

## Methuselah's Daughter: Part 4

### Gods and Monsters

*"Restrain in me the cursed thoughts that nature gives way to in repose." (Macbeth, Act II, Scene 1)*

## Prelude

*Michigan Territory, 1835 CE*

I led the gelding away from the cabin, struggling through the waist-deep powder until I reached the edge of the clearing where there was a sturdy tree with a sufficiently low branch. I tied the horse at the tree and set about unloading the equipment lashed to the saddle, setting up for the day's work. By climbing upon the horse's back I was able to set up the block and tackle on the tree-branch and properly set the lines. After that I stripped the beast of its saddle, setting it on the now hard-packed snow and sitting upon it for a moment.

The cabin was only some thirty yards away, but even at that distance it seemed terribly small and forlorn. The dull grey of the sky was as an almost tangible, oppressive weight. The smoke wafting from the hole in the roof settled around the rude cabin, unwilling to challenge the winter sky. This was the place where we huddled against nature's unrelenting onslaught of cold and storm. The gelding nudged my shoulder with his nose, sniffing at the inside of my thick cloak. I stood up and rubbed his face, then drew out the small bag of oats from my inside pocket, feeding them to him in handfuls until they were exhausted. It was a self-indulgent kindness, yet it seemed right to feed him thusly.

Still, with all the preparations in place there was no point in delaying further. As the gelding munched upon the handful of oats I had provided, I slid Jeremy's musket from the saddle. I drew the hammer back and shouldered the weapon as he ate and shot him through the head. With a huffing, steaming sigh he fell to the ground, and I began the messy business of butchery. It would not be lack of food that would bring an end to us.

In addition to preparing the meat I cut what I could of the wood around us; the outbuilding of the little cabin had been taken down to the stones it sat upon, and the horse stall as well, but after just two weeks I could see the end coming. We had perhaps another fifteen or twenty days of fuel if we took careful measure.

"You should have stayed with them," he said, once the surprise of my return had passed.

What could I reply? His own understanding of the world and his place within it had driven him to protect me against my will. That I had rejected this must have seemed madness in his eyes. Yet had I not returned Jeremy would have slid to his end, secure in the knowledge he had saved me. I know this would have been enough for him, and that by returning I had robbed him of that.

"If it is your desire to see me safe, Mr. McAllister, I suggest you concentrate on leaving that sickbed and regaining your strength."

He gave a dry chuckle. "And what would you say, my strange angel, were I to order you to leave my side immediately and never return?"

I stared at him, contemplating his words. "You all but did so once. Would you again?"

"I might."

I felt hot tears in the corner of my eyes. "I would obey you, my Jeremy," I said, "for I am yours." I contemplated my own words, and surprised myself knowing the truth of them. I repeated

them. “I am yours and I...” my voice caught, and I swallowed. “I will love, honor, and obey you forever. Yet misery would accompany me the rest of my days were you to order me from your side again.”

He took a deep breath and hacked a cough again, but swallowed it and gripped the side of his cot. I stood transfixed as he rose from his bed and straightened his back. All weakness seemed to leave him as he stood in his shirt-tails. He strode firmly forward and took me in his arms.

“You will love, honor, and obey me forever?” he asked gruffly as I leaned against his strength.

“I can do no else,” I whispered, gripping his strong chest against my face.

His lips suddenly met mine and I answered hungrily. He never spoke of sending me from him again.

Despite Jeremy’s determination and my care his survival was no certain thing. When lucid he was as strong in his will as ever, but when his lungs would fill or his fever soared it became a desperate struggle to stave off death. The meat from the horse was helpful, keeping us well-fed, but he continued to fight the cough that had overtaken him. I turned every bit of knowledge I had to aiding him in his struggle. As those first days stretched into a full week his fever became less dangerous in its highs and his breathing became less labored.

When he began to eat more solid food all appearance of disability left him. He was still suffering—naught would fully ameliorate his ills but the coming of warmer, drier weather. He would rise from his bed and set about some task only to have to stop shortly and recoup his vigor, yet he never flagged in his determination to see us quit of this place.

“We must build a sledge,” he told me, “to haul our supplies—we cannot traverse this snow carrying heavy packs. And snowshoes... you said you skinned the horse?”

“As best I could, yes. The hide is nothing to be proud of, but it should serve our needs.”

Jeremy set about fashioning snow shoes from the horsehide and wood while I took the task of gathering what we needed for the sledge. It irked his patriarchal instinct to have me take on the heavier task, but he knew the limits of his strength and he was no fool. Morning time would find him at his most energetic and he would set about cutting and lashing together our crude conveyance, but he would surrender that task to me when prodded- it was more important that he regain as much of his strength as possible.

While I recognized the daunting trek ahead of us I could not help but feel confidence. Jeremy was infectious in that way, not one to dwell on the possibilities of dire outcome when there were no reasonable alternatives to a course of action. I had told him of the Kelly’s promise to send a rescue party, but his assessment of that possibility was the same as my own. There was no way to be certain those men had made safe to the trading post or could make an attempt at reaching us even if they had.

I would have preferred more time. I would have preferred better weather. I would have preferred many other circumstances, but as the end of November closed in upon us it was clearly time to go and Jeremy would brook no further delay. The sledge was heavier than we might have wished, though it bore only the most important supplies. We had thought to take turns pulling it, but

quickly found it easier going with the two of us working side-by-side. Our snow shoes served quite well and we were able to make some good progress, having set out at first light under grey skies with little breeze. Jeremy seemed strong and resolute, whatever remaining infirmity having been stamped down through what I could only describe as sheer willpower.

“Two days’ ride in clear weather should put us no more than seven days out if we keep a good pace,” he said, speaking more to reaffirm things in his own mind than for any other purpose.

“Due north is what he told me,” I said as we trudged forward, “and it sounded like the place you described- a trading post with perhaps a dozen people in residence. They mentioned a man named Leveque...”

“Guy Leveque, yes. Good man and a good friend...”

Small talk quickly fell away as we lent all our strength to keeping the sledge in motion. It was grueling work such as beasts perform, but there was a certain rhythm to it. Once one has broken through that first layer of effort the need to keep moving takes over, forcing you to put one foot in front of the other, constantly leaning into the harness while keeping pace with your partner—the labor builds warmth within the body and a kind of equilibrium is reached where will, pain and motion all settle into an uneasy balance. So long as you keep moving, all is well.

I stumbled first. Whether from fatigue or some other cause I cannot say, but I suddenly found myself face-down in the snow. I quickly struggled to my feet again, but Jeremy had already stopped.

“You didn’t turn an ankle, did you?” he asked as he brushed the snow from my cloak.

“No... I just lost my footing.”

“Well, no reason not to take a short rest—I estimate we’ve been on the march for the better part of two hours.”

My own estimate would have been less generous, but he was blowing hard and as he sat against the sledge he coughed for a minute, clearing his chest. We took water from the canteens inside our coats and snacked on cakes made from ground oats and horse fat. Before the cold could seep into our clothes and stiffen our muscles we took up the sledge harness again and resumed our trek to the north.

We moved in that fashion throughout the day, perhaps an hour of pulling the sledge broken by a short stop for water and rest. As afternoon slid into evening I found I recognized where we were, after a fashion. My guess was we had covered perhaps half the distance to the campsite where the Kelly’s had stopped. It was not an impressive accomplishment, but if we could keep up this pace we might make our way to safety in six or seven days after all.

We set up camp using the sledge as an anchor for a lean-to. A small fire in a pot served to warm some food and make a small batch of root tea before we took our shelter under the canvas. We rolled ourselves together in our blankets, clutching tightly to share the warmth of our bodies, and sleep took me once I felt Jeremy’s breathing settle into a slumberous cadence.

The second day of our journey began with sore muscles and stiff limbs. A light snow had fallen in the night, but off to the west there was a razor-sharp streak of blue. By the time we had broken

camp it was clear the cloud cover was breaking, and when the sun made its appearance in the sky the dazzling brightness of the landscape was almost painful to behold. With our hats drawn down to shade our eyes we set out again, using the shadows we cast to set our course.

It was somewhat slower going as we made a very poor start, being forced to take rest breaks early on until we worked the cold from our limbs. Though the sun was bright the air was cold and dry. Pain began in my eyes and head on towards midday as the strain of the brilliant whiteness took its toll. I could see Jeremy was suffering as well and when we broke for a meal both of us rested on the sledge, lying back with our hats over our faces to seek some relief.

We reached the site of the Kelly's camp a good hour before we might normally have stopped. The stone wall that had supported their lean-to was but a long hump in the snow, but I recognized the terrain such as it was and we were both too spent to carry on further. Jeremy set about clearing the snow from the south side of the wall, piling it up as a wind break to the west and east over which we set the canvas of our tent, folding it double and fixing it in place with long poles driven into the snow.

Having cleared the snow down to the turf we built a fire near the entrance. Our supply of firewood was small, but as the sun dipped below the horizon the temperature began a rapid plunge; lacking the blanket of clouds above us the night turned bitter and we took all we had of blankets and clothing to ward off the cold.

Morning broke upon us as a symphony of pain—our joints stiff, muscles sore and the air so cold and dry it burned our noses and throats to breathe. There was a breeze out of the west that tore away what little warmth our fire offered. It was a dangerous, killing kind of cold and I wondered if it might be prudent to hold where we were and wait for midday before moving on. When I voiced that idea, Jeremy was adamant.

“If we stay here, we’ll die here. Up, my love, and once we’re on our way it should be better for us.”

He tried to make light of it, his voice gentle and friendly, but I could see the concern in him. He truly feared should we fail to move on this morning we might not be able to at all. We managed to warm some oat cakes over our fire such that they were no longer frozen and with that little to sustain us we broke camp and set off again to the north.

The sun offered us no warmth, the steady breeze gusting cruelly, tearing at our cloaks and stealing within our clothes like so many icy hornets. I began to fear the prospect of stopping, uncertain of my ability to move again should I let myself come to rest. Jeremy seemed to feel the same, pressing on well past midday before taking any appreciable rest, stopping only when we found ourselves in the lee of a mound topped with fir trees that took the biting edge from the cursed wind.

The both of us shuffled about like cripples as we took what food we could force ourselves to eat. For drink there was brandy, but not in great measure, and while that served to lighten us a bit it also robbed us of the will to press any further that day. I could feel myself slowing as we made the choice to camp where we were, and though I knew the danger I faced I could not summon the will to stave it off. It seemed merely an intellectual problem rather than something that might threaten Jeremy's survival. When we settled down for the night I knew deep inside what the morning would bring.

Dreams prodded me, my body shaking as muffled sounds fell half-understood upon my ears. I struggled against something, against the grip of some beast tossing me to and fro. There was peaceful warmth that would hold me and I was being drawn away from it, crying as the cold took me... then fire filled my mouth and I screamed...

The world intruded on me as I coughed, whiskey burning in my throat and my nose, the taste of it overwhelming my lungs as I drew painful breaths into my aching chest. Jeremy was above me, his hands firm on my shoulders, shaking me, his voice coming to me as if from far, far away, but my eyes were so heavy and would not hold the sight of him. Keeping them open was painful and I relaxed into the darkness, seeking that peace once again.

Pain exploded against my cheek, my head thrown to one side and I felt my throat working, a cry pouring out of me, some kind of plaintive wailing like that of an infant. My eyes focused again and I could hear him, hear Jeremy pleading with me.

“Listen to me! You cannot close your eyes... Elaine! Listen! Look at me... yes, look at me. You must stay awake!”

With a will I forced my eyes to focus. I knew what was happening, accepted it in a detached sort of way. It was not the first time—it had occurred more than once in my memory where I had found myself alone and starving in the cold, only to fall completely asleep—and to wake up again in the spring, stiff and thin and ravenous. Still, I fought my way to consciousness. I heard myself babbling but barely understood my own words.

“Jeremy... you must go on without me... leave me... this has happened before... I’ll find you in the spring...” It wasn’t until after I said those last words that I realized what I was saying.

My eyes finally focused on him and I could see concern bordering on panic writ upon his face, for Jeremy obviously thought me delusional. I tried to shake myself, but my muscles refused to obey me and my eyes would not stay open. I felt Jeremy shaking me, felt him slap my face again, then again, but there was no holding on to him, nothing to root me there as I slid into the warm embrace of darkness. I felt myself moved, the ground shifting beneath me...

## Chapter 25

*Ann Arbor, February 2005 CE*

I was kind of depressed. For about a week after our last meeting I hadn't heard a word from her and she didn't return my phone calls. Finally one morning she called and asked me to meet her at her hotel room, so I drove on out. I was still mystified and a little hurt, but I tried to keep it off my face as I knocked on her hotel room door. Then, when she opened the door, I looked at her and covered my mouth to stop myself from laughing. She had a dead serious look on her face, and her hair was pulled back in a severe ponytail. She was wearing a long green floral-print housedress and, of all things, a pair of pink bunny slippers.

Her face was cloudy. "You are amused?"

I straightened my face. "No, no. You look great. Glad to see you."

"Thank-you," she said crisply, her back straight as she stepped back and gestured me inside. I walked quietly toward the suite's generous sitting area and chose the large overstuffed brown chair. As I sat, I watched as she walked archly toward the leather couch, the floppy bunny ears bouncing with her footsteps. In spite of the incongruity, she had a new look in her eye that kept me from snickering. I hadn't seen her look that way since the first week we met; guarded, distant. She sank into the large couch and it practically seemed to swallow her as she crossed her arms, dropped her chin, and regarded me levelly, unsmiling. I leaned back in the chair across from her and tried to relax.

"So what's on your mind?"

She crossed her right leg over her left at the knee and bounced her dangling foot, the bunny face on it smiling bizarrely at me.

"I am considering terminating our relationship," she said bluntly and I shook my head and looked back up at her.

"Well," I said, "That's your prerogative. It's in our contract. I guess I'd be disappointed though. Can I ask why? I didn't mean to offend you, whatever it was I said."

Her gaze wandered away, looking past me. She was quiet for a bit, her face impassive but a little sad. Then her green eyes snapped back to me with that almost alien look, like I was a different species. In a way I couldn't put my finger on, she almost seemed inhuman. But then she pursed her lips, exhaled slowly and finally spoke.

"I am coming to understand that to do what I set out to do here may indeed be impossible. I was holding that understanding at arm's length, pretending it wasn't real, but then last week it finally came to me, full force and undeniable."

"You got pretty mad. I'm still not sure what set you off like that, but whatever it was..."

“It was not merely you. It was Joshua as well. You both brought the reality of what I am facing to where I could no longer ignore how very weak my plans are. I thought... I *hoped* that just telling my story would be enough. That I would be able to let this out in careful bits and pieces, let it be dismissed as fantasy until time managed to provide the evidence. By then perhaps it would be easier for people to accept. The shock would be softened a bit. Perhaps my work with the Foundation would give me enough sympathetic friends to blunt any negative consequences... instead, what do I have? You urge me to turn myself over to doctors and scientists and hope some ephemeral construct of *property law* of all things might somehow stand as a shield between me and those who might wish to do me harm.”

“But Zsallia,” I said, “the idea here is to try to help you.”

“Hmm, yes, help me,” she said, skeptically. She paused, still looking at me, utterly without emotion. “Tell me my friend, do you crave immortality?” The way her eyes were fixed on me made me feel like a specimen under a microscope.

I gave another little start. “Um, well,” I thought. “I’m not sure.”

Her eyes narrowed. “I believe you do,” she said. “You all do.”

I opened my mouth, shut it and sat back. “I guess it depends on what you mean,” I said.

“Don’t banter with me.”

“Hey,” I said, getting irritated now, “You think I haven’t thought about it at all? I haven’t exactly slept right or eaten right since meeting you. I’ve been having stupid arguments with my wife, too, because I can’t really think what to tell her about you. I wouldn’t even believe you were real if I hadn’t seen you grow back that leg and then that arm. What the hell is *with* that anyway? You grow the leg, then the arm? Jesus, I mean, what the hell *are* you?”

“Precisely my point. Just what the hell am I? Who else will be asking just that question? Will they be people who see possibilities, or threats, or both? You and Joshua seem to operate from the assumption that once the truth comes out I will be believed, but what if those in power suspect I am lying?”

“It won’t matter if you have the research. Sure, things could get sticky, but you’d be dealing from a position of strength.”

She just kept looking at me, her eyes cavernous and unblinking. It was getting a little unnerving, but I just looked back at her and waited. Finally she spoke again.

“What is it you think you’ll learn from studying me, anyhow? If immortality is not the goal, then what?”

I looked at her, perplexed. It seemed like she was missing the completely obvious. Then I stood up and leaned toward her. She pulled her head back a bit but otherwise didn’t move as I tapped her left forearm. “That,” I said sharply, tapping it again, feeling the warm life in it. Then I sat back down. “Jesus, it creeps me out a little just thinking about it, but just a few months ago *you had no freaking arm* there, lady. Now I see you typing on your computer or putting on makeup with it. That’s just incredible.”

“It is part and parcel with the same phenomenon,” she said.

“Oh, I’m not so sure it is, but...” I paused, groping. “Well there’s only one sure way to find out, isn’t there?”

“So you believe I am obligated to do this.”

“I never said you were obligated to do anything.”

“No. You said I had no right to make decisions about what the human race was permitted to know; however, the one follows naturally from the other.” Her voice was calm, but her gaze was still hollow and accusing.

I paused, “Well now wait just a minute, you’re...” I stopped. I saw her point. “Okay, I said something along the lines of, it’s not up to you to decide what’s best for humanity...” I stopped then as a tight, grim smile appeared on her face and she nodded curtly. I suddenly realized that this was not an argument I could win even if I thought it was worth fighting. “All right,” I continued, “you’re right. I do think you’re obligated to let yourself be studied. *With limits, and within reason.* But I think people are obligated to do all kinds of things they don’t do. That doesn’t mean I run around pointing guns at them making them do it.”

The lizard-like stare softened suddenly, just a little, but she still seemed guarded. “You should realize that after our last meeting I very nearly changed my identity, left town and considered leaving to where none of you would ever find me again. Every day I have agonized over this. I very nearly did not call you again. I still don’t if we should even be having this conversation.”

“Okay, but...” my voice trailed off. “Well, you know what?” She looked at me quizzically. “If you ask me to, I’ll tear up all my notes, destroy our recordings, take the money you gave me and forget I ever knew you. I’ll never tell anyone about you, except maybe I’ll spin some stories for my grandkids, if I’m still around.”

She kept looking at me, quietly. Her eyes narrowed a bit.

“Okay,” I said, “So we could do all that and you could disappear. I think you’d be making a mistake, but you hired me to tell your story and that’s really all I’m here for. I’m not here to force anything on anyone. Hell, I don’t even like making my son clean his room. But I think there are better options where you could definitely help yourself, definitely be in a position of greater control than you’ve ever been in, and besides that, you could...” I stopped, not sure what to say. Then I remembered something. “Have you ever been on a burn ward?” I asked. I knew this was dangerous ground, but I couldn’t let it go.

“I’ve seen people burned,” she said evenly, her jaw set. “I’ve been burned.”

“Right now, while you and I are sitting here, there are children...”

She interrupted “That is enough. If you think I haven’t...”

“There are children,” I said, loudly, talking right over her, “five, six, seven years old, with half or more of the skin on their bodies charred black from burns. The pain is so agonizing they can’t give them any drugs for it because to give them enough to make a difference would kill them. A couple of

times a day at least, nurses have to go to those kids and put them in a bath and take a wire brush and scrape that blacked skin off and do their best to help them grow more back. And they just have to listen to those kids scream, day in and day out, because if they don't do it, those kids will die or have no chance of healing at all. It gets so intense that most doctors and nurses have to be rotated out of there on a regular basis. Even people who deal with death and suffering for a living can't bear it for more than a few months at a time."

Her jaw clenched and she stared at me. I saw anger in her eyes, a dangerous anger, but she didn't say anything, so I kept going.

"Even if the kids do recover they sometimes look like monsters the rest of their lives," I said. "When I was in High School, I knew this kid, track star, on the swim team, too, plus just a really nice guy, everybody loved him. Jumped in the pool wrong in the shallow end, cracked his head on the bottom, broke his neck. Nearly drowned, and later he told me he wished he had. Know why? Because he never moved below his neck again. Doctors told him he'd be eating through a tube and stuck in a wheelchair, no hands no legs, for the rest of his life. Couldn't even scratch his own nose."

"The world is a tragic place. Life is not for the faint of heart. I am unmoved by cheap appeals to emotion. What would you have me do? Do you think you can cut me open and find some magical potion to cure all of this?"

"I think," I said, and stopped for a minute. "Okay, I think your body's your own, but that unless you're some magical fairy from another dimension, with a few vials of your blood, they could learn all kinds of stuff."

She shot me a strange look. "My.... blood?"

"Sure, then they could examine your DNA and learn things. Or they might find chemicals in your bloodstream they could examine. Maybe some of both. Hell I don't know, but it probably wouldn't require anything more than that out of you." I grinned. "What, are you afraid of needles?"

She gave a hollow chuckle. "Not precisely, it's just the thought of..." She paused and shook her head, looking a little sad. "Never mind. What I am truly afraid of is what will happen if that isn't good enough. What will happen if they learn too much, what might happen to mankind..."

"Why do you presume to decide for humanity what we should or shouldn't know? I think you could help people. I think if you explain to people what you're worried about, and they still want the knowledge, then you let them decide whether to use it. And you'd be doing it on your terms, rather than having them chase after you and try to force you."

"It would seem that simple to you. Neither of us knows what such testing might reveal, or what truths might need to be embraced or rejected..." she said, her voice trailing off. She looked terribly tired all of a sudden and put her eyes into her left hand. "I have wreaked much havoc in the lives I have touched, even yours."

I chewed on that for a minute, but I really couldn't see it changing what I believed. "I do think I see what you're saying. But..." I stopped, and thought. "You figure you're a pretty good judge of character, right?"

"Better than you can imagine," she said, evenly, lifting her eyes from her hand.

“Well,” I said, sitting back and looking her in the eye. “Look at me. Would I lock you in a prison or force you to do something you don’t want to do? Am I the kind of person who’d go along with other people who wanted to do that? Is your friend Joshua?”

She looked me in the eyes for a long moment before speaking.

“What if it were your son?”

“What?”

“The child screaming in the debridement bath. What if he were your son? Don’t answer. I know the question is unfair, but you are depending on everyone being selfless and civilized. I know humans, and everything I know of the nature of man and power tells me I should be afraid, and nothing you have said to me here serves to change that one whit.”

“Damn it, there is no way to make a point with you on this, is there? Dennis Novak was right.” She looked confused, and I smiled a bit at that. I’d gotten her. “Dennis said you don’t know how to deal with anything involving institutions, or the law, or bureaucracies. It’s always about individuals with you, isn’t it?”

“Dennis told you that?”

“Yeah, the day I met him in the hospital. He said it’s like you’ve got a mental block when it comes to anything more complex than your tight little circle of friends, or whatever buttons you can push when you’re face-to-face with a stranger.”

She looked surprised. “I suppose I’d never thought of it that way. But of what relevance...?”

“No matter how far up the ladder mankind has climbed, you still don’t trust the civilization we’ve created.”

Her eyes narrowed. “It is hardly so simple. Civilization is fragile and mankind hasn’t changed all that much in thirty-five centuries. Go to New York City and turn off the electricity for sixty days, then see what is left of your civilization there. The constraints are effective only to a point, and then it is the actions of individuals that tell the tale. The more people I am forced to trust outside of those I can see and know personally...” She trailed off, staring at the floor.

“The problem is the world’s big and complex and bureaucratic now, and more so all the time. Some ways that’s good, some bad, but it’s the way things are. So the idea that you can just hide out and push buttons on a few people... It’s just not going to work, Princess. You can run and hide again, but where? You want to leave the United States and go hide in some Third World shit hole? Okay, but what if you were discovered there, what chance do you think you’d have? Can you imagine what some third-world dictator might do to you, versus what people here would do?”

She suddenly looked very small, just staring at the floor and for some reason I felt like a bully. But I went on: “Look, I just think you are going to get caught sooner or later and should have a strategy that has you in a position of strength,” I said. “And maybe you could do some good for mankind.”

“Or perhaps I would do a great deal of harm, with no control at all,” she said, her voice quiet, nearly a whisper.

“It’s your call, Princess,” I said. “It’s your choice. You don’t have to decide now. I’m not going to browbeat you. I’ve said my piece.” I paused. “I thought I was helping you figure out a good strategy, but I guess that’s not my job. You’re going to do whatever you’re going to do.”

Her eyes continued to stare at the floor. Then slowly she looked up at me, her eyes betraying a look of weariness and anguish so deep I was stunned.

“I do not know what I am going to do,” she said, and the rasp in her voice expressed such a conflicted mess of emotions I didn’t know what to say. It was clear she was in some pain, a pain I had no way to understand. So I just cleared my voice.

“That scares the hell out of you, doesn’t it? Not knowing, I mean.”

She just stared at me. Then her head gave a short nod. “Yes. You are not the only one who has had restless nights my friend.”

“So... am I fired?”

“No,” she smiled at me, thinly. “Not yet.” Then she looked to her right and stared into space again.

“Good, I think,” I said. “So what changed your mind?”

Her huge green eyes, storm-filled and relentless until now, turned back to me and finally the storm seemed to break: she looked human again. “You were honest with me.” She said it almost like a benediction. “I can still trust you.” It sounded like a judge handing down a sentence, but she was looking at me like I was a person again. I smiled and felt awkwardly relieved.

“Good,” I said, “because we haven’t gotten anywhere on this damned book in the past few weeks. Why don’t we get back to work?”

“Did you bring the recorder?”

“Yep,” I said, pulling it out. “So what was it like, back in ancient Rome? I was always fascinated by it when I was a kid.”

Her face turned mordant. “It was beautiful,” she said. “Beautiful and terrible.”

## Chapter 26

*Circa 130 BCE*

I awoke swinging by my ankles and wrists, bound to a pole carried on the shoulders of two men like some fresh kill being carried home after a hunt. I was naked, my throat was on fire and I could feel neither my hands nor my feet. Realizing my predicament a roar of incoherent rage pushed from my chest but came out of my aching throat with considerably less force than I intended. Still, it was enough to attract attention and my captors stopped briefly, stared at me, and called out to some others in that strangely clipped tongue of theirs. After a few pokes at me and some infuriating laughter they continued their march.

I prepared myself for the humiliation to come. I would undoubtedly be beaten and raped, but those would be familiar degradations at least. I sincerely hoped not to be burned. I had been burned fairly badly once and that was a pain difficult to suffer through. In any case I would watch for whatever chance to escape presented itself—and though there was no sign of his whereabouts I would await my opportunity to kill that vile creature Rufus the moment he should chance my way.

When we arrived in the camp the initial humiliations were not the worst they could have been. They freed me from the pole and shifted my ropes to the high branch of a tree, leaving me dangling by my ankles, my wrists still bound together but hanging free. I noticed my hands, still quite numb, were purple and swollen. I was left to hang there for a good while as Rufus's men poked, prodded and mocked me, occasionally making threatening gestures, twisting my breasts or roughly grabbing at me between my legs.

I bore their taunting without response until one of them made the mistake of letting his hand stray near my face. I sank my teeth into the meat of his hand and he howled, clawing and punching me repeatedly as he tried to pull free while his fellows laughed at his predicament. It ended when one of them kicked me hard in the side of the head. I saw stars, but managed to laugh anyhow.

I noticed a few of the tribesmen from my people were there in the camp, keeping a fearful distance. Even those who came close out of curiosity did not dare approach me. They were not fools. They knew the legends of the witch-goddess who could not die and the vengeance she might wreak. But finally one of them did find the temerity to speak to me.

“Why did you allow them to capture you, great T'wazō? Have you lost your power?”

I stared at him and said nothing, glaring upside-down into his eyes until he shifted uncomfortably and left. As he did so, I began to feel a twinge of uncertainty. Though he still feared me, an unmistakable doubt had filled his countenance. It was a doubt I began to feel stirring in my own soul, though I tried to deny it.

I thrust the feeling away when I saw Rufus himself finally approach. I noted the poultice bound about his right forearm and the stiffness in his gait from the wounds to his chest and soreness in his groin. He would not soon forget that we had fought. He had obviously groomed himself after our contest and was wearing a fine white shift that hung slightly above his knees, with short sleeves and a loose rope belt. I was particularly taken with his sandals, which were intricately bound to his muscular calves. Even hanging upside-down, I noticed again just how beautiful he was. I briefly

considered spitting at him, but instead merely waited as he looked me up and down carefully. Then he spoke to me again in the seafarer tongue.

“So you speak Greek, witch woman, though your accent is crude. Well, what have you to say for yourself after killing my men and giving me such a chase?”

“I spoke the seafarers’ tongue long before the goat that spawned your father was born,” I growled.

He looked at me with a half-smile and said, “Can you tell me why I should not let my men have their way with you, then cut your throat?”

“If you were not such a pathetic coward you would cut my throat now,” I rasped.

“You would rather die than be dishonored,” he said. Even as I swayed slightly in the breeze I kept my eyes locked upon his. His gaze was level but his smile stayed upon his lips. “Impressive spirit you show for a woman.”

I tried vainly to spit at him but my mouth was too choked and dry to do more than make a rude noise. “If you haven’t balls enough to kill me then let me down little man so I can cut off the tiny ones you have and shove them down your throat!”

He smiled at that and laughed gently. “You have a noble spirit, and might fetch a pretty price in the right market. It is a pity fate brought us to this circumstance.” He turned and spoke in the strange tongue to his men, who stared at me as he gestured and spoke firmly. I listened as closely as I could, attempting to pick up the feel of their language, but I had no time to get the gist before he turned and spoke to me again.

“Cruelty for no purpose is useless and destructive,” he said, “and I am not easily insulted by careless words. Yet by killing my men you have given me no choice. None would respect me were I to allow a barbarian woman to humiliate me,” he said. “I might let you go were it not for that,” he said, “but you have sealed your own fate.”

He seemed serious, but I said nothing. He looked at me some more, sizing me up, then shook his head almost tenderly as he walked away.

As he disappeared into the camp three of his men cut me down and surprisingly gently lowered me to a sitting position. One of them, a particularly weasel-faced one, squatted and showed me his knife, trying to provoke fear. I stared at him as I would a worm and watched the disappointment on his face with some satisfaction. Then he smirked, reached for the complicated knot that bound my wrists and with a jerk suddenly loosened it.

At first I was surprised at my good fortune, but then realized my own foolishness. Before I could stop myself an embarrassing gasp came from my lips. My hands, swollen and numb, were now on fire. As the blood rushed back into them the only sensation was raw pain. A foot lashed out and my head snapped to one side as I was forced on to my belly. Stunned by the blow I struck out with my useless hands but they were seized again and lashed together behind my back. I tried to rise up only to be kicked over onto my back again as another man grabbed my ankles, roughly pulling the bindings free, sending waves of pain into my swollen feet. That did not stop me from driving my

heel into his crotch and the fool went down with a howl, then kicks rained down on me as his fellows jumped in.

