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The Consort

Cynthia Ann Behunin
Eastern Kentucky University

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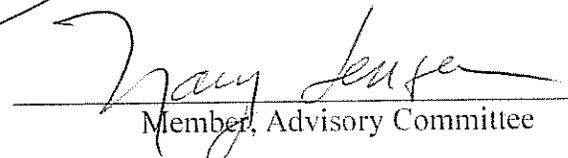
THE CONSORT

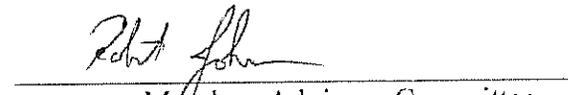
By

Cynthia Ann Behunin

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Date

April 23, 2014

THE CONSORT

By

CYNTHIA A. BEHUNIN

Bachelor of Science
Utah Valley University
Orem, Utah
2007

Submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of
Eastern Kentucky University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my husband and children

Mr. Clinton K. Behunin

AND

Gwenyth B. Behunin

AND

Vivian K. Behunin

Who supported me unfailingly through this amazing and challenging experience.

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ABSTRACT

In the Young Adult novel *The Consort*, seventeen year old Rowan must learn to navigate both sides of the sexual spectrum in the totalitarian theocracy of The Empire. When Rowan isn't selected to serve deity at the age of twelve, which she feels is her right, she loses faith in the religion that has ruled her since birth. She begins to notice the tight leash the government and the church have on its citizens and she silently questions its truthfulness through subtle rebellion which puts her at risk for Re-Education and possible death. At seventeen her eyes change from their natural color to golden and she is whisked away to serve as a priestess within the Order of the Consort. For citizens in the Empire to look upon another with lustful thoughts was enough to warrant severe punishment and to be caught having sex outside of marriage could result in death, but now, as a priestess, Rowan finds that she will be forced to have sexual relations with various partners in the name of communicating with their god, Ama. Her desensitization to sex and sexuality, once complete, thrusts her into ritual sex with men and women. Through all of this she is protected by her handmaiden, Katrina, and her Escort, Jude. Although warned that it is punishable by immediate death they begin to have an emotionally intimate relationship and must figure out how to make it last given the nature of her calling. Because she is different, her eyes are a different color than other priests and priestesses, there are those that fear her or are jealous of her. This causes problems for Rowan as she navigates the corrupt system and finds herself being pushed around by superiors and her peers. Rowan must find her path and purpose as the goddess, The Consort, takes up residence within her and begins to push her to reform the theocratic

government. She must decide if the risk to those around her is worth trying to free her countrymen of the false and tyrannical rule that has been imposed on them for hundreds of years.

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CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

Thesis: *The Consort*

Spring 2014

Cynthia Behunin

The Young Adult novel, *The Consort*, focuses on political and religious corruption through the initial vilification, and later exploitation, of the sex and sexuality of citizens of the Empire. Rowan, the protagonist, grows up in an empire with strict moral standards enforced by the imperial religion as well as by a policing force. After she is accepted into the religious order all that she's been taught is ignored and she's expected to embrace sex completely as the most effective way to communicate with deity. Who would want to take on the task of writing this plot into a YA novel? Apparently, that would be me. Creating a world where sex was both suppressed and revered was a challenge, but it was important for me to show the opposing sides. I knew it would be difficult to do the subject and the genre justice. Throughout the last two years I have given careful thought on how to accomplish this. John Gardner, in *On Becoming A Novelist*, provided me with sage advice as I undertook this difficult endeavor:

“If the dream is to be *vivid*, the writer's ‘language signals’ – his words, rhythms, metaphors, and so on – must be sharp and sufficient: if they're vague, careless, blurry, or if there aren't enough of them to let us see clearly what is being presented, then the dream as we dream it will be cloudy, confusing, ultimately annoying and boring.” (5)

I wanted this novel to address the confusing mixed messages that assault teenagers and young adults daily about sex through the media, peer expectations

and the expectations placed on them by religious belief. It is only through constant and vigilant effort that I have been able to create a world where sexual corruption takes center stage. This has been accomplished by focusing on point of view, literary realism, and thisness.

It was important to me to write about the themes of sexual powerlessness from the point of view of a seventeen year old girl. Young Adult novels are traditionally written in first person from the view point of one character. I chose to write *The Consort* in first person because I felt that it created an intimacy between the reader and the protagonist. I wanted to create a realness to the novel that third person wouldn't quite capture for my approach in this story. The reader is introduced to Rowan four years before the rest of the novel takes place. Readers are exposed to Rowan's world through the tainted eyes of her own experience and indoctrinated belief. I wanted readers to recognize her unreliability as a narrator quickly because, I felt, working through these difficulties with her would be far more powerful than if seen by an omniscient narrator.

The first person point of view is supported through incorporating emotions. As in real life, it is Rowan's responsibility to decipher people's feelings based on her observations of them. This includes their emotions regarding sex and sexuality. In *Aspects of the Novel*, E.M. Forster claims that there are five major facts of existence: birth, food, sleep, love, and death (47). During this discussion of human motivation, and how the novelist addresses them, he combines all forms of affection and sex into the category of love. "All I suggest is that we call the whole bundle of emotions love, and

regard them as the fifth great experience through which human beings have to pass” (50). *The Consort* deals with this basic human experience in a new way through the use of religious theology. Outside of the Verger Centre walls Rowan, and all other citizens, are expected to suppress their emotions and the desires of their body. This can be seen during a conversation between Rowan and her best friend, Celia. Rowan sees Jude, the boy she is attracted to, and stares at his body as he walks away. Celia notices, “You better stop that or they’ll come and take you away” (37). It is understood by Empire citizens that if they are caught doing anything immoral they will be re-educated, (a mysterious program that turns once rebellious citizens into something akin to a Stepford Wife) or executed.

Even with the threat of Re-Education or death the government and religious enforced suppression of natural human instincts is fought against, in varying degrees, by citizens of all ages. An example of this push against the system is seen during Rowan’s first meeting with High Priest Jeremiah. When the High Priest is running through a variety of questions to determine her sexual history and asks her about her familiarity with boys she thinks of secret sexual experimentation parties. “Once you started hanging out with boys things happened. I’d heard of parties where people wore masks so that their identities wouldn’t be known. I thought of Sarah, she’d dated and ended up being Re-Educated” (70). Although Rowan didn’t participate in these parties she had heard of them. The younger generation was secretly defying the strict moral codes of the Empire. If we look at what Forster says about love, as one of the five basic human experiences, then their reaction to its suppression is unsurprising. Hearing about the secret rebellions of teenagers through Rowan’s eyes gives the reader a glimpse into her own struggles with personal choice and societal indoctrination.

A common thread in YA literature is the maturation of the protagonist. Although Rowan's sexual experiences demonstrate her maturation process it does not signify this as a bildungsroman. What does make this a coming-of-age story, or a bildungsroman, is when she begins to question and takes steps against the current societal system. John Truby, in *The Anatomy of Story*, explains that, "A true coming-of-age story shows a young person challenging and changing basic beliefs and then taking new moral action" (81). The kind of growth Truby is referring to is evidenced how Rowan's initial desire, at age twelve, to become a priestess changes by the end of the novel when she refuses to participate in producing an heir for the Emperor. An established woman in the Emperor's harem says, "Child, you don't have a choice" but Rowan shows her growing maturity by responding, "You always have a choice" (251). For much of the novel she felt she didn't have a choice and that she must do as others (the Empire, the church, and her parents) ordered her. The ending, unfortunately, does not support this change as much as I would like it to. Future drafts will have her take a more active role in her escape.

Grasping Rowan's emotions about sex and sexuality was much more difficult than I ever anticipated. Although the psychic distance remains very close throughout most of the novel her character didn't elicit an emotional response from me or, I imagine, my readers. It wasn't until I tried to "get in her head" that I embraced the conflict she must be feeling. I tried to imagine what it must be like to engage in such intimate activities but not be allowed to form relationships with anyone. Love and affection have a balance of give and take, as Forster explains,

“It is selfish and altruistic at the same time, and no amount of specialization in one direction quite atrophies the other” (50). She has been put into a position that creates an imbalance to this idea. Under normal circumstances, in her world, Rowan would be in a relationship where there was give and take, but, as a priestess, she can only give or take. The center clergy have embraced one half of the whole equation. Antoine’s true belief in the system compels him to *give* to his patrons. He has embraced the religious purposes of sex as communication with deity and avoids forming any attachments. The closest he gets is with Rowan at her Advancement Ceremony when he comes to believe that their female god, the Consort, has attached herself to Rowan.

The opposite reaction, as a method of self-preservation, can be seen by the blonde priestess. In an early scene she propositions Antoine while they walk together. She uses the guise of tension and massage as a cover, but it is clear that she wants to have sex with him. The blonde is open that she is on the *taking* side of the equation during a fertility ritual with a female patron. “Massaging the woman's lower belly with soft motions the priestess looked at us and grinned as the woman closed her eyes” (171). The priestess’s acknowledgement of Rowan and Thomas’s presence indicate that she is performing a show and that her purposes are internally motivated.

Rowan is naturally compelled to create the kind of balance that Forster talks about, although she is warned that she must not form any attachments. Her mentor, Antoine, warns her about forming a romantic attachment with her Escort, Jude (118). As Rowan views Antoine’s ceremony she remembers the warning about patrons and clergy forming attachments and worries about her mentor (175). In the end she does not heed the

warnings of her mentor or the High Priest. She and Jude take small steps toward building a lasting romantic relationship in spite of the danger it puts them in.

In general, I don't talk a lot about sex in public so writing a novel where that is a major plot line was problematic. I wanted to push myself out of my comfort zone, and I felt this was the perfect avenue to do so. Getting comfortable with the required language took some time, but Natalie Goldberg, in *Writing Down the Bones: Freeing the Writer Within* provided advice that helped me at the beginning of the writing process. When talking about eroticism she advises that instead of addressing a topic head-on another option is to describe "with a little side dance" (106). As I worked toward the later sex scenes I decided the best course of action was to ease the reader into the idea of sex and sexuality. In the beginning of *The Consort* I used descriptive details to create sensuality in everyday situations. For example, "I'd never feel the caress of soft fabric against my skin or feel the weight of fine jewelry" (8). Rowan is lamenting not being selected into religious service and receiving the resulting wealth. By choosing words like "caress" and "weight" sensuality is achieved as the reader is subconsciously prepared for more graphic scenes in the last half of the novel. It builds a dichotomy between Rowan's everyday life and the life she fantasizes about.

The side-step method Goldberg describes only works, though, if you also use haecceitas, or thisness. James Wood explains the concept by saying, "...any detail that centers our attention with its concretion" (67). In the beginning, I wanted to give readers details and sensations that were familiar to them. Some

examples of thisness include “slow roasted pork”, “half-moon craters” and “shadowy secrets”. All of these create very distinct sensations within the reader and use a variety of our five senses. During the sex scenes thisness is increased as I attempt to capture the intensity of the moment. In Rowan’s first ceremony as an ordained priestess her patron is an older overweight man. The things she notices are the pink stretch marks on his stomach and chest as well as “there was so much flesh around his neck that it was difficult to see where his face ended and his torso began” (203). Although these details aren’t the vivid details seen in the early execution, “The iron smell of fresh blood filled the air” (21), nevertheless they provide the foundation that is needed which allows readers to find it believable in its concreteness. To continue to strengthen the world building aspect of *The Consort* the amount of vivid detail needs to be increased in future drafts.

Brandon Sanderson also utilizes the side-step method effectively in his fantasy novel, *Mistborn*. It was vital that he establish the government and social hierarchy throughout by mentioning, in vague terms, the relationship between noblemen and skaa (slave class) women. He side-steps focusing on sex and uses the threat of rape to form Vin’s distrustful nature, a trait she must overcome. “Yet, despite her brother’s abusive anger, he had kept the other crewmembers from having their way with Vin. There were relatively few women on thieving crews; generally, those women who got involved with the underworld ended up as whores” (34). Common prostitution is approached in six different scenes in *The Consort*, but it is used to compare sex for religious purposes versus sex for individual monetary gain. Both Oona and Thomas, two of Rowan’s antagonists, insult Rowan’s mother by calling her a prostitute. At one point Thomas

explains the difference between what they, priests and priestesses, do and a common prostitute, “She may have been a priestess, but only a prostitute would let herself get pregnant” (138). I didn’t think it was necessary for Rowan to actually come into contact with a prostitute, but it was important to create a comparison between center clergy and prostitutes. This may be a failing with the novel, but keeping it as a threat, by reducing her religious calling to prostitution is a more subtle way to ingratiate sex into a novel for young adults instead of using direct details too often.

F. Scott Fitzgerald creates a sensual feel throughout *The Great Gatsby* by choosing subtly of language over obvious wording. The first time the reader is introduced to Daisy and Jordan they are described sensually, “They were both in white, and their dresses were rippling and fluttering as if they had just been blown back in after a short flight around the house” (8). Neither woman is described exactly, but the sensual wording (rippling, fluttering, flight) gives the reader a preview into their motivations and personalities. When Daisy is finally described in detail Fitzgerald continues the use of sensual words to surround her character with the atmosphere he initially used to introduce her,

“It was the kind of voice that the ear follows up and down, as if each speech is an arrangement of notes that will never be played again. Her face was sad and lovely with bright things in it, bright eyes and a bright passionate mouth, but there was an excitement in her voice that men who cared for her found difficult to forget....” (9).

The continuity in writing style for Daisy's character is needed so that it can be contrasted at the end of the book when it is discovered she is responsible for Myrtle Wilson's death. In *The Consort* I used less sexualized details in the beginning to reflect Rowan's immaturity. In the first paragraph we are introduced to a twelve-year-old Rowan and several other girls. The descriptions of them are vague and concentrate more on their excited emotions, "The girl next to me shivered from the cool breeze or nerves I wasn't sure" (2) then when Rowan enters the Centre the descriptions become slightly more tantalizing, "They had been rubbing and touching each other's naked bodies." (71) until finally, near the end, descriptions are much more graphic, "She moved her hands in knowing circles up the woman's body kneading the small breasts again As she leaned forward her own fuller breasts grazed the woman's flat belly" (170). The progressive element to *The Consort* allows the reader to ease into sex much like Rowan does.

Goldberg contradicts her side-stepping advice to also say that as authors if there is something we need to say it should be addressed head-on. We should not be afraid to talk about it. This approach is taken by Margaret Atwood in *The Handmaid's Tale* when Offred relives the Ceremony, "My red skirt is hitched up to my waist, though no higher. Below it the Commander is fucking" (94). These two sentences convey the proper tone needed for a scene of this magnitude. Readers need to see Offred's own disconnect as she performs her duties, and side-stepping would diminish the effect. Her word choice is strong and direct because what Offred, the Commander, and Serena Joy are engaging in cannot be sugar-coated. This same approach is utilized within *The Consort* although the language is not as explicit. In the attempted rape scene it was important to provide details in a language that matched Rowan's emotions. The scene is much more successful using,

“I felt his hand on his own body as it brushed my thigh his engorged penis searching for me” (214). If I had tried to side-step this action by saying, “I felt his privates searching for my lady parts”, the scene would have become laughable. The importance of knowing when to side-step and when to use more direct language was an important aspect of creating the proper tone throughout the novel. If indirect descriptions had been used exclusively the novel would have turned into a comedy. If direct language had permeated then it would no longer be classified as Young Adult. Balance between the two was vital.

A delicate balance of direct and indirect language is used in the novel *Lolita*, by Vladimir Nabokov. Nabokov addresses sex and sexuality but also the taboo love experienced by a pedophile. He neither avoids the issue nor rams it down the reader’s throat. The first lines in *Lolita* alert the reader to what will be the focus of the novel, “Lolita, light of my life, fire of my loins. My sin, my soul, Lo-lee-ta: the tip of the tongue taking a trip of three steps down the palate to tap, at three, on the teeth. Lo. Lee. Ta.” (9). Shortly after these sentences we find out that she is a child when Humbert Humbert gives a brief physical description of “four feet ten in one sock” and “...a certain initial girl-child” (9). It is left to the reader to put the pieces together to learn that his love interest was only twelve years old. Admittedly, not as accomplished as Nabokov I think that *The Consort* achieves some level of the subtly seen in *Lolita*. Before explaining relationships or plots explicitly I introduce the ideas slowly, for example, Jude has feelings for Rowan but doesn’t tell her until page 132, “I wanted to tell you [that I loved you], but when my father found out he forbade me. Then you were gone”. This same

faith in the reader, shown by the use of subtle language, to put the pieces together is seen regarding Rowan's new purpose as a future priestess. It is implied that she will be having sex to commune with deity, but it is not said explicitly until her fears are confirmed by her handmaiden.

While writing *The Consort*, I wanted to make sure that a world where sex and religion were linked was possible. Without this the novel would lose its power. In *The Anatomy of Story* John Truby explains several ways to "create the arena". The arena I concentrated on was, "Create a large umbrella and then crosscut and condense" (151). This means that in the beginning of the novel the author will address the world and as the story progresses the focus is tightened. Each setting becomes a world within a world. It begins with the Empire, narrows to Verger and the center, then narrows even more to the palace, and ends in a cave filled with rebels. I felt that this tightening of focus would reflect Rowan's journey from being a regular person (a small fish in a large pond) to someone of greater importance (a big fish in a small pond).

The Consort addresses the theme of the unethical union of church and state. These two powers have used sex, or the lack of it, to control the people. I used the crosscut and condense arena idea in the way I addressed sex throughout the novel. In the beginning there are vague references to it, "I stared at his broad shoulders, the fabric of his shirt held tight against his muscles. My eyes grazed down to the small of his back and then landed on his round butt" (36) but by the end of the novel the focus is much tighter, "He took off his shorts; his penis already hard then he reached over and tugged my dress off tossing it to the floor like dirty laundry" (230). By beginning with more general, side-stepping details and ending with tighter, focused and direct details I hope to show the

maturation of Rowan as she becomes more aware of the corruptness of both the church and the state.

As mentioned earlier, it was important to create the two extremely differing views of sex and sexuality between the common people and those in power. This was done to create tension as well as show Rowan's growth into maturity. In her pre-priestess life sex and sexuality was shunned. In the fictional satirical piece *The Handmaid's Tale*, by Margaret Atwood, as well as the non-fiction memoir *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, by Azar Nafisi, the totalitarian governments have put restrictions upon the woman, forcing them to hide their bodies. I used Nafisi's memoir to strengthen Rowan's character motivations as well as the world building. Nafisi introduces her Western audience to the idea of a totalitarian government by helping us picture what it would be like for a woman in Tehran, "[The military presence] are called the Blood of God. They patrol the streets to make sure that women like Sanaz wear their veils properly, do not wear makeup, do not walk in public with men who are not their fathers, brothers or husbands" (26). Evidence of Atwood and Nafisi's influence can be seen in *The Consort* where Agents patrol Grayson and Verger making sure that the Morality Laws are upheld. The novel's world is based on oppressive governments seen in Tehran as well as in Turkey, where I lived a short time during the military coups of the late 1970s-80s. The controlling nature of *The Consort's* government exists in all aspects of life, including personal relationships, in much the same ways seen in historical governments.

The government in *Mistborn* also tries to control sex and any lasting relationships between the upper and lower classes which I used as a guide to create social class within *The Consort*. Morality is not really in question, in *Mistborn*, it is the Lord Ruler trying to keep the bloodlines with magical qualities separate from the slave class. In the male protagonist's, Kelsier, opening scene he is talking to a group of skaa, when they hear the screams of two women as the daughter is taken to the aristocracy and he learns her fate, "Lord Tresting is a law abiding nobleman – he has the girls killed after a few weeks" (12). The noblemen in *Mistborn* risk death if they father an illegitimate child. In *The Consort* breaking the morality laws has equally severe and deadly consequences: Re-Education and death.

Creating life or death consequences to normal human emotion incorporates a high level of stress and tension within the novel. Sanderson has woven these consequences into the vast majority of the scenes within his epic fantasy. In *The Consort*, Rowan must also deal with the threat of death based on the decisions she, and others, make. Much of the threat of punishment stems from being caught acting against the controlling morality laws. The only portion of the law explicitly addressed in the novel includes those related to intercourse and sexual experimentation. These laws permeate every aspect of Rowan's life. Morality, in her world, doesn't just mean chastity. Anything can be seen as immoral or seductive. This is exemplified by Sarah's character. Although we don't know specifics about her before her Re-Education the change is so striking to Rowan that she comments on it, "The perfection made it all the way down to her modestly crossed ankles" (39). I used Sarah to show what the "perfect" citizen was. I wanted to be clear that morality included dress, hair styles, avoiding the touch of others, down cast eyes, etc. Examples of

this kind of immoral behavior are seen throughout the novel and in many cases Rowan is offended by it. The indoctrination she has gone through, since birth, is difficult to undo. By controlling its citizens so absolutely the government and the church have created a fear culture regarding the body and its natural functions.

The extreme nature of the suppression and exploitation of sex within *The Consort* epitomizes what James Wood says about hypothetical plausibility which “involves the defense of the credible imagination against the incredible....it is the artist’s task to convince us that this could have happened” (238). I used this idea within the pages of *The Consort* to create a world where control over human sex and sexuality is not just convincing but likely and probable. I did this by saturating the novel with government and religious control. The policing force, Agents, have an overbearing presence throughout the novel as Rowan sees them everywhere outside the center. Inside the center the security force is in the guise of bodyguards, but Rowan is still uneasy about them. Even within the confines of her room care must be taken when Rowan, Katrina, and Jude talk. It is never obviously stated *how* they are being spied on, but it is evident that someone is listening to them. Katrina has spent a much longer time in the center and seems to be more aware of their surveillance, “*They’re always listening. Be careful what you say*” (102). Because this society is not highly advanced high-tech methods (microphones, video, etc.) could not be used. Future drafts will include a much heavier presence of the threat to Rowan being caught acting contrary to Empire and religious law through the secret surveillance of those in power.

Hypothetical plausibility is achieved in *The Handmaid's Tale* because Atwood's government has embraced specific Biblical passages and slowly incorporated these changes easing both the reader and the fictional characters into a new way of thinking. This same tactic is seen in Nafisi's memoir and in other actual historical events. *The Consort* does not address the changeover of one government to another but instead the results of such a change hundreds of years after its occurrence. I've tried to use the subtle introduction into the world of totalitarian government and religion to ease the reader into a societal form they are probably unfamiliar with. Details, large and small, help to legitimize a tyrannical government that many Western readers will be unfamiliar with.

Including both physical and emotional details to the world and characters of *The Consort* created this literary realism and mimesis. In the real world small details can be the most important things in our lives. When people look back on their childhoods, or important events, they remember the smell of someone's perfume or the chips in the piano key edges where a child has bitten them. I've included similar inconsequential details throughout the manuscript. As Rowan and her family walk home from the weekly worship, Charlotte grips Rowan tightly in "her claw-like grip around my wrist, her perfectly polished nails digging small half-moon craters in my skin" (9). Rowan feels homesick even though she's surrounded by luxury, "My thoughts returned to home. I looked out the window and wiped a tear away as I thought of my father" (101). These details associated with human interaction and emotion help to create a strong sense of mimesis giving the world, and its inhabitants, a realistic quality.

Adding inconsequential details also lends credibility to the novel world. As he explains irrelevant details, James Wood, in *How Fiction Works*, says, "In other words,

fiction builds into itself a lot of surplus detail just as life is full of surplus detail” (81). Is it necessary to know that Rowan’s father keeps scripture in a locked cabinet or the details of a priestesses dress that is about to come off during a ceremony? No. What it does do is make the world richer and more plausible. I’ve paired up these extra details with necessary details so that the reader may not even notice that they are there, they simply become part of the subconscious supporting the scene, plot, or characterization. It is only implied, throughout *The Consort*, that men are in charge of religious and temporal education. Small details like the locked cabinet, the teachers and administration at Rowan’s school are men, as well as, having men in the highest levels of power within the Empire support this ascertain. Inconsequential details create a sensual tone to the novel when reading Rowan’s observation of her breakfast “The three large pancakes dripped with butter which mingled with two slices of crisp bacon” (74) or in the more explicit scenes, “I looked at his member, instead of lying flaccid on his leg like I’d seen in other pictures, it stood at attention, his fingers encircling it, *but he wasn’t masturbating*” (94, italics added). Again, it is not necessary to know about the butter and syrup or the lack of masturbation. These details add to the realism of Rowan’s world.

The texts I used to help me to write, edit, and refine this piece are not restricted to the Young Adult genre, but they provided valuable guidelines for creating a strong world with a controversial subject matter. The advice gleaned went well beyond the scope of this paper, and only a very few pieces were included. *The Consort* is a first person novel rich in details that these texts helped

me to embrace. Novels which address sex and sexuality abound in adult literature, and it's simply a matter of time before YA fiction embraces this topic; what matters is who addresses it the most skillfully.

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CHAPTER ONE

Butterflies danced in my stomach as I sat patiently with the other twelve year olds. I brushed a stray strand of curly black hair out of my face as I sat in the half circle looking at the empty space in front of me. I tried to feel the cool grass through the thin material of my slippers. The hum of voices behind me got louder as the minutes ticked by, and the wind blew through the trees adding to the white noise around me. The girl next to me shivered either from the cool breeze or nerves, I wasn't sure. The ethereal music of the harp being played near the congregation filled the air, but my thoughts weren't on the music or the velvet carpet being rolled down the aisle. I barely noticed as half a dozen well-build men, Escorts, surrounded the small semicircle of anxious girls.

“Do you think you'll be chosen?” I whispered.

Her eyes darted toward me nervously, and she shrugged her shoulders.

“Do you want to be?” I couldn't help but ask questions; I was nervous.

“Of course I do.” She hissed at me through clenched teeth, “Now shut up.”

I sighed and rolled my eyes. She was taking this way too seriously. The only reason anyone wanted to be chosen into the priesthood was because of the money. I looked past the semi-circle of girls at the tall green trees and the shadowed forest. I yearned to explore them, but the forest and this clearing were sacred ground blessed for our ceremonies. At my back our small town spread outward, away from the clearing, but for now I imagined what it would be like to run through the overgrown forest. Even in my imagination, I could hear Mother warning me to obey the laws of Ama so that when I was twelve I could be chosen to serve Him, like she had been. As I sat in the clearing, my heart thumped with excitement knowing that my time had come. Behind me the

congregation became silent; the only sound the swish of soft material against skin. I fought against the urge to look.

A scrawny man walked into the center of our crescent and stood on the small wooden platform. Why was he here? I couldn't take my eyes off of his thick, blonde, curly hair. My hand went to my own curly hair. His mouth was moving, but I was too preoccupied. Besides my mother and myself I'd never seen anyone with hair that curly. He seemed old, maybe twenty, and he was so serious. He never cracked a smile, and his blue eyes remained focused on the congregation. He stopped talking and an unearthly still took over the meadow. Then she stepped forward.

She was tall with broad shoulders and a smooth complexion. Her face was quite pretty, surrounded in a halo of loose golden waves. Her eyes, those strange purple orbs that seemed to look through you, met each of the delegates before she addressed us; but it was her dress that kept my gaze. It was the most extravagant thing I'd ever seen. There were layers upon layers of material with glittering gems around her neck, wrists and even near her eyes. They sparkled in the sun and sent rainbows of color on the small collection of worshippers all dressed in their finest clothing.

“Our Order has one opening for an apprentice available for immediate placement. It has been determined that the Selection will be done here from within this crescent made of the Survivor's Descendants. Delegates, please stand.”

I stood a little too quickly, I noticed, when she frowned in disapproval. Squaring my shoulders, I was determined that she would select me to serve. My father was already looking at potential marriage pairings and I didn't want to be stuck marrying some

strange boy stuck in the lower-middle class. I wanted more. Touching my dress, I tried to imagine it as soft and silky, but the rough fibers kept snagging the skin on my fingers. I deserved more than this. My parents had been respected and honored. I would be too. I puffed out my chest and waited for her to call me to her side. After what seemed an eternity, the priestess's eyes returned to my portion of the crescent and settled in my direction.

“You.” Her voice reminded me of song birds.

My heart skipped a beat as thoughts of decadent food, soft satin dresses, and sparkling jewelry filled my brain. I stepped forward. The corners of her mouth turned downward, and her eyes glanced behind me.

“No, not you. Her.” She pointed a bejeweled hand to the red headed girl next to me who stifled a gasp and stepped forward.

My mouth dropped open. The soft grass beneath my feet felt mushy as I felt the dew soak my feet, chilling me. The wind tried to force my hair out of the tight hairstyle my mother had spent so much time pinning up. The soft murmurs behind me were filled with mocking at my misunderstanding. I felt my face turning red, the heat from my embarrassment and anger crawling slowly up my neck - to my cheeks - and finally my ears.

“But she doesn't deserve to be an apprentice!”

I heard the accusation, but I couldn't figure out where it had come from. The voice was unfamiliar. I turned to scan the crowd wondering who dared to speak so disrespectfully to a Priestess of Ama and came face-to-face with my mother's horrified expression and my father's downcast eyes. Blessed be...was that me? I turned to face the

priestess and found her several steps closer to me while the red headed girl stood with the curly haired man.

“Miss Tinney?” It was a statement, an accusation. All I could do was nod. “You think you deserve to serve Those Above more than Miss Bates?” I nodded again. “Why?”

My breath came out in a gasp; maybe I could convince her.

“By birth.” I announced out before I had a chance to think of anything else. Mother always told me that as their daughter I should be afforded certain privileges. They had both served Those Above, so it was only right that I would too. That scrawny red headed girl had been chosen by mistake. It was supposed to be me. Mother had promised.

“By birth? You think that by being the only child of Liam Tinney gives you a higher birthright than Miss Bates?” Her voice had turned condescending.

“Yes, priestess. I think so. They were in Their service before becoming private citizens.” I held the scratchy material of my dress tight, wadding it in my fists.

“So you think that being the offspring of disgraced Servants entitles you to Their service? Child, you are mistaken.” The priestess mocked.

I felt my face get redder as heat rose from my chest.

I turned and looked at Mother and Father. Disappointment and embarrassment covered their features. My father sat straight, looking into the empty shadows of the forest beyond the circle of rejected hopefuls, while my mother’s lowered gaze and slumped shoulders supported the priestess’s words.

“Disgraced?” My voiced sounded small and insignificant, but what could she mean? I watched as my dreams of luxury and prestige swished past me in a flurry of silk and jewels, followed by the thin-backed red head.

****four years later****

The sun beat down on us as we sat on rough wooden benches placed in a circle several rows deep in the large grass clearing. My mother sat beside me stiff and attentive. Although her eyes stared straight ahead, I knew she was watching me. The rest of the wooden bench lay bare as the other town members giving us wide berth. I stared at the well-dressed priest, and, as my brain had every week for the last four years, I began to relive the day that scrawny red headed girl walked away with the blonde priestess. As always, I felt the anger and embarrassment rise inside my chest. Hot emotions curdled my breakfast and made my hands sweat. Imagining her in nice clothes surrounded by luxury made bile rise in my throat. The priest's words of warning and obedience only inflamed my irritation. I dug my fingernails in the bench wood. I couldn't stand it for one more second.

The priest bent over the simple wooden altar and sprinkled something liquid into a dish before raising it to the heavens. He chanted familiar words, but my mind was obsessed with the blonde priestess and her unnatural purple eyes. The jewels near her eyes sparkled in the sunlight; her blonde hair blowing in the chilly breeze. Her voice echoed the same word over and over in my head. *Disgraced*. My parents still refused to tell me what they'd done. Over the years, I imagined all sorts of scenarios, but they refused to talk to me about any of them. Somehow my outburst at the delegate selection had made things worse. Our neighbors had avoided us politely before, I hadn't noticed it much, but afterwards it was painfully obvious. I'd lived here my whole life, but only one girl had befriended me. Her family still refused to speak to me.

I shifted as the priest's monotone chanting invaded my thoughts. There was no wind to provide relief from the harsh rays of the sun, and sweat began to slide down my back. I'd heard these sermons so often I had most of them memorized.

"After the Great War, the land was barren after having been saturated with the harsh chemicals used to kill each leader's enemies. Those Above chose a select few to survive the war, and then provided them with the means to heal the land-"

How much longer was he going to talk? I couldn't wait to get out of here. I opened my hymn book a bit more forcefully than I intended, and one of the pages ripped a little. I glanced at my mother out of the corner of my eye to see her glaring at me. Again.

"Be respectful, child." The command came out tight and angry.

Looking down at the open book, I read the title *Rejoice in Ama*. The words had once moved me to tears, but now I felt nothing. I flipped the pages then snapped the book shut. I leaned forward, resting my elbows on my knees and my face in my hands; my fingers touching the long raised scar on the right side of my face. Its familiarity caressed my fingertips, reminding me of yet another reason people avoided me. I was damaged.

My mother's plain cotton skirt brushed against my calf and caressed my exposed skin. I shifted away from her. Without taking her eyes off the preacher she touched my leg. I sighed, and crossed my ankles trying to focus on the sermon. Instead, my eyes were drawn toward the forest and its shadowy secrets. I itched to go there. After family worship I could try to slip out. Maybe I could convince Celia to come with me. I couldn't

wait to feel the touch of the bark or hear the wind rustle the thick forest canopy. I smiled, and began to plan my temporary escape.

"Even in times of bounty must we remain committed to deity? If our commitment to Them does not remain strong we will be met with darkness and oblivion." The priest's droning voice cut into my thoughts.

I rolled my eyes again, he was so dramatic. I picked invisible lint off my skirt, pretending it mattered. I could feel my father's eyes on me before I looked up. I met them from across the aisle. He sat proud and alone. A very small smile struggled against his rigid façade forcing him to look away. I looked away too.

"Some of our own children have been chosen to serve as Their disciples..."

The priest's words returned my thoughts to my non-selection as an apprentice. I knew I'd never be a priestess. There were only twelve...no wait, thirteen...and those were selected from among the apprenticed disciples. Dear Ama, why did we have to be here every week?

The sound of a hundred voices filled my ears as the closing hymn began. The words filled me with fear: *The sin of earthly abuse overwhelm thee and cause thee to shake. Fear the wrath of Him and quake. He tolerates no impure soul, To remain upon earth whole.* My shaky voice blended into the others. The voices died away, and the congregation stood. They filed out without a sound, starting at the front. Mayor of Grayson and his family walked past me followed by several other families of prominence. No one met my eyes. As Mother and I got closer to the path, which led from the worship area to the town, the difference in social class was obvious. While the front row parishioners wore finely made clothes the last row parishioners wore clothes that

were faded and threadbare. At least, I wasn't this bad off. A few children disobeyed worship etiquette and followed me with their eyes. Their curious eyes peered at me through overlong hair.

Following my parents home, I noticed, not for the first time, that the further away from the sacred space where ceremonies and worship was held the homes were larger, well built, and well kept. There was one that I looked forward to seeing on the long, quick paced, walk home, but it wasn't because it was the most beautiful. I watched him disappear into the plain wooden door missing the days when he lived closer

"That sermon was beautiful, don't you think my love?" Although severe with me my mother's voice was filled with eager anticipation.

The soft swishing of her full skirt added a musical quality to the conversation. I got lost in the subtle melody created by the sounds around us and her light steps on pavement.

"Priest Onyx has passion that would make Ama proud." Father voice drifted back to me.

I almost said the same words before my father did. This was his standard response when discussing the clergy and it was familiar to my ears.

"I always appreciate him reminding us to remain true to our commitment to the earth." She fell into a thoughtful silence.

My father stiffened at her words, but he kept moving. Since I was little, I had noticed that he didn't like talking about our religion. At least, not like that. His eyes would take one an upset faraway look before silence would overtake him. When he did

respond he tried to be vague and use generalizations when he could. I didn't need to see Mother's face to know that her expression was content.

"He was using fear tactics. It didn't mean anything." I blurted. The priest was an idiot.

"Rowan, that is not befitting your position in this community." My mother retorted without looking back.

"What position?" I countered.

Courage began to fill me as it always did when my father was near. He turned to give me a quick look of warning, as his eyes darted to my left. That was when I saw we were being watched by several plain clothes Agents, a sight so familiar I never noticed them. I stopped talking and stepped closer to my parents. Mother stopped so abruptly I ran into her.

She grabbed my hand in her fierce grip, "You invite the wrath of Ama upon us child." Hysteria tinged her voice through a layer of practiced control.

"Keep moving. You're drawing their attention." My father muttered.

Mother and I looked toward the closest Agent, as he adjusted his course to walk by us. I dropped my head, but I watched him through the veil of my lashes. Everyone around him rushed by, but he strolled along the sidewalk. I don't know if he really thought he was blending in, but he was doing a horrible job at it. If his unhurried walk weren't enough to set him apart his clothes did. They were immaculate. I must've been slowing down too much because Mother's vice grip around my wrist got tighter. I felt her perfectly polished nails digging small half-moon craters into my skin. I held my breath as the Agent eyed us. Our steps became more hurried as our home came into view. I glanced

at the clock tower and watched the minute hand click closer to curfew, my heart skipped a beat, and I could almost feel that big metal clock hand sweep over my heart.

Swift walking neighbors looked over their shoulders at the Agents. Glancing behind me, I saw the disguised Agent, his suit crisp being approached by another man. They were both older with the same hard look. Another Agent leaned against a gaslight lamp the street across from our house, and he followed us with his eyes. Looking at his dark uniform made my palms sweat. I swallowed hard looking toward the clock again. We lived so far from the sacred clearing that it took the whole allotment of time to get home. It was always close.

The Agent stepped away from the street lamp strolling toward us. My father pursed his lips as he hurried us a bit more. There were three minutes left when we got to our patchy lawn. I tripped up the stairs onto the porch of our modest home. Although the grass was browning it was well groomed and the flowerbeds were weed-free. My mother and I spent hours in the yard each week trying to get it to grow. I resented her obsession.

We shut the door a few seconds before the chimes went off. I breathed a sigh of relief. The smell of slow roasted pork enveloped me, making my mouth water. Mother dropped my wrist as she made her way toward the kitchen. I pulled back a corner of the curtain, and peered at the Agent staring at our front door. After a moment, he walked toward the meadow peering between homes looking for anyone breaking curfew.

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I watched as my father went to a locked cabinet and selected an ancient leather book. He caressed the cover. Running his hands over it he crossed the short distance to a chair in the front room. I knelt down by my over-sized pillow, and I began to punch it with enthusiasm.

“Rowan, that is not how a lady behaves.” Mother’s voice lilted in. She had heard me hit it. I decided long ago that Those Above must’ve granted her with ultra-sensitive hearing.

“Maybe I’m not a lady.” I muttered as I yanked my skirt over my knees.

“Listen to your mother.” His voice sounded tired.

I sighed, and leaned against the wall below the open front window. The breeze through the window picked up, and one of the heavy drapes knocked me in the head. Frustration at being stuck in the house worked its way through my body, and I clenched my teeth trying to fight off the irritation. I tried to move the offending curtain away from my head, as Mother would demand, but I yanked it a little too hard. The metal rings at the top clanged. I glanced through the doorway.

“What was that?” My mother’s voice rang from the kitchen along with the knocking of pots, pans, and dishes.

“Nothing, my dear.” He glanced at me and winked.

I smiled, and looked toward the window, soaking up the sun’s hot rays. This was the one perk of having to sit and listen to the same warning stories every week. At times, I got the impression that Father wouldn’t preach to us each week unless empire law mandated it. I had begun to wonder how they would know if he didn’t. Mother’s cheerful humming was drowned out by the teakettle’s piercing whistle.

"Be careful, Liam, it's hot." She smiled as she handed him the translucent brown liquid.

"Thank you, Charlotte." He sipped the tea watching my mother walk out of the room, her hips swaying under the material of her skirt. From this angle the material seemed a tight around her waist. She was putting on weight, but she wasn't bothered by it. I thought I knew why, but she hadn't told me yet. A few seconds later she came back with two small glasses of milk. Before sitting in her flowered chair she handed me a glass. I sipped as little of it as possible. It was thick and stuck in my throat. I stared at the tea my father was holding, the cup so small it looked comical in his large hand. His hands were so large they could crush that small cup like it was nothing. The aroma from the tea wafted toward me and made my mouth water. I had always wanted to try some even though as Father took another sip he pursed his lip at the taste.

