

INFINITY

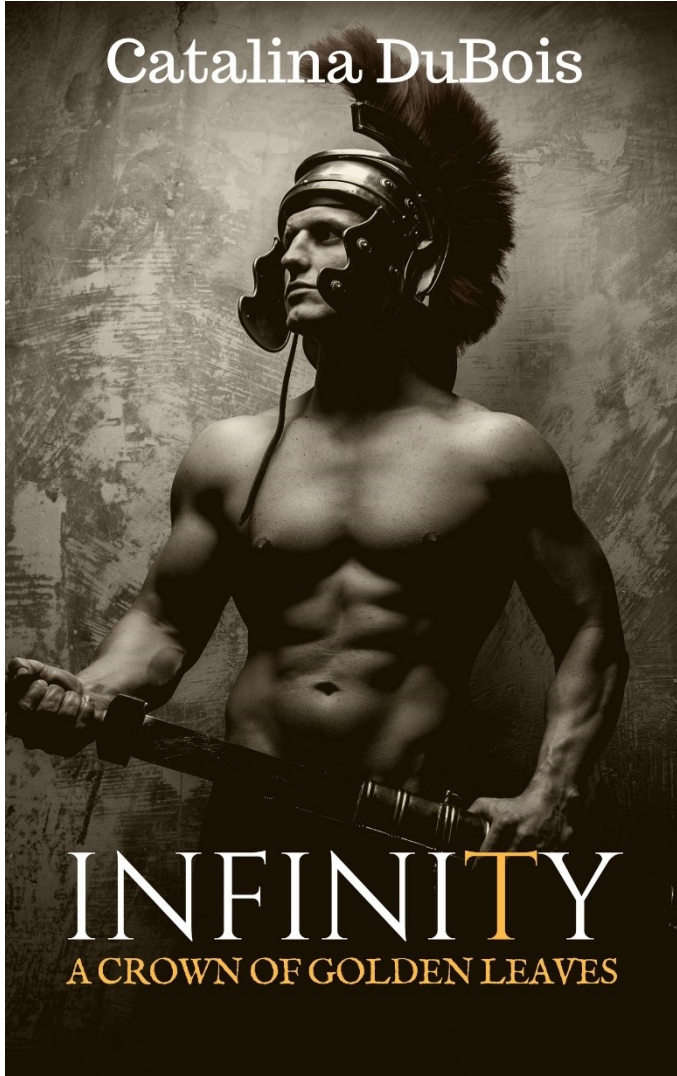
A CROWN OF GOLDEN LEAVES

TWO STAR-CROSSED LOVERS.

ONE ANCIENT CURSE...

CATALINA DUBOIS

Catalina DuBois



INFINITY: A Crown of Golden Leaves
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Critics are saying...

“The characters are one of the story’s strongest points, from evil emperors to gladiators and slaves. The plot is handled well, and the setting is the glory and decadence of ancient Rome. It is the perfect place for Catalina DuBois to tell a love story filled with tragedy and hope. She does just that and she does it very well. An excellent read!”

-Readers' Favorite Reviews

“I didn’t want to be drawn to Titus. I fought hard against it for several chapters. Everything in me told me that Titus was not supposed to be my pick, but that’s exactly how outstanding DuBois’s writing is. She spins a backstory like no one else in this genre. Titus, in all his loathsome and vile glory, is truly the standout in this book. His backstory is heart-wrenching and sheds new light on his choices and his treatment of Sara. He absolutely stands as my favorite in the long list of DuBois’s characters.”

-Literary Titan

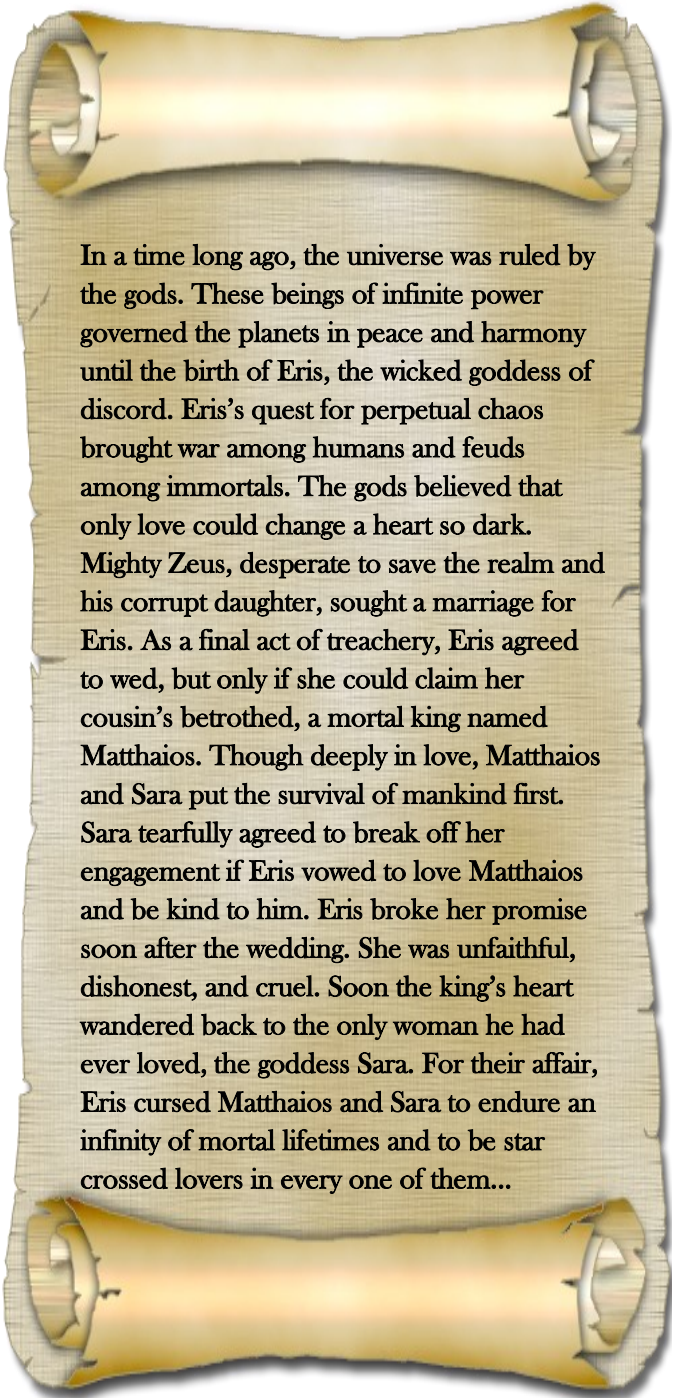
DEDICATION

To my Aunt Elizabeth, thanks for inspiring me in regard to college and so many things in life.

Love always,
Catalina

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Special thanks to Racquel Nadhiri and best of luck in your endeavors.



In a time long ago, the universe was ruled by the gods. These beings of infinite power governed the planets in peace and harmony until the birth of Eris, the wicked goddess of discord. Eris's quest for perpetual chaos brought war among humans and feuds among immortals. The gods believed that only love could change a heart so dark. Mighty Zeus, desperate to save the realm and his corrupt daughter, sought a marriage for Eris. As a final act of treachery, Eris agreed to wed, but only if she could claim her cousin's betrothed, a mortal king named Matthaïos. Though deeply in love, Matthaïos and Sara put the survival of mankind first. Sara tearfully agreed to break off her engagement if Eris vowed to love Matthaïos and be kind to him. Eris broke her promise soon after the wedding. She was unfaithful, dishonest, and cruel. Soon the king's heart wandered back to the only woman he had ever loved, the goddess Sara. For their affair, Eris cursed Matthaïos and Sara to endure an infinity of mortal lifetimes and to be star crossed lovers in every one of them...

PROLOGUE:
THE WRATH OF CAESAR

Rome, 79 A.D.

Prince Matthaios sits regally upon his white stallion. His Mediterranean tan glows bronze in the setting sun. He watches Sara in total bliss, the girl who has secretly possessed his heart since childhood. She is an exotic beauty with dark skin and twisted locks for hair. She saunters barefoot along the beach, with frothy waves rolling over her ankles. Her obsidian eyes take in the vibrant hues of a glorious sunset. Matthaios trots forward and extends a powerful arm to Sara as he helps her onto the back of his horse.

“Hold on tight,” Matthaios warns as he glances over his shoulder at her with a charming smile.

Sara closes her arms around him tightly, putting the utmost faith in him. He spurs his horse forward and they break into a trot. The wind is whipping her braids and it feels like heaven on her skin. As they travel, the sand grows sparser and the land becomes covered in lush green

vegetation.

They gallop through a field of wildflowers, bathing in glorious twilight. Sara is unable to believe she is holding him in this way. Matthaios is heir to an empire and she is a slave from a faraway land. They might as well be from different planets. Most days it feels as if they are, but in this one perfect moment they are free.

The air begins to smell sweet and fruity as they approach the vineyard that gives birth to the best wine in all the land. Beautiful winding grapevines stretch as far as the eye can see. Their joyous and exhilarating ride ends. Matthaios dismounts his steed and reaches up to assist Sara. He helps her down and his hands remain at her waist for longer than they should, but when he withdraws them her stomach flusters with a strange feeling of disappointment.

He plucks a juicy green grape. She parts her lips with an expecting look and he gives it to her. She sinks into the delicious tangy fruit and he kisses a sweet drop from the corner of her mouth.

Sara backs away and nervously looks around. She whispers, “someone could see us.”

Matthaios smirks with amusement. “That isn’t possible.”

Her eyebrows scrunch in wonder. “How do you know the owner won’t approach at any moment?”

“Because she’s already here. You are the owner.” He grins brightly. “I bought this land. Everything you’ve seen today is yours.” As Sara just stares, mouth agape, Matthaios grows concerned. “I am sorry. You mentioned a beach, mountains, wildflowers, and a vineyard. I just thought...”

“It’s perfect,” Sara confesses with tears of happiness. “You are perfect.”

He slowly pulls her into his arms and lowers his lips to meet hers. They are locked in a full-blown embrace before either of them realize it. She soon feels her back pressed into the cool moist earth as they kiss and caress in each other’s arms. Their forbidden encounter remains concealed by endless rows of grapevines. When at last they come up for air they are breathless and their hearts are racing.

She hears him whisper in the coming darkness, “Sara, do you love me?”

“More than words can express,” she answers while twirling her fingers in his silky black curls.

His eyes go wild. His voice has an edge of warning, “If you truly love me you will survive for me!”

A brutal kick to the stomach snatches Sara back into the hell that is her reality. The vineyard is gone, her prince has vanished, and the assault of a furious mob continues. Sara had escaped her torment in the only way she could, with fantasies of a dashing prince, but that’s all they were, the dreams of a desperate slave girl.

The roar of the angry mob shatters the serenity of a Roman night. In an instant, she’d transformed from a palace maid to a prisoner in the stocks. Wooden splinters pierce Sara’s skin like a thousand stabbing needles. Her muscles cramp and burn as if lava flows through her veins.

A cacophony of shouting and torch fire are closing in on her and there is nothing she can do to stop them. The heavy slab of oak locked around Sara’s neck and wrists makes it impossible to escape.

She cries out in pain as a rotten apple slams into her face so hard she would have sworn it was a fist. Her tears stream as the irate mob pelts her with rotten fruit and moldy vegetables.

Daetor, Caesar's enforcer and captain of the guard, slithers up with a satisfied smile. The brute grabs a fist full of Sara's hair and crudely saws it off with a knife.

Sara's screams resonate through the commons as he yanks and saws without care for her pain and discomfort. A woman's hair is considered her glory. Daetor intends to rob Sara of this and so much more...

CHAPTER 1: THE GLADIATOR

Sara sluggishly turns her head to and fro as she regains consciousness. In addition to the agony of being bruised and battered, she feels slimy and cold from the rotten food they threw on her. She wreaks of the rubbish they defiled her with. The odor makes her want to vomit, but she fights the urge.

Sara opens the eye that isn't bruised and swollen shut. She is surrounded by judging eyes, gossip, and whispers. Only one empathetic face stands out in the sea of vengeful mugs. Prince Matthaios is cradling her and yelling obscenities at her attackers. He freed her from the stocks before the mob could do further damage but he hates himself for arriving too late.

Sara tries to calm Matthaios before he strikes them all down in a bout of rage. Matthaios's signature grin has been detached. Sara sees a fury in his eyes that makes her shudder. She isn't the only one who sees it. Her enemies

take cautious steps back, as they ponder why their prince is so deeply wounded over the plight of a lowly slave girl.

My prince is not himself, Sara realizes, fearing that this may be the single blade of straw that breaks the noble camel's back. *A man, even one with a crown, can only endure so many trials. As the son of a warmongering Caesar, Matthaios endures endless hours of weapons training. Though beaten, broken down, and brainwashed to be a killer, the prince is anything but. He isn't easily enraged like his father. Matthaios is generous to beggars, playful to the point of childish absurdity, and he rarely takes anything seriously. All of which are signs of weakness in his father's eyes, but to me, they are signs of strength. I tell him often that it takes a beacon of true power to witness the horrors of life and still find reasons to smile. But tonight is different... he is different.*

To avoid a bloodbath, Sara reminds him in a choked whisper, "I am blessed to be alive. Thank you, my lord."

Her rational words have the desired effect. He knows that most who incur the wrath of Caesar suffer far worse fates.

Dread bubbles up from the pit of Matthaios's stomach. *If she was any other slave Father would have killed her.*

Matthaios carries Sara away, cursing the townsfolk who did this to her. The now docile crowd watches the prince and the slave in profound bewilderment as they disappear into the night.

Sara feebly explains as she bounces down the path in his arms, "I helped Princess Andromeda escape the palace. I had to or a boy would have died."

"You don't have to explain," Matthaios assures her.

“I’m here now.” *I cannot allow her suffering to be for naught. I must find a way to help this boy.* “His name?”

“Huh,” she murmurs groggily.

“I need the name of the boy you were trying to save.”

“Perseus, he’s a gladiator.”

Sara loses consciousness and dangles helplessly in his arms. Matthaios prays that she is at peace and hopes she has escaped to that happy place she goes to whenever life is at its worst. They have never been lovers, only childhood friends. Any intimacy between them had been no more than a figment of Sara’s imagination. Yet the sight of this resilient and beautiful girl reduced to such a state crushed his heart in a way he never knew possible. A single sparkling teardrop falls from the prince’s eye. With no free hand to wipe it away, it rolls down his cheek unhindered.



The Roman Coliseum was a marvelous vision, with its soaring marble walls and elegant architecture. Its sheer enormity was enough to capture one’s breath. Its beauty and functionality ranked second to none, but for the gladiators imprisoned beneath it, this arena was a place of torment, suffering, and death.

The prison mess hall, where the gladiators ate, was a grungy noisy environment. It was eerily lit by torches along the walls and a candle on each table. Without the fancy silver candleholders of the villas above, the wax melted and formed a puddle on the rough unfinished wood.

A young gladiator, named Perseus, sat in the orange glow of a candle, aimlessly stirring his porridge. He knew that he should eat to keep his strength up. Food was never a guarantee for slaves, but the knowledge that any moment could be his last made something as natural as eating seem pointless.

Remus, a sadistic predator of children, winked at the young gladiator and blew a kiss. Remus was a giant burly man, with brown teeth, and arms the size of cannons.

Perseus's stomach rolled and a wave of nausea washed over him. The hairs on the back of his neck stood on end, as Remus watched him in a creepy and unnerving manner.

The fact that Perseus was still of a tender age made him a target among prisoners. What little hope remained in his fragile young heart died as he reflected on the plight of a friend. *My only comrade within these walls was a hilarious bloke named Felix. We would stay up late making plans for distant travels and epic adventures. Felix had me convinced that a life existed for us beyond the confines of the Coliseum. In an instant, everything changed. As Felix lay hemorrhaging before my eyes, he warned me not to fight the vile Remus when he comes for me in the dead of night.*

A single tear escaped the prison of Perseus's lashes and splashed into his bowl. With his appetite lost in a sea of sorrow, Perseus pushed his dinner away. *Despite my friend's warning, I cannot go willingly with Remus. I would sooner cross into the afterlife than allow Remus to have his way with me.*

A strong hand shoved Perseus in the back.

"What's your name boy?" Remus demanded as he

stood with two of his goons.

Perseus sat up straight. “My name is not your concern, you depraved, murdering, heretic.”

“Harsh words for one so young and so pure.” Remus leaned forward to smell the boy's angel blonde hair.

Perseus leaped from his seat and shoved the miscreant away. Within seconds a fist was flying at Perseus's face, which he countered with a well-executed block. Perseus twisted the brute's arm behind his back, slammed his face on the table, and called to the others, “only three of you this time? I'm insulted.”

Within minutes the cafeteria had exploded into the noisiest, bloodiest, most brutal fight the guards had ever seen. The guards charged into the fray, trampling the bodies of dead men in order to get to the cause. Like usual, they yanked Perseus out of the center of the melee. Four guards stretched his arms out wide while the fifth unsheathed his sword to end the ever-present thorn in everyone's side. Perseus's heart pounded at the sight of the blade swishing down on him.

“Sheath your sword!”

The soldiers whipped around at the sound of a feminine voice. Perseus grinned with relief as his sapphire eyes fell upon the beautiful face of Princess Andromeda. She possessed blood red hair, eyes like shining emeralds, and skin the color of a pearl. Thanks to Sara's diversion, the princess had arrived safely, but Andromeda was completely unaware of the price the serving girl had paid.

The head guard shouted orders at the gladiators, “You're in the presence of a lady! To your cells, you filthy dogs!”

The gladiators obediently returned to their cells. The

guard pulled a lever and numerous gates shut simultaneously.

“Would you mind allowing me to enter this cell?” She asked the prison guard.

“Apologies, my lady.” The guard explained, “it’s for your protection.”

Andromeda nodded understandably and turned to Perseus. She jested with a smirk, “I see you’re making friends again.”

He laughed, “I’m Prince Popular.”

The slave and the princess floated into their ritual of witty banter as if they weren’t separated by iron bars, societal rules, and the ever-present threat of death.

As lovely as it was to reflect on the past, Perseus knew that she hadn’t risked severe repercussions just for a chat. He was concerned about the information that she was hesitating to speak of, yet he yearned not to press her for it. He longed to enjoy her breathtaking smile, and enchanting laughter a bit longer. They gazed at one another for an inappropriate length of time before dutifully forcing their eyes elsewhere.

She couldn’t hold it in any longer. *Pretending like all is wonderful will not make it so, no matter how badly I wish it. Perseus deserves to know about the looming dangers.*

Andromeda slipped Perseus a care package through the bars of his cell.

“Thank you, my lady,” he spoke, mesmerized by her generosity and kindness.

“You shouldn’t thank me,” Andromeda confessed. Her smile faded and tears filled her eyes. “I bartered for your release and I’m sorry to say that I have failed you.

The slave trader would not agree to any amount of treasure. He received orders from Caesar, as a favor to his ally Medusa, that you will fight on Saturday, and you will die on Saturday.”

Her words shook him to the core, but he refused to show it. He was determined to be strong for her.

Perseus begged, “please do not cry. You have done all that you could, more than a slave like me deserves.”

He was the one who’d been sentenced to death and yet he was comforting her.

Andromeda reached between the bars and placed her hand upon his cheek. She tearfully and silently mouthed the words, *I love you*.

Perseus felt more for her than societal rules would allow, but to avoid the ruin of her reputation he would take his vows of love to the grave. Out of duty and honor, he buried everything he felt and wished her a long and happy life.

CHAPTER 2:

LIONS AND MEN

Bathing patients and tending wounds was a task for a nursemaid, not a high-born woman of Andromeda's station, but the princess cared for Sara's every need.

"I'm so sorry," Andromeda said as she wrapped Sara's bruised ribs. "If I had known..."

"I chose to get involved, my lady," Sara reminded the princess. "I was not forced." *Princess Andromeda is already burdened with the pending doom of a friend. The last thing I want is to add guilt over what happened to me.*

Andromeda fought back tears and bore a quivering half smile, despite the tragedy and chaos that plagued her existence. "If things were different and life was kinder would you and I be friends?"

"If life was kinder we would be sisters," Sara assured the lonely royal.

Andromeda abandoned royal etiquette and embraced Sara as a friend.

After Andromeda retired for the evening, Prince Matthaios came to check on Sara. He had been relieved to hear the court physician say that she would make a full recovery. Matthaios eased in to find Sara weeping before a handheld mirror at the sight of her black eye and cropped curls.

Sara turned from him at once. "Please leave me. I don't want you to see me this way."

"What way? Looking brave and beautiful? You are so much more than your hair, Sara."

He rushed over to give her a hug. They embraced one another in friendship, gratitude, and sweet silence.

After finally releasing her, he couldn't help but question. "Why didn't you come to me?"

She looked away as she said, "I am grateful for how close we were as children, but that is the past."

"I will be the first to admit that our duties have pulled us in different directions, but do you believe that nothing remains?"

"I didn't say that, my lord."

"You didn't trust me either."

"If I had asked for your help and you told me no or even punished me I would have no choice but to admit that nothing remains of our friendship. That would have hurt worse than being attacked by an angry mob. If you had agreed to help you might have ended up in the stocks right alongside me. I wish not to drive a wedge between you and your father."

"My relationship with Caesar has always been precarious but it is not your burden to save it. Come to me for help next time. This is not a request from a childhood friend, but an order from your prince."

“Yes, your majesty.” Sara agreed at once.

She had answered too quickly. He could tell that she was holding something back. He assured her, “go ahead and ask your question. I insist.”

Sara took a deep breath, knowing that it was not her place to question him, and still feeling a burning desire to do so. “Why does the fact that I did not come to you bother you so badly?”

“For the same reason the possibility of being denied my assistance bothers you so badly,” he confessed. “It forces me to admit that nothing remains of our friendship and it pains me too deeply to do so.”

He took away her mirror, determined to hang onto it until she healed. He feared that her reflection would continue to upset her.

Matthaios was surprised to spot a look of amusement on her face. Sara couldn’t stop the corners of her mouth from curving in a small smile.

“What is it?” he questioned with a grin.

“It’s just the first time...”

“You have had short hair? It will grow back, Sara.”

“It’s the first time you have ever called me beautiful.”

Her sentence was followed by awkward silence, as the shy prince declined to address her observation.

“I made no such admission,” he adamantly denied.

“When you first walked through the door you said I was brave and beautiful. Did you mean it?”

With an embarrassed hue in his cheeks, Matthaios kissed her knuckles and evaded the question. “Sleep well, Sara.”



One week later the Coliseum prison was buzzing as the gladiators prepared for battle. The sour smell of lion dung wafted throughout the prison and Perseus knew this was bound to be one hell of a match. He could smell the blood of those who had fought and died mere moments earlier.

Fighting days became the only times that Perseus saw Felix. As a result of Remus's attack, Felix lost his right eye; his left leg had to be amputated in order to save the boy's life. Felix was moved to the opposite end of the prison, a place the guards called Trash Row. This was where former gladiators, who'd been irreparably injured, lived out the remainder of their days in shame. Felix was blessed because he would never be forced to fight again, and he was cursed for the very same reason. This manner of exile was considered a great dishonor. After a decade or more of fighting in the arena, champion gladiators often achieved fame, fortune, and freedom. Slaves on Trash Row no longer had a chance for such things. This sad reality caused Felix to envy Perseus and a rift formed between the friends.

Perseus stood at the armory table with other gladiators. The disfigured men from Trash Row strapped on the gladiators' armor for them. As Perseus was fitted he could feel the rumble of the crowd. He could hear the echo of their anticipating screams.

Jester, the only empathetic guard, was collecting the men's last words. No one knew this guard's birth name.

All they knew was that he was a former gladiator, who'd won his freedom and now worked for a wage. He was called Jester because of the goofy court jester hat he wore around the prison. It was a brightly colored contraption with bells that jingled every time he took a step.

"Notes!" Jester shouted, banging his sword against the bars as he made his rounds. "You have ten minutes to write your notes! Speak now or be silent forever more!"

Perseus kissed the letter containing his last words to Andromeda. He placed it into the velvet-lined chest that Jester was carrying about.

"Are you serious," Felix mocked him and burst into laughter. "Do you honestly believe that a wealthy woman gives a damn about you?"

Perseus turned his back, not in the mood for Felix's nonsense. Felix had grown bitter, cynical, and pessimistic. He was never the same after Remus attacked him.

Felix scoffed, "don't waste your time."

Perseus growled at his former friend, "what makes you so certain she doesn't care?"

"If she cares why are you still here? Why does she not purchase your freedom?"

Perseus had heard enough. He hadn't the time to allow Felix to get in his head. Perseus needed to focus on what lay ahead.

Felix laughed meanly, "you are weak and delusional."

Perseus shook his head at Felix. "These notes are not a matter weakness. They are an act of responsibility, something an immature, selfish, son of a whore like you could never understand!"

"Pathetic fool!"

“Jealous cyclops!”

Jester ran over as tempers began to flair. He grabbed Perseus. “Save it for the Colosseum! You do not know what you will face in the arena today! Focus on the battle or all is lost!”

The gladiators, at last, calmed down. A furious Perseus and Felix went their separate ways. Two comrades forever torn apart by the hardships of captivity. Felix adjusted his eye patch and limped away on his pegged leg.

Jester pulled Felix aside. “Young man, Perseus is right. These notes are an act of responsibility. If you should fall your loved ones have the right to know.”

“I’ve been banished to Trash Row!” Felix shouted. “I’ve gone from gladiator to garbage. I will never see battle again. I am no longer at risk.”

Jester dreadfully reminded him, “Prison is still a dangerous place. If you have a lady somewhere...”

“So, I’m just supposed to sit down and start spouting sonnets,” Felix spat sarcastically.

“If that’s what you want,” Jester said, “but most chaps merely write a name and location so that I know who to inform. Even if your people are far away I’ll send word to them. If your next of kin or lady reside locally I’ll personally deliver your cape and helmet to her, along with any earnings you might have attained from gambling on the arena fights.”

“And if I don’t have a next of kin,” Felix snapped. “What if there isn’t a person on this stinking planet that gives a damn about me? What happens to my winnings?”

“The contents of your cell are thrown away and your winnings are returned to Master Agamemnon,” Jester

explained. “You earned that money with your blood sweat and tears. Do you truly want to give it to a man who’s already taken so much from you?”

Felix shook his head with tears in his only eye.

