

Please note that this book contains themes of eugenics, discrimination, sexual control, suicide and enslavement.

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CHAPTER ONE

Beware the Eyes of the Wolf

The world didn't end all at once but drip by drip: land slowly sinking under a new tide. When the rain began to beat harder and longer, at first it was easy to ignore, to stick out your tongue and taste not death, but life in the cold beads that landed there.

Until the sun became too hot, the storms too cold and the space between each too small.

Crops failed. Famine spread. The population dwindled to almost nothing. Great cities went dark and silver birds no longer flew. The cables that connected the world at high speed were ripped into worthless tentacles, grasping at the surface of the water as if begging for life.

And then the last deluge came: the great rolling walls of water.

Survivors called them the Sephtis Floods. The waves that came too fast, too sudden, devouring buildings, tearing up forests, and sweeping whole cities away in one deafening explosion of sound: a swirling drift of brick and mortar, spitting metal carriages into the sky. One long tide of terror.

And when the seas calmed, the world was smaller.

It went on. But divisions remained. Wars raged across new borders.

The county now known as Penn Vale envied Foxfields its salt pans, Waddow its blacksmiths, Castle Hill its isolation, Stone Hamlet its books. And all eyed the thriving fields of Penn with gnawing hunger. Fights to the death over bread and seed became the biggest threat to life. So the Calde Valley Council was born. They built border walls, restricted movement and trade. The survival of the species became all that mattered.

But the counties were small, the gene pools shallow. Children died young, unable to fend off even the slightest cold. The chilled hand of extinction reached out again, and fear grew, the new world built on whispers of the old, half-memories turned into stubborn truths.

Only the healthy must be allowed to breed. Not for love, not out of free will, but purely to cleanse the world of defects.

No one remembers a time before the decommissionings, or when the borders were opened for the first Virtue Season. They only know the part they play within it.



“Beware the eyes of the wolf.”

“Fear the sound of his song.”

The tick-tock way the girls speak back to Miss Warne in the schoolhouse is familiar, if not comforting. The room is neatly organized with debs standing to attention before Chief Councillor Torrent. He stands with the air of a man who needs no introduction, confident his uniform alone inspires awe. Which it does. If it stood on the stage without him in it, we would fear it: grey hooded cloak, long boots, a mace at the waist. His hood is down, and his skin is pink, scrubbed and raw as if he’s taken a sea sponge to it and rubbed too hard. His eyes dart, fast and fleeting, searching for defects, which he seems to see everywhere.

I smooth down my dress, scrape the dry mud on the hem, which itches under my nails. I spent the morning digging ditches with Father to tempt the rains away from his crops and I am as hot and sticky as the storm.

Torrent lifts his hand to quiet the already silent debs, raises the piece of paper and reads, without needing to look at it. “Debutants, now that you are in your eighteenth year, each of you will participate in the Virtue Season. At its culmination, you will be united with a suitable partner, one who is likely to produce healthy offspring and ensure the successful proliferation of our kind.”

The letter closed in my fist matches the one in his. I don’t need to read it either. I grip it lightly, as if it’s made

of glass. Every deb in the school does the same, watched by wide-eyed girls in lower years whose turn is yet to come, but my hand itches – I want to screw up the paper, rip it into a thousand pieces, but I fold it calmly, put it in my pocket. I'll burn it later, scrape the ashes to nothing.

I've always known this letter would come, the precise wording even. I have heard debs speak these words season after season, numb to the sound. I didn't know it would feel like this. Even this morning, the hawthorn on the lanes to school appeared the same as always – thorns no sharper today than any that have preceded it. The spring sky wrapped me in dense cloud as it always has; water cloaking us on all sides, just the same. So, the desperation catches me off guard, fear frothing in my throat, bitter and bubbling.

“Over the course of the next year, you will give yourselves to this process freely and, in return for your obedience, each county will be afforded the privilege of hosting a ball.”

