

The Diamond Emperor, 999th Incarnate, sheathed head-to-toe in Imperial white, turned his face into the light. Extreme brightness pulsed, a dazzling insistence on his retina. He gazed at the radiant glare of the Magnificent Orb longer than was sensible, pushing the limits of good sense. His eyes burned, teared. If he continued with the fanatical ritual he would suffer the Imperial prophets' fate, irreversible retinal damage, making his wife right in her blaring accusations: he would be truly blinded by the light. Would that not make her final years meaningful, having at last found the satisfaction of the righteous? Would I not be a sight then, burned eyes and scorched soul?

But he would never underestimate Opal and her scheming ways. It was a long and fettered intimacy between them: love and betrayal, too many betrayals, scarred. Still, he remained where he was, willing himself to blindness, to be consumed by the light.

Beads of sweat formed on his broad, ebony face and moisture oozed from every pore of his thick-muscled body till the fine, silk undergarments beneath cumbersome layers of formal dress started to adhere to his skin. The experience was primal. He took a perverse interest in the sensations: toying with them, rolling them through his mind, embracing them, touching them, being touched by them; all the while contemplating altering the citadel's automated cooling system.

A few more degrees and he could end this incarnation ahead of the predicted date. Make the Blind Prophets eat their prophecies. It would serve them right and he would achieve the impossible: render the Impenetrable Prophecy false. With his long memory, he recalled Amdahl'kyr, first of the Blind Prophets with their eye-rolling visions, to utter the ill-fated words, binding all the Incarnates to The One Thousand Deaths.

The device in his hands made his palm sweat, his fingers twitch. If the micro filaments embedded in the glass failed to capture the harmful rays, the light would blind him. The ritual was irrational and jealously guarded. It inflamed the senses, igniting fires of obsession. It made prophets out of ordinary men, whose scorched souls were sacrificed to the Dynasty, making them into exceptional men deserving all excesses and indulgences. This too was their fate: cursed and blessed.

Intense heat radiated through the glass. He was getting hot. His skin itched. The smell of his sweat, at first blending, seeped through the morning's anointment of perfumed oils. He held his breath, enduring his body's screaming protests, till he could not bear the light another second and he flipped the switch in his right hand.

The glass turned dark. Relief was a rush of cool skin.

The Emperor closed his eyes, met a cold abyss of darkness. Below, movement, shadows stirring from the depths, rising. His eyes snapped open. With a spin on his heels, the long tail of his turban whipping at air demons, he fled, heels clacking on white marble, into a corridor of light.

The device was discreetly returned to the deep folds of his Imperial White robe.

[ONE]

<sm>In the future of Attika, it is prophesized that the Plebs will no longer be ruled by false promises of heaven—</sm> 100th Monkey

Message undeliverable: 999th Cycle: Impenetrable Realm

Sapphire prowled dark corridors, testing entrances and exits while the Stone Guardians' eyes glared red. Doors remained closed, but she tried them, just to make a point. Her confinement may have been written into the Imperial Codes of Womanly Conduct, but she was determined to disobey them.

If only she could.

Another locked door barred her way, more glaring red eyes. She retreated.

Soundless slippers slid across the marble floor. She passed servants' quarters and the empty nurseries. She felt the emptiness, an ache under her breastbone. *A Pleb child? How could her mother say such a thing?*

In her mind, Sapphire heard the sounds of children playing, her brothers laughing, chasing her. She remembered Carnelian taunting her, promising she would be *his* wife and would have *his* children. They were only five years old, but she had been appalled at the idea. She wasn't appalled now, she was frightened. *If I fail to fulfill the prophecy, will I be forced to marry Carnelian and live in a loveless marriage like my mother has done all these incarnations?*

She kept moving.