"Don't you like it?" I asked. He shook his head while grimacing again at the taste. "Then why drink it?"

"It is a reminder to each Head of Household of the bitter trials Ama went through as he brought peace and prosperity to the empire after the Great War." These words came out rehearsed and emotionless.

He sipped from his cup again then opened the old book. He ran his fingers along the words on the page trying to find where he had last left off last week. *Please be about the war. Please be about the war. Please be about the war.* Father cleared his throat to begin, but I had an idea. I refused to sit through another afternoon being preached at about obedience to some god I didn't believe in.

"Father?" My voice was a bit too sugary, but I couldn't help it.

"Yes?"

He looked up from his book giving me his full attention. I sat up a little taller. He made me feel like I was the most important person in all of Grayson, and then I hesitated for a second.

"In the sermon today it felt like the he was trying to scare us. Is that what it was like before the Great War?" I held my breath. He sipped his tea considering what to say. Out of the corner of my eye, Mother glared at me. Again.

"I have come to understand that there are many ways to motivate people. Fear can be an effective tool for Deity and Their servants. I'm glad you have been paying attention because that is one of the ways leaders before our time tried to control the people. Do you remember why the Great War happened?"

"The people were out of control, and they were searching for something better. I think I remember someone saying they did things in the name of their god." I recited.

Paintings from class lectures flashed before me of poor and destitute people crying with their eyes lifted toward the sky. The teacher had explained that their god had also lived above them so that he could watch over them, but, for some reason, he abandoned them. They continued to worship him and fight wars in his name long after he'd gone. Then they realized he was gone. His abandonment was hard on his people. When they realized his absence they tried to fill it with other things that harmed the body and the mind.

"The Great War, and many wars before, was fought in his name. This god used fear to control his people. When they realized that they couldn't live up to the perfection

he demanded, they rebelled. When he didn't reprimand them they lost all control. In the end there were two factions – those that believed and those that didn't." He answered.

I'd never heard this before. I leaned forward onto my knees trying to catch every word. He held my gaze like he was trying to tell me something. I didn't know what, though.

"So they didn't like each other?" I guessed.

"They didn't understand each other. The records show that they tried for years to live in peace, but in the end it wasn't possible. The Great War culminated when several countries released horrible chemicals and bombs on other countries." He glanced out the window for a moment as a frown began to form. I knew what happened next.

"Then the Earth died." I always got choked up at this part of the story. I swallowed hard fighting back the emotion. I thought of those people fighting against each other over something they couldn't prove. It seemed pointless.

"Yes, dear. The Earth died, and it is our responsibility to restore it to a glory never known before. Now, let your father get back to the lesson for today." Mother interjected with a sharp edge to her voice.

I turned to look at her, my eyes not wavering. Her hands rested on her belly, patting it lightly. Something about how she patted it put me on edge.

"Charlotte, it's okay, but, Rowan, your mother is right." Strength returned to his voice as he squared his shoulders, "They killed the Earth because they couldn't find a way to live together. Now it rests upon us, the progeny of the survivors, to heal the land."

The Great War was one of the topics that most people avoided. I loved hearing about it, though. It wasn't just about doing everything some invisible god

told us to do. People actually did something on their own, they took action. I wanted to be like that, I wanted to have a real choice. I didn't want to fight with my parents, but I did want them to see that following Ama wasn't the only way to live. I wasn't sure what other options I had, but I was determined to find out.

"Perhaps we should take some time to reflect on what They have blessed us with. Rowan, your mother has provided you with a shining example of what female followers of Ama strive to be. You would be wise to follow it." He waited for my response. I nodded. It was easier, and less painful, to let her win than push her too far.

She leaned back in her chair and smiled, the satisfaction spreading across her features. I stared on my skirt. I didn't understand why they believed in Ama. He had all but forsaken us. What did we owe Him?

"Perhaps our worship today should focus on the roles of the non-Selected woman. Our daughter is nearing betrothal age, and she must learn to embrace the role of wife and mother." My mother said focusing her intense gaze on my father, "I won't have her bring shame on the family. Again."

Father turned to a different section in the large leather book then cleared his throat before speaking.

"This is a wise decision, my dear Charlotte. Rowan, because of your behavior at the Selection Ceremony, you must perform your female duties better than all the others."

"That was four years ago." The words came out harsher than I'd intended.

"As our daughter, you are held to a higher standard because we served Those Above. As a result more is expected of you." He ignored my outburst.

A feeling of dread filled my stomach. The milk soured and rose in my throat. I swallowed hard, forcing it down, as he read from the book. His voice took on a chanting quality as the familiar words of loyalty, hard work, and blind faith fell over me like sleet on a winter day.

CHAPTER TWO

The next day on the front lawn of the school I was just another face in a sea of girls. I recognized that we were all around the same age. This was strange. We never had a class or assembly on the green in front of the school. I stared at the large squares of cement with the square metal covering in the center, as we waited. I'd seen something like those before. Why were they here? The energy around me buzzed with nervous tension. The principal, Mr. Grey, cleared his voice. Filled with self-importance he paced in front of us reminding me of when he would do classroom visits. He walked up and down the aisles frowning at us.

"I hate this man." A girl said.

I glanced at Celia just in time to see her roll her eyes then rest her forehead in her hands. I shifted my weight trying to get comfortable. He walked between the uneven rows of girls, making his way toward the front. A couple of times I caught him looking us up and down like livestock. I couldn't tear my eyes away from those cement slabs surrounded by the extra green grass.

"In one to two years, each of you will find yourselves running your own homes. You will be given the responsibility of caring for a family and improving your new husband's allotment of land. Today, a guest will honor and privilege us by reminding you of the consequences of acting contrary to the dictates of the law." His voice was filled with conceit.

My eyes widened, I wasn't the only person that looked worried. I noticed the dark purple carriage on the school lane for the first time. It hadn't been there and, for some reason, I hadn't heard it arrive. Behind it rested two very large, very black horses

attached to an ominous looking windowless black carriage. Dear Ama, no. They couldn't do that on school grounds. They wouldn't. What would our parents say? My mother would be pleased, but I'm not sure my father would be.

I watched as the door to the deep purple carriage opened. A stocky man stepped out then offered his hand toward the shadowy inside. That's when I saw her. Her familiar wavy blonde hair made the bile in my throat rise. Dressed in iridescent purples her robes shimmered in the bright sun, her eyes the haunting and unnatural purple I'd never forget. Her long blonde hair was pinned up in an elaborate style framing her face which drew attention to those unnatural eyes. Although I fought against it, everything about her drew me in, demanding that I pay attention; she was, of course, a priestess of the Order of the Consort. I still hated her. She waited a moment before her seductive voice filled the small area.

"I'm here to talk to you about your sacred role as wives. You are required to please your husband physically and bring more souls into this world to assist in the divine task of healing the Earth. It is against the law to participate in any physical activity that is not for this express purpose. If it is discovered that you have done so outside of marriage the consequences are severe." Her speech sounded rehearsed.

It was so quiet I could hear the grass crunching her feet as she shifted on them. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a hand rise with hesitation. I turned to look at Sarah a little surprised at her bravery.

"You have a question?" The priestess's solemn voice rang out.

"Mr. Grey, what does that mean?" Sarah's voice shook.

He turned with slow deliberation finding the source of the question. His body was stiff with anger, but it was his eyes that frightened me. They were hard, like the Agents, and I felt myself cringe as he towered over us.

"What does that mean?" The annoyance in his voice was clear.

"What severe consequences?" She looked worried.

"I'm glad you asked." She said. "Today there are several women who have acted against the Law of Morality." Several Agents of the Emperor escorted three women a short distance away. About six red robed figures, their faces obscured by deep hoods, followed. The priestess's posture and facial expressions never changed. Her fingers were laced together loosely as she spoke, she did not move. Upon seeing this dreary group of people Mr. Grey's demeanor shifted, and I watched as he shifted with discomfort as they approached. This can't be happening. We could only attend executions with our parents. I'd always managed to sit in the back, as far away from it as possible, but now it was going to happen five feet away from me. I squeezed my eyes shut hoping that this was a dream and I would wake up.

"It is my duty to bring people closer to Ama. I help them understand His desires by assisting in the interpretation of impressions or dreams they receive from Him during ceremonial rituals. Another task I am given is to mete out punishment for those who willfully act contrary to His law. Today we will watch as three women undergo the most severe punishment for disobeying the Modesty Laws, thereby committing treason against the Empire. Watch and learn from their mistakes."

During her speech she never teared up or choked back a sob. These women were about to die, and she didn't care. I wanted to do something, but I didn't know what. The

women were brought forward. One of the Agents pushed them toward the priestess. One woman stumbled and fell into a kneeling position before the Holy Woman; I noticed the tear trails on the accused woman's cheeks, leaving small streaks free of grime. She was muttering something so I leaned forward to hear her words, but she was too quiet.

"These individuals have been found guilty of disobeying the Morality Laws in the highest degree. Re-Education has failed, and to prevent their corruption from spreading the Emperor has authorized their execution by stoning." The same man that had helped her out of the carriage, an Agent, addressed us. His strong voice reached all of us without effort.

Each young woman stepped forward and addressed the crowd repeating the following words. I'd heard about school day executions but hadn't believed they were real. Sometimes they made the students participate, and I worried that they were going to make us be the executioners. My hands began to sweat, and I swallowed the lump that had begun to rise in my throat. I wouldn't do it. They couldn't make me, and if they tried, I'd, well, I'm not sure what I would do, but I wouldn't kill those women.

"I have sinned against Ama and the Emperor and must be punished. I accept this punishment and hope others will learn from my failings."

I watched as the Agents locked the chains holding these women together and then slipped iron stakes through several of the links. Two Agents slid the stakes into small square openings after removing the metal covering. The click as the stake locked into place echoed in my ears. The girl that had stumbled sobbed.

"Girls." The priestess addressed us.

The stench of fear filled my nose. I wasn't sure if it was mine, my classmates, or the condemned women. It was overpowering. I bit my lip. That priestess is going to make us kill them.

“In the future you will be called to participate actively in events like this, but for now I'd like you to pay close attention to how it's done. These women have sinned against Ama and the Emperor. They've been found guilty, and they must now return to Ama to beg His forgiveness. We shall help them on their journey.” The priestess's showed no sadness or regret at the impending deaths before her. I wasn't sure which made me sicker, the priestess or what was about to happen.

Half a dozen executioners surrounded them. Each had a bucket filled to the top with stones at their feet. My eyes met Sarah's for a second. She was already crying, and each sob shaking her slender frame. The cloaked figures pick up a large stone in each hand, and, in unison, they threw the stones. Hard. I heard the thumps and crunches as each wave of stones met flesh. Some of the girls around me covered their ears only to have them forced away by an Agent. I kept my head up, but I lowered my eyes looking at the grass. Every hit caused me to jerk involuntarily. When the waves of stones stopped I was shaking and trying not to throw up. The women lay motionless surrounded by stones and blood. I looked up to see three of the executioners walk up to them. They leaned down and ran long slender knives through their throats. The iron smell of fresh blood filled the air. The girl next to me vomited.

CHAPTER THREE

I looked at my paper trying to forget the broken and bloodied bodies. The smell of blood stayed in my nostrils long after I was surrounded by the relative safety of the school walls. Seconds crawled by as images of the execution marched across my memory. Sarah looked just as horrified as I felt. Balance sheets just couldn't keep my attention after what I'd witnessed.

The bell rang startling me into the present. I stood to leave but was knocked back down by the rushing body of another student. I looked up and came face-to-face with Jude. I'd known him for most of my life, but we had never been friends. His parents wouldn't allow it. In a fleeting moment I wondered if my father would pick him as my marriage partner. He was tall and well-built, his light hair unkempt. Whenever he looked me full in the face I felt it pierce my heart. Like right now.

"Sorry about that. You okay?" His deep baritone voice reverberated throughout my body.

He held his hand out. I took the offered hand and he helped me up waiting for an answer. As he smiled at me it lit up his whole face.

"Yes. I'm fine." I tried to keep my voice steady.

"Good." He kept smiling.

As he walked away he waved at some friends and hurried to join them. I could still feel the warmth of his hand in mine. It wasn't impossible. Technically our families were social equals even with my blundering a few years ago and my parents' secret disgrace.

“Rowan. Come on.” Celia snapped her fingers in my face to get my attention.

I thought of Jude as we walked to the library. He smelled nice, like musk and trees. It made me think of the forest. Father had talked so long and kept such a close eye on me that I hadn’t been able to sneak out to the forest. After seeing those women, though, maybe that was a good thing. When I was a lot younger I would watch Jude play with the other boys in the neighborhood. Once I’d even been lucky enough to catch them swimming in the pond near the communal stables. He had only been wearing shorts. His wet body was etched in my memory like a fine carved statue. When we walked through the library door we were hit with the scent of old books. I inhaled filling my lungs with the heady aroma of aged paper and ink.

Smiling, Celia rolled her eyes, “All I smell is dust.”

I forced a weak smile; we went through this every time we entered the library. Looking around we found an empty table and dumped our books on the polished, but chipped, table top. . Celia leaned on the table but didn’t say anything. Her eyes were sad and distracted. She wanted to talk, I could tell, and I could guess about what. I wasn’t sure how to talk about it. What was I supposed to say?

“Um, are you okay?” I hoped the words came out right, but they felt awkward.

Celia nodded and shrugged then began to sift through her pile of books. I was used to this coping mechanism. She would talk to me when she was ready. I looked past her at the shelves of books that lined the walls. I loved being in here surrounded by books. The friends inside don’t judge you for what you’ve done. A low intermittent whisper disrupted the stale quiet of the room. Behind me I could hear the librarian writing something; the scratch of her pencil on paper a soothing and familiar sound. I stared at

the table as the images of the women's faces forced out any other thoughts. They had looked so scared. Could what they had done be so bad? Shaking my head I tried to erase the picture of their bruised and broken bodies as the blood spilled from their throats onto the bright green grass.

Before opening her book Celia studied me then started to read our Domestic lesson for the following day. She was right. I needed to distract myself. I looked through my neat pile and found the same book. The words glared up at me accusing me, but it didn't make sense. This was what was done. I'd been to several executions for Moral Misconduct. I just hadn't been so close. I hadn't seen the bruises rise on the skin right before my eyes or heard the snapping of bone or smelled the iron tinge of blood as it left the convicted's body.

Interrupting my thoughts, I heard the heavy tell-tale footsteps of several Agents echoing in the hallway. I turned just in time to see them escort Sarah away. Our eyes met. Her mouth moved without sound, *Help*, but before I could say or do anything she was gone. The weight of my powerlessness descended on me, and I collapsed onto the table.

Celia rushed around and rubbed my back, "What happened? Are you okay?"

All I could do was nod. Air began to flow into my lungs again, but it just trickled in. I felt more than saw her turn toward the door then back to me. She dropped a pencil.

"Sorry, I dropped my pencil." Celia said to the librarian then whispered to me, "Sit up before she sees you."

I took a few deep breaths and slumped over my book as Celia sat down again. I risked a quick glance behind me. The librarian was watching me with suspicion. She shifted and began to rise from her chair, but another student distracted her with a question. I fought against the powerlessness and fear. I couldn't do anything if I was Re-Educated.

“That was close.”

I nodded as I tried to get a hold of myself. I looked at the door again hoping that I hadn't just seen Sarah with those Agents, but I knew I had. She was gone.

“They've never taken someone out of school like that before.” I could hear the worry and fear in Celia's voice. What would they do to Sarah? My mind drifted to the execution. No. They'd Re-educate her first. They always did that first, and then if they didn't follow the rules, well, then they were terminated.

“Do you think Sarah will be okay?” Celia stared at the doorway.

“I hope so. Re-education isn't so bad, right? She'll just take a few classes, or something, and come back.” I ran my fingers along the thick ropey scar that led from just below my eye down toward my neck. It kept people most away, and if that didn't, the shame I'd brought down on my family did. Celia had always stood beside me, and I still wasn't sure why she'd decided to be my friend. Sarah wasn't my friend but she didn't ignore me like the rest of the girls did. She had always been very nice to me. I think it was in her rebellious nature. She was always walking the fine line between obedience and rebellion. I'd started to look up to her for that.

A murmur had risen throughout the library, and Sarah's name could be heard as the other students began to gossip. It was always big news when we heard about a removal. Extracting her during school, though? That had never happened here before.

“Do you think they took her as a warning?” I asked Celia as quietly as possible.

She thought about it then nodded, freezing as the librarian stood. We all froze.

“Back to work everyone. The show's over.” Her voice had a strange breathy depth that made you want to lean in to hear more.

I wondered how the librarian had avoided marriage and if it was possible for me to as well. I looked up and met her eyes. I dropped my own eyes to my book and thought of the priestess's eyes, Sarah's frightened eyes, and the sightless eyes of the executed. Why was I always being watched? It made me anxious.

CHAPTER FOUR

I walked home taking as much time as possible. I knew that my mother would have heard about the executions, and I dreaded her reaction. I couldn't help but remember the last execution I'd attended several months ago. We received a notice that there would be a public execution in the town center

"Rowan, let's go. I want a good spot." My mother had said as she pulled a shawl around her shoulders.

I looked at her like she was crazy.

"What?" She asked innocently, the question reaching her eyes.

"Mom, they're going to kill those poor people." I didn't hide the accusation from my voice.

"They are doing this for our good. To send a message that Ama commands obedience. It's our job to obey His will without question, isn't it?" She stared at me expecting me to agree.

She had that crazy look in her eye which meant that nothing I said would change her mind. I had been at the receiving end of more than one flat-palmed slap when I didn't back down. She glanced at an old wooden clock that hung on the wall, and she squealed in excitement as she grabbed my hand pulling me out the door.

She yanked on my arm the entire way until we saw the town center. Townspeople were already finding places around the center slab. As she pushed our way through, people glared at us but stepped away, leaving a small space empty right at the front. She tried to pull me to her, but I stood firm.

"I'm going to go sit with Celia." My mind was made up.

She didn't respond as she found an opening to witness the executions. I turned my back as I searched the crowd, but just as I saw Celia I felt Mother's hand grip my ankle. I looked down at her manic expression. Her eyes both were hard and eager as her voice came out in little puffs of breath as she fought to contain her excitement.

“Rowan. Pay close attention to why these people are being punished.”

The memory faded as I turned the corner, my legs heavy with avoidance. I saw my mother digging in the garden and relief flooded me. Gardening was good; it always put her in a good mood. Maybe it wouldn't be too bad after all. As I neared, I saw that she was using a dark pungent fertilizer on her flower beds. The grass had been aerated, and small tubes of dirt littered the lawn. If I could see into our back yard the vegetable garden in the back would tell me how good a day it had really been. My mother had little tells, and gardening was one. If she worked in the front, it was because she was putting on a show for someone she knew was going to be surveying the town. If the back was also done it was because she'd had a good day. She often reminded me of our duty to the earth.

“I hear you had the opportunity to participate in an execution today.” Her voice sounded disinterested, and I was somewhat surprised she had noticed my approach. She kept her head down, her hair hidden under a kerchief as her long fingers spread the manure around. I grunted an affirmative, and she leaned back on her heels, my shadow shielding her from the sun.

“Tell me about it.” She tried to keep the interest out of her voice, but her eyes glistened in anticipation.

I looked down at her trying to decide if I could avoid this conversation. Shifting my weight I turned away from her, concentrating on the house down the street. She stood, a little shaky, her rounding belly putting her off balance. She still hadn't told me what was happening even though Celia's mother had been given clearance several years ago for another child. I had watched as she grew rounder each month. It irritated me that neither Mother nor Father had told me yet.

"Rowan, how many times must I tell you the importance of these events?" Her voice revealed her irritation at my lack of zeal.

"It wasn't a social visit, mother." I retorted.

As soon as the words were out of my mouth I knew what was coming. I expected it, but the sheer force of her slap surprised me. The sound bounced around the homes on our street as my hand went to my cheek, hot and stinging under my protective hand. I was about an inch taller than my mother, but in her anger she seemed enormous.

"If you don't pay attention to why those women were executed you may find yourself in the same situation." She warned.

She held my gaze, and I knew there was truth to her words. Mother glanced around our almost deserted street at a few of our neighbors. They looked away as she met their curious stares.

"Is everything okay, Charlotte?"

"Yes, Amelia." My mother turned to our neighbor and smiled.

"Would you like me to send a message to Liam? I'd hate for you to get upset in your condition."

“Thank you, but that won’t be necessary. If I need stronger disciplinary action I’ll talk to him when he gets home.” She turned toward away then back toward our neighbor, “Could I trouble you for that vegetable dish you told me about?” I could tell Mother was diverting her attention. Our neighbor nodded, still smiling, and waved as she returned to her own yard.

We walked in the house. She muttered under her breath about my embarrassing display of disobedience, and in her distraction left her gardening tools in the yard. They were one of her prized possessions. She would be upset about it later. My hand dropped from my cheek as I stepped through the door.

“Your mouth is too loose and disrespectful. I’m sure that’s why you were in the group chosen to witness it. Now. Come, and tell me about it.” A business-like tone crept into her voice tinged with vague disinterest. I expected her to wash her hands, but she surprised me by sitting heavily on her worn chair. She placed her filthy hands on her stomach as she leaned her head back and closed her eyes.

“There is a lesson in this, my dear.”

“Mother, I don’t want to talk about it.” I pleaded.

With her eyes close my mother raised an eyebrow and pursed her lips. Silence filled the room with more noise than if she had yelled at me. I felt my resolve deflate.

“Okay.” I muttered. When I saw her relax I decided to try to make a deal. “I’ll tell you about it. Everything. But if I do will you just tell me when the baby’s due?” I stared at her stomach not allowing myself to meet her eyes. Out of my peripheral vision I saw her blink several times then she shook her head.

“Maybe later, for now sit and explain everything to me in detail.”

Taking a deep breath I lowered myself onto my floor pillow.

CHAPTER FIVE

The next morning, I looked in the little handheld mirror in our bathroom. A bruise had blossomed on my cheek. I began working with my hair hoping that I could hide the large purple mark that stood out against the light pinkish of my scar. I pulled it back in a relaxed ponytail with the sides hanging loose pushing the dress standards. I remembered something I'd heard about the Old Days. Women had been encouraged to use chemicals and paints on their faces to hide what they didn't like. I couldn't remember what she'd called it, but I wanted some. It was embarrassing to have proof of my disobedience. After several minutes, I put the mirror on the counter top, and I walked to the dining room where my dad sat eating breakfast while reading *The Grayson News*.

Waving his cup of coffee toward my bruised face he asked, "Do we need to talk about that?"

He glanced up, but he didn't hold my gaze. I shook my head hoping keeping my eyes lowered and mouthed "I'm sorry". He nodded and went back to his newspaper.

"Liam, dear, she just got a little lippy yesterday. Remember, I told you?" Walking into the room, Mother put a plate of scrambled eggs, fruit, and toast in front of me. A pitcher of orange juice already sat on the table, and I reached for it to fill my glass.

"Yes, Charlotte, I remember. I'm sorry, work kept me away last night or I would have been here to help. You shouldn't take so much on in your condition."

She waved him off smiling as she returned to the kitchen to wash dishes. Father continued to watch me over the top of his paper, taking slow drinks of his coffee. I played with the eggs on my plate, Mother made them slimy. I gagged on one as it slid down my throat. Looking into the kitchen I saw her rub her back distractedly as the dress accentuated her round stomach and arching back. She knew that I knew so when was she going to tell me?

“Rowan, I received a letter from the school yesterday.” As my father spoke I kept my eyes focused on my breakfast.

I forced some eggs in my mouth with a bite of toast and chewed. The crunch of the toast helped the slimy consistency. I swallowed hard then drank some juice. I looked at my father and expected the worse.

“The letter mentioned a mandatory shot. I want you to tell them that you’ve been vaccinated already.” He said his eyes never leaving mine.

I remembered them talking about it in Health class, “It’s supposed to be something new. The nurses said it was because of some new illness but I don’t think – “

“You are not to get that vaccination.” He interrupted me as he set his mug down hard. Mother leaned into the room to see what was happening. I waited until she went back into the kitchen.

“I tried telling them that, already. They wouldn’t listen.” I explained.

Father slammed down his coffee cup spilling the brown liquid on the table. I jerked back in surprise. My eggs slithered off my spoon and down the front of my shirt. Scooting his chair back Father stood and walked past me.

“Come with me.” He growled.

He strode to the back door, and I did my best to keep up. As we walked outside the cool air filled my lungs. I breathed out a puff of shocked steam.

“Liam, what’s wrong?” My mother’s worried voice floated outside.

“Nothing Charlotte, I just need to talk to our daughter.” His voice remained steady as we made our way to the furthest end of our large vegetable garden.

“Rowan. Did you get the shot?” His voice strained.

“They made me. They did it in my health class.” I said with concern.

“Who else had it?”

“The girls. They gave it to us just before the execution.”

“The execution? What execution?” He clenched his fists.

“I thought you knew.” My hand went up to the bruise on my face.

Father knelt down, and looked up at me taking my hands. He didn’t speak. He just looked at me like he was trying to memorize me. I looked down at our hands.

“Tell me what happened yesterday. He asked.

“After our health class the principal made several of us go to the front lawn of the school by the cement squares. A priestess came, and she talked to us about our future duties.” I hesitated, “Dad, they killed three women right on the lawn outside of my school.” I started to cry thinking about it.

I fell to my knees next to him and sobbed. I felt his hand on my back, and it gave me strength. I tried to regain my composure, but I couldn’t talk. What was I supposed to say? He looked up at me, his salt and pepper hair disheveled by the

breeze. He moved so that he could sit on the grass that surrounded the garden, and he patted a spot next to him.

“They didn’t make you participate, did they?” His tone was solemn.

I shook my head not trusting myself to talk yet. He spoke in low whispers so quiet I barely heard him.

“That is against Empire law. They should have had my permission.”

“Mother knew about it when I got home.” I said.

He took a deep breath then pushed the heels of his hands into his eyes before speaking.

“Did anything else happen? Anything I should know about?” he sounded weary.

I nodded, “Sarah was taken by some Agents.”

“During school?” His brow furrowed in confusion.

I nodded. He looked down at the ground in front of us. He picked a blade of grass and began to shred it with slow deliberation. Deep in thought my father chewed on the inside of his cheek. He looked around then took my shoulders in his hands, and he made me face him.

“I think it’s time we had a talk about the Empire and Ama.” He whispered very quietly.

“Okay.” I said with hesitation.

He took a deep breath, but just as he was about to explain, my mother appeared in the doorway.

“There you two are. Goodness, Liam, you look like you’ve had a fright.”

“Charlotte, I’m fine but I do need to finish talking to Rowan. We’ll be in in a moment.” He said firmly.

She looked toward the door then back at us.

“If she’s late for school the Emperor’s Agents will pay us a visit. We would all be reprimanded for her tardiness and we can’t afford to be punished. Not now. We’re finally making some headway, and I won’t have all my work destroyed.” Mother held her hands toward us beckoning for us to follow her. Herding us into the house she brushed the grass off of my skirt. She gave me a quick once over then tsked at my hair pulling it tighter away from my face before handing me my books at the door.

CHAPTER SIX

Over the next week father was away from home more than usual. Each night around mealtime a messenger arrived with a message from him begging our pardon for his late work night. Mother would box up his meal, with a smile, and finish her own. I tried to bring up our conversation, but he would silence me with a look toward mother. It worried me that whatever he had to say couldn't be said in front of her. I told Celia about it but she couldn't make sense of it either.

“At least the bruise is going away.” Celia said looking at my cheek. My hand went to my face where the bruise had faded to a blend of yellow and light green. “You really need to stop talking back to her.”

The halls were almost empty as we headed to the cafeteria. I heard quick steps behind me, and I turned to see Jude jogging toward us. As he passed us he slowed down and smiled at me.

“That shirt looks great, Rowan. Oh, and nice shiner.” The corner of his mouth formed a half smile of appreciation before he sped up. I stared at his broad shoulders, the fabric of his shirt held tight against his muscles. My eyes grazed down to the small of his back and then landed on his round butt. I heard Celia chuckle, and I knew she'd caught me staring.

“You better stop that or they'll come take you away.” She looped one of her arms in mine, and we both giggled down the hall.

“I can look can't I, at least, as long as they don't find out? Wouldn't it be great if we were matched? I wouldn't mind marriage if it were to him.” I thought out loud.

We moved toward the slow moving lunch line as a gaggle of lower classmen surrounded us then moved on leaving us irritated at the end with Jude ahead of us. I noticed that he looked in our direction several times before finding his friends. After escaping the lunch line we found a table and sat down, the familiar bubble of seclusion surrounding us. I could feel his eyes on me and turned. Our eyes met for a brief second before his friend shifted and interrupted our sight line. Celia sat next to me, like always, ensuring our private discussions remained private.

“Well, why wouldn’t you two get matched?” Celia asked pointedly before eating a large forkful of broccoli.

I shrugged as I stuffed a piece of barbeque chicken in my mouth. We sat in silence eating each bite with careful thought. She knew that if she waited long enough I’d answer whatever question she’d posed. I relented.

“Because of me. Because of my parents.” I said exasperated.

“So you have a scar, and you guys made mistakes. We all do. He’s not out of your bracket.” She said between mouthfuls.

I guess it was possible that our union could be approved, but who would think to pair us. Besides, only in the lower brackets did you get paired with someone in your region, because we were both mid-level it was much more likely that I’d be farmed out somewhere. He’d be matched with a girl transplanted here. It’s how things were done.

“So what did your dad say again?” Celia asked.

“He said something about talking to me about the Empire and Ama. It was really strange how he said it.” I whispered.

“Maybe it has something to do with him and your mom?” She shrugged. I looked around the cafeteria for Jude, but he was gone.

“Do you have to do community service today?” I asked, trying to get my mind off him.

“Yeah, The food market has a shipment coming in, and they want me to make sure their inventory is fresh.” She put the last bite of her lunch in her mouth. “At least my family gets to keep the stuff they can’t sell. It helps now that the baby is eating food.”

“When did your mom tell you she was pregnant?” I asked, curious.

She shrugged, “I don’t know. I think she was about three or four months along; she said she waited to be sure that the procedures worked.”

That was something I hadn’t heard before and I looked at her, my brows furrowed in confusion. She looked at my plate, and I gestured for her to eat whatever she wanted.

“I overheard mother talking to our neighbor that after her approval she had to get the device taken out so she could conceive. She called it something with initials, but I don’t remember what it was. She also said that they had to go to the temple to perform two ceremonies before Ama blessed them with the pregnancy.”

“Which ceremony?” Our heads were now so close they were touching, our voices so low we barely heard each other over the noise of the other voices.

“I don’t know.”

We sat the last remaining minutes deep in thought. I wondered who would know what ceremony she was talking about. Who did I dare to ask? Across the room I watched Jude walk away, his profile serious and his shoulders tense.

#

I couldn't stop from staring as Sarah walked into our classroom. She smiled into each set of curious eyes. Our lesson went on as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened, but each of us stared at the back of her neatly styled blonde head. It had been weeks since she'd been removed from the school by Agents. She looked perfect. Not a hair was out of place, her eyes bright and attentive as she scribbled notes about whatever it was we were being taught. Her blouse was crisp without a button undone or a wrinkle. Even her skirt was pressed and covering her legs below the knee. The perfection made it all the way down to her modestly crossed ankles. I crossed my own ankles and smoothed out the wrinkles on my faded skirt. Looking at her, it was obvious that my skirt was too short and my hair was not regulation. I ran my fingers through it to try and straighten it up. It wouldn't do to call attention to myself.

The bell rang releasing us from class, and I stood holding my books to my chest. As others rushed passed me, I noticed that Sarah waited until the press of bodies was gone. She stood and very primly gathered her things before walking toward the door.

“Hi Sarah, it's good to see you.” I smiled at her and waved a little. She smiled back, but it didn't reach her eyes.

“Thanks.”

“How are you feeling?” I fell into step beside her as we walked toward our next classes.

We were both headed in the same direction, but not the same class. If I was going to get some answers I had to hurry.

“I’m great. How are you?” Her smile still fixed to her face.

I shrugged trying to remain noncommittal. Something was off, but I couldn’t quite figure it out. She walked different than she used to, much straighter, and she was less talkative. There was something more, though. I couldn’t help myself, I had to ask. No one talked about Re-Education or what happened there, and this was the closest I’d ever come to someone who may have gone through it. I might never get another opportunity like this again. I looked around to make sure no one was around. I could see my mother’s disapproving frown and my father’s worried expression.

“Where were you?” I blurted out.

She stopped, and I heard a few irritated mutters as other students dodged us. She looked at me, and her fake smile faltered just slightly.

“I went to see relatives.” She choked out.

“Agents came and then took you to some relatives?” My voice was flat, and I didn’t try to hide my disbelief. She nodded then walked away, leaving me staring at empty space. I turned to watch the edge of her skirt disappear around the corner before the pieces came together. She hadn’t admitted it, but she’d been reeducated, and she was no longer the rebellious Sarah I’d known. She was the living poster of the Modesty Laws. Her clothes, her hair, even her speech and walk.

#

Celia handed me her school bag, and I watched as she rewound the loose bun she'd worn that day. The sun shone hot and dry down on us as we walked through several neighborhoods to get home after school. She slung her bag over her shoulder, the large heavy bag hitting her in the hip and causing her to lose her balance.

"Maybe you should leave some of those at home." I said as I helped steady her.

"I did. Now I have to catch up, or the school is going to notify my parents. I got called in today."

"Celia! Why didn't you tell me?" This was bad. Really bad.

"I don't know. You've seemed distracted with you mom hiding her pregnancy and all, it wasn't a big deal. Now you know." She deflected.

"Well, what are we going to do?"

"I'm going to catch up. It's that simple." Celia said logically.

"How can I help?"

She thought for a moment before answering.

"Come do homework with me."

"Done. I have to do my community service at Mr. Silva's store today, but I'll ask Mother if I can go to the library afterwards. I don't think she'll mind. She thinks you're a good influence." I chuckled.

"Great! Now stop stalling. What's so important?"

"I talked to Sarah today." I looked at Celia sideways.

“Oh yeah. I thought I saw her. Something happened?” She asked a little loud.

I nodded and told Celia about our brief conversation. Celia looked at me expecting more, and I began to doubt what I’d thought. Just then we passed one of the bulletin boards on our route. It was a tall diamond shape providing plenty of room for the plethora of public notices that were now attached. I grabbed her hand, and we circled around until I found it. I knew it was still there. A poster filled the side, and I stood Celia in front of it. She looked at me like I was crazy.

“I’m not crazy so stop it. Look at that girl.” I pointed to her hair, her blouse, her skirt and even the plain flat shoes she wore. It looked just like Sarah, but it wasn’t.

“Celia, they turned her into a walking modesty poster!”

“You think that’s what Re-education does? Why?”

“We know she had to have done something against Empire Law. I think it was the modesty laws since she came back as their poster girl. It must’ve been pretty serious for them to take her during school. Why else would they do that?”

“They probably wanted to make an example of her. Remember? We talked about that.” Celia dismissed my worry.

Just then I heard footsteps behind me and stop.

“Is there anything wrong ladies?”

We both turned. Just inches away stood a large broad shouldered man in a dark suit. An Agent. We froze. I’d never seen one this close. I guessed he was in his early thirties because of the wrinkles at his eyes, which seemed to stare through us. His hands were clasped behind his back.

“Do you need an escort home?” Bringing his hands forward, he motioned for my ID. I rummaged through my school bag, and I found my voice as I handed him the small piece of paper.

“No, but thank you. We were. We were just looking at the modesty poster.” I motioned behind me.

“Is that a fact?” His tone was arrogant. He didn’t believe me.

I looked at Celia hoping she could think of something that might convince him that he didn’t need to see us home. We should have been paying closer attention.

“Yes, we saw a girl at school today, and she looked really nice. We were trying to see if we could copy her.” Celia squeaked out.

I nodded vigorously and smiled. I pointed to the poster girl’s skirt then at mine.

“You see, sir, I’ve grown some, and I wanted to make sure I got the measurements right when I asked my mother to make me some new more appropriate clothes.” It was about a half inch too short, still within the legal limits, but it was getting close to inappropriate.

Without looking at my ID he handed it back. He reached with long fingers toward a pamphlet next to the poster then handed it to me. I looked down, and it was a miniature of the poster. Inside were all the mandatory regulations for both female and male fashions. I smiled at him hoping it looked real.

“Oh, thank you, sir! My mother will find this very helpful.”

He didn't move. He just stared at me, at the part of my scar that dipped beneath the collar of my shirt. The Agent licked his lips and began rubbing his fingers together. My hands began to sweat under his intense gaze. He reached toward me and I took Celia's hand, hard. She glanced over at me, and instant understanding covered her features.

"We should be going. Our mothers will be wondering what's keeping us." She waved at the leering man as I pulled her away. I looked back to see him adjusting himself with his eyes still on me. I felt those eyes on me long after he was out of sight. I clutched the pamphlet in my hand the entire way home, the paper crumpled and the ink smeared by the time I stood safely at my front door.

"I'll be over later if mother says it's okay."

Celia nodded, and then ran the two blocks to her house.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Every week, for the last year, I found myself in Mr. Silva's cramped store. Mr. Silva was an older man with a balding head and protruding belly. Today was no different. As I dusted figurines, he helped a customer at the front of the store. Placing the small replica of the Consort back in the display case, I set her down a little too hard, and the sound carried through the store catching Mr. Silva's attention. He frowned and gave me a look which I knew meant, "Be careful." The tinkling of the bell caught my attention. In walked, Mrs. Moss. Before her husband died, she visited the store on the rare occasion, but afterwards, she became a frequent guest. Now we saw her almost every day, and when she arrived, it was like she filled the store with her happy presence.

"Henry, there you are!" She said with joy.

I was surprised to hear her use his first name, something I'd never been told. I glanced up at him as I placed another figurine in the case just in time to see his eyes look away from me, and back to her, a stern look covering his features.

"Oh! Hello, Rowan." She sounded embarrassed, but she smiled anyway then began browsing noncommittally at several books.

I finished wiping down the inside of the case I was working on then locked it, the soft click announcing that the security clasp was in place. I turned to work on some clothing that needed refolding. The customer Mr. Silva was waiting on left, and Mrs. Moss pranced over to where my boss stood behind the counter, I watched her lean across it, her large round bottom wiggling as they spoke soft and low. After a few minutes they must have remembered I was there because she

moved away from the counter and then loud enough for me to hear she said in a happy voice,

"It's a beautiful day today, sir." Her attention was fixed on him, and he blushed.

A few weeks ago I'd been working in the back at his desk when I came across his letter of approval to remain unmarried. The paper had begun to yellow on the edges, and when he saw me with it. He just took it from me. No explanation. I'd heard that extra sons in wealthy families were not required to marry as long as one other did. Why couldn't I have that freedom? What if I didn't like who was chosen for me? Wiping the dust from some tiny animal statues, I tried to imagine what it would be like to have the freedom to choose my own life's path. I looked back at Mr. Silva's serious face and decided there were good and bad things, just like with anything. Still, to be able to choose ate at me like a parasite.

"Yes, it is a lovely day, Mrs. Moss. Can I help you find anything?" He walked from behind the counter and stood next to her.

I positioned myself so that I could watch them without being too obvious. His features had softened as he stood next to her; they were about the same age with graying hair and round bodies. They gravitated around each other. He looked almost happy.

"I received a letter from the Administration of Marriage today." She teased. "I am searching for just the right thing for a little get together I am hosting tomorrow to share some news. It's a very specific table covering."

"We have several to choose from." He started to walk toward kitchen-wares when she stopped him.

"It's for the Ceremony of Intent."

I'd been looking at a rather ugly animal statue when she spoke, and my head snapped up, Mr. Silva's wide eyes matching my surprise.

"Ceremony of Intent" his voice trailed off. "We, ah, we do have some very nice options..." Without a word, he went behind the front counter. He opened a large book filled with pictures, and he flipped to the ceremonial materials, ready to discuss the benefits of each one.

Watching them, I thought of the brief assembly we had in school several months ago where this ceremony was explained. A priest and priestess had come to the school to speak to everyone fifteen years old and older. I had searched the students for Jude, but he wasn't there. They explained that the chalice and binding ribbon were placed on a pristine table cloth or runner untouched by civilian hands. This kept them clean in both a literal and figurative way. Once the Ceremony of Intent was performed, there was no breaking the union contract, except through death. Mrs. Moss had her hand on his, and they were both smiling down at a letter lying on the counter between them.