Agatha is here, her hand a lightning rod in mine: velvet and steel. She and I have taken the same winding route together every day since we were seven – friends communing daydreams through linked hands; dandelions plucked from overgrown paths; ignorant of the watchers in green cloaks that blend with the hillsides; innocent of the rules of Calde Valley. And despite knowing our paths will soon be hewn, her fate and mine have always seemed as one. Until today. And yet she holds my hand as if my fate is worse than hers.

“If you conduct yourselves morally, within the guidance and sight of the council, you will be able to state a preference. If you form no preference – or your preference is not sanctioned by the council – a mate will be chosen for you.”

“As long as you’re not flawed,” Agatha says in a breathless whisper as Chief Councillor Torrent reads aloud. I kick her as subtly as I can but don’t completely manage to smother my smirk, don’t completely try.

“The Chastity Rule must be observed. Infringements will invoke the death penalty.”

Chastity. Death. These words hover around the hall like seagulls on a wave, travel the long lengths of the floorboards like footsteps. I shiver. We all do. The sting between my thighs is raw, hot with the memory of cold surgical steel. Our first chastity checks were this morning.

“Decommissions will attend the balls in thanks for their sacrifice and as a reminder of its purpose.”

“So generous.” Agatha seethes, the weeping wound beneath her eye glistening sorely as her salt-grey eyes roll. Her sarcasm stretches as thin as the skin that tries to seal itself over the brand of a freshly made decom.

Torrent is a stone sculpture, stiff and proud on the stage, a metallic glimmer in his eyes. His emblem flowers writhe on his chest as if caught in the breeze as he heaves with the thrill of power. Miss Warne sweats beside him, lathered in his heat. She is not an old woman. Her eyes

sparkle with youth, neat brown hair shows no sign of grey, but her spine arcs as if she has aged prematurely and tugs her shoulders forward. Her eyes are lined with pain, though she sets her mouth against it. She wears black, like Agatha. She turns her head from Torrent as if he smells bad, though the smell of meadowsweet is almost toxic, rolling off him even from this far away. He rests his thumb in his belt loop, cradles the mace that hangs there and flexes his fingers.

“Debutants, stand with me and remember,” he commands.

We know the response and our fragile assembly inhales and speaks as one: “In the name of our ancestors, and the Lost Cities, we must make this land fruitful, strive for virtue. Now and always.”

Our voices fuse together, rise and echo back, the sound forming living tendrils.

“I’m going to faint,” I whisper to Agatha – my voice dry.

“No – you’re going to get through it,” she says too loudly. Always just a little too loud. She squeezes my hand, jolts me into the hot space beside her.

“He’s coming,” she says as I struggle to stay in the room, my mind soaring over the green and blue, out beyond the Drift to an unknown world the council says doesn’t exist.

And yet my heart burns to find it.

Torrent makes his way down the line, girls speaking

the same words one after the other. One by one, they fail to meet his eye as he brings his face close to theirs, inspecting the resolve of each one. They shrivel, wilting flowers.

“Manon Pawlak. It is an honour to dedicate yourself to the Virtue Season. What is your pledge?” he says, looking down at his list where I imagine my name flaming in fiery letters. His clean, pock-marked skin is taut over the muscles of his face. He doesn’t blink. Do I?

“What is your pledge?” he asks again, harsh and unfeeling.

“I pledge my body and soul willingly, Councillor,” I answer – the words taught to us by Miss Warne, rehearsed over and over until they are meaningless exhalations. He doesn’t seem to notice how my body is rigid; my soul suffocated. My voice, thankfully, is steady, though I must be gritting my teeth because my jaw aches.

He nods lightly and moves along the line, concealing a yawn, I think.

Bastard.

Agatha gives her consent too, despite that seeping red crescent that half-circles her left eye. The slightest tightening of her grip gives her away as she speaks and I know what’s about to happen, hope I can get her to safety before it does.

