

At Dawn
by Lindsey Pogue

Cold night air stung my eyes, and my chest burned as I ran through the wooded outlands. My little feet ached from the rocks poking through the thin soles, and my toes bunched and curled against the tips of my shoes. But I only ran harder.

Thud-thud.

Thud-thud.

Thud-thud.

My thumping heartbeat was punctuated by the sounds of fear and our uncertain destiny—Sky's ragged breaths rasped behind me; the howling of the hounds, still hot on our heels, grew louder, closer.

I didn't dare look behind me and risk my footing. Camp and the others, or what was left of it and them, had been compromised and was too far away to see. No matter everyone else's fate, Sky and I could never go back. It was just the two of us and we knew what to do.

So, I pushed harder and ran faster. As long as we kept running, we would survive—we could hide. It was what we did in the outlands.

Sky stumbled behind me, but with a whine and a shriek, I heard her footsteps fall into pace behind me again. Rocks crunched. Twigs snapped. Hounds bayed.

Thud-thud.

Thud-thud.

Just keep running. Mama always told me it was my feet that would save me one day, even if they hadn't saved her. But like Mama, I wasn't sure how much longer I could run. I could feel the sores on the bottoms of my feet, and what felt like glass cutting into my chest with each sharp breath.

“Sky!” I shouted, spotting a tree spreading so wide and reaching so high that I thought surely it was placed there just for us. “The Madrone!” The hounds couldn’t reach us up there. We would hide; we would wait them out if we had to.

I reached behind me to ensure my pack was still there and glanced back. “Sky—” The visage of her raven-black hair blurred in the crisp air, and I blinked. A single moment was all it took.

As Sky’s bright-green eyes met mine, shimmering in the moonlight, I saw them come out of the woods behind her.

“Sky—”

“Alena!” But she’d shouted my name for naught.

They had her, and as my footsteps slowed, my head shouted at me to keep running. There was nothing I could do except to run as fast as I could and save myself. But I had no time to think beyond that as I hit a hard, unyielding body.

Immediately, his arms wrapped tightly around me. “Shhh, little bird,” said a smooth voice in my ear. “I won’t hurt you.”

I squirmed against him. “Sky—”

His hand clamped over my mouth. “Quiet now,” he whispered.

I pulled and wriggled as he backed deeper into the cover of the trees. He smelled of incense and earth, like Mama’s patchouli, but despite his soft voice, his hand over my mouth was firm with bruising pressure, and his arm tightened around me. The more I struggled, the tighter his grip became. “You don’t want them to find you, do you?”

As my gaze locked on Sky, kicking and screaming as she was hauled deeper into the trees in the other direction, the fight in me stilled.

“That’s it... All will be well, you will see.”

In my frenzied silence, I watched as Sky, my friend and the last of everything I knew, disappeared into the shadows. Then, I began to sob.

12 Years Later

“With honor, we serve,” the 48 of us recited in unison.

My knees were cool against the white panel flooring, but since taking my place within the Order twelve years ago, I’d grown used to kneeling at the Krad altar twice a day. We’d offered our blessings and gratitude each day since the Krad ship’s crash, awaiting the salvation it would bring when it returned each cycle. The past two millennia had been endless tasks and preparations, but the time had finally come.

“Blessed be they, in peace and worship. Amen.”

We were a flutter of pale-blue robes as we rose to our feet, though as the Chosen’s High Maiden, the Chosen’s tutor and warden, mine was adorned with a border of Egyptian gold. Having been plucked from a dismal existence in the outlands as a little girl, High Maiden was the highest, most dignified position a young woman like me could desire. I had honor and status, friends, and a father, for which I praised Krad every day. I barely remembered life in the outlands. The sting of losing my mother when I was five had become a blur, and my friends from the camp were all a vague memory now.

As I made my way from the prayer room to the arched doorway to wait for the Chosen, I eyed the escutcheons of the Chosen engraved on the walls—the family lines born and bred for thousands of years for what would come in a few days’ time. The Coming was upon us, and soon, all Chosen would leave Earth for their destiny.

“Krad save us all,” I said with a nod as the girls passed me.

