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THE SILVER WOLF

By

Alice Borchardt

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TO

MY BELOVED HUSBAND

CLIFFORD BORCHARDT

"See those fireflies dancing?

That's what I want to do:

dance in the moonlight,

sing to the stars,

jump straight up at the moon."

I did with you.

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Chapter One



THE SUN WAS GOING DOWN. THE FIERY CIRCLE shone past the acanthus-crowned columns of a ruined temple. They cut the incandescent ball into slices of red radiance. *Almost night*, the girl thought, then shivered in the chill autumn air blowing through the unglazed casement.

The window was barred—heavily barred. One set running horizontally, the other vertically. The bars were bolted into the stone walls of the tiny room.

She knew she could close the window. Reach out through the bars. Pull the heavy shutters shut, and seal them with the iron bolt. But she pushed the idea out of her mind with a sort of blind obstinacy. The sight

of freedom, even an unattainable freedom, was too sweet to give up.

Not yet, she told herself, *only a little longer. Not yet* .

The air that raised gooseflesh on her arms was sweet to her nostrils. Oh no, more than sweet. A speaking thing. Each vagrant increase in flow, each slight change in direction, each passing movement sent images to the deepest part of her mind.

Somewhere a patch of thyme bloomed. The tiny blue flowers let down their fragrance into the chill evening air. This delicate scent was mixed with the heavy smell of wet marble and granite. These and many others stood out against the tapestry of odors given off by the flowers and greenery that cloaked the ruined palaces and temples of the ancient imperium.

The vast restless spirit of this, the greatest of all empires, seemed at last brought to rest at the soft hand of the great green mother herself.

Regeane didn't know what she'd expected of the once-proud mistress of the world when she'd come to Rome . Certainly not what she found.

The inhabitants, descendants of a race of conquerors, lived like rats squabbling and polluting the ruins of an abandoned palace. Oblivious to the evidence of grandeur all around them, they fought viciously among themselves for what wealth remained. Indeed, little was left of the once-vast river of gold that flowed into the eternal city. The gold that could be found gilded the palms of papal officials and the altars of the many churches.

Regeane's mother, desperate to save—as she saw it—her daughter's soul, pawned what few jewels she had left. The money was sufficient to pay the bribes necessary to obtain a papal audience and finance the equally expensive papal blessing.

Regeane had gone into the awesome presence, her body drenched in a sweat of terror. If her ailing mother said the wrong thing to the church's leading prelate, she might find herself being burned or stoned as a witch. But as she approached the supreme pontiff, she realized just how foolish her fears had been.

The man before her was a ruin. Ready to be taken by age and sorrow. She doubted if he understood much of anything said to him. Weeping, her mother implored the intercession of God's chief minister on earth with the Almighty. As the ever-dutiful Regeane knelt, kissed the silken slipper, and felt the withered hands pressed against her hair she caught a whiff of a scent other than the thick smell of incense and Greek perfume that pervaded the room: the musty, dry smell of aging flesh and human decay.

God, it was powerful. *He is ready to die* , she thought. *He will go speak on Mother's behalf to God in person very soon* . She knew this blessing, as all other blessings her mother, Gisela, had traveled so far and squandered so much of her wealth to gain, would do no good.

This was the end. Regeane knew it. She was frightened. If the pope himself could not lift this strange gesa from her and let her live as a woman, to what earthly power could she turn? More to the point, to what power could her mother turn?

Gisela was fading as quickly as the only-too-human man on the chair of Peter. Though a comparatively young woman, she was worn down by the string of fruitless journeys she had taken with Regeane and by some secret sorrow that seemed to fill her mind and heart with a bottomless wellspring of grief.

Regeane lied. Her mother believed. And for the first time in many years, Regeane felt the tiny woman who had traveled so far and borne so many burdens was at peace. Regeane's lie carried Gisela through till the end.

Three days after the papal audience she had gone to awaken her mother and found Gisela would never wake again. Not in this world.

Regeane was alone.

She watched with greedy eyes as the sun became a half circle, faded into a glow silhouetting the tall cypresses of the Appian Way, followed by the deep blue autumn twilight. Then, and only then, did she turn from the window and wrap herself in an old woolen mantle and return to her pallet bed. With the exception of the low bed and a small, covered, brown terra-cotta pot in the corner, the room was bare.

Regeane sat on her bed, her shoulders against the stone wall, her legs dangling, head thrown back, eyes closed. She waited silently for moonrise. The silver disc would be lifting itself above the seven hills now. Soon, very soon, its journey across the sky would bring it to her window where it would throw a pool of silver light on the floor. Ignoring the crosshatched black lines of bars, she could drink at that pool. Allowed once more to breathe, if not to glory, in the air of freedom.

The door to the outer room slammed shut. *Damnation*. The girl on the bed scoured her mind for oaths. *No... curses*. Young girl that she was, she was never allowed to speak them, but she could think the words. And she often did. Oh, how she did when those two were present. There were worse things than loneliness. Overall, Regeane felt she preferred silence and emptiness to the presence of either her Uncle Gundabald or Hugo, his son.

"I pissed blood again this morning," Hugo whined. "Are all the whores in this city diseased?"

Gundabald laughed uproariously. "All the ones you pick up seem to be. It's as I told you. Pay a little extra. Get yourself something young and clean. Or at least young, so all the itching and burning a few days later are worth it. That last you bought was so old, she had to ply her trade by starlight. What you save in cunt rent goes out in medicines for crotch rot."

"True enough," Hugo said irritably. "You always seem to do better."

Gundabald sighed. "I'm sick of trying to instruct you. Next time, retain at least a modicum of sobriety and get a look at her in a good light."

"Christ, it's cold in here," Hugo said angrily. A second later Regeane heard him shouting down the stairs for the landlord to bring a brazier to warm the room.

"It's no use, my boy," Gundabald told him. "She's left the window open again."

"I can't see how you stand it," Hugo grumbled. "She makes my skin crawl."

Gundabald laughed again. "There's nothing to worry about. Those planks are an inch thick. She can't get out."

"Has she ever... gotten out, I mean?" Hugo asked with fear in his voice.

"Oh, once or twice, I believe, when she was younger. Much younger. Before I took matters in hand."

Gisela was too soft. That sister of mine was a fine woman—she always did as she was told—but weak, my boy, weak. Consider the way she wept over that first husband of hers when the marriage was so abruptly... terminated."

"She divorced him?" Hugo asked.

"Ah, yes," Gundabald sounded uneasy. "To be sure, she divorced him because we told her to. She had no choice in the matter. Even then, everyone could see Charles' mother was becoming a power at court. There were many well-endowed suitors for Gisela's hand. The second was a much better marriage and made us all wealthy."

"Now all that's gone," Hugo said bitterly. "Between you and Gisela, if our coffers have a miserable copper in them we're lucky. You wanted to rub shoulders with all the great magnates of the Frankish realm. To do that, you found out your shoulders had to be covered with velvet and brocade. And, oh yes, they wanted to be feasted. Worse than a horde of vultures, they swarmed over your household devouring everything in sight. And like vultures when the carcass was picked clean, they departed in a cloud of stink and were never seen again."

"Whatever they missed, Gisela laid hands on, squandering it on relics, shrines, blessings, and pilgrimages, trying to lift the curse from that wretched brat of hers. You told me to get myself something younger. I've a good mind to pay that cousin of mine a visit... by day of course and—" Hugo screamed. "Father, you're hurting me!"

Gundabald's reply was a snarl of fury. "You so much as touch that girl and I'll save us both a lot of trouble and expense. I'll slice off your prick and balls. You'll be the smoothest eunuch between here and Constantinople. I swear it. She's the one and only asset we have left and she—*must*—marry. Hear me!"

Hugo howled again. "Yes, yes, yes. You're breaking my arm. Oh, God. Stop!"

Gundabald must have released him because Hugo's shouting ceased. When he did speak, he sniveled, "Who would marry that... thing?"

Gundabald laughed. "I can name a dozen right now, who would kill to marry her. The most royal blood of Franca flows through her veins. Her father and mother both were cousins of the great king himself."

"And those same ones who'd kill to marry her will run a sword through both you and the girl the moment they find out what she is."

"I cannot think how I got such a son as you as the fruit of my loins," Gundabald snarled. "But then your mother was a brainless little twit. Perhaps you take after her."

Despite the sadistic nastiness of Gundabald's voice, Hugo didn't rise to the bait. Most of the people around Gundabald quickly learned to fear him. Hugo was no exception.

"You liked the way we lived well enough when we were in funds. Vultures, eh! That's the pot calling the kettle black. You fucked all night, fed all day, and drank with the best of them. Now, you leave things you don't understand to your elders and betters. Shut up! And send for some food and wine—a lot of wine. I want my supper, and I want to forget what's behind that door in the next room."

"It was a mistake to bring her here," Hugo said. His voice was high and nervous. "She's worse than

ever."

"Christ Jesus! God!" Gundabald roared. "Even a dumb animal has the sense to do what it's told. Dolt with the brains of a cobblestone! Shut up and at least get the wine. My God! I'm dying of thirst."

Marry, she thought listlessly. How could she marry? She didn't believe even a snake like Gundabald would connive at something so dangerous. Or succeed if he tried. Her mother still had a little land left in Franca, a few rundown villas. They generated only just enough money to feed and clothe the three of them. But nothing she was heir to would be enough to attract the attention of any of the great magnates of the Frankish realm.

As for her relationship to Charles—a king beginning already to be called the great—it was a rather distant connection to his mother. The dear lady, Bertrada, had never even for one moment acknowledged Regeane's existence. In fact, one of the things that endeared Bertrada to King Pepin the Short was that she was followed by a whole tribe of relations. They approached the court ready to swing their swords for church and king, not to mention their odd wagonload of loot that somehow didn't manage to fall into the king's treasury.

Regeane was very much lost in the crowd. She had nothing to offer. She was poor, a woman, and not beautiful. She didn't think there would be many takers for her hand in marriage. Yet if Gundabald could find some poor mope to swindle, she had no doubt he would auction her off without the slightest compunction and then leave her to her fate. She just didn't think he would find anyone. Besides, Gundabald had, as they said, a hot throat and a cold prick. He wanted to cool the one and heat the other as frequently as possible. To indulge himself he needed what little money came in from her estates. He would certainly sell her, but not cheaply. It remained to be seen if he could get his price. At the moment, she couldn't bring herself to care much one way or the other.

When the papal blessing proved fruitless, the thread of hope that had drawn her across the Alps and sustained her in the difficult journey to Rome ... failed.

Gisela's death had been the final blow. She had been Regeane's only protection against a world that would destroy her in an instant if it so much as guessed her secret—and against the worst excesses of Gundabald's greed. She had been Regeane's only confidante and companion. Regeane had no other friends, no other loves. She was now abandoned and utterly alone.

Dry-eyed, Regeane followed her mother's body to the grave. She was overcome by a despair so black, it seemed to turn that bright day into bitter night.

Now a faint silver shadow appeared against the blackness of the floor.

There is nothing left but moonlight, Regeane thought. *Drink it, drown in it. She will never reproach me. I will never see her tears again or suffer because of them. Whatever may become of me, I am alone.*

She stood, stripped off her dress and shift, and turned toward the silver haze.

The gust from the window was icy, but pleasure wouldn't exist without the sharp bite of pain. Even the brief flash of orgasm is too intense to be absolutely pleasurable. The cold caress was seduction, the quick cruel touch that precedes pleasure.

Regeane went forward boldly, knowing that in a moment she would be warm. Naked, she stepped into

the silver haze.

The wolf stood there.

Regeane was, as wolves go, a large wolf. She had the same weight as the girl, over a hundred pounds. She was much stronger than in her human state—lean, quick, and powerful. Her coat was smooth and thick. The pelt glowed silver as it caught the moonlight on its long guard hairs.

The wolf's heart overflowed with joy and gratitude. Regeane would never have admitted it in her human state, but she loved the wolf and, papal blessing or not, she would never let the wolf go.

From the bottom of her heart, she reveled in the change. Sometimes, while in her human state, she wondered who was wiser, she or the wolf. The wolf knew. Growing more beautiful and stronger year after year, the wolf waited for Regeane to be ready to receive her teaching and understand it.

The silver wolf lifted herself on her hind legs and, placing her forepaws on the window sill, peered out. She saw not just with eyes as these maimed humans did, but with sensitive ears and nose.

The world humans saw was like a fresco—dimensionless as a picture painted on a wall. To be believed in by the wolf, a thing had to have not only image, but smell, texture, and taste.

Ah God... how beautiful. The world was filled with wonder.

The rain must have come in the evening. The wolf could smell the damp, black earth under the green verdure as well as mud churned up by horses' hooves in a nearby lane.

The woman hadn't noticed it. She'd spent the day in grief-stricken reverie. For this she earned a brief flash of contempt from the wolf. But the wolf was too much a creature of the present to dwell on what was past. She was grateful for each moment. And this was a fine one.

Usually in Rome, the scent of man overpowered everything else. That effluvia of stale perspiration, raw sewage floating in the Tiber, the stench of human excrement which, even by comparison to that of other animals, is utterly vile. All these filled the air and pressed in around her. Overlaying them were the musty omnipresent evidence of human dwellings: stale wood-smoke, damp timber, and stone.

But not tonight. The sharp wind blew from the open fields beyond the city, redolent of dry grass and the sweetness of wild herbs growing on the hillsides near the sea.

Sometimes the fragrant breath from the Campagna carried the clean barnyard smells of pig and cattle, and faintly, the enticing musk of deer.

The night below was alive with movement. The cats that made their homes among the ruins sang their ancient songs of anger and passion among forgotten monuments. Here and there the slinking shape of a stray dog met her eye; occasionally, even furtive human movement. Thieves and footpads haunted the district, ready to prey on the unwary.

Her ears pricked forward and netted what her eyes could not see—the suave thump of a barn owl's wings in flight, the high, thin cries of bats swooping, darting, foraging for insects in the chill night air.

The rush and whisper of the hunters and the hunted, silent until the end. The agonized death cry of a bird, taken in sleep on the nest by a marauding cat, rent the air. The chopped-off shriek of a rabbit dying in the



talons of an owl followed.

Those and many others were woven together by her wolf senses into a rich fabric that was unending variety and everlasting delight.

The silver wolf dropped her forepaws to the floor with a soft, nearly inaudible cry of longing. Then her lips drew back from her teeth in a snarl at the sound of voices in the other room.

Hugo and Gundabald were eating. The wolf's belly rumbled with hunger at the smell of roast meat. She was hungry and thirsty, longing for clean water and food.

The woman warned her night side to rein in her desires. She would get nothing.

The wolf replied. They were both gone—the woman from her prison, the wolf from her cage. The wolf stood beside a clear mountain lake. The full moon glowed silver in the water. All around the lake, black trees were silhouetted against mountains glittering white with unending snow.

The memory faded. The wolf and woman found themselves staring at the locked door.

The wolf and woman both understood imprisonment. Regeane had spent most of her life behind locked doors. She'd long ago learned the punishing futility of assaults on oak and iron. She ignored what she couldn't change and bided her time.

They were speaking of her.

"Did you hear that?" Hugo asked fearfully. Hugo's ears were better than Gundabald's. He must have heard her soft cry of protest.

"No," Gundabald mumbled through a mouthful of food. "I didn't and you didn't either. You only imagined you did. She seldom makes any noise. That's one thing we can be grateful for. At least she doesn't spend her nights howling as a real wolf would."

"We shouldn't have brought her here," Hugo moaned.

"Must you start that again?" Gundabald sighed wearily.

"It's true," Hugo replied with drunken insistence. "The founders of this city were suckled at the tits of a mother wolf. Once they called themselves sons of the wolf. Ever since I found out about her I've often thought of that story. A real wolf couldn't raise human children, but a creature like her..."

Gundabald laughed raucously. "A fairy tale made up by some strumpet to explain a clutch of bastard brats. She wouldn't be the first or won't be the last to spin a wild story to cover her own... debauchery."

"You won't listen to anything," Hugo said petulantly. "She's gotten worse since we came here. Even while her own mother was dying she..."

The silver wolf's lips drew back. Her teeth gleamed in the moonlight like ivory knives. Even in the wolf's heart, Hugo's words rankled.

Pointless the smoldering anger. Pointless the brief, sad rebellion. The door stood between her and her tormentors. The barred window between the magnificent creature and freedom.

She began to pace as any caged beast will, obeying the wordless command: Stay strong. Stay healthy. Stay alert. Fear not, your time will come.

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## Chapter Two



MAENIEL WAS A WORRIER. TODAY HE HAD A LOT OF worries as he stood on the half-ruined gallery once intended for the delight of a Roman governor.

He envied the man, who had probably stood here once, taking the air and complacently surveying his broad domains. Today, among other things, Maeniel worried about the hay. It didn't seem to be ripening as fast as it should. And they needed that hay to carry them through the long, cold winter. Still, he sighed; the man had been too powerful to worry about hay. He'd probably had other concerns, possibly even more troubling than Maeniel's. Say, for instance, politics inRome .

"Politics inRome ," he muttered.

Gavin, the captain of his guard, sat dozing on a bench, his back against a mural of Perseus slaying Medusa. The gorgon's head in the hero's hand glared at him. This didn't worry Gavin. Nothing worried Gavin. He opened one eye and repeated, "What about politics inRome ?"

"I was just thinking that even though the Roman governor didn't worry about the hay as I do, he probably worried about politics inRome ."

Gavin opened both eyes. "Let me get this straight. You left off worrying about the hay to worry about what a long-dead Roman worried about?"

"Yes," Maeniel said.

"Thank you for clarifying that." Gavin closed his eyes. "Now if you don't mind, I'll go back to sleep."

"It doesn't seem to be ripening as quickly as usual," Maeniel persisted.

"The hay, or politics inRome ?" Gavin asked.

"The hay." Maeniel bit his lip.

Gavin sighed deeply, opened both eyes, and looked out over the surrounding countryside.

The land lay drowsing in the warm gold of the afternoon sun, a picture of tranquil, bucolic beauty. Three prosperous villages lay scattered along the mountainside surrounded by tilled fields, their deep green just beginning to bear the first tinge of autumn's rich red, brown, and gold.

Higher up against the face of the mountains were scattered flocks of sheep, goats, and cattle, fattening in the high summer pasture. Beyond them, snowcapped peaks floated in delicate ethereal beauty against the

sky.

"The hay," Gavin said, "seems to me to be ripening much as it always has ever since we came here."

"Do you really think so?" Maeniel asked hopefully.

"Yes," Gavin replied, closing his eyes again.

Maeniel shook his head. "Still, I hear from Clotilde that it's going to be a bad winter. She says the fleeces of the sheep have grown twice as thick as is usual and—"

"No," Gavin said firmly. "I won't listen anymore. Every year at this time it's the hay. Then, when that's in, the question will be, is it enough to carry us through the winter? Or should you send to the lowlands to buy more, to ensure the survival of our stock? Then, you will fret yourself about wood. Have we enough? Suppose a really bad storm comes and the snow is too deep for us to venture out to cut more? So we must cut more now, stacking it ever higher and higher until we must sleep in the snow because the wood fills all of the houses."

"In between, you will be venturing out in blizzards to visit every cow, sow, ewe, and nanny goat with a pain. To hold her hoof until she delivers. If one sneezes, you hear it in your sleep and come wake me up to commiserate with you. Hold the lantern up, Gavin. Ply your axe with a will, Gavin. Pull, Gavin. Push, Gavin. Take your men and fall on those brigands, Gavin. I know they are not on my land, but I like it not that they raided so close, Gavin."

"Now it is the worries of deceased Romans, and politics that concern us not at all in our mountains. At first I wondered when Rieulf, old and ill, placed his demesne in your hands. But after the first winter I understood the wisdom of the old man's choice. He definitely knew how to pick the right man for the job."

Maeniel listened meekly to Gavin's tirade. They were old friends. He heard it several times a year when Gavin grew frustrated with him.

"I wish," Gavin wound down, "that you would find something else to worry about besides hay or the sheep, goats, wood, and snowstorms. At least it would be a change for me to listen to." His voice trailed off as he sniffed the air. "Fresh baked bread," he whispered. "I forgot it's Matrona's baking day." His body floated from the bench. He seemed pulled along by the enticing odor, his nose sniffing the air.

Maeniel placed one big hand on Gavin's shoulder and pushed him back down on the bench. "Matrona has a lot of work to do on baking day. She becomes very irritable. Remember the time I had to rescue you? She was trying to push you feet first into one of the ovens. You had both feet braced against the wall on either side of the door. You were screaming at the top of your lungs, and if I hadn't—"

"You didn't have to rescue me," Gavin denied hotly. "It's just that I'm a gentleman and didn't want to hurt her."

"To be sure," Maeniel soothed, "to be sure. Besides you were right. . . I mean about the worry business."

"You're giving it up?" Gavin asked.

"No," Maeniel said. "I have a new one." He handed Gavin a letter.

Gavin gave it a cursory glance; then realizing its importance, he began to read more slowly.

"Not politics in Rome," Maeniel said. "Politics in Franca. The woman comes recommended by Charles, the great Charlemagne himself. I had better marry her."

"I wouldn't," Gavin said handing him back the letter. "I'd tell the great Charles to go fly his hawks or chase Saxons, whatever the hell a king does. Forget marrying. When some royal cousin comes here, lock your gates, sharpen your sword, and wish them Godspeed over the pass into the valley. I'm betting you'll never hear any more about her."

"I can't take that bet," Maeniel said quietly. "The stakes are too high."

"No, they aren't," Gavin insisted. "You're sitting in an impregnable fortress. This rock has never fallen to assault, not even in the time of the Romans."

"And if Charles ever seriously decides to dig me out," Maeniel said flatly, "he can. Why do you think I send Charles' court a hefty sum of silver? Every year a nice present of gold and jewels is sent to the court in time for Christmas. I keep the roads clear of thieves and bandits, don't overcharge the merchants traveling through the pass. In between I keep my fingers crossed. So far he's left me alone."

"But no more. The reckoning has come, and in a form I can't really quarrel with. He's offering me a marriage with a woman of the royal house. I dare not refuse. The letter says she is young, comely, and—"

"The letter," Gavin broke in, "does give every pertinent fact about the lady: her birth, her lineage, yes, every fact, but one. What's wrong with her?"

"What could be wrong with her?" Maeniel asked.

Gavin stared out glumly over the village. "Now who's the optimist? Aside from dire poverty, I can think of a few things. Promiscuity, drunkenness, insanity, dishonesty, stupidity, leprosy, cruelty, and greed. Any and all of the above. In addition, she'll probably turn out to be a humpbacked dwarf with only one tooth remaining in her head and halfwitted in the bargain."

"Sometimes I think it was a mistake for your father to send you to school. It stimulated your imagination no end," Maeniel said.

"I know," Gavin agreed. "I told him that every day until it was a question of what would wear out first—his arm, his belt, or my backside. As it was, you and I both ended up trying to run away to seek our fortune. Well, we found it, and now you must marry this... creature to keep it."

"It's a small sacrifice," Maeniel answered.

"Let's hope," Gavin said.

"If she's a humpbacked dwarf, she may have a pleasant personality. If she's insane, I'll see she's cared for. Drunken, dried out at intervals; promiscuous, persuaded to be discreet. Cruelty and greed can both be restrained. And even leprosy, God help me, can be treated. At this altitude the sick either recover quickly or die."

"That's it," Gavin said. "Look on the bright side. She may not survive the first winter."

"Or she may be as the letter says: young, comely, and amiable. Poverty might be her only real fault."

"No," Gavin said. "If that were the only problem, they'd never be offering her to such as you. A down-at-the-heels Irish mercenary. If it hadn't been for Rieulf, we'd still be earning our bread selling our swords hither and yon. As it was, you did him a service and he began to love you. You were lucky..."

"That's true." Maeniel looked out over the valley again, still somewhat preoccupied by the hay. "What do you think, Gavin? Should we get some of it now and—"

A loud yell erupted from the direction of the kitchen.

Maeniel turned. Gavin was gone. The lure of fresh-baked bread had proved too much for his captain to resist.

Gavin on a horse, sword in hand, might be the terror of every brigand in the mountains, but when he fought Matrona, he invariably lost.

Maeniel decided to go rescue him. Leaving the hay and the future to take care of themselves, he started off in the direction of the commotion in the kitchen.

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### Chapter Three



REGEANE WOKE NAKED ON THE BED THE NEXT morning. The wolf had paced the floor until moonset. Until the two in the next room were deep in sodden slumber and snoring loudly. Then, she climbed into the bed, rested her muzzle on the pillow and slept. She didn't remember turning human. The bed smelled of warm animal, human and otherwise.

Her old, blue dress lay across the foot of the bed. Though she thought it blue, it had been faded by a thousand washings into a muddy gray.

As she stepped into it, she realized the dress, only months ago very loose, was becoming tight across the shoulders and breast. Once, she had been able to wear it only if she held the hem off the floor. Now, it barely covered her ankles.

The dress, when it was new, had broad bands of embroidery at the neck and sleeves. The thread was gold. A thing Hugo and Gundabald scrounged assiduously for among her mother's possessions. One of them had long ago picked out the rich strands.

Outside, the light was bright. *They should feel safe*, she thought.

They must have. The heavy door opened at a touch.

Gundabald was sitting at the table. His eyeballs looked as if they were bleeding. Drool was dried in the stubble of his bristly black beard, but he gobbled the dark bread, whey cheese, and sour wine with a

good appetite.

Hugo knelt on the floor, retching into a chamber pot.

The large round loaf was in the center of the table. Regeane twisted off a big hunk. The bread was thick and smelled of olive oil and onions in the dough. Regeane's strong teeth ripped into it. She had good teeth.

Little was left of the cheese but rind. She ate that along with the bread, biting her fingers twice in the process.

A brown terra-cotta bowl of figs rested next to the bread. She reached for a fig. The flat of Gundabald's knife came down across the back of her hand. It made a slapping sound. It hurt.

She flinched and snatched her hand back. Her eyes met Gundabald's.

He chuckled, spraying crumbs from his mouth.

Her hand was still on the table near the bowl. The fingers were long and tapered finely, so it was not noticeable that the nails were dense, narrowing to blunt points at the tips.

Gundabald hit her again; this time raising a weal on the backs of Regeane's fingers. She didn't flinch or pull away. Gundabald loved hurting people. To show pain only encouraged him.

He glared at the red marks his knife made, then back at Regeane's face. He seemed baffled by her stoicism.

"Eat some more of the bread," he said. "It'll put meat on your bones. You need some."

Hugo had finished vomiting. He was sitting in one of the chairs by the table. His face beaded with sweat. But he managed to turn an appreciative eye toward Regeane. "She's not bad now," he said. "That hair. Those eyes." Then he applied himself to a cup of red wine. The first swallow gagged him. He hawked and spat on the floor, then very quickly gulped a few mouthfuls.

Gundabald eyed him, then Regeane. *She does have her points*, he thought. Her hair was long and dark, almost black at her scalp and neck, shading toward silver and, finally, white at the tips. It never tangled. He had himself seen it rise and fall back into position when the wind blew it too far out of place.

Her eyes were truly beautiful, large, warm, and dark—until they caught the light. Then they flared into gold, as water does in the setting sun.

Aside from that, she wasn't much. Skinny, pale, and colorless. Gundabald favored women who allowed him to get a good grip—those who would squeal, moan, and give him a hard ride. He had a feeling she wouldn't do any of the three. And God help the man who woke in bed with her by moonlight.

Still, she was nearly as helpless as any other woman by day and he needed to take measures to protect her. Charlemagne's star was on the rise, and she was a potentially valuable property.

Hugo gulped more wine, presumably trying to keep his mutinous stomach from reacting to the insult. The wine was of strange substance. It stank. Between swallows of wine, he gnawed on some of the bread. He had less success at eating than Regeane and Gundabald did. Hugo had a few rotten teeth.

Gundabald drew his foot back slowly and carefully. Then slammed his heel into the unsuspecting Hugo's groin.

Hugo didn't scream. Regeane doubted that he could scream. He clutched at the spot between his legs. His eyes rolled back in their sockets until only the whites showed. His chair tipped over backward. His skull hit the wooden floor with an audible crack.

Gundabald stuffed the last of his food into his mouth, sighed, and rose to his feet. He stood over Hugo and turned the gasping man on his side so he wouldn't strangle.

Hugo spewed a fan of vomit on the floor: bread, wine, then fragments of meat and turnips as his violated innards reached for last night's supper.

Regeane rose to her feet in horror, one hand on her breast. She knew they were a violent pair, but this exceeded the usual measure of savagery.

Gundabald snorted in derision at the fallen Hugo, then dropped a few silver coins in front of him. "Get her a maid," he said.

Hugo made a gurgling sound that somehow seemed to indicate puzzlement.

"Hire a maid," Gundabald said in a louder voice. "Get your cousin Regeane a maid."

An old woman came into the room. She was small, bent, and twisted with the disease Regeane had observed lingered among the narrow dark streets of cities. Her face was pockmarked. She had a bent nose and a cauliflower ear. Gray hair straggled down from under her veil.

She cursed Hugo for making a vile mess on the floor. She also cursed Gundabald, apparently for the crime of existing. She ignored Regeane. She spoke the rough argot of the Roman streets, a language Regeane found obscene, fascinating, expressive and, at times, almost beautiful, but definitely not Latin any longer.

Gundabald didn't understand her, but he got the message. "What are you yammering about, you old hag?" he roared.

To Regeane's surprise, the woman's speech slowed. She spat out a very imaginative description of some of Gundabald's probable ancestors.

He took a step toward the tiny woman, his fist raised.

In an eye blink, a dagger appeared in her hand. The blade was black and pitted with rust, but the edges were honed fine and glittered wickedly.

Gundabald stepped back quickly. "Everyone's in bad humor today," he grumbled. Glancing down at the fallen Hugo, he dropped a few more pieces of silver beside him. "Are you listening?" he shouted.

Hugo nodded vigorously. He was in no position to defend himself against his father's wrath.

"You will hire a maid for Regeane. You may rape the maid if she will let you. You may not touch your cousin. You may not put your hand under her skirt or on her leg. If you lay one finger on her, I will cut



that finger off. Show any further signs of 'affection' for your cousin, and I'll put you out of action painfully and permanently. Understood?"

Hugo nodded vigorously again.

Gundabald wrapped a ratty velvet mantle around himself and strode toward the door.

The old woman was mopping the floor. As he passed, Gundabald with deliberate malice drove the toe of his boot into the side of the bucket. Dirty water flew everywhere.

The old woman's knife appeared again. She described a sexual perversion Regeane didn't know existed and attributed it to Gundabald. He laughed and left, slamming the door behind him.

Hugo began moaning and crying for help. Regeane ignored him and sat down.

The old woman glanced at her, then left. In a few moments, she returned with a sausage and gave it to the girl. The wolf visited Regeane briefly when she bit into the sausage, but even the beast's hyperacute senses couldn't identify what type of meat filled the thing. For all she could tell, it might have been a previous visitor to the lodging house—one who attempted to leave without paying his bill. Thyme, fennel, and garlic overpowered all other odors, but she was ravenous. She wrapped the malodorous thing in bread and gobbled it. When she was finished, she felt better. The old woman continued to clean with surprising efficiency.

Hugo pulled himself up from the floor and sat on the chair, holding his head in his hands. Regeane was finishing the last piece of bread. He dropped his hands, glared at her and said, "Bitch! You've eaten everything."

Regeane's chin lifted. The wolf paced slowly out of darkness, head lowered, lips wrinkled back from her teeth in a smile of killing rage. She, not Regeane, met Hugo's eyes. He bore her stare for a few seconds, then turned away.

Between one thing and another, Gundabald had dropped a good bit of silver on him. He gathered it up quickly from his clothing and the floor. Then he rose and, giving the old woman a wide berth, was gone.

The old woman muttered several obscenities at the closing door, then chuckled, saying something else in the local dialect.

"Don't do that," Regeane said. "I speak the Roman—" She broke off, not knowing what to call the local idiom.

The old woman chuckled. "I don't care what you know. He fears you. I can't say why, but he does. The old devil needn't worry. The little puddle of puke wouldn't dare lay a hand on you."

"Gundabald likes hitting people," Regeane said dully.

The old woman nodded assent as if this were a given. "Best hope, he tries it again with me. I'll slice off the hand that touches me."

"Do you have any water?" Regeane asked hesitantly. "I'm so thirsty and the wine..."

"Is hog piss." The woman finished the sentence for her. She dropped the mop with a clatter and



shambled out. She returned a few minutes later with a large brown earthenware cup. "Most often," she said, "I would say don't touch the water in Rome. Even the lowest grade of wine sold at the tavernas is safer. But last night torrents of rain fell. They flushed and cleansed the cistern."

When Regeane's lips touched the water, she and the wolf drank. It was cold with a faint undertaste of lime plaster and smelled of the winter sky: chilly gray, hung with rain or mist filling the hollows among the hills before sunrise, bearing an icy dew thick enough to drench the garments of early risers on winter mornings. Somewhere on a hilltop, long grass swirled, danced, and bowed to the storm winds while above transparent gray clouds fled across the sun.

When the cup was empty, Regeane closed her eyes. She and the wolf communed in the darkness of her soul. The wolf snarled. She was ready to tell Regeane how much she hated Hugo, Gundabald, and the life she was leading. She was ready to fight back, escape the trap she was in. Better death than the world they inhabited.

Regeane felt, for the first time by day, the faint dislocation brought by the wolf as she approached by moonlight. The woman jerked back in terror. She feared the consequences of rebellion. She didn't want to know how much she hated Gundabald, how deeply she feared him. Vile as her family was, she clung to them. They were better than the alternative.

The punishments visited on witches sickened and horrified her. Her mother had whispered into Regeane's ears tales of the last agonies of those women doomed for practicing unnatural arts. Naked in a barrel studded with nails, the barrel rolled until the screams stopped. Fire and the stake; sewn into a sack with a rat, a dog, and a snake and thrown into the river. Punishments worse than those designed by fiends from hell to torture the damned were devised by men of God to confront what they saw as evil.

"No, no," Regeane said to the wolf. "I'm too afraid. I can't. Go away. Please, please go away."

The wolf gazed at Regeane solemnly, then she made a soft sound of regret and vanished into the darkness.

"What's wrong?" the old woman asked. "Are you sick?"

"No," Regeane said. "Only tired. Thank you," she said to the woman. Then she went into her room and barred the door.

The narrow stone cell was icy, but brightly lit by the sun on the walls. Regeane lay down on the bed, wrapped the mantle around herself, and slept.

HUGO HIRED THE MAID. HE BROUGHT HER HOME IN the early hours of the morning.

Regeane was awakened by the commotion.

Gundabald was up late. He was entertaining a guest. Whether boy or woman, Regeane couldn't tell. She might have summoned the wolf. No one could fool *her* nose, but the wolf was a virgin and a fastidious one. Regeane couldn't face dealing with her disapproval and downright disgust. The night creature believed humans were oversexed and felt her human partner was too preoccupied with prurient curiosity.

The air drifting under the door reeked of raw sex. Regeane fell asleep to the grunts and snorts of

passion.

She was awakened not by sound, but by scent. The wolf was present. Something, no not something, a snake was hunting among the vines near her window. If the reptile musk disturbed the wolf, it gagged the woman. Regeane rose to her feet in the darkened room.