"Rowan? Go get the white with gold-thread Ceremony of Intent runner, please."

"Yes, sir." As I passed them, I snuck a peek at the letter which lay open and saw the seal of our Regional Governor, Lincoln Truby. They were going to be married! I was surprised that their union had been approved, because Mrs. Moss was passed child bearing age. I was confused but excited for Mr. Silva. Even though he chose to be alone when he was younger he seemed lonely. Getting married to Mrs. Moss would help with that. She could talk for the both of them.

In the back room, the inventory covered the walls in clearly marked cardboard boxes. It was dingy and difficult to see. I turned on the light, and my eyes were drawn to a secluded section I was rarely given access to. The runners, along with so many other ceremonial pieces, sat on white shelves that Mr. Silva cleaned every other day. Each item was wrapped in clear plastic to protect them from our hands. On occasion he let me help with ceremonial items so I was excited to look at them. They weren't secret, just sacred. I might not believe in this, but it was beautiful. I'd once seen some drawn in a catalog at home, but they weren't as detailed or made of as fine materials as what Mr. Silva carried. This store was the premier location for sacred items.

In the back of my head I remembered the Agent and the creepy look he'd given me. I forced him out of my mind and tried to focus. Staring at the pieces my fingers itched to touch them. I wanted to believe that the marble of the Statue of The Consort would help me get pregnant. I wanted to feel the velvet caress of the ceremonial robes as I participated in a rite that I knew would help me or those I loved. Then my eyes fell on the table runner I'd been sent for. Beautiful. Even though I thought that the Ceremony of Intention was a lot of pomp that didn't mean much I wondered what would it be like to touch the golden threads? I fought with my emotions, confused by them. Staring at the cloth I thought of Jude, but I pushed it away. Mr. Silva was waiting. As my hands touched the protective plastic, a sudden jolt of electricity coursed through my body, reducing me to my knees.

I blinked away the tears caused by the pain of the shock. The concrete floor beneath my singed fingers felt cool. Shaking my head I tried to clear it, and understand what had just happened. It wasn't real. Deity never interacted with mortals; they were too

good for us. I looked up at the shelf, and I thought I saw the eyes of the Consort staring at me from behind marble carved irises.

"What was that?" My voice trailed off, it couldn't have been what I saw. That was impossible. Forcing myself to stand, I stared at the statue, but it was ordinary. There were no moving parts or other stones set into it. I looked at my fingers and half expected them to be blackened, but they looked normal. Then I saw the table runner that I was supposed to bring to the front but hesitated. Should I ask permission? No. Whatever had happened was because of static. Really bad static. I needed to get that piece to Mr. Silva; if I took too long he'd report me to my mother or worse. The staring eyes of the creepy Agent came to mind, but I hesitated over the plastic. I took several deep breaths then reached for the package, my hand hesitating before I forced myself to touch it. Nothing happened.

"Static electricity." I spoke to no one, but the sound of my voice brought me strength and comfort. It made me feel like I wasn't alone or going crazy. I walked with slow steps toward the front, holding the package in my hands without looking at it. I placed it on the counter next to them before looking at them. I'd heard about people being lost in each other's eyes, and I'd always felt it was cliché, but they just stared at each other. Mrs. Moss and Mr. Silva smiled in an unguarded fashion. I cleared my throat.

"I'm sorry that took so long." I felt a little awkward standing there, invading the affectionate moment they were sharing. How long had they been courting? This couldn't be a huge surprise to him; he was crotchety but not clueless. Mr. Silva turned toward me, still smiling,

"Thank you, Rowa..." he didn't finish my name, his eyes growing larger the longer he looked at me. Did I have something on my face? Mrs. Moss craned her neck a little to peer around his bulk. As she met my eyes, her hand flew to her mouth.

"By Ama." She muttered.

They stepped away from me like I was contagious. I saw their fear written on their faces. Why were they so scared? Why would they be afraid of me? I frowned then touched my face thinking maybe I had hit my head when I fell. Without a word, Mr. Silva reached behind the counter, and he placed a handheld mirror on the counter. Why was he avoiding my touch? I picked up the small mirror and peered in. I gasped. The blue eyes of my father were gone; in their place staring back at me were irises that literally sparkled gold. They looked like someone had spread golden glitter in them, each piece reflecting light. I looked at the walls expecting prisms to erupt around me, but there was nothing in the room but fear. I could almost smell the cold sweat fear produced.

"Rowan, what have you done?" Mrs. Moss couldn't tear her eyes away from my face.

"Nothing! I just got the piece you asked for." Hysteria grappled with my reason. I reached toward her looking for comfort, but they both stepped away. "I didn't do anything." The words came out pleading.

"You're cursed! You've brought the wrath of Ama upon us!" Mrs. Moss screeched at me.

I backed away from her, and then wiped away the tears that slid from the corners of my eyes.

"Ladies, please. Perhaps this is the His way of blessing our union and calling one of his devoted disciples into his service." Mr. Silva's voice was calm, but I doubted he was that calm on the inside. His eyes were alert and wild. He cleared his throat and looked at me with reservation. "Miss Tinney, we need to get you home."

It had been a very long time since he'd called me that. The distance it created bothered me more than I thought it would. He scribbled a note then handed it to Mrs. Moss along with the still sealed material. As we walked out the door he flipped the sign to 'CLOSED' and locked the door.

"Please give the message to the Agents at our local office. I'll get her home as quickly as I can." He whispered to her, but I still heard him.

"Oh, of course, but do you think we should select a different one? Just in case?"

He ignored her question and kissed her hand. Urging me forward he followed at a safe distance being careful not to touch even the fabric of my clothes. We walked toward my home in silence.

CHAPTER EIGHT

We walked steadily through the streets of Greyson, but it took about ten minutes to get to our street. As we turned the corner, I saw a covered carriage with darkened windows on the curb by our house. The large black draft horses dozed, their noses dipping toward the pavement. The coachman sat erect in his seat, but I felt his gaze as we walked passed them, Mr. Silva still a careful distance behind me. Looking at the door I saw the symbol of the Order of the Consort, an ornate “O” painted in silver, adorning it. I wanted to take a closer look, but Mr. Silva hurried me forward. As we reached the door he reached past me and opened the front door being sure to avoid me.

"Mr. Tinney, you need to see this, sir." Mr. Silva's voice remained steady even though his hands shook with nervousness. I heard voices inside, but no one acknowledged Mr. Silva. He pushed the door open wider, and he stepped in with me close behind.

“Sir, it’s about Rowan.” I watched Mr. Silva’s head swivel as he observed everyone in the room. I bit my lip. This was bad. I looked around for an exit but a tall man with white tattoos on his arms was watching me. His face stern and his body tense. I staggered backwards when I heard my father shout in anger and frustration.

"We are aware of the situation, Mr. Silva!" Father roared.

I saw Mr. Silva’s body jerk at the anger flung at him. He had been nothing but kind to us and didn’t deserve that. I reached out to try to comfort him but he stepped away. I blinked away my tears of hurt and anger as Mr. Silva stepped further into the house.

“Liam. She’s been blessed by Ama. You should be proud.”

“Henry, don’t tell me what I should feel! She’s home. That’s what matters. Thank you for seeing her here.” Father said, almost yelling.

I looked at the back of Mr. Silva’s balding head. As he turned to leave, he inclined his head toward me then backed out, his eyes glued to mine. Hesitant, I walked into the front room, pushing past the large man with short hair and thick muscled, white tattooed arms.

My mother sat in her wingback chair her pregnant belly mocking me. When she saw me she smiled at me bigger than I ever remember. The smile wasn’t welcoming, though, there was hunger in it. She was the same, but different and she scared me. Her hands rested protectively on her thickened middle moving only to push herself up. Walking toward me she wiped away a happy tear then held her arms wide to engulf me in a hug. Before reaching the tattooed man, not an Agent but something else, came between us blocking the contact, for which I was grateful.

"I'm sorry, ma'am." His voice was deep and distant, his face devoid of emotions. I could guess why they were here, but I didn’t want to ask to confirm it. They were here because Mrs. Moss had alerted our local Agent office that my eyes had changed. Any strange change was reported. Priests and priestesses weren’t Selected from the general public; Ama always chose them from the handmaidens. Only after His Selection did the eyes change to an unnatural purple. Mine weren’t purple. This wasn’t normal. I thought back to that stupid circle, that stupid red headed girl, the jewels, and the respect. I clenched my fists trying to hold back angry tears. Four years ago I would have loved the idea of going away, but now that I was being forced to by a god I didn’t believe in. I looked at the big beefy guy and then back at my mother, now sitting and smiling in a

strange knowing way. Another male voice coming from the kitchen interrupted my thoughts.

"Mr. Tinney, it is my duty to deliver her. It is an honor that Ama Selected her directly." His gruff voice drifted in. Deliver me where, I wondered. Were they talking about a training center? I strained to hear them.

"She's not going! According to the law she wasn't Selected to be a handmaiden so she doesn't have to go now." He wasn't yelling, but his tone was stern.

I began to move toward their voices but Beefy cleared his throat and moved to stand between me and my father. I stopped and glanced up at him. He met my eyes without flinching then shook his head "No". I stayed where I was.

"Mr. Tinney, she has been Selected to a calling higher than a simple handmaiden. I'm afraid the law doesn't apply. The Emperor is aware of her, and he has demanded that she be taken and trained." His voice remained emotionless.

I was to be trained as a priestess. His words filled me with uncertainty. After a girl or boy was Selected no one ever saw them again unless they were Chosen by Ama for the priesthood. It seemed like everyone else just disappeared.

"The Emperor knows?" His words were choppy.

"Ama is the one that chooses. The Emperor enforces. We have no control over who is Selected."

Without moving, I peeked around the large body still blocking my view into the dining room, and I watched as my father backed away from the person in the kitchen. His face was filled with anguish as he roughly wiped tears from his eyes. His reaction to my leaving filled me with dread.

"She's my only child. You can't take her from me." He focused toward the kitchen, all but begging the other man to ignore his orders.

"That's not entirely true, Mr. Tinney, but it doesn't matter. Your family will be compensated because of her service to Ama." The man moved into view.

An Agent. I had known he would be but it still surprised me to see one standing in our home. He shifted his attention toward me.

"What about the celebration. Doesn't she deserve that? When they're selected as a handmaiden we're allowed to give the celebration." Father's desperation was obvious.

The man shook his head, "I'm afraid not. Because of her unusual Selection, I am under direct orders that she be taken immediately."

"My daughter isn't going anywhere." I'd never heard my father so emotional before.

"Mr. Tinney, you no longer have authority over me or anyone else. I suggest you be reasonable." The Agent stood with his feet shoulder width apart, and his hands clasped behind his back. I'd seen that stance before countless times, but this time it filled me with dread.

"Why does the Emperor care about me?" I interrupted.

"I think you know the answer to that question. Now, sir, if you would like to dispute the Selection you will need to contact the High Priestess or the Emperor."

"Her." He said it like it was a swear word. Why would he say it like that?

Mother interrupted them by placing her hand on Father's arm. I had been concentrating so much on their conversation I hadn't noticed her slip by.

"Liam, she will be in good hands. Ama has been good to us." She patted her belly then turned to look at me, "We will miss you but you should feel comforted to know our family has been blessed with another child because of your absence." Her smile was strange.

"You did this?" My father looked at her and then to her belly.

"I don't know what you are talking about." Her lie was smooth and sweet, but I had been around long enough to recognize them.

She pulled him away as the Agent walked by. Father looked defeated and angry. Our eyes met, and he looked like he was going to try to save me before he dropped his eyes to the floor.

"I'm sorry, I'm so sorry." Father muttered.

Once more he looked at me then disappeared into the depths of the house. His rounded shoulders cried defeat but when I met his eyes I saw steel determination. Maybe he hadn't given up, after all.

"May I get a few things?" I asked the silver-haired Agent. I started to walk toward my room when the man guarding me blocked my path. I was emotionally exhausted already and didn't know how much longer I take this. I just wanted them to go and for everything to return to normal.

"You won't need any of your things as a priestess." He answered.

"But I'll need clothes and hair stuff. My soap? It's the only kind that doesn't irritate the skin on my face." I stalled, but his stern expression made me realize it was

useless. I didn't care. I was going to try. If my father wasn't ready to give up then neither was I. If my father didn't want me to go then I knew it had to be bad.

"You will be provided with everything you need."

"I don't get to take anything?" I asked, unhappy.

I worried about my journals filled with my angry ranting. Even one of those pages could send me to Re-Education, or worse. I thought of the gifts from my parents and Celia. My hand went to my skirt pocket and I felt the small trinket I always kept with me. I wished that it gave me more comfort than it did. I couldn't let them know I had it. Without a traditional celebration I wouldn't be able to tell anyone good bye.

"Can't I say goodbye to Celia? She's expecting me." I half whined.

"No. You are beginning a new life and must leave the old one behind." His words were firm.

"When will I see my family again?"

His blank look was all the confirmation I needed. This was the last time I would ever see the ice blue eyes of my father and hear the lilting voice of my mother. The thought of never seeing them again made my stomach flip and tears spring to my eyes. Even though my mother and I rarely agreed I knew what to expect from her. I had no idea how I was going to live without my father. I looked around the room trying to memorize it as the sun filtered in through the curtains, and the dust motes floated without care or direction in the light. The light carpet was clean but trampled. I imagined my mother cleaning and primping the entire

room humming a happy hymn once we were gone. I stared at my father's empty chair and swallowed a sob.

"Miss Tinney, it's time to go." The tattooed man moved to let us pass as he led the way to the dark blue carriage waiting ominously at the curb.

CHAPTER NINE

I wiped away my tears on the sleeve of my shirt as I watched Grayson sweep by. The clomping of the large hooved horses echoed on the empty road. The quiet streets and towering trees gave way to vast meadows and then crops. I'd never been out of Grayson; it had never been approved, so I drank in the landscape, fighting fatigue. The fields around us stretched for miles and changed from corn and soybean to green beans and lettuce then to immense apple and apricot orchards. A few times I spied workers in the fields, their skin dark from constant field work. They looked haggard and worn, but in seconds we'd sped by and they became a memory just like the small towns that housed them.

The tattooed man sat up top with the driver while the older Agent sat in the carriage with me. I refused to look at him, and, instead, I stared out the window. Celia was going to worry. I'd never see her again. Fresh tears sprung to my eyes, and sobs wracked my frame.

"Can't you let me leave Celia a note? I could send her a message." I sobbed into the crook of my arm.

He remained silent, his eyes focused on the open book in his hands. I looked up with tears clouding my vision, but his eyes never moved from the words on the page.

"Hey! I'm talking to you!" I yelled. My voice rising so loud that I felt the driver shift in his seat and Tattoo knock on the roof.

He looked up at me calmly, "It's against protocol."

He reached into the inside of his suit coat and pulled out a handkerchief for me. I took it and wiped my nose. He went back to reading. I tried to keep my tears at bay and concentrated on controlling my gasping breath. After a few minutes my breathing was almost normal although tears slid down my cheeks. I wiped them away as soon as they escaped.

“Where are we going?” I asked above the thundering noise of the horses.

He ignored me, again. The inside of the carriage began to close in on me as his silence enveloped me. The steady bang of the velvet curtains against the windows reminded me of the curtains that always got in my way on Recommitment Day. The rich wood, polished so that it shined, and the plush bench seats were too extravagant. They assaulted my senses.

“I just want to know where I’m going. Wouldn’t you?” my voice shook as I spoke.

He kept reading, but he glanced up in my direction.

“Please?” I begged.

“The Verger Centre. That’s where you’re headed for training.” He sighed.

Verger? That was the biggest city in the Empire and the most prestigious center to be called to. I leaned back in my seat letting his words sink in. I didn’t want to go. It was so far away. I looked at the door handle. It didn’t look locked. I glanced at the Agent, but he was reading again. My heart began to beat hard in my chest as I stared at the simple piece of metal. It would be so easy. I looked out the window at the distant woods. I bit my lip wondering if I could make it. I felt the carriage slow down for a turn and, casting a

glance at him, I grabbed the handle and yanked. The door didn't budge. I yanked again and pushed with all my weight, but it seemed sealed shut.

“It's locked. What did you think you were going to do if it did open?”

Comfortable in his seat he looked at me, the beginnings of a smile curving his mouth.

“Well, I thought--” I stammered.

“Well, you thought wrong. Relax. It's going to be a long ride.”

There had to be a way out of here. For hours I watched the landscape around me change from fertile farmland to red cliffs and desert. I kept thinking about my parents' faces as I left. As I thought of my father I could feel the tears well up behind my eyes. When that happened I tried to distract myself and watch the scenery roll by. Something about my mother's expression made me angry. She had been eager for me to go. She hadn't seemed surprised. I frowned. How could she have known? When thinking of them became too hard I studied the Agent. As the sun set the carriage darkened and my distraction vanished. I was left alone with my thoughts, and they consumed me.

“What's going to happen to me?” I asked.

The Agent remained silent leaving me alone with my own frightened and anxious thoughts. We sat for another hour before slowing down at a lighted check-in point. The lookout tower could be seen from over a mile away, and, as we approached it, I began to get anxious. We stopped at the gate, and I heard muffled voices at the head of the carriage. Before long the carriage began moving

again. We passed two very young Agents who watched us go by, their faces tired. After another hour the horizon began to glow.

“We’ve almost reached Verger.”

I looked at the Agent then back toward the glow. Verger. I’d heard stories about it, and here I was. The city created a strange oasis in the middle of the red desert. The bright glow from the gas lights lit up the streets and cast strange shadows on the impossibly tall buildings. In Grayson the tallest buildings were two stories high; I hadn’t even realized it was possible to build something higher than that. I was gawking, and I didn’t care. The Agent, amused, watched me out of the corner of his eye.

The horses clomped further into the heart of the city. The sound of their hooves and the carriage wheels bouncing off the stone buildings. The flickering gas lights accentuated the abstract carvings in the older buildings. Small gardens, their colors subdued by the night, dressed up the fronts of shops and offices. Litter blew past us and collected in doorways or caught in the bushes. Our lonely carriage was joined by several more, more than I’d ever seen in one place, and it overwhelmed me. I watched as a well-groomed man in a business suit slid out of the gray carriage of government administration. There were a lot of those. He stared at me like he could see right through sheer black curtains. I dropped my eyes, embarrassed by his rude behavior.

As the carriage slowed to a stop the Agent shifted in his seat. I looked out the window at an enormous fortress of a building with a large cement courtyard and statue in front. I compared it to the other buildings I had seen and it was painfully unadorned but six floors made up for its plainness. My door opened and Tattoo held out his hand. I noticed, though, that he didn’t look at me. He kept his eyes roaming, taking in everything

all at once. I looked around expecting to see someone appear and attack us. I took his hand, the first touch I'd had since walking home with Celia, and staggered from the stiffness in my legs. I got light headed looking up the sheer sides of my new home. My heart thumped in my chest as I crept toward the entrance.

At the statue, I hesitated. The whitish-pink stone glittered in the lamp light. The details were so perfect it looked like the two people would step off the platform and walk with me into the building. The man was attractive, but it was the veiled woman that kept my attention. She knelt at his feet but there was something regal in her bearing. She was not subservient in the least. Her gown, if you could call it that, was simple and unadorned. I placed my hand on a wrinkle in her dress. The stone was cold and smooth beneath my palm. I don't know if You're really there, but help me. The Agent appeared at my side interrupting my first prayer to Deity in years.

“Miss Tinney, they're expecting you inside.” He prompted.

I looked from him to the windowed front. Inside I saw a shadow on the other side of the dark see through curtains. My nerves overtook me, and I looked at the Agent. I was sure the fear showed plain on my face. He kept walking. I faltered at the golden letters, "Verger Centre". The tattooed man caught me before I fell.

“Thank you.” I muttered.

I dragged my feet to slow my progress, and I wiped my sweaty hands on my skirt. I looked back at the seeming safety of the carriage then toward the frightening unknown in front of me. The wall of glass was split in thirds, and as I

approached the center section it opened up and I was met by a tall blonde priestess: The same blonde priestess that had rejected me four years before at the Selection Ceremony and recently had made us witness an execution. Really?

CHAPTER TEN

The priestess motioned for me to follow her, and I stepped into a room the length of the glass doors behind me. A woman in her twenties smiled in welcome from behind a reception counter. I curled my lips up in a fake smile. My nerves were a jumbled mass within in. The only other thing in the long room was a large painting of Ama. He beckoned to me with arms stretched out. The forest behind him was so thick you couldn't see the sky. A part of me wanted to believe in Him and what he taught, but I just couldn't.

"Amazing, isn't He?"

I turned around to see the blonde priestess smiling at me. She looked back up at the painting so I turned back too.

"Is that what He really looks like?" my voice shook with a mix of emotions.

"We think so. No one has been blessed with a personal vision in over a century, but scriptural descriptions describe him this way." Taking her eyes off the painting she studied me, first at my scar then at my eyes, "I was wrong. I guess you do belong here Rowan Tinney."

She took me by the elbow leading me through an open doorway behind the receptionist. The hallway was lined with paintings. We walked slowly enough that I could see details on a few of them. The first several paintings were landscapes with rolling hills, cattle, mountains, seascapes, and the local red rock. They were nice, but I was too distracted to enjoy them. The priestess kept walking compelling me to keep up whenever I did hesitate at one.

I noticed the next grouping concentrated on people. The clothes were luxurious; I could almost feel the satin or velvet of a dress, the crispness of a suit. A little of the anxiety slid away at my old desire for these luxuries resurfaced. I couldn't wait to feel the gentle caresses of the fabric, and to throw this old dress away forgetting its stiff scratchiness. I pushed the thought away. I shouldn't be here. There had been some kind of mistake. There had to be.

"You must have a lot of questions; your mentor will help you acclimate." Her soft authoritative voice interrupted my thoughts.

We climbed a long staircase with bare stone walls then started down a long hallway. The eyes in the paintings watched me make my way, step-by-step, toward the end. I wiped my sweaty palms on my skirt again.

"First you'll speak with High Priest Jeremiah. Afterwards, you'll visit The Centre physician before you're shown to your quarters." The priestess informed me.

Anxiety filled my chest as I thought about how little I knew about Ama. Our hometown priest was full of his own self-importance. When I watched him it felt more like a production than something we were expected to learn from. I'd only seen priestesses a few times at executions and Oona's Selection. Was that all I was supposed to do? Why would I need to be examined by a physician? No one talked about what went on inside the walls of the temple or these training centers.

As the priestess opened a door I looked at the painting hung there. I stopped and stared. It was of a man and a woman in the middle of disrobing. They were both naked down to their waists but her arms covered her breasts. The painting was so life-like. I had

never seen so much bare flesh before. The image seared into my memory. I stared at it another long moment before noticing the priestess grinning in a knowing way.

"A bit of advice?" She leaned close to me and whispered, "Don't ask question, and just do what they say. Things will be much easier that way."

"What do you mean?" I turned toward her.

She just smiled. In the room were a few comfy looking chairs and a thick rug which covered the hardwood floor. Another wall of windows looked down on a center courtyard in the middle of the building. That was weird. The building was a square with the center poked out. I sat in a chair by the window and a coffee table with an intricate design carved around its edge.

"High Priest Jeremiah will be with you in a moment." She said as she left.

I leaned down to examine the design. It looked like miniscule people. That was interesting. It hurt by eyes to look at it. There were several books scattered on top. *Loving*, *The Art of Communing*, and *Embracing the Call*. The covers were black except for the words which were written in flowery purple iridescent script. Books took too much commitment so I picked up a thin government publication at random. It was one my mother received every month, and I had seen it in her bedroom. I wondered what she was doing. I wiped away a tear. The words in front of me blurred as my parents' faces floated around in my mind. Mother was so happy as I rode away. My father, though, looked sad. He had worry lines creasing his forehead. I shook my head, that hadn't actually happened. The government brochure lay unread and open in my lap. My father's worried face burning in my

memory as fatigue set in. Almost asleep I didn't notice when someone entered the room.

"Rowan Tinney."

Startled, I looked up into the violet eyes of a very fat man.

"Welcome to the Order of the Consort. Follow me."

#

I could see the courtyard from the wall of windows as well. The gas lamps among the garden did little to distinguish the vague outlines of bushes, trees, and flowers. High Priest Jeremiah motioned with a thick hand to a solitary chair in front of his desk. I was struck by how cluttered his office was. As he rummaged through a pile of papers I looked around. The walls were covered with cluttered bookshelves and filing cabinets. There were several piles that included very old books in them. I hated to see them lying under all that paper. Books should be used and taken care of. Behind his untidy desk a painting of Ama stared at us, but his eyes didn't follow me the way some paintings did. This painting was flat and lifeless.

"You are the daughter of former priest Liam Tinney. How is he these days?" he asked, and leaned backwards in his chair.

His eyes were small inside his fat face, but they were sharp and bright. He had the look of someone who didn't miss much. The intensity of his gaze unnerved me.

"He's doing well, sir." I said.

Priest Jeremiah gave me the creeps. He looked at me the way we looked at a piece of meat or fruit at the store. The look reminded me of the principal at our school. Did all people in authority look at everyone else as a commodity?

"And your mother, Charlotte, what does she think of you being here?" His tone remained conversational.

"She was very pleased at my Selection." I answered, vague.

I thought of my mother's face, the smug expression as she sat in her chair. My father had asked what she'd done. What *had* she done?

"That's not surprising. It is a great honor to be Selected into the Service of Ama." He shuffled some papers before looking up at me again with his unnerving purple eyes. "I am High Priest Jeremiah. I oversee the Order of the Consort. High Priestess Annabelle is directly under me and your immediate supervisor after your mentor. We've paired you with Priest Antoine who will be working with you throughout the duration of your service."

"Why is my mentor a priest? Wouldn't it make more sense for my mentor to be a woman?" Sometimes I just couldn't stay quiet.

He lay the folder down slowly before speaking, "I heard that you were a bit of a troublemaker; always questioning things. I hope we aren't going to have trouble with you, I would hate for you to be forced into early Retirement." It came out as a warning.

"What do you mean?" I asked as my insides jumped a little.

"That is something you can ask your mentor." He wrote something down before continuing. "According to my records, you're seventeen?"

"Yes." It came out sharper than I had intended, and Jeremiah looked up from his paper.

"Your facial scar is quite severe. How did it happen?" He didn't look at his paper; instead his eyes seemed to focus on the mottled pink tissue.

"I don't know exactly. I had an accident when I was little." It came out defensive. It always did.

I didn't like the way he looked at me. His stare was a bit too focused, a bit too intimate. People I'd just met would never dare stare so openly at me and I didn't like it. I shifted in my seat uncomfortable under his scrutiny.

"Why wasn't it fixed?" Jeremiah held the pencil in his hand ready to write down my answers.

"The doctor said it was too severe to be repaired."

"I see." He scribbled something in my folder then flipped a few pages running his sausage finger down each. He stopped on a blank page. Looking up at me he searched my face. "The next few questions will help me to assess your prior experiences to ascertain where your training should begin." He leaned forward and rested his arms on the desk.

I leaned back trying to keep as much of a distance as possible between us. What did he mean "assess my experiences". My experience in what? He held his pencil poised over the blank sheet as he asked the first question.

"Have you ever been in a relationship before?" His voice remained neutral.

I looked up and recognized that expression. I'd seen it on my mother when she asked about the execution at school. I bit my lip trying to decide what to do.

"What do you mean?" I stalled.

"Have you had a boyfriend?" His eyes never left my face.

"No." I shook my head, "My father follows the precepts taught within the church of Ama and the laws of the Empire."

"You turned seventeen six months ago. You are no longer bound by that law. You have had ample time to acquaint yourself with young men."

His pencil hovered just above the paper. I hadn't dated because I didn't want to get married. Once you started hanging out with boys things happened. I'd heard of parties where people wore masks so that their identities wouldn't be known. I thought of Sarah, she had dated and ended up being Re-Educated. Now she seemed emotionless and unthinking.

I could remember many nights that I wrote in my journal about Jude. His hair a little too long, his voice a little too loud. All at once I thought of the note he had given to me about six months ago. It had been between classes, and he smiled as he'd given it to me. I'd rushed to the bathroom and locked myself in a stall to read it. It was simple. He'd written "Happy Birthday" and signed it. I hadn't even known he knew that it was my birthday. Later that day, in a silk drawstring pouch, I'd found a tiny carved owl on the end of a red ribbon, a bookmark, in my bag. There had been no note. It lay in my skirt pocket where I had kept it ever since. I shook my head trying to clear it.

"No, I've never had a boyfriend." Regret seeping into my voice.

"Girlfriend?"

"Celia is my best friend..." I said, confused by the question.

"And have the two of you ever slept in the same bed?"

"As kids" I said with caution.

"Did you ever touch each other's bodies? Did you experiment?" He pressed.

Was he serious? No, we'd never experimented, but his question took the most valuable person in my life, aside from my father, and cheapened our relationship. I clenched my jaw and felt my neck and face getting hot with anger. "No." was all I could manage to say.

"Not even by accident?" He prodded.

I thought of the time when, as children, we'd slept in the same bed when our butts had touched or had woken up snuggled together. Those were innocent. They didn't mean anything. I wouldn't allow him to soil my happy memories.

"No." I answered.

He jotted something down, then tapped his lips with his finger, thinking. Jeremiah smiled before asking, "Any incidents where you may have been witness to experimentation by others?"

At sleepovers other girls shared blankets and sleeping bags, and most of the time we all fell asleep pretty fast. Once, I woke up because I heard something strange, voices from where the other girls were. I opened my eyes and saw two girls kissing. Not the best friend kind of kiss but the romantic kind I'd seen my parents share when they thought I wasn't looking. The blanket had slipped off of them, and one of the girls was on top of the other. They had been rubbing and touching each other's naked bodies. I squeezed my eyes shut, but I could still see it and hear it. That had been my last sleepover. I was one of the first times I'd begun to think about Jude, they had awakened something in me.

"Rowan?" He snapped his finger near my face.

"No."

“Are you sure there isn’t something you should tell me?” He searched my face with his pencil ready.

His voice was calm, but I refused to tell him anything. He made me nervous, like the Agent at the bulletin board had. I shook my head. I couldn’t figure out why he so focused on this. He waited like he had all the time in the world, and, perhaps, he did. I was tired, though, and having a hard time keeping my eyes open. I shook my head, “No”.

Jeremiah leaned back in his chair again after closing the folder, which I saw had my name on it, and laid the pencil next to it. His expression was smug although his voice was kind.

"One last question. Do you whole-heartedly believe in all of the teachings of Ama?"

"What?" I stammered. Why would he ask that? I searched the room looking for an escape, but the door was behind me. If I did manage to get out where would I go? Nowhere. I was trapped.

"Do you whole-heartedly believe in the teachings of Ama? All of them." He repeated.

"Um, yes." His question caught me so off guard I stumbled through the lie. I hesitated a second too long, and I could see his suspicion.

Jeremiah stood taking my file with him, "Someone will be in to lead you to the physician’s office."

He walked out, leaving the door open as I waited alone in the flickering lamp light.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Sunlight filtered through the curtains. It felt warm on my face. I heard someone moving around, and I forced my heavy eyelids open. For a moment I couldn't remember where I was. The room was unfamiliar to my fatigued eyes. Then I remembered High Priest Jeremiah and the horrible doctor. I couldn't remember how I got from the physician's office to this bed, though. Motionless, I watched a girl just younger than me busy herself at a dressing table. Across the back of a wooden low-backed chair lay a satiny robe. The vanity was cluttered with brushes, hair pins, jewelry, and other things.

Moving only my eyes I tried to take in my new room. It was bigger than two rooms put together at my house and much more beautiful. I could have never imagined any of this. The sheets and comforter alone were softer than anything I had ever felt before. The intertwining design on the bedspread more elaborate and precise than what I had ever seen my mother do, and she was the best seamstress in Grayson. Why would I need all of this? I noticed a covered dish and a glass of orange juice on the bedside table, and my stomach rumbled.

"Good morning, Miss Rowan, would you like breakfast in bed or shall I set it up by the window." Her voice still had a childlike quality but was deepening, and I guessed it would be rich and sultry in a few years. Her head remained lowered, but she watched me through lowered lashes.

"The bed is fine." I answered as I sat up, and tucked the sheet under my armpits to cover myself. The girl kept her eyes down as she set the tray on the edge of my bed.

"As soon as you're ready I'll help you prepare for the day."

She removed the lid, and the warm homey smell of pancakes and syrup surrounded me. I half expected to see my father walk through the door. The three large pancakes dripped with butter which mingled with two slices of crisp bacon. A cup of syrup and a dish of mixed fruit sat next to the plate.

I thought she'd leave, but she made no move toward the door. Why wouldn't she go? I wanted some privacy. I ate half of the pancakes and bacon ravenously before slowing down to enjoy the rich flavors. This was very different from the plain breakfasts my mother made.

"This is delicious." I said to her through a mouth full of food.

"I'll be sure to let the kitchen staff know you enjoyed it."

I studied her as I chewed. She wore long loose gray dress which draped over her slender body. The only adornment was a plain barrette in her hair that held it away from her face. As I finished, she put on a long plain apron then filled the pockets with pins and brushes. When I swallowed the last piece of fruit she motioned for me to follow her.

"Miss, I've prepared a bath for you. If you'll follow me, we can get started." Her voice remained professional.

She stood at the end of the bed waiting for me, her eyes on the floor. I stood, with hesitation, making sure the sheet was still wrapped around me. What was she going to do? She walked toward an open door at the far end of the room, and I followed her clutching the fabric close to my body. The bathroom was enormous!

"What is that? It's smells so good." A tub that seemed large enough for me to swim in was filled with warm scented water, the heat rising off of it fogged

the air making it heavy and thick. A towel lay on a counter lined with clear jars filled with salts of various colors.

“I thought you might be a little nervous so I chose lavender to help calm you.”

“Thank you, but I’m not sure why you’re here.” I was being rude. I couldn’t help it.

“I’m Katrina, your handmaiden.”

“I’m not a priestess.” Why would I get a handmaiden when I had just arrived?

“Miss Rowan, you are in training to become a priestess so are afforded many of their rights and privileges. I’m here to help your transition go as smoothly as possible. Your mentor thought it was best.” She smiled as she spoke.

“Oh. Okay.” Looking around the bathroom again I glanced from the toilet then back at her. Katrina nodded and left.

#

Sitting in the chair I looked into the largest mirror I’d ever seen. It made me uncomfortable to see so much of myself at once. I twisted the fabric of the soft dress to try to calm my nerves. I still didn’t understand why I was here having my hair done by someone besides my mother.

“Miss, tomorrow you must allow me to assist you in the bathroom. It’s my duty to make sure that you are properly cared for.”

“Katrina, I’m fine. You don’t have to do all that. Besides, I can go to the bathroom by myself.” I thought it was strange to have all of this help. I could take care of myself. I wasn’t a baby.

“Oh no, Miss, not when you relieve yourself!” In the mirror, I watched her face change to surprised amusement as her hands worked through my mass of tangled curls. “I meant in the bath. It will make this process much easier, and when I report back I can answer yes.”

I thought about that for a moment before responding. If she was my handmaiden who did she have to report to?

“But I was naked. No one can see another person naked. It’s against the Modesty Laws.”

“Things are different here. You are different here.” She responded.

She looked around the room nervously before her eyes met mine. Instead of saying anything, though, she concentrated on a very difficult tangle. When I asked her to explain she ignored me. Why wouldn’t anyone tell me anything?

“Katrina, you’ve got to tell me what’s going on. This place is so strange.” I demanded.

“Miss, it is not my place. Your mentor will clarify things for you.” She reminded me of Sarah, a bit too perfect and demure, but Katrina’s eyes were haunted. She looked scared.

I looked down at my dress, and I wondered why she was scared. I didn’t want to think about it. I focused on my dress instead. The light material caressed my skin, and I marveled at the softness of it. Although I tried to repress it I saw my father’s worried look. Then I thought of Katrina’s scared expression.

Something wasn’t right with this place. After she could pull a wide toothed comb

through my hair without hitting snags, she put a few drops of liquid on her fingertips, and she began massaging my scalp. It tingled in a very pleasant way.

“This is a peppermint scalp massage. It should help to ease your tension.” She explained.

I closed my eyes and tried to enjoy myself, it was the most relaxing five minutes I'd ever experienced. As her fingertips massaged every part of my scalp, I felt my fear slip away. Then she ran her fingers through my hair, the fresh scent of peppermint sticking to it. When she stopped, I opened my eyes and watched her reflection put them in her mouth. With gentle fingers she pulled my hair in a low side ponytail then wrapped it around its base before securing it. When it was in place, she put some cream into her hands and ran it through the loose curls. Before my eyes, I watched them bounce back to life. Looking on the counter top she chose a few fresh purple rosebuds and added them to my hair. It had never looked more beautiful.

“Miss Rowan, does the style meet with your satisfaction?” She looked worried.

“Katrina, it's beautiful.” I raised my hand to touch it, a little surprised that she didn't swat it away like my mom would have. By having the loose bun on the same side of my face as my scar it softened it and made it less noticeable.

“I'm glad you approve. The final step is the skin care regimen.”

I stiffened.

“I will be gentle, but it is part of my service. I may be able to help soften the tissues.” She coaxed.

“You mean my scar.”

She nodded but didn't move.

“It’s fine. We don’t need to do anything.” I said in as firm tone as I could muster.

“But, Miss – “

“No.” I interrupted just as my door opened and a man in his thirties walked in. His black hair was longer than I’d ever seen on a man. The soft waves touched his shoulders. He wore long purple linen pants and purple robe over a white shirt. He smiled at us, but I noticed Katrina stiffened up and lower her eyes. Antoine approached me, and he motioned for me to stand.

“Let’s see how you look.” Antoine was all business.

Without moving my head he inspected my hair and moved around me. I caught a glimpse of Katrina who looked even more terrified than when my mentor had walked in. Antoine checked the fit of my dress, its length, shade, and material. Still deep in thought, his gaze went from my face to the dress a few times.

“I’m not sure about the color but it will have to do. Your skin is dry. Why is that Katrina?” His demanded.

“I was just beginning to sta-” Katrina began to stammer.

“You should be done by now.” Antoine cut her off. “Finish quickly.”

Without looking at me, Katrina grabbed a tub of white cream and began to work on my face. She was gentle, but when she got to my scar she kneaded it with a little more force. Her eyes pleaded for forgiveness. She finished, and then she stepped aside so Antoine could evaluate.

“Better. Be sure to clean this place up after we leave.”

Katrina bowed as she moved backwards toward the door, her body rigid.

"How was your first night?" Antoine asked.

"Fine, but I'm still tired." I made myself yawn.

"It will take some time to get used to our schedule. Was Katrina helpful?"

"Oh yes. She did a great job." I answered honestly.

"I'm glad to hear that. Do you like your room?"

I looked around again, I wasn't sure if anyone in their right mind would say no.

"It's beautiful."

"This will be your room until you receive a permanent placement. You should know that you are at a distinct disadvantage to others who have been Selected. They have served as handmaidens or menservants, but you have not. We're trying to figure out what to do with you."

Antoine started to turn away when I touched his shoulder. He turned, his eyebrows raised in question.

"I don't understand why my eyes are different."

"All you need to know now is that they changed. You've been chosen by Those Above to serve, and we will help you." Before I could ask anything more he walked toward the door, and he motioned for me to follow. "In this hallway there are three other initiates, two priests and a priestess. Unlike you, they are almost ready for their permanent assignments, and as soon as an opening is available, they will be transferred. They are your superiors so you would be wise to show them respect."

I nodded even he wasn't facing me. He took long strides, and I had to jog to keep up. Antoine walked so fast I couldn't stop to look at the tapestries and carved doors that

filled the hallway. The floors were covered with rugs weaved in beautiful colors and designs which muffled the sound of our walking. Between where one ended and another began, the cold cement chilled my feet through the thin-soled shoes. Antoine led me down a stone staircase. At the bottom was a large atrium-like area with a wooden double door to one side. He opened it, and he escorted me into an open room filled with. Up on a platform the High Priest sat behind a podium. Another chair sat empty beside him. Antoine took me to the front where the priests and priestesses sat. We sat down at the end where two boys and a girl sat looking superior.