“Then write the bloody note,” Jester informed him with a slap on his shoulder. Jester walked away and continued his rounds. “Notes! Notes! You have five minutes to put in your notes!”

Felix returned to the open cell he once shared with Perseus, staring helplessly at the paper, quill, and inkwell.

“You can’t read or write, can you?”

Felix looked up to find an armor-clad Perseus standing at the threshold.

Felix started for the exit. “If you’re here to gloat...”

Perseus swallowed his pride and blocked him. “I am here because I may not survive this fight and I don’t want to leave things like this.”

Felix was stunned. He had never seen Perseus this worried. Felix always knew one of them may have to bury the other someday, but he never longed for the moment. He held onto hope that they would retire as champions with their freedom and live off of their winnings for the remainder of their days.

Felix put a muzzle on his ego and confessed. “I have never needed to write until now. My father was captain of a merchant ship. I was always at sea with him, no time for book learning. We had a quartermaster for reading ledgers and dividing profits.”

Perseus made his way into the cell. “It sounds like a pretty rootless existence. I can see where you get your sense of adventure.”

Felix had to admit. “It was a great life until we were

attacked at sea. My father was killed and I was sold to this horrible place.”

Perseus sat with the quill and paper. “I know your father was the only family you had, but I’m sure there is someone you fancy. Knowing you, probably nine or ten someones.”

Felix laughed at the memories of drinking and philandering at every port. He’d grown up with roustabout sailors and they were not known for their chastity.

Felix took a deep breath, hoping that he wouldn’t be judged for what he was about to say. “I already had the guards tell Chloe that Remus killed me that night. In many ways, he had.”

Perseus grit his teeth with anger. “You selfish scoundrel.”

“That was my one unselfish act. She deserves more than half a man.”

“She deserves to know that the man she loves is alive.”

Felix mulled over the decision for a while, and then reluctantly agreed.

Perseus asked him, “would you like me to write something special for her? I’m a good writer.”

“We haven’t the time,” Felix replied. “And she knows I’m better with weapons than words. She’ll know I didn’t write it.”

Perseus quickly jotted down Chloe’s name and location.

Felix graciously thanked him, the first kind words he’d said to anyone in a long time. “You’re going to win. You better win. I bet all my coins on you.”

Perseus nodded with a hearty chuckle and walked away. Felix added a pretty sketch of a butterfly to his note since he recalled how much Chloe liked them. He blew the ink dry, folded the paper, and hunted Jester down to turn in his letter.

Minutes later the heavy iron gate began to rise with a series of clinks. Perseus and others marched out into the blinding sun and deafening applause of a roaring Coliseum. They remained firm in their stance with weapons at the ready as Agamemnon made his announcements.

“Let the games begin!”

The gate at the far end of the Coliseum was raised. Ravenous wildcats and chariot riding assassins were unleashed. With eyes fierce and weapons raised, the gladiators charged into battle. Perseus traded blood, sweat, and cold sharp steel amidst a sea of lions and men...

CHAPTER 3: A CROWN OF GOLDEN LEAVES

Prince Matthaios stared blankly into space, tuning out the roar of the crowd, the pungent odor of lion dung, the strong iron smell of blood. He wished he was anywhere else, anywhere but here. He detested the coliseum and loathed his father for dragging him along to witness this savage and inhumane slaughter. As heir to the Roman empire, Matthaios knew he was far more fortunate than most, especially his father's slaves, but days like this made him feel as if he was being crushed beneath the weight of his leafy golden crown.

Matthaios's father, Emperor Titus, known by the masses as Caesar, had continued the Roman legacy of conquering and enslaving all of Europe and beyond. Female slaves were forced to serve in the palace and ravished at will by Titus and his soldiers. Male slaves were forced to fight to the death in the Roman Coliseum. Titus was a wicked man disguised by a beautiful

appearance: tall and statuesque, gorgeous black curls that complemented his chestnut eyes. A very pretty man with a very ugly soul.

Caesar kissed the hand of the visiting queen, Medusa. He promised with a smile, “I have something special for you.”

She grinned. “I’m looking forward to it, Caesar.”

Medusa possessed hair as black as a raven’s wings, and ruby red lips. Much like Caesar, she bore the soul of a venomous serpent wrapped in a beautiful façade.

A slave woman with golden hair, a little older than Matthaios, filled his goblet with dark red wine. She smiled at him for longer than she should before moving on to fill his father’s chalice. Matthaios blushed a deep shade of red as he noticed her feminine curves. He shifted uncomfortably on his throne and gave himself a mental slap. *I can’t be with a girl who’s under my authority. That’s rape, not passion, but if I were to have any woman in the world in my bed I would be thrusting, and sweating, and calling the name Sara.*

Matthaios downed his wine as he waited on pins and needles for the horrifying games to continue. He was blessed to have arrived late and missed the first two matches. All he knew was that there was a great number of casualties.

He looked up escaping for only a moment into the largest most beautiful pair of chocolate brown eyes belonging to his beloved Sara, who due to his position could never be more than a friend. She possessed exotic ebony skin and her feminine curves were barely concealed by her sparkling white toga. Matthaios found himself shifting uncomfortably again as Sara approached

with a slight smile, setting a tray of grapes, bread, and cheeses on the table before him. Matthaios breathed a sigh of relief. The fact that Sara was smiling meant that the gladiator she was protecting was still alive... at least for the moment.

“How may I be of further assistance, my lord,” she asked while taking his chalice to fill it. The wine tinked against the inside of the metal cup.

Would you take *your rightful place by my side as my Empress? Would you rule with me by day and allow me to explore every inch of you by night?* “That’ll be all for now.”

He retrieved the goblet with a grin, touching her fingers in the process, sending tingles up her spine. She smiled bashfully, nodded respectfully, and carried on with other tasks.

Caesar had accumulated slaves from many distant lands. Other than Sara, most were fairer skinned than the Romans. Matthaios saw little difference between the slaves and himself. *My people possess a lovely olive hue but does that make us superior? Does being a different religion make us superior?*

“Ambitious whores,” Titus scoffed in response to Sara’s unintentional flirting. He placed the cool metal chalice to his lips, taking a drink of his tangy sweet wine.

“You should not judge them father,” Matthaios protested. “They are desperate for freedom and know that I am the key to it.”

Titus rolled his eyes. “I wish I had anyone else in the world to pass on my crown to but you. You are pathetic, Matthaios. Your weakness will be the fall of the Roman Empire.”

Matthaios rose from his throne at the right hand of Caesar. With a grit of his teeth, he walked across their private stadium box to sit next to a soldier and good friend of his named Gawain. Gawain was suited in armor that looked like a mold of his chest, a red cape hung down the back of him, attached at his broad shoulders. He wore a shining helmet with what looked like a red broom down the middle of it. The frayed bottom half of his uniform came just above the knee, leaving his muscular legs bare.

Gawain removed his helmet, baring his shoulder-length brown hair and gorgeous face. "I hate this place. I count the days until I can call you Caesar and we can knock the Coliseum to the ground."

"I long for that day as well," Matthaios whispered. "May I ask you a personal question?"

Gawain, not being the shy type, nodded without hesitation, "absolutely, your grace."

Matthaios gave an embarrassed grin. "How...um how do you resist the charms of slave girls?"

"By remembering how much I love my wife and taking my lust and frustration out on her in our marital bed," Gawain admitted.

"But I don't have a wife. What am I to do?"

"If you insist on being noble you'll have to rub one out from time to time," Gawain answered honestly.

Matthaios gasped at Gawain's tactlessness though such a response wasn't at all out of character for him. Matthaios replied in shock, "his majesty says it is better that your seed fall in the belly of a whore than on the ground!"

"Then I'd suggest you find the belly of a whore and plant your seed there," Gawain laughed. "Otherwise, if

you insist on sparing your slaves the indignity and degradation of being used and cast aside, you're going to have to rub one out."

Matthaios didn't know how to respond to his guard's brutal honesty so he chose not to. A hush fell over the attentive audience and Matthaios turned his attention to the stadium's dirt floor. Agamemnon, merciless slave driver and master of ceremonies, fired up the crowd. Agamemnon continued this season's games with a crowd favorite: a match between the reigning champion, Remus, and a man rumored to be an enemy to the crown. Matthaios's eyes narrowed on Agamemnon as a myriad of spectators leaped from their seats, cheering in anticipation of certain death. Perseus, the alleged traitor, was thrust into the ring.

Queen Medusa nearly leaped from her seat with delight. "At last I will be free of him! I must admit, I was disappointed when he survived the first round."

Caesar assured her, "in the first round he fought alongside others and got lucky. He's guaranteed not to survive this one."

"That's just unfair!" Matthaios shouted as a slave boy no more than fourteen stood before the enormous man he would be killed by.

Sara gasped and whispered to Matthaios, "the shield he bears is bigger than him! "

To make matters worse, Agamemnon was determined to use every dirty trick to ensure the boy's defeat. Just before the match, Perseus had been pricked with a poisoned dart to dull his senses. His legs were unsteady and he was stricken with double vision.

When Sara saw the heartbreak and desperation in

Andromeda's eyes, she realized where the visiting princess had been sneaking off to every night. Sara, having lived with the pain of being in love with a man she shouldn't, felt sorrow for Andromeda.

Titus huffed with exasperation as Sara began to weep, "you're dismissed!"

Sara fled his presence at once.

Titus turned to his enforcer, Daetor, "Be certain to beat her later! I came for entertainment, not to hear the keening of a worthless slave girl. Take her virtue. That should toughen her up a bit."

The large black man gave an evil smirk. "Gladly, Caesar."

Andromeda gasped in horror. Just when she thought things could not get worse, Caesar had ordained the unspeakable.

"Father, you can't!" Matthaios shouted.

"And why can't I?" Titus questioned before a look of pride lit his face. "Ah ha, it seems you have already claimed her virtue. My son has his first whore."

"Yes, she is my bedmate," Matthaios lied in order to save her.

Titus grinned from ear to ear. "No one touches my son's harlot! Do we have an understanding!"

"Yes, Caesar!" The soldiers shouted in unison.

Matthaios found himself able to breathe again. The very thought of an assault on Sara had knocked the wind out of him.

Remus taunted Perseus as they faced one another on the arena floor, "this is a dreadful waste of fine young flesh. I had better plans for you but Caesar wished otherwise."

Perseus defiantly spat in the eye of the monster who'd nearly killed Felix. He thought Remus would strike him down right then but the monster only laughed and wiped his face. Remus had every intention of dragging this torture out for as long as possible.

"Gladiators ready! Fight!" Agamemnon hollered, and the crowd roared in response.

Perseus shrank behind his shield as Remus came at him with everything. The sadistic brute battered the shield with his sword, trying to demolish the boy it protected.

Prince Matthaïos's eyes began to glow a molten gold and he could feel a divine power surging through him. This magic was a curse summoned by a Moorish medicine woman who'd been slain by his father.

Matthaïos focused his energy on the giant and caused him to trip. Perseus was able to land a few hits before a mighty lion sprung forth from a trapdoor in the ground. Remus could roll and leap from its path while Perseus stood shackled to the ground by his ankle. The horrified teen ran as far as his chain would allow before he was pounced on. Perseus hollered out as the lion's claws tore across his shoulder. Four large rips appeared.

Andromeda fainted. Gawain caught her before she hit the ground.

It was now clear to Matthaïos that Agamemnon was slanting the odds in favor of Remus. It was time to make things even. As blood flooded from the boy's wounds a second lion came charging at him. Matthaïos mumbled a spell while his eyes glowed like fire. The enormous cats began to stagger like they were drunk. Both beasts collapsed on their sides, tongues hanging out of their mouths. The bewildered crowd gasped.

Remus knocked Perseus to the ground. He wielded the razor-sharp sword over the teen's throat, waiting for Titus to turn his thumb and give the signal to either end him or show mercy. The crowd went insane as their emperor rose with an outstretched fist.

"Father please," Matthaios pleaded with heaving breaths on behalf of a kid just two years younger than himself.

Matthaios nearly fainted when his father gave the signal to kill the slave. Matthaios's mind raced with every spell he could think of. The wicked giant smiled and released an earth-rumbling battle cry coming down swiftly with the blade. Perseus shielded himself with his arms, waiting to be impaled, but the deathblow didn't come.

A large falcon had flown straight for Remus's face. Remus flailed, swatting at the bird that was attacking him relentlessly; its beak pecking and tearing, its sharp talons clawing at his flesh as he screamed. With a final claw of his throat, the bird left as abruptly as it came. Remus fell to his knees gripping his torn throat as blood spurted between his fingers. Perseus looked on in horror as his opponent gagged, choked, and collapsed. Remus took his final breath and his heart ceased to beat. A pool of bright red blood stained the ground around his lifeless corpse.

The crowd erupted in applause as Agamemnon grudgingly declared the scrawny whelp as his victor. He held up Perseus's spindly arm, brandishing him before adoring fans.

Sara gazed up at Matthaios from the stands. She wiped her tears smiling on the inside. *Matthaios possesses magic. A secret he only entrusted me with. Caesar*

believes his son will be the one to bring us down, but Matthaios will be the savior of us all.

After Perseus was taken away for treatment Agamemnon went back to announcing. With a single snap of Matthaios's fingers, the lions sprung to life. Agamemnon ran screaming as they charged him. Hot steaming breath at the back of his neck. The lions were snatched abruptly and whipped around; their chains allowed them limited room. Agamemnon wiped the sweat from his brow with relief as he got safely out of range.

The enormous wildcats sprung up and growled at the end of their chains, licking their chops for him. Agamemnon heaved to catch his breath sidestepping along the arena wall toward the exit. Matthaios snapped his fingers again and the chains just broke. The lions leaped gracefully through the air, pouncing on the malevolent slave driver. His screams echoed throughout the Coliseum as the animals he had captured, beaten, and starved feasted on his flesh. Soon the tortured wails ceased. The lion's walked away satisfied, licking the blood from their paws.

Perseus broke away from the surgeon. He jumped to the ground and grabbed the large ring of keys from what was left of Agamemnon's bloody heap. Guards on his trail, Perseus ran to the gladiator pit and freed the men from their cells. At last, he found Felix fighting at his side rather than against him. Felix was remarkable with a blade. Perseus handled his sword with equal grace and precision. They worked as a team, striking down their enemies. With Jester's help, the Gladiators defeated their Roman captors and fled triumphantly to freedom. The lions fled into the wilderness.

Emperor Titus pounded his fist on the armrest of his mighty throne. “We’ll need new slaves! We’ll need new lions! A new master of ceremonies! The Coliseum will be closed for the better part of a year! The one time I bring my son it’s a disaster! Matthaïos you are a cursed jinx!”

Titus yelled at an empty throne. Matthaïos had long fled, brooding over the deaths he’d caused. In killing two men he’d saved countless more, but he still felt horrible about it.

He ran from the Coliseum without so much as Gawain’s company to keep him safe. His tears streamed, blurring his big brown eyes as he sped through the busy streets. Matthaïos fled until pain stabbed at his sides until he heaved for breath, and then he ran through the pain.

The crown of golden leaves slipped from his black tresses. It hit the street with a loud clink and he didn’t turn around for it. He just ran; ran out the guilt, and the pain, and the heartache of being a murderer...

CHAPTER 4:

AMONG IMMORTALS

The night was cold and dark, a reflection of Matthaios's mood. He'd killed two men and there was nothing he could do to change that awful fact. He ventured cautiously through the vast empty building. His every step was stealthy and aware, careful not to bump into shelves and tables, certain not to knock over artifacts on display.

At last, he reached his destination and lowered to the floor mentally, physically, and emotionally exhausted. With a flash of his eyes, the logs ignited. Flickering orange flames danced in the fireplace. He sat forlornly on a thick bear skin rug, warming himself before the blaze. The fire did wonders for the chill upon his flesh but little for the chill upon his soul. Yet there was something so comforting about the vast Library of Rome: the innumerable volumes, the faint dusty smell of ancient scrolls, all the history of the world under one magnificent

roof. He only visited in the dead of night, to enjoy the solitude and peace of reading by firelight, brushing up on his literature, and learning new enchantments.

It was here that his mother, Arrecina, would take him and Sara to share with them tales of intrigue, romance, and adventure among immortals. Arrecina would unroll maps of the stars, point out each constellation in the heavens, and weave a fantastic tale as to how each divine group acquired its name. Then sickness took her; so it was here at this sacred place Matthaïos came to remember his mother and forget about everything else.

“You dropped this.”

He whipped around to find Sara holding his crown of shimmering laurel leaves. The fire cast dancing shadows upon her lovely feminine form.

He tossed another log on the fire, and shook his head at the crown that felt more like a suffocating leash, “I don’t want it.”

“But it is yours, my lord,” she reminded him dutifully as she joined him in front of the glowing red embers.

She was warmed by the heat and soothed by the soft popping and crackling of the wood. “We use to get in so much trouble chasing each other down the aisles of this great library, climbing the shelves. The place seemed so much bigger then.”

He snickered to himself. “We toppled the Trojan War display, and broke the head off Achilles.”

He looked over at her. A soft smile upon her lips soon put a grin on his.

“You know what I did today and still see me no different,” he said.

“You are the boy with whom I ran through the

meadows with as a child, and the wise and just man who will be emperor of Rome,” she said placing the crown back upon his head gazing at him a bit longer than she should.

His eyes locked on hers for just a moment before she looked away shyly. Matthaios rose and stood before her. They were so close Sara could feel the heat from his body. He rested his palm on the wall behind her, hopelessly lost in her gaze, wishing they were anywhere else, a place where they could give love a chance. Though she willed herself to do the right thing and look away, her eyes remained on him with a force she couldn't ignore. This was something stronger than magic: destiny.

Matthaios whispered as they stood just inches apart, “would you ever consider leaving Rome?”

“I have no desire to be a fugitive slave if that's what you're asking.”

He caressed her face with the hand that wasn't holding the wall and her body shivered with tingles.

The charming prince reworded his question, “if you were not a slave would you leave this place?”

“If you were not a slave would you come with me,” she replied.

He backed away, feeling gut-punched by her remark.

“A thousand apologies,” Sara insisted. “I was completely out of line.”

“It's quite alright,” he assured her. “In many ways, I am as much a slave to my crown as you are to my father.”

Sara turned to leave, having failed at her mission to cheer him up.

Matthaios called over his shoulder as she retreated, “And yes, I would come with you.”

A smile lit Sara's face and she returned to him. She took a deep breath, preparing to confess something that she knew she may regret. "I've never told anyone this, and I hope it doesn't make you treat me differently."

"Go on," he assured her. "There is no judgment between friends."

"I have dreamt of you a hundred times in a hundred different ways. Sometimes you look a little different, but it is always you. In some dreams, we are destined for greatness. In others, we are destined for destruction, but in all dreams, we are destined to fall for one another, no matter the cost."

He sighed yearning not to break her heart or his own. "Sara, we cannot afford to think like this."

"I know, but if I did not tell someone I would go mad."

He nodded understandably, having endured the same peculiar dreams. "I'm so sorry. If I was just a boy and you were just a girl... If things were different..."

"I know," Sara assured him. "If I was just a girl and you were just a boy we would go somewhere with a beach."

"And mountains," he added as he sat on the rug before the fireplace.

"Wildflowers"

"And a vineyard"

Sara asked nervously, "is it true that you've sworn off slave girls?"

Matthaios nodded, "My position doesn't allow for a relationship, only an abuse of power."

"But what makes you certain that you are abusing your power," Sara questioned.

“I can show you better than I can tell you.”

He gave her a devilish grin and removed his crown, yearning not to dishonor it with his actions. Out of curiosity and yearning, Sara nodded her consent for whatever he intended to do. Without warning, he snatched her down on the rug. Matthaios placed his body atop her trembling frame. His forehead pressed against hers. Their mouths were barely an inch apart. Her heart raced. Her breathing quickened as he held her wrists above her head and pressed her hips against the floor with his own.

He smiled and whispered, “you quiver at my touch and I cannot be certain if it’s from fear or anticipation.”

She whispered between heaving breaths, “what if... I said... I wanted it?”

“Even then, how could I believe you,” he replied. “How could I be certain your words aren’t just to appease me out of your own fear of what may happen if you say no?”

He slid a hand down her side, slipping up her toga. Her eyes grew wide as he rubbed the smooth black thigh beneath. She gasped and shivered, breathing hard. His mouth lowered to brace her quivering lips and she feared her pounding heart might break out of her chest.

He stopped abruptly before their mouths met and jumped back. “Get out! Get out before I do something you’ll hate me for.”

She sat up reaching for his hand, “My lord I...”

“Leave me,” he shouted in despair and frustration.

She left at his words. He tuned out the clattering and banging of displayed objects hitting the floor as she ran through the vast dark library.

He sighed. *I didn’t want her to leave, and yet I*

yearned not to rob her of her virtue. Sara is and has always been my rock, my ever solid and steady foundation. Without her, I would crumble.

He sat alone and defeated before the fireplace. Sara was long gone but his desire for her was an ever-present nuisance. He fought the urge to do what Gawain had recommended. Matthaios yearned for the simpler days of childhood when he could be in her presence and just have fun. *Now that we're older things have gotten so complicated. Does she ever want it like I do? Of course not! Sara is sweet and innocent.*

In the end, he chose to distract himself rather than relieve himself. He selected a book from the massive collection and read of the epic adventures that took place among immortals.



Titus lay beneath a pretty blonde slave girl. She was massaging the tense muscles of his back and periodically lowering herself to kiss his neck and nibble at his ear. He needed a bit of pleasure after today's catastrophe in the Coliseum. Titus jumped at rapping on his chamber door but didn't advise her to stop.

Instead, he yelled, "whoever you are, leave now or I'll have you killed!"

"It is I, Father," called the voice from the other side of the door.

"Matthaios, you are a cursed jinx!" Titus shoved the slave off. She fell from the bed and smacked her elbow hard against the floor. Tingling shot up her forearm and

out of her fingers. She yelped in pain and he shushed her. He covered himself at once and impatiently signaled for her to hide.

“Come in Matthaios,” Titus called, somewhat frustrated.

“Sorry to bother you this time of night but I can’t find our royal physician, Uncle Flavius,” Matthaios explained. “Do you have anything lying around that will help me sleep?”

Titus tied the sheet around his waist to conceal his nudity and walked across the massive room. He fumbled around in a drawer, “Ah here we go.”

“What’s this,” Matthaios asked as his father passed him a pipe that was already packed.

“Relax,” Titus laughed. “It’s just a smooth blend of tobacco. It’ll put you right out.”

“Thank you father,” Matthaios grinned ever so brightly.

Titus was a boy of merely thirteen summers when he was forced to marry Arrecina, an older princess. For this reason and many more Arrecina had always been Matthaios’s only parent. Most days Titus behaved more like an annoyed older sibling than a father to Matthaios. It was a rare occasion that Titus actually acted like a dad, and this was one of those moments. As of present Matthaios was the happiest warlock alive. The young sorcerer jogged back to his chamber smiling, pipe in hand.

Titus laughed hysterically. *There’s a concentrated mixture of wild weed and opium in that pipe. It’s going to be an interesting night for Matthaios.*

The slave girl came out of the closet. “Is everything alright Caesar?”

“Everything is grrrrreat,” He replied between chuckles.



Matthaios sat up in his massive bed, with his back against the cool headboard. His every sense super heightened, his every nerve firing at once. His mind was whirling with a million psychedelic colors before they all blended together into a silhouette of Sara. She appeared before him a goddess divine, in dazzling white robes, a golden crown upon her head.

He asked in his delirium, “Will you share my life with me?”

She nodded, “Yes my lord.”

“My throne?”

“Yes”

“My bed?”

“Yes”

Matthaios grinned and took her hand. He gently pulled her into bed with him. He took her mouth ferociously, kissing her with everything, and caressing every part of her. His tongue teased hers, making her even more eager and wanton until passion rang free and he drifted back to earth. The colors faded. His room returned to normal as he came out of his hallucination. He looked down and nearly hollered out in shock. It wasn't Sara in his arms. It was a blond chambermaid he barely knew. His heart stopped. He gasped in horror. *I raped a girl! Oh, my gods, I raped a girl!*

CHAPTER 5:

LOST CITY OF ATLANTIS

The sight of an unfamiliar woman in his bed smacked Matthaios out of his delirium at once. The girl casually donned her toga and started carrying out other duties. She was fluffing his pillows, tidying up his chamber, and blowing out the candles as if nothing had happened. This was the worst part for Matthaios: how accustomed she was to being treated like garbage.

“My gods! What have I done!” He yelled.

“Is something wrong, my lord,” the now startled maid asked, her eyes wide and frightened. “His majesty sent me to... you know... He said a release would help you sleep. He would’ve beaten me if I said no.” She started to tear up.

Matthaios started to panic, “I raped a girl! I can’t believe I raped a girl!”

“If it makes you feel better, we merely played around

a bit,” she swore. “We didn’t actually... do it.”

“That DOESN’T make me feel better,” Matthaios yelled. “Either way you were forced!”

The girl gasped as she caught sight of the pipe on his nightstand, “Is that Caesar’s pipe! He smokes wild weed and opium! You were drugged, my lord! Oh, gods, I raped a boy! I can’t believe I raped the future emperor of Rome! Please don’t have me killed. You took my hand and asked me to relieve you; which is what your father told me to do anyway. I thought you were giving me an order.”

“I was hallucinating. I would never lay with a slave girl,” Matthaios explained as he grabbed the raving girl and sat her down on the bed. “I swear I’m not going to hurt you any more than I already have. You didn’t force me. Caesar forced us both.”

The girl breathed a sigh of relief wiping her tears, “I can’t wait until the day I can call you Caesar.”

He smiled, “I get that a lot.”

She grew confused, “If you don’t force yourself on slave women why would your father think you’d have me?”

Matthaios scratched the back of his head with an awkward look, “I sort of gave him that impression. Can you keep a secret?”

She nodded, and he confessed, “I care for Sara, and my father was about to have her beaten and raped. So I lied in order to save her. I told Father she was my bedmate.”

“Very clever,” the girl nodded. “Everyone knows that to touch your bedmate or wife is treason punishable by death.”

He nodded, “because of potentially deadly diseases

that could be passed on to me. My father forbids anyone to touch a girl I lay with. He would consider such an act knowingly endangering the heir to the throne.”

“I wish you could claim us all,” she said sadly.

“As do I,” he admitted. “But I’m only allowed to claim one bedmate and one wife. Father is extremely paranoid about diseases.”

“That explains his strict directions that I was to relieve you by other means.”

