

A vibrant, high-contrast photograph of a tropical jungle scene. The background is filled with various types of leaves, including large, dark green monstera leaves and smaller, reddish-brown ferns. A white compass rose is positioned in the upper center of the image. The title 'A GENTLE TYRANNY' is written in a large, white, serif font, centered over the image. The letter 'A' is significantly larger than the other letters and is flanked by horizontal lines. The words 'GENTLE' and 'TYRANNY' are stacked below it. The overall color palette is dominated by deep greens, reds, and oranges, with the white text providing a stark contrast.

A
GENTLE
TYRANNY

NEDÉ RISING SERIES



JESS CORBAN

A GENTLE TYRANNY



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A Gentle Tyranny

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ARENA

NEVEVE

Prologue

FEBRUARY 16, 2067

MIAMI

IT'S FINISHED, she thinks. *It's really finished.*

Tristan Pierce's fingers move quickly along the patchwork of headlines, photos, and quotes covering the wall-sized bulletin board in her office. The tall brunette yanks the mementos from staples and tarnished pins and stuffs them into a small metal case within an army surplus duffel. According to Melisenda, they could have company sooner than planned. Her best friend is rarely wrong.

But they're too late, she muses with satisfaction, smiling for the first time in months. No one will find us once we board the boat, and even if they do, what's done is done.

The clippings are crisp between her fingers, and spotted brown, like her own creasing skin—aged beyond her forty-one years by the horrors she's witnessed. She considers reattaching them, leaving the wall as a memorial—a reminder to the monsters of what they've done. But, compulsive or not, she can't bring herself to part with her *why*—the impetus which propelled her to form the

Safety Coalition almost seventeen years before. This montage has pushed her, sustained her, through each nightmarish discovery and daunting obstacle she has faced as leader of the Coalition.

The headlines still ignite as much fury as the first time she read them: “9 out of 10 Girls Molested before Age 15,” “‘Daughter Sex’ Most Searched Internet Term,” “Police Find a Dozen Four-Year-Old Girls in Brothel.” Her gaze moves to a photo of thirty-six women in a heap of blood and black cloth, beheaded for “crimes against Allah,” then to a faded picture of a younger Tristan, arm draped around a smiling young woman, pinned beside the headline, “Mutilated Teen Identified as Sasha Pierce.”

Once again, she allows rage to check the tears threatening to spill, neither her pain nor her fury dimmed decades after losing her sister to a man who showed no remorse for his crimes.

As she slips the picture of Sasha into the case, a final headline stares back from the now-blank wall: “Will Women Ever Be Safe Again?”

Even now, when she knows the answer to that last headline is *yes*, women will finally—*finally*—be safe again, more horrific memories bleed into the corners of her mind. She remembers her father—the first man who should have offered protection but betrayed her instead. The others who made a living degrading her. Waking up in an alley, aching for death. If she were the only one violated, perhaps she could live with that. But she can’t stand by while two-thirds of all women are stripped of their dignity—abused in countless ways—because of genetics. Simply because they’re female, born to be prey for men. Innocent prey like Sasha.

Those brutes, she curses silently, heat flushing up her throat and into her cheeks.

She rubs the back of her neck and inhales deeply, forcing herself to push down the dangerous spiral of fury.

Breathe, Tristan. Breathe.

A GENTLE TYRANNY

She has practiced the coping technique a million times, and taught it nearly as many, to women around the world who found solace in the underground efforts of the Coalition. All those women—battered, abused, frightened to lose their basic human rights—were an easy sell. In only a decade she had gained the commitment of key women from each nation on every continent. Desperation fueled them to end the perversion, their passion coercing the moderates. When it was time to execute the Liberation sixteen months ago, worldwide implementation was seamless, completed two months earlier than scheduled.

And now, a new world is dawning.

Tonight Tristan, along with twenty other Coalition members from the United States, will sail for their new home in Central America aboard a covert vessel. Fifty-four international members will make their own journeys to the site, embarking from twenty-five countries around the world—from Australia to China, India to Haiti. They will transport their daughters, as well as any infant sons they gentled during the Liberation, to begin again at a safe haven disguised as a top-secret military base.

The rest of the world will live out its final generational cycle. Every detail has been accounted for. Thanks to the efforts of the Safety Coalition, no remaining male will be able to reproduce, and hundreds of Coalition leaders, representing millions of members, will stay behind to handle media manipulation and unforeseen issues. Most have agreed to live out their days among the savages, knowing their sacrifice will enable the future they've worked so hard to secure for future generations. But as for Tristan, and the brave few who accepted her invitation to create a world free from fear, they will begin again. And this time, they will do it right.

She rolls up the constitution drafted at their last international council meeting in Rio de Janeiro, and squeezes it into the duffel, along with a well-worn leather journal. Then she straps the bag

atop a large, reflective metal case—the key to their present success and future survival—and wheels it toward the door. Outside, the screeching of tires announces Mel’s arrival.

