

"So you want to be a human sacrifice?"

"No, not me," I say with a disregarding wave and as disarming a smirk as I can manage. "Amy here wants to be sacrificed." I point to the woman in the seat next to me. Dressed in a green college sweater and fashionable jeans, she smiles at him, but doesn't say anything. Thank god. The first thing I told her when we came to the Placement Office today was not to speak unless asked something directly.

"Well," begins the man as he looks down, adjusting the placement of odds and ends on the otherwise pristine and perfectly organized desk. "Let's see what we can do." He smiles, which is a good sign. It seems like a real smile, not a bureaucrat's smile. But then, he is the vice-chair of the placement office.

Still, we lucked out on that one. Usually when you come into one of these municipal placement offices, lodged into some failing mini-mall or buried deep just outside downtown, you end up being shoved before some tired paper pusher. We got lucky by ending up before a professional. Dressed in a respectable brown suit with a receding hairline that actually manages to add to his professionalism, he looks up at us both, the tiny bone pierced between his nose in no way seeming out of place. "As you know, with it being late winter and all, sacrifices just aren't in demand at the moment."

"We're aware of that," I acknowledge casually as I fight to not nervously play with the zipper on my black and silver racing jacket. "But the thing is, she's a rare opportunity." Amy realizes I'm talking about her and sits forward with grade-school posture, smiling eagerly. "She's a legitimate half-Vietnamese, half-Scottish girl in her mid-twenties with honest-to-goodness fiery red hair." The short mop in a pageboy cut shakes as she nods. I pause, like that alone should seal the deal. And damn it, it should, but I have to keep going. "She started ballet when she was nine," I say, not adding that she stopped when she turned twelve, "and she was on her high school gymnastics team."

The man behind the desk nods, looking over her paperwork. I tense up just the slightest bit. That bit about the gymnastics team is almost a lie. She was on the team, but as a third-string alternate. I doubt this girl could do a cartwheel if her life depended on it. Now that I think about it, it might. Well, the end of her life might.

The man's once-worn but now manicured ebony hands flip through her paperwork. He reads over a standard questionnaire before looking at Amy with wise, green eyes. "Do you speak any foreign languages?"

Her eyes go wide, becoming saucers for just a second and she looks sidelong at me. I motion subtly for her to answer. She laughs in the most

annoying, nervous manner imaginable. "Um, I speak a bit of Vietnamese," she says, her voice shaking. "And I know a few words of Spanish. Yo habla escargot."

"Hmmm," the man behind the desk says, going back to the file. I see he gets to the pictures of her. A mix of family pictures and a few professional photos. Or, semi-professional. A friend of mine getting her some decent headshots with high-end department store camera was the best we could manage.

"That's when she was in a high school production of Pippin," I say, motioning to the largest picture. "She sings too. Alto and she can get up into the second soprano range. No professional training, but she's pretty good." I smile at him, adding a bit of a laugh. "Plus, she gets lots of practice singing along to the radio."

"No, I understand," he nods, clearly barely paying any attention as he pours over whatever details placement officers like him look for. He turns around in his dark brown leather desk chair and scans the books on the shelf behind him. On the wall above him, a doctorate in pathology hangs next to a masters in public relations. Opposite both achievements hangs a medicine mask hangs, its paint and edges worn with frequent use. "The problem is," he says, turning back to us, his mismatched Creole/Kenyan accent almost impossible to discern from British. "If she can't speak Spanish, that closes down a lot of opportunities right there. The South Americans are simply our biggest market for sacrifices right now. Them and the Polynesian Islands. But the Polys..." He gives me a polite laugh. I laugh too, though at what I have no idea. "And they demand black hair." Something clearly kicks in his mind. He muses for a second and asks Amy, "Would you be willing to dye your hair blonde?"

She shrugs. "Yeah, sure. I used to dye it a lot."

"That's usually their one exception, but certain groups do go crazy for it," he says, scribbling that note down on her file. After writing it, he looks back at us. "The thing is, we have to place with the most active demands in the most active markets. That's South America this time of the year. They may not have many volcanoes, but they're just rife with other sacrificial needs. Sun gods and river gods and the like." He leans forward. "Did you know that last year, over a hundred girls and thirty men were sacrificed to a crocodile god alone. Just one god." He sits back, at first proud of that tidbit, then slowly his gaze drifts to her file as he stares absently in thought. This may be her chance.

"And you see, she'd be perfect for that," I advocate as charismatically as I can, gesturing between him and her. She again sits up and nods

eagerly with perfect posture. "She loves reptiles and she's got a great scream."

