

III – The Acolyte

She was scrubbing the floors in the great hall diligently. She did all things diligently, to the letter of her instruction if she could help it. Her lot in life was full of choices she absolutely would not have made for herself, but she learned early on that you either make the best of what you've got, or you drown. Her instruction going back as far as she could remember was to either focus on being a good Consort, perhaps finding your spot in the shadow of someone important and under the sheets of their bed, or a life of service and study. Of course, the third option was always there to be sold and roll the dice on what life awaited you then, but that was no option for her at all. The horsehair brush she held in her hand was worn in such a way to fit her grip perfectly. She had been scrubbing floors in this Institution for two years and was only halfway through her studies as an Acolyte. In this, she envied the boys who attended the Hound training...only three months of hard work and they were free from this tomb, gilded though it was. Many a morning was spent daydreaming that she was one of them, training with the sword, learning to best any adversary with skill and patience; she was often jerked out of her musings by the realization there were floors to clean, books to read, lectures to attend, and prayers to memorize.

The life of an Acolyte was not terrible, but neither was it grand. They were the backbone of the Consortium but were treated as if they were lesser. Less than the Hounds, less than the priests who could only come from Provincial families and their relatives. But the fact of the matter was that more Acolytes taught the damn religion to the masses than the priests did. They learned healing arts, they learned history, they were forced to memorize the Holy Scriptures and as some strange testament to the gods, they cleaned. She had gotten herself worked up thinking of this, a habit of hers that did well to explain the worn brush she used. She grunted with effort, pushing harder and harder against the floor in the same spot as if to dig right through the stone slab entirely and escape this place.

Then, a dull thud in the distance. A second, louder thud. She stood from her spot on the floor and walked under the Altar of The Three, where a group of new victims were currently pledging themselves in one way or another to the Consortium for life.

The bangs began to get louder and more frequent, yelling and screaming just outside the doors. She could hear the murmurs of the initiates upstairs and was not immune to speculation herself. *What is going on out there?* She mused, *Are we under attack?*

No...

No Apostate group, regardless of the size, would be so brazen as to attack the Institution. She knew what she'd been told, keep those doors locked during the ceremony, allow for NO interruptions. She knew, but she was also curious. She slowly and silently crept her way to the doors, hoping no one would see her approach them. The banging had stopped now, and it felt safe to investigate. She pulled the lock bar from its hole in the floor and slid the bolt that held the doors together in the center. She pushed the door to her right open and peered into the sunlit courtyard.

Immediate disappointment.

There were two young men no older than 14 crouched near the doorway, one of them was crying and nearly inconsolable. The other was a slim, pale boy with sandy hair who was shaking his friend gently. She heard him yell his friend's name, James, which managed to pull him back to reality. The brown-haired tan boy gave her a slow, searching look with sad blue eyes that made her skin crawl.

"...Stupid boys." She said after watching for some time. There was work to do, but elsewhere or she'd be caught. The Acolyte trainee briskly retreated from the doorway and grabbed her brush and bucket, swiftly exiting through a hallway before anyone noticed she'd been there. It was near mid day, so she didn't need to be in lecture for another thirty minutes. After years of doing precisely what her instructors told her to do, with no deviation, they'd trusted her enough to do her job without an omnipresent supervisor. She was proud of this and planned to leverage that trust to help her rise through the ranks of the Acolytes. There wasn't much of a ladder, but the top of the ladder seemed to have numerous benefits. She'd need to climb from trainee, to Acolyte, to Acolyte Ascending, Acolyte Superior, and finally Acolyte Attending. Any goodwill she could muster would surely be of benefit on her inevitable rise to the top. She took some time for herself to study, but not what the Consortium had prescribed for her. The library of the Institution was not small by any means, but it was...cramped. Two stories of books lining every wall save for the hallway that led into it and a few small windows near the top. She'd spent most of her free time here searching for books with knowledge she was told she couldn't have. She'd found books about the Blood Children, the gods of Rediron. Books about the old Monarchy that had been wiped out when the Consortium took power, and further histories of Fundas that the Consortium would have burned if they knew they existed. It was an amusing kind of irony to her that all of these books were being kept in the heart of the Consortium's machinations, just beneath their noses. She quickly went through her mental list, deciding to find a book on her favorite subject of Rediron. Looking across the library she eyed the rolling ladder perched next to a cluttered desk. The sun's rays highlighted small motes of dust as they passed through, and they danced in excitement as she walked to the ladder. She made her way with the ladder to the proper section of the library and found herself a book.

