

SMALLEST SEED
Ashley Catherine Fontones



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by Ashley Catherine Fontones

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In all the existence of Human Nature, there have never been more compelling questions than "What if?" and "What is?".

This story is an attempt at "What if?".

“A great sign appeared in the sky, a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars...”

Revelation 12:1

Chapter One

“Almighty God;” the voices spoke.

“...Whose footstool is the highest firmament...”

“...Greatest Ruler of Heaven and all the powers therein: hear the prayers of thy servants...”

The choir of incantation rung throughout the cave with the utmost fervor. Dozens of voices in muted whisper, when combined created a low yet intimidating growl. Such was the power of the ones who sought the Knowledge.

“...Thou great fount of knowledge and wisdom...”

Buckets of rain careened through thickets of heavy summer foliage hanging from strong palms. I wiped the cool precipitation from my cheeks and rubbed flecks of rogue sand away from my eyes. Between the legs of the standing assembly I could see dancing hints of fire. Its inviting orange glow dared me to step closer to the mouth of the cave. Despite the risk of discovery, I slid behind the trunk of my palm tree disguise and scampered to a lone boulder that sat consolingly out of view. I was closer, but not remotely enough to feel the warm lick of flame.

“...And he gave the bread to his disciples and said...” I heard the crunch of unleavened sustenance among the crowd as they now sat around the fire. The sound reignited my dulled memory and my stomach responded with a harsh gurgling noise. I clenched my waist and huddled in a fetal like stance. If it were not for my intense fear I would have shushed myself.

“...Take this wine and drink it, for it is my blood...” at that I stilled my body. I had begun to move closer to the mouth of the cave, but the words had startled me. What intense ritual had brought these people to drink someone’s blood? The thought brought a sickness to my stomach, and I held my hand to my mouth. In my confusion, I had begun to teeter in my kneeling position. To steady myself, I had repositioned my foot, breaking a twig in the process. The sharp stick had pinched the arch of my foot, and I yelped. Realizing that I had made noise, I huddled lower and covered my mouth. As I feared, the crowd had stopped within their ritualistic practices.

“...Please James. Please make sure no one is out there.” I was surprised to hear my mama’s voice from among the throng. And she spoke in a familiar tongue, the one we used at home, not the Egyptian dialect I was barely fluent in.

Within seconds, the forgiving figure of the one I called ‘Uncle’ appeared in my view. His shadow melted in the flame he carried, revealing a golden complexion and a large mass of curls atop his head. His face was thin from hunger, and yet his eyes sparkled brighter than that of a fat nobleman. As he approached my hiding place, he spoke on a hunch: “Makal...” he spoke my pet name in a hushed tone. I could tell he was apprehensive, and unsure of my identity. To snuff any fear in his heart, I slowly stood. I barely reached his shoulders in my short stature. He heaved a sigh of relief and stooped lower to match my eyes’ level.

“Ariel, you are too young to be out at this time of night.” He spoke, laying a hand upon my shoulder. I saw his eyes glance from side to side and behind my body.

“I was not followed;”

“Be that as it may, these are dangerous times...” he murmured as he skimmed the groves of palm from where we stood.

“What strange rituals were you and mama performing at this hour...?” I whispered, afraid of any answer. My question seemed to catch my uncle by surprise, and his lips opened as if searching the air for words.

“Makala, I shall walk you home now. Are you sure you weren’t followed?” I nodded ‘yes’ and lowered my eyes. I was angered at the lack of a true answer.

“Will mama walk with us?” I asked in worried pitch. I did not want to leave my mama alone in a cave with a group of strangers.

“No. She is quite busy with her teachings.”

“She is teaching in there? In a small cave, in the middle of the night-” James brought his finger to his mouth as if to put out the fire of my words. I stood there defeated in my quest for answers and turned my head towards the cave yet again.

“Let us leave then. While the rain is light...” I began to walk away from my hiding place behind the rock, and James rushed to my side to escort me.

“Makal...” my mama spoke in her honeyed voice. My eyelids were still glued shut from exhaustion, but the bright sunlight that poured through the window burned through my skin and forced me to blink.

“Uncle James told me about last night child.” She stated. She sounded not angry, but surprised. I supposed she thought it odd for an eight year old to find the courage to wander through the dark forests in the middle of the night.

“I am confused mama, about what I saw...but I don't think you'd answer me anyway. Uncle James ignored me.”

“And I unfortunately can do nothing else to satisfy you. I am afraid you’ll have to wait for an explanation of our ritualistic practice, although it is nothing to be ashamed of. You are too young to comprehend the greatness of our God.”

“Does it have to do with Papa?” I was genuinely curious.

“It has everything to do with what he learned Makala.” She kissed my forehead and brushed strands of curly hair away from my eyes. Her touch had an incredible comfort to it, and I could do nothing to fight the threat of sleep. As I succumbed to my slumber, mama replaced the shabby blankets over my body and stepped away from my bed.

We shared the house in Egypt with a host family that had welcomed us for close to three years now. Mama and I had dwelled in an extra bedroom on the second floor, while most of the others had occupied two rooms near the back of the house. The family that had welcomed us was one of wealthy merchants and devout followers of The Way. The family had two daughters, both only a year older than I, but less mature. They refused to associate with me, for they didn’t approve of my mama’s role in the sect.

She shared her responsibility with the twelve, whom I regarded as extended family. She taught and lectured as they, and spoke with the gentle tone of a woman. She was highly respected amongst the disciples, but did not feed her ego with it.

“Good morning Ariel.” The merchant’s wife greeted.

“Good morning ma’am.” She smiled at my politeness, as if her own were unknowing of the art of kind speech. I smiled back, only to be startled by a crash of pottery nearby. I heard a stirring of voices, and my suspicions were correct.

“Oh dear. They’re throwing the pots again.” It was Nefersat and Hotepsat in the storeroom. They often fought each other for petty reasons, and the fights more than once became violent ones. Shards of pottery and clay dust were commonplace after one of their fights.

Soon I heard the familiar dialect of Aramaic emerging from the next room. The voices belonged to my surrogate uncle Kefas and my twin brother Anastasius. I heard a few words; they spoke of fishing I think. I knew my uncle would be weaving the tale with marvelous analogies and metaphors that related to the life of my father. I knew the stories, but I only knew lectures from my mama. She knew not of the adventures my uncles experienced with my father. Later in my father’s life she had been bedridden with sickness.

Her pregnancy was a troubled one, and my uncles told me that it was the devil himself trying to keep my brother and me from being born.

I was five when my father had passed, and so my memories of him are faint. My brother claims he remembers everything about him: his voice, his fingerprints, even his scars.

I only know of my father’s face from my dreams, he is tall and sturdy, with a sun burnt face and black hair like my own. His is shorter and not as curly, but his face is like mine. My brother and I share his high cheek bones, and his bright gray eyes full of the holy fire of God. But like my

mama I am short, and like her my brother's hair is lighter. His is wavy like my father's, and he will be tall like him. His skin is light like that of a prince, as I always thought he should be. Anastasius, or Anani as we sometimes called him, had a natural grace about him. For as young as he was, he was generous and just. His innocence was inherited, he was not just a young child- he was pure in spirit. Although he possessed not my intelligence or eloquence, he had a knack for socializing. It was something my mama had told me would be his winning attribute in the future. I being eight years old, had not an idea what she meant, but I knew it was important.

I don't remember much about the night we left Egypt. It was cold, and I remember the winds bit at my nose, and swept grains of sand into my eyes. My mama covered my entire face with a long cloth and I felt my Uncle James' arms embrace me and protect me as he lifted me up. I fell asleep thanks to the rhythmic beating of his heart. The sound and vibrations comforted me, and created a lullaby that spoke of the Spirit.

When I awoke the next morning, I was secured on James' lap. He was sleeping, and I covered him with the cloak my mama used to shield my face from the sand.

We had been at sea for week, using a fishing boat Uncle Kefas had secured from some friends. Mama didn't tell me why we had to leave the merchants behind in Egypt, but I knew that it had to do with our 'family' and The Way. The last thing I remember of that day is my mother humming a song that made me remember hundreds of years past. In my mind I sung along with her, until yet again I fell into a sound sleep.

While I napped I dreamt of a sunlit city, one that dwarfed Thebes in both size and beauty. It had high palaces and temples that were made of gold, and the sky was an incomparable shade of blue. While I looked upon this city, I heard my mother's song in the wind, and I felt an incredible happiness, one I have not again encountered. It is after this moment my memories begin to fade.

Chapter Two

I had half-expected our lives in Galilee to be much simpler than when we lived in Thebes, but I couldn't have been more wrong. It was true that it was easier to speak, everyone spoke Aramaic; but I was not allowed to talk with anyone. I spent my days hidden behind the stone walls of the small house occupied by my surrogate 'family'. My mother taught me history, and instructed me in the primary languages. Greek, Egyptian, Latin, all spoken fluently by the teachers of The Way. She told me that it was my destiny to teach the people about The Way my father spoke of, that I was a sister to the poor and downtrodden. Soon a new age would come. Soon, everything around us would be destroyed and built again. It would be my job to help this new world "cope".

But I was restless, and wanted to escape from my cage.

It must have been late at night, for my mother and James had returned from their secret teachings already. I watched them put out their lamps from between the woven fibers in my blanket. They whispered and spoke quickly, retreating to another room. The house was dark and quiet now—this was my chance.

I hurriedly threw my blanket to the side, I was well prepared for what I was about to do. My sandals were secured in place, my tunica more appropriate for daywear rather than sleeping. I pulled several sand filled sacks from the corner of the room and placed them gingerly on my palette. I replaced the blanket on top of the sacks and surveyed my handiwork. It would pass for a small sleeping child no doubt.

With the slightest of footsteps, I crept out of the house. As I began to run for nearby forest, I took a glimpse at the stone structure behind me—small, dark, and eerily quiet. The door resembled an open screaming mouth, and the two windows on either side reminded me of wide, terrified eyes. It was like a face weakened by fear, screaming in horror. Was it shouting at me in warning? I shook it off and continued to scamper. I knew these woods, day or night; and I knew where they would take me.

I approached the shores of the Sea of Galilee with caution; who knew what life was present at this time of night? I could smell the familiar scent of dying embers and burnt wood. I followed it to a small cavern that was hidden behind two small fishing boats. I was small enough to get passed them, and found myself in the dark cave at last. Close to the mouth was the fire pit, it smoldered still. I blew carefully on the few surviving embers until they began to glow more powerfully. Nearby the pit I found several dry leaves that I lit upon the embers, successfully creating a small fire. The honeyed glow of the flame lit the place comfortably, reminding me of home. As I surveyed the cavern, I realized that it stretched indefinitely behind me, into a sort of tunnel. I ignored it and returned my attention to the cavern walls, upon which were numerous words and pictures drawn in some sort of paint. Images of fish, men, clouds, and stars were everywhere. There were also strange writings upon the stone, written in some sort of odd script. The letters were made up of curves and wavy lines, but I couldn't read them. Could this be the place where mama brought followers of the Way? I turned to see two clay pots and a wineskin on the other side of cave. I then saw that this room was outlined in circles drawn into the sand. I slowly closed the ten foot distance and lifted one of the pots. They were heavy, and my arms wavered, dropping it and shattering the pot into several large pieces. The contents were revealed as thin, crisp unleavened bread, freshly baked not too long ago. My stomach growled and so I took a piece. As I ate it I noticed some sort of thick liquid trickling from the pile of bread. I couldn't make it out in the dim light so I brought a lit stick back from the fire pit. The thick liquid was a deep red.

Drink it for it is my blood... words echoed inside my skull, increasing my pulse. My heart beat heavily against my ribs, faster than any drum, and twice as loud in my ears. I felt a cool sticki-

ness tickle my elbow, only to find that the blood had been on the piece of bread I held, and had trickled down my arm. I yelped and threw the bread to the ground, stepping away carefully. I surveyed the damage done to my sleeve, only to find that the blood smelt surprisingly sweet. Was it really blood? I wondered as I sniffed the pink trail it left on my skin. I brought my tongue to my wrist and took a small cat-like taste of the blood trail. It was sweet and pleasant, with just a slight sour aftertaste. It was wine. I looked down to the ruined bread, soaked with wine. It was an open invitation for bugs and animals. The wineskin was ripped by one of the pottery shards, and its contents spilled into the surrounding sand and dirt. The side of my mouth twisted into a sort of grimace. I needed to get out of there before anyone found me and blamed me for the destruction of their ritual foods. I couldn't leave the way I came in; I would track prints no doubt. I took the wineskin from the ground, still dripping with wine, and swept away my foot prints from the front of the cave. I smothered the fire with the skin, only to set it more ablaze. The alcohol had done it. I kicked sand into the pit, and this had actually worked, snuffing out the fire. I replaced the wineskin in its proper place next to the shattered evidence of bread and pottery, and held my fire stick into the air. The tunnel seemed to go on forever, and it was narrow. I could fit comfortably, but no doubt adults had trouble getting through. I took a deep breath and trudged on, taking a bite of bread.

With every step I took, I slid one foot, to confuse the footprints. Along the path I found other pottery jars, some with water in them, and some with molded bread. I decided I would not utilize either, in fears of further damage.

Finally the tunnel seemed to end in a wall of stone. I cursed using whatever profanity I knew at eight years of age, and looked behind me at the miles of secret passageway I had taken. But then, light came from above me. I looked up, and saw that I was in an abandoned dry well. To my left, an inconspicuous ladder made of metal handles jutted from the stone. I smiled. I placed the stick onto the floor and put it out in the dirt. I took every handle carefully, trying not to let my sweaty palms lose their grip. The handles were rusted and ancient—they cut at my soft hands. With every step I took upward I cringed at the tiny pains my palms were enduring for survival's sake. Halfway up my foot slipped, causing me to hit my chin on one of the handles and dangle for a minute or two. I took a deep breath and continued onward, determined not to look down or give up. As I reached the top, I finally stole a glance down, but I could no longer see the bottom. It was black as pitch in the depths of that well. I reached the top and swung myself over the side onto the ground. I breathed heavily, happier than ever to be on flat ground breathing the fresh air. The moon was still in the sky, but the mountains were backlit by the sun. It was almost dawn, and I didn't know where I was. I needed to get home before anyone noticed. I looked around and took in my surroundings. There were several abandoned homes, most likely due to the dry well. I was several miles from the village I was sure. There were some miles of forest that lay between my destination and me. It would have been easier to leave through the mouth of the cave. I looked back down into the dark empty well, contemplating my return. I couldn't go back that way, not after I had taken such precautions to hide the evidence of my time there. I decided to take off blindly into the woods. How far could it be? I was young and full of energy at this point.

I ran as fast through the sparse forest as my eight year old legs could take me. By the time I reached the town, the sun was finally rising, and many people had begun their daily routines. Rabbis were taking water from mikvahs and using it to wash themselves underneath their robes; farmers were leading workers out to the fields; peddlers came into town with merchandise on donkey back. This was the sleepy town of Galilee, nothing but work and ritual. I began running again to the house. I snuck into my room through the window in the back and was about to sneak under the covers when Uncle Kefas and Uncle James came into the room.

“Ah Makala is an early riser today!” James beamed with a grin. I smiled back and began to fold blankets, careful not to reveal the sacks that I hid beneath them. Anani still snored, secured in his dreams. I sneered at him, envious of how comfortable he looked.

“You still look so tired though Ariel, you should probably get back to bed.” Uncle Kefas suggested, concerned. I glanced meaningfully back at the floor and my bed, and nodded. Yes that was for the best. I bid them a hasty good night as I climbed under the covers. I could hear them giggle out the front door. It wouldn’t be long before someone noticed the dirt all over me, and the wine stained sleeve on my tunic. But that’s not what I was really afraid of. I was afraid of their reaction when they noticed the cave—disheveled and ransacked. I buried my head into the small excuse for a pillow beneath me and groaned. I was going to be in a lot of trouble, I could feel it.

Of course they knew I was gone all along. Of course they could smell the wine on my clothes. Of course they wouldn’t let me leave the house unsupervised anymore. Anani or James went with me *everywhere*. I couldn’t stand it. And now the worst was Mama didn’t trust me either. I had snuck out at night before, but I had never damaged their sacred supplies. I hadn’t *known* were sacred. But due to my clumsiness, I was trapped inside the stone walls of the house. I definitely had to earn their trust back now.

One day I was told to help Mama gather grain with the other women. It was a hot summer morning, and the group was shorthanded. I agreed with gusto—gathering was something the older girls and the women did. It was an occupation for the mature, so I was told, perhaps they thought it was my turn to be *mature* too.

