

A SECRET AGENDA



Attie tried to ignore Rose's soft weeping and Binny's comments about the tantalizing feel of the satin garments they wore. True, the material of their flowing chemises felt almost sinful against the skin, so unlike the sensible cotton cloth used to make almost all of the things worn inside their city. *Odd, the use of white for clothing worn to venture outside of the safety of the walls, Attie thought, where they faced a land of hostiles ready to devour them.*

Eyes glued to Oma, their chief priestess, Attie could not resist the urge to grab Rose's hand and give it a reassuring squeeze. Rose might be older, but by Attie's estimation, she was fragile and unprepared for this mission. At least she and Binny had not needed medical intervention during the training session.

Red roses lined the wall Oma stood before. Dressed in black instead of her usual muted tones, she carefully plucked a red flower and stem from the vines. Walking to the three young women, she lifted it for each to smell. "My daughters, like the petals of this flower, the people of our city cling together, forming a perfect creation of beauty and harmony."

Though well over sixty cycles old, her hair still maintained its rich, raven shade. Both Attie and Bonny favored the priestess, with

high cheekbones and bronze skin tones. They might well be direct descendants of the highest official in their section. Oma made no secret of her repeated donation of life giving DNA to help breed and keep their city thriving. Rose, on the other hand, was blonde and pale.

Stepping back, Oma continued her lesson. "When the petals pull apart, trying to function independently, the life of the rose is weakened, and eventually falls to pieces on the earth. Its time ends."

The other girls with Attie clung to each word, for the longer she spoke, they avoided their challenge. Anxious to finally be outside the city, Attie had to hide her rebellious feelings. Yet another lesson on community, she groaned inwardly. Truly, was there any need? From birth, every woman inside the city was reminded of the duty to community. To achieve perfection, all actions and decisions were made with such knowledge in mind. There is no individual, only teams working together for the betterment of all.

"See how the vines of the rose bush grow from the ground," Oma said while Attie forced herself to pay attention, for this part was a new lesson, and she knew not where it might lead. She needed to be fortified with every bit of available information if she was to complete her self-assigned mission outside the wall. "The stem giving life to the flower comes from our creator, but it is lined with thorns ready to draw blood."

The hostiles. Binny and Rose flinched, for they all knew about the evil outside the city which they would soon have to face. The wall had been created to keep these lesser evolved creatures out. Their hunger for blood was legendary. The world had come to the brink of annihilation because of the hostiles. Only a few humans survived and clustered together to begin anew. Yet the species had separated into factions when some in their numbers continued their production of weapons.

"The rose cannot survive without the stem and thorns, though it lifts above their interference as long as possible." Oma reached up

to carefully pull one petal away from the rest. "Sacrifices must be made to insure the safety of the community."

"Why must we open the wall at all?" Binny asked. Rose nodded her agreement. Attie wondered the same, but prayed the priestess would not see the rightness of keeping the border closed. The exit needed to be open if she was to fulfill her task. Not the one she stood ready to face for the good of the city, but a personal one she had worked on formulating for an entire cycle now. If Oma knew what Attie intended, the leader would have ordered her sheltered behind lock and key like all other residents who were not taking part in the ritual.

"The wall opens so we may obtain treasures not in abundance within our city. Trust me, my daughters, if there was another way to ensure the continued survival of our community, none of us would ever venture outside." Oma's green eyes gazed upon them, as if she wanted to pardon them from the journey ahead. Then her fingers dropped the single petal of the rose she had ripped from it. She lowered her hand and clasped the thorns below as the three with her watched in horror.

Attie ran up and pried open the priestess' hand. Rose offered to run for the healing seeds which fought the flow of blood. Binny was frozen in fear at the stain which pooled on Oma's palm. If not controlled, death would surely follow. Many within the city were affected with a mysterious condition which caused excessive bleeding. "Calm yourselves. This is part of the ritual which comes before the sacrifice," the priestess ordered.

Separating from the three, she used the hem of her gown to draw back a section of the rose bush. Oma laid her red palm upon a small piece of the wall. A section of the wall to their right moaned, slowly pulling apart, offering a way out of the city. Attie, unlike the others with her, was eager to explore what lies ahead.

Oma led them to the opening, taking Rose's hand when the girl lingered behind. "Why must I go?" she cried, but eventually followed.

“Because you were chosen, each of you, for this task,” the priestess said softly.