Tristan steals a final glance at the lone headline on the wall, pondering the enormous responsibility she carries to usher in a renewed era—an era safe from the depravity of men. As founding councilwoman of the Coalition, she has been given the task of naming the new society.

According to the religion she once believed in, it was in an ancient garden, the Garden of Eden, that men first poisoned the world with patriarchy.

They’ve tried to rule over us ever since, she thinks, grimacing. But we’ll reverse all that. We’ll do it all differently—create a system opposite of everything that screwed up this backwards world. We’ll even reverse the name of its origin. Eden stood for repression, but . . .

“Nedé,” she whispers, her decision made. “Nedé will stand for women.”

The Constitution of Nedé

We, the seventy-five founding women of Nedé, do hereby establish the laws and code of conduct for our great society, to abolish the evils of patriarchy and to rid the world of the Brutes who have harmed women for millennia due to their biologically driven lust for pleasure and power. The following five Articles shall serve these purposes:

- I. **MATRIARCHAL SYSTEM.** The peace and prosperity of Nedé shall be maintained by three cords of government: the Matriarch, the Council, and the Alexia.
 - A. **MATRIARCH.** We hereby appoint Tristan Pierce, founding Council member, to serve as the first Matriarch of Nedé. The Matriarch shall hold executive power to act in the best interest of Nedé, in partnership with the Council.
 - I. **SUCCESSION.** At such time as the Matriarch should choose to retire from service (but before she reaches eighty years of age), she shall possess the right and responsibility to choose a successor. Each of the four Provinces—Fik'iri, Lapé, Amal, and Kekuatan—shall supply one Candidate, selected by senatorial vote, for the Matriarch's consideration. Upon evaluating the merit of each Candidate, the Matriarch shall

choose one woman to become her Apprentice for a duration of one year, after which time executive powers will be transferred in full to her successor. Should the Matriarch perish or be rendered incapacitated before such a Succession can take place, the Council shall elect a successor by vote.

B. COUNCIL. The Council shall consist of four senatorial houses, each representing one of the four Provinces. Each provincial Senate shall comprise twelve members, elected by popular vote. A Senator's term shall last eight years, with one re-election possible. Senators shall advise the Matriarch in matters of state, serve as judges in civil matters within their Provinces, and serve as examples to all Nedéans of the Virtues we strive for.

C. ALEXIA. To guard Nedé against any threat—within its borders or without—we hereby appoint Siyah Assad to establish and organize a peacekeeping force, hereafter termed the *Alexia*, to uphold the Articles of this constitution, to maintain order within Nedé, and to protect our borders from any threat, present or future. The leader of the Alexia will report directly to the Matriarch, who will select and appoint future Alexia leaders.

II. GENTLES. Males born to the women of Nedé, hereafter termed *Gentles*, having been liberated from their aggression and lust, shall contribute to the good of Nedé—and maintain their enlightened state—through the important tasks of public and private service, as deemed beneficial by the Matriarch and Council. These duties shall not deny nor diminish the dignity of life but aim to make

provision for the inherent frailty of Gentles and supply them with meaningful labor. For the good and safety of all, in perpetuity, the women of Nedé do make these sacrifices:

- A. Between the ages of three months and one year, Gentles will be relinquished by their birth mothers to a Materno finca, where they will live until the age of seven.
- B. Between the ages of seven and fourteen, Gentles will reside in special facilities called Hives, where they will be educated and trained to serve Nedé.
- C. To prevent undue or inappropriate attachment, interaction with grown Gentles shall be limited to necessary instruction.

III. **DESTINIES.** To spread the abundant capabilities of Nedé's women across all necessary sectors, at eighteen years of age each woman shall choose, based on her own interests and abilities, a particular field of expertise, where she shall serve Nedé until she is physically unable to do so. These destinies shall include: Ad Artium, Agricolátio, Alexia, Fabricatio, Gentles Regimen, Innovatus, Materno, Politikós, and Scientia & Medicinae. A detailed description of these fields of employment can be found in the forthcoming document *Nedéan Customs and Practices*.

IV. **MATERNO COMPENSATION.** Without denying a woman's right to refrain from childbirth, to ensure the longevity of our population, special honor shall be bestowed on women who choose as their destiny the bearing and nurturing of children during the span of eighteen to thirty-eight years. These honors shall include: substantially comfortable lodging, a stipend for each delivery, and a stipend for each

baby she breastfeeds for one complete year. Any woman who births ten or more children shall receive a pension for the remainder of her years. All others shall choose another destiny in which to serve the remainder of her years.

V. **VIRTUES.** Contrary to the rampant immorality of our respective origin societies, Nedé shall cultivate a haven of incorruptible ethics. All Nedéans, led by the Matriarch, shall endeavor to embody the core Virtues of diversity, harmony, ingenuity, simplicity, and self-restraint. The development of these Virtues shall remain the free responsibility of the people, whether through their religion of choice or without it.