My legs were kicked apart, my ankles pinned by strong hands, and one of them dropped to his knees and pulled up his tunic. I tried to head-butt him as he descended on me, but a foot pressed me down, grinding the left side of my face in the dirt as I felt myself violated, the men laughing as the one raping me spent himself in mere moments and another took his place.

I had stopped struggling and they took the bait. As a third man took me the foot lifted from my face and I waited, lying motionless as he worked himself into a frenzy. When I moved it was sudden and swift, twisting my aching ankles and wrapping my legs tightly about his waist. With all the strength left in my back I lifted myself up and lunged my face at his. His head snapped back to avoid my forehead, but my teeth sank into the side of his neck. He screamed and bucked in my grip, but I bit deep, my mouth suddenly filled with a gush of salty copper as his veins tore asunder and everything dissolved in flurry of feet and fists, my eyes blurred in red and black, my body jerking from the blows until a sudden strike to the small of my back made everything numb.

The world was pain and darkness, and I so desperately wanted to lie down, but something held me, pinning my arms above my head so that my feet only barely touched the ground. I was cold, so very, very cold and I felt rather than heard the moan of anguish escape from me. One eye would not open; the other offered only blurred grey ghosts. My wrists... they were afire with pain, and when I tried to move them white-hot agony lanced through them and down my arms to my shoulders and spine. I forced myself to focus, to try to sort out one pain from another.

My vision cleared slowly, the one eye I could open gazing up at two hands, my hands, crossed at the wrists with a long metal spike driven through them fastening me to a tree. I hung suspended, my body beginning to scream at me as the agonies of my wounds fought for my attention. I tried to move and I cried out as broken bones grated in my right leg.

Laughter drew my attention and I spied several of the men building a cage from poles they cut out of saplings. It was small, no more than four feet long and perhaps two feet square. When it was done three of them approached me and I tried to move, but my body was beyond obeying my will and I concentrated on keeping silent as two of the men secured my arms while the third struck at the spike impaling my wrists, finally wrenching it free. I collapsed into their grasp and they dragged me over to the cage and then shoved me inside head-first, lashing it closed. They flipped it over and attached a rope to one corner, using that to hoist the cage high up in the air, hanging me from a high tree limb. I lay curled around myself, unable to move, just trying to breathe through the waves of pain wracking my body.

That cage was my home for the next six days.

From my lofty position I watched as Rufus and six others left camp the following morning, armed with spears and nothing else. Once he was gone my cage was lowered and I was given some water by a man who simply seized a handful of my hair and yanked my head back, then poured water from a jug into my mouth, half drowning me. Then it was back up into the branches of the tree to hang for the rest of the day. If I should happen to doze off, there was always a man detailed to stick me in the leg or the side of my chest with the point of a spear to keep me awake. During the day there was nearly constant taunting, and the men would often sport at spinning the cage or striking me with a well-pitched stone while at night the insects would be out in force. Through it all I had not a morsel of food and barely enough water to sustain me.

My bones and some of the other wounds healed, but my hunger was like a flame after the first day, sapping my strength to the point I could hardly bring myself to move. The sixth day was the worst. Up until that time I had retained a semblance of rationality, but as dawn broke I could hear laughter in the wind rustling through the trees. I thought perhaps the demon Loghaz had finally returned to taunt me, but it was a different sound, seemingly more gleeful and malicious. I strained for it, desperate for even the mocker's voice, but what came to me was cold and angry in a way the trickster could only dream of. It hungered for my flesh, promising in words I could only barely comprehend to tear the meat from my bones and consume me whole, to make an end of this foolish goddess. I could hear it singing to me through the trees, a song of avarice, destruction and appetites insatiable and horrifying even to one such as I. It overwhelmed my senses, making time itself seem to stumble to a halt.

I became vaguely aware of the commotion of Rufus returning, his men carrying two huge boar carcasses slung upon poles. It seemed as though I was floating freely above the scene, detached, warm and comfortable. I was dimly aware of the man below prodding at me, but I could no longer feel his spear point against my side. I looked down and saw a deep gash in my side, oozing thick blood, but I was numb to it, as if it were happening to somebody other than me. My gaze returned to Rufus, the world slowly contracting, and as my sight darkened all that filled my field of vision was this magnificent, arrogant man.

He seemed to glow a radiant light and I watched as he cast his eyes up at me. I could feel his gaze as a physical thing, touching me, almost caressing me. He shouted and a moment later the cage began to sway, settling towards the ground as my eyes finally succumbed to the aching weariness, closing and embracing the darkness.

Rough handling forced me back to awareness. The cage had been opened and I was being carried. The scent of raw male sweat filled my nostrils, a heady and intoxicating mixture of animal, leather, spice and smoke... and a taste, the taste of Rufus. I forced myself to focus on that taste, to hold to it as an anchor of awareness to keep the abyss from claiming me again. The scent of cooking meat set my belly afire with such a raging hunger that I nearly choked on my own spittle. I forced the hunger down, determined to keep some measure of my dignity even as my head spun madly.

Rufus set me down upon something soft and yielding, a bed of some kind, and then he spoke words in his savage tongue. A damp, cool cloth kissed my forehead and my eyes focused upon his darkly radiant, manly face.

"You have had a very difficult time of it, yes?" he asked tenderly. I simply stared at him and said nothing. My hand moved to my side where several deep, sticky gashes were torn in my flesh, wounds that would have healed had I been given food but which were now days old, oozing and hot, and then there was the newest gash, seeping my strength into the blanket I lay upon. His eyes shifted to them, and I saw genuine concern, then anger. I remained silent.

He turned away from me and then produced a leather bottle, uncorking it with his teeth. He brought it to my lips and I drank deeply, hardly noticing that it seemed to be water mixed with wine. I wretched, but managed to prevent myself from vomiting. As I did so he made soothing, comforting noises and continued to wipe my face with the cloth.

"You are hungry, pretty one," he said. "Would you like some food?"

I looked upon him impassively, calculating his behavior. What he was attempting was pathetically obvious. I had seen slaves broken many times before and this was always the cleverest

way: to make the new slave see you as a savior. Yet this felt almost like a dream and he was suffused with a fire of beauty. I stared at him, exhausted, and finally nodded silently. Let him play his game.

“I will have some lessons I must teach you,” he said, “for fate has made you mine. But I have told you I am not needlessly cruel and you should believe me”

At that moment another man entered the tent. He was older than Rufus, thinner, his head bald but for a thick fringe of white hair that spanned the back of his head from ear to ear. He was bearded, but his beard was neatly trimmed even as it fell nearly to his chest. His eyes were quite dark and piercing. He spoke and I saw an odd thing: the old man clearly deferred to Rufus, but at the same time Rufus deferred to him as well. Rufus called him “Marieko” and I recognized other words as well as I began to pick up the feel of their speech, words that seemed to mean “girl” and “hurt” and, perhaps, “heal.”

Rufus turned to me. “This man is skilled in treating wounds,” he said. “He shall tend you now.”

“Tend” is hardly the word I would have chosen for what followed. As Rufus left the tent, the old man did not deign to so much as speak to me. Instead he simply began prodding at my wounds. I felt the pain as a distant thing, almost as if it were not a part of me. Then he called out to men standing outside the tent and shortly thereafter two large warriors entered carrying a pot full of glowing coals with wooden handles. There were several long iron rods stuck in the coals. I understood instantly what he was about and I struggled to move, but the two warriors pinned me down and I was too weak to fight them. One after another the old man pressed the hot irons into my wounds as I gritted my teeth, refusing to scream. Once he was done the warriors took the pot and left the tent.

“I will enjoy watching you die, old man,” I rasped once I was able to speak again.

“You’ll need to live first, barbarian,” he laughed, the first words he had spoken to me, “and who taught you the language of the Greeks? You speak like a sailor’s whore.”

I spat dryly at him, but he did not react and merely stepped back to the opening of the tent. Then he said, “I am the slave of Secundus Talmudius Africanus Rufus, as are you. Be certain to obtain your master’s permission before attempting to carry out your threats.” With that he turned and left.

I heard myself growling, a low moan coming from my chest, whether with rage or fatigue I could not truly tell. My head began to feel light again and I let myself fall back onto the blankets where I had been placed, feeling the darkness creep inward again even as I heard someone approaching. Rufus entered, followed by a boy carrying a large tray of meat and bread, the sight and scent of which immediately snapped me back to full awareness as my side burned, my muscles screamed and my belly ached. The boy set the tray on a low table next to where I lay, then backed out of the tent while Rufus settled down opposite, reclining on his left side upon some cushions piled there. With his right hand he took one of the round loaves from the tray and tore off a piece, then gestured with it to me.

“As I have said, you will find I am not a cruel master unless I need to be, and for now you need food.”

I could not have refused to eat no matter how determined I might be. I attacked the feast laid before me as I looked back at him. A tender smile crossed his lips as he watched me. I suppressed

my own smile because I knew the game he played. I planned to kill him as soon as I had the chance, but for now there was the food and the drink, and my head swam from the alcohol and exhaustion. I had a belly finally being filled after a week or more of running and fighting and then another week of torture and starvation. I could think of little but feeding.

There would be a time and a place to contemplate the destruction of this arrogant creature. As I ate greedily, involuntary animal noises escaping me between swallows, he spoke again.

“My men were cruel. They are greatly displeased with the way you murdered their comrades. They sought to punish you and I could not deny them. By all rights I should let them kill you. Now that this is all done I will see to it that they are kept from you... but only if you are cooperative. Defy me, and I shall return you to them.”

It was suddenly clear to me that Rufus had expected to return and find me dead. The past week had been some kind of test. He was watching me expectantly, but I said nothing. Let him read what he would in my silence. I continued to methodically dispatch the food and drink at hand.

After the tray was emptied and the bottle was spent, I sat back in exhaustion and watched listlessly as he produced iron shackles. As I looked mute daggers at him he very casually reached for my ankles and shackled them, then did the same to my wrists. I did not resist. I needed time to rest, to heal and to plan, but I plotted how painful I would make his death even as I silently allowed him to chain me. Then he arose to his feet and straightened his tunic.

“I shall see you again at sunset, my barbarian witch,” he said, and turned to leave.

My only reply was a glowering silence. I worked to keep my anger in place, but a slaked thirst, a full belly, and the ability to lie down and stretch worked their magic and hard slumber fell upon me like a hammer. Still, in my dreams I felt my arms closing around him, my hands squeezing, squeezing about his throat as I screamed in rage and sank my teeth into his face, tearing, making him howl with pain....

I did not awaken until the next morning, did not even recall Rufus returning although I am certain he did. Instead I awoke and found the old Greek, Mariako, bending over me. I lunged at him and looped my chains about his throat, squeezing with all my might. But I was still weak and he punched me several times in the head to make me fall away. He did not make so foolish a mistake as to allow himself into my grasp again. Still he examined me, with Rufus watching in the background. Both looked surprised but said nothing. From then on I was allowed to stay in the tent, my wrists and ankles joined by a short chain and staked to a metal pole driven deep into the ground.

Rufus fed me all my meals personally. I made no attempt to kill him, though that desire burned so fiercely in my heart. I was chained and still weak, though now I was healing quite well. I smiled at him, talked with him, let him believe his little trap for my soul was closing about me.

And throughout it all I could not escape the realization that he was beautiful, so incredibly beautiful it took my breath away, especially when he smiled. His brow came to just above the bridge of my nose, which seemed quite comical. Many of the Romans seemed short to my eyes, yet he was shorter than most of them. Most of the men he commanded, and most of the people he owned, were at least a little taller than he. Yet a fire burned within him that all could see, and there were times when Rufus seemed to tower over men a full head taller than he.

Most of the Romans were dark-skinned, he no exception. His skin was nearly as dark as the

bark of an oak. His hair and his eyes were even darker; indeed both were as black as the blackest night, yet gleamed with a fiery intensity. His strong brow had an almost delicate veneer, with thin lashes that seemed like an angry stripe across his face. His nose was a bit large yet appealing and sat like a proud hawk's beak over thick, slightly down turned lips.

His enormous head sat above shoulders as broad as a boar's, his thick mane of black hair pulled back in a short tail. The knotted muscles flowing from his enormous neck led to arms more than twice the size of mine, yet so shapely and well defined I could almost point to each bulge and name it. The whole rest of his body—his chest, his waist, his thighs, his calves, were smooth and almost hairless like a woman's body, but hard and knotted and manly in a fashion I found almost intoxicating. Even his feet astounded me. They were almost twice the size of my own, were shaped like the curve of a pear, yet were muscular and mannish and beautiful.

By the third day in his tent I was still weak, but both he and Marieko were amazed at how well my wounds had already healed. With plentiful sleep, and enough food and water to satisfy a small army of men, the wounds on my side had already begun to fade to mute scars, and my hands began to work properly again despite the wounds in my wrists. Finally I could breathe easily and I was fully alert to my surroundings. Still my ankles and wrists were bound closely together and I feigned infirmity, knowing at some point that perceived frailty might be crucial.

The fourth morning Marieko had looked upon my wounds once again, and suddenly looked upon me as if I were an unearthly thing. I laughed openly at him for he knew and I knew that he could see the truth, that I was no mere mortal like himself. I laughed at his chagrin, even as my wounds were already disappearing like the wisps of forgotten dreams. Rufus sent two boys to the tent with bowls and towels and they bathed me, an act I tolerated with ill grace, for I was certain I knew what was to follow. A choice was approaching.

Each night Rufus would come and take a meal with me. Each night I would look upon him with glowering animosity and fascination. Bit by bit I began to learn his language, but more importantly, I began to learn him. On the fourth night as he fed me again and looked at my fading wounds, he suddenly reached down, released the shackles upon my ankles, then fiercely grasped my left breast and kissed me.

Time to choose. It was not yet dark, but the gate to the palisade was closed and I doubted my ability to scale it. To kill him now would require a feat of strength, and I already knew my physical prowess was nothing compared to his. As I relaxed into his grasp, my mouth alive and eager under his, I reminded myself I had given my body to far less appetizing specimens of manhood.

Morning came and I awoke to find him already up and gone. The events of the night before were etched deep in my memory and my body tingled at the thought of them even as I steeled myself against his eventual return. He was a superb lover, as facile with a woman's body as he was strong and swift in combat. That admission diminished my desire to see him broken not a whit, rather it strengthened it: such beauty of form and arrogance of character begged for destruction.

He entered the tent clad in his habitual short tunic, belted at the waist. He had the scent of fresh bathing and his hair was wet, but freshly combed, falling about his shoulders in a black, gleaming mane coated in oil. He looked down upon me where I lay chained and a look of decision set in his face. He produced the key he always carried with him and first unlocked my ankles, then freed my wrists.

I sprang into a crouch, eyeing him warily as he turned and reached out through the tent flap to seize up a wrapped bundle and then tossed it at my feet. I glanced down and saw my bow wrapped in a leather tunic along with sandals and my knife—the very one with which I had attempted to kill him. That day seemed an age ago though it had not been more than eleven days past. He smiled and cocked his head, gesturing to the bundle before me. He was perhaps the most magnificent thing I had ever seen, even at this moment of supreme arrogance.

He drew a deep breath into his huge chest, looked down at me and said, “So, barbarian witch. Would you like your freedom?” He paused, then turned toward the tent opening. “There it is,” he said, gesturing broadly. “Go on, take it. You want your release? Go, I offer you forgiveness for all your crimes against my men and me. I give you your freedom.”

I stared at him, seeking some hint that this was a lie, but there was nothing there but the ridiculous assumption that I would choose to remain here, his slave. It would have been ludicrous, but for the fact that I did hesitate.

Freedom or slavery? I could leave this place of my own free will, disappear into my forest certain in the knowledge that in a few short seasons this man, this Rufus, would be dust and whatever existence he had beyond life would be plagued with my laughter. It would mean allowing him to live, no small price for my freedom. It would mean allowing him to walk away from this desecration of my altar, my land and my body, believing he had won some victory over me. That was a bitter thing to contemplate—that he would die not knowing how wrong he was, how foolish and unworthy he was of even my contempt.

There were things I had learned from him, and from Marieko, intriguing stories of Rome and Rufus’s home in a place called Arretium. They had gods and goddesses of their own and a mighty City they spoke of, the descriptions of which made me laugh in disbelief yet sparked a burning curiosity. These men also had amazing order among themselves, such confidence in their own power and the inevitability of their triumphs. Most beguiling of all, I had seen Rufus scrawl some marks upon a scroll and speak just a few words to a brace of men, then within mere hours see his will done. It was a power he wielded with astonishing ease.

And I had been ignorant of my own people, the ones I called ‘mine’. They had a king, traded with far off places, temples of their own gods—I had been ignorant of all this, cocooned in my forest, toying with the odd hunter or straggler from time to time. My standing with them could have done naught but suffer after witnessing my capture and humiliation at the hands of these Romans.

I made my choice. I fetched the bundle and unwrapped it, pulling the simple leather tunic over my head and belting it about my waist, and then fetched up the proffered sandals, Roman sandals, like those Rufus wore. I took up my bow and my knife, moving with extraordinary care for I was boiling inside with rage and the hunger for his blood, but I knew the time and manner of his end had to be my choice, not his. I stepped towards the tent opening.

Rufus settled his large, powerful hand upon my shoulder. The touch was almost thrilling, a rush of energy suffusing me so greatly that he nearly died by my hand that very moment.

“We shall be here for another thirty days,” he said, “Perhaps we shall hunt together.”

I stared at him, my eyes wide in disbelief at his continued arrogance, but he was utterly serious. I could not bring myself to even speak, but my face could not have failed to express my utter contempt at that moment. Instead I snorted, just a brief, sharp exhalation from my nose, then I

slipped free of his grasp and strode barefoot out into the camp.

A commotion erupted, several of the Roman men-at-arms scrambling to their feet, reaching for their swords. They stopped instantly as Rufus barked a command. They all stepped back, a look of astonished disbelief on their faces as I walked with my back straight and my head held high to the open gate. There I spied a familiar face, that weasel-looking man whom had taken such pleasure at my torment.

I stopped and stared into the weasel's eyes, my face expressionless as a stone. Our gaze locked for a very long time until he shifted nervously, his hand fiddling with the hilt of his blade, and he finally looked away. I allowed myself the barest hint of a smile and then resumed my carefully measured exodus from the camp. I could feel myriad eyes burning into my back, but one pair above all others. I was shaking now, so violent were my emotions I could no longer fully contain them.

I reached the edge of the clearing and my will broke. I turned around, looking back to see Rufus standing in the opening of the gate, his massive arms folded across his chest. His face broke into a wide grin.

Suddenly it was too much to contain and I threw down my bow, my knife and the sandals Rufus had given me. I tore at the tunic, stripping it from my body, cleansing myself of all things Roman. My fists balled in rage I stared across the clearing at him and it erupted from me, unbidden and uncontrollable as I drew in a huge breath and screamed, my throat pouring forth such a sound I could taste blood in my mouth as it rose and rose as if I could never stop screaming until it had all poured from me. It ended with me shuddering with the violence thundering in my heart, my vision red and wavering as I finally gasped for breath.

I do not believe I had ever been so powerfully aroused in all my life.

With that I fetched up my bow and my knife and strode into the forest. Behind me I heard laughter, the laughter of Rufus.

## Chapter 27

*Circa 130 BCE*

The forest enveloped me as I ran in long, loping strides while watching my footing along the game trail. Branches tore at me unnoticed as the seething anger in my breast drove me forward, expending my fury in the physical exertion of separating myself from the Roman camp. Following the game trail let me make good time, but it also rendered me somewhat easier to follow . . . except I knew Rufus would not pursue me. I slowed once I felt the mad rush of anger waning—why run when none followed? I was near my altar clearing and I set myself to pass to the northwest. It was unlikely anyone was there, but I had no desire for a confrontation. I needed to reach one of my camps and collect myself.

The first site I approached had been looted, doubtless by Rufus and his hunting party. I struck out to the east from there, away from the river valley, only to find yet another of my regular haunts thoroughly tossed. From there I traveled north, walking into the early evening until I came to the cave I sought. This was unmolested, but I spent another hour circling carefully, ensuring there was no sign any person had approached it.

It was sparsely provisioned—just clothing and blankets and tools. I was famished, but still too agitated to set about hunting. Instead I eased my hunger with berries and great draughts of water from a nearby spring. I built a fire and set about fletching arrows for my bow as darkness descended on the forest, the fine fingerwork easing my mind and returning focus to the world.

*Liar.*

It was but a whisper in the rustling leaves, but it set my heart to leaping and I struggled to contain myself, closing my eyes and listening, my thoughts floating free on the shifting breeze caressing the forest.

*Liar!*

“Loghaz,” I whispered, a smile on my lips, “I have missed even you . . .”

*I have no name your lips are worthy to speak. But I know your name—liar and whore!*

The voices of the gods never made themselves heard when mortals were about. Even when I was captured and taunted by the Romans, they had abandoned me. I had longed for even the worst of their voices when trapped among the Romans. But now as I listened to the demon-god Loghaz’s voice upon the wind, I found myself faltering.

“I am Tiwazō the huntress . . .”

*You are a slave. Your Roman snaps his fingers and you jump and spread your legs like a pampered concubine.*

I snarled at him, striking my fist out in rage at the empty air. All he offered in response was laughter. Yet, while there was hot anger in my breast, I still felt some satisfaction at the return of these solitary companions, spirits who were such an integral part of my daily existence, whom I had come to know for so many lifetimes. I resolved not to argue with them, but to rebuild the shambles that Rufus had made of my life.

That night I did my best to commune with the mother-goddess. I ached to hear Her words. Once She spoke: *You shall endure my sister*. But it was only once, and She sounded almost uncertain, then She fell silent and did not answer my calls. I curled into a ball that night and quietly prayed for Her voice until I fell asleep.

She did not touch me in my dreams, either.

By day, the only voice I heard was Loghaz. I tried to ignore him or taunt him in return while spending my days attempting to restore my surroundings to their virginal beauty. Cleaning up the violations as I went, I began hunting and collecting useful belongings from my few remaining campsites. It was clear the Romans had looted the first site I revisited, but I could tell that others besides the Romans had desecrated my other sites. Each place I returned to brought the icy laughter of the demon back to my thoughts as I wondered whether it was the Romans or my own people violating me in each case; either way, Loghaz' gloating ridicule grew with each passing day.

*You fear him, little fool. His mark is burned deep within you.*

It angered me to suffer the taunting of this deceiver while all other voices remained lost to me. The mother-goddess Nerthō refused me even when I went to the extreme of killing a stag and making an offering to her. Worse, Loghaz shrieked in derision as I did so. The sudden sense of shame I felt in that moment was so alien and so overwhelming to me I sobbed.

I endured the taunting. I also endured Nerthō's rejection of me. Despite them both I forged ahead, preparing to reassert myself over the people I had owned for so long. I knew them as the *Darribardož* although apparently they no longer called themselves that.

There was much else I realized I had not known about them. They had changed over the centuries while I had not, so I avoided any direct confrontation with them, for now, as I contemplated how I might reassert my power over them.

They were mine! If I had to kill them all I would do so, but they would be made to worship me again. Yet night after night the voices would not respond, and I could not bear the thought of facing another mortal. I could not clear my head enough to plan how I would re-take their worship.

Then Loghaz invaded the realm of my dreams, his demon's voice conjuring images of shame and despair that tore me screaming from my slumber. He tormented me with images of Rufus, the memory of Rufus's hands upon me, and the pleasure I felt that last night with him even as I struggled to resist the urge to tear out his throat with my teeth.

*Why sleep when your master's touch awaits you? Or does he await his death at your hands were you not such a weakling coward? Yes, you are a coward, coward and weakling and pathetic whore...*

But this time, I quieted and just listened to the demon's taunting. Instead of arguing or shutting him out, I just listened. He seemed almost disappointed and soon quieted himself as I felt resolve grow within me. Like a moth to a flame, I knew where I would go. I set out that next morning knowing what I would find, and I feared it in a way I had not permitted myself in so very many years. As I journeyed, silence was my only companion.

There had been much coming and going around the clearing where my altar had stood. Taking my time I circled the site, satisfying myself that no one was lurking nearby. Approaching from the

south I could taste smoke in the air, and I knew it to be a campfire for I could detect the scent of meat upon it.

Crouching In the shadows I listened for any sound carried upon the breeze, but there was nothing of any note. I advanced carefully, watching my footing, staying to the shadows until the clearing was in sight. There was a single tent, Roman, and a campfire with simple cooking accoutrements set to one side. There was movement in the tent and I settled down to watch. After some time Rufus emerged and set about tending his fire.

His arrogance angered me, but did not surprise me. Whatever he was, he was not one to give up easily. He desired something from me, something more than my body or my obedience. Memories of whispered gloating in the night air chilled my heart. I could not accept that this man might be my equal—the very thought of it was absurd. At that moment all it would take was the lifting of my bow and the setting of an arrow. I could take him in the leg, then the arms and let him struggle towards his weapon as I strode up to him. Knife in hand I would kick him over onto his back so he could see my face as I slit his throat. . .

I wonder even now what would have been the course of my life had I done just that?

I watched unmoving as he went about his small chores with the efficient precision of one well accustomed to living in the wild. He maintained his fire, buried his scraps, gathered more wood, refilled his water gourd from the nearby stream and tended to his bodily needs. It was boring routine, yet I watched him in utter fascination, as if by taking in these mundane things I could divine the inner secrets of his soul. Not once did I raise my bow. As the day wore on towards evening he partook of bread and what had to be salted meat along with a generous portion of wine—first taking a small part of each serving in a cup and pouring it over the fire as he spoke quiet words of ritual.

When he finished his meal he stood and stretched, his magnificent form straining as his muscles tensed and bulged. As he relaxed, his gaze wandered about the clearing.

“I know you are out there,” he said, his voice firm, but not shouting. “This is my sixth night here. The first five you were nowhere near this place, but tonight you are here. I can *feel* you.”

My heart leapt up into my throat and I forced myself to cease the trembling that threatened to betray me. I turned my head, listening for the telltale signs of anyone approaching, but the forest was undisturbed by anything other than Rufus’s voice. He turned, slowly scanning the edge of the clearing, his eyes trailing past the spot where I sat concealed.

“Had you come to kill me you would have done it by now. Since night is falling and I still live, you must have had another reason. Do you know what it is?”

That I did not understand why I had not killed him made the question almost intolerable to hear from his lips. He went on, his voice friendly, even jovial as he spoke to the darkening gloom of my forest. Eventually he fell silent and with a rueful shake of his head he retreated into his tent. I waited, keeping quiet counsel with myself as the moon crawled up the sky, a bare sliver of the waning light casting a dim silvery glow to the land.

Nothing stirred for long hours and finally I rose to my feet, quietly stretching the cramped muscles in my legs as I carefully slung my bow over my back and drew my knife. I crept forward, taking a half step every few heartbeats, circling my way into the clearing and towards the tent.

Drawing closer I could hear his deep rhythmic breathing as he slept. I circled his tent, but I could not bring myself to enter it.

It was not fear, nor was it mercy. I knew that should I retreat into the forest the brutal spirit haunting my dreams would return, his derision and scorn redoubled and well-deserved. Why could I not act? How had he done this to me? My forest, my people, my world—all now bore the mark of this man. He had torn all the rhythms of my life asunder and I could not make them whole again so long as he lived. For the first time in a very, very long time I was afraid of what songs were sung on the night breeze. My place was not certain, my understanding unclear and at the center of it was this magnificent, arrogant enigma.

Trembling with renewed anger I stepped to the tent flap and carefully drew it aside.

For the first time all day Loghaz spoke.

*Kill him, little whore. Will it set you free, or destroy you? Kill him and see.*

The choice was made so suddenly I hardly had time to think as I dropped to one knee and scraped my mark into the soil outside the opening to his tent, and then backed away slowly until I reached the edge of the clearing. I turned and fled into the forest as a dark, malicious laughter tainted the air and hot tears stung my cheeks. I ran as hard as I could, trying to make a reckless pace and the sound of my passing drown out the words I knew that dark spirit spoke, but to no avail. I reached my camp and he was there, just a wordless laughter amongst the rustling leaves, dripping with contempt.

Sleep was elusive, as it had been for days. I would close my eyes and it would steal over me—the sensation of being watched. So strong was the feeling that I would start suddenly, my heart racing as I gazed about. I knew there was nothing to be seen, but the certainty of danger in the once-comforting darkness was lodged in my mind and would not be cast aside. And so I spent yet another restless night, finally falling into a light slumber as the birds began their chirping to greet the coming dawn.

Rufus touched me, his strong hands urging me over on to my back and I gazed up at him, clad in his shining breastplate, the gleaming helm upon his head, its crest a brilliant crimson flowing over his shoulders. He touched me and my body shuddered even as the anger burned in my heart. I shouted at him, *Why are you here?* He simply smiled and reached out to me, clasping my hand in his and drawing me to my feet, my body so light I seemed to float in his grasp. He spoke to me in a whisper—I strained to hear, then recoiled as I recognized the bleak, grating voice: *I know what you are...*

Laughter rang in my ears as I was startled to wakefulness and I leapt up, confused and frustratingly frightened until the sound fell into place—merely birds. I went to the entrance of the cave and found hundreds of birds in the trees twittering and chattering at each other. Fear and anxiety were replaced by the low, burning anger that had settled in my heart since the day I awoke and found myself Rufus's captive. In turn, that opened the door to shame and confusion. Why had I not taken his life? Why?

I wrestled with that question for the next two days and through it all the demon laughed at me, stripping all my pretenses bare until I wept tears of anguish, begging him to be silent just one night, just one hour...

*It is not for me to choose silence, fool. It is for you to silence me.*

It was as if I were trapped, as thoroughly bound and imprisoned as I had been in Rufus's camp. I could strike out in any direction and take myself far from this place but the memory of Rufus and my humiliation at his hands could not be left behind. It was as I came to this point after another long and sleepless night, followed by half a day of wrestling with the demon's laughter, that I heard other voices, voices unlike those that tormented me, the voices of people.

I fetched up my bow and followed the sounds, knowing what I would find. I came upon them by a stream that fed into the river another day's walk to the southwest. There were five of them, women. My people. Following the stream they were gathering berries and anything else of interest, an activity that in and of itself was not unusual; however, they had not approached my altar. This was most likely due to the man camped there, but I could tell there was more to it for they were blissfully unconcerned. Surely they knew I had escaped the Romans? They should have been cautious and wary of the shadows, but there was no hint of unease about them.

I could have changed that. They were women and unarmed other than the long knives they used to chop back the brush and take whole branches from the fruit-laden bushes—I could easily take them with my bow. Delivering their heads in a sack to their village would serve as ample warning I truly had returned and would not countenance disrespect. Yet I felt fear at the thought of approaching them and anger at my own fear. These were my people, mine by divine right! But I could not face them even to destroy them. It was maddening.