Her mother had taken refuge in the Crystal Quarters with the girls-soon-to-be women, but her Night Terrors were no secret. The Immaculate gossips sent the rumors to all the Imperial Towers. The women here were cruel to her mother. Her mother was unstable and they were frightened of her. They did not

want her in their Women's Quarters. *I'm her only friend, the only person who understands her. How can I possibly leave her?* Sapphire walked slowly, thinking she would enjoy the silence, for once, but the whispers of the Stone Guardians prevailed. The Immaculate Towers were flooded with their constant emanations, their subliminal messages. The air itself spoke volumes of Imperial Scriptures. When Sapphire was still a child, she could hear the Guardians speaking inside her head. When she had told the Imperial Scholars who attended to her education about the voices they had told her that it was only her imagination.

That was when Sapphire had learned to keep secrets.

She strained to hear them now, but their voices were muffled and strange. She stretched her senses to tease the voices out, reaching to hear *their* secrets. Suddenly, she was in a cold darkness. A thick, chilling fog shaped itself around her. It brought goose bumps to her flesh . . . *the darkness is coming. It is summoning me.*

"I am ready," she said in a low whisper. "Take me."

She held her breath, listened with all her might – holding herself still. The fog clung to her body, seductive, caressing. She shivered, waited, but there was nothing more . . . just a cold embrace . . . and warmth seeping from her body.

Exasperated, she exhaled, breaking the spell.

The mist evaporated just as mysteriously as it had arrived.

When she walked into her father's Imperial Offices, she was still feeling the chill of the fog. She walked to the glowing controls, the only light in the room, and touched the screen. The holographic image of a blue and white robed woman, her friend and teacher, lit up the alcove.

"Fatima, I wish to see the latest message from the 100th Monkey," Sapphire said.



Lord Obsidian opened his one good eye. The Fetishettes, arms and legs entwined with his, covered the large bed. He could not tell which limbs belonged to him and which did not and, in the afterglow of bliss, it was even more difficult to *feel* which limbs belonged to him and which did not. With his strength replenished, he slowly extracted a leg, an arm, another leg and then his torso from the splay of sleeping bodies.

A hand reached out to stop him. "Stay," a sweet voice begged.

He was tempted but he took the hand and kissed it, "Sleep Skye." The hand went limp and fell to the bed. The Fetishettes were a special breed of

women and Skye insisted she was one of them. Obsidian sensed some recklessness in her that appealed to him. He would have stayed with Skye gladly. Her passion was strong and he loved sleeping in this cocoon of naked bodies. It was the only way he could sleep. Sated and spent and warmed. He yawned, stretched. He could not stay, much as he wanted to. He was compelled to leave the warm nest, to prepare for the Ball.

He put on his Death Robe with all the obligatory paraphernalia of the dark. He returned the rings to each of his long slender fingers and hung the heavy black chains around his neck. He ran a hand through his short white hair and left his guests to their much deserved sleep.

He walked through dark snaking tunnels, sputtering braziers lighting the way. A vision of a beautiful, young girl – almost woman – stopped him. He could have touched her, she was that close. Gold, swirling tattoos covered her from head to toe. He could not see her face, her features were obscured, but the tattoos, there was something about the pattern . . . he stepped closer, she retreated, turned as if to taunt him. The tattoos glowed. She was all golden light. He was disturbed by her allure, his lust for her rising, but it felt wrong. He stepped back, escaping into the nearest cavern.



Ramtha'kar and young Nemur'kar intercepted the Emperor on his way to his Imperial Offices. Both scholars wore the simple, ascetic robes of their calling and greeted him with the symbol of Essential Bless'd Health. With their right hands, they touched shaved crowns and dark, shining foreheads that gleamed in the reflected light.

“My Lord Emperor,” said the excited junior scholar, “the day promises to be the longest of the season and the Magnificent Orb is at its most-luminous and most-dangerous.”

“A favorable day,” old Ramtha'kar agreed in a trembling voice.

“It is only the fifth hour and we are well into dangerous temperatures,” Nemur'kar said, concern altering the perfect, facial symmetry of the Immaculate race. “More Innocents will die—

“There are many Plebs,” the Emperor said, “enough will be spared.”

