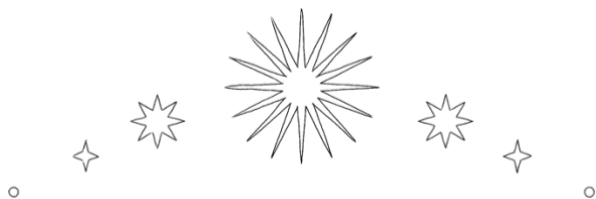


The following is an exclusive first look of

Under The Light

By Sadie Sheridan.

I hope you enjoy!



1

The Eve Before

I took a large gulp of my drink and came to terms with the whole ballroom watching me vomit tonight.

Chunks. All over the elegant marble floor.

How my insides churned made it nearly inevitable, but it couldn't be helped. It was the eve of the most terrifying day of my life, what I had spent twenty-one years preparing for.

After tomorrow, I would be one step closer to becoming the Ruler of Rhea.

The thought made my stomach drop to my feet, and I set my drink down on the large banquet table beside me.

This was the eve of the year that I had been impatiently waiting for, a year filled with traditions and rituals created by The Light to ensure I would be a proper Ruler. It was a year I would much rather have just gotten over with and not thought about. I wanted it to happen swiftly and painlessly.

I did not want to spend this evening in the grand hall, celebrating what I was about to do with people who felt like strangers.

But that was how the evening of my twenty-first birthday was foretold to go. Tonight, a celebration, tomorrow, my blessing ceremony.

My mother, Adella, crossed through the crowd of the hall in front of me, making her way to another councilman or member of the high Polaris society. She looked regal as she moved, her pants, top, and cloak all deep plum with golden beading that complimented her rich brown hair. I was wearing nearly the opposite, all white with my pale blonde hair and fair skin.

Her eyes cut to mine, and she did not have to say a word for me to know what she was thinking.

Fuck.

I was in trouble. I should have been socializing too, wooing our guests with my carefully constructed charm.

The problem was, if I attempted to make conversation with anyone in this room, there was a chance I would empty my stomach all over their shoes. The closer I got to *the* day, the only day that seemed to matter to anyone, the higher the risk of full body failure. Which would not only be embarrassing for me, but the sight of my digested food all over some councilman's finest fabrics would kill my mother. My fingers itched for another sip of that deep amber liquid in my cup and I decided I was best to stay in this small corner for as long as I could.

People took to the dance floor as the music picked up in tempo, bows dancing across the instrument's strings with newfound vigor.

Everyone in the room was dressed in an array of rich colors; emerald greens and cobalt blues. I was the only one in white, and I wondered if that was also because of my mother's planning.

My mother did plan this all very well. I have always

loved this grand hall. The room arched high overhead, crisp white marble pillars holding up ceilings made of the same. It was all detailed in gold sculpture. Mostly motifs of sun and fire were displayed with the occasional winged Deity swirling between them. Not all of the palace was this elegant, which made it such a shame that this room was so scarcely used. But, not every event warranted buffet tables full of food and drinks, a full orchestra, and this wide of an invitation list.

If she saw me still standing there, she would not be happy.

Weighing the odds between utter humiliation and my mother's wrath, I scanned the room intently, trying to find someone I could talk to without actually making conversation.

My father was on the other side of the hall, deep in conversation with an old friend. His suit was less formal than what my mother wore, but it matched her choice of deep plum. Shining gold buttons down the center of the jacket replaced the intricate beading. The dark color of the suit made his light hair stand out in contrast.

Like any good Ruler's consort, my father was charming the crowd. Over the dancing figures, I saw his face

light up before a laugh burst out. Although I could not hear it over the music and the chatter, I knew exactly what it sounded like.

He was too busy to help me act like I wanted to be here.

I did want to be here. Or rather, I *wanted* to want to be here.

A familiar form came toward me, throwing a side-eye at whomever she had just been talking to.

“You found a perfect little cove to hide in, eh?” Sage gestured to where I hid, between a pillar and the end of a banquet table. Most people likely thought I had not yet arrived.

Sage was my closest friend. We had both grown up within the palace walls, for very different reasons. Sage and her brother were children of two Devoted, those who have dedicated their lives to The Light. As they came from a long, well-respected lineage, they had the honor to serve in the small palace Temple. At least, they had before the fire.

Sage and I had grown close since that day two years ago.

