

# 21

‘You’re lucky. So lucky.’ We are standing by the dress rack and Imogen is watching the female Carer lace the ties at the back of my dress.

I look down at the beaded silk bodice, and the skirt that falls from my waist in a white cascade. The silk is ice against my skin.

I Image the army of New Joiners who cut and sewed. I see them stitching the tiny crystal beads. I see them embroidering the faint True Cause stars. It strikes me that we must have had to walk a lot of streets, sell a lot of books, set up a lot of stalls—just to make this dress.

But of course it is the Right Thing. The Right Thing. We are doing it for Howard, and Howard is doing so much for us.

Imogen fusses with the skirt of her own simple white dress. It has been adapted for the day, but hangs loose and is a touch too short. My dress has been specially made, but the other Chosen wear the same ones over and over, at least until the seams split or the hems tear beyond repair.

The other Chosen are not here. They will already be kneeling inside Star Temple, meditating on my Glorious

Future. Except for Felicity. Felicity is asleep in her bunk because she hasn't been well.

There will be other Followers in Star Temple, but no New Joiners. There are some things New Joiners are not ready to know.

A car draws up outside. 'This is it.' Imogen lowers the veil down over my face, and hugs me hard. 'I love you,' she says. 'And I'll miss you. We all will.'

I smile from behind the white gauze. 'It'll be your turn soon enough.'

'But it's over a year before my time comes.' Her voice is flat, but it picks up as she says suddenly, 'Unless he calls me early, like he did with you. You're lucky. So lucky.'

'Lucky. So lucky.' I do not know why I have been called early. It is not in line with Outsider law, and Howard is usually rigid about not breaking their rules. Breaking their rules just gives them a way to get at us. Excuses to come snooping round.

'Your flowers.' Imogen hands me the clasp of white lilies that we collected earlier this morning. It is normally the job of the Shadow to make the bouquet, but no one new has been moved up for me—I am still linked with Imogen and Felicity.

It was hard gathering lilies in the wood. The trees still seemed touched with the time I was there with Jamie, as if we had left all those moments behind and they were waiting for us to go back and reclaim them. But I must stop these memories. It will not help to be weakened again. Jamie brought me Bad Thoughts. He tried to lead me from the path, and I was haunted so for a while I followed. But not any more. The Counsellor has shown me this. I have sung and chanted and swayed and loved and the demons will not dance through me again. I look down at the lilies. 'These are lovely. You must have worked hard.'

The Carer walks to the door and checks outside. The car engine is still running and the smell of the exhaust blows in on us. 'It's time,' she says, coming back over to me. 'Are you ready?'

I walk slowly through the shed where I have lived since I was first Chosen, and stop by my bunk. I have a sudden urge to touch the frame, grab on to it, as if by holding it I will remember it better. But why do I want to remember? I am moving on to my Glorious Future. 'I'm ready.'

Imogen steps behind me and lifts the train of my dress.

'True Cause is the true cause.' The Carer stands aside as I pass her on my way out to the car.

'True Cause is the true cause,' I reply.

At every step I can feel the cobbles press through the soles of the white silk shoes, and it hurts. The hurting surprises me. Nothing should hurt me on my Bonding day.

The Watcher who is driving is already standing by the open back door.

'True Cause is the true cause,' he says, as I dip my head and climb inside.

'True Cause is the true cause.'

It is strange in the car. There is a perfumed smell that sticks in my nostrils and my throat. The seats are too soft. The engine too smooth. I missed my time as Shadow to the Bride because of what happened to Meryl, so I have not had the training run that Imogen is getting now. I sit in the centre of the too-soft back seat, my dress spreading round me. Imogen holds my hand. The darkened windows seem to tint the passing fields, making them dull. Depressed. Along the far side runs the line of trees that edges the wood. I will not look. I will not look.

'Don't do that,' Imogen whispers. I jump because I think she means 'don't think like that'—because she

has caught my thoughts—but she is looking at my lap. I have been picking at the petals of a lily and have stripped it open. A tiny white heart nestles in the centre of it. I ease the heart out with my thumbnail and lay it on my palm, sorry that I have exposed it. Sorry I cannot keep it safe.

The limousine slides to a halt outside Star Temple and the Watcher comes round to let us out.

‘True Cause is the true cause.’

‘True Cause is the true cause.’

The golden door is open and I can hear the other Chosen singing—only the Chosen can sing at a Bonding. All these girls—these friends—I have grown up with. They sound so young. They are so young. I cannot understand why, but I want to cry. But then, without even knowing that my silk-clad feet have been moving, I am inside, my hand holding on to Rael who has stepped forward to escort me to the front. Imogen is behind me, carrying the train of the dress.

Howard stands at the front, shimmering in his silver Bonding robe.

I walk towards him. The air in the temple chokes with the scent of lilies.

And as I reach Howard I seem suddenly to stand outside myself, to watch as if the girl beside him in the magical beaded dress is someone else. It is just some stranger murmuring the True Cause promises, letting him seal his palm against hers.

The Chosen raise their voices in song again.

Howard and the stranger are joined beyond Endtime.

He lifts her veil, and it is as if the movement jerks me back into my body again. I have to look at him. The skin on his face is sallow and yellowed. His cheeks are sunken and there are lines pulling out from his eyes and his mouth. Amongst the silver blond of his hair there are

deadened streaks of grey. Why had I never seen that he is so old?

Jamie. Jamie.

I crush my fingers tightly around the stems of the lilies. Build a fence. Keep him out. Keep him out.

The voices of the Chosen rise higher. Lifting my hair back from my face Howard marks me with the Dust of Destiny. I feel the shape of the W as it is drawn onto my forehead.

I smile, the way that all the Brides before me have smiled. 'True Cause is the true cause,' I murmur. 'True Cause is the true cause.'

But I have shivered at his touch, and I can feel the W like something numbing. Like my skin traced with ice.

Now Howard's hand is gripping mine and it is as rough as dry leaves. Memories of Jamie blast through me. I Image my mother crying, and the bearded man. *Think for yourself, Maria. Think for yourself.*

I will not remember. I must not remember.

We turn together to face the Followers. Behind us Rael opens the chamber door.

They blow through slowly at first, a release of white butterflies that keeps thickening until they are swarming through Star Temple. They settle on heads and shoulders, or spread their wings and flatten against the golden walls. I notice some rise as high as the ceiling. Others cluster around the windows. There must be hundreds. Thousands. The Followers start chanting, their voices soft as dust. *'Vessen terr sherrlie roomay.'* Two butterflies settle in the folds of my dress. Another floats down onto the lilies that I am still clutching in my left hand.

I must not touch these butterflies. Must not even breathe on them. They are sacred—a symbol of my Glorious Future.

But as I kneel with Howard and sway in the flow of the endless chants, I realize with a strange ache that although the release of the butterflies has been part of every Bonding I have ever watched, by the next day—the next Star Temple Meeting—there is never any trace of them.

I am still shivering. Still struggling. And I do not want to think about how the butterflies might be cleared away.