“But they need not suffer,” Nemur'kar added.

“Ah, of course not.” *This one will have to be watched.* The Emperor turned to the elder scholar, “Our most-auspicious days are dangerous. It is an unfortunate circumstance. No doubt, there will be petitions for more Pleb Shelters.”

The scholars bowed, took two steps back.

The Emperor watched their progress down the corridor. After endless debates with the Imperial Scholars, bickering over petitions and Codes of Conduct, the day would progress at the same slow crawl. He did enjoy the entertainment, the political game of give and take. He would concede and see a rise in Merit Points for the ‘Compassionate Quota’ needed for his soul’s journey. In matters concerning the planet’s punishing bipolar ecosystem, the Fatima Oracle was an infallible authority. It would be decreed: All the Immaculate descendants would remain behind the citadel walls during these dangerous though favorable climatic disturbances when the One Being gifted the Emperor with the most-brilliant light as proof of his glorious exaltation.

As for the Plebs . . .

“Fatima, we cannot blame the Plebs for what they believe,” his daughter’s sincere words drifted into the corridor. “They are the Innocents and are like children.”

“Sapphire,” the Emperor stopped at the entrance to his Imperial Offices. “I hope you are not troubling the Oracle with your childish philosophies?”

His daughter sat in front of a complex control console in the center of a spacious room. Ornate, empty alcoves adorned three walls. There was only one chair, *his* chair, which she positioned to conceal something . . .

She turned to face him, “My Lord Father, Fatima and I have had endless debates over the Dynasty’s duty to the Plebs and we have come to an agreement—”

“What have the two of you agreed upon on this auspicious day?” he asked, in a disingenuous tone.

“There can be nothing more important than the Plebs,” Sapphire answered.

Behind her, a hologram of the Fatima Oracle flickered and blinked out.

“How so?” The Emperor stepped into the room and the screen Sapphire had been intent on studying turned dark.

“How *not* so?” she countered.

The hairs under his turban strained against their binding. *It is a blessing in disguise that training with the Imperial Scholars required to win these arguments is denied her.* But when he looked down at his daughter, fear crept into his soul. *Is it simple and unerring sincerity that makes her face glow with light?*

She smoothed out her weighted, embroidered dress, slow and thoughtful. “Father?”

He was startled by the deepness of her voice.

“May I ask you something?” She lifted her chin and sat forward.

These defiant postures were an obstacle to the serenity of his soul and, if he did not master his reactions, would doubtless lose him Merit Points. Still, she remained true to herself, always genuine even in her annoying rebellion. He braced himself for the impact of unbridled sincerity, and nodded.

“What do you object to most?” she was quick to ask. “Is it my *childish* philosophies? Or,” she lifted her eyes, a look that pierced through to his soul, “is it the existence of true innocence?”

“Neither. This argument is not worthy of you. You must be more sincere in your efforts to fulfill the Bodhisattva Prophecy. This is where you must direct all questions when addressing the Oracle.” He looked around the room, taking in the Oracle’s mysterious absence. “Now, I believe Garnet may be able to find work worthy for your idle hands and mind.”

“Kitchen duty!” A quick smile turned into a frown. “Father must I?”

“Your brother will be elbow deep in soups and sauces and could use some help—” Sapphire’s feet danced across the floor “—with preparations for this evening’s . . .” the Emperor’s voice trailed off.

This was a charade. She only pretended to mind kitchen duty and her galling questions were enough to bring on an attack of biliousness. *Whatever happened to thou shall not question thy father? There it was, another scripture gone missing.*



Sapphire hurried along the bright, outer ring of corridors. She was grateful for the citadel’s cooling system. She was forced to wear so many layers of formal dress to satisfy the Immaculate Codes. She feared what was on the other side of the glass, all that heat. Fatima had frightened her with a virtual demonstration of casualties. It was too gruesome to behold. The Oracle had driven the point home. Sapphire would wait till the Dark Season to make her escape. Exposure at this time would damage her Sac’d Pure Body. *But, what does it do to the Plebs? What protection, if any, is offered them?*

She crossed the skywalk that divided the Emperor’s Sun Tower from the heart of the citadel: the pristine and secluded Crystal Quarters. More Stone Guardians defended the entrance to her rooms. The Guardians were a persistent reminder of her Lord Father’s shameless conceits. She faced the 78th Incarnate. Eyes flashed blue and she heard a click. Nomi, her Intimate-servant, peered through the opening.

