

Kappa Kappa Kappa

*Welcome to Kappa Kappa Kappa, the sorority that celebrates spreading kindness, cultivating kinship, and upholding karma!*

*Founded in 1965 at our very own University of Texas at Austin by two best friends with a big dream, our sorority has since opened 147 chapters nationwide! Our philanthropy partners include the Tuskegee HIV Research Center, the Springfield Shelter for the Unhoused, the Austin Institute for Human Trafficking Prevention, and many more! Famous alumni include Georgia Representative Melanie Tyler Gene, women's rights activist Raleigh Gayes, and our very own First Lady, Diana Tramp!*

*Do your values and vision for the future align with our society of forward thinking women? Join the Kappas class of 2040! We initiate 35 girls each year. Will you be one of them?*

The flyer is made of cardstock, with a shiny plastic layer on top. It's a blush pink, with lavender lettering in a rounded, curly font. In the photo in the top right, I see rows upon rows of extremely white teeth in face splitting grins. In the middle left photo, there are lines upon lines of variations of the same lacy white dress with low necklines and thigh high hems. In the bottom right, girls are jumping into a clear blue lake in floral string bikinis, their skin glaringly white.

The back of the flyer is plain, yet elegant. There is simply the insignia, three symbols in a slim column. First, the magnolia, their flower, with six white petals evenly spaced. In the middle, their crest, a bundle with a broom, a trident, and a whisk tied at their bases with a pink bow, encircled by a laurel. And finally, their letters, in raised relief gold, K K K. I press my thumb into the letters and hold for ten seconds. When I lift and look, there it is, like a branding, the three letters in red on my white skin.

"Why are you still looking at that thing, Kaelin? Come on, are you ready to go?"

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Yolanda takes the flyer from my hands and tosses it back onto my desk, where I had watched it for the past week like a burning hot coal. She squeezes my shoulders and runs her hands down my arms, then grips my fingers. The warmth of her skin feels good, but I instinctively look behind me at the window, the flimsy plastic blinds and blackout curtains as shut as ever. She pulls my chin to face her and kisses me slowly, softly, inaudibly.

I pull away.

“Don’t do that again,” I say, walking over to my desk. I look into my mini mirror. She didn’t smudge my nude lipstick, but I notice that I could use a touch up on my lip gloss anyway. I grab my purse from its hook on the dorm closet door and twist open the clasp. There’s so much junk in here: keys, wallet, hand sanitizer, compact mirror, plastic comb, eyeliner, receipts.

It’s only after Yolanda takes the purse from me that I realize my hands are shaking. She pulls the lip gloss from some hidden recess of the purse and applies it onto my lips. Her wavy blonde hair looks deflated and parched compared to her natural springy dark chocolate curls.

Last year, we bleached our hair and our eyebrows for the first time together, and we did it together again right before rush week. It looks passable on me, even though my eyes are brown, but even with her eyes that change from green to blue to hazel depending on the light, her skin is just a shade too dark to be called tan, to look natural with the bright yellow of her hair.

Yolanda hands me back my purse. She’s already wearing her own identical leather purse across her chest. They told us to wear long white dresses, nude heels, hair down, gold jewelry, tan purse. *Like the Greek goddesses you are!* the bid invitation said in gold ink.

“What if we just don’t go?” I ask, trying to smother the dread in my chest.

Yolanda sighs and puts her hands around my waist. “Kaelin, it’s going to be okay. We’ll be together at every event, every party, social, fundraiser, whatever. We’re doing this together.”

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“Surrounded by a bunch of wasps, watching constantly.”

“Hey, some of those wasps might be nice,” she says, stroking my hair. “No better place to find some closeted queers than the whorehouse for fascists.”

“The only thing that scares them more than us is their own secrets,” I laugh hollowly and hold her to me. Moments like these keep me sane, keep me myself. And yet, as I feel more and more sharply in the past several months, moments like these need to be rationed out, hidden. I can’t get used to having her so near, and I can’t ever stop being aware of who’s listening.

“Why did we have to pick Kappas?” Saying their name leaves an ashy tickle in my throat. “They’re like a cult.”

“All of Greek life is a cult.”