A. **DIVERSITY.** Because Nedé combines the cultures and languages of dozens of countries of origin, to create a new, diverse yet unified society we shall:

1. Establish English as our common tongue, precious-metal coin as our common currency, and the metric system for measurement.
2. Preserve distinctive relics of our respective heritages, including food, dress, art, and religion.
3. Treat all women equally.
4. Rely heavily on the ancient roots from which many of our cultures of origin arose (i.e., the Greeks and Romans, with special attention given to Latin, mathematics, and music) while not ignoring the contribution and influence of ancient Eastern cultures.

B. **HARMONY.** Nedéans shall strive to live by this guiding principle: treat other women as you would treat yourself. Furthermore, because harmony shall prevail

as long as our citizens adhere to these Articles of the constitution, the Matriarchy shall guard them at all costs. Failure to adhere to these Articles shall result in fines, loss of privileges, or imprisonment. While capital punishment shall have no place in Nedéan justice, either for woman or Gentle, the Matriarch reserves the right to ensure—by any other means necessary—that all Nedéans benefit from our collective peace and prosperity.

- C. **SIMPLICITY.** Nedéans shall endeavor to live in harmony with Mother Earth, respecting and cultivating nature in ways the old world—dictated by Brutes—failed to do. The location of Nedé, with its limited access to man-made resources and technology, shall foster the virtue of simplicity, as well as contribute to the previous Virtues. Gentles shall provide the manual labor necessary to work the land, care for animals, and enable a simple life for all Nedéans.
- D. **INGENUITY.** In order to thrive in Nedé's locale, Nedéans will apply their minds to creative problem-solving, make do with what is available, and refuse to give up when setbacks arise. Without compromising simplicity, our limited technological resources shall be focused first and foremost on creating and maintaining life, public sanitation, and fostering harmony. Should additional resources be discovered in Nedé, they shall be repurposed at the discretion of Innovatus to increase convenience without compromising our core virtue of simplicity.
- E. **SELF-RESTRAINT.** Recognizing the dangers and evil of primal lusts in every form, and to demonstrate our

superiority over the Brutes who abused, suppressed, and mistreated us, the women of Nedé will adhere to the highest standards of self-restraint by denying any and all base urges; instead redirecting our passions into productive contributions for the good of Nedé. Unlike our brutish predecessors, women are capable of enjoying all the merits of platonic friendship and sisterly affection without digressing into crude gratification. Those not exercising self-control will be punished as deemed appropriate by the Matriarch and, if necessary, the Alexia.

Protect the weak. Safety for all. Power without virtue is tyranny.

*Signed,
Representatives of the Safety Coalition,
founding members of Nedé*

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Li Na Kuang, China

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Part One

CHAPTER ONE



JANUARY 2267
NEDÉ

THE STICKY-SWEET SCENT of orange blossoms quickens my pulse, triggering a nervous twist in my gut. We're almost there. Callisto, my pinto horse, weaves a little faster through the rows of citrus and mango trees, as eager as I am to reach our destination.

Howler monkeys announce our arrival, crouching in the tall, broad-leafed teak trees that stand sentinel around a large clearing. It's a poor replica of the real Arena in Phoenix City, but it's mine. Bright sunlight illuminates a maze of makeshift jumps, barrels, hoops, and other obstacles. When Mother had this section of the teak forest harvested five years ago, I begged her not to replant it.

"What do you want it for, Reina?" she had asked, concern wrinkling the corners of her hazel eyes.

I didn't answer, but I knew she'd already guessed. She let me claim the field anyway—let me have the very thing she knew could take me away from her.

Callisto stamps a hoof as I adjust my legs over her bare back. A click of my tongue sends her happily running around the barrels, high-stepping over lattices of branches and logs, and ducking through a curtain of dried vines. She hesitates at the jumps, but I don't have to urge much to get her to acquiesce. She is the best of horses.

After half a dozen laps, I retrieve homemade weapons from a sun-bleached wooden shed: a rough-hewn short sword, a bow, and a hip quiver of arrows. I arrange targets around the clearing for my session, pinning a leaf to a trunk here, balancing a rock on a stump there. My weapons would garner smirks from anyone who knows anything about the real things, but I've never had the heart to ask Mother for authentic ones. So I'm left with this roughly-carved bow made from an ipê branch and a linen string, arrows fashioned out of thin branches and fletched with chicken feathers, and a short sword that couldn't pierce a pillow. But I'm partial to my weapons because of the Gentle who crafted them for me—in secret, like everything about our friendship. Anyway, at least they've helped me learn the basic mechanics of archery and swordplay, in case I muster the nerve to . . .

A rustle pulls my attention to a pile of leaves. A lizard skitters up a stump, and I quickly take aim. I'm about as good at hitting moving targets as I am at keeping the Articles, but I try anyway. No surprise, the lizard lives to see another day.

