

Chapter 1

Milana learns she was different from the others when she was eight years old. When she first sees death.

The morning smells like rain, clinging to the damp walls of the orphanage after a night of storms. She wakes to the sound of bells tolling, ringing out to signal the start of another day. She cracks her eyes open and sees the sunlight filtering through the tall, arched windows painting the room in foggy golden streaks. The other children are starting to stir, yawning and stretching as they haul themselves out of bed.

Milana pads down the cold hallway, the chill of the morning air seeped into the stone. These morning sermons fill her with dread, being the most boring part of the day. The chapel smells of wax and old books, with younger girls sitting at the front fidgeting restlessly, whispering amongst themselves. The older ones sit at the back, their eyes are fixed to the front, quiet and unconcerned.

She slides into her usual seat on the hard wooden bench at the front, next to Coral and Sasha, the two girls chatting away. Usually the conversation would draw her in, but today her head felt a hum of pain buzzing through it, leaving her distracted. She stares at the ceiling, her hands fidgeting with the mirror pendant on her neck, opening and closing the item with small clicks.

A priestess makes her way towards the pulpit, opening a heavy pristine book that thumps against the wood. Mother Jeneth's hair glimmers under the sunlight like smooth pale silk. Her voice is a steady drone as she reads out the scriptures of Atheriosis, the almighty Goddess of life.

“Sol vest zafir, sol vest moras, sol vest kethar—”

Milana stares at the stained glass portrait of the Goddess behind the priestess and feels a hint of agitation in her chest. To those who do not possess the Goddess' holy light, the power of life, the scriptures are nothing but noise; broken syllables that are strung together in some strange manner. She never understood the purpose of these sermons. What was the point?

She knows she's supposed to be paying attention, to be letting the scriptures fill her soul with light, but she just can't find it in herself to care.

Then the words changed. The syllables began to blend together into coherency.

"Life is eternal, life is reverent, life is truth."

Milana's head snaps up, staring at the priestess with widened eyes. She looks around her, seeing if anyone else heard it. But the children around her are none the wiser, heads bowed, eyes closed and hands clasped in devotion. She blinks as her breath catches in her throat.

She shakes her head, thinking it's just a side effect of her headache, but the words keep coming, clear and defined as they sink into her skin. Real solid words.

"And through her light, we ascend. Through her benevolence, we are born."

Suddenly the world blooms into vividness, an excitement, shivers in her heart. Because she isn't just Milana the troublemaker, the orphan. She is different. She is special. She is chosen.

She has life energy. She is a girl blessed by the Goddess Atheriosis.

Before she could stop it, a giggle emerges from her throat. It echoes through the chapel like a blade through butter, shattering the reverent, hushed quietness of the sermon. Her face cracks into a grin, her eyes alight with joy.

The priestesses standing at the side observing the sermon turn their heads towards her like a whip, scowls etched into their faces. An older priestess, Mother Nessa, rushes towards Milana, her robes billowing behind her. Her greying hair and the cold fury painted on her high cheekbones sends a shiver down Milana's spine.

"Milana Monatelle," Mother Nessa approaches her, her voice low and icy, "How dare you interrupt the sacred service once again." Her pointed fingers find purchase, grabbing Milana by the arm, her nails digging into her skin as she yanks her up from the bench.

“Wait, I hear it, I understand it! Sol vest zafir, sol vest moras, sol vest kethar,” Milana calls out, her voice ringing loudly in the room. But it does nothing to deter Mother Nessa’s war path as she drags Milana out the back of the chapel.

“Silence. I don’t want to hear another lie out of you,” The Mother Nessa commands, “Your blatant disrespect for the holy word will be punished.” Milana stumbled behind her, her eyes flashing with outrage as she struggles against her iron grip.

“I’m not lying! You said the ones chosen by Atheriosis can understand the scriptures, and I do!” Milana tries to explain, “I swear, I just heard words from the sermon.”

“You must think I’m a fool.” Mother Nessa mutters, each syllable falling out like chipped marble, hard and bitter. Milana’s pleas fall on deaf ears as Mother Nessa pulls her along until they reach a small room at the end of the hall. “You will spend the rest of your day in the prayer room, copying lines until you learn the meaning of respect.” She opens the door and shoves Milana inside.

Mother Nessa lets go of Milana as she tosses her towards the large oak table sitting in the center of the room, shoving pieces of parchment in front of her with a brutality that crinkles the pages “I want to see twenty pages by the end of the day, or else you’re missing dinner.” She orders before turning away from her, beginning to stroll out of the room.

Milana stands up, running after her, “Wait! Wait, just give me a chance to—”, she reaches the door too late, as it slams in her face. She hears the lock click shut and pounds her tiny fists against the wood. “Come back!”