They dipped their heads, each girl’s eyes glittering with excitement, and barely there smiles tugging at their lips. Their life’s purpose would culminate in a matter of hours. No more waiting, no more planning for the future. The Third Coming was upon us, and the Chosen would honor the Earthlings left behind for a cause far greater than a single, unmarked life here on Earth.

Soon, they would replenish and secure the human race on Earth II. Through them, humanity wouldn't simply live as it did on Earth, it would thrive. Soon, the three percent of us remaining in the Order and temples around the world would begin to breed the Chosen once more.

But none of that was why the Chosen smiled so brightly. Tonight, they would be with the men who would be theirs in the next life, not simply for procreation. Tonight, they would celebrate and feast.

When Devina, the fairest of the Chosen and the most beautiful songstress, filed out the worship room door last, I fell into step behind her. The scent of honeyed ham and spiced apples filled the air of the Great Hall, and my stomach rumbled.

Selma, wearing a black apron and kitchen hat hurried past, carrying a tray of sweet-smelling mulled wine. She delivered food to my room on occasion, sometimes bringing me special desserts, knowing I had a sweet tooth. But unlike usual, Selma looked directly at me, and my footsteps nearly faltered. Just as quickly, she looked away, cheeks reddened, her footsteps becoming more hurried toward the banquet room.

Falling back into line with the Chosen, I continued toward the west wing. As silly as it seemed since the day I'd arrived, none of the servants looked at us. It was forbidden, and yet, that kitchen girl had this time, despite her familiarity with the rules.

I glanced behind me once more as she disappeared further down the hall. She was my age and had been working on this level of the 18- to 21-year-olds nearly as long as I had been here. Though, I wasn't sure I could fault her for looking at the Chosen's High Maiden; it was a celebration day in the Chosen's honor, and everyone was giddy with excitement. I couldn't hold her curiosity against her.

With the promise of a lavish banquet in an hour's time, my feet moved more quickly. The sound of our slippers echoed as we walked through the long walkway toward our chambers to ready for dinner.

The passageway of windows overlooked Seattle, Capital of Earth I and ground zero of the crash. We were the hub of all technological advancements in the Northern Hemisphere, and a beautiful, vibrant city of culture and lights.

Seattle was a mixture of old and new. Ancient buildings of brick and mortar were overrun by ivy and rooted greens. Steel skyscrapers stood tall, like flashing beacons in the night, and there was a reliable hum that filled the air, a comforting sound when it was silent.

The Grand Temple itself was the heart of the city, an awe-inspiring honeycomb of glass and steel hallways over two dozen stories high that stretched the length of the Krad ship itself. Every chamber and corridor mimicked those of the ship, both a memorial to the thousands who'd perished, and a necessary tool to prepare the Chosen for life during their yearlong journey to Earth II.

"Will you miss us?"

Devina's voice stirred my thoughts. She glanced at me over her shoulder with a small smile.

"Of course I will," I told her. They'd been my friends for the past three years—all that I'd known, aside from Father. "But I am happy for you."

Devina glanced forward again, and I felt a tug at my heart. "What are you most excited about?" I asked her.

With a wry smile and sparkling blue eyes, she said, "Being with Phillip."

My cheeks flushed at that. I couldn't imagine being with a man whenever I wanted, but once they were on Earth II, it was their sole purpose to procreate.

I stifled a giggle and rolled my eyes.

"Alena," Father's voice bellowed behind me. It wasn't the cool, rich calmness I was used to, but pitched and anxious.

I nodded for Devina to continue with the girls to dress for dinner, and I waited for Father as he hurried toward me. His red robe trailed behind him, and his gray hair curled around his

ears. He was not only a Father of the Chosen, and head of the Seattle Order, he was a true father to me. My savior and family.

“Father,” I said with a slight bow. I met his tired, amber eyes that were drained of their usual warmth. “I was about to dress for—”

“Are they ready?” he said impatiently. “Do they know what is expected of them once the ships arrive? Are you certain they understand procedure and how perfect everything must be?”

I nodded. “They are aware of what is expected of them, and they are honored to serve—”

“Fine, fine—but have you had them tested again?”

I caught my breath, and worried momentarily if I’d forgotten a very important task.

“Tested? No, was I—”

“Do it, Alena, please.” His tone brooked no argument. “We must ensure everyone on this level meets the criteria. We cannot afford a single mistake.”