"It's true, I love reptiles," Amy adds with big, bright eyes. "When I was in elementary school, Mrs. Danvers had a--" I subtly put a hand on her knee, reminding her to nix the story. She remembers and stops mid-sentence.

"Hmmm," thinks the man across from us. He begins to unconsciously play with the bone in his nose.

Amy leans towards me. "Is that a good sign or a bad sign?" she whispers.

"Could go either way," I answer back, worried.

He comes out of his thought and asks her squarely, "Are you a virgin?"
Shit.

The woman to my right stares placidly for a second, her smile wavering but not quite disappearing. "Sort of," she responds stiffly.

He grows considerably less enthusiastic. "That will be a problem," he understates. "Just about every market these days requires a virgin for their sacrifices. You get a few up in New England that want promiscuity, but we need documentation of sexual history, list of..." He waves it all off as an insurmountable formality. "The South American market is composed almost entirely of needs for virgins."

One side of her lip comes up, almost like a Billie Idol sneer. It's something she does when she's discouraged. "He pulled out," she offers weakly.

I'm pinching the bridge of my nose, accepting that we've already lost the placement. "Like he was the only one," I jab unfairly at her.

"There was only one," she shoots back under her breath.

"Only one this month?" I curse at her childishly.

"What religion are you?" he asks, going back to the file. Crap, we've gone back to the usual interview. That's not just a bad sign, that's a sign that it's shot. This ain't happening.

"I, um, I was raised Catholic," Amy offers very properly. She pauses. "I still have the uniform," she decides to throw in with a weak smile. I cover my face. This is just getting embarrassing now.

"Raised Catholic," he confirms. "What are you practicing now? Or are you?" He asks like it doesn't matter. To be fair, I'm not sure if it does or not.

"She's a video game nut," I grumble from my seat. "Put her down as a Jenova's Witness."

If he got the joke, he doesn't react. Instead, he writes some stuff down before he says with a professional, tight-lipped smile, "Well, I'm sorry. Given the time of year and your qualifications, it just doesn't look like we'll be in the position to match you up with any sacrificial requests in the near future." He stands up and extends his hand. "But thank you for coming in and filling out an application. We'll keep it on file for six months, and then you'll need to come in and renew your information."

"Thanks," Amy says, shaking his hand after she shoulders her tiny purse.

"Yeah, thanks a bunch," I say genuinely. I think we were just an inch away. And you know what they say; an inch today, there tomorrow. I hope they say that.

"If I may, I'd recommend dying your hair blonde next time," he offers with a genuine confidence. "And keep up the ballet and the singing. Those are probably going to be your key selling points."

"Okay, great," Amy grins, already halfway to the door. "I appreciate it."

He nods to her, then sits back down at his desk. I open the office door for her and we step out into the small hall. A quick few steps out to the waiting room and we see a handful of others – mostly girls but a few guys – with their representatives sitting in the beige seats. Some of them are being coached by their reps, while others sit in quiet contemplation.

"Well, that didn't go so well," Amy grumbles with a sputter of her lips, all smiles and happiness gone as she all but sulks her way out into the parking lot.

I got to do something to salvage my client. "Ah, don't worry about it," I say, hitting the auto-unlock on my car. The car's lights flash at us, as if trying to be upbeat and supportive as well. "Nobody gets picked to be a sacrifice on their first time in."

My red-headed Asian compatriot stops walking and turns back to me, the wind coursing through the office park pushing her hair in her face. "Do you really think I can do it?"

"Absolutely," I say with probably a little too much enthusiasm. I got to stay upbeat for my client. "But I wouldn't listen to him about the dying the hair. You need to show that you've got some will as well. Most sacrifices are supposed to have some feisty spunk in them. Prove that by not doing everything he told you. But the ballet is a good suggestion. Maybe some voice classes, too."

She softly sings a couple of scales, accepting the limitations of her voice. "It's just six months, though," she sighs as we arrive at the car.

"And you may hear from them before we come back in," I encourage her. "The Vernal Equinox is right around the corner. That's a big ceremony season. Maybe it's not known for sacrifices, but you never know. I'm sure they'll be a big rush around then. And somebody may ask for a red-haired Asian. I've heard the weirdoes in Britain are always asking for bizarre stuff. And there's always Burning Man. There's no telling what Hippies will be sacrificing this season."

She gets in, muttering, "I guess so."

I can hear the disenchantment in her voice so I reach my arm around and hug her supportively. "Don't worry," I assured her. "We'll get you sacrificed before too long."