Milana pauses, leaning her head against the unyielding door as the muffled voice of the priestess drifts through. “The Goddess would not choose a girl like her... not with that attitude. But could she really be...?” Mother Nessa murmurs distantly. Milana continues to hammer against the door, but it’s no use. The priestess’ voice and footsteps fade away.

“Please...” Milana pleads, “I’m not lying.” She slams her hand against the door a few more times, feeling the wood splinters dig into her skin before she gives up, letting her hand fall aimlessly to her side. She looks around the familiar dim room, a room she frequented far too

often for her usual antics: late night wanderings, ditching chores, and running her mouth at the wrong times.

The last time she was in this room was a week ago, when she and a group of other girls her age were assigned to scrub the chapel floors. Milana groaned, completely disinterested in the task. The grimy stone tiles would take ages to clean. In protest, instead of doing what she was told, Milana raised her head up, jutting her chin out as she pulled her face into a silly grimace. She mimicked Mother Nessa's shrill tone, "Scrub, scrub, scrub! Don't just stand there, girls!" She grabbed a mop nearby, waving it around like a wand. The other girls giggled, making her puff up as she became more and more engrossed in her performance. She strutted about the room, stomping her feet, wagging her finger, and pointing around.

She was so engrossed that she didn't realize their laughter had stopped and turned into nervous looks. She turned—and there was Mother Nessa, standing in the doorway, her large shadow looming like a heavy storm. Before Milana could react or come up with some excuse, she was already being marched over to the prayer room.

Milana rubs her wrist as she remembers the sharp sting of the ruler against her flesh. But that day feels like a lifetime ago now. She can't help but feel a small smile slide onto her face, her eyes alight with awe. Not even the punishments could stop the pounding of her heart today. Life energy. She had it. Her, of all people! The words circle inside her head, buzzing.

Milana shuffles over to the table, slumping down on the wooden chair. Her eyes idly wander to a name carved in the wood of the table, her fingers tracing each letter.

Evie.

It wasn't the first time someone had manifested life energy here.

There was a girl a year ago, the only girl who wasn't afraid to associate with Milana, given her infamous reputation. She could still remember that day so clearly. Milana was assigned to work the gardens outside. She had neglected her duty for weeks, and the wilted plant that sat before was evidence of her disobedience. Its leaves were brown and dry, the terracotta pot baking in the blistering sun. Evie, with her eyes glazed over, stumbled towards the plant like a

sleepwalker. Milana stood there, transfixed and shocked, as Evie pressed her hand against the soil.

A bloom of light, warm and yellow blossomed from her palm. It seeped into the plant, and its leaves gradually faded into a vibrant green, its shriveled petals unfurling and blooming before Milana's eyes.

It was a miracle. Like the ones written in the scriptures. Like the sacred vows uttered by the priestesses. That other worldly look in Evie's gaze, like she was a piece of the goddess herself.

Evie had disappeared in the middle of the night. Milana overheard the priestesses talking, whispered conversations when they thought the children weren't around. The ascension ceremony. To be taken up into the sky and become a knight to serve the Goddess.

A sudden warmth on her face draws Milana back to the present. Sunlight creeps through the small window that sat high on the wall as the clouds part. She rests her chin on her arms, staring upwards towards the grand shape of a glittering castle sitting distantly in the pale blue. Atherion, the capital city of Atheria that oversaw all below it. She looks down at the pendant mirror resting on her neck, the beautifully peaceful portrait of the Goddess resting upon the scratched gold. Its dull luster glinted in the dim room, a gift from her mother before she left, before she never came back. Her parents were knights, they were heroes of Atheria buried in cold soil.

Milana digs her nails into her arm. What did it really mean to be chosen?

She feels a burn of restlessness in her chest. She couldn't stand to be in this terrible room a second longer. Leaping to her feet, the chair screeches before clattering to the floor. The walls are closing in like a cage, and she needs to be free. Suddenly, a small wounded chirp drives her attention. She looks through the window and in the tall grass she sees what looks to be a small bird, laying on its back twitching weakly. It needed help.

With a burning determination, she decides she will get out of here no matter what. She could help the bird, do something brave, like the knights in the newspapers. If she was chosen, if it's her destiny to be a knight, then she needed to protect all life around her.

Milana examines the wall closely and realizes that some of the stone bricks have been dislodged, jutting out of the wall and beckoning her to scale it. She kicks off her shoes, and lands a foot against the cold brick. With great effort, she began to climb, slowly but surely she was making her way out.

Then, her foot slips against the brick, her heart lurching in her chest as she falls, hitting the ground with a painful thud. The wind knocked out of her lungs as she cries out.

But she couldn't give up. Not when the little bird needed her.

She grits her teeth as she pushes herself back up, her legs trembling as she attempts to scale the wall again. She falls, and she gets up again. Over and over. Her hands are slick with sweat and her arms burn as she grip the rigid stone. Until eventually, she makes it near the top. A yell tears out of her hoarse throat, a battle cry as she reaches the window, her hand grabbing the sill and pulling herself over the edge.