“But Kappas are even more culty. Why didn’t we choose pious prudes like Chi Omega or bigoted bimbos like Tri Delta? Why did we feed ourselves to the nest of killers?” I wince as I say it, the panic itching to set in again.

Yolanda hugs me tightly and I can feel her heart beating rapidly. But when she pulls back, her face is calm and smooth. “First of all,” she says, tapping my nose, “That’s just a rumor. There is no way they could get away with half the stuff people say they do.”

“But the other half?” I press.

“Second of all,” she says, tapping my nose again, “There’s a reason why, if anything weird *does* happen, no one knows about it. The Kappas are the most well connected sorority in the republic, which is why joining Kappas is the best way for us to gain protection and influence. Those Kappa necklaces fend off and intimidate politicians, let alone police.”

I nod and nod. We’ve said all these things before. It’s okay. It’s just the name. The title. The brand. We don’t actually have to be *one of them*. We’re just going to do what they tell us.

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“More than half of women in power are Kappas. Any charity they endorse rakes in millions in donations. Becoming a Kappa will give us the respect and security we need to be self-reliant. And then, eventually, advocate for people like us.”

As infectious as her optimism is, my worries bite back. “They can just as easily take away power once they give it. You have to support them or they won’t support you.”

Yolanda sighs. “Don’t freak out, Kaelin, I’m not going to start a revolution. I just want the freedom to keep you close by.”

“But not *too* close,” I say, pulling her closer.

Yolanda scoffs. “We survived five years living in the same foster facility where the *bathrooms* had surveillance cameras.” She laughs. “Remember when we got caught holding hands in the greenhouse? I was so scared, I couldn’t move. And you just kept gripping my hand even though they were clearly suspicious!”

The memory incites a wave of feverish heat over my head. “Letting go of your hand would be admitting it, or that’s what I thought. I was just being stupid. They already knew.”

“You were so brave,” she says, tilting her chin up to me.

I hear what she isn’t saying. *Why can’t you be brave now?*

A week after that incident, Yolanda was sent to live in a building across the compound. We would still see each other in the mess hall, but I swear the scrutiny intensified. From the adults, and even some of the other kids who were True Patriots.

“Things are different now.” I care about her more, want her more, need her more. More than I can express, envelop, endure.

She strokes my cheek and draws her finger over the curve of my ear, sending electricity down my spine. “Yeah, we have this whole dorm to ourselves.”

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“No, that’s not what I mean. For most of those three years, we were just friends, Yolanda. We weren’t, like...” I don’t know how to finish that sentence without feeling dizzy with nausea.

Yolanda waits and raises an eyebrow. “Like what?”

I crawl out of her warm, soft arms and go sit on my bed. I wish it was yesterday or tomorrow or ten years ago. Anything but now.

“God, Kaelin,” Yolanda says, sitting on her bed, facing me. “It’s enough that the government calls us perverted, mentally twisted sinners. But for you to have gotten brainwashed into believing them about this, about us?”

I don’t have the energy to argue. Yolanda loves limitlessly, ignorantly. But lately I’ve been feeling like an empty well, drying up with the drought. She doesn’t get it. She doesn’t remember her parents. She wasn’t ripped away from them screaming.

“If they find out—”

“Please,” Yolanda says, “You think these straight girls have a gaydar?”

“Yolanda, *if*,” I stare into her color changing eyes that so effortlessly mask her true emotions, that so eloquently lie in exactly the way I can’t. She always deflects with humor, but I can’t let her. She needs to accept that nothing is funny anymore. “What are we going to do?”

Yolanda rolls her eyes and heads for the door. “Come on, we don’t want to be late. I already know these stupid stilettos are going to slow me down.”

I clear my throat and walk cautiously to her. “You know all I want is to make you safe.”

Yolanda looks at the ceiling, and I notice her eyes are brimming with tears. I feel like I just swallowed boiling vinegar. I need to fix this, explain myself.

“This *will* make us safe. Initiation is the last step we need to take to be one of them. Once we’re *in*, they can never take us *out*. Then, the Kappas will protect us.”

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I nod, but she's not looking. I want to speak, but I feel like words will make it all worse.

"Anyway, this isn't just about me and you. This is so we can protect the future Kappas."