Tonight, she looked stunning, although that was far from unusual. Sage had a dark skin tone with a golden hue

that could catch anybody's attention. She had big, deep brown eyes and a small nose with a wide bridge.

If we were to be compared, we were exact opposites. She was petite where I had curves, and she was dark where I was light. Both of us held our own on opposite ends of the spectrum of beauty.

Despite me being two years her senior, she could read me like a book. Being unreadable was a trait I had quite literally been trained in, so her uncanny ability to do so filled me with frustration.

"I am not hiding," I said as my fingers twisted around themselves restlessly.

"Then there must be some councilman or woman hidden with you back here." She peeked her head around the pillar dramatically, braids swinging over her shoulder.

I laughed. "Of course, there is not."

"Are you sure? My evening would be much more interesting if there was." A cat-like smile crept onto her face.

"Can you imagine the scandal?" I gave an empty laugh. "I am just—"

"Trying not to run?"

My hands stilled. My legs shook.

Running would feel very good right about now.

“No, I am thinking.”

“You do a lot of that.” Sage picked up a square of bread from the table beside us, dipped it into the seasoned oil, and popped it into her mouth.

“I’m not sure that can be helped.”

She looked at me, and her joking features softened. Her eyes scanned my face in a way that was so familiar it made me squirm.

“Tomorrow is going to be fine, Adenne,” she comforted.

Any mention of tomorrow was little comfort to me. Tomorrow was the day I would be blessed, the first of three steps in order to rule. Just like my mother did, and her father before her and his mother before him.

Upon wider examination, the blessing was the easiest of the three steps. I would walk across the plaza from the palace to the Temple Minora. The whole nation of Rhea would be there to see that walk. They had slowly piled into the city of Polaris over the last week, and their presence created a heightened volume to the whole city. The ground practically shook with the energy they brought with them.

Then, in the Temple Minora, the Deities would come

and bless me.

It was a fact I had known my whole life, yet it made my heart feel like it was made of iron.

The Deities were the closest thing we had to The Light itself. When The Light left all those centuries ago, it created Justus, Manunit, and Hebera to protect and watch over us, which they do well. They bless each new Ruler and bestow guidance on how to rule in a way that The Light would desire.

Tradition states the ceremony is sacred and secret, so my mother has never been able to tell me more about it.

All I know is that tomorrow, I will meet with the three Deities, and they will bless me. My eyes will change from this dark brown to the same molten gold color that my mother has.

For the Ruler will see the vision of The Light and rule with blessed intention.

That was *only* step one.

“You’re overthinking again,” Sage cautioned.

“Tomorrow will be fine.”

I looked at her through slitted eyes. “What if I was not worrying about tomorrow?”

“The pilgrimage, then? That will be fine too. You’ve

been over it a million times. You will leave all blessed and golden and beautiful. You'll mount your horse and travel west along the same route you have mapped out a million times, you'll meet the Sisters and they will give you your title. Now, if you aren't careful, they will call you Adenne the Over-thinker."

"They wouldn't do that."

Sage nodded along with her own ideas. "Or Adenne the Party-Ruiner."

I sighed. "Yeah, they might do that."

Sage smiled. "For real, Adenne, you're more prepared for this than anyone I know." I could see her processing what she had just said. "Not that I know anyone else preparing for what you're doing, but that's not the point. You're ready, you've worked hard, and after these next few months, you will become a fantastic Ruler. I know you will, and I'm so proud of you."

Tears welled in my eyes. Many people saw me putting in the work, but I think Sage was the only one who knew how much work that actually was.

The sweat coating my palms so heavily I had to rub them on my trousers to keep them dry. "That means a lot, thank you."

Sage looked away, ignoring my praise as she rubbed her arms uncomfortably. “If you want to back out now, say the word. Me and you will run away together.”

I winced.

“Sorry. Bad choice of words.”

It was. Running away always hurt more people than it helped. I picked up my glass and took a big drink of the golden brown liquid.

“Is he here?” I asked.

“Would it matter if he was?” Sage danced around my question, which meant he was.

“I would prefer he was nowhere near here.”

Sage sighed. “I believe he is here. Working.”

The large drink I took burned when I swallowed. I hadn’t seen him when I scanned the rooms, and I knew my eyes would have caught him immediately. That must mean he was lurking in the shadows, waiting for someone to attack me or someone in my family.

“Well, if he has to be here, at least he is out of sight.”

Sage stood beside me, scanning the room as I had just been doing.