Even this slight sound was enough to frighten the slender predator sliding among the vines. The scent weakened. She heard a thump and a swish below her window as the interloper departed.

Hugo crashed through the door in the next room.

Someone shrieked.

Hugo screamed, "Sodomite!"

Evidently, the visitor *had* been a boy.

This was followed by the sound of running feet.

"God damn him!" Gundabald roared. "Now, see what you've done. The little ass fucker took my purse with him."

The sound of a blow followed.

Hugo howled.

A feminine screech followed, then four screams, in rapid succession.

Boom. Boom. Boom. Boom.

Regeane gasped and backed away from the door. She recognized this sound. The landlord below was pounding on his ceiling.

A volley of curses followed, along with threats to throw them out into the streets *now* if the noise didn't stop.

The voices in the other room dropped.

Hugo cursed Gundabald.

Gundabald cursed Hugo.

The girl's voice sobbed.

"Shut up, you stupid little cunt," Gundabald whispered hoarsely. "I'll twist your other tit if you don't stop caterwauling. Strike a light, damn it. It's black as a mole's ass in here."

Regeane heard the snap of flint and steel.

"Merciful God, who is this?" Gundabald asked.

"Regeane's maid," Hugo answered. "I found her in a tavern."

"Where in a tavern? Down the cloaca? In the shithole? She makes most nanny goats look bewitchingly beautiful."

REGEANE REALLY DIDN'T CARE TO SIDE WITH GUNDABALD, but in this she had to agree with him when she met the girl the next morning.

Her name was Silve. She was bowlegged, skinny, buck-toothed, walleyed, and sallow-skinned, which might not have been too bad if she'd been intelligent, kind, or even hardworking and well-intentioned. She was none of those. When she was not sleeping in her alcove off the main room or being violently and noisily ridden by Hugo, she joined with him in harassing Regeane.

As her mother had done, Regeane tried to bring some measure of order into their lives. She took over the chores Gisela had once performed. She did her best to stretch the little money they had. She cooked simple one-pot meals for the four of them, saw to the washing when she could persuade Gundabald to pay the washerwoman, and helped the old woman—Regeane never knew her name and always thought of her as "the old woman"—clean up after the other three.

The old woman was the only one who could get any work out of Silve. She accused her of such vile obscenities that Silve, afraid to attack her, would be so galvanized by rage that she scrubbed and washed with a will.

In her spare time, Regeane would retreat to her narrow room and, with cold, numb fingers, try to put her scanty wardrobe in order. She had no decent sewing needles. The few she had were made of bone and their points blunted quickly. She had no thread so she unraveled rags to get enough thread to alter her dresses.

Her mother had been buried in her one good mantle and gown. Regeane had seen to that, even though Gundabald and Hugo cursed her for a fool, saying Gisela wouldn't need warm clothes where she was going, only a winding sheet. What remained of both her mother's and her wardrobes was shabby beyond belief.

Regeane accepted the situation. Most women had the same problem. Cloth was expensive. With a loom, she could have woven her own, but a loom was a large, costly piece of equipment. Few families had access to one, so women spent their time often as not resewing what few clothes they had, trying to decently cover their nakedness.

As autumn slowly wore into winter, Regeane's despair deepened. The lodging house was part of an old ruin. Even the proprietor had no idea of the purpose it once served. The icy winter wind sobbed and moaned through the stone rooms by day and by night. A charcoal brazier heated the air for only a few inches around the coals. The walls and floors remained bitterly cold to the touch.

Gundabald and Hugo were more than happy to eat the food Regeane prepared, though they denigrated it as coarse peasant fare. They scattered bones under the table, spat gristle on the floor. When they pissed, they missed the pot and left reeking yellow puddles everywhere. After eating, Gundabald wandered off to a tavern in search of further entertainment.

Hugo and Silve went to bed and exercised the webbing under the mattress. They fucked each other

blind, drank themselves incapable, then into a sodden coma.

Gundabald usually returned in the small hours and—depending on his luck with the dice box, boys, or women—he might or might not wake Silve and Hugo and chase them 'round and 'round the room, flogging their screaming, naked bodies with his leather belt. The landlord's fury usually put an end to these entertainments, whereupon they all retired.

In the morning, someone would wake early, usually Silve—she was most easily ejected from a warm bed—would open Regeane's door so she could come out and clean up the mess.

To compound Regeane's problems, the rain moved in.

The wolf loved it. The winds moving through the city blew the human stench away. Freshets swelled the Tiber, flushing out the raw sewage seeping into the river. Downpours cleansed cobblestones and walls. Briefly, in the watery winter sun, the city became a place of light and color. Marble gleamed. Orange stucco walls glowed. Long wands of red valerian grew in brickwork, and crumbling pediments waved red and pink banners against the cloudy gray sky.

The Romans loved flowers. Window boxes and pots on balconies flamed with late blooming blue sage, golden yarrow, fragrant dusty white chamomile, and yellow autumn daisies.

A few sellers of iris, lavender, and late blooming roses clustered in the city's squares and piazzas. Usually, the vendors huddled around fires or charcoal braziers, warming their hands, the flowers looking incongruous against the cold black and gray cobbles, their petals nipped and tossed by the icy wind.

On days like this, Regeane managed to drag Hugo and Silve outside, ostensibly to visit churches. Actually, Regeane hated churches. She had some compelling reasons. First, because after her mother's death and the failure of the papal blessing, she believed God had abandoned her. Secondly, because she could see ghosts.

These visitations weren't frequent, but they were always unsettling. Most often the materializations happened near churches. Usually not inside, but near the door as she was entering or leaving.

The wolf didn't care. The brute was the most logical of creatures. What, after all, can the living do for the dead? To the woman, the dead were a source of pain.

The worst had been a shadow-faced cadaver wearing rich velvet and brocade garments. They were moldering, falling to pieces, and stank of damp, rotting rags and decay. She followed Regeane, weeping and wringing hands that seemed at first to be flesh, then bony claws. The sobs and moans came from a face that wavered, as the hands did, between beautiful, pale, aristocratic features—but with only holes where the eyes had been—and the foggy shape of a naked skull.

The ghost terrorized Regeane for three days and only departed when Gisela, at Regeane's repeated urgings, left the shrine they had been visiting. Regeane had been sixteen at the time. She'd tried to ascertain the source of the shade's grief, but the ghost's rotting brocade and the horror of the empty-eyed face inspired an overwhelming terror. Besides, she and her prominent tomb in the church were clothed in a sense of evil. Her outcries were not those of sorrow and repentance, but outrage at a well-deserved damnation—a fate she was unhappy at facing alone.

Regeane's other encounters had been brief and less frightening, but she couldn't remember any of them without a shudder of revulsion. She had learned to be wary of churches.

This day began with something a little bit like happiness. Regeane managed to persuade Gundabald to part with a few coins. Not a lot, but enough to buy a stewing hen, some fennel, tarragon, parsnips, and a nameless bunch of greens. The old woman contributed garlic and a rather withered onion. Regeane put them together in a pot to cook slowly over the low fire.

The morning had been foggy, but near noon the weather cleared. The sun came out. The air was mild, almost warm. The old woman ladled up bowls of stew for Regeane, Hugo, Silve, and herself; on the strength of her contributed onion, she was due her share. For once, Silve and Hugo weren't too hung over to eat. They all chewed the tasty chicken meat, ate parsnips, and dunked their tough gray-brown bread in the broth.

When they were all replete, Regeane, Silve, and Hugo left to visit churches. The old woman remained behind. She placed the leftover stew in a covered dish for Gundabald and went on with her cleaning.

The church Regeane chose was a very ancient one, said to go back to the time of the apostles. A few steps down led to the door. The church itself was located in the atrium amid the magnificent reception rooms of an ancient Roman villa. The building was so old, the walls were sunk three feet below street level.

Just inside the door, the roof was open to the sky. Below the opening in the roof was a small pond. Some green reeds and a few purple iris still bloomed in the pale light.

Regeane knelt. The floor was covered by a thin layer of clean straw. She found this a kindness to her knees. Away from the small, ancient atrium, the villa had extended into a long room colonnaded on either side. Tall, slender, white Corinthian columns led the eye toward the sanctuary.

The acanthus leaves at the top still bore faded traces of green paint. The walls and roof were stark white stucco. Here and there, a flaking bit of plaster showed a trace of color. Regeane knew the plaster must have been placed to obliterate frescos either too explicit or too pagan for the nascent church.

The altar was—after the custom of time—an unadorned clean square white marble table. Four small grainless pure white marble columns supported a simple blue silken awning over the altar.

A sanctuary lamp burned near a basin of blessed water, alerting a visitor to the fact that the real presence in the form of consecrated hosts must be nearby.

The place, she knew, must always have been sacred.

Long ago, when Rome was a small village on the Tiber, a family lived here. The eldest male in the family, together with the women, children, and even slaves, gathered at the altar to sacrifice to the fructifying spirits of earth and sky. And also to care for their own dead, most of whom were buried in the fields and orchards surrounding the villa.

They honored all of those things without which no one can live, things still present here: earth, air, fire, and water.

The bread of consecration rises from the burgeoning wheat field. The wine from the cold, bracing air of the mountains. Vines hold the soil to rock with roots like claws clinging to steep slopes where nothing else will grow. Red and white grapes ripen while the sun warms their hearts and cool breezes caress their skins. The fire flickering near the altar remembered the woman-tended hearth, and water in the basin

commemorated the source of all life.

Around the small atrium the city grew. The family's wealth increased. The villa was extended, but the ancient sacred heart of the house was preserved.

Where the altar now stood, the owner of the villa must have sat in state to receive his clients and tenants. His tenants would have knelt before him, presenting him with the money due in rents and fees. His clients would have kissed his hands, solicited favors. In return, they followed him through the streets, bully boys, increasing his importance in the eyes of the Roman mob, ready to intimidate any of his enemies.

Time passed. The family dwindled. Its power faded. More and more parts of the villa were sold off until only these quarters remained. When they became Christian, the great family slipped into the family of man. Still, the little atrium was sacred and always would be.

Regeane saluted Christ, but not as a friend. She did not think He would ever be her friend. Still, she showed Him due respect and did not court His enmity.

When she rose to her feet, she noticed Silve stood alone by the door. "Where is Hugo?" Regeane asked.

"He sneaked off," the girl said resentfully. "He's probably in some wine bar with his hand up the barmaid's skirt. You want me to go find him?"

"No," Regeane said shortly. Send Silve after Hugo? Ha! In a few hours they would be sleeping in the sawdust on a taverna floor.

She spotted a bench along the back wall of the church, no doubt once intended for the villa owner's clients and petitioners. It seemed a perfect spot to take her ease. She and Silve walked over and sat down.

The church was a peaceful place. The present watched over the past without enmity. The air was cool, but without the bite of the wind outside. Mottled sun shone in around the white marble altar and from the opening in the roof above the atrium pond.

She could see now as her eyes adjusted to the dimness that under the straw the church boasted a sumptuous mosaic floor gardened with a pattern of bright spring flowers.

Silve took a jug from under her robe, jerked out the cork with her teeth, and took a long pull. She offered it to Regeane.

Regeane declined. Silve and Hugo both favored tavernas where the host adulterated the wine with substances designed to increase its potency. The occasional patron of these establishments went permanently mad or dropped dead after a heavy drinking bout. Regeane didn't wish to join their number.

Silve got a bit glassy-eyed as the wine hither. She discussed Hugo's ancestry, then laughed. "He'll have to peddle his ass in the back room to get a drink," she said. "I have the money. Oh, look!"

Regeane looked. Silve was pointing to the atrium pool. Regeane's eyes picked up movement in the water. "It's a carp," Silve said. She began pulling off her veil. "Let's see if we can net it. I'll hold the veil. You chase the fish into it. He'll make a wonderful supper." She started to rise, but Regeane caught her arm and pulled her back.

"I'm not sure that's a fish," Regeane said.

The thing in the pool lifted its head above the water. A snake.

Silve made a sound reminiscent, to Regeane, of an ungreased axle being overstressed. Then bolted. She ran in the wrong direction toward the altar where there was no exit. She leaned against one of the columns and applied the jug for a bit more restorative.

The serpent moved out of the pool easily to the straw-covered floor and glided toward Regeane. The woman was afraid, but the wolf was indifferent, queenly even. She knew the snake wasn't poisonous or even angry, only curious.

Put to it, Regeane scorned to show fear in front of Silve. She was, after all, the daughter of Wolfstan the Saxon prince, called by his people a talisman, and Gisela, blood kin to Charles Martel, the hammer of God. She would not be shamed by the creature before her.

The thing did not move very quickly, thus it allowed her to prepare for its arrival. She noticed on closer examination the snake wasn't ugly. The scales were a tightly fitted mosaic similar to the colors of water sparkling in the sunlight—white, blue, and green. They formed a pattern down his back overlying darker bands at each side.

The wolf eyed him with a bow of appreciation for such good camouflage. He must be nearly invisible when swimming in the muddy sun-struck Tiber.

The snake reached Regeane's shirt and investigated the hem with a brief flicker of his forked tongue. The wolf was aloof, yet the woman stretched out her hand as to a courtier.

The serpent's head rose. She felt the flickering, timid caress of the tongue on her fingertips. He, or perhaps she, made an amazing U-turn and hurried back toward the water.

"Aha! Ahaa! Ahaaaa!" Silve commented. "It paid you homage."

"Like hell," Regeane said. "It decided I was too big to eat. Now, shut up. If there's any attendant or a priest about, you'll have him bolting in here to find out what's wrong."

Silve shut up probably because she couldn't scream while finishing off the contents of the clay flask.

Regeane rose and walked toward the pool. She watched as the serpent—with the air of one who knows where he is going—swam down toward the drainage pipe that probably emptied into the river. As he entered, she saw the woman.

There was a small marble bench near the pool. She was sitting there, staring contentedly into the still water. A child sat on her lap—a little boy. He was sleeping, small, curly head resting on his mother's breast.

For a second, Regeane wondered when she had come in. Then realized the woman could not have entered without her noticing, and that she could see the far wall of the church through their bodies. She understood what she was looking at. The wolf yawned, bored.

Regeane felt a bit envious: the expression on the spirit's face was serene and filled with love and peace.



Above the opening in the roof, the sky brightened. Regeane looked up. When she turned her eyes back to the bench, the woman was gone. *Yes*, Regeane thought. *This place has always been holy*.

Silve wailed. She sounded like an unhappy hound dog.

"Oh, for Christ's sake!" Regeane shouted. "What is it now? The snake is gone."

"You were looking at someone on the bench. There couldn't have been anyone on the bench. But I saw something on the bench—" Again the stressed axle sound.

Regeane had enough. "Silence!" The building's acoustics were excellent. Regeane's voice reverberated loudly under the roof.

Silve made a snorting noise and shut up.

Regeane marched past the colonnade until she reached Silve. Took her by the ear, led her to the door.

"Hugo says—" Silve screeched.

Regeane cut her off. "You might give some thought to the fact that you and Hugo drink at the same wineshops."

They passed through the door and up the small flight of steps into the square. Regeane looked up. She saw the sky had grown even darker than when they had entered the church. Light rain sprinkled her upturned face.

Silve sniveled. Regeane let go of her ear. "I'll die," she wailed. "The cold and damp will be the death of me. You don't care if I do die. You don't care about anything. You just sit in that little stone room of yours with your face all stiff. Judging us. I'll get siiiick." She wailed. "My lungs will fill up with stinky pus and when I cough, I'll cough up blooooood! I won't be able to walk or climb stairs. I'll get the flux. IIII'lll dieeeee."

If there was anything on earth more disgusting than Silve, Regeane thought, it would be Silve coughing up blood and stinking up their cramped lodging by getting diarrhea. Advertently or inadvertently, Silve had hit on the one thing that would open Regeane's purse. Regeane fished quickly in the leather scrip tied on her belt and pulled out a copper coin. She handed it to Silve. "Oh God, oh Christ! In the name of His Holy Mother and all the saints, go ahead and get yourself some more wine."

"Yukkee," Silve burbled happily, then leaped to her feet and ran around the corner to the wine bar of her choice. Regeane remained near the church.

The sky grew darker, and Regeane felt someone watching her. This didn't surprise her. The Romans, especially Roman men, watched everything. Women were important targets and young women were at the top of their list. The undressing stare was one of their favorites. Regeane thought wryly, *If so, in this case the starrer has his work cut out for him*. She wore long, linen drawers attached to long, linen stockings. Strophium around her breasts. Her mother always made her wear it, accompanied by dark warnings that she would sag later in life if she neglected the binder too often. One long, sleeveless linen shift, and another long, linen shift with sleeves at the wrist. Overdress with wide sleeves to the elbow. Dark, woolen mantle wrapped around her head and body. Covering a veil which in turn hid most of her face.



Her eyes searched the square for the watcher, and did not find anyone. The rain increased slightly. The only other person abroad was a beggar. He or she was a filthy pile of rags sleeping on the porch of an insula nearby.

She could still feel the stare. *I am imagining things*, the woman thought. The wolf demurred. She didn't use words, but she knew how to say "no." Her hackles rose. Regeane felt as if a trickle of cold rain ran down her spine.

The stare was malignant, icy, and somehow not... living.

She pulled the mantle down further over her face and hurried off in the same direction Silve had taken. She found Silve sitting in a mud puddle near a wineshop. She was cursing. In one hand, she held a large clay bottle, in the other her drawers and strophium. Her stockings were down around her ankles.

"Cool your ass in that, bitch," the wineshop owner shouted.

"You faggot cocksucker," Silve screamed. "What makes you think you ever warmed it?"

Regeane grabbed Silve by the arm. The tavern keeper seemed to be searching for a weapon. Regeane hustled the servant down the street. She found an empty alleyway and served as lookout while Silve put her underwear back on.

"What happened?" She peered down the empty street.

"I gave him the copper," Silve answered, "and he told me if I gave him a little extra, he'd sell me something special—wine with syrup of opium and hemlock."

Regeane was horrified. She had a very good education. She knew how Socrates died. "Hemlock?" she asked.

"It's very good." Silve had her dress up over her head and was tying her strophium. "It gives you a nice tingly feeling."

"To be sure," Regeane answered. *And if you get tingly enough, you die*.

"Anyway, we went in the shit room. We did it on the floor and then when he rolled off, he tried to take the wine jug back." Silve's voice was a yell of sheer outrage.

"So?" Regeane asked.

"I smeared shit on the bastard's head."

"Ah," Regeane said.

Silve washed her hands in a rain puddle, then drank some of the wine. She thrust the jug at Regeane.

"No," Regeane said. "What now?"

Neither of them wanted to return to the lodging house. Silve knew that if Gundabald had returned and was in a bad humor, he'd beat her. So might Hugo if—as she said—he'd had to sell himself to a sodomite

for drink money.

At present, no one would lay a hand on Regeane. Hugo never would and Gundabald wouldn't want to risk disfiguring her. She suspected a lot of beatings would come her way if she did not prove as saleable as Gundabald thought. This was only in the nature of a temporary respite. No, she wouldn't be beaten, but she would be locked up and sent supperless to bed. Gundabald would be angry that she didn't return when Hugo sneaked away.

The air was misty with rain. She could see it in the afternoon light sifting past the second-story windows of the houses. She felt the stare again. This time, it seemed closer. She scanned the street. The windows above were tightly shuttered. There were no doors, only blank walls made of the narrow terra-cotta brick the Romans favored. Ahead, the street curved away into the foggy distance.

"Let's see if we can find a bread seller. Have you any more money?" Silve asked.

"A few coppers," Regeane said. She and Silve both loved the flatbreads the Romans made, stuffed with olives, onions, garlic, and savory bits of pork. Regeane's stomach was griping.

They wandered off together in search of a bread seller. In due time, they found one and got lost in the narrow twisting streets near the ruined Colosseum. Regeane spotted the tall cypresses lining the Appian Way and they found themselves walking along the most famous of all roads to Rome.

They were looking down on the city. It was covered by lowering rain clouds. Swags of mist stretched like gauze curtains between earth and sky. The afternoon was wearing on toward night, the wind getting colder and colder.

"Let's stop and finish the breads here," Silve said. They'd each eaten one when they got it. Each had one left.

"There's no place to sit," Regeane said.

"Don't be silly. If we take the bread home, Gundabald and Hugo will eat it." Silve pointed to a ruined tomb down the road. "We can go in there."

At the height of the Roman order and power, people had buried their dead here. Now, all the tombs were desecrated; robbed long ago.

This one must once have belonged to a great man, but now the building was empty. The sarcophagus rested at the roadside. Shepherds driving their flocks to market used it as a watering trough.

The tomb once looked like a small house with a pitched roof, but one wall was broken and the side of the structure opened to the elements. However, the overhanging roof and the low platform that once held the sarcophagus created a dry spot where they could sit, look out on the road, and finish their stuffed bread.

Regeane was ravenous. She felt a mild despair as she devoured the food. She could have eaten several more. Silve drank the wine with her loaf. She was soon replete and slightly glassy-eyed. She itched and started scratching herself everywhere.

Regeane finished the bread, licked her greasy fingers, and wondered if there was enough food in the world. She also understood why Silve and Hugo drank the noxious mixture of wine and drugs—they

stilled the pangs of hunger. She was tempted by what remained in Silve's jug, but resolutely resisted the temptation. The stuff was poison and, sooner or later—probably sooner—it would kill them.

Silve continued scratching vigorously.

"Silve," Regeane snapped. "Are you taken with a plague of bugs?"

"No," Silve said. "It's the poppy gum. The stuff takes you that way sometimes."

Regeane glanced around uneasily. The sky seemed to have grown even darker.

"Shit," Silve said thickly. "It will rain all night. I've a good mind to find a warm taverna and spread my legs in the back room. Come one! Come all! A copper apiece! At least I'll get to sleep half the night. The tavern keeper will want part of my take, but he'll give me plenty of wine, and I won't have that damn Hugo rubbing me raw while he sweats the drink out of his carcass. The bastard can get it up while he's drunk, but the nasty little cocksucker can't get it down."

"Why don't you leave him then?" Regeane asked.

Silve laughed. "Because, of the nearest two, I owe money to the owner of the first. The barmaid of the second told me if I took away any late night business from her, she'd cut my face."

"Awkward," Regeane said commiseratingly.

"Whatever," Silve replied.

The Appian Way gleamed in the fading light like a narrow black ribbon. As Regeane watched, a few lights appeared in farmhouse windows along the road.

"We have to go," Regeane said, some alarm in her voice. "It won't be safe here after dark. As it is, I'll be locked up and you'll probably get a beating."

"Noooooo," Silve moaned. "It's dry here. Waaaaarm. I want to stay," she sniveled.

Again, Regeane felt the sensation of being watched. She glanced at Silve and saw a wasp crawling over her face. The insect was black, an iridescent blue-black. The tiny carapace shone like a dark rainbow. She looked more closely and saw the whole right side of Silve's body was covered with them crawling everywhere. Dark antennae quivered on their heads; feet feeling, exploring. Their bulbous abdomens armed with the vicious stingers wavered above Silve's skin.

Regeane reached out, snatched Silve's dress at the shoulder, and pulled her out of the tomb. Silve saw the wasps. She screamed and began waving her arms, beating at them with her hands.

To Regeane's momentary surprise, the wasps didn't sting Silve. They drew away and hovered near the entrance to the tomb like an evil black cloud. Silve, still half drunk, staggered. She was searching her face and body for possible lumps.

Regeane looked down the Appian Way and saw it coming.

"No," she whispered. Then screamed, "Run, Silve! Run!"

"Run?" Silve said looking around. "Run where?"

The thing was approaching faster and faster, moving like the first rocks of an avalanche, but headed up the road toward Regeane. It gabbled and gibbered with a thousand voices, somehow one in madness and agony. It stank of burning cloth, burning wood, burning bone, burning flesh. Then, as it drew closer, of decomposition and death.

She could hear its voice, howling and shouting at her. "Where is she? You saw her. You can bring me to her."

Then it was all around Regeane, and the anguish in the voice was almost beyond endurance. "They said I killed her—her and the child. I never—I never—" The thing moaned.

Regeane threw her mantle over her face, trying to escape the stinking cloud surrounding the apparition. She found herself alone in the dark with it. Its existence flowed with sorrow.

"I couldn't feed them." The desolation in the voice was pain compassed by the hoop of eternity. "I couldn't stand to see their faces as they starved." Sorrow, so heartwrenching it seemed to drown the whole world in grief. "I was mad with pain."

"No," Regeane heard herself shouting. "You were mad with pride." She remembered the woman and the child in the church. "They had wanted to live," she yelled at the damned and damnable thing around her. "They wanted to live! You killed them and you paid the forfeit."

The air around her stank of putrescence. "They hanged me in chains!"

Regeane saw and smelled it. The rotting body swaying at the gallows. Leg only, bones trailing rags of flesh, dancing almost as if alive in the night wind. Falling and scattering in the grass. The torso coming apart at the belly; the hips falling to splatter against the earth dragging the lungs and the skin from the ribs. Last of all, the head and shoulders coming down; the fleshless skull striking the cobbles and bursting with an appalling stench.

The almost-liquid brain mass that had once been the man running off in puddles, congealing to be trampled in the road.

The wasps struck, sinking their stingers into her face through the mantle into her cheeks and tongue, through her dress into her arms and breast, and, worst of all, through her eyelids into her eyeballs.

She didn't hear the wolf roar. Her own screams deafened her. She only knew she had four legs, not two. Her jaws opened with a shout of outrage and fire filled the air around her.

When she woke, she was lying on her side. One shoulder rested in a clean rain puddle. She opened her eyes and slowly got to her feet. One side of her dress was soaked. She explored her face and neck with trembling fingers. No swelling. No pain. Had the whole thing all been a dream?

She glanced down. Near the puddle a big patch of mud showed canine footprints. She remembered the wolf coming to her aid. Had she really been here? Somehow fought off the terror? Regeane was too stupefied by shock to consider the implications of this.

She looked around. Silve was gone. She had evidently found somewhere to run. Then she realized the tomb where they stopped to eat had vanished. It simply didn't exist any longer.

Regeane picked up her skirts and ran.

She stopped running near the city. Not because she was winded. Her stamina was usually greater than most humans'. But because she passed some laborers working near the city. And was frightened by their stares. Respectable women alone were an uncommon sight. Prostitutes advertised their wares. So she wouldn't be taken for one of them, but she might be mistaken for a married woman sneaking out to see her lover. As such, she left herself open to being accosted by some lecherous opportunist. She stopped, wrapped herself tightly in her mantle, pulled the veil down over her face, bowed her head, and walked on.

She didn't dare pass through the ruined Forum so late. She started home through the narrow streets surrounding the Pantheon. These alleys were impassable except on foot. Flights of stone stairs surrounded the terra-cotta brick walls. Among them, it might as well have been night.

The sky above was a dim blue-gray pall. What little light remained showed only rain misting past high shuttered windows.

She was making her way home as quickly as possible when she met the funeral cortege. It was a poor one—the corpse wrapped in a winding sheet carried on an open bier. Torches flared in the hands of a few relatives and friends following the dead man. The flames sputtered in the wind, funnelled down the street, and burned blue from the damp.

Regeane flattened herself against the wall to let them pass.

Silve appeared from the darkness like a bat flying out of the mouth of a cave. "Witch!" she screamed as she pointed at Regeane. "Demoness! She is here to steal his soul. Kill her! Kill her! She will drag his soul to hell and sell it to the devil in place of her own!"

Regeane stood for a few seconds transfixed by both fear and sheer astonishment. Then she saw the dead man's relatives believed Silve. The pain and sheer terror in her voice carried a dreadful certainty with them. Even Regeane could tell that whatever the truth or falsity of the servant's outcries, Silve herself believed them—absolutely. Suddenly, the bier rested in the street and the burial party were groping for missiles in the shadows.

Regeane ran again. The only thing that saved her was the relative scarcity of stoning material. Yet even as she fled, she felt something hit her hard in the small of the back. A broken roof tile slashed past her arm, leaving a burning sensation behind. Then she was clear of the enclosing walls, running along a thoroughfare intended for more than foot traffic. The lodging house was just ahead.

She slowed, not wanting anyone to see how frightened she was. The sky was indigo blue twilight, not quite night. An outside stair on the side of the house led to their quarters.

She was climbing the stairs when she saw her arm was cut and her hand bloody. She wiped it on her dark mantle. The thick woolen mantle was almost black; she hoped the blood wouldn't show. She flexed her arm, and the cut closed.

She was thinking only of warmth and safety when she entered the door. She knew she would be locked in for the night, but even the narrow room seemed a secure haven after what she'd been through today. She had no idea what awaited her.

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## Chapter Four



FOR THE FIRST TIME IN MONTHS, THE ROOM WAS warm. Braziers glowed in each corner. A roaring fire burned on the hearth.

Regeane sank into a chair by the fire.

Hugo and Gundabald sat together at the table, feasting.

The wolf's nose wandered among perfumes, saffron, cinnamon, cloves, and pepper—spices that didn't find their way into the food ordinary people ate.

Gundabald was disjointing a capon stuffed with a forcemeat of preserved figs, seasoned with butter, cinnamon, and the excruciatingly expensive pepper. His cheeks gleamed with grease. He popped some of the moist, delicious meat into his mouth, then glared angrily at Regeane. "Where the hell have you been?"

She realized his anger concealed some anxiety. Since he had never before shown any concern for her welfare, she couldn't help but believe his worry must be rooted in some change in her status.

"You've found a match for me, and it's a wealthy one," she said.

"Clever girl! Now, where the hell have you been?" He was rising from the table.

The wolf warned her. She didn't listen or react quickly enough, but she was on her feet when he reached her. He backhanded her across the face as hard as he could. Her head flipped loose on her neck like a broken doll's. She lost consciousness for a second. Her ankle caught on one leg of the chair. She fell, striking her head hard against the floor. This was the first time she felt the full power of a man's fist directed at her. The sheer force and destructive ability was shocking.

She sat up, then. Using the arm of the chair, she pulled herself to a standing position. Blood was streaming from her nose and trickling from one corner of her mouth.

Gundabald stood in front of the fire, warming himself at the flames.

She reached for a napkin, one of the ones on the table.

"Damn! Don't stain the linen," Gundabald said.

Regeane used her mantle to wipe off the blood on her face.

"Now, where have you been?"

"Hugo deserted us," she said.

Hugo—his mouth full—made a gabbling noise.

"Shut up!" Gundabald said, then clouted him hard on the side of the head.

Hugo strangled, and began coughing on what he was trying to swallow.

"I'm surrounded by fools!" Gundabald mused. "Don't you ever dare leave your cousin alone in the streets again! Hear me!" he roared. "Or that's only a taste of what you'll get."

"God! God! God! Yes," Hugo moaned. "Christ Jesus Savior, what's gotten into you! First, you try to spoil what little looks she has... then you're... clubbing at me... what..."

"Shut up!" Gundabald roared.

Hugo shut up.

"You," Gundabald said, "are a fool who never can see beyond the end of your nose. And she," he pointed at Regeane, "is a hateful little snob who no doubt wishes both you and I are in hell! But she is now very valuable property! She is sold! And a damned generous price I got for her in the bargain. No! It's not a great match. That's not to be expected. She's too damned poor, but it's a wealthy one. The fellow is sitting on a pile of gold. The king wants to bring him to heel. A marriage is cheaper and a whole lot less trouble than throwing an army against his stronghold. The king will expect him," Gundabald chuckled, "to be deeply and tangibly grateful for a match among the royal kin, and so will I. In fact, the moneylenders had only to hear his name and their purses opened. Did you think all of this luxury fell like manna from heaven?"

Regeane's nose had stopped bleeding though she could taste salt in her mouth from an oozing cut on the inside of her cheek. But the terror she felt outweighed the pain. "What about the full moon?" she whispered.

Gundabald stepped toward her. She shrank back, cringing away from his fist.

"Wolf," Gundabald said softly. "More like a dog, and a whipped dog at that."

Regeane hated herself for being grateful that he didn't hit her again. Somewhere in the darkness deep down, the wolf was enraged beyond reason, but the woman wouldn't let her near consciousness.

"You are a fool," he continued. "Do you know that? This man loves you about as well as you love him—that is to say, not at all. What were you thinking he'd do—welcome you to his bosom? A penniless woman fobbed on him by a king. A mighty king. A king he dare not disobey."

Gundabald backed up and warmed his rear end at the fire. He laughed harshly. "God, my sister was a mawkish sentimentalist. The idea of bringing up a thing like you to be a proper lady? But then considering what has to be done, perhaps you're better off as you are. No, trust me, bitch creature. Your secret is the least of your worries. From the day you arrive, you'll probably have to be careful of everything you eat or drink. As soon as he dares, he'll be rid of you."

Regeane stared at him, eyes wide, her guts turning to water, sick with terror.

"Wake up, you lackwit," Gundabald said gleefully. "Nothing protects you. How many wives have been dismissed in disgrace, labeled barren by their husbands because they were never bedded?" Gundabald



smiled. His big, blunt teeth gleamed yellow against his black beard.

"Barren," Gundabald mused. "Barrenness is a kindly, even compassionate excuse. Are you aware of how easy it is for a great lord to arrange the pollution of his marriage bed? He waits until nightfall, then sends a strong servant to her room. They are caught. The man—already paid—flees. But the next morning, she is led out into the wilderness with a halter around her neck. Unless she has a family to uphold her protestations of innocence, the woman is doomed. There, near a lake or swamp, the erstwhile wife is strangled or drowned. She is forgotten, the mud is her tomb."

"I've only mentioned two ways husbands have of ridding themselves of inconvenient spouses. There are others, many others. One wrong move—one moment's silly arrogance—and he'll be done with you." Gundabald shrugged and smiled his terrible smile again. "Perhaps your foot won't even have to slip. Perhaps he prefers his concubines already. In fact, the more I think about it, the less I doubt my own judgement. And, as for you, whey-faced brat, you have nothing to recommend you. Not wealth. Not strong kinfolk. No, not even a hint of beauty. You pale, flat-chested, stupid little twat..."

"Father," Hugo shouted. "Stop! Look at her. I've seen dead men with more color in their faces. You don't want her to hang herself before she even sees him. We need the money!"

Gundabald snorted. "What do you want me to do? Let her go into this marriage with her head stuffed with moonbeams? Most men are like me, even the good ones. They have the morals of bulls or stags."

"This one now. This one likely has the morals of a jackal." He spoke thoughtfully, at least as much to himself as to Regeane. "Else, how did he rise from paid hireling to his present position of eminence?"

"God, but Gisela spoiled you. It is time you found out how the world goes and what drives it. I see it's up to me to teach you and, if you don't learn, your husband will likely kill you, if the church doesn't burn you first."

Regeane could feel herself trembling. Her stomach muscles fluttered. Not so much because of the threats Gundabald held over her head. She had confronted them all her life. But because she knew she was in the presence of evil. Gundabald was cruel, but when he was sober, his outbursts were almost always calculated to serve his interests. He wanted something from her and it couldn't be good.

Regeane wiped blood from her mouth with her hand and looked at it.

Gundabald walked up to her and slapped her again. Not as hard as before. This time only enough to make her ears ring and her nose bleed a little. "Pay attention," he said smiling. "Pain is a great attention-getter. At least I've found it so. Now, don't be downcast," he said gently. "And don't be afraid. We won't abandon you."