That aggravates me, because this totally *is* just about us. But Yolanda always has to have the moral high ground. She relishes the danger of flaunting stolen territory.

And now she's taunting me, luring me, trapping me. Before I can start to argue, Yolanda yanks the door open and heads out without looking back.

We don't talk on the way over, and I feel a strange relief when we walk up the brick path to the house. It looks, intentionally or covertly, like your classic plantation house. Pristine, neatly trimmed grass, ancient trees on either side creating a canopy of leaves, and at the end of the tunnel, thick white pillars and black iron balustrades and glowing white walls. Every window is lit and the old fashioned black lamp posts cast our shadows in all directions as we click clack in our heels toward the crowd of white silk and bobbing blonde heads and tinkling laughter.

When Charity Charleston, the president, sees us approaching, she squeals, "Welcome! It's so good to see you, Kaelin and Yolanda!" She pronounces Yolanda with a twangy long "a" sound: "yo-LAN-duh" instead of "yo-LAHN-dah." I bristle inside.

We exchange brief breezy hugs with the leadership board, and amid the swishy fabrics and soft whips of well conditioned blonde hair, I catch that familiar vanilla creamsicle lavender musk they all seem to wear. I hope my rose perfume doesn't stick out amid their cohesive scent.

"Pamela will lead y'all to the ceremony!" Charity calls, then squeals at the next arrivals.

We step into the foyer, heels crisp against the marble floor. The double staircase is decorated with magnolias around the railings. There's a humongous crystal chandelier hanging from the ceiling with candles refracting their light across the domed ceiling.

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“Yolanda, look...” I point with my eyes to the mural in the rotunda. There’s Lady Liberty, with her American flag and billowing robes. There’s Lady Justice, blindfolded, a scale in her hands. And there’s Manifest Destiny leading pioneer wagons across a plain, sunlight behind her.

“Was that there before?” she asks, hand gripping my wrist. Not mad enough to ignore me.

“Hey, I’m Pamela, please let me take your bags and follow me to the dining room.”

Yolanda immediately releases her grasp and I can feel her stiffen beside me as we both see Pamela. She’s the first Black girl I’ve seen on campus and she has a scar running down her left cheekbone. And around her neck, there it is. The gold choker of three finger-width chains, clasped in the front with a ring from which the crest dangles. All the girls wear it. But there’s a line of red on the skin that peeks out from under the choker that I haven’t seen on white necks.

This rumor, it seems, is true. I touch my neck. Are we going to be given *that* necklace?

Pamela takes our purses from our stiff hands and hangs them up in the hall closet, which is stuffed with similar tan purses. Nothing is labeled, so how are we going to get our bags later?

Pamela shuts the door and we fall into step behind her. We go through sitting room after sitting room, with beige seat cushions and gold wainscoting panels. It’s eerily quiet as we go through carpeted passageways, with old oil paintings of past members on the walls.

Pamela doesn’t say anything, and I’m scared to speak. But Yolanda, always bolder, asks, “So how do you like Kappas so far?”

Pamela turns back to us and smiles. “I love it. It’s such a welcoming and caring community. I’ve found my best friends in Kappas.”

“That’s so sweet,” Yolanda says, returning an equally blinding grin. “That’s really why we wanted to rush Kappas,” she says, tapping the small of my back with a cold hand, “The girls really care about each other and everyone is dedicated to making the world a better place.”

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Pamela nods, then loses her grin when she faces forward. I falter a step.

After a beat or two, Yolanda presses cheerfully, “What made you want to join?”

“Oh, the same as you two,” Pamela says, “A way to find my place on campus, a sisterhood that would have my back for the rest of my life.”

Yolanda relaxes in relief, but I’m not ready to yet.

“So is that your favorite part about Kappas? The sisters?” I ask, pulse quickening.

Pamela tilts her head to consider it, revealing more angry red blisters under the choker.

“My favorite part was probably initiation. The dinner that you both are about to have.”

“Really?” I ask. “What about philanthropy dinners? Bonding retreats? Quarterly dances?”

We’ve reached the dining room. Soft chatter and violin music reverberates from the walls. The door is covered in gold mouldings of magnolias. Her hand is on the gold round doorknob, with the K K K on it. She presses her palm into the letters and says, “God, no.”