Mama led the way to the fields for me, following an older woman she called Sarah. Her daughter Adina, a muscular fifteen year old, had a hairy face and arms. Most of the villagers, save for my family, called her Adam behind her back. She knew this and became a stoic young girl. I felt sorry for her, and tried to remain indifferent to her appearance. Upon meeting her, I smiled warmly and kissed her on the cheek, something she was surprised by. Since then she held me in higher regard.

Sarah and Mama babbled away about the heat as we neared the field. The other women seemed to be trudging from all directions, dreading the day's work. Chava, a determined young woman, had arrived early to gather for her family. The cloak she used to gather was practically overflowing from her harvest. Eliora, a young bride with a harsh attitude, sneered at the young woman as she came with a group.

"That young one, always here too early. Making us look bad, gathering the best of what was left of the threshing." She grumbled to a group as equally annoyed as she was.

"Come Ariel, I'm sure you'd rather work on this side of the field." Sarah chuckled heartily. It was true, I didn't want to be invited to gossip. I'd rather be useful and gather my share of grain.

By noon I had helped Mama gather a whole bushel, while others had just reached halfway. We took a break with Sarah and Adina to eat a packed lunch and drank from wineskins filled with water. Mama and Sarah sat with the twins Maya and Maryam. While Maya's daughter Orit, sat quietly with us. I was surprised with she broke the silence.

"Congratulations on your Betrothal Adina." She barely whispered, not looking up from her flat bread. I could see Adina's cheeks flush in the corner of my eye. I turned to meet her with a grin.

"This is wonderful news Adina." I flashed a smile full of children's teeth. I heard muffled guffaws from the distance, and shuffling in the tall grass around us.

"News indeed." Eliora thundered. She was joined in her laughter by her sister Herut and their cousin Liorit.

"What's his name." They seemed to ask in unison.

"Who would agree to this? It must have something to do with her father's business." Liorit grumbled in a mousy voice.

"Nonsense. Why would they be here gathering if it was truly that profitable?" Herut chuckled.

"She must be trying to spread lies. What a shame."

"A devious old maid..."

I could bare it no longer. It was as if a red sheer veil covered my eyes, and all I could see was their hideous figures, trembling with laughter, the sound of their snickering a high pitched scratch against slate.

I don't remember doing anything, but I do recall their frightened faces as I stood from my place.

All four feet of me, shadowed by the three young women, scared them to silliness. They ran and screamed, falling occasionally and tugging at their hair. I cocked my head to the side, wondering what they had been so afraid of. Had Adina made a strange face? Had Orit sat too still, disturbing them with her silence? I turned behind me to check. My lunch companions held similar expressions of fear. What had I missed?

I hadn't been able to figure out what I had done to scare the girls so, but I did gain the loyalty of Adina and Orit. I had defended Adina's honor, somehow. Even Mama noticed the attention the two older girls gave me, and was forced to allow me a few days a week to be a frivolous young child. The girls took to me like older sisters, feeding me and caring for me like a baby. Although I was eight years old, I was in no way comparable to that of a young child. The girls ignored my obvious maturity. Adina had slowly begun to come out of her isolation.

Her betrothed, Samuel, was a brawny man six years her senior, but he was kind and soft-hearted. He was the first person I had met to have double her strength, and I could tell Adina grew to love him. On the days they were allowed to see each other, Adina would create an elaborate meal, a talent remained hidden from the rest of the village. She had conquered Samuel's heart through his rugged and rough stomach.

Orit spoke more and more each day. Her voice was a heavenly sound, and I soon learned that she was gifted with song. The more she sang, the more beautiful she seemed to me. I truly felt my age when I sat and listened. I felt the true awe and wonderment of an innocent child. It was a refreshing feeling.

It wasn't long, though, before rumors began to buzz among the village. It began shortly after the incident at the fields with Eliora, and grew to include her family and even got to Orit's mother and father. There was something wrong with me, they thought. The daughter of that family of pilgrims...

As months passed, the rumors became public slandering. I couldn't leave the house. Orit stopped coming to visit. Only Adina was brave enough. A year after the incident, she had married Samuel, and moved with him to Jerusalem.

I was once again alone, and kept in isolation, though it was not my fault. Anani was just as frightened of me as the villagers, but kept greeting me with a smile.

"It wasn't your fault Ariel. Whatever you did, you didn't do it on purpose." I still had not known what I had done, but the support of my brother did give me strength. Galilee became a lonely place for me, the door was closed tighter than ever.

I wasn't allowed outside of the house at all. After a few weeks, my skin started to lighten and sallow. I spent every morning waving as my family left to work and teach. Anani and Mama

came and went, checking up on me every few hours. My mother almost seemed reluctant to let me stay alone, but Uncle Kefas assured her it was for the best. I was deemed too conspicuous for some reason. I still did not know why but because of that I was treated differently. Almost with an odd mix of reverence and fear. My family was not afraid of me, instead they were afraid of losing me. They were afraid of me being kidnapped, arrested or killed. Apparently these were fears they were used to, but now it seemed more relevant. Mama refused to tell me why I was so precious, but it had something to do with the Way and the death of my father.

There was a day when I was alone for longer than usual. Mama and the family had to make a day trip to a neighboring town, because a friend of the family had died. I could hear several families from Galilee walking to the funeral, because they sang dirges and cried loudly. It must have been someone important. I slid down from the window and sat against the wall, my head bowed over my knees. As my thoughts raced, I dreamt a silent prayer for the family. If whoever died was an important person, then the family would be suffering more than those going to visit.

My thoughts swirled in a rainbow of colors. As I thought of the struggling family, the wife and children he must have left behind, my mind went to a deep shade of blue. Her face was painted in soft shades reminiscent of a dawn sky, her eyes a piercing silvery gray. Her face was stained with dirty tears, and her hair was visibly matted behind her black veil. To her, her husband was lost. He was gone forever. There was no home for him in Limbo, no rest for the wicked.

But then, a light began to shine. It felt warm behind my closed eyelids. The shades of blue became bright and beautiful. The sun gradually became visible in the desert sky. The true beauty of the landscape became evident as rays of sunlight poured into the scene. A halo of light lit the family from behind as they turned towards the east. The woman's expression changed dramatically as she saw who was standing behind her.

If I could see my own expression I would bet it had changed as well. I could feel my eyelids tighten, and my lips purse. An odd feeling of recognition hit me when I saw the man in my vision. He stood proud and tall, skinny but strong. His hair clung tightly to his head in black curls. His eyes shown bright and gray. I couldn't see the exact features of his face, but something told me that I knew him, and he knew me as well.

He came to the woman and touched her shoulder lightly. At this she was brought to her knees, and her children followed suit. Suddenly my vision turned a warm purple color, and I instantly felt calm. The family looked serene, as if the man's presence alone eased their pain. I felt like I could stop praying in peace, that my help was no longer needed.

When I opened my eyes, I felt as though the death had never happened. It was as if I had woken up from a dream. The man had never died, and the wife and children were not in any pain. I felt foolish for believing that the man was dead. The man I saw in my vision, although not

the once deceased, had something to do with the serenity and peace of mind I felt. I looked out my window, to see that the sun had set. I must have woken up in the middle of the night. I rose from my seat and exited my bedroom. When I entered the front room of the house, I found Mama cradling Anani on the ground, a blanket on top of them. A few of the Twelve stood in front of the door murmuring with several neighbors. I could make out Uncle Kefas' voice from the group.

“Ariel!” It felt strange to hear Uncle James speak my name. He didn't use the pet name that he had given me years ago. His voice was strained, as if he had been worried for hours. Mama looked up to me at the sound of his voice. Her eyes were focused on mine.

“What did you do Makala...” She whispered, half angry, half afraid. Was she afraid of me?

“I just woke up. What's wrong Mama?” Her eyes flicked to meet James' concerned gaze.

“Did you follow us to the funeral?” James asked, not angry, but anxious to hear an answer.

“No. The funeral?” My thoughts began to wander away. What was it that I saw? If I did not indeed dream his death, then what was the vision I saw? “...That man is dead?” The expression on Mama's face softened to a relieved expression.

“She didn't do it James. It wasn't her. She slept the entire time we were gone.” James stared at her, then turned his eyes to me. He didn't buy it. He turned away without saying a word and went outside to join the rest of the men.

“Sit with me Ariel.” I didn't dare disobey her. I had a feeling that she knew something I didn't. “What happened while we were gone?” She whispered, ruffling Anani's hair in the process.

“I was praying in my room...” I swallowed. Stifling a shiver, I tried to continue speaking. “And I must have fell asleep...I started dreaming...”

“Who were you praying for...” The words didn't make sense to me. I thought everyone would be praying for that family today.

“...Th-the wife and children...” I choked. My eyes grew hot as the tears welled in them. My throat became dry. I didn't want to believe I'd be in trouble. Uncle Kefas moved, raising his arm. I didn't brace myself. I wasn't sure what to expect would come next. I was surprised when his hand gently came to rest on my shoulder. I looked up to see him half-smiling.

"It's okay Makala...but now your nickname seems to have meaning." They didn't tell me what happened, and they didn't punish me. They did the opposite. The twelve each took turns hugging me and raising me up in their arms. They laughed and teased like they used to. They started letting me out of the house again.

When we went out in public, people stared. People made way. People gave us no trouble. I wasn't sure if they respected us, or if they feared us. My mother had told me to ignore it, but I couldn't. It was too easy to succumb to their glares. The most painful of treatment was their silence. Even the gossiping women in the fields had sewn their mouths shut out of fear. Mama would smile and nod out of respect, pretending to be ignorant of their behavior. I couldn't bring myself to say anything to the women who stared at me like I was some sort of walking abomination.

I had a day's worth of gleaning finished and held tightly in the fabric of my dress. The sun was covered by a gathering of wispy gray clouds. It wasn't as hot as usual.

"You've gathered quite a bit little one." Mama smiled. I nodded back and kept my eyes forward. There was too much on my shoulders for an eight-year-old. Mama must have noticed how I was feeling. She put a free hand on my shoulder and squeezed.

"They do not know who we are. They do not know what they do. Someday you'll find your place my dear." I couldn't understand the message, but her voice did comfort me. I sighed and looked down on the ground. The sand weaved a tapestry of gold, with pebbles acting as if they were holes in the fabric. Dirt and grass add shapes and figures, creating a piece of artwork. My steps destroyed each picture and yet created a new one at the same time. Mama's hand continued to guide my body as I became more and more mesmerized by the ground.

Suddenly, there was a break in the conformity. Several spots of wine began to appear as I continued to walk. The spots got closer and closer together, forming a string of red pearls.

"Oh..." Mama sighed. I followed her eyes to a young man sleeping against a house. He was breathing heavily and loudly; we could hear him even though we stood far away. We were closer to the town now, and although there were many people, no one seemed to notice him. I heard a growl force its way out of Mama's throat. She moved her hand away from my shoulder and walked closer to the man. That's when I realized that the wine on the ground wasn't wine at all. It was blood.

Mama knelt by the man, talking to him in some language I couldn't understand. Curiosity got the best of me, and soon I was next to her, barely taller than her kneeling form.

“We need help.” Mama sighed. I looked at the man—no boy, and met his eyes. They were gray and his skin was the color of olive oil. “This man is Iberian, he does not speak Aramaic...”

“Let us ask some strong passerby to help us.”

“We cannot...” her eyes narrowed. I studied the failing mound of bone that lay before me. His hand was tucked behind his cloak, which was stained red with blood. “...he is a criminal, fleeing his homeland.” I barely heard her as I removed the cloak from atop his hand. There it was, a fresh gash as deep as a shallow stream, seeping blood and becoming purple at the edges. For some reason, I felt that I knew what to do.

Taking a heaping handful of grain from my dress, I covered the wound. Mama said nothing but watched me work in silence. I could tell she wasn't sure what she should do, and I silently prayed that she would let me continue. I didn't know why I did this, but I knew I had to. When I took my hand away, his skin seemed to interweave with the grain, and the wound disappeared. His blood began to flow backwards, and was soaked up by the pores in his skin. Mama gasped. The boy's breathing began to even. He began to speak to Mama, who was startled by whatever he said.

“He said: 'I am humbled by the kindness of a child, for she has given me a second life. She knows not what I've done, and yet she's healed me with divine hands.'” I looked at his eyes. They mimicked the sky.

“He won't do it again.” I said, sure. The boy stood up, looked at me, and left running without a word.

“How dare you help him!” An old man heckled. “A murderous bandit deserves to be left to fester!” A woman followed him and nodded.

“He's right! You heal with the powers of evil. A sorceress only helps her own! They must be in league with the Devil!” Soon more people began to gather around. Mama put her free hand around my neck in a protective gesture. She opened her mouth, but she couldn't find words to defend me. She was as surprised as the villagers. I decided that I needed to settle this.

“How could you call him murderous, when you would have been murderers yourselves had you let him die!” That was all I needed to say.

“Put your hand on her tongue woman!” an old maid yelled. “How dare she talk to elders like that!”

“That's enough Ariel...” She said so that I could only hear. That was the last time I did anything like that in Galilee.

The spring I turned ten years old was surprisingly warm. The air smelled lightly of salt, and the sun shone warmly upon the Galileans. Uncle Kefas had promised me something incredible.

“...The boat? Oh Uncle! Is it a promise?” I shouted gleefully.

“I figured every child should go for a joy ride in a boat at least once in their life, especially on their birthday!” he laughed heartily. For the first of hopefully many times, I'd be going for a ride in his fishing boat.

“So then it's a promise?”

“Yes, a promise.” I felt lighter than air. It would be a tremendous birthday present, I felt greedy just accepting it. I looked over to Mama who smiled from the doorway. I wanted to share my gift with her.

“What about Mama? Can Mama come too? Oh please Uncle Kefas! It would mean so much to her...”

“Ariel; it is enough for Kefas to take you with him on his fishing trip.”

“Nonsense. You are of course to come along. I guarantee your safety and happiness.” How formal Uncle Kefas had sounded, I thought I saw my Mama's face redden. She smiled and nodded.

“Well alright. But you know that I think boats are dangerous. I'm afraid for Ariel's safety so I will come along.” She feigned her concern. I knew deep down that she was excited about the idea.

The night before my birthday I had covered my head with blankets, but I could not fall asleep. My fantasies drifted on the morning ocean. The happy sunlight tickled my cheeks and the salty air left me hungry. If only I were able to dream, I'd be able to wake up sooner.

But then the tones darkened. From my room I heard voices speaking in hushed and worried tones. One voice belonged to Mama; the other belonged to one of The Twelve. My ears had to wrestle the sound of my brother's snoring to get a good examination of the conversation in the

next room. My nerves began to rattle me. My heart was beating incredibly loud. Something was wrong; the energy around me was hostile.

“Absolutely Incredible!” I recognized the voice of Uncle Kefas. Next there were additional voices present, speaking in varied levels.

“She’s right Kefas. It’s the safest alternative.” I believed this to be my Uncle James’ voice, though I couldn’t make it out entirely. At this time my brother had been grunting instead of snoring. I stared at him as if my thoughts alone could silence the noise. And the noise did stop. My eyes grew wide at my luck and I smiled. Anani smiled too, feeling relief in his nostrils. I replaced the blanket over my head and finally fell asleep.

The next morning I had awoken sleepy, but anxious. I had packed a sack of things I may possibly have needed on the boat. A linen veil, some unleavened bread, and a home-crafted fishing rod I had whittled the afternoon before. I felt proud and prepared. I felt closer to being a woman.

After folding my mats and blankets, I knelt down in front of my window to pray. It was the first time I prayed since the funeral incident. I closed my eyes gently and placed my hands folded in my lap. I opened my mouth to speak prayers of protection and guidance, and yet no sound came. I opened my eyes and pursed my lips. It was difficult to find inspiration for prayer. I was blessed enough already, why ask for anything more? Surely someone else deserved an opportunity to ask for a blessing. But what if they couldn’t pray? What if there was someone somewhere who had no hands for folding? Or they didn’t have knees for kneeling? I shivered inwardly. I was about to get up from my place when I felt abruptly inspired. I should pray for the one who can’t! It seemed incredibly simple to me, like a revelation. At this moment, the words came out like a bucket with a hole in the bottom.

“Dearest Divine One ...” I began, closing my eyes tightly as if that would intensify the prayer. “It is I, Ariel, a sister of the downtrodden. Please Lord...” I paused to take a sharp breath. “Please Lord; give those who cannot pray the ability to pray. Give those who have wandered a calling back to your love. Give those who suffer a relief from their burdens. Give those that fear, the courage to carry on. Give those that...” I was interrupted by a knock on the door.

“Ariel... Uncle Kefas is waiting. Did you pack some of the bread like I asked you to?” Mama spoke through the barrier.