Matthaios’s eyebrows scrunched in bewilderment, “What other means?”

She laughed a little. “Do you really want to know?”

“I suppose not. I’ll only feel shame.”

She rose from his bed, “I should let you get some rest. Caesar sent me to help you sleep, not keep you up all night with my yammering.”

Matthaios smiled and nodded, “I’m ashamed to admit after such an intimate act I don’t even know your name.”

“Chloe,” she smiled at his decency.

As she stumbled and tripped over a fallen pillow he recognized her, a chambermaid he’d seen around from time to time. She was sort of goofy and a bit accident prone, but sweet. He sighed and shook his head. *She doesn’t deserve this life. None of them do.*

“I’m a little clumsy,” she laughed at herself. “Thank you for treating me like a person. I’ll pay you back someday.”

“I assure you. You owe me nothing,” Matthaios insisted. “And I’m sorry for what happened tonight.”

She smiled. *An emperor apologizing to me, a nobody.* She reached out to touch his cheek, making sure he was real.

“I will never tell your beloved about this,” she vowed.

He humbly kissed her hand. “My sincerest gratitude for your confidence, my lady.”

She left and with her so did his composure. In order to spare her feelings he’d kept himself together, but now the brutal revelation of having a father who didn’t love him was becoming overwhelming. Matthaios shook his head and gripped his short black locks in anguish until his head ached until tears rolled down his cheeks. It was now apparent that he would never have the sort of dad he could come to for anything. *Is Father really so evil that even when he tries to do something good it turns out evil! Most fathers would tell their sons a story to help them sleep, maybe offer them medicine. But my father! My father drugs me and has me raped by a slave girl!*

Matthaios walked toward the servants’ quarters in search of the only person who could make him feel loved and needed after such a tremendous hurt caused by his father. He knocked but received no answer from Sara.

So he spoke to her from the other side of the door, “I know I’m the last person on earth you probably want to see after I yelled at you in the library. I pushed you away so I wouldn’t soil you. I respect you too much to use your body in such a way. Sara, please say something, anything. You’re my best friend.”

The door to the tiny cell creaked open and he peered inside. She was gone, but where at this hour and why?



Sara had sprung from her tiny closet of a room unable

to rest. She fled through the palace corridors and burst from an exit only used by servants. She met the cool night air and ran toward the sea. Her vision was stifled by her tresses as a strong wind whipped them over her face. She vigorously flung her stubborn locks aside and wiped her tears. Sara reached the edge of a small cliff. *How could he reject me when I love him so much?*

She glared down at the vast Mediterranean Sea, her dress flowing about her body as she stood on the ledge, her braids dancing wildly in the breeze. The waters were calling her home, beguiling her soul. She'd been different her whole life. She could be under water for hours before coming up for breath. She could communicate with sea creatures telepathically, and tonight she truly needed a friend.

Without further hesitation, she dove into the sea. She fell for what seemed forever before receiving its cold comforting embrace. The waters felt like heaven on her skin, tantalizing, and rejuvenating as she swam into the deep. Her eyes cast a bright glow in front of her to light her path.

She reached mermaid cove, a vast metropolis of sea women and men that land dwellers called *Atlantis*. The mermaids were the loveliest and wisest creatures of the seven seas and Sara's gift allowed her to befriend them. She smiled as she saw Daniel's face, forgetting for just a moment that the man she loved with all her heart and soul spurned her earlier that night, only for her to walk in on him committing the most depraved of acts with another woman.

The gorgeous red-haired merman wrapped his strong arms around her and questioned telepathically, "what

troubles you my Sara?”

“Matthaios claims to have sworn off slave women on principle, but now I know that the only one he’s sworn off is me.”

Under the sea, her tears were hidden but the heaving of her shoulders told all. Daniel could tell she was crying hard and her pain cut him to the bone.

“He didn’t even care that I’d walked in on him.” Her thoughts echoed to Daniel as if they were vocalized. “He never even looked up, never noticed my heart being torn out and stomped on.”

“Not everything is as it appears,” Daniel said. “The slave Matthaios saved in the arena is a boy of just fourteen summers called Perseus. Who thanks to Matthaios may have a chance at fulfilling his destiny of becoming the greatest hero the world has ever seen.”

“How do you know all this? Can you tell the future,” Sara asked in wonder.

Daniel explained, “the guards in Caesar’s watchtower can sound the alarm bells and alert the city of approaching enemies?” Sara nodded and he went on to say. “They have no greater ability to tell the future than anyone else but from where they are standing they can see a little further down the road. Even then, during a storm, it may be difficult if not impossible to see what’s ahead, even from their great position. That’s how I am Sara. I’m no great prophet or seer but on a clear day, I can see a little further down the road than you. If what appears to be a lowly slave is actually a reincarnated demigod, then maybe this thing with your beloved may not be what it seems.”

“Even if there was some miraculous explanation it does not change the fact that we are from separate

worlds,” she cried as they floated slowly over the streets. “I cannot be the friend he needs if I am jaded by my own pain. I need a spell, one that will free my heart of Matthaios. He can never love me and it plagues my soul to go on loving him.”

Daniel nodded reluctantly, “I do not agree but if you insist you must first compose a letter in your own hand. Write down everything you feel for him that you no longer want to feel; whether it be love, anger, or lust. Write it all down and bring it back to me before the next full moon. I’ll bind that letter as well as the love written therein. You’ll never love him again.”



Without taking time to doddle, hair still damp from her visit to Atlantis, Sara hunched over the parchment. The candlelight flickered over the small desk in her room as she wiped her tears. She fought to wrestle sentences and pin them to the intimidating blank canvas.

She gingerly stroked the crescent moon shaped charm attached to a chain that hung from her neck. Inside hid a potion that had been given to her by Daniel. She kissed the moon shaped vial, escaping for just a moment in happy thoughts of him. *Daniel is always looking out for me. He said my very life depends on this potion and he’ll tell me when to use it. When I was just a girl of ten summers I stole a kiss from him when he wasn’t expecting it. There was absolutely no chemistry. It felt as if I’d kissed a brother, and ever since he’s been my brother of the sea.*

She yawned and stretched, dipped a feather into the inkwell and feverishly began her letter. She scribbled everything she felt for Matthaïos with the relief of knowing that she would love him no more once Daniel's ritual was complete...



The following morning Matthaïos stalked through the palace, ready to give his father a beating, even if it landed the young sorcerer a month in the stocks or a sound lashing. *What kind of rotten, bottom feeding, pile of pig dung has his own son raped! My only consolation is that Sara didn't find out. She would never forgive me if she knew.* Matthaïos ceased his heavy steps as he saw his father alone in the council room. His eyes narrowed on Titus, who looked up at the sound of Matthaïos's molars grinding together.

Before Matthaïos could get a word out Titus asked, "How did you sleep, Son?"

Matthaïos smiled without humor, happy that Titus was being a sarcastic, cruel, monster. Titus's lack of remorse would make Matthaïos feel all the more justified in beating him senseless.

"Son, I asked how did you sleep," Titus repeated.

The sincerity of Titus's tone made his son's furious expression transform to one of utter discombobulating. *Is he serious! He's smiling ever so pleased with himself! He honestly believes he did something fatherly!*

Matthaïos un-balled his fists. "Father, do you realize what you've done?"

“Of course,” Titus grinned with pride. “When I was eleven I suffered from a recurring nightmare. Fire, ash, and brimstone rained from the heavens, laying an entire city to ruin. There was running and screaming in the darkness and the chaos. Men, women, and children were mummified in flaming toxic ash. There was death at every corner and I was unable to save my people. I was unable to save myself. I relayed this horrifying tale to my mother. She started sending her maids to my chamber. After a nice release and a little opium, I slept like the dead.”

Matthaios’s eyes popped and he gasped in repulsion and shock. He’d come looking for a fight, but now some part of him pitied Titus. *Oh my God! He was just a child!*

Titus chuckled, “I’m glad Mother instructed her maids to make a man out of me, or I might have been lost two years later when I married your mother.”

Matthaios felt as if the wind had been knocked out of him; when he finally caught his breath, his tone was humble. “Father I... um... I had just come to say thank you, but I will no longer be needing anyone’s services.”

Titus gave Matthaios a proud slap on the shoulder and said, “Sara’s a jealous little lover. I don’t blame you for wanting to keep your bedmate happy. I won’t send any more maids your way. Please let Sara know that just because you can’t marry her doesn’t mean I won’t take care of her children. In fact, I’m looking forward to them. She’s going to make me some very pretty grandbastards.”

Matthaios laughed almost sadly but Titus was such an emotional cripple that he took it as a happy chuckle. Matthaios excused himself with a fretful sigh. *Tradition murdered the good man my father might have been, deprived him of all empathy, destroyed his very soul until*

he became the ruthless cutthroat monster known by the masses as Caesar. Will that be my fate...



Sara had been aloof and melancholy all morning, causing the other slaves to avoid her. She wasn't bitter, resentful, or angry, just sad.

She walked down the corridor and grudgingly greeted Titus, "may I be of service, your majesty?"

Titus smiled brightly, which frightened Sara. Though a wicked man, he often smiled but never at her.

Titus cleared his throat, "take this letter to my son. It's about our visiting royalty and it's for Matthaio's eyes only."

"And you would trust me with it, my lord?" Sara's look bore utter confusion.

The only ones Titus normally trusted with sensitive information were his personal guards and centurions, never slaves.

Titus assured her, "relax, my dear. You're practically family."

Sara's mind whirled with apprehension. *Why is he being so nice to me! Maybe the evil bastard just finished feasting on the souls of virgins and washing them down with the blood of infants.* She took the sealed letter with a trembling hand and placed it in her knapsack, nearly dying as he bent over to kiss her forehead.

Sara backed away slowly. "I better deliver this, my lord."

Titus chuckled as a horrified Sara bolted from his

sight. Sara arrived at Matthaios's chamber still frazzled, huffing to catch her breath. She banged on the door but got no reply. For this she was happy. He was the last person she wanted to see. She rustled through her knapsack and shoved the letter from his father through the mail slot.

Sara took a moment to compose herself before heading to the linen room. There she could avoid Matthaios until she could get her letter to Daniel. Sara sighed as she caught sight of Chloe, who just happened to be the second to last person she wanted to see. Now it was too late to turn around. She'd been spotted. Sara began helping with the laundry. Chloe could tell something was troubling her friend, though Sara had sworn to the contrary. The two girls folded linens without words, drowning in a deep blue sea of awkward silence. Chloe placed aside the large white sheet they'd condensed into a neat rectangle. Sara grabbed another and they continued to work as a team, making the linen smaller with each fold until it neatly fit into the wicker basket.

Chloe shook her head hoping for the best but preparing for the worst. The previous night when she was in Matthaios's bedchamber she thought she might have heard the door creak open, but when she looked up no one was there. *I thought I was just being paranoid, but now I'm not so sure. Either Sara walked in on us or someone else did and gossiped.*

"Sara I..." Chloe started.

"I harbor no ill will," Sara assured her. "I know you were only doing what you had to."

"Listen please, you don't know the whole story."

Before Chloe could explain Matthaios's diminished

capacity, they were interrupted by the matriarch. The stout built older woman named Agathe snatched the finished basket of linens with a snarl, “not bad for a ladder climbing harlot.”

Sara reared up like a cobra in defense of her friend. “How dare you speak to Chloe in such a crude and vile manner!”

“I was talking to you,” the scraggly haired Amazon of a woman smirked. “Everyone knows that you’re Prince Matthaios’s whore.”

“Shut up you evil old hag,” Chloe shouted with her fist balled and ready to sock the belligerent lady. “You know not what you speak of!”

Sara’s eyes widened at her friend’s reaction. She had always known Chloe to be docile and mild-tempered. Sara put a hand on Chloe’s shoulder to calm her. “She isn’t worth being lashed over.”

Sara turned back to the goonish Agathe and smirked. “Do you believe every outlandish rumor floating around these walls?”

“Only the ones from my lord’s own mouth,” Agathe sneered.

“I beg your pardon!” Sara snapped.

“Ignore her,” said Chloe. “I will explain everything.”

Agathe laughed, “I speak the truth. After Caesar dismissed you at the Coliseum Matthaios told everyone within earshot all about your escapades.”

“No, my lord would not brand me a whore!” Sara shook her head in utter disbelief and turned to Chloe, “You were there. Did Prince Matthaios say these horrible things behind my back!”

Chloe stood mouth ajar, “Agathe, could you excuse

Sara and me for just a moment?”

Agathe tightened her paper-thin lips and shook her enormous Easter Island Head no.

Chloe huffed in frustration. *If I explain Matthaios's lies to Sara in front of that treacherous crone. Agathe will tell all of Rome Sara isn't truly bedding Prince Matthaios. He will be severely reprimanded by his father. Sara will lose her protection and become fair game like the rest of us.* “We should talk later in private, Sara.”

Chloe's stalling only made her heartbroken friend even more furious. Steam rose from Sara as she demanded through clenched teeth, “Did he tell people he soiled me or not!”

Chloe's silence was confirmation enough and Sara realized why she had been snubbed by the other servants all day. Sara stormed from the linen room without giving a damn as to the Matriarch's complaints or the beating that would surely await her. *I thought everyone's blatant avoidance, hushed whispers, and surreptitious glances were because of my foul mood. Attitudes are contagious and I figured the other slaves had caught mine. When in reality a man I called a friend ruined my reputation, branded me a harlot and made me a pariah merely for sake of having a good story to tell his idiot friends!*

Chloe bolted into the hall. She collided with Matthaios and they both went down.

“Ah yes, you said you were clumsy,” Matthaios jested as he pulled himself off the floor and offered a hand to the accident-prone maid.

His smile faded as the normally good-humored chambermaid blurted out, “we must find Sara, my lord!”

He didn't need to ask her why. The tears in Chloe's

eyes said it all. Sara knew what he'd done and now she'd run away. Matthaios ran to his chamber. He sounded the alarm bell.

Gawain and a fleet of guards flooded in. "Your Majesty!"

Matthaios bellowed the order, not giving a care if his men knew of his feelings for the slave girl, "leave no stone unturned until you find my Sara!"

CHAPTER 6:

THE RITUAL

Matthaios, Gawain, and the soldiers had searched high and low, but not low enough. Sara had traveled countless leagues under the sea to the lost city of Atlantis. All Matthaios could do was wait for her to return with no love for him.

Daniel's undersea palace was enchanted. The waters stopped at the door without surging in as he entered. His large fishtail transformed into a pair of clothed legs as he crossed the threshold. Both he and Sara were completely dry from the moment they came inside. While the city of Atlantis was an amazing underwater metropolis, the inside of merpeople's homes was just like that of land dwellers. Sara sat on a stool at a bar. In front of her were all the potions and tools that Daniel had pulled out to bind her love for Matthaios.

"How will we do this," Sara asked. "I'm certain the words were washed from the letter during the long swim

here.”

“Worry not,” The merman cast a small enchantment on the now blank parchment. As the ink began to reappear on the paper, Daniel held her open letter with a disapproving look.

Sara explained herself, “I know you don’t agree but it should be my choice who I love. So I implore you to perform the ritual and not judge me.”

“I agree that it should be your choice even if I do not agree with your choice. This is why I prepared to perform the binding ritual, but this letter says nothing of your feelings for Matthaios. It’s just talking about a visiting princess.”

Sara gasped. Her heart nearly stopped at the sight of the broken royal seal, “You are holding Caesar’s letter! Oh, Gods, I gave Matthaios the wrong letter! He’s soon to know everything!”



After finally hearing Chloe’s explanation of the events Sara was even more desperate to get her letter back, but Matthaios’s chamber door was locked. Sara desperately shoved her arm through the mail slot, fumbling about the cold floor for her letter. A chill swept over her as the doorknob began to turn. She glanced up from her knees as the door started to open. Sara took her arm out of the mail slot and froze at the sight of Matthaios standing in the doorway, letter in hand.

“Looking for this?” Matthaios gave his signature grin as he helped Sara to her feet and hugged her tight. “Thank

gods you are home.”

She nearly had a heart attack, until she saw the letter was sealed. *Thank gods he hasn't had a chance to read it.* “I’ll be taking that now. Thank you.”

“I was worried sick and you’re just going to take your letter and leave,” Matthaïos chastised her playfully.

She followed him in grasping for it as he playfully held it out of her reach. The door shut behind them. She jumped for the letter, grabbed at it as he laughed and kept it from her.

“That letter was never meant for your eyes, my lord,” She reasoned with him, realizing the much greater reach of his arms would never allow her to grab it. “I implore you to hand it over. I need that letter back.”

Matthaïos grinned. He was inquisitive by nature. Sara could never hide anything from him, and she never wanted to until now.

“This letter was delivered to me and I will read it,” he declared. There was a quiet pop of the seal as he opened it.

“Have a seat,” he said as she turned to flee, and she knew it was not a request but an order.

Sara lowered to the bed. Her hands were trembling so badly she sat on them to stop the shaking. Her stomach tied itself in a knot as he silently read her letter:

1000 Times Yes

My lips long to brace yours. Let nature take its course.

You swear you cannot have me for fear that I am forced.

In what language must I speak it? I yearn for

your caress.

Please love me from the inside. I swear the answer's yes.

I quiver at your touch, and you think that I fear you.

And sure, I'm a little bit nervous to be near you.

Being anxious does not mean that I love you any less.

If you ask to steal my innocence the answer will be yes.

You want to know the heart of me. Well, it belongs to you.

You yearn to know my feelings. I want it as you do.

His eyes grew large. He turned to look at her, a little shocked and a lot intrigued. She burned with humiliation as she realized what he must've read and it would only get worse from here. She wished she could shrink into the soft mattress and disappear as he continued. His lips moved just subtly as he read without sound.

But there's nothing I can say that will put you in the mood!

Because when it comes to Sara, you're such a haughty prude!

Don't make it complicated. We neither need the stress.

I want you. It's that simple. Believe the answer's yes.

Of course, Mr. Perfect won't take me to his bed!

But has no problem letting other girls pleasure

him instead!

He glared at her, his look very perturbed and she knew once again what he'd read. What happened with Chloe was both a mistake and an accident. Sara felt awful for passing judgment and thought she would die right there. Matthaios huffed in frustration and read on.

To her, you'll be a lover. To me, you're just a flirt.

*I do not hate you for it, but I must admit it hurt.
You crushed my fragile heart and the pieces
love you still.*

*I clamber for your love. Am I an imbecile?
I thought I'd die the moment I witnessed you
betray me.*

*I feel like such a fool still wanting you to lay
me.*

*Please thrust between my thighs. Let me satisfy
your need.*

*Ravish me all night until you gasp and spill
your seed.*

Sara was utterly mortified and buried her face in her hands as the intrigued look returned to Matthaios's face. He grinned from ear to ear and she was well aware of the part of her letter he'd come to. A blush spread over his youthful face as he continued.

*How come you never think about the pleasure
as I do?*

How can you feel NOTHING when I'm so in

love with you!

You care not how I feel when this is where you lead me.

My heart and soul implore you a thousand times to bed me.

How cruel of mighty cupid to pierce me with his arrow!

And curse my heart to love a dunce whose views are so damned narrow!

*If I must spell it out as if we were in class,
I 'L', 'O', 'V', 'E', you. You stubborn stupid ass!*

He gave her a shocked look in regard to the insults but he wasn't angry, just a bit confused. She clenched her eyes so tight just praying to be summoned away, or interrupted by a hurricane, or some other natural disaster, or killed. Anything to stop this non-verbal assault!

Do I yearn for you? Do I want you to the point that I can't rest?

To the point, my body needs for you to put it to the test?

To the point, my cheeks grow red at the thought of you undressed?

To the point, I want to prove to you that I would be the best?

To the point, I touch myself at night and dream of your caress?

My dearest love, a hundred times, a thousand times the answer's yes.

Nobody spoke. The only sound was the colliding of

his sandals against the marble floor as he walked over and drew her into his arms. His lips met hers in a kiss that felt like a million stars bursting forth. It was like destiny encompassed in a single embrace, and Sara knew in that fated moment she could never love another. She belonged to this prince of Rome, and he belonged to her for all of infinity.



Medusa, Queen of Ealdor, restlessly paced the marble floors of Caesar’s palace cursing both god and her father. The beautiful young queen was at her wit’s end, ready to tear out her own raven tresses.

Her dusky skin grew dark crimson with anger as she reprimanded her late father’s ward, “What did I do in my past life to inherit such an insolent ungrateful wretch for a ward! You will marry Matthaios, son of Titus!”

“I will do no such thing,” cried Andromeda.

Medusa gave her ward a suspicious glare and raised a brow, “Are you sure there isn’t another reason for your sudden defiance, Andromeda? I am aware that you were slipping out of your guest chamber at night, sneaking food to the slaves in the Coliseum. I know you were doing that to save one boy in particular.”

Andromeda gasped with a petrified expression, “my lady I...”

“Shut up,” Medusa snapped. “That boy was prophesized to end my reign and you are feeding him! Do you love him?”

Andromeda shuddered, her eyes full of tears and fear.

“Your majesty, I am not in love with Perseus. I am eighteen summers, a woman. He is merely a child of fourteen.”

“He won’t always be a child,” Medusa growled with a cold glare and a hostile tone. “It seems I can’t trust anyone. The henchman I hired to kill my treasonous cousin grew greedy and sold Perseus into slavery instead. So imagine my shock when I bring you here to meet Caesar’s son and my eyes fall upon none other than Perseus! To make matters worse my own ward was sneaking out of Caesar’s Palace to care for Perseus, just as she’d snuck into the dungeons of Ealdor to bring him comfort. So tell me, Andromeda, how many nights did you cry when you thought he’d been executed? Was it as many nights as you begged me to spare that lowly wretch’s life!”

Andromeda lowered her head in shame of betraying her Queen. Tears escaped her large green eyes, trickling down her creamy white cheeks, “I meant not to betray you. After Perseus was orphaned because of the evil man you yearn to make my father in law, I took the boy under my wing. Then some charlatan, looking for trouble, swore he saw a vision of Perseus cleaving your head from your body. The boy never made such a claim. He never asked for any of this. So yes, I fed him, comforted him, but only because I pitied the boy my lady, nothing more. I implore you, my queen, please do not force me to wed this Roman prince.”

Medusa gripped Andromeda’s throat. She slammed her against the wall with such force paintings dismounted and crashed to the floor. Andromeda’s face turned purple as she gasped for air. Her feet dangled off the ground as

Medusa pinned her there with phenomenal strength; the strength and power of a witch who practiced the dark arts in secret. Medusa slipped a sacrificial dagger from the waistband of her toga. Andromeda's heart pounded as her Queen gripped the weapon so tightly her knuckles whitened.

Medusa's usually lovely face darkened and twisted with a deranged scowl as she glared upon the gasping face of her traitorous ward. *You keep my greatest enemy alive and then dare to ask me for a favor! If you refuse to secure my alliance with Rome through marriage then my dear Andromeda I have no further use for you.*

Andromeda clenched her crying eyes as Medusa raised the tool of her demise...

CHAPTER 7: THE CRESCENT MOON

Andromeda flailed and struggled as she felt her life slipping away. She clawed at the wicked queen's arm as Medusa pinned her to the wall by the throat.

Medusa brushed a scarlet curl from Andromeda's face with the blade of her dagger. She twirled the sharp point before Andromeda's beautiful green eye. "I went through a great deal of trouble to secure you a match from such a well-established family and you will show me some appreciation! I swear on everything holy that you will marry Caesar's son, and if you so much as look at Perseus again I will cut out the eyes that disobeyed me."

Medusa released Andromeda, who fell to her knees coughing and choking. The queen adjusted her toga to conceal her tattoo, which bore the words *Order of the Serpent*. This referred to an ancient coven of witches. Medusa left Andromeda crying on the floor like a

worthless discarded rag.

Andromeda stopped her sniffing at the cooing of a pigeon outside of her window. She pulled herself up and slowly approached the bird. To her amazement, it didn't take flight. That's when she noticed a small cylindrical case attached to its leg. *A messenger bird. Titus was complaining about them earlier. His guards had come upon at least four today but the messages were all gibberish. They were convinced the pigeons must have gotten lost on their way to their true destination, but I'm not so easily convinced. I believe Queen Medusa is up to something and if so I must warn Matthaios.*

She took the soft feathery creature into her hands and removed the case. She set the pigeon back on the window's ledge and gave it her leftover bread. Andromeda secured the lock on her chamber door and took a seat at the desk. She removed the tiny scroll and reached for a round glass magnifier. The message wasn't for Medusa or even Titus. It was for her: a delicate script of Gaelic symbols written by Perseus. This was a sacred language from the birthplace of her mother. Andromeda taught it to Perseus in the dungeons of Ealdor, to pass the time while they plotted an escape. She held his note close to her heart thanking the gods he was alright even if she wouldn't be.



Matthaios and Sara cuddled and kissed on his bed, having shattered the barriers that separated friend from lover. He tried to persuade her to stay the night but she

promised she would on a different evening. So much had happened in such a short while her skin was the only thing keeping her from bursting everywhere at once. Such a tidal wave of emotions had washed over her unlike any she'd ever felt.

Sara had to reflect and get some fresh air. She came to the shore to listen to the roar of the sea and feel a salty breeze on her face.

She felt like she was flying and dreaming, with her arms outstretched like the wings of a Roman eagle. Sara twirled around and around on the deserted moonlit beach, reverting to her childhood.

She was transported to the long grassy meadow where she and Matthaïos locked hands, leaned back, and swirled about in a circle. Their sweet carefree laughter rang in the air as the world transformed to a blur until vertigo took over and they released one another falling to the ground in an ecstatic dizzy heap of joyful giggles.

Sara collapsed on the cool gritty sand from spinning herself. Her exhilaration slipping away with the knowledge, *the time for children's games is over. I am now his woman.* Part of her wept for the little girl within that was lost forever. Matthaïos had become the keeper of her heart.

She left her shoes on the shore and ran into the sea until it deepened. She swam the remaining distance to an enormous flat rock. This room size platform jutted out from moon glint waves, not far from the beach. She rung out her short black braids and sat with her feet in the water. She closed her eyes and rubbed her fingers at her temples, mentally calling to her brother of the sea.



Daniel had traded his magnificent tail with its coin size florescent scales for a pair of clothed legs as he stood upon glorious Mount Olympus. Unbeknownst to Sara and the human world, Daniel was no ordinary merman but the god of the sea himself: mighty Poseidon.