I could see the fear in his eyes, and there was a crack of desperation in his voice. “Yes, Father, of course I will.”

The lines in his face softened, and he let out a heavy exhale. With a warm smile, he reached out and brushed the side of my cheek with the crook of his finger. “What would I do without you, my sweet little bird?” Leaning in, Father kissed my forehead and sighed again. Then, just as quickly as he’d approached, he spun on his heels and headed back down the hall, his hands clasped in front of him.

It was because of him that my fortune had changed when I was seven years old. I could do everything he ever wanted and it still could never repay him for what he’d done to help me.

Turning, I continued down the passageway to my chambers. Devina’s question lingered in my mind. What *would* life be like for me, once the Chosen were gone? The halls and pews would be empty, and I would never see my friends—my sisters—again.

In truth, I would keep busy, helping Father in the labs, doing my part to ensure we found viable embryos for the generations to come. We would do our part to continue our teachings and preparations for the year 8080 when the ships would return again.

Opening my chamber door, I sighed with a sudden sense of loneliness and stepped inside. I closed the door and as I turned for my wardrobe, I froze.

“What—who are you?” I stepped back, my heart racing to see a young woman sitting on the end of my ivory, four-poster bed. Her clothes were soiled and well-worn, her skin was tanned from too much sun, and her black hair was unwashed. She was familiar in a strange way, but she did not belong here.

“You’re with the Resistance,” I realized.

They were outliers and thieves who lived on the outskirts of the city walls, in the tech-less land surrounding the cities. They were without morals, caused trouble, and disturbed the peace with their protests and terrorism every chance they got. They were warped and clung to an ancient past that didn’t exist, and never would again. They hated us and what we stood for, and there was one of them in my bedroom.

“The Chosen,” I breathed, realizing they were likely in danger. Whirling around, I reached for the door.

“Alena, wait... Please.” The girl’s voice cut through the racing sound of my heartbeat, and I glared over my shoulder at her.

“How do you know my name?”

She rolled her eyes. “Everyone knows your name. You’re one of the High Maidens.”

“I am *the* High Maiden.”

Her chin tilted up, but whether it was out of respect or a challenge of disdain, I did not know. I hoped it was the former, for it was true that the Order was everything to the human race. We were who the people prayed to, the keepers of the history, and the protectors of the future.

She stood silently, her eyebrows now raised a tiny bit, as if I should know her purpose here. I did not.

“What do you want, rebel?” I bit out. “And why should I listen to anything you have to say?” They spread falsehoods and rumors, and they were responsible for temple burnings and kidnappings all over the world.

Momentarily, she looked almost saddened. “You don’t remember me,” she said.

My glower deepened. “No. Why would I? I don’t talk to rats and filth.”

The girl’s shoulders straightened and she cocked her head to the side. “I should’ve known you wouldn’t. You always did think you were stronger and faster—that you were better than me.”

I meant to turn and hurry out the door, calling for security to take her away, but I couldn’t move. She did look strangely familiar—green eyes with raven-black hair that hung in choppy layers around her face. I remembered those eyes, clear and thoughtful...

I faltered backward. “Sky?”

She nodded and took a hurried step closer. “Yes, Alena. It’s me, and I need your help.”

A hundred thoughts swirled through my mind as Sky scowled at me. I wasn’t sure if I should be happy to see her, or afraid.

“Your Chosen are in danger,” she said, and despite the slight flutter of panic, I knew instantly that she was lying.

“What have they done to you?” I shook my head, looking her up and down. The Resistance had turned her into a liar and likely worse.

“You look like you pity me, Alena.” Her tone was more than amused.

“Pity?” Perhaps that was it. “I wasn’t even sure you were alive. It was the Resistance that took you that night, and they’ve turned you into one of them.”

“As *they* have done to you,” she bit back.

“The Order has been good to me,” I told her, and the moment I said the words, I hated myself for them. “I’m sorry they didn’t take you, too—”

“I’m not. It’s because of them that your Chosen will die horrible deaths, deaths more terrifying than you can possibly imagine.”