Jeremiah's long indigo robe lay open at the chest, revealing a large golden talisman nestled in his graying chest hair. The chair to his right was empty.

"We heard that Liam was a little difficult during your collection. Do you know why?" Antoine asked conversationally.

I shook my head. I looked at my mentor with suspicion then past him at the other priests and priestesses. I only recognized one. In the past every time I would think of her I thought of the Selection Ceremony, but now when I looked at her I thought of those poor dead women.

Antoine fell silent as Jeremiah pushed himself out of his chair and stood up to the podium. As he spoke, his deep voice filled the room and vibrated in my chest. Looking down at me from his perch, he nodded in welcome.

"I would like to wish a quick welcome to our newest initiate, Priestess-In-Training Rowan. We hope you find pleasure and contentment in your Service."

Looking into the crowd of silver-grey clothes behind me, he began again.

“We have had news that one of our priests in the Dove Creek region has retired. Thanks Be to Ama for his Service, and we pray his retirement will be a restful one. The vacancy will be filled by one of our longtime initiates. We know that you will fulfill your role as it would please Those Above. It has also come to my attention that our High Priestess has fallen ill.”

I heard several people behind me gasp, but the fat priest motioned for us to calm down.

“Fortunately it is a minor illness, and we expect her to make a full recovery. When fulfilling your service, please be sure to plead with Ama on her behalf. Now, I would like to remind you all why we are here. Although most of you serve the Order through service to the Selected we are all here to serve Ama and remind His disciples of their duty to Him. By serving at your best, you bring honor to your family and help redeem those who have been lost. Thanks Be.” The room reverberated with the sound of a hundred different voices reciting the same words. I mumbled it a little late. The words felt false against my tongue.

A sea of silver gray rose up and flooded out the double doors. Once they were gone the priests and priestesses, including the blonde, milled about the room. I studied the people around me, but my eyes stopped on the statuesque red haired girl my age. She was talking with two young priests, but she watched me through their parted bodies. She looked familiar, but I couldn’t think why. Antoine was talking to another priest, so I waited until the other walked away.

“Who are they?” I looked at the threesome.

“That’s Paul. He’s the one who was just assigned to Dove Creek. Next to him is Thomas, a priest-in-training and the young woman is Oona, a priestess-in-training.”

“Oona? Oona Bates?” My head snapped back to face him.

He nodded, “Do you know her?”

“Yes. Well, I did.”

I saw Jeremiah motion for Antoine. He excused himself, and I stood alone in a flurry of purple with Oona glaring at me. She wasn’t the skinny-backed red head I’d known when I was twelve. I took a few deep breaths preparing myself to go over to them when she was suddenly right in front of me.

“Rowan. I can’t believe you’re here.” Her words came out a little too sweet, her smile a little too welcoming.

“Me neither. I didn’t know you’d been Selected.”

She flipped her long red wavy hair behind her and laughed, a high tinkling noise, and then looked at me. The laughter drained from her strange purple eyes.

“Why would you? You’ve been stagnating in that stink hole.” Oona retorted.

My mouth dropped open before I could stop it, and she sauntered away. Paul looked at me confused, but Thomas laughed. Both of them followed her out, jogging to catch up.

“What is her problem?” I muttered.

“Who?” Antoine had made his way back to my side.

“Oona.”

“Pay her no mind. Come, it’s time to start your education into the priesthood. Perhaps we’ll find out why Those Above have blessed you with such unusual eyes.” Antoine smiled to reassure me then led me toward the door.

The blonde joined us matching Antoine’s stride and engaged him in a conversation. Behind us was an Escort, one of the tattooed men, but he didn’t say anything. I lagged behind as the decor caught my eye. No one seemed to mind, and they slowed their pace. As I lingered at a painting the distance between us lengthened. I moved to catch up when a vibrant painting of Ama and the veiled woman caught my eye. Before I had time to really study it I heard their voices rise above the hushed whisper

“Antoine, he was here. He’s looking for her.”

I moved with slow steps, willing my hearing to be better than it was. I could just hear Antoine’s whispered response.

“I heard about that. My question is how he knew she’d been brought to this center. That is confidential.”

“How can you be so calm? What if he makes it inside?” She said a little too loud.

“Don’t alarm the girl.” Antoine shushed her, “You’re being far too emotional.”

“You’re right. Perhaps I need a massage?” She leaned in toward him, and tilted her head so that her lips were close to his. Out of the corner of my eye, I watched as she reached up and tucked a piece of hair behind his ear then traced his ear with the tip of her finger. His posture changed and he fidgeted, shifting from foot to foot.

“Perhaps you could give me that massage?” Her voice was filled with promise.

He swatted her hand away. “We are only authorized to engage in ceremonial activities in order to commune with Those Above. What you are suggesting, priestess, is blasphemy.” He cleared his throat and started moving down the hall again.

“Antoine, you’re such a prude.” She accused as she stormed by me.

“Rowan, please keep up.” He called back to me, and this time I obeyed.

CHAPTER TWELVE

We entered a small room with a line of paintings leaning face down against one of the walls. An empty chair sat in the middle of the room. Jeremiah already sat in another one, his bulk dripping over the sides. Antoine motioned for me to sit.

“Rowan, according to your file you have no previous physical experience, is that correct?” Antoine questioned.

“Like a relationship?”

“A relationship or experimentation.” Antoine responded.

“No. It’s against the law.” I said flatly.

“We are going to show you several paintings, and we need you to tell us how they make you feel.” He explained as Jeremiah sat poised with his pencil and folder in hand.

“Priest Antoine, you’re my mentor, right?” I asked, and he nodded. “So tell me what’s going on. Why do you and High Priest Jeremiah seem so interested in my relationship status? Why does that matter? And why did the doctor put an IUD in me last night.” With the flurry of new people I’d forgotten about that. It did seem strange to me though.

“Please, Rowan, let’s just focus on the pictures.”

“Well, what kind of pictures?” I began to sweat. If they were asking me all these personal questions what kind of pictures would they need to show me?

“Just tell me how they make you feel.” His tone was kind.

Antoine patted me on the shoulder, which made me feel like a child, then went to the long line of canvases. He chose the first one then pulled a chair closer to me. He

turned the canvas around, revealing a forest landscape. Hidden in the trees were brightly colored birds that appeared to be in the act of singing to the deer that grazed below.

“Peaceful.” This wasn’t so bad.

Picture two: A battlefield littered with bodies, and the earth covered in their blood.

“Sad. Horrified.” I cringed, and leaned back into my chair a little.

Picture three: A family ate a picnic under the large sprawling canopy of an oak in summer.

“Love.”

Picture four: Women bathing in a pond, but their bodies were covered by the water. I stared at this one trying to figure out my emotions as Antoine and Jeremiah studied my reaction. I knew how I was supposed to feel, but that wasn’t what I felt.

“I’m uncomfortable, it’s like I’m doing something wrong by looking at them.” I was uncomfortable, that was true, but the painting was actually beautiful. Part of me would have loved to join them.

Picture five: Ama and the veiled woman. I leaned forward to get a closer look. She was the Consort. The woman He loved.

“Awe.” What I didn’t tell them was that the awe was for Her. She held my attention.

Picture six: A woman styling her hair at a dressing table with her lower half covered by the bottom of a robe, the top has slipped off and reveals her ample breasts. I avert my gaze then look back. I can't help it. She's beautiful.

"Embarrassment." I answer automatically.

"Why?" Jeremiah asked me while jotting something down.

"She's naked." My voice was flat.

I wished I could tear my eyes away from the topless woman. She was so sure of her own body, so comfortable in it. She seemed proud of what she had. As I stared at her I realized that I wasn't embarrassed. I was envious of her. I thought of her confidence and comfort in her own body then compared it to my own. My body was something to be covered. It was only to be used to create babies when I got married, but not something to enjoy. But wait. I wasn't getting married now. I wanted the freedom that she had. Jeremiah stood with effort, and taking heavy steps walked to the canvases.

"Let's try one more before we move on." Jeremiah suggested before selecting one.

He stood in front of me and turned it around. I came face-to-face with a naked man holding his member. The look in his eyes, and the way he held his body, made me cringe into the back of my chair. He looked feral.

"How do you feel, Rowan?" Jeremiah asked.

"What?" my voice shook.

"What does this painting make you feel?" His smile was cruel.

"Fear." The look in the painted man's eyes was like the Agent we had seen at the bulletin board.

“Why fear?” he prompted.

“What he’s thinking about doing is not right.” I answered.

“And how can you tell what he’s thinking?” Jeremiah mocked.

I tore my eyes away from the painting. I opened my mouth to answer, but nothing came out. I just stared at him trying to forget the leering eyes of the painted man. Antoine put his hand on my shoulder. I jumped at his touch.

“Do you feel anything else? Is there any other sensation?”

“No. Please. Take it away. Show me another battle scene or something.” I squeezed my eyes shut until I heard the heavy steps of Jeremiah walk away. Antoine followed him and whispered angrily.

“Why did you show her that one?”

“Antoine. I am the High Priest of this Order. You are her mentor. Perhaps you should mentor her and help her deal with her feelings.” Jeremiah spat back.

“Sir, just explain it to me. Why not show her picture eight or fourteen. Why that one?”

“I needed to see her reaction.”

“But, sir, now every time she sees a naked man she’ll associate it with that.”

Jeremiah was silent for a moment before responding, my fist clutched in his ham fist.

“With your mentoring, I’m sure you could change that.” he moved toward the door then added, “We’ll have to slow down her training. For now she can join

the handmaidens and menservants for basic instruction.” As he walked out the door, Jeremiah added, “Along with our teachings, of course.”

We watched him leave. Antoine’s face was a mixture of anger and frustration. In silence, we returned to my room. As I followed him, I began to memorize his broad shoulders and black hair.

#

In the classroom I was seated at a two person table next to Katrina. I felt out of place amid Katrina and her peers. She both looked surprised and pleased to see me when I appeared. Her first genuine smile spread across her petite face as Antoine led me to her table’s empty seat.

“Katrina, we would like you to help Miss Rowan in her basic studies. She’ll attend here until it’s time to specialize her studies.”

She nodded with enthusiasm, the formality I’d been met with this morning was gone, but why? I looked at her confused trying to figure her out. Leaning close to her, much the way I had done with Celia, I whispered.

“What does that mean? Specialized studies.”

She raised her eyebrows in surprise.

“You don’t know?” I shook my head and leaned an elbow on the table waiting.

“Sex. He means sex.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

My bed was covered with books. I stared at the words, but they were fuzzy. I couldn't make my eyes focus. Katrina's words filled my ears. Sex. Sex. Sex. Sex. She couldn't be serious. I wasn't supposed to even think about kissing a boy much less *that!* I felt the tears begin to well up behind my eyes so I squeezed them shut. None of this made sense. None of it! I stood up and began to pace until a light knock interrupted me. The door slid open a fraction, and Katrina slid in.

“Miss Rowan, I'm here to help you get ready for the evening.”

Her formality was back. Her head remained bowed as she worked. When I didn't say anything she started turning down my bed and putting the books on the table. Katrina laid out a sleeveless silky nightgown which was much more revealing than anything I'd ever seen before. The neck dipped low and the back even lower. The deep rich color reminded me of dark nights in Grayson. She pulled the vanity chair out and stood behind it.

I sat heavily, and I stared at her reflection, my gaze never leaving her face. My scowl remained a permanent fixture. She worked with calm steady hands removing the pins and unwinding my hair. When the last piece lay unrestrained, she ran her fingers through it, the pain in my hair a reminder of times past. Normal times.

“I don't understand you.” I accused

“I'm sorry, Miss, what do you mean?”

Katrina stepped back from the chair and picked up the nightgown from the bed.

“I can change my own clothes.”

She took a breath before speaking. “Miss Rowan. It’s my job. I’ve been assigned to serve you. As a priestess-in-training there are things you do, and as a handmaiden there are things I do.” She looked me full in the face, her own eyes pleading with me, “Let me do it.”

“And if I don’t?” I crossed my arms across my chest.

Her hands dropped to her sides, and the edge of the silky material pooled on the floor.

“If you don’t let me, then I’ll be removed and someone else will be assigned to you.”

“What if I don’t do whatever it is they want me to do?” This place was crazy. They couldn’t be serious about making me have sex with people. Why would a god make someone do that? It didn’t make sense. Any punishment they had would be fine. I looked at Katrina when she didn’t saying anything, “Well? What are they going to do?”

“They’ll kill you.” Katrina’s whispered words rammed hard into my chest.

“What?” I said flatly.

She nodded, “And your family with you.” She looked at me with worry, “Please don’t tell anyone I told you. Please? Promise me.” The urgency in her lowered voice frightened me. Her eyes darted around the room.

“How do you know that?” My voice had turned hoarse.

“The first girl I was placed with refused. They took her away and I never saw her again.” She sat on my bed and wiped away a tear.

“Katrina, that doesn’t mean she’s dead.” I dismissed.

“Yes, it does.”

“No, it doesn’t! Why are you trying to scare me?” Anger raced through my body, my hand itched to slap her downcast face and shake her slumped shoulders. I moved toward her and screamed, “Why?”

“Because I saw them do it! I don’t want you to die too.” She screamed up at me.

I stumbled backwards as the force of her emotions and words punched me hard in the gut. I felt the air rush out of my lungs as my back hit the door and I fell to the floor. I gasped for air then looked at her. My mouth hung open as I sucked in as much air as I could. Katrina slid off the bed and onto the ground my nightgown in her lap, her head resting on her knees.

“You, you saw it?”

She nodded, not looking at me. Sobs wracked her small body. I crawled to her, and leaned against the bed. We sat in silence for a long time. Her sobs tapered off, and then we stared at the wooden door sharing in the comfort of the quiet that surrounded us. She turned to look at me. She took a breath, a deep breath, gathering her courage.

“They showed me. They made me watch through a mirror into the center courtyard where they beheaded her.”

“Just because she refused?”

“Yes. I think they were scared of her. Please you can’t tell anyone. I wasn’t supposed to tell.” I looked at her tear stained face as more streamed from her eyes and dripped onto her chest.

“But why?”

“I don’t know.” Katrina shrugged, some of the motion lost because of her hunched shoulders. “Nobody rebels against Ama. If they do, they’re gone.”

We sat without speaking for a few more minutes.

“Miss Rowan, if I fail again as a handmaiden they’ll kill me.” Her voice shook.

The tears and fear had brightened her eyes. She did this because she had to, and so did I. I wouldn’t let her die because of something I didn’t want to do. Maybe, just maybe, I could change things. My eyes were different for a reason, right, and it was about time I figured out why. I thought about that then stood. I held my hand out to her.

“I promise. I need your help getting ready.”

Katrina reached for me and began filling the tub. It took all I had not to hide myself, but besides the doctors she was the first person to see me entirely naked.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Every morning Antoine led me to that little room, where Jeremiah waited, and showed me pictures. Sometimes I told the truth, and other times I didn't. I could tell that they were either happy or disappointed in my answers. Each day more and more of the pictures were about sex: People disrobing, a woman pleasuring a man, a man pleasuring a woman, a man kissing a man, a woman kissing a woman. As the shock began to wear off, I tried to guess what the next picture would be. I think Antoine knew what I was doing because he would wait a few seconds before showing it to me.

“And this one?” He waited then flipped it around. I guessed wrong. I thought it was going to be some naked woman doing household duties, but it was a man sunbathing wearing only a hat. A woman watched him from behind a bush, lust reflecting in her eyes.

“He's attractive.” I shrugged.

“Is that all?”

I studied the picture like I would have studied a book back in school. I looked at his member, instead of lying flaccid on his leg like I'd seen in other pictures, it stood at attention, his fingers encircling it, but he wasn't masturbating.

“Yes.” I lied. I wanted to touch his body and feel it on mine.

Jeremiah scribbled something in his notebook then walked over to the pictures leaning against the far wall where Antoine's chair had once sat. We watched him thumb through them, and I looked at Antoine several times to see if

he could give me any clue about what was happening. Jeremiah had a habit of trying to shock me so I guessed this would be something unexpected.

“Rowan, I’m pleased at your progress. You’ve made impressive strides acclimating to the human body. I don’t think either of us expected you to embrace these lessons so quickly. I have one more picture before we move to the next level.” He explained.

Jeremiah flipped over a large painting. I gasped. I didn’t think he could surprise me anymore, but I had been wrong. I exhaled through clenched teeth.

“Why would you show me that? Doing that is punishable by execution.”

“In the Temple of the Consort this is acceptable. Now tell me, how do you feel?”

“I’m shocked! What else could I be?”

He studied it, his face impassive, before replying, “Why.”

“They’re having sex. Intercourse is only for procreation.”

The three of us looked at the two masculine bodies, the strong jaws and hard chests, the corded muscles under straining skin. The look on their faces was something between pain and ecstasy.

“Why is this more shocking to you than when you saw two men or two women kissing?” Antoine asked.

Most of the time, Antoine remained silent during Jeremiah’s tests, so I was surprised to hear him. I thought for a moment trying to figure out the difference. Jeremiah stood behind the painting, his girth framing it. I stared at each part of it.

“Kissing is not procreation. It’s not intercourse. The law punishes same-sex non-intercourse experimentation with Re-Education, but people are killed for that.” I pointed to the men.

“Not within the temple walls, they aren’t.” Jeremiah responded.

“Why are the laws of Ama and the laws of the Empire different on this?” I demanded.

As I sat there, years of sermons rushed through my head. Not only were we supposed to refrain from intimacy with potential partners but connecting with someone of the same sex was considered treason. Why would he show me that, and why wasn’t Antoine upset? I tore my eyes away and looked at them, first at Jeremiah then Antoine and then back. Neither said a word.

“You’ll find a lot of unfortunate discrepancies within the law of the Empire and the law of Ama. It’s time to advance to the next level of your training.” Jeremiah sounded a little disappointed.

#

Katrina looked at me sideways out of the corner of her eye, but I didn’t make eye contact. I knew it was just a matter of time before she got it out of me, but for now I didn’t want to talk about it. She just wasn’t Celia.

The handmaidens, menservants and I were headed outside to learn about herbology, apparently knowing about plants was important. Katrina knew some. She had already proved it with my relaxing baths and massages, but I couldn’t figure out why I’d been included. Throughout class I was distracted. I kept thinking about what Jeremiah said, and I wondered what it meant.

“Aww, look at the little priestess out to play with the help.”

I looked up and saw Oona and Thomas, the familiar look of superiority look on their faces. They were so close to one another that their arms brushed up against one another. Something about that seemed a little too intimate. He was always with her, or very close by. When they were talking to different people I'd noticed that he always had a good view of her, orbiting her.

“Thomas, I think she likes you.” Oona's voice was condescending.

He made a disgusted face and whispered something in her ear, making her laugh.

“I know, her poor patrons. How are they supposed to connect with Deity if they have to look at *that*?”

As they passed, they roared with laughter. The hallway, although large and bright with the sunshine beaming through the window wall, felt like it was closing in on me. I took deep breaths trying to calm my racing heart and brushed away a stray tear. Outside our small group formed a semicircle around Antoine who had been joined by a woman in dirty clothing and a smile of contentment. Her voice had a musical quality, very similar to my mother's, but that was where the similarities ended. This woman was nice.

“Welcome to The Verger Centre Gardens. Each Centre provides the priest or priestess you serve with the herbs and flowers needed to perform the ceremonies which bring their patrons closer to Those Above.” She stopped and made eye contact with each of us. When she noticed me, she bowed a little.

“Miss Rowan. I didn't realize you had joined this group. If there is anything you need, please let me know.” She bowed her head as she spoke.

I nodded. Antoine was smiling, pleased by the respect she was showing me. She handed each of us a paper and had us pair up. With Katrina at my side, we headed for the gardens to find the plants listed. Katrina waited until we were out of earshot before she began talking as she looked at a pink rose.

"Just ignore Oona. She's hates everyone."

"But I don't understand why she hates me. What did I do?" I wondered out loud.

"Rowan, she's like that with everyone. I think it's her way of showing that she's superior. At least, she thinks she's superior. She wants to be the next High Priestess, you know." She kept her voice low.

"Oona wants to be High Priestess? Why?" I couldn't imagine wanting that.

"I don't know. Keeping up with you is enough for me." Katrina laughed, "She'll have to wait, though. High Priestess Annabelle has been in that position forever. I don't think she'll ever die. Poor Oona will have to settle for being a regular priestess."

I glanced back and noticed Antoine watching. We worked in silence trying not to draw too much attention. As I snipped off a piece of lavender she asked me in hushed tones what was wrong.

"What do you mean? I'm fine."

"Okay. If you're "fine" then I'm High Priestess." She folded her arms across her chest and began tapping her foot. I couldn't help but smile as I saw more of the real Katrina underneath the girl that had been beaten into submission.

"What's so funny?"

"You. I'll tell you later."

She shook her head, “Not that. What’s bothering you?”

“Jeremiah is advancing my training.” I said in a nervous whisper.

“That’s good, right?”

I shrugged still bothered by the painting he’d shown me. “Today he showed me a picture that doesn’t make sense.”

We wandered away from the lavender and into another section of the gardens passing, several of Katrina’s peers. They didn’t even look at me anymore and part of me was grateful for their disinterest.

“What was the painting of?” Leaning down to a small flowering plant, she inspected it and moved on.

I brushed up against a shrub and was surrounded by the scent of rosemary. I tore a twig off and began to pick off the fragrant needle-like leaves tossing them on the ground. Katrina walked past me. I caught up with her and threw the now bare twig on the ground.

“It was of two men.” I whispered.

“And?”

“Katrina. They were, they were having sex.”

“So?”

“Intercourse is only for procreation.” What was wrong with her? Why didn’t she care?

She stopped and looked at me with so much intensity she seemed older than fourteen.

“If that’s true then why are all women implanted with an IUD when they get married or enter into Service? Once entered into the marriage contract, do they think that the partners are going to avoid intercourse?”

Why hadn’t I thought of that? I thought back to my conversation with Celia about my mother’s pregnancy and the ceremonies they’d performed. Now my mother’s intense interest in my monthly cycle made a little more sense.

“We’re going to be late. Priest Antoine is waiting for us.” Katrina took my arm pulling me toward the waiting priest.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

That night I sat in my room alone after Katrina had gone to her own smaller quarters, right off of my own. Once it became clear we worked well together they had moved her from the dorms to here. It was late and the city outside slept except for the occasional lamp lit carriage. Agents of the Emperor and I were the only ones awake this late, and the loneliness began to engulf me. My thoughts returned to home. I looked out the window and wiped a tear away as I thought of my father. I would never forget the anguish on his face.

I wondered how big my mother was. She had to be getting close to her delivery date. I could imagine her sitting in that horrible chair and drinking milk. I was supposed to forget them, but how do you do that when they're all you know. I wanted to see them, just one more time, to say a proper goodbye. My thoughts were interrupted by a light knock. Startled I looked at the door. I inched towards it pressing my ear to the wood.

“Rowan...open the door.”

I knew that voice! I swung the door open, expecting to see the welcoming face of my father, but instead I met emptiness. I looked down the hallway, but it was deserted. This didn't make sense. Someone, my father, had told me to open the door. I looked down, and on the floor in front of my doorway lay a small slip of paper. I picked it up without making a sound and backed into my room. I closed the door behind me. I lit a lamp so that it was just bright enough to see the words scrawled on the paper. *We'll get you out. Stay safe.*

Just then I heard a loud thundering down the hallway. I swung the door open in time to see several Agents racing after a dark figure that ducked into the stairwell.

“All of you. Back in your rooms!” One of the Agents yelled as he raced by. Oona and Thomas, both bleary-eyed, were peeking out of their rooms. She eyed me with suspicion then disappeared back into her room. As I closed the door I turned to see Katrina staring at the note in my hand. Snatching it from me she began to read.

“They’ll kill whoever gave you this.” She said, warning me.

I snatched it out of her hand then climbed into bed without saying a word.

“Rowan, you have to tell whoever gave that to you to leave you alone. If you know who it is tell them to stop. It’s the only way to keep them safe.” She urged.

“And how am I supposed to do that? Besides, what if I want to leave?”

Katrina rushed to my side and put her hand over my mouth looking around the room.

“Shhh.”

I swiped her hand away, “What are you talking about?” She was so paranoid.

Instead of speaking she went to my desk and wrote something down.

The walls have ears.

“Be serious.” She was overreacting.

Taking the paper back she wrote again, her writing sloppy and rushed.

They’re always listening. Be careful what you say.

“Fine” I mouthed.

There are ways to get messages out, but if you’re caught it will mean Re-Education.

I waited, not as scared or worried as I probably should be.

Don't let them hear that you want to leave.

“Okay.” I mouthed to appease her.

She handed me the paper and mouthed that I should write the letter. The note had to be from my father, he's the only one that wanted me out. He was the one who missed me. My mother certainly didn't. I wrote a short note telling my father to leave me here, that I would find a way out. As I wrote, Katrina motioned toward the door and began talking

"You're from Grayson? That's what, a few hours away? I can't believe you're so close."

“It's about seven hours.” I answered.

"That's still pretty close." She looked at the doorway, and we both stared as the shadow stopped in front of the door.

“Where are you from?” I tried to concentrate on our conversation, my letter, and the person eavesdropping.

"I grew up in White Canyon."

"But that's so far! How long did it take you to get here?" I'd only heard of White Canyon. It was outside of my own region, but the name had come up during geography at school.

"About two days." Even with the Agents outside I could tell Katrina missed home.

“I've heard it's beautiful there. What's it like?” I prompted.

“There is a river that runs through our canyon, so there is a lot of fishing and farming. The sides of the canyon are white and at night it almost seems to glow against the night sky. I miss the sandy islands and the little forests I used to explore.” She glanced at the door again. The shadow moved a little, but it didn’t disappear altogether.

"Why didn't they place you in the center in your region?" She was so far from home. It made me think about how far I was from home, but then I remembered, I'll never see home again.

"You are never placed to serve in your region. Didn't you know that?" She looked so serious; it was easy to forget who was older. "Anyway, I was honored to come to Verger, only those with the most promise come here."

The shadow moved down the hall accompanied by several other pairs of heavy footsteps. But they didn’t fade away. I finished writing and slipped the paper to the bottom of the stack and went to the door and cracked it. Agents stood guard “protecting” us, me, from the infiltrator, probably my father. Katrina pushed the door shut and wrote, *Tomorrow we'll send it*, then led me back to my bed. I fell asleep to her brushing my hair with her fingers.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Assembly the next morning was buzzing. I heard snippets of conversation as I made my way to the front, Katrina right on my heels. *They broke in; How did they get past security. Who were they after? What were they after?* I sat down next to Antoine. Since my first day the chair to the right of Jeremiah had been vacant, but today a woman sat there. I was close enough to see that her eyes were the deepest shade of purple I'd ever seen, almost black. Her eyes held mine, strong and confident, and I turned away. I was too distracted by the woman and the mystery note to hear whatever jibe Oona had decided to throw at me today. Jeremiah welcomed us then welcomed this dark-eyed guest.

“I'm sure I speak for all of you when I welcome back High Priestess Annabelle. We have missed your presence. She would like to address you regarding the events of last night. Mistress.”

She stood, and I was surprised that she wore a black fitted pantsuit. It was strange to see one of the Order not wearing a purple robe or dress, and it unnerved me. I couldn't stop staring at her legs, there was something appealing about a woman wearing pants, exciting and alluring. I could imagine the feel of soft material encircling each leg. It was tempting. Her voice rang out loud and strong, just as I imagined one at the top of our Order would speak to a group.

“By now you've all heard that there was a breach in security last night. Let me reassure you that nothing was taken and steps have been taken to apprehend the person responsible for the blasphemy of entering this sacred building. Alert your mentor, or myself, if you have any information as to who might have been responsible. We would

like to question them and then bring them back into the fold of Ama. For now, know that you are safe and secure.”

Her eyes found me again, but the kindness in them seemed forced. I got the distinct impression she didn't like me. The rest of the assembly, I sat uncomfortable under her gaze. Jeremiah finished talking and excused everyone. Just as I was about to leave, Antoine stopped me.

“I have been informed that the High Priestess would like to speak with you after she meets with the priests and priestesses.”

He must have read the fear on my face because he smiled and murmured, “She's just a person. Ama and the Consort will be with you. You'll be fine.”

#

I sat awkwardly in my seat as a few ordained members of the Order joined the High Priestess on the dais. A few members of the kitchen staff set up a small table with refreshments near them. A priestess sat across next to a very effeminate priest, chatting happily.

"Did you see what she was wearing? It was vile!" the effeminate priest made a face. He used his hands to try to describe her hairstyle, which he described in great detail comparing it to a pigeon nest. The priestess laughed and added to the description. I didn't know who they were talking about, but it was mean spirited. Annabelle began the meeting.

“Does anyone have anything they wish to discuss?” she asked

"I'm just wondering if there are any standards to who is allowed to see us. I had the most awful patron this morning. You should have seen her Mistress Annabelle, she

looked like a homeless person." The priest's hands waved in all directions as he spoke about the woman. "She shouldn't be allowed here. It's not like she has anything to say to Ama that He'd want to listen to."

"Need I remind you that you think every female patron is 'awful'. Are you sure you're not letting your preferences color your attitude?"

"I know, Mistress Annabelle, but this woman. I mean, it was like she didn't have a comb OR a mirror! I could barely focus on what I was supposed to be doing."

"Perhaps in the future we'll see about having the female patrons sent to another priest and the male patrons sent to you? Anything else?"

"What's going on with our chef? My meals have been tasteless. Did you notice the trash they gave us today? How do they expect us to fulfill our duty if they feed us that?" A priestess with dark brown hair lifted up one of the stacked sandwiches like it was covered in mold and tossed it back on the tray, the meat and cheeses separating from the bread and landing in chaos around the platter.

"I have already notified the kitchen. The problem should be rectified, if you have further grievances please let the head of staff know."

Annabelle dealt with every complaint thrown at her with ease. She even seemed to anticipate problems before they had been verbalized.

"What about the rest of your patrons, besides Jason's irritation at some of his patrons' apparel. I'll be getting your weekly reports later today, but I'd like to know if you have had any problems or concerns." Her voice remained emotionless.

The meeting continued and I was disgusted by their pettiness. I thought the Order was to help increase spirituality. All these people cared about was themselves. By the

time the meeting was over and Annabelle and I were alone I was agitated. Antoine and Katrina waited near the doors for me to finish. After the others had left Annabelle motioned for me to join her. I climbed the steps as slowly as possible. Her Escorts stood a little away from her but within quick reach if needed. I stood in front of her, but she ignored me. I looked toward Antoine who mouthed something then bent his knees and pointed to the ground. I squeezed my eyes shut in irritation and knelt.

“Mistress, how may I serve you?” I asked through clenched teeth.

Then she turned, holding my chin so she could inspect my face. I was used to people staring but not holding my face like I belonged to her. I hated it. I fought against the urge to pull away. She had the highest position in the Order, and I needed to show her respect, even if I didn't feel it. This close I saw fine lines and wrinkles around her eyes and mouth, she wasn't as young as I'd thought.

"Golden eyes. Very interesting." She released my chin. Her voice was pleasant and inviting, "I understand that you have taken quite well to our teachings. At the rate you are going, you'll be ready for your assignment within a matter of months." I flinched. It sounded like an accusation.

"I'm just trying to please Those Above." I lied.

I hadn't seen anything that made me think this was a spiritual place. I just wanted out and becoming a priestess was the only chance I had. I shifted, my knees beginning to hurt as they dug into the hard stone floor. She waved my reply away with the flick of her wrist.

"Of course you are, my dear, we all are." Her tone was caring but distant.

"You turn eighteen soon, old enough for the real training to begin and then to be

given an assignment. As a priestess you must develop a relationship with Deity. I have spoken to your mentor, and he has accelerated your training, but your young age is a bit of a hindrance." Her fake concern irritated me as it colored all she said. I couldn't be the only one to see who she really was.

"I'm not sure I understand."

She smiled at me. "Although we are the disciples and representatives of Ama, we must still obey the laws of our beloved Empire. According to that law, it is illegal to participate in any kind of physical intimacy before the age of eighteen. As much as I admire your enthusiasm, I think it would be wise for you to contain it. We wouldn't want you to fall into disrepute and become nothing but a common whore." She stood and one of the Escorts offered his arm. She laid her hand on his forearm, just on top of a very light white tattoo. I longed to inspect it, to run my fingers on it and see if it were raised like a scar or if it had become a second skin.

"So interesting, golden eyes..." She walked away without another word, and I was left kneeling on the cold floor.

#

"Rowan, what did she say?"

Katrina hissed in my ear as I sat down in my seat after my morning session with Antoine. Jeremiah hadn't been there. I was still reeling from meeting Annabelle and her warning words.

"Row..." her voice sung in a clear saccharine sweet tone.

"Katrina, I'll tell you later. She just, I don't know. Warned me. She's weird." It's not what I wanted to say, but there were too many people around.

"The head of the Order is weird? I've been here two years, and she's never so much as looked at me. What's she like?"

"Being noticed isn't always a good thing." I muttered.

A priestess knocked on the desk to get everyone's attention, but I think it was us she was directing it at. Katrina didn't hide her frustration at me, but I had no idea what I was supposed to say. I needed a distraction. As the priestess explained the geography of the Empire I wrote Katerina a note.

Delivery? I tapped my paper until she looked at it.

Later. She wrote on her own paper.

The priestess began walking around the room so we both flipped our paper over and scribbled down a few lines about the centers where one could be assigned. As I finished writing down the numbers something didn't make sense. I raised my hand.

"Yes, Rowan?"

"There are only twelve priestesses and twelve priests within the Order."

"Yes, As well as Mistress Annabelle and those who work in the training centers."

"Why are there so many handmaidens and menservants training?" As I asked she looked at me with suspicion. Maybe I shouldn't have asked.

"Priests and Priestesses are called from among the ranks of our closest servants. It is important that there always enough ready to take up the call should Ama Select them for special service. It is also important that those still in the

Service of Ama have the assistance they need. Some of your classmates may serve those who work within the walls of a region center.”

She waited to see if I had any other questions then went on to explain our assignment, a region report. Katrina brushed a blonde curl out of her face before getting the books we’d need. While she was gone I thought about what the priestess had said. Selection happened within their ranks. There needed to be enough ready. In case of what? A plague? What if Selection wasn’t divinely inspired, and it was someone else who chose? If that were true my guess was the Emperor. I needed to know more. They wanted us to do a report about a city in the Empire. Well, the Emperor’s palace was a place. Maybe I could learn more about him by learning about where he lived. Maybe that would give me some answers.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Katrina and I walked down the hallway away from the main part of the center. I was in one of Katrina's dresses with my hair only up on the sides. With her in the lead we walked with purpose past the assembly room and down a passageway I'd never noticed before. The walls were cinderblock, windowless, and unadorned. The flickering lamplight created dancing shadows around us. I heard quick footsteps approaching us and hung my head letting my hair shield my face.

"Hey, Katrina. It's been a long time." An older girl commented. As we rushed by Katrina waved.

"Try not to say anything. We don't want anyone to recognize you." Katrina said when we were out of earshot.

We turned into a doorway and took the stairs to a lower level. Our steps were quick. I felt the note in my pocket getting ruffled in my sweaty grip. At the bottom of the stairs was an old wooden door, the surface splintered and worn. Katrina pulled hard on the handle opening us to the working underbelly of the Verger Centre. The paint was an ugly grey and had begun to peel. The cement floor was beginning to crumble.

"You guys work down here?" I asked hardly believing my eyes.

Katrina nodded then turned toward the first door. It was labeled "Facilities" in dull letters. She pushed open the swinging door unbothered by its dirtiness and held it for me. When she let go it "wooshed" blowing my hair with a gust of wind. Tucked in the corner of the dingy room sat a woman of about sixty-five. Her gray head was bent over a pile of papers that she then sorted into open-

ended letter boxes behind her. I could see a shadow on the other side taking papers and disappearing then reappearing again. At the first whoosh she raised one crooked finger before finishing with the few papers in her hand then she glanced up.

“Katrina. How is it upstairs?” she rasped.

“Good. I just need to speak to laundry.” Katrina’s shoulders were squared. She spoke to the woman with confidence. I looked at her surprised to see this new side.

The old woman waved us through not giving me a second look. We went down the hallway behind the woman into yet another dark and worn passageway. The stagnant filled my nose. Finally, we reached the door labeled “Housekeeping”. Katrina pushed it open and I came face-to-face with those who kept the upstairs world clean. The room was a lifeless gray. There were about ten people who buzzed around the room, all wearing the same gray clothes of the handmaiden and menservant.

“Katrina, were they all Selected for Service?” I asked as quiet as I could.

“Yes, they’re all waiting to be assigned a priest or priestess.” She turned toward me, “I don’t think it’s going to happen though.”

I took a closer look. They looked haggard and were all over twenty. Katrina led me through the labyrinth of washtubs to an office tucked in the back corner and knocked. We heard a voice and then the door opened. The room was tiny. Shoved in the small space was a woman with grey frizzy hair piled in a haphazard fashion on the top of her head. Her green eyes remained vibrant as she looked up from her desk.

“Katrina, my darling girl, what brings you to the bowels of the Order?” she said it light heartedly, but her serious expression proved her belief in those words.

“I need to send a package.”

The woman looked at Katrina then to me, her eyes turning into suspicious slits. When she pursed her lips a dimple appeared.

“I’m not sure I know what you’re talking about.” Her tone was dismissive.

“But Ja-“

“No. No names.” The woman interrupted. “I don’t want that one to know it.” She jerked her head in my direction. “Why would you bring her here? She’ll get all of us killed.”

“She’s trustworthy. If she weren’t I wouldn’t have brought her, but she needs to get a message to her father.” Katrina’s confidence and poise was slipping.

“I’m sorry, Katrina, but I don’t know what you’re talking about.” She turned back to one of the leaning piles of paper and studied the top sheet.

Katrina looked at me, her shoulders slumping in defeat. She shook her head, as she began to move to the door, but I stopped her. Slipping past Katrina I sat on the only free surface in the room, a ratty chair that wobbled as I sat.

“I understand your hesitation in helping me, but if I don’t get this sent my father and mother may die. My mother is pregnant. I need your help.”

She cocked her head to the side as she weighed my words. Making a face she shook her head, “It’s too much of a risk. If we are discovered with a package from you we face execution instead of simple Re-Education. I won’t put my people in that kind of danger.”

I didn’t move. I took the letter out and put it on the desk. It lay between us meaning the potential of death if it were sent or not.

“If you don’t take this then you condemn my family, and the unborn baby, to death. You know who I am so you know that in the future I will be able to return the favor. Tell me what you want and I’ll do it.”

Just then I heard Jeremiah’s voice. Oh Ama! I was dead. The woman looked around as his voice grew near then motioned for me to get under her desk. I scrambled past them and into the cramped space underneath. She pulled her legs close to me as I heard the door open.

“Katrina, what are you doing here?” He asked surprised.

“I was just making sure that one of Miss Rowan’s dresses would be ready for tomorrow. It’s one of her favorites, and I wanted to try a new hairstyle with it.” She lied.

I was surprised at how easy the lie seemed to roll off her tongue. I began to wonder how much I could really trust her.

“Is there something I can do for you High Priest?” the woman asked, her tone sugary. As she stood I heard her joints crack.

“I wanted to let you know that the ceremonial rooms need to be deep cleaned.”

His voice sounded distracted and false. I could tell he was lying and hoped that Katrina and the woman could too. Katrina and I had to get back to my rooms fast. The woman disappeared to the front of the desk. I held my breath.

“Sir, it’s so rare that we are blessed with your presence. I’d love to show you some of the improvements we’ve made.” I imagined her taking his plump arm in hers and coaxing him out the door.

“Oh, of course.” He stammered.

“Katrina, I’ll put the order in for you personally. Will you write it up for me, and leave it on my desk? I have a form right over there. I’ll take care of the other matter as well.”

A few seconds later I heard the door shut, but I waited listening to Katrina scratch something on paper above me.

“Give her one more minute.” She whispered.

I crawled out, keeping low, and peered up at Katrina who motioned for me to stay still. She was looking through the drawn curtains, moved open a smidge so she could see what was going on in the large washing area.

“Okay, we’ve only got a few minutes to get back up there. We’ve got to hurry.”