*It is because such things avail you nothing whilst your master awaits you. He takes his ease in your sacred place—there shall be nothing for you here so long as he lives.*

That dark and demanding whisper—it came now without the breeze to give it voice. It mocked me with words I knew to be truth. These women did not represent a challenge to me. Not yet. Not so long as Rufus dwelt in these woods. Not so long as he lived.

I turned away from them, leaving them to the chores that defined their short lives. I had business this evening with an arrogant creature whose hand still gripped my thoughts and haunted my dreams. He who had no right to hunt me, to hold me, to gloat over me and then offer me my freedom as if it were *his* choice, *his* decision. Accepting that from him was the weakness in me that now drove the madness, forcing me to hear little but the dark and malicious spirit who now mocked my every thought and deed.

Once the choice was made silence again became my companion. As I made my way directly to the altar clearing, my mind became so very settled and calm. I slipped into the icy detachment of my familiar mien, embracing it with joy as my murderous resolve invigorated me, setting me to running that I might reach the clearing before darkness fell.

Everything fell away from me, all my anger and doubts since I had left the Roman camp, the fear and confusion of my dreams. The calm focus in my mind centered on that single thing required for me to be whole once again.

I reached the clearing while there was still some daylight remaining. Approaching warily I took up a position on the eastern edge, directly across from the opening of Rufus's tent. He sat within, his tunic gathered about his waist, his chest and shoulders uncovered as he worked a stone along the edge of the short blade of his sword. I watched him for some time until he finished with his task,

cleaning the blade with an oiled cloth and returning it to its sheath before he stepped out of the tent and stretched, much as he had before. His eyes turned toward where I crouched... and they stopped.

“I spent the past days learning every shadow and tree surrounding this clearing,” he said, speaking directly to me, “and now there is a shadow that does not belong. Perhaps you might care to share my supper, sparse as it is?”

I said nothing and he sighed after a moment, shaking his head slowly as a smile touched his lips.

“As you wish. Crouch in the shadows if that is your desire, but I’ll make you pay a price for your loitering about. I am going to enjoy some wine, and I am going to tell you a story.”

With that he turned his back to me and picked through the bundles laid out before the tent, fetching out a leather bottle and a loaf of bread. He made a show of settling down to eat, again pouring a small portion of wine into his cup and offering it to the fire before tearing off a piece of bread and beginning to eat. I watched with some curiosity as I debated whether to take him down with my bow, or to risk his strength and face him again with my knife.

“The Greeks,” he began, “named her Artemis. To my people she is Diana. To both peoples she is The Huntress, amongst other things. When I was born my father took me to a seer, one purported to ken things unknowable to other men. That oracle proclaimed me to be one whose fate was known to the Huntress, and that through Diana I would find greatness and power. My father took great care in seeing that my path was set to honor Diana, and through that I have achieved some fame. Yet it seems there must be more. I know I yearn for more. I feel the eyes of a goddess upon me.”

He stopped then and partook of his wine. Despite my purpose this day I was fascinated, for Marieko had spoken of the gods of the Greeks and Romans, but had never mentioned this. Watching Rufus I knew there was no deception in him and in the light breeze touching the leaves there was nothing—no laughter, no mocking, no dark spirit urging me forward. Intrigued by his tale and enthralled with his beauty I awaited his next words.

“My father was a man with powerful friends. They took an interest in me and recommended me to the Praetor of Spain, he himself a man of influence and friend of my family. I came and took the commission offered for I believed the frontier was the place to find glory that might propel me further towards my ultimate goals. It was there I first encountered an old man, a barbarian from beyond the borders, who told a tale of a beautiful Witch both ageless and cruel who killed with a bow made deadly and unmatched by the gods.

“I dismissed his words, but I did not forget, and as life in Spain grew tiresome and repetitive I began to wonder if I had made a mistake. Some few years had passed and the tale of the Witch came to me again, this time from a trader, a Roman of low status, but good bearing. He told of peoples who lived in fear of the Huntress. I was ready to dismiss this as well, but then the Praetor asked that I undertake a mission, visiting the peoples beyond the frontier. I was given some two hundred men-at-arms and sent out to follow the frontier and take the measure of what lay beyond it.

“That mission led me here and allowed me to see if this Witch was a creature of myth or of fact. When I saw you that first day, standing proud and arrogant over the bodies of my men, your bow clutched in your hand and your eyes fixed on mine... all doubt left me then. I knew that fate had brought me here, had brought us both here, so that we might meet and contest. Our destinies, yours and mine, are bound together. I can never achieve the glory I am due without you. You can never be more than a frightening and murderous witch skulking in the shadows without me.”

He stopped then and I found myself regarding him in a new light. Rufus was my enemy, of that there was no doubt in my mind. I hated him for his arrogance and his presumption of the right to call me his own. Yet his words... his words rang true. It was frighteningly clear to me that he believed what he said, and if anything, that fanned the flame of resentment even hotter within me. I listened to the forest, straining for some hint that he was lying, that he was a fool, but the voice that had driven me forward was now mute. Just as before, with Rufus aware of me, speaking to me, the gods abandoned me. And what did that mean?

“You presume much, Roman,” I said, speaking in a low, contemptuous voice as I rose from my crouch with my bow in hand, an arrow at the ready. “My only desire is to claim your life, and have my freedom.”

“Yet you are free, are you not? I gave you your freedom without hesitation or reservation. Turn and go from here. I’ll not follow.”

“You gave me nothing!” I spat, “You sent me from you with the promise I would be free, yet you haunt my dreams!”

He stood then, his eyes fixed upon mine and said, “Then we have another thing in common between us.”

We stood regarding each other for a very long time. Curiosity warred with anger in my breast as I tasted the words he had spoken and the admission he had just made. My own dreams, the restlessness borne of mocking words that filled the air when I was parted from him, it all possessed a kind of symmetry when I took his claims into account. He believed these things, was willing to place his life in my hands to share these notions with me. I remembered my thoughts as he had pursued me so relentlessly, driving his men by sheer force of will: I had thought he must be a god himself. Could it be that simple?

Moving carefully, deliberately, I lifted my bow, turning to the right as I drew the arrow back until my hand rested just below my jaw. I sighted on the center of his belly, a target impossible to miss at that range. I watched him as he stood unflinching, his eyes hard as granite as he awaited my judgment. He was confident, and arrogant, and beautiful...

My arm trembled as I allowed the bow to relax and then slipped the arrow into the quiver on my back. I was by no means certain of my choice, but there was no other way. Were I to kill him now there would be no way to be certain he was not telling the truth. I strode into the clearing until I faced him from across his campfire.

“Why?” he asked. Just that one word.

“I don’t know why. Tell me more.”

## Chapter 28

*Ann Arbor, March 2005 CE*

I stared at her, waiting for her to continue. But she just stared at the floor for the longest time. Then she sighed and looked up at me.

“What?” she asked, finally seeing the look on my face.

“You went back.” I said it flatly, not sure whether it was even a question.

“I believe that is what I just said, yes.”

I chewed on that for a minute, but it didn’t taste right.

“You went back to him and he talked you into going back to Rome with him? As his *slave*?”

“Not to Rome. Arretium. As to being a slave... you’re something of a liberal, aren’t you?”

“What? Well, yeah in some ways, maybe not others...”

“Yes. Well, slavery was difficult to accept but not so much as you might think. I had been one many times before, often a treasured and valued one, sometimes not. It was a normal thing for most of the peoples I had encountered, from my earliest days, and Rufus assured me that it was in name only. He said it was the only way other Romans would accept my presence, and as time went on I saw that was obviously true. He told me to see it as merely *pro forma*. I believed I could leave at any time and he assured me that I could. I didn’t believe he could stop me.” She paused. “I wasn’t quite right about that, but it was mostly true.”

“But wasn’t it still a big step down for you?”

“I chose to view it as a meaningless mortal concept that did not truly apply to me. You modern Americans have a different view of slavery than was once common. Slavery was not always a horrible bereavement.”

“I always thought that was just, well, you know, something white people say so they don’t feel bad about slavery in America.”

She made a face. “Such concepts are not... do we really need a philosophical debate on the differences between American and Roman slavery? Neither were good things, but we are not talking about the American experience here.”

“Okay, okay,” I said, backing down. “I’m just trying to understand.”

“It is a wonderful thing that modern men loathe slavery. But in that time and place, well, I wasn’t Roman and there was no real reason for me to be among them otherwise. Rufus already had a wife and couldn’t marry me. Slavery amongst them was not universally terrible to endure. Marieko

was his beloved and respected slave and had been his teacher since childhood. A slave in a household such as his, with her master's favor, could live quite comfortably..."

"Fine," I interrupted her, "but that doesn't explain why. From what you were telling me you were pretty..." She just looked at me with that eerily empty look of hers. "Well you killed pretty casually. Back then anyway." My voice faltered because sometimes she scared me that way now.

Her eyes softened. "Killing is not a thing I am proud of. I don't... I don't kill so casually now. I don't... killing... killing eats away at something in me, destroys something in me. I don't do it unless..." She swallowed and stopped. Her face stayed impassive, almost expressionless. Very quietly she said, "I don't like who I was then."

"Do you like who you are now?" I asked without thinking, then immediately regretted it. I thought she'd get angry. But she didn't.

"Ask me that question another day," she said, quietly.

We both sat for a while. I felt like I was intruding again, but I finally continued.

"So, okay you were pretty... pretty... ruthless I guess you'd say, back then. So why didn't you kill him? Why did you stay with him? You obviously hated the guy, but you were attracted to him too? Make me understand that."

She left her chair and slowly walked to the small bar where she picked up her pack of cigarettes. With deliberate care she drew one from the pack, then took up her old Zippo and lit it. She stood there, taking drag after drag, exhaling through her nose. I suddenly noticed she was shaking, her hands fluttering like a hummingbird's wing. When she turned to look at me again the expression on her face was pained.

"Your hands are shaking," I said. "You want to stop?"

She suddenly looked at her hand like it was a snake, like it betrayed her. "That is very frustrating," she said, balling it into a fist.

"What, a lot of people, a lot of women, they get that way when they're upset."

"I DESPISE BEING SO OUT OF CONTROL!" she bellowed. I didn't know someone so little could yell that loud. But I was used to her getting mad, so I just relaxed.

"Hey, Princess. Chill out. We're still friends, right?"

She turned away and lit another cigarette. Her hands weren't shaking anymore, like she was deliberately making them smooth and hard with her gestures. Then she slowly shook her head and looked back at me, a quiet half-smile on her face. "Nobody has ever called me that before."

That startled me. "You know I don't know where that got started but hey, if it offends you..."

"I find it charming," she said, with a smoky half-grin, then sighed. She was relaxing visibly and that was a good sign. "No, we don't need to stop." Her voice was even. "My apologies. As I have said, some of these memories are painful and some... embarrassing. But it is what we are here for."

“Okay. So make me understand you and Rufus.”

“I don’t know that I can,” she said, then her demeanor settled, but the pained look crept back onto her face just a little. “You are a man of your time and place. But what are you?”

“I’m pretty sure I know who I am,” I replied, “but what I am?” I thought about it. “I’m a husband. A father. A writer, a liberal, kinda…”

“Blend that into the whole of what you are, all of those discreet little labels and characterizations, and what you are is easily described in a single term: you are a human being. Would you agree?”

“Sure.”

She took a final drag from her cigarette and carefully snubbed it out in the ashtray, then said, “There were some seven hundred years behind me when I finally turned my back on the communities of men. I couldn’t bear to be with them any longer, even though at that time my life was much better than it had ever been before. I was a valuable individual. I was a huntress and warrior. Over time I also learned the secrets of bronze and iron. By the time I left men behind I had seven centuries of shaman wisdom to draw upon and I knew what was fakery and what was not. I daresay I may have been the greatest single repository of pharmacological knowledge in the world at that time. I was a skilled midwife. I was not *orjan* any longer, but I was still an outsider. I had no ties to anyone and whenever I allowed myself to feel any real attachment to any place or any person…”

“You’ve talked about this before—the alienation and the need to get away.”

“Yes, I have. But you must try to understand—when I finally left, walking into the wilderness on that first day of what turned into six hundred years on my own, I had no idea what I was. All I knew was what I was not. I was not a human being. But I did not stride into the forest and proclaim myself a goddess. No, that came over time, a very long time.

“But when I encountered Rufus I was deep in the grip of that delusion. Yet I had never seen his like before, or that of his men, and I misjudged them from the very start. His pursuit and capture of me fueled hatred, a hatred borne mostly from fear of what he might represent and from the very effrontery of making me fearful. When he offered me my freedom he fully expected me to choose to stay with him and that was even more infuriating. But when I left, he changed his tactic and came to meet with me alone. That, too, was impressive.”

She stopped then and returned to her chair. She sank back into it and crossed her arms into her shoulders, suddenly looking almost pitifully small. That always startled me. When she spoke again her voice was low and so quiet I had to lean forward to hear her again.

“Rufus offered me an explanation of what I was and why I was there. When I told him how many years were behind me he believed me without question. He said I was clearly the lost daughter of Jupiter or Latona, a half-sister to Diana or perhaps even one of her divine creations. Perhaps even Diana herself. When I told him I’d never had children that only confirmed it for him, and he told me the same was true for Diana. It all made so much sense that we both believed it.”

“That’s it? He told you a story about Diana and a prophecy and you just bought it?”

She sat up then, and raised her chin a bit defiantly. “Before I took up the hunt, I was nothing! But now I was a *goddess!*” She hissed that last word out. I watched with fascination as she visibly forced herself to calm down again. She was so mercurial she had me in awe.

As she looked at me, a tiny wisp of a grin appeared. I could tell she was practically reading my thoughts. She nodded, as if to say, *yes, you see how I am.* Then she sat back in her chair again, her back straight and her face falling into that preternaturally calm demeanor she affected most of the time, the stormy forces roiling inside her only distantly visible behind her huge green eyes.

She went on. “I was nothing but a beast of burden and a toy for men before Att taught me the art of the sling and the spear. When our time together was... when he was gone, I took Attuz into the wilderness for two years and sheltered him like a mother. When we rejoined people and I had to abandon him before he grew old... well I was quiet for a while, disconsolate, and returned to my meek ways. Then after the incident with Oskuz I resolved to learn everything I could, to make myself invaluable to the men I accompanied. I resolved to set myself above those around me so I would not be at anyone’s mercy again. The more I learned, the more it was as if I were being shaped and prepared for some destiny. The moment when I finally stepped into the wild for what I thought was the last time, shedding myself of mankind completely, I felt like I was finding that destiny.

“When finally I met Rufus I was quite mad. But I was easily his match in arrogance and in disdain for those we felt beneath us. And almost everyone was beneath us. We were so very alike, he and I.”

“Yeah, I kind of got that vibe from what you were saying.”

She smirked at me, then nodded. We sat there again for a few minutes without saying anything, her eyes off in the distance. Then her gaze fixed on me again.

“Rufus sought power and fame. He wanted a seat in the Roman Senate, his uncle’s, but was too far down the family line to take it without a fight. Yet he wanted to be a driving force in the Republic and in the world as a whole. When he encountered me and saw in me the realization of his personal prophecies, he aimed even higher. Diana was most beloved of slaves and while he never admitted it I know now just having me as his slave was part of fulfilling his prophecy. In any case, he told me that by making me his consort, he could become as a God. He believed... well, he believed he could become like me.”

Suddenly, it clicked for me. “So you wanted to believe it. And that was enough to make you forget all that crap he did to you?”

“He had explanations, and they made sense to me.” She stopped, then her voice grew very intense. “Yes, I wanted to believe it. With every fiber of my being I wanted to believe. He was going to become as me. He was going to become a God. He had a prophecy and plans I would be an integral part of, and had he succeeded...”

She stopped. I waited. Then she looked at me again. Looking into her eyes was like staring into a cavern, and though I’m pretty sure it was my imagination, it was almost like her voice echoed when she spoke.

“I would have forgiven him *anything* if he could save me from ever being alone again.”

## Chapter 29

*Ann Arbor, March, 2005 CE*

She was packing for the ride back to Pennsylvania when I arrived that last morning to see her off. She was, she'd told me, going home. That word, "home," had resonated from her voice a few times in a way I didn't really understand.

Pennsylvania was obviously pretty important to her, but I couldn't get her to tell me much about it. I knew there was someone named Edna that she thought the world of, and I knew Edna had a son named Joshua who was a lawyer that she also admired. She thought of them as family somehow, but any time I tried to get her to tell me more she'd find some way—sometimes subtle, sometimes blatant—to change the subject. But Pennsylvania was home to her, and while part of her wanted to stay away from it, part of her couldn't wait to get back. She'd had enough of farting around here in Michigan working with me and toying with college kids. Apparently whatever conflicts were going on down there were settled up and she was done with the Wolverine State. She wanted me to meet her down there in a week or two for more talks once she'd settled in.

When I met her in her hotel room that last morning I cracked up at how much crap she'd picked up in her time in Ann Arbor. She had three huge suitcases jammed with stuff and a big cardboard box full of clothes. Today she was wearing blue jeans and a fuzzy pink sweater and I realized couldn't remember seeing her in the same outfit twice since she'd arrived in Michigan. Every time I saw her she was wearing something different, and today was no exception. It seemed like she never wanted to stay with the same old same old, yet had a lot of stuff she just wouldn't let go of.

What really caught my eye, though, was a large Bible. It was old and dog-eared and sitting carefully on top of the folded clothes in one of the open suitcases. I was sure I hadn't seen it before, but it was so distinctive she must have either got it from an antique shop or had it all along. I guessed it must be the latter because she treated it with a weirdly casual reverence: a few times while she packed I saw her treat it a little carelessly, but then once I saw her smile and rub her hand over it.

"Are you a Christian?" I asked her while she packed.

She stopped what she was doing and looked at me curiously. "What makes you ask?"

"Well, the Bible," I said, gesturing to the book in her suitcase.

She stiffened a little, with that odd look she got when I was hitting something sensitive. She'd once promised me she'd never lie to me, but I could tell when she was trying her damndest to keep that promise by changing the subject. "It is a set of religious books," she said. "I've seen a lot of those. This is a nice one."

"May I?" I asked, gesturing at it.

She looked at me solemnly and nodded. I reached into the suitcase and hefted it out. It was an old, heavy King James Version, with a real hand-made but cracked leather binding. It had looked old, but it felt even older. I flipped open the front pages and found a list of family names scrawled in hand-written letters, noting marriages, births and deaths, in different people's handwriting. On the

first page it listed a Samuel McAllister, married to one Mary Van Der Winkle in St. John's Presbyterian Church in 1792, and later the births of five children; Jeremiah, Mary, Zachary, Catherine, and Sarah. It went on for a few generations with a bunch of important family events and ended around 1905 with the birth of a boy named Alexander in 1902 and two girls, Rose in January and Edna in December of 1905. It looked incredibly valuable, in more ways than one.

I glanced up and the look in her eye made me stop my first question in its tracks. She stared at me with a look that practically screamed that there was a line here she didn't want me to cross. I groped for a minute, but before I could say anything a part of her relented.

"Edna gave it to me," she said, smiling nervously.

I looked back down at it. "Beloved daughter born December the Fifteenth 1905, baptized Edna Ruth Tremblay on the 18<sup>th</sup> of December." I pointed and she nodded.

I had a lot more questions I wanted to ask, but I hesitated. There was a look on her face that made me feel like I was doing something rude. Just looking at her, she seemed, well, *violated*, like she didn't even want me to look at this, but was forcing herself to let it happen. This was something sacred to her somehow, like she was ashamed to let me touch it or even look at it. I wanted to hammer her with questions, but I could just tell it would be a mistake to press it right now. For whatever reason, she didn't want me to ask too much about this.

Still, I looked down at it and didn't want to let the moment pass. Then another line of questions suddenly hit me and they were at least as interesting. So I tabled the obvious and changed the subject.

"Do you believe in God?" I asked. I couldn't believe I hadn't asked that sooner.

She looked a little surprised, then simply said, "Define 'God.'"

I laughed gently. "No, you define it."

She narrowed her eyes and pursed her lips, then said, "You asked the question, you define the parameters."

Right. "Well, the God of the Bible, then."

She returned to her packing without saying anything for a bit. Then she finally shut the last suitcase and zipped it closed.

"No," she said.

"You have to know that's not enough of an answer... how can you, being what you are, not believe in God?"

"What does my existence have to do with the question?"

"Well, I mean, you're impossible but you exist. Don't you think maybe God or something had a hand in your creation?"

Her eyes narrowed. "I cannot dismiss the possibility," she said evenly, her face expressionless.

“Well, I’ve read a lot of what you’ve written in your journals,” I said. “You might not like to admit it, but there’s a pretty heavy spiritual element in there sometimes. You use terms like ‘Good’ and ‘Evil’ and ‘wicked’ and ‘the beauty of life’ pretty freely and with a lot of implied meanings...”

“I use the terms because they are familiar.” She paused, staring at me, acting like she was sizing me up again. Then she took a deep breath and said, “I spent over a hundred years as a nun, living in convents between the mid-fourteenth to the late-fifteenth century, so I am quite well versed in the nomenclature of Christianity. When dealing with concepts such as... what?”

I was trying not to laugh while she glowered at me. I finally gave up. “I’m sorry, I... you’re telling me you’ve been *a nun*?”

“Yes,” she said, a little crossly. “I have by necessity been many things.” Suddenly she stopped and her eyes narrowed again. “Yes,” she said, her voice going flat. “Yes, I have been both a whore and a nun.”

I laughed a little and then felt embarrassed. “Hey, I’m just teasing you, okay?”

“You have a juvenile sense of humor,” she said, obviously not amused. “I was a very good nun, quite devout in my duties,” she said. “When the Plague began its ravages across France I took the identity of a young Cistercian novice. She and the Sisters of her order had come to tend to the sick. They all died so I took advantage, joining a traveling band of flagellants, eventually landing in my first real convent.”

“I’m sorry,” I said. “Tell me more.”

“I’d had plentiful exposure to Christian teaching by then, and I learned more as the years passed in the convents.” She stopped for a moment and her eyes wandered a bit. She said something I didn’t understand: “*ut omnis qui credit in ipso non paret sed habeat vitam aeternam*,” she muttered. Her eyes suddenly refocused and fastened on me. She saw the confusion on my face and smiled, just slightly.

“That whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have eternal life,” she said. She stared out the window. “Would that it were so,” she whispered. Then her eyes moved back to me warily, like she hadn’t realized she’d said that out loud.

“I was not certain I believed in Him,” she went on quickly, pointing at the ancient book. “But I believed in them. In *them*. Those sisters, and the friar, the father who accompanied us, they wanted to help people. Serving with them seemed a reasonable tradeoff, especially as time went on and they sheltered me for so long.”

“They knew?” I asked, incredulous.

She shook her head. “Oh, no, never. I never told anyone, not anyone.” She said it flatly, almost emphatically. “No, they burned witches and heretics back then. I was witness to more than one such event and I had no desire to take a starring role.” She shuddered just a little. “I am not certain that there is anything more painful or horrible than fire.” She stopped then and gave me her smoky Mona Lisa smile, seemingly acknowledging the conversation we’d had about fire earlier. “But the order often did good things, truly it did,” she said. “It could also be very tranquil and safe much of the time.”

“But you never believed?”

“It is a bit more complicated than that. Saying you believe or disbelieve is difficult when religion suffuses every aspect of life. I honestly have no idea whether the stories of the Bible are true or not. I always assumed they were, but I assumed that the tales of the old gods were real too, and so...” Her voice trailed off and she looked out the window again. She seemed to be wandering through the endless caverns of her mind again. Then she smiled faintly.

“Throughout most of my existence I believed there were many gods,” she said. “To an extent, on a quite visceral level, I still relate to that polytheism, to what the young ones today call the Asatruar faith, even though I now view it as likely false. But back then, the world seemed full of spirits, driving every facet of existence; the sun, the sky, the moon, the herds, the wolves and boars, the deer, the trees and flowers, the earth itself when it shook.” She stopped and looked around, almost not seeing anything. “Every aspect of the world, it seemed ruled by some God, and every great or small thing happened as a result of this or that God’s will. And there was the Night God’s will, the Demon God’s will, wherein all that was frightening or painful ruled.” She looked up at me suddenly. “Or even my will. Do you understand what I am saying?” she asked.

“I’m not sure.”

She paused, staring up at me yet somehow seeming taller than me. “No, I suppose you would understand it only dimly,” she said, sounding resigned. “You are a rational man of 21<sup>st</sup> century America. So perhaps you can never understand what it is to grow up believing that spirits surround you, that all you see is driven by those spirits, that every sound you hear in the night and every rustle of the wind and the leaves is the voice of one or more gods.”

“Well, I think I...” My voice trailed off. She was just looking at me in that faintly condescending way of hers, almost like she could see through me. So I just shut up and waited.

She took a deep breath. “When you know nothing about anything, when your whole life is given over to whether you will find enough food and shelter to make it through the coming days...” her voice trailed off. “When to count beyond your fingers and toes is a skill of amazing power, and anything beyond that unthinkable...” she stopped again. Then her eyes gripped mine, sizing me up. “When you are a 16 year old father whose own father died when he was but 18...” she said, almost but not quite asking a question. “Can you comprehend what an entire world made up of such people would be like?”

“I can imagine it, but I don’t think I could really comprehend it,” I said.

She nodded with almost visible relief. “As I have told you, there was a time when I believed the gods spoke to me.”

“Yeah I kind of have a hard time getting that.”

“Imagine growing up in a dark world of death and violence from your very earliest age, when even rudimentary math and literacy were unknown, where a very old man was a man of fifty,” she said, her eyes boring into me again. “Can you imagine it?”

I paused. “Okay, that would be pretty different from now.”

“Now, imagine being completely alone for decades at a stretch, with no one to talk to but yourself and whatever gods you believed in.”

A light went on in my head. “So you thought when you were meditating that you could hear...?”

“I was utterly alone and I utterly believed,” she said. “I heard the voices of the gods in everything: the birds, the wind, the water, the rain...” She paused again and then sat on the edge of the bed. “One day I realized I had completely tired of human companionship and truly did not need them to survive anymore. I fled into the woods to hunt and forage for myself. There, after many years, some men encountered me and I frightened them but relented briefly to allow one of them to dally with me. The next season he and some other men returned seeking my company. Then he and others returned with their sons, and those sons brought their own sons, and so they always found me, unchanged and unchanging. The more capricious I became the more they deferred to me. They built an altar, they made offerings, and I thought, ‘men do not make offerings to mere women.’”

“They don’t?” I asked.

She stopped and looked up at me again, a rueful smile on her lips. “Well perhaps they do,” she said, laughing softly. “But rarely so blatantly. Yet they did keep coming and leaving these offerings, and though I sometimes cursed them they kept returning. It all made sense and was so very easy to believe.”

“So, when you encountered the Christians, it was just another God.”

She paused, thinking about it. Slowly, she said, “No, the Christians were different.”

“How so?”

“They believed there was one, one and only one, like the Jews. They had the Father-God, but they rejected the Mother-goddess, the War god, the Earth goddess, the sun god and the moon goddess...” Her voice trailed off, and she looked at me with a little laugh. Then her cheeks suddenly turned pink as she looked at me unblinkingly. “The huntress goddess,” she said, a little embarrassed.

As I gathered my thoughts, she went on. “Yet when these Christians appeared, they said there was one and only one, and they were willing to sacrifice all, even their own lives, to Him. So who was He? They believed they had an answer, but more importantly, they believed there were no others but He.”

“But you never believed?” I asked.

“Of course I was intrigued. Christ promised eternal life to his followers, so how could I not perk up my ears at that? But when I realized they had to die to obtain that eternal life I could see no reason to think that what Christians believed was any more or less true than the gods of old, even as the old gods faded.” She paused for a bit, her eyes downcast. “But they were different, these Christians, more willing to take a stand and stay with it, to sacrifice themselves to the greater good.” She paused, and shook her head and looked at me again, looking a little cynical. “Still and all, belief in the divine seems simply to be something people do. I no longer have any firm beliefs beyond my own senses. Yet I’ve no interest in challenging anyone’s faith.”

“So you don’t believe in the Christian God at all?”

Her eyes turned stormy. “I must be honest with you,” she said, darkly. “If He does exist, I have some very pointed questions for Him.” She paused. “Some very, very angry questions.” Then she relaxed. “But I simply don’t know. I was always a pagan and in some ways I suppose I still am.”

I thought about that for a minute. I didn’t know where to go with it, so I just asked. “So you really thought you were a goddess?”

She laughed a little nervously: “Yes, I did.”

“When you met Rufus you thought that,” I offered.

“Yes, Rufus,” she sighed, “just his capture of me should have ended my foolishness, but it only set the stage for much worse. He had come to those forests looking for me, drawn by the stories of the locals. Boar hunting was little more than a pretense, something he could use as a face-saving tool should I turn out to be a myth or a fraud. He had ambition, believed himself favored by the gods. The Roman mythology was full of tales of the offspring of the union between gods and mortals.”

“I’ve studied the Romans a little,” I said. “They always seemed less enamored of those kinds of things than the Greeks.”

She gave a little smile and chuckled. “Marieko would have agreed with you, but his explanation would have been simple. He would have told you that the Romans had done their typically sloppy job of interpreting the grand mythos of the Greeks.”

“Marieko. You took his name. Did you marry him or something?”

Her eyes narrowed and she stared at me like I was nuts. Suddenly the air peeled with a sound I’d only heard once before, back in her hospital room—laughter. She sounded almost like a schoolgirl.

“Marieko?” she asked, incredulously. “Marry him?”

“Well what, was it a coincidence?”

She took a step back and leaned against the hotel room wall between the bed and the nightstand, her right hand wrapped around her ribcage. “That crotchety old bastard?” she asked. “That hairy, skinny, know-it-all, snooty old cuss?”

I’d known her for six months and I’d never heard her bust a gut like this. As she leaned against the hotel room wall between the bed and the nightstand, in her tight blue jeans and a fuzzy pink sweater, she looked like a 15 year old girl. With a shock I realized that she’d never looked more human than she did at that moment. She looked like every woman I’d ever known who bitched about how silly and annoying men could be. For all the times she’d seemed spectral, ethereal, even gigantic and spooky, suddenly she was just a girl laughing her head off. She was all of 5’3”, maybe 115 pounds, pretty as hell but no supermodel, her chest quivering through her sweater as she laughed. I marveled again at how much she had filled out since her hospital days. She’d seemed almost sticklike then, but not anymore.

“Marieko,” she said, subsiding a little. “Oh, sweet, wonderful, snotty old Marieko,” she said. “No, I never married him. But I never forgot him.”

I caught a little of her laughing. “Okay, so, his name is the same as your name. That’s a coincidence?”

Her laughter subsided and she looked at me sideways, still leaning against the wall. “No, of course not. I adored him, and I did take his lovely name.”

“Why?”

