

Chapter 2: Consecrated Love and Public Humiliation

Anthony and Jessica had chosen to get married on the shores of Lake Voxmore instead of in House Kolb's courtyard, as was custom. Maybe this act of defiance was why Rowan hadn't been allowed to invite her friends today. Maybe it was why she hadn't been asked to stand as a witness for her brother.

Instead, that honor had gone to Paisley and Logan, two more of her siblings, who were standing beside Anthony. As dapper as ever, he was wearing a navy suit with a pastel blue button-down shirt underneath it, one set to match Jessica's cocktail dress. The lake's wind kept whipping her auburn hair into her face, and her frustration with this as well as her inability to fix it had put a soft smile on Anthony's face.

They were angled toward their gathered guests with Rowan's parents standing behind them. Veronica, the head of their House, had clasped the couple's joined hands while her wife, Bay, hovered at her shoulder.

"Today, we bring two people together as one, merging the noble blood of one to the other," she said. "May it be marked and known throughout the land."

"It is known," Rowan intoned alongside everyone else.

While they'd been planning this ceremony, Rowan didn't know how many arguments had broken out between Jessica's parents and hers. After all, the people of Athari and Roswines made marriages official in different, quite non-compatible ways. In the end, Veronica had agreed to do things Roswines' way, so long as House Sono would let the newlyweds spend their first year together in Athari with them.

She'd also insisted on leading the ceremony. Rowan could see her mother's tension and dislike of the next bit in the slight twitch of her eyes and in how ramrod straight she'd made her spine. Still, Veronica smiled, refusing to upset her son on this most momentous of days, and pride for her mom swelled in Rowan's heart.

"A married couple should be tied together in the deepest of senses: one body to another, blood to blood, and soul to spark of soul," she said. "The first is something the couple must do on their own, whether later tonight or several months ago, as we all know has probably occurred."

While Jessica ducked her head, flushing, Anthony laughed, wild and carefree as he always was, and it infected the gathered people, spreading to anyone who'd been unsure about Veronica's

impromptu addition to the ceremony. Smirking, she waited until they'd settled before continuing.

"The last is something no one will ever see, something to be worked at throughout your lives, and I, as well as everyone here, wish you all the best with it."

Resting one hand each on Jessica and Anthony's shoulders, she squeezed them before letting her hands fall away, much like the pleasure warming her eyes dropped.

"As for blood, that is a joining we can witness here and now," she said. "Jessica Sono. Anthony Kolb. Show your love to those gathered here this day."

Taking a deep breath, Anthony kissed Jessica's cheek before shrugging out of his jacket. Paisley, chewing on her lip, accepted it while Logan offered their oldest brother a knife with his face closed off. Once he was finished with rolling up a sleeve, Anthony accepted it, turning to match Jessica's pose. Carefully, he joined her in setting the blade's edge against his skin, exactly where she'd showed him a few weeks ago, and Rowan tightened her hands around one another.

As he dragged the blade down his arm, running parallel to the vein that would have seen him dead if it had been opened, Anthony didn't flinch. He never flinched, a perfect child of House Kolb, so Rowan did it for him. She didn't like seeing red droplets trickling over her brother's arm and hated what she couldn't help but view as a barbaric ceremony, no matter how symbolic this near-drain-of-life from the couple might be.

Jessica didn't handle her marking nearly as well as Anthony, wobbling so much that he took her elbow to steady her. Rowan wondered why Jessica's sister, standing as a witness like Logan and Paisley, hadn't done that for her.

With an encouraging smile, Anthony pressed their bloodied wounds together before hooking his elbow around hers. Together, they bent to their lover's arm, sucking on each other's presented cuts, and when they rose, Anthony grabbed Jessica's head, kissing his new wife. He didn't seem to care about the crimson smears around their mouth or an ooze of that same color, ruining his shirt, but honestly? Rowan couldn't blame him for that. He was finally married to the woman he'd been chasing for years, and Rowan couldn't keep this bubbly glow inside of her to herself.