On a hanger by the door I noticed a long purple silken robe. I grabbed it and bundled it like a ball. We opened the door and I ran across the huge washing area. Jeremiah had his back to us and I stayed low as Katrina speed walked toward the door. He turned, and I ducked behind an industrial sized metal tub, the woman working at it glanced down at me, but her face remained impassive. I began to wonder how often this kind of thing happened.

Katrina kept moving, but when I would fall behind she would stop to talk with someone then we’d move together toward the exit. My heart raced in my chest so fast it began to hurt. I felt myself relaxing when we made it to the first of many hallways, but Katrina kept me moving. A few grey dressed people looked at us, curious, but we kept going. The woman at the front counter didn’t even look up as we walked quickly by. Once outside the swinging door we ran for the

stairway. I reached the door before Katrina and pushed on the old splintered door hard flinging it open lodging a few splinters into my palm. I swore under my breath and we started climbing the stairs.

At the top of the stairs our breath came out in gasps. We pulled the door open and made it to the cinderblock hallway. Walking fast enough not to draw attention I pulled the robe over my shoulders and moved to the front position. Just as we passed the assembly door Antoine appeared from a different corridor.

“Rowan, I’ve been looking for you.” He said not hiding his concern.

“I’m sorry, Antoine. What did you need?” I tried to control my ragged breathing as I wrapped the robe around the gray dress trying to hide it.

“Are you okay?” He placed the back of his hand on my forehead but I backed away nodding.

“Miss, did you still require my presence?”

“Katrina, I need both of you to come with me. I’d like to introduce you both to Rowan’s Escort, Jude.” Antoine said.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

In a room with a large meeting table I sat across from the one boy I would have rejoiced to marry. My heart was still pounding, but now it wasn't from all the running I'd done. I had no idea what my face looked like, but I felt unprepared to be so close to him when a few moments before I didn't think I'd ever see him again.

"Rowan, this is your Escort, Jude. He is in training just as you are, and, like you, he is a quick study." Antoine motioned to Jude. "He'll be housed across the hall from your own quarters to ensure your safety at all times. I want to make sure you both remember that relationships are forbidden. If a Representative of the Order is found having a relationship with their Escort both are retired and taken to different communities. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, sir." The sweet baritone filled my ears and caused a sharp hunger in the pit of my stomach. All I managed was a nod.

#

Inside the carriage I looked across at Jude, but I kept silent. Jeremiah sat next to me explaining the purpose of this visit and my role in it. The sun shone hot on the dilapidated and crumbling building. A few sick looking saplings struggled within the concrete garden. A stooped old man with a shock of white hair and deep wrinkles met us, his brown robes shabby and thread bare in spots. We sat in the carriage looking at his welcoming smile.

“This is Brother Daniel; he’s been here for several years and is a devoted member of our brother order which preaches to the public. I’ll introduce you, but at this time it is best for you to remain silent.”

Jeremiah raised the hooded cowl over his head casting his face in shadow then handed me a full veil.

“Because your eyes are not the accepted color we feel it’s important to conceal them. There is no need to confuse outsiders.”

I nodded then watched as our Escorts conducted a sweep of the area. Once they were satisfied that we were safe the door was opened and Jude helped me to step down. The long skirt got caught under me as I exited, but Jude caught me with ease. They fell into step behind us as we moved to meet Brother Daniel.

“High Priest Jeremiah, what a pleasant surprise. Welcome.” Brother Daniel bowed low. “Blessed day.”

“Blessed day, Brother. I’d like to introduce you to one of our initiates, Priestess-In-Training Rowan.” Jeremiah’s voice was full of self-importance.

Brother Daniel bowed to me, his smile kind.

“I understand you’ve been having a difficult time retaining followers.” Jeremiah prompted.

He nodded and looked at the cement yard. The peeling fence was old and sun damaged. A few sprouts of crab grass forced their way through the uneven cracks on the pavement sending spidery fissures outward. This place was a mess.

“High Priest, I think that repairing our place of worship would help draw them back, but because I have few followers, my funding has been cut. I have no way to improve where we worship.”

“Then you will need to do something else to bring them back.”

I watched his head drop and his shoulders slump, defeat radiated off of him in waves. I looked at Jeremiah, but he remained impassive.

“Forgive me, I have tried, but those in this area feel that Deity has forgotten them.”

“Then it is up to you to help them realize He hasn’t.”

The Brother raised his eyes to the skies. I could almost hear his silent prayer. When he dropped his eyes they met mine through my veil, and something stirred within my heart. I was supposed to be helping people as a priestess. If I had to be a part of this then I was going to start making a difference. He seemed like a good person to start with. I turned to Jeremiah and cleared my throat. He ignored me. I pursed my lips and stepped closer to him and addressed him in hushed tones.

“Excuse me, High Priest. This Brother’s parish is funded according to the amount of people that attend?”

Jeremiah turned toward me, our faces inches away from each other. His were eyes wide with surprise and anger.

“What did I tell you in the carriage?” He whispered low and harsh in my ear.

“Yes, but how is that fair?”

“This is not your concern.”

“How is it not my concern? One of those trying to spread the word of Ama seeks our help and we are refusing him? If he were given some extra funds –“

“Rowan, you are not an ordained priestess so do not presume that this matter involves you.” His low voice had a sharp edge.

“I was just trying to –“

Jeremiah turned to Jude, “Take her to the carriage.”

Jude took my elbow, but I yanked it away then stalked to the carriage with him behind me. Once inside I yanked the veil off my head and glared at Jude, my arms folded across my chest. He just sat across from me smiling.

“It’s good to see they haven’t taken the fight out of you.” He said.

“Why are you here?” I accused.

He just smiled. His body remained still.

“Jude. Why are you here?” I screamed in his face then raised my hand to slap him, but he caught it as I swung.

“Rowan, you might want to calm down.”

“Not until you tell me why you’re here.” I said it through clenched teeth, gripping the edge of my seat so that I didn’t lose control again.

“Not now.”

“Yes now.” I demanded.

His eyes flickered toward where Jeremiah stood talking to Brother Daniel, his posture stiff and formal. Brother Daniel’s shoulders drooped in increments as I watched them.

“They were recruiting. I signed up. Now calm down, he’s coming back.”

He answered, his words jumbled together.

I looked out the window as Jeremiah and his Escort strode toward us. Jeremiah motioned for Jude to move next to me then he slid in. Sitting across from me, he waited until his Escort had closed the door and the carriage was moving before speaking.

“You don’t appear to be ready for this.”

“For what?” I asked, my voice tight with anger.

He swept his hand around indicating everything.

“Rowan the inner workings of the Order, indeed, the Empire, are not explained to the unordained. You were out of line questioning me in front of Brother Daniel.”

“He needs help. If you want more followers then he needs our help.”

“That is not for you to decide. You’ve forced my hand, I’m afraid. When we return you will be taken in for Re-Education.”

My mouth dropped open. Re-education. I looked at Jude then back at Jeremiah.

“No, I don’t need that. I promise, I won’t question your decisions again. Please.”

He studied my face. I lowered my eyes examining the details of the veil in my lap. It almost felt like I was back at home trying to save myself from my mother’s temper. Silence surrounded us. I began to trace patterns in the fabric. I flicked my eyes up and saw that he was still looking at me so I dropped my eyes

again. After a few minutes, the carriage stopped and we stepped out in front of the Centre. Without a word he led us inside and straight to his office leaving our Escorts in the waiting room. Before I could sit down he pushed me into the seat and leaned over, gripping the arm rests.

“I don’t care about your eyes or the scar on your face. I don’t care about who your father was. I do not tolerate insubordination, and if you step out of line again, you’ll be retired before you’ve even begun.”

He said *retired* as a threat even though I didn’t know exactly what that meant. I shook my head and stared at him open mouthed.

“Now. Go back to your quarters before I change my mind.” He turned his back on me and stared at the picture of Ama.

#

Antoine stood in the now empty room, the pictures which had lined it were gone. The chairs were gone. There was a floor length mirror and I stood in front of it, glancing back at him waiting for instruction. He offered none. Jeremiah entered the room, and while looking at Antoine he motioned toward the door. Without a word Antoine left.

“Since going out into the community isn’t quite right for you yet, I think we ought to work on something else. I want you to disrobe.”

“Disrobe?” I asked in disbelief.

“Yes.”

I stared at him and couldn’t speak for a full minute. He was serious. It was a few more months until my birthday, and then I could only imagine what he’d ask me to do. I

had to do it otherwise it was Re-Education and then I'd be just like Sarah, I'd lose myself.

Taking a deep breath, I slid my dress off my shoulders and let it slide down. It pooled around my feet, and I kicked it away while looking at my body in the mirror. This felt wrong, but unless I wanted to forget myself I had to do it. I tried not to think of my father, he would be so disappointed in me for giving up. I took another breath and looked at Jeremiah who watched me with disinterest; his pencil poised to take notes as always. I reached behind my back and searched for my bra, once I found it I unhooked the clasps and let it fall away. Biting my lip, I let the straps slip down my arms until my breasts were bare. Glancing at him one more time, I hooked my thumbs into the sides of my panties and slid them down. I fought the urge to cover myself.

Jeremiah just watched me, as cold as a physician, as I stopped fidgeting and began try to get used to my nakedness. The more I looked at my reflection, the more I began to appreciate my body. I turned my back on the mirror and craned my neck to see what I looked like from the back. Jeremiah handed me some paper and a pencil.

“Now create a self-portrait.”

I sighed. I drew a quick drawing that could have been anyone and handed it to Jeremiah who shook his head. It took forever, but I drew as detailed picture of me as I could and handed it to him. He nodded approval.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

“Our Order began four hundred years ago after the former god abandoned the Earth. Ama, a man of incredible knowledge and beauty, took his place to help those who survived the resulting war.”

Mistress Annabelle’s voice rang out over the assembly. Oona and Thomas watched her, as enraptured as the rest of us. I wondered if she would tell the story the same way my father had.

“The land was desolate. Before the war, Ama had been a man of the land and taught some of the survivors how to restore the soil and water sources. In return, he asked for one thing: a beautiful chaste woman untouched by human hands.”

Well, this was different. I couldn’t believe he wanted a virgin. That’s why they had the morality laws? I leaned forward in my seat.

“Feeling indebted to him the survivors agreed and selected a chaste and virtuous woman; her ability to remain pure during the Great War enhanced her beauty. We know nothing of her physical description except that she was beautiful with unique irises.”

Annabelle looked at the priests and priestesses then roamed the room before settling on Thomas, then Oona, and then me.

“Afterwards Ama and his Consort disappeared. A year later the first priest and priestess were Selected. As the first, they had a direct line to Ama and were able to know His will, and they could teach it to the people.”

Something about what she said felt wrong. Behind her a painting of Ama stared at those gathered in the assembly room. His gaze stern. If He was such a caring god why did he always look so upset?

#

After the assembly people shuffled out talking in low reverent whispers about the things Mistress Annabelle had shared. Oona came and stood next to me.

“You know what we call people who fail at their Calling?”

“What’s wrong with you?” I demanded.

“A prostitute. That’s what your mother was, and that’s what you’ll be.” She ignored me.

I grabbed her arm as she turned away and forced her to look at me. She was a few inches taller and it made me feel small as she glared down at me. In my head she was still the scrawny girl from four years ago. She yanked her arm away.

“What do you want?” she spat.

“Why do you find it necessary to insult me every time you see me? What did I ever do to you?”

“Really? You really don’t know? Are you that thick?” Stepping even closer so that our toes almost touched she looked down at me, clenching and unclenching her fists. “You ruined my Selection Day with your theatrics. You always tried to overshadow everyone just because of your father. After coming here I thought I was rid of you, but everyone still associated me with you. Just because we both lived in Grayson they assumed we were friends. I was never your friend. Ever.” Oona turned to walk away.

“Look, I’m sorry. That was wrong of me.”

“Yeah, well now we’re back together again, but this time you’ll remember that I was here first. I was Selected first. I’m going to a priestess before you. Your eyes might have everyone else falling all over themselves but I see you for what you really are, what

that scar of yours shows you to be. Common. You were a second thought. Now get out of my way before I give that scar a twin.”

Before I could think of something to say she was almost out the door. I looked up and saw Annabelle smiling at Oona’s back, like she’d heard the entire argument and approved.

CHAPTER TWENTY

While she was recovering, Priestess Annabelle visited once a month instead of every week. Each month, I watched as she sat on the dais and glowered down at us. She and Jeremiah were a perfect match as their self-importance rolled off of them in waves. Annabelle openly sized us up and made judgments about our likelihood of success. Her loud conversations and judgmental looks were hard to miss. With me she seemed to try to be more careful, I'm sure it was my eyes that threw her off. Today she was different though. Today her distaste for me was obvious. I tried to ignore her and focus on what Jeremiah was talking about, but the intensity of her hostile gaze made that difficult. Gritting my teeth, I focused on the wood grain of the table trying to wrap my mind around something positive to give me the strength I could tell I needed.

I thought about the note I'd received through the package delivery system last week. After reading it I had burned it so that no one would know. *My dearest daughter*, he'd written. The words filled me with the warmth and love I remembered. *All is well. I know you mean to protect me, but I will not stop trying to save you from that corrupt system. Stay strong, and don't lose yourself. Mother and baby are well. All my love, Father.* They were safe, for now. I wasn't sure what I could do if he wouldn't listen to me. In his note he said the system was corrupt, but what exactly did he mean? I had to find out.

By the end of the assembly I looked up to see her eyes still fixated on me. I smiled. When she returned the smile, it wasn't genuine, but mine hadn't been either. Annabelle sat very erect with her hands in her lap. Her light brown hair was streaked with gray but other than that I didn't see any signs of aging. She was

quite pretty, and I figured had been beautiful when she was younger. I imagined she was judging me just I was her. Out of the corner of my eye I saw Antoine get up and leave. A few minutes later, he returned and a message was passed to Annabelle. As she read it her face went through several emotions before returning to passivity. I turned glanced at Antoine then looked in Jude's direction. He stood against the wall, his eyes the only thing that moved as he never stopped surveying the room.

“Next month we will be honored to have the Emperor's Advisor join us. Your behavior in the following weeks will determine if you are included in this momentous occasion. Mistress Annabelle informs me that he is looking forward to meeting several of you.” Jeremiah's voice rang in my ears.

I'd never seen Advisor Lincoln before, and the announcement caused a stir among everyone in the room, even the priests and priestesses. I wondered why he was coming to the center and from the snippets of conversation I wasn't the only one. At the end of the assembly I stood and turned to leave when my ankle got caught on something, and I crashed to the floor, my head hitting the concrete floor hard.

I woke up with Katrina, Jude, and Antoine all looking at me.

“Her eyes are opening. Miss Rowan, are you okay?”

Katrina had a cool cloth on my forehead, and the room was empty besides them. My mouth felt dry. My arms and legs were weak.

“Let's give her some room.” Jude gently pushed Antoine and Katrina out of the way then knelt and picked me up with ease. I wrapped my arms around his neck as he cradled me in his arms and then turned to Antoine.

“Sir, don't you think it would be better for her to recover in her room?”

“Yes, of course. I’ll send a healer and be up later to check on you. Katrina, you are, of course, excused so that you can see to Rowan’s care.” Antoine left, the quick taps of his shoes on the floor getting further away.

With Katrina close behind, Jude carried me out of the assembly hall and through the maze of hallways until we reached my door. Katrina opened it for us. She gasped. Jude’s fingers gripped me a little too tight as the three of us stared at the mess. My room was destroyed. Katrina’s door was opened, and I assumed that her room had been ransacked as well. Katrina put the vanity chair upright again and Jude down before walking through each of the rooms,. He excused himself to his quarters then returned after discovering a mess in his room too.

“They were in my room too. What were they looking for?” His question almost an accusation, but his eyes were filled with worry.

I shook my head still in shock. Katrina walked around dazed picking up a nightgown or a brush and putting it away. Jude crawled under my bed, the only thing too heavy to move and inspected it. He did the same thing to the rest of the furniture.

“It has to be someone within the Order. How else would they have access and know when I wouldn’t be here?” I sat on my bed looking at my hands.

“Who wasn’t at assembly?” Jude wondered aloud.

I raised an eyebrow; did he really think we would notice one person gone out of all those people?

“Rowan, we have to start somewhere.”

“Antoine left.” Katrina offered.

“He wasn’t gone long enough to do this. What about people who don’t like you or think you shouldn’t be here?”

“I don’t think there is anyone that really thinks I belong here.” I said, the sadness thick in my voice. “Well, except my mother, maybe.”

Katrina sat next to me putting her arm around me, and the three of us sat in silence. I looked at the mess trying to see a pattern or if something was missing, but nothing was gone. As far as I could see there wasn’t a pattern either. I slid off the bed and bent down to pick up one of the books that lay open on the floor. The page it was open to had a detailed drawing of Ama and the Consort. I stared at it without seeing it.

“We should report this. Tell Antoine or someone.” Katrina suggested.

“No.” I responded without looking up.

“What?” Katrina and Jude said in unison.

I looked up from the book and placed it on the bed. I wandered around my room stepping over the debris on the floor.

“We don’t know who did this or why. At this point I don’t trust anyone except the two of you. For now, we clean this up and tell no one. Let’s wait, and see if anyone else’s room was ransacked.”

“Rowan, I’m not sure that’s the best course of action. According to protocol I should report this.” Jude stepped toward me but stopped and looked at the ground as something caught his eye.

“I hate to pull rank but I think I’m going to have to. This is my room, this is my life that someone has invaded so I am going to demand that we all remain quiet.” I looked

toward Katrina. She nodded agreement. I looked at Jude, but his eyes were staring at something in his hands. “Jude? You can’t tell anyone.”

He nodded a little but couldn’t take his eyes off what he was holding. Without looking up he walked toward me stopping just in front of me then took one of my hands in his. It was calloused and rough and I thrilled at his touch. I looked up into his eyes trying to understand what he was thinking. Without a word he opened my hand and put something in it. I knew before looking what I would find.

“You kept it.” His voice was the gentlest I’d ever heard.

“I’ve kept it with me since the day it was given to me.”

“I wanted it to be the first, and not the last.” His voice trailed off as he still looked at the small wooden owl on the frayed red ribbon. “I wanted to be with you.”

My breath caught in my throat. The room, the break-in, Katrina, where we were, it all disappeared as I looked up at him. My heart fluttered as I reached up and ran my fingers through his hair.

“After not being Selected you were all I wanted. I just didn’t think you felt the same way. I never knew this was from you.” I said.

His head dropped, and he rested his forehead on mine, I loved the smell of him. He held my hands in his. “I wanted to tell you, but when my father found out he forbade me. Then you were gone.” He took a small step backwards, his eyes serious. “I found out what happened to you so I volunteered to serve. I did

everything I could to be the kind of Escort you would need. Some of the people I met pulled some strings to get me here. I'll do whatever it takes to protect you.”

Holding my face he caressed my jawline with his thumb and then kissed me. His lips felt like light touches of a feather. It sent a thrill through my body.

“Someone’s coming.” Katrina warned.

Jude pulled away and the moment faded away. I put his gift from so long ago in my pocket relishing the touch of it as well as the knowledge that it had come from him. We heard the footsteps draw near. I looked at Katrina and motioned toward the door. She slipped out. I leaned my ear against it trying to hear what was going on. Muffled we heard her say I was asleep and could they come back later. Two sets of footsteps walked away from the door, and I exhaled in relief.

We began to clean up my room, neither of us mentioning the rule we had just broken. I caught him casting glances in my direction before looking away. What was I going to do?

#

That night as Jude, Katrina, and I sat in the cafeteria in a secluded corner we tried to determine what to do.

“I serve you, Rowan, and you serve Ama. You have my word.” Although her words were vague I knew she was talking about me and Jude. I felt a weight lift off my shoulders. If we pursued any kind of relationship the three of us would have to be very careful. If we were caught Jude and I would be retired. I had no idea what would happen to Katrina.

Jude sat with his back to the wall and surveyed the rest of the cafeteria. We kept our voices low as we ate. After going in circles about the break-in our conversation turned to High Priestess Annabelle.

"My parents told me she was assigned to Advisor Lincoln. I guess they knew each other when they were younger. He worked in research and development. Something about the vaccinations we all have to get."

"In Grayson, my father worked in Research and Development for the Empire. I wonder if they knew each other." I wondered aloud.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

A few days had passed since the break in. On my way to class I noticed several Agents marching down the corridor. Two of them held a boy by his upper arms and dragged him along. I ducked into a doorway as they passed and made eye contact the boy, his expression frightened. I stepped out of the darkened doorway and looked in the direction of my classroom and then to the backs of the marching Agents. I took off my shoes and followed them as casually as possible.

They took him to the hallway that led to Jeremiah's office, but instead of turning there they walked toward the end and a door I'd never noticed. They pushed him in the room and entered afterwards. As I crept toward the door I heard Jeremiah's voice and ducked behind a large potted plant trying to mold my body into its shape. The High Priest spoke with the blonde priestess as they both walked in the direction of the room the boy was in.

"I don't think his Re-Education will be a problem, he's a perfect candidate for the new methods the Emperor wants to use."

"I've never worked with someone so obstinate and headstrong in my career. I think in the future, if this works, he might be a good match for the Order. He's already very carnal." Her voice, although not loud, bounced off the walls.

"We shall see how he takes to this first." Jeremiah sounded a little bored.

The door clicked shut behind them and I moved forward again checking to be sure no one else was around. Once there I leaned against the doorway and listened. The noises were muffled, but what I could hear were his cries of pain. I reached for the doorknob but stopped myself. If I interrupted they would just Re-Educate me. Or worse.

I crept away being careful not to make a noise. When I came to the entrance of Jeremiah's office I hesitated. Maybe there's something in there I could use to help this boy. I thought of his cries and then of Sarah, and turned into the waiting room. His door was open so I slipped in and began looking around. There was so much clutter I didn't even know where to start so I just walked around and looked at several papers written on in his elaborate cursive. I picked up a few old books and set them down. I began to hear the boy cry out in pain as he screamed so loud it pierced through the walls. I wiped away my own tears of helplessness and kept looking. There was nothing. I didn't understand how there could be this much paper but not one thing useful.

As his cries got louder and reverberated down the corridor my tears flowed without stopping. My own sobs started to come out in gasps. Before anyone found me I grabbed the oldest looking book and ran away as fast as my bare feet would carry me.

#

The next day Annabelle attended our assembly for the second time that week to show her support for our preparations for Advisor Lincoln's visit. Afterwards, she made a point of speaking to me. She didn't say anything of consequence, just that she was interested in my progress, and she was keeping an eye on me. People noticed her interest in me and while the priests and priestesses were not surprised, Oona and Thomas took it as a personal attack. Part of me had hoped that they would see that I wasn't out to take anything from them, but her attention created a large target on my head.

As the chime rang to let us know it was time for a break during class, I got up and Katrina followed me out. My head was swimming with the nude priest I'd had to draw earlier that day. Jeremiah asked that I draw him at several angles, and then he wanted me to focus on his member. Since then, I couldn't concentrate on what was being taught in class. I kept imagining what Jude must look like, and I began to get very uncomfortable. After freshening up in the bathroom, Katrina and I headed to the snack table. There were several people around, and they were looking at me and whispering.

I looked around wondering what had gotten them so riled when I saw Thomas emerge from a group on the far side of the room. Why was he here? Thomas' open hostility shocked me and his stiff posture and angry face warned me an attack was imminent. All I could do was prepare for it.

"No more private lessons with the High Priestess today?"

"What are you talking about?" I asked.

"We've all seen how she looks at you during her visits. She's getting friendlier with you, it's like she's in love. It's disgusting!"

I didn't understand his jealousy. The High Priestess didn't like me. How could I get him to see that she hated me?

"Thomas, you've got it all wrong. She doesn't even like me."

"Whatever! There's something wrong with you: Your eyes, her infatuation with you, that hideous scar, not to mention your parents. What'd they do to get you accepted into the Order after your ridiculous behavior during Oona's Selection?"

I stared at him dumbfounded. I thought back to that day with shame at my zealous behavior. I wanted to forget about it, and I had hoped others would forget too, but, of course, Oona would remember.

"Thomas, this is between you and me, leave them out of it."

He had no idea what he was talking about; my father didn't want me here. Both he and my mother were in hiding because I was here. Why did he even care? And why was I so angry?

"Everyone knows that your dad was High Priest. And your mom, wow, I heard she was gorgeous. I bet she had a long line waiting for her services both in and outside the temple."

"Take it back."

"Why?" He asked, a smirk curving his mouth.

"I don't like what you're suggesting."

"What? That your mother was a prostitute?" The word rolled off his tongue.

My hand flew of its own accord, and the slap resounded in the alcove. I'd never hit anyone before, but it felt good. My hand stung where it had made contact against his cheek stubble, and I knew I'd made a mistake. I should have kneed him. Before I knew it he was on me pushing me against the far wall. I could hear the other students chanting, but I couldn't make out the words. As I hit the wall, the air rushed out of my lungs, and all I could see were his light lavender eyes staring into mine.

"You're the daughter of a prostitute. She may have been a priestess but only a prostitute would let herself get pregnant. I wonder, do you take after your mom?" He

grabbed my breast and squeezed hard, I wanted to scream, but there was no air. I tried to make eye contact with someone, and that's when I noticed several girls holding Katrina back as she fought wildly.

"What's this?" His authoritative voice rang in my ears. Thomas let go of me, and I crumpled to the ground gasping for breath and clutching my chest.

"I asked, what was going on?" Antoine demanded. I had never seen him so angry. Everyone remained silent until Katrina pointed toward Thomas.

"He attacked Miss Rowan." Katrina yelled.

"Calm down, Katrina. Is this true, Thomas?"

"She hit me. I was defending myself." Thomas accused.

"Rowan? Did you hit your fellow initiate?"

I still couldn't breathe, and I held my left breast gingerly knowing that a bruise must be forming. Jerk.

"Rowan?" Antoine's voice sounded closer, and I looked up to see where he was. He was closer to me and about to lean down.

"He insulted my mother." I wheezed.

"Where is Jude?"

"Our class is his personal time. I'm not sure where he is." Katrina offered.

"Rowan, Thomas, you and your domestics will follow me to see the High Priest. The rest of you will return to class and explain to the priestess where we are."

They filed by us as Katrina knelt beside me and whispered that Thomas was trying to compensate. I couldn't help but smile. She had such a way with words. A few minutes later two older Escorts and Jude arrived. The men had more of the same white

symbols tattooed on their arms that Jude had but theirs were more elaborate. Their faces were stern, and I knew we were going to get into trouble. Escorts made me nervous, except for Jude. He kept his face neutral, but his eyes searched mine. Each time he looked at Thomas I thought he was going to hit him. Jude clenched his fists so tight his knuckles turned white. Antoine and one of the Escorts were in the lead, then the four of us, two-by-two, then the other Escort and Jude brought up the rear. He took us to Jeremiah's office.

"Thomas, Rowan, have a seat." Thomas's manservant and Katrina took their positions behind us. I tried scooting my chair away from his but it was so heavy it might as well be nailed to the floor. Thomas scowled at me but said nothing. The two Escorts stood against the wall on either side of the door while Jude stood near me. I began to lose track of time when High Priest Jeremiah walked in, his robust body filling his robes. He sat down.

"Rowan." His eyes dismissed me as he looked at my attacker. "Thomas, remind me what region you are from."

"Halls Crossing." Thomas said with pride.

"And you attacked this woman?" Jeremiah didn't have his pencil or paper in hand which I found odd, he was always writing things down. He laced his fingers together then rested them on his round stomach which reminded me so much of my mother I choked back a sob. It surprised me how much I missed her.

"She slapped me, I retaliated on instinct." Thomas responded without emotion.

Thomas kept his voice quiet, respectful, and strong. His face was placid and professional while mine, I just knew, was red from crying. Jeremiah didn't

like me, but his estimation of Thomas improved with every question. The portly man leaned across his desk, and looked at Thomas' face noticing the very distinct hand print welt that had spread along his cheek.

"Rowan. Why did you hit him?"

"He insulted my mother."

"How?"

"He called her a prostitute."

"I cannot say I find his words completely without foundation. She disobeyed the law of Ama and deserted her calling."

"But..."

"Rowan. You may have an Elect father who was well respected, and you may have been given a . . ." Jeremiah searched for the right words, "unique eye color, but you will not get preferential treatment from me nor from any of those I oversee. You are the product of a complete disregard of the ways of Deity. Your existence is an abomination. You are an oddity and something to study, but I anticipate that Deity sees you as I do, and They will bring down punishment upon your disgraceful family. Until that time, it looks as if I must allow you to remain. I don't want to see you here again, but if I do I will allow the Rules of the Order to prevail. Do I make myself clear?"

All I could do was nod before being dismissed. I stood and looked down at Thomas' smug face then left his office with Katrina and Jude right behind me. As I walked out I heard Jeremiah's voice,

"Thomas it is reassuring to know that someone of your caliber and understanding dwells in these hallowed halls. You are a benefit to the Order..."
Jeremiah's voice was cut off by the click of the door closing.

#

"You are to wait here until summoned." Antoine said as he left us at the door of our suite.

"Summoned?" My voice sounded flat in my ears.

I felt dead inside. I looked up at him and felt comfort in the bluish tinge his purple eyes held. He hesitated before turning toward me so close I could smell the mint on his breath and the heady scent of his skin.

"Not everyone agrees with him. You are not an abomination but a gift." Antoine looked at Jude and smiled. "Keep her safe."

He straightened then walked down the hall as the three of us watched him disappear behind a corner. Without a word, Katrina opened my door and stepped back so that Jude could clear the area before I entered. Pulling me next to her, she whispered so low only I heard.

"I've never noticed how handsome he is. You know, for an old guy." Her voice a little dreamy.

"I hadn't noticed." I looked at Jude and I forced smiled.

Jude called the all clear, and I shuffled in picking up a book that rested on the bedside table and threw it against a wall...hard. I hoped it left a mark.

"I guess I'm a waste of life and an abomination." My voice was as defeated as I felt.

"Rowan, if you were an abomination to Ama why did He select you?" Jude picked up the book and set it on the bedside table.

"Jude's right. Think about it." Katrina said.

I sat on my bed and folded my arms across my chest. I couldn't get his words out of my head. I had known he didn't like me but that was horrible. They thought of my mother as a prostitute; someone who sold their body for no other glory than money. She was a lot of things but she was not godless.

"He's the High Priest of the Order. According to our teachings he can't be wrong. Who am I to argue with that?" I couldn't believe I was defending him?

"He's just human. Listen. When you're in your private lessons I've been studying," I gave her an incredulous look, she'd been a little lax lately, and I found her studying hard to believe for some reason, "What? I have been! And I want you to look at some of these pictures." I sighed and waited for her to bring a few books over to me.

"We concentrate so much on Ama, but what about the woman? What about the name of our Order. We're the Order of the Consort so why do we pray and always talk about Him? Why don't we mention Her?"

My mouth dropped open in surprise. She was right.

"Rowan, if you look at these pictures or the sculpture in front of the Centre He's not alone. She is with him but who is She?"

Jude and I watched as she flipped through pages marked with notes until she reached a collection of satiny pages separated by vellum. As she slid the vellum away I saw His face. It was beautiful and strong. His eyes were not purple but a hazel color

similar to the Jude's. He had large muscular arms and a strong chest, his face was angular and rugged. He looked more like an Escort than many of the priests I'd seen.

"Does He look like He'd say you were an abomination?" Katrina had an obvious crush on Ama which, most of the time, I thought was endearing.

"Kat, turn the page." I asked.

She did and moved the vellum out of the way. We came face-to-face with those same hazel eyes and rugged features, but this time there was something dark and sinister about them. He didn't look full of love and acceptance. He looked angry and vengeful.

"Maybe He was in a bad mood that day?" Jude offered.

I laughed, I couldn't help it. I flipped the pages back and forth and compared the two. I noticed that in the background of the first was the shadowy figure of a woman, in smoke or mist form. Her features obscured and there was no color to her but she was there. She blended in so well with the background I wasn't surprised to have not seen her before. I flipped to the angry painting and noticed that Ama was alone. She was nowhere to be seen. I studied it just to make sure and then looked at Kat.

"He's mad because the Consort isn't there." I thought aloud.

They looked at me like I was crazy.

"Look." I showed them the first picture and the mist-like figure in the background then compared it to the picture without Her.

"I never noticed that before!" Katrina declared.

"Me either. I wonder if He's always in a bad mood when she's gone." I was thinking out loud so when she answered, I was surprised.

"Why would she be gone?"

"Good question."

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

That night alone in my darkened room I burned a lamp on low, and I reached deep under my mattress for the tattered book I'd taken from Jeremiah's office. After today I was glad I'd taken it, the guilt of theft melting away as I held it in my hands. I was glad I hadn't had a chance to look at it before now, and I hoped it had something that might help me know what to do.

I removed it from the towel I'd wrapped it in studying it for the first time. The cover was old, cracked leather with no title. As I opened it the binding creaked, and a few pages fell loose. I picked them up with care, and placed the yellowed crumbling pages back inside. Turning to the first page I began to read.

Five hundred years ago a great battle overtook the Earth, destroying most of the civilizations that dotted the once over populated rock in the solar system. Out of the ashes of destruction, a man emerged and gathered the survivors together in the hopes of taming the spoiled land.

Amartya looked around at the desolate earth, the dust at his feet, the people in front of him with hopeful eyes and broken spirits. Before the war he was quite handsome but the rigors of war and the massive death had taken its toll on his once handsome features. At 5'8" the young Indian man had to use more than physical intimidation to convince others to follow him. He had realized early on that this war would end civilization as the world knew it and those that survived would have to carve out a whole new existence. He collapsed in a chair the weight of the people and their survival heavy on his shoulders. He had never thought that he would be one of the survivors. In fact, he had taken extreme risks

to bring about death. He wanted nothing more with this place and the sorrow it brought to people.

Amartya had watched helplessly as his small family had died in one of the raids. He had been taken prisoner and interred in a work camp where he was subjected to hard labor and little food. He had looked to the gods to take him but he had persevered and his resiliency had caused others to look to him as a leader. He knew how to look inside a person and figure out what motivated them. Whether it was greed, lust, fame, food he would find a way to appeal to this. During his imprisonment he had watched as soldiers had ravaged men and women, taking what they wanted from them. In many cases, the filthy conditions of war and the brutality of military doctors, familiar with bullet and shrapnel wounds, killed the child and the mother during labor and delivery, thus losing two lives and two opportunities for laborers. It was at the hands of these doctors that Amartya watched his mother die while a brutal attack by a soldier resulted in the death of his sister.

Now he looked into the dead eyes of women whose bodies had been abused and their spirits had been neglected. The men were not much better off. Most of those who had been raped had died or killed themselves. Their attackers still believed that same sex love was a sin and abomination. Those that did survive had been so beat down, physically and emotionally, that they were half men. In this new post war society, a friendly touch and smile were seen as precursors to death or abuse. The survivors he was to address numbered perhaps two hundred men and women. There were no elderly and there were no children. They had separated themselves into groups out of habit. Europeans, Americans, Asians, and so on. There were not many in any one group, with

just two others from India . . . Or what had once been India and they stood near him. This kind of separation was what had caused the devastation.

The lamp flickered and almost went out. I re-lit it and snuck to Katrina's door. I heard her soft snores on the other side. I then listened at my own door but was met with silence. Sitting back on my bed I found where I had left off.

"Lord Amartya, what should we do?" a scarred Indian woman whispered. How could they look to him? He wasn't yet thirty, he wasn't a soldier, he was no one. Yet when he looked up into her eyes he saw something he hadn't seen in a long time. Hope.

"I am not your Lord . . . I need each group to proclaim a leader and have them meet with me in my tent in two hours." His voice was strong, silky, and soothing. He watched as each group separated from the crowd and heard the din of conversation increase. He made his way to his tent, small and patched to keep out the burning sun and the incessant wind as it kicked up dust, threatening to blind with its sharp grains of dust and sand mixed with tiny pieces of metal infused with radioactive poison. The Indian woman and man stood at the tent opening, his unofficial bodyguards. As he entered the tent he shook the man's hand and rested a hand on the woman's shoulder in unspoken thanks. Since he had found them, they had become very protective of him. The woman was slight but strong and during the war had learned several defensive moves as she tried to protect herself and her little family. The only thing that had saved her from being able to save them was a bullet to her leg. Her limp was still pronounced, and her thigh ached as the bullet rubbed muscle and bone. The man, who was just older

than Amartya, had survived by pleasing those around him. He did all they asked, claiming allegiance to none. At first this had concerned Amartya, but after a week the man had won his trust by protecting him against surprise attacks by others who were just as powerful in their ability to obtain followers.

He washed his hands and face in the little metal basin, just to feel free of the dirt for a few minutes before heading over to a table created from bits and pieces scavenged among the rubble. He took a piece of precious paper and an equally precious pen and wrote very small letters identifying what roles they needed in their new society. When each representative arrived he spoke to each, discovered their strength and motivation and assigned them a job. The hope he had seen earlier began to spread like a disease, but this disease was one he wanted to spread. He explained that as a council they would speak to each member of their small community to determine where they would be best utilized and in this way, find ways to survive in the husk of a world that had been left to them.

Years later, Amartya still found himself as the leader of a thriving community. Survivors of the war had begun to arrive every day and he always found a spot for them. Consumed with the work of rebuilding a world, he neglected his own wants and desires until a young woman about twenty years old showed up on his front step. She was beautiful in a way that he had not seen before. Her sandy blonde hair had been chopped short in a utilitarian style. Her hazel eyes shown like gold from a war weary face that had seen the realities of both war and survival since childhood. He wondered how she had survived but didn't ask. Instead he invited her in.

She had demanded privacy, which he granted realizing that this was something she had had little of in the last decade. When she finished she joined him for dinner. Her long empty stomach overcame her, and she ate several plates before fatigue commanded her attention. He showed her to a small room with a small one-person bed. The blankets hand sewn by members of the community and freshly laundered. She slept for days waking up only to relieve herself and eat what food and drink had been left at her bedside.

When she was recovered, Amartya found that he did not want her to leave and that she refused to anyway. She begged him not to reveal her name, the only thing she had been able to hang onto during those long and awful years, and he agreed that no one should know her name. When referring to her in the company of others he said she was his consort. The population began to talk about her sudden appearance and placement with their Overseer. She began to take on a goddess-like quality rarely appearing in public and when she did covered in thin gauzy fabric which obscured her features and retained the mystery surrounding her.

As years went by Amartya and his Consort made fewer public appearances until one day they were gone. Those that served and protected them were accused of treason and murder, but no evidence was found. There were no bodies, no blood, and no sickness. Rumors proliferated that they had been kidnapped, but no ransom letter ever appeared. While Amartya had been at the head of the community, there had been no religion except that of survival. Now that they found themselves prosperous and inventive a few felt the need for

religion and the saving of souls. One man said he had received a vision from the Overseer and that he and his Consort had gone to live with the gods that had forgotten them. That they were going to cleanse the heavens as the earth had been cleansed. The man said that in his vision Amartya had said that his whole name was to be sacred, used only by high priests and priestesses and that he should be called Ama instead. At his side, he said, was his Consort who remained the most sacred, meaning women should be revered and adored. That without their calming influence the world was out of balance. He explained that those that he and the Consort selected to represent them would appear with a change in eye color, that it would not be a natural hue, but one that was distinct and an obvious touch from Them.

The man later found that his own eyes had changed and that as he put out a call to the public several others, both men and women, joined him. In those early days Ama and the Consort spoke freely with their followers and helped them understand the spiritual nature of intimacy and the enlightenment that could happen if done in the right spirit. This healing of the soul and intimacy was something that had been neglected. They said, because the people weren't ready. It was important to heal their bodies and minds before starting the long healing process of the soul.

This man was George Abbott, a farmer in the days before the war. He had become a widower because of the war. He'd felt no desire to enter into matrimony again nor to feel the warmth of bare skin on his own. After receiving this vision and subsequent communications from Ama, he realized that as High Priest it was his duty to participate and teach the proper way to perform each rite. Abbot performed the ceremonies he'd been shown various priestesses, but the enlightenment he sought evaded him. As he was

about to give up a thirty year old woman appeared at their compound doors with eyes the color of gold. That night, Abbot dreamt that the Consort explained the woman's purpose and why she had been set apart. He took the woman and explained to her the Order's purpose and her own unique one. She agreed to perform a rite, as it was explained to her, but at the beginning she felt compelled to perform it a bit differently. During that time of union between the official Representative of Ama and the official Representative of the Consort on Earth it seemed that the negative energy of the world polarized becoming positive. Abbott realized the full truthfulness of his calling in that one union as well as the sacredness of the High Priestess of the Consort.