“Can you imagine what it is like to live a thousand years with no name of your own except whatever anyone who happened to own you decided to call you? Even those who worshipped you?” Her voice and her face were serious.

“Well, no.”

“Well try to imagine you had lived such a life, then imagine one day you chose a name for yourself that no one else had ever called you.”

“Okay...?” I asked, waiting.

She stopped, gave a little harrumph and parked her curvy bottom on the hotel bed. “Names are powerful things,” she said, “and for several lifetimes I had no name but whatever those who owned me gave me.” She stopped, reached into her purse and dragged out another of her Camels. “Truly I had no name for a very long time, except perhaps some variation of ‘whore.’” She paused, lighting her smoke up, staring at the flame as the ember on the end of her cigarette glowed orange and hot. “That’s what ‘Utha’ meant, you know,” she said, puffing and regarding me levelly. “When they first gave it to me. Later it came to be a boy’s name, but no one remembered that and they simply thought it meant ‘provider.’”

I was stunned, a little aghast. She saw that, and gave me her smoky half-smile again. “Life is what it is,” she said.

I couldn’t think what else to say. So I just looked at her and waited.

She thought about it for a bit before speaking again. “Utha was not all I was ever called, but it was perhaps the one I remembered best for some time, even when others took me as property and provided their own names for me. But then I finally abandoned ‘Utha’ and I took the name of a huntress-goddess for my own because my worshippers called me that. I let myself and others use it for centuries. But that, too, was a lie and one day I finally had to choose—if only for myself, and no one else—a name I would call myself forever. I chose two, one for myself that was uniquely my own, and one for the family I knew I would never have. For the family name I chose Marieko’s. Partly because I thought it beautiful, partly because it seemed unique, and partly because I wanted always to remember him.” She stopped again, and took another deep drag on her cigarette. I cleared my throat.

“Well you didn’t marry him. I guess from what you’ve said you weren’t even really intimate with him.”

“Intimate?” she asked, chuckling a little again. “Oh we were intimate. But not in the way you think. In that way, I was utterly Rufus’s woman and would have had no other man. But Marieko was almost like a father to Rufus and Rufus forced him to open up a whole new world up to me.”

She paused and took another deep drag from her cigarette. Then she blew it out slowly, coating the room with silky smoke. “Ah, Marieko.” She paused, and then looked at me solemnly. “You should realize that in two thousand years, I have shared that name with no more than a few dozen people. It was and is my own,” She took another drag from her smoke. “It is not a name for sharing and I almost wish I had never shared it with you. But I needed a name I would always know myself by, one I would never doubt.” She paused and took another deep drag, staring into space. “One I could never fool myself with.”

She stubbed out her cigarette. “It was my fault that he died,” she said, flatly. “Not that I realized it was coming, but still it was my fault. I would like to believe he would be honored if he knew that I chose his name, and I believe he would have been—though he likely would have pretended to be offended. In any case, he gave me a most amazing gift before he died, perhaps the most precious gift I ever received.”

“That’s a hell of a thing to say about a guy,” I said. “So what was it?”

“Funny, grumpy old man,” she murmured. “Not that he ever approved of me, but he changed everything for me.” She looked at me again and I could see something in her eyes I really hadn’t seen before, a kind of misty sentimentality, and she smiled at me.

“I know you wish to pursue this, but... not today. I need to be done with this place. I need to go home.”

## Chapter 30

*Arretium, circa 129 BCE*

I watched as the young man left the patio, his olive skin rippling over smooth muscles, his body alive with that energy that can only be captured by youth in full bloom.

“He’s beautiful,” I offered, then stifled a laugh as I saw Marieko’s spine stiffen. “There are things I could teach him... but you already know that, yes?”

The old Greek turned to face me as I reclined on my left side and snatched another pear slice from the tray before me. His face was unreadable, a skill he thought he had perfected years ago but had been forced to re-learn in the year or so since Rufus brought me to this place. It was his only defense against me.

“My grandson is none of your concern, *Felicitas*,” he growled at me and this time I did laugh, but quietly.

“I like you, old man. Why do you rebuff me?”

“It is none of my concern what you like or dislike. Rufus would be displeased should you kill me—that is likely all that stays your hand.”

“Not at all! True, Rufus holds you in very high regard, so were I inclined to still your breath I would refrain for the sake of his happiness. But I do like you. I always have.”

He made a sour face, but decided to end the conversation when he heard Salia’s bare feet happily racing up the stone steps to the patio. The little girl, all of seven years old, squealed in joy as her grandfather turned and swept her from her feet, lifting her high above his head before drawing her to his chest in a firm embrace. It caught at me, that simple act—that such a dour and suspicious man could in an instant become a doting grandfather merely from the spell of a child’s love. Though I had seen such things countless times, and had long come to accept that such were always to be denied me, it brought home just how alien I still felt here among the Romans.

Rufus had taken me from my land and my people. After doing so, he journeyed with me across the frontier adjourning his mighty Republic into Spain. That in itself had been a humbling time, as I saw the power and industriousness of these people he called his own. But still it failed to prepare me for what followed when we took ship from Spain and made our way to his home in Arretium. It took all my skill at deception to hide from him the awe and wonder I felt at the works of the Romans.

Though to modern eyes all I saw would probably seem small, to me they were immense. Yet Rufus assured me what I had seen was nothing compared to the sheer size and grandeur of Rome herself. Even their roads—I knew paths and trails, the well-worn routes between villages, but nothing like these solid brick passageways, these straight and level conveyances upon which their carts and wagons traveled as we made our way toward the seaports, and the mighty fleets of ships that took us to the center of what Rufus called their “great Republic.”

It was dizzying and confusing to see one city, then another, then more and more, and to understand that though these were disparate peoples they shared a common allegiance to “Rome,” either by choice or by circumstance. But it was also the thought of the labor required to make these roads and cities and massive seaports, as well as their fine clothing and their beautiful and deadly armor and weapons of bronze and iron that impressed me so. How could any chieftain or king hope to rule them all, or muster all the energy and materials and organization to not just create all these things but to actually make them commonplace and unified? When I asked what King had begun all this, Rufus surprised me with the forcefulness of his answer.

“Only barbarians allow kings to rule them! Rome has no king!” He practically spat the words out. But then his visage softened and he smiled. “Ah, but you are a barbarian still,” he said, grinning warmly and embracing me briefly as if to apologize.

As we traveled he would describe to me the way the Romans were governed: by a huge council of men, Senators, who were overseen by men called Consuls who seemed somewhat king-like but could serve for only one year and had to share power on alternate days with another Consul. All were defended by an army of “citizens” and organized by “equestrians” and “centurions.” But at a deeper level, written laws that were beyond mere custom and which all recognized governed their actions. According to Rufus these were laws that even their greatest men, even the Consuls themselves, would prostrate themselves before. No one man, no matter how mighty or prosperous, could risk defying these laws, or what he called “the law,” without punishment.

How did it come to pass that they all agreed to these same laws? Rufus said they were first written by Senators long dead and added to and modified by current Senators, then read to an assembly of all citizens who would decide: whether or not to accept them. It was difficult for me to grasp and dizzyingly complicated, for I had always lived among men ruled by a chieftains whose word was law when tradition had no answer. Sometimes there would be an allegiance to a greater chief or even a king, but for Rufus and the other Romans this was an offensive thought. To them the ultimate law had solidity, an unbreakable certainty far greater than any king could ever create. I did not quite fathom it but pretended to understand. In any case I accepted it: most things among the Romans were so because “the law” or “the Roman way” made them so, and for no other reason. Though it infuriated me at times, I felt small and insignificant in the presence of such power, for it had clearly made them a mighty and fabulously wealthy people.

After several months among them living in Rufus’s villa in Arretium, my sense of wonder for the Romans had eased a bit. I found the people I met to be people still. They had unusual ways and their law ruled great expanses, but taken individually they were almost as simple to fathom as any other men. It was only their politics, and Rufus’s maneuverings within that sphere of power, that left me utterly baffled. He would describe to me his plans for ascension to the Senate, then even to Consul, but the terms and assumptions were outside my knowledge. I would feign understanding, but I suspect Rufus was aware of my confusion.

Rufus would often have me at hand when visitors called, displaying me like some trophy. It irritated me and yet amused me as well. Early on Rufus told me that my name, Tīwazō, sounded barbaric to Roman ears and named me “Felicitas.” He called me simply “Felicia” in the quiet of our bed at night. He said that it meant “good fortune.” This rankled me only slightly, as it annoyed me to have others view me as his slave. Yet I had worn many names in my long existence, and “Felicia” had a lovely and exotic sound. My old people might know me by one name and the Romans might know me by another, just as the Greeks knew Diana by the name of Artemis. I decided to accept this.

The city of Arretium dazzled me, for it was larger than any town I had seen before. The streets ran between buildings that were usually made of Roman bricks but sometimes made entirely of stone. The buildings were cut in square and rectangular patterns, with columns supporting the immense curved-tile roofs. Beautiful mosaics and lifelike painted statues abounded, and the smells were often overpoweringly exotic. The Romans ate more salted fish than anyone I had ever encountered and they loved their oils. Indeed it seemed that when they were not putting oil into their food, they were smearing their bodies and hair with it, only scraping it off in order to cleanse themselves. The entire city of Arretium seemed to smell of salt, fish, brine and olive oil.

Rufus's own villa within the city of Arretium was most impressive. It was made entirely of stone, with beautiful mosaics on its walls both inside and out. Its stone-tiled floors covered the entire domicile, with nary a sight of the earth underneath. The rooms included quarters for his dozens of slaves and servants, a kitchen with an impressively large stone hearth, an open-air atrium with a garden in the center of it all and several bedrooms each with their own fireplace. One bedroom was set aside especially for his wife although Rufus assured me that she never visited here and would likely never use the room. Yet all viewed that room as sacrosanct. His wife resided in a supposedly even grander home with others of his family in the city of Rome itself. It was hard to imagine a home more huge and clean and beautiful than this one, yet he assured me that this was not only so, but that his family's means were meager compared to the most powerful families in fabulous Rome.

Our lovemaking was energetic and exhausting, and it amused me that he often referred to me as his "virgin" even as he merrily had his way with me and I with him. The Romans considered any woman who had never borne a child to be a virgin—how utterly amusing a thought for one such as me! It also flattered my ego, for the Romans believed that a woman who would not conceive ("would not"—Rufus's own phrase!) was either flawed like a whore, or even more magically powerful than other women. In the quiet of our room at night, Rufus painted this as the ultimate proof of my relation to the goddess Diana, herself an eternal virgin. Surely one so powerful as I could hardly be lowly, so I must be the goddess of his dreams. Indeed, he told me I should become Queen of a group called the Vestals, and that he wanted ultimately to become one among the gods such as myself. He wished to make me first among the Roman goddesses and he assured me he would make it so.

How could I doubt him? He was so utterly certain and he had already shown me he could do far more than any man I had ever met.

As impressive as this all was, however, it rendered me even more difficult for Rufus to deal with, for I was both his slave and his goddess at once. I also had a habit of questioning him incessantly in front of others on things he considered settled or that he thought I should already understand. But he could never stay irritated with me for long and would usually laugh and hug me and say, "Just accept it, my beautiful barbarian."

Yes, I was not immune to flattery. To this day I still am not, I confess. It is one of my many failings.

"You are my beautiful, beautiful Felicia, my virgin goddess and my soul," he often said to me during and after our nightly lovemaking. "With you at my side I know I can accomplish things greater than any man has ever dreamed."

I believed him, for I so very much wanted to believe him.

Thus I found myself with Rufus in his incredible home in Arretium. All there called me Felicitas and I was considered his most favored and beloved slave. Neither Rufus nor I spoke of how I was a God among others, not to anyone. I still chafed a little at this, for while I had been a slave many times before, I felt I had left that part of myself far behind. When I felt the instincts of a slave returning to me, I felt repulsed, yet sometimes allowed myself to go through the motions—if only to help further his plans. It was difficult, yet sometimes seductively easy, for this was different from other forms of slavery. I now had a master who viewed me as an equal.

I do not know that I can describe to modern ears why this bothered me in some ways but flattered my ego in others. Still, Rufus would often beat his slaves for failure; he felt it necessary to maintain discipline, as did most Romans. I even once saw him cut the tongue out a young male slave who dared to speak to me crossly. But he always treated me as his most favored and valued of properties and would tolerate no rudeness toward me from any of his other slaves (save one), nor from any other member of his household.

Rufus was in most ways more powerful than any man I had ever encountered. He was also so very beautiful in form and grace, with nut-brown skin and searing, onyx-black eyes, hair like black wool, and he possessed a form as hard as it was fluid. His short stature held an incredible energy and self-assurance. When he was occasionally self-deprecating (in his privacy with me, if not before others) it was intoxicating. While he had a wife, in his eyes I was first among his women. He was shorter than me in a way I sometimes found comical, but his short stature only accentuated the resonant power within him. He sometimes drew a small chuckle from me, yet I never forgot that he had been able to humble me in a way no man ever had—in a way that I would have instantly killed any other man or woman for trying. While I was not sure I loved him, he surely loved me—and he saw me as the key to his own ascension to power and immortality. It was an alluring dream and one that flattered my ego all the more.

Rufus told me many times I could walk away whenever I wished and it seemed arrogant—yet he thought he would be nothing without me, which I found irresistible. Though he did not speak this aloud to anyone but me, it was clear all who served him knew his regard for me. Indeed, all but one of his many slaves and servants deferred to me in even the smallest of areas.

Marieko was the perennial exception. When he could not otherwise avoid me, he made it clear in both his manner and posture that he dissented, and that he thought very little of his master's decision to elevate me to such a high position in the household. Yet somehow this never offended me. In some strange way it endeared him to me. There was always my demon-lover Rufus to flatter my ego, after all.

“My beloved Felicia—my lovely Felicitas! In our nights together as man and woman in my own bed, do you not know what it portends? For I take you, but in so many ways you take me, while the gods look upon us and favor us. Divine destiny must have set us together and surely it all promises that you and I shall be together forever!”

Forever. He used the word “forever” constantly while we were alone. He did not want his other servants or friends to hear it, but he believed that with me by his side he would be able to live forever, and that the two of us would come to rule the entire Roman world with might and justice and wisdom. I cannot describe it fully, for it was a wonderful vision. He was a man who had bested me and then showed me he thought himself less than me, one who wished to join me. He believed that with me he, too, would live forever and we would be together for eternity.

In response I did little but smile, sometimes a bit giddily. I was hoping beyond hope, believing beyond reason, that he must be right. In any case, for now I would be his Felicitas and I began to understand myself to be his helpmate. To modern eyes this must seem so very primitive, yet it seemed so very right. Indeed, our conversations on the matter became more passing strange with time, not less. Every night we would pray certain rituals of his making to the gods. And once every week, at night and in private, I would open the veins of my forearm to fill a cup with my blood that he might partake of it in his pursuit of immortality and godhood.

I accepted all this as I accepted so many things from him. But after more than a year like this, something began to irritate me. It began as a small notion, but quickly grew into suspicion, then anger. I had been intrigued by the power of scrolls since I first saw Rufus use one. There were runes, and of course I was familiar with runes. But these runes were varied and intricate beyond any I had ever known and they were carried upon these scrolls. Rufus would study them and pronounce they had “told” him this or that story or fact. Sometimes he would create small sets of runes upon thin squares of pressed wood and send them off to some person, only to receive others back claiming this person had now spoken to him as if he were present in the very room.

“Ah, Lucius says there shall be a feast on the first of next month at the governor’s estate,” or “Martinus says all is well at the tax office.”

I would strive to hear voices, but it quickly became clear to me that the runes themselves conveyed a very complex meaning. Rufus would leave scrolls about his room as he ruminated upon them. He seemed unconcerned when I might take one up and examine it. My ability to read humans, to see the workings of their minds, was and is strong. Yet while I could see no guile in him, I began to wonder if he had found some way to counter my own ability to understand the thoughts behind his eyes. My pride would not allow me to ask the meaning of these things—instead I grew angrier and more resentful until I convinced myself he sought deliberately to keep understanding of these things from me.

It came to a crisis without warning one evening more than a year after our arrival together in Arretium. We had taken our meal in his bedroom, an oddity he was known for amongst his servants. Every night we followed a precise ritual: first our meal, then lovemaking, then certain chants and small sacrifices to Jupiter, Pluto, and Diana. Once a week he would drink of my blood and this was to be one of those nights. I had not understood that I would take issue with him this night, but after our meal, as we moved to his bed, my anger was suddenly fierce within me, though I gave no outward sign of it.

Rufus reached for me and I let him draw me towards him across the bed even as I rolled out of the soft wrap I wore, then slid my naked body up along his until our mouths met and we kissed. His powerful arms encircled my waist, pulling me to him, his body like a granite statue beneath me as I felt his manhood stiffen against my thigh. Our lips parted and I bit playfully at his nose, rolling with him as he urged me over onto my back, then his face moved, his mouth sliding down my neck before nuzzling into my breasts. I gave a soft cry of encouragement and Rufus’s hands moved, sliding up and down my body with firm assurance, delving between my thighs while I reached down to grip his member, encouraging him to move up further. Then, as he pressed me back, easing between my open thighs, he lifted himself up, looking to my face.

I slowly slid my free hand between us, tracing my fingers up his breastbone until I reached the point where his neck began. Two of my fingers suddenly turned hard and pressed forcefully at that soft spot in his throat. He gagged and drew back, but I kept pressing even as I heaved beneath him, throwing his balance astray when he reached for my arm. I twisted beneath him and his body

stiffened as my grip on his penis tightened most threateningly. I forced him onto his back, that huge, powerful body of his suddenly as a child's doll in my hands as I straddled his belly. Suddenly my right hand released his penis and darted to the tableside where our dinner platter lay, seizing up the knife and bringing its point to his throat before he could react.

There was no fear in his face, but as he looked into my eyes I saw a certain doubt creep in. I reinforced it by sinking the edge of the blade into his skin. Should he make any sudden move I could open his throat with a mere twitch of my wrist.

"You keep secrets from me," I hissed at him through clenched teeth, "You would rule me, my fine Roman. You would call me Queen amongst gods, but you are at my mercy. This little play-act, this fiction of me as your slave, you would make it a reality, an eternal servitude!"

"Felicitas..." he began.

"*Timazō!*" I shrieked, "You will address me by *my* name, not yours!"

"I... I don't understand," he said. There was still no fear in him, but I expected none; he was certain I was deadly serious and that would suffice.

"You keep secrets from me, secrets of power. You flaunt them before my very eyes as if they were nothing, but I am no fool! I see them, and I know them, *Talmudius Africanus Rufus!*" I spat each of his names with vehemence, feeling him respond to each word as if to a physical blow. "I have sought them out, but they are powerful and arcane... they are secrets that must be shared and given, not spied upon and stolen!

He merely stared at me, his eyes filled with confusion. To my anger, I could not tell if he were feigning or not. "You will share with me," I whispered, leaning forward and putting more pressure upon him, "or you will die."

He stared into my eyes for long moments and then spoke in careful, level tones.

"I will share all I have, anything you desire... but I still do not know of what you speak."

"I am no fool! I have seen you, seen others of your kind wield these powers! You have an entire room full of these secrets and you let me wander there thinking I'll not understand and not bother to wonder! You flaunt these things, these *scrolls*..."

Suddenly his eyes widened in surprise. I think he might have laughed had he not been certain I would slit his throat for it.

"Of course," he sighed, and chuckled a little nervously. "You cannot read, can you?"

And so I found myself that next morning on a sun-drenched stone patio engaged in light verbal sparring with an old Greek, envying him his family and the joy they gave him. Once Marieko sent Salia on her way he turned his gaze fully upon me and his displeasure was clear. I tried to imagine his reaction when Rufus handed him the task of teaching me to read and write, for I felt certain it must have been an interesting moment. He seemed fond of Rufus, but at the same time he held him in a sort of disdain, somewhat as if he were a father looking upon a son who simply had not turned out as

well as he had hoped. I was even more amused when I came to understand Rufus's chief failing in his eyes was that he was Roman rather than Greek.

If he had somewhat conflicting emotions regarding Rufus, he had no such confusion regarding me: I was a barbarian and a dangerous barbarian to boot. He never truly forgave me that episode in the hunting camp when I tried to strangle him and he never turned his back on me again. In an odd way I found that endearing, for it was the one thing that made sense to me in the midst of all the new and confusing ideas I faced here among the Romans. It also added to my amusement at how sourly he accepted his task, becoming even more curt and dismissive than ever before.

There we were, he disgusted and disdainful, me amused and yet hiding my nervousness that I might not be able to understand this magic.

"For the love of all that is proper in this world," he finally barked at me, "stop lounging like an idle whore and sit up straight!"

It was an inauspicious beginning.

He thrust a red wax tablet and stylus at me, then pulled up a wooden stool and sat stiffly upon it, holding a tablet of his own. I sat up with the tablet in my left hand and a stylus clutched uncertainly in my right, while Marieko sat across from me glowering unhappily.

"Let us begin. Repeat after me: *Alpha...*" He would draw the shape and show me. "*Beta...*" He would draw it and show me again. "*Gamma... Delta...*"

I slowly began to repeat the words, one after the other.

"*Nefas*" he said whenever I got it wrong—which was often at first. So I would stumble and repeat, feeling almost like a child, but unwilling to end the game. "*Fas*," was all he said whenever I shaped the rune correctly. I think his frown may have actually deepened whenever that happened.

"Now, write the letters out."

I tried. He would show me one shape, demand that I name it, and then draw it as he had drawn it. When I had first learned the Seafarer tongue—called Greek by these people—only the women had known what symbols meant but today it was considered ill form to teach women these things. Still, I slowly wrote out the letters, taking care to put every slash and dot in the correct spot.

The first morning was hardly promising. It ended somewhere around "*theta*," which I drew poorly. He slammed his own tablet down, muttered something about barbarian women and stomped away. I was too relieved to be angry myself.

Yet the next morning he and I both returned. And the next. And the next. Soon I could make all the shapes and name them, and we began creating groupings of them in order to form words. Then we began doing so in both the Greek and the Roman.

Other than repeating the sounds for me, he rarely said much. "*Nefas. Iterum Attemptabis.*" I would try, again and again each new task, usually finally earning at least one grudging "*Fas*" before ending a day's lesson.

“*In lingua Barbarae iterum*” he would command after I finished some string of Greek symbols. His estimation of the Romans was not much higher than it was of me. I doubt I ever saw him happy about anything, save possibly the plays of Euripides.

For several weeks this was how it would progress, out there on Rufus’s patio except on days when it rained. Marieko would teach and I would write, learning by rote without much true understanding. It was grueling on both of us and on occasion his irritation would get the better of him, sending him off growling about unwashed barbarians while he left me to copy some string of writing over and over again. Yet he always returned the next morning and we would press ahead. Although he clearly hated this task, it became clear at some point that once he was started Marieko was far too stubborn to give up, even with a student as hopeless as me.

My pride aside, I became too embarrassed to quit, although I thought about it every morning as I contemplated returning to those accursed wax tablets yet again.

We were some three weeks into the lessons when suddenly I understood the essence of it. It took me so unexpectedly as to be almost a physical blow.

“*Nefas!*” he grunted with irritation as my hand jerked and I mangled a “theta.”

Yes. He had seen me err yet again. But suddenly something was different. He did not sense it but I did. My head spinning, I finished the rote line of shapes, but then I simply sat there, staring at the tablet in my hand and some of the other tablets, my eyes roving back and forth. He stared at me as I looked up at him.

Suddenly, I could understand the connections between the various things I was doing. It became so clear to me, so easy to understand that I could hardly believe I had not seen it before. Before he spoke again I said his name. “Marieko.” His bushy gray eyebrows shot up toward his bald pate, but I ignored the implicit question in his eyes. Instead I turned to the tablet and spoke his name aloud again, slowly making the sounds: “Marr-eee-eck-oh.” And as I made each sound, I scrawled a shape. Then I looked up at him and turned the tablet to him.

His eyebrows scrunched back downward as his brow furrowed, then arched back upwards in surprise.

As plain as day I had just written his name.

I had never seen it written before.

“*Fas,*” he said, seeing the comprehension dawning in my eyes. “*Fas.*” His face may have become a bit gentler. Perhaps. A bit.

“*Homerumne legeritus esses?*” he asked, a grudging smile on his face. I looked at him blankly. Though the *Iliad* has since become one of my favorite books, until then I had never so much as seen it performed. But the next day, he introduced me to his old friend Homer, and the *Iliad*, and together we began to read each morning from it.

It was stimulating, for the tale was thrilling, especially when I learned that the goddess Diana played a major part in it. Yet it was also most difficult, for he would read a line from the Greek and expect me to write the Latin. But in this manner I would reinforce my understanding of both

languages. Perhaps it was not the easiest or best way of going about it, but it worked for me and more importantly, it worked for him.

After I truly understood the magic of reading and writing, Marieko's attitude began to thaw somewhat. He still neither trusted nor approved of me, but he loved to speak of literature and was always (after some needling) willing to answer my questions or point out new things I should read. As it turned out I loved the written word even more than he did—and at the end of two months, I was fluent and literate in both languages.

I had also begun to learn far more about the gods of the Romans and Greeks than any of my prayer sessions with Rufus had ever taught me. Soon it was more than just Homer, but also Plato, and Aristotle, and Aeschylus, and—Marieko's favorite—Euripides. Soon our daily lessons ended as I began to study on my own, but always from then on Marieko was happy to talk to me about anything I had read and to make recommendations and answer questions for me.

It was as if an entirely new world unfolded before me, made up of a glorious tapestry of words nearly as ancient as me. After those first months any time Rufus wondered at my whereabouts he would find me in his library, poring over the volumes upon volumes of texts he had collected there. Rufus was proud of his collection and even took time to read from them from time to time. I on the other hand all but made that library my home. I drank in the works of Herodotus, his *Histories* opening my eyes to the unknown and heretofore unknowable world beyond the horizons. I consumed Xenophon's *Hellenika*; I read Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* a second and then a third time. The tales of the gods fascinated me, as did the philosophical works of many major and minor Greek and Roman thinkers.

This new and engrossing world largely drove out all other activities during the day. The only thing that could draw me away was Rufus's return to the villa in the afternoon, and even then I would find myself planning which texts I would absorb next. Rufus laughingly proclaimed that teaching me to read had been his gravest error.

I would have given anything to make that last the truth.

## Chapter 31

*Pennsylvania, April, 2005 CE*

It was a month before she finally sent for me. We hadn't spoken at all, and then *plop!* some money for plane tickets and a note asking me to come just showed up in a FedEx envelope. I was used to this by now though and was sick of sitting around at home all the time, so I booked the first plane out the next day.

You build up mental images of places when you hear about them. For some reason I had it in my head that the house in Pennsylvania would be one of those sprawling, piecemeal farms that you see in paintings; a small house with an obvious addition, a barn in the back to one side. But the place was huge, spread out across a hilltop at the end of a tree-lined gravel drive. It had a very Victorian look to it, but there was a wrap-around porch with a large balcony overhanging it. Each end of the house was marked with big, multi-windowed rooms. As the limo pulled around the driveway I also saw a modern-looking barn and what looked like a corral. When the driver parked in front of the house I saw her coming across the lawn on horseback.

She trotted up to us as the driver dragged my bags out of the trunk. I had to admit she handled the horse like a natural. The grey Arabian seemed a little big for her, but she sat on it like a queen. Somebody who'd never grown up around horses probably wouldn't even notice how well she handled it or how the animal seemed to respond to her so eagerly.

"You ride an English saddle?" I asked, by way of greeting.

"When I'm riding for pleasure, yes. You're a rider?"

"Grew up in Texas," I answered and she simply nodded. She seemed a little stiff, like she wasn't real happy to have me there.

"You get settled in," she said diffidently. "The kitchen is well stocked so help yourself if you're hungry." She gave the horse a little nudge with her heels. "I'll join you later," she said as she rode off.

I was a little uncomfortable being dumped at the front door like that. I stood there wondering what to do with myself until an older black man showed up at the door. He introduced himself as George and took me to a room where I unpacked.

After unpacking I found myself wandering around the house. George, who appeared to be like a butler or house manager, seemed to go out of his way to avoid me as the old house's floorboards creaked under my feet. It wasn't much of an exploration since I avoided going into most of the rooms, but it was enlightening. The house was old but there had been lots of renovation. The bathrooms were laid out in early Victorian style, but everything was brand new, including the pull chain toilets and claw-foot tubs. The light fixtures looked like they could be oil lamps and all the switches were discreetly tucked away where they wouldn't jar with the old-fashioned style of the place. That pretty much described the whole house, Victorian style, modern convenience.

About an hour after arriving I found myself in the kitchen. Like the rest of the place, it had a pleasant old-fashioned feel but with modern conveniences. There was a Dutch door that opened on to a patio behind the house, so I headed outside.

The property was huge. The lawn was carefully mowed about a hundred yards out from the house, but past that was tall grass, then trees surrounding everything. I decided to explore. As I wandered around I found traces of the past strewn about; an old hand lever pump set in a concrete slab, installed in 1936 if the date written in the concrete was right. There was some rusting farm equipment and the crumbling remnants of what looked like an old Ox yoke.

There was a small, fenced in area further back. I was just heading that way when an old woman's voice spoke to me.

"So you're Jenny's new friend?" she said.

Startled, I turned and discovered a small, elderly woman, bundled up against the light chill in the air, grinning at me from under a heavy, wide-brimmed hat. She was round-faced but otherwise wiry and small. Her pale blue eyes sized me up and she seemed excited and guarded at the same time. Her hands were perched on top of a simple cane and she seemed to be leaning towards me like she expected great things from my answer.

"Yes," I replied, smiling I offered her my name and stuck out my hand. She took it in a surprisingly tight grip. "I'm guessing you're Edna?" I asked.

"The one and only," she said with a laugh in her voice, "Edna Carstairs. So, what d'you think of the place?"

"Honestly? I was expecting an old farmhouse, not this..."

"Mansion? I understand, but it really was a farm, you know. Family grew feed corn here up until the fifties... oh, here she comes."

Edna pointed and I followed her gesture to see Zsallia approaching on horseback across the grassy field, moving at a canter. Once she reached the lawn she slowed to a trot, bringing her mount to a halt beside us.

"Edna..." she began with an odd inflection to her voice, "do you think it wise to be out back here? The grounds really aren't up to snuff yet. I'd hate to see you take a fall."

Edna scowled up at her. "If I take a tumble and break my fool neck out here then it's just my time, isn't it? I already go to bed at night tellin' the Lord that if He calls me home I'm ready to go and no complaints. So why get all worried about it? Besides, you've got enough hired hands loafin' 'round. I expect one of 'em'd pick me up."

I had to chuckle at the matter-of-fact way Edna said that, but then I saw Zsallia's reaction. She slumped and went a little pale, and then caught me looking at her and straightened up. What happened next just about floored me.

"Please," she said in a whisper, "Edna... don't talk like that."