“Nomi? Is that you?” Sapphire burst through majestic doors, knocking the servant off balance. She looked for others who may be lurking in the

shadows, then whispered, “We have received another message from the 100th Monkey.”

When she recovered her feet, Nomi’s eyes were wide, encouraging more details.

“I barely had time to distract my father,” Sapphire told her. “I goaded him with a philosophical question about the innocence of the Plebs. He cannot resist an opportunity to pontificate though thank goodness he kept it short. He can never know what I have seen on Fatima’s screens. She has warned me about displaying the messages in broad daylight. I left this one blaring out in the open for too long. I scrambled it and sent it back to the messenger – undeliverable.”

Nomi laid out a change of clothes.

Sapphire sat on a sparkling divan. “Fatima keeps searching for the 100th Monkey, all trails are dead ends. We bury the most damaging of the subversive messages. I pray my Lord Father is afflicted with the Blind Eye. Since he favors it so much, this is not a difficulty. Fatima is right. I can no longer risk exposing her. I will limit my visits to the Dark Hours when the Curfew of Darkness sends everyone to their quarters. And, I won’t run into Malachite. Honestly, if he wasn’t in my mother’s distant descendant line, 77th removed cousin, I wouldn’t even speak to him. Do you know he spies on me and uses the information for an exchange of favors? And his sly questions about Garnet are not innocent.” She bit her lip, paced to the ends of her room.

“I must find the 100th Monkey.” She stopped, stricken by an unwelcome thought. “If my father finds the 100th Monkey before I do, he will put an end to the messages.”

Nomi nodded in agreement.

“I cannot allow it.” Sapphire’s body was rigid with determination. “I have to go to the Shadow Ball.” She walked to an ornate dressing mirror. Her generous hair, shining with diamond beading, was a stark contrast to Nomi’s close-cropped head. Her formal dress – Summer Cream White layered with Rose White and Wisteria White – *is so dull, even if it makes my ebony complexion shine.*

Silent, Nomi stood behind her.

“Fatima was shocked the first time I mentioned it,” Sapphire spoke to her servant’s reflection. “I tried to be casual about it. Her response was typical. In a neutral tone, which did not fool me, because her halo turned dark and made the-buzzing-sound, she said: ‘The women of Attika are not permitted beyond the Demon Gates. There is a covenant against it.’ And I said: ‘All these covenants have never served a single soul.’ Honestly Nomi, she of all people should know that.”

Nomi smiled.

“Onyx has told me all about the Demon Gates and how they are engraved with shocking profanities, but you and I both know my brother is given to exaggeration. More so since last year’s Shadow Ball. He has changed. I don’t know how to say this,” she let out a short nervous laugh, “but I’m afraid he’s gotten more . . . sensual. Do you see how many Immaculate girls chase him? And not just girls.” She unfastened the first of seven diamond clasps. “We’ll have to hurry or I will miss the delivery boy.” With Nomi’s deft fingers, the remaining clasps yielded. She removed the first of the layered garments. When Sapphire was dressed in her kitchen whites, Nomi fixed a tight, white cap onto her head, tucking in any stray hairs. Nomi stepped back, nodded her approval.



Yari Hakai hoped his sister would bring enough produce to fill his order. Zara had a green thumb but quantities were always an issue. She prodded the door to their small kitchen with her foot. Her hands were full. “Are you coming? Or are you going to play games all day? I thought you had another delivery to make.”

“Uh-huh,” Yari said.

“Today would be good.”