Zeus, king of the Gods, stepped down from his majestic throne, “I have warned you not to interfere in mortal affairs.”

Poseidon spoke angrily, “I wouldn’t have to if that wretched daughter of yours hadn’t turned my Sara mortal, long ago. That Eris has only ever caused discord and misery!”

“Eris is the very reason I no longer allow interference in mortal affairs. This whole mess occurred because Sara and Eris were feuding over the heart of a mortal king.”

“This mess started because my daughter was happily betrothed and your daughter can’t stand to see anyone happy.”

Zeus sighed. “What Eris did was awful, but no god can undo another god’s curse. You know how stubborn she is. The only way I could force her to relinquish the spell on your daughter and her beloved would be to kill Eris. I can’t.”

Poseidon nodded, unable to think of anything Sara could do that would make him strike her down. “I understand why you can’t harm your daughter, but that doesn’t explain why you would give Sara the most difficult quest of all. She’s your niece!”

“Because she’s my niece,” Zeus declared. “I have all the faith in the heavens that she will do what needs to be done, but that isn’t all that’s bothering you.”

“Matthaios is a good boy and yet I want to stab him in the heart with my triton,” Poseidon admitted. “Once again he has beguiled my baby girl and they are always star crossed. He’s going to get her killed.”

“I understand, but would you rather she be alone on earth? It can be a cold place,” Zeus questioned and Poseidon shook his head no.

Zeus gave his brother a supportive slap on the shoulder and reminded him, “you would not have your baby girl had you not enchanted someone’s baby girl.”

Hearing Sara’s call in his heart, Poseidon prepared to leave, don a tail, and arise from the sea disguised as a merman named Daniel, “I know it is the way of life, to love and be loved, but I still want to wring that Matthaios’s neck.”

“Well, you shouldn’t. His destiny is too great, and your daughter would be destroyed if anything happened to him. Sara may no longer be your baby girl but she will always be your daughter. Now the time has come to tell her about the *crescent moon*...”



Chloe made her way through the deserted palace corridors. Only a skeleton crew of guards were awake at this hour. Chloe was confused as to why Andromeda would summon her when she had not been assigned to the princess. Andromeda had been Sara’s charge.

A guard with rough looking stubble on his face thrust open the door to Andromeda's chamber. Chloe nervously swept a blonde curl behind her ear and walked over to the crimson haired royal. Chloe prayed that her signature clumsiness would not cause her to look foolish before noble eyes. The guard shut the door behind her, encasing the princess and the maid in silence.

"How may I be of service, my lady," Chloe asked with a curtsy.

Andromeda informed her in the most delicate way she could, "I was asked by a friend to deliver some news that may be difficult to hear." Chloe looked on in fear and shock as Andromeda continued, "your beloved, Felix, lives and he plans to rescue you."

Chloe's already fair skin drained of what little color it possessed. It was as if the world tilted from beneath her. Chloe dropped like an anchor.

Andromeda caught her just in time. Without the strength to hold her up, Andromeda eased to the floor with the unconscious maid.

"HELP!!!"

The guard burst through the door. "What happened!"

"She received some shocking news," Princess Andromeda explained. "Get her onto the lounge and fetch the physician."



Daniel sprung forth from the waters. He flipped end over end like a dolphin and reentered with a giant splash.

"What have I told you about showing off," Sara

scolded him with a smile. “No one can know that you exist. I could not bear to see you snared by some fisherman’s net or killed, stuffed, and placed on display in the library’s museum.”

“I’d like to see them try and take me,” Daniel scoffed as a glimmering silver triton materialized in his grasp. He set the weapon before Sara and held only his torso out of the water, careful to keep his large fishtail concealed by the waves.

Sara gave him a suspicious and somewhat perturbed glare, “Did you know I would mix up the letters?”

Daniel smirked, “From time to time I see a little further down the road.”

Sara grabbed his head and dunked him into the sea. He surfaced, spitting out salty water and sweeping his soggy red hair from his eyes.

She shouted, “I was humiliated!”

“I’m sorry I didn’t warn you,” Daniel swore.

Sara gave him a hard poke to the chest. “No, you’re not.”

“You’re right. I’m not sorry,” he admitted grinning. “And from the glow about you, I can tell you aren’t sorry either.”

She laughed a little and kissed his cold wet cheek, “Thank you.”

He gingerly caressed her cheek, a little sad that her relationship was ill-fated but abundantly grateful for his daughter’s happiness. Then his eyes fell to the moon-shaped charm and the gravity of the situation took away his joy. The smile slowly faded from his handsome face. His heart grew heavy and burdened.

“What’s wrong,” She questioned, her large brown

eyes darkening with concern.

“It’s this,” Daniel said, lifting the moon shaped vial suspended from her graceful neck.

“My potion?”

“It’s a poison actually.”

Sara gasped, “Why on earth would you give me poison!”

He put his head down as he informed her of the duty Zeus himself had bestowed upon her, “you must kill Titus...”

CHAPTER 8: THE UNLIKELY ASSASSIN

Sara backed away, shocked and horrified. Daniel reached for her. She withdrew her hands and raised them to her mouth, which was gaped in terror. At a complete loss for words, she just stared.

He pleaded, “Sara I would never ask this of you but you are the only one who can. Every time Titus has his food brought to him he makes a servant taste it first and then he waits an hour to make sure there are no adverse effects. The poison I have given you is deadly to anyone not a magical being or creature of the sea. So when you test the food and Titus sees that you are fine he will assume it’s safe to eat. The man is evil in its purest form. You will be doing mankind a favor.”

Sara shook her head and surveyed her friend’s face for a sign that he was joking. To her dismay, his look held no amusement, just a sad mixture of panic and worry. The desperation in his weary eyes was enough to cause her

physical pain.

“I do not dispute the wickedness of Caesar but he is my beloved’s father,” She reached out to Daniel and took his hand, “I am not a stupid woman. What plagues you, my Daniel, that you would ask that I commit high treason?”

A desolate silence enveloped them that seemed to span a mortal lifetime.

“I have seen your death,” he admitted in a voice as cold as the underside of a stone, and she could have sworn her heart stopped at that moment. “It may not come today or even tomorrow but I promise you it will come. You will leave this world long before your time at the hand of Titus.”

Sara breathed heavily and still found no air. She thought she might faint. Daniel pulled himself onto the platform no longer caring if he would be spotted, captured, or condemned. He wrapped his cool wet arms around her and whispered into her hair, “You have to kill Titus, my Sara. Your very life depends on it.”

Sara’s very soul loathed, dreaded, and feared the awful duty bestowed upon her, but too long had Titus plagued her fellow slaves. He was even rumored to have murdered her parents, though he adamantly denied this to Matthaïos. Sara could also tell Titus had done something awful to her friend Chloe, though a combination of fear and shame had always kept Chloe from admitting it. *Yet Titus is still a person. Can I actually murder him?* Sara clutched the crescent moon with a trembling hand and a heavy heart, both cursing the deadly mission and tearfully accepting it.



Days later Matthaïos sat in the enormous banquet hall. It had been the longest most painful night of his life. He fought back tears just thinking about the hurt on Sara's face as he and Andromeda were pronounced man and wife. He kissed his bride to the sound of the only woman he loved keening as she fled the temple with a face full of tears.

To make matters worse Matthaïos was certain his lawful wife's heart belonged to another. Could she ever love him? Would she even try? If either of them had backed down the opposing side would've taken it as a declaration of war. Andromeda and Matthaïos had to prevent further bloodshed even if they had to sacrifice their own hearts to do it.

Titus took both of Andromeda's hands in his. The skin on her knuckles wanted to break free and roll up her arm as Caesar's evil lips kissed one of her hands and then the other.

"May I borrow your husband for a moment, my lady?" Titus asked, making his best effort to charm the future Empress.

She'd heard tales of his ruthlessness and it was going to take a lot to win her over. Andromeda nodded at once, holding her breath as if sharing the same air with Titus would condemn her soul to Hades. *Yes, take your son, anything to get your hairy palms off of me.*

He released her hands and walked away with Matthaïos. Andromeda found herself able to breathe

again.

Titus spoke to Matthaios in the corridor, “Could you at least try not to look like you’re having your teeth ripped out?”

“No, just my heart.”

“This is a joyous occasion. Andromeda was prophesized to be the greatest queen the world has ever known and you have placed her on our throne.”

“You promised not to send any more girls my way,” Matthaios grumbled.

“I promised not to send any more chambermaids your way,” Titus corrected him. “You had to take an appropriate lawful wife at some point.”

Matthaios looked up to find Sara’s beautiful face gazing longingly from the crowded banquet hall. Their eyes met for just a moment before she went back to filling goblets. He wanted to hold her and comfort her. He yearned to tell her he was in as much pain but he couldn’t.

Matthaios confessed to his father, “I can honestly say that I hate you.”

Titus laughed. “Is this about the slave girl?”

“Her name is Sara!” Matthaios snapped. The anger in his voice caused Titus to take a step back.

“I’ll smooth things over with her,” Titus promised.

“And why would you do that when you have Andromeda to birth heirs for your throne!”

“Because Sara will birth heirs for my arms,” Titus admitted. “An illegitimate heir has little or no political power. We’re free to love them. I’m going to make sure Sara is alright because you have the emotions of a girl, Matthaios. You won’t be able to consummate your marriage if you are worried about your bedmate. It’s long

after midnight. I can tell you are stalling.”

Father is right. I am stalling. Matthaïos huffed in frustration and struck up a deal, “If you can put just one smile on my Sara’s face I’ll slip away with Andromeda and take her to bed.”

“We have an accord.” Titus walked away and approached Sara. “May I have this dance?”

Sara nearly dropped her serving dish. “Are you speaking to me, my lord?”

He extended an arm to her and she backed away cautiously with her bowl.

“I am honored but I must serve,” Sara reminded him. She’d never been the *center of attention* sort of girl, and dancing with Titus would make her the center of the universe.

He took her bowl. “Then we will serve together.”

Sara watched with utter shock and amusement as Titus approached Matthaïos’s table. Andromeda gasped as Titus asked her with a cheerful smile, “Soup?”

Andromeda stammered after a prolonged and awkward silence, “uh... um... certainly, my lord.”

A hush fell over the ballroom as every eye watched Caesar himself pour a ladle full of chowder into Andromeda’s bowl. Sara took the towel that hung from her arm and wiped the drop that spilled on the table. Titus moved on to serve the next guest and the next. Noble women and serving girls alike found Caesar’s large man fists performing such a dainty task to be amusing, almost sweet. Matthaïos nearly fell dead of shock as both Andromeda and Sara smiled just so.

“Your majesty, people are staring at us,” Sara begged him for the serving bowl.

“Then if you will not dance with me take a walk with me,” he said as he passed the serving dish on to Chloe.

Sara reluctantly took his arm. As they leisurely strolled out of the ballroom Titus gave Matthaios an inconspicuous signal. Matthaios nodded and at last took his bride to bed.

“So how did I do?” Titus questioned, proud of himself, as he and Sara walked the high-ceilinged corridors of the palace. “You have permission to speak freely. This will be a night of honesty between us.”

“You must serve the most powerful person at the table first and then work your way around,” Sara admitted with an attitude. “But other than that you have the makings of a suitable slave.”

“So I was out of order to serve Andromeda before my son.”

“You were out of order to pick up the bowl in the first place.” Sara stopped in her tracks and released his arm. “Caesar you said this is a night of honesty. I know you feel I am beneath you but I love your son and you destroyed that love. So why are you being nice to me?”

“Because my son needs you.”

“To be his whore?”

“To be his everything. This marriage is political, nothing more.” Titus took her hand and they began to stroll once more.

“Where are you taking me, your majesty,” Sara questioned.

“To your chamber. You seem tired.”

“The servants’ quarters are in the west wing.” Sara pointed in the opposite direction.

Titus stopped and unlocked the door of a palace

chamber as extravagant as his own. "It's all yours."

Sara whipped around unable to believe her eyes. There was marble, gold, and fine fabric everywhere.

Titus passed her a skeleton key and said, "you have washed your last dish, and served your last bowl of soup. I had the servants bring up your belongings during the reception. I hope you don't mind."

Unable to take it all in, Sara sat back on the softest bed she'd ever felt. "I am grateful, my lord, but I fail to see what I've done to deserve such an honor. While we are being honest I must know, did you kill my parents, your majesty?"

"I cannot answer that," Titus took a deep breath and sat on the bed next to her, "I don't want to lie to you."

"Then don't, my lord," Sara pleaded. "Did you kill my mother and father!"

Without eye contact or words he solemnly nodded yes and then rose to leave.

"Wait, your majesty."

Titus stopped at her words and turned around. Sara unlocked her trunk and pulled out a bottle of white wine she'd poisoned days ago but couldn't find the hatred within to use until now until he'd married off her beloved and confessed to slaying her family. "If some part of your black heart cares for me I implore you to stay and keep me company until I fall asleep. My beloved is likely bedding another woman as we speak and you are all that is keeping me together, the only thing preventing me from dying a spiritual death by drowning in a sea of my own tears. Please don't leave me alone tonight."

"I'll stay until you drift off." Titus removed his shoes and lied down on the bed. His back was propped up by

soft decorative pillows.

Sara filled two small tin cups with trembling hands while coaching herself. *I can do this. If I don't he'll kill me the moment I've lost his favor. Daniel informed me Titus will have just 5000 heartbeats to live after drinking his first cup, that's a little over an hour. I just have to keep him in here talking until he draws no further breath. Daniel promised it will be a nearly painless death for Titus. He won't suffer.*

Titus questioned, "What are you doing?"

"Preparing the taste test, my lord," Sara explained.

"That won't be necessary," he assured her. "I trust you."

His naivety made her heart sink. Tears came to her eyes as she walked over with the cups. She began to feel ill and tears rolled down her cheeks as she climbed on the bed with her foolish enemy, whose only good and moral deed would be the one to get him assassinated.

He clinked metal cups with her. Sara's heart raced as he brought the drink to his lips. Before she could fully perceive the weight of her actions Titus downed the poisoned wine. She sat speechless, breathless, in a horrified trance as he took their cups and placed them on the elegant nightstand.

Nothing put Sara's mind at ease. She had killed Titus even though he didn't realize it yet. He was doomed. Her shoulders heaved as heavy tears began to cascade down her face. Titus lay back on the bed and wrapped his unlikely assassin in a warm embrace. She listened to the strong and steady rhythm of his heart, already dreading the moment it would stop. *Oh, gods what have I done?*

"Don't cry, my dear. Matthaios is only doing what he

must,” Titus assured her, oblivious to the cause of her distress. “Shhh, it’s alright.” He wiped her tears and gingerly brushed her coarse dark tresses to calm her as if she were a child, his child. “How about a story?”

“Will it take at least an hour,” she questioned sadly, remembering how many heartbeats he had left.

“Yes, I believe so, my dear.”

“Is it a love story?” She smiled through her tears of guilt and anguish.

He smiled ever so slightly and placed a sweet kiss upon her forehead. “No, but it is a story about love.”

CHAPTER 9: TEST OF COURAGE

17 Years Ago...

The day had been filled with festivity and merriment. The lavish wedding of Rome's future leaders had commenced. The whole peninsula and beyond was celebrating with drink, food, and dance.

Princess Arrecina stood at the side of her husband, Titus, as they rode a dazzling white chariot trimmed in solid gold. Flower petals rained from every window and rooftop as the future emperor and empress rode through the city streets waving to ecstatic admirers. It was like something out of a fairytale to everyone... but Arrecina.

She looked over at her husband and sighed. *He's already taller than me and built as solid as a man, but he doesn't even have his beard yet. Titus is a sweet kid. But he is just that, a kid. Husband or not how am I, a woman of nineteen summers, to bed a child of merely thirteen?*



Young Titus lay next to Arrecina on the enormous fancy bed of her lavish chamber. He grinned as dim candlelight cast a soft glow on her lovely olive skin. Her lustrous dark hair was tied up elegantly with just a few tendrils sweeping her feminine collar bones.

“I am a lucky man,” Titus swore, unable to hide his excitement.

He placed a sweet kiss upon the neck that had been beguiling him all evening. He could barely eat, could hardly concentrate, and finally, the time had come to reign, conquer, explore. His hand crept slowly up her waist until it cupped her breast, thinly veiled by a translucent gown. He suckled the sensitive skin just above her collarbone. Her eyelids fell and she swooned in his wonderful scent, his caress, the feel of his soft wet tongue upon her neck.

“I can’t.” Arrecina pushed him off.

“I am young but I know what I’m doing,” Titus promised as he moved to take her neck again. “Maids have been training me since I was eleven.”

“That is the part that bothers me most,” Arrecina confessed with tears welling up in her crystal blue eyes. She placed a hand on his naked chest to stop him. “What those women did was wrong, and what we are doing now is wrong. You are a child, my lord.”

“If I was nineteen and you were thirteen we wouldn’t even be having this ridiculous conversation,” he rebutted.

“Perhaps,” she confessed. “I know it seems

hypocritical, but women mature faster.”

Titus settled back on the mountain of decorative pillows. “You are beautiful Arrecina, a goddess. How could I not want a piece of you?” He took Arrecina’s hand and rubbed it down the mountains and valleys that composed his muscular chest and rigid abs; then he asked with a wink and a smirk, “do I feel like a child to you?”

Oh, my gods! Thirteen or not I must admit he’s a masterpiece. Arrecina gave herself a mental slap. *What kind of depraved monster am I!* She snatched her hand back in guilt and shame, “My lord, you certainly feel all grown up but you are not all grown up. I’m not at all comfortable with this.”

Titus took both of his wife’s hands, looked deep into her eyes, and poured out his heart, “Before I met you my mother and uncle had to force me into this betrothal. I wasn’t ready for marriage. I didn’t think I would ever be ready. Then I met you and my whole world stopped. I fell in love. I would ride into the underworld and back to put a smile on your face. I know it would have pleased you to marry someone older and wiser but you are *my* wife, *my* princess and I love you. How could you not love me the same? Are you ashamed of me?”

“Of course not.” She wiped her tears. “And I do love you. That is why I am going to wait for you. I promise on the day I see you as a man I will take you to bed, but not a minute before.”

“And how long will that take!”

“I don’t know,” Arrecina admitted. “But I believe there are three traits real men have in common: courage, humility, and honor.”

Titus huffed, “what am I to do until then?”

“Take a bedmate your own age. I’m a widow, an experienced woman. You are going to need the practice,” she flirted without meaning to. *What is it about this boy that poisons my mind with such wanton images?*

A look of intrigue warmed Titus’s frustrated scowl. He grinned from ear to ear in anticipation. “I am content to wait forever for the day you call on me. With you, by my side, I haven’t any doubt I will prove all three of those traits if that will make you happy.”

She smiled and kissed his cheek. “That will make me very happy.”

Titus affectionately kissed his wife’s hand and slipped out of her chamber. He took a single candlestick with him to light the cold eerie corridors of the palace. He walked down a long winding staircase until he reached the hall he was housed on.

“Where do you think you’re going?”

Titus spun on his heels to meet the hollow black eyes of his mother, the empress, Domitilla. Her very stare put a lump in his throat and caused him to take a step back. She was leaving the reception hall with four of her guards.

“This is my marriage. I beg you to stay out of it,” Titus snapped. “Arrecina and I have an agreement.”

Empress Domitilla stomped over. She balled up her fist and struck her son so hard his head snapped sideways. The candle fell from his hand. It hit the floor. Hot wax spilled everywhere burning his bare foot. He saw stars as he grabbed his jaw with a painful groan.

She growled in a low tone, “You simpleton! A marriage is not official until it is consummated! Until then Arrecina’s father can have your marriage annulled if it suits him and welch on the treaty. I will lose the territories

I worked half my life to attain!”

“What do you want from me!” Titus yelled. “My wife isn’t ready to lay with me!”

“Then be a man and make her!” His mother bellowed. “It’s her duty.”

“I will not force her!” Titus vowed. “You can do your worst to me. I don’t care.”

A cold sensation trickled up Titus’s spine as his mother smiled. Her bone-chilling smile was at times more threatening than any furious glare she could conjure. He shivered. *Oh Gods, what unspeakable evil is she planning?*

“I figured you would say that,” Domitilla spoke ever so nonchalantly, circling him as if he was her prey. “But what of your precious Arrecina? If she does not conceive an heir within the first year of your union I will be well within my rights to kill her and get you a new wife.”

“You wouldn’t dare!” Titus protested.

“She is manipulating you!” His mother swore. “Arrecina is slow-walking you until she can convince her father of a better match for herself.”

“No,” Titus shook his head adamantly. “Arrecina loves me!”

“Then why won’t she bed you!”

“My age makes her feel guilty,” Titus explained. “I implore you, mother, not to make me ravish her. I don’t want my wife to hate me.”

“I care not if she hates you so long as she beds you!” Empress Domitilla pulled a decorative but razor-sharp dagger from her waistband. “You have 365 sunsets to get Arrecina pregnant and secure my treaty or I will cut her throat from ear to ear. Do we have an understanding?”

Titus nodded frantically and breathlessly at his mother's heartless remarks. He turned to the palace guards who had been patiently standing by. "Follow me."

They trailed him upstairs and waited outside the door while he fought with his wife.

"Stubborn woman, you will be executed if we don't do this!" Titus yelled in frustration and concern for his wife.

Arrecina crossed her arms and stiffened her shoulders. "I would rather die than sell my soul by spreading my legs for a child!"

"You may be willing to die for a sense of honor but I am not willing to let you," Titus stomped over to her door and beckoned the large imposing men who waited in the hallway. Titus's stomach wrenched. What he had to do was bad enough. The last thing he wanted was to have to strike her in order to subdue her. His heart sank as he was forced to instruct his guards, "Tie her down. I want to cause as little pain as possible. If she's free she'll fight me. That will only hurt her worse."

They nodded and tried to reassure him as they witnessed the pain in his eyes.

"You are saving her life and upholding the treaty, my lord," one guard reminded him.

Another swore, "you are doing the right thing, your majesty. Empress Domitilla will kill her if you don't make the union official."

"Then why do I feel like such a horrible rotten bastard," Titus asked.

"She'll get used to it," another guard promised, and then the four of them marched in to tie her down.

Arrecina screamed and fought as the guards bound

her wrists above her head and her ankles to the bedposts. She was helpless to defend herself, left at the mercy of her husband who was soon to ravish her.

“STOP!” Titus screamed, unable to stomach her cries any longer.

The guards left and Titus started snatching off the restraints. Arrecina threw her now free arms around his neck and cried in his embrace.

“How does forced intimacy not drive you to tears,” she wept.

“Because I’m used to it.” He pulled away just far enough to place both hands on her cheeks and look into her weeping eyes.

He spoke in a hushed tone, “your life is in danger.”

“I know, but what is my life worth if I have no honor, decency, or principles. I love you, Titus.”

“Then lay principles aside and survive for me.”



A while later Titus fled Arrecina’s chamber. He stayed strong in her presence but broke down the moment he left. Tears were pouring down his face before he could make it to his bedroom. He burst through the door, fell to his knees, and heaved profusely into a chamber pot. Arrecina didn’t want this, and neither did he. The very recollection of their forced consummation made him violently ill and he slumped over to throw up again. He sat on the cold marble floor in solitude, with a shattered heart and a rancid taste in his mouth. *She didn’t say that she hated me even once! Though I would have understood*

if she did. I hate myself right now! But the only words that broke up her cries of sadness were, "We had an agreement, Titus... We had an agreement... You lied to me."

"My lord!" cried a chambermaid and friend of his; a young girl with sandy brown hair and stormy gray eyes. She knelt at his side and held his head to her chest as he cried.

"I'm a monster," he murmured.

"No," she shook her head. "I overheard the Empress. That is why I came to check on you. If anyone is a monster it's her."

She helped him to his feet and fetched him the metal cup of water from his nightstand. He promptly swished it around his mouth, rinsing away the taste of old food and stomach acid.

"Thank you for being so kind," he told her as she retrieved the cup.

She smiled, "It was nothing, my lord." She met his gaze and looked upon him longingly before placing her lips on his cheek.

Titus backed away. "Despite my treachery, I do love my wife."

"I know you do," she assured him with a gentle caress of his arm. Her eyes began to glow red pulling him into her with the vacuum force of a tornado. "I'm not asking for love. I'm merely offering the pleasure her majesty's conscience will not allow her to provide you at this time."

Titus's mind began to whirl. He sluggishly pulled her hand away from him. Fighting against the powers he felt overtaking him. "I can't. I'm sorry."

"It's only physical," She promised with a hypnotic

gaze. “You know you need this, and I would be honored to serve you in any way.”

The sultriness of her voice and the passion in her eyes was causing him to second guess himself. He gazed down into her round youthful face remembering what his wife had told him to do, “How old are you?”

“I’ve seen thirteen winters.”

“So you’re my age.” He smiled in a daze. “Are you a maiden?”

She nodded, “yes my lord.”

He informed her dutifully, “if you agree to be my bedmate you can never lay with another man.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it.” She smiled and placed a tender kiss on his lips. She swirled her finger over his naked chest. “I’ll meet you here at the same time tomorrow night.”

He nodded and bent at the waist to kiss her hand, “I would like that. Goodnight Penelope.”

She left him and ventured outside. Just beyond the servant’s exit stood her father, Lucius. He passed her a walking stick with a mystical orb at the top and fastened a silver cape over her shoulders.

“Do we have to kill him, father,” Penelope whispered with a sigh.

“The gates of Questria will not open for anything less than the heart of a mortal prince,” Lucius explained as they walked to the sacred lake with their magic staffs. “We are Raliko, an ancient race of fairies. We do not belong here and Titus is our way home.”

She nodded sadly and reluctantly, “What did I do to be banished from Questria?”

Her father embraced her and explained, “it wasn’t

you. It was me. I killed another Raliko and they sentenced us to live and die as mortals. Our only way home is through a human sacrifice, and a random drunkard or beggar just won't do. The elders are demanding royal blood."



Two months later Arrecina had grown to loath Titus. She hated him with a fiery passion and the feeling was mutual. His mother had destroyed their love and all that remained was an abyss of bitterness and contempt. Arrecina pushed past Titus's guards and interrupted his meeting with King Einhard and Empress Domitilla.

"I just thought you would like to know I'm with child, you rotten little bastard!" Arrecina growled with disdain.