She was the first person on her feet, clapping and hollering, but other people quickly followed suit. The newlyweds turned to them, rightfully pleased, while the lake's wind buffeted their hair and clothing against their bodies.

A few hours later, Rowan was watching them laugh and playfully swat one another at the other end of the receiving hall with her arms crossed and her lip caught in her teeth. She was glad Anthony was happy. As House Kolb's heir, he was always under so much pressure, so it was good to see that burden taken from him, if only for a short time.

She wished his happiness had been extended to her, though. Considering how well today had gone, Rowan didn't know why she had a gaping pit in her stomach right now.

After coming home from Lake Voxmore, the evening had started with a bang. Literally. Several hand-picked Kolb troopers had fired a round of blank projectiles into the air while Jessica and Anthony had dashed into the receiving hall, laughing the whole way. Dinner had been a thing of beauty, full of artfully crafted dishes that Rowan had eaten way too much of, and as people had finished their meals, they'd risen to mingle on the terrace outside or along the edge of the room. A few brave souls had even started dancing, formal stuff that only made Rowan cringe, but not many guests had joined them yet.

Rowan wondered how her home appeared to the citizens in the greater city tonight. Did they see the warm lights glowing from the reception hall's windows and wish Anthony Kolb, the son of their most favored house, all the best? Or did they curse the nobles for having another damnable party while they went home to their shoe-box apartments?

Clicking her tongue, Rowan turned away from her view of the newlyweds. She must be drunk. She only got this maudlin after she'd had a few, and she *had* already drunk several glasses of champagne. She wasn't sure how many, losing count after the third.

Out of reflex, she looked for her family members, hoping one of them wasn't occupied.

Her parents were, of course, busy keeping Lord and Lady Sono entertained. *Avan* help them if the head of another House got bored at their party. The scandal of it!

But seriously, if Bay and Veronica didn't show those two prudes a good time, the Sono family could use it to pressure Rowan's parents into holding future social gatherings at their home, and social gatherings were where the noble Houses' political maneuverings took place, as could be seen tonight.

Rowan's twin brothers, Henry and John, were busy chatting up the middle child of House Mistral, or rather, Henry was doing that while John provided backup. Their target might be rather famous for his good looks, but he was a he, and John didn't play for that team, unlike his twin. John was also Rowan's favorite brother, the most thoughtlessly giving of them, but shh! The other boys didn't need to know that.

Paisley had somehow gained the misfortune of keeping Jessica's sister company tonight, which she was *loathing*. When she was unhappy, Rowan's sister got that same twitch in the corner of her eyes as their mother, although her eyes' murky blue color didn't conceal the tic as nicely as their family's signature green did for Veronica.

Her last brother, Logan, had gotten himself surrounded by House Breyham's daughters with the lot of them probably discussing money right now. Breyham was currently the wealthiest of Athari's noble families, not through inheritance but through those girls' shrewd investments in corps over the last decade. Considering Logan managed the family's finances with great enthusiasm, Rowan wasn't surprised that the four of them had found one another so quickly.

Which left her, the youngest child of House Kolb. The most disposable daughter with the least useful talents, although her family would probably slap anyone who said such a thing out loud.

Except for her. If Rowan voiced thoughts like that, she'd probably get drowned in hugs and reminders of her many good qualities.

Those qualities hadn't helped her with finding company tonight. As usual, she was on the outskirts, watching other people shine, but that was ok. She'd accepted that this was her role in life.

She *had*.

Even given her relative uselessness in the world of nobles, people had been approaching her. Rowan had done her best to charm anyone who came to chat with her, but a lack of shared interests had usually ended those conversations quickly.

But most of the people who'd given her their time had been boys, asking for a dance. Rowan had tried to turn them down as politely as possible, but her irritation over their requests had jumped with the hour and how much champagne she'd had to drink.

She didn't dance, not in the way people were doing it tonight at least. Here, everything was carefully controlled with every movement measured. If Rowan was going to dance, she wanted to throw herself into it. She wanted the music, no matter what type, to flow through her, intermingling with her cells and the spark of neurotransmitters between her nerves. She didn't want to be... *graceful*. A marionette on strings.