History is meaningless without context...she'd read that somewhere. It stuck with her and made her realize she needed the whole story, not just what she'd been force-fed by the Consortium. Texts that were absolutely forbidden always pertained to the old Gods. Gods the monarchy worshipped in times past, and gods still worshipped across the Blood Sea. She couldn't preach the Consortium's gods without at least knowing about those that came before. She also couldn't help but wonder about her heritage. Being of an ochre complexion, with telltale auburn hair, she knew she was descended from Rediron quite directly. What she didn't know was why they worshipped gods of blood, sailed on oceans of blood, reveled in the spilling of blood, and wished to be interred in the red depths of the Blood Sea.

She was most taken aback by her findings on Rediron religious practices and overall social policy. The island functioned on a strange mix of Matriarchal and Patriarchal leadership. Overall, it was the female priestesses who dictated policy and led the island nation, but when at sea the men were in charge. More than that, women who sought to join the Church of The Blood Children were forced into years of slavery beneath their male counterparts. But if they didn't join the church, they would forever be considered beneath all men. Their philosophy was that you could not connect with the highest of

powers until you've been robbed of your own power first. To live as a slave meant they knew what life was like for the lowest of the citizens when they finally joined the highest of them.

She was deep into another book on this topic when she felt a stern tapping on her shoulder. She jumped up and fumbled to close the book quickly.

Before her stood Acolyte Attending Raynes, and she had a feeling that she'd just lost all those years of goodwill in an instant.

"Ahh," he began "*Of The Children*. A solid read, and the title is misleading enough at first glance that they didn't manage to cull it." He walked to another shelf and thoughtfully stared at it for a moment before finding what he was looking for. He pulled it from the shelf and brought a thick, dusty tome back to her table and set it in front of her. "This, however, is far more comprehensive. Bekker's *Fantasy? History*. Will teach you things you'd think impossible, and it's named in a way that insulates it from our historical blindness." She stared at him in awe, unable to formulate a sentence in reply. "Oh, come now, you truly didn't think you were the only one of us to peruse this library looking for more scintillating materials? Well, it may just be the two of us. Everyone else is a bit...indoctrinated, I'm afraid."

She shifted her feet nervously, "Are you supposed to be telling me this?" she asked.

He ignored her. "Did you know? The men of Rediron who desire to join the priesthood must take a lifelong vow of silence. Lifelong! Incredible determination." He casually closed the door to the library as he walked about, then continued. "But the women? They are the true leaders after all, and dreadfully smart by all accounts. They know better than to take a man at his word to keep his mouth shut!" he laughed lightly at this. "See, the male priests, and those being entered into their vows must choose to willingly cut off their own tongues. In this way their vow is forever maintained."

"I'd read that..." She began nervously, "that the priestesses then eat the tongue in front of the men? How brutal!"

"That is unfounded nonsense. Your people *are* brutal, but they aren't cannibals. Though symbolically that would be an interesting choice. No, they *burn* the tongues on an alter, so as to cleanse the men of any blasphemy they may have spoken until their vow." Raynes had been fiddling with a specific section of books in the back of the library as he spoke, organizing. "We need a real librarian. It is an absolute shame to have so much knowledge in a room with near zero hope of utilizing it properly."

The girl had been sidling towards the closed door of the library as he spoke, hoping to slip away and go back to her normal duties wordlessly.

"Did I tell you to leave? Don't be a fool, sit down or stand still." Raynes snapped a dusty book closed and pushed it back into the shelf. "Your people, slavers and pirates though they may be...they've got the right idea about violence...You need to understand what it's like to be on the receiving end to understand what you're inflicting...Come with me, Kiara."