It came out as a plea and I was seeing things in her face that I'd never seen before. It was like she was at war with herself, trying to keep from showing her feelings in front of me, but incapable of doing it in front of this woman. Suddenly I was more certain than ever that Edna was somebody I needed to talk to.

"Dearie," Edna replied, "you just stop worrying about me. I've taken care of myself good enough for ninety-nine years. I think I can make it across the back yard. Are we still on for our bridge game tonight?"

Zsallia smiled broadly and nodded. "Yes indeed!"

Edna turned to face me again. "It's been nice meetin' you, sonny. Maybe we'll get a chance to chat later." And with that Edna just wheeled around on her cane and started off towards the patio. Zsallia dismounted and took the reins in her left hand as she watched Edna. She kept careful watch until Edna finally entered the house, then she sighed.

"Sometimes she can be a handful," she said, looking at me again, "I suspect she'll be talking your ear off once she gets the chance."

"I can't wait," I replied. "I've been waiting nearly a month to meet her."

"Yes, I know," and she sighed again, looking at the ground as we began walking towards the barn with the horse in tow. "I apologize for making you wait so long. I didn't expect it to be so hard for me to bring you here."

"I was wondering about that. I started to think you'd decided to drop this all together."

"Well, try to remember that a month is not a terribly long time to me."

It was her standard *I'm 3500 years old, so get used to it* tactic, but it was delivered with no enthusiasm at all, so I didn't wisecrack with her. Soon we reached the barn and she handed the Arabian off to a pretty blonde girl who might have been eighteen at most. Then we returned to the house. She left me in the library while she disappeared upstairs for a shower. I thought about seeking out Edna but Zsallia seemed to want me to just wait there, so I did.

The library was a pretty impressive room. It had a high ceiling, maybe thirty feet long by twenty feet wide. The walls were covered in books except near the doors and the large fireplace. Most of the books seemed to be brand new, even if the titles were old, although a few were pretty beat up and looked as old as the house.

I took one of the battered old ones down and read the title: *The Wide Wide World*. The author's name was Wetherell. I'd never heard of her. The pages were very old and I opened it carefully. There was a note written on the first page. It had faded quite a bit, but I walked to the window and it was easy to read in the sunlight:

*Catherine,*

*Please do give this to your young Alice when she is old enough, for it is an engaging story, even if a bit dark upon its start.*

*With Love,*

*Elaine*

I found the printing date inside: 1851.

“I received it from a woman who’d just arrived in Boston from London. She’d had it for the trip across the Atlantic and she made a gift of it to me when I noted my niece...”

I hadn’t even heard her come in, but she stopped talking when I turned to face her. She was wearing blue jeans and a sweater, her hair still wet and pulled back into a ponytail. She looked miserable. I closed the book and set it on a nearby table.

“Zsallia, what’s wrong?”

“Not Zsallia. Not here. Genevieve, please, or Jenny. I... I’m sorry I’ve been so off today, it’s just that...” she paused again, laying her hands on the back of the chair before her like she was using it as a shield. “I know we have spoken together of many things... some horrible things, and I know at those times you sometimes felt as if you were engaged in a violation, as if you were forcing things from me I did not wish to share, but that has never been the truth. Not until now. Not until today.”

Well, what do you say to that? “I don’t have to be here,” I said, trying to sound neutral. “I can get a room in town...”

“No,” she stopped me, raising her hand, “that’s not it. Truly, it’s not. I just need you to leave me to myself today... I thought you might not come until the weekend and I... I should have been more... I just need to accept that you’re here and I’m not ready. Not today. Tomorrow I’ll be fine, I promise.”

“Sure,” I said, but I wondered.

“I have another idea however. Tonight I have plans with Edna. But there’s time yet in the day and perhaps it’s time you talked to my lawyer, her son Joshua. I’m sure you have many questions you could ask him.”

I was a little surprised. “Well, yeah, I hadn’t thought about it but... sure.”

“Excellent,” she said crisply. “I’ve already taken the liberty of calling him and saying you’d like to meet him. His schedule is clear—he’s semi-retired anyway—and he asked that you meet him at his office.”

“Well, okay...” I said, feeling a little lost.

“No worries my friend. I have it all planned out. George has the keys to a car you may borrow and a map with names and phone numbers for Joshua, for me, for the local garage if you should get in trouble and so on. Please feel free to come back this evening... after dinner. There’s a fine diner right next to Joshua’s office.”

I laughed. "Don't rush off but here's your hat," I said, grinning. She looked at me mutely and gave a brief gesture of apology. I relented. "Okay, you had plans for tonight, I don't mind. I'll talk to Joshua and see you after dark."

"Splendid," she said. Her smile was a little forced but also a little grateful. Well, what the hell I thought and headed off to find George and his map to Joshua.

## Chapter 32

*Pennsylvania, April, 2005 CE*

“Well, the original McAllister Trust was created by Catherine Tremblay, my great-great-grandmother. Until Genevieve showed up I never really understood why...”

Joshua Carstairs frowned and hesitated. We were supposed to be talking about the Trust and the history of the family, but I could see he wanted to change the subject. His jaw moved sideways and the left side of his lip pursed out a bit, sticking his distinguished, bristled silver mustache out a bit as he regarded me.

“Son, how long have you known this woman?” he asked abruptly.

“A few months I guess. Since Thanksgiving.”

“How convinced are you by her story?” he asked, his cool blue eyes suddenly piercing.

I grunted a short laugh. “When I met her she had no left leg and only half her arm. I watched ‘em grow back.”

He stared at me levelly, his eyes narrowing. “What if I said I don’t believe you? What’s your angle anyway?”

I suddenly felt defensive. “Well you can...” I started, a little hotly. Then I stopped and shut my mouth. I took a deep breath and smiled at myself. When we’d first met I’d gotten the impression that he thought I might be the motivator behind all of this and I’d let that get to me. But I could see where he was coming from and fighting him wasn’t going to do any good.

“Hell, I wouldn’t believe me either.” I laughed. “Does it matter? I’m just here to do what she hired me to do. I got no horse in this race otherwise. Wanna see my driver’s license? Run a background check or something? I’m no one, man, just a writer.”

He kept staring at me, trying to take my measure, then relented. “I’d like to believe this, especially because mother believes it and it means so much to her. But whenever I try to, my mind stops me. Could she be two people? Twins maybe?”

“She said you did DNA tests, but I guess that may be some way possible... well except for what I’ve seen, which isn’t. Anyway I’ve thought pretty hard about it myself, and if this were a hoax somebody spent an awful lot of time and money setting it up. And for what? Is your family that rich? Mine sure as hell isn’t.”

“No, that’s what keeps me from putting my foot down with mother. There’s just no motive I can find. If somebody wanted the land all they’d have to do is wait for the foreclosure. Instead she’s refurbished the house, rebuilt the stables...”

“I find her a pretty hard to figure myself,” I said, “but you know, she does what she does, whatever her reasons.” I paused, leaning forward a bit before continuing, “And to tell you the truth, I still wonder, even with everything I’ve seen... sometimes it just turns so bizarre... but I always come back to the same idea. If she’s *not* what she says she is, then what the hell is she? Seems like it’s close enough either way that it doesn’t really matter.” I stopped and laughed again. “Dude, she grew her freaking leg back.”

His thick silver lashes furrowed. “Dude?” he said, his voice gently mocking. “Am I a dude?” He shook his head and we both laughed at my 1980s slang. I just waited while he sat at his desk drumming his fingers with a half-frown, half-grin on his face. After a minute or two he relaxed, sagging back into his chair. I spoke again before he could.

“Okay, look, I’m not here to be her advocate or whatever. I mean I like her, hard as she makes that sometimes. But you know I’m here to ask you questions, not the other way around. What you think is up to you, sir. So why don’t you tell me what you think?”

“I?” he asked. “What do I think?” he stopped. “What do I think?” he asked again, emphasizing the second word. “What I think is that... well it seems as if she’s been good for this town, and I haven’t seen mother this lit up and happy since... since Dad died. Mind you, everybody was up in arms when she first showed up. People tried to deny permits for the house renovations, forbade work on the right-of-way, things like that. I was expecting all sorts of court fights and wasn’t sure where we’d come out on those, but then she went on a charm offensive. She won a lot of people over that way, one person at a time. It was something to see.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“Let me tell you, she had people who hated my guts for holding out on the development plans, eating out of her hand in just days. Some of it was straight-forward bribery, but most of it... how she did it is a mystery to me.”

“Bribery?”

“Well, not in the legal sense, no, but... The town’s getting a brand new high school. We’ve been debating about it for five years, mostly how do we pay for it and what do we build. She plunked down a few million dollars and told them to build whatever they wanted so long as they named it Jeremiah H. McAllister Memorial High School! And that was just the beginning. She started renovating the old house, hired all local contractors, even helped one man get his company off the ground by hiring him for the wiring and network installation. All local suppliers... it was like the gold rush. Since she arrived on the scene she’s dropped so much into the local economy just about everyone’s in love with her.”

“Jesus, I knew she had resources, but that’s...”

“Impressive?” he said, chuckling a bit.

“Excessive. Jeremiah H. McAllister Memorial High School. Did that raise any eyebrows?”

“Oh, yeah. Had a flurry of folks down at the Historical Society looking him up. And the portrait of Elaine McAllister drew lots of attention as well. Jeremiah and Elaine...” He stumbled for a minute and then forged ahead. “They weren’t all that well-known, really. In their time they were considered a

somewhat risqué couple, almost disreputable but for his father's solid reputation. Old Samuel McAllister used to be a big shot in this town back about 200 years ago and had some good contacts in Harrisburg and Philadelphia. Also, Jeremiah didn't step up as patriarch of the family. Left that up to his sister and brother-in-law. It seems they just concentrated on raising his brother's children, including my great-great-grandmother—Catherine McAllister Tremblay.”

“Ah, yeah, that brings up something I wanted to ask. I don't see any McAllister's in town. Is the family name dead?”

“No, but that part of the family spread out across the country. The Trust is named the McAllister Trust after Jeremiah, but the beneficiaries are all descendants of Catherine Tremblay. The last McAllister in this area was buried about thirty years ago. Nobody really paid much attention because there wasn't a lot of money tied up in it, just the old house and about fifty acres of land. Things got sticky when the developers started trying to force us to sell. Folks came out of the woodwork to remind us they wanted their share.”

He looked angry when he said that last, but then shrugged, “It doesn't matter now,” he finished.

“One thing I don't understand, about the house I mean. Why didn't the town take it by eminent domain?”

He grinned at me. “They made noises about it, but they know I can devote as much time as I please to fighting them in court. Also, there are people in this town, hell, in this state, who owe me favors, and I know where some bodies are buried. Add it all up and nobody was ready to play hardball. If it hadn't been for some bad turns in the Trust's investments there never would have been the tax problems and it all would have been moot.”

We went over some other things, minor details about the family history in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the history of the house and property up until the present, which was really all I had come to get, and once we were done I packed up my notes and prepared to leave. As he walked me out he paused at his office door, his hand on the doorknob.

“I need to ask you something,” he said. “I wasn't going to because it feels like I'm being... ungracious, maybe? But I think it needs to be done.”

“Ask away.”

“Do you trust her?”

His face was very serious, so much so that I had to stop and think about my answer.

“I believe her,” I finally replied, “Everything she says has the ring of someone telling the truth, and everything I've been able to verify matches up.” I stopped and thought again. “The more I get to know her, the more I just do believe her.”

He shook his head. “That isn't what I meant. Let's assume she is what she says she is. She's immortal. She's thousands of years old and nothing can hurt her for very long. Let's say that's true. But is she telling you the truth, the whole truth, about herself? Is she telling *us* the whole truth?”

I stared at him, frowning. I wasn't sure how to answer him. He saw that and he looked down a little.

"Have you ever even considered the possibility she's something... sinister?"

"Mr. Carstairs..."

"Please, Joshua. We're both in this deep enough, don't you think?"

"Joshua," I nodded at him, "I don't know what she is. I've never seen her suck blood or anything like that. All I know is, everything I've been able to check pans out. Also, she made me a promise that... well it seems very important to her. She's repeated it a few times, almost like a ritual, especially when she seems upset." Joshua's eyebrows went up and he peered at me quizzically. "She's said she'll never lie to me." His look turned skeptical, but I just shrugged. "Well that seems very important to her. But she also tells me she's been a liar her whole life. So...?" I shrugged again. "Those things I *can* verify all check out. I've met Dennis Novak—he's known her since the Fifties, and they both showed me some proof."

"Yes but proof of what? Just that she existed?"

"Well, yeah. She said you dug into her past. Did you find something important?"

"Perhaps." He gestured back to his desk and we sat again.

"Assuming she's Elaine McAllister, I can trace her with a fair amount of certainty starting from the 1830s or so," Joshua told me. "Crazy as it sounds, it looks like she..." his eyes stopped and looked at me, "it looks like after Jeremiah McAllister died, she wandered off down south, keeping occasional correspondence with the rest of the family. Then..." he stopped. "Well, it looks like she was hanged for murder in Georgia in 1868," he said, showing me a very weathered newspaper clipping sealed in an airtight plastic bag. His eyes took me in and I pursed my lips and leaned back.

"Hanged for murder...?" I asked, feeling a little uneasy.

"You don't seem surprised." His eyebrows shot up.

"Well... she's told me that she was once pretty insane and that she's killed people. 'I have been a murderer' were her exact words I think."

His jaw dropped and he blinked. "So you're still willing to work with her?"

I stopped and thought about it. "Well I've known some reformed criminals and..." my voice trailed off. "Look, she confessed to losing her temper and murdering a woman about 3,000 years ago in Scandinavia. So what do you do with that? Call the FBI? See if Interpol wants her? Truth is she seemed haunted and tortured by it."

Joshua just looked at me. "Tortured." He said it without much emphasis, with just a tiny hint of skepticism.

"Well, the way she's explained it, she's been completely alone, without any guidance... no parents, no family or friends, without anybody at all, her whole life except for brief periods here and

there. She's got to be the loneliest person I've ever met." I was surprised at the emotions this seemed to be bringing up in me. "She seems to have gone through a lot. I don't know, I can't judge it. A few times she's scared me to be honest with you but..." I stopped. "I don't think she likes herself much and I know she's not proud of things she's done. I'm also pretty sure she doesn't want to hurt anybody now." I paused, surprising myself with my own certainty. "I think it would tear her up if she hurt anybody today."

"You think those people in Georgia in 1868 would believe that?" he asked, his eyes still piercing.

"Well, I don't know. I can ask her. In fact I will ask her. Do you think she's wanted in Georgia?" I asked. I was genuinely curious.

He laughed. "I've asked myself that. Honestly, I can't see a Georgia District Attorney trying to have her extradited. I'm not even sure what the law at the time would have said about someone who was hanged and pronounced dead, then turned out not to be."

"They really hanged her? Wow!"

"We're almost certain it was her. Afterwards, some old drunks told a detective they saw her claw her way out of her grave."

"Yikes! And he believed them?"

"He was a private detective my great-great-Grandmother hired. I don't think the law got involved after the hanging. He was pretty sure she was just lucky. Anyway supposedly she changed identities, then supposedly drowned in a river a few years later, again according to eyewitnesses who never recovered the body. Catherine never believed she was dead and kept writing to her. She kept sending letters to her last attorney of record until she died."

"So basically we're pretty certain she's telling the truth about her past, yes?"

"A lawyer would say the evidence available seems to be in agreement with the facts as presented. What we could also say is that she's been truthful about things we'd be able to check. Conversely, she may simply have been very careful about researching her lies before she told them." He sat back and let out a long breath. "I'm not trying to prove she's lying about anything. I'm just wondering... What do we know about her motives, what she's really trying to accomplish?"

"She seems to be doing exactly what she says she's doing. She's letting more and more people into her inner circle. Can't we choose to judge her by her actions? Don't they seem to follow her words?"

"So far as we can tell, yes. But if we accept that she's this ancient thing... I can't escape the notion that a creature with that much experience would have no trouble getting people to believe anything she wanted. And she's a killer, apparently, or has been. So, what is she really and what is she up to?"

I wasn't sure what he was getting at. "I'm not going to try to defend her. I can only say so far it looks like she's never lied to me, and in my gut I don't think she's a killer now. She's scared me a few

times with her temper but... well hell I don't know what she is, but I think..." I stopped, surprising myself again. "I don't think she's evil now. I think she obviously has been though."

"An evil supernatural creature that's no longer evil." He said it flatly. It wasn't even a question exactly. "You believe that?"

"Joshua, I honestly don't know what choice I have. If she's such a master at manipulation and she's working towards some goal we have no way of understanding, why are you involved?"

"Partly it's my disbelief. I still think this must be a scam somehow. Also mother loves her. Also... well there's the money." I looked surprised and he gave me a grim smirk. "You think I'm immune to money? She pays well, and so far absolutely nothing she's asked me to do has been in any way shady. In fact if anything it's the opposite. She's in the habit of paying for things she doesn't need to pay for, or overpaying for them. Yet, according to what you've said, she's a confessed killer. Yet still, she's so kind and gentle to my family, and me, I allow her to live in the old family homestead without objection. I even let my mother, *my mother*, consort with her at will. Now I'm up to my eyeballs in financial ties with her via the trust. When I sit back and look at that, it scares the hell out of me because I don't know how I let it happen. It all seemed so damned reasonable at the time. And if I believe any of this, I have to believe she's supernatural." He paused. "I'm not a superstitious man," he said, sounding fairly firm.

"Me neither," I said, grinning a little. "Yet just to keep doing this job I have to believe there's at least something to it. Mostly I just try to accept what she says at face value. Maybe that makes me crazy." I chuckled. "Maybe she's crazy and I'm crazy and you're crazy, too, and we're all in a madhouse without knowing it."

He didn't look amused. Instead his eyes narrowed, then he slumped forward, his forehead resting in his hands. He looked exhausted and a little embarrassed. "So what do you believe she is?" he asked, not looking up.

I didn't say anything because I didn't know. Instead I thought about it. How did I get involved in this, anyhow? She'd played to my ego and to my needs—my family had been fighting the financial beast for years with no end in sight until she showed up and dropped a year's salary in my lap. I was still wrestling with that when Joshua spoke again. This time his voice was darker and he still wasn't looking up.

"My mother is a Presbyterian, but my father, he was a Baptist through and through. Any time mother would let him he'd haul us off to his church to listen to old Pastor Fisher preach the gospel. One thing he taught always stuck with me: The war between good and evil is purely spiritual and it's fought on the battlefield of the soul. Evil doesn't show up on your doorstep and make you rob banks or kill people. No, it invites you out for a soda pop, or an ice cream. It offers you help by showing you easy solutions to difficult problems. It helps you to take the things you did and find ways to justify them. 'Evil,' he'd say, 'leads us to Hell in baby steps'. I look at the way she has worked her way into our lives. I see the way everything we do, and everything we care about, is slowly but surely being twisted into tools that serve her purposes."

He stopped, then went on. "I step back and I see how she's bound my family and this town to her, emotionally, financially... and I see how I helped her do it... and all I can hear is that old preacher."

He finally looked up and fixed his steely gaze on me, waiting. Finally I found my voice. “Okay, but what’s she asked you to do that’s bad or wrong? So far you haven’t said anything... and she’s never, not even once, asked me to do anything bad or...”

He shook his head. “So far, nothing even remotely sinister. Yet she’s obviously got these plans she isn’t always clear about, and sometimes she has a way of changing the subject... and if she is this ancient thing, and she’s lying to us about her desires, about her purposes, then...” He paused, taking a deep breath and then slowly letting it out. “If she’s lying we are all of us well and truly damned.”

“Come on, man, you think she’s like a demon or something?”

He snorted at me, a bit angrily. “You mock the idea?”

“I don’t really believe in demons and devils,” I said, my voice trailing off. I suddenly felt uncertain. I knew his next question before he asked it

“Yet you believe in three thousand year old women.”

I realized I couldn’t answer that and didn’t try. So he just went on.

“I think it was C.S. Lewis who said the devil’s greatest trick was making us think he didn’t exist.”

I just looked at him. Slowly I nodded. “I guess that’s something we’ll both have to think about” I said, feeling a little knot in my stomach. “Hard to know what to be skeptical of once you’ve already believed six impossible things before breakfast,” I muttered.

“Fair enough.” He then peered at me again through squinted eyes. “Well let me ask you this, son. What do you want to believe about her?”

I thought about it. An alien from another planet? A vampire? A fallen angel...? I couldn’t say for sure, but I doubted all of it.

“I want to believe there is a natural explanation for her existence. That’s why I was so pumped by this research effort you proposed...” I stopped when I saw him frown again.

“I proposed that as a trap, you know. Ah, you didn’t see that, did you?”

“No. I thought it was brilliant, actually. You weren’t serious?”

“Oh, I’m serious about it. It’s a win-win proposal. If she was a fraud, she’d never agree to be examined like that, and I’ll tell you—when she hesitated about it I was convinced I had her number. But if she was not a fraud and was the benign immortal creature she claimed to be, well, it would work just the way I suggested. Learn the secrets, offer the knowledge, and leverage the influence of that in order to protect her. But now... these other thoughts have me wondering if we’re just playing into some sort of infernal trap.”

“I’m not sure I follow you.”

“Assume we learn the secret to her ‘immortality’ and that it’s something that could be shared. Can you imagine what the reaction could be?”

“Actually, yeah. She and I argued pretty hotly about this when you proposed it. When I said it was a good idea she nearly fired me and pulled the plug on everything. She’s afraid of what might happen to the human race if practical immortality is dropped in our laps. She doesn’t want to be responsible if it turns out bad.”

“You think that concern is... overblown?”

I nodded.

He looked a little surprised “Well I certainly don’t! There are a lot more religious people in this country than most Americans realize, all perfectly normal, rational people whose faith is not worn on their sleeves. For some of those people the idea of embracing an immortal life in the mortal world is going to look an awful lot like a Faustian bargain and a rejection of God’s will: The Devil dangling immortality as the prize for abandoning God’s Kingdom. I can see televangelists screaming about it already.”

“I guess,” I said, not sure I really agreed. “But I could see it going the other way too. I look at the possibility of healing people, curing horrible diseases... and I’m basically pro-choice. I think most people are adults who can make their own decisions. I also think people have been saying things about medical technology thwarting God’s will for as long as I can remember and the country didn’t fall apart. I don’t see this as much different.”

He shook his head. “This seems more extreme.”

“Well, does it help to know she shares your fears? Because she does.”

“I don’t know,” he said. “I honestly don’t know.”

We sat there for a while, quietly. “Well, we’ll just have to see won’t we?” I said.

I thought about asking him to dinner but then I decided I’d rather be alone to think. The meat loaf at the diner wasn’t bad and a couple of beers helped relax me. Before I left the diner I broke out my laptop and made some notes. The town was still old-fashioned enough that they looked at me like I was kind of exotic to be using a computer like that in public, so after a while I just got back in the car and made my way back down the country roads outside of town to her house. I got lost once, but the map she’d given me was excellent and it didn’t take me too long to find my way to her place again.

George met me at the door and told me Zsallia was out for the night, asked if I wanted him to make me a snack or anything. He showed me to my guest room, again, made sure I knew where to find the bathroom and kitchen, and told me to make myself at home. Then he retired to his own quarters downstairs and told me to call him if I needed anything.

The old house seemed spooky and empty, so I just went to my room, shut the door and called my wife. I went to bed, listening to the creaks and groans of the old, empty house. I had a hard time falling asleep, feeling like there were ghosts all around me, thinking of Joshua’s more disturbing words. But finally I dozed off.

## Chapter 33

*Pennsylvania, April, 2005 CE*

She woke me up the next morning some time after sunrise and told me if I didn't shower and come downstairs soon I'd miss breakfast. When I got downstairs she seemed cool, distant. She was making pancakes, eggs and bacon, pattering around and humming absent-mindedly. She insisted I sit down and not help. As she poured me some coffee and put a plate of hot bacon, eggs, cakes and grits in front of me, she told me she normally had servants come in and cook but she didn't want anyone around today.

She seemed constantly distracted, like she didn't want anything but small talk. As I ate I occasionally caught her staring at me, only to look away quickly. When I finally started to ask her what was up, she promptly said, "So I understand you ride. Finish your food and then I'll take you on a tour, show you around."

Clearly she didn't want to talk. Instead, after breakfast she took me out to the stables. Pretty soon I regretted even agreeing to this. I hadn't been on a horse in ten years, but she took me on a three hour ride around the area, all around the estate, then through the woods to other areas, showing me the other farmhouses, pointing out historic spots where some homes and families had once stood, but were now gone and generally chattering endlessly without saying much of anything. Still once in a while I'd catch her looking at me oddly, sizing me up, calculating in some way I couldn't fathom. I just tried to shrug it off.

By the time we got back for lunch I was exhausted and I had to take a nap. When I woke up later in the afternoon, I was a mess. My legs were on fire, I'd gotten too much sleep, and I was grumpy as hell. I took some aspirin and a long shower, then went looking for her.

As I came downstairs I heard her humming. The huge empty house was otherwise deathly quiet. It seemed spooky, but I followed the sound of her humming and found her reading a book in what looked like an old smoking room, with big overstuffed chairs and a bar on one end.

"Well, are we going to talk at all today or just play around?" I asked, walking in and plopping into one of the chairs. She just looked at me, almost accusingly, like I was being rude. I sighed and said, "Okay, sorry, you're the boss." I drummed my fingers and looked out one of the big double windows.

"No, we're here to talk. Go on, bring out that infernal recorder."

I looked at her and yanked it out. She was still looking at me weirdly and I couldn't tell what was behind those eyes of hers. So I just launched into it.

"Okay, so, you don't want to talk about Jeremy just yet," I said. "I get that. But you know, we haven't talked about Rome since we left Ann Arbor. You kind of left me dangling on that. You told me you learned how to read there and I guess that must have been a mindblower." She gave me her

smoky half-smile and nodded. “You also said you thought you could have saved Rufus. But from what?”

She sat back a bit when I said that, and then slowly, a little ruefully, shook her head.

“Rufus could have been a great man... probably would have been. Instead, he ran into me and got his head filled up with notions of destiny. Why not? He thought the gods were with him, yes?”

“There you go again,” I said, making sure I was smiling when I said it. “Everything is your responsibility, right?”

“In this case? I certainly had something to do with it, don’t you think? Rufus wanted his uncle’s seat in the Senate, but he had no realistic chance of achieving it. His cousin Livius was very well established and Rufus’s side of the family had not been seriously active politically for a generation. He knew this. Had he returned from that expedition to Gaul without ever meeting me he certainly would have channeled his aspirations in some more constructive direction.”

I was feeling a little uneasy about something. “I hate to say it because I know you liked the guy, but... he doesn’t seem like he was a very nice man. I mean... you talked about him beating slaves and even... well...” I stopped, feeling a little repulsed, not sure I wanted to ask, but I went ahead. “Did you mean that part about him cutting a slave’s tongue out? Literally?”

“That was not uncommon among the Romans,” she said, her brow furrowing a little, almost like she wasn’t sure what I was driving at.

“Well, Jesus?” I said. “I mean, he tortured you! He cut people’s tongues out for chrissakes...”

I just stopped. She was staring at me with a look I didn’t like. It wasn’t even angry. It was just emotionless. She seemed to be calculating, watching me, like she was deciding something. Finally she spoke again.

“Before we left my lands, he wiped out the entire village near where I was captured... then killed all the men who had witnessed me killing his fellow Romans. He called them traitors and liars who were spreading tales to discredit him. He had his fellow Romans cut all their throats.”

“Christ! Why?”

“It would have shamed him if anyone had known he had allowed me to live after killing his men. So he eliminated everyone who witnessed it. Well, save for Marieko.”

I just stared at her. She was still utterly without emotion. Her look was almost alien. “So you were okay with that?” I finally asked, more than a little repulsed.

“The world is a harsh place. I’ve met harsher men. I’ve been even harsher myself. You do not realize this about me by now?”

I took a deep breath. I thought back to my conversation with Joshua and tried to keep my face passive. “So are you like that now?”

She just stared at me, then gave the barest hint of a smile. “You really are a good Christian boy, aren’t you?” she asked.

At first I thought she was mocking me, but by now I’d learned to count to ten before responding to almost anything that seemed provocative. Her tone didn’t seem mocking. It seemed almost affectionate. I couldn’t decide if that was worse or not. Either way, the question bugged me on more than one level. Finally, I just laughed.

“Princess, I’m not even a believer...”

“No? Are you a hypocrite, then?” she asked. There wasn’t even a trace of hostility to the question.

I frowned. “Okay look, I’m not a religious guy, but... this guy wasn’t nice. You weren’t nice either. I’m just asking you...” I stopped and thought about it. “Crap, I’m not sure what I’m asking you.”

“It is so simple for you, isn’t it?” she smirked, “Brought up in this modern American utopia of yours, ensconced in the bosom of a well-defined moral universe. You have your rules, your directions all laid out before you, easy to see, easy to follow... you have no idea what it means to not know what is right and what is wrong.”

“I don’t think it’s all as simple as that,” I shot back. “And I don’t buy into moral relativist bullshit. I know you know right from wrong. It’s all through everything you’ve said to me, or in your journals, or even on that weird web site of yours. Or was that all a lie?”

Her eyes narrowed but her face was otherwise impassive. “It is the end result of thirty-five centuries of fear, of mistakes, loss and horror. You realize, don’t you, that by your biblical accounting of three score and ten for a normal lifespan, I have already seen 50 lifetimes—do you not?”

I thought for a second. “Okay, yeah.”

“So are you so foolish as to think that regardless of your lucky freedom to believe or disbelieve as you please... due to this lovely liberal democracy you were born in, this apex of civilization you are the inheritor of... are you so foolish as to think that you haven’t had your moral certainties handed to you on a silver platter? And yet you presume to judge *me*? Or the people I have chosen to love? Who do you think you are?”

“Yeah, *whatever!*” I snapped. “This isn’t about me!” I immediately regretted that. But it didn’t seem to upset her. She just chuckled—dryly, humorlessly. Then she stood up.

She walked to the window, looking out. “No, no it is not, is it? Still, my friend...” she stopped, still facing out the window, her hands behind her back. “I don’t call many people that, by the way. You know that don’t you?”

“Well,” I said, suddenly feeling embarrassed. “Yeah, I guess so.” I felt apologetic, but wasn’t sure why.

She gave a little nod, still looking out the window. “Still I must ask you,” she continued, “Do you believe for an instant that your affected disbelief, your supposed atheism, somehow erases a lifetime of conditioning?”

I’d learned from previous collisions not to speak too quickly. She had a tendency to leap to conclusions that could be really destructive. I wasn’t about to feed that beast again. Then, as I thought about it, I had to wonder if she was wrong.

“Okay, I don’t believe in some white-haired God in the sky or the Saints, but I do believe that there were great and wise men in the world, and that Jesus was one of them... and that people have learned a lot with time...”

“You are even less willing to lie to yourself than you are to lie to me, aren’t you?”