I allowed myself to laugh. “You’re so foolish if you believe that,” I told her. “You have listened to that Resistance nonsense too long, but I guess you wouldn’t know any better. The Chosen are treated like kings and queens. They are the most healthy, the most noble—”

“And they’re going to die.”

Her words made my smile falter, even if I knew they weren’t true.

“It’s all been a ruse, Alena.” Sky crossed her arms over her chest. “They’ve been cultivating people with the biomarkers, spewing crap about divine purpose, when really, every single person with the marker is going to be herded into those ships, whether they want to be or not, and they will be fed upon like the livestock they’ve become.”

“Livestock?” I was affronted.

She spewed, “No amount of fine clothes and prestige will change the fact that once your Chosen are taken, it won’t be to a *better* place. They are sacrifices and they are being led to slaughter.”

“If you’ve come here to threaten me—”

“I’m not here to threaten you, Alena. I’m here to help you. You think the Resistance brainwashed me?” she continued. “What do you think the Order has done to you? You only know the lies they feed you in order to keep their secrets.”

“You can’t possibly believe that—”

“It’s not a belief, it’s the truth, and I can prove it to you.”

I laughed again. “Why would I ever listen to you?”

“Because,” she said with a smirk, and I wanted to slap it off her face as she stood in my room, in my home, telling me everything about my life was false. “If I’m even the slightest bit

right in what I'm telling you, your precious Chosen really are in danger, and by the time you discover the truth in two days' time, it will be too late, and you could've prevented it."

"You said they'd be herded into ships whether they want to or not, so if what you say is true, they'll be taken regardless."

"But don't they deserve to know the truth, Alena? Don't they get the option to fight for their lives, if they wanted to?"

"I know what you're doing." I shook my head and turned for the door. "Your people have been thwarting the Order for centuries. You've stooped to a new low by coming here, thinking I would listen to *you*."

"My people? I hate to break it to you, Alena, but we're all humans stuck on this dying planet, but unlike you, I am grateful for it because I know what truly awaits the poor souls that are going to be taken away, and it's a fate worse than death. And I've risked everything to come here and warn you."

"How did you get in here?" I took a step closer, my eyes fixed on hers. "Unless the Resistance taught you how to scale buildings, someone had to have let you in—someone who secretly sides for the Resistance, perhaps?"

"None of that matters. Not right now. I can explain later, if you want, but for now, I need you to listen to me."

Throwing my hands up, I began to pace. "You say you have proof of this, then where is it?" When she didn't answer, I stopped pacing and turned to look at her. "Well?"

"I need to get into your archive room."

"What? Absolutely not—"

Sky took a step closer, pointing at me as if I were the problem in all of this. "There's rumor of a recording from the Krad crash and the people who were inside it. It shows what it was like for them in there—it will prove to you how horrible it really is."

“If what you say exists, why would Father keep something so incriminating? It would dispel everything the Order has stood for, three millennia and counting.”

“We have to hope that he would be that foolish, or rather *arrogant*, knowing him.”

I wasn't sure why she would say that, but she wasn't winning any points by insulting the one man who had ever shown me any kindness. “Well, I can't help you. I'm not allowed in the Archive Room. None of us are.”

Sky rolled her eyes. “Geez, Alena, did you ever stop to wonder why that might be?”

“Because there are ancient artifacts and—”

“You're the keeper of the Chosen in the most revered temple in the Northern Hemisphere, and you're telling me you don't have the credentials to go inside a mausoleum of history?”

I swallowed thickly, hating that she had a point. The truth was, I'd always wondered what was in the Archive Room. It wasn't that I *couldn't* get in, it was that I had always been told not to, and I'd never questioned why. I'd simply obeyed. It was the least I could do after he'd shown me so much kindness. It never crossed my mind to go against Father's wishes, and that I was even considering it now made me sick to my stomach.

“The sooner you get me in there, the sooner you can prove me wrong,” Sky said. “*And* the sooner I will leave you alone.”

“Or I could call for security now. Or will you shoot me with that fancy gun on your hip?” I glanced at it. Whatever they'd done to her, she was harder than before, I'd give her that much. Though she'd always been the more stubborn of the two of us.

“You could do that, but you won't.”

I laughed at her audacity.