Behind me, Callisto makes a noise that sounds suspiciously like a laugh.

“What are you snickering at?”

She stares back, feigning innocence. Sometimes I wish she could talk. But not now.

A GENTLE TYRANNY

I mount her again, this time with sword tucked into my belt and bow at the ready, and begin to trot the course, shooting poorly as I go. *Focus, Reina*. I squeeze the bow's grip harder, but sheer determination won't make the arrows hit true. The next shot misses its target by a handbreadth. *Ugh*. I wish I had someone to teach me.

What I lack in skill, Callisto more than makes up for. She does her part brilliantly, breezing through the choreography of each obstacle. Ever since my first visit to the real Arena—almost ten years ago now—I've been obsessed with Nedé's peacekeepers and their sleek horses, tempted by a dream that would crush Mother.

I fine-tuned Callisto's footwork for almost a year before I even tried to shoot a bow from her back. Now I can trust her to weave and jump through weathered posts and vine-wrapped hoops with little guidance from my lower body, even without a saddle. My torso and arms can focus on my weapons. Well, except on the last obstacle, the breach, named for the challenging gap between two inclined ramps, and it's coming next. I'm not yet steady enough to make this jump and shoot at the same time. Maybe I never will be. But if I maintain my focus, I can keep my seat across the breach without holding onto the circle of rope around Callisto's neck. I position my legs, sway with her movements, and prepare to soar across two meters of nothing.

Just as Callisto's hooves hit the bottom of the ramp, another rustle snatches my attention, this one bigger and farther away, toward the edge of the teak rows, where thick brush and leafy vines mark the edge of our property. My eyes follow a flash of brown that darts from behind a wood target toward the thicket. Two legs. Not an animal. The figure is brown all over and covered in dirt and—Callisto lunges forward in a mighty jump—I feel my legs come loose, and I'm thrown through the air. It all happens so fast. One second I'm twisting and falling, the next my head collides with a support beam on the far ramp.

Sparks shoot through the darkness like the pain ricocheting around my skull. I vaguely feel my face rub into the dirt . . .

I register pain first. Then something—cloth?—being wrapped around my head. I should try to open my eyes, but before I muster the strength, a sound freezes me solid. A voice. I've never heard one like it.

“We should take her to the house in the valley. That's where she lives.”

The tone rumbles like rock against rock, deep as the River. It's quickly followed by another, even thicker voice.

“Are you crazy? Torvus would kill you. *Kill you*. We're not even supposed to be here.”

“What do you suggest—we just leave her here, unconscious?”

“Yes? She's fine. Girl or not, that hit wouldn't kill her.”

“It doesn't feel right leaving her like this, Rohan.”

“Fine. I'll put her in some shade. You watch from that thicket till she wakes up if you want. But you better not let her see you, or I swear, Jase, I'll skin you myself.”

“Alright.”

One set of footsteps trails away, and I'm lifted like a sheaf of dry grass. I vaguely realize this should terrify me. Even in my pain-induced fog, there's a nagging awareness that my limp body hovers unnaturally over the ground, held in midair by two impossibly strong arms. No Gentle could do that. Those weren't women's voices either. My pulse quickens to a distant, double-time beat, which only makes the pounding in my head worse. I claw toward coherence, gathering just enough clarity and courage to open my eyes the tiniest sliver.

The face is as foreign as its voice: shaped more like a Gentle's

than mine, but squarer, with bristles on its cheek, and wild, dark hair, pulled back but not tamed. It's a he, I think, though his strength far surpasses a Gentle's. Eclipses even mine. Am I dead? Dreaming? His bare chest sticks to my cheek, and feels rough with . . . hair? On his chest? *What the bats?*

In the blurry corners of my narrow vision, I can just make out his neck and one shoulder, muscles tensed from their load. They're pronounced, like a stallion's flank after a run. Whoever, whatever, this is, I think I should be afraid. I tell myself to do something—to swing or kick or yell—but my body won't listen.

He lays me down as softly as a kiss on a pile of teak leaves. I sigh into it, relief washing over me. *Don't try to move now. He's going to leave.*

But he doesn't seem in a great hurry. First he adjusts the cloth wrapped around my head and then, for some reason, his fingers linger near my face.

"There's resemblance," he mumbles in a husky whisper, to himself or the other one, I'm not sure. "But she's . . . *beautiful.*"

He gingerly wipes a trickle of blood from my forehead, and I flinch involuntarily, sending him running for the thicket. His footsteps fade, but I still don't—can't—move.

My head aches like it got kicked by a mare. I lie still in the cool leaves for who knows how long—immobilized half from throbbing pain, half from lingering panic—letting my heart slow and giving whoever-that-was the chance to disappear. He told the other one to wait and watch in the brush. Are they both there now?