She wondered if he was egotistical enough to believe she found this promise comforting.

His face was close to her. His breath laden with the scent of the elaborately spiced food was hot on her skin. She sat down to escape the sickening smell.

"This man's demesne straddles one of the passes through the Alps. Every merchant and traveler crossing the mountains makes him richer. But this rascal is an upstart, lord of a band of mercenaries. Their loyalty can, no doubt, be bought once his strongboxes are in our hands. But it will be up to you to make the killing look like an accident!"



"Now." He lifted her out of her chair by the loose fabric on the front of her dress. She could feel his knuckles pressing into her sternum. His lips were near her ear. "Now, little girl," he said softly, "tell me you understand me and will do as I say. Sweet, now," he shook her lightly. "Repeat after me. 'I will do as my wise uncle tells me.' Say it!" he commanded.

Regeane's hands rose from the chair arms. The nails were sharp at the tips. She dragged them down both of Gundabald's cheeks to the chin. Blood and skin peeled in long strips from his cheeks.

He screamed. He lifted her upright with one hand. With the other, he drove his fist directly into her face.

She flew backward. The chair went over. Her body hit the floor and rolled. In the darkness, she fought the wolf for control. The creature was madly trying to come to her aid, but she had the woman's more rational terror on her side—the fear that if the creature appeared in her present weakened condition, Gundabald would be able to kill it.

The wolf was hesitant—retreated into savage silence. Regeane came to full consciousness on her knees.

Gundabald was holding her body up by her hair and flogging her with his belt. She was in so much pain, fighting back was instinctive.

One of the braziers was within reach. She snatched at it, got one leg, and flung the coals at Gundabald.

He ran across the room, drawing his sword. Hugo jumped behind him.

Regeane realized the reason for their terror. The brazier was solid iron. No normal woman or even most men would have been able to lift it and scatter the contents as she just had.

"The building will burn," Hugo squeaked.

No, Regeane thought. *I might hope so, but it won't.*

She was right. Damp had invaded every piece of wood in the holy city during the last few weeks of rain. The floor was slimy with it. The coals smoked, stank, and hissed viciously, but began going out one by one.

"It's dark outside." Hugo gave a hiccuping wail.

"Yes, I know," Gundabald said, flourishing the sword. "Jesus Christ," he continued in a soft, astounded voice. "She's just like her father."

Regeane was on her feet—swaying a bit, but standing.

"Twice," Gundabald said. "I hit her as hard as I could with my fist. A normal woman would be dead or at least unconscious."

"Tell me about my father?" Regeane asked.

Gundabald shrugged.

"You want this man to die very suddenly. The same way my father did. He was hard to kill, wasn't he?" Regeane asked.

"Nearly impossible. In fact, we wouldn't have succeeded with him if your mother hadn't taken a hand."

"No!" Regeane shouted. "Not my mother!"

"Oh, yes," Gundabald said cynically, "the saintly Gisela."

"It's not true," Regeane said, shaking her head from side to side like a tormented beast. "I don't believe you. I won't believe you. I can't believe you. She loved him."

Gundabald sheathed his sword, sat down, and poured himself a cup of wine. Gundabald was smiling again. He loved inflicting pain and he was succeeding beyond his wildest dreams with Regeane. "Oh, yes, we tried twice. His constitution defied poison. He had the wolf's ability to vomit immediately anything that disturbed him. We sent paid assassins. They didn't return. I can't think of what he did with them."

Gundabald looked baffled for a moment. "We never found any trace. Not clothing, weapons, bones, not even skulls or—damnation on it—teeth. They simply vanished. It wasn't until we convinced your mother that his powers were demonic, and he would carry her off with him, that she took a hand. She was difficult to persuade. I believe they may have had that sexual intensity between them that passes for love. At any rate, he fell victim to her wiles."

"They had a place near his stronghold—a love nest where they crept away alone to engage in private dalliance. We all rode out on a hunt party—you must understand ordinary hunts bored him—she enticed him to their special bower and I—" Gundabald paused for effect and simply beamed upon Regeane. "I put a crossbow bolt through his heart. He died instantly before his alter ego had time to heal him."

Regeane bowed her head and rested her forehead against the back of the chair. She wondered for how long she had refused to see, refused to understand.

She'd spent her life burdened with her mother's sorrow, long nights of weeping, self-accusation. Her mother's despair had been their constant companion as Gisela dragged Regeane from church to church, shrine to shrine. Gisela spent the remainder of her life on her knees, begging God's forgiveness for the one sin she didn't dare admit, even to Regeane: the murder of the man she loved.

"Those Saxons," Gundabald continued. "I was afraid of them, but there again, your mother was invaluable. Her grief was so terrible we had to set a watch over her lest she do herself some harm. So his people were convinced we couldn't have had any part in his death. When they understood his line failed—their sorrow was nearly as great as your mother's. They departed for their northern forests. Unfortunately, as I found out later, they also took the greater part of his wealth with them. Your mother retained only what was bestowed on her on the morning after the wedding. A very generous sum. A handsome endowment for a woman, but not nearly enough for a family's needs. Now you have a chance to repair our fortunes. And you're playing the fool!"

"I'm sorry," Regeane said quietly. The wolf gritted her teeth, but the woman really tried to sound penitent. "You had not heretofore fully explained the situation. My mother understood her duty to her family. I'm sure I will understand mine."

A crossbow bolt through the heart. She'd never seen a human shot with a crossbow, but they were common weapons. Mostly used on large animals, wild cattle, boar, or bear. She had once seen a stag brought down by one. Though not hit in a vital spot, the deer fell, its shoulder crushed. It died of shock and blood loss a few seconds later. Her mind turned from the memory. Wolfstan had known himself

betrayed by the woman he loved, even as he fell.

They planned to use her in the same way they'd used her mother. Even if she refused to help them, she knew that wouldn't stop their plotting. They had turned to her mother only when other methods failed with Wolfstan.

Gundabald eyed her suspiciously. Her capitulation had been too rapid. "My, we are mealy-mouthed all of a sudden," he said.

"Yes," Regeane replied, "but I don't really have a choice, do I?"

Gundabald uncovered another one of the dishes. This one a highly spiced fish stew, thick with onions, leeks, and blazing hot cracked peppercorns. "Want some?" Gundabald asked, spooning it out on a trencher and falling to with his fingers.

The dish assaulted the wolf's nose across the room. "No. I have no appetite. My head is spinning." She looked around. The air in the room was a smoky haze, left by the brazier's embers as they burnt themselves out.

The blazing hearth fire was dying down, the remaining braziers darkening. Cold began creeping in.

Regeane walked over to the table. Gundabald was occupied by his greed and a jug of good red wine. Hugo, when he saw her walking toward him, scuttled to the other side of the table. Gundabald rolled his eyes at him, annoyed. "Where is your sword?" he mumbled, his mouth full.

Hugo looked shamefaced. "I pawned it to buy drink a few days ago."

Regeane stopped in front of the table.

"Have some food," Gundabald invited her.

Regeane shook her head. "Only a cup of wine."

Hugo poured it and offered it to her, keeping his arm extended, well away from her.

She took the wine—sipped it. *Very good*, she thought—finished the cup and placed it on the table. Exhaustion was on her like a leaden cope, weighing her down.

"Remember," Gundabald said.

"Yes," Regeane answered.

"You don't really have any choice." His face was red, smeared with grease, flushed with all the wine he'd taken. The marks scored by her nails on his cheeks were still visible. He probably couldn't feel them now, but in the morning he would, along with his hangover.

She felt she'd gained at least a small advantage. She'd better press that now. "I'll need some money," she said.

"For what?" he asked, then ate a large prawn yellowed with saffron. "Wonderful!" he exclaimed, then gulped a mouthful of some pale vintage.

"Clothes!" Regeane said. "Look at me. This is the best dress I have. I'll need at least one new mantle and two respectable gowns. Not to mention something to attend the marriage feast in."

"Don't worry," Gundabald said. "He won't be in Rome for months."

"I'll still need to get a start," Regeane said.

Gundabald was almost drunk. He was happy, things were going his way. He knew the girl was going to be a problem, but he had months to break her, crush her spirit.

Outside the wind buffeted the building. A particularly loud blast rattled the shutters, making it sound as if a giant hammer was being flung at the walls. He shivered. Next time, he wouldn't tackle her after dark. True, her face was swollen and mottled with bruises, the gown she wore stiff with bloodstains, but she still looked entirely too good to have taken the full force of his arm.

Next time, he would face off with her by day and he could learn to judge more exactly how much punishment she could take without being maimed or killed. Physical suffering inflicted on a regular basis would soon sap her will to resist him. So much the better if it didn't leave scars behind.

He fished in his scrip for some money. Regeane saw the glint of gold among the coins. She didn't think she'd get any. She was right. Twenty or so copper coins and four silver dinars landed on the table. Thankful for that much, she quickly scooped them up and went into her room.

The imprisoning bolts rattled shut as soon as the door closed behind her. She had one bolt on her side, and she drove it home. She stripped off her dress and shift. Then the wolf smelled food!

She burrowed under the blankets with her hands and found the pot. The old woman must have put it there. Protected by earthenware and the blankets, it was still just warm. The room was freezing. The shutters over the barred window did nothing to stop the wind.

Unimpeded and welcome, the wolf visited. She was starving. It took her less time to finish the stew than it would the woman. Her fur sealed out the cold. The rough tongue made one last circuit of the bowl.

Then, the woman jumped up naked and climbed quietly into the bed. Regeane crouched down under the covers and blessed the old woman: she'd double blanketed the bed and put on clean linen sheets. They were patched, worn, and threadbare, but smooth and comfortable to the touch.

When the wolf left, she took most of Regeane's injuries with her. Her body no longer ached, though she remained exhausted almost to the point of unconsciousness. Still, her mind would not stop working.

Gundabald! The devil! They were one and the same. She knew she'd only begun to taste the misery he planned to deal her.

How could they have persuaded her mother to connive at the death of one who had loved and protected her? What kind of exchange had Wolfstan been for Firminius, her mother's second husband? She remembered him as notable only for corpulence, indolence, and monumental greed.

No, she had nothing to hope for from Gundabald and everything to fear. Somehow she must escape, but she had no idea how. The little money he had given her would not carry her far.

The she-wolf, bold creature that she was, was simply angered by the usurpation of her freedom. She was physically mature, but her sexual maturity didn't match the woman's. She was yet the lean hunter—meat provider of the pack—able to outrace even the fleetest deer. Vestal virgin of the moonlight—unchosen, untouched. She might rise to defend the woman on the marriage bed.

Ye gods! the woman thought. *A true disaster*. She must escape. How? Where?

Something plucked at the edges of her memory the way an importunate beggar plucks at one's sleeves. Wolfstan! His people believed his line had failed. Gundabald let that slip. But it hadn't failed. She was here, carrying the same powers he had. They called him the Talisman. Who told her his story? She couldn't remember and was too tired to try.

Her decision was made. It left her at peace. Could she find her father's people? She would face pursuit and treachery by Gundabald and Hugo. So be it. The female hunter of the dark stared at her from the edge of sleep with glowing eyes, beckoning her into beyond.

She would succeed or die trying. She and herself were in accord. Regeane followed the wolf drifting into darkness where, in the shadowland of sleep, she and her companion could run free... through the endless forests of her dreams.

SHE WOKE EARLY. ONLY A FAINT BLUE LIGHT SHONE in around the shutters. She ruffled through the basket under her bed, searching for a few clean things to wear. Again, the old woman had not failed her. She had freshly washed a clean gray linen gown and a worn, but redyed, brown mantle. Underwear and a very threadbare veil of her mother's—it had large, translucent patches—completed the ensemble.

She was afraid the door might be locked, but the old woman was there, involved in her endless cleaning, and she had undone the bolts.

Regeane collected Hugo—he protested weakly, but mindful of Gundabald's orders, he came. She passed the old woman sweeping the hall with a twig broom.

Hugo was already out and going down the steps. Regeane paused next to her and pressed one of the silver coins into her hand.

The old woman could tell by the touch it was more than a copper. Her eyes widened as she secreted it. "Good fortune," she whispered. "May the Virgin watch over you. Take care. They are both pigs..." she muttered. "Pigs!"

Regeane hurried down the stair following' Hugo. The sky was gray, as was the light around them.

"It's before dawn," Hugo whimpered. "Where are we going?"

"The thieves' market," Regeane said.

"I'll kill that little cunt, Silve, for leaving me with this problem," Hugo muttered. "What did you do to her? I went looking for her last night."

Gundabald probably made him, Regeane thought.

"I couldn't find her in any of the usual tavernas. She's disappeared. Oh, my head," he sniffed. "My tongue tastes like the floor of an outhouse. My eyeballs are fried. The food, it burnt doing down, but it was worse going out. It feels like somebody poured hot grease up my ass."

"It's the pepper. Would a jug of wine quiet your nether regions?" Regeane asked.

"A jug of wine would quiet a lot of regions," Hugo replied.

Regeane gave him some copper coins. "Please don't buy the same stuff Silve did yesterday."

"What was it?" Hugo asked.

"She said it had poppy gum and hemlock in it."

"No wonder I couldn't find her," Hugo commented glumly. "She's lying dead somewhere and nobody noticed her because she hasn't started to stink yet."

Regeane's stomach rumbled with hunger. "Go get your wine," she said irritably.

Hugo returned with a wineskin. He dosed himself liberally on their way to the market. He brightened a bit, but continued complaining as they walked. "It's dangerous," he said, "even for a man. You might be subjected to insults not proper for a lady to hear."

Regeane stopped so quickly Hugo ran into her.

They were turning into a piazza by then. "Go away," she whispered between her teeth to Hugo. "Amuse yourself. I don't care how, but don't bother me while I'm trying to shop. Now, go away."

He did, drifting off after giving her an apprehensive look.

The little market square was filled with merchants whose mules were still harnessed to their carts. All in all, a highly mobile group. Ready to vanish quickly when the papal guard, the only effective law in the city, made one of its periodic sweeps through Rome. They were close to the river. The insulas surrounding the square were run down. In many cases, the first floors were abandoned to the Tiber's periodic floods and the omnipresent damp.

The cloth seller's cart was sandwiched between a slave dealer's wretched stock and a load of broken furniture. To Regeane it looked like kindling. Irredeemable junk. The man hawking it was aggressive. On seeing Regeane, he tried selling her a "beautiful" chair—a perfect chair if only she had the enterprise to add one leg. And, he burred cheerfully, he had several ones that would do. And he would offer them to her at a very nominal price.

"Firewood," Regeane said.

The cloth seller cackled gleefully as Regeane pushed past and began examining the dresses hanging from the staves of his two-wheeled cart.

She glanced at the slaves, then quickly away. She shuddered. They were a painful sight. All women, too young, old, or ugly to interest the dealers in more attractive human merchandise at the bigger markets.

By and large, the dresses were equally hopeless. Most were worn. All were too small. Regeane was considered tall. The condition of the cloth discouraged her more than anything else. Silve had told her there were bargains to be had here, but nothing she'd seen was worth flint and steel to turn it into fire and smoke. If she could find good cloth, she was willing to rip out the seams, bleach, dye, and resew. But cloth so rotten it tore while being handled was hopeless.

"Cleaning rags," she whispered.

The furniture seller looked angry. "Firewood!" he said in the Roman gutter argot. "Cleaning rags! Barbarian hellcat. She needs a lesson."

The cloth seller laughed again, then dragged something from under the debris in the cart. The thing, though stained at the hem, was beautiful: an overdress of blue brocade trimmed in white fur. The cloth seller dangled it before her.

"How much?" Regeane asked suspiciously.

"Six coppers only," the cloth seller said, placing it in her hands.

Yes, it was in good condition. Her knowing fingers explored the fabric. Not pure silk, but that wasn't to be expected, not here. If the stains didn't wash out she...

The world vanished. She could feel the garrotte around her throat and even before it closed, she knew herself a dead woman. The man's hands tightening the wire and twisting the wooden dowels at the back of her neck were too strong for her to challenge. Even though she ripped into them with her nails, felt the skin peel, and her fingertips slick with blood. She knew the hands would not release the wire and even probably took some satisfaction from the proof of her agony.

The steel thread crushed her windpipe. Sight was gone. Air was gone. Life was gone. The only thing remaining was the scream... silent... only in her brain and it went on and on and on and...

Regeane threw the dress away from her.

"What? Are you sick?" the cloth seller shouted. "Are you pregnant?"

"Why is it?" Regeane replied acidly. She was leaning on the cart, trying to get her stomach under control. "Why is it when a woman turns pale or seems ill—if she's below seventy years—the nearest man asks her if she's pregnant?"

"Because she often is," a musical voice answered. "But in your case, I believe you to be unusually perceptive."

Regeane turned and looked at the speaker. She was dangling the luxurious robe by one finger as if it were some filthy discard. "Take this... thing," she said to the cloth seller, "and dump it into the unmarked grave where she lies. I'll pay you."

"Oh, God!" Regeane said. "That's foul." She was wiping her hands on her mantle. She felt contaminated.

The cloth seller tucked the robe deep into the rags on his cart.

The woman continued lazily. "Its previous owner betrayed her lover to a man named Paul Afartha. He



pulled the strings on our late Lombard pope. Her lover belonged to the present pope's party. Paul had him tortured but—unfortunately for her—not to death. He was released when Hadrian became pope. He's blind in one eye and lacks some fingers, but he still has one good eye and two hands. He strangled her. She was wearing that dress at the time."

"It's a good piece of cloth," the man grumbled.

This time the imposing woman spoke sharply. "Bring the thing to my house. Apply to my maid, Susanna. She will pay you and burn it. Sacred blood, man! Stains from her last natural functions discolor the hem. Do as I say."

"Yes, my lady," the man replied meekly.

Regeane felt disheveled. She was. Mantle at her feet, veil on her shoulders. The speaker, a tall woman, was fingering her hair.

Regeane had an impression of rich clothing and silky exquisite perfume. Two large men who flanked the lady prevented forward progress. Regeane tried to ease backward. Impossible. She was caught between the cloth seller's cart and the furniture man's. They were pushed together at the back. She was wedged between them.

"What's a beautiful creature like you doing fumbling through trash like this? I could easily find you a... protector who would buy you better gowns," the lady said.

"I wouldn't... I don't think... I don't know..." Regeane stammered, trying to push past the lady and her escort. The two men planted themselves like boulders and refused to let her by. The lady blocked the passage between them. They all looked amused.

Regeane had never been so close to anyone as well dressed or as clean and sweet-smelling as this woman. The wolf was charmed and half in love already.

"Cluck, cluck, cluck." The furniture seller mimicked Regeane. "Stand up and speak to Lucilla like a proper woman. She's as nervous as a pullet in a yard full of roosters," he told Lucilla.

Regeane was stung.

The wolf was stung.

Regeane drew herself up and studied the woman called Lucilla.

At first sight, she seemed young, but then Regeane realized this was an illusion created by a number of deftly applied decorations. Her shift was Egyptian linen, a fine weave embroidered with white silk. The overdress she wore was a woolen silk damask, dyed two shades of green and of such a fresh, bright color that it reminded Regeane of the first flush of new leaves in the spring. Some very clever painting. Powdering had been done to her face. She was still beautiful, but carried the telltale marks of age in the lines around the eyes and mouth, and the faint, as yet so very faint, webbing of wrinkles on the brow and cheeks.

"How do you do this to your hair? By what art?" Lucilla asked. "Teach me. I'll pay you well. I'd like to learn it."



"No art," Regeane said. "I know no arts. My hair has been so since I can remember." Her hair was as the silver wolf's fur, dark shading to white at the tips. Each tress appeared dipped in moonlight.

"No art," Lucilla said. "Of course not. I was foolish even to ask. You are obviously as nature made you. Not even a strophium." Regeane's hair fell from her fingers.

Regeane gasped. Her hands came up to search her breasts. Her cheeks glowed. "Oh, my God," she gasped. "I forgot."

Lucilla's escorts and the two merchants doubled whooping with laughter.

Lucilla stretched out her hand and cupped one of Regeane's breasts. "May the angels bless my soul," she said quietly. "A ripe peach. My poor dear, you don't need a binder."

Regeane knew she should be angry at the liberties taken with her person, but she found the lady's touch stimulated a stab of pleasure in a part of her body far from her breast. She caught Lucilla's wrist, but didn't push her away. Lucilla withdrew her hand at her own pace, slipping her wrist slowly through Regeane's fingers.

"Are you a free woman?" the lady asked abruptly.

"Free and freeborn," Regeane replied proudly and a little angrily. This woman was frightening her. She wondered if she should shout for Hugo, but then abandoned the idea immediately. The two mercenaries accompanying Lucilla were well armed, well dressed, well paid, and—doubtless—well practiced servants of a noble house. Either one of them could pulverize Hugo with one hand.

"Married or betrothed?" Lucilla asked.

"Betrothed," Regeane answered doubtfully.

Lucilla pounced on the uncertainty in her voice. "Then you don't like him?"

"I don't know." Regeane felt at a loss. "I've never met or even seen him."

"Aah," Lucilla said. She smiled, lowered her eyelids. Regeane was amazed to see the eyelashes were outlined in black and the lids themselves were stained pale blue, shading away at her brows.

"Why not come home with me," Lucilla said. "I'll give you a good dinner, then you can share my couch. In the morning, my maids will fit you with a better dress than any you could buy here. And if I find you especially pleasing, as I believe I will, you shall have a little gold in the bargain."

Regeane didn't say anything at first because she didn't understand. When she did, the proposition was so foreign to her experience, she was confused by it. She blushed, then became very annoyed with herself for blushing and made a determined effort to get out of her corner.

Lucilla and the two mercenaries stepped aside laughing. Regeane was ready to flee, not out of displeasure, but embarrassment. She was brought to a halt immediately.

The cloth seller, perched on his wagon seat, had a good grip on the back of her dress. He shook her gently. "Huffy little hatchling. Don't pay any attention to her, Lucilla. Her feathers are still damp. She doesn't understand what a fine offer you've made her. Listen to the barbarous turn of her Latin speech.

She's a Frank."

"He's right, lovely one," Lucilla said. "Don't run away until you're sure you want to. Girls have gone from my arms to the beds of kings, cardinals, and popes." She lifted one beautiful long-fingered hand in a graceful gesture. "I, and I alone, have made the fortunes of several noble families."

The cloth seller let go of her dress and tapped Regeane on the shoulder. "You see before you," he said indicating Lucilla, "the richest and most successful courtesan in Rome. Her interest in you is an honor. Ah, these stern, virtuous barbarians. They keep their women so closely guarded. She looks still a virgin. She must be." He lifted Regeane's arm. "Such skin she has, white as the finest grainless marble. Touched with only the faintest blush of rose," he rhapsodized. "Certainly she's still a virgin."

"I don't know," Lucilla said, tapping her teeth with a fingernail. "Like all barbarians, she's been out in the weather too much. She's a bit tanned. It isn't fashionable at present."

"Tanned!" the cloth seller cried. He sounded mortally wounded. "She isn't tanned. A touch of the sun brings out the warmer flesh tones." He lifted Regeane's arm, exhibiting it like a trophy. "Look at that golden down, softer than the fur on a newborn kitten. Look how it glows in the sunlight." He must have had a good imagination. The sky was gray. The sun hadn't been seen for weeks. "Think how it would glow by lamplight as she undressed herself in your chamber. Think how delightful it will be to instruct this young foam-born Venus in the first arts..."

Regeane had heard enough. More than enough. She snatched her arm away from the cloth seller, shouting, "What? Are you getting a commission?"

All the men laughed.

"Yes," Lucilla said. "He began waving his arms at me the moment you reached his cart, but don't worry, he's already earned his pay. The man admires you. He has a good eye. Tell me, do you still want to run away?"

Regeane knew what her mother would say. "Pick up your veil, snatch your mantle from the stone street. Flee! This woman is painted vice. The very embodiment of sin." *Yes*, Regeane thought, *and you murdered my father. You murdered a man who loved and trusted you*. In a twinkling, her mother was gone and the wolf looked out at Lucilla.

The woman's brows drew together slightly as if she sensed someone else was present.

A thousand cues flooded Regeane's human-wolf senses. The deceiver smells of anxiety, fear, and decaying body chemicals drench the skin and make the truly unscrupulous stink. Nothing like that here. Only clean soap, warm flesh, woman at the armpits and groin. She didn't trail the nauseating effluvia of sorrow or pain... only peace, silence, but somewhere, grief.

The wolf left. She knew something she hadn't or couldn't tell Regeane, but she registered no disapproval, only a wish for Lucilla's touch. *My*, Regeane thought, *and what have I to look forward to? Only the narrow stone room and an unknown spouse who might be both repulsive and cruel*.

"Well," Lucilla prompted. "Still want to run away?"

"No!" Regeane said. "I will never return home."

"My," Lucilla said. "Such grim resolve. And in one so young. Tell me—"

Hugo, on the other side of the cart, screamed. "The little bitch bit me."

Regeane peered past the mules' rumps at the group of slaves.

Lucilla chuckled. "It appears one of the slaves just bit a customer."

"I know," Regeane said. "My cousin, Hugo."

Lucilla clucked her tongue in polite sympathy. "Too bad."

"Not at all," Regeane said. "I hope she drew blood."

They all peered past the carts at Hugo and the slave dealer.

"Cocksucker!" the slave dealer screamed at Hugo. "Why were you pawing the merchandise if you hadn't the coin to buy."

"You painted, dung-eating pimp!" Hugo shouted as he drew his dagger.

"Oh, no!" Regeane cried, trying to push past Lucilla and her men-at-arms.

"What!" Lucilla snapped, catching Regeane's arm in an iron grip. "Are you mad! Getting involved in a quarrel in a place like this? Whatever my people may have become, little barbarian, they have not quite forgotten they once ruled the world." She shoved Regeane between the two carts and ordered the soldier to stay by her side. The cloth seller and the furniture man immediately jumped down, forming a barrier in front of her.

Regeane held her peace. Lucilla was right. Regeane's interference could do no good. It might rather get her beaten or killed along with Hugo.

Lucilla elbowed the mercenary not occupied with Regeane.

"Hurry," she said. "Go hit that idiot over the head and content the slave dealer with some silver—if it's not too late."

Luckily, Hugo, not the bravest of men, and the slave dealer, who really didn't have the stomach for any fight involving more than words, were still standing about ten feet apart, hurling insults at each other.

Between the two of them, they had a lot of material. Hugo, who could barely carry on a polite conversation in broken Latin, had fluent command of all the vilest obscenities current among the Roman mob. The slave dealer had a hair-raisingly well-furnished vocabulary also.

A crowd was gathering to watch the show and urge the combatants on; each no doubt hoping some particularly exotic insult would be sufficient to prod one or the other of the antagonists into an attack. The situation could turn ugly at any moment.

But Lucilla's man reached Hugo. He smacked him hard on the side of the head with his sword hilt. Hugo staggered. A glassy stare entered his eyes, then they slowly closed. The big mercenary caught him by the back of the shirt and eased him slowly to the ground.

"By the horned one's balls," Lucilla whispered, "thank heaven for small mercies." She strode toward the slave dealer. He was still waving his arms and shouting in a fine Roman fury. Giving him a contemptuous look, Lucilla quelled him with a sentence in street argot too rapid for Regeane to follow, then placed some silver in his hand.

"Which one bit my cousin?" Regeane asked.

The slave dealer looked around at the wretched huddle of women and children that constituted his stock, then immediately began screaming again.

"What's wrong now?" Regeane asked, frightened.

Lucilla sighed. "The little girl's run away." She spat one word at the distraught slave dealer, one Regeane didn't catch, but it brought him up as short as if she'd flung a shovel full of hot coals at his face.

The slave dealer fell to his knees on the cobbles. "I'm ruined," he moaned. "My wife will starve, my children—"

Lucilla made several statements concerning the slave dealer's relations with his wife, added a short discussion about the paternity of his children that made Regeane gasp and blush, then organized a search for the child.

"Why not let her get away?" Regeane whispered to Lucilla.

Lucilla shook her head. "No. Think. Sooner or later she'll be caught by someone. What will happen to her will be worse than what might happen here. It can't be better."

Regeane nodded. She understood the voice of reason. Even the crudest protector might be better than to struggle starving and begging at church doors.

The wolf visited Regeane's eyes and ears. The girl staggered slightly with the shock. The light in the square became intense. Smells an overwhelming experience: wet stone, damp air, musty clothing, perspirations shading from ancient sticky filth to fresh acrid adrenal alarm. A veritable flood of sound changes, but one—the most important one—close by. Rapid, frightened breathing near the cloth seller's cart.

Somewhere, the silver wolf stood. She lowered her head to touch noses with a cub, one yet unsteady on its tiny legs. Trust passed between them. The wolf was satisfied, then gone.

Regeane found her eyes were closed. She open them and pried the three remaining silver coins from her scrip.

The slave dealer was still shouting and tearing his hair.

"I'll buy the girl," Regeane said. "How much do you want for her?"

The slave dealer broke off in mid-screach.

Lucilla said, "What!"

"I said, I'll buy the child," Regeane repeated. "Name a price!" She clutched the silver tightly.

The man's eyes fixed on Regeane, a look of hard calculation in them.

"Wait a minute," Lucilla said. "You're going to buy a runaway slave you've never seen. Are you ill? Let me feel your forehead. You must have a fever."

"No!" the slave dealer shouted. "She must know where the child went. It's a put-up job between you."

Finding the search for the slave girl fruitless, the crowd was beginning to collect around them to watch this new entertainment.

"Where is she, you robber?" the slave dealer screamed at Regeane.

Passion seemed the order of the day. Regeane drew herself up. "Do you want my money or not?" She watched avarice and fury war in the man's face. She gave avarice a little encouragement. "Three silver dinars."

"Done," the slave dealer said.

Regeane slapped the coins into his outstretched palm.

"Where is she, then?" Lucilla asked, hands on hips.

"She's mine," Regeane said. "You're my witness."

"Yes, I'll support you. You're the child's owner. Now, tell us where your property is hidden."

Regeane turned to the cloth seller's wagon. "Come out," she commanded. "Come out now."

The crowd pressed closer. The wagon had been searched, its contents prodded with arms and poles. No one believed the runaway could be there. Laughter could be heard among some of the onlookers.

"Come out," Regeane repeated. "You're safe with me. I'll only like you better for biting Hugo." She glanced over at Hugo. He was sitting up, muttering unintelligibly to himself, and holding his head. Regeane continued. "I have often wished for a... similar—yes, similar is the word—opportunity myself."

The little girl dropped from under one of the dresses hanging from the sides of the cart. She was small enough and strong enough to cling like a small monkey to the inside of the dress and so not be found by the hands poking and prodding the cart's contents. Only Regeane and the wolf heard the rapid breathing.

The child was an unattractive specimen. Her blond hair was matted with filth. Little could be told about her features because the small nose was swollen and two streams of blood ran down, smearing her mouth and chin. She was barefoot. The one garment covering her body was a single torn rag. Her expression was one of mutinous bad temper. Obstinate resistance. Regeane approved.

The little girl muttered, "Hyrrokkin wicca."

Hyrrokkin's witch.

A picture flashed from the wolf's mind to the woman's: a face of unearthly loveliness but so white it

seemed fashioned of snow. Eyes of terror flashing with the myriad pale blues, greens, and blacks of glacier ice. She of the snowy wastes where the foot of springtime never falls. The "never born," older than the gods, witch queen of mountaintops and glaciers locked in eternal winter. She for whom the only proper sacrifice is human, always ready to choose her own victims: unwary wayfarers, travelers among the high passes deceived by fine days, blinded in the whiteout, wandering in circles, mad with terror. At length when they sink exhausted to the snow, her servants, the wolves, claim them. Men say, or perhaps only whisper, "They looked into her eyes."

The little girl was a Saxon. Regeane spoke the language. Even after her father had died, she had a Saxon nurse for many years. "No," Regeane replied in the child's native tongue. "She never leaves her snows."

Regeane pulled off her veil and handed it to the child. "Go wash your face. Come with me. We will be companions."

The child rose slowly. She studied Regeane's face closely. Then ran toward the fountain carrying the veil.

Lucilla stood next to Regeane. She looked puzzled and a bit disapproving. "I don't deal in children, and I have no truck with those who do," she said. One look at Regeane's horrified expression was enough. "Forget I said anything, please," she pleaded.

Regeane and Lucilla followed the child to the fountain. The child had managed to clean off the blood, but the top layer of grime was intact. Regeane washed the child's face vigorously, grumbling, "You're filthy. Have you been looked after at all? My God, the hair is a rat's nest. I can't do anything with it here."

The little girl closed her eyes and accepted the scrubbing with dignity. "I have but one face. Don't wash it off."

"I want to see what you look like under the filth," Regeane said and smiled. "There, little one. That's better. Are you hungry?"

"But of course she's hungry," Lucilla said. "Children are always hungry."

"It doesn't trouble me," the child said stubbornly.

"She's Saxon," Regeane said proudly. "Most of them would die rather than complain."

Lucilla lifted the child's chin, gave her a quick professional appraisal. "Not bad, better than at first sight. A bud, and a green one at that, but she may yet grow into a beauty."

The child jerked away from Lucilla. "I don't want to be beautiful ! I want to be a man. Then I could be revenged on that!" The child stared at Hugo. He was on his feet. The very soldier who'd knocked him out was sympathetically helping him stagger toward the fountain.

"Don't feel too bad about being a woman," Lucilla said, patting the child's head kindly. "Women get their opportunities for revenge, also. Ugh, such hair. She's probably lousey."

"Yes," the child said. "My head crawls and my clothes, too. At home I kept myself clean. I hate this." She shifted her gaze from Regeane's face back to Hugo. "At home," she whispered, "my father would have taught him what it means to lay hands on the daughter of a thane."

Then the child's eyes filled with tears. "I'm crying. I don't want to cry. It's weak to cry, but I want to go

home." The soft wail of grief reached into Regeane's heart past all the layers of caution and indifference into the deepest part of her being.

"It's too far away," the child sobbed. "The ship must have sailed thousands of miles. I'll never see home again."

Home, Regeane thought. *Yes, I, too, would like to go home. At least she knows where hers is. All I have is a name, Wolfstan, and a people who vanished into the forest.*

Disregarding dirt and lice, Regeane held the child against her body and let her cry her grief out. Feeling for the first time since her own mother died, a gentle warmth as the slender arms wound around her and, for a time, clung as if they would never let go.

Lucilla shook her head. "You're kindhearted, I see that already. It's sad, but there are thousands like her. You can't help them all."

"No," Regeane said, "but I can help this one." She moved the child protectively away from Hugo. He was dunking his head in the water and muttering imprecations directed at the general state of the universe. Regeane flicked a contemptuous look at him.

"Coming with me?" Lucilla asked.

"Yes," Regeane replied as she used her wet veil to dry the child's tears.

Lucilla sighed and produced a square of clean linen. Regeane dropped the veil on the edge of the fountain. It landed with a wet plop. She took the clean linen and continued wiping the child's face, whispering, "There, there, little one. It's not so far. Perhaps if your father is a thane we can find—"

Suddenly the square filled with the thunder of hooves.

Lucilla shouted in alarm. Her men-at-arms joined her quickly.

"The militia!" someone cried.