My mother would not count this as socializing.

“Oh, I’m sure he’ll remain out of sight. Leon, on the

other hand, may be a different story.” Sage's head nodded toward eyes that were right on us.

Leon smiled when I made eye contact, and after saying a few parting words to the crowd he was with, he came my way. His smile grew the closer he got.

I supposed I was socializing now.

“Adenne, I did not know you were here. I figured you were planning on being fashionably late.”

Sage suppressed a laugh while I suppressed the urge to jab my elbow into her ribs.

I stepped out from my hiding place. “I have been here. We must have missed each other, but I am happy to see you now, Leon.”

It wasn't a lie. Honestly, if I had seen him earlier, I would have approached him. He was one of the few people I could talk to without putting any genuine effort in.

We were friends, at least for the time being. I had known Leon for a long time, growing up in the same circles, attending the same parties. He was always friendly, top of his class, and son of a councilman.

That was likely why my mother had decided he would be a good match for me. Nothing was official, but it was suspected our marriage would take place soon after I

returned home. He, and the wedding, are step three. Blessing from the Deities, pilgrimage to the Sisters, marriage to Leon. Three steps over a year and then I would be allowed to rule.

That was why many eyes in the grand hall watched as we conversed, finally noticing I was there, whispering and gossiping about all the things they thought they knew about us.

That we had dated before.

False.

That we were already together.

Also false.

That we hated each other.

False again. We were... friendly.

Sage was always quick to fill me in on the rumors she heard. Once, she heard that some speculated Leon and I were cousins, which was absolutely ridiculous. Beyond the light hair, we looked *nothing* alike.

Despite the rumors, I understood why my mother chose Leon for me. He was a good man and would be a supportive partner while I ruled.

That, and he was handsome. Conventionally so, with long, light, thick hair that parted down the middle and cut off just below a sharp jawline. His eyes were a crisp blue with

naturally long lashes that any woman would envy.

He was not my type, historically speaking, but I could see the appeal.

“Are you excited about tomorrow?” He asked.

My heart flipped again, but I smiled through the dizzying feeling. “Yes, very. I am grateful it is finally time.”

I swear I heard Sage chuckle lightly. Thankfully, Leon’s eyes stayed on me.

“It will be an extraordinary day.”

“Thank you, I hope so.”

“And your pilgrimage, you must be excited about that.”

Leon would need to work on reading people if he was to ever become the Ruler’s consort.

I smiled wider. “Yes, of course.”

He smirked, “It will be a shame, though, that no one will be able to look at that smile for so long. But tradition is tradition, not to be broken.”

No one was to look at me from the end of my blessing to the end of my pilgrimage. That time was for deep introspection and a distracted Ruler was an unsuccessful one.

For a Ruler alone must take the knowledge bestowed

from The Light as to not burden their people. To share the weight is to condemn all.

It was a tradition that I wanted to avoid messing with.

Someone called Leon's name from behind him, and I wanted to thank them.

“I suppose I should leave you now.” He smiled. “I will see you when you return. Good luck, Adenne.” He leaned in and lightly placed a kiss on my cheek.

It was... nice.

I smiled at him, clutching my drink in my hand. “I will see you soon.”

Leon was nice. He was thoughtful, kind and truly was a friend, but my heart sank at how little I felt when he looked at me, how little he made me laugh.

He was friendly, intelligent, and attractive, but I did not think I could ever love him.

Love leaves people broken. It takes more than it gives. Love, I thought, was made to be something that kills.

I did not think I wanted to be with someone I loved. I did not want that pain.

When I thought of Leon and the safety he gave me, I felt content and I had decided a long time ago that

contentment was not the worst emotion to live with for the rest of my life.

And, if I had to produce an heir with anyone ... Well, at least he is handsome.

Not the most handsome I had known, but even still.

Sage and I had talked at length about Leon, and even though I had told her all of this, I could see in those dark brown eyes that she disagreed with my plan to be just content. She asked me once why I was so scared to risk wanting more. I didn't have the heart to explain to her who broke me so profoundly that I changed into... this.

Although, I think she knew. That man had hurt her, too, although in a very different way.

Now that people realized I was here, the dancing had stopped. Instead, they started to circle. I felt like a dead animal, left discarded somewhere for the birds to find and fight over. It was not typical for me to feel this awful at a party. I was generally pleased to be the center of attention, but my heart was beating faster when I realized how many eyes were on me.

A lot of eyes were on me.