“Hold on. Just let me finish this—”

“You’ll never finish, that’s the game, you said it.” She shook her head. “One day, and it can’t be soon enough, you’re going to see that you’re marching straight to Hades Door.”

Her judgment was a needle poking him in the back. He put down his Game Board. “One day,” he said, “you’re going to be proud that I did.” He got up and took the box of baby vegetables from her. “Holy diams! You are a wizard in the garden.”

“It takes wizardry to get anything to grow in our soil,” Zara agreed. “And your idea did help . . . the right amount of diffused light from the One Being instead of the Immaculate’s artificial light. Pure light, they call it? I can’t believe they use it everywhere, in the Sun Towers, and in the green houses. You’ve seen the green houses haven’t you?”

“Endless rows of them. Food factories. They are all the same. They grow perfectly shaped and perfectly tasteless produce. How do you do it? How do you get everything you grow to taste so good?”

“Oh, a little bit of this and a little bit of that. Any amateur could get the same results.”

He cocked his head. “Not true.”

“All you need is love. I talk to them. I sing to them. I play music for them. They need individual attention, a little pampering for their true selves to bloom.”

“Now you’re teasing me.”

She rolled her eyes. “Sure I am. The secret,” she leaned into him, “is pure science. It’s in the cross-breeding.”

“Like us?”

“Yeah,” she pulled back. “I didn’t think of it that way.”

“It’s perfect. It would never occur to the Immaculates to cross-breed. Never in a million years. It would never cross their pure minds. It would be seen as a contamination.”

“And,” Zara set a box down, “there’s nothing like good-old-world farming. Natural soil and natural light will always yield the best taste. My tomatoes are beautiful. Look at the colors. Orange, red, yellow, purple and these striped ones. And so meaty on the inside. Fit for Immaculates? You think?”

“I think they are going to love them.”

“Can’t we keep some of them?”

Yari put an arm around her and pulled her close. “We have to have the best for Garnet or he won’t even look at them. We get so little from your gardens. I hate taking them from you—”

Zara pulled away, “I still have my uglies. And they taste just as good, if not better.” She set another box down on the counter.

“Well, I hate taking your best and giving them away,” he paused, twisting his face into a sneer, “to them.”

Zara shrugged. “Don’t say it. I’ve heard it a thousand times. We have to so that we can have a chance at changing things,” she added, “for the better.”

“It’s the only way into the Sun Towers. I may never get past the kitchens—”

“Just as long as they don’t find out about my gardens. I’ll never forgive you if you’re discovered. They’ll send the Imperial Guards to destroy them, all of them.” She picked up a plump, ripe, baby tomato. “They still think my beauties come from one of their own farms? They still buy that story?”

“Yep, special delivery rushing the best of the best straight to the Emperor’s Table. Onyx bought the whole package and sold the idea to Garnet.”

“Which of the farming territories did you tell them you were from?”

“The southern territories where it’s too hot and they won’t dare go. Anyway, the way they code everything, it was easy to make us disappear. I’ve made sure we’re not on their radar. They’ll never find us and the blind spots are a stroke of luck. I’ve just found a few more that will give us more cover. Here,

look, closely now.” He pointed at the tiny screen of his computer. “Boredom. Conceit. Arrogance.”

“I could have told you that without the help of your toy.”

“Besides, Garnet is hooked and he’s not asking questions. You should see him. He’s round as a barrel but can he cook. It’s impressive. He has a refined palate and we can be thankful for that. He fell in lust once he saw and tasted your magic. He wants them and he’s being generous with his diams. That is how I am funding our rebellion.”

“Your rebellion. I just like growing vegetables.” Zara lifted her thumbs in the air.

“Sure. Whatever you say.” Yari picked up one of the boxes and went to the back door. They started loading them into the bigger cart that they would push to the nearest public transit station. He nearly dropped one of the small crates. Zara glared at him and took it from him. His mind was somewhere else.



