peter?"

"Call a nun, Frank," answered his superior.

(Peter Oberhofer was born in Grisons, but over time he became a Roman like everyone else.

Francesco Ceccarelli grew up outside Zurich, both of his parents had migrated from Italy: his father was from Bufalotta and his mother came from Tor Marancia).

Death is something left to women in the Vatican too, even better if they are nuns.

The nun in question this time was Remedios.

Her father had given her that name. Officially, it was meant as a tribute to her grandmother, Maria Dolores de los Remedios, who was from Barranquilla, Colombia; but it was actually out of devotion for García Márquez. Remedios was a beautiful brunette, dark, petite, but not frail at all. Her devotion was sincere, her hair was braided under the veil. She belonged to the Congregation of the Bernardine Cistercians of Esquermes. She had taken the vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience; therefore, she was inclined to take care of a sinning cardinal out of love for Christ.

That morning, she was in the kitchen making his breakfast: fresh orange juice, the strawberry and blueberry jam that Aldrovandi ordered directly from Provence, butter, whole grain rusks, cherries ("My little sister, what kind of life would it be without the first fruits of the season?"), as well as two slices of bacon ready to fry and two eggs to drink immediately.

That's how it always went: he would spend the entire night out and, when he got back in the morning, he needed a fresh source of energy.

Remedios didn't seem grief-stricken by the news that the man who had become her life's mission was as dead as a doornail.

She placed the orange juice jug in the refrigerator and said dryly, "I think I'll have to make him presentable for Our Lord. I'll get the necessary things and follow you."

It seemed to the Swiss Guard that she was almost expecting it.

Instead, his death took the cardinals by surprise, turning their smug smile into a grimace of complaint over that injustice that happened when everything was going so well.

They brought the corpse to the second floor of the gendarmerie building.

Monsignor Gaetano Bandoni, the chief of protocol, was also headed to the pharmacy to pick up some anti-wrinkle cream when he was discreetly asked to go upstairs to recognize the body. He opened the door with surprising cool-headedness; all it took was half a glance at that body lying on the couch (sooner or later it happens to everyone), he turned around and confirmed, "Yes, it's Michelangelo."

Remedios moved in the same slow, calm way with which she laid her parents to rest.

She fixed Aldrovandi's hair.

She closed his eyelids.

His mouth was wide open, as if it were still asking for air. Remedios thought they didn't need a medical examiner to emit a verdict that would never get written: death by suffocation.

She dropped the thought and started to take his jacket off. He was still a man of God after all, he should meet the Maker in good order, wearing his red robes and with his arms crossed over his chest like a warrior fallen for the Holy Sepulcher.

The body, however, was already stiff and she struggled just to get his right sleeve off. She had almost succeeded when she saw it slip out of the inside pocket.

It was a cell phone. But it wasn't his. The Cardinal used an old BlackBerry, he took notes on it at an extraordinary speed. That device was an ultra-thin iPhone 8.

And it was placed where it shouldn't have been.

The Cardinal always kept his phone in his pants. He claimed it should stay as far as possible from the heart because of pulses and radiations.

That device was in the jacket's pocket.

Somebody must have put it there.

Remedios decided instinctively.

It was probably the Holy Spirit who inspired her.

Or maybe it was pure recklessness.

With a sudden gesture, she hid the phone under her habit. She would have a chance to look at it later.

Knowing the man, she was prepared for the worse. But what she would see shortly thereafter was darker than the deepest abyss she could ever imagine.