She was visibly shaken after he spoke her name. She hadn't told anyone at the Institution what her true name was, and most simply called her Miss Redhouse.

"How do you?—" she started.

"I know many things. As do those in my employ, now come with me." His tone was a bit more imposing now, not forceful exactly, but she knew better than to ignore him. He led her to the back of the library where the books he'd been fiddling with rested. "Tell me what you see here." He ordered, gesturing to the books.

She peered at them intently, mostly inane titles by blathering old historians, grasping for recognition like it was their last breath. "Honestly? Mostly garbage and hot air." Raynes let a quick smile dart across his face.

"Funny, but no. Don't just look at the books, look at everything. What do you see?"

Kiara traced her hands along the wooden shelves, watching the dust pile up beside her finger as it dragged across the surface. She blew the piled dust away and made herself sneeze, but she didn't see what he was clearly trying to show her.

Wait.

She ran her fingers across the left edge of the bookshelf. Scratch marks...and...and an indentation! A small hole almost invisible.

"Is this?" she began.

"A keyhole, yes." He finished for her.

"To what?!"

"Come with me." Raynes pulled a small key shaped like a scythe and inserted it into the hole. With a twist there was a deep *clunk* and the shelf sunk into the wall, then Raynes slid it sideways revealing a dark passageway that seemed endless in its shadow. "Follow me." Raynes looked at her expectantly. "Quickly! A secret is only a secret if it is kept that way." He slid into the hallway, and she followed fast enough, though her mind screamed for caution. Once she was in and out of the way, Raynes slid the false wall back into place and pushed, the bookshelf responding with a dull click. They were now standing in a black darker than Kiara thought possible, she had to struggle to keep calm; the darkness felt heavy and crushing, almost alive. Raynes spoke, but his voice seemed distant, fading, "Search through the darkness for the truth, child. If you survive you will have answers to questions you haven't thought to ask."

Kiara groped out from side to side, the crushing darkness and the narrow walls driving her breaths ragged and she began to fumble backwards, the door would not give and there were no handholds to pull it, she was trapped in a tomb of stone and darkness.

"If I survive?!" she yelled into the black, she received no response but a resounding echo mocking her in the distance. With her options limited to sit at the door and die for certain, or push forward and potentially die, she truly had no option at all. She pushed forward, groping as she went. Kiara walked for some unknown time, the hall led in curves this way and that but to her it seemed to go on forever, and the black made it hard for her to think. It could have been ten minutes, or it could have been ten days, time seemed not to exist in this hell Raynes had trapped her in. Water dripped onto her face, and she licked her lips. The intense bitter flavor made her cough and spit, and she began blowing raspberries out of disgust. She walked steadily, her hands trailing along the walls of the narrow passage

and she began to wonder if this was all just one large circle, perhaps Raynes was now following behind her, smiling in the darkness.

Then, the walls gave way to emptiness. Kiara stumbled in surprise and her small footsteps created greater echoes in the distance. She walked forward into what seemed an endless chamber, no walls to feel just floor and air and darkness. There was that, and the scratching steps of what she could only hope were rats. She kept walking in a straight path, her hands to either side swinging in wide, searching arcs. She couldn't help hoping the path would continue forward and she would find Raynes smiling around some corner with a torch in his hand, ready to lead her onward. She was mistaken. She continued until, with a meaty smack and the clack of her teeth, Kiara struck the opposite wall.

"Fuck you and your games!" she yelled, certain Raynes was somewhere laughing at all of this, just another dumb orphan who didn't accept her place and dared to educate herself beyond the Consortium. "I am no man's plaything!" the word 'plaything' echoed off the distant walls again and again fading into nothing, a fate she feared she would share. She could feel the blood running from her nose down her chin, but she didn't bother wiping it away, she just spat the blood she felt pooling in her mouth.