There is nothing to be afraid of, Rei. I grit my teeth and will myself to believe it. I'm not accustomed to fear; the sensation irritates me. *Relax.* Whoever they were, they didn't want to hurt me. *You're fine.* Still, when I finally get to my feet, I head straight for Callisto. I am braver with her. I heave myself clumsily onto her

sweaty back. Only then do I find the courage to scan the thicket at the edge of the clearing. No movement.

“Of all the stupid . . .,” I mumble, touching a finger to the tender lump on my head, gashed down the center and still throbbing. I lean against Callisto’s neck for support. “I suppose that’s enough training for today.”

Perched on my horse, still frozen in indecision despite the lack of immediate threat, I replay the bizarre events. It all happened so fast. I slog through the sequence again and again, searching for any clue that might shed light on the strangers’ identity, their purpose for being there, the reason they emerged from the shadows to help me, the odd words spoken by the one who carried me. No answers come.

Eventually the dizziness ebbs, and I unwrap the cloth tied around my head. The bleeding has stopped. The fabric is a shirt of sorts—made of a stiff material, dirty, and now stained with my blood. That explains the bare chest. But it doesn’t explain who they were, or why they were at Bella Terra. I drop the cloth on a half-hidden stump, not wanting to worry anyone or raise questions about my whereabouts this morning by bringing it to the villa.

“Come on, girl. Let’s go home.”

The next morning, my first conscious thought as my mind sheds sleep explodes as a muffled yell into my pillow:

“Ciela! I’m going to *kill* your rooster!”

Light barely filters through the sheer curtains of my bedroom window, if you can call it light at this hour—more of a dusky gray than true morning. Another crow from Diablo, and I start thinking about chicken and rice, barbecued chicken, chicken stir-fry, and a feather pillow made from the rest of him.

A GENTLE TYRANNY

I know better than to think I'll fall back asleep, so I decide on the next best thing: an early ride.

I'm in the large pasture behind our villa by the time the sun properly wakes. Despite my fussing at that cursed chicken, there's a small satisfaction in beating the sun at her own game. I haven't beaten Tre, though. I never do. As a Gentle, he's always up before the sun to begin work around the finca: tending the animals, trimming overgrowth, hauling water. Well, unless he's sick, which happens as regular as the rains. Gentles might be amiable, obedient, and helpful, but they're also fragile, weak-bodied, and often ill. I hate to say it—Mother insists I shouldn't—but some are frustratingly dim-witted too. It's like their minds are riddled with holes, losing streams of thought, forgetting the simplest instructions. Tre, though, he's not as bad as the others. He can't grow muscle, any more than I can change the Article that forbids our friendship, but when fate threw us together almost five years ago, his relative boldness caught me off guard. He was sharp for a Gentle—or, perhaps, what he risked helped me see beyond what I expected him to be.

He had stumbled upon me near the riverbank that day, next to a giant fig tree, where I had found one of our baby goats lying dead. The soft fur on its tiny body was mottled with blood, and flies were already gathering. I'm not usually overly emotional, but I had just fought with Mother, the sight really was awful for a thirteen-year-old, and for whatever other reasons I found myself sobbing over it. Like, *really* sobbing. The blubbing-mess kind of cry.

Tre was walking a short distance from the bank with an armful of wood when he noticed me. He dropped his load and approached, timidly, without a word. Then he knelt down beside the tiny kid goat, took a broad stick, and started scraping the moist soil, stroke after stroke, until sweat trickled down his sun-leathered, freckled

cheeks. When I realized what he was doing—giving a burial to an animal we would have burned or fed to the dogs—I knelt down too, helped him dig the deep grave and pile it with rocks to protect the corpse from scavengers. By the end, Tre’s thin body was shaking with exertion, and that caught my attention too. Most Gentles would have given up far sooner.

I knew what I was risking by interacting with him. Despite my great respect for the Articles, I guess I was too impertinent to keep them perfectly, even then. Or perhaps Mother’s influence really had made me soft, as other women whispered when they thought we couldn’t hear.

After a while, I even got the nerve to ask him his name. I knew he had one; Mother always names her Gentles.

“Treowe,” he had said.

“That’s a funny name,” I said, wiping the remnants of my cry on my shirt sleeve.

“Dom Pierce gave it to me. She said she hoped I’d live up to it.”

“What does it mean?”

“Faithful.”

He chanced upon me at the riverbank again after that, more and more often, until our meetings were orchestrated less by chance and more by intention. Unlikely though it is, our secret friendship works somehow. We enjoy each other’s company, when we can manage it. I speak to him as an equal, and he treats me as more than one, which, admittedly, feeds my ego. He’s always looking for ways to make me laugh behind my tutor’s back, calms me down when my temper flares, leaves little treasures where I’m sure to find them. I don’t know why Mother chose “faithful” for this Gentle, but he’s lived up to it.

I see him now across the field, his shaggy, straw-colored hair flopping over his face as he leads a row of semi-obedient sheep. When he sees me, he crosses his eyes and blows out his cheeks,

trying to coax a laugh. He doesn't dare wave, and I don't dare call to him, but his gesture lets me know I'm seen, and my smile tells him the same.