Sapphire raced to the kitchens. The corridors were full of Immaculates. They whispered loud enough for her to catch the vitriol in their voices. *How have I earned this harsh attention? Perhaps it is because I am almost a woman and can no longer be trusted?* Better her father did not know about this latest entertainment. There would be consequences. So, for their sake, she would endure their unkindness. She turned a corner and froze. She looked right and then left, hoping for an escape route. Malachite stood in the center of the wide corridor, blocking her way – *most probably spying on me again.*

“And where are we off to so early in the morning? And in such a hurry?” he asked.

She displayed her uniform, “Kitchens.” She reminded herself to be kind. Malachite’s line was moved to the lower ranks because of some unforgivable slander and there would be no beneficial marriage for any of his descendants though the entire family pursued her.

“It is a shame the son of the Lord Emperor should be gifted with such a large appetite. The girth on your esteemed brother allows for no fair challenge,” he said in the affected spitting speech, every word spat from the mouth, every word an accusation. “One worries.”

“It pleases the Lord Emperor, and so it should please you,” she said. “But I see your concern for my esteemed brother’s health makes you caring.” She looked through him, plunging into his soul.

“S-s-surely,” he stammered, though his face remained a perfect, calculating mask.

She continued, “Essential Bless’d Health is our sacred duty.”

Malachite blundered through the symbol for the health of the descendants and whispered the prayer, “May all Immaculates live in Essential Bless’d Health.”

“We must make every effort to prepare our body and soul. Now if you’ll excuse me I have humbling work to get to.” She stepped around him.

“Oh, but before you go,” Malachite bowed, “I would ask, for my daughter Tourmaline only, you see. How is Citrine? Tourmaline has not seen Garnet’s beloved in a fortnight and she is concerned for her Essential Bless’d Health.” He made the symbol again. “Last time they were together in the baths, well, Citrine did not look her most-radiant self.”

Sapphire took a deep breath. “*Distant* Uncle, I will convey Tourmaline’s concern for Citrine’s Essential Bless’d Health. I am on my way to Garnet now.” She made the symbol again. “My brother will look with favor towards your line when I inform him of Tourmaline’s concern. Perhaps you may even see an improvement in your rank.”

She left him before he finished his first bow. Of course Malachite would inquire about Citrine’s Essential Bless’d Health and now Sapphire would be forced into politics. Malachite would expect a favor and she was bound to see it through. It was true, she hadn’t seen Citrine for at least a seven-day. She was always in the kitchens in the mornings. For all she knew, it was Tourmaline who had started the outrageous rumor about Citrine. *Citrine, promised for the Virgin’s Vessel? Never. She was Garnet’s beloved.*

She heard Yari’s challenging voice long before the stimulating fragrances reached her. She smelled potatoes, leeks, thyme – *ingredients for a delicious soup for lunch?* She rushed to catch Yari’s heated words. She arrived panting. Hidden from view, she watched and listened. All talk about the Plebs would cease straight away as soon as she showed her face. It was like that with both her brothers. They were too protective.

“The temperature out there is hot enough to do all your cooking,” Yari was saying. “You just set that pot out there on a stone and count to one hundred. Your soup will boil. And while you’re at it, you’d see the damage the Light Divine will do to your skin if you dared stay out longer than five minutes. But what would you know about that? You, in your cool, controlled environment. Only the best for the Immaculates. Makes you wonder what the Plebs ever did to deserve their fate.”

“It doesn’t make me wonder at all.” Garnet’s gentle but firm voice could be heard above the din of busy cooks and kitchen servants, all with close-cropped heads, working at various stations. “But let’s not talk about injustices. Leave the political banter for the Imperial Scholars. I understand it stimulates

the mind but I'll not have it in my kitchens. My kitchens are for cooking and nourishing the body and soul of man—"

"Of the Immaculate man," Yari interrupted. "What about the Pleb man?" He leaned over a pot, inhaled and licked his lips.

Sapphire bit her lips. She wanted to ask about the Pleb woman. *Where is she in all these debates?* But she did not dare call attention to herself. She watched Yari's mouth instead and imagined touching his lips, his rough face, his bare muscled arms.