“Y-yes Mama.” I felt feverish from my intense praying. I decided that that was enough, and silently thanked God for all he has given my family and I.

The air smelt deliciously of salt and iodine. The sky was a magnificent pale cerulean color, and there were no sign of clouds. Several other fishing boats dotted the horizon. The sun

shone pleasantly upon the beach. I heard Uncle Kefas and my mother speaking in words I couldn't understand. Mama looked worried as she walked to my side.

“Okay Makala, we're ready for our trip!”

“Trip?” I asked. I had thought this to be a simple ride in a fishing boat. Uncle Kefas was now talking with some other man I had not met before. His hair was like the sand, a pale cream color; and it was short. His skin had reddened in the sun. The two laughed with each other and shook hands. Some sort of deal had been made. Mama looked at the two with a sense of reluctance. It was the kind of look that a mother had when she delivered ‘tough love’ unto her children. Her eyes were like when she scolded me- loving, but stern. Something was happening, but it was obviously for our own good.

“My lady...” the man began in broken Greek.

“*Fatigo nusquam.*” My mother responded. They were speaking Latin now. I could just make it out in my mind. The strange man spoke with a harsh dialect, but he was still understandable.

“And this is she? The Princess?” The man spoke, gesturing to me. I was startled by the sentence. Perhaps my knowledge of Latin was not to be trusted.

“Yes. This be she. The daughter of a man; of The Way.” Uncle Kefas spoke proudly. This stranger grew nervous. He bent down on his knee and lowered his head.

“What great fortune our God has given us... And to think, all hopes were lost...” I looked upon him with a curious eye. Noticing this, Mama intervened. She spoke a few words to him in some odd dialect I could not understand, and the man looked up. He stood up slowly and nodded. After they exchanged a few words in the dialect, Mama grasped my hand.

Uncle Kefas stayed behind. The rest of the Twelve stayed behind. Anani stayed behind.

Mama and I had taken the trip alone, with Mr. Stranger. As the small fishing boat drifted further away from the shore I began to become nervous.

“Mama- Uncle Kefas...” I whispered, growing fearful of Mr. Stranger's presence.

“Hush Makala. Uncle Kefas has to finish his work here in our homeland. Perhaps one day he will join us.” I became confused at the comment, and perhaps this was what she had wanted. I didn't ask any further questions on the subject, for I couldn't think of any. She had summed it up easily; we were on the move again.

Chapter Three

Five Years Later

Happiness and security were my rewards at Gaul. I had arrived there, just ten years old and full of fear. On the night we disembarked I was so full of terror and longing for my family back home, that my mother anointed me with sweet oils on my forehead. The odd ritual calmed me, and appeared to strengthen my senses. The next morning, she took me into the village with Mr. Stranger close at hand. I felt at home. The people spoke a language I was able to understand. And to my own astonishment, I had been able to communicate with them! I felt stronger, and more confident. I felt as though perhaps by moving away from the men in Israel, I had commenced on my own journey- my own life's work.

The children there were rough and resilient, having grown up in forested lands and treacherous conditions. But they were warm and playful, and nonjudgmental. I was welcomed into several playgroups. The children often asked me about my unusually darker skin and springy hair, and about the languages I spoke. I was happy to tell them stories of my homeland, and to instruct them on foreign custom. And while most couldn't comprehend Greek philosophy, they appreciated it nonetheless.

Life was simple. We girls played. Mama and the women gathered. Mr. Stranger and the men hunted. The boys often play fought and snickered at us girls from behind walls of prickly brush. Usually the girls would throw rocks or sputter weak insults in retaliation, but I often took it a step further.

One morning, I had been playing a game with Ethelinda, a village girl I had become close friends with. We heard gossiping and jeering from the trees. Ethelinda threw a rock, missing of course, while shouting that the boys should show themselves. I lowered her hand and projected my voice:

"And who is this, who says such things? You sound like an old man, why would you be playing here with young children? What odd behavior. Perhaps it is a homeless drunkard."

"Who taught this girl to speak so harshly?" It was Arthmael, the son of Mr. Stranger.

He let himself drop to the ground, landing gracefully on the balls of his feet. He had curly light brown hair that shown gold in the sunlight; it wasn't as long as most boys, he kept it slightly below his ears. His skin was a shade or two lighter than my own, an oddity for the region, as it was still considered dark.

He was old enough to hunt with the older men, being of seventeen years. He was considered a man, and yet still he taunted and jeered with the community boys.

I had met Arthmael the night we arrived in Gaul. Mr. Stranger led us to a small wooden house several cubits from the shore, it was covered in soft green moss and securing stones. The moon was full that night, and poured glorious silver light upon our path.

We lowered ourselves and entered the hut. There sat the then twelve-year old Arthmael, busy preparing the home for our arrival.

“Arthmael!” His father called in a humored tone. “Come! Greet our guests!” Arthmael came up to us and stared. He smiled at Mama, he sneered at me. I let my jaw drop, totally astonished at the act.

“This is Arthmael, my only child. He is incredibly strong, and knows much about the village, while I am out with the hunting groups, he will escort you both while you assimilate with our culture.” Mama smiled and nodded. She knelt before the boy and took a blushing cheek in her hand.

“Arthmael, your services are greatly appreciated. This is my daughter;” She acknowledged me. “Her name is Ariel, and will need more help than I in assimilating.” She smiled, and he returned the gesture. When she stood up and lost his glance he again sneered at me.

“How rude.” I whispered. He ignored the remark.

Today Arthmael was still as immature as he had been five years before. But he became a favorite among the other girls. Most of them swooned over him, save for myself. With each step he took their eyes followed, sizing and studying him like an idol. I scoffed at their actions and kept to myself. The girls, who still loved me as a sister, became jealous of me, for they knew that I lived with him as a perpetual house guest.

“Makala shouldn’t you be out with the other women gathering? You’re too old for children’s games.” He laughed, satisfied with himself.

“And what are you doing? Hanging from trees like a child.” I remained serious. Ethelinda remained silent. She couldn’t side with either of us, as she was just as close to him as to me. The only reason she wasn’t in love with him was that she was promised to another young man from the village.

“You’re so brash Ariel. I leave for the hunt tomorrow.” He stressed the ‘morrow’ in his

speech. "It's the last night of my boyhood." He smiled triumphantly. Another boy several years younger appeared from behind a bush.

"It's not fair. The other boys aren't old enough to spy on girls with me!" Arthmael rustled the boy's hair and laughed. He knelt down to meet him at eye level. The air he put on- the arrogance. It disgusted me. I sneered at his actions.

"I'll be home before nightfall." He smiled. The young boy smirked and nodded as if agreeing to a telepathic plan.

"Your immaturity gets to me." Arthmael remarked on the walk back to the house.

"The same to you." I spoke without emotion.

"You know you could be more like your fellow ladies, Ariel."

"Why should I act like a *lady*?"

"Well- *Makala*..."

"You can't call me that." I murmured. That ended the argument. The rest of the stroll was spent in silence.

"Welcome home Ariel, Arthmael." Mr. Stranger greeted from in front of the fire.

"Where is our Lady?" Arthmael said as he sat down on a straw mat.

"She's out with the women." This meant that Mama had been teaching today, as she usually did. She spoke to the women great tales of the Son of Man and educated them to be confident and strong. She spoke of equality and divine love. The women loved her, and soon most were calling her 'Mama' or 'Milady'. She'd stay out for hours at a time, usually after she had done her work in the fields.

"Hello everyone." Her voice was like a flowery breeze that wafted into the home. She entered modestly, and smiled. Mr. Stranger gave her what was left of dinner, and she sat with us and ate while we talked about our days.

This was our family, no blood ties or ties by law. This was a family bound by fate.

Mama and I slept in the same room, in two separate beds. They were made of old sturdy wood, and achieved their purpose. The room we shared was small, and cold in the winter. Often times we shared a blanket on a rug on the floor and told stories to each other while we tried to keep warm.

Spring winds herded us under a quilt on the floor. Mama wove a tapestry of imagination. Tales of the ancients; of valiant titans and jealous gods and goddesses.

The walls in the hut were thin and brittle, so Arthmael often listened to her tales. He never admitted to it, but he enjoyed them. He often made references to her stories of the heroism of the ancients. Mama had spoken of Thermopylae again tonight, and had fallen asleep in the process. After I had roused her and walked her to her bed, I stepped outside my bedroom.

The house was quiet, everyone had been asleep. My mind was racing; I couldn't seem to calm myself. I could feel my heart beating like a leather drum in my chest. Outside it was silent, a clear spring night. I could see small threads of moonlight peaking through the cracks between the planks of wood. It was inviting, it beckoned me.

I sat on a rock that was painted in silver moonlight. The air was warm and teased of summer weather. I closed my eyes and allowed myself to be swept away by the tranquility.

"Women shouldn't be out alone at night." A voice startled me, but then registered as familiar.

"Arthmael, you should be sleeping."

"I can't. I hunt tomorrow. I am beside myself in excitement." He sounded younger to me.

"You'll need energy for tomorrow." I tried to be civil, hinting that I wanted to be alone.

"I have too much energy at this point. You need more sleep than I do." He came over by my boulder and sat down onto the grass. "You shouldn't be alone milady." The words rang like bells in my head. I hated it when people called me 'milady'.

"I am but a low maid; titles such as milady do not suit me." I rested my head on my elbow, which I had propped up on top of my knees. I opened them to glance quickly at Arthmael, but then noticed that he was staring at me. I turned away, my face red.

"Any woman deserves to be referred to with chivalry. My father has taught me to put women on a high pedestal. It is something we've kept from our old ways." I was surprised by his openness, but I couldn't help but smile.

"Your father is very kind to Mama and I. We are forever indebted to him." He looked up at me, and in a moment of weakness I faltered at the sight of his green eyes in the moonlight. I looked away.

And then I felt his hand pet my hair.

“Please rest Ariel. You and I both know how dangerous it is for you of all people to be out at night alone.” I couldn’t deny the truth in his statement, so I rose and returned to the house. I felt his glance linger, as if waiting to see if I safely returned.

Chapter Four

The men left before sunrise to join the others for the weekly hunt. This hunt in particular was quite important, for others besides Arthmael were joining the older men. Mama and I felt the effects of their absence. I had not gone out with the other girls. Mama stayed in the house and composed a letter to Kefas.

“Ariel!” A local girl called from the road in front of our house. To appease her we met outside.

“Good afternoon Silvia.” I feigned a smile. I did not want to be bothered.

“Ariel, the men are returning from their hunt early! They’re coming in a procession from the hills, you have to see them! The younger ones are incredibly handsome today!”

Silvia led me to a hill that overlooked a clearing. The men could be seen carrying game back in a small group. The younger boys lingered behind with their long bows, recapping tales of the day’s journey. They laughed heartily and held their abdomens tightly as if they’d loose an organ. Silvia sighed. I picked through the group. Arthmael was not among them. Briefly I held my breath, fearing the worst. Then he appeared from the wood, carrying a fawn across his shoulders, accompanied by his friend Tacitus.

“Oh there’s the one!” She squeaked, full of girlhood-excitement. “There’s my Arthmael!” Another throng of young women began to gather at the crest. Ethelinda was surprisingly among them. She was always incredibly quiet, and never showed interest in teenage weaknesses.

“Ariel, why are there so many girls here?” As I suspected, she had no idea what was going on.

“They’re all here to gawk at the male specimen. I am here as a hostage.” I jerked my head toward Silvia, and earned a laugh from Ethelinda. She smiled and kneeled down beside me. Her eyes grew wide at the sight of the parade. She looked away quickly, a slight blush creeping upon her cheeks and chest. I giggled and teased her.

“Why are you so uninterested Ariel? This is a beloved pastime.” One girl asked. I shrugged my shoulders and lay on my stomach, propping my chin up with my hands.

“It is not that I don’t find men interesting...” I won a few chuckles from the flock. “It is that I do not see the benefit of wasting time and gawking. There are more important things to be done.” Romana, a noble’s daughter, sneered at me.

“What important things can you be forced into doing? All you do is read and write letters to who knows where.” She remarked, quite rudely. I tried to ignore the sentiment

“There are many things we girls can do with our time. Why; we can educate ourselves in so many things! We can take hold of our futures. We can become strong and intelligent.”

“Like that’s what I need! All I need is a man that can impregnate me quickly! My father has no heirs, only daughters.” A shorter, plumper girl stated.

“There’s nothing wrong with wanting a family...” I began.

“Oh what about tunics and fabric!”

“Murex!” The herd was mooing like hungry cattle now.

“I have all the murex I can tolerate...gold and silver is what I require.” Romana said with a haughty air.

“Yes but what do we do with these *things* when we pass on from this world?” I already knew the answer to my question; I was just aching to hear their opinions.

“Well I suppose that our children can inherit what is ours. I’d hate to leave any child I had hungry and without an ounce of money.”

“But...suppose the answer is—that these things are of this world, and when we descend we cannot take them with us?” Ethelinda believed in the Old Gods, but I loved her better for her logic. I grinned widely and nodded my head.

“Indeed that is what I believe.” I spoke. “To me, it is not this life that matters, but the next. And where we are in the next life, depends on how we live this one.” The group began to quiet down.

“Well then—how should one live this life?” Romana’s question broke the silence. I lay on my back and played with my thoughts. It was hard for me to answer such a complex question. I rolled over and stared at her intently. I tried to grab her glance and keep it. It seemed to work because our eyes were locked as one.

"There are many lives our God gives us. This one we live on Earth, is by far the shortest.

Should we not take our time to cultivate our souls? To seek the truths that are laid out in front of us? We are constantly told what is "expected of us" as young women. Shouldn't we do what is right instead of what is expected?"

The men were long gone from the clearing by the time the girls and I had finished our 'forum'. They were actually more receptive than I had realized, and I came to acknowledge that I had underestimated them. It was a conversation of varied opinion, but many of them had something to say. I found that I had learned much by simply listening. Ethelinda, Silvia and I walked back to my house and they watched me return to my door. The sun was setting, creating an amber overlay on the walls. Mama and Mr. Stranger were out in town. The house was incredibly empty and lonely. There was work left for me to complete in the front room. I picked up the basket of dirty laundry and left through the back door onto the beach.

The shore by the hut was well hidden and private, and immediately I was reminded of my arrival in Gaul. It was still light outside, so I took this to my advantage, and decided to bathe in the water. Removing my tunic and sandals with one hand, I loosened my hair with the other. The basket of laundry was still in sight as I waded up to my shoulders in the water. I had stolen a bit of soap from the laundry kit to wash myself, and now I decided to enjoy the freedom. But then, a cracking noise sounded from the nearby forest. I stood still, and lowered myself, so that only from the nose-up on me was visible. I willed myself quiet, as to not anger an animal or worse—an intruder, an assassin. The noise stopped. I tried to convince myself that it had been wind, and decided to resume my swim.

Again, a snapping twig echoed nearby. This time, I grabbed several palm-sized rocks from a nearby bank and prepared myself for battle. At the next sound I hurled one.

"Ouch!" came a familiar voice.

"Arthmael!" I shrieked. "How dare you watch me!" He appeared from the brush, half his tunic taken down so that it hung like a kilt around his waist. His skin was burnt from the sun.

"I wasn't watching!" He growled, massaging his shoulder—the obvious point of battery. "I had been sleeping, and when I woke up, I noticed the laundry was gone- so I came outside to help you with it and was surprised to see you naked and frolicking in the ocean." He muttered. I became humble and felt younger than I was. My cheeks heated and I wanted to sink to the bottom of the water. He began to walk towards the edge of the beach, where the sand met the waves.

"What are you doing? I'm indecent, I'll come inside later. You need not get me." I was speaking in hurried, scattered speech.

"I'm not coming to get you. I'm dirtier than you are." I could not help but wonder if his comment was an innuendo. "I've been out in the woods all day, hunting with greasy, lecherous

men. I need to bathe as much as you do.” He came into the water with his tunic still wrapped about him. I appreciated his modesty, but grew ever more aware of my own nakedness. “Why are you shy about yourself?” He asked, genuinely curious.

“I-well...It is just not acceptable to be naked with a man when I am not his wife.” I made it up on the spot, it sounded rather convincing.

“You are a Hebrew are you not?” He raised an eyebrow at me as he waded closer. I nodded, slowly moving further out. “Then you know of the story of Adam and his wife Eve? Who were naked in the garden?” I had forgotten that we had converted him. He knew the Word as well as me.

“I suppose you are correct, that we who are God’s creation should not feel ashamed of ourselves, for it is God who molded us from the Earth.” I stammered, growing increasingly uncomfortable. I was not uneasy because he was there, but because I was ashamed of my own body. I wished that I had been more attractive.