Then she began to see stars and a sudden wave of dizziness began to wash over her. Among the roaring of panic in her ears she also began to hear the dead echo 'plaything' shouting back at her from all directions. As she stumbled and searched for a wall to catch herself on, she fell clumsily to her knees.

PLAYTHING PLAYthing PLAything Plaything plaything playthingplaythingplay...

The scratching of rats began growing louder and louder, becoming a deafening cacophony when paired with the screaming of her own voice yelling 'plaything!' all around her. Kiara struggled to her feet then dropped again, screaming inaudibly above the army of rats and the screams of a dead echo growing like a gale in her mind.

Silence.

Sleep.

Kiara awoke with puffy red eyes and a blood crusted face. She could no longer tell if her eyes were opened or closed and brought a shaky hand to her face to feel, they were open. It seemed to her that it was almost brighter when her eyes were closed, or at least more familiar, a darkness she had welcomed and embraced her entire life, a darkness that meant comfort instead of this crushing, living darkness she was trapped in. She could still hear the scratching footsteps of rats and they seemed to be receding, as if they realized she was awake and burst away from her body in a cloud of furry black fear. Kiara tried to scream out for Raynes again but all she could manage to croak out was a squeaking rasp too weak to create an echo. She coughed dryly then rolled onto her hands and knees and began crawling slowly in the direction of the wall she was so rudely introduced to earlier. After a painfully slow pace of crawling, the small amount of luck she still had on her side showed itself in the form of an impenetrable wall. *Low luck is better than no luck* she quipped to herself, groping forward. Kiara climbed to her feet, keeping her hands pressed firmly against the damp stone wall. Her thirst awakened at the feeling of moisture like a lion to the scent of blood, and she began to crave water madly, her sore throat and sticky tongue demanded it.

Kiara spent the better part of an hour groping desperately in one direction down the dark wet wall until she felt a wet patch of fur and withdrew her hand with a dry gasp. She waited in a defensive stance for some large beast to come out of the wall like a monster from a nightmare but heard nothing for several heartbeats. Slowly and possessed of an extreme caution, Kiara's hand reached out and padded at the splotch of fur, it was wet and spongy, and her hand came away dripping after contact. A smile crept across her face, *water for the love of The Three, water!* Kiara took great pains as she removed the moss from the wall and hung it over her face. She squeezed the moss like a fruit and exalted in the divine sensation of liquid passing through her lips, running down her dry, aching throat. Pleased but not sated Kiara continued her search for water against the moss-covered wall. The moss seemed to be getting thicker in the direction she was headed, and she wondered just what caused it to grow here. That academic thought came more as an echo of the girl she had been before life threw more important matters in front of her like survival. Piece after piece she tore the moss from the wall and felt the life returning to the ashen waste that was her throat; she spent countless *minutes, hours... years?* In this fashion, giggling to herself gaily when that function had returned to her. *How long have I been down here?* The thought burst into her mind like someone else had planted it, but she considered it, nonetheless. She knew just how absurd the question was, it didn't matter, really, she was trapped until she died or until she was no longer trapped, time was a liquid concept beyond her concern. What was her concern was the growing rumble in her awakening belly, her thirst had nearly been quenched from the countless mops of moss she had been squeezing and collecting, but she knew she needed something solid. *Was that my thought?* The moss did not seem edible, the small bits that had fallen into her mouth taught her that lesson soon enough, they were unbelievably bitter and musty.

She began singing to herself, she had been repeating lyrics in her head for these long hours but until this point she held them in with some long-trained self consciousness, until she put some actual thought into it, and she began to laugh loudly before she sang:

My lady you say, oh this orphan you made,

She has bested your blade with a feather.

Now tell me I pray, if she's working all day,

Where did this girl learn to fight like a fella'

She's a Hound at the heart,

Not some Consortium tart!

And she screams,

And she screams,

AND SHE SCREAMS!

Kiara's voice rang off the imperceptible walls as she finished, her voice cracking at the end followed by a wince of pain, but a wide smile still played on her face. She began to sob softly against the moss-covered wall of her tomb. Her sobs echoed back as laughter from the blackness, and she began to suspect that she was going insane.