The wicked empress smiled at the news and Arrecina gave her a bone-chilling look. Empress Domitilla hummed, ever so pleased with herself. Not only had she succeeded in forcing her son to create an heir for the throne she had also succeeded in making him hate his wife. *There's no place for love in the royal court. Love causes emperors to make bad decisions. I need my son's mind free, clear, and uncompromised by emotion.*

Titus smirked at Arrecina, "I am glad to hear it. I never have to touch you again. Be gone from my sight."

"I couldn't be happier to hear those words," Arrecina snapped.

King Einhard's eyes fell from Arrecina's bee-stung lips, to her graceful neck, and then to her breasts full and luscious due to motherhood. He grinned and bit his lip,

watching the soft curve of Arrecina's hips.

King Einhard murmured to himself, "motherhood certainly agrees with the princess."

Arrecina gasped at his brashness, taking her husband's cape to cover herself.

Titus grit his teeth. *I do not like this visiting king at all.* "King Einhard! You think that because I am young I will allow you to disrespect my princess in her own palace! I will only ask you once to never look at my wife like that again."

"Or you'll do what boy," the gray-haired king chuckled.

Titus sprung to his feet and unsheathed his sword.

"Titus!" The Empress screamed. "Are you to send us to war over a misunderstanding!"

Einhard rose at once, his sword at the ready. He needed an excuse for war. Peace was making King Einhard broke and there was glory to be had and profit to be made in battle. *I just have to kill the whelp and his guards and war will be declared.*

Arrecina put a hand on her husband's cheek, which soothed him like a savage beast. She laughed nervously, "Gentleman I implore you to control your tempers." She turned to her young husband. "Titus, my Titus, how chivalrous of you to defend my honor, but I am certain our guest king was merely jesting, my lord."

Titus's contemptuous stare held fast on Einhard. It wasn't until Arrecina pressed her lips to Titus's that he finally relaxed, melted into their kiss, and surrendered his sword to her.

"Please pardon us for just a moment," Arrecina smiled politely and pulled her prince into the corridor.

“You are bullheaded and arrogant,” Arrecina chastised him. “Why would you charge into a fight to the death over a mere insult upon my character! He might have killed you!”

“I would charge into the fiery depths of hell for you!” Titus confessed. “When you are at stake I fear nothing.”

Her jaw dropped at his words. *Could this be courage he’s shown me?*

Titus smirked as he noticed how taken by his actions she was. He retrieved his sword and sheathed it, “Admit it, Arrecina. You like the fact that I defended you.”

“Maybe a little.” She fought back a smile. “But try to stay out of fights from now on.”

“You have told me on more than one occasion how much you hate me. Most days you don’t even pretend to hide your disdain. So what do you care,” he questioned with a sly grin.

“I... I don’t care. In fact, I don’t give a damn about you.” She put her nose up and crossed her arms over her chest. “I just don’t want us going to war over your temper and pride.”

“You just didn’t want me getting hurt.” Titus took her hand and intertwined his fingers with hers. He pressed her body against the wall with his own, looking down into her dazzling blue eyes. With their lips so close he could feel the warmth of her breath, he whispered, “why can’t you just admit that even after all I’ve done to you, you still care about me?” He leaned forward, his nose brushing hers. “You are having my baby, Arrecina.” He gingerly rubbed her still flat belly. “Can’t you dismount your high horse for just one night and celebrate. Be with me, your husband, just once of your own volition. I could make you

feel so good if you just allow me.” He looked around cautiously to make sure Empress Domitilla couldn’t hear before whispering, “I still love you.”

With such a simple admission from Titus, Arrecina could feel her bitter cold hatred melting away. She shivered as he moved to take her mouth, and soon his lips were upon hers, and his tongue slipping through the crease. Her breathing quickened as both of his hands fell upon her hips, and slid around gripping her backside. He hoisted her up on his hips taking her mouth, and tongue, and neck feverishly, hungrily. Her legs instinctively wrapped around him without a command from her brain, not giving a care who walked down the corridor and discovered them in the throes of passion. After so much pain and heartache, she needed this; they both did.

Her heart raced with need, passion, anticipation until common sense doused the flames. She freed herself from his embrace. He sighed and grit his teeth with frustration and disappointment.

“You look like a man and sound like a man, but you are not yet a man. Lay with your bedmate and touch me no more,” she fled from his vision chastising herself for her wanton behavior. *It’s one thing for him to take it, but another for me to give it to him. He’s just a child. What on earth is wrong with me!*

Titus returned to his meeting to find his mother shaking her head disapprovingly.

Domitilla growled impatiently, “For reasons like this, there is no place for love in a royal court. We nearly went to war because another man looked at your wife.”

“I wouldn’t have touched your wife or bedmate,” King Einhard assured the young prince. “I am well aware

of the rules. Now can we get on with this treaty?"

Titus spoke with a suspicious glare, "I will sign the treaty but you must swear to never lay a hand on Arrecina or Penelope."

"I promise on my daughter's life," King Einhard vowed, silently cursing both Titus and the peace treaty that would bankrupt him, wishing he had even the smallest excuse to push Titus over the edge. A sinister grin braced Einhard's lips as he got a wonderful awful idea. *At last, I have found a way to force this stupid young prince into war...*



Present Day

Titus coughed and coughed. He sat straight up in bed.

"Are you alright, my lord?" Sara questioned, instinctively rubbing his back. She had become so engrossed in his story that she'd forgotten momentarily what she'd done to him, that she'd poisoned him.

She glanced over at him and shuddered. His normally beautiful olive skin had gone pale. His dark curls were damp with sweat. He felt cold to the touch, as cold as death itself. This harsh ugly reality crushed her like an anvil. The vision of him blurred as tears welled up in her eyes. *He's dying. Oh, gods, I've killed him...*

"I feel strange," Titus admitted. "I am sorry, my dear, but I must finish my story another night."

She caught his hand as he turned to leave. A single glistening teardrop fell from her eye and landed upon their joined hands.

“I implore you, my lord,” Sara cried, “tell me more.”

He looked upon her face so wet with tears and found himself unable to deny her request, despite how dreadful he felt. He settled back on the pillows embracing her once more.

Titus crowed in a gravelly voice, “Test 2: Humility...”

CHAPTER 10: TEST OF HUMILITY

Flavius, the court physician, sat in his vast doctor's quarters studying the latest surgical techniques. He was a rather stern-faced serious fellow, the type of man that children ran from and cowered behind the skirts of their mothers. Everyone feared the surly physician, but his nephew Titus, who happened to be the only one capable of putting a smile on Flavius.

The doctor's quarters appeared more like a library than an infirmary. It possessed as many volumes and scrolls as it did remedies. He grimaced at the grimy build up on his leech tank. *I suppose I'll have to clean that soon. I can't wait to get an apprentice.*

Flavius went back to reading by candlelight. He jumped at the sound of a knock.

Before he could welcome the person in, Titus burst through the door complaining like a spoiled child, "I will be fourteen tomorrow. I am a man, and yet my self-

righteous wife will not have me. I don't understand. Just an hour ago she allowed me to kiss her and caress her body. She was reeling to give herself to me right out in the corridor. I could see the passion in her eyes and feel how much she wanted it in the way she returned my affection. Then suddenly she rejects me."

Flavius closed the medical book he was studying with a snicker, repeating a very common phrase Titus had heard his entire life but never paid much attention to until now, "sire, even the mighty empire of Rome was not built in a day. The last time we spoke you said Princess Arrecina despised you, and now she's shoving her tongue down your throat in public. I implore you, nephew, to show a little humility and be satisfied with the progress you've made. She didn't give in to her desires today but at least now you know she has them. That means..."

"There is hope," Titus finished his sentence with a gigantic smile, yearning to shout his triumph to the heavens. "Arrecina still loves me! Why couldn't I see it before?"

"Because Empress Domitilla made certain to build such an enormous wall between you and your wife," the physician explained. "How could anyone see past such an obstruction?"

Titus gave a cunning grin. "If mother wants to build walls then I'll just have to learn to climb. Nothing but death will keep me from Arrecina."

"Now that's the spirit, your majesty." Flavius smiled.

Titus nodded respectfully. "Thank you, Uncle Flavius."



A young chambermaid with chubby rose-colored cheeks left Arrecina's side. The servant sauntered over to answer the door.

"Leave us," Empress Domitilla instructed the girl, who curtsied ceremoniously and waited in the hall.

"My lady," Arrecina rose from her vanity and curtsied.

Domitilla slithered up grinning at the colorful bouquet of wildflowers. "Most consider it treason for us as women to take lovers, but I say why not when our husbands will bed anything warm. Good for you, my dear. Your secret is safe with me."

"Lover? Whatever do you mean?" Arrecina questioned with a puzzled look.

"The 'no special occasion' flowers," Domitilla smirked. "You don't have to be coy with me."

Arrecina giggled. Her face positively glowed with happiness. "Those flowers are from his majesty the prince. He picked them himself."

The Empress laughed aloud, "Titus would never."

"Your majesty, I swear I am not having an affair," Arrecina read Titus's note aloud:

My Dearest Princess,

I have been molested by maids for so long I never learned the value of a passionate kiss from the one you love. So I send these flowers as a token of my profound love and sincere

appreciation for the incredible kiss we shared today. Counting the days until... You already know what I'm waiting for.

P.S.

Yes, I picked the flowers myself, and your posterior is amazing.

*Love always,
your husband Titus*

“He isn’t much for tact but I’ll take it as a compliment.” Arrecina turned to look at her backside in the mirror with a smile. *I thought I was getting fat. It’s nice to know my Titus appreciates the softer more filled out body I’m getting.*

Domitilla snatched the letter and cringed at the sight of the broken royal seal. She grew furious as she recognized her son’s sloppy, barely legible, handwriting.

“May I have my letter back! You’re crumpling it,” Arrecina snapped.

“Oh... here.” Domitilla passed her the wrinkled paper and forced a phony smile. “As a fellow woman, I merely came to warn you. Never fall for any man’s lies. This includes my son. He kissed you in a moment of weakness, nothing more.”

“And why is it a moment of weakness to love one’s wife,” Arrecina questioned.

“My son has taken a woman on the side. He put her up in a lavish chamber and provides for her, an official mistress. Titus is likely lying with his whore as we speak. So he couldn’t possibly love you.” Domitilla gave an evil grin. “I am only telling you this because a future empress of Rome must be strong and trust no one, not even his

majesty. Titus can't breathe without lying. Even these flowers, though very beautiful, are a lie. There is no way my arrogant son would toil in the dirt picking flowers when he has hundreds of servants to do his bidding, including the palace gardener. We both know Titus is incapable of humility."

Arrecina was furious. Her eyes reddened and the veins on her temples pulsed. "Though I thank my lady for your concern for me, I already know Titus has a bedmate. He chose one out of obedience to me. Though I must admit it did sting to have you throw this girl in my face."

Domitilla stammered, "you are taking this all wrong... I... I"

"And in regard to the flowers," Arrecina cut her off. "This is the shabbiest bouquet I've ever gotten in my life. Wouldn't a palace gardener have trimmed the stems to a proper length, or at the very least know the difference between an appropriate flower and a weed! There are at least four dandelions in here!"

Domitilla was taken aback. "I did not notice. I will dispose of these myself and have a maid fetch you an appropriate bouquet."

"I appreciate the offer, your majesty, but the raggedy bouquet I have is perfect," Arrecina said with a satisfied smile. "I know my husband, my dear Titus, picked every last flower and weed herein. I will dry these beautiful flowers and keep them on display so that I may treasure them always, even the dandelions."

Domitilla was speechless and defeated. She fled Arrecina's chamber with an aghast expression. Of one thing the empress was certain. *This bothersome princess has to go...*



The palace had fallen cold and dark that night. Titus ventured through the drafty corridors on his way to Penelope's chamber. At first, he was sad and disappointed with Arrecina's dismissal of his affection but after talking to his Uncle Flavius the young Emperor couldn't be more elated. He practically floated down the halls with happiness and hope, two emotions he had rarely felt in his young life.

Titus stopped and whipped around at the sound of footsteps. "Is anyone there?"

The only reply was eerie silence. He brushed off his paranoia and continued forward. Before Titus could call for help a strong hand closed over his mouth and snatched him into a room. He breathed a sigh of relief once he recognized the face. It was Xuthos, the royal historian and records keeper.

"Xuthos, you gave me a fright," Titus exclaimed.

Xuthos danced back and forth nervously. "There isn't time to waste, Sire. This very message may cost me my life so I need you to listen."

Titus nodded at once wondering what could have the royal records keeper so fired up. He had never seen him like this.

Xuthos looked over each shoulder before whispering, "Empress Domitilla ordered me to burn many royal decrees years ago, but I managed to hold onto just one, the most important one of all." Xuthos passed Titus a sealed scroll and explained, "Your father named you heir

of his empire. All power wealth and responsibility are to be bestowed upon you on the day of your fourteenth birthday.”

“That’s tomorrow,” Titus gasped. “Why would Mother keep this from me!”

“You are too soft to take the throne in her opinion,” Xuthos said. “And that isn’t all. I know your marriage was arranged, but if you care at all for Princess Arrecina you will banish your mother from these walls. If you do not send Domitilla elsewhere your wife will not be long for this world.”

“You lie!” Titus bellowed. “Why would Mother kill my wife when I have done everything the empress has asked of me!”

“Because you have done everything Domitilla has asked of you,” Xuthos replied. “I overheard the empress telling her guards that she never liked Princess Arrecina. She thinks your wife’s loving influence makes you soft, unfit to reign and conquer. Arrecina proved useful in gaining the empress a much-needed alliance. Arrecina’s dowry came with valuable territories as well as riches, but once the princess gives birth to an heir Empress Domitilla will have no further use for her.”

Titus’s head began to spin. His heart pounded. A cold chill swept over him. He felt as if the wind had been knocked right out of him. He coughed a response in such a low tone his words were barely discernible, “All my life I have taken Mother’s abuse, and neglect, and degradation. I have catered to her every fleeting whim without question or complaint. Through it all, I’ve only ever asked one thing of her: do not harm my Arrecina. After all I’ve done to please the Empress she would plot

to assassinate my wife!”



Domitilla whipped around as Titus charged into her chamber. He smacked her to the ground. Snatched her up and struck her again. She gasped in shock, terror, and pain.

As she glanced at the enormous gong suspended from her ceiling Titus informed her, “Cry! Scream! Sound the alarm! Your guards won’t come to save you! At midnight I turned fourteen. I own them now.”

“Xuthos,” she growled wiping the blood from her lip.

She released a series of muffled squeals as Titus clasped one hand over her mouth and the other around her waist. She flailed, kicked, and scratched him as he dragged her to the bed. She screamed as he tore the front of her dress.

He held her down and questioned with a deranged look, “Do you want me, Mother! Huh! Is that why you’re so jealous of my wife!”

Her tears flowed. “Have you lost your mind! What’s wrong with you!”

He pinned her wrists above her head as he forced himself atop her and bellowed, “I can only assume this is what you want since you will not allow me to love anyone but you!”

“No! Son, please! I beg of you!” She implored him, her eyes wide with horror, her face soaked in tears.

He released her. She sat up, terrified and shaking, clutching her arms over her torn gown.

Titus warned with a cold bitter scowl, “if death falls upon my wife I swear on everything holy that you will take her place! I will lock you in my dungeons and ravish you without mercy and when you beg for death I will give each of my soldiers a turn with you.”

Domitilla gasped and covered her mouth with a trembling hand. “You would do this to your own mother?” She shook her head tears streaming. “You are sick, a monster.”

“I am the man you made me,” Titus growled. “But my child will not be like this: damaged, broken, evil. He or she will grow up good, innocent, and noble because this baby will never know your evil influence. You are henceforth stripped of your title and banished from Rome.”

“Titus no,” she begged between choked sobs reaching out to him.

He turned from her and ordered, “leave while I still have a mind to allow you to breathe.”



Titus celebrated the dethroning of the despot with a visit to his favorite chambermaid. He longed for Arrecina’s company but yearned even more not to rush her. They were making progress and that would have to do for now. Instead, he ran into the willing arms of his bedmate.

Penelope lay in bed with Titus, watching him sleep after a pleasurable night of his company. Dawn broke outside her window and she realized she’d have to rouse

soon. The other servants were already buzzing about in preparation of Titus's coming of age ceremony. As his official mistress, Penelope was no longer required to perform such duties, but she wanted to make certain his party was perfect.

She rested with him a moment longer. She hadn't felt well in days and his visit to her chamber perked her up a bit. Their coupling made her feel even better. She rubbed the strange sore on her hand trying her best to remember how she had hurt herself. Was she burned? No. Was she cut? No. This sore along with her sudden illness were both a mystery.

She smiled as she gazed down at Titus. She didn't love him. Her kind was incapable of romantic love. Raliko babies sprung forth from budding flowers every time a human performed a benevolent deed. But even without feelings of romance, Penelope did respect Titus and see him as a friend. For these reasons she stood against her father and acted against her ruthless Raliko nature. She gave up immortality in order to spare Titus's life. She removed her enchantment from him and confessed all her secrets. She was amazed that he didn't kill her or at least banish her. Instead, he kept her as a friend and a bedmate. Penelope kissed his lips and he began to stir.

Titus woke up smiling and spoke in a gruff sleepy voice, "it's nice to see you are no longer cross with me."

She laughed, "I was only cross with you because of the way you treated me last Monday. You are usually gentle. Our coupling pleases me as much as it does you, but Monday you were brutal and demeaning. You did things that hurt and degraded me."

"Penelope no, I would never," he swore as he sat

straight up in bed. “Who were you with on Monday!”

“You, my lord! I swear.” Her eyes grew wide and frightened. “Remember the night it stormed so heavy it flooded the street?”

“Yes, I remember that stormy night and I did not come to your bed!” Titus grew furious. “I was fighting with Arrecina Monday night! I was not with you!”

“My lord, I promise I have never lain with another!” She cried.

“There is no way I was in two places at one time!” Titus punched the headboard furious with her lies.

They froze at the sound of a ping. Something had hit the floor.

“What was that,” he questioned.

She shrugged with tears in her eyes, “I don’t know.”

Titus climbed out of bed at once. He retrieved the object: an emerald the size of an egg on a broken chain. It had mysterious symbols carved into it.

Penelope cried out, “see that’s proof you were here. I snatched this from your neck when I was fighting you off!”

Titus shook his head in fury and disbelief. “I’m not certain but I think I just figured out how I was in two places at once. This looks like a transformation stone.” Titus hastily dressed. “I must check with Uncle Flavius. If I am correct in believing sorcery was at work here, then the wearer of this amulet can take the form of whoever’s blood it touches.”

“But how would anyone attain your blood, my lord?”

“During weapons training accidents happen.”

“This doesn’t make sense,” Penelope protested. “Wouldn’t whoever it was have changed back the

moment I snatched off the amulet!”

“If it was pitch black in the room would you have noticed, especially as frightened as you were?”

Penelope clutched the covers, crying uncontrollably, “Oh gods he looked just like you. Am I to be executed for treason!”

“Of course not.” Titus wrapped his hysterical lover in a warm embrace. “But I will kill the man who did this. Has anyone in particular been paying a lot of attention to you?”

She vigorously shook her head no, “I am but a lowly bedmate. I cannot speak against a man of his stature.”

“I promise I won’t allow him to harm you,” Titus vowed, “but this is treason. I must know who he is! Is he one of my counsel men, guards, or elders! Is he a senator!”

She wiped her tears with the back of her hand. “I can’t be certain of his guilt, but that king who left yesterday could not keep his eyes off of me. He made me uncomfortable.”

“Einhard!” Titus gripped the amulet. “So is that what’s wrong with your hand?” He questioned with concern, glancing over her bandaged fist. “Did you hurt yourself fighting off a man you thought was me?”

Penelope shook her head, “to be perfectly honest, I have no idea what’s wrong with my hand.” Her voice became slurred and woozy as the room began to spin. “I don’t feel well.”

Titus gasped in shock as she fell back on the pillows, “Penelope! Penelope!”

He shook her but she refused to wake. Her eyes had rolled back in her head. Her skin was burning hot to the touch.



Titus felt like the ground had been snatched out from under him. His whole world was shaken by Flavius's news. The sore on Penelope's hand was called a chancre. Not only had Einhard taken advantage of Penelope, he'd given her an incurable disease that would attack her brain and eventually be the death of her, a disease she'd unknowingly spread to Titus; who at the moment was restlessly pacing the corridor in front of his wife's chamber door waiting for Flavius to emerge.

Titus hoped and prayed he had not unwittingly infected his wife. *I couldn't live knowing that I've harmed Arrecina, and what would this mean for our unborn child?*

Titus couldn't breathe as Flavius came from the room. His heart ceased to beat. After what seemed the longest pause of Titus's life Flavius said, "I am so very sorry."

Titus felt his whole world crumble. Tears filled his eyes. "Will my child survive? If he does will he be sick?"

"I can't be certain," Flavius admitted.

"And what of Arrecina," Titus cried out desperately. "Is she to share my fate! Eventually going deaf, or blind, or insane! Have you told her?"

Flavius shook his head no, "I thought it would be better to come from you, Sire."

"I can't," Titus backed away. "Not after I've finally gotten her to trust me. Not after at last I've gotten her to love me! She kissed me, Uncle Flavius. We made progress and now she'll hate me forever."

Flavius grabbed the shoulders of his hysterical young Emperor. “It is time to be a man and admit the truth. The princess deserves to know she is sick. If you love her you will be honest with her.”

Titus nodded, took a deep breath, and entered the chamber. An ecstatic Arrecina leaped into his arms placing kisses all over his face. For a moment he considered waiting to tell her. He couldn’t bear to rob her of her immense happiness.

“Happy fourteenth birthday, my Emperor.” She smiled joyfully. “The flowers were beautiful. I only hope you will love my gift as much.”

He forced a smile for her. “I’m certain I will, my love.”

This didn’t fool her one bit. Her grin began to fade as she noticed his grim demeanor. She slumped onto her bed. “I completely understand if you are upset over sending your mother away. We can bring her back if it pleases you, my lord.”

She nearly gasped as Titus climbed down on his knees at her bedside. *This can’t be good.* “What troubles you, my lord, that you would subject yourself to such a humble position at my feet? I implore you to rise, Sire.”

“No. This is where I belong, here at your feet,” he solemnly confessed. “I have terrible news, my lady.” Arrecina looked down into Titus’s worried chestnut eyes. She put her hands over his as he spoke, “Penelope is sick.”

“Yes, I heard. Is she alright,” Arrecina asked with concern.

“Flavius managed to break her fever so she’s alright for now,” Titus replied and Arrecina breathed a sigh of relief.

“But there is more,” he continued. “King Einhard used sorcery to take on my appearance.”

Arrecina shuttered with fear and disgust. Her eyes filled with tears. “That piece of slime didn’t touch me, did he!”

“No my lady, but he attacked Penelope.”

Arrecina was aghast and outraged that Einhard would sink to such a low.

“He gave her a lovesickness,” Titus confessed, a tear leaving his eye and trickling down his cheek. “This means I have it, which means you have it. I put you and our baby in danger. Please forgive me, Arrecina.” He laid his head on her lap, his tears soaking into her dress.

Arrecina started to breathe heavily, rapidly. Her heart raced with fear for her family, especially for the life of her baby. A tear fell from her eye and landed on Titus’s cheek.

He pleaded, “please slap me! Punch me! Do your worst. I deserve your anger, your contempt.”

When her petrified lips finally brought forth sound she coughed out breathlessly, “this is my fault. If I hadn’t told you not to touch me. If I hadn’t told you to take a bedmate.”

“Then it would have been you he attacked instead of Penelope.” Titus looked up at her and explained, “Einhard hates me. This was about hurting me. It’s not your fault.”

“Neither yours, my lord,” she vowed. Her mouth opened in utter shock as her eyes fell on his face, so heavy with remorse. “Are you... crying, Titus? I thought you were incapable.”

“I know you find it weak of me, right?” He turned away in humiliation.

She turned his face back to her and said, “to shed a

tear for good reason before the one you love is not weakness, but humility.” She leaned forward. Her soft moist lips brushed his ear sending tingles up his spine. She confessed in a whisper, just as he’d done the day before, “I still love you.”

Before either of them realized what was happening, his lips were on hers and he was laying her back on the bed. His hands tore at the golden broach that held up her toga until it gave way, placing sweet kisses on her now bare shoulder. She bit her lip to keep from moaning. He really did know what he was doing. She reached over his back, pulled his tunic over his head, and tossed it somewhere unimportant. She started kissing his neck, chest, and shoulder, smiling as a pleasurable groan escaped his lips. Titus took her mouth feverishly as Arrecina undid the laces of his breeches. He kissed her until she was breathless and senseless with desire. His hand slid up her thigh as his hips pinned hers to the bed.

He looked down into her crystal blue eyes, so full of need, lust, and anticipation. He confessed, “there is nothing I want more than this, but before we make love I have to know you won’t regret this, Arrecina.”

She nodded anxiously, lustfully.

“Am I a man in your eyes,” he questioned breathlessly, fighting his most basic instincts, denying his need to be one with her. He yearned to stroke her senseless, to make her feel so amazing she would never deny his love again, but first, he had to know, “am I old enough for you? Or will you wallow in guilt, regret, and shame for giving it up to me? I want to make you feel good but not if it will later make you feel bad.”

She ached so badly for his love that a tear rolled down

her cheek but she had to admit, “I will harbor guilt if we do this.”

He rose with a disappointed sigh and lied on his back next to her, both of them still breathing heavily as passion slowly faded.

“I’m so sorry,” she said.

“Don’t be,” he assured her with a chuckle. “We’re making progress.”

They turned on their sides facing one another. She gave him a peck on the lips. This turned into a full-blown kiss that had him ready to commit unspeakable acts with her. Titus backed away breathlessly.

He confessed with a smile, “Arrecina, I love your kisses but I can’t handle them right now. It took all the strength I had to climb off of you, and if you kiss me again we are going to hump. I promise you.”

She laughed softly at his brutal honesty, “you’re not one for tact, are you?”

He laughed, “it’s your fault for being so beautiful and making me love you so much.”

“I love you too.” She smiled, wanting to kiss him once more, but refrained knowing full well where that would lead them. Instead, she assured him, “do not worry about our child. He will be strong like his father.”

Titus smiled, “what makes you certain you’re giving me a son?”

“I just know,” Arrecina grinned.

Titus caressed her face and confessed with a heavy heart, “what Einhard did means war. If I do not attack, it will send a message of weakness and other kingdoms will see fit to attack us.”