A councilman I knew came up to me first. A round belly stuck out above his pants, the shirt stretching to make

it over the mound. His black hair was graying at the sides, showing his age.

When he smiled, his teeth were yellow. “Adenne,” he said with fake affection.

“Councilman Webber, thank you for coming.”

From there, the conversation went much like the one with Leon.

Was I excited?

A lie.

This would go well.

I sure fucking hoped so.

Good luck on my pilgrimage.

I hoped I would not need it.

Best wishes.

And off he went.

Then the next one came.

One by one, each person in the room sought me out to have the exact same conversation, and every time, my heart got heavier and my head filled with more fog. Faking excitement was exhausting, but faking calmness was worse.

Calm was not what I was feeling.

My hands clutched my cup to stop their shaking. I let

my mind grow numb to the repetitive questions as I wondered how no one in this room could see how little I wanted to be there. Maybe they just didn't care. Their need to see my dark eyes one last time, and to wish me well, went above my need to be left alone to prepare.

I should have done a better job hiding.

Sage stood to my right, diverting as many people away from me as possible. She was bringing attention to herself, the more eyes on her the less on me. Sage was never scared of a show; her arms waved as she said something to an elderly man I vaguely recognized and his wife.

My mother and father stood off to the side, fielding people of their own. Even as they did, both of their eyes strayed toward me. The expression in them could only be described as pride.

It felt great, making them proud. It also made my stomach start to wage a new war inside of me.

They would not be as proud if they knew how I swallowed my own bile while pretending to listen to a councilwoman tell me about what an artist thought the Deities really looked like.

And they kept coming. The forced way my words came out made me feel sick. I was grateful for their good

wishes and support, but I wanted to be anywhere else so badly.

I wanted to be alone.

Tears welled up, but I held them in.

More people came.

More conversations.

I held back more tears.

After today, my whole life would be different. It would be dedicated to helping the people as The Light wanted. I was about to give up the rest of my years to that cause, and I was okay with that. It was all I really wanted, all I had ever wanted. I knew in my bones and in my heart that I was supposed to do this.

But, if I were to spend every day serving The Light for the rest of my life, asking for tonight to be for myself did not seem selfish.

And that is what I wanted.

To be alone.

For one last time, to do what *I* wanted to do.

Go where *I* wanted to go.

One night to prepare for what I was about to do, a ceremony that no one else could complete.

To follow in my mother's footsteps and take her

place.

My breaths were quick as I nodded along to a man whose mouth was moving, but I could not hear his words.

My ears were ringing.

I pressed my hand to my chest to stop the feeling of my pounding heart.

When did it start pounding?

Leon was watching me to my left. Did he know? Did he know I was falling apart at my own celebration?

I did not want to celebrate.

He raised his glass and smiled at me. He didn't know how my mind whirled, and my head felt light. The chatter in the room mixed with the music, making it harder to hear much else.

I liked the way it silenced everything else.

Sage yelled over the music, her eyebrows gathered in concern.

Maybe I looked as bad as I felt.

And I felt terrible. My stomach twisted over itself. My heart fought to get out of my chest.

Someone was still talking to me.

I smiled and nodded.

And nodded.

My head became lighter.

Then my glass slipped from my grip. I watched it fall in slow motion, the dark liquid splattering down my front, seeping into the light fabric of my trousers.

The glass shattered.

The person I was talking to stopped talking.

Finally. Sage was at my side. Someone was already clearing the mess.

Through my haze, I heard her say something about
Getting changed.

I felt myself nod.

I heard myself apologize.

Sage held my arm as she led me through the crowd.

We passed my parents, and I looked away.

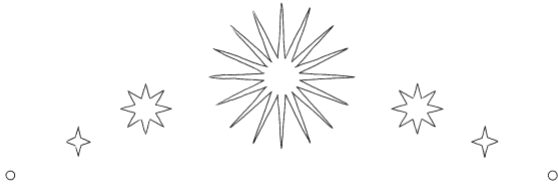
Once we were near the door, Sage let go of me.

“I’ll handle this, go.” She glanced at the crowd over her shoulder. “*Quickly.*”

Tears burned their way down the back of my throat.
I gasped.

“Thank you.”

I turned and ran.



Thank you for reading!

If you enjoyed this first chapter of *Under The Light* please consider following along on TikTok and Instagram @thereaderscraft for exciting updates. *Under The Light* will be released Spring of 2024.