Defects are the end of our civilization, the council says. And even though every fibre, every sinew in my body aches to fight what I know is wrong, I give my

consent. Because it is only the illusion of choice they offer, and I know it. What choice can there be when every attempt at rebellion ends in death?

Torrent ends the ceremony and shuffles Miss Warne away – slowed by her curved spine and tapping cane but no less beautiful for it. The debts filter into the yard, uncertain and slow.

We are at the furthest edge of Penn, the Boot, where the world slips off a cliff just beyond the schoolhouse door. The hot wind whirs around us and will soon rupture into fevered rain. Again.

Agatha walks heavy, hanging on my arm.

Not yet, Ag. Please.

We follow the line of the huge metal fence that severs us from the boys, and I feel the familiar fight to look away. Someone is always watching. One of the watchers will see. Brack is in his tower, sharp-eyed as always.

Beware the eyes of the wolf.

It is forbidden to speak to the boys until the first ball, and even looking at the fence feels criminal. But the blond-haired boy pulls my eye. I try not to think of his name, though I know it and it sits on my lips unspoken.

Tomie.

And then it happens.

“Not yet,” I say pleadingly, as if I can delay her seizure by wanting it so, but her eyes are hazy, her body stiffening. Before she falls, I take hold of her and lay her down as carefully as I can, as I have done many times before. She’s

still for a moment, and then the twitches take her. Her hair, the colour of cracked wheat, splays across her face and her back arches, somehow elegant, even now.

Some of the debs snigger and huddle, staring as if they haven't seen it before. Brack – a dirty hateful man whom everyone in Penn despises, leans out from his tower, laughter ruffling his broad shoulders.

Like me, Agatha will go to the balls, but she will not be allowed to choose a mate because the council say her blood is flawed. Because they have ripped her motherhood from her flesh and branded her face with a crescent scar to show her failing.

“Leave her be,” I cry, pushing at Tabithe who is heading up the crowd as always. She steadies herself, her neck long, her chin pointed, as fierce as the mythic swans in Miss Warne's stories. Her eyes shimmer with the threat of a fight as she edges towards me, her full lips pressed into the cold sneer that I'm sure will soon set there for ever. But she won't take me on whilst the councillors are here.

“Come on,” she mutters to her hatchlings, “we need to get home before curfew anyway.” And they waddle after her in a line.

I crouch beside Ag, who's still now but not alert, and cradle her head in my lap. Her cheek is grazed and pooling with spots of red where her skin has rubbed against the hard floor as she's seized. I wipe the abrasion clean with my thumb, but the red pools again.

The seizures began last year but no one knew. She told no one. Until she had to. I still find it hard to believe. Her parents' bloodlines were pure, sanctioned by the council.

When it happened at school, Miss Warne was bound by law to report it, the scar below her own eye lending no allegiance to her favourite student.

“Agatha!”

His scream is sudden, splits the air. And I know the mouth that makes the sound belongs to Alsis: dusty hair and moon-shaped eyes that have followed her always.

“Agatha!” he shouts again. I lay her head on the floor as gently as I can, run to the fence before she's fully alert, the beat of my heart propelling me. I've never been this close to the fence before, nor spoken to a boy as openly as this. The metal wire seems to hum.

“She's fine. Be quiet. It'll be over soon,” I hiss, shaking the fence as if to shake him off it, the fear in my gut solid.

“Come away,” Tomie says, pulling at Alsis but looking at me with eyes that see more than I want them to. I blink in thanks – can do no more with the thrill of his scent hanging in the air. Carved wood, cedar, and oak – the carpenter's son – who so many girls prefer because they will never go hungry in his house. He tries to yank Alsis up, but he is a dead weight and stockier than Tomie.

“Torrent's still inside. *Think*,” I seethe. But Alsis isn't thinking. He shakes the metal fence, screams into its metallic sound. His body shakes, as if Agatha's spasms have travelled to him by some hidden channel between

her heart and his. It has never happened in front of him before. And seeing it is like a puzzle you cannot solve. How do you fight something that's so out of your control, beyond your understanding?