Tears welled up in Arrecina’s eyes. “I understand but

don't dare get killed.”

He grinned and placed his lips upon her cheek. “I wouldn't dream of it.”

He left for war the day after his fourteenth birthday with his head held high and a token of love from his bride tied to his armor. He was determined to destroy Einhard as well as the wicked religion that allowed Einhard to commit such unspeakable evil.

Titus was entirely unaware of how his sickness would affect him, that the disease would attack his mind. He would begin to hear whispers voices telling him to do awful things, and violence would be the only thing to quiet them...



Present Day

Titus looked over to find Sara wiping away a tear.

She shook her head screaming on the inside. *Titus isn't evil. He's brain damaged, insane by no fault of his own. Oh God's I've murdered an ill man.*

Titus rose on unsteady feet and extended a hand to her. “Come, child,” he crowed feebly. “If you want to hear the rest then I must tell you on the balcony. I am in dire need of fresh air.”

She took his cold clammy hand and walked with him. They opened the elegant double doors and took a seat on the cool stones of a spacious balcony.

“Did your voices ever stop?” She questioned with a burdened soul and a heavy heart.

“That's funny you ask,” Titus said in a raspy voice.

“About a week ago my mind became so clear for the first time in many years. I’m not sure why but I’m glad for it.”

Sara nodded with remorse realizing why he was suddenly so nice as of late. She placed her hand on his, gazing with guilt into his dying face as she said, “I want to know more. I want to know everything.”

He nodded, put an arm around her shoulders, and confessed, “Test 3: Honor...”

CHAPTER 11:

TEST OF HONOR

Titus and his soldiers had stormed the continent of Europe. After a year and a half of combat and bloodshed, he was this close to making it to Einhard's kingdom. Titus felt justified in going to battle, though he wasn't entirely honest with Arrecina about the reasons. He said he'd gone to defend the kingdom, and that was true, but the main reason he'd gone was to defend her. No one would ever be able to harm his queen and endanger the life of his child and get away with it, not Einhard or any other who practiced sorcery.

Late at night in his spacious private tent, Titus consorted with his General, the man with phenomenal military strategy who had been responsible for many of their victories. Titus could honestly say the General had kept him alive in this brutal and relentless world of war.

Fifteen-year-old Titus lay in his cot that chilly night longing for home and his beloved Arrecina. "You know if my son survived, he's a year old now and I've never even

looked upon his face. I don't even know his name.”

The General, lying in the cot across the tent, jested with Titus, “I hope you're not planning to keep us up all night with your homesick ridiculousness again. We are on the cusp of greatness. You'll have plenty of time to chase your runt around the palace.”

Titus laughed, “I did not go to war for greatness. I went for Arrecina and my kingdom.”

The General smirked and announced dramatically, “Well I went for greatness. I yearn to be remembered for all time.”

“And you will my friend,” Titus assured him. “I thank you and Rome thanks you.”

Titus turned over and gave a nod of appreciation to the General who bore his exact image. The man no one else could see or hear but him.

“Do you trust me?” The General questioned.

“With my life,” Titus insured his twin.

“Good,” The General grinned. “We leave at dusk for the pagan battlefield.”



Though sickness affects everyone differently, it seemed to hit Penelope the hardest. She was human but had the heart of a fairy, which happened to be a pure race of beings. Her body did little to combat the illness. She had become frail and sickly due to frequent fevers leaving her without an appetite. Penelope had gone blind and delusional. Most days she didn't even know who she was.

Though most women could not care less about their

husband's former mistress, Arrecina saw fit to look in on the girl and at least try to keep her comfortable. Arrecina entered Penelope's chamber, happy to see she was sitting up in her rocking chair, even if her blind eyes were staring at nothing.

"She's having a good day," Lucius informed Arrecina. Tears came to his eyes. "Empress, words could not express how much I appreciate all you have done for my daughter."

"Nonsense," Arrecina assured him. "Any friend of Titus's is a friend of mine."

Lucius kissed Penelope's forehead and left the ladies to gossip and catch up.

"Empress! Empress!" Penelope called ecstatically at the sound of Arrecina's voice.

Arrecina made her way across the room with a hefty basket of goodies. "I brought grapes, your favorite."

Arrecina opened the drapes allowing the sunshine to warm the girl's skin. Then she began setting out the smorgasbord on a small table.

"No, allow me," Penelope insisted, taking the wine bottle in her hand. She filled each goblet with her finger on the inside of the cups in order to tell when they were full.

"Thank you." Arrecina smiled.

"I am the servant here, remember." Penelope smiled back.

"You are no such thing," Arrecina insisted, placing a hand over the girl's. "You are my friend."

"May we go outside today, my lady," Penelope asked. "I so long for fresh air."

Arrecina assured her friend, "if you are feeling up to

it. We'll go after lunch."

Arrecina stayed in good spirits for the sake of Penelope but she knew the agonizing truth. Penelope would only get worse and she wasn't long for this world...



Back on the battlefield the pungent odor of blood and entrails still poisoned the air as the surgeon finished wrapping Titus's broken ribs. Earlier during the battle, an enemy warrior had landed a brutal blow with a mace.

"How's that, Caesar?" The medic asked.

Titus let out a painful chuckle, "I will live, though it does not feel so."

"My advice is to sit out the next few battles," the surgeon warned sternly.

"Not a chance," Titus scoffed with a grin.

"I figured you would say that," the medic smiled at his brave young leader. "You fought heroically, a noble victory, my lord."

Titus gave a nod of thanks and the doctor left his tent. Once the medic was gone and the coast was clear the General appeared before Titus.

Titus sat up with an agonizing groan and admitted, "Another battle won. You are brilliant, my friend."

The General took a bow, graciously accepting the compliments. "Ah... but there is still work to be done."

Titus glared upon his lookalike with confusion, "We have defeated their army. We are done here. The path is clear to Einhard's kingdom."

Without warning, the General struck Titus forcefully with a rock. As Titus fell unconscious the General bound his wrists and ankles with rope. He tied a gag over Titus's mouth.

"I control this body from now on," the General growled as he made Titus a prisoner of his own mind.

A mutiny had taken place in Titus's head. The dark side had taken over, and the consequences would be severe. The General stepped out of the tent. The bustling camp of soldiers came to a halt.

The men snapped to attention, "Hail Caesar!"

The General strutted before them chin up, chest out, hands clasped behind his back. He paced in a regal and stately manner. "We ride out for the Moorish village!"

"There is no one left but women and children," Captain Pendragon protested.

Lieutenant McLane yelled, "I implore you, Caesar, to rethink your orders!"

"We must send a message that sorcery will not be tolerated from anyone," the General bellowed. "Those who refuse to convert from their wicked faith shall be executed!"

The troop shouted as one, "YES CAESAR!!!"



Arrecina walked through the vast library at the side of Titus's uncle Flavius. She prepared to ask the question she had been yearning to know since she met him, "Lord Flavius, you were the brother of the late Roman Emperor Vespasian and centurion of his army. You returned from

war as the highest ranking senator. You were living a life of wealth and adventure, a life all men covet; yet you placed riches, power, and politics aside for medicine.”

“Is there a question in there?” He replied in his usual snarky tone.

“Why?”

Lord Flavius answered, “the first thing you will learn about me is that I never pushed glory and riches aside for medicine. It was the other way around. A physician is who I have always been, but as the brother of Emperor Vespasian I had to put the good of Rome before myself.”

“I see,” she nodded solemnly and understandably. “I had no right to ask. I am sorry.”

“It’s quite alright. I don’t expect those who have never seen battle to understand. I spent half my life killing, now I save lives. Then there is the benefit of remaining close to my nephew.”

“You were close to him in the Senate.”

“That’s not the same. As a senator, I would not know the state of my nephew’s health, and his physician would not be at liberty to tell me. As a senator, even private conversations with the prince would have raised suspicions with Domitilla as well as the other senators. Domitilla has assassinated men and women for less.”

“But as royal physician, Titus can speak to you in private whenever he pleases and no one can question what was said.” Arrecina grinned and placed a hand on his bearded cheek. “You are noble and selfless for your sacrifices. I thank you, as does Rome.”

“Your gratitude warms me, your majesty, but I am merely fulfilling a promise to my brother. In the interest of defending you and Rome, I must warn you to beware

of Domitilla. She is a vindictive and dangerous woman.”

“How long have you known Domitilla?”

“As long as I have known King Einhard: all my life.”

Flavius ceased his steps and pulled two dust-covered scrolls from the vast shelves. He laid the scrolls out on the table and pulled out a chair for Arrecina.

As they took a seat Arrecina couldn't help but ask, “What happen to Domitilla and Einhard that made them so dark, so self-serving and evil?”

Lord Flavius's grim face lit up in a chuckle. He took Arrecina's hand and said, “you are so good-hearted you honestly believe that there is good in everyone and if someone is a monster there had to be some devastating thing that made them that way when the truth is some people are just inherently evil.”

Arrecina shook her head, “I don't believe that. Einhard is cruel because of his sickness, and I'm not sure why Domitilla is wicked but there has to be a reason. There just has to be.”

Lord Flavius shook his head at her sweetness, her naivety that blinded her to the true intentions of men. “This is exactly why I chose you to marry my nephew. I told Domitilla I had picked you for your dowry and powerful alliance, but the truth is I picked you for your heart. I saw Domitilla's influence was turning Titus toward the dark side, and while some people are inherently evil, I knew my nephew was not one of them. All Titus needed was the right influence to push him in the right direction. So I chose you to guide him back toward the light.”

“I thank my lord for your faith in me but I am merely a woman,” she said humbly. “I have no effect on Titus's

choices.”

“I assure you, my dear, not only do you affect Titus’s heart, you are his heart,” Lord Flavius vowed. “And though I know my nephew has likely put you through hell, I implore you for the good of the empire to stay strong. You don’t know what darkness Titus would be capable of if he ever lost his heart.”

She nodded and solemnly vowed, “I will stick by him. Nothing but death can keep me from Titus, but I refuse to believe that anyone is born evil. As with my husband, perhaps Einhard and Domitilla merely need a good influence.”

Lord Flavius laughed. He was soon to educate the ever sweet Arrecina who sometimes saw what she wanted to see in people rather than what was actually there, “do you know that a decade before Einhard even caught the love disease, you believe corrupted him, he cut the head off his brother in law so he wouldn’t stand in the way as Einhard brutally raped his own sister, because she was the only woman in the kingdom his father denied him. Even after he contracted the disease it never affected him because he used magic to ward off its symptoms. Believe me when I say Einhard has been the same cruel, selfish, wealth, war, and glory driven bastard all of his life and he will never change.”

Arrecina gasped in horror and disgust, “No. No.”

“Yes,” Lord Flavius confessed. “And Domitilla had been a pampered wealthy noble all of her life but nothing was ever enough for her. She wanted more. She coveted the throne. When my brother, Vespasian, came to court her he sensed something dark in her. For this reason, he chose Domitilla’s slave, Caenis, for his woman. Caenis

was wise beyond her years, good natured, and kind. She became his wife in all but name. On the anniversary of their first kiss, my brother the emperor found his beloved cold and dead, with a poisoned chalice in her fist. Domitilla offered comfort and condolences to the heartbroken Emperor. She eventually whored her way onto the throne. I was just fourteen when they wed. Though Domitilla had sworn to love my brother for all eternity she still saw fit to seduce me. I tried to tell Vespasian that his wife coveted me for her bed. He took her side and threw me in the dungeons. Domitilla came to visit me there and told me that she was the only way I wouldn't spend the rest of my days in prison. Though I am ashamed to admit it I took my brother's wife just once in order to gain freedom. Over a decade later clues began to surface about the murder of Vespasian's beloved Caenis. We'd long since made amends so he talked to me about it. Vespasian apologized for ever believing Domitilla's lies over my truths and told me he was going to confront her. It was the last time I saw him alive. He suffered a sudden and unexplained death. Before my brother's ashes had blown from the burn pile Domitilla found her way from his bed to mine. She asked me to stay as her lover and high council. I only agreed so that my nephew would have at least one ally in the court. I know you don't agree with me marrying Titus to you so early in his life and I know the age difference often bothers you, but I stand by my decision. It simply had to be done. Titus was becoming more like his wicked mother by the day and if I waited any longer it would've been too late. Thirteen or not he needed to be a husband. He needed to be mentally, emotionally, and even physically loved by

you.”

Arrecina’s eyes welled up with tears as she saw the profound hurt in Flavius’s eyes. Domitilla had torn his family apart, and for what: greed, glory, power or maybe none of those things. Maybe she just thrived on the chaos and misery of others. Arrecina abandoned all royal etiquette and threw her arms around Flavius. He hugged her back, sniffing to hold onto his tears from the memories of a murdered brother. He fought to keep in the tears of his own betrayal from the night he gave in to Domitilla’s demands and took her body in the bed she shared with his brother and emperor. Through all the pain and the heartache, he held onto those tears determined not to let Domitilla break him. Not now. Not ever.

Arrecina whispered to him amidst the embrace, “I know you feel guilty for having an affair with your brother’s wife but you did what you had to in order to survive. Had you not survived my Titus would’ve had no one. Thank you.”

She felt him nod into her shoulder. He felt as if an enormous weight had been lifted from his shoulders as he poured out his heart before her gentle soul. At long last, he could release all the guilt, shame, and grief that had plagued his troubled mind. When his weary eyes finally released his tears they were of happiness rather than strife. Lord Flavius released Arrecina and kissed her forehead. She gingerly wiped the tears he hadn’t realized he’d shed.

He smiled. “you are a truly wonderful girl, Arrecina.” He spread the scrolls out on the table and informed her, “if you truly yearn to know how any human could be so evil the answer you seek may lie among immortals.” He gave Arrecina a watery-eyed smile and a reassuring pat

on the hand. Then he rose and left her to her studies.

Arrecina read the scrolls feverishly. The legends told of a ruthless god obsessed with warfare, slaughter, and glory named Ares, known by the Romans as Mars. The fables also spoke of a corrupt goddess named Eris who thrived on causing chaos and discord. At first, Arrecina couldn't see what any of this had to do with her notorious foes, Einhard and Domitilla until she read further: *Every century the goddess of discord and the god of war will grow bored of Mount Olympus. They will seek out the womb of a mortal woman to bear them. Though they do not remember who they are while living on earth, their true evil nature never ceases come out. They will bring misery and chaos to all they touch during their mortal reign.*

Arrecina shook her head and pushed the ancient scrolls away. Her heart sank with disbelief and pity for Lord Flavius. *My poor friend is so distraught over what Domitilla has done to him, his brother, and his nephew that he honestly believes her to be immortal.*

Arrecina's heart began to pound, flutter and skip beats. She could feel her chest tightening as if the life was being squeezed right out of her.

She gasped for air and uttered, "what's... happening to... me?"

She fell from her chair perspiring heavily. Grasp the table leg as she fought to pull herself off the floor. Pain tore through her chest and shot across her back. *I can't possibly be having a heart attack! I am only twenty-one years old!* Arrecina made it to Xuthos's desk before she fell to her knees gripping her chest.

"My lady!" Xuthos hollered as she completely

collapsed on the floor. He dropped to his knees at her side.

She called out through gasping breaths, “Get... Flavius.”

The records keeper swept her up in his arms and headed for the infirmary.

She whispered faintly as she struggled for air, “If the worst should happen, tell Matthaïos and Titus... tell them...”

“I know, my lady,” Xuthos assured. “And the worst will not happen. I promised Caesar that I would help Lord Flavius look after you, and I always keep my promises.”

Arrecina smiled through her agony and her tears at her old friend. As the vision of him blurred and everything went black she realized she might cause him to break his promise...



Titus released a bunch of muffled squeals as he roused many hours later. It was cold enough to see his breath in the air. He could barely feel his fingers and toes. He scooted across the frost-bitten grass praying the stone in his sight would be sharp enough to cut his restraints. His head was pounding. He couldn't remember a thing. *Why is the camp so quiet! Where on earth has everyone gone!*

Titus took the small black stone. He used its sharpest edge to saw at the rope which bound his wrists. Once the last thread popped loose, he quickly snatched down his gag. “Someone help me please!”

He snatched vigorously at his ankle restraints. At the

point the last rope which bound him broke free, the entire tent disappeared. The deserted base camp vanished. Titus had recovered from his psychotic break. He opened his eyes in the middle of a Moorish village, which was ablaze. Its charred and ruined structures were consumed by leaping flames and barreling black smoke. The bodies of slaughtered women and children littered the streets. It seemed a nightmare. A horrifying nightmare from hell.

He froze petrified amidst the chaos unable to scream or even breathe. His heart raced in sync with his thoughts. *This isn't real! It can't be real!* The tortured screams of the fallen spoke to the contrary. The smoke and ash stung his eyes and burned his nostrils rendering him unable to deny the truth. This savage and heinous slaughter was real, and he'd commanded the massacre. The blood-drenched sword fell from his hand as he gazed upon the poor dead woman at his feet. Her mahogany skin bore the markings of a Moorish medicine woman. The wail of complete terror that had been caught in his petrified vocal chords shredded the air at last. He fell to his knees at her side. An injured baby not older than his son wailed as she lay soaked in her mother's blood.

"Stop!" Titus called to his soldiers. "Cease the attack!"

The soldiers ran to him. "You gave the orders, Caesar."

Titus shook his head, horrified, in utter disbelief. "Noooo!" He yelled as a soldier lifted a sword over the screaming infant. He tackled the man to the ground and started punching him. Titus's soldiers grabbed him by the arms. They drug him away from his beaten comrade.

The tall stately captain yelled at his hysterical leader,

“What shall we do with the child then! She shall surely die without her mother, whom you had no qualms about slaying!”

Titus pulled at his own hair unsure of what to do. The slaughter the General ordered on Titus’s behalf had to end but Titus couldn’t appear weak or fickle in front of his men.

Titus heaved to catch his breath and pulled himself together. “Take the Moorish child. I’ll need slaves for my household.”

“What of the others?” Captain Pendragon bellowed. “If word gets out we’ll be at war with all of Europe as well as the Moorish settlements that have emigrated here! We have to kill them now.”

“No, we don’t!” Titus yelled. “There will be no more killing of women and children! Take them all as slaves if you must. I’ll free them once the fighting ends.”

His men nodded at once. They shouted in unison, “YES CAESAR!!” Then they rounded up the slaves.

Titus pointed to one of his soldiers who’d been shackled to a tree. A scarlet haired Celt who had begun life as a slave, but risen through the ranks.

Captain Pendragon reminded him, “you had Lieutenant McLane arrested because he refused to participate. He attacked you in defense of the villagers, but I beg you, Caesar, do not see his execution through. He has a daughter just a little older than your son. Her name is Andromeda. McLane has been a loyal comrade up till now. Do not make his daughter an orphan.”

“Release him with my full pardon,” Titus ordered the soldiers at once. Then he addressed his most loyal and wise captain, “you, Pendragon, will govern and rule

Ealdor once Einhard falls.”

“I am honored, Caesar,” Pendragon bowed respectfully, graciously accepting his lordship over the vast kingdom. Total happiness filled Captain Pendragon’s eyes. “I only wish my dear wife had lived to see this day. I can’t wait to tell my daughter, Medusa, that she’s going to be a princess.”

“And a beautiful princess she will make,” Titus assured his friend, keeping up a pleased appearance until Pendragon left.

Titus shook his head in anguish, remorse, and shame as his men rounded up the slaves and treated the wounded. *I didn’t leave home with the intention of taking slaves but after the General’s massacre what other choice do I have...*



“You will be fine, your majesty,” Flavius said as Arrecina lay in her chamber recovering.

“You are lying old friend,” she smirked. “Please tell me the truth. What’s the prognosis?”

Flavius sighed deeply regretting his choice of occupation for the first time in his life, “I believe I have found a cure for the love sickness you and Titus contracted but not for the damage it’s already caused.”

Arrecina’s face filled with concern. “What damage?”

“For some reason, a disease that normally affects the brain targeted your heart,” Flavius admitted. “The heart is like a pump, Empress Arrecina. There are valves that separate each chamber. Those valves keep blood moving

in the right direction. They're like doors that prevent the backflow of blood. Your illness weakened your heart valves, causing them to malfunction. Now your blood does not flow as it should, and your heart has to work twice as hard."

"Can anything be done," she questioned with tears in her eyes.

"I will do all I can," Flavius promised. "But the damage to your heart is likely irreparable."

He hugged her tightly as she began to sob uncontrollably, her tears soaking into his tunic.

He whispered into her hair, "I am so very sorry, your majesty."



Excruciating horrible death will come to whoever opens this cage. This was the message displayed on a prison cell atop a rolling cart. Captain Pendragon examined the small cell with a ponderous look. *It's empty except for its straw bedding. Yet I have never seen a cell so heavily locked up. This thing is like a fortress.*

Pendragon called to Titus, "Caesar, what do you make of this?"

Titus walked over with the dark-skinned baby in his arm. "It certainly is peculiar, but I wouldn't recommend that anyone trifle with it. It may contain a curse from the old religions." At those words, Pendragon and the other soldiers took a few steps back. Titus informed them, "I will take it back to Rome untouched. Perhaps Uncle Flavius will know what to do with it. No one touches this

cage! Do we have an understanding!”

“YES CAESAR!” The men shouted, not really having to be told. If there was even a possibility the prison cell was cursed they wanted no part of it.

Titus left his men and returned to the campfire. It had been a month since the massacre and his days and nights were still haunted by the blood of the innocent. Just when Titus thought he’d never again see happiness after what he’d done, he found it in the large doe eyes of the Moorish child, a little girl he named Sara. She giggled joyfully as he rustled her thick black curls. They bonded under the stars, being warmed by the flames of a cozy campfire. He smashed the vegetables in his bowl of stew with his spoon. He wasn’t sure how well the baby’s four teeth would serve at grinding up her food, and he didn’t want her to choke. Baby Sara clapped her hands together ecstatically as he gave her another spoonful of mushy stew.

“Mmm,” the baby cooed joyously as she gummed the food and swirled it around in her chubby jowls.

This brought an elated grin to Titus’s face. Helping a child the same age as his own grow up was comforting in some way. He could watch her stages of development knowing that his child was doing the same thing.

“You are getting good at that,” Pendragon commented taking a seat on the ground next to them.

Titus looked at the messy baby and chuckled, “I think I got more food on her face than in it.” He wiped her face clean and stood her up, announcing ecstatically. “She has four teeth now and look what she can do Pendragon!”

Sara stretched out her tiny hands in Titus’s direction as she took five awkward wobbly steps toward him. She

lost her balance and fell on her bottom with a pout.

“Well done.” Pendragon clapped.

Sara’s pout transformed to a gummy grin. She climbed back to her feet and wobbled the rest of the way to Titus. She fell into his arms. Her joyful giggles ringing throughout the air like heavenly bells.

Captain Pendragon sighed with concern as he saw how close Titus was becoming with the baby girl. “Caesar, this child will have questions one day. What are you going to do?”

“Lie like I have never lied before,” Titus admitted. “What else can I do? I can never tell Sara the truth about her family, and I cannot bring myself to kill her in order to cover it up.”

“I understand,” Pendragon nodded. “But I beg my lord just one question.”

Titus said reluctantly, “ask away.”

“Why did you order us to raid that village just to call off the attack?” Pendragon enquired.

Titus looked down at his feet, “I’ll just say I was not myself that day, but now I am back.”

Titus peered into the distance at the small prison cell on top of the rolling cart. It held an evil man who bore his own image, a man that no one could see but him.

The General yelled to Titus, unbeknownst to everyone else, “if one of us dies we both do! Will you make your wife a widow? Your son a bastard? All to be rid of me!”

Titus shook his head at the evil one. *What you made me do was unspeakable! I am going to lock you in the deepest darkest cave until Flavius invents a medicine to rid me of you!*

Titus tuned out the screams coming from the cage, the voice that only he could hear. He hoped and prayed his soldiers believed his lie about the curse and they would not tamper with the prison cell. Titus held little Sara in his arms. She nodded off to the strong beat of his heart. He placed his lips on the sleeping child's forehead. "You are safe now little one. He will never hurt you again."



Three years later...

A blanket of gray clouds stretched across the sky as thunder rolled with the force of the gods. Rain poured and lightning flashed, illuminating the dismal skies as Arrecina stood and watched the storm. These days were the absolute worst for her because the storm reminded her of her beloved. *My Titus is like the storm in so many ways: Dark, chaotic, at times even destructive. Yet the crops, like my heart, begin to wither and die without the rain. There would be no life without a good storm and as such no happiness. Had he not taken me I wouldn't have brought forth life. Storms can be harsh and powerful, as such, we ward them off, treat them like a plague. After they are gone it is then that we realize just how much we needed them. I pray that you come home my mighty storm. Rain your powerful love upon me. Replenish my withering heart once more.*

Four-year-old Matthaïos tugged at his mother's toga as she stood at the window with tears running down her cheeks.

"What's wrong mother," Matthaïos asked, gazing up

at Arrecina with his large amber eyes. “Why are you sad?”

Arrecina sniffed and wiped her tears. “Your poppa’s eighteenth birthday is today. I only wish he was here to share it with us.”

She gave Matthaios’s hand a comforting squeeze to assure him she was alright. Then she turned back to the window to watch the thunderstorm. Arrecina’s breath caught in her throat. Her heart ceased to beat at the flash of silver and red in the distance, the approaching soldiers mounted high upon their horses.

To be continued...

CHAPTER 12:

A STORY ABOUT LOVE CONTINUED...

Arrecina and Matthaïos bolted downstairs as the company of soldiers trotted forward on their steeds.

“Empress!” Her maids ran after her.

When the child could not keep up, she took him in her arms and ran with him. A chambermaid caught up to Arrecina and relieved her of Matthaïos as they met the mounted soldiers. Arrecina’s very heart leaped as she laid eyes on Titus, mounted high upon his steed. She could not breathe as he climbed off of his regal black stallion. She barely recognized her husband. He was a full head taller than her now, built as solid as a brick house. His handsome face brandished a well-kept beard which did little to hide his gigantic grin.

The rain had passed and the sun was finally beginning to peak out from behind the clouds. Arrecina walked over to him and it seemed as if she was bringing the sunshine

and warmth with her. At that moment it was apparent to Titus that Arrecina had always been the light in his darkest hours, the only one capable of quieting the storm. She leaped into his arms and he swung her around with total happiness in his heart. She could not stop her tears from flowing. She'd spent five years never knowing when she'd receive news of his death, and at long last, he'd returned to her.

