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A Virgin Made Less

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Merriam Scafide

A Virgin Made Less

Silence. Not a word spoken. Not a soul untouched by the horrors they came to watch. Vestal Virgins, six in all, now totaled five since one was condemned to die. An unjust death. A scapegoat in every rite... a Virgin made less.

A litter tightly bound with rope and fabric travels to the Colline Gate carrying the victim. No one can hear the girl's screams. Is she crying? Is she pleading? To the Pontiff she is no victim, but the cause of Rome's demise. An intense fire that must be put out before it spreads to the rest of the state and burns the conglomerate enterprise.

A veiled girl steps out. A sliver of her face is revealed to the crowd and is cast downward toward her fate. The other Vestals and I watch from a distance. My hardened heart observes this horrendous act with indifference.

A crack in my armor as she quickly glances behind her. I was her mentor... No, don't think of that now. Tears glisten in her blue eyes. Her fair skin is deathly pale, appropriate for the ghastly occasion. Her hands are clenched, I can tell from afar. How long till she dies? Will she first thirst or starve?

Did she commit any crime? Well, it's hard to know. But with the state of Rome, someone had to go. A person to hold all political sin; but why her, and not me, I thought in despair. I was older, held more respect and proved my chastity. She was in her prime, years more to learn, to grow.

There was no room in her obedient heart to undermine. She wore her duties with a smile, this girl of twenty-five, my shadow.

A flashback, one year, then two, then three. These fiery memories bright in my memory. A pretty girl comes from a clean family, no physical deformity in sight. She works by day bringing water to cleanse the temples, and harvests wheat for rituals to prevent Roman plight. By night she goes to dinner gatherings with men and women alike. "But beware," I remember telling her, that one summer night, "do not get close enough to touch those men, or you will be looked at with spite. Vestals must stay away from men who have the potential to turn our holy status to strife because we must always be seen doing what is true and right. Our virginity is our sacred vessel, our one defining aspect, what gives us this free life." The girl nodded her head, blue eyes piercing mine with severity. Hopefully, she recognized what perception would bring grace. She waded into the dinner crowd, and I could only pray to Vesta that she comprehended the message and remained in her place.

My memories subside when my warnings to Lucinia come to mind. No matter what I said to help her, no matter what advice I gave, it did nothing to stop the Pontiff from unchaste accusations that ultimately put Lucinia in her grave.

She takes one more look, sighs and turns towards the chamber. With her back to me she descends. Down down down she goes with as much dignity as a person on death row can muster. What lies down there in the dark? Some water? Some bread? Surely a god will save her now.

What did this girl ever do but be loyal and true? I guess interment is what happens when politics run askew.

The solemn guards scoop dirt slowly, slowly, over the entrance to her tomb. Silence all around. Waiting. Watching. State is restored. Scapegoat is sacrificed. What next? A new Virgin? Will they pass the test of chastity or time? These questions flicker in my mind as the shoveled earth flattens out and hides Lucinia's eerie confine.

The guards stand up, wipe their hands on their tunics and let their sweat drip to the ground as noiseless splashes. The crowd stares at the turned earth. Unmoving. I steadily swivel my head from side to side and take in the people who witnessed this show. A show of power, a show of restoration, a show that signifies political ebb and flow.

Children cling to their mothers, and mothers wrapped their arms tightly around their children's chests. Husbands survey the scene like stone fireplaces. Should I leave now or wait? I hesitate. It dawns on me that there is one less Virgin no longer free... I can only pray to Vesta that these mothers didn't also bring the children to the flogging of the man accused of impurity. To be with a Vestal was the highest crime. I heard the man who was condemned beside the woman was flogged to death in public for some time.

Years after this event, as my remaining days as a Vestal burned low like dying embers, I still saw the faces of disgust from the crowd. The grimaces, the tears, the permanent wincing, the frowns.

There is always a balance. With great power comes great renown. But there is always a chance to fall, to die, to suffocate trapped below ground. That is the fate of a Vestal who breaks her sacred vows. Vestals must be careful in public to remain virtuously sound.

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