She opens the door and we enter a small annex decorated all over with vases of magnolias. At the other end of the room, there’s a table with two girls behind it, waving us over.

“Welcome Initiates! I’m Janet! I’ll check you in! Lizzie will help you find your table!”

“What’s your full name?” She asks Yolanda first.

“Yolanda Garza,” she says. Janet flips through her clipboard and checks Yolanda off.

“Okay, Lizzie, bring her to Table 45.”

Lizzie nods and comes around the table to lead Yolanda away. We catch each other’s eyes and panic seizes my chest. I can tell the fear dissolved her anger by the way her smile doesn’t reach her eyes. But for me, there’s no anger to dissolve. It was only ever fear in my chest.

The door to the dining room shuts with a deafening click and it’s just me and Janet.

“Name?” she asks, smiling brightly.



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“Kaelin Copperfield,” I say.

Janet flips through her clipboard, finger running down the page. It stops. “*Full* name?”

I can feel my heart beating in my jugular vein. I take a deep breath, trying to not seem too obvious about it, and say, “Kaelin Zheng Copperfield.”

Janet nods thoughtfully and checks my name off. The door to the dining room opens, and Lizzie emerges. Bubbling chatter from the room washes over me.

“Table 58 for Kaelin Zheng Copperfield,” Janet says, pronouncing it like “zang” instead of “jung.” Which, of course, is how I pronounce it too.

I follow Lizzie into a giant room with red velvet drapes on the walls. There’s a stage in the front, with the crest on the wall behind it and a long row of set tables and empty chairs. Across the dark wood floor are small round tables covered in white tablecloth and gold plates. They’re all numbered, and I’m shocked to notice that the highest number goes up to 70.

“There’s so many tables,” I mutter, scanning them. I can’t find Table 45 and Yolanda.

“Yep!” Lizzie says. “Each table has four chairs, so there’s one sophomore, one junior, one senior, and of course, one initiate freshman!” She giggles.

“I thought each class has thirty five members,” I say.

“Yep! Thirty five *true* members. Not everyone makes it past initiation, obviously!”

My chest seizes. Another rumor. But that can’t possibly be true, can it?

We reach Table 58 and I sit down. Now is not the time to jump ship. Maybe I can find Yolanda and we can pretend to need something from our purses—lip gloss, pads, anything. But could we even find our way out of this maze?

“Welcome Kaelin!” says the girl with curly red hair to my left, makeup barely concealing her freckles. “I’m McKenna, and I’m a senior, majoring in social work.”

I nod and smile. The girl across from me, with thick dark hair and brows, waves at me.  
“I’m Elizabeth! I’m a junior and I major in nursing.”

The girl to my right also seems to be Wasian, but unlike me, does not pass. She made no attempt to change her hair; it’s that washed out dark umber, straight as a knife. Her skin is olive, not milky like mine. She has monolids and narrow eyes, while I inherited my dad’s wide eyes and long lashes. Her nose is round and doesn’t protrude from her face, while mine has a gentle bridge. But what I notice more than anything else is that her neck is pink around the gold choker.

“My name is Lindsay, and I’m a sophomore, majoring in history,” she says.

“Really? I’m majoring in history, too. What’s your focus?” I try not to stare at her neck.

“Asia, specifically East Asia and China,” Lindsay says.

“That’s so cool! What made you choose that?”

“Politics, mostly,” Lindsay says. “I want to analyze how those Communists gained dictatorial power and control people through the One Child Policy and video surveillance.”

I blink at her. I’m starting to feel a poisonous sting in the pit of my stomach.

“Mostly, I research their ethnic cleansing of the Uighurs.” Lindsay smiles. “You?”

I clear my throat. Focus on the script. “Um, American history.”

They murmur approvingly. “So what do you want to do?”

They’re all smiling at me, waiting. Hungry, eager wasps. “I want to teach history. I love working with kids and I always aced my history classes in school. Just don’t ask me to teach math!” I end with my little giggle that’s supposed to signal for them to laugh too.

Instead they stare at me, then each other.

“Ohh,” McKenna says, then laughs explosively. “You mean you want to be a nun and work at a Christian school! My sister is a nun! She loves it.”

The others laugh. I don't know if I should feel relief, resentment, or dread.