“You're curious,” she said. “I can see it in your eyes. You're hesitating because that *what-if* rings too loud in your thoughts. If I'm wrong, it costs you nothing, and if I'm right, you can save your people.”

“If security sees you, I will tell them you broke in,” I warned her. “I’ll tell them you threatened my life. Are we clear? Because they won’t give shooting you a second thought.”

Sky hesitated, but finally, with a brusque inhale, she nodded. “Yes. Okay, fine.”

Gritting my teeth, I peered down the hallway in both directions, seeing only the glow of the halogen lights, and I nodded for Sky to follow me. “Stay close, and I swear to Krad itself, if you stray, I will scream bloody murder. We go to the Archive Room *only*.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Sky muttered, her footsteps heavy and loud in the quiet hallway.

“Everyone will be gathering shortly for dinner,” I whispered as we hurried toward the Great Hall and the Archive Room. “I will be missed if I’m gone too long.”

“Then,” she said with far too much attitude, “we better stop wasting time and move faster.”

Rolling my eyes, I silently cursed myself for what I was about to do. If Father knew of it, he would be heartbroken and would never forgive me. But I couldn’t ignore what Sky was saying either. As much as I hated the Resistance and what they stood for, they hadn’t killed her, as Father had always told me they had. She was alive, even if she was on the wrong side, and I was grateful for that. More than that, I was shocked that he’d lied to me about her death and had to wonder if he simply hadn’t known.

When we finally got into the grand entry, I made sure no one was meandering in the foyer. “They’re all sitting down to eat,” I whispered. The cacophony of voices rumbled through the hallway.

We hurried onward, toward the administration offices and meeting rooms where Father and the technicians met weekly to check in and review plans and progress. I headed down an off-shoot passageway, and passed closed doors to different chambers that I prayed would stay closed. “It’s through here—the last door,” I told her and pointed down the darkened corridor. The halogens flickered on as we passed, lighting the Archive Room sign. I stopped outside the door.

“Why are you hesitating?” Sky grumbled.

I glared at her, and with a steadying breath, I ran my hand over the reader, heard the lock open, and stepped inside. I pulled Sky in after me and instantly closed us in the room.

I could smell it—the stale air and old pages of the world before. Unease washed over me, along with a strangely intoxicating thrill.

As the lights flickered on, the room illuminated and we were standing in a library of sorts, lined with shelves and tomes and boxes, though less exquisite than the true library upstairs, or the records room, even. This place was more like a crypt of old, forgotten things, but still, I was mesmerized.

“We need to find the old ship tech,” Sky said, ruining my rumination. “A recording of some sort, a reader or projector maybe...”

I laughed. “Good luck.” The room was filled with boxes and all of it looked far more ancient than tech from the crash. I picked up a thin plastic box that read *Terminator*. It had a man with a buzzed haircut and red, glowing eyes on the cover. I popped open the box and pulled out a slender disc. “I have no idea what it is, but I promise you everything in here is older than the 2020 crash.”

Ignoring me, Sky ran up and down the aisles, scouring the shelves, and clanking things around like they were nothing but old tin cans she cared nothing about. I gaped in awe at images of what Seattle had once looked like—the curved lines and luminescent siding of the Museum of Pop Culture, now a rusted-out husk filled with live gardens.

“Hey—that’s a Rembrandt,” I scolded, and reached for the small painting before Sky could chuck it over her shoulder.

“Yeah right. It’s a knock-off,” she said, rolling her eyes.

“Who cares? It might be all we have left of his work.”

“Trust me,” she grumbled, and pulled what I thought might be a cell phone out of an old tech box. She stared at it. “These old, stuffy objects are the least of our worries.”

“So you keep saying.” I took it from her and put it back in the box she’d pulled it from.

There were large black disks with titles like *Prince: 1999* and *Purple Rain*, though the quicker she went, the harder it was to keep up, and I cringed as Sky began to discard them over her shoulder.

“Where the hell is it...”

“I told you,” I said. “Whatever you’re looking for doesn’t exist. These are relics and old documents. This is all our history. You won’t find—”

“Here,” she breathed in awe.

Sky held up an antiquated hologram screen that was bulky in her hand. She turned it over in her palm and pressed her finger against the only indentation on the side. Two prongs flipped up, causing us both to gasp, and then, a recording began to play.