"Come on," Tomie begs. I try not to notice the way his arms harden with the effort.

But it's too late. Torrent emerges from the schoolhouse, Miss Warne lagging behind. Her hair is dishevelled, her cheeks flooded red. Her black cloak is gone, and her skirt is askew, her eyes smeared sore. There's a circlet of tiny red pressure wounds on her cheek that look a lot like the spikes on the end of Torrent's mace. And he is angry, fiddling with his grey cloak, refastening the loops and buttons at the neck.

"What is going on here?" he demands, a little relish staining his temper. He steps around Agatha with barely a look and heads straight for us. I step away, ashamed.

"Explain yourself, boy," he commands. Alsis still clings to the fence, silently gritting his teeth in a way that carves a hollow into his cheek, dusty fringe framing his eyes.

Another Councillor – Reade, I think – stalks up behind Alsis on the other side of the fence, his eyes wide but controlled. He walks steadily, measuring the scene, flanked by a couple of watchers, including Brack. Reade must have taken the boys' pledges whilst Torrent took ours. Brack's crooked teeth gape in a smile.

Shit.

I open my mouth to speak – but my voice hitches, sharp in my throat.

“Reade,” Torrent barks, his mouth slanting into a smirk. “I believe we have an infringement here. This boy has formed an unsanctioned preference, I’d say. Who for, boy? Not that hideous decom, surely?” He glances at Agatha, something unreadable softening the hard lines of his eyes, as if seeing something else, or *someone* else. He stares at her, bewildered, his head tilted to one side.

Agatha is sitting now, a girl in our year kneeling next to her. I try to remember to be nicer to Bertie.

Torrent shakes himself free of the image that has tamed him, and makes a show of disgust, coils his lip around his practised revulsion of decoms.

Hypocrite.

“Sir,” I say, my voice catching. If I was as strong as everyone says, I’d spit in his face.

And be hanged from the nearest skeleton tree.

“There’s no preference. That’s just... That’s how people react sometimes, the first time they see a seizure like that. A lot of people are ... disgusted.” My throat clasps tight around the word, angry at the feel of it, at the lie and the twisted truth inside it. I look down at Alsis to censure him for a crime he couldn’t even begin to fathom. He has always loved Agatha.

Torrent tuts, his hand tickles his mace. I wonder, when he was doing what he was doing to Miss Warne, how did he manage with one hand always on his mace?

The councillors treat decoms that way – safe in the knowledge there’ll be no damaged spawn. The decoms don’t fight it. Not after a while. It is just another part of their world.

“Reade,” Torrent orders, “take this boy inside. Remind him of our rules. The council will rule on the penalty for this disobedience at the hearings.”

Reade – a small man neatly packed with muscle – looks unwilling, and I notice his mace looks unused, the grip still perfectly varnished where Torrent’s is worn to the bare wood. It is not him but the watchers who yank Alsis away, Brack lugging his fighting body like a rag doll.

“As for *you*,” Torrent snorts, stepping closer to me. I feel around me for the blond-haired boy, for Agatha, for their strength to aid mine. But I feel only the glare of Torrent, who seems to grow into the space around me, making my heart flare and burn until I think I might strike him.

“Councillor?” Miss Warne interrupts, shuffling towards us as quickly as she can manage, her cane tapping the floor with a click-clack sound. “Won’t you accompany me back to my office?” she asks, as she hooks her arm through his and tries to pull his bulk away. He is still at first, looks down at her with that same practised horror he looked at Agatha with. But it soon turns to a thinly veiled desire.

“Of course,” he says, giving in to the strongest pull.

“You were showing me examples of the students’ work.”
They walk away, not quite in step as she struggles to
match his pace, and it is the wind that speaks his words.
“The girl’s family will donate *double* to the claims this
season,” it says, carrying the sound.

Bile twists my stomach, the threat of hunger burying
the deep gratitude I feel to Miss Warne.

This is how my season begins.