I grinned a little. “It’s not about me.”

The words just sat there for what seemed like an eternity. Finally she spoke again.

“Perhaps by your judgment Rufus was an evil man.” She stopped. “By your judgment I am probably an evil thing.”

By my judgment? I thought about that for a minute. I was afraid to let this out, but I decided there was no better time.

“Joshua tells me you murdered a man in Georgia about 140 years ago.”

She didn’t move, although I could swear I saw a little flinch. “Joshua knows about that, does he?” she asked.

I didn’t answer, just waited. She stayed completely calm. Finally she sighed and said, “The family’s detectives did good work.”

She was calm, matter-of-fact. Her gaze never strayed from the window, her hands locked firmly behind her back. I began to squirm a little. Her tone reminded me of a moment back at the hotel room in Ann Arbor. She’d been fiddling with her gun and I’d asked her if she was planning on shooting someone. “*No, that would probably just complicate things,*” she’d said, looking at me with no expression. It was the exact same look and tone she was using now; dead, expressionless, matter-of-fact, *cold*.

“You keep your promises don’t you?” I asked, not sure why I was asking. “Especially the ones to yourself.”

“You are in no danger from me,” she replied. It was flat, factual, certain. It wasn’t what I’d asked, but for whatever reason I believed it. We both just sat there for a bit, me in my chair fiddling with the hand rests, her quietly staring out the window. “Murder is a horrible thing, but there are worse things,” she finally said, evenly. Then she took a deep breath.

“I do not kill lightly, not since....” Her voice trailed off and she didn’t finish the sentence. “Even when I think I must kill, it leaves a stain upon me. I learned long ago not to do it if I could avoid it. If I could....” She suddenly took another deep breath and swallowed, her voice catching a

little. She kept staring carefully out that window into the back yard, though her voice started grating a little. “That man in Georgia deserved to die. But I do not kill lightly. Not anymore. The price... the price is so very high.”

Finally, I decided to change the subject. “So you figured out Rufus wasn’t going to become a God with you... and trying to be one was his undoing?”

Without changing expression or looking at me, she turned and walked to the bar. Every time we reached a point where I was getting under her skin, the scotch would start flowing and she’d light a cigarette. Even as I thought it, there she went again, knocking a cigarette out of the pack with one hand as she poured a drink with the other. I couldn’t help but laugh a little.

She didn’t look up, but she obviously heard me. “I amuse you, do I?” she asked, her face and voice still impassive as she lit her cigarette, staring into the flame as she puffed.

I grinned. “You’re predictable, Princess. Every time I try to point out that you might not have been in control of everything, you get up, light up and pour a drink.”

She turned and stared at me for a minute. I thought I might have gone too far—but then her face cracked into a grin and she looked human again. She deliberately tossed her freshly lit butt into her scotch glass and turned back to me, leaning against the bar, hooking one bare foot on the side of a barstool, her mouth in a little half-smiling moue. She just looked at me like that for a minute until I spoke up.

“Anyway,” I said, groping for words. I felt a little nervous, but she was starting to look normal again and that was good. “I guess I understand what you’re saying. It was a harsh world and I guess the Romans weren’t more brutal than most people, huh?”

“They were even more brutal than most actually,” she said. “In some ways. But in others...” she stopped, and nodded a little curtly. “Sometimes they were kinder.”

“Okay, but still, it’s like... it’s like you can’t stand the notion that maybe, just maybe, Rufus was just another arrogant glory hound whose own ambition did him in. I mean, seriously, Roman history, hell, *human* history, is chock full of guys just like him. You say it all went bad, and I can almost see it coming from what you’re saying. His idea to be a god and take over the world was crazy. But why does it have to be because of you? What the hell happened that makes you so certain?”

“Rufus,” she announced flatly, “committed suicide. He did it right before my eyes, before his entire family, with all his friends and supporters in attendance.”

“Wow. Why?”

“He stood accused of treason.”

“Because of you?”

She looked impatient. “He had a plan to usurp power. His first step was to discredit his cousin. His uncle was a Senator and Rufus’s cousin Livius was his heir apparent. Rufus started rumors that his cousin enjoyed loving men.”

“Huh? You said yourself that Rufus was a switch hitter.”

She smirked again. “Indeed, but the rumor was that Livius was fond of performing fellatio on his more handsome male friends, and of receiving anal pleasure from them. That he extended those favors even to his slaves.”

“So wait a minute, you say it was okay to... but not to...” The light finally went on in my head. “Oh, I get it. Okay to be on top but not on the bottom.”

“Quite,” she said. Then she straightened up and started walking aimlessly around the room, looking at her paintings, fiddling with her plants. I could usually tell by now when she needed to be quiet, so I just waited as she glided around. This seemed to be her favorite place in the house because it was well lived-in. There were comfortable leather chairs, low tables, another of the ever-present fireplaces and the bar. Finally, she stopped at the same window again and stared out at the back yard.

“The Romans had some very strict notions about what constituted proper behavior amongst males,” she said, a little flatly. “My Rufus was spreading the notion that Livius was disgustingly weak and decadent.”

“So that’s treason?” I asked, forcing my brain back into gear.

“Oh, no, that was just a piece of the plan. It wasn’t enough that Livius should be thought weak and disgraceful. Rufus had to be seen as a stark contrast to him. Rufus needed his cousin’s weakness to threaten the Republic.”

“So how did he do that?” I asked.

“Young Livius had substantial holdings outside Arretium, including a farming estate not far from Rufus’s own. So Rufus set about fomenting a rebellion amongst Livius’ slaves, particularly amongst the laborers who worshipped Diana. Many of them were Carthaginians and Spaniards from the rebellious provinces.”

“So he was...” I stopped. “I’m confused,” I said, finally.

“Rufus thought to ‘fortuitously’ uncover a rebellion by Livius’ slaves. He would then crush it personally and lay the blame squarely at the feet of his weak, effeminate cousin.”

“So wait, Rufus was trying to talk Livius’ slaves into rebelling so he could turn around and stab them in the back?”

“Precisely,” she said. “Livius’ slaves would rebel and bring other slaves in with them, and then Rufus would put them down.” She paused. “Fomenting a slave rebellion: *That*,” she said in a voice as cold as ice, “was treason.”

“And you knew he was up to that?” I asked.

“Certainly. Then he would kill them all.” Her voice was flat again and that look was creeping back again.

“And you were okay with that?” I asked.

She slowly turned to face me and I stiffened a little. Her face was completely dead, with that deep, almost inhuman *presence* behind her eyes. It was almost lizard-like. The other times I'd seen that it had disappeared pretty quickly. This time it stayed and it was almost like I was seeing something behind the mask. It was unnerving. When she spoke again her voice was like ice dragged across a rough stone floor.

“Rufus miscalculated. He thought the slaves were more loyal to him—and more stupid—than they were. He was filling their heads with odd notions about the goddess Diana, whom they loved, and how they might throw off their shackles and find freedom with her blessing.”

I opened my mouth but something in her look made me shut it again. She went on, still cold as ice.

“Mind you, he planned to sacrifice them all to Diana. But first he was making them think he was their friend, that he and I would support them in rebelling and escaping. Then he would make it clear that the rebellion was a direct result of his cousin's weakness and kill each and every one of them.”

She said it like saying Rufus planned to crush an anthill. She just kept looking at me, expressionless and cold.

I shivered a bit. “Okay,” I said. “He came up with a plot and messed it up. Get to the part where it's your fault.”

“He was going to sacrifice them to Diana” she said, her face still expressionless. “On my behalf.”

“Well that's a pretty harebrained...” I started.

Coldly, she cut me off. “It wasn't harebrained. It was genius.” Her only emotion was a slight annoyance, which was really creeping me out. “The slaves were stupid fools anyway and probably deserved their fate.” She just went on, not even reacting to my expression. *Deserved what Rufus had in store for them?* I thought, but said nothing.

“Rufus was subtle in all his workings. It took him well over a year to bring events close to where he could spring his trap. His cousin was just beginning to suffer from the whispering campaign against him and had yet to act in his own defense. The timing was crucial. Livius and his father, Rufus's uncle, were well respected in Rome. Once they took a public stand it was unlikely the rumors would prevail. The rebellion had to erupt just before they were forced to act. The combination of the two, that was to be the fatal blow. Rufus had it planned perfectly... perfectly, except for one, small thing.”

I shivered a little, but she just kept staring at me with that dead look. “So... what did he forget?” I finally asked.

“That bitch...” she said. It came out in a hiss. “Vipsania,” she spat the name out, her face still impassive, but her voice dripping. “Vipsania,” she said again. “I should have snapped her neck the instant she set foot near our house.”

*Our house?* I wondered. But I just waited for her to go on.

She stood there, her face like granite as she stared at me... or not so much at me as *through* me, like I wasn't even there. The rest of her was so still she almost looked like a statue. "Rufus was a fool and hinted at his plans to her when he visited her in Rome, about two months before he sprang his trap. I'm certain that he only hinted... but that was enough. It was his undoing, and mine."

I wanted to ask her more but her eyes were still boring into me, and behind those eyes was just... nothing. Emptiness. Soullessness. I felt like I couldn't breathe. Then finally her eyes slid off me, down to a spot on the floor in front of her. She turned her head and pointed that lifeless gaze outside again. All of a sudden it was like I wasn't even there, but it was a relief not to have her looking at me that way.

I shook myself, straightened and cracked my neck, then got up. She still didn't move. I went to the bar and took two fresh glasses. I poured myself a drink, then a double for her, and grabbed her cigarettes and lighter. Part of me didn't want to get close to her. But I knew... I hoped... I could wipe that terrible inhuman look off her face.

As I walked up she was so motionless I wondered if she were even breathing. It was almost startling when she suddenly turned her face to me. Her deadly eyes locked on mine, cold and bottomless. Then they dropped to my hands, where she stared at the booze like it might be dangerous.

Suddenly, she chuckled.

It was just a short exhalation of breath, but all of a sudden it seemed like the room was warm again—and just like that she was human once more. She smiled and took the drink, then let me light her cigarette for her.

"A superb idea," she quipped, lifting the glass to me before she drank. I took a gulp out of my glass as she took a hard drag off her cigarette. She took another look at me and her eyes asked a question.

I searched myself for a minute, then took another sip out of my drink. I looked at the paintings on the wall across from us, then back at her. She was still staring at me, but without malice. She looked a little embarrassed, but knowing. Her eyes waited for me, almost like she knew what I was going to ask.

"So... What did I just see?" I asked.

I could tell she knew exactly what I meant because her shoulders dropped just a bit. She looked a little resigned, but behind it I still saw something... something a little bit... alien.

"So, you saw me," she said. When I looked a little confused she went on. "So you finally saw *me*," she said, a bit of resignation in her voice. She also sounded a little amused, but I was still confused.

Her eyes suddenly returned to that chilling look. "Just me, nothing more, nothing less." I thought about it and said nothing. "It's not pretty, is it?" she asked.

"I saw a..." I paused. I took another sip. "We're just kind of *things* to you sometimes, aren't we?" I asked.

She paused and tossed back the rest of her scotch, then looked out the window again. "Sometimes I forget where I am... what I am. I get lost in the moment and the person I am supposed to be... what people expect me to be... falls away, and all that's left is me, raw and naked." She looked at me again. "I am not one of you." She said it flatly, coldly, without even a hint of remorse or regret.

"Are you saying... that this is all an act?" I couldn't help but think about that afternoon in Joshua's office. What would he make of all this?

"An act? My entire life is an act. I pretend to fit in; I learn to make the appropriate responses so no one sees just what I am. I suppose it's a natural consequence of living the way I have for so many centuries." She took a breath and I thought I detected a little bit of regret. "Sometimes it's hard to understand where I begin and the act ends."

That was something I hadn't really expected her to say and I wasn't sure what to do with it. I knew at some point I'd have to explore it with her again, but not now. Instead I asked the obvious question.

"So, who the hell was Vipsania?"

"Vipsania? Vipsania was Rufus's wife."

## Chapter 34

*Arretium, circa 128 BCE*

Death, when it comes, rarely arrives by knocking at the door and waiting politely while you prepare yourself. This is a lesson I had learned long before, yet still the following events struck me with a force beyond any I had experienced in many centuries.

Two days before it came, Salia was playing in the library while I read. Her childish musings were no distraction to me; indeed, they were almost calming. Sometimes this place was simply too quiet for my liking—a thought that would have seemed passing strange not so long before. In a way her presence there was also an act of defiance, for Marieko had forbidden her to speak to me. This naturally rendered me irresistible to her, but I respected her grandfather's wishes as best I could, feeling that I outraged the old man sufficiently as it was.

I was reading Euripides that morning, finishing up what Rufus had of his writings with *Troïades*. It struck me that Euripides seemed certain the gods were much like mortals, so petty and childish. It made little sense to me. In my domain I had most certainly punished those who slighted me, but mortals with the good sense to run away seldom had much to fear. Indeed, the more I read of the doings of the gods of the Greeks and Romans, the less kinship I felt with them, extending even to my counterpart, Diana.

It was while ruminating upon these things that a phrase caught my attention, something Salia whispered as she toyed with a rag doll on the floor near my feet.

“No, she's not a tricker, you're a tricker. You should be nice to her—she's so lonely.”

My head snapped about and I stared at her down on the floor. She looked up at me, then looked to her side and made a shushing gesture.

In a calm and friendly voice I asked her, “Who are you talking to, little one?”

“Nobody,” she replied, looking up at me wide-eyed.

I smiled at her. “Ah, it sounded like you were talking to somebody. Perhaps you were talking to your doll?”

“Dolls don't talk,” she said in a very matter-of-fact tone, “they're just dolls.”

“That's true, but tell me, does anyone talk to you? Anyone... special? Perhaps someone who only talks to you?”

She tried not to smile, but her face gave her away, then she giggled. It took no small amount of will for me to maintain my calm demeanor, for inside I was roiling.

“I'm not supposed to say,” she told me, “but you already know...”

“Yes, Salia, I do know. What is your friend’s name?”

“It’s a secret. He won’t tell me.”

Even as she spoke I knew the truth of it and began to calm myself. With a few more questions I confirmed it: an imaginary friend. Lonely children often created those and, though I had never been a child, I recognized the phenomenon well. I found myself uncomfortably remembering my past, from the time before I became a goddess, memories I had pushed away but which came suddenly to the fore. I remembered times when I had cared for children... and remembered seeing people be very cruel to children who imagined friends, accusing them of consorting with demons. I knew it was merely harmless play.

Yet that knowledge could not completely erase the flash of trepidation I had felt, for I had thought for one brief, terrifying moment that my nemesis, *Loghaz*, had found the path to put his voice in this child’s ear.

*Loghaz*, the trickster, demon whisperer of lies and fear. Not since the day that voice had driven me back into the arms of the man I had hated, then feared and now loved, had he deigned to speak to me again; indeed neither *Loghaz* nor any other of the familiar voices of the gods ever came to me. It was as if leaving my lands had stripped them from me.

An unbidden thought startled me: *Or perhaps we were never more than a lonely dream...* It was as a whisper from some secret place, yet I knew it to be merely my own words, and that realization chilled me such that I shivered in my seat.

I gazed again at the tome I held. Now the tale of Cassandra and Hecuba and the gods held no lure for me. I had felt for some time that something was amiss and this sudden remembrance had focused my mind and fixed my heart upon it. The gods of the Romans might be powerful and hold sway over these people, but they were not my kin. They did not speak to me.

And if that were the case, if these unfamiliar feelings of doubt were indeed simple and undeniable truth, then what of Rufus? What of his certainty that my divinity would guide his plans to fruition? This revelation was sudden and crushing, all the more so for having built within me these many weeks as I partook of the fountain of knowledge given me by the written word. Rufus, so confident, so certain...

*Whom the gods would destroy they first make proud.*

One old Greek had recently taught me the meaning of written words. Now the written words of another old Greek taught me the meaning of doubt: doubts I had long suppressed, doubts I had never even considered.

I sent Salia on her way and then set out to find Marieko. I had questions for the old man and I hoped to find him in a talkative mood.

“A question? You? The wise and immortal Felicitas, O child of Jupiter and Priestess of Diana. You seek to ask lowly Marieko a question?” He cast his eyes skyward and grimaced. “What great power have I so wronged that he sets you on my doorstep *again!*?”

“Please,” I whispered, “old teacher... this is not a moment for your ranting against me. You have knowledge and I have fears. My questions may be your very own.”

He stopped then and regarded me with narrowing eyes. I had never used either of those words with him before; neither ‘please’ nor ‘teacher’, and hearing them from me clearly gave him pause.

“Well, speak your questions quickly then,” he said, “for I am busy. Rufus’s wife is coming to visit you know.”

This caught me up short. “His wife?” I asked. Rufus had gone to Rome twice without me to attend to business matters with his wife, but he had assured me she meant nothing to him and that she would never come here.

“Yes indeed,” Marieko continued while my mind wrestled with several conflicting emotions and ideas at once. “An advance courier arrived not an hour ago to say she would be arriving no later than sunset with important business matters for Rufus. We will of course need to sort out what to do with you while she’s here.”

“What do you mean, ‘do with me?’” I asked, a flush of anger and jealousy injecting itself into my confusion as my mind caught up with his words.

“Come now, barbarian, you’ve been carrying on as this man’s mistress, shamefully above your station, and now his rightful wife is...”

“Enough Marieko!” Rufus’s voice barked from down the tiled hallway. He was striding toward us purposefully, a moderately manic look marring his normally cool and controlled features. As he approached he gave the old Greek a withering glare, then stopped and gently took my elbow. “Felicitas, please come, we must speak privately.”

I locked my knees and glared at him. “Oh we must speak, must we?” I said. Sudden anger drove all my earlier thoughts and concerns away. “And of what must we speak of that the old man must not hear?”

A look of anger whipped across his countenance, and then suddenly turned—for a breath—to a flash of fear that he quickly put under control. Then he laughed jovially.

“Ah, my Felicitas. You are so lovely when you are like this. Come with me and we shall talk.” As he chuckled, he tugged at me, and I reluctantly allowed him to draw me away. Fury warred with what I had to admit was petty jealousy as he guided me to the privacy of our shared bedroom.

“My lovely Felicia...” he began. I merely glared at him. “A complication has arisen in our plans.”

“Your plans,” I said coolly.

His look became cold. “Our plans,” he said firmly. “We have spoken of this. You know that a Roman wife does not begrudge her husband casual dalliances but that I must still honor my contract with Vipsania until such time as I can divorce her.”

My eyes narrowed. “Yes...”

“Would it make sense for either of you to meet, then?”

“You wish to hide me. In shame.”

“My darling no, of course not,” he said, sounding a little rushed. “But again please, my dear... have I ever begrudged you anything you requested—my sweet lovely goddess?” He said it with that gentle purring noise that usually made my knees a little weak.

“Perhaps, but...”

“And surely one so wise as yourself would not wish to be forced into the same room with this other woman—the woman your man does not love? Would you be so cruel as to torment her so?”

I stopped. I had been so jealous I had not even thought of that. I cared not a jot for her discomfort, but what of my own?

“So you are not ashamed of me,” I said, my voice betraying a bit of an edge, “yet you wish to send me from our home.”

“My darling...” he said, embracing me, cooing in my ear, nuzzling and kissing my neck between his words. “Never, never.... But would it not be beneath your dignity... to have to play... Vipsania’s petty jealousy games? Would it not be... perhaps better.... To take a shopping trip to the sea for a few days... perhaps with a few of the... household servants...?”

He always was able to make me shiver with delight and forget my cares. By the time we were done making love, I almost believed it was my idea to leave the villa that very afternoon.

Still feeling a bit confused between my doubts, my anger and my jealousy, I made to leave for a few days with three of the household servants—two girls, and a boy to drive the cart—in tow.

The slaves were loading up the cart in the stable behind the villa, packing some belongings and goods for our stay as we prepared to take our leave, when a commotion broke out by the front gate. As I had agreed that a confrontation with Rufus’s wife would be a pointless exercise I urged the girls to finish putting our things in the cart and ordered the boy to take us away. Yet as he whipped the horses into motion and we began to trot away, I suddenly grabbed his shoulder and demanded that he stop.

Some two hundred paces from the villa, we halted. Motioning the slaves to hold still, I found myself walking quickly away from them, traveling back down the alleyway to the villa, then slipping surreptitiously around the side of the wall to gaze upon the front entranceway.

Rufus’s wife was strikingly tall for a woman, with a mane of dark hair gathered about her ears with barrettes, a proud nose buttressing blazing black eyes that glowed with power—not unlike Rufus’s very own eyes, I found myself thinking. She waited with her retinue some 20 paces from the front entrance, expecting her husband to greet her. In that moment I knew I hated her and wanted to kill her. Who was she to claim my Rufus’s affections?

Within a few breaths my Rufus came through the front entrance, walking in his regal and arrogant way, to greet her. As he grasped her hands, I turned away and ran back along the wall and into the alleyway, at once both repulsed and understanding. Surely he must greet her cordially now,

and yet I wished he would set her aside this very moment. Yet it would make no sense to confront her here and now, would it? So I sped down the alleyway, knowing now there was no good purpose to my being there.

I returned to the other slaves in the cart. We sped away to the east, heading to the seaport where we planned to spend a few days at a local inn, spending Rufus's money shopping for trinkets and whatever exotic goods might be brought in by merchants from Africa and other far away places.

We planned to stay until Rufus sent for us, but the next morning, before we had a chance to do almost anything, a boy from the household arrived at the inn. He was a good boy, one of Rufus's favorites, and he showed up at my door in the inn looking a little flustered.

"My apologies for waking you, mistress, but I have a message here from our master," he said, thrusting a ribbon-wrapped scroll into my hands. I opened it slowly, reading the boy's trepidation as I did so. On it were written words that made my heart drop to my toes:

*My darling, I have made a horrible blunder. Our plans together are come to naught. When last I visited Vipsania, too much wine and a loose tongue made me speak foolishly, and now I am undone. All is lost. I have told you many times that you might take your freedom any time you wished, and now I say to you, take it. By the time you read this, I shall likely have perished. Take what wealth you have garnered from me, including the slaves if you wish, and depart back to Gaul. Run with all speed my darling—all our plans our come to naught.*

—R

It was marked with his seal. The boy just stared at me as I looked up from the scroll into his face.

"No," I said to myself. "**No!**" I screamed at the boy. As he cowered away, I slapped him in the face. Then I quickly turned back into the room, gathered up my most important belongings, including my favorite knife, and strode out into the courtyard. Ignoring the stable hands, I grabbed a saddle and reins and put them on the back of the stoutest horse who had pulled our wagon, then mounted and galloped away.

It was only a day's ride back to Arretium and I ignored everyone who might chance across my path. Still, it was evening when the exhausted gelding trotted me back down the alleyway toward our villa—Rufus's villa. Slipping quietly off the horse's back, my knife secured in my belt, I made toward the back-corner window—Marieko's chambers.

Pulling back the shutters, I was stunned at the scene I beheld. Marieko's grandson and granddaughter lay by Marieko's straw-stuffed wooden bed. As I pulled myself through the carved stone window, hefting my legs over the opening and setting my feet upon the tiled floor, Marieko's grandchildren stared at me.

Marieko... the old Greek lay in his bed, his pallor grey, his body unmoving.

"You!" his grandson said, hoarsely. Little Salia ran into a corner and hid her eyes, clutching her doll. "You!" he said a little louder.

“Tell me what has happened here young man,” I said evenly. Yet my eyes already told the tale. In Marieko’s hand was a cup containing the remnants of a crimson liquid. It appeared that he had drunk poison, and died in the arms of all that was left of his family.

“He died because of you!” the young man suddenly screamed, charging toward me with his arms flailing. I struck him in the belly just under the ribs and he folded over, falling to his knees as he gasped for air.

I suddenly realized that I must find my Rufus now, at this very instant, and charged to the bedroom door, unlatching it and flinging it open. Two armed men who had obviously been guarding the door and heard the commotion inside confronted me. With a shrieked curse I lashed out with one foot, striking the one on the left in the knee as I seized my knife, lunging low at the other and raking the blade along his arm as he reached for me. He cursed, but his stout arms encircled me, lifting me from my feet as I twisted in his grasp. Other men came running, attracted by the shouting, and I kicked another hard in the groin before they overwhelmed me, forcing me to the ground. They rained kicks and punches upon me as I shrieked and struggled. Soon the clutch of them had stripped me of all my belongings and even my clothes, pummeling me with their fists until I was silent and then dragged me to the room Rufus and I had shared, bellowing at me to be silent as they made fast my limbs with iron shackles.

“No,” I heard myself sobbing. “No, no, you cannot do this to us...”

They left me alone in our room, bound hand and foot like a common slave, unable to stand or even move in more than the smallest way. As I lay there shaking, my limbs screaming to reach out and kill all of these Roman bastards, I realized I was alone in the bedroom that Rufus and I had made our own, and that I could do nothing but await what might come.

After what seemed an eternity two stout Roman soldiers came in and seized me by my armpits, hoisting me to my feet and then, half-carrying me, forced me to hobble out into the main Atrium of our house.... of our home together... of....

...of Rufus’s villa in Arretium.

Rufus was there, on the high couch where he had often reclined while friends and political acquaintances sat on the couches strewn about. Suddenly I was afraid for him more than for me. How could all of this, which had seemed so obviously right and proper and inevitable, have gone so terribly wrong? I had thought we had the world at our fingertips. I had thought that this was the answer, the reason I had been so tortured for so long. I had thought this was the final ending of centuries of fear and loneliness and pain.

Rufus just looked at me as they dragged me in. “Oh my Felicitas... my *Tivazō*... how could I have led us both so far astray?”

His wife was standing at his left, looking down her haughty nose at me as she said, “This? This is the barbarian strumpet you preferred over me?” she said, her voice dripping with disgust.

At his right, a fey, slender middle-aged man said, “Oh really now Rufus, this filth is what you thought to conquer me with?” I suddenly realized that this must be Livius.

As I stared at my lovely, beautiful Rufus, I was horrified to realize both his wrists were slashed with angry red welts across them and along his forearm; laid open, palm out, both of his arms slowly bled into cups held by servant boys. The cups already overflowed onto the tiled floor.

Naked, my hands and feet bound with chains, on my knees, I could only look helplessly into his beautiful, beautiful face—which I had never seen so dark.

“Rufus, you always were a stupid fool,” said Vipsania.

“Honestly, Rufus, had I known you were such a fool I would never have taken your efforts to poison my name so seriously,” Livius added, simpering as he laughed.

Rufus’s eyes seized my own—pleading, apologizing. “Felicitas, you should have fled.... I stand accused of slander and of fomenting rebellion. If I do not destroy myself, my entire family’s estate will be forfeit... and I realize now that this was all my folly.” He glared accusingly at Vipsania, and I understood he had told her just enough that she was able to betray him. I looked at the woman and felt sick inside. Rufus was going to die, and that bitch he called a wife was positively ecstatic behind her glowering visage. I could not let this happen.

“I am to blame for this!” I cried. “No, please, it was my plot! Please, you cannot blame him!”

Vipsania and Livius merely grinned as Rufus shook his head.

Rufus looked at me and said, “No, no, my darling one, you seek to save me but you did no wrong... I will have no one blame you.... I love you... there is nothing in this world that matters more to me. Not my life or the life of any other man or woman, slave or free—nothing do I hold above you!” Livius and Vipsania both made disgusted noises at that, and he looked defiantly at them before focusing on me again. “Nothing means more, not my life, nor the Gods...”

“Gods?” I laughed, “Oh, I am certain that there is much laughter amongst the Gods this day! ‘Look at that fool mortal, Rufus! Stumbled on a whore in the woods and thought he’d made a Goddess his slave!’”

“Do not take this upon yourself!” he pleaded.

“Enough!” Vipsania screeched, “Are we all to stand and listen to this nonsense? Bind her mouth!”

Strong hands seized me again and a rag was thrust into my mouth. Prostrate and helpless I pleaded with my eyes as my beloved launched into his final oration, declaring that his own life was far too compromised to continue, that his acts, though taken with the good and security of the Senate and the People of Rome always first and foremost in mind, had led him to believe that his innocence might be questioned and his honor impugned. That to make good on his failings and to preserve the honor of his family, he would take his own life, protesting to the end that he was innocent of charges of Treason and Tyranny.

A low moan erupted from the family slaves and the handful of Rufus’s friends who had come to bear witness as he finished his oration. Then he settled back onto his couch and took a cup of wine, using both hands now that his arms were so crippled. For perhaps the next hour, he ate and drank wine, his life oozing from the wounds he had inflicted as a result of our madness. Muted by my gag I

pleaded with my eyes, but he would not look upon me. His gaze always avoided the naked girl bound and gagged at his feet. I would sometimes try to gain my knees, but one of his retainers would always force me down, grinding my face in the spreading pool of his blood. Though he refused to allow them to blame me, clearly they all felt me guilty.

As he grew weaker, his speech slurring, he finally stopped. Though he could no longer muster the strength or will to move, he made his voice heard clearly.

“Unbind her mouth,” he finally whispered, “and bring her to me.” Vipsania protested, but no one listened and the gag was finally removed. I crawled up to him and took his hand in mine.

“Behold our handiwork... are you Diana, or perhaps Discord... what would you say to me now as my end approaches?”

“Forgive me,” I wept, “I should have known with what wisdom might be mine, I should have seen...”

“Forgive?” he whispered, his hand reaching out clumsily to grasp my shoulder and draw me close, “There is nothing to forgive... I know whose folly this is... fear not—Vipsania is a calculating woman, but she will not begrudge me my dying decree... you are not to be harmed...” Drawing a deep breath he said it loudly, “She is not to be harmed...”

Then his hand slid from my shoulder as his head slacked backwards. Though my wrists were still bound together as I sat shamed at his feet, suddenly a wild thought came upon me. As his eyes began to glaze over, I suddenly took my left wrist to my mouth, bound as it was in chains, and bit into it hard, feeling pain and a sudden gush of blood, and I thrust it to his lips screaming, “Drink my darling, drink of my blood and live forever with me!”

With his last breath his eyes looked upon mine. Then he turned to drink from the blood that flowed from my hand... and with a sigh, died while I watched, my blood flowing across his teeth, over his lips, and down his face.

I wept over him. “I love you... we should have been as gods together... we could have been... we should have been...”

After that I remember nothing but the cold, distant laughter of Vipsania as the guards dragged me away.

## Chapter 35

*Arretium, circa 128 BCE*

Rufus's suicide and the open gloating of his wife and cousin had been bitter to endure. The next morning Vipsania had taunted me before the household, daring me to act, to prove I was divine and undo the acts she had set in motion. And I had been powerless, knowing in my black and burning heart that the Romans themselves had stolen my divinity from me—tearing me from my lands and the comfortable dominion I had enjoyed, burying me in the stinking swamp of their worthless and corrupt myths and beliefs. What place was this for the Huntress, amongst the brick, stone and poison of a city?