At first, the image was scratchy, a three-dimensional space that felt oddly real as the footage continued.

An outline I could barely see moved in the shadows.

A whirring and suction noise clapped.

Blue and yellow LED lights blinked along walls of panels.

“What are we looking at?” I whispered with bated breath. “What are we—”

Sky swiped to the side, and the blinking lights flashed a hundred times faster. The recording went on and on, and it wasn’t until a strobe of red and orange lights filled the screen that she slowed the image again. We waited as the interior of the ship began to shake, the tubes hanging above the camera began to swing, and the rows upon rows of clear pods shook, the fluid inside of them sloshing onto the grated floor like a liquid sunset. But it was the outlines of the pod inhabitants I couldn’t pry my eyes from, the black human shapes trapped in a shell, seemingly lifeless.

Chills ran down my spine. “Those are *people*.”

Sky and I watched in horror as the lights continued to flash, and the fuselage that stretched as far as the eye could see dipped down—down—down. Everything was splashing and flashing, until finally, it all went black.

The sound of crunching metal filled my ears, and a siren unlike anything I'd ever heard before rang out, nearly dropping me to my knees, and I covered my ears. "Shut it off!" I commanded. "Hurry!"

With a few scrambled finger movements, the viewer closed, and all that was left was my rapid heartbeat.

Chest heaving and nostrils flaring, Sky looked at me. "Did you see them," she said, but it wasn't with satisfaction. She was as equally shaken as I was. "Those people—that's"—she cleared her throat—"that's what will happen to your friends."

"It can't be." The words swam in my mind, a whirlpool of disbelief. I turned for the door.

"Alena—" She grabbed hold of my arm and tugged me toward her. "Where are you going—"

"I need air," I told her. I needed to get out of the suffocating room—needed air so my lungs would work again. The endless rows of humans with tubes coming from their pods made my stomach roil, and I doubled over and threw up my breakfast.

I gasped for breath. I forced myself to breathe. I stared at the vomit on my shoes, wondering how many people had been on that ship when it had crashed, and what exactly had been done to them. More than anything, I wondered if what Sky had said was true, and if death truly would've been a better fate.

Wiping my mouth with the back of my arm, I shook my head. "It can't be real," I told myself.

"It's real, Alena," Sky said softly. "It's why you have to help your friends. It's why you have to say something."

“Father must not know then—like the rest of us, he’s been trained his whole life. What if he doesn’t know?”

“Oh, come on, Alena!” Sky grabbed my arm. “He knows everything, you know it in your gut. Of course, he does. All the Priests have to, it’s the only way everyone does exactly what they’re supposed to.”

I blinked at her and thought about the concern in his eyes this evening when he’d asked if the Chosen were ready.

“So, you have to say something—”

“Say what?” I shook my head and looked into her wide, green eyes, grabbing onto the only rational thought I could tether myself to. “These people have the biomarker. They are what the ship wants. No matter what we prepare for, no matter what we do, it’s who they will take. Telling the Chosen won’t make a difference.”

Sky’s eyes widened and she shook her head, taking a faltering step backward. “How can you brush this off? You would have them go to that fate—to that ship, feeding off of them or whatever it was doing? You could live with yourself, knowing you could’ve given them a fighting chance?”

I thought about Devina. I thought of all of their hopeful, smiling faces. And then, I thought of Father.

There were two options, and both would lead to mass death. “Perhaps it’s a gift he’s given them, their innocence of what’s to come,” I said, though my mind was a foggy mess of uncertainty. “Their fate is already sealed.”

“You’re a coward!” Sky spat, and her disappointment stirred a wave of fear and anger.

I spun on her. “You don’t get to judge me,” I called out. “It’s so easy for you to point fingers and judge, but those are my friends and family, not yours. Telling them would send them into a panic, it would shatter every sense of peace, especially if they are to be taken away regardless.”

“They could fight back.”

I laughed at her, a cruel brittle sound. “Your rebels are stupid if you think we have a chance against the ships. I’ve been the one training the Chosen for life after Earth. *I* know what they are up against. I would rather be ignorant than be pulled away from my loved ones screaming for my life, wishing I were dead instead.”