“You need not be so ashamed. I’m just about done. You can continue bathing in private.” He said immediately. Perhaps he became embarrassed by how bold he acted. He went back to the shore and replaced his sandals. He left wordlessly. I hugged my shoulders and cursed myself for not being more confident.

The next day Mama left early to teach a group near the shore. Normally uninterested, I decided to tag along, and Arthmael followed. Mr. Stranger brought food to give to the audience, and Arthmael and I handed out provisions to sitting listeners. Mama sat atop a high boulder, with Mr. Stranger at her side.

“Good morning everyone.” Mama smiled at the crowd. A mixed greeting of ‘hellos’ and ‘good days’ sounded from the throng. “Today we are in for a change...” she began. I had supposed that it was just another sermon. “Instead of words from my mouth...” she cleared her throat. “... We will hear instead from my daughter, Ariel.” I was shocked. But it had not fazed the crowd. They nodded and approved, but I had not. My mouth was agape and my palms began to sweat. I was not prepared, nor had I ever orated in front of anyone save the few friends I had. I tried to retreat, but all eyes were on me, expecting greatness. I made my way to the sand and looked up to my mother.

“Mama...” I hissed. She looked at me without expression. I knew there were no other options. I probably could be successful, but I had no idea how to go about it. Mama slid off the rock effortlessly, and put a hand on my shoulder quickly.

“Just speak and listen. Hear what they have to say, build on it. You’ll be fine.” She sat down on the ground next to Mr. Stranger, who gave her a piece of fruit. She ate it slowly and

thanked him. I surveyed the large boulder with my hands, quickly realizing that there was no way I could get up there. I decided to stay where I was.

“G-good morning! It’s quite a pleasure to be here today.” I greeted them. I got polite answers back. “Today is my first time speaking to such a large audience, so please forgive me.” I noticed that quite a large number of the group was young, some younger than I. It dawned on me to use that as my subject. “It appears that many of us here are young. And it is from youth we build faith. We children and young adults are the future. My father often referenced seeds in his sermons...I believe the greatest of his stories to be the Mustard Seed. What a strengthening tale, for when you plant a single seed in good ground, hearty roots shall grow, and from there great branches expand and reach towards the heavens.” I raised my hands as if reaching for falling stars. “We children are like seeds. If we are planted in good soil; if we are taught right from wrong, if we are surrounded by love, there’s no telling where our branches lead us. We can extend half-way across the horizon. God has given us incredible gifts. We are alive in an incredible time. God gives us mouths and words to speak; hands to create, eyes to read. How grateful are we to Him who bestows upon us these things? What use do we make of his gifts to us? Do we help our parents? Do we help our neighbors? Do we study philosophies, orations, and works of art? Or do we do these things without gratitude? When was the last time you thanked the Universe for your health? Yes we are young, but we are not young enough to feign ignorance in God’s presence.” I continued on, branching here and there. I tried to remain unbiased and said words that were from my heart. I spoke of doing well for those that were older than us, and of caring for the younger ones. I spoke of the future, and preparation for responsibility. It reminded me of a speech Uncle James had given years before. He spoke of the development of youth—how we grow into adults, and about how responsibilities develop. He told about the prodigal son, a favorite parable of his, about how we children were always welcome in God’s arms. In a way I mimicked his speech, but tried to make it my own. The longer I spoke, the easier the words came.

Each wave crashed against the shore with a gentle passion, the sound creating an incredible symphony for the oration. Gulls squawked overhead, but no one seemed to be bothered by it. Overtime the sky went from a dull early-morning gray, to a crisp brilliant blue. When I finished my speech, a sense of relief fell upon me like the ocean waves. It was like a burden lifted from me—I had finally gotten it over with.

“Very nice job Makala. I bet you feel incredible after such a speech.” Mr. Stranger squeezed my shoulder, his eyes gleamed with pride. I smiled back and nodded my head, I couldn’t say anything more. My throat ached.

“You would make your father proud Makala. The villagers will expect you here next week at around the same time.” My eyes grew wide.

“I have to do this every week? What about your lectures?” I asked Mama, worried.

“The closest village has requested that I come and teach to them. There are many Hebrews there, and some have heard of The Way. They are curious to hear what I have to say, and I am obliged by the promise I have made to the Divine One. I am to go and spread the Good News.” She promised that she’d be back next month, and that Mr. Stranger would have to go with her for safety’s sake. Arthmael would stay and watch over the house with me.

Although I felt safer knowing that I wouldn’t be alone, I felt nervous staying with Arthmael. After the incident on the beach, I couldn’t help but be embarrassed of myself. I had stopped teasing him altogether, and became more introverted.

They left that night. A carriage from the other village arrived at the edge of midnight to retrieve them. After a tearful good-bye, I waved from the doorway of the house. When I came inside, Arthmael sat staring in front of a window. He became startled by me, and sat upright.

“I’m sorry princess, you scared me.” I scared him. I had scared him. The words bothered me.

“Don’t be afraid of me. I’m the least of your problems. Good night.” I bowed slightly to him and retreated to my room. He must have followed me because he poked his head through the entrance.

“Ariel what’s wrong? Ever since the other day you haven’t been yourself.”

“I’m just tired. Now please leave so I can change my clothes.” I began to take several different night dressings out of a wooden crate that I kept near the back wall.

“Don’t go to sleep just yet, its quite early.”

“Early? Its early in the morning you mean.”

“I’m not tired.” Neither was I in truth, but I didn’t want to admit it. I didn’t say anything, I just stared at him. He stepped inside the room and approached me. He brought a single hand up to my chin and took a lock of hair in it.

“I’ll be up all night, making sure no harm comes to you. If you can’t sleep, I’ll be awake to keep you company. Goodnight my Princess.” And with that he left, leaving me with a trapped breath in my lungs. When I exhaled, I looked out the door, and making sure he was gone, I changed into a nightgown. As I climbed into my bed, I couldn’t help but dwell on how beautiful his eyes looked when he touched my hair.

Chapter Five

I woke up that morning because pressure had been placed on my abdomen. Not much, but enough to startle me. I opened my eyes to see a wooden tray with a bowl of light porridge.

“What is this? Have I sleep-walked?” I muttered, still groggy from slumber.

“No you haven’t.” Came a voice from the floor. It was Arthmael, laid flat on his back with hands behind his head. He seemed quite proud of himself.

“Did you make this Arthmael?” I said, taking a bit in my mouth with a spoon. It was bland, but it hid the sour taste in my mouth. Not a sound came from the floor. “Have you eaten?” again trying to create conversation. When I became frustrated with his silence, I looked onto the floor to find him sleeping soundly. He really had stayed up all night. I finished the porridge and brought the tray back into the kitchen. When I returned to my room, I placed my quilt on top of Arthmael’s body.

Around noon a knocking came to the front door. I glanced out of a window to see who it was, surprised to see that Silvia had come to visit.

We sat around a bowl of fruit and talked about dreams we had the night before. Dreams and fantasies were Silvia’s most favorite subjects. Perhaps this was true because she would be doomed to an arranged marriage; she took comfort in her musing.

“...And he took me and threw me onto the bed!” She uttered, popping a grape into her mouth. I grew uncomfortable, but I laughed nonetheless.

“You always have these types of dreams Silvia! You must be intensely frustrated.”

“I enjoy being frustrated, if I am allowed such episodes of fantasy.” She smiled. “I am to meet my betrothed within the next few weeks!” She blushed. Her betrothed was the son of a merchant from Hispania, and the marriage was contracted to create a partnership between the two families’ businesses.

“I can’t help but wonder if he’ll be beautiful- or will he be a hideous old crone?” She stuck her tongue out at me. She was marrying a man seven years her senior.

“Are you nervous?”

“If you mean about the wedding night...”

“No. I know you’re not nervous about *that*.” The comment made her push me backward.

“Are you nervous about marrying so young?”

“Ariel...I’m fourteen...already going on an old maid.” She stopped short.

“It’s alright. Being old isn’t so bad.” I laughed. Then her eyes lit up, as if she were set on fire.

“Oh!” She gasped. I looked at her and inquired what was wrong.

“Nothing’s wrong! But...is Arthmael home? The men aren’t out. And I know that your mother and his father are away...” she bit her lip. She held a lot of affection for Arthmael, but never had the chance to formally meet him. I bid that she linger a moment and went to my bedroom to find him. He was awake, and folding the quilt onto my bed.

“Did Silvia and I wake you? We didn’t mean to be loud...”

“Who’s Silvia?” he mumbled, rubbing his eyes. I brought him out to meet her, and he sat down in front of the bowl of fruit. Taking a grape in his fingers, he squinted at our guest.

“Nice to meet you Miss Silvia. I am Arthmael, Ariel’s protector and humble slave.” He placed the grape in his mouth as if he were performing a chore. Silvia giggled with a delicate hand placed over her lips. I couldn’t take the fakeness of the moment, so I changed the subject.

“Arthmael, Silvia is Caratacus the Merchant’s daughter.”

“Oh! You’re the one marrying that rich boy from Hispania! What’s his name...Horatius! Marinus Horatius!” Arthmael snapped his fingers. I could tell that Silvia grew uneasy because of the conversation. She really liked Arthmael, and would rather learn more about him instead of babble about her intended.

“He’s visited before—years ago...When we were younger we called him Maurus because of his dark skin.” He chuckled lightly, remembering years past.

“You’ve met him before?” Silvia grew excited. The tension lifted in the room. “What’s he like? Is he handsome?” We were both afraid of any answer.

“Oh yes; I suppose he could be called *handsome*. Many young women *swooned* he came with his father that many years ago. They sold fish at the market, and took back some of our own exports. He was about fifteen years old at the time. They didn’t stay long. Yes he’s a handsome devil alright. Dark skin, light eyes, and long black hair. He resembled some sort of exotic prince

to me...” Knowing Arthmael’s character, I realized now that he was just mocking poor Silvia. She seemed to take to his description, and fell backwards onto a cushion.

“Oh! Marinus! Your name strikes even longer a chord now that I can picture you in my mind.” She sighed. Arthmael chuckled.

“Arthmael!” I growled. He looked at me with a questioning expression. Then he looked at Silvia and laughed harder. “What’s so funny to you?” I yelled.

“Sorry milady, I just can’t help it...” he seemed to find it entertaining.

“What pray tell are you two arguing about?” Silvia grabbed another grape and gleefully took it with her teeth bared.

“Arthmael is being the typical man.” I crossed my arms and looked towards the ceiling with an exasperated look.

“And you of course are the perfect female.” He fired back.

“For seventeen years you are quite immature.” Silvia just sat watching now. It became very tense in the room, and we grew more hostile. “You really are interesting Arthmael! You should be married by now, but it all makes sense seeing as you have the mind of a seven year old!”

“Watch your tone girl! I could easily leave right now and then you’d be completely vulnerable!” Silvia stood up as he made his last comment.

“I’ve had *enough!*” yelled she, replacing the sandals on her feet.

“Wait Silvia! Oh! I’m sorry...” I began.

“No, it’s obvious that you two need to sort some things out, and it’s probably a good idea for me to take my leave. I’ll be fine getting home myself.”

We sat in silence for about ten minutes, me glaring at him, his icy stare fixated on me. I stared at the bowl of fruit, one orange remained. *Too hard to throw...* thought. I’d like to think that he was contemplating the same thing, but I let it go. I decided to stand up and go to my room. It was about to get dark so I wanted to light some candles.

“Where are you going?”

“To my room.”

“No you’re not.”

“What makes you think that you can tell *me* to do?” I turned around to find him smiling at me. He seemed to be entertained by the reactions he was getting. This made me even more frustrated, so I stormed away from the scene. He followed me.

“Ariel!” I ignored him, quickening my pace. “You can’t hide from me! Makala!” He persisted. I couldn’t help but find his urgency quite comical, but I remained silent and stomped into my room. “Ariel!” He sounded more exasperated now. He grabbed my wrist and spun me around, burning my skin. I yelped and he let go quickly, then he took my hand again.

“I’m sorry.” He said, rubbing his thumb into my wrist. I couldn’t think of what to say. Should I forgive him? Or should I remain stubborn? I decided that neither option was promising so I pulled my hand away.

“You’ve some nerve you know!”

“I know. I wasn’t lying when I called you the perfect woman though. Because you are perfect.” Again he stunned me. Was this some sort of sneak attack? He’s played with dirty tactics before.

“Arthmael... why do you talk to me this way?” I spoke his name softly, hoping to inspire a true answer from him. And then that’s when it happened.

It was unexpected, and unlike what I thought it would be. He planted his lips on mine forcefully. And of course I lost myself. I felt myself grow faint, but he supported my back with his arm, which was now around my waist. I was incredibly surprised, and didn’t know what to do; apparently he was just as experienced as I was. As we lingered in the kiss, I felt something slimy lick my lips. I pulled away immediately, and wiped my wrist over the area of attack.

“Oh! Oh my! What was that? Was that your *tongue*?” I yelled, trying to catch my breath. His face was red and he ruffled his hair.

“Sorry! I don’t know what I’m doing! I’ve heard stories about that method before but...” He really was immature, but I didn’t hold it against him. He slid down with his back against the wall onto his behind. I mimicked him.

“I suppose I’m just inexperienced then.” I said, bringing my hand to my chin.

“I think that’s what gets to me about you. You really are this untouchable person.”

“Well maybe that’s because you’re not supposed to touch me.” I playfully shoved him.

He let his head fall on my shoulder. I didn't shrug him off. His hair had been left to grow longer, and it fused with mine which cascaded loosely behind my ears.

He fell asleep on my shoulder, which grew quite uncomfortable after a while. With all of my might, I lifted his head, and helped him onto the floor. He looked ridiculous, sprawled out on the flag stone like that. I got the quilt from his room, and placed it on top of him. That night I stayed in my tunic, afraid to change in front of him.

"My back! Dear Lord!" he yelped the next morning.

"Good morning."

"Why was I asleep on your floor?" my face fell. Did he remember last night at all? "I remember we got into another fight, and I followed you; and then I..." he grew silent and his face reddened. He buried his face in the quilt. I placed a bowl of warm porridge in front of him, along with a cup of water. He took it thankfully, and ate quickly. I sat down on the floor next to him.

"What's so comfortable about the floor?" I asked, knowing I'd get a hostile answer.

"Nothing, but I keep ending up here for some reason." He scratched his head. I mussed his hair, which was wild and matted. He laughed and did the same to me, but with more force. It stung my scalp, but I didn't say anything. I scooted under the covers next to him and covered my head. "What are you doing, you?" He laughed and went underneath to find me. "Stupid girl..."

"Not as stupid as you." Under the dim light of the quilt, I couldn't help but notice that he had gotten muscular, probably from hunting. I turned away, ashamed to look at him. "You're so pious!" He taunted and grabbed me. I laughed and turned around to bury my head in his chest. It felt good to lay there in his arms, so I didn't protest. I had heard stories about intercourse from other girls, thus I had to speak up.

"No further than this Eros." I said, closing my eyes and allowing myself to relax.

"Some Hebrew you are—referencing Greek gods!"

Chapter Six

Over the next few weeks, I became more open with Arthmael. We spent any free time we had together, and when he left for the weekly hunt, I grew intensely lonely. When he had been away for the first time, I greeted him with a kiss upon his return. Kissing; we practiced farther than our first mishap. As I grew more confident, he became more loving towards me. He'd bring me flowers; take me on walks—away from village eyes of course.

Our relationship was kept a secret. How scandalous was our situation, in which a boy who protected the Teacher is in love with her daughter? I had missed Mama terribly at first, but as the days passed I began to dread her return. How could we explain ourselves? Could we keep it secret? Somehow, I felt that my mother had already known. We were successful in being furtive; the village girls still idolized Arthmael, and spoke of the day they'd finally snatch him. I always stayed out of those conversations, as was my character. We were playing house like a couple of children. He was not allowed in my bedroom at all now that we realized we had affections for each other, so we kept to the living room. Simple hugs and kisses were satisfying to me. I was sure that I was a woman now, but Arthmael stated that this was not so.

“We have to sleep together.” He stated one morning. “It’s the only way.”

“What do you mean *the only way*.” I chided. “We've napped together before. And don't you think you sleep too much?” I was folding laundry on the floor. It was raining outside so I decided to stay in. He slowly approached me and took some of the laundry from my hands. He laid it out on woven mat and began to crease the fabric into a fold.

"That is not at all what I meant Ariel." the way he used my real name resonated deep within the pit of my stomach. All too quickly I understood what he meant. The cloth I held in my hands suddenly felt softer. The air smelled sweeter. The heat became palpable and it was as if I could hear every individual drop of rain hit the flag stone outside.