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I remembered meeting Amartya, or Ama as he chose to be known. He wasn't the man I'd thought he was. He liked the power that I had and began to use it for his own purposes playing on my love for him. Once I'd realized this I left, I went back to the Immortal World, but he found a way to use that to his advantage as well. He sullied my name and that of those who would follow in my footsteps. His priests found a way to make people believe that they had been called to serve a righteous duty, but in fact, it was to satisfy others' lust for power and sex. I'd been so ashamed. I'd gone down to give them hope after their near extermination after the Great War. Instead I made it worse. I'd watched as the years went by and the corruption continued, each generation was worse than the last until I couldn't take it anymore. I found Liam and Charlotte and noticed that

they loved each other and that she had conceived. I Selected that child still in her mother's body to be my body.

I dropped the book closed on my lap. My room seemed to close in on me, and I looked again at the old leather book in my lap. I got up and paced for a moment before making my way to the heavily curtained window. Looking down, the dark void swallowed all the light below. Hearing Katrina stir I wrapped the book then slid the book deep under the mattress again before crawling under the covers and feigning sleep.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

It was drawing closer to the Emperor's Advisor's visit and my birthday. I became nervous for no reason, and I did my best to stay away from Oona and Thomas. In the mornings when I wasn't drawing, or now sculpting, the human form, Jeremiah spoke about theology explaining in detail the reasons for moral restrictions within the empire. He never mentioned my fight with Thomas but acted the same as he always had.

"Before the laws were put in place by Emperor Gideon three hundred years ago our society was falling into ruin. Girls younger than your handmaiden were finding themselves pregnant with no husband or marital prospects. Crime rates were higher than they had been in over a century, and there were rumors of a rebellion. After consulting with the Leader of our Order the emperor decided to enact martial law, and things improved so it was decided that this control was preferable to the chaos and ruin enveloping the empire." His voice droned on.

I thought about that. It made sense. Why wouldn't the Emperor and the High Priest of the Church work together to keep the citizens of the empire safe? Of course, they would, wasn't it in their own best interests to? It made me wonder, though, about the people who didn't agree with the new laws. Antoine flipped through several paintings of the reforming empire.

"These were painted before and just after the enactment of the new laws unifying church and state." Jeremiah motioned toward the paintings.

The women wore next to nothing. They showed their bodies like they were on display. The men looked at them with lust. One painting showed the rape of one woman by several men. I almost threw up. The men also wore little

clothing, their legs and arms bare. A beach scene showed women wearing their bra and panties, and men in their underwear.

"You'll notice the complete disregard for the public decency. You may be surprised to know that this is what they wore swimming."

He continued to speak while motioning to Antoine when he wanted him to flip to the next painting, each one more disturbing than the last.

"During this dark time, men and women prostituted themselves for money and other material things much more often than we see today. Crime increased as did sexual promiscuity until the unification of church and state." The last painting of the Dark Times was of a poorly dressed woman with two children, all in rags. In the background, it looked like a riot was in progress, yet she did nothing, she just stood staring out with sad eyes. Yes. It was good that control had been taken.

"During martial law various policing divisions were set up. The military took action first patrolling the streets in ancient machines, instituting and enforcing a dusk curfew, and rounding up rebels. The Morality Unit was created to ensure that men and women obeyed the new laws and caught infractions early on."

He had Antoine stop at a painting with several smiling women dressed in long sleeved ankle-length robes. Their hair was covered by plain scarves and their unobscured by make-up. The next image was of several men dressed in business suits with short, cropped hair relaxing at a conference table conducting business. He continued showing me images of the modest and happy citizens of the Empire.

"As you can see, the changes enacted by uniting church and state provided our ancestors safety and happiness. The drastic changes were hard for some to embrace, and

there were several rebellion attempts among those that didn't understand Ama and His will. Most of these individuals underwent Re-education and soon repented of their earlier wayward decisions. Others were imprisoned or executed.” His voice remained dispassionate.

I thought of the executions I'd seen just before being Selected and shivered at the still vivid memory.

"As a Representative of our Order, you will be required to attend executions in whatever region you are assigned. On occasion, you will act as the official witness when called upon. This allows others to see that Ama is still present, and He plays an active role in our lives. Once the executed is pronounced dead you and the attending medical personnel will sign the death certificate."

The bell rang signaling the end of our morning session, but Jeremiah didn't dismiss me. He gathered his papers, as he did every day, and then walked up to me.

“Rowan, your birthday is next week, and I've noticed an improvement in your attitude. You seem to be questioning authority less which shows you are embracing your role here much more seriously. I will be busy with the Advisor's visit so you will be mentored by Antoine without my assistance. Antoine, I have something I'd like you to take care of.”

As he left, he handed Antoine a large envelope. Without opening it, Antoine looked at it, and a sad frown formed on his lips. He took my elbow and led me to the atrium outside the assembly room. Jude was there. I noticed that, unfortunately, Oona and Thomas were there as well.

"Good afternoon, Oona, Thomas." His face was serious and professional, but sad. "Our group has been selected by High Priest Jeremiah to represent the Order at tonight's executions in Verger."

"Priest Antoine, I'm sorry. Did you say execution?" I stammered.

He nodded then continued speaking, "Travel cloaks will be provided to you, Oona and Rowan, you'll also be given veils. You are to stay covered. You should not be identifiable in anyway except as a member of the Order. If any of you act inappropriately or compromise our Order you will be reprimanded."

He made eye contact with each of us to emphasize the severity of his words. The vivid red and green of the last execution filled my mind as bile rose in my throat. I remained rooted in place.

"I can't." I mumbled.

Everyone froze. I shook my head trying to free it from the images.

"I can't sit by and watch more people die. It's wrong."

"Rowan, didn't you hear anything High Priest Jeremiah said? This is your duty. You must go and witness their deaths." Antoine reminded me.

"I don't care. I can't. It's too horrible." I wiped away a tear and felt Jude step up behind me.

"Sir, maybe she could be excused this one time?" Jude asked.

I looked up at Antoine hoping he would say yes, but he shook his head.

"Rowan, I understand your feelings. Of all my duties as a priest this is the one I dread, but it is my responsibility to represent the Great Ama and His judgment on those

who do not follow His laws. It is your duty to represent the Consort in the same way.” His voice was soft but firm.

“She wouldn’t approve of these needless killings. If She were here we would be condemned for the inhumane way we treat each other.” I spat.

Oona rolled her eyes and Thomas walked over to a painting to study it. Jude didn’t leave my side as Antoine put both his hands on my shoulders.

“What you say may be true, but right now the only things we have are the rules that were set in place by Ama. It is His law we live by and must obey, not Hers.”

“Then why are we called The Order of the Consort?” I countered meeting his eyes.

Antoine was silent for a moment before speaking, “The Consort served Him and we must follow Her example. We must serve Him in all He asks us to do.” He turned and walked toward the front entrance of the building.

How did I get stuck representing a god that I still didn’t believe in and who killed people because He didn’t like what they were doing. This was madness!

“Please, Rowan, just go. I couldn’t bear to lose you again.” Jude pleaded so soft I barely heard him. I felt his hand on my back, and I wished I could hug him and cry on his shoulder.

Antoine waited at the doorway as Oona and Thomas joined him, and then looked at me.

“I won’t leave your side.” Jude murmured.

I forced my feet forward. Thomas and Oona whispered about being on the outside, their excitement palpable. I could tell it had been a very long time since they'd been anywhere. Just before leaving the secure portion of the building, our domestics helped us get ready. Katrina lowered my veil as we walked out, and the world became obscured.

#

It was hot and humid outside with dark clouds collecting above us. It was going to rain. I could smell it in the air, and my traveling cloak clung to my already sweating skin. We made our way to two waiting carriages, the windows darkened. Oona, Jude, and I climbed into one while Antoine, Thomas, and an Escort took the carriage in front. None of us spoke, as our small somber caravan drove toward to the center of Verger. I watched the buildings get older and more elaborate than those near the Centre. The carriages weaved through the congested streets avoiding the masses as we all moved in the same direction. The city center was similar to Grayson's except on a grander scale. Surrounded by buildings a multi-tiered platform had been erected on a large green space. The three tiers were still vacant except for chairs, however, the green was filled with the citizens of Verger. They were packed into the square, standing shoulder to shoulder, with their eyes fixed on our darkened carriages. As we stopped door closest to the platforms opened, and a large Escort waited to guide us to our places. Jude followed us securing the rear.

I stepped into the humid air and my hair and dress clung to me. I kept my head up and straight, but I tried not to look into the faces of those around me. Their faces were a mismatch of emotions. The wooden steps creaked as I climbed to the second highest platform, the top one holding two large and comfortable looking chairs. I found my place

and stood until given the signal. I wanted to move my veil so that I could see better, but I remembered Antoine's warning and kept my hands in my lap. Sweat rolled down my face, my back, and between my breasts. This was miserable. I looked to my right and noticed Thomas and Oona fidgeting uncomfortably in their seats. They were as miserable as I was.

A hush fell over the crowd as two proud figures approached the viewing platforms. Walking with a cane was an older man with sallow skin, a shock of white hair, and dressed in the red robes of the Emperor. His arm was linked with a priestess in very dark purple, her dress gauzy and moved free. A thin veil obscured her face and hair. A familiar Escort helped them climb the steep wooden steps and I realized as they passed that it was Annabelle. I should have known. She turned her veiled face to me, and through the obscuring fabric I could see a hint of a smile.

“Welcome, Rowan. I do hope you enjoy the proceedings.” She mocked.

How had she known it was me? I was covered. Jeremiah must've told her that I would be attending. Oona was so much taller than me she'd probably figured it out that way. Anger at her mocking tone filled me, and I stared back without flinching. She looked away and finished climbing up to the platform with her seat next to the old man. The man in red must be Advisor Lincoln. Why would he come to an execution? And why was he already in the city? He lifted his hand and an Agent in his fifties addressed the crowd his voice crisp and loud.

"These individuals have been found guilty of disobeying the Morality Laws at increasingly severe degrees. Re-education has failed, and in an effort to

prevent them from corrupting others it is deemed necessary to make an example of them."

I remembered his voice. It was the same Agent that had delivered me to the center. He was older than I remembered. He recited the same words spoken at each execution and I cringed. A young woman and a young man were led to the main platform just below us. Both were dressed in drab brown tunics and pants, their bare feet making a soft thud as they walked on the wooden platform. His hair was cut short, but hers was traditionally long and filled with tangles and snarls. Their bodies thin from prison and hard labor. Taking their positions at the center of the platform they faced the crowd.

"I have sinned against Ama and must be punished. I accept this punishment and hope others will learn from my mistakes." The young man addressed the crowd in a loud voice.

He stepped back and bowed his head staring at his feet. Next the girl stepped forward and repeated the same thing word-for-word. The only difference was that she choked on a few as her emotions took over. When complete she stepped back. Two executioners stood behind them then reached forward, the light glinting off the wicked looking knives in their hands. All eyes glued were to the scene, even mine. The men received the signal and then slid the blades across their throats in unison. Blood spilled and spurting from the wounds as the men let them fall and lay in an ever expanding pool of sticky crimson.

I raised my hand to my mouth to ward off the vomit that rose in my throat, but others weren't as lucky.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

The execution filled my thoughts much like the last one had. Even when Oona received her assignment the following day I didn't rejoice that she was leaving. As Thomas watched her go I didn't delight in his anguished looks or the tears that fell from his eyes. His reaction made me realize he was in love with her. He probably didn't hate me for any reason other than she did.

The one thing that soothed my troubled thoughts was the note I'd found hidden in one of my books. It assured me that my mother had given birth to a baby girl and she was safe. I had a little sister. I had to make sure that she didn't get caught up in this mad world we lived in, I just couldn't figure out how to fix it. I thought of the danger they must still be in. There had been no news or evidence of new break-in attempts, and I began to wonder if my father had given up. I hoped not.

My thoughts ran in circles as Jude escorted me to my morning lesson with Antoine. When we entered the room the large massage table glared back at me.

"Rowan. We are in the final stages of your training, and after your birthday next week, you'll start participating in ceremonial rites. The physician reported to me that you appear to have remained untouched. I'm proud of you."

I felt my cheeks burn and glanced at Jude thinking of the time we had kissed. I had wanted more. Antoine wound a record player up and the scratchy music filled the room. He waited a moment before he spoke, his voice low so that I had to concentrate to hear him.

"There are old texts that talk of a golden-eyed woman that will come to cleanse us. I believe that is you. Those of us who remain devout have been waiting for you, but

until today we didn't know it was you we were waiting for. Mention of this strange trait is listed only a few times in a few texts.”

My mind went to the book still hidden under my mattress, but I remained silent.

“There are others who know that She will come again to cleanse us, and they have been searching as well. It is a matter of time before they discover you are the one.”

“Wait, what?”

“I have felt Her presence when you are near. She will help you if you let Her. You must discover your own path. I will guide you for as long as I can.”

Antoine turned to Jude, “You. You must keep her safe. Rowan must be allowed to fulfill what the Consort has returned to do.” Antoine pleaded.

“I would be happy to lay down my life to keep her safe.” Jude promised.

“Rowan. Find your path before you are discovered.” He pleaded, worry lines forming on his forehead.

“I'm working on it.” My words felt inadequate, but I hoped they calmed him.

I put my hand on Antoine's arm and looked up into his purple-blue eyes. He forced a smile then cleared his throat and walked to the massage table and looked at Jude patting it. Jude looked from it to Antoine with suspicion.

“Until she can fulfill her purpose she must be trained in the ways of the Order as it currently stands.” Antoine's voice remained low.

Jude's suspicious look didn't disappear, but he did walk over and sit awkwardly on the massage table.

“So, Rowan, there are several ways to commune with Deity. Patrons come to the temple with problems they need assistance with or insight into. Most of them will be considered “high level” patrons, those that donate large sums of money.”

My mind started reeling. I'd suspected this much, but no one had explained it to me. I stared at Jude sitting on that table sitting the most relaxed I'd seen since we were in school. What was Antoine going to make me do?

“Massage is a way to connect with your patrons that doesn't have to lead to intercourse. You've studied theory and practiced on Katrina, but before you find yourself in an actual ceremony I think it's best to practice on someone of the opposite sex. Physical touch is intimate and personal and it is very hard not to create a connection when doing it.”

“But if that's the case then shouldn't I be careful who I practice on?” Nervous, I looked at Jude. I wanted nothing more than to touch him, but my strong feelings, and his, didn't need any encouragement.

“Under other circumstances I would warn you against getting too close to your Escort, as I've already done, but based on our overarching needs this is more important.” Antoine looked back and forth between the two of us. “I can already sense a bond between the two of you and to keep you safe I want to strengthen that. Although I can't prove it, I believe your Escort has stopped taking the emotion repressing pills he's required to take. Jude, please put the linen shorts on.”

I looked, wide-eyed, at Jude as he picked up the shorts on the massage table then met my nervous stare.

“Rowan, turn around so he has some privacy. He will not be naked while you practice, but we do need to have access to his flesh.”

I turned and listened to the sounds of Jude changing. I had imagined an uncountable number of times what his body must look like, and my hands began to tingle at the thought of touching him. We heard him sit back on the table, so we turned around. His legs were bare all the way to his upper thigh, and I drank in the sight of them. Jude chewed his lip, a nervous habit I’d noticed in school.

On the way to the other side of the table, Antoine stopped the record so that we started in silence. I stood opposite of Antoine and watched as he began to knead the flesh of Jude’s calf and move upward to his lower thigh. I mirrored his movement and felt the tension start to leave Jude’s body as I we worked. Several minutes later I was surprised to feel my own tension begin to leave my own body. Antoine began humming an unfamiliar yet soothing melody putting us both at ease

"Skin-on-skin is more intimate so if you feel uncomfortable at any time tell me." His voice had become softer. He continued to massage Jude’s thigh focusing on the underside, and I followed his example.

"Tension can be held in any major muscle group so if a patron is dealing with stressful issues be sure to address all the major muscle groups." He smiled an encouraging smile to both of us, but Jude’s eyes were closed and his breathing deep and even.

As we worked it felt like someone else was there, I had that feeling when someone is watching you. The hair on the back of my neck rose and my head tingled. I looked over at Antoine who smiled and nodded.

“Do you feel that?” He whispered so as not to disturb Jude. I nodded. “Those Above are here with us.”

I glanced around again. I felt something brush my, cheek but when I turned to look there was nothing there. Dear Ama, They were real!

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Neither Jude nor I talked about his massage, but his looks were longer and he found reasons to touch my hand or back. The morning of my birthday Katrina ordered me a special breakfast, and Jude gave me a small silver ring, "To go under the one you get when you're ordained". He explained to me not hiding the sadness he felt. I understood, I didn't want to be ordained if that meant I couldn't be with him. I wondered if he'd still want me.

After the morning assembly I met High Priest Jeremiah and Thomas in the atrium, Jude stood veiled in the shadows. Jeremiah strode into the circular room and looked at each of us in turn.

"It has come to my attention that neither of you have yet to observe any rituals. Today we will view two ceremonies, and then you will meet with your mentors."

"Sir, will we know the participants?" Thomas asked his lips curled in a predatory smile. He was vile.

"You should recognize the Representatives, but not the patrons. They are not otherwise associated with your training, although they are aware they are participating in it."

Jeremiah led us down a hallway decorated with pastoral paintings to a narrow stairway and up four flights before stopping at a locked door. Jeremiah took a key ring filled with keys from his waist and selected a shiny silver one with an ornate filigreed handle and slid it into the lock. I heard a sharp click that echoed in the stone stairwell

then faded into nothingness. He opened the door and pushed it with his beefy hand and motioned for us to enter. It was just another hallway.

The stone walls were covered in yellowish silk with gold brocade. It didn't warm up the hallway, but it did give it a sense of importance. It reminded me of some of the table runners we had carried in the store. We walked without a sound along the corridor passing several rooms when Jeremiah, who had taken the lead again, stopped in front of a beautiful carved wooden door. He unlocked the door and we filed in. It was a small room with a large window looking into another room. Thomas chose a chair then I sat down, making sure there was an empty chair between us.

"The first to enter will be the Representative and then the patron will enter from the other door. The first ceremony to be performed is a fertility rite. The patron has come to us seeking guidance and healing. Please do not make noise or comment unnecessarily. Depending on the fertility to be addressed, either Ama or His Consort will be present. Show the respect you would if you were in the room with Them." Jeremiah spoke to us in a hushed voice.

He locked the door as he left. I shifted in my seat while Thomas leaned back and spread his legs wide in an arrogant display. Jude and another Escort stood by the door, their faces impassive, but Jude's eyes never left my face.

From the door on the right the blonde priestess entered, her hair piled high on her head. Did it have to be her? She seemed to be everywhere. The neck of her sheer red gown was a double layer of crystal jewels that draped down, the sides open except for a small crystal clasp at the waist. Her feet were bare, and she stood facing the other door, the back of her body visible beneath the sheer cloth. Thomas grunted his approval and

licked then bit his lower lip. The other door cracked open, and a head appeared, looking in with trepidation. The priestess beckoned to her.

"Please, come in." Her voice was like honey and flowed over me. The fear in the other woman's eyes seemed to lessen, and she straightened walking in, shutting the door behind her. She wore a simple robe of plain white, cinched at the waist.

"Tell me, why have you come here?"

The patron looked to be in her mid-twenties, but worry lines made her look older. "Priestess, I am to be married, but the physicians have said I may have a difficult time conceiving a child. If I can't give my husband a child he may put me aside."

The priestess walked around her to the woman's other side, "And if Deity has other plans for you besides being a mother?"

"My lady, it has been my greatest desire to be a mother, but if They have other plans for me, I will accept them."

"What have you done so far?"

"I have been to the medical centers as well as those that work with herbs. We have prayed as well as having others pray for us. I have done all that those with more knowledge have ever asked me, but my chances remain dim."

The priestess bowed her head as if in deep thought.

"Are you prepared to do all that They ask of you?"

"I am."

"Very well."

I watched as the priestess poured hot water into a small teacup then she added some herbs in a tea ball. As it steeped, she mixed some essential oils into a

lotion. Something felt very wrong about this. I glanced over as Thomas leaned closer to the glass. His eyes were ravenous.

"Drink this then disrobe." The patron took the cup and sipped the brew; she grimaced as she drank. The woman gave back the teacup and looked down at her robe pulling at the tie holding the robe closed with hesitant fingers. The neck of the robe began to fall open. The woman took a deep breath, her shaky fingers calming then slid the robe off her shoulders letting it fall to the ground. The priestess had her back to us, but she turned and her eyes reflected not the calm patience I had seen from Antoine but a look mirrored by Thomas.

"The Consort is pleased with your trust in me. I am Priestess Diana and I am here to assist you on your path. Do not be ashamed of your nakedness. The body is beautiful as are those activities in which it participates, including the joining of two fleshes to bring forth life. In this way we are creators." The words were familiar, but the look in her eye did not match the intention behind them. I shivered. "We must embrace all that we have, and celebrate the physical beauty each of us has, and the ability we all have for creation. For some, creation is obtained, without effort, but for others they must work hard. It is possible that after this rite you may conceive. If you not do, though, not give up hope." The priestess moved toward her, gliding like a predator after an unaware prey. "The Consort and Ama are with you. They may ask you to create in other ways before allowing the full healing of your body to take effect. The herbs you partook of today will need to be taken every day, and the massage which I will perform will need to continue once per week. You may schedule that with me or we can arrange to teach your

companion to perform it in a room set aside for that purpose. Do you accept this responsibility?"

"Yes, Priestess." The woman's voice shook.

The predatory priestess began applying lotion to the woman's body. She started at her crown and worked down toward her belly, then started again at her feet and moved upward. I looked away as she spent extra time on the woman's breasts and pubic area.

"Lay on your back." She ordered.

The patroness leaned back, but she watched as the priestess disrobed then sat atop her, the woman, the priestesses' buttocks touching the woman's knees. Massaging the woman's lower belly with soft motions the priestess looked at us and grinned as the woman closed her eyes. She moved her hands in knowing circles up the woman's body kneading the small breasts again As she leaned forward her own fuller breasts grazed the woman's flat belly. Against my will goose bumps erupted on my body. I squeezed my eyes shut, but I still heard the noises of their communing. I opened one eye and watched as the massage and movements became even more seductive.

This was not what was supposed to happen. That horrible priestess had cheapened what was supposed to be sacred. I felt sick to my stomach. I glanced at Thomas who was transfixed by their movement and watched the women like a hungry animal. He made me nervous. He was too much like that horrible Agent. I didn't want to be near him when his animalistic side was so close to the surface. I scooted my chair closer to the wall. Only once did I make eye contact with Jude whose face revealed worry. As their voices reached their peak I focused on the floor studying the pattern of the ceramic tile until it ended in the sound of exhausted breath.

After the ceremony had been completed, the Priestess praised the Consort for blessing them with Her presence, which I hadn't felt at all, and asked that she heal this woman so that she could fulfill her desire of motherhood. The priestess then thanked the patron and made sure she had a supply of the herbs. Jude walked over and closed the curtains on the viewing window and stood in front of them.

"There will be a break between patrons. Feel free to freshen up and prepare yourself for the next ceremony. The restrooms are across the hall." The other Escort announced pointedly to Thomas.

Thomas left, the front of his pants pointed outward by his arousal. I stood up and went to Jude.

"I have to get out of here. These ceremonies are fake. I can't do it." I whispered and wiped away a tear.

"Jeremiah posted guards outside the door with instructions only to allow the two of you access to the bathroom. None of us can leave." He whispered and looked at the other Escort.

I looked over too. His gaze was a little too intent. I sat down again and wondered if the patroness had known that she'd been watched by others. When Thomas came in he flashed me a menacing smile.

Priest Jeremiah returned a few minutes later addressing us in reverent tones, "You are about to witness another sacred ritual. This patron has come in searching for answers to a particular question. We are not privy to that question ahead of time and we may, or may not discover what it is during the time spent together. This rite is important because when joining the male and female bodies together, you allow both Ama and the Consort

to commune together. Their opposite yet complimentary natures allow the patron to see their issue from various sides and even be presented with an answer from one or both of Those Above."

Jeremiah glanced once in my direction then left the room, motioning for the Jude to open the curtain. We watched as a priest entered. He didn't face the window, but something about him was familiar. Then he turned. I sucked in my breath without thinking. Antoine! I sat with my mouth hanging open. Thomas chuckled next to me, but I couldn't take my eyes off of him. Oh no! I prayed that he wasn't like Thomas and the blonde priestess. Antoine was bare-chested and wore knee-length white cotton shorts, held up by a white drawstring. He stood by the bed, breathed deeply, and swung his arms like he was warming up for a run. Muttering something incoherent under his breath he looked at the patron door as a statuesque woman waked in. She wore a simple cotton dress, something like my mother used to wear, her feet bare.

"It's nice to see you again." Antoine's voice broke the silence, and the woman smiled.

"Priest Antoine. How have you been?"

She walked up to him and bent her knee into a slight bow before placing a chaste kiss on his cheek.

"I am well. Are you here with the same question as last time, Miss Lane?"

"No, I am here with a different question. Our last commune worked so well I had the answer before I left the temple grounds. It has offered me much comfort and direction, but a new issue has arisen that I need to speak with Those Above to gain clarity."

"Is it a financial matter?"

"No, it is a personal matter." She blushed and looked away.

Antoine smiled then went to the table and lit a few candles dropping some dried herbs into a burner, its flame set very low. I heard him mutter, "Ama be with me" just before walking back and standing behind her. With a slow, deliberate hand he unzipped her dress and brushed the fabric from her shoulders, letting it fall to the floor. She stood naked before him unashamed. She bent down and picked up the dress and took it to a small table where she folded it neatly. Antoine came over and knelt before her, his hands on her hips, as if praying to the Consort Herself. Her skin seemed to glow with health, I could tell that she knew she was beautiful, and I wasn't sure if I envied or hated her.

Antoine kissed her belly then stood up and took her by the hand leading her to the bed. Before lying down, she took the drawstring of his shorts between two of her fingers and pulled, loosening the tie allowing them to slide down. I was surprised at how my heart began to race at the sight of him. His member stood semi-erect; I couldn't tear my eyes away. Unbidden, my body filled with desire as he laid her on the bed, her legs open and inviting. I tore my eyes away and looked at Jude. His eyes were fixed on me, the corners of his mouth turned down. In my line of vision Thomas snickered.

Turning my attention back to Antoine I saw him slide in without difficulty. As they moved together, I was surprised how much I reacted. I wasn't sure if it was the ceremony itself or if it was Antoine. In the moments that I could see his eyes, they were filled with compassion. He didn't seem to be overtaken by the lust I'd seen earlier. I dropped my eyes and focused on the tile, but when he began to moan with pleasure, my eyes snapped back to him. Absorbed, I watched as he pulled her closer and his whole

body tensed just as hers did. For a moment I felt the back of my head start to tingle, it was the same experience I'd had while massaging Jude. I could tell this wasn't quite right, but it was closer.

I wondered what would happen in the aftermath as he collapsed on top of her, their sweat mingling. He didn't have a lot of hair on him except on his chest and that was just a light sweeping of black, like a gentle dusting. They lay that way, almost in an embrace for a few minutes before he rolled off and seemed to drink in the sight of her. Her breath came out in heavy gasps.

"I have received my answer, but I do not know how to put it into action." Her voice sounded worried.

"Miss Lane, give it time. The full answer will come to you, not only what you should do, but how it should be achieved. If you find yourself struggling you may return, and if I am available I would be happy to assist in your communing." His voice was comforting.

He stood and walked naked to the table that burned herbs and began making tea. He let it steep then brought two cups back to the table and handed her one.

"For the next several mornings, be sure to drink the tea."

She propped herself up on the bed and sipped while watching him. I couldn't see her face, but her head followed every movement he made. My mouth dropped open, and I forced it shut. She was in love with him! How could he be so blind? If the Jeremiah noticed she would no longer have access to Antoine. The other Escort closed the curtain and opened the door.

High Priest Jeremiah came back into the room.

"Do you have any questions?"

"Yeah! How do I get a patron like that?" Thomas asked, a huge disgusting smile plastered to his face.

Jeremiah looked at him a moment, displeasure coloring his features for the first time regarding Thomas in as long as I could remember.

"Any non-sacrilegious questions?"

I kept my mouth closed tight. I didn't trust what would come out. After being met with silence he waddled out with Thomas and I following him back through the various passageways back to the section of Verger Centre we knew best.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

After Jude had gone to his own quarters I told Katrina what I'd seen.

“Antoine! You got to watch him commune?”

All I could do was nod. Every time I closed my eyes I saw his body pressed up against hers. I didn't feel jealous of his attention toward her, but I did wonder what it would be like. Seeing the paintings was very different than seeing it live. Jude hadn't spoken much to me afterwards, and I began to understand why relationships between Escorts and those they serve was prohibited.

#

The next morning I woke early to a knock on the door. Disheveled and rubbing her eyes Katrina answered it. We were both a little surprised to see Antoine standing there. I pulled my comforter up around my chest.

“Rowan, I wanted to talk to you about yesterday. I wanted to tell you, but Jeremiah forbade me.” Antoine said as he came in.

“It's okay. It's what we do, well, it's what I will do.” I stammered.

“I suppose you're right. I need you to go out today.”

“Out?” I couldn't hide my confusion or my excitement.

“I need you to visit with Brother Daniel.”

“Why?”

“I'd like to see how his parish is doing, but I am unable to get away. As your mentor I feel that exposing you to the common people will help you in your Service. The High Priest has also said that he would like for you to do some community service, as a

punishment for not watching the entire ceremonies yesterday.” He struggled to hide his smile.

“A punishment.” My voice flat.

“Yes, most of those who Serve view community service as a punishment. The High Priest said that Brother Daniel expressed a need, and I’d like to see what if there’s been any improvement.”

I was surprised that Jeremiah had asked that I take care of this and looked at Antoine with suspicion.

“You and Jude will leave as soon as possible. If it goes well, I can arrange for you to visit other areas of Verger as well.”

#

The carriage wove through shabby neighborhoods, and I watched as the Agents became meaner and harder looking the further into the slums we went. I hadn’t noticed that before, I’d been too excited to get out. This time I remembered that in Grayson, the Agents had all worn suits and tried to blend into the background, they became noticeable close to curfew or during an arrest. Here it was different. All over Verger they were obvious. Near the Centre they wore suits, but their eyes were hardened, and I could see where they hid their weapons. The further into the slums we got, the less professional they looked. These looked like mercenaries, men without proper training glared at my car as we drove by. They made me nervous.

The minutes seemed to last an eternity until we stopped in front of the old church building. The old church looked much the same as it had several months ago. The building was rundown, the steeple crumbling with a jagged point, almost all of the

stained glass windows were boarded up, and the concrete patio still broken up, the saplings weak and brown. Jude and I looked out the window, and I took a deep breath.

“All right. Let’s go.”

Jude climbed out of the carriage then helped me out. We moved up the stairs careful to avoid the crumbling edges. The stairs were so battered by the elements and overuse that pieces were breaking free from the lip of each step making it precarious. An iron security gate was held open by a chain allowing us to enter through a carved wooden door. The simple carvings, worn down by age, suggested a once magnificent and elaborate door praising the former god of the Earth, but now it just looked sad. The door squeaked as Jude pushed it open. Inside was a chapel much like I’d been shown in paintings at school, but this one sat empty. No candles were lit. The sunlight struggled to filter in through the darkened windows.

“Priestess. Welcome!”

“Brother Daniel, how are you?” I didn’t correct him. Let him think I was already ordained.

I smiled back at his trusting face and happy emotions. How could he be so happy to have been placed in such a horrid place? Still, his church was clean and the structure seemed strong even if it needed repairs.

“We are so honored that you have come to visit. I’m sorry I wasn’t expecting you, or I would have been more prepared.” He bowed to show his respect.

“Thank you for having me. The Order sends their warm regards as does Mistress Annabelle.”

“She is still at the top? That is good. Forgive me, we don’t get much outside news about the church here. It is good to hear that she is doing well. We pray to Ama for her continued health.” There was something in his tone that caught my attention. He sounded both relieved and worried, but when he spoke of her there was just a hint of fear in his voice. Why was he afraid?

He stopped a few feet from me and motioned for me to follow. As we walked, he spoke of the history of his little church. It had been here since the Great War and served a large area of followers.

“Priest Antoine has asked that I check in with you. I’m curious, how long have you been here?”

“After my ordination, I was assigned to this little piece of heaven. That was, I think, about forty years ago. It’s hard, but the people I serve make it worth it.”

He was so different than the priest in Grayson. We descended a tall staircase and entered the middle of a large basement filled with tables. He held out a chair for me, and I sat. A few moments later, a boy about twelve years old brought out a plate of warm fragrant bread and a large pot of soup. Another boy followed him with table wear. A pitcher of water was already on the table.

“Priestess, we have been hoping that someone would come. We are in great need, and I’m not sure how to provide for my people.”

“We have heard of your need. Tell me, my Brother, what do you need to bring more to Ama?” I tried to remember how to speak formally to another member of the

Order. These rules still seemed stupid to me, but I had to follow them if I was to get information out of him.

“As you can see, our building is in need of repair. The members have good hearts, but live in such squalor that they cannot help the church much less themselves. Many pray to Ama that one of their children will be Selected for Service and the blessings that that will bring to the family.”

“Ah, yes. The compensation provided for that child’s absence. How many have been Selected to Serve?”

“None.” He said it without thought as he ladled soup into a bowl and pushed it toward me.

“None? I asked surprised.

“No, Priestess.”

“Ever?” My disbelief clear to everyone.

“Not in our recorded history.” He bit off a piece of crusty bread and chewed.

We spent the rest of our sparse meal talking about the needs of the locals and his building, but I couldn’t stop thinking about what he said. He had to be mistaken. After finishing our lunch, he walked me to the carriage, watched as we slid away. Inside the relative solitude of the carriage, I held Jude’s hand and thought about the Selection process.

“Do we have access to the records of those who are Selected into Service?” I pondered out loud.

“Why?” Jude asked

“It doesn’t seem right that no one from this area has been Selected into Service.”

Jude thought for a moment, “Within the Centre? Those would be with Jeremiah.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

That night I waited until I heard Katrina's soft snores and tiptoed past her then pressed an ear to Jude's door. I didn't hear any snoring, but his even breathing let me know he was sleeping and wouldn't wake up. I tip-toed through my suite and opened the door, closing it behind me. The hallway was empty so I moved toward the stairwell as fast as possible and headed down. The stone floor chilled my bare feet, but I kept going. On the first floor I stopped and listened. I heard footsteps echo off the walls, and my heart skipped a beat. Biting my cheek I stood still trying to pretend I was invisible. The Escorts didn't notice me and eventually their footsteps grew distant. Relaxing a bit I poked my head out of the doorway into the circular atrium of the main hall. Relief flooded me when I realized it was empty. I raced to the far hallway then walked as stealthy as I could past the darkened paintings until I came to a familiar door. I reached for the handle, and it opened without a problem. I wondered why it wasn't locked. The waiting room opened up in dark shadows before me. Crouching, I half crawled to Jeremiah's office door and checked the handle, locked, of course.

I tried it again just to make sure, but it was secure. I put my ear to the wood to listen for movement, but it was silent. Sighing I slid down the wall and put my head in my hands. I just knew he had a record of where all the Selected came from. Sighing, I stood back up and left being sure to close the door behind me. Distracted by my frustration, I didn't notice the hushed voices ahead of me or the two men in the atrium.

“You! Stop!”

My heart jumped, and I stopped trying to peer into the darkness. I could just make out the bulky shapes of two Escorts.

“I’m, I’m sorry. You scared me.” I stammered.

I scrambled to think of something. What would they believe? They strode over to me, one taking me by the arm the other looking around to make sure I was alone.

“Your name?”

“Rowan. I’m an initiate.”

“What are you doing out of bed, Miss Rowan?”

“I couldn’t sleep, I thought a walk might help. I didn’t want to wake anyone, I didn’t think it would be a problem.” The lie fell from my lips with ease.

“What were you doing down that hallway?”

I looked behind me down the dark hallway then back at the large man in front of me.

“I was just wandering.”

He took my arm and pulled me along rougher than I thought was necessary.

“Next time you can’t sleep have your handmaiden prepare some tea. Stay out of the halls.”

Hauling me up the stairs to my room he stopped in front of my door. Looking at him, I wondered for a moment how he knew this was my room. Realization struck me that he had known who I was as soon as he saw me. He opened my door and shut it behind me. Through the heavy wooden door I heard him order the other Escort to stay and secure the area. Secure it against me.

#

Jude stormed to my side and glared at me.

“Why is there an Escort outside our suite and why was this delivered to me?”

He held an opened message in his hand, the edge crumpled from being held so tight. His anger was so clear it radiated off of him and engulfed me.

“Jude, I’m sorry.” I muttered.

“What happened?” He demanded

His words were sharp and cut through me. His calm voice was now punctuated by his anger. He grabbed my shoulders and forced me to look at him.

“I was out.”

“Out? Where ‘out’?” His voice evened and his grip eased, but he didn’t let go of me.

“Calm down. I’m fine. If anything had happened it’s not like it would’ve been your fault.”

“Not my fault? I am responsible for your safety. And. I.” he tripped over his words, “Look, do you have any idea what happens to an Escort whose Representative is harmed?” I shook my head. “They’re killed. Without a chance to explain.”

“You’re not serious.” I gasped.

“Don’t ever do that again. Now. Tell me where you were.”

I looked around the room stopping at the door and pursed my lips. His eyes softened in understanding.

“I couldn’t sleep. I just, I just went for a walk.” I said as Katrina walked by giving me a funny look.

“That’s it?”

“Yes.” I shook my head “No”.

I took some paper and wrote down what had happened. Staring at me, his lips pressed in a straight line he wrote back.

Never again...without me.

I agreed.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

It had been weeks since I was in Jeremiah's waiting room. Katrina told me she'd received notice that I would be ordained today, a priestess had died unexpectedly, and I was to replace her. I sat in Jeremiah's cluttered office waiting for him. My breath caught in my throat when he entered, but I held my tongue, waiting for him to speak. As he rounded the desk he looked at me and smiled a rare smile which reached his eyes. Why was he so happy?

"I apologize for making you wait."

Why was he apologizing to me?

"I had to make sure that things were in order for your Advancement. I will admit that when you arrived I was surprised to see you sitting on that side of my desk. You are not the kind of person Ama chooses, and with your eyes, well, we are working on that."

I glanced to the still cluttered area where the book had been, and thought of all it had said. Something nagged at me, but I couldn't remember the words.

"Your placement has requested that you perform several ceremonies here, at the Verger Centre, before arriving so after your ordination you'll spend about a week here as a full priestess."

"Will I be going alone?"

I looked down at the embroidery of my dress, afraid of what the answer.

"No. Your domestics will continue to attend you."

Relief spread through me, and I relaxed.

"Katrina will take care of preparing your things for transport when the time comes. Until then she will also be helping you before the ceremonies. I've arranged for your Advancement Ceremony to take place today."

"I'm ready." I wasn't ready! My mind went to the ceremonies I'd witnessed since my birthday, and I bit my lip.

"I've already sent word for the Priest to prepare himself."

As I followed him out, I began thinking about Antoine and wondered where he was. Why wasn't he there to tell me this news?

"Excuse me, High Priest, why didn't Antoine tell me himself?"

"Your mentor is detained elsewhere on business."

I wished he could have been here, but my anxiety at what was about to happen kept pushing the sadness I felt at his absence out of my mind. As we weaved in and out of corridors I thought of Jude's face when Katrina had read us the message. We'd been sitting together in the cafeteria, our knees touching under the table. He had squeezed his eyes shut then his face went blank, but when he took my hand it was clammy. I'd been glad Katrina had chosen this dress with its bell sleeves. The first hallways were familiar to me; I had grown used to the paintings that hung on the walls. As I passed each familiar object, I said a silent goodbye. I knew something was out there and thanked that presence for helping me get through this. I felt lost as I walked, step-by-step, toward fulfilling my new calling. At the door to the ceremonial room I was noticed the richness of the material but the door itself was beautiful. The wood was deep and rich, and I longed to run my fingers along the grooves of the carvings, to feel the message they must contain. I'd asked

once what the various carvings on the doors meant and was told that once I had achieved my priestess status I would continue to learn.