"Well, I'm not sure if I want to work at private schools," I say.

"What do you mean?" Elizabeth says, "Honestly, by the time you graduate, God willing, I think all public schools will be shut down. They might as well turn all those buildings into prisons—they're already filled with drug dealers and trans school shooters."

Just hearing her say the word "trans," even if it's not directed towards me by people who don't know what that word means, makes my heart beat faster. Does she know? It takes me more seconds than it should, but I take a deep breath and flash her my pearly whites.

"Um, I meant, I might want to teach in college. As a professor. Of history."

"Ohh," the table says with a collective sigh. "Of *course* that's what you meant!"

"I thought you said you wanted to work with kids," Lindsay says, narrowing her already too-narrow eyes. First rule of passing is *not* accentuating your giveaway features.

"So, where are you from?" McKenna flicks Lindsay's arm, and I feel sadistic satisfaction.

"I'm from Houston," I say, then wince. That's always my automatic answer, even though I've practiced this and am supposed to say rural Maryland.

"Oh, me too! What part?" McKenna says.

"Um, well, I was just born there, but I grew up in Maryland, forty minutes out from Baltimore," I ramble, digging myself into a hole.

"Why did you move?"

"Um,"

Because my mom got deported, my dad was imprisoned for marrying her, and I was sent to an Evangelical foster facility. "Because of my parents' work. My dad's in the Air Force."

"Oh, which division is he in? My uncle is in the Air Force too." Elizabeth asks.

Wait. Did I say Air Force? Haven't I been saying Coast Guard?

I'm saved by the bell. Charity and the rest of the officers, including Janet, Lizzie, and Pamela, at the very edge of the table, are on stage now. Charity is tapping a glass with a fork.

"Welcome, everyone, to the Initiation Dinner for Kappa Kappa Kappa!"

There's a few cheers, but mostly robust applause.

"We are beyond thrilled to have you all here today. This is a very special night. On this day, September 21, 2040, we are celebrating three things."

"First," Charity holds up a finger, "It's International Peace Day! We love peace, don't we, girls? We celebrate International Peace Day just as we celebrate our first tenet, *spreading kindness*. We want to spread kindness and spread peace throughout our beautiful country!"

Cheers and applause. I search for Yolanda. I see Table 44 and Table 46, but no Table 45.

"Second," Charity says, putting up a second finger, "It's actually the 75th anniversary of our founding! Seventy five years ago, two women with a bold vision of hospitality, womanhood, and social justice started our sorority with the original class of thirty five, here in this room, in this house. They *cultivated kinship*, just as we start our journey of cultivating kinship with y'all!"

I clap, fueled by jitters, offbeat my rapid heartbeat. The rumors... of course they're true. How else would they maintain their fearsome reputation? If Yolanda isn't here, where is she?

"Third," Charity says, and sticks out her thumb in the German hand sign for three, "Today is the day that, fifteen years ago, in 2025, our country's founder signed into law the America First Act, that purged the immigrant vermin from our country and ordered law enforcement to clean out the dirty criminals that poison the blood of our nation. That, my sisters, is *upholding karma*. Those people had been suppressing our Western heritage and culture for too long, had been taking our jobs for too long, had been mixing with our pure race for too long."

The girls cheer savagely, hungrily. I clap hollowly. If I tried to cheer, I'd just scream.

"And now, girls, before we begin with our ceremony, I need you all to know something. Listen carefully. Secrecy is what keeps sororities special. Can you all repeat that after me?"

I have no voice as the girls around me chant, "Secrecy is what keeps sororities special."

"One more time," Charity says, and I feel Lindsay pinch my arm, so I face forward and say as steadily as I can, "Secrecy is what keeps sororities special."

"Beautiful. And now, Pamela, can you bring her to the stage?" Charity beams at Pamela, who goes off stage for a moment, and brings out Yolanda.

Terror seizes my chest. Yolanda looks brave and unmoved as she walks to center stage, which means she's scared out of her mind. And when she's scared, she bites.

"Sisters, let me tell you what isn't a secret. Kappa Kappa Kappa believes in justice. In making the world a kinder place. That means rewarding the good and punishing the bad."

