

Her onyx-colored skin glows beneath the stark white bedsheets. Her eyes fall to the slowly turning doorknob. Breathing in the intoxicating musk, she slides into her most deductive pose. The door opens.

“Number 871343.”

“Come on in. Is this your first time?”

He couldn't be much older than 16 rotations old, Ashe3X1P thinks. She's not more than 19 rotations, herself. She's been a temple prostitute since she was 12 years old. Her mother was a prostitute at 14 and her grandmother, at 16. She comes from a long legacy of temple prostitutes. Prostitution is only legal as a means of atonement, not pleasure.

“Tell me your name,” she says.

“Marcus. Marcus. Marcus Johnson.”

“Well, Marcus Johnson, what would you have us to do this morning?”

Ashe's bedroom is covered in intricately woven mats. They are beautiful and welcoming. Most congregants take off their shoes when they walk into her room. They also take off their clothes, so the dust from the outside doesn't usually make it in. This reason, alone, is why Ashe is a sought out prostitute. Her bedroom blocks out the outside world. Entering into her room is an escape.

“I am...uh...finished.” Marcus blushes.

Ashe coos, “No problem, honey. Just lie down. No pressure. Your sins are forgiven. Your sacrifice counts.” He makes his way to her bed and lies down. Her hands caress his entire body. He shudders in ecstasy and falls asleep for the rest of his allotted time.

After Marcus wakes, he leaves behind a bag of wool garments along with a food offering as payment. Ashe grabs her journal and writes a description of the services rendered:

Marcus was experienced well beyond his years. His prowess was not that of a first timer and I was worn out. I felt as though I were with a man, not a boy. His family should be proud and his sins are more than forgiven. I look forward to being with him again.

This proof, required by the priests, is to ensure that no one is left out and that everyone is participating in the sacraments. In the olden days, people participated in the sacraments willingly. Once Babylon was established, it was necessary to create a system. The routine kept people happily occupied. Each prostitute then scans the information into the system. It holds everyone accountable.

A ringing tone brings Ashe back to reality. Temple. The cleansing pod glows purple as she turns it on. The light feels warm and refreshing. It immediately smells like strawberries.

“Grandma, where is dad?”

“Out in the oil fields, baby.”

“Grandma, why am I so dark?”

“Because you are.”

“Grandma, where is mama?”

“Baby. Here. Eat these.”

“Thanks Grandma, but...”

The strawberry juice dripped down her chin and onto her clothing. Six-year-old

Ashe was suddenly preoccupied by the sweetness of the fruit.

The cleansing light shuts off, bringing her back to today. She quickly gets dressed in her Temple costume of oilmen's pants and work boots with an almost black sweater that has seen better days. Ashe's thoughts are with the memory of her Grandmother. The light from the golden counter distracts her for a moment. 326. The number seems small, but it is the most of any of the prostitutes.

"Temple begins in 5 minutes. Temple begins in 5 minutes," the Voice drones on. Her door opens automatically and the lights start blinking. She knows that when she walks out of the door it will stop, but that does not make it any less bothersome.

The parade of people walking to Temple is silent. The Bloods are looking pious and every Com hopes to be noticed by the Bloods. The bots, which monitor security, are amongst the crowd, making sure everyone keeps moving towards the Temple. Ashe slips into the crowd, hoping to go unnoticed. The Temple stands squarely in the middle of Babylon. Its spires almost reach the sky. The architecture is gothic and modern at the same time. Pure oxygen is pumped into the temple, which lifts everyone's spirits. The air they are used to is only moderately filtered, not pure.

Ashe finds a spot in the back of the room, away from everyone. The pews date back to 2014. They were, as legend has it, salvaged from a Christian church in Babylon. Ashe likes to rub her hands along the grooves and imagine who sat there. What were they like? How did they dress? What was Temple like for them?

"Excuse me."

A Blood interrupts her thoughts.

"I'm sorry," she mumbles as she lets the man scoot past her. Who would want to

sit this far away from the priests? Most Bloods want the priests to see them.

“Aloysius.”

“Ashe3X1P.”

“I know.”

Ashe’s eyes widen. She can’t place him. He wasn’t one of her regular congregants. His eyes are deep, like pools of chocolate. He seems kind, but that’s not normal for a Blood.

“Do you?” She smirks. It isn’t hard to slip back into prostitute mode.

“I need to talk to you,” he whispers.

“Make an appointment,” she coos.

The priest starts service and Aloysius seems to only see Ashe. She’s used to attention, but this seems different. His eyes don’t leave her the entire service.

---

There’s a knock on the door. Ashe isn’t expecting anyone, but sometimes the Bloods are early. They feel entitled to her time. The smell of musk fills the room. She turns off the lights and beckons the caller in.

“Come on in.”

Aloysius stands at the door, smiling.

“Well, hello madam!” He is so happy.

“Hello. Tell me your name again, sir.”

“Aloysius. May I sit?”

She points towards a simple wooden chair and he sits.

“So, tell me. What do you like?”

“Ashe, I am not here for sacraments. I need to speak to you. I made an appointment!”

Ashe sits up in the bed. This is strange, but she’s curious.

“Go ahead, Aloysious. What would you like to talk about?”

Aloysious takes in a deep breath. The musk smell is strong. He coughs.

“You are not who you think you are. This is not who you were made to be. You can choose to be anything you want. You can dream.”

Ashe looks at him, confused.

“Twenty years ago a priest found a room where the ancient texts were kept. It is called a library. In this library, there were texts that pointed to the existence of self-government. Meaning that you can choose what you want to be and who you want to be.”

“I don’t...”

“Let me finish. We don’t have much time. Ignacio, the priest, started reading these texts and was so moved by them that he began telling people about them. Twelve years later, the government of Babylon murdered him. He was beheaded.”

Ashe is surprised.

“What does that have to do with me?”

Aloysious smiled, “Have you ever felt as though you didn’t belong? Have you ever looked at your family and longed to see yourself in their faces? Have you noticed that you are nothing like them?”

Ashe is silent.

“You have. Well, I am here to tell you that your destiny is your own and that you are not bound to be a temple prostitute. You can be anything you want. I also am here to

tell you that you are my sister.”

“Okay. Well, I don’t believe you. Please leave.”

“Ashe, please. Listen to me. When my father, Ignacio, was beheaded, my mother found out that she was pregnant.”

“Women do not carry fetuses!”

“I know. That was why it was so secret. She gave birth to a little girl and gave her to the woman you knew as your grandmother. She vowed to keep you safe as long as she could. Ashe3X1P. You are something special.”

Ashe made her way to the door. Aloysious rose. He wasn’t welcome anymore. There was a knock at the door, they both jumped.

“Ashe, give me a call. The frequency is fourteen. And, no one can know who you are.”

“Thank you. Goodbye.”

Her next congregant stood, impatient, at the door. As she ushers him in, Ashe does her best to focus on his pleasure and put Aloysious’ claims out of her mind.