My ultimate humiliation had come after the death of my doomed love, after she showed me the cold and lifeless body of the old Greek Marieko who had despised me yet had won my affection and respect. She told me Marieko cursed my name before he died.

“You should die as well,” she told me, “Though Livius says I should deny Rufus the final honor of his dying wish, I believe I will keep your pretty throat intact.”

“You would do well to heed the words of your husband-to-be,” I snapped at her, seeking to goad her into action, “lest he suspect you might have designs upon yet another man.”

She laughed at me then, the sound made ever more cutting by the clear beauty of her voice. “Oh, no, little one, Livius has no such concerns regarding me. He shall be Senator and I shall have what I desire—a path to power for my sons. Our match is too perfect for either of us to risk it. No, I am free to do with you as I please. And I am mindful of my debt to you, for I am certain my late husband would never have been moved to such a bold plan had you not filled his head with silly notions of Destiny and Prophecy. And, of course, I know the perfect solution... the perfect place for the likes of you.”

And so I finally came to the great city of Rome herself not as a victorious goddess, but in chains in the back of a slave cart to be sold as a whore. Somewhere on the journey to that city in the back of that cart, something inside me flickered and died. I was overcome with numbness. My rage and anguish still burned furiously hot, but it became distant, muffled and far away. When I tried to reach out to embrace it, to feel it... there was nothing, just numbness, nothingness. It was as if I had been torn asunder and that part of me, the part that knew the taste of rage and fury and all other passions now sat apart, screaming at me in vain.

By the time I was sold in the marketplace in Rome, specifically to a whoremaster at Vipsania's request, I had become disinterested in all that surrounded me. I watched my own actions with detachment as I did what was expected of a slave, a role I knew well and that came back to me without effort. In the coolly intellectual part of myself I knew this could not last, that this submission was more than odious. Yet that knowledge could not stir in me the urge to rebel against it. I submitted to every indignity, iron chains and a mark upon my hip. I could seem to take no action of my own volition.

My new master's name was Pavlos. He was a freed slave who ran his patron's brothels in Rome and Ostia, seeing that they turned a profit whilst never allowing his patron's name to be too closely associated with them. He dragged me to the *adiles* to register me as a prostitute under the name Felicia, then set me immediately to work. He fancied himself a strong-willed man and a demanding

master, but I had his measure in a day. In a way his pathetic nature eventually drove me to some action beyond listlessness. It became my plan to endure this place until I could leave Rome without worry of being pursued and then make for my old lands. I kept a civil tongue when that bloviating fool spoke to me and I bided my time.

It was decidedly not a high-end establishment, and I turned out to be popular amongst his clients, at least those who preferred the company of women, for without any pretense to vanity I can say I was easily the most attractive of the girls there. I wore a mask of cheerful servitude that I had learned many centuries before—the instincts came almost automatically and while part of me recoiled in horror I could not find the energy to break out of it. Still, my cheerful demeanor endeared me to many clients so that my earnings were always good.

Pavlos was a terrible manager and a worse master—he beat girls who failed to perform to his satisfaction, that in itself no unusual thing. He simply lacked the good sense to avoid bruising their faces. Of the sanitary conditions, the less said the better.

Seeing that Pavlos somehow had to be turned I made certain to pay special attention to him, for his suspicious and brutal nature stood in opposition to my half-hearted thoughts of escape. It never occurred to me to simply dispose of him, such was my subdued condition, but he proved ridiculously easy to manipulate, as did all those around me, and within a few weeks I had him convinced I loved him and could not stand to be without his touch. It suited his ego and certainly amused the other whores, but once I had him firmly in hand I was able to effect changes in the house, making subtle suggestions that come morning he would swear were his own thoughts.

It began as simply as having the ten girls and four young men spend an hour or two every morning just cleaning rather than standing out on the street trying to attract customers who seldom visited during those hours anyway. We began keeping clean cubicles and making more use of the laundry Pavlos's patron maintained. Pavlos complained bitterly of the cost, but soon the combination of a clean house, well-groomed whores and fresh bedding did have the predictable result: business increased and our prices rose accordingly. From there it slowly became my responsibility to discipline the bad performers and see to it the establishment gathered in the monies Pavlos demanded. In order to do this I was forced to endure more than one beating at his hands, but such were of small consequence, and once the changes had taken place the weekly tallies were easily met, then well exceeded.

Some twelve weeks after arriving in Rome I found myself in charge in all but name and I ran the brothel with a sunny and efficient brutality, gathering in more control as Pavlos became happily preoccupied with counting his patron's money and skimming profits for himself. I disposed of the older and less comely whores, dipping into the brothel's accounts to purchase new slaves, youthful and attractive and at least less diseased than their predecessors. I set my own medical knowledge to the task of keeping them as healthy as was reasonably possible. There were now thirty girls and seventeen boys and our establishment began to gain more respectable clients as word spread through the *suburra* that ours was an entertaining and reputable place to spend one's free time. Profits increased even more as I raised our prices and hired boys to escort some of the prettier girls out during the day to drum up business. I often went myself, since I remained better-looking than most of what passed for beauty in this place.

All in all, after perhaps six months effort on my part, we reached a point where I could be out upon the streets without Pavlos to keep me in check. Once that was accomplished I set my sights upon leaving, to buy my freedom so I would not have to flee and risk being caught and in even worse circumstance. I knew I had reached that point...

But something still held me in check.

It served a purpose, all of this activity on my part. I cared not one whit for those whom my actions gave benefit, not for Pavlos's pocketbook or the young men and women whose lives were still miserable but certainly less so now. It all helped me to avoid looking back upon that tiny, scintillating spark that dwelt within me, yet so far from me I could not even feel its warmth.

At night my dreams were fevered and I would awaken sometimes with my heart racing, my breast filled with panic and hate, but it would fade so swiftly into the numbing grey that cocooned my thoughts and my life. I would almost look forward to the nightmares because for one brief instant I would actually *feel* something, anything other than the cold and passionless plodding of the days as they passed. I confess the numbness at times was so bad that alone in bed at night I would occasionally cut myself with a knife, just to *feel* something. Yet even that pain was usually so dull and distant it brought almost no reaction. One night in frustration I thrust the knife through my left hand completely. But even that brought only a brief escape from the numbness that enveloped me, the pain a thing I could feel only as a phantom, removed from me, unreal. By the next day, of course, the wound was gone. I took at least some comfort in the fact that at least this visible manifestation of my strange nature had not abandoned me, even if it frustrated. I could not even truly hurt myself.

We had begun hiring out to banquets and other festivities, sending a dozen or more to act as servants and entertainment for the assorted guests. I usually took part in these for I was in fairly high demand amongst our regular patrons. Pavlos preferred that I go because it spared him the need to see that everyone returned the following morning along with whatever accoutrements they might have taken with them. I would send everyone on their way, remaining behind to ensure nothing and no one had been forgotten, and then I would make my way back to my lonely room. I told myself I would one day use just such a day to take my leave of Pavlos and Rome, but I never truly acted upon this, not even so far as to scout the ways out of the city.

I was returning from just such an engagement, this having kept me at our customer's dwelling well past midday, when I encountered the man who led me to feel something again. He was a taller, more prosperous man. Older, perhaps forty, and I spied him walking with some five others of similar bearing, headed to some businesslike purpose. I noticed him because his eyes locked onto me with recognition, and then he made some excuse to his companions and parted from them. Not one of them even chanced to glance in my direction.

I recognized him, of course. He had been in Rufus's villa in Arretium for a day during my first year there but his name escaped me. He did not offer his name when he spoke to me but simply asked if I were the Felicia from that house. I told him that I was. He enquired as to my current circumstance and I was truthful regarding that as well. We chatted in an appropriately amiable fashion as he accompanied me on my way and I maintained a friendly flirtatiousness with him. Inside I was deeply annoyed—he brought up memories of those closing days, memories I preferred not to revisit.

But the annoyance lit a small spark and I began to blow gently upon it as we reached the alley that would take us into the heart of the *suburra*. I thought to part with him there, but then he noted in a very matter-of-fact way that he had always fancied me.

"Well of course you do," I replied, smiling, "you have excellent taste, after all. If you come to the House of Pavlos tonight I can promise you..."

“Oh, no, that won’t do,” he protested. “I shall be on my way soon with much I must do. I was thinking we might just try one of these.”

He walked to one of the stalls at the entrance to the alleyway and tried the door, which was surprisingly not even fastened shut. He smiled charmingly and seemed to like me. I smiled in return. He looked around and no one was about, so he ushered me inside. The stall was really the back of a workshop, perhaps where a mule was kept, though it seemed unused as he peered out front and pronounced the place unoccupied. We haggled briefly on a price, since this was obviously not the most accommodating place, then I stripped off my garment, a robe somewhat more modest than my usual raiment, and I spread it on the ground, reclining upon it as he worked open his own clothes.

He descended on me in full heat, but I was accustomed to such treatment and bore his rough penetration without complaint, relaxing to accept him even as I made quite sounds of encouragement. I danced on my back underneath him for a bit, but he seemed intent on taking as full advantage as he could, suddenly urging me onto all fours that he might mount me from behind, then laying back and having me straddle him.

It was strictly utilitarian from my point of view. My purpose was to bring him to climax quickly, but one had to be sure to play upon the male ego. My face was a mask of pleasure and excitement while quiet sighs of passion passed my lips. All the while I was growing angrier and more impatient. I hated him for recognizing me, for being part of a past that had robbed me of so much, for his easy acceptance of the circumstance that led me to be here, and for taking advantage. In another place, under other circumstance, I would have killed him for far less than what he inflicted upon me now. I would have killed him just for being Roman, and the visceral thought of that sent a thrill through the core of me, like some deep well of fire had been tapped and was seeking release. My anger fueled it such that my pelvis now ground against his with renewed purpose as I imagined taking this fool’s life in the most gruesome fashion even as he urged me to greater effort, his body straining upwards beneath me as his finish approached.

I looked upon his face, seeing him straining close-eyed, his hands firm like clamps upon my hips as he held me tight against him, and it burst through me as a storm—not orgasm, but screaming rage so hot it burned through all thought and caution. He shuddered as his own pathetic pleasure took him and I struck him, first my right arm driving the knuckles of my balled fist into his exposed throat and then my left, feeling his windpipe fracture as he jerked beneath me, his body now rigid and trembling, his spine arched as his climax poured forth.

He began to thrash, his hands suddenly as fists, lashing out at me, but I held him imprisoned beneath me and batted aside his flailing arms, his body already so spent in this furious copulation there was little left for his final, defiant spasms, and as his face darkened and his motions became but trembling, it swept through me; a pleasure so sweet, so utterly delicious in its source and flavor I could hardly believe it could be real but for the convulsions of physical joy rippling through my flesh. *I was so very alive!*

It subsided slowly as I held myself atop him, unwilling to so much as move unless it should bring this joyous convulsion of pleasure and hate to a sudden end, but it could not last and as my heart slowed and the furnace of my rage banked and cooled I felt tears in my eyes, so desperate I was to hold on to that delicious pleasure, that white hot feeling. When it was gone I sprang up to my feet in sudden revulsion, standing over the corpse, stifling my sobs of anguish as the dead and icy vault of numb resignation returned to claim me. I kicked the body, trying to reclaim the savage glee I had felt as I struck him and crushed his throat, but it fled from me, returning to that far away place I could not reach and could hardly bear to look upon.

All of it, the pleasure, the fiery joy of it, the delicious sensation of such total arousal, left me trembling and confused, but I quickly realized I had a very real problem on my hands. In all our thrashing about on the floor my robe had been kicked aside so I fetched it up, donning it swiftly as I moved towards the door, peering out between the cracks to look on the street beyond. Traffic was normal, nearly all on foot, but this end of the alley had no open shops so people were not venturing in this direction. I found a bit of cloth hanging from a post and used it to wrap up my hair so that its color would be less obvious, then watched the ebb and flow of the crowds. When I judged the moment right I swiftly slipped out the door and began walking *away* from the alley. I would circle around and approach the *suburra* from the opposite direction.

As I made good my escape I felt a cold certainty within my heart: I knew what was needed now. Escape would not serve, not until I had recaptured that part of me these Romans had stolen.

As time passed the memory of that killing became more muddied and I began to doubt I had experienced those things. It was the deadness inside me, the numbing lack of *anything* that deceived me, pushing away that fleeting moment of absolute feral ecstasy. Still, there was that searing spark, buried so deeply in me, so very hot and painful yet so far away—that far away part of me watched, and waited.

It was more than a month before I took another life. My second victim was barely a man, just seventeen. Drunk on wine and so very full of his own needs he accosted me as I sought to join others from my House on a job just off the Aventine Hill. I let him draw me into an alley before the fury awoke within me and I slipped his grasp, twisting to one side as my left arm caught him by the neck, pulling him off his balance. My grip tightened and he made a noise, a quiet, desperate gasp as his throat was closed and I continued to twist, leaning back as he fell forward, turning his head until I felt the sudden cracking of bones and he went limp. I let him slide to the ground, dragging his corpse to the wall and dropping him there, then moving on down the alley and out on to the street again, walking as if I had not a care in the world even as my blood sang with the fire of this new found delight.

It was so easy to do because I hated them so. I hated their pretensions to civilization, their fascination with blood sport, their arrogant assumption of superiority. The very soul of their culture was warped and diseased and I had allowed it to infect me, to deceive me into believing that I could become a part of it, could rule over it. Then I had watched it destroy the man I loved and bring all my hopes—hopes I had never dared allow myself before they gave them to me—to ruin.

So it became a game, truly a sport for me, taking my trophies in dark alleys or even in the most public of places, each death restoring to me just one more shred of that which had been lost at the hands of this vile race.

I grew bolder as I realized they were unable to recognize what was happening, treating my acts as individual events. A family would send hired men to hunt down the killer of their loved one, only to fall upon some hapless thief who stumbled on the body and stripped it of anything of value. I would hear the uproar and go to the square where some magistrate would condemn the fool to death and then watch with glee as these Romans did my killing for me. If anything those deaths were sweetest of all.

There was a hunger, a ferocious need within me that could only find satisfaction in wanton slaughter. I once took an entire household, poisoning the wine they had purchased for a son's wedding, then watched in astounded glee as the fury of the neighborhood turned on a cousin who

had some petty squabble with the family, ending in his suicide. It was as if they could not help but step into my bloody grasp, helpless to resist, even eager to feed my rage.

The butcher's bill grew longer, years passing as I struggled to reach that point, so tantalizingly close, yet always just beyond my grasp, where I could call myself satisfied and whole once more. My ferocious appetite began to leak out around the edges of the carefully cheerful persona I affected, frightening my master, Pavlos, such that he shipped me off to Ostia. There I found even better game amongst the transient merchants and sailors who regularly flooded that port city, for who noticed just another dead foreign sailor apparently waylaid by muggers?

Soon I lived for nothing but the kill. More than a decade passed, a savage, bloodstained collection of years where my vicious sport left a trail of death and heartbreak in two cities and even across the sea, and though I came close to being discovered once or twice, I always managed to outwit the fool Romans.

Yet it never seemed enough, and my determination to see it done, to complete this tapestry of murder and vengeance, began to overtake the fury that drove me, the pleasure of each act falling prey to the desperate hope that this one would put paid to the debt I sought to collect.

How many lives would it take to quell the hunger within me? After some time, I ceased to even ask the question. There was always more prey to find instead...

## Chapter 36

*Pennsylvania, April, 2005 CE*

She wasn't looking at me, but was sitting back in her chair staring out the window with her hands clasped behind her head and her bare feet up on the coffee table. I turned her words over and over in my head, but there simply wasn't any way to avoid what she'd just told me.

"How long..." I started, but that wasn't the right question so I started over. "How many... how many people did you kill?"

"It wasn't killing," she replied, her voice still flat and ominous, "it was murder." I didn't argue. I noticed that the hair was standing up on the back of my neck and had been for almost an hour. "Less than one thousand?" she went on. "Yes, perhaps somewhat less than that, but not by much. It went on for a long time, thirteen years. Once it took hold of me I'd say I managed to strike at least once a week, on average anyhow."

"Why? What could it possibly mean to you?"

She turned her gaze on me and just stared, which was almost worse than any response I could have imagined. Ever since I'd come to Pennsylvania she'd seemed to be on this downward spiral, the person oozing away and slowly replaced by this *thing* sitting in the chair, casually recounting horrors and cold-blooded murder. I remembered the story she told me about the pregnant woman Saennuz, but that was so different than this. Where was the regret, the quiet admission of being wrong? For that, she'd seemed to want forgiveness, but for this she seemed unremorseful, almost like a vampire she was so casual about it.

Her face was still completely expressionless, but she struggled to speak for a bit, then finally answered.

"They were vile," she said, finally showing some emotion. But it was almost worse: it was *contempt*. "They'd stolen something from me," she went on, "something precious. I was determined to have it back." She paused then, looking into my eyes. What she saw there made her frown. Then she sighed, "It truly was that simple."

"I don't buy it. You had to know there was nothing to gain. How could you *not* know?"

"Nothing to gain?" she snapped back, and I saw genuine anger in her face. She suddenly leaned forward, her feet falling to the floor and her voice became louder, almost threatening and I recoiled a little as she went on. "Who the hell are you to tell me what I felt I had to gain? Who are you to presume to tell me what I *had to have known*?"

I leaned back and put up my hand almost—I was a little embarrassed to admit—to ward her off. Defensively, I answered. "All I'm saying is that after everything you've told me up to this point, this sudden... *spasm* of violence seems out of place. Yes, Rufus was dead, yes it was unexpected, yes it was certainly humiliating, but... why lash out? Why didn't you just leave? If these people were all just ephemeral to you, what was the point of hurting them so much? I don't understand it."

*“Of course you don’t understand it! You can’t!”* Her voice struck me like a club, not shouting, but almost violently emphatic, and it set off something inside me that probably should have been left where it was. Fight or flight I guess: I went from fear to anger.

“That’s bullshit, Princess, and you know it,” I snapped.

She snarled and stood up suddenly, her fists clenched, and took a step toward me. I swear to God, without even thinking I leaned forward and shifted my weight to the balls of my feet, making to grab her if she lunged at me. My heart was pounding so hard in my throat and ears I almost couldn’t hear anything else.

But she didn’t lunge. Her eyes just blazed at me and then suddenly they went out. She was just staring at me, almost through me. “Do you really think you could stop me from snuffing you like a cheap candle, little man?” she said, her voice a complete monotone.

“I won’t make it easy, lady,” was all I said, keeping my voice as level as I could, even though my heart was doing a drumbeat like Bonzo from Led Zeppelin and my stomach felt like alligators were trying to get out of it. She just kept staring at me like a tiger ready to pounce.

Finally, infuriatingly, she started laughing at me. Contemptuously, she plunked back down in her overstuffed chair and threw her leg over one of the arms, still laughing a little and muttering to herself. I couldn’t tell what she was saying. It sounded like Latin, or maybe that guttural old barbarian-talk she sometimes spat out when she was angry. She wasn’t even looking at me, just shaking her head.

“You didn’t hire me to take abuse,” I said.

She suddenly stopped and just stared at me. I went on. “If I don’t understand something it’s my job to ask.”

“You’ve lived what? Thirty-five years? You’re nearly halfway through your life and you know there’s an end to it. I was more than thirteen hundred years old! I was already far beyond human terms. I know you dislike that notion; you prefer to think of me as basically just like you with a few added quirks, but it is not the case. It hasn’t been the case for a very, very long time.”

“So you’re just an utter mystery? Something fools like me can’t ever know or understand? If that’s the way you feel why are we even doing this? What’s the point?”

“I am,” she pronounced with certainty, “just what I am. I am not what you would like to think me to be. You can’t fully understand because no matter how much empathy you bring to the table my experience lies outside your understanding. You haven’t got anything to compare it to other than your own life and the stories you’ve internalized through the years. This doesn’t make less of you or...” the she paused and sighed, looking down, sounding resigned. “...or any more of me. It just describes the differences between us, important differences.”

She was relaxed now but still wearing that cold demeanor. I was pretty sure she wasn’t going to yield an inch in this.

“So you refuse to even try to explain any of it? Why you did it?”

She stared at me for almost a full minute, still looking through me. Finally she shook her head ever so slightly from side to side.

“No, of course not. I’m just not certain I can put it into terms you’ll be willing to accept.”

“Try me.”

Her eyes closed and she sighed. After another moment she finally spoke again.

“I loved Att, loved him in a way I’d never allowed myself to love anyone before. Until I met him I don’t think I was capable of loving anyone like that. And he loved me. I was everything he ever wanted in a woman. He knew I was different, but he never knew how or why. He never knew the truth and I can’t be sure I ever would have told him. If there was any stain on our love, that was it. I knew he would die, but I pushed that all aside because I was so desperate to have what he offered me.

“When Att died... when he died it was sudden and unexpected, but it wasn’t a mystery. I understood what had happened because I’d seen such things before. And I had Attuz, a chance to honor Att by seeing his son safely in the embrace of a new family. It was as if I’d been given the chance to somehow seal our relationship, to make it so real and so... permanent. Despite all its flaws, that love was perfect in my memory. Its only failing being that it was so terribly brief.

“After that, I never dared to allow myself to love. I knew how dangerous it was, how fleeting. Att gave me something precious, but it was special because nobody else could have done it, and it could only have happened precisely when it did. I had four centuries behind me, but they had been dead and thoughtless, aimless and pointless years. I understood nothing, had no grasp of what it truly meant to be what I was. Loving Att, and losing him, brought that home to me.

“Rufus... I knew better by the time Rufus came along. I saw him and I hated him. He was just another mortal with an enormous ego. Yes, he was handsome but that just made him more intolerable. Then he defied me. He pursued me, captured me and humiliated me. After that I hated and feared him as I had hated and feared no other human being before.”

She stopped, her eyes closed, and she didn’t speak for some time, but I could see things, her face changing as if she were remembering something painful.

“But you came to love him, eventually,” I said.

Her eyes snapped open and locked on my face, but there wasn’t any of the cold anger in them anymore. Instead she looked... confused.

“I’m not really sure anymore. I thought I knew, I thought I loved him... we certainly had a passion for each other, that’s undeniable. But love him? I think I was in love with what he promised me he would be. I attached my fate to his far more deeply than I could ever have imagined and it made me ignore things... things I shouldn’t have... and when it all came to naught I was sent reeling.”

Her voice wavered a bit as she went on. “Once I’d fallen under his spell it never occurred to me that he might...” She stopped and closed her eyes again. “...that he might *fail*.”

Her voice cracked, ever so slightly, on that last word. She didn't open her eyes. I just waited.

“He created a world about me that was so real, so very familiar, all his talk of Gods and Goddesses and the twists of fate that brought us together. Even in those final days when I began to wonder, to have doubts, his absolute confidence in himself succeeded in overwhelming me. He truly did not see his end coming. It must have pained him so when he realized there was no undoing it and that we were finished. And yet...”

Her voice caught again and I was surprised to see a glimmering of tears around the edges of her closed eyes. She visibly forced herself to take control, shaking a bit before she continued.

“And yet he sought to protect me. In the end he sent a warning. He thought he'd failed *me*. He told me to flee. Instead I sought to save him, to confront whatever mischief his wife had set in motion... and found myself powerless.

“I once had the power to send armed men fleeing before me in terror. Those who worshipped me, they did so out of fear. They knew that to hunt my woods without paying homage meant death and that to confront me meant punishment even more drastic. I was a real deity to them because my anger had very real consequences and I had been a part of their existence for more than three hundred years. But amongst the Romans? Amongst them I was nothing. They stripped me of my power, first luring me away from my lands and the peoples I knew, and then laying waste to the hopes and dreams they gave me. Rufus thought he had failed me, but the truth is I failed him. I allowed my desire to lead him to his doom and allowed myself to be robbed of my godhood... then of all my hope.”

I cleared my throat. “So it was revenge...” but she held up her hand to silence me, her eyes still closed, her head tilted back, although she was becoming calmer.

“Killing those men and women made me powerful again. At first it was the thrill of embracing the raw hate buried inside me, but it grew into something more insidious, and more desperate. When I killed I had power over those people. Not just the victims, but their families, friends and neighbors. I could twist them to my bidding, turning my one murder into two, or even more as they flailed about in vain attempts to find and punish those responsible. I was able to play the part of the frail innocent too perfectly and to manipulate those around me too well. I began stalking some victims, finding people who had open enmity with others, then weaving my spell. Sometimes just a few minutes effort with my hands, or perhaps a well-placed drop of poison, was all it took. And then I could watch the aftershocks ripple outwards and I was a goddess once again.

“When it was over... I told myself it was revenge. But it was never about revenge. It was just about my hunger to return to that place of power.”

Her eyes stayed closed, then she suddenly sighed and seemed to relax. She was almost completely still. “You could not understand,” she said, quietly, as if she were falling asleep from exhaustion.

She was wrong though. I did understand what she was saying. She sounded like every confessed serial killer I ever read about.

“I was evil,” she said. It was as if she'd read my mind. Her eyes were still closed, her voice a quiet whisper. “Naked, unfettered evil. Such is the price of love for me.”

I had to say something, but I was honestly afraid to provoke her. I wasn't sure I could bear to listen to any more of this. My thoughts kept sliding back to Joshua and his fears. I had to admit they might not be as foolish as I'd thought. Remembering that caused something to come to mind, something so obviously important that I couldn't let it pass without asking.

"Yet you fell in love again. Why?" She sat up and her eyes snapped open. They were cloudy, stormy, but not angry. She just looked lost. She stared at me, her eyes almost accusing, but I thanked whatever higher power there was anyway because she'd finally lost some of that horrible blackness. "You fell in love again," I repeated and I waved my hand around the room, "You spent twenty years here and are living in this house today with descendents of his family. Why?"

She turned away from me and looked at the floor, her hands clasped tightly together in front of her. When she spoke, it was almost too faint to hear.

*"I don't know..."* she said forlornly. Her eyes were still brimming a little at the edges, anger warring with regret. But then she took a deep breath, sat up straight and scrubbed her face, looking at me with eyes that were hard and cold. "Have you had enough yet tonight?"

I paused. "It's up to you but you haven't finished telling me what happened."

Her eyebrows moved down a little, then one raised slightly. "What?"

I was afraid of this question. "Why did it stop?" I asked. "Or did it ever stop... completely?"

"Oh," she said. Her head tilted back as her eyes rolled up a little and to her left. "Yes it stopped."

"When?" I asked.

## Chapter 37

*Ostia, circa 115 BCE*

Dawn was breaking and I was making my way to the fish market—our brothel had its own kitchen and we could bring in quite a morning crowd, turning a decent profit from selling fish cakes and bread, let alone our other common wares. The morning was delightfully cool. There had been a rain during the night and the air was clean, delicious on the tongue. I was feeling rather content; something that had been so very rare the past years, so when I was interrupted it made me more predisposed to strike out. He was a young man, who recognized me from a party some time ago, and I did try to politely put him off, but he was insistent. He thus sealed his own fate.

I led him into an alleyway, to some empty stables for a quick dalliance and I took his life almost as an afterthought. As I did so I nearly felt... regret. He struggled on the ground, weakening by the second as he hissed and burred. I had struck his own knife deep into his throat, cutting his voice box for good measure. Leaning back against the wall I watched silently as he died.

It used to mean something, killing these people. It had been a visceral joy the first time, the second, and the third... better than sex, better than a full meal after a week of grass, bark and stream water. Each death was an epiphany, an eruption of feeling. It was the closest thing I had to feeling true power, and that had fueled me for more than ten years, but now? Now it was almost a habit rather than a joy. All these men and women dead by my hand and it seemed the only reason I kept on was to hold at bay the creeping suspicion that it was all meaningless.

As he faded I stepped away from the wall and settled to my knees beside him, laying my hand upon his cheek. His eyes glazed, the ruddy complexion of his face slowly darkening.

“It’s not your fault,” I whispered, “it was just bad timing... sleep now and be done...”

I made to clean my hands on his cloak; by now I had learned to kill a man with a knife without making too great a mess, but I had some blood on my hands. I also stripped him of his valuables to make his body look as if he had been robbed. It was a dangerous ploy, for I would be at risk while they were in my possession, but I would dump them in the river so no one would find them. I had no stomach these days for seeing common thieves put to death for my crimes.

A small sound coming from the back of the alley made me freeze in place. I turned just in time to spy movement behind a wooden box at the other end of the alleyway. I waited a moment, just listening. I had known this place well and was certain it was empty this time of day. Clearly someone was near the back of the alley cul-de-sac. If it was more than one I would have to pretend I had found this man waylaid. It would be a weak excuse but it had been so many years since anyone had even questioned me I believed I could pull it off. But if it was just one, then perhaps I would have one more kill to crown this morning before returning to my more mundane tasks.

I rose to my feet and strepped towards the box and there was an unmistakable intake of breath. It had the sound of a woman, or a boy.

“I know you’re there my friend,” I said. I was calm and welcoming. “Please show yourself.”

Not a sound came and I sighed in resignation. What did this person hope to accomplish? I resolved to make it quick for I had lingered here long enough. A single corpse could be explained easily by a simple robbery, but two would attract attention and my last had been taken just four days previous.

I strode down the length of the alley and stepped around the box to find myself confronting a boy, no more than ten years old, huddled in a servant's entrance doorway. He was dirty the way only long months on the streets can make one dirty. He looked Greek, or perhaps even Ethiopian, with hair like black wool, dark olive skin and eyes large and wide with terror. He was beautiful, quivering in the deep alcove leading to the door, his eyes darting from side to side before fixing on my face.

"There's nowhere for you to go," I told him gently. I smiled broadly, welcomingly, like an aunt or sister, and stepped towards him. He bolted towards me, ducking as if to run underneath me, and I lunged downward to catch him. But suddenly he jumped *up*, leaping like a squirrel and actually bouncing off my shoulder and kicking at me as he ran. I turned and grabbed for his kicking leg but his skin was slick with the sweat of fear and he slipped my grasp. I cursed myself for being so careless.

For a brief moment I thought to let him go. I stood there for several heartbeats, watching him sprint to the end of the alleyway. It was still dark in the alley and my cloak covered my head. He could not have seen my face clearly, and who would listen to a street urchin's tales of a woman killing a man nearly twice her size?

But I became frantic. I had to have him. He had an enormous head start and people would be filling the streets soon. Yet I sprinted down the alley, determined to find him anyway. As I left the alley I saw him a ways away, stopping to catch his breath. As he saw me he began to run again, directly toward the market. I walked quickly but calmly. I had to catch him. I would not let this little street rat bring me down.

Turning a corner I spotted him not ten paces away behind a crowd of women bartering with a large African basketseller. I pointed at the boy and yelled, "Thief!" The merchant and women turned to stare as he jumped and sprinted away, dumping over a pile of baskets. The merchant swore and the women squawked as I shoved past them, tripping over the baskets and cursing. As more and more people filled the streets, I ran on, looking for any sign of the boy while others looked at me, idly curious but not otherwise paying much attention as I searched for anything out of the ordinary such as shouting, or swearing or...