She comes to the front of the stage next to Yolanda, and places a hand on her back. My skin writhes. Yolanda's face remains impassive, but I know she's plotting for a way to take back the upper hand. *Don't do it. You can play with me but these girls are a vicious breed.*

"There are good people and bad people in this world. Likewise, there are good sisters and bad sisters in our sorority. But bad girls don't have to be bad. We've discovered that certain forms of retribution help bad girls become good girls. As Kappas, we take initiative to act as positive forces in society and do God's work. We preserve the hard work of our ancestors and protect future generations from corruption, perversion, and evil. Girls who repent, like this one will, with proper treatment, are truly the most inspiring sisters of us all."

It's one thing to play pretend, parroting nonsense. But this is something else, I realize. This is very real to them. And it's about to become very real for us too.

Charity holds out her hand. “Pamela. The necklace.”

Pamela shrinks backstage and returns with a red velvet box, the gold crest on the cover.

My head is spinning. This is my fault. She’s trying to prove a point to me.

Charity clasps the necklace onto Yolanda. I need to run over and rip it off, but I’m frozen. I need Yolanda to be frozen, too. But knowing my girlfriend, she’ll hurl a torch at the bonfire.

“Congratulations, initiate. You’re almost one of us now. Just one last little ritual.”

“This girl is a bad sister,” Charity’s heels echo as she click clacks to her seat, “A bad sister is not only a danger to us, but to herself. Let’s all support her journey in becoming good.”

I can see Yolanda searching for me. I’m too scared to draw attention to myself, but by some miracle, she locks eyes with me. The gold choker glimmers around her neck.

*Please*, I try to scream through my eyes. *I’m sorry! Stop with the righteousness, Yolanda!*

“Yo-LAN-duh,” Charity says, “Tell us what you did to deserve this.”

Yolanda smiles a smile that doesn’t reach her eyes. *Being right isn’t worth being dead!*

“I’m in love with a girl.”

My gut solidifies to cement. This was supposed to make her safe, make us safe. But I realize now what I should have known. Yolanda wants Kappas, us, the whole world, to implode. I feel the eyes, the piercing blue eyes all around me prick at my skin, watching. Do they know?

“Who?” Charity asks. Bile rises in my throat. This can’t be real. This can’t happen again.

And Yolanda’s grin widens, creases up around her eyes. “Myself.”

I don’t dare breathe. Of course. This isn’t my fault. Yolanda wouldn’t let me take the blame. She’d hoard it for herself and offer her body up for crucifixion and make me watch.

“Wrong!” Charity makes a buzzer sound. “You will continue to receive retribution treatment until you confess. How can you be good if you lie to your sisters? Don’t be silly!”

Charity laughs, and around me, everyone laughs. McKenna, Elizabeth, and Lindsay look at me, eyes wide and surveilling, as they laugh. I open my mouth and laugh. Quietly at first, my vocal chords stuck, but then louder and louder, my voice violent and harsh.

Charity clears her throat and glares. We all stop laughing. But the laughter still echoes in my head, acrid and accusatory. Of course we couldn't be Kappas. They wouldn't take us.

But maybe they'll take me.

"This new initiate is going to play a little game with us. She's going to dance on the stage until her heart bursts with remorse. Are you ready, Yo-LAN-duh? Ready to dance?"

Yolanda stares at me and internally I squirm. Can they see her looking at me? *I'm sorry. I'm so, so sorry. Please look away.* Her mouth opens, but before she can make a sound, she begins jerking and dancing across the stage.

Charity has her finger on her own choker, on some button on the back. As she holds it down, Yolanda dances, electrocuted and in bone breaking motions, dancing, twirling, tripping.

It feels like hours that I watch her twitching every extremity and limb, her eyes rolling to the back of her head, her tongue lolling out of her mouth. The violin music in the background quickens in tempo to her quickening movements, as she travels back and forth across the stage. The girls around me begin to clap, clap, clap in time to the music and her motions. She's whirling and twisting and jumping until finally she falls off the stage, flat on her face.

The music stops. The clapping stops. I realize, with sickening self hatred, that for both our sakes, I hope her heart stopped, too.

"Thirty five of our initiates, according to the laws of karma, require retribution." Charity takes a long sip for her glass. "Are you one of them?"