The Roman Militia, the papal guard controlled by Pope Hadrian, was the arm of civil order in the city. It was both respected and feared by the citizens.

"No," Lucilla said softly. "It can't be the militia. I would know. Besides, they never bother with this place." She whispered something to one of her men-at-arms. He promptly vanished into an alleyway. As did several merchants. Others began to gather their stock hurriedly and beat a quick retreat into nearby houses.

Regeane pressed back against the fountain. She felt naked. Her mantle was lying near the cloth seller's cart, her veil sopping wet.

The armed men fanned out and began to search among the carts and tables.

"A curse of piles on the lot of them," Lucilla snarled. "May they itch, burn, and bleed. The bastards are blocking the only exit from the square. Hold the child's hand," she commanded Regeane. "They will think you her mother and a married woman. They seldom bother—"



One of the armed men shouted, "Stop running, fools. We don't want you or your trash."

"Christ!" Lucilla's remaining man whispered. "Basil the Lombard."

Lucilla said, "Don't—"

This was as far as she got. He clapped his hand over her mouth and carried her bodily into the nearest vacant house.

Regeane gasped. The child jerked her arm. "Don't look," she said. "Eyes front. If they see you looking, they'll know where she went." Regeane was terrified and, at the same time, utterly bewildered.

What could men like these want here? They were mercenaries. Their arms and armor proclaimed them the most competent of the violent breed. They sported heavy dark linen tunics under new leather armor. Each man wore heavy cross-gartered leggings. They were chasing the merchants with drawn swords. Top quality hand-forged, hand-filed steel glimmered in the gray light. Dark, oxhide cross-braced shields hung on each man's arm.

The leader—he wore a rich black velvet mantle over his armor and his sword hilt was more ornate than the rest, so Regeane surmised he must be the leader—had reined in at the cloth seller's wagon. He began browbeating the man who crouched near the feet of his horse.

The answers he was getting seemed to satisfy him because he backed his horse and allowed the cloth seller to rise. The man stood trembling, visibly relieved that the powerful warrior ceased threatening him.

He backed his horse again. *God*, Regeane thought, *the creature is beautiful*. It was a Barb of the kind parts of Greece and North Africa were still famous for. White, but with gray at the hooves, tail, and muzzle. A magnificent arched neck, deep chested, muscular but high at the shoulder with long, slender, graceful legs. The slightly darker mane and tail curled magnificently. A stallion. The long member hung in its sheath at the loins.

The horse was restive. Regeane knew why. The wolf was with her as much as she could be by day. The horse knew.

The square had fallen silent as both the people and the mercenaries waited for the leader's commands. The horse stomped and snorted. The man on his back curbed him firmly, pulling his head down. At the same time, his gaze made a circuit of the square.

Regeane caught a good look at his face: superficially handsome. Large, dark eyes, Roman eagle profile, broad strong nose, mouth, and chin. *Oh, no!* she thought. She'd never seen this particular man before, but she'd met the type often enough. They were without mercy or love, existing in absolute selfishness—the very sort she was afraid her future husband might be. The endless wars threw them up the same way a breaking wave foams as it falls.

She had learned in her travels to be utterly wary of them. They didn't reject kindness, caring for another, the sweet gestures of human intimacy; most of them simply didn't know these good things existed. To them, the world was one big, gray passage of human images like the faceless figures on a worn frieze circling some forgotten monument—except that, at times, those faceless figures bled.

A change of expression too brief for reading flickered across his features when he saw Regeane. He turned toward the cloth seller.

Regeane snatched the child's head around and buried it in her skirt so she wouldn't see.

The man spoke negligently, quickly to the soldier at his side. A spear went through the cloth seller's chest. He died, folding into a heap like one of his worn garments. His face showing no fear or pain, only mild surprise.

On the other cart, the furniture seller began screaming and pointing directly at Regeane.

Regeane shoved the child away. "Run!" she shouted. Groping hands pulled the child into the crowd.

The leader of the mercenaries drew his sword, wheeled his horse, and charged straight for Regeane.

The wolf was with Regeane, pouring into her blood, muscles, bones, lending her the beast's strength, the cunning, the absolute concentration of the self-disregarding killer. Pandemonium exploded in the square. Some tried to flee, others to attack with improvised weapons: firewood clubs, axes, hammers, and paving stones.

Regeane stood her ground. Instinctively knowing that if she ran, she would be cut down in a few steps.

Horse and man swept past her in a cloud of leather and sweat smell. His knee slammed into the side of her head, even as he realized he'd thwarted himself. She was on his left, protected by the fountain. He couldn't get a clear swing at her with his sword.

God, what a blow. Regeane staggered, her vision cleared.

The stallion turned with an almost catlike grace and reared, his fore hooves striking down, driving her into the open, away from the fountain.

Regeane leaped to one side into the center of the square. The mercenary laughed, lighter teeth flashing in his weatherbeaten face. Giving him a look of almost childlike delight. He had her now. He was sure.

There was one chance. As the stallion's fore hooves descended, she and the wolf both saw an opening. She darted in toward the horse's head and snatched the bridle at the bit. She pulled her right arm, turning the horse's head too quickly for him to follow. The beast's legs skidded out from under him.

She saw the sword rising from the corner of her eye—then disappear as man and horse fell, landing with a crash beside her. She leaped clear of the thrashing hooves and caught one last look at the expression of stunned disbelief on the man's face.

Mouth like velvet, she thought as she bolted into one of the narrow alleys surrounding the square. It sloped upward like a ramp. From the square came the furious shout, "After her. By Christ's bones, I'll have the bitch's blood."

Hoofbeats clattered echoing on the stone. Regeane went like the wind. The ramp ended in a blank wall.

The entrances of the few houses leading into the alley were baaed by heavy wooden doors, as were the shuttered windows looking down into the gloom.

To her right, the street continued as a flight of stone steps. They were slimed with the eternal Tiber damp and raw sewage from the overlooking houses. The stench choked the wolf, but the woman plunged

headlong up and up. Scrambling, her feet slipping on the filth, Regeane made the top of the steps on all fours.

A shout rang out. Regeane turned. The little Saxon girl was taking the steps two at a time. "Keep running," she cried. "One of them is right behind me."

Regeane did. The child paced her. "Why didn't you run to Lucilla?" Regeane gasped reproachfully.

"Argumentative now?" the child asked. "Punish me later." She passed Regeane and drew ahead.

Shouts and curses rang out as the horseman encountered the steps. Hoofbeats become booted footsteps.

Regeane's heart hammered with terror. The alley was narrowing, no longer wide enough for two to walk abreast. The walls pressed in closer and closer. The street turned—a hairpin turn and ended in—a blank wall.

She spun around, her back against the wall, and looked around desperately. The insulas surrounding the alley were three stories tall... Three stories straight up. Smooth surfaces of narrow terracotta brick up to the cold, gray sky.

The wolf tried to come, tried to draw Regeane into the change and—couldn't. She was too weak. She subsided when she seemed to realize in her dark heart that she was only draining the woman's strength.

The footsteps sounded closer now. Hurrying.

"Hisst!" The voice called from close to her feet. The opening was so clogged with debris, she'd missed seeing it.

"Hurry!" the child's voice called. "If you keep dithering, he'll have you."

"I'm not dithering," Regeane snapped in a hissing whisper. "Is it big enough?"

"Yes... maybe... well, I don't know." This a wail. "I went down so fast, I don't know. But, please—"

The mercenary appeared at the entrance of the cul de sac. Her panicked brain estimated he was approximately three times her size. Another part of her brain presented her with a really gruesome picture of her upper body stuck in the drain while the soldier hacked at her lower body and legs with his sword.

Regeane's hands cleared dead leaves and twigs aside. The wolf, a burrower, made a lightning calculation. Regeane dove for the hole.

With a shout of fury, the warrior leaped after her.

The tunnel was downhill, the walls slippery with slime.

The man's hand closed on her ankle. Regeane screeched and clawed desperately at the inside of the clay drain. It was too slick for a handhold.

Something gripped her hair and yanked. She shot out of the other end of the tunnel like a greased pig, landing right at the feet of the child, leaving one shoe in the soldier's hand.

Shouts, evidence of the man's frustrated rage, echoed in the pipe.

"Let go of my hair!" Regeane ordered as she got shakily to her feet.

The child looked offended. "You are lucky I got as good a grip on it as I did. You're too fussy. You should have jumped in when I told you to." The child tried to look up the drain, still reverberating with the soldier's fury. "Don't worry," she said. "He can't get through until he gets more of his armor off."

"And it won't take him long to do that," Regeane said emphatically as she pulled the child away.

The courtyard was surrounded with two-story insula. Every door and window was closed and barred. Regeane could see no escape.

"Up," the child said pointing to a row of stone balconies that ringed the second story of the houses. The balconies were tiny and shallow, but even in this poor quarter, each sported at least one pot of herbs and flowers. The nearest one held quite a few more. It offered at least a possibility of concealment.

Regeane snatched up the child and boosted her over the rail, then pulled herself up behind her. She tried the shutters with her fingers. Solid planks. She saw bolts at the bottom, middle, and top. No escape there.

The warrior slid out of the drain.

Regeane and the child crouched down behind the flowerpots and tried to make themselves as small as possible. The warrior down below turned in circles, scanning the empty courtyard. He may have discarded his armor, but he carried a large, lethal-looking sword. She remembered the cloth seller and shivered.

"It's no good," she said softly. "He will find us."

She felt the little girl's clutch tighten on her arm. She shook herself free and stood up. He was standing almost under the balcony.

She seized a pot of gray sage sporting long spikes of blue flowers and dropped it on his head. She scored a direct hit, but it didn't do much good. He was wearing his helmet.

He gave a roar of fury and turned, leaping for the balcony rail. He pulled himself up with one hand, sweeping the sword ahead of him to keep her off.

Regeane's fingers closed on the lug handles of a big rosemary jar. She parried the sword's backswing with it. The man's wrist and sword hilt crashed into the jar. The warrior yelled again, this time in pain, and started to drop down.

Regeane was too quick for him. With all her strength, she smashed the bottom edge of the pot into his forehead.

Both man and pot went down, landing with a ringing crash on the flagstones. He rolled over amidst the dirt and broken crockery, getting to his hands and knees.

"Oh, God," Regeane whispered. "No."

"Yes," the little girl said, her mouth set in a tight line. "He's very obstinate." She selected a clay pan of chamomile. This time when the soldier went down, he lay still.

Regeane stood leaning against the rail, gasping for breath and trembling.

"Why do they want to kill you?" the child asked. "What have you done?"

Regeane shook her head. "Nothing," she answered, completely bewildered.

The little girl looked up at her, disbelief written in every line of her features. "You won't tell me then," she said, sounding deeply offended.

"I don't know what to tell you," Regeane said. "Truly I don't."

"Maybe you're right," the child said pensively. "The way I cried in the square, that was shameful and you think me weak." She looked up at Regeane with an expression of almost adult belligerence marred only by a slight protrusion of the lower lip. "But I'm not weak." She climbed over the rail, dropped to the ground, and drew the fallen man's knife.

Regeane scrambled down quickly to join her.

The little girl's fingers were twined in the soldier's hair.

Regeane cried, "No! It's wrong. It's dangerous. You are not yet a free person and I'm a foreign woman. We might be punished."

Crouching beside the man's head, the little girl looked up at Regeane, an expression of disgust on her face. "You are making excuses. A fine protector you'll be. Not even the courage to cut a man's throat. I'd do better on my own."

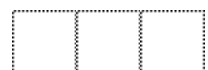
Regeane reflected that, for a number of reasons, this might be true, but she was determined not to let the child take the risk. The consequences were unacceptable. She had seen the grisly punishments visited on slaves.

She snatched up the child's hand and pulled her away from the unconscious man. "No, you will not cut his throat. Come. We'll try to find a way out of—"

Regeane broke off because the child's expression changed suddenly from one of disapproval to one of terror.

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## Chapter Five



"WHAT?" REGEANE ASKED.

The little girl reached inside her dress. She wore something around her neck—a piece of stone on a thong. She clutched it and whispered a low prayer in her own tongue and began to back away quickly.

Regeane heard footsteps. She spun around. A soft whimper of terror rose in her own throat.

The thing half limped, half shuffled toward her. Most of its body was covered by a heavy black cloak and hood, but what Regeane could see was bad enough. It held the hood over the lower part of its face with the stumps of fingers.

Bone protruded from dangling shreds of pale, rotten flesh. Inside the black cloth of the hood, the nose was half eaten away by disease, the septum clearly visible. All around, the silver wolf smelled the stench of death, yet above the horror of the nose, two living eyes stared at Regeane. Eyes that were almost beautiful: large hazel eyes fringed with dark lashes.

"My garden," it whispered. "You've ruined my little garden."

It stopped, dropped to a crouch beside the broken pot of sage, the blue flowers blooming proudly amidst the dirt and shattered clay. It stroked the petals softly with one pale, bony index finger.

"My garden," it keened softly to itself, "my poor little garden. It was all I had left."

"I'm sorry," Regeane stammered, "but the soldier was chasing us."

"You still had no right to ruin Antonius' garden," someone screamed accusingly at Regeane.

The doors to the little piazza were opening. A young woman stood in one of them. Her long hair was hennaed bright red, showing black at the roots. She might have been pretty, but for the big hole in one cheek through which two rows of her teeth could clearly be seen.

A hand lifted Regeane's skirt. Something giggled. She looked down.

It hopped along on the stumps of its legs. The arm attached to the hand was long and simian. The face was dished as if it had been bashed and flattened by a giant club. Mucus flowed from the nose, and drool spilled from a grinning mouth filled with the stubs of yellow teeth.

Regeane gave a stifled shriek and backed away.

The thing followed, reaching, chanting, "Pretty lady. Pretty lady."

She backed into another, but this one only stared at her solemnly, a boy so deformed by his humped back that he scuttled on all fours. His eyes had a vacant stare. She realized as she twisted away from the thing's hands that this one was blind.

They were everywhere, all around her. Every doorway and balcony held one or another twisted obscenity. Some bore the marks of torture and mutilation—noseless, eyeless, ears cropped, hands or feet stumps. Were they alive? Had she fled somehow into a quarter peopled only by the dead?

Regeane felt something clutching at the other side of her skirt. Her body jerked violently; then she realized it was the child clinging to her desperately, face buried in the folds of her gown. She put her arm around the little girl.

"She doesn't like us," the red-haired woman shouted with a shrill laugh. "Who asked you to bring your pretty face here and remind us of what we've lost? Get out." She picked up a piece of broken flowerpot and threw it at Regeane.

They clustered around Regeane, hemming her in, their voices a cacophony of idiot babbling, giggling, and here and there, most frightening, a cry of hatred or rage.

Regeane felt a strange weakness. The wolf was trying to claim her. She sensed the quivering readiness to change, a frisson between the day-to-day world and the drifting wraiths of moonglow.

"For shame." The voice was hoarse, yet commanding. It came from the first one Regeane had seen, the one who had bemoaned the ruin of his garden. He came forward, leaning on a long staff. The lower part of the hood was held up more tightly over the ruined face and now all she could see were those two oddly beautiful eyes gazing at her over the black cloth.

"For shame," he repeated angrily. When he reached Regeane's side, he swung the staff in a wide circle, driving back those who had crowded most closely around Regeane and the child.

"Here is a stranger come among us, seeking courtesy and protection." The hooded head turned and looked at the soldier still lying in a heap on the stones of the street. "Whatever we are," he said quietly, "we cannot be dead to all compassion or humanity. If that passes from among us, what will we become?"

The crowd fell silent. The gentle rebuke of the hooded one seemed to carry great weight among them.

"You, Drusis," he spoke to the legless man, the one who had been trying to lift Regeane's skirt. "Go fetch my brother." He went on sternly. "Wash the rheum from your face. You're not fit for the eyes of a gentle lady."

To Regeane's surprise Drusis looked abashed, hung his head, and hopped away quickly.

Then Antonius turned to Regeane. The clear, calm eyes looked into her own. "Drusis will bring my brother," he assured her, "and he'll be able to lead you out of here. You must pardon the bad manners of my friends. It's not often that an outsider strays into... the house of the dead."

The little Saxon girl peered past the folds of Regeane's skirt up at the hooded figure. "Are you then a dead man?" she asked fearfully.

The eyes shifted from Regeane's face to the child's. "Not quite," he answered, "but the next thing to it. I am a leper."

Regeane felt her knees grow weak, not with terror, but relief. The fear that she'd strayed into a precinct populated by those dim shapes she saw clustered at church porches or near cemeteries was dispelled. Compared with those, the poor deformed outcasts were not terrible, but pitiful.

"Oh," she sighed, "thank God. I... I feared you might be... something else."

The hazel eyes shifted back to her face and, if she wasn't mistaken, the expression in them was one of mild perplexity.

"I believed you a ghost," she explained.



"No," he said calmly. "Soon enough, but not yet. Do you often see such things?"

"Yes," Regeane admitted reluctantly, then qualified her statement. "Well, not so often. Only two or three times a year, but when it happens..."

There was a stir in the crowd. A man pushed his way through.

"What in the world..." he said, then stopped, looking in astonishment at Regeane.

The hooded leper turned to him. "Stephen, my brother, this lady and—" He indicated the child with a quick gesture of his hand. "—her little friend came here pursued by that one over there." He pointed to the soldier, still lying amidst the dirt and shattered pots. "Please, if you would, conduct her to a place of safety."

Stephen was a tall man, lean-faced, with a thatch of gray hair and an equally gray clipped beard which curled crisply at his chin. His dress was as simple as that of the Latin farmers Regeane saw every day driving their cattle and flocks to market, just a brown woolen tunic and sandals. He didn't wear the mantle most of the freeborn men used as an overgarment, but the ancient cloak of the people of the earth, a simple square of cloth with a hole cut out for the head and gathered in at the waist with a belt. Yet aside from his simple garb, there was something about him in the set of his shoulders and the firmness of the mouth under the strong jut of the nose that bespoke one used to authority, used to giving commands and having them obeyed.

"Crysta." He spoke to the woman with the hole in her cheek. "Who does that belong to?"

The woman walked over and looked down at the warrior. "He's one of Basil the Lombard's followers. I can't call his name, but Basil is his master."

"Basil, eh?" A small wrinkle appeared between his brows. "What's he doing here? You, Sixtus, Numerus." He pointed to two men, one who had iron hooks for hands, the other lacking nose, ears, and part of his scalp. "Take that offal and dump it somewhere. I don't want him to wake here." Then he turned to Regeane. "You, my lady, follow me," he said.

"I'll come," Antonius said diffidently to Regeane, "if my presence doesn't offend you?"

"Oh, no," Regeane shook her head. She was still deeply grateful for his rescue.

Then she remembered the few pieces of copper in her scrip. She pulled them out quickly and extended her hand to Antonius with the coins in her palm.

"Here, please take this," she said. "It's for your garden, your flowers. I'm so sorry that we broke the pots, but you'll see. The flowers will grow again."

Antonius didn't move or stretch out his hand to take the money. Instead, his eyes sought his brother Stephen. "The widow's mite," he said. He turned again to Regeane. "I'm well looked after. My brother sees to all my needs. I, in turn, must apologize for being so childish about a few pots."

When Regeane looked at Stephen, she realized that the sternness in his expression had softened into a look of kindness.

Regeane glanced anxiously at the soldier. Stephen's men were dragging him off by the heels. *Rather*

*callous procedure*, Regeane thought. His injured skull bounced along the stones. "Is there any chance I could be called up before the magistrate and accused of... I'm not so worried about myself, but the child... is... she's not yet a free person."

"No," Stephen snapped. "He shouldn't be here at all. Were I not in the service of Christ, I would order his summary execution. The present pope Hadrian had ordered the Lombard faction out of Rome and—"

Antonius broke in with a soft chuckle. "It seems Hadrian hasn't had as much success as he hoped in controlling their activities."

Stephen looked annoyed. "No," he growled. "But I think once Hadrian is aware of the problem, he will be able to take measures."

"Never think it," Antonius broke in, more seriously this time. "The Roman families are still hedging their bets, and likely so are the clergy. Believe it, brother, and be careful," he cautioned.

"What's 'hedging a bet'?" the child asked.

"Hedging a bet," Regeane corrected her and, since she didn't know the answer herself, she shushed the little girl and told her not to ask so many questions.

The child's lip shot all the way out. The small eyes flashed fire. She and Regeane glared at each other. "I only asked one. And besides, my father says the only way to find out anything is to ask questions. So there!"

"She's right," Antonius said. "Questions, answerable or not, are always a necessity. In this instance, 'hedging a bet' refers to the last pope who was dominated by the Lombard party in Rome. The present pope, Hadrian, has declared his independence from the Lombard duke Desiderius and expelled his man, Paul Afartha, from the city. Basil was Paul Afartha's captain. Many of the poor wretches you see here were afflicted by nature, but others suffered at the hands of Paul and Basil. Their sin was belonging to the wrong party. So far as hedging bets is concerned, the Romans are still not sure if Hadrian's policies will be successful. In other words, they fear the present pope may fall under the influence of the Lombards, also. So they are trying to be very careful not to offend anyone."

"But what has this to do with me?" Regeane asked, distressed.

"Brother," Antonius whispered. "If we could go inside and sit down, I would be deeply grateful. These days I find heat and cold both difficult to bear. And even walking a few steps tires me." The words were spoken serenely without any touch of whining or self-pity. Regeane realized they were the simple truth.

"I'm sorry," Stephen said penitently. "And I'm forgetting my duties as a host."

Regeane would have scorned to beg for herself, but she knew the child must be hungry. The girl looked very much as if the slave dealer probably starved her in an attempt to break the independent little spirit. "Please, sir, if you could find a bit to eat for the child."

"I think we might find something for both of you," Stephen said. "Come this way."

Stephen led the way, Antonius shuffling after them across the piazza.

She followed him into a church, a small place, rather bare like most of the chapels serving the poor

people of Rome .

The blank whitewashed stucco walls had only a few narrow windows that let in long shafts of light. Its only adornment was a fresco wrapped around the sanctuary, framing the altar with its worn canopy and bare marble surface.

The painting depicted a meadow at dawn. The green grass was bejeweled with spring flowers. The ruby cups of poppy, bluebells, delicate violet, wild basil, and over them all, glowing amethyst and gold, the first magical light of sunrise.

Illuminated by an opening in the top of the cupola above the altar, the scene filled the simple little church with the fragrance of a spring morning and the freedom of wide vistas under the open sky.

"It's dawn," Regeane said.

"No," Antonius said behind her. "Sunset. I know. I painted it. It's easy to mistake sunset for dawn. The light is almost the same."

"How wonderful to be able to make something so beautiful," the little girl said.

"Hush," Regeane said, remembering the condition of Antonius' hands, the white stubs of bone protruding from the flesh.

"It's all right," Antonius said. "She doesn't understand."

Regeane was leading the little girl through the church. The child stopped and pulled back against her.

"What don't I understand? If I don't understand something, I want it explained to me so I do understand it." Her small face had a mulish expression and the lower lip was protruding again.

"Come along," Regeane said, embarrassed, "and stop being a nuisance."

The child tested her strength against Regeane's firm grip on her arm and decided that dignified progress was better than being dragged.

"It is one of those things that I'm supposed to wait till I'm older to know. People are always telling me that! If they'd only explain, I'd understand now!"

Regeane heard a chuckle behind her and realized that Antonius wasn't offended.

"She can't be yours," he said. "You're too young."

"Of course I'm not hers," the little girl said indignantly. "I'm a Saxon. She's a Frank. Can't you tell the difference?"

"Whatever you are," Stephen said, "you're a handful."

They were near the altar by now. Stephen pushed open a door in the wall and ushered Regeane into what she knew must be his living quarters.

She was suddenly conscious of her own disheveled state. Her mantle was gone. She remembered with a

shiver the cloth seller lay bleeding to death on it. She didn't think she'd want it back. She'd used the worn veil as a wash rag. She'd dropped her shoes—one pulled off by her pursuer, the other falling as she climbed into the balcony. She looked down and wiggled her toes. The dress she wore, threadbare to begin with, was stained and spattered with the filth of the streets and the slime of the tunnel. Her hair clung to her scalp, matted by sweat and dirt.

The room was immaculately clean, and though sparsely furnished, its appointments might have come from one of the beautiful patrician villas that guarded the city.

An alcove at one end of the room held a curtained bed. It was, as most Frankish beds were, a wooden box that served as container for the feather tick and quilt. But the coverlet had the sheen of silk and the simple design that bordered it was picked out in golden thread. The linen of the bedsheets and curtains was bleached to snowy whiteness and edged as simply as the coverlet, but with cut lace, the eyelets embroidered in silk.

A table stretched the length of the room. Regeane's first impression was that it was very old and her second that it must have once graced a palace. Oak and iron-hard with a satiny gleam, the surface inlaid with curving ivory acanthus leaves.

The benches that stretched the length of it were of equal quality, and decorated with ivory in the same pattern.

At one end of the table near a fireplace set into the stone wall stood a high-backed carven chair before a bookstand. The book on it was a big one, and Regeane's eye caught the gleam of bright gold and blue illumination on the parchment.

One piece of furniture in the room stood out by virtue of the fact that it didn't match the quality of the rest. A simple wooden bench with a straw cushion at the end of the table opposite the high-backed chair.

Antonius limped into the room behind Regeane and shuffled toward it, explaining, "That's mine, so that when..." He paused for a poignant second, poignant because Regeane understood what he did not say. "When I no longer need it, it may be burned."

He moved with difficulty as if in pain. Regeane sensed that the time to burn the bench might come soon.

His Latin speech was clear and beautiful, closer to the language of the Caesars than the argot spoken in the streets of Rome. Clean, precise, the accent that of a wellborn and well-educated man, though strangely slurred. Regeane didn't like to think of the condition of the lips from which the words issued.

The voice may have been young, but his movements were slow, painful, and unsteady as if he dragged himself along by an effort of will. His brother's eyes rested on him with so much love and resigned sadness. They spoke more clearly than any words the certainty of Antonius' doom.

Regeane and the child hesitated in the doorway.

Antonius paused beside the bench. "Please come in. You need not fear any contagion. While in this room I sit only on my bench and handle nothing that is my brother's. He is not infected and never has been, though I and the other unfortunates who dwell here are in his care."

"Oh, no," Regeane cried. "It's not that." She looked down at her tattered dress and the child's matted hair. "Our own state is..."

"We are dirty," the little girl said flatly, "and we're sorry, but we had no time to be particular. We were running for our lives. The slave dealer who had me wouldn't let me wash. He kept me chained up. He was afraid I'd run away. He was a bad man, though he was right. I would have run away if I'd gotten a chance. And," she said, looking up at Stephen, her dark blue eyes defiant, "I am not a handful. My father always said I was a good, obedient child. And I am."

Antonius chuckled again, the sound muffled by the heavy mantle.

Stephen suppressed a smile and showed them to a small scullery where Regeane and the child did their best to repair some of the damage wrought by their flight. They had clean hands and faces when they returned to the other room.

Stephen set wine, bread, and yellow cheese before them, then sat down in his big chair at the head of the table, taking only a little watered wine for himself.

At the sight and smell of the food Regeane realized she was ravenously hungry. It was all she could do to keep from bolting it down. Only when she'd taken the worst edge from her hunger and relaxed, sipping the wine, did Stephen begin to question her.

"Now, why was Basil the Lombard chasing you?" he asked.

"She wouldn't tell me," the little girl said. "Maybe she'll tell you."

Regeane was annoyed. "I can understand your skepticism, but don't carry it too far. I am truthful in most matters. We both know what is generally said of liars."

The child shot her a glance. "I stand corrected," she said stiffly. She sniffed and applied herself to the food.

"Brother," Antonius said, "I don't think you need to look any further than her lovely face. Basil saw her and—"

"No," Regeane broke in. "He tried to kill me, charged at me sword in hand to strike me down."

"How did you escape?" Antonius asked.

"That was wonderful," the little girl said. "She caught the horse at the bit and pulled him down. I've heard of that warrior's move," she said enthusiastically, "heard my father's men talk of such things, but never before seen it done."

"Who are you?" Stephen asked. "The child said you were a Frank. What is your name?"

Regeane turned toward him. "Regeane, daughter of Gisela and," she hesitated, then said proudly, "Wolfstan."

"Gisela the Pepined?" he asked.

"Yes," Regeane answered.

"You are betrothed to Maeniel, the outlander. No wonder Basil wanted to kill you." Stephen sat back

on the chair. He looked horrified. "What is a lady of *your rank* doing wandering around the streets of Rome unescorted and in the thieves' market of all places!" He looked outraged.

"I was trying to buy a dress," Regeane stammered. "You see, we're very poor and... his name is Maeniel, then? Gundabald didn't tell me his name. He only said he was a mountain lord."

"Yes," Stephen answered. "Something of a man of mystery, this Maeniel, but he holds a fortress that commands a pass through the Alps."

"A very powerful position," Antonius said. "The king of the Franks has bestowed an important match on you."

"I don't understand," Regeane said. "What has that to do with Basil?"

Stephen pushed his chair back from the table. "You need not concern yourself with such things, girl. Tell me where your uncle lodges. I'll call two of my men. They'll see you return there safely. Don't stick a hand or foot out of doors until I have a chance to drop a word in the ears of a few of my friends and see to it that Basil is driven out of the city."

"No!" Regeane shouted, jumping up so quickly she almost overset the bench. "I'm not going home. As for this Maeniel, he can find some other woman to marry. Today in the square I met a woman named Lucilla. She—"

"What is this nonsense!" Stephen shouted, slamming his fist down on the table. "Lucilla! Are you so foolish, so naive as not to know what Lucilla wants of you?"

Regeane faced him, chin lifted defiantly. She groped for the Saxon girl's hand, caught hold of it, and said, "I'm neither foolish nor naive. I know exactly what Lucilla wants of me, but it's better than being sold to some man who'll hate me. Living my life in fear, afraid to eat and drink..."

Stephen stared up at her in astonishment. "What fancies are these? Who's been stuffing your head with foolishness? How can you despise an honorable match and turn to a courtesan like Lucilla?"

"Regeane," Antonius said, half rising from his bench. "Stop shouting and sit down. No one here will force you to do anything."

Regeane turned toward him. He still held the mantle up over his face, but the dark eyes above it looked up calmly and compassionately into hers. "And," he said turning to his brother, "I do not find her evident terror at this match to be unfounded. Consider the situation of Desiderius' daughter. That marriage was also hailed as a brilliant one, securing peace and amity between two great kingdoms. How did it end? The girl was sent home, driven from her husband's bed disgraced, her reputation ruined. She was the daughter of a Lombard duke. There are other frightening stories. At times the women fared even worse. Regeane's not a child. No child successfully escaped Basil and—"

The Saxon girl piped up proudly. "She dumped him to the ground. The horse kicked like mad. The warrior cursed and shouted. Everyone began fighting. I crawled through people's legs and escaped."

Stephen sat back in the chair and shaded his face with a hand cupped at his forehead, but Regeane could see he was smiling.

"Very well," he said, dropping his hand to the table and looking back at Regeane. "As usual my brother

is right. He nearly always leads me back to the path of wisdom when I stray from it. These things should be discussed calmly, rationally, so sit down. No one will force you into anything."

Regeane sat; her knees still trembling.

Stephen leaned forward and folded his fingers together. "What do you know of politics, girl?"

Regeane shook her head. "Almost nothing."

"Good," he said. "Then I won't have any silly misconceptions to clear up. So listen; this is how it stands. Rome, the once-proud mistress of the world, is now fallen on evil times."

"So I noticed," Regeane said.

"Yes," Stephen said, the dark eyebrows rising. "It doesn't take a genius. The city is two-thirds ruined, its inhabitants struggling with poverty and intermittent food supplies. The magnificent aqueducts my ancestors built are cut off. Even fountains which until recently ran pure water are dry. We are nearly powerless, placed as we are between two great powers—the duchy of Spoleto and the kingdom of the Lombards. Either one of which, I might add, would be happy to gobble us up, sit in the rubble, and pick their teeth with our bones. What prevents them, girl?"

Regeane looked at the shrewd face with a feeling of surprise. She wasn't used to being talked to in this way by distinguished gentlemen. "Respect for the Holy Church," she hazarded.

Stephen gave a hollow laugh. "No, my dear. The Franks do."

Regeane was bewildered. "How can the Franks keep them from conquering you? They are far away."

"But very powerful," Stephen said, "and both Desiderius and the duke of Spoleto fear them. And it's very much in the Frankish king's best interest to secure the Alpine passes. If he doesn't, he could wake up some fine spring morning to find himself with a Lombard army at his back. So you can see why Desiderius would like to prevent a marriage between a woman of the royal house and this mountain lord, Maeniel. Basil is, as his name implies, a confidant, servant, and friend of Desiderius, king of the Lombards."

"I still can't understand why I'm so important," Regeane said. "Couldn't the king simply find another lady to wed this Maeniel?"

"Yes," Stephen said, "but these are matters of some delicacy and, in the meantime, Desiderius, seeing this Maeniel uncommitted, might begin other maneuvers to bring him into the power of the Lombard kingdom. Besides, in some ways you're ideal for Charles' purposes."

Regeane looked away from Stephen and down at the bread in her hand. She crumbled a little of it with her fingers. "My family is poor, you mean, and I have no proud kinfolk to object to such a match. And I am no great beauty, so..."

"On the contrary," Stephen said, "it was of your youth and beauty that I was thinking when I said you were ideal."

"'Whey-faced' and 'flat-chested' were the terms my Uncle Gundabald used."

"Indeed," Stephen said. His eyes hardened and his mouth drew into a tight line. "Did he? Why, pray tell,



did he say such a thing to a maiden who is so soon to be married?"

Regeane looked up at his face. Something in it and the way he asked the question frightened her. She thought, *This man has power*. She didn't know what kind of power or how much, but there was in his expression the absolute self-assurance of a ruler.

"He would like me..." She faltered, realizing she didn't dare communicate Gundabald's plans to these men. "To help him... He feels this lord should be grateful for the marriage..."

Stephen's eyes narrowed. "I begin to like this Gundabald less and less, and I haven't even met him."

"What a cruel insult," Antonius spoke up softly, "and not true."

Regeane turned toward him. His beautiful eyes were fixed on her. The shadow of an almost forgotten hunger shone in them.

"You have not the matron's blossom, but the maiden's pliant grace. The air of springtime hangs about you. You are a bud, velvet petals as yet unfolding, the golden fruitfulness of its heart untouched by the sun of love."

The compliment was so beautifully spoken, so gently turned, that Regeane's palms flew to her cheeks.

"In other words," Stephen said, "there are many things about you that would tend to endear you to a husband—beauty, youth, and the ability to cement his relations with the royal house and legitimize his position."

"Besides," Antonius said softly, "you are not as unprotected as you may believe."

"How so?" Regeane asked.

"Charles is a very powerful king. He personally arranged this marriage. If word were to reach his ears that you were badly treated by your husband, he might see such behavior as an affront to his honor. And, my dear, Charles is not a man I would care to insult."

Regeane shook her head. "But Charles doesn't know me and besides, Gundabald said he—my husband—likely had the morals of a jackal and he probably has other women he'll prefer to me. And I'll be poisoned..." To her own horror, Regeane felt tears start in her eyes. "I'm sorry, but don't you see? I can't live on fruit and spring water..."

