

I oversleep one morning, and Maya shakes me awake. “Come on, Shea, you’re going to miss breakfast. Hurry, I’m starving,” she says, pulling me to my feet.

I get up, rubbing my eyes the way a sleepy child does.

“Wait, your hairpins are coming out, let me fix your bun.” Maya’s not very good at it; she’s always had short hair, and the little girls wear their hair down, but she smiles as she finishes, proud of the results. She’ll be a good mom someday, I think, and then stop, horrified—she’s only fourteen. I don’t want it to happen down here. I hug her for a good long time, then pull away and peer into her eyes, smoothing her hair, which is no longer a pixie cut and now has auburn roots. It’s almost long enough to fashion into a tiny bun. The beautiful roses that once colored her cheeks have faded until they’re an almost imperceptible pink.

“Don’t grow up too fast, okay? You should be a kid as long as you can.”

“O—kay,” she says like I’m a crazy person. Sometimes I wonder about that.

We head down the hallway toward the Dining Hall, and just as I spot Julian waiting for us, two older women seize my arms, one on either side of me, and pluck me away from Maya.

“It’s your time, Sister Shea. Start working on that smile. The Elders like them smiling, don’t they, Sister Leah?” the thin woman on my left says in a honeyed voice.

“They certainly do, Sister Victoria,” the stout woman on my right replies in a Minnie Mouse-on-helium voice. “You’ll have plenty to smile about. You’re going to be as beautiful and fragrant as a whole garden of flowers. To be a vessel for God. You girls are so lucky. So, so lucky.”

I look to Julian for help. I know he loves me. Why won’t he publicly profess his love for me and fight for me? His misty eyes tell me, his bright smile tells me, the relaxed lines of his

body tell me that he won't try to stop my breeding. My devout Julian believes this is my calling from God.

Everyone around me is smiling and clapping. Some try to touch me as if I'm valuable and they would steal me away if they could.

"Tell Mother I've been called by God," I shout to Maya as they pull us apart. She's squealing and jumping up and down as she always does when she's cheering someone on. I hope she heard me. I need Mother.

As we move toward the Spa more middle-aged women fall into step with the group, an avalanche picking up snow. They jabber like they're going to the most prestigious affair, and I'm nothing more than the flowers they're bringing to the host. Or the vase. I'm the vessel. I'm queasy and have a headache coming on. Is that a good excuse to get out of sex down here?

We reach Door 7. Mother hasn't arrived yet. Did Maya ask her to come? They won't let her in once the door closes behind us. Hurry, Mother! Please hurry!

I'm afraid to comply with the breeding, but I fear refusal more, knowing the danger it could bring all of us. The Ordeal made my decision to breed for me.

"What about breakfast?" I stall at the door. I come to an abrupt halt, and an overweight woman behind me runs into me, pushing me a step further. "It'll be easier for me to smile if I have something in my stomach. We don't want my stomach growling during the breeding, do we? That would be a turnoff for anyone. I'll just ..." I turn to go the other way, but the sisters surround me.

"We have delicacies for you to eat, sweetheart: chocolates and luscious frozen berries," Sister Victoria says, touching the corners of her mouth like she's drooling. "And wine. You'll be

absolutely swooning with pleasure before you meet the father of your first child.” She pats my hand, and I think she’s going to pinch my cheeks.

Just as the group is turning me around to face the door again, Mother runs around the corner, breathing hard. I make my body an X, my hands and feet holding me in the doorway. Some sisters push, some pull me through, and the door slams shut. I glance over my shoulder and see Mother. I’ll be okay with Mother here, exuding strength and calmness. Having her here will remind me why I’m doing this—I cannot have my family vanish in the night.

The Spa is a spacious room, everything stark white except for stainless steel and mirrors in brilliant silver. It’s balmy. The light isn’t harsh here as it is in other rooms in Daeios. The Spa seems to twinkle with stars as light bounces off the mirrors and stainless steel. A large Jacuzzi tub sits in the center, a halo of soft golden light shimmering above. The water is bubbling and steaming and fragrant, the scent drawing me into the room like a field of bewitched red poppies.

I’m trying to get a sense of the rest of the room when four sisters remove my water pack and ID badge and then pick up the bottom of my dress. My arms lift automatically as they pull the dress over my head. I’m naked, except for my socks and sandals. Sisters on each side bend down and bare my feet as I balance on one back, and then another.

As two tall women escort me to a seat in the Jacuzzi, their eyes downcast, I see in the mirrors on the wall that the curves of my body have disappeared. My muscles are too defined. The sisters turn me to face the hottub. “Careful, Sister Shea, it’s slippery getting into the tub,” they say in unison as they help me to sit down.

Ah, it’s heavenly. I hadn’t realized how much I miss a good bath. The water bubbles around me, not too hot, and they leave me to soak up the heady fragrance: lavender, with something green like eucalyptus. The lights are low, the light gleaming off the mirrors and

projecting a pastel rainbow over the tub. The jets hit my body, and the steam opens my sinuses. I picture all of the dirt and rock around me crumbling away, leaving me to bathe in the outdoors as the golden sun sets. The chattering is absent. I hope the sisters left and forgot about me. This is as far as I need to go.

I'm relaxed for the first time in a long time as if I were drugged with a magic potion.

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When my fingers have begun to prune, a woman kneels behind me and removes the pins from my hair. She shampoos my hair with a lilac-scented shampoo. Her fingers feel amazing on my scalp. She pulls a hose from the floor near the Jacuzzi and rinses my hair with lukewarm water, adding more bubbles to my bath. She rubs in a creamy conditioner and leaves it in.