For once, Sky had nothing to say. The room was a vacuous space so brimming with emotion that I wanted to scream. I wasn’t sure how many breaths elapsed as we stood in silence, the world falling apart around me.

“Maybe some of the Chosen *will* kill themselves,” Sky finally said, “but isn’t it their choice? Don’t they get to decide how willingly they walk to their deaths?”

I forced myself to look at her, knowing I would find the same sincerity I heard in her voice also reflected in her eyes, even if I wanted to believe she didn’t care. Even if I wanted to hate her for shredding my world to pieces in a matter of minutes. Her words made sense, and yet... I didn’t want the Chosens’ last hours to be filled with horrors outside of their control.

“Why don’t you take the tech and do it yourself?” I asked quietly. “Why are you really here, Sky? I know it’s not the Chosen your Resistance cares so much about. And, if you got into the Temple so easily, you could’ve gotten into this room.” I straightened. “Why are you really showing me this?”

“Because,” she said, squaring her shoulders. “We need you.”

“Why me?” I ground out. My legs felt weak and my hands shook so violently, I had to clutch the shelf.

“You are the High Maiden, and a Priest’s daughter. If you spoke out against the Order, the whole world would be forced to listen.”

I stared through her as I imagined the look on the Chosens’ faces when I told them the truth. I could hear their screams and see their terror. More than anything, I could see the

disappointment on my father's face when he learned of my betrayal. Every word spoken against him would gut him—more than that, they would *ruin* him.

"I can't do this," I said with a gasp, and I pushed Sky away from me and hurried to the door.

"Alena, wait—"

"No!" I shouted, squeezing my eyes shut. "It's so easy for you to spew words of plots and lies and shatter a person's life, but I can't do that so easily. I will not betray the people I love so that the Resistance can rejoice as the world hears them for the first time. I am not your pawn. I'm *no one's* pawn. Not anymore." I flung the door open. "Find your own way out."

"If you change your mind," she said, and begrudgingly, my footsteps slowed. "Get all of the Chosen down to the kitchen girl, Selma, before the first gong chimes tomorrow at dawn. She'll tell you what to do. I promise, we'll get your Chosen to safety, for now."

Without bothering to glance back, I trudged down the hallway toward my chamber. As I entered the Great Hall, I paused to listen to the voices in the dining hall. Hopeful tidings and contented laughter, they knew not what awaited them in two days' time. The sense of peace they would have marching to enslavement seemed preferable to absolute horror. But, as I told myself that ignorance was best, my heart seized, my chest burned, and my eyes blurred at the thought. Everything about the Temple—about the world—was a lie. Everything I'd thought I stood for was a fabrication.

"Alena." I shuddered at the sound of my name on Father's tongue, and I squeezed my eyes shut as he approached behind me. "What happened to you? Why have you not come to dinner?"

Clearing my throat, I forced myself to look at him—at the crystal-clear eyes that had always been a comfort, and the tenderness of the voice that had made me feel like the most special orphan in the world. He'd saved me, but the more I thought about it, the more I realized his finding me was no accident. He'd needed an outlier like me, someone without the blood who

would always be at his side. Someone so grateful, with nothing to lose and everything to gain, he could mold to his will.

“I’m—not well,” I said, and it wasn’t a lie. “I’m very... tired.”

He touched my chin and eyed me carefully, dotingly, like a father would on his daughter. Only, that wasn’t what I was. His touch was meant to control, possess. Now I knew the truth, that I was a means to an end. “You do look exhausted, little bird,” he said, taking my hands in his. They were warm and soft, but I could feel the uncleanness of them. “I’ve been very hard on you, I think.” I could tell he’d had a few glasses of wine. “I’ve been distracted, and I’ve put too much pressure on you.”

I smiled, if a little weakly, and shook my head. “I’ll survive.”

It hurt me to say it because it was so true. No matter the heartbreak, I would survive, and I would always remember. There was no way to forget.

“You should get some rest. Perhaps Selma will bring you pecan pie after the festivities. I know it’s your favorite.” He winked at me. He was so good at playing the affectionate guardian. It oozed out of him so easily that it made me sick to my stomach.

“Who was in my place?” I asked before I lost my nerve. “Before you found me, I mean?”

Father frowned. “What makes you ask such a question?”