“Your mother and my father come home tomorrow night. We received the letter remember? ‘The night of such-and-such date...’” He began. I threw a piece of cloth at him.

“Arthmael, I cannot do this. I’m unmarried. There are so many risks...” He came over to me and laid his head on my lap. I promptly covered it with a few folded tunics, and he snorted.

“Ew donf luff meef.”

“I love you as I always have.”

“No ewf donf.” I pulled the tunics away, to allow him some air. I bent down and pecked

him quickly on the cheek, then replaced them. “Hey!” he cried, shoving the clothing away from his face. I laughed and stroked his hair. He was like a puppy now, his eyes begging.

“No. Absolutely not. Virginity is the only valuable thing I possess; I cannot just give it away.”

“You don’t think I’m worthy then? Is that right *princess*?” I should have chosen my words more carefully. I ran my hands through his hair, and he shut his eyes.

“You are the only worthy one Arthmael.” I whispered, and although he pretended not to hear me, he blushed.

We indeed spent the night together, but nothing was done. We stayed up all night, listening to the sound of rain on the tiled roof. We spoke of memories from years past, and laughed endlessly. When I finally became tired, Arthmael got up from the floor and sat next to the front door with a spear. He insisted that this was the best way to protect greedy men from harming me. I giggled myself to sleep and dreamt of him.

The next day was spent much like the night before, except I felt fire light inside of me. I didn’t want to admit it to him, but I regretted not sleeping with him. This was the last of our time alone together before Mama returned with Mr. Stranger. This was also the day of the weekly hunt. In an hour or so I’d be alone for the entire day. He had been sitting on the floor, his head cradled by his hands. I crawled over to him and climbed onto him, staring him down like a curious child.

“What are you doing, you?” he chuckled, poking my forehead.

“I’m sad. You’re going to be leaving. Mama isn’t home yet. I’ll be all by myself.” I made a childish face, to which he laughed. His chest rose with each sound, and the feeling was contagious. We laughed together until I rolled off of him. “Are you alright?” he asked, making sure I didn’t bump my head. I cursed myself for being so clumsy and nodded. I moved in closer to him, and he took the signal to put his arm around my waist. I looked up at him, and put my hand through his hair, then resting at the nape of his neck. He reacted with a shiver.

“You’re driving me mad Makala.” He spoke, kissing my forehead. “You seem to be unaware of what you do to me.” I smiled back him, and then I stuck my tongue out. He gnashed his teeth and pretended to bite it, and I yelped. He laughed and I pushed him off. “You’re as prude as ever.” I didn’t want to be. I wanted to show him that although I was younger, I could be what he needed. He seemed to read my mind. “Please don’t worry about it. I love you. All I want to do is show you how much; but that will come in time.” He rose from the floor and walked over to his room to retrieve his spear and equipment. I helped him put on some hunting vestments and brought him his hunting boots from the corner. Before he left I tied his hair with a piece of chord

I found in my room. I kissed his neck after finishing, and he stiffened. When he turned around, he pulled me in for a tight embrace. I knew that if he kissed me, he wouldn't be able to leave.

I was roused that night by the sound of horses neighing outside. I got up and rushed out, greeting Mama and Mr. Stranger with a tight hug. Mama looked exhausted. Arthmael was paying the driver of the cart, and later joined us. Instead of getting caught outside in the misty air, we hurried them into the house so we could hear about their trip. Mama said that the Jews in the next village were very pious and old-fashioned. They were very skeptical at first about Mama's teachings of The Way. They were not used to such an intelligent woman, and at first pretended to not be interested. By the second week, however, her sermons were packed with villagers. Hebrews and Gauls alike flocked to her like sheep without a shepherd. Mr. Stranger was quite amused at the fact that nobles would follow them home in order to get private advice on all matters.

"One man asked me what I thought about finances!" Mr. Stranger remarked. Mama allowed herself to laugh.

"They began to call you *Brennus*! Of all things- the Celtic title for a king!" Mama couldn't contain herself, and her laughter infected me.

"They were all snobs in that place! Trying everything to buy their way into God's favor...they didn't take any of our sermons to heart at all! How old-fashioned!" Mr. Stranger snuffed.

"How did your lectures go over with the group? Were you nervous Makala?" Mama asked me. I explained that the audience grew larger each time, and I became more comfortable with my speaking. I did not explain however, that Arthmael and I would linger after everyone had gone to watch the water together. He noticed that I left the detail out, and he seemed very relieved.

Chapter Seven

"Makala..." The voice was soft. I was awake, but didn't open my eyes. The amber color of my closed lids in the sunlight comforted me, and I felt the warmth of the light seeping through my pores. When I could stand the voice no longer, I opened my eyes and sat up on the grass. The end of spring was approaching. Many families prepared for the equinox with a passionate enthusiasm, but I remained unmotivated.

The end of spring meant my birthday was approaching. The sixteenth anniversary of my father's death came and went, and we spoke of his legend to hundreds of people in secret. We were staying in Hispania, in an area where the Bastetani peoples thrived. They spoke an intense language, but I learned it quickly, and was soon translating for Arthmael and Mr. Stranger.

This was the first year I had made such a trip. Usually Mama had me stay with Ethelinda during this time of year, for I was too young to accompany her on the journey. Arthmael knew this land better than I, but I was able to speak the language. Due to this we were inseparable.

Mama and I taught alone and at separate locations from each other. Arthmael accompanied me some days, Mama on others. Mr. Stranger did the same. We were speaking several orations a day, leaving me parched and exhausted. We stayed with friends of The Way, who had generously taken us in. I was told that we were staying at least the entire season in Baetica. We were staying with a house that held two families of Roman origin, who had migrated to Hispania for economical reasons. The patriarchs of each family were cousins, and partners in their business.

The Camillus families were composed of two married couples and their children. Eusebius Camillus the elder was the one who introduced the family to The Way. He and his younger brother Hilarius traded in metals, but wished to give up their worldly wealth. Their families were not pleased with this, and were reluctant to have us stay with them. All three of Eusebius' children were a year older than I, but they treated me as if I were even younger. Hilaria, a thin scrawny brat of seventeen years, had set her eyes on Arthmael. She brought him fruit at odd hours, bought him tunics, and even had the 'help' scrub his boots. He was oblivious to her affections, which made her increasingly desperate. I became the target of her frustration. Her twin brother Amandus often vied for my attention, but it was always in vain. He was tall and lanky, with grayish brown hair that fell in a matted mess over his ears. His eyes were muddy and brown, and his skin was like the color of milk. He looked quite sickly, and often I was afraid to be in the same room with him. He followed me endlessly, never speaking, always watching. I had not met the oldest of the three, but Justus appeared to be the least abnormal from the stories his family told us. He was solid who was tan with rich brown hair and dark, clear eyes. He spent most of his days at the barracks, and returned home only for holidays and festivals. We had not met him yet. The mother of the children was often out of sight. We had dinner together a few times, but other than that she was a regular society lady, following gaudy Roman trends. She had dyed her hair to match the latest fashion, and always wore a heavy red stola upon her tunic. I had not learned her name, so in my mind I continued to call her Mrs. Poppy in honor of the poppy flowers that grew in fields near by.

Hilarius' family was more pleasant, due to the fact that his children were not yet toddlers. His wife was a nervous looking thing, with bulging eyes, a hooked nose, and a heavy neck. She slouched not because of insecurities, but because her neck was too tall to support her incredible head. She spoke not much, but in a bird-like twitter--and she was hardly understood. I called this one Mrs. Crow. She had dark skin and hair, and for this I found myself more at home with her.

The two Camillus patriarchs were rarely at home, and when they were they talked mainly about Mama's sermons.

Although we were not welcomed by the extended family, we were treated quite well. I had my own room, as did Mama and the men.

This particular day, the Camillus women had gone to the local temple to pray to Vesta. It was the sixteenth of the month, the night before my birthday. Five days from now they'd be celebrating Vestalia. The weather was already summer in my opinion, but the season was still spring. I had grown over the last year, looking more and more like my mother. My hair was incredibly long now, and I had to constantly tie it back. Arthmael had grown too. He surpassed his father in height months ago, and towered over me. His hair had grown wavy, as if affected by the ocean. He was tan and attractive to the women of the town. He never paid attention to them, but barely paid attention to me either. I grew quiet over the months past, partially due to his lack of interest. Because I no longer worried about our relationship, I put most of my energy into my speaking. I earned a large fan base, and more than once received proposals of marriage. I often joked about them at the home, but received no reaction from Arthmael.

The grass felt like a prickly quilt against my back. It was damp from last night's rain, and smelt of fresh soil. I relished in the sunlight.

"You'll get darker if you remain in the sun!" a voice squawked above me. I opened my eyes and saw Hilaria staring at me like some sort of carrion. I let my lids drop again and ignored her. "What is wrong with you? No greeting? I am your hostess after all!"

"Good afternoon Miss Hilaria." I invented a grin.

"That's better." She smirked. She plopped down onto her knees beside me, and shielded her eyes from the solar glare. She watched Arthmael and her brother pass a ball between their feet. Arthmael was very kind and diplomatic with the families, whereas I had not the patience to be. "Arthmael! Amandus!" She hollered, waving her hand in the air. The two boys stopped kicking and returned her gesture, in which I did not participate. I grew weary of her frivolity, so I rose to take my leave.

"Come now Miss Ariel, please sit down with me. Let us watch the boys play." Her voice was like a gull.

"As much as I'd like to spend more time with Miss Hilaria, I have important matters to attend to." I politely bowed and took my leave, heading out towards a nearby wood. I had already made my speeches for the day, and had a free afternoon. I was tired and wanted to be alone. The trees were like a delicious canopy of sorts, and allowed rich rays of sunlight onto the graveled path. Spring birds were common, and their song was welcomed in my heart. I felt a great peace with nature.

“Ariel!” Arthmael must have followed me.

“Arthmael!” I was startled; we hadn’t been alone in a while. He smiled and walked next to me.

“A walk seems like a good idea.” I smiled at him. He remained quiet, I appreciated him for it. I saw Hilaria approach the mouth of the forest, but she relented when she realized that she’d have to interact with nature if she had followed us.

“She’s always following me.” He laughed. She followed him everywhere, so naturally he’d try and get away from her in here with me. I was simply an excuse for him to hide.

“She has a great deal of affection for you. Maybe you should return it?” I was trying to take on more of a sisterly role, as I assumed he considered me a sibling. I hugged my shoulders. I didn’t like the idea of him with someone else, but he was not bound to me, and I was in no place to make bold actions.

“What’s wrong? Are you cold? Have you fallen ill?”

“N-no! I’m fine...”

“Watch where you’re going!” He grabbed me by the shoulders and pulled me onto the other side of the path. “You narrowly missed that root. Are you sure you’re alright? And why are you telling me that I should flirt along with that horrendous Hilaria?”

I couldn’t look at him. I felt like a small child being interrogated by an adult. He must have noticed this because his shoulders fell and he became silent. We took an early turn on the path that led us back to the field with the house in sight. We continued wordlessly to the house, exchanging nothing but an occasional glance. I retired to my room early, and he took his meal with his father in the study.

I took the time to sit in front of the window and watch the stars. I closed my eyes and allowed myself to drift into a silent prayer. I prayed thanking the lord for the beautiful night and for the safety I enjoyed here with the Camillus family. I was on the floor, with elbows folded on the window ledge. As I grew more comfortable, I permitted my head to take rest on top of my arms. A warm breeze wafted through the window and tickled my nose. I became focused on my breathing, and intensely felt the rise and fall of my chest. Every time I inhaled I felt more and more at ease. Slowly my thoughts began to swirl into mixed colors and shapes.

My vision was black, and then all of a sudden I saw a desert. The white sands rolled over dunes and hills, and a fierce wind blew in all directions. Then the image changed—an ocean

grew and sprung up from the ground. It covered the land and spread its waters. Its tranquil green color sparkled in the sun's rays. The water swelled and expanded until the sand was no longer visible. Nothing showed on the horizon, nothing except the vast ocean.

Chapter Eight

My dreams grew more and more complex to the point where the very process was frustrating. There were nights when I dreaded falling asleep so much that I often held my eyes open to stay awake.

The tension between Arthmael and I felt like a thinning rope; we were drifting further and further apart. He must have taken my advice about Hilaria, for he spoke often to her, and with more frivolity than usual. Amandus must have finally relented in his pursuit of me, because I no longer caught him following my footsteps.

It seemed like all around me my world was changing. I felt alone and in the center of the universe. Mama was never home, for she had plenty of teaching to do in town. When Mr. Stranger wasn't with Mama, he was helping the servants around the house.

On the day of Vestalia, the Camillus families attended the temple festival with the other citizens. Mama, Mr. Stranger, Arthmael, and I stayed at home.

"I do admire their devotion to tradition." Mama remarked, while passing around a basket of bread.

"They worship Roman gods...they've stolen culture, as the Romans stole them from the Greeks." Mr. Stranger was well versed in history. I remained silent on the matter. I was fascinated with foreign custom, and although I saw the flaws in their religion, I could not help but respect it. Arthmael was against it whole heartedly, for most of his life was immersed in The Way. These days I knew not what I should believe and what I should condemn. I was quite puzzled by the world. Mama poured water in our cups for us and sat on a cushion.

"How can so many people agree to worship so many gods? What festival is this one today?" She asked.

"Vestalia—the passing of spring into the summer season. It has something to do with their goddess Vesta. The virgins perform the ceremony." My ears drew back. Virgins? Arthmael's face reddened.

“The Vestal Virgins...are priestesses that abstain from sins of the flesh. They are highly regarded and are the holiest among mortal Roman women...” Mr. Stranger explained it further. “Some of them prophesy against us. They believe us to be distracting Romans from their faith.”

“Oh how silly. I believe if anything, we could help them to strengthen their own faith. Do you think them violent?” Mama said while taking a bite of bread. She dipped the last of it in wine and took it whole. Arthmael stiffened and fidgeted on his cushion. Mr. Stranger’s face grew sullen and his eyes narrowed.

“We must pray. If we must leave, then we must heed warnings. On the surface, the people in Hispania are casual and welcoming, but deep down they are old fashioned and crude.” He seemed to have lost his appetite, as did I. I remained wordless and lost in the conversation. I tried to pretend not to understand, but I could comprehend everything he said. It seemed that the time for relocation was near.

“The citizens are narrow-minded. Common folk are worldlier than we credit them for.” Arthmael broke his silence. “We could gather them behind us perhaps. They outnumber the wealthy with greater numbers.”

“We are not here to start a revolution Arthmael. We are here to spread the Truth that has been entrusted to us. We must turn the other cheek; we cannot stoop to their level and turn to violence.” Mother said with great conviction. She spoke with the charisma of nobility, the air of a queen. She rivaled that of a sage in matters of maturity.

I, however, found myself siding with Arthmael. Perhaps it was my attachment to him, or the fact that I was quite passionate and could stand not the people of Hispania. I knew Mama spoke the Truth, but I was unwilling to admit it.

“Makala;” Mr. Stranger, who's latest nickname "Brennus" began to stick, woke me from my trance. I glanced at him with a questioning look and tired eyes. “What do you make of this matter?” What an interesting question indeed.

“I cannot make a clear-headed choice. I do not like this place. I’d rather leave it behind.” I played with my hair and sunk deep into my cushion. It was getting late.

“Indeed. Then it is better to be safe than sorry.” Mama and Mr. Stranger agreed. My ears perked. Arthmael looked at his father eagerly. “We will leave the midnight before Vestalia, but not a word to the Camillus. We shall leave them kind words and prayers in a letter—for the brothers have been benevolent to us, even if the others were not.”

“I believe it all pretenses, for women oft are the embodiments of their husband’s thoughts. They are most loyal to their men, these Hispanic women. And these parts are ghosts of

Carthage, greed and avarice float like smog atop the water.” We all stared at Arthmael, hindered by his speech. He blushed and looked down into his cup. “Besides, I have observed no piety in this home. The Camillus brothers are constantly at work, furthering their financial status. Should not followers of The Way give up their robes and their palaces? You speak of Simon Peter, who for the Son of Man he left his wife and family.” I grew uncomfortable, but not because of his words. I was surprised by his bold speaking; he was speaking his mind like a grown man. His figure began to take the shape of an adult in my eyes as we sat at dinner. I couldn’t look at him; I kept my eyes down at my plate.

There was a clamor outside in the courtyard—the Camillus family was returning from the forum. All of them appeared like a flock of gawking carrion pecking and meandering over their prey. I returned from the window and began to collect my plate. I began to aid Mama with cleaning the dishes as the family came in to greet us.