After a long spell of just holding one another in sweet beautiful silence, their hearts beating as one, Arrecina gazed up into his gorgeous brown eyes and said, "Happy eighteenth birthday, my emperor."

He smiled as she touched the coarse black hair on his handsome face. She whispered between soft sobs, "I can't believe you are home. It feels like a dream. Prove to me you are not a dream, dear husband."

Arrecina blushed as Titus grinned and cupped her backside with both hands. He pulled her soft warm body into his and leaned forward to brace her mouth. He kissed her hungrily and passionately, his tongue caressing hers as he showed her how much he loved and missed her. She ran her delicate fingers through his dark tresses as she returned his loving affection, the two of them melting into their mind-blowing embrace. When at last they came up for air it was to the cheers and chants of obnoxious soldiers.

"It seems the Empress wants to give him his birthday gift early!"

"Bed her well, Caesar!"

"Give her a laying worthy of an empress!"

Titus laughed hysterically but Arrecina could feel her cheeks growing warm with blood. So he yelled at his

company of soldiers, “I will not have you humiliate my wife. I’ll cut the tongue out of the mouth of the next man who makes a comment.”

Silence fell over the crowd of burly soldiers. Titus gazed down at Arrecina with a smile and asked, “is that better?”

She nodded, breathlessly swooning in the sound of his much deeper voice, mesmerized by the vision of him. She forced her eyes away from this tall dark Adonis and stammered, “there is someone I want you to meet.”

It took all the strength within Titus not to cry right in front of his soldiers. “My child survived.”

She nodded and walked over to the boy. Arrecina whispered to Matthaios, “Now remember how we practiced.”

Titus’s heart stopped. He was speechless as little Matthaios approached him ceremoniously. The boy bowed respectfully and spoke in the small angelic voice of a child, “I am honored to make your acquaintance, my lord.”

Titus forgot and abandoned all the royal etiquette that had been drilled into him from the time he could walk. He took his son in his arms at once. One of the tears Titus had fought to hold back escaped the prison of his lashes and trickled down his strong jaw as he at long last embraced his child.

When Titus finally released Matthaios he said, “I have someone I’d like you to meet.”

Titus walked over to Captain Pendragon’s horse and helped Sara down. Titus smiled and told the girl, “Remember how we practiced.”

Sara froze mid-step as she saw the most amazing pair

of chestnut eyes she had ever seen. She had rehearsed for this meeting at least twenty times but the sheer presence of this boy had rendered her speechless.

Titus nudged her forward. "It's alright. He won't bite."

At last Sara curtsied to Matthaïos ceremoniously. "I am honored to make your acquaintance, my lord."

Matthaïos could feel his young heart skip a beat as he laid eyes on Sara for the first time. She possessed exotic brown skin, and her pile of curls had grown into a long beautiful mane. Her large doe eyes captured the very soul of him. Arrecina felt her heart melt as Matthaïos bent to kiss his little companion's hand.

Titus knelt and instructed Sara, "you are to be my son's companion. Serve and respect him as you do me."

Sara nodded, her tiny round lips curving up in a smile, "Yes Caesar."

Titus turned to Matthaïos and informed him, "she is yours to command, but you should never take advantage. Always remember to be kind and fair."

"Yes Father," Matthaïos said with a respectful nod.

"Find her a chamber to live in, a very nice one," Titus said with a pleased smile.

Matthaïos took Sara by the hand, the two of them smiling and laughing as they ran ecstatically to the palace. When Titus first told Sara that he had a son of his own she was devastated, completely heartbroken. She thought she would hate the boy, but now she was convinced she and Matthaïos would be the best of pals.

Titus rose and returned to his wife. As he saw the happiness on Sara's face he joked, "well I suppose Sara has forgiven me. When I first told her I had a son she

wouldn't even talk to me. She was so jealous and hurt she asked to ride home with Pendragon."

"Matthaios is going to have his hands full with that one," Arrecina laughed. "She is lovely. I'll have my maids fetch her a hot bath and fresh clothing. Was she orphaned?"

Titus swallowed hard. "Yes... something like that."

Titus turned to his wife's maid and ordered, "Please feed and bathe the children. Keep them away from the windows for a while."

"Yes, Sire," the girl curtsied and gave Arrecina a knowing smirk.

Arrecina flirted boldly with her husband, "and just why is it the children can't come to the windows, my lord?"

Titus grinned slyly and bit his bottom lip. "I don't want them to see what I'm about to give you. It might damage them for life."

"Oh really," she flirted with intrigue.

Titus embraced Arrecina from behind wrapping his strong arms around her waist. She swooned as he leaned forward and kissed the side of her face. She cared not that he smelled like man sweat and horses from his long journey home. He could have her right out on the soft green lawn, still filthy from his trip, like a barbarian savage until he groaned her name and vowed to never look upon another woman. Or if he preferred she would wash his body, massage his muscles, and once he was relaxed they would make sweet gentle love as she gripped the silk sheets crying out his glorious name. With her body still trembling in lust and pleasure she would vow to love him and no other.

Arrecina snapped out of her erotic fantasies of being ravished by her husband like an animal as Titus snapped his fingers. There was a ruckus. Pendragon and McLane drug a prisoner forward. The man's hands were bound behind his back. This was not at all what Arrecina expected or wanted in a gift.

"Titus!" Arrecina's hands flew to her mouth. "What are you doing!"

Titus stormed over. He snatched the hood from the prisoner's head, baring Einhard's face.

"Kneel, you dog!" Titus ordered.

Einhard glared at Arrecina as if she was lower than a cockroach and gave an arrogant scoff, "never."

Titus planted a harsh boot on the back of Einhard's leg. The scoundrel fell to his knees with a painful howl. Titus walked back over to his wife. He placed a dagger in her trembling hand and guided her up to the prisoner.

Titus instructed her plainly as if killing was as simple as following a cooking recipe, "it might be easier for you to slit his throat. You would have to push the blade very hard in order to pierce his heart."

The shocked and terrified Arrecina looked back over her shoulder at Titus, wondering just how many he might have slain in order to make him this way: dissociated, void of empathy. "No. No," Arrecina uttered.

Einhard laughed aloud, "Titus, you know you aren't going to pass up a king's ransom to kill me. I am worth a fortune."

Arrecina pushed the dagger away and placed a gentle hand upon her husband's cheek. "Titus I have always appreciated your chivalry but an apology, a simple show of remorse, from this evil bastard will suffice. I don't have

to take his life.”

“Suit yourself,” Titus said with a smile and a shrug. He retrieved a small ax from one of his soldiers. He yanked Einhard up by the collar and stood him on his feet. One hand clutching the lightweight ax, the other clutching Einhard’s throat, Titus yelled in his face, “You will apologize to my wife or I will cut out your arrogant heart!”

“I will do no such thing,” Einhard snapped. “This whore is beneath me! As are you!”

Titus thought for a moment. *It would be wise to spare him and accept the ransom. The war hit us hard financially and Arrecina doesn’t want to see him die. Mother once said there was no room for love on a royal court. For love causes emperors to make bad decisions.* Titus’s lips curved up in a thoughtful smile. *I couldn’t agree more...*

Time seemed to freeze in that instant. Arrecina found herself unable to breathe as she saw the ax blade swishing through the air. Even her screams could not drown out the crack and splinter of Einhard’s rib cage as it gave way to the heavy steel blade. Einhard spun, fell, and collided with the earth, screaming the whole way down.

Titus dropped at his side and placed the ax on the blood-soaked grass. Titus retrieved a hunting knife. Einhard’s face twisted in agony, but his gasping lips brought forth no sound as Titus sawed away at his chest. Peeling back each ghastly layer, tossing aside splinters of bloody white bone. Until at last Einhard’s evil eyes fell closed and Titus held a fist size dark red mass.

Arrecina stood trembling in complete shock. Titus walked over to her and said, “I am no Flavius but I believe

this is it.” He placed the warm wet organ in her quivering hands. It was much firmer than she expected, heavy like one big tough muscle.

Titus whispered humbly, “Arrecina, as a token of my love please accept this heart. Mine already belongs to you.”

Arrecina shook her head in disbelief murmuring, “You killed a man. You killed a man out of pride.”

“No,” Titus closed his hands over hers, the two of them holding their enemy’s heart as one. “I killed that soulless monster because he harmed and disrespected you. I did it for love and *Honor*.”



Once Arrecina’s initial shock wore off she was abundantly appreciative of Titus’s gift to her. He had justly defended her honor, rather than freeing an evil man for sake of filling his coffers with gold.

Arrecina whispered to her adoring husband as they walked the vast corridor arm in arm, “We are trained from birth to dread the storm but sometimes a little rain is just what we need. And though I appreciate you giving me the heart of my enemy, your heart will always be more than enough. So I am going to pass on my gift to someone who needs it because I have all I need in you.”

He smiled and placed a kiss on her cheek. “Are you thinking what I’m thinking?”

Arrecina smiled wistfully up at him. “I believe so.”

The two of them approached Penelope’s chamber door. They knocked soundly. The door creaked open.

“It’s a bad day,” Lucius warned Titus and Arrecina with tears running down his face.

“No, it’s a good day,” Titus informed him placing a comforting hand on his shoulder.

Lucius looked upon his poor sick daughter babbling incoherently as she tossed and turned in bed. “With all due respect, Sire, I fail to see how. Penelope burns with fever and hasn’t been able to keep any food down for days. Lord Flavius said she won’t make it through the night.”

Arrecina gave him a leather pouch.

Lucius accepted the gift anxiously. “Is this a cure?”

“Even better,” Arrecina informed him. “Penelope said the gates of Questria will not open for anything less than the heart of a mortal prince. Well, how about the heart of a king? At long last, you are going home, Lucius!”

“You got the bastard!” Lucius cried. “You got the monster that did this to my baby!”

Titus nodded. “When the two of you return to paradise where you belong, and Penelope is restored once again to a glorious fairy you tell her that we got him.”

Lucius hugged both Arrecina and Titus so tight they could barely breathe, not caring at the moment if he’d be thrown in prison or the stocks for his inappropriate conduct.

When Lucius released them, he smiled through his tears and said, “you were right, Sire. It’s a very good day.”

When darkness fell the kingdom celebrated the emperor’s return as well as his eighteenth birthday. It was a massive celebration that would carry on for a fortnight. The aroma of the magnificent feast wafted throughout the

palace. Every cup was filled with wine. Ecstatic couples danced ceremoniously to the harmony of elegant leers, flutes, and harps.

Titus sat before the glorious feast surrounded by dignitaries and nobles. He grasped a chalice in one of his fists and Arrecina's dainty hand in the other. The two of them made polite conversation and graciously accepted gifts. Titus brought their joined hands to his lips and kissed Arrecina's knuckles as he admired the way the golden cords wrapped about her sparkling toga, brandishing tantalizing curves.

Titus grinned like Hades himself and shifted uncomfortably in his chair. "Are you trying to kill me Arrecina? That dress fits like a second skin."

She shrugged innocently, "whatever do you mean, my lord?"

"You know exactly what you are doing." He smiled impatiently. "I hope that gown is not a favorite of yours. I will rip it off your luscious body if it proves difficult."

"Your majesty," Arrecina turned to hide the dark red blush on her cheeks.

He grinned and shifted uncomfortably once more. *Arrecina has certainly filled out over the years. The one thing I must agree with the vile Einhard about is that motherhood indeed agrees with the princess.* Titus's eyes fell to the beautiful neck that, just as on their wedding night, had been beguiling him all this time. Would she allow him to love her? Would he, at last, be old enough?

Soon he received his answer as her supple wet lips grazed his ear, "tonight."

Titus's eyes grew as round as saucers. He would've sworn his heart stopped at that moment. No one word had

ever given him more satisfaction as it echoed over and over in his disbelieving mind.

He had to make certain, “tonight?”

She nodded with a hungry gaze, “tonight.”

Titus escaped with his wife for just a moment, holding her close on the beautiful stone balcony. Rather than the traditional robes topped with a crown of golden leaves, Titus was dressed from the neck down in black leather. Arrecina had to admit that black was truly his color. He looked good enough to eat. Arrecina closed her eyes and breathed him in. The warm embrace of her husband’s leather-clad arms blocked the cool wind that nipped at her exposed skin. Every twinkling star was out in the heavens on this festive night.

They watched from high above as Lucius carried his daughter through the tall grassy meadow. Lucius could already see the beautiful blue sprites and nymphs frolicking gracefully over the surface of the Lake of Questria. But to Arrecina and Titus, it just appeared a lake. The only thing out of place was how Lucius now stood weightlessly atop it. He stood his daughter up. With a bright dazzling flash, the heart in Penelope’s frail hands disappeared, and with it so did her suffering. She looked radiant and happy again as she waved goodbye to Arrecina and Titus. They waved back, their hearts leaping with happiness as Penelope and her father vanished before their eyes.

Titus looked down into Arrecina’s dazzling blue eyes and sadly confessed, “most husbands would bring their wives jewelry and flowers after such a long absence, not the brutally sliced out heart of an enemy. You deserve better Arrecina. I’m sorry I’m not normal.”

Arrecina smiled and kissed his lips. “Who’s to say what is normal?”

Titus hugged his wife tight and kissed the top of her head. He spoke into her sweet strawberry smelling hair, “Most times I envy your good nature.”

“You shouldn’t,” she spoke into his chest. “I wouldn’t have been able to cut any man’s heart out, no matter how rotten he was. And because of that, I would’ve condemned an innocent girl and a friend to suffer an excruciating horrible death. It was not my nature but yours, my lord, that saved a girl’s life and gave that family of fairies a second chance.”

He smiled at her unrelenting reassurance of him, brightening his life like a ray of golden sunshine. He gave her the same devouring look he did in the banquet hall.

Arrecina smiled bashfully, feeling naked all of a sudden. “May I trouble, my lord, to return to your guests, and give me an hour to prepare?”

“As my lady wishes.” He lifted her chin and bent to place a tender and loving kiss upon her lips.

It was just past 1:00am when Titus’s birthday bash finally wound down. Soon the last stragglers had left the elegant ballroom.

Titus’s own mother had beaten and degraded him. His own cousin once plotted to assassinate him. Yet neither of those betrayals combined hurt more than finding Arrecina’s chamber empty. Her wardrobe was bare. Her drawers cleaned out. She’d taken everything, even Matthaios and Sara.

Titus stood in the now vacant banquet hall before the massive gift table. He’d dismissed his servants and told them to clean up after the party tomorrow. For now, Titus

needed to be left just how he felt, completely and utterly alone. He felt as cold and empty as the ballroom he stood in. He forlornly opened his presents in a bit of a trance. *I couldn't have been easy to love. For gods' sake, I forced myself on her the night of our wedding. I can understand why she left me, but what I will never forgive her for, what I can never comprehend, is why she would lead me on all night just to leave me out in the cold...*

A tear trickled down Titus's cheek. He punched the table so hard the blast echoed throughout the vast empty chamber. His hand ached and yet he invited the pain, grateful to feel something other than heartache and betrayal. Lord Flavius approached from behind and put a comforting hand on his nephew's shoulder.

Titus turned to him and said, "She even took the kids! I have never felt more alone in my life."

"You are not alone," Lord Flavius assured him. "I found this in her chamber. It slipped off the table and fell behind the nightstand."

Titus sighed and reluctantly accepted the note, not really in the mood to read Arrecina's Dear John letter, and yet he needed to. He popped the wax seal:

My Dearest Titus,

Please understand that I could not have you touch me in the room I was violated in. For this reason, I moved to the chamber down the hall, number five. Also, I sent the children to stay with my cousins in the country so we wouldn't be interrupted.

With all my love,

Arrecina

Titus bolted from the ballroom without saying goodbye to his uncle, whipping down the corridor past idling servants. He raced up the stairs taking two at a time. He pounded on the door that brandished the Roman numeral V. Arrecina answered wearing nothing but a large red bow; which only covered the essentials. She felt the breath go right out of her as Titus squeezed her tighter than a boa constrictor.

When he finally released her, she gave him a playful poke to the chest. “You are late, Sire. I said to meet me in an hour. It’s been two.”

He grinned at her, positively elated. “A thousand apologies, my lady. I stopped to open a few birthday presents.”

“Well you forgot one,” she chimed and twirled around in her bow.

“No, I was just saving the best one for last.” He puckered his gorgeous lips and whistled.

“I suppose I’ll forgive your tardiness,” she jested. “I did sort of cost you a king’s ransom.” Her smile faded. Her look turned serious. “I do pray I didn’t hurt the kingdom.”

“You are worth a hundred kings’ ransoms,” Titus confessed dreamily as he gazed upon her lovely face. “Besides, the birthday gifts I received more than made up for it.”

Arrecina breathed a sigh of relief, smiling wistfully up at his handsome face. She placed her hands on the back of his neck. His hands slid over her strategically wrapped bow to the small of her back, pulling her forward, and dipping to lift her. One strong manly arm supporting her

legs and the other supporting her back, he carried his wife, his love, to bed. With the covers already turned down he laid her on the cool sheets.

Arrecina shivered as he undid the straps on his leather shirt. With trembling hands, she helped to peel it off his broad shoulders and soon it was on the floor with the rest of his coverings. He laid beside her and placed a sweet kiss upon her neck. She nearly jumped out of her skin.

He asked with concern, "Are you frightened of me?"

"A little, your majesty," she admitted.

"This time will be different. I will not hurt you," Titus grinned devilishly. "Unless you ask me nicely."

She giggled and pulled him down into a kiss, her lips parting, granting him entry to her waiting mouth. When they came up for breath it was with a pleasurable moan. Titus gazed at his beautiful wife, mesmerized, not knowing where to start.

Arrecina took his hand and assured him, "You are beautiful Titus, a god, how could I not want a piece of you?"

His jaw clenched with anticipation. His lips lowered upon her gasping lips. Her wanton moans were trapped in his passionate kiss as they gently caressed one another.

"I want to be one with you," she whispered, refusing to be further delayed, her voice heavy with passion.

"As you wish, my lady." He grinned eagerly as he crawled over her, lowering his strong body atop hers. She gripped the muscles at his back bracing herself to take him in, shutting her eyes tight as she felt him at her threshold, but the thrust didn't come. She opened her eyes to find him gazing down in wonder. Titus wanted this so badly he could barely think as he anticipated the stroke that

would make them one, and yet he had to know, “Arrecina, my love, my goddess, am I a man yet in your eyes?”

She gingerly caressed his face, a tear leaving a beautiful blue eye as she said, “Titus, my love, you are so much more than a man in my eyes.”

He placed his lips upon hers kissing her sweetly, grateful to the god’s that they would be one at last.



Titus and Arrecina held one another in a breathless, sweaty, heap after a pleasurable and magical evening.

Arrecina smiled ever slightly as a storm began to brew outside. Gray clouds were barreling in. Thunder rumbled hard enough to send shivers up her spine.

“I love you, Titus,” Arrecina kissed his lips sweetly, and then rested her head upon his shoulder as she gazed out the window. She watched the storm, ever pleased, and abundantly grateful to the gods it had finally rained.

“I love you, Arrecina,” Titus confessed, thanking the gods to have his sunshine, at last, the majestic beautiful glow that always brightened his darkest hours. *Our relationship is anything but a fairytale, my Arrecina. We have faced war, disease, insanity, scheming in-laws, and corrupt kings. It is not a love story by far, but as sure as I live and breathe you are the heart of me, which makes ours a story about love...*



Present Day

Sara stood at the banister, her curls dancing in the cool wind, as tears pricked at her eyes. She gazed up at the stars overhead with long forgotten memories tearing a hole in her heart. “Now I remember everything, the way I was so accustomed to drifting off to the beat of your heart, that when you brought me here I could not sleep unless you held me in your arms and read me a story. I recall the day I ran from you screaming because I didn’t recognize you after you’d shaved. Then you vowed to never go entirely beardless again. Empress Arrecina died when I was just a girl of seven. Then you changed. I was your ward, like your daughter! This chamber you gave me tonight once belonged to me! After your wife’s ashes had blown from the burn pile you made me a slave like all the others. You cast me out of this chamber as well as your heart! Have you nothing to say for yourself!”

Sara whipped around. Titus was slumped over on the balcony. She screamed and tears cascaded over her face. “Caesar! Caesar!”

His skin was pale and beaded with perspiration. His lips and fingertips were blue. She could see nothing but the whites of his eye, which were closer to bloodshot red at this point. She knew at least a part of him yearned to kill her and yet the sight of him like this was horrifying, devastating. He had enslaved her, murdered her parents, thrown her in the stocks. Titus was indeed the great Satan, but Sara, like sweet gentle Arrecina, was no killer. Titus’s death would haunt her forever.

Sara shook him desperately, “Wake up you bastard! If you love me at all you’ll say something! Anything! Please... Please...”

At last, he gurgled an incoherent response but his skin felt like ice.

“My Gods! Somebody help me please!” Sara screamed.

Soon her body sped ahead of her mind. Without even thinking she shoved her finger down Caesar’s throat. He coughed, gagged, and threw up the poison along with his dinner. He made a few more incoherent ramblings. Sara leaped to her feet. She grabbed a hefty stick and swung it with all her might, striking the gong that hung from the ceiling.

She ran back to Titus and placed his unconscious head on her lap. Waiting for the guards to burst through the doors. She implored him with choked sobs, “I’m... here... Stay with me.”

She tried to wake him once more but he didn’t move. His chest did not rise and fall with breath. She could hear the approaching cacophony. It grew louder. Louder. LOUDER. Armed soldiers burst through the doors.

“He’s here!” She called.

They followed the sound of her voice. One soldier ran to retrieve Flavius. The others each grabbed a heavy limb and lifted Titus onto the bed.

“Is this how you found him,” asked Daetor, the newly appointed Captain of the guard.

Sara nodded, wiping her tears. Daetor and the guards stripped Titus’s coverings so that Flavius may examine and treat him swiftly. Daetor bent to place an ear to Titus’s chest. The large soldier shook his head with a distraught look.

“Well!” A frantic Sara demanded answers. The other guards were desperate to know the answer as well.

“Wait outside,” Daetor ordered her in avoidance of an answer.”

“Is there a heartbeat or not!” Sara’s tears streamed as she refused to back down. Refused to be turned out of her own chamber without answers.

At that moment Flavius burst through the door, and Daetor had no choice but to admit, “he’s dead...”

CHAPTER 13:

THE ROMAN NUMERAL V.

How could just two words shatter Sara's entire world "He's dead?" Her vocal chords were paralyzed. Her petrified feet were nailed to the floor. She stared at Titus's pale body with Daetor's awful words repeating over and over and over again in her disbelieving mind.

"He's dead..."

"He's dead..."

"He's dead..."

Lord Flavius pushed past the enormous guard. "As royal physician, I will be the judge of that."

Sara waited breathlessly. Her heart was pounding so hard she thought her breastbone would shatter as Flavius examined Titus for any sign of life at all.

The physician checked Titus's wrist, his throat, his chest, and finally, two places no one else would've thought to check: behind the Emperor's knee, and lastly his inner thigh right below the groin. "There's a pulse, but

it's very shallow."

The crowded room released one big collective exhale as the doctor went to work immediately. Flavius gave Titus a remedy in hopes of starting his breath back. Sara's heart leaped as Caesar's chest rose with a gasp, but his eyes did not open. Daetor was awestruck, entirely discombobulated as he witnessed a bit of color returning to Caesar's skin.

Flavius assured the guard, "it was an honest mistake. It takes a trained hand to detect a pulse so faint. How do you think people get buried alive by accident? We call them dead-ringers."

Daetor nodded with the doctor's reassurance and ordered his subordinates, "retrieve the prince at once!"

Sara, at last finding herself able to speak, asked the physician, "is he going to make it?"

Flavius confessed, "Titus appears to have either had one too many drinks, or overdosed on opium, or been poisoned. If he hadn't vomited he would be dead already."

Sara breathed a sigh of relief that her unlikely shot in the dark had at least done some good. "So he's going to make it then! Look he has color again."

"But it's the wrong color. Look carefully. He's yellow, almost orange," Flavius shook his head. "Vomiting only bought Titus a few hours. Whatever poisoned him is still destroying his liver. That's why he's jaundiced."

Sara's voice cracked under the weight of her emotions, "he's going to die."

Flavius nodded regretfully, "I only know of one remedy that could rid the body of toxins fast enough to save his liver as well as his life and I haven't the

ingredients to make it.”

“What are you missing,” Sara questioned desperately.

“A flower that hasn’t grown in this region in over a decade,” Flavius explained.

“Then where does it grow,” Daetor called. “I’ll take a party to retrieve it.”

“The nearest place it grows is three long days ride each way. My nephew would be long dead before then,” Flavius said regretfully.

Sara fell to her knees sobbing uncontrollably. Daetor picked her up and carried her across the massive chamber. He laid the hysterical girl upon the lounge.

As Flavius and Daetor debate over who should tell Matthaios that his father is as good as dead, Sara remembers a vital part of Caesar’s story. Something Arrecina had said when she stood up to the wicked Domitilla: *“I know my husband, my dear Titus, picked every last flower and weed herein. I will dry these beautiful flowers and keep them on display so that I may treasure them always, even the dandelions.”*

Sara called out to Daetor, “was Empress Arrecina’s chamber ever cleaned out?”

“Are you jesting,” Daetor snapped. “Titus considers that room a shrine. No one is ever allowed to go in there.”

“That’s good,” Sara turned to Flavius and asked. “Does the flower you seek have to be a fresh one? Or will a dead one suffice?”

“Actually a dried one would be better,” Flavius raised a brow at her unusual questions. “Why do you ask?”

Sara admitted, “I may know the location of a sixteen-year-old bouquet. It’s a long shot but the flower you seek may be among the ones Titus long ago gave to his wife.”

She snatched Daetor by the hand and ran out the door with him. As they hurried upstairs she said, “if Titus indeed treats this room as a shrine then he’s the only one with a key. He can’t tell us where it is and we don’t have time to look for it. Do you think you can break down the door?”

“Yes,” Daetor said as they skid to a stop before a chamber brandishing the Roman numeral V.

Daetor rushed the door. Gave it a hard shoulder. His second mighty hit made the door fly open. Sara ran in. She whipped around in all directions.

“There!” She grabbed the vase of dried flowers. Then they hurried back to Flavius.

Flavius had been preparing the rest of the remedy as he waited for the missing ingredients. He looked up as the door flew open.

Sara ran in. She dumped the crunchy flowers out on the bed. “Are any of these it?”