I resume my search for the object of my predawn expedition and find her cropping grass between four other mares. When Callisto hears me coming, she walks over with a pleased whinny.

"You're not sleeping either, huh?" I rub her forelock, then down her neck, fingers pushing through one of the white patches on her tobiano-patterned coat.

"Maybe you'll accidentally step on that nasty rooster while we ride." I slip the braided neck rope over her head and swing onto her bare back. "Let's go, beautiful."

Callisto walks west through the pasture as her muscles warm. Howler monkey calls cut through the hum of insects and bird chatter. The air is heavy this morning. It may be the dry season, but we'll probably still get drenched with rain by noon. The endless wet is what makes Nedé so beautiful, so lush, Mother says, but I prefer the dry days. Just another way we're complete opposites.

Outside the south gate, Callisto moves faster, anticipating a return to my teak forest arena. Me, on the other hand? Paranoia might be cousins with weakness, but I don't have the urge to return to my training grounds today—not yet. I decide to follow a trail past the teak forest instead, opting for my favorite place on Mother's three hundred hectares: a ridge overlooking Bella Terra. When I pass my obstacle course, my eyes thoroughly scan the thick wall of foliage for movement. Seeing nothing, I wonder again whether being lifted off the ground could have been a hallucination, brought on by the smash to my still-tender skull. I seriously consider this possibility for about four seconds. Then I notice the shirt I left on the stump yesterday is gone.

That strange bare-chested . . . person . . . and the other one—whether or not they were as strong and strange as I imagined, they

did exist outside my mind. And they'd come back. Or maybe never left. *Quit panicking, Reina. Of course they would come back for the shirt*, I tell myself, irritated by the way my breaths have shallowed. I didn't get the impression they had much to spare. *That doesn't mean they're still here*. Still, I give Callisto a click and a squeeze with my calves, urging her to pick up her pace until we pass the teak forest entirely. I spend the next ten minutes trying to puzzle out a logical explanation for what I saw yesterday: my sister Ciela, home from the city and playing a trick on me? A Gentle wearing goat skin? Each possibility sounds even more ridiculous.

Once we reach the treeless ledge perched high on the edge of a foothill, boasting sweeping views of Bella Terra and beyond, my questions still. This place never fails to overpower whatever weighs on my mind.

From the overlook, the white buildings of Bella Terra resemble the dollhouse set my oldest sister, Jonalyn, used to play with when she was young. The smooth, white walls of the casitas and outbuildings seem to glow from within, topped with perfectly symmetrical rows of red-brown clay tiles. Papery bougainvillea shades arched doorways, and a tiered fountain shines like a new coin in the pebbled courtyard. Sheep, llamas, and horses graze in their respective fields, and a small column of smoke curls up in wispy fingers from the outdoor kitchen.

The villa, schoolroom, stables, and other outbuildings lie tucked in the center of the surrounding fields, which are sectioned like a rolling, tightly stitched green quilt. The property is hemmed on the north and east by the coiling, twisting Jabiru River. I can just make out a large crown of leaves along its banks belonging to the fig tree where Tre and I often meet during his afternoon break. The pastoral scene is familiar, though not particularly inspiring. For a muse, I turn my attention east.

Squinting toward the sun, I search for the only tall buildings in

all of Nedé, which mark our capital, Phoenix City. I find their outline, flanked by the shimmering Halcyon Sea. The city has always felt thrilling, a melody that sings to me, tempting me to dream of more than I have and more than I am. Today is different, though. Today I know that change is finally coming, and I welcome it.

This simple life on the finca is quaint, serene even, but it isn't for me. The view is tolerable this morning, I'll give it that. But morning and evening light show off everyone's good side, and I don't trust them. Love a thing at noon, and your amor is real.

Next week, I will have to decide on a destiny: my vocation and, ultimately, lifestyle. I know what Mother wants. She hopes I'll become a Materno, like her and like my sister Jonalyn. Ciela chose Scientia and Medicinae, working at the Center for Health Services, which isn't far removed, especially since she still comes home some weekends. She can't stand to be far from Mother for long. I don't resent them for their choices. Their destinies complement them, like lime to avocado. Not only are there perks to being a Materno—like our own rural finca—but nurture and care come naturally to the women in my family. Three of them, anyway.

I was eight years old when I realized I was different from my sisters and Mother, as unnatural as a filly born to a herd of sheep. We had attended a demonstration at the Arena, where the Alexia, all beauty and fierceness, rode their dark Lexander horses through intricate obstacles, pelting moving targets with arrows like their bows were extensions of themselves. I've been enamored with the Alexia ever since, hence my makeshift arena and weapons. If I'm honest, the Alexia scare as much as inspire me, but that life rings vastly more exciting than raising babies and managing a finca. And none of the other destinies—Scientia and Medicinae, Politikós, Ad Artium, Gentles Regimen, and the like—intrigue me much. Dom Bakshi, my tutor, urges me to reconsider—I suspect because of her loyalties to Mother. Some days, her certain disapproval is enough

to steer me clear of the Alexia; others, it draws me toward them. Today? Today I'm not sure I'm ready to face the disappointment my choice would spark, and that makes me wonder if I understand the Virtues at all.