"Enter when you're ready." Jeremiah said.

I took a deep breath and clutched the knob in my hand and turned. Pushing the heavy door open I stepped into a beautiful circular room lined with drapes, a crystal chandelier in the center hovered over a luxurious bed. I noticed a teakettle, steaming already, by two delicate teacups. I couldn't believe how extravagant this room was, none of the rites I'd witnessed took place in a room like this. Those rooms were simpler. I started to step forward then stopped, frozen in my tracks. I wasn't alone, as I knew I wouldn't be, but I was surprised at who stood smiling at me. The priest that would be helping me during my Advancement and ordination was my mentor.

"Rowan, are you okay?" Antoine stepped over to me taking my arm gently. His concern written on his face; I was so shocked to see him there that wasn't sure what to do.

"Yes, I'm . . . fine, I guess I'm just surprised." Thoughts of his naked body swam in my head, but when I opened my eyes he was holding me. He nodded in understanding and released me after he was sure I was steady enough to support my own weight.

"Because we want to make sure our initiates are ready mentors are those who assist during the Advancement Ceremony."

I looked around the beautiful room, "Are we being watched?"

Antoine laughed and shook his head.

"This room is private, there are only a select few used for training that are equipped with viewing windows. If you'd like to investigate it you may."

It wasn't that I didn't trust him. I trusted him more than anyone else except for Katrina and Jude, but I still walked around the perimeter of the room and moved curtains and examined walls. About halfway through, I noticed that he was watching me, his face revealing his amusement. Relaxed, he leaned against the bed, his arms crossed over his chest. Trying to refocus myself I began to talk, something I still did when nervous.

"We don't have a time limit do we?" I asked unsure.

"No, we take as long as we need to." Antoine responded

"Do you do this often?" I blurted.

I didn't really want to know the answer, but I needed to fill up the space. I was a little scared of the answer and it bothered me. He was a priest, and I knew he had done it. I'd watched him. I sensed what was coming, the bed a glaring clue.

"Not anymore, but on occasion it is necessary for me to commune. As your mentor it is my duty and privilege to assist you in this."

I continued to search the room in the same way I had seen Jude do on several occasions, but came up with nothing. I was going to be a priestess! This was the only time I would be a patron. I ran my hands along the curtains, peeking behind them and touching the walls. After I'd made a full circuit of the room, I crawled on my hands and knees and peered under the bed, just to be sure. I couldn't bear the thought of being spied on.

"Satisfied?" His voice was still filled with amusement. I nodded and looked around the room, at the herbs and incense, and even the bed, but I couldn't look at him.

"Is there something the matter, Rowan? Do you not want to go through with this?" The amusement was gone, and his voice was laced with concern.

"It just happened so fast. I'm just not sure how I feel about all of this. I just didn't expect to see you here."

"It's unprecedented, but I could see if we can find someone else, if you'd like?" He said trying to hide his disappointment.

I walked over to him and took his hand. I felt awkward and confused holding it. My feelings raged inside of me. Why was I going through with this? Looking at Antoine I saw the sadness and disappointment turn to gratitude, but I didn't understand why he'd feel that for me. I thought of having to go through this ceremony with someone like Thomas, the greediness and desperation of their touch. The look of lust in their eyes. I tried to blink the image away.

"You are the perfect choice."

"I'll do my best." He sat on the edge of the bed and I felt something charging the air with electricity, waves of it began to flow through my body. I watched as he closed his eyes and breathed, inhaling soft and slow. His whole body relaxed. He went to the tea station and steeped two cups of tea then walked to the incense stand.

"Rowan, what do you hope to gain from this?"

The answer filled me. I told Antoine only the barest of truths.

"I want to make sure that I do all in my power to fulfill my purpose, and do what I am meant to do."

Antoine smiled as he lit the incense, and the rich fragrance permeated the room. He turned and stepped toward me, confidence radiating off of him. The electrical current continued to hum through me, and I began to get used to it. I could feel those eyes on me again as Antoine caressed my shoulder, his touch sending an electrical pulse through my body. A charge not unlike the one I had when my eyes changed shook my body, coursing through me. I held myself up, but I couldn't walk. Very gently, Antoine picked me up and walked toward the bed where he slid the shoulder of my dress down, the top falling down to my waist.

I reached behind me to take off my bra but I was so nervous I couldn't find the clasps. Antoine stopped me and with an expert's precision he unclasped the hook. I slid out of my panties and sat on the bed hugging my knees. My eyes roamed trying to take it all in. I wanted to remember every piece of it. My foot twitched as I watched his nimble fingers loosen the drawstring from his pants and slid them down, flinging them onto my pile of discarded clothes. His muscles were well-defined and moved like silk just underneath the surface of his skin. As he walked I watched his penis become more erect, but by the time he reached me it still had a little bit to go. He didn't climb on top of me, as I had assumed he would, instead he sat behind me, his back resting against the headboard then wrapped his legs around me. He began to rub my shoulders, releasing pent up tension and anxiety, his fingers working from my shoulders to my lower back then toward the front of my body. I felt myself lean into him, my arms loosening their tight grip on my sides, allowing his fingers to touch and caress the front of my body. When I couldn't hold myself back any longer, I turned to face him. My body seemed to know what to do even if my emotions remained a confused mess. I maneuvered my knees

over his, opening myself up to him. He pulled me close and in the moment he entered me, everything changed.

The air around me electrified, his emotions became clear and unclouded. Every cell in my body was filled with the essence and energy of him. Our purpose, like our bodies, had become one and we were not alone. I could sense two other presences in the room. Ama filled Antoine so when I looked at him, I didn't just see the bluish purple eyes I knew so well, I also saw the dark eyes of Ama that I'd seen in every painting. They were ancient and knowing. The other presence was female, and she descended into me, sharing my body. The Consort. His Consort. I welcomed Her and embraced the love and acceptance I felt surrounding me.

After what seemed like a matter of moments, it ended. I watched as Ama's presence receded and I expected the same from the Consort. I felt Her exit my body, but Her presence remained. I sensed Her, and for the first time I felt complete. Antoine and I lay in a sweaty heap, my thighs sore. When he looked at me, I noticed something akin to affection and awe lining his features and brightening his eyes.

“Antoine, you're eyes are different!”

“What do you mean?”

“They aren't purple anymore.”

Antoine reached over and removed our tea cups from a silver tray on the bedside table and held the shiny surface to his face. I watched his face change from fatigue to alarm then acceptance and excitement.

"They were here, I felt Them stronger than I've ever felt Them before." Antoine said in reverence, "She is still with you, isn't She? I can feel Her."

"Yes, She's here." I answered.

"She has begun to cleanse us. The false Selection process is being purged."

"Do you mean I'm going to have to have sex with everyone in the Order?"

Hysteria filled my voice but Her presence calmed me.

"I don't think so. I think She just needed a little extra energy to manifest in you."

Antoine looked at me and smiled.

"Antoine. What does it all mean?"

He stood and made us another cup of tea. Sliding off the bed I noticed the red stain on the sheets. Once my dress was on, I went to the incense stand and examined the ashes of burnt incense. Its earthy scent still clung to the air, and it mingled with Antoine's scent in my hair. It made me smile in a way that seemed foreign and welcome. I could hear his bare feet padding toward me, and I took the cup of tea and put it to my lips letting the warm liquid fill me. Antoine had put his shorts back on before finishing his tea.

"I have to report your Advancement." His gaze was intense and filled with meaning, "I won't share it all. What we had today, what we . . . shared . . . is sacred. I've never felt Them closer. "

He took my hand and brought the back of it to his lips and kissed it.

As he opened the door to leave, he turned and motioned for me to come over. I set down my tea and joined him. He wrapped his arms around me in a tight hug.

"She has returned to us." He sobbed with deep gratitude into my ear.

He walked out leaving me alone to contemplate the ceremony, his words,
and the presence that clung to me.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

When I left the ceremonial room Jude was waiting. I couldn't look at him. He followed me back to my quarters so I could rest. Lying in bed I tried to address the female presence that I felt around me, but She said nothing. Jude sat near the window looking out at the city below while Katrina prepared a warm bath, the water creating a sort of white noise in the whole room. His demeanor had changed.

“Jude?” We had learned to keep our voices low during our conversations.

He glanced toward me, but remained silent.

“Are you mad?” How do you ask the person you love if they are mad at you for doing your job? This felt like an impossible conversation.

“How can I be? This is what a priestess does. I should start taking my pill again.”

I heard something in his voice, a sad acceptance.

“What pills? You never explained that to me.”

“They dull my emotions. So I don't have to feel. This.” His face remained impassive.

I slid off the bed and sat on the table beside him. I took his hand which remained limp in my own then placed it over my heart. When he looked up at me I spoke.

“Jude, patrons may have my body but you have my heart. I wish there were some way –“ my voice trailed off at the futility of the thought. I was a priestess, hours away from being ordained. He was my Escort bound to serve and protect me. I didn't want to think about it. There had to be something he and I could do distract us. My mind returned to Brother Daniel.

“Katrina, would you come here please, and turn on some music on your way?”

I heard the water stop and her quick light steps as she entered the sitting room. When she came into my line of view, she was drying her hands on a deep purple towel. Before sitting on the bed she wound the record player setting the needle on the record. The scratchy sound of instrumental music filled the air.

“Miss Rowan, is there something I can get you before your bath?”

I shook my head and motioned for her to sit down, Jude started to stand to give us privacy, but I stopped him.

“This involves both of you.”

Jude sat down and both looked from each other back to me. His slumped shoulders conveyed his lack of confidence. That was an unavoidable result of my new calling.

“It’s unlikely that the board won’t approve my advancement and ordination into the Order. High Priest Jeremiah reassured me that you both will continue to work with me.”

Katrina didn’t suppress her smile, but Jude’s reaction was more reserved. I could tell by his expression that he knew that wasn’t why we were talking, he expected me to say more.

“They want me to stay here for about a week before transferring me and I need your help before we’re moved. Jude, do you remember when we visited Brother Daniel? Remember how he told me that no one from his parish had been ever Selected into Service?” I asked

“Yes, I remember.”

“I want to figure out why.” I stated with determination.

“How are we going to do that with the ceremonies and other duties you’ll be called to perform?” Katrina asked concerned.

“That’s why I need your help. I want to pay Jeremiah’s office another visit.”

Just then a knock echoed through the room. Katrina went to answer it and came back with a message. They were done deliberating.

CHAPTER THIRTY

I shifted in the plush chair in the waiting room just outside Jeremiah's office. The wall looking out on the garden was covered by sheer curtains. I could make out a few faint voices but couldn't see anything. When I looked at the glass, the only face that met mine was my own. My eyes flicked toward the paintings on the wall, but Jude caught my eye and smiled. I tried to smile back to show my gratitude. My leg bounced a little as I thought about Antoine, the ceremony, the plan to break into this very office, and the woman I felt near me all the time now. If I was going to figure out what was going on, I had to stay in Verger. The rest of the Empire acted like spokes on a wheel, this was the hub, and the information I needed was here.

I checked the clock again, time felt like it was standing still. The capital was close by. I'd seen paintings of it, a large castle-like building sculpted into the side of a cliff. The entire capital city was the palace, but the closest priestess to be assigned there was Annabelle, and she was there because of her assignment to Advisor Lincoln. The book I'd read said that Amartya had a consort, and he was like an emperor. It was strange that the Emperor didn't have a designated consort but used an advisor instead. Why was he tucked away in a cliff-side palace far away from his people and the religion that had secured his rule? His paintings showed him as virile and strong, but I'd never seen him in person. I didn't know of anyone who had.

The soft swish of the door opening interrupted my nervous thoughts as Jeremiah, stiff and formal, invited us. He took no pains to hide the irritation from

his face. Inside sat Annabelle, but Antoine was missing. I looked around again to make sure, but he wasn't there.

“Everything is in order for your ordination to commence immediately. You'll have the rest of today off to prepare and seek advice from your mentor and others, but tomorrow after assembly, you'll meet with your first patron.”

“Sir, where is my mentor?”

“He's feeling a bit under the weather. It is our hope that he will be well by tomorrow, if not you may contact High Priestess Annabelle. She'll remain on the premises in case you need her.”

Annabelle smiled, but it was fake, and going to her with questions was the last thing I wanted to do. I took a few deep breaths to steady myself. After a moment the nausea went away. As my gaze was lowered I noticed the labels on the filing cabinets were divided into the alphabet. That seemed the most logical place to start looking for information on those Selected into Service. Jeremiah dismissed me, and I left I mouthed *tonight* to Jude. Now we just had to figure out how to get in.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Relaxing in a hot bath I told Katrina about the folder and wondered aloud how I was going to get it. As she massaged the shampoo into my hair, she voiced a question loud enough for Jude to hear who remained in my bedroom. He had agreed not to take the emotion dulling pills for now and was coping with my status change as best as he could.

“What do you think you’re going to find?” she asked.

“Well, I think it’s strange that no one has been Selected for Service from a poor neighborhood. Ama wouldn’t avoid them, would He? When deprived of something don’t we become more humble, and isn’t that the best kind of disciple?”

“I guess. Do you think that something’s up?”

I shrugged, “Maybe. When I was twelve, Oona was Selected as a handmaiden. She comes from a wealthy family, respected within our community, and she ends up a priestess. Then my eyes changed, a different kind of Selection, and my parents used to belong to the Order. We weren’t well off, but maybe someone was worried that my father was getting out of line. The last week I was there, he was acting a bit strange. Distant.”

“Don’t forget about my family, Rowan.” Jude’s voice floated in.

“But you weren’t Selected.”

“I was recruited, though, which is the same thing.”

“You volunteered.” I reminded him.

“But I didn’t have to be accepted. My family is very wealthy, and my older brother was married to the daughter of a scientist here in Verger. Instead of staying in Grayson, they were relocated.”

“Where?” Katrina asked.

“We were never told.”

“Katrina, what about you?”

“We were more middle class, but my own Selection happened right after they discovered a rare cluster of precious stones in one of the family mines.”

“So they’re wealthy?”

“Yeah, I guess they are now.” Katrina reflected.

“It makes me wonder about Thomas.” I thought out loud.

“His family is the main trade runners between regions. He was always bragging about it, but no one cared, then his eyes changed.”

Jude’s voice filtered in again, “Wealthy.”

Katrina rinsed the shampoo from my hair and massaged the peppermint oil into my scalp. All wealthy or of high social standing in the community, except for my family, but I don’t have purple eyes.

#

As an ordained priestess, I was not prohibited by the same rules as I had been the day before, and I took advantage of it after dinner. Jude and I went for a walk while Katrina tried to find out about the families of the others Selected into service. I smiled to those I passed in the hallways, and I even studied paintings when I didn’t want to talk to someone. When I saw Thomas hurrying toward his chambers, I squared my shoulders

and prepared myself for a verbal attack, but when he caught sight of me, he changed direction, avoiding me.

The windows were black with night as I arrived at Jeremiah's office. Jude pressed his finger to his lips. I heard them too. There were two people in there, but instead of leaving, I ducked behind the sofa. Jude crouched behind me, his breathing shallow.

"...the names you presented."

"They were compiled as you directed, Sir." The male voice sounded familiar, but I couldn't be sure.

"They have all received the inoculation?" The deep bass seemed to vibrate against the walls of the room.

"Yes, Sir. Do you anticipate openings?" The familiar voice asked surprised.

"There will be several. This one, why is she unavailable?" He sounded annoyed.

"She has been paired with the newly ordained Priestess Rowan. Protocol prohibits her removal from her handmaiden position."

They were talking about Katrina! I glanced back at Jude, his face a mask.

"I want someone close to her." A snort, "If the girl's not available who is?"

What are they talking about? They wanted someone close to me? That didn't make sense.

"Perhaps this one?" I heard the shuffle of paper.

In the silence that followed I fought the tears that sprang to my eyes, the choking sobs. Jude put his hand on my shoulder.

“She will do although he’s past the age of Selection.”

“Sir, we could put her in a position at the place of assignment.” Suggested the familiar voice.

“That will have to do.”

“What of her family? Any news on their whereabouts?”

“Our Agents have not found her father or her sister but her mother’s body was found half eaten in the desert. Jeremiah, if this doesn’t work it’ll not only be your head but your sister’s.”

“Advisor Lincoln, you don’t have to worry about anything.” Jeremiah’s voice sounded shaky and his emotions spiked at the mention of his sister.

My mother was dead? The news rang in my head. Jude took my hand and squeezed. I tried to lean closer to Jude but he held me back.

“You don’t sound worried enough, Jeremiah. Maybe death is too good. If I find out that you’ve done anything to help this girl, I will make sure that your darling little sister, is Selected, trained and appointed, then retired to a facility so far away you will never ever see her again.” His voice was hard and unfeeling.

As footsteps grew closer I began to panic. I was about to bolt when Jude pushed me down and put his hand over my mouth. His body pressed me to the floor, our faces touched, and the scent of him was even more intoxicating than Antoine’s. I watched as Lincoln left the office and the door shut. We waited as we heard Jeremiah moving papers

around in a desperate search before exiting, his shuffling gait moving as fast as his large body allowed, into the hallway where we heard him lock the outer door.

I relaxed for a moment under Jude's bulk as we made sure no one was coming back. I gazed up at him wishing this was happening differently. When the echoes of their footsteps disappeared he got off me and poked his head from our hiding place then we walked, crouched, to Jeremiah's office and closed the door. The danger of the moment dampened the excitement I would have felt to have his body against mine. Jude lit the lantern just enough for us to see then he started looking in the filing cabinets while I searched the desk.

Just as we were about to give up I found a thin folder at the bottom of a pile of papers on one of the bookshelves. I waved Jude over and we read a few papers in the folder. In it were the names of those Selected into Service, their region, their family's income, and their center home. The record went back for at least one hundred years. Everyone that had become a priest or priestess was from a wealthy family who had donated financial support to the Order.

"Jude, they buy their way in. Being called is a payoff." I was dumbfounded. It was fake, just as I suspected, but here was the proof.

"Except for you."

I looked at him, my eyes glittering in the flame light.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

The following morning the assembly room was filled to capacity with all of the local Order members anticipating Advisor Lincoln's speech. The Advisor stared at me, not smiling or frowning, from the top of the dais. Annabelle's eyes jumped between the two of us. Part of me wanted to tell her she didn't have anything to worry about, but I kind of enjoyed her discomfort. Jeremiah was prattling on about Advisor Lincoln's visit and how honored we were, but he was not honored. He was afraid. I saw it in the way he held himself and remembered the fear in his voice from last night. Advisor Lincoln looked very much as he had at the execution. Seeing him brought back those deaths in vivid detail. He hobbled to the podium and began to speak.

"The Emperor sends his deepest gratitude for the work you for our Empire. By taking on the name of Ama you remind citizens of their duty to Him that brought us out of darkness. The Order and the Emperor, hand-in-hand, will continue to guide the people to prosperity and a joyous afterlife." His voice was strong and reached all those in the room with ease.

#

I stood alone in one of the ceremonial rooms dedicated to the spiritual edification of the followers of Ama. This was the first time I'd been allowed in one alone and it was decorated with simple plain touches. The room included all that would be needed for any ceremony including a bed, a teapot, herbs, and incense. My patron was preparing himself and I tried to do the same, but I was so nervous I had a difficult time concentrating. I prayed to Ama, for the first time my silent prayer the night I arrived. Although we weren't taught to I said a secret prayer to the Consort. I knew she would understand how

I felt. The female presence embraced me, and I knew I wasn't alone. The woman was with me here, and Jude stood just outside to ensure my safety. A moment later, I heard the other door open and looked up into the face of a man about sixty years old. He wore white shorts and the hair on his chest was gray. His large stomach hung over the waistband. There were pink stretch marks along the sides of his belly and his chest. His man-breasts were almost as large as mine, and there was so much flesh around his neck that it was difficult to see where his face ended and his torso began. I couldn't do this.

"So, you're the new one." His voice bounced around the empty room. I tried not to think of his words, which seemed odd, but instead focused on my impression of him. He was proud.

"Your face isn't much to look at, but you'll do." He was excited about our encounter in more than a sexual way. Something just beneath the surface kept grabbing my attention, but I couldn't quite place it.

"What have you come to Commune with Ama about?" I ignored his veiled insult, deciding it was better to proceed.

"Oh yes, that. I'd like to find direction in my financial affairs." He shrugged his shoulders, and the movement rippled down the rest of his body.

"What about your financial affairs. Is there something specific you'd like to speak with them about?" I prompted.

He circled me, appraising me like I was something to be bought. He wasn't here to draw closer to Ama, and I wasn't sure how to react or what to do.

"I suppose I want them to increase." He responded without feeling.

What was I supposed to do? I tried to remember everything I'd learned, but nothing came to mind. I didn't know what to do when someone just wanted sex. I looked at him again and tried to imagine communing with him through sex.

"Are your financial troubles personal or business?" I stalled.

He waved my question away, impatient with me.

"I already know which ceremony I need."

"But sir..."

"Look. I've been here before to, uh, commune, and I know which ceremony has been the most helpful. You're new, and obviously you don't know who I am. I am the most powerful man in the Empire except for the Emperor himself."

As he spoke he puffed up his chest. I couldn't tell if he was trying to convince himself or me. His face was not familiar at all but I tried to hide my ignorance. When he looked at me I realized I had been unsuccessful.

"I'm James Barker. Don't they teach you people anything." My face must've still had a blank expression because he added, "Head of the Bureau for Economic Stability?"

"Oh, yes, I'm sorry Mr. Barker, they taught us so many heads of state that I didn't recognize you right away." I lied. I'd never seen this man before in my life. "Are you sure you're here for financial troubles?"

"What else would I be here for?" He asked defensive.

I could tell that it had hurt his pride not to be recognized right away. He looked at me, his deep brown eyes filled with loneliness.

"What were you thinking about when you made the appointment?"

He shrugged, "I didn't make it. I received a message that a new Priestess needed practice before leaving for her assignment. The financial ritual was suggested. I figured this was my reward for keeping the empire economics stable. It was my due."

I made some chamomile tea and lit some lavender to help relax the both of us, then sat on the bed inviting him to join me. I handed him the steaming teacup and sipped mine.

"Please, it will help."

He sipped the tea and began to relax. We sat in a comfortable silence drinking our tea and inhaling the relaxing scent of lavender. As soon as I finished, I sat behind him, my legs surrounding his generous body. I poured some lavender massage oil into my hands then began to massage his neck and shoulders. We didn't speak, but instead I let the gentle and calming atmosphere surround us.

I felt the female presence around me and felt confident that I was doing what She wished. As I massaged his shoulders I felt his tension slip away. I moved to his arms and hands then asked him to lie down so I could focus on his legs. The relaxing fragrance enveloped us putting us both into a deeper state of relaxation. As I finished the massage I smoothed on one more layer of lavender to keep him calm and carry him for a few hours. Although we hadn't spoken much he seemed less worried and more balanced. He looked at me, his eyes no longer desperate and alone but filled with something like gratitude.

"Priestess, thank you." Mr. Barker's voice was filled with gratitude.

"Thank the Consort, She was here with us. She wants you to be happy and know your own worth. You may not believe me but They will guide you in your personal and public affairs. All you need to do is listen."

"Can I come see you again?" He sounded like a child in his desire.

"If I am here, of course, but I am due to leave for my assignment soon."

Our session was over, but he sat on the bed, his feet planted on the floor. I didn't rush him, but he seemed like he wanted to tell me something.

"Is anything wrong?"

"I haven't communed in so long. I thought it was just about sex, I had no idea it could be so relaxing and positive."

"You should always leave feeling better than when you arrived."

He looked into my eyes but hesitated before speaking, "I thought all of you just wanted a reason to have sex, but I was wrong. You actually care. You really do have a connection with Those Above. "

I didn't say anything; I didn't know what to say.

"This has opened my eyes. Thank you, I'll be back."

He started to walk toward the door but stopped and hugged me tightly, his thick fleshy body surrounding and encasing me in a pleasant and loving way. He kissed my forehead then walked out. I sat on the edge of the bed where he had been and thought about the session. Maybe he wasn't the only one struggling here to reconnect with Those Above. Maybe that's why I was here, to bring back those who had fallen away from the truth. It went much better than I thought it would have, plus I avoided having sex. I wondered how long I'd be able to do that.

#

Katrina, Jude, and I walked in the center garden surrounded by the stone walls pocked with windows. Instead of keeping my head down to search for specific plants, flowers, and herbs, as Katrina and I had done in the past, I drank in the fragrances and beauty. The sun spread across the acre of medicinal herbs and fragrant flowers. Occasional benches under mature shade trees provided us relief from the scorching rays. Fountains added to the symphony hidden within the city. I fell in love with the garden all over again. I hoped that my assignment would have a similar place for me to escape into. The gravel walkway crunched under our shoes as we followed the meandering path stopping to inspect a flower or another plant closer. I was grateful the garden was deserted.

“Did today go well, Miss Rowan?” Katrina’s voice was soft as she watched me for an answer. I kept walking.

"Yes. It was fine, but there’s something wrong. I think that the wealthy use us the same way they would a prostitute. My patron said something when he was about to leave. He said he didn’t know it could be positive.”

“It’s not a lasting positive if it’s just used to appease the physical body.”

She added

I turned to look at Jude who remained a few steps behind me.

"If we aren’t helping people communicate with Ama then why are we here? How are we here?"

“Miss, perhaps the services you provide are an outlet for man’s most basic desire. If people like you aren’t available then they might take it out on other citizens.” Katrina suggested.

I hesitated at a large rose bush, its pink blossoms beckoning me closer. As I leaned in, the expected fragrance wasn’t there. I frowned in disappointment at both the flower and the suggestion that my task was keeping wealthy sexual deviants off the streets.

“So Thomas was right. I’m a prostitute. We all are.” I said dejected.

We remained silent for a long time. I could tell by their faces that they were concerned, as was I, but I didn’t know if it was for the same reason. I turned to face Jude, stopping so abruptly that he almost tripped over me.

"What?" His sharp voice revealing his irritation. We were still working on how to make our relationship work.

“What’s going on in this place? Only wealthy people are Selected to Serve. Only wealthy people are allowed to commune. Plus why is Advisor Lincoln after my father? What happened to my mother? And what, by Ama, are the inoculations he was talking about?” I ranted in a rushed whisper.

“Miss Rowan, we all get inoculated when we arrive.” Katrina informed me.

Then I stopped and stared at them.

“What is it?” Katrina asked.

"The night I arrived after my meeting with Jeremiah I was taken to the center physician. I’d forgotten, but there was a needle with stuff in it and after examining me he

said “Well, I guess you won’t need that.” and he finished the exam. It was so strange, but I think I know what’s going on.” I couldn’t be right, but it fit.

“Okay, what?” Jude asked.

“Katrina, you had the shot when you arrived?”

“Yes, I’ve gotten them every year since I arrived.”

“But nothing before that?”

“No.”

“Jude did you have to get a shot?” I asked, curious.

He shook his head and directed us to a bench shaded from the sun by a beautiful weeping willow, its branches providing a curtain of privacy and shade. He waited for us to take a seat then sat in one of the nearby chairs.

“I think that those vaccinations do something to us.” I conjectured.

“If that’s true then what happened to you?”

“That’s what I haven’t figured out, yet. There are things about me that don’t fit.”

“Your eyes aren’t purple. Your family isn’t wealthy. You have a scar.” Katrina listed the differences.

“Maybe that’s why were they so surprised to see you. I don’t think you were supposed to be Selected.”

I looked at them both and sighed. Deep inside I knew the vaccinations were responsible for the Selection of the children of wealthy donors. The thing I didn’t understand was how they choose who to bring into the order. I knew that Lincoln and Jeremiah were behind it, but who else was involved and why did Antoine’s eyes lose the purple hue after we’d communed? And where was he?

“Have you guys seen Antoine? I haven’t seen him since he left my Advancement Ceremony. I’m getting worried.”

They both shrugged.

“So boss, what do we do now?” Jude asked.

“I’m not sure.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

The following morning I prepared for another patron. Katrina had been able to find out that it was a woman, and I waited in the ceremonial room, but she seemed to be taking her time. The door opened and the woman came in, but she stood by the door.

“Priestess, I’m having second thoughts.”

“What about?”

“I’m not married, and my marriage prospects are low.”

I waited for her to continue.

“When I was young, I lost my virginity to, well, to someone. People found out, and I was sent through a Re-Education program, but even after that no man would have me. I don’t see how this is going to help.”

“Come sit with me. Communing is all about connecting with Deity. Those Above are here, and They want to reside within you as well.”

“But I don’t want to have sex.”

“Communing is not about sex. That is one way to connect, but They are not as one-sided as that.”

We sat on the bed facing each other cross-legged just as I had done at sleepovers with Celia. I reached out to touch her, but she jerked away. She put her face in her hands hiding her silent tears.

“I don’t want people to touch me.”

“Did someone tell you to come see me?”

Her tear filled eyes met mine, and she nodded.

“Do you mind me asking who?”

“It was Mr. Barker. He’s a friend of the family and like a father to me. We ran into each other yesterday, and he told me how wonderful you were. That it was a deeply spiritual experience and he wanted me to find peace. He thought that could happen through you.”

I reached out to the female presence and invited Her to inspire me. I felt Her prompt me to select some fragrances, rose and clary sage, then mix them into a lotion base. I steeped some rose hip tea sweetened with honey. Returning to my patron, I handed her the tea and invited her to drink while I massaged the lotion into her shoulders. The presence then slipped away allowing me to perform my duties.

“The Consort is with us. Can you feel Her presence here?”

“I do feel something. It feels nice.”

“She is concerned for you. Use this lotion all over your body and drink this tea in the morning with breakfast. It is too soon for us to perform a tactile ceremony, you must begin to heal first. Each time you use these herbs it will be as if the Consort is embracing and protecting you. When you feel ready contact those at the Centre to see if they’ll allow you to visit with me again, but if not then pray in private to Ama and the Consort, and they will assist in your healing.”

She gripped the loose tea and the lotion close to her chest and thanked me with every step until she closed the door behind her. I straightened up the room, not wanting to bother Katrina as I waited for the final patron of the day. Choosing a corner where I could view the entire room I sat cross-legged on the floor and began to meditate, concentrating on the female presence.

In the middle of my meditation, a man walked in. My next patron. He had sandy blonde hair and sun-kissed skin and his teeth flashed white in a predatory smile. I'd seen a look like that before, and it filled me with fear.

"I wondered when I'd be seeing you again. I got worried when you weren't around, but imagine my surprise when I found out you were here."

Vomit rose in my throat. I stared at him, hoping I was wrong, but I knew I wasn't. He began to toy with the drawstring of his shorts, it already forming a strained tent as he grew more aroused.

"I'm, I'm sorry. There must be a mistake." I choked out.

"No. There's no mistake. When I found out that a new priestess with a glorious scar was here I came right away. Well, and then I called in a few favors."

"I help those who wish to speak with Ama." I said as I rose to my feet.

"But darling, this is *how* I speak to dear absent Ama."

He began to move toward me, but my legs wouldn't move. I watched him advance toward me too scared to do anything.

"My Escort is right outside."

"So."

"He'll know. He'll stop you!"

"Stop me from what? You know you want it. Why else would you be a Priestess? Besides, that toddler of an Escort can't stop me. I've been an Agent since before either of you were in school." He reached out and touched a stray black curl that had escaped one of Katrina's pins, and he exhaled in a shiver of anticipation. "You know, these walls are pretty thick. I'll bet he can't hear us and

that means we are utterly and beautifully alone. How I've been dreaming of this day."

He began to trace my scar the pads of his finger, following it down into the neckline of my dress. He hooked his finger on the fabric and yanked hard, ripping it.

"You'd think that with as expensive as this stuff is it would be more durable."

He laughed then leaned down and licked my scar starting at my jawline and moving up. Without thought, I swung with all my might hitting him in the ear. He staggered away, and I ran toward the door where Jude stood just on the others side. I made it to the center of the room, near the bed, when I felt his hand grab the waist of my dress and jerk me backwards flinging me into the bed. I collided with it, pushing it a few inches, and sank to the floor, the breath shoved out of me. He stood above me looking down, my small hand leaving a welt on his face much worse than what I'd given Thomas months ago. Picking me up he threw me onto the bed, and I scrambled to the other side, but he grabbed my ankle and, finding my voice, I began to scream.

"Scream all you want song bird, these rooms are sound proof. No one except a sicko wants to hear people having sex."

I swung at him again, but he caught my hand and grabbing the other held them both in his firm grip above my head. Realizing that my hands wouldn't be of use to me, I kicked even harder, but he maneuvered himself between my legs and ripped off my panties in one try. Hovering over me as I continued to scream and struggle, tears spilling from my eyes, I felt his hand on his own body as it brushed my thigh his engorged penis searching for me. Somehow my knee connected with his jaw, the clack of his teeth echoing in my ears. I jumped off the bed screaming, but he grabbed me by the neck and back handed me with such force that I fell backward, my vision blurred by the force of

his strike. He knelt down and pulled me toward him but he was suddenly jerked away. The sounds of a scuffle met my ears as I heard swearing and fist upon flesh. I kept my eyes squeezed shut until I recognized the voice.

“Take him to a holding cell and contact the head of Verger Centre security.”

Jude. My precious, wonderful Escort. He wrapped the comforter from the bed around me and picked me up, carrying me out of the room and to my own several corridors away. I hid my face in his chest and he kept all of me covered, even my head and face, so that no one could see me. Still sobbing, I heard Katrina running a bath, the strong scent of citrus wafting in and encircling me. With his arms still around me Katrina unwrapped me from the blanket cocoon then cut away the ruined dress. A thick warm material was draped over me as Jude lifted me again and carried me toward the scented water and lowered me into the tub letting it and the warm water surrounded me. He never let me go even in the tub he held onto my hand which I held in a vice grip. Katrina brought in some tea and made me a drink. Through my tears, I saw their fuzzy outlines. He kept murmuring that he was sorry. Over and over again he was sorry.

I couldn't stop crying, and I couldn't get the stench of the Agent out of my nose no matter how much fragrance Katrina put in the water. She rubbed a citrus sugar scrub all over my body taking special care where I'd been bruised. The abrasiveness of it felt good, like it was taking off the layer of skin that he had touched. Then she went about scrubbing my hair finishing, as she always did, with a minty scalp massage. Jude lifted me out of the tub, his clothes soaked, and

held me while Katrina dried me off then slid a cotton nightgown over my head and wrapped my hair in a dry towel before telling Jude to take me to my bed.

“Don’t go.”

He squeezed my hand.

“We won’t.”

As I dozed off, I realized that Katrina had put something in the tea, and I didn’t care. I welcomed the blackness that medicated sleep offered. I opened myself up to it and drifted off feeling Katrina remove the towel and run her lithe little fingers through my hair as my hand continued to clutch Jude’s.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

I entered the conference room stiffly and looked around, there were three other members of the Order there, and they nodded in my direction, then went back to their excited chatter. Antoine was still missing, and my worry was turning to alarm. Annabelle sat at the head of the table looking over some files.

“Mistress Annabelle?”

“Oh. Rowan. I didn’t realize you were scheduled to attend this meeting.”

“I’m not. I still can’t find Priest Antoine, and I have something I need to discuss.”

My voice was soft, but I just wasn’t feeling the same excitement those at the table felt. I didn’t want Annabelle, I wanted Antoine.

“Antoine is still unwell. You may share your concerns with me.”

I hesitated and looked at the others, but Annabelle just stared at me. She was irritated by my intrusion and let it show on her face.

“Rowan, I haven’t got all day.” Her voice was loud in my ears.

“I was hoping to talk to someone in private.”

Annabelle pursed her lips and motioned for me to sit down.

“We can talk afterwards. You look ill, have you eaten? Here, eat something while I talk to the others.” She pushed a plate of sandwiches toward me before going back to her papers. I stared at the plate feeling self-conscious and awkward.

The meeting was very similar to the one I’d witnessed before. During much of it I tuned out and tried to think of happier things. I thought of my father

and baby sister that I hadn't met. I thought about holding Jude's hand and how it felt when Katrina did my hair. Before long Annabelle was closing the meeting and turning to me.

"Good. I think we're done. Rowan, walk with me."

She didn't wait for anyone to respond but instead walked out, her shoes making a clicking noise on the floor as I scurried after her.

"What is it you wanted to talk about?"

"Well, I just had a difficult patron yesterday."

"Why didn't you bring it up in our meeting?"

As old as she was, she walked much faster than I expected her to and I almost had to jog to keep up.

"I didn't feel it was my place."

"What happened?" There was no emotion in her voice.

"He forced himself on me."

She stopped and looked at me, disgust shadowing her features for a moment. She pursed her lips and touched them with a finger. I thought, for a moment, that she might actually help me with this.

"Help me understand. You had a patron force himself on you?"

"Yes."

"Are you a priestess?"

"Yes" I answered with reluctance.

"And this is a problem?"

"Mistress Annabelle, I didn't want to –"

“You are a priestess. What you want with who you want is of little matter. You are a body and that’s it. Next time, just close your eyes until they are finished.”

She turned and walked away leaving me in a cloud of disbelief and despair.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

Annabelle made arrangements for me to do the community outreach that afternoon, and I found myself standing inside the prison compound staring at the inmates I was to assist through a wire fence. They were dirty and ragged, their clothes ripped and tattered. It was hard to breathe; their body odor was so strong, so I took to breathing through my mouth. The warden came up to me and held out his hand to shake mine, but I remained still. He was balding with squinty blue eyes and a smile plastered to his face. He looked at me, a smug expression covering his features. I didn't like him. His hand hovered in the air between us then fell to his side.

"Warden, you are not permitted to touch her." Jude warned as he moved to my side, blocking him. He was much more protective since the incident.

"I apologize Priestess, I had forgotten that touching is only allowed within the temple."

I wanted to reach up and hug Jude. He stood closer to me than he used to and intervened earlier than was acceptable in his division.

"You have Communed?" I asked trying to study his veil-muddled features.

"Once, but it changed me." He continued to smile as he led the way into the compound. He smiled larger for a moment before it settled back to the political smile he had plastered on his face since my arrival. The building was old, made from material I didn't recognize. It was ugly and grey with narrow slits for windows, the doors were a heavy metal which absorbed the heat from the sun. Inside we passed through a sparse reception area where a lone woman sat waiting, clutching her bag to her chest. Her hair was non-descript brown and tangled. She looked old, but she wasn't. Her eyes flicked

toward me several times trying to get a good look but not lingering, some would say out of respect, but I suspected it was fear. Ignoring the warden I walked over to her and sat in an uncomfortable chair across from her. I wanted to remove my veil, but I knew that my unique features must be kept secret. For now. The warden watched our conversation.

“Ma’am. Why are you here?” My voice was soft and coaxing. She looked at me where she thought my eyes should be and then looked up at the imposing figure of Jude behind me.

“My son. He’s here, but they won’t let me see him.” She choked back a sob.

“Why is he here?” I could feel the warden’s eyes on me. He shifted his weight and when she didn’t answer right away, he did for her.

“Her son is a thief.”

I didn’t turn but replied sharply, “I didn’t ask you.”

Her eyes darted from me to the warden and back again. I wished to rip this stupid veil off, and take her by the hand or wrap her in a hug. What was she so scared of?

“Don’t be afraid. The warden has accused your son of theft. Did he take something?” My voice remained soft. She nodded a little and dropped her eyes.

“What did he take?”

“He, he took some jewelry from a woman. He was going to trade it for food.”

I sat back. I hadn’t realized I’d been leaning forward. “You don’t have food?”

She shook her head not meeting my eyes.

“How long has he been here?”

“Over a year, Priestess.”

“When did you last see him?”

“The morning he left our house he told me he had a job. I come every day, but they won’t let me see him.”

I turned toward the warden. I stood with slow deliberateness wishing I was taller so that my height could be used for intimidation. Instead I tried to call on the power of my office as Representative. I walked with purpose toward him. My voice low but forceful.

“He stole jewelry to feed his family, but why keep his mother from him? Why?”