"Stop yammering," the child snapped. "You are making a fool of yourself and convincing these men you are a coward when really you're *redauntless*, like me. Besides you can't get married."

Antonius cocked his head to one side. "Why not?"

"She has no breasts, and you can't get married without breasts, because you can't catch a man."

Regeane made distance from misery to mortification in one leap. "What!" she shouted.

Stephen turned his face away and Antonius pulled the cow! down over his eyes.

"Are you bent on embarrassing me?" Regeane asked furiously to the child. "How dare you..."

"Wait!" Stephen said. "Don't be angry. She is a child and has a child's frankness. We understand." He grinned wickedly. "I would like to know more of this matter of breasts."

Antonius had himself under control and cautioned, "Brother..."

Regeane turned her face away.

The child spoke animatedly to Stephen. "My cousin, Matilda, came to visit us. She was to be married. My aunt stood her up next to me and I was taller."

"Mmmm," Stephen said. "So?"

"Well, they said it was a disgrace I was so big and flat-chested and ran around and played like a boy and if I didn't stop growing soon and get some breasts, I would never marry." The child stopped and took a deep breath. "I asked them what I needed breasts for and they said I couldn't get married without them. I said I hoped I would never have any there, but later on I cried. But my father said I should not worry about breasts yet. He said they were not important. What was important, he said, was to be truthful in all matters of consequence."

"Yes," Antonius said. "We are allowed tact, kindness, and excuses, are we not?"

"You mean like saying you're busy when you're on the pot?"

Antonius nodded.

"And, he said to give one's word sparingly, but once given to always keep it, for good or ill."

"True," Stephen said.

"And," the child sighed, "to be dauntless in battle. She is," the child indicated Regeane, "and so am I." She ended proudly, "You know, though, I still don't understand about breasts."

"Well, don't ask these men about the matter," Regeane said acidly. "Wait until we're alone and I'll explain it to you." The child subsided. "She's still innocent," Regeane said. "I can't bring her home with me. She bit Hugo and he hit her in the face. God knows what he'd do to her. No, I know what he'd do to her and the fact that she's a child wouldn't make a bit of difference to him. I won't bring her back and let him get his hands on her."

"Very bad," Antonius said. "Brother, can't you see how much damage is being done here? Her relations are terrorizing this girl. And Regeane, I believe you understand why."

"Yes," Regeane said bitterly. "They are very poor and want my help in extorting money from my husband."

Stephen nodded his head. "What will they do with the money if they get it?"

Regeane shrugged. "What they do now—spend it drinking and wenching in every taverna and brothel in Rome. They boast of my future husband's wealth, saying the mere mention of his name opened the moneylenders' purses immediately."

Regeane bit her lip. She'd made her decision last night. Her fear was that this Stephen, whoever he was, might have the authority to return her by force. If so, she wasn't going to place herself in the position of having them tell Gundabald to take measures against her running away. Still, she was more afraid for the child than herself. A night with Hugo and the little girl would wake up far less sure of the ultimate goodness of the world than she was now. First, Regeane had to secure her safety.

"Please," she continued, "place the child in the Saxon colony in Rome and I will return peaceably to my uncle if you wish."

"No," Antonius exclaimed decidedly. "No. Brother, look at this lady. She arrived hungry and the dress she's wearing would not do credit to the lowest maid in an honorable house, much less to a lady of rank. And, Regeane, whatever my brother decides about you, the child may remain here among us. Many here are not infected with disease. They are the victims of Paul Martha's cruelty. That woman, Crysta, has a bitter tongue, but a kind heart. She will look after her."

Regeane felt a wave of relief wash over her. She was sure, and oddly the wolf was also certain, that with Antonius' protection, the little one would be safe, even here.

"I don't know," Stephen said slowly. "The men in her family are her legal and traditional guardians."

The sigh Antonius gave rippled the covering over his mouth. "All my life, your face and only one other have been the fairest I have ever looked upon. When I wander among the shades I will ask the gods to remember only you two. But, Brother, there are times when, dealing with you, I feel I'm facing a talking law book."

"If this mountain lord comes to Rome and finds his bride in her present neglected condition, he is more than likely to believe she has been discarded by her royal kin and the marriage was intended not as an honor, but a cruel jest. He may rebuff her and turn to the Lombards. Brother, I beg you, don't allow your scruples to override your common sense. Send the girl to Lucilla."

Stephen stared thoughtfully at Antonius. "Lucilla is an old friend. She'll do as I ask."

Regeane looked quickly from one to the other. "I don't understand you. Only a few moments ago you spoke as if Lucilla were a woman of... the streets; her home a house of... ill repute."

Stephen waved a hand at Regeane in a gesture of negation. "No. No, not at all. Lucilla's ladies aren't streetwalkers and never become so. They usually go to her as virgins and, after some training, she places them discreetly in the arms of one protector or another where often they remain for many years. Not a few eventually marry quite respectably."

"That sounds heavenly," Regeane said. "I wish I were so free."

"Well, you aren't," Stephen said harshly. "Your marriage is in a minor way dynastic and the king of the Franks must understand that we—"

"Brother!" Antonius exclaimed sharply.

Regeane glanced from one man to the other again. Stephen had been about to reveal a secret, and Antonius had prevented him.

"Ah," Stephen continued, "my brother and I are of a noble house. We are well connected. I'll write a

letter to Lucilla explaining the situation. She's a woman of intelligence and, as I said, a friend of mine. She'd be the first to understand the importance of this match to both you and the city. Lucilla is a staunch supporter of the Holy See." Stephen smiled a quick, rather strange smile and gave Antonius a meaningful look. "As I am, my dear."

"Now, as for the child, tell me your name, little one, and your father's. There are many Saxons living here in Rome. I can inquire among them. It's possible that someone here knows your family."

The child gave Regeane a reproachful look.

"Oh, God, yes," Regeane cried. "I knew I was a fool when I bought her from the slave dealer, but, you see, she bit Hugo and I—"

"Wished to bite him yourself," the little girl finished the sentence for her.

Regeane's cheeks began to burn again. She glanced down angrily at the child. "I did not say that," she exclaimed, then added equivocally, "well, not exactly..." Her whole face flamed. She was sure her cheeks were scarlet. "Must you repeat everything you hear?"

The small face looked up at her. The blue eyes were pools of reproach. The lower lip was extended again. "Why not, if you're going to abandon me like a pregnant cat?"

"A what?" Regeane snapped.

"My father says that the three most annoying things in the world are a drunken man, a shrewish woman, and a pregnant cat. He says everyone wants to be rid of them. He told me when he tied a strip of leather around our tomcat's things. You know," she said, "the little furry things they have in the back."

Regeane's face felt incandescent. "Oh, God," she said, "for heaven's sake, hush." She was afraid to look at the two men.

"Why should I hush?" the child protested. "Everyone knows about cats. They are very lecherous beasts. He was right, though. There were no litters for a while, but then they started back and my father said she must have found another friend. I asked him why our tomcat didn't defend his honor, but he said—Ouch!" Regeane kicked her hard in the ankle.

"What did I do now?" the child asked in an aggrieved voice, clutching her bare foot.

Regeane glanced quickly and covertly at Stephen and Antonius.

Antonius was looking down. The black mantle covered most of his face, but his shoulders were shaking. Stephen's hand was up, hiding a smile.

Regeane glared down at the child. "Stop going on about cats and breasts and all manner of foolishness. Tell us your name," she said between her teeth, "and tell us now! Do you hear me?"

"Oh, all right. I was just getting to that. Elfgifa."

"Elfgifa," Stephen said.

"And your father?" Regeane asked.

"Eanwolf. He's one of the king's thanes," she said proudly.

"Thank you, Elfgifa," Stephen said. "If your father is an important man, it's likely that one of the Saxons living here in Rome will know of him and we can return you to your kin. Your lady doesn't mean to abandon you, but she has responsibilities of her own and must consider them." He spoke gravely, graciously as if to an adult.

The child nodded.

Stephen rose. "Now," he said to Regeane, "I'll see about sending you to Lucilla. And," he said gently to Elfgifa, "when you see Lucilla, be sure to ask her about breasts. She will explain their function and importance." A shadow of the wicked smile returned to his face. "You may tell her I told you to apply to her for the information."

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## Chapter Six



A FEW HOURS LATER, REGEANE SOAKED IN A POOL in the tepedarium at Lucilla's villa. Lucilla sat on the side of the pool, studying her with open admiration. "What a pity. I had the perfect man in mind for you. He's a little old. In fact, he's very old, but a realist, my dear. He knows you wouldn't share his bed for the joy of it. You'd be showered with presents and, if you're as discreet as you are lovely, you could easily end by being a wealthy and influential woman."

Regeane rolled over on her back and floated in the warm water, looking up at the ceiling of the bath. Plugs of thick glass set in the domed ceiling let in a soft, diffuse, yet brilliant light. She felt perfectly relaxed and happy. A half hour ago when she'd arrived, she'd been weeping and half hysterical with relief to find Lucilla not only alive, but well, and in fine fettle.

"We truly settled those devils! The temerity of it, that rat Basil coming to Rome in despite of the pope. The Papal Guard arrived. I sent men after you and the child, but they couldn't find any trace of where you'd gone."

"I'm sorry I seemed to desert you. Evoie, the captain of my guard, became frightened when he saw Basil. He was convinced it was an assassination attempt by the Lombards. He was right, but he had the wrong woman in mind."

A delegation of Lucilla's maids arrived and collected Elfgifa. They oohed and aahed over her. The most knowledgeable of them, Susanna, pronounced her beautiful, which Regeane was sure secretly pleased Elfgifa. Then they all agreed she needed a thorough scrubbing and new clothes.

Elfgifa asked the question Stephen had told her to ask.

Everyone, including Lucilla, found it hysterically funny. They departed, whooping with laughter, taking Elfgifa with them to be bathed, fed, dressed, and cosseted.

To Regeane, it seemed as if she were now caught in the matrix of some glowing jewel. The pool was of gray polished marble, the floor surrounding it peach, the walls of alabaster marble inlaid with green porphyry, each inlay shaped into fantastic trees and tall ferns.

The water swirled around her, cradled her, soothing away her fears and relaxing the tension in her muscles. She floated in delightful, languorous peace.

"I think it's the most beautiful place I've ever seen," she told Lucilla. "I didn't know people lived in such surroundings, enjoyed such luxury. I thought only churches were decked in glowing stone, cut and polished with such exquisite care."

Lucilla smiled at Regeane's artless admiration. "Oh, yes. Some did and a few still do. It's said that this villa was built by the Emperor Hadrian for a favorite of his—whether boy or woman, I can't say. But he intended a quiet retreat, small, where he could come and relax without being surrounded by the hordes of courtiers, hangers-on, supplicants, and other nuisances."

"He made a wonderful thing," Regeane said muzzily, closing her eyes and drifting in the blood-warm water.

"Did he?" Lucilla scanned the room with a slightly cynical expression.

The change in her tone made Regeane open her eyes and look inquiringly up at her face. "Didn't he?"

"What if I told you that once the hypocaust that heated these baths was fired by slaves who never saw the sun from one end of the year to the other. Men, and perhaps women, to whom even the simplest of human joys were denied. Since the water must always be kept warm to await their master's pleasure, those slaves had no rest from their labors."

Regeane rolled over with a splash and stood.

"I'm sorry." Lucilla smiled with gentle malice. "Did I spoil your fun?"

"Yes."

The water was shallow, coming up to Regeane's shoulders.

She paddled over to where Lucilla sat. The beautiful room seemed suddenly darkened by horror.

Regeane rested her arms on the edge of the pool. Lucilla reached down and gathered Regeane's long hair together and coiled it into a knot at the neck.

"My pleasure isn't worth such suffering," Regeane said.

Lucilla laughed. "Don't worry, little one. That was long ago. Now, my men are paid extra to fire the hypocaust and they're always happy to do so. They spend the money in the wineshops and bordellos of Rome. This world is better than that of the ancients. I only wanted to make the point that all this beauty and luxury aren't conjured up by magic. There's always a price to be paid."

Lucilla, naked as Regeane was, slid into the water behind her and began washing her hair, scrubbing Regeane's scalp with her fingers and then smoothing out the tangles with a steel comb.

Regeane rested her cheek against the cool marble at the edge of the pool and submitted to Lucilla's ministrations. She shifted when Lucilla's fingers fell from her head and began gently to caress her breasts.

"I see—the price," Regeane said.

"No," Lucilla said with a soft laugh. "Not at all. You come highly recommended. Stephen is..." Lucilla paused. "A powerful man. A powerful protector. You need not love me or even allow me to make love to you."

She finished with Regeane's hair and draped the long coil of it over her shoulder. She was behind her, breasts pressing against Regeane's back, her belly against the soft curve of her buttocks. Lucilla's head drooped forward, lips near Regeane's ear.

"You needn't accept my love, little one, but do accept it. For know my love can't hurt you. I can't make you pregnant, can't enslave you into a marriage you hate. I can't even take that oh-so-marketable virginity of yours." Lucilla laughed softly. "I haven't the equipment."

Deep in Regeane's brain, the silver wolf stirred, and woke, rising from the abyss of primal darkness to welcome the pleasure brought by Lucilla's touch. The beast, aflame with life's sweetest happiness, is innocent of man's fall from grace. De-sire burned in the wolf. Desire without conscience, memory, or regret.

Regeane yielded to the wolf as she had to Lucilla's touch. They were one and the same. Her head slipped back to rest, eyes closed, against Lucilla's shoulder while the long fingers explored her body.

"Come," Lucilla whispered, guiding Regeane toward the flight of steps at the end of the pool. "Come out of the water where my kisses can delight you."

They lay together on linen towels beside the pool. True, Lucilla was no longer young, but she was beautiful, skin soft, muscles firm and taut, belly flat and tight, her big breasts upright, ripe, and full.

Only her hands and face showed her age—the soft pleating of the skin of her wrists and the sadness of her eyes as she bent over Regeane's young body.

"Ah, what torment. Why do I torment myself so?" she whispered.

"What torment?" Regeane asked as she reached up with her own hands, trying to give back some of the exquisite pleasure wrought by Lucilla's gentle, sure fingers.

"Hush," Lucilla murmured, lowering her mouth to Regeane's breast. "Be still. Love me. Let me love you."

Regeane felt the wolf, strong in her, whimpering deep in her throat as her body seemed to ignite into a quivering fire of pleasure.

The moisture flowed between her legs, rich, warm and sweet, as Lucilla's mouth reached down, lips parted, tongue red between her teeth for that final, most intimate kiss of all.

Later, they dressed in Lucilla's chamber. Lucilla handed Regeane a transparent silken tunic, then began slipping her own arms into another just like it.

"What happened to my clothes?" Regeane asked.



"Phew. Those rags. I burned them." Lucilla covered her own tunic with a stola of soft, white linen, embroidered with gold at the neck and hem.

Regeane donned the tunic, then looked down at herself. "I can't walk around like this. It's... indecent."

Lucilla smiled. "No. I have a stola for you, too, but first I want to show you something."

Lucilla's room was as most Roman bedrooms, very simple, unadorned, the walls whitewashed. Her large bed of cedar inlaid with gold was the only departure from the norm. It was comfortably appointed with a goose-down tick, lush pillows, and bleached linen sheets and hangings.

She noticed the direction of Regeane's gaze and said, "Yes. You northern barbarians have taught us Romans a few things. Bless you for it. You sleep more comfortably than we do."

Then she turned to Regeane, the appeal in her eyes wistful, almost sad. She touched Regeane's cheek gently. "Share that bed with me tonight, my pretty one."

Regeane took the soft hand between her palms and kissed it. Unaccountably, there were tears in her eyes. "I thought I'd never know love, but today you showed me what it is. I'm glad you still want me, glad I wasn't too... clumsy."

"Clumsy?" Lucilla freed her hand from Regeane's grasp and, taking her face between her palms, kissed her softly on the lips. "Inexperienced, perhaps. Experience comes with time. But clumsy? No. No. Never clumsy, my sweet one, but come."

There were two crowns of flowers on the bed resting on the coverlet. White lilies and roses were woven together with rosemary and thyme.

Lucilla placed one on Regeane's head, then led her to one end of the room where a strip of tapestry covered the wall. She pulled a cord and the tapestry leaped aside.

Regeane looked at herself. She had never seen herself, not all of herself. The figure that looked back was beyond her reckoning of beauty, beyond her wildest dreams.

The face, crowned with flowers, was a soft oval; the eyes of melting tenderness, their depths both gold and luminous black; lips brushed with the blush of rose petals; her skin reflected the pallor of the lilies with its fresh velvety softness.

Her body was as Antonius had said, slender, but with the tightly furled slenderness of the bud almost ready to burst into bloom; small breasts tipped in pink, high and pressing against the silken gown; the dark pubic triangle below a mystery of desire and fruitfulness.

Regeane stretched out her hand until it almost touched the silver mirror; surely the girl-woman standing before her must be a painting, could not be real, could not be herself.

But the fingers of that outstretched hand mimicked the movement of her own aim and her reaching fingers brushed the polished silver surface of the mirror.

Lucilla stood nearby, her smile like the serpent offering the apple to Eve.

"Gundabald lied," Regeane said.

"Your uncle?"

"Yes. He told me I was ugly."

"Pimp!" Lucilla spat the word and stroked the long spill of hair on Regeane's shoulders. "That's what pimps do—lie to the girls they sell. Degrading them for losing their honor. Saying 'Only I could love you,' so that they despise themselves and so are easier to buy and sell. But I don't pimp. My women know their worth."

"Ah, I should love to lead you forth to a banquet. I would invite the sons of Rome's best families to amuse myself by watching them vie for the honor of being the first to possess you, the first to embrace you. None knowing that I have come before all the rest. But enough." Lucilla drew back. She jerked on the cord and the tapestry covered the mirror again.

"What we experienced today is but the *gustato*, the appetizer before the banquet. This is to teach you how to be delighted. I will train you in the arts of pleasing him and yourself. And, last of all, in the most delicate task—that of teaching him to be your enduring source of boundless pleasure. But come, this is the time of day I love most. We'll sit together in the atrium, take the air, and watch the sun set. It's best not to gaze too long into a mirror. In your case it might lead to an excess of vanity, in mine, my dear, despair."

"You're beautiful," Regeane said as they strolled together along the gravel path that edged the atrium pool.

"Yes," Lucilla said. "I believe there's something left of what I was when I was your age. And doubtless I could still ensnare a lover or two, but I've reached the time of life when I value my leisure, my quiet evenings in the garden alone or in the company of a good friend. I'm rich enough to indulge myself."

She paused beside the fountain that fed the pond. A bronze nymph, green with age, poured clear water across a fall of stone, crusted with emerald moss, into the long, still pool. The water reflected the changing hues of the evening sky, now a sheet of gold as the sun-struck clouds drifted across the surface, shading into the turquoise and violet at the approach of darkness.

The villa garden was a dream of beauty. Iris, purple and yellow, bloomed at the edge of the water, clumps of lavender, and, here and there, the arching stems of the rose *opaeatum* still bore large pink flowers.

The beds, arranged against the back of the house, held sun-loving herbs—yellow-crested yarrow, small-flowered fragrant chamomile, large-leafed basil, and tall scarlet-flowered sage. Climbing the pillars of the porch were the tall thorny stems of the Eglantine rose, heavy with the scarlet rosehips of autumn.

The gentle fragrance of each herb bathed them as they passed. Here and there, Lucilla stopped to brush a leaf gently with her fingers and drink in the perfume. She remarked that it was a pity that *therosa gallica* had faded for the season. Regeane followed her, wrapped in a dream, until they reached a marble bench. Resting on it were a pitcher and two cups. Both goblets were miracles of the glassmaker's art.

Regeane lifted hers to catch the last light. A cameo of white on blue showed a procession of youths and maidens turning garlands to escort the chariot of the bride. "How beautiful," she whispered.

"And how apropos," Lucilla said as she raised the silver pitcher to pour the wine. The silver spout was the head of a wolf.

Knowledge fisted Regeane in the belly. She was in a trap.

The cup fell from her hands into a patch of thyme growing at her feet. The wine stained the white flowers like a splash of blood.

She was in a trap, a beautiful, dangerous trap.

Truly, she could abandon herself to the loveliness of this heavenly garden, to the pleasure of Lucilla's caresses. But this idyll could have but one ending. The mountain lord would come to claim her and one of them would die!

"My God! What's wrong?" Lucilla exclaimed, setting down her own cup to stretch out her hands to Regeane.

Regeane bent over, clutching her stomach for a moment. She felt again that blurring of the world and the first shadows that took her before she changed.

Desperately, she fought it off. The shadows around her in the evening garden reached toward her, but then drew back as she felt Lucilla's hands on her arms.

"What is it, girl?" Lucilla asked.

Regeane realized that for a little while she'd allowed herself to think like a normal woman... To look at her approaching marriage and her bridegroom the way any other young girl would. She couldn't. She didn't dare.

Regeane reached down, fumbled for the cup lying among the thyme, afraid she'd broken it. "I'm sorry," she whispered. "Your wonderful cup."

"The devil with my cup," Lucilla said, hands gripping Regeane's arms. "Are you all right? Never have I seen such an expression of terror on a human's face. What happened? What frightened you so?"

"There," Regeane lifted the cup out of the bed of thyme. "Thank heaven it's not broken."

Lucilla took the cup from her hands, filled it with wine, and held it to Regeane's lips. "That's better. The color's coming back into your cheeks. Now, tell me what's wrong."

Regeane knew she could not. No one would understand the silver wolf, not even a woman as worldly-wise and clever as Lucilla. Regeane forced her whirling mind into a semblance of coherence. She'd lived with the wolf for most of her life, and deception had become second nature. She parried Lucilla's question with another. "What would happen if I defied the king and became a courtesan like you?"

Lucilla looked away from her abruptly, out across the dark garden. "I couldn't be a party to that."

"Why?" Regeane asked desperately. "Is Charles so powerful?"

"Yes," Lucilla said, turning to stare back at Regeane. "He is. It would cost my life to cross him."

Regeane again felt the terror of her flight from Basil and the despair that filled her heart the night after her talk with Gundabald.

When she first spoke to Lucilla in the square it seemed somehow miraculously a way of escape lay open before her. The demands made on a courtesan, the sale of her body for money, was repulsive. Yet, she could have borne such a life if it offered freedom to the beautiful, silent creature she was by moonlight.

A courtesan lives alone. She could contrive excuses for her lover or lovers on those nights when the mistress of heaven commanded her heart.

But apparently her encounter with Stephen and Antonius had slammed that door in her face. She was again trapped, with Gundabald and Hugo her only refuge. She had no assurance she could trust them once she had become their accomplice. Either one of them might betray her out of greed or simply spite.

Lucilla stared at Regeane's face, shadowed by the blue dusk that now lay over the garden, her brow furrowed and troubled. "Little one, tell me what it is you fear so terribly. Maybe it's nothing so awful that it can't be taken care of. Eh? Tell me. Is it the touch of a man, a man's love? Believe me, that can be dealt with. I'll show you what happens. Most women are afraid at first, but that turns quickly to tedium or, if the woman's blood is warm enough and the man is reasonably skilled, joy."

She leaned closer to Regeane and placed an arm around her shoulders. "I'll tell you a secret. Men love to please their wives and the most clumsy and stupid of them can be trained to pleasure even the most difficult women."

The look of desolation on Regeane's face didn't change.

"Is it childbirth, then?"

Regeane shook her head.

Lucilla drew back. "I am at a loss."

"Suppose there are other women."

Lucilla laughed, a high silvery sound. "Is that all?" She patted Regeane's hand, then kissed her cheek. "Oh, my little one, with your assets—beauty, grace, and a great name—it won't be necessary for you even to acknowledge other women exist." Lucilla sniggered. "Set out to enslave him and you will. I guarantee it. If you but learn a little of what I can teach you, he will worship at your feet."

Regeane pretended to be reassured. She sipped her wine. The light was gone from the sky, but it was not quite dark. The white flowers of the garden still glowed faintly against the darker masses of vegetation. The reflecting pool was beginning to fill with stars.

Behind her in the open rooms of the villa she could hear the clatter of dishes and cutlery. Lights shone through the open doors and the voices of Lucilla's servants called back and forth as they set the table for supper.

It was beginning to be chilly. Lucilla's arm embracing Regeane's shoulders was warm, and somehow, in spite of the fact that Regeane couldn't fully confess her fears, comforting.

"Now, my dear," Lucilla said, giving her shoulders a squeeze, "are you feeling better?"

"Yes," Regeane said softly, lifting the cup to her lips. She added hesitantly, "But there is one more art you could teach me."

"What's that?"

"The art to which one appeals when all other arts fail."

Lucilla looked down at her, puzzled for a moment. Then she understood and stiffened. Her arms dropped from around Regeane's shoulders and she drew away. "I see," she said coldly. "You're not as guileless as you appear. Is this your idea or was it planted in your head by that uncle of yours?"

Regeane set the cup on the bench and rose to her feet. She stood facing Lucilla, a slender figure in the white stola, the older woman's face just faintly visible in the light of the lamps in the room behind her.

Regeane felt tears running down her cheeks, tears of rage and sorrow. "All right," she sobbed out. "I am afraid, but not of men or of children or of my future husband's wandering eye. The truth is... Oh, my God," she faltered, "the truth is I can't tell you the truth. How can you know what my life has been? These hours, these few hours I've spent with you, are the first happy ones in years. Since I first bled, since my womanhood came upon me, since..." Regeane clenched her fists and stared up at the moonless sky. "Oh, my God. how can I ever explain?" She cried out, covered her face with her hands and tried to run.

But Lucilla stood up and clasped the girl's trembling body to her, quieting her as she might a panicked child, stroking her hair and patting her back gently.

"There, there. Don't torment yourself so. I do believe you are as afraid as you say you are. I don't know why you won't tell me this dark secret, but I believe that it exists if only in your mind. And yes, if you so desperately wish it, I'll teach you that final art. God knows it's not difficult—a half dozen plants grow in this garden alone. Some in moderation help nature. Increase the amount and they harm it. Physicians steep the poppy capsule in wine. The one who drinks it enjoys a better sleep and freedom from pain; but too much of this potion renders that sleep eternal."

"I don't want it for him," Regeane said, "but for myself."

"What!" Lucilla stepped back. "Yourself?"

"Some kinds of death are better than others," Regeane said miserably.

Lucilla's eyes probed Regeane's tear-stained face relentlessly. Finally she murmured, "I wish you could bring yourself to trust me with this terrible secret. I get the feeling there's much more wrong here than..." She broke off as one of the maidservants left the lighted triclinium and approached them.

"My lady, we await you at the table. Shall I bring the child?"

"Oh, Elfgifa. I'd forgotten her, but no matter. There's more than enough. Yes, yes, get her. She must be tired of waiting for us to join her."

The maid dimpled. "No, my lady. Right after her bath she fell asleep and awakened only a few minutes ago."

Another one of the maids approached, leading a yawning Elfgifa by the hand.

"Come," Lucilla spoke quietly, taking a still distraught Regeane by the hand. "I'm forgetting my duties as a hostess. Don't upset yourself anymore. We'll talk tomorrow. For tonight, enjoy yourself. Only light conversation at dinner. After all, we met only today. Why should you trust me with the secrets of your heart?"

Regeane was quiet during the meal, her fears pushed into the background by the problems of dealing with the unfamiliar Roman style of dining.

They ate reclining, the food brought to the couches and set before them by the serving girls. There was a separate table for each course. While this might have been a quiet, informal little supper to Lucilla, it was a grand affair to Regeane.

The tables set before her were decked in embroidered white linen. The dishes and cups were of silver. Above her head, lamps in the shape of alabaster doves had flames leaping from their mouths. Painted on the walls of the chamber, songbirds played out their gentle rite of spring lovemaking amidst the flowers of a garden.

Elfgifa, wide-eyed and on her best behavior, watched Lucilla's every movement like a hawk and copied her carefully, as did Regeane herself.

Lucilla treated them both with amused indulgence and, as promised, she kept the conversation light. Still, Regeane felt she was being instructed, since most of Lucilla's talk concerned the multifold factions of the holy city.

The food was simple, but beautifully prepared. Spiced olives and a white cream cheese covered with pepper were the gustato. The appetizers were followed by roast pork with a stuffing of bread, honey, red wine, and bay, served with a miraculous red wine.

The taste astonished Regeane. "It's wonderful," she told Lucilla, awed by its smoothness and silken freshness.

Lucilla laughed. "Oh, you Franks reckon wine ready to drink when enough of it will knock a man down, but we age our best, sealing it in clay jars. It mellows the flavor and softens and smoothes it. This is only ten years old, but I have tasted rare vintages upwards of forty and fifty years."

"Doesn't it spoil?" Regeane asked.

"Sometimes," Lucilla admitted, "but those amphoras that survive make it worth the trouble. The worst that happens is that it becomes vinegar, and that may be used in cooking. This wine is from my own estate. Very few people bother to age wine these days," she explained. "Fine vintages command a correspondingly high price. It's much more lucrative simply to sell the young wine as soon as it's drinkable." She looked sad. "So these civilized arts vanish, but I set aside a few jars for my own table."

When the pork was gone, the tables were taken away and they relaxed over a chilled, sweet white wine served with honey cakes. It was late now, and Lucilla's villa, set away from the bustling heart of Rome, partook of the quiet of a country farm. The only sounds Regeane could hear now were the faint night songs of insects in the garden outside and the whisper of the breeze that drifted cool and refreshing through the open door of the triclinium.

A long day, a full stomach, and the half cup of watered wine Lucilla allowed her were all too much for Elfgifa and she fell asleep on the couch. She awakened only briefly when Lucilla signaled a servant to carry her off to bed. Elfgifa protested, but it transpired that the child only wanted a goodnight kiss from Regeane before she would allow herself to be settled in for the night.

Regeane obliged, and Elfgifa went peaceably. When she was gone, there was a brief, awkward silence between the two women. Then they spoke almost simultaneously.

"I'm sorry," Regeane started to say.

"I do apologize, Regeane..."

They both laughed.

Then Regeane said, "I'm the one who should apologize. I feel I made a fool of myself. I suppose I've allowed my fears to prey too much on my mind."

"Not at all, my dear. I shouldn't have pressed you."

Suddenly one of the maids ran into the room from the garden. "My lady, there's a party of men at the gates!"

Regeane heard shouts and a crash. A woman screamed.

Lucilla jumped up from her couch and ran past the girl into the garden.

A half-dozen armed men stood in the atrium. The light of their torches reflected in the dark water of the pool. One of them stepped forward, and Regeane saw the face she remembered from the square earlier in the day.

He pointed to her and shouted, "There she is. Take her."

Regeane cringed and turned, not knowing where to run, but Lucilla strode toward him. "Basil, are you mad?" she shouted. "We are under the protection of the Holy Father himself!"

The men with Basil hesitated.

Lucilla's tall form, her chin lifted fearlessly, stood between Regeane and Basil. "I'll have your heads for this! All of you!" she threatened.

The men with Basil drew back, looking at each other.

Seeing she had the upper hand for the moment, Lucilla stepped forward to press her advantage. "Leave my house this instant, and I'll forget this unsavory incident ever occurred."

Basil laughed, his white teeth gleaming in his dark, bearded face. "My, what airs we give ourselves now, threatening us with the power of the church and the pope. This from the greatest whore in Rome. Whore and panderer."

Lucilla stiffened with rage, her face a frozen, beautiful mask of fury. Her reply to Basil was low, hoarse,



and deadly. "One more step toward me, Basil. I won't bother about your head. I'll see you die in torment."

Basil returned her stare with a heavy-lidded look of contempt and turned toward his men. "What are you, children, that you fear the anger of a woman? I said, take the girl! And as for you, bitch," he said to Lucilla, "interfere with me again and I'll send you to ply your trade in hell."

Basil and the men with him advanced on Regeane and Lucilla.

Lucilla caught Regeane by the wrist and whispered urgently, "It's no good. I can't hold them. Where in God's name are my men? Run!" She darted toward the back of the garden, pulling Regeane along with her through a door.

The abrupt change from the light of the torches to the darkness of the passage blinded Regeane. When she could see again they were stumbling across the furrows of a kitchen garden. Ahead, she could see the tree limbs, an orchard, and then a wall.

Basil and his men erupted from the passage in a blaze of torchlight.

Regeane's foot kicked against something. Lucilla bent down and snatched it up—a hoe.

The nearest of Basil's men was less than six feet behind them. Lucilla turned and drove the handle of the hoe with a straight thrust into his groin. The man doubled over, howling.

"Run, girl, run!" Lucilla called to Regeane.

The rest of Basil's soldiers hung back, perhaps a little intimidated by the fate of the first. Then another leaped forward and snatched at the hoe in Lucilla's hand: a mistake. She fetched him a crack across the side of the head with the handle that sent him to his knees, clutching his skull. Then she chopped viciously at his face with the blade.

Regeane couldn't bring herself to leave Lucilla. She was sure Basil would kill Lucilla.

Basil drew his sword, leaped past Lucilla, ignoring another swing of the hoe. He grabbed Regeane by the arm. She screeched and tore free, staggering, and fell on her face in the soft earth of the garden. Basil's sword chopped into the furrow near her face, showering her head with mud.

Regeane came to her knees, clutching a handful of soil. Basil caught her hair with one hand, stretching out her throat, positioning his sword up and back to cut off her head.

Regeane let fly with the mud. Wet filth caught Basil full in the face. He gave a shout of fury and let go of her hair to clear his eyes.

The darkness of the moon flooded Regeane's brain. She was wolf. Shocked and terrified, she staggered. The light of the torches dazzled the wolf's eyes more than it had the woman's.

In the wake of her shock and terror rushed a triumphant fury.

Basil was still pawing at his eyes with one hand while hacking at Regeane's discarded dress with his sword. He believed she was still in her clothes.

The silver wolf lunged for him clumsily. He kicked her in the ribs.

The woman's will, still alive in the wolf, was overwhelmed by rage. The wolf made an eel-like turn around the legs in front of her, teeth slashing for a hamstring. Her fangs laid open the calf of his leg.

Basil shrieked and chopped down at her with his sword. But the silver wolf leaped clear.

Three men struggled with Lucilla, one holding her around the body, two grappling with her for her quarterstaff hoe. For the moment they had their hands full. A fourth stood back, torch in hand.

"You damned fool," Basil shouted. "Drive off that mad dog."

The fire flared in the silver wolf's eyes, blotting out everything as the torch was thrust down toward her face.

"Jesu mercy!" the man screamed. "That isn't a dog!"

She went back on her haunches. The woman commanded the wolf. *The torches! Get the torches! In the darkness you are the stronger.*

The wolf backed, twisted away from the flames. The man holding the torch was trying desperately to draw his sword.

The wolf, maddened by rage and fire, thought only of two things—throat and groin. With the merciless logic of a killer, she went for the groin. The throat was too far. She wasn't sure enough of her powers.

She uncoiled, driven upward like a striking snake. She missed the groin, but her teeth snapped shut in the soft tissue of the upper thigh. Blood, salt, and thick stinking of raw meat flooded the wolf's mouth and nose.

The man gave a piercing scream of pure agony, tore free, and bashed at the wolf's back with the torch.

The wolf dropped off, rolling.

The man staggered backward, crashed into Lucilla and the other men struggling. They all went down in a heap. The torches fell clear and lay flickering, half extinguished by the damp soil.