Binny followed, but she was just as fearful. “There are rumors, Mother. Others claim people have disappeared while taking part in these missions, never to be seen again.”

Attie was at the exit now, but she turned back to see what the priestess would say. It was a waste of time she could have used to study what awaited them outside. Oma did not even acknowledge the rumors. None of the elders within the city ever did. Maybe they feared those inside the wall would refuse to participate in future events, even when called on by their community.

Attie did not need anyone to confirm the rumors, though. She knew women on these missions did indeed go missing. Last cycle, her childhood friend Naysa was selected to take part in the ritual. She had never returned. Somewhere outside this safe cocoon, Attie knew her friend was lost. She meant to escape this responsibility to find Naysa so they could both return to the safety of the city.

The feeling of being watched plagued them as the group of four walked outside. Were the hostiles near, waiting for them to move just far enough from the city so they could block their path? The ground below their feet was plush with greenery, and the land they traveled looked like a patch of uncivilized land, save for a few developed areas. A spring filled with fresh water ran off in the distance. Everything needed to sustain life was within reach, Attie noted. If Naysa had stuck close to the wall of the city, she could still be alive.

Binny’s surprised gasp disrupted her visual search of the area. Looking ahead, Attie was prepared to face any manner of threat, from wild creatures to the legendary hostiles. What she had not expected to see was another wall. Though not as tall as the city’s was, it was imposing and impossible to scale. Rose turned to flee back toward the wall of the city, but stopped dead in her tracks. Three figures now stood between them and city entrance.

“Are those the...” Binny started.

“Hostiles,” Oma finished. “Stay close to me. This set cannot touch any of you.”

After cycles of hearing about these less developed members of their species, Attie could not help but be a bit let down. The three of them looked only slightly older than she and the other girls Oma brought outside. They were not female: a shock. None like these three existed inside the city any longer, having been banished long ago. Books talked about them. Men, they were called.

Their frames were larger than most of the grown women inside the city. Their golden skin glistened in the sunlight. In the city, women were encouraged to keep their hair no longer than their shoulders. Longer hair required more time and care and was frowned upon. These men did not look as if they wasted much time keeping up with their longer hair. It reached just below their shoulders. Though clean, each could use some grooming. Hair sprouted out from under their noses and under their mouths.

Only a loin cloth shielded their lower region. They reminded her of the girls who were allowed to settle just outside of the nursery, still green and unwise in the ways of the world. If these were what she could expect from the hostiles by way of enemy, she could outwit or outrun them in her mission to save her friend. The swords hanging from holders at their sides were alarming. Weapons drew blood and cost life. As such, swords were nowhere to be found in the inner circle of the city.

“Come, it is almost time for the next parting.” The priestess started for the outer wall. Attie saw her squeeze the wrist of her injured palm and wondered why Oma was forcing her body to expel even more blood, especially since the seed for the Tree of Life was now blocked by hostiles. Short of the wall, Oma stopped and motioned for them to stand behind her. Only when they were in place did she reach out to touch a blood stained portion of the structure.

Nothing happened at first. It was silent; Attie allowed her eyes to stray in search of her friend on this side. A groaning sound soon

had her eyes back in front. The wall breached, slowly revealing a small divide. On the outer portion which slowly came into view, a large, gray haired man stood, his own palm planted on the opposite side. Like Oma, he was much older, possibly a leader of the men. He was clothed all in green and his face was lit with a welcoming smile. No facial hair hid his features which were surprisingly pleasant. Behind him, three others stood.

This lot of hostiles was even less impressive than the last, Attie decided. They were smaller than the first lot, and they only carried small daggers at their sides. They lacked facial hair, and it made them look childish somehow. Still Binny and Rose looked horrified. The set of three younger men crossed into the land between the city and the second wall. They kneeled before Oma and pounded their fists against their hearts. Taking their feet, they recited in unison. "We stand ready to earn the right to protect the city." Then they walked toward the entrance at the city wall and changed positions with the more mature group of men.

Those they replaced headed toward the second wall, stopping to gather more weapons, bundles of clothes and personal effects. Rose whispered her worry that they might drag them all through the newly opened exit, but these men did not pause. They greeted the old man, tossing their bags to the side, but holding fast to their weapons.

"Otto, any news from the village?" one of the three asked. Another, who appeared to be the leader of the set, cuffed the speaker, nearly knocking him off his feet. Rose and Binny shrieked at the blatant show of violence. They sought shelter behind their leader's back.