“It is the law Priestess.” He said emotionless.

“Where is he?” I demanded.

“He is confined.” He sidestepped.

“Then he is why I am here. Take me to him.” I countered.

The warden stuttered, “He’s not, not on the approved list.”

“Well he is now. And, I’d like to see this list.” I held out my hand and waited.

“She didn’t say that was allowed.” He muttered.

“Who didn’t say?” But I already knew.

I stood right in front of him, standing as tall as I could glad that Jude was behind me. His presence was much more imposing than mine.

“The High Priestess.”

I balled my hands into fists. That woman. I was starting to dislike her.

“I want to see him. Now. I am here on behalf of Ama and the Consort, not Priestess Annabelle.” He blinked several times and nodded. I heard the woman stand behind me but not follow us as we went through the locked door. The warden led me

through several unembellished hallways until we reached an empty room with a heavy metal table and two metal chairs.

“Please wait here.”

I sat in one of the chairs, my shadow Jude right behind me as we waited. A few moments later, the door squeaked open and a guard with a much smaller inmate entered the room. I gasped then rose and walked to the warden.

“This is a boy!” I exclaimed

“He is a thief.” He said

I turned back toward the little boy, his shaggy hair hung limp in his face. Dark half-moons shadowed his red-rimmed eyes. He stood and watched me through the veil of his hair, his eyes hard and distrusting. I knelt in front of him, close so that he could see me better through my veil. I smiled, hoping he could see it.

“What’s your name?”

“Robert.”

“Hi Robert, my name is Rowan, and that’s my friend Jude.” I motioned to Jude who stood nearby surveying the room. Robert nodded then leaned a bit closer studying me.

“Your eyes are weird.”

“You’re right. They are. Do you know why?”

He shook his head.

“Because I work for Ama.” I responded

“Why do you have that thing on your face?”

“Because my job is important and this helps to keep me safe. Can I ask you a question?”

He nodded, and sat cross-legged on the floor in front of me. I joined him, leaning toward him, and resting my hands in my lap.

“Did you take that jewelry to help your family?”

He nodded, touching the fabric of my traveling gown. He looked at me every minute or so, but he focused on the embroidery at my hem, running his fingers along the threads then touching the satin material before returning to the rougher threads.

“Robert, how old are you?” I wondered aloud.

“I’m nine.”

I turned toward the warden and glared, but he just looked at me like he was bored. I knew I was going to pay for this, Robert wasn’t on the list of inmates I was to see. I began to wonder who would be. What kind of person would they want me to be exposed to if it weren’t for someone like him? At this point there was nothing I could do for him so I stood. I reached toward him but stopped. I wasn’t allowed to touch or be touched by anyone outside of the temple. Even when Jude touched me outside our suite it was the cloth he touched. I lowered my hand and looked down at him. I didn’t know what to say. I wished I could promise him something. Anything.

“Warden, how long is his sentence?”

“Five years.”

The sun shone through the high window reflecting off of his bald head. Stopping just inches from his face I stared at him. His eyes widened, and I knew he could see my eyes, my scar.

“But they’re not, you’re...”

“The boy’s mother is waiting to see him. I’ll meet with the approved list, and while I’m meeting with them she will be here with Robert.”

“He doesn’t have clearance for visitation.”

“I am his clearance. While I meet with the others, he will visit with his mother.” I repeated.

I didn’t move. I just stared at him daring him to disagree. He started to fidget and became uncomfortable under my golden stare. After a few moments he nodded agreement and went to one of the guards. As we left the room I saw her walking with eager steps toward us, wiping tears from her eyes. I heard her open the door and gasp his name.

The warden took me to another holding area, a larger room where seven inmates sat, all in shackles; five were men and they leered at the two hard looking women. The air was thick with tension as I entered and when they saw me it intensified. Jude came up very close behind me just barely touching the cloth of my traveling robe. There was an empty chair at the head of the semi-circle they sat in. I took a deep breath and went in.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

After lunch I had one patron. I was grateful to Katrina who had managed to find out some information about him and put it together for me. I sat in the office by the communing room, Jude stood just outside the door, and I opened the file: an attractive young man in his late twenties. I glanced through Katrina's summary; he was a junior accountant for a wealthy merchant. He was the second youngest son of one of our top donors, and this was his first visit. He was unmarried with a clean record. He sounded boring, but after yesterday that sounded pretty good. I was scheduled to meet with him in twenty minutes, just enough time to get ready.

"Katrina, I'm ready."

She walked with me to the preparation room, my body still sore and bruised. Katrina took extra care knowing that I was struggling to fulfill my duties to Ama. I felt Her presence, but I ignored it. She had done nothing yesterday, and what could She do. Nothing. While I lounged in the lavender scented water, Katrina worked on my hair. After unpinning it my hair tumbled down cascading over the side of the tub and into her lap. She took some massage oil and using the pads of her fingers to massage my scalp with more of the relaxing lavender. A steaming cup of chamomile tea rested near me, and I sipped it. I could do this. I figured my patron and I would both be nervous.

"Katrina, let's choose a less revealing gown today."

"Of course, Miss Rowan."

As I stepped out of the tub she sprayed me with a scented moisturizing body mister. I stood naked in front of the mirror, staring at the bruises that were a deep shade of purple. I looked away and fought back the tears that sprang to my eyes. She pulled my

hair up on the sides allowing my thick black curls to fall in small ringlets down my back hiding some of the bruises. My golden eyes no longer caused me a double-take, I had already forgotten the exact color eyes I'd had before the change. I prayed that his boring façade didn't hide a demented pervert, and that the Consort would somehow protect me from physical and emotional harm. As I formed the request in my mind I felt a loving presence surround me.

The sacred chamber remained the same, as Katrina had warned me, and the memories came rushing back. I forced myself to take a step forward. I tried to convince myself that this patron, Connor, would be different. That he would give me new positive memories to replace the negative ones I'd made so recently. I walked to the table holding the incense on shaky legs and lit one at random then spoke to Them as if they were in the room with me.

"I am here as Your Representative, to help this young man, Connor, connect with You. Protect me from those that would harm me physically and emotionally and surround me with those who have my best interest. Blessed by Ama."

As I finished, I heard the patron door open a crack and turned to see Connor peeking through. When he saw me, relief flooded his features.

"I was terrified you'd be butt naked and spread eagle on the bed."

My eyebrows shot up in genuine surprise and a laugh escaped before I could contain it.

"I take it you aren't mad that I'm not?" I asked

"Lords no!" Relief emanated off of him.

"Good. Why don't you come in?" I invited and motioned for him to join me.

He walked in shyly, his right hand in a fist hitting his side.

"What brings you here today?"

He shrugged. His demeanor seemed more like a teenager than a man almost thirty.

"I hear you are an accountant? Do you like it?"

"Yes. Numbers are much easier to deal with than people. People always want you to talk to them, care about their day, and think that their problems are so much worse than your own." He smiled as he spoke.

"Are you dealing with a difficulty right now, Connor?"

Connor wandered around the room touching the bare walls avoiding the bed.

"Isn't everyone."

"Is it a difficulty that you've come to find help with?"

"I guess. My parents suggested I come, they have been pressuring me to since I was eighteen. They seem to think it'll help."

I began to walk toward him, and he stopped cold in his tracks. I stopped too.

Something was wrong.

"Connor. I'm not sure why you are here. "

Silence.

"Were you curious?"

Nothing. His feet remained rooted to the ground.

"You're nervous. It's okay. We won't do anything you are uncomfortable with.

There are many ways to commune with Ama."

"No...I...I want to...commune. I just can't."

"You can't?" Most of the time, I tried to hide my emotions from others, but this time I allowed it to color my features.

"That's why I'm here." He took a deep breath and continued, "There's this girl, woman really, I would like to marry, but I don't want to trap her in an unsatisfying and unproductive relationship. She deserves more."

"Why can't you perform?" I realized that this was more than just speaking to Ama, much more, I just had to figure out what we needed to do.

"It's embarrassing."

"Our time together is confidential. This is just between me, you, and Those Above."

He took a deep breath inhaling and then exhaling it in slow puffs before inhaling once more and held it. As he exhaled, he spoke but his words rushed together, "Ican'tgetitup."

"You can't what?"

"I...uh, I can't get hard."

This was going to be more interesting that I could have ever imagined.

#

In the office I glanced at the clock and realized why I was so exhausted. That session had taken an hour and a half and my next patron would arrive in thirty minutes.

"Can I get you anything? Would you like to go freshen up?" Katrina peeked in.

"No, but thank you."

Katrina handed me another piece of paper before asking Jude if he wanted something. I heard him mumble something and with a smile in her voice she promised to return. I looked at my next patron's information: Mid-thirties, married, addicted to sex and uses Representatives to justify his behavior. It didn't say all that exactly, but it was implied. I took a deep breath, Annabelle's lecture ringing in my ears.

"Jude?"

He poked his head in.

"Stay close."

He nodded in understanding

#

I chose not to light any incense or brew any tea. I knew what my next patron wanted. I could do this. It didn't matter that I knew it was wrong. There would be good patrons and bad ones. Sometimes I had to be a vessel: A glorified prostitute for the upper class. This is easy, I can do this. I kept talking to myself until he came in.

"Hi." He walked confidently toward me, his hand outstretched to shake mine. I took it, trying to understand him.

"Are you here to commune with Ama for a specific reason or..."

"You know why I'm here. Why does anyone come here? For a free piece of ass. Okay, not free."

"So you're just here to-"

"Look, I hate to rush this, but I have a meeting so I need to make this quick."

I hesitated and swallowed hard. It wouldn't be too bad if I just laid there and shut my eyes, right?

"Umm, okay. I'll follow your lead."

"Just the way I like it."

He took off his shorts; his penis already hard then he reached over and tugged my dress off tossing it to the floor like dirty laundry. He smiled then licked his lips as his eyes surveyed my body then led me to a wall where he hoisted me up and slid inside of me. He leaned me against the wall and began. It was strange, it felt like I'd left my body as he grunted and moaned his way to climax. He was done quickly and thanked me, told me I was amazing and was gone before I'd even left the room. He hadn't even put the shorts back on. I slid my dress over my head and headed to the bathroom. Jude studied me, but I remained silent, motioning to Katrina. As I slid beneath the warm water Katrina began to massage my shoulders. My hair was barely out of place, but my spirits were a bit worn. I'd take field work any day over that.

"Don't worry, Miss Rowan, people like that will get what's coming to them for abusing the sanctity of a Representative. Don't you worry."

I nodded, but I wasn't sure I believed it. How many people would that involve? Did it matter?

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

We didn't talk about the sex maniac or the Agent again, instead I requested more fieldwork and it was granted. They needed someone in the community and no one else was willing. I met a woman who managed a home for minors who are on their last chance before being shipped to a workers colony. It was her job to try and Re-Educate them and return them as hard working members of society. She functioned under previous Re-Education methods, not the new kind I had overheard. Everyone was very pleasant, but the way they looked at me indicated mistrust and resentment. The day after that, I was taken to a local workers colony. I saw more of the same. The cleanest place I'd had visited had been the prison although based on the clothes Robert had worn, I figured that the rest of the prison wasn't as nice and tidy as the area I'd been in.

#

That afternoon I had one patron. I was so tired of this. How did they do this day in and day out? I walked into the sacred room after freshening up and began preparing once again. Just as I finished the preparations the door opened and a scrawny man poked his head in.

"Priestess, you ready?"

Quirky...that's all I could think. I nodded, and he walked all the way in. His collarbones stuck out, and I could see his ribs. The cotton shorts hung off his bony hips, and his flesh clung to his body. He did not look like the wealthy well-fed men and women I'd seen so far, but confidence radiated from him. I wouldn't have imagined someone that looked like him to have that much confidence. I stared at him, curious.

Sitting on the bed he patted the spot next to him like I was a little girl and he was my father getting ready to tell me a bedtime story. I sat down and began to open my mouth to speak when he put a finger to his lips in a motion telling me to be quiet.

He got up and walked around investigating the room in much the way I had examined the room at my final assessment with Antoine. His movements were quick and spidery. I marveled at how quickly he assessed the room. Nodding more to himself than to me he rejoined me on the bed.

"How can I assist you in communing?" I realized my voice sounded tired and that my shoulders were slumped.

"Priestess, I'm not here to be serviced. That should be reserved for the Emperor not for me."

My mouth dropped open in surprise. I had no idea how to respond, that was how it had been long ago, but we then things had changed.

"You are surprised?" His voice was as confident as his walk had been.

"If you are not here to commune with Ama why are you here?" I asked once I'd regained my composure.

"Priestess, I have a message from your father. He is safe, as is your baby sister. We have reports that were made aware of your mother's death. It was tragic."

I didn't know what to say. What was there to say?

"I've come to commune with Those Above but not in the way you have been taught. Things are not what they appear to be. What they have trained you to do is not what the sacred texts have revealed is the true way."

"The true way?" I knew that things didn't feel right, but how could he know what was true and what wasn't. How could he know the minds of Those Above?

He stood and began pacing, his bare feet silent on the floor. He glanced at me a few times before continuing.

"They don't teach you the ancient texts?" It didn't feel like a question, but I shook my head anyway. "After the War, the world was being reborn of the destruction and death caused by humanity, and a man stepped forward."

"Amartya...Ama."

He nodded, impressed, but composed himself quicker than I would have expected.

"It looks like you know more than most. Amartya helped the ancient ones to survive and unite, becoming the Empire. While he was Emperor there was only one Consort. *The Consort*. And the two of them ruled together as one until the day they disappeared. During the dark times just after They left many people came forward trying to put governments and religions in place. Priestess, it was a very dark time. People reverted back to the ways just after the Great War, many did not survive that time, but one man did. He taught that Amartya and the Consort still ruled over us, but that They had been taken to the Heavens to help the battles there. That They would designate and select those who would spread Their word. The sign would be a physical change, the eyes. Several were Chosen to be the traveling messengers, they were blessed with purple irises, but one woman was Selected by The Consort Herself, and this woman was given irises of gold."

I blinked several times. He was saying that I hadn't been Chosen by Ama, or by some manmade device. I had been Chosen by The Consort! Somehow I'd known this already but hadn't believed it.

"They intended for the religion to be matriarchal, not the veiled patriarchy we have today. There is no Consort today, or at least there wasn't until about six months ago. Didn't you ever wonder why you were taken from your home without the normal fanfare? They were hiding you. The heads of the Church of Ama don't want you to know that by all rights you are their leader. Instead they want you to believe that you are somehow a freak, something to be tolerated." His voice filled with passion.

He stopped pacing and stood in front of me staring at my eyes, it felt like he was trying to look deep into my soul.

"Priestess, they have perverted the Old Ways. This government no longer functions, but is a pawn in the hands of Lincoln Truby and his whore."

"If Annabelle is a whore then so am I."

"My apologies. Let me explain. Annabelle was not Selected until she was in her thirties, and then she was assigned to Lincoln. The Church of Ama and the Emperor choose those who serve. There are too many people designated to teach yet not enough to help the people. Too many traveling messengers that do not travel, but instead are trained in the art of sex or rotting away within these walls instead of learning the messages of Those Above and blessing the people with them."

"I was right. It's the vaccinations. How do they change the irises and what about the clergy that preach on the Holy Day?"

"We are working with your father to figure out how it's done. As for your clergy, they join the Brotherhood for financial gain. They are paid a lot of money to teach the agenda of the Church of Ama."

"It can't be just for financial gain. I heard sermons filled with as much passion as you have. Filled with conviction and power. I've felt the power of Ama and the Consort through their words."

"Maybe you have, but these men are trained well in their craft, much like you were trained in yours. The difference is that you really were Selected by the Consort while they are using it for their own personal gain."

"What you're saying is that they chose to be priests and that I didn't. That my own choice, my own wishes, would not have been taken into account had I put up any kind of resistance."

He nodded. We remained silent, and I wondered how long we had been there. Although emaciated, I could see intelligence shining from his eyes. I doubted his name was Seth or that he worked in marketing. He bowed then left the room leaving me to contemplate all he'd told me.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

Sitting in a chair in front of the Jeremiah's desk sat a very curly haired man. He looked very familiar to me but I couldn't figure out why. Instead of heading out into the community, as I'd gotten used to doing, I'd been summoned here. This man turned toward me as I walked in, his hawk nose pointed and sharp blue eyes that missed nothing. His eyes reminded me of my father's and mine before they had changed.

"Priestess Rowan." It was a statement. He stood, and I was surprised to find that we were the same height. His face remained emotionless, but his posture and demeanor shouted his own self-importance.

"Mr. Fitzpatrick, are you sure about this, she's not . . ."

"Are you questioning the Emperor's decision?" His voice was cold and calculated as he addressed Jeremiah without taking his eyes off of me.

"No, of course not. It's just that she had been approved for another assignment."

Mr. Fitzpatrick stood to his full height and although slight, he filled the room. His small stature was nothing compared to the intense and dynamic energy he radiated. Jeremiah backed away a little. The other person he'd been this nervous around was Advisor Lincoln. This little man frightened him, and that frightened me. What was it about Mr. Fitzpatrick that made Jeremiah shake like a child? I was afraid of the answer.

"The Emperor is the voice of Ama. You mistake your place, and the histories, if you've forgotten this. Perhaps you should be Re-Educated?" The

threat was flung across the short space between them. Jeremiah flinched and shook his head.

"Of course, sir."

Mr. Fitzpatrick turned back to me. He looked me up and down and focused on my face. It was difficult to tell if he was staring at my scar or my eyes, but either way it made me fidget. I blinked with nervousness then remembered that I was a priestess and should behave like one. I stood up straight and met his gaze. A small smile crept onto his lips.

"You have one more duty before your new assignment begins. At the end of the day, you and your domestics will be taken to your new location. I expect you to be ready."

He turned and brushed past me, out of the office.

#

In my rooms, Katrina was packing in a flurry muttering under her breath but refusing to allow me to help. Jude had excused himself to put together his few belongings. As she finished folding my gowns and placing them in the trunk, we heard a loud knock. Katrina disappeared out of the doorway only to return, white in the face and handed me a sealed envelope.

"You have been called to be a witness."

"A witness to what?"

"Traitor executions are being held in the center of town. You are required to be there. You've been chosen by Advisor Lincoln to be the Primary Witness."

"The Primary Witness? Why?" My head spun. I hated executions. I'd only been to a few because Grayson was so far from the city. Traitors had no interest in small towns of little consequence.

"I don't know, Miss." She handed me a shiny envelope she'd opened. I took it and slid out the shimmery cardstock which had been placed back inside. It was dark red, the color of executions, and in a floral script I read my invitation:

Priestess Rowan, Order of the Consort

Your presence as the Primary Witness is required at

Verger Green

For the executions of traitors to both the Empire and Ama

Today at 12:30.

~Lincoln Truby, Emperor's Advisor

I glanced at the clock, it was eleven thirty. I had just enough time to get ready and make it on time. The transport would leave at noon. Clenching my teeth, I contemplated not going, but that would land me in prison or worse. I sighed and looked to Katrina who was already selecting a gown. The scent she'd chosen for my bath was lily, the traditional flower of death in the Empire. I disrobed and slid beneath the fragranced water, both enjoying the scent but also repelled by it. Growing up, we were protected from the appearances of death except for rare executions. I thought about the executions, and felt my stomach flip with queasiness.

Katrina washed my hair with practiced hands then held the towel up for me. I stood, water dripping down my body and stepped out of the tub. She wrapped the towel around me, another around my hair and a small third one she handed to me to dry my

face. Most handmaidens dried every inch of their priestess, but she knew that no one touched my face. The scarring no longer hurt, but the emotional memory of it was fixated in my mind. I still dabbed at the scar although it had long since healed and the nerves had died during the healing process.

With my towel wrapped around my body, I sat at the vanity and watched her manipulate my mass of black curly hair into order. In some of the curls, she nestled miniatures lilies, their stark white petals contrasting against my blue-black hair. Katrina was subtle in her rebellions. The fragrance and the use of these lilies would let others know how I felt about the executions without me having to say a word. I was making a political statement by wearing a flower in my hair since lilies were only worn during the mourning process after a loved one died.

After donning a suitable gown and veil, Jude escorted me to the front of the building while Katrina continued to pack. Because I was the Primary Witness, I was granted my own carriage. He sat next to me staring at the head of the driver; I was used to his silence, but something didn't feel right. He seemed stiff, formal, and angry. Not at me, although he was a bit surprised by my wardrobe choice, but he was angry, nonetheless. The drive wasn't long, and it took us to the grassy area in the center of Verger that was now clogged with citizens. Usually it was used for picnics, games, and other frivolities, but today there was a somber atmosphere as the citizens stood facing a large fenced off area, a platform built in the center.

The carriage stopped at a gate before being waved through. It came to a complete stop and an Agent opened the passenger side door. Jude slid out and took his position before motioning for me to exit. He closed the door behind me and we waited until the

carriage left before climbing the steps to the witness seating area. As I reached the top, I noticed the various levels to the stage. The lowest section was the execution area, which remained empty, then about three steps higher was the Witness area and two steps higher still were two seats. They remained empty. The witnesses were all there, including Thomas, and the rest from the Verger Office. One seat, closest to the execution area remained empty. Jude led me toward it, and I sat on the hard uncomfortable wooden surface. Several others on the Witness platform spoke with animated voices and even made a few jokes, but I just stared at the large axe glinting in the sunshine. A few minutes later Lincoln and Annabelle made their way to the two empty chairs on a platform of their own. If they were here why was I being forced to be the Primary Witness? They looked regal and imposing. Four hooded individuals were escorted to the execution platform and roughly positioned in a crooked line on the far side of the block. Lincoln stood.

"These individuals have been found guilty against the empire for teaching falsehoods and inciting unrest among the people. Their false teachings include negative speaking against government officials as well as blasphemy against Ama and His Church. Their punishment is public execution by beheading. Bring the first one forward."

The smallest of the group was brought forward and after they took off the hood, I saw that it was a woman. She looked frail and frightened. Her eyes searched the crowd for a familiar face, for someone willing to speak for her, but we knew that anyone who spoke for any of the condemned would find themselves on the platform as well. The executioner led her to the block and had her lean down; as he raised his axe the town center became eerily quiet, and her soft crying could be heard by those closest to the

platform. In one swift powerful swing, her head was severed from her neck. A young man ran up and lifted it for all to see then placed it in a large basket. Others dragged the body away, leaving a trail of blood behind them. The next was a middle-aged man, pudgy with cuts and bruises all over his body. He was killed just as unceremoniously as the woman.

When the third person was revealed my mouth dropped open, and I heard a quiet gasp from Jude who stood behind me, "No!" I felt his hand clutch the back of my chair as he fought to remain beside me. I wasn't sure how to react. I didn't know Seth, at least not well. Was I next? I swallowed a large lump in my throat and forced down bile as his head was separated from his neck. As the axe swung, I could hear Jude's nails dig into the wood by my head. As they brought the last person, Lincoln stood once again and cleared his throat. He motioned for them to wait to reveal him; it was a man's large frame.

"This is an unusual execution, and one we are sad to have to perform. This is the most heinous of the treasons we have experienced in many years. What makes it most despicable is that he is a priest of the Order of the Consort. He made a slight motion and the hood was removed.

"NO!" It came out before I could stop it. Lincoln's words were lost as I struggled to understand why Antoine was standing on the executioner's stage about to have his life extinguished. I thought of his beautiful natural eyes after we had communed. He smiled at me, mouthed something to me and then walked without fear to the block. I couldn't hear anything around me except the whoosh of wind as the axe swung, and I crumpled to my knees on the floor of the Witness platform as a wail of mourning rushed from me as

the fire of life was taken from the one who had believed in me more than anyone else ever had.

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

Without giving me a chance to grieve, Mr. Fitzpatrick met us outside the center and shifted me from one carriage to another as the tears streamed down my face. Jude was numb, following me on automatic. Fitzpatrick, without acknowledging our grief, spoke with urgency, his calm confidence surrounding him in a protective layer.

"You are the property of the Empire. The Emperor is the only person, besides priests and priestesses, to receive direct guidance from Him. You all," his arm made a sweeping motion, "guide the people in spiritual matters while the Emperor guides the people in temporal matters. You, young lady, are the newest member of the Emperor's harem."

He spoke with plainness and without the reverence as if this were a business transaction.

#

As we rode, the silence engulfed me, I remembered the distinct words Antoine had mouthed to me just before his execution. "She is pleased with you." Then he was gone. The fortress-like buildings closed in constricting me. My hands trembled in my lap. The ride from Verger to the cliff-side fortress of the Emperor took several hours, and I dreaded that much time to just think on Antoine's death. We rode in silence as the full force of Antoine's death settled upon me. I buried my head in my hands then felt Jude's hand on my back as I was wracked with sobs.

"Jude, how could they?"

He was silent, but his emotions were not. The anger boiled off of him hot and livid.

He wiped his hand over his whole face and I turned my head toward him, his face angry through my tear filled eyes.

“Rowan, there is one man that signs execution orders, and we’re headed straight for him.”

We weaved through the streets of Verger and slowed down long enough to pick up Annabelle and her own Escort. They slid in the bench seat facing us, a smug smile on her face. I felt the carriage shift with their weight and then again as their luggage was added to ours.

“We’ll be riding home together.”

“That’s not my home.”

I refused to look at her. I was afraid I might jump across the carriage and strangle her. I gathered a handful of my dress and gripped it tight in my hands. I looked out the window as the landscaped rushed by. I was going to meet the man that ordered my mentor, my friend, to be murdered. After several minutes I stole a look at Annabelle who looked matronly yet beautiful in a traditional priestess gown. I wondered at the deep purple perfection of her eyes and remembered Seth's words, “Annabelle was not Selected until she was in her thirties, and she was assigned to Lincoln”. If he wanted her for himself why didn’t they just marry?

The car began to slow as we entered a thick wooded area, the setting sun creating a spotted and dappled look on the road. When the forest fell away we were in a large canyon with a beautiful palace built into the side of the sheer cliff face. There were columns and windows with large balconies, vines grew up the

side and covered some of the carvings that enhanced the stoic beauty of the balance between manmade intrusion and the natural splendor of the world. I craned my neck to try to take it all in and noticed lush gardens on each side of the road filled with flowers and trees of all kinds, the bushes and shrubs sculpted into various shapes. We pulled up to a grand staircase and crept to a stop as two large men appeared and opened our doors. Agents. Annabelle and her Escort exited first, but I held back.

“Jude, I can’t do this.”

“You have to. You don’t have a choice.”

You always have a choice. The words came to my mind. I would not connect myself to someone who murdered people without reason.

"But, Rowan, I don't trust this. Something's wrong, they're up to something."

As I climbed out, I nodded just enough for him to notice. The Agents led us up the wide staircase and the grandeur that greeted me pushed my anger to the back of my mind for a second. As I walked my feet tapped on hand-painted tile. Inside, huge sprays of flowers overflowed golden vases while larger than life paintings in golden frames hung from the walls. I stopped to gaze up at the largest crystal chandelier I'd ever seen, the setting sun glittering through it casting rainbows throughout the room. We walked at a half pace, pride rolling off of Annabelle. She controlled the pace as the lead person and for some reason she wanted me to take in the richness and power of the palace. The sheer size of the palace dwarfed me and made me feel insignificant.

I noticed Agents at regular intervals. I thought it was a little silly considering that there were only four of us and so far I'd counted as many as twenty of them. There was something that felt odd about this place that I couldn't figure out. Part of it was the lack of

servants. It seemed like there was a large guarding force but maids, stewards, and general housekeeping personnel seemed notably lacking. It just felt off.

We entered the throne room, large with high pillars, polished floors and space for hundreds of guests. At the top of a dais sat two thrones - one was occupied. Step-by-step we walked closer to the foot of the raised stage. We knelt in unison and then waited in silence for him to acknowledge us. My dress billowed around me so my bare knee was resting against the hard marble floor, we waited so long my legs began to shake and my back ached. I swayed as fatigue began to set in. I felt Jude's strong hand under my armpit steadying me.

What seemed an eternity later, we heard a noise from above us, like a grunt or the clearing of a throat, and one of the Imperial Guards motioned for us to rise. I stood on shaky legs, pins and needles tingling in my feet and was grateful for Jude's steadying hand. Through lowered eyes I peered up at the form on the throne. The Emperor was older than Advisor Lincoln, who he made look robust and healthy. The hair on the Emperor's withered and liver-spotted head were thin wisps of white, the stubble on his chin patchy and white. His skin hung on his bones as if it were a simple draping, his hands were gnarled with arthritis. He was covered in an imperial robe several sizes too big, a symbol of his power which made a mockery of him instead of inspiring respect. Instead of the awe I was supposed to feel for the most powerful man in the Empire I instead felt pity. I noticed Agents stationed all around the throne room. I was surprised at how many there were. One in particular caught my eye but he remained in shadow so I wasn't sure it was him.

Lincoln entered the throne room from the side and took his place next to the Emperor. He wore perfectly tailored red imperial robes. The Emperor's mouth moved, but his words were much too quiet for us to hear. Lincoln motioned for us to come closer. As all four of us began to step forward, Lincoln stopped us.

"Only the women." His tone was terse and abrupt. Annabelle's Escort looked to her, but at her nod, he returned to his original position. Jude gave me a similar look, but I motioned him to stay where he was. His look screamed caution, and, with effort, I smiled to calm him. He walked backwards returning to his original spot, and I could feel his eyes burning into the back of my head, and I was comforted. As Anna and I reached the dais, she curtsied and presented me as I knelt at his feet. He smelled like decay.

He muttered something, and Lincoln motioned for me to stand. He raised a bony hand, and with a deformed finger, he motioned for me to come closer. As I did he leaned forward with curiosity. I knelt again on both knees and leaned forward, my hands in my lap, not touching him. He touched my scar, turning my head this way and that with his weak hand, and then he pulled me toward him. As he gazed into my eyes, I couldn't read his reaction, but when a light behind him bounced off of us just right the flecks reflected from my eyes caused him to gasp.

The Emperor released me then motioned for Lincoln to come closer, murmured something, then he leaned heavily back onto his throne. He looked exhausted. If there were a god of death, I imagined it looming over him waiting to take his soul. This man reeked of death and decay, he was dying from the inside out, and I had no idea what was keeping him alive. Lincoln motioned for me to stand.

"Priestess, sadness surrounds you. Why?"

"I am in mourning." My voice caught in my throat. I was still in the clothes I'd worn to the execution and the turn in appropriateness was not lost on me.

"The Emperor is grieved at the loss of your loved one."

"Advisor Lincoln, it was a traitor and former mentor at her training facility, not a loved one." Annabelle's voice held the slightest hint of venom.

"He was my mentor and friend. You signed an execution order for an innocent man." I accused the decrepit figure on the throne.

The Emperor gazed at me with clouded eyes.

"Impossible." His voice was breathy, deep and weak. "But to ease your troubled mind I have someone here that would like to see you." With obvious effort he motioned to someone and I heard an excited squeal from behind me. I turned and saw Celia running toward me. Forgetting all protocol we hugged, and I clung to her.

"Be careful, something's wrong here." I whispered in her ear.

I felt her tense up but couldn't explain more because of those who watched us. Annabelle began to speak breaking up the small moment I had with Celia.

"Priestess Rowan, the Emperor does not make mistakes. Priest Antoine taught blasphemy regarding the Empire's leadership as well as against Ama. He used his position to recruit the impressionable to follow his cause. He was working to overthrow the Empire." She said with importance.

"Those are lies!" My quiet voice was filled with passion. "He never taught anything but the approved curriculum. He never asked me to join any cause, to undermine our government or to blaspheme against Ama."

After several minutes the Emperor shifted in his throne, straightening and with more energy than I thought possible, he motioned for me to come closer again. As I did he reached out and took my hand and pulled me toward him.

"Child, if I signed those papers then that man was guilty of treason. As of now, you are part of the palace staff, and I expect you to behave as such. Your gifts as a priestess, although admirable, are not why you are here. Your gifts as a woman and the uniqueness of your face and eyes make you a perfect addition. My physician will remove your device, and you will provide me with an heir. That is your new role. You are mine." Although very close, I could barely hear him.

I stared at this rotting corpse of a man with disbelief, and before I could stop myself I asked the one thing that could be construed as treason, "And if I refuse?"

The room went silent. Celia shifted, nervous, beside me.

"We thought you might have that reaction. If you refuse you forfeit your life, and the lives of all you care for. Your Escort, your handmaiden, your father, your sister, and your best friend, Celia." Lincoln stepped toward me, his chest puffed up importantly.

The Agent who had tried to rape me grabbed Celia by her upper arms and grinned at me. His face was still bruised and cut from the beating he'd received from Jude, but there he was. My mouth dropped open.

"The Emperor wants you to be happy in his service. He has brought almost all those you care about here to keep you company. Celia will join you as one of the

Emperor's women. He will send for both of you tonight so I suggest you freshen up.”
Lincoln said.

Several Agents surrounded me and Jude and pushed us forward. As we walked by Celia, I reached out to her, but we were pushed ahead. Jude seethed as we were taken down several long stone corridors. As our feet echoed off the walls, the staff that I hadn't noticed before peeked at us from darkened doorways or scurried out of the way.

The Agents secured us in a lavish shared bedroom with a few middle-aged women; the small bits of cloth they wore barely covering them. Bored, they looked at us as we were thrown in. Jude pounded on the door as Katrina rushed to my side hugging me, her eyes red rimmed.

“Miss Rowan, what's going on? What are we doing here?”

I put my arm around her shoulders and walked her to a circular couch and stroked her hair. Celia joined us, fear and anxiety surrounding each of us in a haze. Dry-eyed I sat thinking about what had just happened as one of the haggard old women came over to us, her hand on a boney hip.

“So he thinks that getting 'em young is gonna help?”

Her accent was so thick at first I had a hard time understanding her. Katrina had stopped crying, and we looked up into the woman's painted face. The thought of having sex with that dying man turned my stomach. I was not going to let him get close enough to me to provide him with an heir, and I wasn't going to let him touch my friends either.

“What happens if he dies without an heir?” I asked.

“If he doesn't spawn some offspring, then the Empire goes to his Advisor. That power hungry snit and his harlot will get everything. You included.”

“What do you mean ‘you included’?”

“You belong to the Emperor. You’re his property.”

“But you can’t own a person.”

Another of the women had approached us, her body round with great sagging breasts and a large belly.

“You can when you own the Empire. How do you think *we* ended up here? Not by choice, that’s for certain.”

“She’s right ya know. You girls are in a world o’ hurt if you don’t produce. I can’t believe nothin’s happened to us yet.”

I stood, dropping Celia’s hand and took a few paces forward before turning to look at the four of them.

“I refuse. I won’t let him touch me.”

“Child, you don’ have a choice.”

“You always have a choice.”

CHAPTER FORTY

A few hours later ten Agents came to our quarters and escorted us out. Two of them grabbed Jude and forced him to come with us.

“How did you get out?” Jude growled at the rapist Agent.

The Agent smiled, shrugged, and patted Jude on the back. “I just called in a favor. Don’t they say it’s all in who you know?” He barked a laugh and sped up so he could walk near me.

“I’ll kill you if you lay a hand on her, you scum.” Jude struggled against the men holding him.

“Show him the respect his position requires Escort trash.” I looked back and saw one of the Agents holding a wicked looking dagger to Jude’s throat.

Jude clenched his teeth, and the rapist Agent pushed me forward chuckling to himself. In a lavishly decorated corridor, several of the Agents turned toward us. I hadn’t noticed the older Agent, but when he spoke the others straightened, except for three: my nemesis, the dagger wielding Agent, and a very young one.

“You boys have a choice, you can serve a corrupt government and die tonight, or you can join us as we weed out corruption. You decide.”

“Rebels.” My nemesis spit toward the closest one.

“Sorry to hear that.” The man moved his hand and five rebels began fighting the Imperial Agents.

“Go. Now!” The older rebel barked at us.

We followed him, running as fast as we could, the sounds of fighting receding into the background. Turning a corner the rebel slowed down and made a sharp right into

a closed doorway. He pressed his finger to his lips and mouthed for us to hide in the darkened room. Jude hid with me inside a wardrobe, Celia and Katrina hid under the bed while he stood by the door and listened.

I held my breath as a thunder of running footsteps and loud voices passed by. The rebel opened the door a crack and, without looking at us, motioned for us to follow. We ran down the hallway as quiet as possible then ducked into the servants passageways. A boy of about thirteen met us and led us through the impossible maze of hallways until we reached an outside door where a mortician's carriage awaited just outside the gates. We ran across the courtyard staying in the shadows as much as possible. As I neared the carriage, I noticed the large red and black symbol painted in rough strokes on each side. The rebel noticed my hesitation.

“People try to stay away from morticians, but just in case, this plague symbol will ensure it. Don't worry. It's safe. The closest outbreak is two regions away.”

Jude climbed in the back where he held out his hand and pulled Katrina and Celia in then reached for me. I took it and lay down next to him. The rebel closed and latched the door and climbed onto driver's seat.

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

In one of the red cliff caves between the palace and Verger, I sat in the cool air and shivered. Jude sat between me and the older rebel on a stone seat carved out of the side of the cave. I listened while the rebel, Enoch, explained what had happened at the palace.

“She knew Antoine, and she’s Liam’s daughter.” Enoch said.

Several rebels covered in red dirt, murmured in approval.

“That’s all fine and good, but how do we know she’s a supporter? Why would you bring them here, you’ve put us all in danger.”

“I wouldn’t tell anyone, none of us would. You don’t understand.” Jude stood and addressed them in a voice that seemed to belong to someone older.

“You know me. I’ve been part of your numbers for years. Rowan isn’t like the others. She wasn’t Selected artificially. Liam didn’t know that. He has tried to help us by providing us information about the research on the vaccinations the government has used. Antoine trusted her and believed she is in touch with the Consort, personally.”

“She seems nice, and it’s unfortunate that she’s been a pawn of the government religion, but I don’t see how she can help.”

Jude motioned toward me before speaking.

“I’m not sure, but just look at her. The ancient texts all describe the Consort as a dark haired girl with golden eyes. I know it sounds crazy, but I think that the Consort really did choose her.”

The room filled with discussion. I let my eyes wander over the faces of the men and women gathered in the cramped space. In a dark part of the cavern I met some familiar eyes. Mr. Silva. What was he doing here? He didn't participate in the conversation, but his alert posture and roaming eyes showed that he was very engaged in it. Some agreed while others weren't as sure. I knew I needed to say something, but I wasn't sure what. I stood, still unsure what to say as the cavern talk hushed. I walked around making sure they all could see my eyes.

"The Consort left us without a true High Priestess several hundred years ago, but a little over eighteen years ago She began taking steps to return to us." I addressed them with confidence I didn't quite feel.

The room was silent. I saw emotions ranging from agreement and excitement to fear. Occasionally, the lamplight hit my irises just right, splashing rainbows around the cavern.

"Think about how many more people will listen if you have a priestess with you. I'm willing to do whatever it takes to make this Empire a place where any of us can communicate with Those Above in ways they feel comfortable with. The government should not have a say in who marries whom, what job people hold, what we learn, or how we worship. Because of this corruption, my family has been shunned. Please. You have to let me try. They've taken everything from me. I have to do what I can to save my father. And my new sister."

I looked around the room as all the eyes were focused on me.

"A few days ago, Seth came to me and told me about the rebels. I don't know who found out about his visit, but if you let me join. I will find out, and they will pay.

During my Ordination the eyes of my mentor changed back to the dark brown of his birth as a result of the power of the Consort that lies within me. She has come back to bring about reform. Someone must pay for the deaths of so many innocent people.” My mind turned to Antoine and my mother. “Let me represent you and travel the Empire recruiting more to our cause. Let me embrace the role of Consort.”

As each head nodded approval, a force slammed into my body, and I fell to the ground. I felt paralyzed and looked up as people surrounded me.

“Rowan! Can you hear me?”

I tried to respond, to blink, something, but nothing happened. Soon they faded out and memories that weren't my own flooded my brain. “Rowan! Answer me!”

I coughed, overwhelmed as the memories of the Consort and mine meshed and melded together. I remembered everything.

“I'm okay.” I propped myself up on my elbows and looked around, my eyes no longer just those of the eighteen year old Rowan, but the ageless Consort, the goddess returned to demand change and remind humanity of the sacredness and power of womanhood.