“Blessings on our house, on our children! And to yours as well pilgrims! May Vesta warm your hearts with the loving camaraderie of kinship!” Mrs. Crow clucked and twirled merrily in her light gown. I was surprised by their warm tidings, and greeted them with a kiss on each cheek. Even Hilaria was kindhearted. She brought me a wreath of flowers and placed them upon my head.

“Oh radiant! How wonderful some color makes you look Miss Ariel!” She choked my name in her accent. Arthmael stood in the corner of the room, his arms crossed. Hilaria approached him with a similar wreath of flowers. “Dearest Arthmael! A gift for you...shall we go out for a walk?” I shuddered.

“No thank you Miss Hilaria. I am a converted Jew and follower of The Way. I wish not to participate in Roman practices.”

“Oh hush! You cannot accept a simple gift and affections?” She laughed. She was intoxicated, surely.

“I want not to nor can I even if I desired. How is it that now you act is if you take pride in your faith? All year round you are cruel and hedonistic, why is it now you wish to practice your *camaraderie*?”

“Arthmael that is enough!” I interrupted them in a whisper. The others had taken to the courtyard for discussion, while we adolescents stayed behind. “I will not have you insult the cultures and religions of others. The Son of Man preached love for our enemies, we cannot judge nor shall we cast the first stone.”

He looked at me with astonished eyes. He had been backed into the corner further by my words, and I felt ashamed and embarrassed for it. Hilaria was in her own world, unaffected and

chuckling heartily on our cushions. His eyes trailed the floor, darted up at my face, then returned again. He gently pushed me aside and walked away.

“Arthmael!” I called after him, but his ears were like stone.

“Ah, that walk now! I do feel a need for the fresh night air!” Hilaria snuffed from the ground. She got up but could not keep with his stride, and eventually relented at the door. She giggled and ringed her linen peplos between her fingers. I couldn’t stand her laughter any longer, so I went back to my room. Hilaria followed.

“Oh! I seem to have forgotten that this was your room Ariel!” the honorific was dropped as she made her way through the door. She slumped onto her knees and began to rummage through several bags and crates near the door. “What’s all this? Have you been stealing my dresses?” I could smell the wine on her breath from across the room. “Right under my n-nose! A dirty Israelite rat!” She picked up a modest tunica from one of the sacks and held it up to her nostrils.

“Miss Hilaria! Please! These are *my* things!” I yelled as I yanked the dress, ripping it in the process.

“You’re not even that pretty...neither is this rag. I suppose it could be yours, I’ll agree to lend it to you a while;” she hiccuped and struggled to regain her balance. “How can he not love me better than you Ariel? It’s obvious that you’re nothing but a smudge on his back!” She chortled even louder, as if wanting someone else to hear. I wanted ever so much to hit her, my wrists were twitching. But I suppressed my rage.

“Hilaria please get a hold of yourself.” She looked up at me, sniffing and smiling, tears streaming down her chiseled cheeks. She looked like a roughly carved statue in a mournful pose, as if poised above a solemn sarcophagus. I held out my hands to her, begging her to grab them and stand up, but she refused my aid. She scowled and stood up, pushing past me violently.

“Judean rubbish! And he is a Gaul...am I doomed to be forever surrounded by proletariat...” I heard her mumble outside my door. She was a teenage girl swept away by fresh meat. Her own prejudices removed her from her lust for blood and skin, and so she ignored Arthmael and me altogether. Reduced to everything lesser than a Plebian, I sat down onto the floor and allowed my tunica to absorb the dust.

“A-Ariel...” his voice came from the archway.

“Arthmael...I can’t take it here anymore.”

“You were right, I shouldn’t judge them. I don’t hate them for being Roman; I just hate them because they’re cruel people. Hypocrites all.” He took the empty spot next to mine and laid

his head on my shoulder. “I love you Makala...” I felt my face get hot, and I lowered my eyes. “Can you not say it back?” he whispered, desperate to hear any sound of my voice. I sneaked my glance at him, and met his gaze. Again my face reddened. He smiled. I supposed he could tell my answer without me speaking, because he kissed me lightly on the top of my head. He squeezed my hand and got up to leave the room.

I opened my mouth to say something but I just couldn’t think. I somehow knew that he cared for me this whole time, but I had denied it. Perhaps this was the evils of the world working at me--like a mad sculptor hacking at an already finished masterpiece. The whole time I had felt trapped in my own mind, in the darkest reaches of my subconscious, begging for attention, praying for light.

His words, although simple and brief, freed me from this state. I felt lighter than clouds and could not make words come forth from my mouth. I felt enlightened by the emotion of ‘love’. I was sustained and satisfied by it. I couldn’t compare it to anything else.

Suddenly, a crash from the next room echoed through the building. Muffled yells and mutterings reached my ears and a gradual pace. It sounded like Mama and Mrs. Poppy.

As I approached the grand hall another voice became audible- Justus, the oldest son of the elder Camillus. He had returned from his monthly training for the Vestalia.

“... good to see you well son!” The voices became more understandable. He had grown taller and more handsome, but that is to be expected of a young legionnaire.

“Your daughter, Maria?” He said politely, gesturing in my direction. He smiled and nodded his head at me.

“My name is Ariel.”

“And your surname?” I couldn’t understand the word—surname. It was peculiar.

“We haven’t got a surname.” Spoke Mama at last, breaking my tension. “We are widely traveled, but most would say we are from the town of Galilee.”

“Israelites? How refreshing—are you of Herod’s house? Merchants? What brings you to Cartago Nova?”

“We are peregrinus, pilgrims- young Camillus. We travel to hear what we must hear, to learn what we must learn, to say what we must say.” Mr. Stranger interjected.

“Why be you crusaders, when you sound more like philosophers? Oh we must have a fine meal in your honor. Mama, have you yet eaten?”

“Oh Justus we’ve just returned from the town. I’m afraid I am too full of wine to drink, but perhaps the cook can conjure something delectable for a party?”

“Some bread and wine will do, I’ve been eating at the barracks all day. I am interested to hear of your travels sir...I’m sorry you’re name was;”

“You may call me Renatus. I abandoned my true name long, long ago; and I fear that I have forgotten it.” I thought about telling Justus about how many had begun to call Mr. Stranger *Brennus*, the old Celtic title for King, but I thought it dangerous.

“Quite noble of you sir. If only I changed my name to Pius then I could join you.” Mr. Stranger laughed at him.

“Oh but son you can, with or without your name!” Justus seemed perplexed at his suggestion.

“Oh, my son...” Mrs. Poppy began “These few here are not crusaders, but religious pilgrims that come to speak the word of a prophet of their homeland.” Mrs. Poppy was polite with drunkenness.

“Prophet? And you are of Judea you say?” Mama’s eyes narrowed. She turned a warning glance at me. We mustn’t trust the army.

“We are from Gaul, but I am born in Galilee.” Mother did not mention me. It was most likely for the best. Justus nodded, his face hardened with the urgency of possibility. It had been so long since I had been with Uncle Kefas and the others that I did not know much about what was going on in my world. If it was wrong to speak the Word, then I had no idea about it. I was frightened.

“And it is right for you to have left! Nothing but pompous rebels there now. I’ve heard of one years ago who had tried to rally all of Jerusalem behind him.” I saw Mrs. Poppy’s face become sallow.

“Oh my son! It seems as though the cook has prepared a wonderful meal for you.” This caught his attention immediately.

“...But that wasn’t even the end of it!” Justus sounded above the clamoring of goblets and dishes. “The animal was more afraid of the group than we were of it! It was too easy!” Arthmael and I remained silent among the forced laughter, horrified at the subject of the conversation.

“Oh Amandus! When will you be following my foot steps? You’re getting to be the right age, if any age exists. You should return with me to the barracks next month to enlist.”

“Oh indeed a fine idea boy! But if both my sons die in battle, who might I say will carry on my name?” inquired Eusebius. The brothers Camillus had returned at the stroke of midnight to join the family festivities.

“Well there’s always mine.” Spoke Hilarius. “Mine are still toddlers and much too young to die anywhere!” They laughed in a drunken fervor.

“Oh but Amandus is so pale and sickly! He would not do as a legionnaire. The other men would eat him alive!” Mrs. Poppy tried.

“Crescentia leave him be! Allow Amandus the chance to become a man! Perhaps some physical training and bloodshed will increase flow in his veins, give him color! It will give him health and honor I am sure.” Mrs. Crow interjected.

“Not a bad idea. Hilarius your wife always was wise and full of good ideas. Son, you shall return with your brother to the barracks next month!” We of the Way remained silent. This was not of our business and we were against matters of war anyway.

“And you! Son of Renatus! You seem too a strapping young man! Look at the muscle and build. Of course that is to be natural for a Celt. You should enlist with Amandus.” Arthmael shifted in his seat.

“I have too much responsibility at my home to become a soldier.”

“Oh and of course you are a pilgrim. Of violent nature you are not.” Mrs. Crow squawked.

“Such a shame! You are of pristine build. Reminds me of a Spartan he does.” Eusebius remarked. I looked at Arthmael with a sense of urgency. He rivaled Justus in muscle and strength I’m sure. Life in Gaul made for a hardened man. Several of Arthmael’s friends had enlisted in local legions. It had been a long time since we had been to Gaul, so I did not know if they had been deployed anywhere. Had we been at war, I wouldn’t have known even that.

Justus stood up and stretched his arms. “Its getting closer and closer to dawn I think...” He yawned without covering his mouth. “Methinks a nap, or some sort of slumber, shall be good for all of us?” I couldn’t disagree. After I helped the servants clean up the dishes, earning a few awkward glances from the Camillus family, Mama and I retired to our respective rooms. Before she shut the door on me, Mama startled me with a warning.

“Speak very little of our business here Makala. It is the warriors who seek our blood with much haste. Speak not of Galilee, nor of the Way. We must attend to our sermons in secret from hereon.” She left without expecting an answer from me, and shut the door lightly.

Before I blew out my oil lamp, I replaced the clothing Hilaria had scattered back into their bags and crates. I sat on the floor, the cold stone tingling every hair on my body. I allowed myself to slouch forward, and became very comfortable in the position. My eye lids grew heavier and heavier as I sat. A loud crash and murmured laughter from outside shook me from my reverie. I climbed into my bed with a sluggish gait and allowed myself to drift.

Chapter Nine

Hilaria had woven a crown of red poppies for the two of us, an unexpected gesture of kindness.

“Oh, how this brings out the color of your eyes Miss Ariel!” she remarked, fastening her own within her wavy golden hair. Her tunica was incredibly sheer, and one could make the outline of her body appear underneath it with a lingering glance. “I love celebrating feriae!” caring not about my birthday, Hilaria just enjoyed general celebration. She fixed my crown quickly, moving stems here and there. She held my hair in her hands and clicked her tongue.

“Miss Ariel, it’s as if we buy our porridges with tesserae! Welfare annona indeed!” I would rather buy my food with the welfare tokens she had mentioned, than to have her bony fingers picking at my pelt.

“Like proper animals you are ladies.” Justus’ voice came from behind us. The soldier was dressed in civilian garb, a tunica and sandals. He took a seat next to his sister on the grass; Amandus and Arthmael followed. “With the spring comes the blooming of women as with flowers. A fine flower you are.” Said the legionnaire as he handed me a foraged weed from the ground. I took it slowly, as to not muss my posture. Hilaria removed her hands from my hair and placed them upon her lap.

“There! And now that she is a woman, she has a crown as well.” The Camillus family was surprisingly kind to me on the day of my sixteenth birthday. They had decided to have a large feast in my honor, with elaborate dishes and even live entertainment. This apparently was common of the patrician class, but not for women. Evidently it seemed the Camillus family was not as discreet as others in Baetica.

I remained silent and modest, not too happy about the arrival of my birthday. I allowed them their souvenirs of compliments and sympathy, to placate their efforts. A simple nod and smile sufficed as a ‘thank you’. I didn’t need any gifts or tokens. Sitting outside on the drying grass was satisfying enough. I wanted the opportunity to be at peace—to be tranquil in nature and my loneliness. But that was almost impossible these days, what with Justus in the house. The atrium echoed with the loud sounds of Justus and his fellow legionnaires at all hours of the day. The day of my birthday was of course no exception.

As we walked through the main doors into the open atrium, several soldiers stood up from wooden chairs to greet Justus.

“Justus Camillus! It feels like its been ages since I last saw you!”

“Adeodatus Agrippa and Otho Pomponius! What an incredible surprise to see both of you here. What’s good my friends?” Justus bellowed while taking their hands.

“Well we are sorry for dropping in unannounced, but we just had to tell you;” spoke the curly haired Adeodatus. Otho, a large burly man with a shaved head and beard jumped into the conversation.

“You are due back to the barracks within the week, by orders of the general.” His speech was blunt and his voice was husky. He said the words without emotion, which intimidated me. Justus put a free hand upon Amandus’ shoulder and smiled.

“And so my brother will join me.” The other men clapped their hands together.

“A good age. Get some meat on them bones and a ruddy color to his face.” Adeodatus said. Otho pushed out his chest with a satisfied smirk on his lips, and put a heavy paw atop Amandus’ shoulder. I felt out of place in this hall of men. Hilaria must have felt it too, for she moved from her place on the right of Justus over to my side. He noticed, and flashed us a warm smile.

“Oh and are you two joining us for house guest’s birthday party?”

“Who?”

“Don’t be a buffoon Otho, have you not noticed unfamiliar faces among us?” chuckled Adeodatus. Justus motioned for Arthmael and me to step forward. I stood behind Arthmael like a ‘proper’ lady.

“These are guests at my father’s house for several months now. Arthmael and Ariel, they travel in a group of philosopher pilgrims.”

“Philosophers you say? Exquisite!” Said the thinner guest.

“From what school? Who is your teacher?” Arthmael’s shoulders tensed and his face became sallow. I had prepped myself for the question.

“We are taught by my mother Mary of Magdala. We seek wisdom and learn from the people that we meet.”

“Via Vino;” Arthmael interjected—‘the way of the vine’.

“The Mary Vine? I haven’t heard of that.”

“Otho is quite a snob when it comes to academics. He is schooled in Plato, Socrates; the classic Greek philosophers.” Adeodatus shrugged and heaved an exaggerated sigh.

“You shall tell me of your mother’s teachings at dinner young man.” Otho huffed. All he could do was nod a quick ‘yes’—he was afraid to say that she wasn’t his mother. I supposed his comment would hint my absence from dinner; I was a woman after all, and men ate alone in most Roman circles.

“Where are you from? You speak Iberian Latin well for a young woman, and you don’t look much like the Baetic women. Are you from Africa? And where is this blonde boy from? Your group must be of an assorted kind.”

“I am Gallic...” Arthmael began. That was all that was needed to deter them from guessing my ethnicity.

“A Celt!” Adeodatus exclaimed with a hand to his face. Otho’s eyes widened as he studied Arthmael’s frame.

“Are you enlisting with Amandus?” the large one said immediately. Sure he was of superior build and strength, but was he really good enough to be a legionnaire? I saw Arthmael falter for a second, perhaps considering the opportunity. My heart jumped. There was the opportunity to see him in a Roman uniform, but it was the same as seeing him wrapped in a shroud and sealed behind rock.

“It has been said that those who live by the sword, will die by the sword.” Arthmael said. In my eyes he stood twenty feet tall in the group of sturdy soldiers. I was proud to know him. Adeodatus snorted at his words, while Otho remained silent. My eyes darted from the group, to Hilaria, who seemed to be tuning out the conversation. She caught my glance and took me by the wrist.

“It is nice to have seen you both again after so long! If you’ll excuse us...” Hilaria grinned in pure feminine charm, which won stupid smiles from the guests.

The night went off as the Camillus had planned—elaborate food, guests, and noise. A group of hired dancers from Ethiopia, a bard, and several musicians entertained us throughout the evening. The food was rich: lamb, rice, bread and several types of cheeses. At first I had thought the cheeses rotten, because they had reeked far worse than a dead animal. Mama explained this was due to an aging process that made the cheese more valuable and delectable. I couldn’t believe it. It tasted like some sort of rotten dirt.

At around nine that night the help beckoned the women to join the rest of the guests in the atrium. There the entertainment had set up and began to amuse the group. The Camillus brothers and their friends sat upon couches and were waited upon by servants with fruit. The younger men, legionnaires included, sat in a huddled group upon floor cushions. They spoke in muted tones and leaned towards each other in great interest. Hilaria began to approach them, but was called by her father to the section of couches. I walked on, towards Arthmael and the others. He saw me, and called out my name with a mouthful of chewed fig. I sat behind him, against the wall. Amandus acknowledged me with a nod. I had barely sat down when Justus caught sight of me and began to shout.

“Ah! Friends! A toast to the girl who has risen to womanhood! The lady Ariel!” he brought his gilded goblet up above his hand and toasted. The others followed suit.