Flavius picked through the pile. Smelling the flowers, examining petals and stems for what seemed an eternity.

After the longest pause of Sara’s life, the physician said, “This one. It’s a good thing the stems weren’t trimmed. I need the whole flower.”

Daetor said, “now that he’s going to live it’s time I got to work finding out who wanted him dead. I have some questions for you, slave girl.”

He got no response. Daetor whipped around. She was gone.

Sara fled the castle. She ran toward the sea as the cold air chilled her. The night was silent. Not so much as the hoot of an owl in the distance. The only sounds were that of the approaching troop of soldiers hot on her trail.

“She’s there!” A voice yelled in the darkness.

Four guards appeared at the end of the alley. She skid to a stop and ran back the other way. Three guards appeared at the opposite end. She was sandwiched, trapped. They closed in on her. Bumps rose on her skin. Her blood turned to ice. She screamed and fought as a man as great in stature as Daector grabbed her. Another brute covered Sara’s mouth and nose with a scrap of cloth heavily saturated with a compound of hogwort and phillarian. She struggled and thrashed about violently as the chemicals invaded her airways. Her body went limp. Her wild eyes fell shut as she drifted out of consciousness. The enormous man tossed her over his shoulder and the seven of them took her away...



Sara roused not long later expecting to be in a prison cell staring at the hollow black eyes of Daector. Instead, she woke up in a cozy bed to the blazing brown eyes of the man she loved. Matthaios was dressed strangely, like a commoner. His image was blurry at first before eventually coming into focus. She sat up at once, threw her arms around his neck, and hugged him tightly.

As her tears of relief ran onto his tunic he whispered, “We are on a ship destined for freedom. I’m sorry my guards had to drug you. They said you ran from them and fought. It was the only way they could subdue you and prevent us from getting caught. There is a young nobleman who truly cares for Andromeda. As such he was the only one willing to harbor us. His name is...”

“Perseus,” Sara finished his sentence remembering the words of Daniel.

Matthaios took Sara’s hand and explained, “Andromeda and I only agreed to the marriage because we knew our wedding night would be the only time we would be left alone for long enough to escape. I wanted to tell you what we were planning so badly but my father is not a stupid man. If your grief over my marriage wasn’t genuine he would’ve seen right through us and the plan would have been foiled.”

“I understand,” Sara assured him, gingerly caressing his face.

He closed his eyes swooning in her heavenly touch. She quickly withdrew her hand as she remembered the harsh reality of the situation, “You belong to another.”

Matthaios confessed, “I didn’t consummate my marriage. Xuthos can grant me an annulment.”

“Thank gods,” Sara said, tearfully hugging him again. “I thought I had lost you forever.”

Matthaios shook his head, “Andromeda may be destined to be the greatest queen the world has ever known, but she is not destined to be my wife.”

Sara found herself speechless, breathless, as Matthaios pulled out a tiny gold band. He climbed down on his knees at her bedside, looking up into her beautiful brown eyes as he said, “will you marry me, Sara?”

Her tears flowed as she coughed the words, “a thousand times yes.”

He rose and wrapped his arms around her as they sealed their betrothal with a loving and passionate kiss.

EPILOGUE:

WHERE THE WILDFLOWERS GROW

Magnificent dawn broke outside of the ship's round windows, making the sea sparkle like heavenly stars. Matthaios removed the lid from a good size box. He pulled out a gown of the finest purple silks and velvet and passed it to Sara.

"An engagement present from Andromeda," he said.

Sara put the beautiful gown up against her. Matthaios smiled with total happiness in his heart and confessed dreamily, "you look like a princess."

"I'm not," Sara said with guilt and shame. "I can't take this."

"What's wrong?" he asked as she passed the gown back to him along with her engagement ring.

"You keep doing all this for me," she cried. "I don't deserve it."

"I want to," he insisted, his brows furrowed with confusion.

Sara admitted tearfully, “I made an attempt on your father’s life.”

Matthaios’s eyes grew large. All the color drained from his face, but the silence was soon broken with a hearty chuckle from him. “You and everyone else. You had the most cause to kill him.”

Sara snickered as he slipped the ring back on her finger. He passed her the beautiful purple gown and said with a warm smile, “You’ll look wonderful in it.”



Sara donned the finest dress she had ever laid eyes upon. Its fine fabric felt like a gentle caress upon her skin. She pinned her gorgeous dark locks up in a graceful and elegant do with just a few wavy tendrils sweeping her lovely collar bones. She ventured upstairs as the enormous ship sailed the beautiful ocean.

Sara froze as her feet reached the deck. This was not the private breakfast she had expected. All the slave girls from the palace were there along with a handful of Matthaios’s guards, and of course all the sailors. All were dressed up. The whole ship was decorated, festooned with flowers and ribbons. A long table with a magnificent feast was stretched out before her. At the point that she noticed the giant five-tier cake, she realized this was no breakfast but a beautiful wedding at sea.

She covered her mouth with a trembling hand as Matthaios approached and informed his speechless betrothed, “I hope you don’t mind. I invited a few friends to breakfast. I figured nothing would be more fitting for a

lover of the water than a wedding at sea.”

Sara nodded ecstatically and hugged him tightly. Matthaios released her as Xuthos beckoned him, “Please allow me just a moment to get divorced.”

“Of course,” she nodded with a chuckle.

Chloe ran up and embraced her, both of them jumping up and down like little girls. The women regained their composure as Andromeda approached. Sara and Chloe curtsied respectfully, “my lady.”

“Andromeda,” she corrected them and joined the ecstatic embrace.

Once they were calmed down Andromeda spoke to Sara grinning, “now if you’ll excuse me, I must divorce your betrothed so we can get on with the show.”

Sara giggled, wiping away a joyful tear. “Thank you, Andromeda. Thank you for everything. I’ll repay you someday in this life or the next.”

Andromeda nodded and returned to Matthaios and Xuthos. She signed the papers at lightning speed and then ran into the arms of her noble Perseus.

Andromeda’s actions were so out of character for a princess that Perseus felt obligated to restore a sense of decorum. He bowed respectfully and addressed her formally, “My lady, I...”

“Shut up and kiss me, Perseus.”

He laughed. “As my lady wishes.”

Claps and whistles floated on the air as Perseus embraced his princess at long last.

Sara nodded respectfully to the sailors and former gladiators who’d rescued her: the chivalrous men to whom she owed her freedom and her happiness.

Sara felt a tap on the shoulder. She whipped around

to find Daniel standing on legs. She embraced him at once, releasing an excited scream, “But how!”

Daniel smiled with tears in his eyes and gave Matthaios a respectful nod. Then he turned back to Sara and said, “your betrothed helped me out with a little spell. It’s only temporary. I must return to the sea by the stroke of midnight, but I couldn’t miss this day for anything in the world.”

Elegant music floated throughout the air and everyone got into position. Daniel extended an arm to Sara, “may I have this honor?”

“Of course,” she answered, taking his arm, her large brown eyes beginning to water once more.

Her heart melted as Matthaios awaited her at the end of the aisle dressed ceremoniously. The only thing missing was his crown of golden leaves, because that he had given up for her. He’d given up all of Rome for her. She willed her nervous legs to move and took the first step toward her destiny.



They partied well into the night, beneath the dazzling constellations. Elated couples enchanted by wine kissed and caressed at the table, even out on the dance floor without a care who bore witness to their passion.

Jester wandered off with a chambermaid under each arm; one of the girls was wearing his silly bell hat and the other was pouring him a hefty goblet of wine.

Felix, the regal captain of the ship, was the only one not joining the festivity. Together he and Perseus had

reclaimed the ship that was Felix's birthright, but it all meant nothing without Chloe. She was still furious with him for leading her to believe he was dead. She had mourned him for months. Drowning in a deep blue sea of her own tears. Her grief distracted her from performing her duties with grace, which resulted in beatings from the matriarch. Chloe's sorrow at times caused illness and weight loss. A lie Felix had told to protect her had created nothing but strife. Even if she forgave him one day would she be able to live with his drastic change in appearance?

Soon Felix had his answer. The golden-haired beauty grabbed him by the collar and snatched him into the captain's quarters. Chloe wasn't at all put off by his appearance. He looked dangerous now, mysterious and daring.

Sara had never seen Chloe happier than in the arms of that boy with the eye patch. Sara giggled at the wanton moans coming from the captain's quarters. The squeak of the mattress could be heard clear out on deck.

Matthaios lifted the sparkling white tablecloth as something bumped his foot.

"Get lost," snapped a pretty brunette from underneath her husband, Gawain.

Matthaios laughed, "Gawain you old dog!"

Gawain growled, "Matthaios, go away or I will throw you overboard."

Matthaios threw the tablecloth down with a chuckle and turned to Sara. "Let's get out of here."

"I thought you'd never ask."

They made their way downstairs to their private chamber. Matthaios snapped his fingers and candles illuminated the room. They kneeled on the bed, gazing at

one another in the soft glow of candlelight.

“I love you, Sara,” he vowed to his wife, the keeper of his soul.

“And I love you, Matthaios,” she swore from the depths of her heart. “But where will we go?”

He grinned and pulled her into his strong arms as he repeated her words of longing, “somewhere with a beach.”

She laughed, elated that he remembered that night in the Library of Rome. “And mountains,” she said as she fastened her hands at the back of his neck, stroking the silken curls that lay there.

“Wildflowers.” He smiled, looking dreamily into her eyes.

“And a vineyard,” she whispered, completely lost in him.

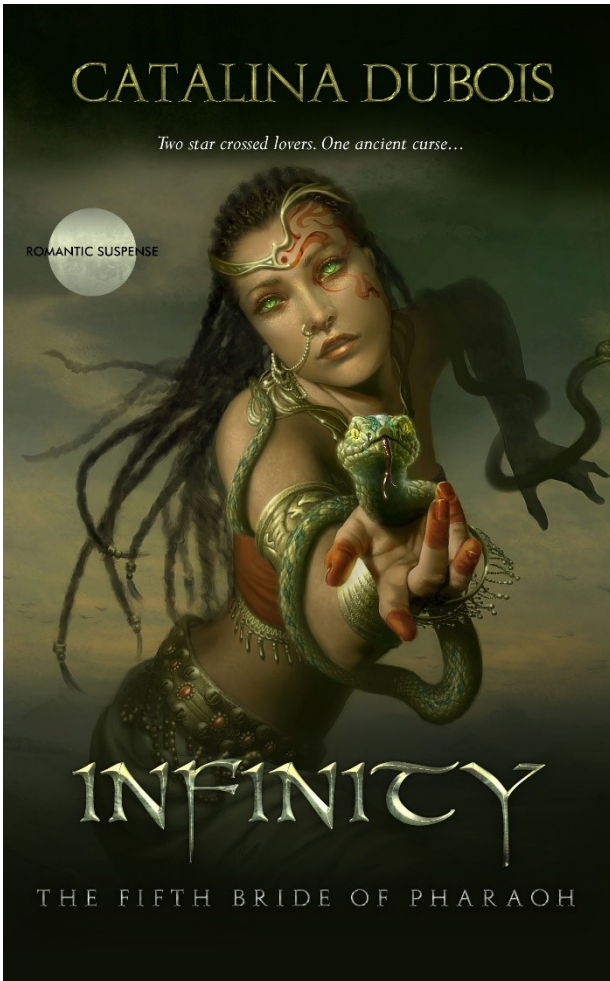
He kissed her with all the love in his heart and a passion that would burn for all of infinity.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Catalina DuBois was first published at the age of eleven and has loved writing historical thrillers ever since. She resides in Roswell, New Mexico with her husband and daughter, where she is writing *Infinity: Quest for the Holy Grail*.

Try this next...



Matthaios is a slave and Sara is the bride of a powerful dictator. Can love unite them even as Pharaoh and all of Egypt threaten to tear them asunder...

PROLOGUE:

THE FINAL PLEA

Ancient Egypt, 1806 B.C.

Matthaios clutched his handkerchief with a shaky hand. He used the cloth to dab at the spot of blood at the corner of his mouth. He sucked in sharply through his teeth as pain seared across his face. A raw taste flooded his mouth and Matthaios spat out a bit of blood on the floor of his grimy prison cell.

In his many years as Pharaoh's faithful servant, Matthaios had experienced many of the ruler's personalities. He'd seen bratty Pharaoh, noble Pharaoh, fearless warrior Pharaoh, but never had Matthaios experienced the monster who'd captured and imprisoned him.

The emperor's eyes bore a perilous mixture of fury and disbelief as his fist collided with Matthaios's jaw in one swift punch. Pharaoh ordered the arrest of the servant who'd betrayed him. Of all the women in the world, why did Matthaios have to go for that one?

Matthaios glanced around the torchlit dungeon. The fires glowed against the inky night that poured in through barred

windows. He went back to dabbing his tender and busted lip until realizing that his efforts were for naught. He threw the bloodstained rag across the cell. What was the point of fixing his lip just for his neck to be severed at dawn?

Pharaoh strode into the dungeon with a retinue of henchman. The noisy prison suddenly quieted, as if falling under an enchantment. Pharaoh had not come into Matthaios's field of view, but the slave boy knew every time his ruler was near. The air would still around Matthaios as if the world was rearranging itself to accommodate Pharaoh. Matthaios preemptively took a knee, and as suspected, Pharaoh appeared.

"Your majesty," Matthaios respectfully greeted the emperor, who had vowed to claim his head.

Pharaoh snapped his fingers and a guard ran forward with a chair. Pharaoh addressed his soldiers, "leave me with the traitor."

"Yes, Pharaoh," the guards replied in unison and filed out of the prison.

Pharaoh took a seat before the bars of Matthaios's prison cell. Matthaios dropped from his knee to sit flat on the floor, careful to remain lower than his sovereign, as was the custom.

Matthaios asked cautiously, "did you read my plea to spare Sara?"

"Yes, and I have denied it."

Matthaios's heart sank into his stomach and tears welled up in his eyes. "You don't have to kill her. You are the all-powerful Pharaoh of Egypt. Squash any rumors of her running away with me and carry on with your life together."

"To what end?" Pharaoh shook his head. "I cannot have a wife who might be putting any man's bastards upon my throne. If I can't trust her to remain loyal to me, how can I trust her to remain loyal to Egypt? Do you have the faintest clue of the bind

you have put me in?”

“I know, my lord,” Matthaios spoke humbly with a tone of defeat.

“I’m going to have to kill you,” Pharaoh spoke without emotion as if taking a life was as simple as deciding how to dress in the morning.

“I know, my lord.”

“You have left me no choice.”

“I know, my lord.”

“THEN WHY!” Pharaoh shouted in a voice that could quake heaven and earth.

Matthaios’s eyes lowered in shame. “You demand to know how I could betray my emperor, why I would sentence myself to death over a woman. I would tell you if I had an answer. All I know is from the moment I met her I suddenly became aware of my blood being pulled in and out of my heart, the way the moon directs the tide. I tried to catch my breath, but the more I inhaled, the more I felt consumed...”

CHAPTER 1:

IMPENDING DOOM

Months ago...

Sara, princess of Nubia, gawked at the shadow on a sundial. She urgently informed her friend, “we must be going. It’s getting late.”

“I implore you, just one more vendor,” cried the spirited Princess Sobek, sister of the Egyptian pharaoh.

“Just one more,” Sara agreed, not that she had much of a choice.

Sobek would have never let it rest. She towed Sara through the sea of elated faces. This friend of Sara’s was nothing like what she’d expected of a princess of Egypt. Sobek had only been in Nubia one night when she convinced Sara they should disguise themselves as commoners, sneak out of the palace, and attend a festival in the lower village.

The sun made its glorious descent below the horizon, bathing the joyous festival in magnificent twilight. There were magic shows, puppeteers, acrobats, and jugglers. Vendors and merchants filled the streets, as far as the eye could see. They sold food, spices, livestock, and fabrics. The scent of sweet

desserts and salty meats wafted throughout the kingdom. You could practically taste the air.

Some structures in Nubia were humble. Others soared clear to the heavens, with mighty pillars, and statues of the gods. All were swarming with elated figures, drunk on beer, love, and happiness.

This festival was held to celebrate Wepet Renpet, also known as the opening of the year, marked by the Nile's annual flood. This Egyptian New Year also served as an assembly period for the Counsel of African Kings. Pharaoh Amenemhat, a former rival of Nubia, would be in attendance this year. Nubia offered a warm welcome to Egypt, a symbol of peace between two nations.

"Why are you in such a rush to leave," Sobek questioned as she moved her body to the beat of African drums. "This festival is incredible!"

"Believe me, you will want to be gone when the Wepet Renpet bells sound. The closest boy in your vicinity is going to kiss you, whether you know him or not!"

Sobek laughed at Sara's paranoia. "I forgot... I will fall down and die if a man kisses me. I should miss the best celebration ever because I'm at risk of a boy kissing me. Egyptian lands are at risk of war, famine, disease, and drought but the worst plague of all is a boy's kiss."

Sara had a good laugh at herself. "When you put it that way, I sound prudish and fearful."

"You are."

"You're not even a little concerned? We have our reputations to protect."

"No one will recognize us, and bystanders will be too occupied with kisses of their own to notice with whom we are engaged."

Princess Sara had skin of smooth mahogany, as was common for a Nubian. Princess Sobek was tanned, like the golden sands of Egypt. Both girls possessed raven hair and eyes of sparkling obsidian. Their beauty earned them lusty gazes as they explored the celebration.

Sara was surprised and a little unnerved at how differently men perceived her when they were unaware of her title. Sobek, on the other hand, soaked up the attention with the consistency of a sponge, a sign that this was not the first time she'd pulled a charade like this.

It was urgent for Sara to leave soon. Her uncle, Myron, King of Nubia, was loaning their castle to every eligible prince of Africa. Sara knew that she should be home entertaining; one of these royals would likely be her future husband, but Sobek was a terrible influence.

"Isn't this the most amazing thing you've ever smelled?" Sara said as she held an exotic spice up to Sobek's nose.

"It is remarkable. What is it called?" Sobek asked with a grin.

The merchant spoke up from behind his stand, "this is a spice known as cinnamon, my lady. The one next to it is called nutmeg."

"I'll take them both," Sara said as the enchanting festival whirled around them.

If nothing else, Sobek knew how to have fun and Gods only knew how much Sara needed that in her life.

Sara closed her eyes and turned her face to the moonlight, breathing in the spicy air. She enjoyed the sensation of a warm breeze as it fluttered the colorful silks of her gown. Sara's eyes drifted open as the shopkeeper placed the bag in her hand.

"Thank you," Sara said politely and he told her the same.

"Alright we've gone to our last stand," Sara reminded

Sobek. "It's time to leave. I'm hosting a party."

"I haven't even purchased fabrics."

"Sobek!" Sara shouted with glee as her mischievous friend towed her throughout the celebration.



The royalty of Egypt traveled by camel and chariot, but their hapless slaves were forced to make the entire journey on foot. Pharaoh's servants were just outside of Nubia. The exhausted slaves took a much-needed respite on the side of the road, while guards doled out soup and beer. Luxuries like beef and wine were reserved for the wealthy.

Matthaios aimlessly picked his food. He kept lifting a spoonful of soup and allowing it to fall back into the bowl in a series of splats. He had no appetite. All he felt was a pull like magnetism calling his soul away from this place, and the harsh iron shackles keeping his body from following his spirit.

He could envision the city ahead, alive with festivity, funny men, and beautiful women. He could taste the tanginess of the wine, the sweetness, and warmth of a freshly baked pie.

The wind shifted and blew dirt into the open wounds on his feet. It stung bitterly. The leather straps of his sandals had chafed his feet bloody. Heavy manacles had scoured his wrists raw.

Despite these harsh conditions, Matthaios counted his blessings. *I'm more fortunate than those who labor in the sun building the pyramids of Egypt. Builder slaves fall victim to the lash, malnutrition, treacherous falls, and the desert sun. They don't live very long. I'll be in Nubia shortly, treated to a bath, and serving the brides of Pharaoh.*



The echo of persistent clanging caused Sara to spin abruptly. She collided with a man, much fairer skinned than her. His shackled arms launched out to catch her. Once steady, her eyes trailed up to his face, which bore a half-smirk of a smile. It was the most beautiful smile she'd ever seen.

There was beer pouring from the rooftops like rain. Drunkards were gallivanting. Fistfights were springing up like daisies. The cover of night had transformed a lighthearted festival into chaos, but as Sara gazed into the face of this peculiar slave all seemed perfect.

He removed his rough sword calloused hands from the smooth black skin of her shoulders. He bent to retrieve her sandal. She felt herself exhale as he held her ankle to slip on her shoe.

He rose with her fallen bag of spices. "My lady."

"Thank you," she spoke, nearly breathless as he passed her the bag.

"No, thank you," he insisted. His eyes traced the curves of her face as if trying to brand her image upon his mind.

"For what may I ask?"

"For being the most amazing thing I'll ever get to touch."

"You are entirely too bold, slave," her tone was reprimanding but her smile gave her away.

"Apologies, my lady."

His full glorious smile came out and Sara could feel her stomach flipflop. Her life had been spinning out of control, but in this one perfect moment, all was calm. For the first time in her existence, she knew she was in just the right place at just the

right time.

A thunderous BING, BING, BING, echoed throughout the celebration. The bells were ringing. Tradition demanded a kiss between them.

His smoothness went out the window and he rambled awkwardly, “we don’t have to... I wasn’t expecting...” Matthaios drew in a deep breath and gathered his wits. “Sorry, I get flustered when I’m nervous.”

“Ancient lovers believed a kiss would literally unite their souls because the spirit was said to be carried in one’s breath.” Sara took a deep breath to calm herself. “Sorry, I spout trivia when I’m nervous.”

They chuckled at the absurdity of it all.

Matthaios shook his head with amusement. *What’s one kiss between strangers in the night? The awkward conversation we’re carrying on has lasted longer than the kiss would have.*

Sara just stood there with a bashful smirk. *It’s one kiss of my own volition before being forced into a lifetime of mandatory embraces. I doubt I’ll know my future husband any better than I know this slave.*

Matthaios convinced that no beautiful woman would kiss a man in shackles, politely nodded, “Goodnight, my lady.”

“Goodnight.” Her hope was snuffed out like a suddenly extinguished candle.

They had bid farewell and yet no one moved. They stood in silence, waiting for the other person to walk away. Gazing into his eyes was like falling into the stars, causing Sara to feel weightless and disoriented.

Matthaios looked deeply into her eyes, searching for signs of rejection. When he found that her desire mirrored his own he leaned forward and kissed her softly, a chaste press of his lips to hers, with an answering push of hers to his. This simple

embrace was like being hit by a title wave. It bore the power of an earthquake and the heat of a volcano. They parted with a slow exhale.

Life carried on around them, but they were trapped in a different moment than the other people in the crowded festival.

Matthaios was violently struck in the face with the heavy handle of a whip, a painful and abrupt end to a wonderful encounter. Sara shrieked in horror.

“I apologize, my lady,” spoke a slave driver with a patch over one eye, a sadistic tyrant known as Osiris. “These slaves are savages. He asked that we stop for a moment, so he may smell the pies, and he rewards my leniency by harassing a young woman.”

“This was my fault,” Sara spoke hurriedly. Her hands were shaking and her mind was flustered. “I bumped into him. He merely caught me from falling and being trampled by drunkards... and then the bells went off. The servant was only trying to help.”

Sara made certain to pull her hood forward and cast her face in shadow when she addressed the slave driver.

She could not believe it when Matthaios mouthed the words, “I’m alright.”

He was the one who’d been abused and still he was comforting her. She’d never known a man who would place her needs above his own. Now the one time she met a fellow of such caliber they lived in parallel universes. When his silent words failed to wipe the concern from her face a subtle nod and wink did the trick.

“Very well,” Osiris nodded. “Sorry for the inconvenience, my lady.”

Osiris signaled his guards and they led the single file of slaves away.

Sara stood mesmerized, her mouth slightly parted in a smile. She silently urged Matthaios. *Look back... glance back just once so I can recall your likeness in my dreams.* And just as if he'd done the impossible and heard her silent plea, he glanced over his shoulder with a smile.



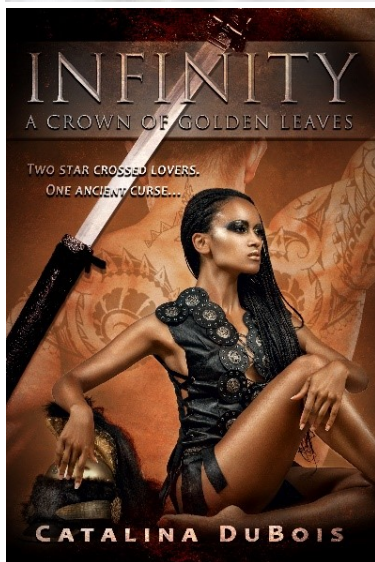
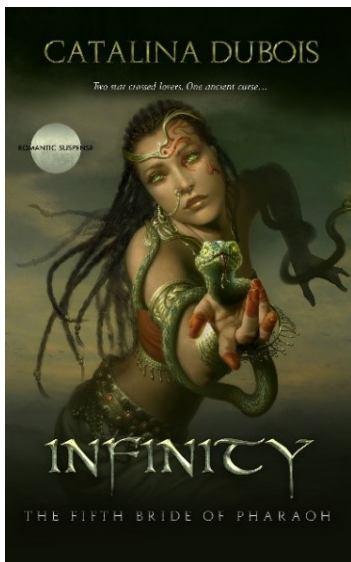
Matthaios was drawn from his beautiful memory by the sound of a metal plate skidding across the floor of his prison cell. The joyous festival music faded into the tortured cries of sick and dying prisoners. Beauty and décor transformed to dreary gray walls and iron bars. Sara's delightful scent was replaced by the foul odor of urine and rat droppings.

He stared at the food with disgust. *It's stewed rat or some other diseased rodent with a loaf of moldy bread.* Knowing the food might give him more sickness than strength, Matthaios ignored his growling belly and pushed the plate aside. *Perhaps I should have eaten it, might have given me a better death than decapitation by the sword of an executioner.*

The furious Pharaoh, sitting just beyond the bars growled with contempt, "what happened next?"

Matthaios confessed, "I walked away on that wonderful night, completely unaware that I had started down a path from which there was no return and the impending doom that would follow. All I knew was from the moment I kissed her half of my heart sang and the other half recognized that I would never be the same again..."

Two star crossed lovers. One ancient curse...



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