She looks out the window and realizes she was quite high up. Milana looks around for a moment until she spots a pile of leaves swept up on the grass. She braces herself as she tumbles out the window, landing in it. She lays there for a moment, catching her breath. The cool autumn air brushes against her skin as she stares out into the sky. A triumphant grin on her face as she relishes in her freedom. She looks up at the window she just climbed out of. She knows the priestesses would have her head for this stunt, but the thrill of getting away with something always outweighs her fear of punishment.

Milana emerges from the crunchy pile, dusting bits of leaf and twigs from her shirt. She looks out beyond the edge of the garden, the sprawling expanse of the Mire greets her gaze. The unassuming and plain hills and forests, coated in a sepia haze, with small buildings interspersed amongst them.

She looks at the great maple tree to her left and spots the injured sparrow on the ground. Milana approaches the bird carefully, her heart aching at its painful chirps. Its small body struggles as its wing juts out at a wrong angle.

“Hey there friend,” Milana approaches the bird, her voice low and reassuring, “don’t be scared. I’ll help you.” She reaches her hand out slowly, watching the bird’s frantic flails. But to her surprise, it doesn’t try to fly away. Its dark eyes blinking at her as she gathers it into her palm, feeling the touch of its soft feathers. She watches it in awe as the tiny creature seems to trust her. A strange, foreign sensation hissing below her skin. It was like the same feeling she had when she understood the scriptures, but now more intense, like magnetism.

She scoops up the bird into her hand, cradling it close to her. It flutters in distress, but she only murmurs reassurances as she leans into the tingling sensation in her fingertips. She reaches her hand out to clasp it over the small creature’s form, determined to help.

But instead of a warm glow, the same one she saw from Evie’s hand, a dark shadow slithers from her skin. In an instant, the bird stills as the energy seeps into it, like a candle blown out in the wind. She gasps, stumbling back a step as the shadow fades away. The sparrow lays limp in her hand, its eyes dull as its warmth fades away. A chill runs down Milana’s spine.

This isn’t life energy. It was dark and terrible, something horrible and evil.

“No...” she chokes out, “birdie? Please don’t be dead...please don’t be dead...” she begs, shaking the cooling body in her hands. She mutters the words over and over again like a mantra, but nothing brings it back. No soft heart beats, no little breaths, nothing. It’s dead. It’s dead and she killed it! She didn’t mean to! She only tried to help, she only wanted to fix it. She stares down at the sparrow, unable to move, unable to think.

Milana’s mind whirls in fear as she stares up at the sun-speckled canopy above, panic rising through her chest. It was death energy, the antithesis of everything the Goddess stood for. She remembers the stories the priestesses had told them about the God of death, Kiglorth, a cruel being that reveled in bloodshed.

Just the other day, she had been running through the gardens with Coral and Sasha alongside a few other girls after chores, the air warm against their skin as they charged at each other with sticks. Someone always got to be Atheriosis, commanding her army of knights while others pretended to be Kiglorth's monsters and followers, growling and charging at them. Milana had waved her stick around, yelling "for the Goddess!" as she leaped fearlessly into the fray. She had wanted to be the Goddess too, but the other girls said she was too loud, too wild, and too scrappy for the role. She was okay with that. Being a knight meant you could protect everyone. It meant you were brave...it meant you were good.

With shaking hands, she settles the bird down on the forest floor. She could not bear to hold it for a moment longer as her skin crawled with unease and terror. She squeezes her eyes shut, fighting back tears, digging her nails into her palm.

This can't be happening. She was chosen! She was supposed to embody the Goddess' light, follow in the steps of her parents and become a protector of Atheria. Not this...not to be cursed, to be damned for evil.

She's heard of those who manifested death energy before, but they were all distant reports in the news. The criminals with death energy she had seen in the papers, their eyes dark and malevolent. They were imprisoned. Cast away and locked up to protect those around them from their destructive power.

At the end of their games, the Goddess and her knights had always triumphed over evil, Kiglorth and his army defeated.

She looks out into the surrounding forest—the scenery seems to warp before her eyes. The trees feel tall and imposing, its shadows dark and ominous.

The worst part is, there is something within her that feels too big for her skin. Her body is heated as she breathes heavily from the sensation the power provides. As the tendrils of death energy claimed the bird, it only seemed to hunger for more. If the priestesses found out about this, she didn't know what they would do with her. But if she didn't tell them, what would happen then? Would she keep killing things, hurting innocents with her cursed power?

A wave of nausea washes over her as she sinks to her knees on the muddy forest floor. The bells chime in the distance, signaling the end of the morning sermon. The sound is slow and hollow, ringing with a sick sense of finality. The horrified recognition suffocates her chest as she begins to cry.