The garden was suddenly in darkness.

The wolf lunged with a roar of fury at the men on top of Lucilla. They scattered, scrambling, crawling in all directions.

Basil dived for a torch as Lucilla came up fighting, the hoe still in her hands. She slammed one man across the chest; a few of his ribs snapped. She caught another across the back, driving his face down into the mud.

Screams and cries rang out from behind the wolf. More torches appeared. "The pope's militia!" someone shouted. "They're coming!"

The garden blazed. Lucilla's servants mustered to defend their mistress.

Basil and his men ran. The wolf barrelled along behind them. She broke through a low screen of pomegranate bushes and raced among the tree trunks of the orchard toward a low wall. Basil and his men were up and over it in seconds.

The wolf hesitated, then gathered herself. She had never really run free. One easy leap took her over the barrier. Basil and his men were already mounted and galloping away.

For a second she stood still in the darkness; flanks heaving with exertion until a thunder of hoofbeats sounded from behind and sent her diving for cover.

A company of the Roman civil militia swept past, riding hard after Basil and his men.

Silence fell. The silver wolf slipped out of the brush and stood, paws in the dust of the road, dread and terror churning inside her.

Beyond the walls of the villa she could hear voices. She moved off down the road quickly, instinctively, seeking the comfort of darkness, the obscurity of the night.

There was no moon, only the dazzling streamer of the Milky Way arching above her. A road of light. She didn't know what Lucilla or Basil had seen. Basil had a face full of mud. Lucilla was fighting for her life.

One thing the silver wolf did know. She didn't want to go back. The silver wolf was free, bewildered, frightened, and yet aquiver with frantic joy.

She was free.

She trotted on, dropping into the mile-eating lope of a creature that makes nothing of a fifty-mile hunt.

The wolf's heart sang. Old memories called out of the ebb and flow of the blood in her veins. Memories not her own. Oh, there were forests the wolf's heart remembered: tall forests that clothed mountainsides, trees of pine, fir, and spruce, a landscape bejeweled by the blue lakes filled with fish. Lowland forests of oak, ash, beech, and elm, swarming with the dark antlered shapes of deer. They fed in clearings drenched by moonlight.

She hunted them, age upon age long gone. She was the swift-footed, sharp-fanged mistress of the night, taking her blood tribute in the silver glow. She fled across sun-drenched plains where the smoke of grass fires hung sharp in her nostrils. She ate her fill of beasts fallen in panicked flight from the flames.

She tracked her prey across frozen, lifeless wastes. Her belly rumbled with hunger. Her paws, frost-crusting with splinters of ice forming between her pads, left bloody footprints in the snow. Her heart yearned for the warm, blood heat of the kill, a full belly, and sleep.

She was all these things and more—strength, courage, and a defiant beauty. *Am I wolf or woman?* she wondered, then stopped on the crest of a low hill to feel the stillness, the alive-ness, the perfect solitude of the night. It enfolded her as a mother's arms enfold a child and protect it from harm.

The wind was cool, refreshed by the scent of dew just beginning to settle on green growing things. It ruffled the fur of her neck and face pleasantly. The woman would have been cold, but the wolf, protected by her pelt, was warm.

The legion of stars shed a faint light on the landscape. On one side, the dark hills rolled away, sloping gently into the plain of Campagna; on the other lay the city of Rome, its lights a cluster of fireflies flickering around the smooth, black snake of the Tiber. The breeze from that direction carried the stench of an open sewer.

Am I wolf or woman? she wondered again. Both the wolf and the woman were in accord with each other; each would be incomplete without the other. Yet the open spaces of the hills and even the desolation of the war-shattered Campagna called out to the wolf's heart. She wanted to turn her face into the clean wind, to vanish into the tall grass and remain a beast among beasts forever.

But the woman knew better. The woman knew morning would come and she would find herself naked and defenseless and alone. For better or worse, her destiny was forever linked with sleepers whose lights flickered like dying embers in the valley below.

Neither wolf nor woman, she thought, *but something more than either one, or less, different and so, perhaps, damned*. Would she end hated and accursed, dying in flames at a stake, condemned by the church? Or perhaps stoned by humans fearful of her powers? She remembered with icy fear the funeral party's quick acceptance of Silve's accusation. Others might be as precipitous as they.

That she had lived this long was a challenge to the accepted order of her world—a challenge to death. And live she would until life was torn from her. Live and never yield the woman to save the wolf, or the wolf to save the woman. She would live to be herself, to be free or be dead.

She trotted to the center of the road and sniffed the air. Amidst the smell of horse and sweat, animal and human, there was the scent of blood.

The wolf dropped her nose to the ground. She'd wounded one of Basil's men. He was still bleeding. She set off in pursuit.

Basil and his men hadn't returned to the city. They'd circled its outskirts, traveling out across the Campagna toward the sea.

On the rich plain of the Campagna, nature had once smiled beneficently on man. Blessed with the fertile soil of volcanic peaks, mild summers, and gentle winters, it once overflowed with milk and honey. Now, no more. Four centuries of warfare over that pearl of prizes, the imperial city, had turned it into a wasteland of swamps and ruins.

Unlike most of rocky Italy, it was not locally defensible and no power remained strong enough to protect it. The fortress of Casino, towering alone above the plain, offered refuge to those few travelers who braved its fear-haunted darkness. Only armed parties of men traveled here alone at night. They, and the silver wolf, drawn by she knew not what.

She moved with the easy lope of a hunting wolf, following the trail of blood, the scent of horses and men clear in her nostrils now.

Her nose caught the tang of woodsmoke, even before she saw the fire. She increased her pace.

It had once been a temple of Apollo, a sanctuary of the god of light. Now, the tall columns were fallen and the cella was an empty shell. Even the statue of the god was gone. Only the face of the dread monster brooded from the pediment—her hair snakes, her tongue protruding from her mouth as if to lap up the blood of sacrifices.

Basil and his men were camped in the ruins. They were gathered around their fire blazing on the broken porch of the temple.

The wolf stole up through the black poplar trunks of what once had been the gods' sacred grove. She stopped, face screened by the tall grass, listening and watching. The wolf was disappointed. Basil had many more men with him than he'd had at Lucilla's villa.

Far too many for a lone wolf to challenge.

Basil stood on the stained marble steps to the temple, speaking to someone hidden by the firelight. "There's no rescue for you, and none for that brother of yours. Not now that I have him. Whatever path he takes leads to his destruction."

"Do you hate him so much then?" a voice asked from the doorway into the ruined cella.

The wolf knew the voice. *Antonius*. She eased to one side, where her eyes weren't blinded by the flames, and saw him, robed in black, the mantle, as always, covering his face.

"Hate him?" Basil asked. "Christ, no. I don't give a damn about him. When I take the city, he can stay pope as long as he does as he's told."

Pope! That rocked even the wolf's mind. Regeane had known "Stephen" had power. But she hadn't guessed quite what kind or how much. That Stephen might be Pope Hadrian himself hadn't entered her mind.

She drew closer. She peered through a leafy screen of low bushes and tall grass at the men gathered before the porch of the temple.

"I can't think I'll be of much use to you," Antonius said with angry bitterness. "I'm a dying man, and I hope my brother has more sense than to let you blackmail him with threats against my rotting carcass."

"A very apt description, my friend. The stench of the charnel house does hang about you," Basil said. "But you were a young man when you were taken with the disease, and I'll lay odds you'd last a long time tied to a cross."

The two eyes, all that Antonius ever showed the world, closed slowly. The shoulders under the black mantle slumped in resignation. He got to his feet, went to the fire, and fished out one of the flaming branches.

"I assume," he said to Basil with quiet dignity, "that you wouldn't begrudge even a captive a fire against the cold."

Basil drew away as if afraid of contagion. "No, I wouldn't, and you'll have food if you want it."

"I don't."

"As you wish," Basil said indifferently. "Now crawl into your hole and give the rest of us some relief from the sight and stink of you."

Whack! An arrow quivered in the trunk of a sapling near the silver wolf's shoulder. In seconds she was

twenty feet away, deep in the darkness. It took all the woman's strength to master the wolf's reflexes.

She heard Basil shout, "What the devil!"

"Eyes!" one of the men shouted. "The eyes of some animal, watching us from the darkness beyond the fire."

The silver wolf stood trembling among the tree trunks.

"Build up the fire then, and stop shooting at shadows," Basil snarled.

The silver wolf crouched and then moved farther away as men with torches approached the spot where she'd been hiding.

Some laughed. "Look, Drusis. You killed a tree."

"I saw eyes," Drusis insisted stubbornly. "I missed, that's all."

"Whatever it was, it's miles away by now."

"The eyes were big and high up off the ground. It was a wolf. I've hunted wolves."

"Not on the Campagna, you haven't," Basil said. "It was likely an owl."

Still arguing, they returned to the camp and began to bed down for the night.

The silver wolf waited until the camp quieted. They left only one man on guard to tend the fire. He sat dozing on the temple steps, secure in the knowledge that no large party of men could take them by surprise in the open country.

During the commotion, Antonius had withdrawn into the interior of the temple to sleep.

The wolf whined and snapped at the air as Regeane took control of her. Antonius was in deadly danger and the woman's sharper human mind comprehended it at once.

She grasped that neither Hadrian nor Antonius would alter state policy under threat of Basil's blackmail. In fact, he was a suicidal fool to attempt such a ploy. Antonius would die a horrible death.

An enraged Hadrian would, no doubt, avenge him by killing Basil. Everyone would suffer and nothing would be changed.

The wolf didn't comprehend the convolutions of human cruelty. To her, Antonius was simply a friend. A pack brother, stricken and in need of protection. The woman stepped back and loosed her reins on the wolf. She acted on instinct.

She drifted slowly and silently around to the back of the temple and found what she sought.

Although it had been faced in marble, the fabric of the structure was clay brick. One of the trees of the grove had fallen and taken down part of the wall of the cella with it. A hole gaped wide. The entrance, choked with weeds and brambles, was only a few feet above the ground.

The wolf forced her way through without difficulty and stood looking out at Antonius.

He sat before his small fire, head bowed, his back against the wall near the door.

She walked toward him and stopped on the other side of the fire. Even alone, he kept most of the mantle wound around the lower part of his face, but the wolf could see enough of that face to understand why.

On one side, his lips were gone and she could see the teeth. The lesion extended up into the nose. The area spared by the disease was haunted by the shadow of a great beauty.

The human ruin reminded Regeane of one of those statues of ancient gods, abandoned, broken, part of the face eroded by wind and rain, but still bearing traces of the glory of its prime. As Basil said, Antonius was very young.

His eyes were closed.

The silver wolf stood there, baffled.

When she entered the building she hadn't had any clear plan in mind, only a hope of somehow helping him to escape Basil. Escape. The idea was ridiculous. She couldn't even make him understand what she wanted. How could she talk to him? How could she persuade him to talk to her?

The woman would have laughed. The wolf was only frustrated. She whined softly, expressing her aggravation.

He blinked, looking surprised, but not frightened.

At first he must have thought she was a dog because he made as if to stretch out his hand. Then his eyes took in the long, vulpine muzzle, the erect ears, and the magnificent silver-black ruff that framed the face. He drew the hand back.

"My poor friend," he said. "Have we usurped your den? Your eyes must have been the ones Basil's archer shot at."

Since the wolf simply stood, staring at him, he continued. "What is it? Do you want something from me? Something to eat? I almost wish you had me in mind. Your teeth and jaws would be more merciful than Basil's cross."

He turned to one side. A half-loaf of bread, some olives, and goat cheese lay on a wooden trencher near the doorway. He lifted it and set it in front of the silver wolf.

"Here, take this. I have no appetite for Basil's food. The less I eat, the sooner I'll be free of Basil and no longer a trouble to my brother."

The silver wolf dropped her nose to the trencher, then, ignoring it, trotted to the door, skirting the glow cast by Antonius' small fire.

The man on guard was slumped against the base of one of the ruined columns. He'd piled some fresh fuel on his fire. It burned high, the flames wavering and crackling in the night breeze. The guard snored softly.



The wolf returned and stood by Antonius' fire, looking over it into his eyes.

"Wolf, you are beginning to puzzle me very much. You don't behave like any wild beast I've ever met."

Deliberately she reached out, set her teeth in the edge of his mantle, and pulled.

"What?" he asked in surprise. "You want the mantle?"

Desperate to make him understand, she lunged, caught him by the wrist, gently, and pulled. Regeane was a small woman, but she was a big wolf.

Antonius slid a foot or so away from the fire.

She released his arm and stepped back.

He stared at her, then at his wrist in astonishment. "If you wanted to kill me," Antonius said softly, "you could kill me easily."

The wolf made a low sound in her throat, an urgent sound. She ran to the hole in the temple cella, then back toward Antonius.

"This is madness," Antonius said. "What are you? Who are you?"

She caught the corner of his mantle again and tugged.

"Don't you see? They have horses. I'd be ridden down," he whispered.

This time she snarled softly, her lips lifting clear of her teeth.

Antonius got up. "I'm standing here now, explaining myself to a wolf."

She tugged again at the mantle.

"Maybe you're right. Anything seems better than the fate Basil has planned for me."

HE HAD TO SADDLE THE HORSE ALONE. SHE FOUND the saddles in the darkness for him, the scent of leather loud as a shout in her nose. She stood in the shadows at the edge of the camp keeping carefully downwind of the horses, waiting impatiently and watching the guard who still snored on the temple steps.

The horses were picketed on one long rope tied between two trees. Her teeth severed the rope with one bite. The nearest horse to her reared, a black shape against the sky. She leaped aside, dodging the slash of a forehoof.

The horses tore free. Still tied together, they didn't run, but circled and milled.

The silver wolf would have loved to have been able to curse. As it was, she leaped back from the milling animals with a vicious snarl of fury. It was too dangerous. She couldn't get close enough to cut them free

of each other.

Antonius' horse reared. The wolf saw he'd lost control of it.

He stayed in the saddle by a miracle.

The guard on the temple steps gave a shout.

The wolf was frantic.

Basil and his men awakened, reaching for weapons and torches.

The wolf flattened her ears and lunged, nipping at the hocks of the nearest of the horses. The animal lashed out at her with its heels and bolted at Basil and his men.

They thundered in a tight group across the bedground of Basil's camp, Antonius' horse following.

In blind panic, Basil's men scattered to avoid being trampled. Basil himself ran to the top of the temple porch as the horses flew past, followed by Antonius on the last of them, clinging desperately to the pommel of the saddle. "Stop him!" Basil screamed.

The men around him were too stupefied to react. Basil snatched a crossbow and fired.

The wolf saw Antonius' horse swerve and stagger as the bolt thudded into its side.

Basil grabbed another bow and the wolf went for him, taking the path cleared by the stampeding horses.

"Deus meus," someone screamed. "It's the dog. The dog from the villa."

"Dog, nothing," another voice shouted. "It's Lupa herself, the wolf of Rome."

Basil spun around, taking aim at the flying silver shape.

The fire blazed ahead of the running wolf, between herself and Basil. She saw the rage in his eyes above the bow and the glitter of a sharp-ridged bolt aimed at her. She cleared the fire on one bound and crouched, gathering herself as the bow thrummed.

The head of the bolt seared her back as it grazed past, plunging into the fire. She leaped upward, fangs gleaming, for Basil's throat.

Basil aimed a clubbing blow at her with the spent bow. It took the wolf in the ribs, sending her rolling down the temple steps.

"Kill the damned thing. Kill it," Basil screamed to his men.

The wolf got her legs under her and ran.

She followed the horses. The woman strove to control the wolf. Part of her was terrified, yet, she was exultant and delighted. She'd deprived Basil of his prey and nearly gotten him. She slowed her pace and looked up at the stars, realizing for the first time the horse Antonius was riding was running the wrong way—away from Rome, out across the wilderness of the Campagna toward the coast.

She stopped, sides heaving, and became aware for the first time that she was injured. The scratch seared her back, out of reach of her healing tongue. It itched and burned. She shook herself. Her fur rose, then fell back into place. Not mortal, she decided. Not even serious.

In the silence far away, Basil's voice came to her ears. "After them," he was telling his men. "The horse is wounded. I put a bolt through its ribs. Antonius is crippled and won't get far on foot."

The men's reply was unintelligible, even to the wolf's preternaturally sharp ears, but it was evidently a demur because she heard Basil shout, "In the name of God, why am I afflicted by such fools? Take the torches. The thing's just a wild animal. What are you, women, to be afraid of such a thing?"

She had to find Antonius before Basil did. She lowered her muzzle and began circling. In a few moments she picked up the trail of the horses, including the blood scent of the injured one. It had dropped back, trailing the rest. Crossbow bolts were deadly things. Shock and hemorrhage kill quickly.

It was not long before she caught up to Antonius. He was on his feet beside the wounded animal. It stood, legs spread, head lowered, breathing in harsh, roaring gasps.

She knew he'd seen her silver-tinged shadow come up beside him, for he spoke. "What now, my friend?" He stared back the way he had come. The torches of Basil's men bobbed across the flat countryside toward them.

She edged her body between him and the horse, pushing him away. As the horse scented her, it stamped its feet. The head came up and she saw the pale gleam of one rolling eye.

With a roar, she launched herself at the animal, her teeth meeting with a snap just inches from the equine neck.

With a cry of terror, the horse lurched forward at a staggering run.

The wolf stood quietly, listening as the drumming of hoof-beats faded into silence.

"I see," Antonius said, looking back at the bright knot of torches behind them. "They'll follow the horse."

The wolf whined softly, then made a grunting sound in her throat.

"Mother of God," Antonius whispered. "You can think."

The wolf didn't venture any kind of a reply. She was unhappy about what she'd just done. The animal was dying. She felt detached from herself. There had been more compassion in the wolf's heart for the horse than for the human. "To use" was a purely human concept. The wolf didn't understand it. The wolf's actions were dictated by need.

She turned her face into the clean wind and led Antonius away from the torches. She had to find a place to put him because, in the morning, the wolf would forsake her. Sunrise signaled the end of the silver one's power. She must find shelter before she became woman again. The thought hung over her head like a sword.

To the wolf's ears the night sang with a thousand voices.

Regeane felt as she had when, as a child at her mother's knee, she'd first been confronted with a book. The tiny letters fascinated her and she was sure there were wonderful secrets contained within them, if only she knew how to interpret them.

So were the voices of the night: a book opened before a caged beast's eyes. A book she couldn't read. As wolf or woman she had been confined so long.

She left Antonius behind for a moment and ran in a wide circle, her head up, sniffing the wind. She could smell water far away, and the musky scent of deer.

She had to keep reminding the beast that when dawn came, the joyous creature would fade and she would be abandoned to God knew what fearful fate, naked on the Campagna alone.

Besides, Antonius was in pain. He couldn't walk very well and the rag bindings on his feet were already tattered. She whined softly.

"Yes, Lupa," Antonius said, "and I hope you know what to do because I don't. I don't have any idea."

She ran down the slope of a low hill, then up another to the very top. She stopped, a lean dark shape under the stars.

The breeze was cool. Even from far away, she could smell the city. A cleaner smell of wood smoke came to her nostrils. The torches of Basil's men? No, high above the plain she saw the distant light of Monte Casino. Could she find shelter for Antonius there? Reluctantly she decided against it. Basil would look there first. She didn't know if the monks could prevent him from taking away someone under their protection.

She realized the scents mapped out the Campagna for her, the city so far away. Casino on the horizon, and a damp, vertiginous odor. What? It was coming from a heap of ruins nearby.

She returned to Antonius and guided him in that direction.

Hidden in a fold of ground near a clean stream were a few chimneys almost covered by the lush vegetation that flourished near water on the dry plains.

The woman's mind remembered something like them once near Paris on the Seine. A glassworks.

She dipped her muzzle into a clear pool and lapped. The water was fresh and sweet.

Antonius hunkered down beside her. "Where have you brought me, Lupa?"

The wolf made a low sound in her throat.

Antonius waited. Then she trotted off and began to circle. After a few minutes she found the flue. The glass furnaces had to be vented from below to get the fire hot enough to render the sand molten for the blowers.

There were two furnaces. The first tunnel was choked with dirt and debris, but the second was open. She led Antonius to the tunnel.

He stared at the hole in dismay. "Lupa, are you sure?"

The wolf was growing afraid. She wasn't sure how long she'd been out. It was late. She *must* return to Rome before morning. She whined urgently.

Antonius crawled into the hole. The flue led to the bottom of the turnip-shaped oven. When Antonius reached it, he said quietly, "I see."

Part of the chimney above had fallen away and thick bushes and small trees had grown up around it. The entrance was overgrown by tall weeds. The only reason the wolf had been able to find it was because at some time in the past, another wolf had used it for a den. She'd picked up the scent.

She hoped that if Basil's men searched the area they wouldn't think to look down into the ruined ovens. They might not even know what they were.

When Antonius was safely inside, she hurried out and began to run toward the city.

She was terrified. During her race, her terror grew. She hadn't realized she'd come this far. When she reached the tombs along the Via Appia, she realized she was caught. She wouldn't be able to reach Lucilla's villa before dawn. When the sun topped the horizon and the gray light around her turned to gold, she would be woman again.

The lodging house where Hugo and Gundabald had their rooms wasn't far off. She had no choice.

As she was going up the outside stair to their apartments, she met Hugo coming down. All the desperate, exhausted wolf wanted to do was dodge past him, but Hugo didn't know that.

He gaped at her. Despite the faint light of early dawn, she saw his jaw drop and his face turn green with terror. He lunged back up the stair, opening the door, and trying to slam it in her face.

The silver wolf dropped back on her haunches and sprang for his throat. Her flying body crashed into his chest, and he went down on his back.

She found herself, paws on his chest, staring down into his horrified face.

Hugo's mouth opened. He looked as if he wanted to scream, but was too paralyzed by terror to make a sound.

He gazed up into a wrinkled muzzle filled with long, white teeth. Her hot breath fanned his cheek. Her snarl was loud as a thunderclap.

She had Hugo where she'd always wanted him. She knew an instant's regret that she could not prolong the moment. Hugo looked as though, if she were able to remain in her present position, he would shortly die of fright.

How delightful.

Too bad she was going to be human in a second. If she bit him, he would leave a very nasty taste in her mouth.

She felt mildly grateful for at least this momentary satisfaction. She knew Gundabald would make her pay dearly for it.

Hugo pissed on himself and fainted. Warm light flowed through the doorway. Regeane snatched away his mantle, anything to cover herself. It was dawn outside and she was naked.

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## Chapter Seven



SHE AWOKE IN HER CELL IN THE AFTERNOON. SHE crouched next to the wall. She had never felt more of the beast. Her body was human female, but the wolf prowled in her brain. The wolf might be the only reason she lived.

She was naked. The narrow stone room was empty. She was chained to the wall by an iron collar around her neck. Her skin was blue with cold, her fingers and toes numb.

She was on her knees, one shoulder pressed against the stones. Her hair offered a little warmth, so she kept her head bowed. It hung around her breasts and shoulders like a cape.

In any case, she couldn't stand. The chain running from the collar around her neck to the staple in the wall was too short, only about three feet long. The iron collar was heavy. The edges were rough. Every so often, when she moved, she saw a rivulet of blood run down her breasts and stomach.

There were many more blood stains on her skin, some particles dried, dark; others red, only beginning to stiffen. The beast said, *Sleep, withdraw from the pain and the cold*, but the woman couldn't. She'd reached the point where cold and pain were so intense, they wouldn't let her.

Her stomach cramped viciously. Her back throbbled with a dull ache where Gundabald had flogged her.

She ended by being almost as terrified of him as Hugo had been of her. Gundabald seemed at first to have lost all control. He grabbed her by the hair, pinned her to the floor facedown with his boot on her shoulder. He flogged her with his belt until Hugo's mantle was bloody and her screams roused the keeper of the lodging house.

Gundabald wouldn't open the door to him. But the man and his wife stood outside and cursed them both so savagely—Regeane for screaming and disturbing the other tenants, Gundabald for causing the screams—that Gundabald finally stopped hitting Regeane.

"Think you're getting away with something, don't you?" he'd asked as he stripped off Hugo's mantle. "That thing from hell will come to you and heal you."

Regeane, thinking he meant to rape her, fought desperately with the only weapons she had left—voice, teeth, and nails.

The landlord began shouting and pounding again.

Gundabald had Regeane cornered near the fireplace. Regeane appealed for help, screaming Gundabald meant to kill her. Gundabald promised the landlord and his wife a gold piece if they would go away and

leave them alone.

The landlord and his wife left.

Gundabald clubbed Regeane down with a chunk of firewood. It took three blows. She still wasn't completely unconscious when he dragged her into the cell and snapped the collar shut on her neck.

Her head throbbed. The left side of her face was swollen. She moved her neck against the rough edge of the iron collar, this time deliberately.

Blood flowed—scarlet, warm, even hot, against her blue-tinged skin.

When Gundabald slammed the door shut, she'd begun to awaken. She'd fought the chain, screaming, pulling at the staple in the wall with more than human strength, thrashing and jerking at the collar. Nothing helped. The iron, forged and hammered, was beyond her strength.

In her wildest nightmare, she hadn't believed Gundabald would go this far. After she fought, she begged. Sobbing and pleading for at least some water. Something, even if only rags, to cover herself.

She received no reply—nothing—and finally realized Hugo and Gundabald had probably gone with the landlord to the nearest taverna. They were likely all drunk by now, sodden and sleeping off the morning's exertions.

Her stomach cramped. Her gorge rose. She gagged. Then leaned to one side and vomited a puddle of light green liquid on the floor. It began slowly trickling across the uneven floor toward the wall.

Another puddle of yellow liquid rested near it. She'd stood the torment of needing to empty her bladder most of the morning. When it became unbearable, she'd let go.

She closed her eyes. The cell stank to both the wolf and the woman's nose. But an icy wind blew and the room filled with the clean delicate smell of the Rosa Canina—the dog rose.

She saw a woman's face, then a man's. He wasn't much. Sandy fair hair, cropped short, wide cheekbones, a wickedly humorous grin. You might pass him in the street and not notice him. The woman was small with the same fragile, pink-and-white beauty as the abundantly blooming rose sheltering their bower.

They lay naked together, limbs entwined. The velvety rose petals drifting down to rest on skin warmed, blushing with the heat of an inexhaustible erotic fire. He cradled her in his arms. He had loved her. The languorous relaxation of her body was clear evidence. And, if the position of his hands was also evidence, he was gently preparing her to be loved again.

Until he saw the tears on her cheeks.

He turned. He was naked. Helpless. His weapons weren't far. But he would never reach them.

Regeane and the wolf awoke with a start. The collar bruised her neck. A few drops of blood dripped down her arm.

The bit of sky she could see through the barred window was dark gray. The wolf, whose internal clock was netted with the wheeling stars, knew afternoon. Another dark rainy day labored toward its close.



When night fell, the wolf would come, trying to heal her, to protect her. But how long could that last?

The wolf looked at Regeane through a scree of blowing snow. Not the southern snow with big, soft flakes melting on the fur or even the nose. But snow like icy sand, blistering exposed skin like a rubbing with pumice stone and then freezing the blood oozing from the raw wound.

The wolf's eyes were clouded, her ribs showed. Her spine ridged like a broken stone down her back. She, too, needed food, water, sleep, and warmth. In the end, she would perish as the woman would without them.

Regeane knew what Gundabald wanted: a pale puppet of a woman. A creature so terrified of his displeasure that she would yield to any command and pretend to be pleased to obey him rather than risk his anger—and his punishment.

How many times would she have to be dragged to the cell and chained by the neck? How much starvation, thirst? How many beatings—beatings the wolf would heal over and over again—before she became a witless, broken thing? Living like Hugo and Silve between a flagon and a fuck. Willing to do anything she was told rather than risk this horror one more time.

Suddenly, she and her nightmare sister were one. The wolf's eyes looked at her from the land where the sun only rolled on the horizon, casting a purple, scarlet, violet, and gold fire. Its rays painting a dead, white, frozen plain. When the sun was gone, the wolf died. Long ago, and only one of her deaths. She lay down in the snow and there wasn't enough flesh on her bones to keep her warm through the subzero night. She still lay there entombed in ice forever. Her spirit ranged the stars.

There was a chance—one chance. Lucilla. Regeane might be rescued, but after having seen Antonius in Basil's grip, she wasn't sure if Hadrian was still pope. Or if Lucilla had the power to release her.

But if Lucilla had no power, Regeane did. Release was within her power. She reached up and touched the jagged edge of the collar and felt how sharp it was. She remembered the wolf's teaching about rivers of blood, dark and bright, puking below the skin.

Her eyes closed as a sick beast's will. She waited, at peace, her decision made, resting, conserving her strength for what would come.

THE SOUND OF LUCILLA'S VOICE IN THE NEXT room woke her.

"Damnation!" Lucilla shouted. "Build up the fire. I have been in warmer and more cozy catacombs. No! You stingy fool—put on more than that. I want a roaring blaze."

Regeane heard the landlord's voice. An obsequious murmur as he verbally bowed and scraped to a very testy Lucilla.

"We will want food. No! I do not want your leavings. I saw a taverna down the street. It had a cook shop."

The landlord's voice murmured objections.

"What!" Lucilla said. "Don't tell me what they won't do! You see this? It's gold. Not copper, not silver,

gold. You and Euric go to the cook shop. I want the best they have—wine, food, bread. The best. And I will expect change. A gold piece that size is enough to feed a family for a year."

The bolts on the door rattled.

Regeane tried to call out. All she could manage was a husky whisper. "Lucilla."

"Well, I hear her, so she must be all right. They were beating her, you say?"

"Yes, my gracious lady. The girl screamed pitifully. My wife and I came up to try to help, but her uncle barred the door against us and we couldn't..."

The rest of his reply was lost in the rattle and clash of the sliding bolts.

Lying pig, Regeane thought. He had been only too happy to be bribed by Gundabald.

Lucilla stepped into the room. Regeane saw the color drain from Lucilla's face. She gasped and swayed where she stood.

"Don't faint," Regeane croaked. "Don't let the men see me like this."

The door was slightly ajar. Lucilla pulled it shut, tightly shut. She closed her eyes and turned away from Regeane, her forehead resting on the closed door. "Is your uncle mad?" she asked faintly.

"No," Regeane replied. "I don't think so. He wants to rule my mind. He doesn't care if there's anything to rule when he's finished."

"My lady," Euric asked from outside the door. "Do you need help?"

"Go away, all of you," Lucilla screeched.

"My lady," Euric queried again. "What's wrong?" He sounded alarmed.

"Nothing," Lucilla stammered. "I mean, nothing I can't handle. You and the landlord go and purchase the food. I adjure you, go at once and leave two men at the door with orders to admit no one. If her uncle returns unexpectedly, I don't want to have to fend him off with my dagger. Now, go!" she shouted and stamped her foot.

A few moments later, Regeane was sitting in a chair in front of the fire, her feet in a bucket of warm water, eating a bowl of chicken and leeks in heavy cream. She wore a threadbare dress intended for a woman far gone in pregnancy. It hung in heavy folds around her body.

Lucilla stooped over her to examine her face. "God," she whispered, "I thought that looked worse a few moments ago."

Regeane knew the wolf was present.

"What happened to you last night?" Lucilla asked abruptly. She was rummaging through a chest in the corner. It contained a few of Gisela's gowns. "My God," she said, lifting a tattered garment of indeterminate color and holding it up. "Hadn't your mother any sense of what was due to her from her kin? She was a noblewoman. They should have dressed her better than this even if they had to go

hungry."

Regeane was up. Her body was warm now. She'd finished the chicken dish and was raiding another on the table: spinach cooked with slices of rich, sweet bacon. "My mother had a nice dress," Regeane gabbled between mouthfuls. "I buried her in it." She tried to sound pathetic.

Lucilla dropped the dress. The look she gave Regeane could have etched glass. "Don't... you... dare... try... to... make... sport... of... me, my girl! What happened last night? I want to know and I want to know now!" Lucilla commanded.

Regeane had a story ready. "I... I got frightened. I ran away in the dark. I got lost..." Regeane looked up from the food and gave Lucilla a quick glance to see how she was taking this.

Lucilla nodded gravely.

"I was afraid... I found the lodging house... near dawn. My uncle thought I had been with a man... He went crazy. Thank God you came. I was dying," Regeane said faintly.

"My... my... my," Lucilla said, every word dripping sarcasm. "And all without your clothing."

Regeane finished the soup. Lucilla's gaze was fastened on her like a death grip. Regeane couldn't think of any convincing lie at all. She was naturally more or less truthful, but telling the truth in this case was impossible.

Regeane slurped the juice left in the dish and snatched up a loaf of bread. One of the kind stuffed with rich, black olives. She dunked it in the juice. Then she said a word. The nastiest one the old woman ever taught her.

"Ha!" Lucilla said. "That's better." She returned to her task at the chest. "There was blood on the ground, in the garden, a lot of it,*and* on the wall,*and* in the road. Someone—something—did a remarkable job of slicing up Basil and his friends. But you wouldn't know about that, would you? You were too busy running away, naked, without your clothes, into the cold, wet winter night."

"It's not necessary to belabor the point," Regeane said. This time she tried for dignity.

"Also," Lucilla said, shooting a probing glance at her features. "You heal very quickly. When I first saw you, I was afraid you might be disfigured. But now they are only minor patches of purple and yellow. However, when we return to the villa, I'll have my own physician look at you."

Regeane went limp with a relief so profound it was dizzying. "Are we returning to the villa?"

"Oh, yes," Lucilla said. "I, we, you have no choice. Your mountain lord will need to be impressed. I can't think he'd be impressed in this... squalor. The pope handed me the task of persuading Maeniel he is being honored by this match. Men don't value what comes to them too cheaply. So, you must be taught how to dress, learn at least some semblance of proper behavior in polite society. Be introduced to the problems of running a large household. And, lastly, be brought out. Fortunately, your future husband is no doubt a filthy barbarian, so he won't expect too much."

"I know you're angry with me," Regeane commented darkly. "But there's no need to insult my betrothed because of it. And what is brought out?"

"Brought out is being introduced to the right people by the right people," Lucilla replied haughtily. "And, as for this Maeniel, I'm beginning to think—even though you played on my sympathy last night like a viol—I now know you will probably be more than a match for him. Whatever he may be."

"This marriage, though you don't know, grows more important by the day. I will apply to the moneylenders again in your name. If they can't produce enough coin to dress and bejewel you properly, the state coffers may crack open a bit. Come, finish eating. We must leave soon. I don't want a brawl between your relations and my men. I don't want any loose talk about you—whatever you may be. That monstrous uncle of yours can't be allowed to cripple or kill you before your marriage. When I hand you over to Maeniel, my responsibility will be discharged. I don't have much time. Your eager barbarian will soon be in Rome."

"Rome!" Regeane gasped.

"Yes," Lucilla said. "The pope sent for him. He feels there's no time to waste."

Regeane said another word the old woman taught her.

"Regeane," Lucilla said sternly. "There are various ways of purifying a young woman's speech. I warn you. I know most of them."

"I was carried away by strong emotion," Regeane said sweetly.

"Regeane," Lucilla began, but then was distracted by a commotion at the door. "What's wrong?" she asked. "Is it her uncle?"

"No," one of the soldiers outside answered. "A... woman?"

