



Ancient Fanfiction: A Vestal Virgin
By Katy Lawrence

I don't know what to do. I heard rumours about things like this happening, but I never believed them. I didn't want to. I couldn't.

Ever since I was selected and took that first fateful step into the atrium, I knew my life would never be the same. It was somehow both terrifying and thrilling; I was told that I no longer belonged to my *pater* and that instead I was a daughter of Rome, under Vesta's protection. I thought that meant I would be safe from men trying to control and dictate my future for me, but I didn't realise how wrong I was.

I was content enough at first — I felt so special that the Chief Priest had chosen me from all the other girls. As one of the Vestal Virgins, my life was dedicated to serving Vesta, the goddess of the hearth and the home. The other women took care of me and I used to have so much fun getting a front row seat at the theatre, being transported around in a carriage and watching everybody make way for me. We had the most lavish banquets and there was no better way to end the day than sneaking glances through the curtains as the sun painted the sky.

I settled into a routine with the other women: collecting water, preparing mola salsa, keeping watch over the Palladium and so on. Of all of the jobs, I was most afraid of guarding the sacred flame for fear that it would go out. One of the other Vestals, Licinia, who was the next youngest after me, would tell me stories of when one of the older women was beaten for letting the fire extinguish. I was pretty sure she was just trying to scare me with her tales because there was no way that Vesta would abandon us...right?

That was the start of my uncertainty and fear, which only grew as I began to realize the steep price of my freedom. I couldn't afford to slip up; girls who dressed too frivolously or who crossed the wrong people were not granted any amnesty. I had to constantly watch my step in public and put to bed my daydreams of marriage and children. For I knew that I was constantly being observed, with people just waiting for me to make a mistake. We all lived with this sort of fear; it surrounded us, but I just trusted that Vesta would keep us all safe. And for a while it seemed that she did.

Then this morning everything was turned upside down.

Floronia was caught with a young man. In that moment, both her oath of chastity and her state of protection were things of the past. She beat her chest and pulled at her hair and reached her arms towards us as she was ripped away from us. I wept until her



writhing figure was too blurry for me to see. The rumours, so it seems, were true. I am only now hearing the truth about what then happened to Floronia, through whispers. And it is almost too horrible for me to relate.

I always believed that we were sacred and could not be harmed — it turns out that this is only partly true. They killed her. They claim that burying her alive is not murder. They claim that they left her food and water, so it won't count as harming her. They claim that they are innocent. No matter their attempts to clear their consciences, I know the truth. But what am I supposed to do? I have no power and she did break her oath. I guess now the cycle will begin again and a new girl will be chosen, replacing me as the youngest.

And so, life must go on.

Most life, anyway.

Context:

The Vestal Virgins were some of the most important women in Rome. They were a group of priestesses selected at a young age and raised to be servants to the goddess of the hearth, Vesta. As the name suggests, they had to swear an oath of chastity and had very important duties such as tending a sacred flame that could never go out. In return however, they received many privileges that were not granted to women at that time.

Resources for more information:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ER0Cu0KQFqM>

<https://www.nationalgeographic.com/history/magazine/2018/11-12/vestal-virgins-of-ancient-rome/>