She'd been to enough social events in Athari that many of the boys here should know her preferences by now, but still, they kept coming. It only made her drink faster.

Seeing an attendant coming her way, holding a tray with champagne flutes on it, Rowan downed her current drink, swapping it out for a full one. Some of her new glass's liquid splashed over its lip, pattering on the silver lace of her dress's bodice, and hunching to wipe at it, she took a sip, despite her head's awkward angle. A handkerchief slid into view, and glancing up, Rowan met the eyes of the next boy who'd come to pester her.

At least this one was somewhat aesthetically appealing. Despite the steadily strengthening veil around her, one that had been fuzzing the world throughout the night, Rowan clearly saw his black hair, well matched with his amber skin tone and brown eyes, although his face was just a little too soft, but that was compensated by a well-built body in a... violet suit?

That was new.

"For your dress," he said, gently bobbing his offered handkerchief at Rowan.

As she accepted it, Rowan drew her eyebrows together, and when she straightened, she teetered a little.

"Thank... you?" she said.

Oh, damn. She couldn't remember what she was supposed to do next in this sort of interaction. Did she ask for his name? What if she was supposed to know it? He looked familiar...

That suit really was nice. Rowan wondered how Mia or Thomas would look in it, although they'd probably scoff at wearing something so fancy.

Why was she holding a handkerchief again?

Frowning, Rowan filled her mouth with champagne instead of words that might get her in trouble, looking for somewhere to put what she was holding.

"Are you all right?"

Oh, yeah. There'd been a boy. She should talk to him. Right?

"I'm fine. My brother just got married. Hurrah," Rowan said, barely slurring her words. "Are you ok?"

She poked him before quickly retracting her finger. What the fuck, Rowan? One did not touch an unknown noble without an invitation.

Fortunately, he didn't seem upset, more curious. He'd narrowed his eyes, tilting his head almost to his shoulder.

"This might not be so bad after all," he said under his breath.

Maybe he'd thought Rowan wouldn't hear him or had been too drunk to understand, but those words had definitely parsed in her head and oh... she'd gone ice cold.

"Excuse me? No. Wait. Excuse *you*."

Rowan took a step into his personal space, not caring how much he towered over her.

"Do you have a problem with me, mister?" she said. "I don't even know who you are, and you've already insulted me."

Frowning, the boy didn't back away from her as she'd hoped.

"You're right. That was rude of me. I'm sorry," he said. "I only came to request a dance, but I... dislike danc-"

"He wants a dance, everyone," Rowan said in a loud voice.

With her hands slightly raised, she turned in a circle, taking in the people who'd started staring at her.

"Did the other two dozen guys I've refused not give you a clue about what my answer would be? I do. not. want. to dance. with anyone."

For the last bit, Rowan had shoved her palm into his shoulder, putting greater force behind it with each word, and on the last push, he stumbled away from her, running into an attendant. The

woman tried to keep her tray aloft, but it tipped over, spilling canapes and drinks all over the boy, and Rowan's mouth dropped open at the rate of his climb to his feet. Oh *avan*, he was glaring at her.

What had she just done? What the *hell* had she just done?

"Um," she said into the dead quiet with every eye on her.

Before Rowan could make more of a fool of herself, someone grabbed her elbow, tugging on her, while Henry slid between her and the boy.

"Well! That was exciting," he said. "Let's get you cleaned up, good sir, and we can..."

The rest of his words got swallowed by the room's swelling murmurs, ones that Rowan barely paid attention to, what with John swiftly dragging her through a door. Even after they'd entered the main house and the danger of running into a guest was gone, he didn't let up, but Rowan hardly noticed. She kept replaying what had happened in her head.

The boy's clumsy dance to stay on his feet. Thinly sliced tomatoes on his violet suit's jacket. Sticky, black locks partially obscuring the most hateful glower she'd seen in her life.

"Shit," Rowan muttered.

Glancing at her, John shook his head.

"Yep," he said. "You done fucked up, itty-bitty baby bean."

And Rowan was so caught up in absolute *mortification* that she didn't protest her brother's use of that hated pet name.

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