“I heard rumors,” I told him, remembering my first months in the Temple. “You had a High Maiden before she was taken down to the fourth floor with the younger Chosen.”

His eyes widened infinitesimally, but he didn’t lie. “She was my ward, but not a High Maiden. She wasn’t you.” He reached out again and brushed my cheek with the crook of his finger. “I hadn’t realized she had the marker, but when I found out, she was sent to be with the rest of the Chosen.”

“You needed a replacement for her.”

His eyes met mine, and I wondered if I was giving myself away. Then I realized, I wasn’t sure I cared.

When he didn't answer, I continued, "So, you went out searching for one." *You went out hunting.*

"No, not at all, but I was lucky to have found you." He smiled, but it didn't reach his eyes, and for the first time, I feared my father. He was lying. How many times had he lied to me and I'd never realized it?

"Now, tell me, what are all of these questions about?" His voice was fatherly, but his words were laden with suspicion.

Forcing myself to smile, I shook my head. "Bad dreams," I told him. "About my past."

"Ah, perhaps why you are so tired." He seemed satisfied with that conclusion and tsked.

I nodded, but couldn't bring myself to speak.

"Well, rest assured, little bird, that's all behind you now. Go on," he said, pointing toward the hall of rooms. "Get some rest. I'll come check on you in the morning." He winked at me.

Father turned and headed back for the dining hall, his red robe floating behind him. The fear in his eyes made sense now. His sometimes quick and vague answers suited him. He bent the truth as needed, and no love, not for me nor the Chosen, would sway that.

As a choked sob burst from my throat, I ran for my chamber. I would lose my friends, whether I told them the truth or not. I had already lost my father. The only question now was whether or not to send the world into chaos with a single sentence.

They've lied to you.

Even as I imagined their screaming and shrieking, their tears and madness, I knew exactly what I had to do.

I waited for the garden clock to chime just before dawn, and I stole away from my room. Wrapped in a gray robe with my hair wound tightly upon my head, I hurried down the hall to Devina's chambers. Quietly, I waved my hand over her door lock. When it popped open with a hiss, I hid myself inside and closed the door behind me. Her room was awash in gray moonlight

and I watched as her chest rose and fell beneath the sheets. Tiptoeing toward her, I sidestepped her wardrobe and the trunk at the end of her four-poster bed.

“Devina,” I whispered and squeezed her arm. “Devina, wake up.”

“What—” she mewed and her eyes fluttered open. “Alena? What—”

“Shhh.” I pressed my finger to her lips. “We must be quiet.”

Devina blinked at me and I saw a mixture of confusion and fear on her shadowed face.

“Do you trust me?” I whispered, my eyes fixed on hers.

Without hesitation, Devina dipped her chin.

I dropped my hand from her mouth. “Don’t ask me any questions, we don’t have time.

Do you understand?”

Reluctantly, she nodded again.

My voice low and steady, I told her, “We’re not safe here.” I told her slowly, so that she would understand. “I need you to help me wake the others as quickly as possible. And I need you to help me get them down to the kitchen.”

Her eyes flickered as she processed my words.

“Do you understand what I’m telling you? Your life might depend on it.”

Devina’s chin trembled and her gaze shifted over my face. She wanted so badly to question me. I could see it in the purse of her lips.

“I promise you,” I said. “I will explain more once we’re out of here. For now, we must go. We must be silent, and we must get everyone out.”

I flung the covers off of her. “Take only a robe and shoes. There’s no time for anything else.”

We had to rally the 48 Chosen before the sun came up and sneak them all down to the kitchen. Everything hinged on Selma being there, ready.

“I’ll go into Catia’s room and wake her, and when you’re ready, go into Evon’s. Tell them their safety depends on their silence, and show them this if they question you.” I handed her my

High Maiden brooch. "You gather the ones from the north side of the corridor. I'll get the ones from the south side. We meet up in the kitchen. *Go!*"

Devina nodded and ran for her wardrobe.

I hurried to the doorway, relieved by her obedience, but when I heard her soft voice whisper my name, I whirled around.

"What are we doing?" She was searching for a scrap of reassurance, and I couldn't blame her for asking.

Unwilling to lie like my father, I told her the truth. "Today, we start a revolution."