There was another angry merchant collecting a pile of fruits that had tumbled into the street near a corner, cursing and looking over his shoulder, to the east. I broke into a run, sprinting around the corner in the direction the merchant had been looking. Noting the zig-zagging direction the boy seemed to be taking, the memory of his scent came... rotted fish and oil. He must live near the docks. I zigzagged though the narrow streets and even narrower alleys, pausing now and again to look and listen.

I came to a square where three bakeries formed another small marketing spot and I stopped, something telling me to pause and look. I scanned the crowd and the corners of the buildings and a sudden motion caught my attention. I saw him staring at me, his face a study in shock as he peered around the corner of a stall selling baskets of yellow bread loaves. He bolted again, but I had his measure now and I sprinted down a parallel alley before turning to spy him across the way, just as I anticipated.

*I have your number now you little vermin!*

I bolted down a parallel street, threading through the growing crowd like a serpent through grass, heedless of the sometimes-indignant cries of those I passed. I had to get ahead of him before he reached the river, for he doubtless had people there who knew him and that would complicate matters. I broke into the cross street and turned east, expecting him to emerge from the alley at any moment... except that he did not. I reached the entrance to the alley and saw nothing, not him, nor any obvious place he might be hiding. I whirled about, looking west and caught the barest glimpse of a small form as it disappeared into another alleyway further down the street.

The insolent little mouse had doubled back upon me! With a growl in my throat I took after him again, able to run at a full gait along an empty side street. There would be no more attempting to finesse this. He had shown me how clever he was and I would not let him slip from my sight again.

I sprinted along the space between two buildings and out into another narrow street where I turned again towards the river mouth. I heard a shout ahead, some cursing, and I knew I was close. Suddenly, I burst into the docks area.

I saw him then, not too far ahead but running full out, the flash of the pale bottoms of his dirty bare feet almost a blur as he headed toward a ship... a boat that had just cast off its last moorings, and was already beginning to row out to the mouth of the river.

I set after him, closing the distance rapidly, but as I ran a man stepped toward me as if to grab my arm. I spun as he reached for me, my cloak and part of my shift ripping away as I tore myself free. I continued running after the little wharf rat, thinking I would catch him in the river if I must. I was sure I could out swim him and I was certain he could not possibly catch the boat.

But I was wrong. As he reached the end of the dock, perhaps only ten paces ahead of me, he gave a mighty yell and launched into the air, hands and feet flailing... and he caught onto some thick netting hanging from the stern of the boat.

I skidded to a stop and fell just at the edge of the dock, sweating and panting, nearly falling into the water. Looking down I noticed that I was all but naked, my shift torn to shreds and my cloak long gone. I looked up to see two stout seamen pulling the boy into the back of the ship, staring at me as the rowers eased the vessel out into the mouth of the river, bound for the sea. The boy was saying something to the crewmen, and others were watching with great curiosity. The man who had grabbed my cloak came running up behind me and suddenly I was acutely aware of just how public and dangerous a situation I was in. I had to do something, say something, and a desperate thought for cover came to me.

I leapt to my feet and shook my fist at the boy as I screamed at the top of my lungs.

*"The little shit didn't pay!"*

Silence fell over the docks for an instant and then someone started laughing uproariously. It spread to the others, shrieks of laughter coming even from the man who had my torn cloak in his hands. He was bent over, tears streaming down his face as he guffawed. On the boat I saw the men laughing and clapping the boy on the back, clearly amused and astounded by his supposed audacity, but he was not laughing himself. His eyes were fixed on me, still wide and terrified.

I locked my eyes on his and then very deliberately broke into a smile. I raised my right hand high in salute and after a moment he did the same. I could see him visibly relax. I then turned to the man holding the remnants of my cloak and snatched it from his hands.

“Tell me, where is that ship bound?” I asked him.

“Oh, they’re Egyptian, sweet *doris*. They won’t be making way back here for another year. Maybe you can settle up then?”

He was laughing at me as he said it, but I ignored him and stomped away, wrapping what was left of my garment about my hips, relieved to find I still had the pocket with my last victim’s belongings in my possession. I tried to calm myself, but I was shaken so badly that I had to find an alley where I could just stop and try to make sense of what I was feeling, of what had happened.

There was a sensation in me that I could not place my finger upon and it touched me whenever I thought of that boy sailing away, escaping my grasp. It wasn’t until several minutes passed that I realized just what it was. I was happy.

I was glad he had escaped. I had not put my hands around his slender little neck and I was relieved for him. It surprised me to realize this, and as I tried to understand it I felt myself going weak, my knees buckling, forcing me to sit.

The confusing happiness I felt turned to something bitter and terrifying. How could this failure render me more satisfied than all the murderous artistry of the past thirteen years? What did it mean that a child had bested me and that I was relieved to have it so? In the years since Rufus died I had been in pursuit of something almost indefinable and it had lain forever just beyond my grasp. I sought to feel powerful again, to assert mastery over others, but that quest seemed unending—and what had been such ultimate joy had become a desperate habit.

In that moment I just stared at the wall opposite and it came to me. I finally knew the truth about myself. I was not a goddess. I had never truly been one and never would be one. As I tasted that thought, I angrily rejected it. But it returned, refusing to be set so easily aside. I tried to hold it away, to make it leave my mind, but it returned, doubly insistent until I clapped my hands to my ears and crouched, singing softly to myself. But finally I was forced to look at it and accept what it meant.

*All the hate, all the fury, the death and mayhem sown by my hands: Futile. Meaningless.*

I remained in that alley for a very long time, alternately raging in frustration and weeping in resignation. But there was no escaping it. Rufus had been more right than he knew: *You can never be more than a frightening and murderous witch skulking in the shadows...*

Suddenly I felt more pathetic than even the lowliest of slaves. And I could no longer escape myself.

## Chapter 38

*Pennsylvania, April, 2005 CE*

I opened my mouth but couldn't think what to say. She turned and looked at me, answering the question I hadn't asked.

"I never killed... for sport... again." She said it flatly, matter-of-factly. But she was looking at me, a question in her eyes.

I stood up and walked to the bar next to her and poured myself a drink. I thought about stealing one of her cigarettes but thought better of it. I took a sip and then just looked at her. I didn't know what to say, but for whatever reason, I wasn't afraid of her anymore.

"So now you know the worst of me," she said, finally. Her eyes were hollow and empty. She had a look in her eye I couldn't quite make out. It wasn't remorse and it wasn't exactly a question. But she was watching me, looking for... for what?

"I think I need to go get my head around all of this," I said, and put down my drink. She just nodded as I walked to the parlor door. I picked up the recorder and snapped it off as I reached the door, then turned and said, "You know I'm not really a religious guy," not sure what I meant to say.

She just nodded calmly and took another drag off her smoke.

"But you were right about one thing, I did grow up religious, and I guess... I guess I do believe in redemption." I wasn't sure she'd like that, but it's what came out of me.

She just stared and then did something strange. She turned and poured herself another drink and stared at it, then looked at me and smiled gently. She gestured with the drink in her hand.

"*In nomine Patris, et Filii, et Spiritus sancti,*" she said, delivering it like a benediction. Then she tossed the drink back, and swallowed it down. "Bless you and thank you, but this is all I need." She poured herself another drink, then leaned back on the bar, watching and waiting for me to leave. Her smile was gentle, but her eyes were far away. It was almost like I was already gone.

I shook my head. "Sleep well," I said.

I made my way upstairs to the guest bedroom and lay down on top of the bed, thinking but trying not to think. I mean, what do you say to a story like that?

Some time later I woke up hot and sweaty. It was the middle of the night, but I was still dressed and I needed the bathroom, bad. I took all but my pants off, wiping the sweat off with my shirt and crumpling it to the floor, and then pulled on a fresh t-shirt. I grabbed my shaving kit and made my way to the bathroom. Quietly I did my business and brushed my teeth. As I left the bathroom, I heard what sounded like muffled gunfire downstairs. The TV, obviously, and I could see its glow. Feeling a little more awake, I quietly crept down the stairs and was surprised to find Edna in the den

watching TV. I hadn't even known she was in the house. I thought she was asleep, but as I entered quietly she suddenly looked up.

"Been wondering where you got off to," she said.

As I reached for the light switch a movement back down the hallway caught my eye. I saw Zsallia heading to the kitchen with what I swore were two bottles of liquor in each hand. Edna was going on about how this had been the ladies' tea room back in the day, but I stuck my head out into the hallway and watched as she turned out of sight. Then I heard a door banging open.

Trying not to be too obvious I crossed the room and looked out into the darkness outside. There was a light out there, like a hurricane lamp or some such, already lit. I saw her walk into the circle of light and then sit heavily. Next there was the clear silhouette of a bottle being raised.

"You probably should just let her be," Edna suggested, "I suspect this'll be a yearly thing for her."

I looked out the window again. I could barely make her out, sitting with her back to something—a stone or a box of some sort, I guessed. But I could easily see the bottle as she raised it again. Then I felt Edna's surprisingly strong hand grip my arm and I turned away from the window.

"Why don't you come and have tea with me? I've been dying to talk with you ever since Jenny told me about you, and she'll be out there for a while I'd guess."

"Um, make mine coffee and you've got a date."

She led me into the kitchen where she set an old coffee percolator going, then turned to making her tea. Suddenly I was famished and Edna found a fresh loaf of bread and some butter for me. We settled down at a table in the breakfast room and I started to evaluate this woman again. Edna was small the way very old people get small, but she seemed like someone who'd just contracted and gotten harder and tougher as she aged. Her face was round and cheerful, with long white hair in loose curls. Her blue eyes blazed with energy. I had a hard time believing she was ninety-nine years old—she was just so vigorous.

"So," she began, "how much has Jenny told you about this place?"

"Nothing, really. I know it's tied up with the man she married in the 1830s, but she hasn't really talked about that yet."

"His name was Jeremiah Henry McAllister, Jeremy to his close friends and family. He met her in California in 1829. When Jeremy's brother and sister-in-law died in a fire in 1836 he came back to Pennsylvania to take care of the family. Bit of a scandal that was, him showing up with this pretty young wife nobody'd heard of before. Jeremy was a black sheep, disinherited by his father, spent his life traveling the world. The only person he'd stayed in touch with was his brother. Lots of suspicion there."

"I'll bet there was. So they showed up and moved in..."

"Oh, not that simple. This house," she gestured about us with one hand, "was burned to the ground, and there were the four surviving children, along with Jeremy's sister and her husband. They

tried to force Jeremy and Elaine, that's what she was calling herself then, to live with them. Wanted to keep an eye on 'em, I expect. Something happened in that time because Catherine, Jeremy's sister, did an about-face and started supporting her brother and his plans to rebuild the house."

"Sounds like Zsallia's handiwork to me," I noted. Edna made a sour face, but nodded. She didn't seem to care for the name Zsallia at all. I took a sip from my coffee cup and then asked, "How long was she here?"

"Jeremy passed away in March of '51. She stayed another year, then left for Boston. Kept up a correspondence with Jeremy's niece, Catherine, for a few years, but then disappeared."

"Disappeared?" I asked, a little confused, "I thought she'd stayed in touch with the family."

"Oh, no, she dropped out of sight, left it all behind. Why would you think that?"

"Just the way you two relate I guess. She defers to you so much I just thought you must have known each other a long time."

"Heh, well, I have my ideas about that. Anyhow, she disappeared, but my great grandmother knew about her. Jeremy's niece, she was my great grandmother, you see. For some reason Jeremy confided in her. It's a little complex, I suppose, but I knew about Jenny—well she was called Elaine back then—since I was maybe twelve years old. Great Grandmother told me all about it when I was just a girl. She set up the McAllister trust to hold the house and property for two hundred years just in case her Aunt Elaine ever decided to come back.

"I have to admit, I didn't really believe it. Figured it was just a family folk tale, but I loved the story. I had this journal of Jeremy's, read it over and over—he was absolutely insane in his love for Elaine. It was intoxicating, especially for a young girl like me."

She fell silent then and looked toward the back of the house while I thought about what she'd just told me. It was a graphic example of what Zsallia had been trying to impress upon me almost since the beginning; this entire family had had its destiny changed because one member ran into her. Over one hundred and fifty years later they were still dealing with the repercussions of that chance encounter. And Zsallia seemed painfully aware of that fact.

"What happened?" I finally asked. Edna gave me a questioning look, so I rephrased it. "How did you finally meet her, I mean?"

"Oh, that. Well, Jeremy had written her a letter, sort of a deathbed good-bye, and in it he told her that he'd spilled the beans to his niece. She found the letter a couple of years ago when she was going through some of her old papers, finally read it, then came down here to see if it was something she should worry about. She's very skittish, you know."

I just laughed at that. Edna chuckled, too.

"She walked into the Historical Society in town and like to gave me a heart attack when I saw her. There's a big oil portrait of her hanging there, very good likeness, too. My niece, Sarah, saw her first. Jenny just claimed to be a descendant of Elaine and, honestly, I believed it. It made sense.

“But she was like a guardian angel. The Trust was out of money and the town was hiking our taxes, trying to force us to sell the property, and here came Genevieve, with a plausible story about being related to Elaine, and a big bank account. Turned the whole situation on its ear, she did. But something about her nagged at me. I thought maybe I was going nuts, old age finally making me batty, but it just wouldn’t go away.

“On the day she was planning to leave I talked her into taking a trip up to Great Grandmother’s grave. When I saw her standing there, looking at Catherine’s marker... she just looked... I don’t know how to describe it exactly, but sort of lost and like she’d just seen too, too much of this. And for such a pretty thing she looked old, old in the eyes.

“So I tested her. Out of the blue I told her I knew she was Elaine and I knew her secret.”

“Jesus... you had no idea how dangerous that might be?” I could only imagine what Zsallia’s first impulse would have been in a situation like that.

“Well, I’ll tell you... the look on her face was what we used to refer to as ‘eloquent’. For a minute there I thought she might do something drastic. She has this pistol...”

“I know,” I said. “She scares me the way she plays with it sometimes.”

“Oh, she wouldn’t have shot me. At least, I don’t think she’d have done it.” She chuckled a little morbidly. “It doesn’t really matter now, does it? She’s here. That’s what’s important.”

That led straight to something I really wanted to know, so I asked her flat out, “Why? Why is it important?”

“Oh, sonny, she’s got to find a place to set down roots. She’s going mad, you know.”

I started when she said that, staring at her for a moment. “What makes you say that?”

“Oh come now, surely you’ve noticed she’s not entirely stable? She’s been skulking around the underbelly of humanity for a long, long time. I think she’s sick of it and she’s been trying to put an end to it for a hundred and fifty years now. She married Jeremy because she wanted to stop running, but the habit was too hard to break. And now... well, here she is.” Edna stopped talking and took a careful sip of her tea, watching me through the small round lenses of her glasses.

“You could be right,” I finally offered, “but it seems to me she’s being pretty rational about this now. That’s what this book is all about. No more running, no more hiding. She wants the world to accept her on her own terms...” I stopped because this wasn’t what I really wanted to talk about. I took a deep breath and asked, “What is she doing back there?”

Edna looked at me with obvious surprise. “She hasn’t told you?”

“Not a word.”

She thought about that for a minute, then sighed, “Today is Jeremy’s birthday,” she said. The way she said it, it was like she thought that explained everything.

“Oh... well, maybe that explains why she’s been so...”

“Sonny,” she interrupted, “that’s his grave she’s sitting on out there.”

“Damn...” I couldn’t think of anything else to say.

Hours later I rolled out of bed again and looked out the back window. She was still out there. I couldn’t stop myself; I just pulled on my pants and a sweatshirt and made my way down to the door to the rear patio. Outside it was cool, almost cold, the sky clear and star-filled. There wasn’t even a hint of a breeze, so I heard it almost immediately as I stepped out the door.

She was singing.

The words were unintelligible and the tune was odd, a little flat, but her voice was clear and firm; beautiful, really. I stopped in my tracks and just listened. She went quiet for a minute, and I decided I should either join her or go back to bed. So I started walking towards the light of her lamp. I saw her take a drink, and then she started up again.

*O tekos, heion escho ponon.*

*Sei dtb'aoteis,*

*Galatheno dtb'etori knosseis*

*En aterpei dtbourati*

*chalkeogompho*

*To dtbe ingktilampe*

*Kyaneo dtbnopho tatheis.*

*Halman dtb'hyperthen tean koman*

*batheian pariontos kymatos*

*Ouk alegheishoudtb'anemou phthonggon*

*prophyrea keimenos en chlanidthi,*

*Proseopon kalon*

*Proseptheanon.*

*Ei dtbe thei deinon to ge deinon en,*

*Kai ken emon rhematon*

*Lepton hypeiches ouas.*

*Kelomai s'eudtbe, brephos*

*Eudtheto dtbe pontos,*

*Eudtheto dtb'ametron kakon.*

It sounded sad, but I couldn't be sure. It seemed to lack certain tones I expected to hear and the meter was strange. But it was haunting.

"You have a beautiful voice," I finally said.

She turned her head and smiled up at me. "Thank you. Have a drink?"

Relieved that she wasn't angry, I took the bottle of Raynal and put it to my lips. I'm not a brandy fan but this wasn't too bad. As I handed it back I started. Despite her friendly greeting and clear voice, it was obvious she'd been crying. A lot. She had three entire empty bottles sitting next to her and another of Chivas. She saw my face and laughed.

"I hardly even feel alcohol unless I drink steadily and brandy barely touches me. But it was his drink, and today is his birthday." She lifted the bottle towards the headstone across from her and then took another drink. I leaned in and read the marker: Jeremiah Henry McAllister.

I settled down next to her and took the bottle from her hand. It was just a little chilly, so I swigged some of it down. Then I decided to probe her again.

"We've been talking about your life for six months now and you haven't said anything about him. Do you know why?"

"No... yes... I suppose that's an honest answer. I don't talk about him because I don't know what to say."

"I read your on-line journal. You made it pretty clear you felt he was special... more so than other people you've talked about, but it's pretty hard to get a feel for who he was from that. I don't feel like I know Jeremy the way I got to understand Att, or Rufus..."

She sighed, sagging against the old headstone behind her, then turned her eyes towards me again.

"It's too close... I thought I had put this away, that I was done mourning him. I even came here in secret to finally say goodbye. I was all done..." She laughed then, not with any bitterness but like she was really amused. "Two weeks later I read his letter and suddenly it was all alive again, all right in the center of me. And here I am." She lifted the bottle to the headstone again, "It's all your fault! You horny, meddling sailor." Her voice got quiet on those last words and then she laughed again.

"Why didn't you tell me what today was? We didn't have to go through... all of that. Not today."

"It doesn't matter. I wasn't even going to do this, but when we were finished... I don't know, I guess I needed to be here right now."

I'd never really seen her like this. Despite what she said she was clearly a little drunk and not lost in some deep funk. My hand slid into my pocket and I drew out the little digital recorder. I turned it on and set it on Jeremy's headstone. She stared at it, then looked at me.

"So, how did you meet him?" I asked.

Zsallia put the bottle to her lips for a moment, drinking deep, then handed it back to me.

"No... not tonight. Another time. I had my diaries sent down from Boston. We can go through some of them together. Promise." She grinned. "But not right away." I took another sip of brandy, then nodded.

"So that song you were singing. It was pretty, but I didn't recognize the language..."

"Greek. *Danae and Perseus*. It's ancient. Like me."

She took a deep breath and began singing again. Despite the language I could sense the melancholy in it, yet there was also something of the heroic resonating through her voice as she sang with her eyes closed, her head resting against the stone. She went on and on, repeating the refrain three times before finishing. Then she opened her eyes and looked at me again.

"I've been thinking about Joshua's proposal, about the research corporation," she said.

"You've made a decision?" I asked, keeping my voice as carefully neutral as I could.

She drew a deep breath. "I'm going to do it. I still can't escape the notion that of all my mistakes, of all my crimes, this may prove to be the worst. Yet what am I to do? In for a penny, in for a pound."

"I think it's the right thing to do... the best thing to do, really. I've never understood why you were so disturbed by it."

"Hmm, no, I never did explain it, did I?" She paused then and took another drink.

"Looks... looks are deceiving. You look at me and you see a human being. All the outward appearances are what you expect so it's nigh on impossible for you to see me otherwise. But it's a lie. How many lifetimes can one live before she is changed so deeply, so fundamentally, that she cannot remember what it means to feel normal? To feel as if she belongs? To not be... *warped* by the weight of years upon her?"

"You want my opinion?" I asked. She nodded, and I continued, "You're here for a reason. Here with me, I mean. Here in Pennsylvania."

"I'm here in defiance of my better judgment. I am here because... I think it might be preferable to embrace this, rather than to continue as I have. The centuries have changed me. I can feel it, deep in that part of me that defines who and what I am. You said you were not sure I had the right to decide for everyone else, but you assume that there is only good to come from all of this."

I didn't assume that. But I stayed absolutely still and just listened as she went on.

“If I choose to allow this, to let your doctors and your scientists see what they can tease from me, then I am responsible for the consequences, am I not? No, I see your objection, but you are wrong. No one can be expected to be rational in choosing between a life of perhaps one hundred years, and a life of thousands. Mortality is the ultimate driving force for your kind. It drives you to accomplish. It drives you to procreate. It drives you to build today for the betterment of tomorrow. It also removes the weight of old ways from the path of the new.”

I opened my mouth to object but she interrupted me.

“I understand your optimism. You feel that people will make their own decisions about what is learned, that it is wrong to withhold access to knowledge. But my fears are not mere selfishness. I could be the undoing of much of the good in humanity, and once the choice is made it seems unlikely it can be unmade. That’s why I am unmoved by pleas to my obligations to mankind, or all the good things that could be had if I would only be reasonable.

“I am not merely looking at tomorrow; my gaze is fixed far, far down the road. Unlike you, I know what it means to fail to consider the coming thousand years. And what do I say, centuries hence, if it comes to pass that my decision was horribly, irrevocably wrong? It’s not as if keeping this knowledge secret dooms mankind—you will live out your lives as you always have. Perhaps you will learn to make yourselves like me in your own time, in your own way. Then the choices are yours and yours alone.

“So, what’s more selfish? To allow mankind to march forward on a path of its own making, or to fundamentally change the definition of what Man is, merely to assuage my own fear and loneliness?” She tipped the bottle again, drinking deeply this time, then handing it to me before asking, “Can you answer that question?”

“Phrased like that? No, I doubt anyone can.”

“Hmm, well I just did. I’ve made a decision that all of mankind will have to live with.” She sighed then, sagging back against the marker again with her eyes closed. “My choice. My decision. My responsibility.”

I started to object, but she gently held up her hand. Without making me feel small, she was making it clear: she didn’t want to argue. So finally I just said, “You’re not going to change your mind in the morning?”

She opened her eyes and glared at me, but then she smiled and shook her head. “No,” she said, “I made the decision sitting here... but I’ve known for days what I would decide. I just haven’t been able to say it...” she trailed off and her eyes settled on Jeremiah McAllister’s headstone. She just sat there, not even blinking, for an uncomfortably long time. Not sure what else to do, I just took another drink.

Finally she straightened up and stretched. “Enough of this,” she said, “I’m off to bed.”

We gathered up the lamp and the empty bottles and made our way back to the house, but she walked as if the weight of the world was on her shoulders. We reached the porch and put the bottles into the garbage before she shut off the lamp, then she stopped and put her hand on my forearm, looking up at me. It was so dark I couldn’t really see her face, just its dark oval. Then she spoke.

“I would be lying if I didn’t say I was afraid of this. It’s all going so fast... so fast for me especially. Before the accident I was planning to spend the next 50 years getting ready to reveal myself. I can’t tell you how often I’ve considered dropping everything and disappearing since November.”

“I figured,” I said. “I think you’re making the right call, for whatever that’s worth.”

“Your optimism is encouraging, but I can’t allow myself to share it so casually. It brings me to another matter, however.”

“What’s that?”

“Do you remember why I told you I’d hired you? That I’d seen certain things in your work? And seen them confirmed upon meeting you?”

“Well, yeah, kind of,” I said.

“I find you to generally be without guile or ill intent. You’re also fairly worldly without being cynical.”

“Well, shucks...” I started to say, but she interrupted.

“If I’m to do this thing, I need people around me whom I can trust. I have all but convinced Dennis Novak to move here and accept a job with the new corporation. I’d offered him a make-work job before just to get him out here, but now with this new business he can see that I have a genuine need for him.”

“That’s cool,” I said, wondering where she was going.

“I’d like to make you a similar offer.”

“Me? Your ghost writer?”

“I need people who can keep a steady head. I need people who understand my... moodiness?” she said that last with a little laugh. “People to stand by me and help me make rational decisions.”

“And won’t put up with your crap,” I said, grinning.

She laughed lightly. “Yes, well, there is that,” she said.

“Well, offhand I’m not sure. I’ll have to talk with my wife...” I said.

“Of course. We will speak more of this in the morning, then?”

“Sure,” I replied.

There was a moment of still silence and then I felt her hands on my chest. She gripped the front of my shirt and pulled me forward and she kissed me. I was surprised, not sure what to do, but she just pressed her lips to mine for a moment before pulling back. It was soft and sweet, and... innocent.

“Thank-you,” she whispered.

That suddenly I knew I would take the job and she knew it as well. Everything else was a formality.

## Chapter 39

*Pennsylvania, August 29, 2005 CE*

*[---Begin journal entry---]*

Long ago, before Rufus—before my solitary madness, when I still dwelt amongst people but knew I was not of them—during that time, there was a woman. She was older, in her forties and still in remarkably good health. Her life was tragic; her mate dead, her children all lost in such a brief span of years they seemed to pass in but an eye blink. But she lived amongst good people and she had their sympathy, their support, even their love.

This woman, she suffered her losses and misfortune with the stoicism common amongst peoples of that time and place. Every day she made herself useful and none could call her a burden. Nonetheless there was emptiness in her, for the community in which she dwelt could not hold her as her family had. She looked about her and felt a longing for what she had lost and eventually that longing became too great for her to resist.

I was there the day she surrendered. We were on the shore mending nets under the shade of trees just above the beach. She stood and for a very long time she stared out to sea, her face calm and peaceful. Others talked to her, but she ignored them and they decided to let her be; she had earned that level of deference. Then, without warning or preamble of any kind, she began to walk down the beach and then continued into the surf.

We all saw what she was about and some of the younger girls cried out for her to stop, but the rest of us simply stood, bearing quiet witness to the moment. The sea was gentle that day, the soft swells lapping against her as she laid her hands palms-down upon the water, continuing forward without pause. She simply walked and waded until she slipped beneath the surface with nary a sound, nor a struggle. She embraced the sea and the sea took her, giving her the peace she sought.

I thought I understood her then, but I understand her better now. She accepted her own end, as I do mine. She waded into the sea to her death, unable to know what exactly that meant, but unable to embrace any other course. I find myself wading into the world I have held at bay for so long—and I know not what awaits me. Yet I, too, can follow no other course.

I embrace this brave new world today, seeking to make it my own and to be within it as others are. There is no longer a place for my reserved and private existence. I cannot explain how this feels, the unease bordering upon panic that greets the notion of attempting to exist within the blindingly fast-paced reality of these young ones today who are forced to accept an existence of mere decades—longer it is than their forebears, yet still barely as a span of breaths to one such as I. I still see the primitive drives of tribe and superstition that hold sway amongst these people who would call themselves enlightened and even mighty. The ancient savage within me recognizes them for what they are and fears them.

So many changes in such a short time. Dennis is here, he and Joshua laying out the basics of this research effort, while I endeavor to maintain this facade of calm acceptance and Edna strangely feels like my anchor in a troubled sea.

I have avoided doctors for so very long that the idea of willingly placing myself in their hands, inviting them to probe and test and learn what they can smacks of insanity. I have taken what precautions I can, but I know in my heart should I have to flee my chances are not good. My ghost-writer is correct; this new modern world, with its birth certificates, its identification cards, its security precautions and its mass-media, is destined to snare me eventually. I can confront it on my own terms or wait for it to confront me. Fleeing would only stave off the inevitable.

I am committed not just by my actions, but by the realities I face.

Fear makes an uninspiring companion and as much as I can I hold it at bay. Despite all the eager plans swirling in the heads of my trusted friends I have not abandoned my own efforts. This house shall ring with the voices of young, eager minds, the first in such a long time. The McAllister Foundation has gathered in its first five students and I find myself eager for their arrival. I have been a teacher in the past, now perhaps I can take that experience further than ever before. I am using them, preparing them to be my defenders without their knowledge or consent. It is unfair to them, but... it is never truly fair.

Not to anyone.

*[---End journal entry---]*

## Epilogue

*Missouri Territory, 1835 CE*

My mind still clung to the crumbling edges of consciousness. I knew he was moving me, carrying me. Brief snatches of words came to me, his voice sometimes strong, sometimes gasping with effort, but I could not respond, could not summon the will to force my way out of the cool darkness calling to me. Yet every time my awareness slipped away something pulled me back into that twilight existence.

When motion would stop and he laid me down he fed me carefully administered sips of brandy mixed with water. His voice was still ever-present, the words and tone soothing, sometimes pleading yet always reassuring and confident. Still all I desired was to retreat into that place of comforting nothingness that beckoned. It seemed to go on and on, this twilight reality until the sharp report of gunfire stabbed into my awareness.

A single shot, then another, still close by but not as loud as the first- a pistol. Then again. There were more distant reports and the sounds of dogs and men coaxing me out of the fugue enveloping me, but then I was surrounded by warmth and my will to resist broke: I collapsed into nothingness.

Something startled me, or at least I felt something had. The transition from oblivion to awareness so sharp and sudden it sent terror welling up in my throat. Wrapped in warmth I still shivered violently, the sensations too many and too alien for me to grasp. I felt something warm and wet moving upon my forehead. A voice both soft and ancient sang to me in words I could not grasp, the scent of a wood fire, its heat strong against my left side, pouring warmth into shaking limbs. My eyes finally obeyed my will, opening upon a scene familiar, yet so very different from... from what? I had no understanding of what I had expected, but as I looked up and saw the brown, weathered face of an old woman, her grey/white hair falling over her shoulders as she bathed my forehead, dipping her cloth in a pot of steaming water, then moving it over my face and neck, warming me as I lay with my head in her lap. Confusion gave way to panic as she smiled at me and spoke words that meant nothing to me. I struggled to speak, forcing words past my lips.

*"Kvar em? Kwat er... kwos ert?"*

She turned her head and shouted to someone, again in that strange tongue. I tried to sit up but she held me down, gently, but with firm strength, her voice whispering words that were perhaps meant to soothe me, but did nothing to quell the rising panic in my breast. I heard footsteps approaching, boots on a wooden floor. He stepped into my view, bearded, looking exhausted and beaten, yet smiling now, his eyes sparkling as he gazed down upon me.

*"Jeremy!"*