It's true that most of the other women in my family seem made to nurture. The clearest exception? Grandmother. It's a wonder she had a child at all, let alone two. I asked Mother about it once. She said Matriarchs are required to give birth twice, to improve the appeal to potential Materno recruits. It's difficult enough to maintain thirty percent of Nedéans in that destiny, she had said grimly. I wondered if she resented being a child birthed by law rather than choice. Regardless, the thought of Grandmother choosing to mother anything goes against all sensibilities. "Mother of Nedé" or not, she's about as tender as a teak tree.

Mother once told me I remind her of Grandmother. I wonder if that's what she meant.

I must be taking too long admiring the view, because Callisto gives a soft tug on the rope in my hands. She's often the more responsible of our duo. I reluctantly let her lead us down the trail, past my arena—quickly now—and back through the groves of fruit trees, towards home. Chores are waiting, then studies, followed by the murder of a certain bronze-tailed rooster.

"You smell like you've been in the sheep field, Reina." Dom Bakshi's voice drifts flatly over the top of a large book, opened in front of her face so that a bouffant of shiny, grey-streaked black hair is the only visible part of her.

"Then your olfactory senses serve you well, Domina Bakshi," I tease, using her full title with a nasally, academic delivery. I only use *Domina*—rather than *Dom*, the shortened version of a

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distinguished woman's prefix—when I'm being falsely dramatic. I drop the accent to add, "I marked the lambs, fed the dogs, and swept the villa too. I swear, if Mother had her way, we'd do all the Gentles' work for them."

Dom Bakshi snaps shut the book, which appears drab and ancient next to her purple sari, draped over a peach-pink cropped bodice. She often resembles a passionflower next to Mother's simple Materno clothing, and I only wear what I can ride in, if I can help it. But Dom Bakshi's great, great, great, great-grandmother—or was it five greats?—was a foremother from a land which wore such clothing. Not that all Nedéans wear the dress of their foremothers. Our climate isn't suited for most. Others carry on food traditions, still others dialects and songs. And some, like the Pierce line I descend from—a family marked by Matriarchs and Senators—prefer a blend of the best diversities Nedé offers.

My tutor raises her chin, and I know what's coming even before she says, "We'd be better off if *more* daughters of Nedé knew how to take care of themselves, as in the earliest days of our Matriarchy. Back then, the Gentles were too young to work, and our survival depended on our own ingenuity, ability, and grit. You're lucky your mother knows the value of such things."

Her words are so predictable I have to force down a laugh. We've had this conversation dozens of times over the years. Mother makes us learn some of the Gentles' tasks—farming, cleaning, washing clothes, and the like—me and my sisters complain, and Dom Bakshi reminds us of the virtue of hard work and the rarity of our mother: a woman who came from privilege yet values character and all life. And then we roll our eyes while knowing full well she's probably right.

"Besides," she adds, "you clearly haven't been worked *too* hard, or that attitude of yours would have been curbed by now." It's her turn to smile.

Dom Bakshi is at least twice my age, speaks five languages, and is usually a model of professionalism, but every once in a while I catch the faintest bit of sass, hinting that her sharp wit doesn't always squeeze into the perfect tutor mold. After nearly eighteen years spent under her teaching, I've learned more from her than Latin, mathematics, history, and music. I've also inherited her intensity and questioning spirit, and I'm proud of it.

On my way to the far side of the room, I pass half a dozen small desks arranged in rows. Those are for the Gentles, though we're never taught at the same time. My own, larger desk is littered with charts, books, papers, and a wooden monkey I carved with my first knife when I was ten years old. Got my first stitches whittling it too, and as Mother tied off the last knot, I vowed I'd never get rid of that monkey—being bonded by blood as we are—so there it sits. He grins up at me with a crooked smile.

The two other desks positioned adjacent to mine have been collecting dust since my older sisters finished their tutelage and began their destinies. If I were a more sentimental person, I might get choked up at the thought of my own desk's fate, which—following today's final lesson—will follow suit. But I'm not, so I don't.

No, I'm not sentimental, or so I'm told. I take in the familiar smell of oiled wood and the flower garden behind the schoolhouse. I notice the large map of Nedé on the wall; the shelves of books, so rare; my inkwell and favorite curassow-tail-feather pen; the plaques of Nedé's Virtues, taken from Article V of our constitution. I notice them all without sadness. I celebrate what I've accomplished here, but the future is coming too fast to waste tears on what's behind me.

"Dom Bakshi," I say, thankful she will have already moved past my initial ingratitude, "how did you know you wanted to be an Ad Artium? And why be a tutor instead of—I don't know—a painter?"