“We'll be shaving this off soon, hmmm?”

I touch my hair as if I can protect it.

The other women move as a group toward me. The sisters who seated me each take an arm and help me up, leading me up the steps of the Jacuzzi. Cold air assaults me, but two other matrons hurry in and dry me with two warm and thirsty white towels. Another nonbreeder brings a thin towel and wraps my head in a turban. Another sister flutters over with a comfy, white robe, helping to place my arms through the holes, and shooing my hands away when I try to tie the belt. She ties it for me. My ensemble wouldn't be complete without a pair of fuzzy, white slippers, which yet another sister places on my feet as I hold on to other ladies for support. How many of them are there? I sense my Mother is here, calming me. I imagine her caressing my shoulders, but I don't see her. She's hanging back so the others don't notice her. She wasn't in the training class.

The sisters coax me to a white manicure/pedicure station, where they poke, prod and trim all twenty nails to perfection. One paints my nails, fingers and toes, a ruby red, and then covers the top half of the nails with a sparkly midnight blue. I don't usually go for this kind of thing, but I have to admit I like the way the polish looks. Not white, for one thing.

The matrons bustle me to a massage table covered in white flannel sheets. The woman who encased me in the robe removes it and indicates I should lie face down on the table. I comply. Four razors deftly shave my entire backside, except for my head. I never thought of shaving my butt before. They have me roll over on my back and shave my entire front, including all of my pubic hair. The only hair I have left is on my head. It's becoming more precious to me by the minute.

Once shaven, they exfoliate my skin with lavender oil and sea salt, the excess removed with hot towels. My skin retains a light sheen; I hope I'm too slippery to stay on top of. Robe Lady swoops in and replaces the robe, and then the gaggle takes me over to a barber's chair with a large, round mirror in front of it, encircled in bright, clear light bulbs.

I haven't seen my face in so long that it's like an awkward meeting with a stranger. The light acts as a filter, softening the lines of my square jaw, but I can still see that my cheeks are too thin. The circles under my eyes are darker than before, the hollows beneath my eyes too deep to reflect the light. The glow doesn't touch my hair, which once had sunny highlights from being outdoors. It no longer has any sheen to it. And my monobrow is flourishing.

A sister comes forward and places a small silver bowl of chocolates and frozen blueberries in my lap. She hands me a generous crystal goblet of full-bodied red wine, which matches the ruby color of my nails. I guzzle it down and hand the goblet back for more. I need a lot more wine. I catch sight of my Mother for a brief second in the mirror, but she disappears in

bun-heads and blue eyes before I can make eye contact. They shape my monobrow into two eyebrows—thank you, Lord! I finish all of the treats as they trim, blow dry, and curl my hair, letting it fall across my shoulders, and spray it with a shiny spray that makes my hair glimmer rose gold in the brilliant light.

Now the makeup, which I've also been dreading. I've never bothered with it and don't think I need it. They start gooping it on. First, one bad-breathed sister spackles on foundation; another applies powder; another makes my cheeks flushed and rosy. A woman with striking features seems to be in charge of the overall effect, as she gives instructions and moves my head from side to side to assure my makeup is even. She darkens my brows until they look heavy and ogreish to me. She shadows, lines, smudges, and wings my eyeliner until my eyes are lupine, and adds several coats of black mascara as I try not to blink. One last woman rushes in and expertly applies my crimson lipstick.

The sisters assemble behind me to observe the results in the mirror, looking only at me, as if their reflections weren't showing in the looking glass. They exclaim at my beauty and declare my makeover a success. I see a deranged Barbie doll with small boobs. Maybe they're too flat to be called boobs. They turn me in the chair with a small mirror in my hands so I can see the back of my hair—it's pretty in curls, and has grown a few inches since we came here. They beam at me, they caress me, they play with my hair, they gloat over the results. All except Mother. I catch one glimpse of her face in the mirror. She's not elated or disapproving of my appearance—her face is etched with angst. She disappears again behind the bevy of women, but I'm reassured that she's here.

The women seat me in a plush, high-backed white chair that reminds me of a throne. I'm facing a mirrored door opposite the one through which we arrived. It surely contains the

Breeding Room. Has my seed-bearer, or perhaps all of the Elders, been watching the entire time? The sisters form a ring around me, holding hands, their eyes closed, with peaceful smiles on their faces. I wish I could see Mother.

The ladies begin a prayer, in unison, that I'll be fruitful, that my womb will be accepting of the seed-bearer's sperm, that I may have many babies in the name of God and Daeios. That I'll maintain my health and that of my children. They repeat themselves and repeat themselves, and after a while, the prayer becomes more of a musical chant filled with resonant voices. The sisters sway from side to side, and it's as though they will transport me from the throne to the other side of the door with their voices alone.

The chanting stops abruptly, and two women drop from the circle to take my hands and help me rise from the throne. Robe Lady slips in to remove the robe. The women get behind me and drive me toward the door, giving me a moment to admire my lithe body in the full-length mirror one last time before it becomes distorted with pregnancy. I look prepubescent with my labia shaved and my almost nonexistent boobs. I drink up every line of my face and body. When will I see my reflection again?

"Off you go," Sister Leah says as she scans a key card to open the mirrored door. As she holds it open for me, the women exclaim, "Bless you, Sister Shea! Bless you!"

They push me through the door with soft hands on my back and ease the door closed behind me.