"Maybe it's the old one. She may want to clean. Let her in," Regeane said.

The door opened a crack. Silve scuttled in on all fours. She saw Regeane. She made twelve hiccuping sounds, six horse snorts, followed this with an undetermined number of sheep bleats as she gained the space under the table. Silve was so wet she left a trail of water from the door to the table.

"What are you doing here?" Regeane snapped. "The last time I saw you, you were trying to get me killed by that funeral party. Now, you have the nerve to come back—"

"You wanted to steal the man's sooooul! You did! You did! Pleeeaaasse," Silve gurgled. "I'm cold! I'm starving! Hugo beat me and stole the money I worked alllll night to get—" Silve made a sound like a drain backing up. "—enough. I was going away. I was! I really waaas. I won't tell, won't tell. I promise! I vow. I swear. On my father's head, my mother's head, my sister's—"

"Silence!" Lucilla said. She peered down under the table. "Who is she?"

"My maid," Regeane said.

"Your maid!" Lucilla replied, horrified. "She's a—" The word she used was one not even the old woman ever taught Regeane.

"I am not!" Silve screeched. "I always charge at least a copper."

"At most a copper, I should say," Lucilla replied disdainfully.

Silve made some sounds reminiscent of an inadequately strangled chicken. One that escaped the hands of the executioner before its neck was quite broken. Regeane snatched up some bread, a bowl of soup, and passed them hurriedly to Silve.

"Sllluuuurrrpppp!" from under the table, then rapid crunching.

"What is this nonsense about you stealing someone's soul?" Lucilla asked, outraged. "Do you *do* things like that?"

"No!" Regeane shouted back, scarlet with indignation. "Besides, what would I want with someone's soul? Whatever I may be, I have no truck with the evil one. I was bom the way I am. I can't help it. You blame me for it. She, my mother, blamed me for it. Hugo and Gundabald don't think I'm human."

"You aren't!" Silve screeched. "You made a place that wasn't there, be there. You had teeth, big teeth. Fire was all around you. The wasps died in it... the ghost thing stank... burnt black and flew away."

"You!" Regeane screamed. "You! You..." She couldn't think of a word sufficiently unpleasant. "I protected you against that nightmare, you ungrateful little wench. If you don't shut your mouth, get out from under that table, and behave yourself right now I'll... I'll... turn you into a toad and you can spend the rest of your life sitting in the Forum ruins catching flies with your tongue. So there!"

Lucilla threw up her hands.

Regeane had never seen anyone actually throw up her hands. She found it an interesting sight.

"I'll never get things sorted out here," Lucilla said.

Silve slithered from under the table and sat on one of the chairs, still gobbling the bread.

Lucilla looked at her and said, "Yeech! God! Turning her into a toad would be an improvement."

Silve began to cry, slobbering onto the bread.

"Don't make her cry," Regeane said. "It's worse."

"So I see," Lucilla replied. Then to Silve, "Stop caterwauling!" Her tone did not admit the possibility of disobedience.

Silve stopped caterwauling.

"You are warm?" Lucilla asked.

"Yes," Silve replied.

"You are fed?"

"Yes," Silve replied.

"Very well," she said to both Regeane and Silve. "We are leaving now. My carriage is waiting

downstairs."

"Silve, you are going with us. She can rest on my side of the carriage," Regeane added hurriedly. She was used to Silve's aroma. Actually, this was one place where she and the wolf took separate paths. The wolf found it interesting. Regeane would rather have been spared the experience.

Lucilla shared her feelings. "Not in my carriage she won't!" Lucilla said firmly. "I have no doubt the crabs that cluster around her source of income are sufficiently large and numerous to march on a walled city. I have no doubt a few moments' work with a comb would be sufficient to capture enough from her head to defend the battlements. And, in addition, I believe she may not have ever had a bath in her life. A pile of rotting garbage in the summer sunshine is far more pleasant company than she is."

Silve opened her mouth.

"Shut it," Lucilla said.

Silve shut it, but managed to whisper, "I could leave."

"Oh, no, you couldn't. I'm not giving you a choice. You *will* do as you are told. Or...I'll have you strangled, attached to an anvil, and thrown in the Tiber."

Silve's lips parted.

"Or... perhaps..." Lucilla continued, "if I find myself sufficiently annoyed, I might not have you strangled, instead thrown into the Tiber attached to an anvil—and let you breathe water—all the way down."

Silve's mouth opened, but nothing emerged.

Regeane snatched up an old mantle of her mother's and handed it to Silve. It was faded, ragged, torn, and patched, but ample and warm.

"Now!" Lucilla said. "Downstairs! Take your place behind my litter and say nothing to anyone and wait. *Quietly*. Understood?"

Silve said nothing, but she nodded vigorously.

"March!" Lucilla said loudly clapping her hands.

Silve fled.

"You do just leave them strewn about, don't you?" Lucilla said.

"What do you mean?" Regeane asked.

Lucilla smiled for the first time. It showed all her teeth. "People who know far too much about you."

"Is that why we're taking her?" Regeane asked anxiously.

"Yes," Lucilla answered shortly. She was still going through the clothing looking for something decent for Regeane to wear. The dress she had on covered her well, but came up rather high on her legs. Giving up on finding anything, Lucilla lifted the hem and looked at it. "Maybe I can let it down quickly... It's cut

off!" she exclaimed. "Well?" she asked Regeane.

"Hugo and Gundabald," Regeane sighed. "The hem must have been embroidered in gold or silver thread."

Lucilla gave an angry, exasperated snort.

"Did you really mean to drown Silve?" Regeane asked.

"Yes," Lucilla said, peeling off her mantle and wrapping it around Regeane. "And I still might if she doesn't do as she's told. I don't want her roaming the streets, carrying tales to your future husband, the Lombards, Basil, those wastrel relatives of yours, or even the pope. God knows, he has enough on his mind right now."

"Your marriage is important, very important. Securing the Alpine passes is vital to King Charles' interest and... the pope's. Desiderius, the Lombard king, has given Basil a free hand here, promising him lordship of the city if he succeeds in unseating Pope Hadrian or bringing him under his domination."

"Hadrian wouldn't dare flout the grandson of Charles the Hammer. I can't afford loose talk about you in every bordello and dive in the city. She will not drag your name through the mud. And neither will those relatives of yours. If they give me trouble, I'll have them all silenced! Understood? Understood?"

"Yes," Regeane answered hurriedly.

The mantle was beautiful, she saw, even as she used it to conceal most of her face and body. An autumn brown, Regeane felt it must have been the natural color of the very soft, silken wool used to weave it. Embroidered with a pattern of long willow leaves in mixed gold and silver thread.

"Woe the willow," Regeane whispered. "It weeps for the dying. Where is the cypress?"

Lucilla's lips tightened, a bleak hard expression froze on her features. She looked, for a second, her age or even older. A matron standing before a tomb.

"It's not time for cypresses, yet," Lucilla replied. "They guard the dead. But I do think you might be better off with a new maid and as an orphan."

"Why an anvil?" Regeane asked.

"Simply the best choice," Lucilla said. "It holds the corpse to the bottom until decomposition is far advanced. No identification can be made. Though in the case of those three, I can't imagine anyone caring. It's still safer."

"What do you do when you run out of anvils?" Regeane asked.

"Don't be pert," Lucilla said. "You are warm and fed?"

"Yes."

"Very well, downstairs into the litter immediately. Now! March!"



LUCILLA'S CARRIAGE WAS LIKE THOSE USED BY ROMANS in the past: curtained and cushioned with silk and velvet within. But the Romans of earlier days had been borne in comfort, high above the throng on the muscular arms and shoulders of sweating slaves. A smooth ride was probably guaranteed by the presence of a driver with a large whip.

Lucilla's carriage rode anything but smoothly. It was drawn down the Corso by four stout gray mules. Steel wheel rims pounded the cobbles. Silk and velvet the interior appointments might be, but they were not enough to make the ride comfortable.

Lucilla sat at one end of the litter, her back against the cushions. Regeane rested on the other. Cushion or no cushion, Regeane was flung into the air at every bump and pothole. She came down sometimes painfully on her backside, sometimes off balance. She had to grab for the heavy canvas curtains to keep from falling out.

One wheel went into a deep hole. Regeane skidded sideways, arms flailing in desperation, sure in a second she'd be lying in the street. Lucilla caught her wrist just in time and pulled her back. She gave Regeane a nasty smile. "Relax, it's just like riding a horse. You must go with the movement. Faster," she shouted to the driver.

Regeane gripped the pad covering the bottom and dug in with her fingers. But, inexplicably, the litter didn't speed up. Instead it rolled to a stop.

Something thumped against one of the heavy canvas curtains surrounding them. Lucilla whispered something ugly in gutter Latin, then pushed aside the curtain and peered out.

A small crowd gathered around the litter. They eyed the magnificent vehicle with a mixture of awe, curiosity, and veiled hostility.

A voice in the back of the crowd shouted, "Throw aside the curtains, Lucilla, and let the people get a good look at the pope's whore."

Lucilla snatched at the curtains and shoved them back with a loud clatter of rings. "Very well," she shouted. "Here I sit. Now, you, sir, step forward so that I can get a good look at your face... and remember it."

The man who had shouted the taunt at Lucilla ducked down and vanished into an alleyway.

"How very brave," Lucilla commented in a loud voice, then asked the crowd, "Are any of the rest of you of his opinion? Is he a friend of yours? Can any of you give me his name?"

A nervous titter of laughter swept through the idlers around the litter, and they melted away with magical speed.

Lucilla shouted a command and flung the curtains shut. The litter started forward again. "The pope's whore, eh?" she said between clenched teeth. "I wish I'd gotten a better look at him." She gave Regeane a rapid, hard glance. "You don't seem surprised to hear me called the pope's whore."

"I'm not," Regeane found herself saying. She remembered that last night Basil had called Antonius the pope's brother. Stephen, she thought, as Lucilla studied her from the corner of her eye. He is the pope himself. And Lucilla... When Stephen realized what sort of rascals Gundabald and Hugo were, he hadn't

shown the slightest hesitation in sending her to Lucilla, about placing her under Lucilla's protection. "I imagine," Regeane said, "that you've been the pope's mistress for a very long time."

Lucilla went slack-jawed with astonishment for a second.

A flurry of missiles thudded against the curtains.

Lucilla's teeth caught at her lower lip. Her fists clenched, but she didn't open the curtains again. Regeane heard the crash of galloping hooves and a loud cry of pain. She surmised the stone thrower had been punished by one of the men in Lucilla's personal guard.

"Hydra-headed monster," Lucilla whispered bitterly.

"What?" Regeane asked.

"The Roman mob," Lucilla answered.

"What's happened?"

"No one wants a strong pope, Regeane," Lucilla said, "least of all the Lombards. Basil's minions in the churches have been giving sermons accusing Hadrian of being tainted with a vile disease, one that makes him unfit to be supreme pontiff."

"They wish everyone to believe him a leper, as Antonius is?" Regeane asked.

At that moment the covered litter lurched to a stop before Lucilla's door. Without waiting for help, Regeane swung herself down. Lucilla followed more slowly.

When Regeane entered the atrium, a small body launched itself at her like a missile thrown from a catapult. Elfgifa hung around Regeane's neck and threw her long legs around her waist.

"You're back! I knew she'd get you! I was the one who found you. Did she tell you?" The small face stared up at her expectantly.

"Did she?" Regeane asked, untangling herself from Elfgifa and turning to Lucilla.

"That terrible, terrible child," Lucilla said fondly. "Yes, she did. The moment she heard you were missing, she climbed over the wall. She reappeared a short time later with the filthiest little boy I've ever seen. He demanded a silver coin and a bath."

"A bath?" Regeane asked.

Elfgifa glanced coquettishly up through her eyelashes at Regeane.

"Yes," Lucilla said waspishly, "a bath. He got his bath and his silver and," she continued, placing her hands on her hips and glaring down at Elfgifa, "a big, wet kiss."

Elfgifa pursed her lips and lowered her eyes modestly. "I promised him a kiss, but I told him I wouldn't kiss anyone as dirty as he was." She tossed her head. "My father says a man who doesn't wash himself before he goes to a woman and after doesn't respect himself or the woman. I can understand 'before,' but why 'after'? I told him I thought once would be enough, but he said after, too. Why is that?"

"Why didn't you ask him?" Lucilla's lips twitched.

Elfgifa frowned. Her lower lip began to creep forward. "He smiled the way you're smiling now, and told me I'd understand better when I grew up."

"Don't start going on about how you want to understand now," Regeane said haughtily. "You embarrassed me in front of Stephen and Antonius."

Elfgifa stared up at them mutinously.

"You must remember you're only a child," Lucilla said. "There are some things you'll have to wait to understand."

Elfgifa sighed. "Thank you for calling it to my attention. That's what my father says when I tell him things he doesn't want to hear. I know I'm a child, but I understand..." She broke off as another train of thought struck her. "Besides, my Uncle Thungbrand and Aunt Huldigun visited and neither one of them washes ever. I asked my father about it. He says they are both strangers to any kind of water. I couldn't understand that either except that they both got as drunk as some of my father's men and rolled up under the table with them and..."

"I think possibly that may have been what your father meant." Lucilla said.

"They don't put any water in their wine either?" Elfgifa asked.

"Yes," Lucilla said. "Now run along. I've called my personal physician to see Regeane."

"Did he beat you?" Elfgifa asked. "Postumous—he's the boy who told me where you were—he said three Franks, one called Hugo, lived near the Forum. He said you were screaming this morning."

Lucilla began hurrying Regeane along the peristyle walkway toward the back of the house. "Yes, he beat her."

"Oh," Elfgifa said. "May I see?"

"No, you may not," Lucilla said sternly.

Elfgifa clasped Regeane's hand firmly. "If I'm going to be her lady's maid, I'm going to need to—"

"Who in the world said you were going to be her lady's maid?" Lucilla asked.

"Your maid, Susanna, told me," Elfgifa said. "And I want to be one. She says it's wonderful to be a lady's maid. You get to order the menservants about, and all the tradesmen give you expensive gifts so you'll bring them your lady's custom. You can take all the lovers you want and you don't even have to marry some dirty old man for his money and... though why you should marry a dirty old man for his money is another thing I don't understand. Don't young men have any money?"

"I can see," Lucilla said ominously, "that I must have a word with Susanna."

"Oh, no," Regeane said. "I'm sure the woman meant no harm." The feel of the small, warm hand in hers was very comforting. "Please don't send Elfgifa away."

Lucilla stared down her nose sternly at Elfgifa. "Very well, I won't if... if you promise to sit in the corner and be absolutely quiet while the physician examines your mistress. If you're going to be a lady's maid, the first thing you'll need to learn is when to speak and when to be silent."

"Susanna didn't tell me that was part of it," Elfgifa said.

"Didn't she?" Lucilla said. "Expensive gifts from the tradesmen, eh? Apparently it's something she hasn't learned herself."

The physician, Pappolus, arrived. He was a tall, well dressed young man who assumed an air of dignity beyond his years.

Regeane balked at undressing in front of a man, but with Lucilla standing over her like a female dragon and Elfgifa watching curiously from one corner of the room, she was at length prevailed upon to show the physician her back.

He sniffed and studied her, then gave his opinion in long, complicated phrases well-larded with very impressive Greek words, took his pay, provided an ointment for Regeane's back, and left.

Lucilla sniffed the ointment suspiciously, then threw it away, saying, "He once prescribed an eye ointment for one of my girls. Her problem got worse, not better. I investigated and learned he believed hippopotamus dung, which he imports from Egypt in powder form, is a sovereign remedy for everything. I was hard put to save the girl's sight. But much as I hate to admit it, he has greater expertise than I have in preventing scars from forming. That's why I asked him to see you."

Lucilla pressed a sleeping draught on her. Again, Regeane resisted, but finally drank. Lucilla conducted her to a cubiculum. The small room was dark, even by day. The only light was the lamp in Lucilla's hand and the glow from the sun shining beyond the pillared portico into the atrium. She made Regeane stretch out on the bed.

Lying down, Regeane could feel the sleeping potion clouding her mind, dulling her senses.

Lucilla stood over her, holding the dove-shaped lamp. By its flame she seemed only a disembodied face, a void in the cool, pleasant gloom. "Rest," she said quietly in a soothing tone. "Sleep." Then, even more softly, "Sleep."

Though Lucilla was as quiet as possible, the snick of the bolt on the heavy door going home was loud to both Regeane and the wolf.

She was half paralyzed by the sleeping draught and absolute exhaustion. The wolf's powers weren't infinite. All her reserves were completely drained. She'd been warmed and fed. Now, she *must* sleep.

Antonius? He was alone on the Campagna. Without her help, he would die. She reflected that Lucilla might not starve or torture her, but she was capable of imprisoning her just as efficiently as Gundabald could. More so, in fact, as she had the greater resources.

Regeane's eyelids lifted. She saw the window of the bedroom was as well-barred as that of the one in the lodging house.

The daylight was brighter outside than it had been earlier. The rain must have passed. It was early

afternoon. The wolf yawned. *Sleep now. Do now what now demands. Night must fall.*

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## Chapter Eight



REGEANE WAS AWAKENED BY THE WOLF AT DUSK. Her eyes opened slightly. Through her lashes, she could see the stars, each tiny light pricking through the deep, blue velvet twilight. She lay still. Two voices were speaking nearby.

"Well, I'm sorry. I simply won't give her any more. It might kill her." She recognized the voice. It belonged to the physician, Pappolus.

"I doubt it," Lucilla replied skeptically. "She has the constitution of a lioness. You wouldn't believe the condition she was in when I found her. Now, she's nearly healed. She's not completely human."

"Bha!" Pappolus snapped. "Good God, woman, I had thought you superior to your sex in trusting reason above the spider's web of superstitions that bind most women hand and foot. Besides, I told you: sometimes it doesn't work."

"Yes, but in this particular case, why not? The rest babbled of everything—loves, friends, plots, lust, greed, and a simply unbelievable amount of envy, jealousy, and downright hatred."

"Yes," Pappolus replied. "Some of it real and a lot of it imaginary."

"But all *she* did was talk nonsense," Lucilla snapped.

"Nonsense that made my skin crawl," Pappolus said. "Rose petals, pink and white like a fair woman's skin, steeping in pools of blood. I understand she's to be married. Well, marry her off. You'll be rid of her."

"Now, who's being superstitious?" Lucilla asked.

"She could be a thing of nature. Many strange and dangerous things are thrown up by the real world. I have, after all, seen the giraffe while I studied on the banks of the Nile. Few more peculiar things exist than the giraffe. I was greatly impressed by it."

"Besides, she may talk nonsense because her thoughts are nonsense. I've told you in the past, you judge other women by your own nobility of mind. Most are really very stupid. Some philosophers, as you know, saw them only as animals, like a cat or a cow that somehow acquired the power of speech. A fine horse or hound exceeds them in an ability to think abstractly and in the virtue of loyalty. A horse or hound will, as you know, serve or defend its master's interest to its last breath. Whereas women, all too often, fail to show any appreciation for the benefits conferred on them by men. They defy their fathers, deceive their husbands, and demand completely unreasonable loyalty from their sons! Most unsatisfactory. Most," he clucked. "Now, dear lady, if I may be so bold, I have another patron of distinction to wait upon. He has gout. I pray you give me leave to depart."

"By all means, go," Lucilla said darkly.

When Regeane heard the door close, she sat up and opened her eyes.

"Ah," Lucilla said, "I thought you were awake. I heard your breathing change when it became dark outside."

"You drugged me to learn my secrets," Regeane said.

"Not expertly enough, I fear," Lucilla said. She directed an incandescent glare at the door through which the physician had departed. "Idiot. Did I not know that that imbecile develops a palsy of shivering at the mere thought of my displeasure, I would have him followed from my house by assassins. Probably do his 'noble patron' more good than his medicines."

"What did you want to know?" Regeane asked.

"Where is Antonius?" Lucilla lifted the lamp she was holding higher so she could see Regeane's face.

"Hidden on the Campagna," Regeane said. "I'll tell you where, but I can't be sure even *you* could find it." She managed to meet Lucilla's stare with a look of limpid innocence. From somewhere warm and bright, the wolf gave Regeane a stare of pure disgust.

"Well," Lucilla said. "Basil's men certainly can't. My sources tell me something—or someone—got him away from Basil last night and hid him so well that even all of Basil's men combing the area close to the old shrine of Apollo couldn't find him."

"Yes, well *I* can," Regeane said.

Lucilla walked to the door. She opened it to be sure no one was in the corridor. The hall was empty. In the distance, Regeane could hear the clatter of pots and pans and the sound of feminine laughter. Lucilla closed the door. This time, she bolted it from within.

The only light in the room was cast by the alabaster dove lamp in Lucilla's hand. The flame burned deep in the lamp, seen only through the translucent sides of the bird. It flickered and danced over the wick and oil, casting kaleidoscope shadows that fluttered against the walls.

Lucilla placed the lamp on a low table near the bed. This left her face in shadow, her expression unreadable.

Regeane could smell Lucilla's body fear, an acrid smell so strong it almost made the wolf's eyes tear. The odor was so powerful, Regeane could only remember smelling it being so overpowering once before—on a brigand captured on the Via Julia when she and her mother were entering Rome. He was being conducted out of the city by soldiers. They were going to execute him. Lucilla had to be desperate.

"What do you want?" Regeane asked.

"It's time for Antonius to die," Lucilla whispered out of the darkness.

"I'm not a murderer," Regeane said.

"You don't have to be," Lucilla said.

Regeane realized the reason Lucilla was whispering was because she was panting. She sounded as if she couldn't get her breath.

"What do you want me to do, then?" Regeane asked.

"Take him the poison. And... and." Lucilla's breaths increased in rapidity. She sounded almost like a spent animal.

"And?" Regeane prompted.

"And tell him I sent it. He will know what to do and how to do it." Lucilla gave one last gasp.

"The choice of life or death is his," Regeane said.

Lucilla didn't answer. She sank down next to Regeane on the bed.

"Very well," Regeane replied. "I will do as you ask. I will wish a reward."

Lucilla said, "Naturally," with a negligent wave of her hand. Her head was bowed.

"I will need help with the marriage contract," Regeane said. "I want it written to give me a separate residence, my own servants."

"And bodyguard—men-at-arms you can pay and who are correspondingly loyal," Lucilla added.

"You are clever," Regeane commented.,

Lucilla smiled.*A dreadful smile*, Regeane thought.*A smile the ghastly-faced woman must use in place of tears or madness*.

"Is that what I am?" Lucilla asked.

The wolf turned away, afraid, her hackles up.

"God knows what happened last night. I certainly don't," Lucilla whispered. "You vanished. You simply vanished. One minute Basil was after you with his sword, the next... nothing. But Basil's men were screaming and, by the amount of blood, wounded when they ran."

When Regeane made no response, Lucilla gave her an appraising glance. "How I would love to get that fool Charles here. We'd hear no more of mountain lords. He'd want to plunder your blossom himself. At least for the first time. I could plant you at the Frankish court as a friend of Hadrian's. You would be a wealthy woman, powerful, able to engage in any nefarious activities you..."

The wolf didn't listen. She was far away. She'd found the morning. The sun was hot on her face. She was walking at the top of a hill. The countryside was open, a parkland. The grass at her feet was low, not lush, but still rich, though tufted and coarse.

Many small trees were scattered across the hills. They had thick, deeply ridged bark, and small, feathery green leaves. They, and the grass, still flashed with the scattered diamonds of morning dew. Birdsong rang out all around her. The wind's voice rose and fell in her ears. Now a ragged fluttering followed by a



rasp as it visited undergrowth and the tree trunks, then fading away into a sigh.

The wolf lifted her head. The hills rolled away into the distance. Green at first, the closest ones, then hazy pale blue until they reached the edge of the world at the horizon's rim.

"Now go and bathe," Lucilla's voice intruded. "We will dine together and take the poison to Antonius."

Regeane rose and went in search of the baths. She bathed, and when she stepped out of the pool, she found two of Lucilla's maids waiting for her. They dressed her in a chiton. A Greek garment of great beauty that draped over her slender form. It hung straight down to the floor in soft folds.

Lucilla's maids offered her jewels. This required more thought. At length, Regeane selected an antique necklace of silver and pearls. The links were large, the metal very soft. She could dent it with her fingernail. Gold sandals were laced to her feet and a gold fillet bound her hair.

She realized she was being dressed for Lucilla's pleasure when she looked at herself in the mirror. The soft, tightly woven linen was almost transparent. Not quite, but almost. It showed the pink breast tips and the dark pubic triangle.

One of the maids showed her how to undo the girdle at the waist and the two clasps at the shoulders. This would allow the chiton to fall around her feet.

Regeane asked to see Elfgifa, and was conducted to a small, comfortable chamber. Elfgifa was sleeping curled in a tangle of knees and elbows. She looked like a grimy little ball. It appeared as if she might have spent the afternoon playing in the garden. A few tendrils of soft, blond hair curled on her forehead. Regeane brushed them aside and kissed her gently.

The maid who shared Elfgifa's chamber was a stout, motherly woman with graying hair. "I was Antonius' nurse once," she told Regeane. "We haven't had a child in the house for some time. I miss them."

"What do you think? Did she take any great harm from her captivity?" Regeane asked.

"No," the woman said. "I don't think so. She is, as she claims, gently bred. Despite her sometimes hoydenish ways, she is very mannerly and obedient. Always has a 'please' and 'thank you' for everyone waiting on her. She has been a bit indulged. She says her mother died before she can remember her. Her father did not care to marry again. I believed he cherished the child. She worships him. He must be wild with grief. I hope he can be reunited with her as soon as possible. Theirs is a cruel separation."

Regeane nodded.

"So tender, and she is not even your own." Lucilla was a dark shape in the doorway. "Imagine how you would love her if she were your own."

Regeane didn't answer. The maidservant made as if to squeeze past Lucilla.

"Fausta!" Lucilla said to the woman. "You loved him as much as I did. Don't abandon me to my grief."

"My lady," Fausta said softly, "years ago my family took me to the slave dealer. My mother wept while my father bargained for the best price. I was but thirteen years old. They saw my sister as the beauty who would ensnare a husband. My brother as a strong back to work the land. In me, the purchase of a new bullock. You took me from the slave dealer because you said I had a kind face. I helped you bring

up your son. Everything good in my life has come from you. I have loved him. I have loved you. But no one in the world loves Antonius as you do. If he finds his death tonight, so will you. Don't ask me to betray either of my loves. You are not the only one in mourning."

After so speaking, she slipped away softly, taking the lamp and leaving only darkness behind her.

Once the light distracting her eyes was gone, Regeane found she could see quite well. The wolf was present.

Lucilla's face was blank with shock. She was trembling.

The wind was flowing into the casement, blowing Lucilla's scent away from Regeane. She was glad. Even the wolf didn't find the atmosphere Lucilla walked in interesting.

"Your son, Lucilla?" Regeane asked. "Your son?"

Lucilla didn't answer. "I'll go bathe now. I will meet you in the dining room. And... I cannot bear any more discussion of the matter. My decision is made. Did I not love Fausta, I would put her out on the street tomorrow to beg her bread on church steps and spend her old age sheltering in doorways from the rain."

Before Regeane could reply, Lucilla turned and hurried away. The night air coming through the window was cold. Regeane closed the shutters, bolted them, and covered Elfgifa. The child stirred. Regeane kissed one soft, still-grimy cheek. Elfgifa heaved a deep sigh and stretched out a bit under the warm coverlet.

Regeane was uncertain. Was the child safe here?

The wolf was satisfied. Something about Fausta. Her quiet speech. Her ripe apple smell reassured the wolf. A fine pack member, not bold, but always to be relied upon. One of the steady ones.

Regeane hurried toward the dining room.

THEY DINED IN PRIVACY AS LUCILLA HAD PROMISED. The two couches faced each other over a low table containing what to Lucilla was obviously her usual fare—and, to Regeane, a sumptuous meal.

A perfumed breeze drifted into the room from the dark garden.

The dinner was spread out on the table before them: venison done over an open fire, covered by a sauce made with the drippings; a larded capon cooked with honey and almonds; black olives; bread; and a few boiled eggs.

A silver tray with red glass cups and a jug sat on the table.

Lucilla lifted one of the red goblets and poured Regeane a cup of wine. "This is my very oldest vintage. I preserved it for my son's wedding feast, but it will do as well for his funeral, because he must die tonight. Tell me where he is."

Regeane shrugged. "I wouldn't know how. I found a secret place."

Lucilla stared at her. "You're lying."

"No." Regeane denied the accusation. "I'm not a huntsman. I don't travel the same way Basil and his clumsy henchmen stumble around. I'm... different."

Lucilla sobbed deep in her throat. Then she lowered her head, resting her brow against the high-raised cushion at the end of the dining couch.

Regeane stretched out her hand to the food. Her fingers swirled a chunk of venison in the sauce and carried it to her lips. The wolf was hungry, half starved, and she set Regeane to work as quickly as possible.

The wolf's feelings were too strong for the woman's verbal mind. The wolf knew only that somewhere in the depths of her being, she had come to a decision.

She had come to it without argument or analysis, almost without thought of the ramifications or consequences. She was going to save Antonius. Regeane was in accord.

With the clarity born of the almost hysterical tension within her, Regeane looked around the room at the beautiful frescoes on the walls that gave the illusion of light and space, at the alabaster lamps, the purplish-red velvet cushions on the dining couches.

Lucilla didn't eat, though she took a goblet of the dark wine.

The dining room that had seemed so splendid the night before now seemed tawdry and cheap. The frescos were stained and darkened by time and the sooty smoke of a thousand contaminated dinners. Here and there bits and pieces of paint were flaking away, showing the bare walls.

The dove-shaped lamps were the overstated touch of a procuress, a brothel keeper. But that was what Lucilla was, wasn't she? Whatever pretty words she put on it—a pander.

Regeane finished the venison. She snapped a wing and a breast from the capon and her teeth tore at the soft-scented white meat.

Even if Lucilla served the first families of Rome, her goddess was still lust. Aphrodite with golden fingers. Noble lords took the girls as Maeniel would take Regeane. Lucilla took her pay. And her son's blood.

For what seemed like a long time, Regeane ate without speaking. She felt caught in a maze. A journey that began when Gundabald told her she was going to be married and what he wanted her to do to Maeniel after she wedded him. He wanted her to be a compliant wife and lure Maeniel into a false sense of security.

But come the night of the full moon or even, she thought joyfully, any darkness, she could change. Change and tear her inconvenient husband's throat out. The men in the garden last night hadn't stood much chance against her. She was not only much bigger than a normal wolf, she was much more intelligent. She could wait and pick her time.

She glanced around again at the luxurious room's shabby grandeur. She felt sickened, disgusted by Lucilla's readiness to murder her own son because he was politically inconvenient.

Lucilla's voice broke in on her thoughts. "Where is he?" she asked again.

"Why do you want to kill him?" Regeane asked.

Lucilla reached across the table and snatched Regeane's hair. She shook her head viciously. "Why do you torment me with this nonsense?" she screamed. "What's Antonius to you? Why should you care if he lives or dies? Tell me where he is and be done with it."

It took everything Regeane had to keep the wolf from coming into being, but the beast spoke, and the voice echoed in Regeane's throat. At the same time, the woman's arm swept out. Her palm landed with a loud crack on Lucilla's cheek.

The growl and the slap cut through Lucilla's rage. She drew back with a shudder and whispered, "Christ, what was that sound? God, what are you?"

"Keep your hands off me," Regeane spat. "I'm... not... taking... any... poison... to... Antonius."

"You said—" Lucilla began.

"No," Regeane shouted as she jumped off the couch to her left.

"You promised." Lucilla's voice was shrill and murderous as a bird of prey's.

"*I lied!*" Regeane shrieked. "I had to get out of that room with a bolt on the door. I had to... I don't know if I can help Antonius, but I'm going to try." Regeane's head snapped back as the wolf tried to seize her. Then the night creature fled, snarling as the woman slapped her away... hard. Regeane stopped. She was gasping, partly with the effort of keeping the wolf down, partly with purely human fury.

Lucilla stared at her, shocked into silence. "Regeane, Regeane. Do you think I want to kill my own son?"

"No," she answered. "I think you feel you must."

Lucilla nodded. "I do. You saw that mob today, saw how quickly they surrounded my litter, heard the insults they hurled at me?"

"Yes."

"Well," Lucilla said, "if that mob really comes to believe Hadrian's family is tainted as Antonius is, they will destroy him. Factional politics, my dear, aren't simply a problem in this city, they are a disease."

"All that has restrained him so far is that Hadrian is deeply respected by the old senatorial families and wildly loved by the people. But if Antonius is found and publicly shown to be a leper, it may be all Basil needs to unseat Hadrian."

Lucilla turned, swung her legs over the side of the couch, and got to her feet. She turned to Regeane with outstretched arms. "Since the disease began to show itself three years ago, we've hidden him. Now... now I can't save him. And even if I could, dear sweet merciful God, for what? For what, I ask you, girl? Until the rot reaches some vital organ and he dies, slowly and in misery?"

Lucilla's arms dropped to her sides. Then she raised one hand and thrust it into her hair, dragging at the

long, blond strands as if she wanted to tear them from her scalp. "Or until Antonius takes matters into his own hands and does what he must to prevent himself from being the instrument of Hadrian's destruction."

Regeane didn't reply. She had, in truth, no answer for Lucilla. She felt the tug of the night in her flesh, in her bones. The wolf wanted to be away, to smell the clean wind, to run across the fields under the stars. Far from the humans like Lucilla who had for so many years imprisoned her in narrow stone rooms with bars on the windows. Far from the humans who created such agonizing, incomprehensible conundrums as politics and war.

The room grew dim around her. The wolf reared in the gathering darkness. Wolf and woman smelled the freshening night breezes drifting in from the atrium.

Regeane looked up at the hanging lamp festooned with alabaster doves. Some of them must have exhausted their oil. They were going out now slowly, one by one.

Lucilla staggered against the couch. "Oh, God," she whimpered. "Christ, I'm everything they say I am—whore, bitch, a sow eating her litter, and my son... Oh, God, Antonius!"

Her face paled to a dirty white color. A faint sheen of sweat broke out on her skin.

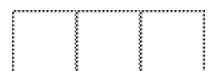
Regeane eased away. As the oil in the lamp was used up, the room grew darker. The wolf moved closer.

Lucilla staggered and fell to her knees. She stared up at Regeane, uncomprehending. "Where are you going?" she asked. "What are you going to do?"

Regeane backed toward the inky darkness of the atrium. The change was taking her powerfully, paralyzing her throat and tongue. She could barely form the words of her answer. "I'm going to find out what is in the night."

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## Chapter Nine



THE PAPAL MESSENGER'S FINGERS WERE TIGHTLY wound around one of Maeniel's silver wine cups. Fast asleep, he was stretched out on the table, lying on the remnants of last night's feast.

Maeniel scratched his head and tried to remember the man's name.

Matrona eyed him from the other side of the table.

"What did he call himself?" Maeniel asked.

"Harek," Matrona answered.

"Harek," Maeniel said. "Funny, I could have sworn he was a Roman."

Matrona snickered coldly. A snicker is always cold, but Matrona's was nastier than most. "A lot of them name themselves after us barbarians. They think it makes them sound tougher." She smiled, but the smile wasn't much of an improvement over the snicker. "I can't say it helped him very much."