“To Aurelia!” A few of the men slurred. They chuckled and chugged their wine happily, while I sat quietly and took ‘dainty’ sips.

“Her name is Ariel.” A sober Arthmael interceded. Upon realizing that he had not taken wine, my face grew red and I pushed my cup aside.

“Aurelia?” A young soldier said. He had a heavy accent, he was most likely a native of Rome.

“He can’t pronounce anything Jewish!” Adeodatus laughed.

“Jewish you say? This girl? Why, she’s a flower of the desert!” The same man spoke in broken speech. He took a rose that encircled a nearby man’s head in a wreath and held it in front of me.

“For you, Aurelia—a rose to thank you for gracing me with your presence.” I couldn’t help but smile, and I hid my blushing face with my sleeve.

“What a ladies’ man this one can be!” Justus yelled. The boys roared with laughter—all but Arthmael joined in the throng. I felt bad for enjoying their attention. After all, it was Arthmael’s attention that I truly wanted.

“Thank you sir, for it is more an honor to receive a rose from a ladies’ man, than no one at all.” His mouth dropped and the rest of the boys gripped their sides in pain from laughing. I caught Arthmael’s eye, and he had a slight smirk that played his lips. I knew he appreciated wit in a woman.

“This Jew speaks perfect Latin?” The ladies’ man spoke, this time more understandable.

“She also speaks Greek, Egyptian, Gallic, and I’m sure many others.” Arthmael sighed while staring into his cup. The Roman flirt became even more interested.

“Tell me maiden, how have you become so educated?”

“My mother is highly learned and an exquisite tutor.”

“A woman? A Hebrew even! Indeed how curious...” I had not expected him to be so ignorant, but perhaps this was our fate.

“I have traveled far and wide as a pilgrim, and it was necessary that I learn certain speech and histories, customs, and even certain mathematics.” He nodded as if he understood. He nodded to Arthmael.

“And this one, your traveling companion, is he also an intellectual sage as yourself?” He smiled.

“I am fluent in Gallic and Latin, but that is all. I know many things that I have learned from Ariel and her mother, but I know how to hunt and fish. I can also defend Ariel from danger...” He trailed off at the last point as he knew they weren’t listening. I threw him an apologetic glance as I tried to answer their questions. I wanted to grab him by the hand and leave the atrium all together; to have him for myself. I couldn’t bear just sitting and looking at him. My hands itched just to touch his face. I decided that the men were too much intoxicated for me to interact with, so I stood up and did what I wanted to do.

Chapter Ten

I took Arthmael by the wrist, and led him away from the cushioned area of the atrium. In return I received a few hollers and growls from the soldiers, but I knew they would not remem-

ber this tomorrow. The hall was too full for anyone to see us leave. I led him outside to the gardens.

As we walked in pale moonlight, he freed his wrist from my hold and replaced it with his hand.

“There are things I have asked of you.” He said, his voice trembling. I suddenly began to remember his wish to sleep with me, and the ways he had tried to convince me that week so long ago. I couldn’t think of what to say. “I am glad we didn’t do what I wanted.” His voice faltered. “There are things you are destined to do. You should be a role model to the people that you speak to.” I squeezed his hand tighter. I didn’t want to hear any of this.

I remember the day that the first miracle occurred even clearer than my first kiss. The Hispanic sky was a hazy bluish gray, the type hours before a storm. The air was heavy and warm, perfumed lightly with salt. We had taken a day trip down south towards the ocean, to speak to several groups. The area was a tapestry of culture, with people of all colors and sizes. Skin ranging from the most bluish black to sun-burnt white created a rainbow of inhabitants.

I walked with Mama and Mr. Stranger while Arthmael hung behind us a considerable distance. He was silent, and spoke only when spoken to. I felt vibes of tension and annoyance pouring from him. Was I the cause of this? I wondered.

We had brought one of the Camillus’ horses with us, stocked with bags of bread and supplies of fish. A group had already assembled themselves near the foot of a small hill overlooking the horizon. It was atop a tall cliff that jutted out against the sea, if you looked down you’d falter in fear. Arthmael and I passed out rations of food to the audience, while Mr. Stranger stood by Mama’s side as her guard. After the group was satisfied with our gifts, Arthmael and I took our places at the very back of the group. We were far from my mother’s eyes, but we could still hear her voice. I often wonder if she had heard mine that day.

“Good morning brothers and sisters.” She began. The throng greeted her with a medley of Latin, Greek, Gallic, Hebrew, and other ‘Hellos’. Although they all spoke in different tongues, Mama seemed to be able to communicate with them all at the same time.

“You are quite silent today...” I whispered from behind the heavy linen veil I had hid my mouth with. Wind whipped sand into my eyes and disheveled my hair. I took the back of my hand to quickly remove grains from my cheeks, only to have the process backfire. Arthmael remained silent.

“Ever since the other night;”

“Indeed it is my own option to remain wordless.”

“Have I said anything to bother you?”

“No.”

“Then why have you been treating me this way?”

“What;” he was cut off by a shush from a zealous older woman nearby.

“What way have I been treating you?” He said in softer, yet pompous tone.

“You won’t speak to me anymore. You’ve said that you love me, but I don’t understand what to think anymore.”

“We’re speaking now aren’t we?” My face fell and I clutched the bottom portion of my veil.

“Arthmael;”

“I’m enlisting.”

“What?”

“I’m enlisting with Amandus when Justus returns to the barracks.” Words I was about to say trapped themselves in my throat. I was sure he was joking.

“You can’t be serious... What about what the Way teaches us?”

“The Way has taught me that the Word is a sword to be used against oppression. Perhaps for men this is reversed and I will take up a sword to liberate the gates of Heaven.”

“Arthmael, that’s not what he meant.”

“I know.” I was puzzled. He was lying to me—yet I would not admit that to myself. He had never lied to me in the past, and here he was, tripping all over himself.

“It is my duty as a member of the Republic.”

“You shall swear loyalty to no flag but the banner of the Divine.”

“I will be rewarded, and my father can retire and rest easily.”

“What material things we are given are left behind when we leave this place.” The comment silenced him for a moment, brief as it were, that seemed to last forever.

“I’ve been thinking about this for months now. I promised Justus days after he arrived. I cannot turn my back on a promise.” My eyes began to water. I looked over my shoulder and leaned my cheek against the boulder I had been leaning on. I stared at an old woman for a distraction.

“And so you will ignore me.”

“As you have ignored me?” My tone grew harsher, and I couldn’t care less that others had heard.

“Ariel...” it hurt to hear my name spoken by him. “Makala.” It killed me to hear my pet name spoken by him. I wanted to bury my head into his shoulder, to soak the robes with angry tears. I looked up at him, making sure he’d get a glimpse of how shiny and glazed my eyes had become. He looked away at the ground.

“I go with Justus at the end of the week.” It was like an ultimatum—‘speak now or hold your peace’.

“I don’t like this.” I said, rather boldly.

“How could you? I wasn’t expecting you to.”

“I love you.” And out it came. The words that were trapped in my chest, spewing like blood. He again looked away and hung his head. The creases of the veil around my face grew wet with tears that had begun to flow. I didn’t hear an answer from him.

But instead of sadness, an intense anger grew within me like a flame. My hands itched to slap his face. Remembering my teaching I steadied myself and stood up from where I sat. Despite the stares I received from surrounding people, I began to walk away from the throng. I could hear Arthmael moving sand behind me as he followed.

“Ariel.” He spoke in a quiet, stern voice. It wasn’t loud enough to distract the audience from Mama’s lecture. I ignored him, and continued to walk.

“Ariel!” This time he was louder, but spoke within a whisper. Again, I continued to walk away from him.

“Ariel!” He yelled at me this time.

White light cloaked me like a fiery blanket. I stood still in my cocoon enjoying a shower of heat and electricity. I couldn't hear anything, but muffled cries as if my ears were buried in water. I felt like I was spinning, and twirling in bright sunlight.

When I opened my eyes, the entire group was soaking wet, and all were staring.

"A-Ariel..." Arthmael whispered, his beautiful hair matted and wet. I surveyed the damage, unsure of what had happened. It was as if we were all hit by some sort of tidal wave. I looked over to Mama, who miraculously had been left untouched by the water. She glared at me, her mouth sealed shut by holy glue. At the same time I stared at her miracle state of dryness, trying to piece together what had happened. The audience looked astounded, as if they were in complete shock. I took a step backward, and almost lost my footing in a puddle created in the sand. I removed my veil, which was dry, and ran my hands through my hair. I was completely untouched by any water. Mother began to walk towards me, followed closely by Mr. Stranger, who nodded towards Arthmael. He returned the gesture and took my mother's position as teacher.

"And so it begins." Mama said

Chapter Eleven

I had brought forth a tidal wave. I had drenched all but my mother and me. I had been responsible for three children becoming ill. It was I.

When we returned to Baetica, it seemed like news of what had happened had followed me. Neighbors refused to interact with the Camillus'; people stared as I walked. All with eyes wide with fear. Local Jews feared me possessed, while others thought me a political threat. Of course they would.

"It was indeed a misdirected miracle." Mama said while folding sheets one day.

"It was an accident."

"As I'm sure it would be."

"Was my father like this?"

"Oh yes. But I did not expect you to be."

“Is Anani like this?” I cringed at the mention of my brother. After not seeing him in six years, memories began to fade.

“I-I’m not sure. Who knows... Who knows if our family is even alive.”

“We could go to visit them you know! We could make a trip to Jerusalem, for Passover perhaps.” My voice heightened in anticipation.

“A trip like that would take twice as long for us, as we would not leave unchecked.” She spoke without emotion and continued with her work.

“I want to see Uncle Kefas, and Uncle James! And of course the rest—and Anani of course! Arthmael should meet him...” I stopped myself. Arthmael would be gone by the time we would leave, if we did. I cursed him for enlisting. I hated him for it.

“He’s leaving for the barracks tomorrow. We cannot afford to do anything without him.” I could sense her reluctance to see him go.

“The Camillus were very generous.” Indeed they had been, donating everything: his armor, weapons, helmet...everything he would need to become a proper soldier. Ridiculous.

“Talking about me? Hah.” Arthmael had entered the room, his hair shorter and pulled back behind him, under his captain’s orders. He was cocky and seemed full of himself. His muscles swelled beneath his wretched tunic, and his face was burnt from the sun.

“We were talking about going back to Galilee.”

“Oh? When will you be leaving?”

“No Arthmael, we are not going to Galilee. This is something Makala has dreamt up in order to deter her sadness.”

“Sadness?” He spoke. My eyes watered. I rushed passed him and out the door, and did not hear either of them call my name. I was overreacting, and later I would blame it on hormones. Why had he been so nonchalant about it? How could he stand there standing so tall and proud? How could he be so willing to cut down another man? My stomach churned at the thought of him killing.

How long had it been since I saw the rest of The Twelve? Since I saw my brother? Five—no; six years had passed. Some may not be alive. Anani could be married, or he could have suffered another cruel twist of fate.

The concept of marriage made my eyes water. I was much older than most Hebrew women that weren't married. I would be considered an old maid, childless and loveless. Could I return to Galilee? Was I weak enough to let any of these things stop me?

"Ariel!" Arthmael called from behind me. He found me lying on my back in the meadows beyond the Camillus house, basking in the cloudy light of the sun, my face wet with tears.

"Go away." I mumbled as I rolled over to hide my face.

"What are you doing out here, crying like a little girl?" I didn't answer him. He tore some spare grass from the ground, and sprinkled it into my hair. I huffed and jumped immediately, trying to free the dirt and fiber from my head. I opened my mouth to yell at him, and he met me with a kiss. The first we had shared in at least a year.

"What a horrible person you are." I said when we finally parted. He said nothing. "Going off to join the army, and then coming here and kissing me like that! Making fun of me crying too; I ought to..."

"I don't want to be smote by some awesome natural disaster now." He said as he assumed my original position. The clouds began to waver and the sun started to shine. He closed his eyes and let himself become drenched with the warmth. I wasn't sure if I felt better because the sun came out, or if I was feeling happy before that.

"I don't want you to leave me." I whispered, lying down next to him.

"Do you think I am leaving you?" he spoke, softly.

"I want to think that you'll be with me forever."

"I will be."

"What if you die?"

"I just won't die then, will I?"

"War is war. Those who live by the sword..."

"Die by it. Your father spoke the words didn't he?"

"Yes. Why would you go against his Word?"

"Because of this: the Word of God is often called a sword. Therefore, those who live by

the sword may also live by the Word of God. He, who lives by the Word of God, will die by it.” I couldn’t argue with his logic. “We as followers of the Way are constantly on the move. We are always persecuted. As your ancestors the early Jewish people were. It is honorable to suffer in this way I think, but I want to mature and learn to appreciate life in battle.” I was sure this could be done without fighting, but I couldn’t find the words to say.

“So then promise me something.”

“Anything.”

“Return to me, safe. Return to me as you are now—in one piece. In the body and soul that God had given you.”

“As you wish milady. But you must promise me something first.”

“Of course.”

“Promise me that you’ll marry me when I return.”

Chapter Twelve

“Those Britons won’t know what hit them.” Justus slurred, obviously wined.

“Son, you take care of yourself. Oh, and you too Amandus. Bring yourselves home in one piece!” their mother choked.

“Ah what a pleasure that our boys should be chosen to conquer Britannica.” Said the eldest Camillus.

“And here we thought they’d just keep these two in the barracks?” Otho boomed while taking the shoulders of Arthmael and Amandus under his paws.

“I have friends in high places Otho. It would be a shame for these boys to have not witnessed the sheer glory of battle.” Justus pumped a fist into the air. I shielded my eyes from the sun with a free hand, and watched Arthmael from my spot in the door way. Hilaria had a face dirtied by tears and eyes red from weeping. She was an absolute mess, and refused to say good bye to her brothers and Arthmael in such a state. Instead, she clung to my tunica and sobbed deeply, drenching my hair in the process.

Our eyes met. It was incredibly painful, and yet it was beautiful. These boys, legionaires, posed much like that of a marble statue. Backlit by the dawn. Oh God was he beautiful in that

light. I held back every expression possible. If I could detach myself from emotion for a brief instant, I could record this as a beautiful memory.

Everyone knew about our betrothal at this point. Some found it strange, that a girl who was raised in the same household as this boy would find herself promised to him. Those closest to us reacted not, for it seemed as if they'd known for years. Arthmael had left for the barracks months before. He returned with every Roman festival, older, braver, and more handsome. His eyes were lit by the fire of knowing. His new friends often joked that he would be the greatest soldier, for his Love (that was me of course) was a sorceress who had blessed him with immortality. What a complex joke that was! By now, no one thought of my "wave incident" as truth, but more of a simple rumor spread to humiliate my family. As soon as the town realized that Arthmael had enlisted, we became highly respected. "Oh what joy, a converted Jew from Gaul wishes to defend our growing Empire" as if it were the holiest and most selfless act they had ever witnessed. I couldn't help but view it that way as well. Maybe that was Arthmael's intentions all along? To clear my name? It had worked.

Hilaria finally withdrew from my tunic and sprung to her brothers, hugging them and wiping her mucus on their vestments. I walked forth to Arthmael in silence. Oh what a painful day this had turned out to be. My love was leaving me to go against all we had taught him. To conquer a group of people. To perhaps take a life. Worse of all, he was leaving me alone. He took both of my hands in his and brought them to his lips. I glanced over to the Camillus siblings, who were distracted in their efforts to console their weakened sister.

"I understand that you still think my actions heinous." He smiled. Oh curse that smile. That wretched, sweet grin.

"I understand that you will still think me beautiful when you return."

"My princess. I must see the evils of the world to appreciate the goodness." His princess. Why did he always call me that. He had now sworn allegiance to an earthly cause. He leaned in to my ear to whisper, but instead laid a soft kiss.

"I've given you my heart to keep Arthmael, if you die, it will die along with you."

"You and I both know that you are destined for greatness. I don't care about what happens to me. You must be the one to stay safe. When I return, I will be able to protect you as your own personal soldier." I smiled at the words. No matter how tall he had grown, or how handsome, he still had the fantasies of a boy. He held me to him for a brief moment, as if we were both trying to memorize the feeling. When he let go, I went to get Mama and his father.

The rest of that afternoon became gray. Some type of storm was on the way.

"Ariel, can you join me outside please?" My mother asked. What an odd request. The outdoors looked completely unappetizing.

She brought me down the canopied path I often took on my lonely walks. The trees seemed to pour out emotion over us, they were nervous and worried. She had removed the linen veil she often wore outside. The humidity had made her hair wild and rather wonderful. We took a turn that I often ignored, a crossroad path that never appeared very interesting. It was rocky and many roots obstructed its safety. For some reason, I felt that I could not ask her a thing. After walking for several minutes, she stopped at a group of boulders. They seemed to have been arranged in a circle. This must have been one of Mama's secret meeting places.