She sighs, sympathy replacing her irritation with me. “You still haven’t decided yet, have you?”

I shake my head.

Perhaps she realizes that one more day of lessons won’t define my educational career, because she pushes aside the chart intended for today’s teaching and sits down beside me.

“Well,” she says, “the important thing, you’ll remember, is that you can’t make a wrong choice, Reina. Every destiny is vital to the success of Nedé, and every woman has a dignified role to play. The jobs we do are as unique as the women we are: all colors, all sizes, all peculiarities, all languages, all heritages, brought together as one people, of equal worth, for the safety and good of all. So whether you choose Scientia and Medicinae, like your sister Ciela, or Ad Artium like me, or even Alexia,” she gives me a knowing smile, “your only task is to follow your heart. How lucky we are to live in the days of Nedé!”

I’ve heard the speech before, but I’m grateful to her nonetheless. Yes, lucky. I can’t imagine what it would have been like to live in the world before Nedé, in those faraway places where Brutes ruled over women, hurting them by . . . well, I don’t know how, but it must have been terrible, because the foremothers declined to record the atrocities in our history parchments. I can’t imagine what those women went through before most of them and all the Brutes were wiped out in the Great Sickness. If the foremothers hadn’t already been fighting the Brutes and working on important medical advances, they would have died too, and never have found the key to curing their sons from the inferior genetics that caused Brutishness. Because of the foremothers’ courage and insight, the sons of Nedé were freed once and for all to be their true, Gentle selves, able to use their best gifts for us.

Unlike the women of long ago, I’ve never been anything *but* safe. I mean, Nedé isn’t perfect, but I’ve never been in any real

danger. Most women are happy to abide by the Articles of our constitution, and the Alexia would make a short history of any dissenter. The Alexia . . . just the thought of the slick-clad, bow-wielding, imposing but impressive peacekeeping force of Nedé fills me with both excitement and fear. Not fear of what I would face—squabbles between finca owners, the rare Materno who won't part with a Gentle, or an occasional wild animal venturing from the Jungle are hardly terrifying—but with whom I'd face them. The Alexia are known to be stern, strong, and steely. The whole group of them is tough as a coconut: rough and hard, unless you're on the inside. I'd like to think I'm strong enough to make it in, but . . . what if I'm not?

Dom Bakshi continues, "Imagine if no one chose Fabricatio. Who would teach the Gentles to make and sew cloth, fashion carts, or press the very paper on your desk? We need women in Innovatus as well, to use the few natural resources and repurposed materials we have at our disposal to create new technologies and maintain those the foremothers inherited when they arrived—like the phone in the villa, or the Center's important medical machines. And of course, where would any of us be without the Maternos, the faithful women who sacrifice their bodies and decades of their lives to bring new life into this world?"

I try not to let my mind camp on the word "Materno," but despite Dom Bakshi's rousing speech, the name itself is so boring compared to the other destinies that I can't help but feel it doesn't belong. *Materno*. Might as well be called "predictable." "Soft." Or maybe just "Leda," after Mother herself. As soon as I think that, guilt pricks my insides. That wasn't fair. See? I'm not patient or kind enough to be any good at nurturing, not even for the incentives.

"I'm sure I'll figure it out. I have a whole week anyway—that's practically a lifetime." I waggle an eyebrow at Dom Bakshi. She shakes her head.

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I feel better for her words of encouragement, though, just like I do after every time I fret with indecision and she gives me the “all of Nedé is at your fingertips” speech. Because she’s right—Nedé is a remarkable place: diverse, safe, and full of possibilities. Whatever destiny I choose, I’ll be okay.

So why do I fight this inner worry that none of them suit me *exactly* right?

We spend the rest of my foiled lesson talking about life, and destinies, and Nedé. Dom Bakshi has taught me well, and I see her look of satisfaction as she dismisses me. I’m another job completed, I suppose. I gather the few books and papers I wish to keep, plus one wooden monkey, and leave the Bella Terra schoolroom for the last time.

A Note from the Author

I CARE DEEPLY ABOUT WOMEN. Of course I'm biased. Not only am I female, I gave birth to two more. I care for my daughters' safety, honor, and futures even more than my own. But I also care equally for men, and believe that selfless masculinity, unleashed, has the power to change the world. My heart aches over the great divide between us—the blaming, shaming, and fear. I believe there's a better way—a partnership that brings out the best in us all, a world in which we choose the good of others above our own desires.

Most authors dream that their words will somehow make a difference in this world, and I'm no different. But words sail further when tethered to action. That's why I'm donating half of all my earnings from this book to the Corban Fund, which supports organizations seeking to end violence against women and promote change, like the A21 Campaign, the National Center on Sexual Exploitation, and Fight the New Drug.

Men aren't better than women; women aren't better than men. We both have the capacity to choose good, so let's do more of that.

*Safety for all,
Jess*