Garnet stepped in front of Yari and gave the soup a possessive stir. Yari backed away. Garnet raised the spoon to his lips, tasted it, and added a handful of fresh herbs.

"No doubt the Plebs have their kitchens and their politics," he said. "Let's keep everything in its proper place. Now if you'll leave the produce you have kindly delivered." Garnet said this in the sick-saccharine tone of voice. Sapphire hated to hear her brother speak it. And, honestly, Garnet was shameless. The Imperial kitchens played out their own game of politics. Everyone revered him as Imperial chef and competed for his attentions. Politics were everywhere.

Yari took a quick glance around the large, polished chrome kitchen. "Plebs don't have kitchens, to speak of, never mind politics," he said. "Besides, what's a little harmless speculation?"

"Speculation can never be harmless," Garnet whispered. He raised his eyes towards the entrance of the kitchen where twin Stone Guardians, in the likeness of the 64th Incarnate, guarded the entrance.

Yari's eyes looked to the door. He scratched at the short bristles of a beard.

Garnet stirred the soup.

Sapphire edged back, out of sight.

She couldn't miss Garnet's irritation. "You'll be on your way now. Thank you." He nodded toward the door leading to the back halls of the towers. "And take that spice with you. Chipotle? Is that what you call it? I've had it analyzed. It is pure, no question. Sampled it myself for a seven-day. Holy Emperor! The emanations coming from this Sacr'd Pure Body could have chased demons straight to Hades Door. I'm still suffering from an inferno in my stomach." He shook his head. "The Immaculate palate is delicate. Blandness of diet is the cure, and helps humility. How Plebs live docile and obedient lives with fire like that in their bellies—"

"Is that right?" Yari raised both hands in disbelief. "You know this, how?" and calmly, "If, you'd bother, to get to know the truth about us—"

Sapphire stepped into view stopping him mid-sentence. All eyes turned towards her. Garnet beamed. “Well, well. Look who’s late, again.” He looked at the clock as he stamped his seal on the invoice Yari held out to him and handed him a pouch heavy with diams.

Sapphire threw an apron over her head and walked to the sink where fresh produce waited to be rinsed. She cursed her timing. *Why did I do that? Am I so afraid he will leave without seeing me? I’m turning into a foolish girl like my cousin Tourmaline. Perhaps, in this case, my Lord Father is right. I must be more sincere in my efforts to fulfill the Bodhisattva Prophecy. These towers have enough foolish women . . .*

From the corner of her eye, Sapphire watched the delivery boy. Playing the silent kitchen servant had advantages, *I hope Garnet will not give my secret away.* She tucked a stray hair into her cap.

Garnet was always kind to her, but he had acted out an unkindness towards an innocent Pleb. Yari looked confused about Garnet. But then, they all were. Garnet had secrets, deep secrets. He guarded them and he would keep hers. She prepared the fresh baby greens for the first of seven rinses. Onyx had been too proud of his find, the best of the best, and had boasted to Garnet, who welcomed anything that would improve the bland Immaculate diet. It was her good fortune that Garnet was unable to resist the temptation.

She wondered what the Plebs ate.

It was difficult not to stare at Yari. *I’ve never seen anything like him. Are all Plebs like him? And his bare arms . . . deliberate insolence? Are all Plebs insolent?* He lacked the perfection of her race. His features were irregular, but she found him handsome, with his light brown skin and his straight, sheen-black hair tied in a long tail. She cursed her sheltered life. She considered it an ignorance to know so little about him, about the Plebs. If she was to be a Bodhisattva, she must see what was beyond the Demon Gates.

She gathered a bunch of sweet smelling herbs into her hands. She thought she might bring some to the altar where her mother prayed to the Goddesses day and night. Sapphire felt an unkindness towards the Goddesses who refused to speak to her mother. Her mother was completely bereft over it and so alone. Sapphire could not hide her disappointment in them.

When she looked up, Yari and his offending spices were gone.