"My apologies," the old man called through to them. "These rituals are well scripted and no one is supposed to stray off topic. Jacob was just reminded of such. Yet I hope I shall not be thrashed as I, myself, take liberty to speak of other matters besides our trade agreement. Our healer begs assistance from the city. She prays you will spare her a few seeds from the Tree of Life. She would have

come herself to present this plea, but the other elders and I thought the risk too high.”

Oma’s face showed weakness and regret for a moment before she returned to her gentle state of calm authority. “When my sister left the protection of the city, she knew returning was impossible. The healing powers inside belong to those who live within. There is a price to pay for the seeds, and she knows what the cost entails. The sun will set soon. We must complete the ritual or forfeit this cycle’s trade.”

The land behind the second wall was much like the city wall. Attie’s eyes darted about as her leader motioned them on. Could her friend be lost here? She noticed the three mature men from the city wall bend on knee as Oma paused before them.

Standing, they recited a pledge. “We have proven our worth to protect the city. Now we seek the honor of earning a mate.”

Mate? That term was odd. If Oma knew it’s meaning, she had never shared it with any of them during the training for this mission. Attie did not have time to dwell on such concerns now. She kept herself alert. This set of hostiles stayed close to the gap in the second wall, their swords drawn and ready. Understanding came at once. They were guarding the wall, preparing to control all who passed back toward the center. Attie’s mind raced. Her mission, already impossible, only got more complicated. Not only did she need to slip away unnoticed, and find her friend, but now she needed to figure a way past two walls and six hostiles.

Attie consoled herself. She was strong, intelligent, and capable. It was a sin to admit such, for pride in self was not encouraged in the city. She was but one part of a whole and no one part was greater or worse than the rest. Silently she allowed herself to give up that notion at the moment, though. To complete her mission, she must be able to stand alone. Saving her friend depended on it.

Stopping dead in her tracks as they marched through the second wall opening and farther from the city, she wondered if

their Creator was trying to warn her of the futility of her plans. "Another wall?" She cast a weary look at her friends.

"More hostiles," Binny warned.

This set stood against a third wall. They were larger than both other sets, older, too. Their bodies were tanned and filled out with impressive muscles. The hair on their chins was longer, though well groomed. No one in her right mind would consider taking on this group. Swallowing, Attie fought an inner battle of the rightness of her mission. Weapons of all kinds lined a six-foot section on this wall. The men waited for Oma to reach them before kneeling and pounding their chest.

Their pledge was even more confusing than the others. "We have proven our worth to protect the city, proven our worth to select a mate. We will await a final cycle to claim our right and shall protect the city with our last drop of blood."

"Prepare them before the final wall is parted," Otto, the chief of the men told Oma.

Final wall? Attie perked up. Maybe her odds were finally improving. Which ring of these walls did Naysa get lost in? Where should she start her search? Wisdom said getting outside the final wall improved her chances of success. She could always work her way backward.

The priestess was already speaking before Attie started paying attention. "...fuel to run our city. Though we have our own supply, we must fortify it with offerings from outside. There will also be an offering of meat. Though we loathe the practice, partaking of the product of slaughtered animals, in small amounts, helps maintain our health. Outside this wall awaits these needed rations. You must retrieve them and bring them back to this ring."

"Will they try to stop us?" Attie found the courage to ask. She gestured to the large hostiles by the wall.

Otto replied, "They are bound to this ring until the next cycle. They protect it from any and all who mean harm to those within

your city.” Something in his wording warned her he had been careful in what information he shared.

“There are more hostiles outside this wall,” Attie stated, readying herself for battle.

The man chuckled with delight. “Oh, my dear Oma. Do you still think of us this way? After all these cycles?” When the priestess did not respond, he turned to talk to the three younger women. “My people are not hostile. We seek to maintain peace and harmony like those within the city, but we stand ready to protect what is ours. All manner of creatures live outside the safety of these rings. I lead those from the lineage of Konrad. We provide soldiers to protect your city, because those inside did not understand their own vulnerability. You have nothing to fear from us.”

He nodded to the three men who no doubt guarded this ring. They went to the wall. For a moment, Attie feared whose blood must be shed to form an opening, but the men grabbed hold and used brute force to pry it apart. They groaned under the weight. The sound grew louder as a sliver of light appeared between the wall’s opening. The reason for the increased noise became evident to Attie, and terrified Binny and Rose into a stupor. Three more hostiles were on the outside, pulling against the opposite portion of the wall, helping to break the final seal.