"Have a seat Makala." She gestured to the circle. It began to darken. The storm drew closer and closer. In the center of the circle, was a fire pit. This location was probably used at night. "Please for the safety of our members, close your eyes my daughter." I was surprised at the request, but indeed I shut my eyes.

When I was allowed to open them I saw four others at the circle. Arthmael's father, Mrs. Crow, Otho, and Arthmael. They were all dressed in brown robes, to hide their identities no doubt. I was beyond happiness when I saw Arthmael, and expected his father, but I was surprised at our other guests.

"Makala you know Alba Camillus and Otho. They have been our liasons in this part of the world for years now."

"I know I've come off as harsh and cruel my princess..."Mrs. Crow began. "But you must understand that it is because I have been trying to keep our cover."

"And I will be Arthmael's personal guard in Brittany. We have a deeper mission in the Legion." Otho explained. I sat there with my mouth slightly open. Unable to understand anything of what was happening. It seemed as if everyone knew something much larger, and they had been keeping it from me my entire life.

"Princess, its now time that you receive the final gift from your father." Mr. Stranger whispered. I turned to Arthmael, who smiled proudly. Mama's face was serious, stoic.

"Please. Would you all stop calling me 'Princess'." Mama's face went unchanged. "I do not understand anything of what is going on."

Arthmael took my hand. Oh how I wished he wouldn't leave me. Mama turned to me to speak, her face solid.

"This responsibility is not optional Ariel. When I found that I held you and your brother

within me, I had to accept the quest given to me by your father. And now that you have revealed your capabilities for wisdom, I must acknowledge this quest once again."

"Quest...?" I whispered. My mother reached out her hands and placed them on my forehead.

"Sophia. Wisdom. I call upon you Holy Spirit. Anoint my daughter as you have confirmed us in the past." It felt warm. My eyes closed on their own. I saw things I had not seen since I was a child. Painted clouds, glowing cities. Whispers of ancients rumbled in my ears. "Let those who have ears to hear, let them hear it." My mother's voice became low. I had never heard one of her secret lectures before. Thunder shook the ground. The smell of earth was too comforting, so I grew sleepy. Within my own breath I felt the rain break free from the clouds and onto my skin.

When I opened my eyes, I was in a familiar place. A stone house, warmly lit with oil lamps, the air was dry. The room was small, and there were no windows. A heavy wooden door shook slightly behind me. It was locked. I rose from my palette, to view a small desk, shelf, and numerous scrolls and tomes scattered about.

"Good morning. Happy birthday." A sweet voice sounded. I turned to see a man much like myself, sitting cross legged on a woven mat. His eyes were shut and his hands were out.

"What are you doing?" I asked. For some reason, it seemed appropriate.

"I am gathering energy into my palms." He answered as if he knew I would ask.

"Why." I stated. Not even in a question. Everything appeared to be rather rehearsed. The man opened his eyes, and I saw the light gray color I've often dreamt of. His skin, dark, his hair, dark and curly, everything about him familiar.

"It is important to gather Divine energy in this way. We can use it for many things. For protection, healing, controlling our emotions..." His eyes locked with mine.

"Father..." I whispered.

"Ariel." He smiled. I smiled back. But I couldn't move from my seat to hug him like I wanted. "This is your first time in this altered state. You will not have much control. Well, you never could control anything you've been able to do now have you?" He smiled.

"Why..." I whispered again. It seemed that every time I spoke I lost even more energy.

"A woman is a man's glory. It is a woman that holds a man's secrets, a man's power, and

she protects it. As your mother held you and your brother secretly for me. I loved her greater than anyone, including myself. You and your brother received half of me, I had hoped that I would have been divided equally, but it seems a little more black and white." I shifted in my seat. Perhaps Anani was still alive. "You have the capabilities that were given to me by God. They were passed down to you. Do not let those around you call this sorcery." Again I shifted. I decided that it would best if I remained silent. I'd rather hear what he had to say.

"Do you know what you are experiencing little one? What state of mind you are in right now?"

"I'd like to think it a dream. I've had some like this before." I smiled.

"A dream it may seem to you, but take this to heart. This would appear to be more than just a dream." He reached his hand out to me, and placed it on my shoulder. I felt a cool sensation overcome me, a soothing breeze. "Your mother is God's fire. I am God's water. In this world of duality, I had often thought that the Divine made all men and women the same generation after generation. But it would seem as if you have been given the same cool water as I. Water gives life. Water creates. Water can flow and reshape. But there are times when the roughness of water gets the best of it. We have both let the water act on its own accord I am sure." I inhaled, trying to remember.

"Do not stress your mind. You are in an altered state between spirit and soul that allows you to experience this. Your mother, always held the fire of the Holy Spirit deep within her. She has always been warm, passionate, sometimes stoic. But how intelligent. Do you know, Ariel, that I appeared to her as a ghost before I appeared to everyone else." I swayed. I was starting to feel nauseous. The air around me thickened. He squeezed my shoulder. "Today Ariel, I am giving you a late birthday gift. You will be able to utilize this watery energy that flows through your veins. You will know what to do and when to do it. It may seem now that everyone around you will need healing. As a child you have been able to heal and you've been able to see Spirit. All of these things will now be constant." He then moved his other hand to my collar, and a white light came from it. He drew his finger across my bones, trailing light. This light peeled at my skin until the humors and organs were visible. My heart glowed brightly and beat incredibly fast. The sensation was too much.

The room went dark.

Chapter Thirteen

I awoke the next morning, bright sun dancing on my skin. I was in my bed, dressed in nightclothes. I tugged at my hair. Did last night truly happen? Did Arthmael leave me? Did I have a conversation with my father? I exhaled. The image of my beating heart was still fresh.

Every painful moment of the day before appeared to be magnified. Gone was the calmness of yesterday. How on earth had I handled all of that so well? Arthmael was gone, and I had a ridiculous dream about my father. I could barely remember it at the time.

The only thing that seemed real that morning was the sound of nature. I could hear everything I couldn't the day before. The sound of birds miles away, trotting paws, worms and insects hustling through the ground. All this from the second story window. I must have still been dreaming, I thought.

"You've slept rather late today". My mother remarked. I had slept passed noon, and worse yet I was still tired. I rubbed my temples and took a sip of water from the cup Mama had given me. I contemplated asking her about the night before, the meeting in the woods, the meeting with my father. Had it all been a dream? I was afraid to know. I steadied myself on my bed, smoothing my hair behind my ear with a free hand. I heard a scratching noise from behind me. It sounded very much like nails scratching against wood. Or perhaps moving a rock across a wooden floor. I covered my ear with the palm of my hand, hoping the noise would cease. It did not.

"The humidity broke..." I mumbled. I looked to my mother, who nodded at the words. Indeed the air felt lighter. Indeed weight of the world had been lifted from me. Again, the scratching noise. This time it echoed and pounded against my brain.

"Aye, it rained last night it did." My mother whispered. Her voice was lighter than air. It floated like a song. I felt that I would start to hear music any moment. I almost began humming along with the music that did not exist.

"Aye." I mumbled. The room threatened to spin. Again, the scratching noise on the floor. I couldn't focus. My eyes met my mother's. Her gaze was strong, expectant. She seemed unafraid. She knew what I was feeling, even if she did not feel it too. The scratching noise grew louder still.

"Drink more water Makal." She pushed the cup under my nose. The pleasant scent of clean filled my senses. I could smell the very makeup of the water beneath me. It smelled like cold air, like peace. My mouth began to beg me, please Ariel, take the cup. I obliged.

"Thank you..." I whispered, my own voice, music. The scratching sound became lower, more rhythmic. It was an improvement.

"Take your time trying to stand. You have to get used to everything now. We're leaving tomorrow." And so my mother confirmed it for me. She knew what I was feeling. She knew what was to come next. Last night had happened. I had been anointed with a gift from my dead father. I saw color like I never had before. I heard everything and anything and things I couldn't comprehend.

I turned my body towards the door as my mother left. I pushed off the bed with all of my strength, practically throwing myself onto the ground. I stumbled onto my knees. I heard the scratching noise again, this time as loud as moving marble. My eyes followed the sound, and I smiled. A small caterpillar made his way along the wooden floor beneath my bed. Small in the eyes of a human, incredibly proud and strong to the ears of The Way.

The grass was strong beneath my feet, as if it were a sacred floor that carried me above all things. I saw every blade of grass as if it were alone in sand. The leaves on the trees, similar to the grass in that I could see every single one, but in addition, I saw the reflection of the sun in them that mimicked that of diamonds. I had never seen a diamond before, but I hoped they were as brilliant as this. I looked above, and saw the most brilliant shade of blue behind the most comforting clouds. The blue was mesmerizing, and even though the sun was high above me, I could see every star as if they were a collection of fireflies.

My stomach fluttered at the sight. Was I still dreaming? And then, the scents of the world took me. The sweetness of the greenery, the beauty of far away flowers that were not even near me. The smell of last night's rain, the rich earth below. Of animals in trees and deer in the mountains. I wanted to vomit, it was as if I had never smelled anything before. As if my nose had never worked and all of sudden, it had. The world was sparkling before me. Every hair on my body stood on end, I felt that I could float away at any moment.

“Ariel! Good morning love!” Brennus' voice boomed behind me. A sound of warm fire and thunder. He smelled of seared wood and the sea. I turned slowly to him, afraid of what I would now be able to see. It seemed that with every passing second, my senses grew stronger. And it was true, I saw everything about him. He had a wonderful light green aura about him, and it was as if the sun radiated from his head. This light surrounded him, protected him. The light was made up of silvery strands of light that were constantly wrapping around him, tying themselves into knots and plates. He smiled at me, knowing I was studying him.

“I'd often wondered what you would see in me when you could.” He kneeled before me. The motion itself made his halo grow brighter. I could see the ghost of his insides pulsating against his skin. His heart glowed white.

“Princess. I'm so proud to serve you.” He whispered. His voice was proud. His voice was like a brass horn. I tilted my head at him. I would not have him kneel.

“Please stand Brennus.” My voice was like seaspray. He obliged my request, but for some reason kept his distance. His gaze averted mine. If only I could turn off my sight for a second and see him as the man before. If only he could see me as the girl he raised alongside his own son. But there was no going back to my former life. I couldn't turn this off. “I can't have you kneeling like that. I should be kneeling to you, thanking you for everything you've ever done for me and my mother.” I could feel my voice catching in my throat. It seemed that even my emo-

tions were stronger than ever, I could no longer blame it on female wiles. I could feel my eyes shining wet.

He smiled at me, understanding. Still quiet as he always was. I saw Arthmael in his smile. I smelled Arthmael in his blood. I took a deep breath, remembering the scent. “Your mother wanted me to ask if you were hungry.” Hungry? I guess I could be. Was I still hungry? Could I eat anything at this point? I didn't know how to process the thought, so I followed him inside the Camillus house.

Mrs. Crow and mama were busy laying out the table with fruit and bread. I flinched when I stepped through the doorway. My God, every grape was shining fierce. The bread provided a heavy smell that embraced me with its warmth. My mother placed a bowl of porridge on the table and studied me. She seemed apprehensive this time, wondering how I would react to food. The porridge smelled terrible, something like curdled milk and cinnamon. I winced, unable to contain the disgust. She pulled the small bowl away and placed it on another table. The smell calmed, and again I was enthralled by the wonderful scents of bread and fruit. I took a piece of the bread and let myself taste it. I now had a new appreciation for pita. It was like I could experience the care that it took to make it, the love in the baker's hands. I suppose I was hungry, and I was glad to know that I could still eat.

The night came with similar fascinations and a strange bravery about it. I had never really considered myself afraid of the darkness, but I could say it even more so now that my father had given me his gift. It was merely the day in a different color. With brilliant blues and purples and a higher energy. I felt my own blood sing and swim within my veins, as if it were being set free in the starlight. And the stars, fireflies by day, glowing diamonds and pearls by night, glittering the sky in infinite number. Every creature that many thought fearsome, were nothing but a second shift of animals living in the darkness. They hunted, ate, and loved. The day by different color. I was so energized by this night, this new moon that hung black in the sky, that I did not want to sleep. And so it was again that when I did retire, I slept past noon the next day. Mother said it was for the best, for we were leaving that night, and I needed my strength. I felt a renewed purpose. I could help them navigate the night with new precision. I felt a new control. Things that mattered yesterday couldn't matter today.

Mr. Stranger and Mama packed light. We would have to leave on foot, so there was little we could bring. Mrs. Crow joined us, and we met at Mama's circle in the forest.

“We'll be taking a coastal route to Gaul.” My mother whispered, reaching into her robes for a small map. It was hand drawn on parchment in old black ink. “There was word of a man on horseback asking the Basque if they knew anything of the Way. There may or may not have been a death, but my intelligence stops there. I believe it to be Cassius, but Otho could not learn the man's identity.” I raised my hand at my mother gathering the attention of the rest.

“Who is Cassius. What is Otho's purpose for telling us about a death in Basque? Is this why we are leaving.” My mother moved her lips into a thin line. Mrs. Crow looked over her shoulder, and Mr. Stranger shifted in his seat.

“Makala. We have kept you from the truth for most of your life. Would you like to hear this now? Are you afraid?” I swallowed at the question. I felt betrayed.

“I can't remember what being afraid feels like.” I brimmed with anger. Mama sighed, she knew she could not get out of this. Her hands smoothed the paper of the map. I saw her own energy flickering. Her aura glowed a warm amber color, but her strands moved so quickly, I could start to feel her anxiety.

“Cassius is the reason we have been running for so long. He is an agent of the Empire's agenda. He wishes you dead. He wishes both you and your brother dead.” I felt myself blink.

“Why would you keep this from me...”

“The less you knew, the safer you are.”

“Is Anani alive.” I stated. I didn't want to question it, but I had to know.

“I am not sure. They left not too long after us and headed north, but the letters from Kefas stopped coming five years ago.” Again I brimmed with anger. The sadness my mother felt when she told me this was deafening. I could hear her soul cry out.

“No more keeping things from me Mama.” I growled. She seemed taken aback by what I said. It felt more like a demand. I felt her spirit calm. She nodded in agreement.

“You're right. We will be meeting Otho on the coast by the town of Narbo, and receive supplies and intelligence. Makala, Otho has been using his influence as a legionnaire to track Cassius. He was last seen in a village in Basque, which is far from here, but he obviously knows that we are in Iberia. We can outrun him to Gaul and then take a boat from there. Maybe from Massillia.” She pointed to dots on the small map in her hands. I nodded. I made sure I remembered the names. I saw our location and I saw the compass drawn on the map. The stars would lead us there.

“I do have another question.” I muttered, feeling my chin with my hand. The three of them looked at me, apprehensive.

“Why did Arthmael join the military? And Amandus...why did he follow them? Does Justus know anything about our family?” I saw Mrs. Crow wring her robe in her hands.

“Arthmael joined to help clear your name, as well as to train with Otho and be his partner in tracking Cassius. Amandus joined out of pride. Justus knows nothing of Otho's plans or our family's history.” My mother explained.

“Otho plans to fake his death in battle after he learns of Cassius' plans. Justus is friends with one of Cassius' personal body guards, who brags about their mission. Justus in turn brags about his friend to Otho, which is how we have been able to track him for the past few years.”

“So they will be fighting in Britannica then.” I began to understand. Arthmael was risking his life to protect Otho, in turn protecting us. It was ridiculous. He was sure to die. How could they let this happen. How could Brennus allow his son to do this?

“Arthmael could not be swayed in his decision. He felt he needed to be by Otho's side to protect him.” Mama of course, knew what I was thinking. I could see in her flickering energy that she felt the same way as I did. Mr. Stranger bristled. No one had wanted Arthmael to leave us, but he made a selfless decision. Was he afraid? I felt my heart burn brightly. If only he were with me now, I would have liked to see him, to truly see him.

“Does everyone know the plan? We must stay together. We cannot be separated.” Mama tucked the map into her robe. This was the first time we were traveling on foot. This was the first time that I could help them. I could do something now.

We left with the waxing crescent moon. It provided just enough light and still kept us safe in the cover of its darkness. I could feel my father pushing at my feet, willing me to walk with them. I kept my eyes forward, listening to the sounds of owls and loons and whatever else kept us company. It was as if the path itself were glowing for me, that I could navigate with such ease. The glittering light of the stars provided us with a shimmering reflection on the ground in the shape of a sparkling walkway. I smiled as I took my place in front of the group.

I knew how to get us there. Only I could do it. I had no choice.