Maeniel nodded. The papal messenger was about an inch under five feet tall. Matrona towered over him.

"He was a bit stiff at first," Gorgo said, "but he loosened up nicely after a while."

"Too much," Matrona said.

"Oh, I don't know," Gorgo said. Gorgo was a big man whose long brown hair melted into his thick brown beard and moustache. He was still sitting upright, something of an accomplishment after a night of heavy drinking.

"How about when he chased Silvia around the hall?" Matrona said.

"Silvia?" Maeniel said. "She was afraid of him?"

"No," Matrona said, "coy."

"Maybe she wanted some privacy," Gorgo said delicately.

"I can't think why," Matrona said. "She never bothered about it before."

"That's true," Gorgo said.

"Silvia." Maeniel mulled the matter over in his mind, then asked, "Did he catch her?"

"In the kitchen," Matrona said.

"Did he achieve his objective?" Gorgo inquired.

"I can't say," Matrona answered, "but he charged in bravely, pushing things aside with his hands. He looked like he was swimming."

"Silvia has no reason to fear a high wind," Maeniel said.

"Silvia," Gorgo said, "has no reason to fear an avalanche."

"True," Maeniel said, studying the small man on the table with interest. "He's very brave for a Roman."

"At any rate," Matrona continued, "they both behaved as if they believed he had."

"Don't describe it," Maeniel said.

"It's just as well the kitchen has a stone floor," Matrona said.

"It's just as well he found Silvia attractive," Gorgo said. "I was about to see if he could fly."

"Don't do that," Maeniel said.

"Not from the parapet," Gorgo said, "just here in the hall. He called me a barbarian, a crude, stupid barbarian."

"Drink," Matrona said, "brings out the worst in him."

"I didn't chop the hole in the ceiling," Gorgo complained. "Besides, it's as I told him, if there wasn't a hole in the ceiling, how would the smoke get out? If it couldn't, when we lit the fire we'd all suffocate."

Maeniel squinted up at the hole in the ceiling and scratched his head again.

"I can't think what they wanted so much space for anyway," Gorgo muttered.

The dining hall was what remained of a small Roman basilica. It was a long, T-shaped room with a barrel-vaulted ceiling and a high domed roof over the long table at the end. At some time in the past someone had taken a pickax to the center of the barrel vault that covered the long end of the T. A similar implement had gouged a large hole in the marble floor. The remains of a large fire smoldered in the pit under the hole in the ceiling.

A lot of Maeniel's people were sleeping heaped together around the crude hearth. Legs protruded from under the table at the end of the room.

"Where's Gavin?" he asked.

"I don't know." Matrona was busy prying the silver cup out of Harek's hands.

"You can tell he's a churchman by the tight grip he has on the silver," Gorgo said.

Maeniel glanced at the firepit Gavin wasn't among those sleeping around it. Where was he?

Maeniel walked along the table, looking at feet. Some had their toes pointed upward, others the heels, but heel or toe, none belonged to Gavin.

He finally found him, heels up, lying between Silvia's larger feet at the end of the table.

"Gavin and the papal messenger in one night?" he asked Matrona.

"No." She was still occupied with the silver cup. "I think he just crawled on top of her so he could have a warm, comfortable place to sleep. He asked me and I said yes."

"But he was too far gone," Maeniel said.

Matrona finally freed the cup and strolled away to put it with the rest under lock and key. "I know," she shot back over her shoulder at Maeniel. "That's why I said yes."

Poor Gavin. However, poor or not, they had to get started today, and left to himself, Gavin would sleep until late afternoon. Maeniel grabbed him by the ankles and pulled him out from under the table.

Gavin screamed. "Eeeeeee! Daylight!" He went back under, powered by his fingers and toes, and tried to flop down again on top of Silvia.



Maeniel sympathized with him. She looked billowy and comfortable. She was almost as big as a bed. Silvia, however, was waking up and didn't want any part of Gavin. She straight-armed him, catching him under the chin and pushing him aside.

Gavin moaned. The cold from the icy stone floor penetrated his clothing. He curled up on his side like an injured caterpillar and whimpered softly.

Maeniel grabbed Gavin by the ankles and hauled him out again. He held Gavin up like a wheelbarrow, legs in the air, upper body free, and arms on the floor.

"Oh, God!" Gavin shrieked, both hands clutching at his skull.

"Must I throw you in the fountain?" Maeniel asked.

The fountain in the courtyard was fed by snowmelt from the glaciers that towered over the pass. Even in the warmest weather, the water was bitter cold.

Gavin shuddered violently, but immediately decided sobriety was the better part of valor. "I'm awake, Maeniel."

"Good." Maeniel let go of his ankles.

Gavin managed to stagger to his feet. He was pale and his eyes were slitted against the light.

"We are going to Rome," Maeniel said. "We're leaving today."

"No," Gavin moaned. "There's going to be something wrong with her, I tell you, terribly, terribly wrong. You already know part of what's wrong. You saw the letter. Her closest relatives are such bestial scoundrels, they even managed to shock the pope himself. And living among those dissolute and depraved Romans, you know, it must be difficult to shock him!"

Maeniel's eyes roved around the hall. Under the table Silvia huffed, snorted, and rolled over. "Dissolute Romans," he muttered at Gavin. "And what are we?"

Gavin staggered along the table, looking for a jug with some beer or wine in it. Eventually he found one. He lifted it to his lips. His Adam's apple moved up and down for perhaps half a minute. When he set the jug down he said, "Noble, pure-hearted, chaste barbarians. I know because that's what the pope's messenger told me last night. Some writer named Tacitus said so."

Matrona rested her fists on her ample hips, threw back her head, and howled. "The only time you're chaste, Gavin, is when you chased, but could not catch her. I have seen manure piles purer than your heart and, as for nobility, you're a by-blow gotten on a scullery wench who was probably a slow runner."

"You notice," Gorgo said, "he had already learned better than to mention sobriety."

Gavin's face turned an unhealthy and nearly impossible shade of greenish purple. "My father," he said in a strangled tone, "is..."

Matrona began to roll up her sleeves. "Come on, Gorgo," she said. "He's started going on about his father. He needs to be thrown in the fountain."

Gavin backed up and jumped behind Maeniel.

Maeniel noticed Gavin had a black eye and a split lip on one side. "Who had the temerity to strike my captain?" he asked half jokingly. "Matrona?"

Matrona gave an evil chuckle. "No, I wasn't the one this time."

Joseph spoke up. He was a large man with a lugubrious face. A moustache drooped down over his upper lip. "He mistook me for Matrona."

"I didn't." Gavin's horrified denial came from behind Maeniel.

"You did," Joseph said, shaking his head. "And I feared lest you make a similar mistake with someone less patient, so I put you to sleep."

Gavin staggered away, muttering about disrespect and false friendship.

"Gorgo, Joseph," Maeniel said, "go fetch some money."

People all along the table were waking now, searching for and finding a hair of the dog.

Gorgo and Joseph returned with a large chest, "It's heavy," Joseph moaned.

"Well, dump it out on the floor," Maeniel said.

They did. A heap of gold and silver poured out. There were antique silver and gold coins, jewelry studded with precious and semiprecious stones, and the occasional showy pieces of glass, tableware, cups, plates, serving platters, and bowls.

Matrona came up with two pairs of saddlebags. She began to pack them. One pair with jewelry, the other with gold and silver coins.

Maeniel's household gathered round. Both men and women selecting jewelry for themselves and, sometimes, others.

Gavin clapped a dented diadem on his head. It was made mostly of copper, but had a ring of gold and silver birds in flight on it. "Was this a king's?" he asked.

"No," Maeniel answered. "It belonged to a priest." He looked faintly ill.

"A Christian priest?" Gavin asked mystified.

"No," Maeniel said. "A pagan one. A..." He groped for the word. "A druid. Now, take the damned thing off. For it's a damned thing, and you will find out soon if you wear it."

Gavin snatched the circlet off and threw it back into the pile.

Maeniel clapped his hands. "Listen! We are leaving this day for Rome. Those of you who want to come, scratch up some silver and gold coins. We will need to stay under a roof from time to time. And I hear living in the holy city is expensive. Matrona, who will remain here and care for the livestock?"

She had taken advantage of everyone's distraction to strip off her dress and put on a costume she found in the chest. It consisted of draped gold chains that covered her breasts and another set of smaller chains that hung from her hips and hid the pubic area. Matrona was a tall woman with a slim waist and ample hips and breasts. Her skin was dark. She had large brown eyes—they were heavy-lidded and sleepy looking—and beautiful curved, sensual lips.

Gavin stared at her. He was glassy-eyed. His mouth was hanging open.

"Matrona, the livestock! Cattle, sheep, goats, horses," Maeniel said. He snapped his fingers. "Remember."

"Three families have pregnant women among them," Matrona said. "I consulted them. They fear to risk the journey. They will remain."

Joseph looked at Gavin sadly. "Let her take him in the kitchen, my lord. His brain is mush."

Maeniel noticed that the chains didn't hide nearly enough of Matrona. "Please," he said, making a graceful gesture. "Tend to Gavin before we leave."

"I don't know why I bother," Matrona said. "His brain is always mush." She snapped her fingers at Gavin and departed. Gavin followed, looking as if he were drawn along by a ring through his nose.

"What about the papal messenger?" Joseph asked. "Don't wake him," Maeniel said, strolling away. "Put him on Audovald. He will bring him safely down the mountain."

THE PAPAL MESSENGER DID AWAKEN WHEN THEY were better than halfway down the mountain. Gavin had fallen asleep on his horse. Matrona put a handful of snow down his neck. Gavin screamed. His scream woke the papal messenger, who screamed in turn when he realized where he was.

Maeniel, who was riding behind him, said, "Be quiet. Don't alarm Audovald. His task requires concentration. This path is steep."

"Oh, yes," the papal messenger murmured. "The horse." In truth, he had no desire to distract Audovald. The path was not only steep and marred by patches of ice. On one side the drop was straight down into a valley filled with rocks. About five thousand spruce trees clung to a slope too steep to hold snow. Insuring that if he fell, the spiny tree limbs would rip him to pieces on the way down. A boulder in the valley would reduce him to something with the consistency of fruit pulp and in addition, there appeared to be a river in the valley that would wash away what remained.

"Where are we going?" he asked in a shaky voice.

"To Rome," Maeniel replied unconcerned.

"With all your household?"

"They normally accompany me when I travel," Maeniel said.

The papal envoy made as if to pick up the reins.

"Do not annoy Audovald with directions, either," Maeniel said. "He knows the way."

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## Chapter Ten



THE WOLF EXPLODED INTO THE NIGHT, THE BEAST in full control. She wanted to escape Lucilla and her dreadful grief. To flee the stifling city, the stench of its gutters, the enclosing walls. The multiple terrors of a world ruled by men like Gundabald and Hadrian. A world that would force a woman to kill her own son.

So she ran, a gliding gray shape, skimming low across the ground beyond the environs of Rome through the long grass of the Campagna. *Thank God*, she thought. *Thank God for the wolf*. The wolf had always set her free, even when she'd been imprisoned. The wolf had always allowed her to escape; given her freedom. The wolf drowned her grief for her mother, consoled her for the sense of separateness she'd felt when she'd first realized that she lived not only in this world, but in another, also.

Regeane thought. Regeane pondered. Regeane feared. Regeane struggled. But the silver wolf simply was.

She came to a stop in the long grass shivered by the night wind. The sweep of the countryside was faintly illuminated by the slow, unending dance of the stars.

To the wolf's eyes, it was a shimmering, dark sea of grass, an undulating satiny carpet of life.

The rhythms of the night were timeless, formed by the needs of the earth as it drifted beneath the stars. The wind rose as the parched autumn earth released its heat into the cool, night air. and the stalks of the long grasses brushed each other, rustling and whispering in the silence.

Regeane heard the hunting cries of bats as they darted and swooped above her, seeking their insect prey.

Men might have abandoned the Campagna, but all around Regeane it throbbed with life. The rattle and shift of grasses as they moved and tossed. The cry of insects as they challenged each other and made love, fighting, mating, breeding, and dying in their swift-moving miniature world. Frogs called, singing their ancient songs in the low marshy places concealed in the folds of the earth's grassy gown.

To the wolf's ears, even the velvet slap of an owl's wing was loud. She heard clearly the nervous squeak and churring of the mice foraging warily among the grass stems for food.

She scented a deer nearby; the musk vivid as a spoken word.

The scent of blood drying and fading, rising from the spot where a stoat had surprised a rabbit.

Regeane understood that the wolf knew... the wolf knew things she didn't.

She'd had no plan when she went flying from Lucilla's villa. She had taken the necklace with the vague

idea of bringing it to Antonius in the hope that he could use the jewels to buy food and shelter for himself until she could find a way to rescue him. But what rescue could there be for Antonius or, for that matter, for her?

She had only the wolf and her dim knowledge that the world was more than the plans of men like Gundabald or follies of war and politics. But the woman had only the haziest idea of what the wolf knew.

The wolf stood perfectly still, motionless as only a wild creature can be on the hunt. She searched the Campagna with eyes, ears, and nose. Her body quivered like a harp, strung with the intensity of her desire, her need. Listening, seeing, but above all, feeling with her whole body, until far away she heard music, the distant strains borne by the night wind to her ears.

The wolf lunged forward at a run.

Regeane ran, the night wind in her face, the stars a deep cold fire above her. The act of running filled her with profound joy. She reveled in the bunching and return of the wolf's powerful shoulder muscles, the advance and retreat of the iron sinew that drove her hips and thighs.

She fled from the world of men and into the vast dark universe that stared in indifference at the follies of mankind and would, she was sure, gaze at its passing with the same indifference.

The wolf's mind joined her forebears on other runs beneath other stars. Sometimes driven by the lash of terror and starvation as she traversed barren wastes, her belly cramping with hunger. Sometimes in joy when the quarry was sighted and she bore down, closing in with the rest of the pack, tasting the warm, rich blood in her mouth.

And then there were the runs on the nights of love. For a few moments, it seemed she didn't run alone. A dark shape raced beside her. Love, brief, excruciatingly joyous love, unlike human love, without its guilt, fear, and regret.

Love, a lance of fire in her loins; its delight echoing through her whole being.

Love, the warm milk scent of the den, the life flowing from her teats into small mouths. The soft young bodies pressed against her seeking comfort and security.

Love, a circle garnering of itself, for itself, what it gives.

A love that yields and adores, that is not taken or forced.

She reveled in these memories, memories without words, images, dreamlike fragments wrenched out of time. Images of what the world had been, what it should be, and what it never would be again. Not for her. For the woman, she would be wed to a man and he would take her maidenhood by force and perhaps wreak other violence upon her unless she killed him first.

She was so deeply caught up in the wolf's memories that she was almost shocked when she realized she'd reached her objective. She saw the procession before her.

The wolf stopped so quickly it brought her down on her haunches. And when the woman realized what she was looking at, she made a soft whining sound of distress.

But the wolf ignored her. And, caught deep in the matrix of the wolf's indifference, the woman had to

agree. The music was the most beautiful she had ever heard. Even played as it was by hands and lips that were dust. The instruments carried by men and women who were now only bone encased in the house of earth.

In the forefront of the procession, the priests and priestesses danced joyously to the sound of lyre, cithara, and the double flute. The low, endless throbbing pulse of the drum bound the music together.

The sacrifices led the procession: white oxen with gilded horns garlanded with flowers and greenery. They paced tamely forward, going tranquil to their fate.

Behind them, marching four abreast, came the gods' worshippers. They were crowned with gilded laurel and linked by long garlands of spring-green branches turned with daisies, clover, lilies, and roses.

Torchbearers, pacing alongside them, led the silent throng as they passed before the wolf's eyes.

The clothing they wore was that of the distant past, and reminded Regeane of the few broken monuments remaining in Rome that depicted the ruling families gathered to honor their gods. The men wore draped togas, their heads covered by one fold of the garment. They were accompanied by their wives, clad in the long stola of honorable marriage, uncut hair dressed high behind a diadem. Both sexes led and carried small children. The older children and young people walked before them, trying to emulate the dignity of their elders.

As Regeane studied this stately company, she remembered one rainy day when she paused beside a bas-relief of some unknown emperor leading his family toward the capital in solemn worship. An old farmer, who'd sold his produce, paused beside her. He rested his handcart on the ground and gazed at the frieze in sorrow and asked, "Did we ever stand so... before our gods?"

The wolf's first impulse was to flee. They were dead. The dead had a right to the peace and joy of fond remembrance. They had no need to be reminded of the agony and struggle of the living.

Unlike so many of the shadows the wolf saw, these dead had cut their ties to the earth. To the pain and strife of those who breathe and bleed, suffer and love. They had overcome the futile grief at the terrible wrench of life's ending.

What right had she, a creature of moonlight and darkness, to bring her need to them?

But need she did.

Hunger she did. For... justice.

And there would never be justice among mortals for her or Antonius.

Perhaps she might find some among the dead. At least when Antonius' struggles were ended, they might welcome him and let him join them.

The glittering procession glided past her. The late night air held the biting chill of winter. The stars glittered in dense, magnificent loneliness.

But the cold breeze that stirred the wolf's fur moved not a fold of their garments. The flowers of a forgotten springtime bloomed in the crowns the frolicking dancers wore. The procession marched in the warm, still air of a summer evening. The wolf followed through the cold, winter night.

The sacred way they trod led to a high rock that towered over the surrounding countryside. A temple, bone-white, crowned the rock. Its pale columns and pediment reared against the midnight sky.

Even from where she stood, the wolf could see it was a ruin. Roofless, the columns pitted and broken, the pediment looted of the ivory and crystal-eyed statuary that once did honor to a nation and its gods.

But still it stood majestic, decked in robes of starlight, a plaything of the wind and rain, gazing with patient tranquility on the brown plain and the eternal splendor of the dark blue sea beyond.

The wolf paused at the foot of the rock and looked up.

The steep path to the summit, once paved with marble and lined by statues of kings and emperors, gods and goddesses, was now only a barren, weed-grown trace.

The marbles had been ripped out long ago to feed the lime kilns at Rome and Naples. The few standing statues were mutilated, without hands or heads. Many had fallen and were only vine-encased lumps lying on the grassy slopes leading up to the rock.

The woman inside the wolf wondered what the dead eyes of the ghosts saw. Did they behold the temple in its ancient splendor or did they see what she did—an abandoned ruin? Did it matter to them what they saw? Did they care?

The wolf sniffed the wind and scented the clean, sweet breeze from the ocean and she knew it didn't matter. They lived beyond time with no worldly trifles to diminish their ardor or tarnish their love. To them, today was as yesterday or tomorrow. Life an eternal moment.

I will come, she thought, *as a suppliant. And beg help for Antonius and... myself.*

Laurel bushes grew all around the approach to the high rock. A branch yielded to the wolf's jaws. A suppliant must bear a palm. The wolf began to climb the steep path to the temple crowning the summit, toward the stars.

The sacred way circled the rock, going ever upward toward the sky, until she came at last to the top overlooking the sea. The air was clear, and the breeze blew constantly.

When the wolf reached the top she found the temple empty and dark. The wind whined softly among the stark, broken columns. Before the doors to the sacred precinct the undying fire of the gods was a conical mound of pale, dead ash. The eternal sea breeze drew the ash into a veil of dust, dancing before her in the cold night air.

The wolf paused, the laurel branch still clenched tightly in her jaws. A flicker of ironic laughter danced in her mind, so softly the wolf wasn't sure if it belonged to her or another.

"You feared to trouble the dead. Now all of your fears are set at naught. See how easily they escape you when they desire." Somehow Regeane formed the words in her mind. She had only the limited resources of the wolf to draw on. And though the wolf thought well, she thought in images and patterns and not with words as humans did.

But somewhere in the recesses of the wolf's brain, she found the symbols she needed. They coalesced into words and she cried out silently. *I come as a suppliant. Hear me. Answer me. Help me.*



The night wind blew more strongly for a moment. It swirled around the fire circle, lifting a cloud of ancient ash into the air, and sobbed through the shattered columns of the temple.

Voices. Voices sang in the wind. Voices out of time. Voices whose lips were dust.

Some condemned. Some mocked. Some even laughed as if coming from an immense distance down a long, coiling corridor of eternity where they had forgotten they were ever human.

Voices. Wordless, whispering voices. Fading and finally falling into silence around her.

Regeane gathered herself within the wolf's brain and cried out again silently. *Does no one hear the supplicant ?*

The reply was the shadow of a sound. As if a vagrant breath of the ever-moving air swirled and caught at the broken pedestal where the tall statue of the god had once stood.

Be silent, the voice commanded, *for where I dwell, the supplicant is always heard .*

The sweet scent of bay seemed to grow stronger in the wolf's nostrils.

She glided from the far end of the temple toward Regeane, clothed in white, wearing the long, softly draped chiton and peplos of a woman. The peplos covered her head and arms. Not even her hands were visible.

Her form was the shape and semblance of a woman. Her face was a thing of horror. The starlight gleamed on the naked bone of a skull.

The wolf, wrapped in the beast's indifference, whined softly, deep in her throat.

The voice of the apparition resonated in the wolf's mind. "Who are you? Why do you come to Cumae to trouble the noble, the sacred dead?"

The voices in the wind leaped to a crescendo, moaning, weeping, cursing, howling. The blast plucked at the wolf's fur and rattled the leaves of the branch in her mouth.

The specter drew closer and closer.

I am wolf, Regeane thought as her consciousness strove to separate itself from the wolf's. The world seemed to recede as the woman's mind twisted and turned, trying to force the wolf's muscles to run gibbering in terror from the thing she faced.

Red fury exploded through the double consciousness as the wolf raged back at the alien creature trying to control her, to turn her from her objective.

Regeane was thrust away into blind darkness. She could no longer see or hear. Taste and touch were denied to her as she was tossed into a lightless void, screaming soundlessly. Their union was as sudden, as simultaneous as the burst of lightning and the clap of thunder when a storm breaks directly overhead.

One moment she was in darkness; the next she stood woman-wolf, naked on the broken stone before the ruined temple and its dead fire, the laurel branch in her hand.

She was woman and wolf both, and she had never known such power. She could feel the quivering tension inside her. She was taut as a wire, drawn between the two opposite poles of her nature, taut as a harp string strained to its absolute limit just before it sings its sweetest note... or snaps.

She confronted the unnatural horror in front of her.

The form stopped.

The night wind flowed over Regeane's naked flesh like cold water. Wind from the sea, a bath of brilliance. Regeane stretched out the arm with the cluster of laurel leaves toward the figure, their perfume still thick in her nostrils.

"I come to you," she said, "as a suppliant, and you confront me with horror."

"You summoned me," the voice answered. "What care I what you see?" The forked tongue flickered at the lipless teeth of the skull. Behind the empty eyes of the bone mask the long length of a serpent moved beyond the black stare, in the hollow of the cranium. "Who are you to come here clothed in only your flesh, naked as the goddess herself and wearing her necklace."

"I was born of darkness," Regeane said. "My father's eyes closed before mine opened. I am not of this world or the other, and I have the right to be what I am."

The death-head woman vanished into a twisted, coiling blackness, and the serpent reared before Regeane, the dark, triangular head a shadow between her and the stars shining through the broken roof.

But the woman who was not Regeane and not the wolf stood her ground. As she watched open-eyed, unblinking, the serpent faded into wispy shadow till only the stars remained. Regeane faced a twisted, wrinkled crone.

The burst of light was fire in her eyes. The temple was thrown open before her, breathtakingly beautiful as it had been on the day of its dedication. Ablaze with torchlight, lit by the twinkling fires of a thousand lamps festooned with green garlands. The festive worshippers stood arrayed in white, crowned with gilded laurel, and carried a rainbow of spring flowers in their arms.

They were still as if interrupted in their revels by this trespasser from beyond the world, gazing at Regeane with the stony distant stare of the dead.

Towering over them stood the statue of the god clothed as Regeane, in primal nakedness, and alight with the beauty of youth. He smiled down at the throng who had once and now forever adored him.

Regeane stepped around the fire and toward the doorway.

"The suppliant will be heard," the crone whispered, "but come no further for beyond this threshold is the land of the dead."

Oh, there was beauty there, Regeane thought as she met the distant eyes of the throng. For here chaos lurks, waiting, and beauty can be a mask for horror and horror a gateway into the unimaginable.

Regeane turned again to the old woman standing in the doorway. But was she old? Even to the creature of power Regeane had become, the apparition seemed to shift and change.

Youth and age flickered like shadows over her features. Smooth skin collapsed into wrinkles. A winsome smile turned into a gap-toothed, evil grin. Lustrous hair thinned to a few lank strands on a scabrous, balding head.

And then it all began again and again and again endlessly.

"I can't seem to see you," Regeane said.

"No," the voice answered. "No one ever has. Speak. What do you desire? For you have not much time. You said you came as a supplicant. I will hear you. Speak."

"I seek a man's life," Regeane said. "I seek to remold his flesh, to heal him."

All those crowded into the temple began to laugh. *The weeping of the dead is very terrible*, Regeane thought, for she had fled from it often. *It wrings the heart, but their laughter is worse, hideous beyond belief because there is nothing left of humanity in it. Only a cold, ringing jeer*.

Regeane almost fled from it, but the pride and power she felt wouldn't let her.

The figure standing in the doorway didn't laugh. Her face, except for the slow changes of bud, blossom, and decay, remained the same and, as Regeane watched, Regeane realized each face the twisted hag wore was a different one, yet each the same in their destruction by time. They faded into each other in unbroken sequence as perhaps they had since the very beginning of the world. And so they might until it ended. The being didn't laugh, she nodded.

"What you wish to do is very simple," the voice said. "The fire behind you still burns though its flame is no longer an earthly one. Bring him here, stretch him on the firepit, and then pass this threshold. Perhaps you will emerge, perhaps not, but what you wish will be accomplished."

Cross the threshold, Regeane thought. *Journey into the land of the dead*. With a shudder, the triumphant willpower that held her where she was collapsed and she began to run.

She didn't remember afterward when she ceased running on two feet and began to run on four, but somewhere in her precipitous flight she did, and the wolf found herself down from the rock, skimming over the Campagna, taking heaving breaths of the clean wind as she ran.

The night was growing older. The wolf could tell by the smell of the wind and the slow wheeling changes in the stars. Dew was beginning to settle in the grass over which she flew like a streak of silver light.

She ran toward Antonius.

Death. She had known death was not the end of everything, but she had not grasped the true significance of her knowledge.

The terror of endless possibility.

That was where she sinned against human thinking the way the dead did.

One of the most important things men ask of life, of the world is predictability. The sun rises. The sun sets. Serfs bow to their lords, the lords to kings and emperors.

The Romans had been oppressors, condemning whole populations to abject slavery. But their orderly rule had at least lent predictably to life. The peoples living under their heel and yoke had known what to expect.

But in this clash of nations where Lombard struggled with the pope, where Frank and Saxon merged with the ancient Gauls and all battled for supremacy and power, who knew what to expect?

She was herself to them, to mankind, a creature of restless substance... One with insubstantial night and the universe, an impossibility. Unknown, and therefore, uncontrollable and that was why men wanted to destroy her. Would destroy her if they caught her.

A woman they could understand, and a wolf, but the two as one? Never.

She stopped running near the glassworks. She could smell Antonius, smell his fear and the dreadful workings of the disease that slowly destroyed his flesh.

The wolf stopped, feeling the dew damping down her fur. Her flanks heaved from her long run through the night, and she was thirsty.

She drank from the rivulet that once supplied the glass-makers, lapping the crystal water with her tongue. The wolf went through the rite, its sensation unknown to man, of straightening her fur, shaking herself, forcing it to rise and fall back in a comfortable pattern.

Death. Yes, they would kill her if they caught her. She shivered, thinking of the torments visited on those convicted of black sorcery—drowning, burning.

But however agonizing the pains, death would end them and death was part of the predictable universe.

Beyond... who knows?

Perhaps the greatest terror the dead faced was that they could not die. That they were set adrift on the uncharted ocean beyond life. To drift forever across the sea of eternity.

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## Chapter Eleven



SHE FOUND ANTONIUS LYING WRAPPED IN HIS thick mantle. For a few seconds, she crouched against him, shivering.

"Lupa," he sighed when he felt her body pressed so tightly to his side. "So you've returned. I don't know whether to be glad or sorry. I was thinking this little oven might be my tomb. At first the thought terrified me, but after a time it became a more comfortable one."

"I could lie here, my flesh melting into the earth, my bones dissolving, watching the play of swallows above me by day," he mused. "There are swallows here, you know. They build their nests in the lip of the

chimney and they must raise generation after generation of their young here."

Yes, she and the wolf thought, *and if Basil's men were not blind human fools, they would have noticed the presence of those swallows and known there must be ruins about. And they would have had you posthaste.*

"And the stars. Locked in a city as I was, you forget the stars, how beautiful they are when the Milky Way builds a bridge across the night sky. How can any artist truly hope to catch their glory?"

"Perhaps if I lie here moldering for a few centuries I might learn something about them." Antonius chuckled softly as if amused by his own thoughts, by the idea of his imminent death and dissolution.

The wolf was not amused. To her it was simply defeatism. She leaped to her feet, snarling.

Antonius' beautiful eyes stared up at her from the shadow of his cowled robe. "Why, Lupa, what was that? A command or a warning?"

Both, Regeane thought, trotting toward his feet. She snapped at them, her teeth closing in the air with an ominous click.

Antonius sat up. He studied the wolf in the dim starlight. "Lupa," he said softly, "can't you see there's no way out for me? I'm as well off here as I would be anywhere else. Basil can't find me. He can't use me against my brother."

"There's water here. I can creep out and drink when I want to. I'm seldom hungry anymore. In a few days I'll cease to feel what few complaints my belly makes. And, after a few more days, a little pain won't make any difference."

More wolf than woman now, Regeane was infuriated. She was willing to dare the gates of eternity for him, and here he was talking as calmly about dying as he would about dropping into the nearest wineshop.

She crouched, sinking back on her haunches, and launched herself at him with a roar of fury that echoed back from the walls of the oven like a thunderclap. She dropped to the ground, just short of crashing into his chest.

Antonius struggled to his feet. The wolf stepped back, mollified.

Antonius studied her for a moment. "Lupa?" he asked anxiously. The wolf trotted to the little tunnel that was the entrance to the oven. "I can see I'm not allowed to die in peace."

Strangely he seemed to greet that prospect with the same equanimity and amusement he had the thought of resting in this little sanctuary forever. He had, as always, drawn the dark mantle over his mutilated lips and nose, but he smiled. The wolf felt the smile—a peaceful radiance—rather than saw it.

"Very well. I abandon myself to you. Lead me where you will."

REGEANE FOUND THE SHEPHERD A FEW HOURS later. She had been afraid of trouble from his dogs, but found when she faced the scruffy mongrels her fears had been completely unfounded.

They had encountered wolves before, but never wolves like this. The silver wolf, unlike the slinking grays of the Campagna, was a creature of dazzling power. She was a dense mass of muscle and bone clothed in the shimmer of moonlight. She was fully twice as big as any they had ever seen before.

The dogs stopped, snarls dying in their throats, their ears laid back, tails tucked firmly between their legs. They fled to crouch protectively near the white mass of sheep.

The sheep were tightly bunched against both danger and the cold night. And the silver wolf understood if she tried to attack them, the dogs, driven to desperation by a threat to their charges, would fight back. Otherwise they would do nothing. Not even warn the young shepherd the silver wolf saw beyond the massed flock. He was sleeping, curled on his side in front of a rude hut near a small fire on the hilltop.

The wolf eyed the dogs contemptuously. One of them bared its teeth at her in a silent, terror-filled snarl.

The silver wolf was shocked by a sudden awareness of her own power. She could hear the confident, steady hammer of her heart. Feel ropey muscle in chest and haunches tighten, ready to put into play the steel sinews that drove her legs.

She was *nota* wolf, but *the* wolf. A creature of matchless strength, in her prime. She knew, and the dogs knew, she could slaughter them and then tear out the throats of as many of the sheep as she cared to. The shepherd himself could easily be her first prey, a helpless victim of her newfound strength. And why not?

His hut, the clothing he wore, whatever food he had would serve to feed and protect Antonius. If the food wasn't enough, she could kill a few of the sheep.

The silver wolf loped toward the sleeping form on the hilltop. The shepherd was no more than a boy, a stripling who looked to be at most in his early teens. In repose, his face showed the placid innocence of all sleepers. The winsome and frightening vulnerability of mankind at rest. A timeless helplessness before mother night and the eternal stars.

The wolf, merciless aristocrat of killers, wasn't disposed to question expedience. The boy would be dead before he completely awakened. Regeane stopped the wolf in her tracks. The silver one shook her head in annoyance. The woman knew what the boy was, likely the youngest son of one of the small farmers whose tiny holdings clustered near one of the vast estates of the wealthy.

They lived in a poverty so absolute, it sickened Regeane. She wondered how anyone could lead a life so devoid of all pleasure, happiness, or even hope. Many had given up even trying to rear their children, selling those who did not die in infancy as slaves to the powerful as soon as they were old enough to work. Young as he was, probably even his master didn't value him much. If the boy survived the unremitting toil, the hazards of the Campagna, and was able to forage and augment his meager slave rations with enough food to grow to adulthood, he might be better treated and fed.

Right now, his survival was as precarious as the life of a runt in a litter of puppies or kittens. He might be able to struggle hard enough to win sufficient nourishment from the great world mother. Then again, he might not. If he didn't, he would go down silently, tracelessly into the dust with the world's discards. But whatever happened, Regeane would not let the wolf be the instrument of his doom.

The silver wolf stopped at the edge of the fire and lowered her head. Wood was scarce on the Campagna and the shepherd's tiny fire showed his poverty. A ring of small branches, the cull of brush

and saplings, clustered at the base of one big olive log. The log supported a solitary flame.

The sheep milled and muttered softly, disturbed by the wolf's scent. Belatedly, one of the dogs barked sharply.

The shepherd awakened and saw the wolf through a veil of flame. He grabbed his staff and tried snatching up the last flaming branch from the fire. Half-consumed, it fell to pieces in his hand, burning his fingers. He tried to get to his feet, slipped, and succeeded in getting as far as his knees.

The broken ends of the branch caught and the fire flared. And, through the flames, he saw that in the place where a wolf stood only a moment before... a woman.

A beautiful woman, clad only in a magnificent nakedness and a necklace of silver and pearls.

The young shepherd bowed down, pressing his forehead to the earth. He choked out the words, "Oh, queen of the night, why do you come to me?"

Though woman in body, Regeane's mind was still dominated by the wolf and she was filled with the wolf's boldness. The plan had been a crude one, only half thought out. She had hoped to bribe the young man with the necklace. And if that failed, turn wolf and terrify him into submission. Finding herself worshipped was disconcerting.

But, she decided, worship was not all that bad. She had been afraid of what she might have to do to compel him to her will. Now her task seemed much easier.

She stepped toward him, keeping the low fire between them. He peered up at her through his fingers.

The wolf-woman laughed, something the wolf wouldn't have thought of and the woman wouldn't have dared to do. "Aren't you afraid that if you stare, the nakedness of a goddess will blind you?"

To her surprise, the boy raised his head and gave her a look of adoration. "They say he who looks upon the mistress of the night will be desired by all women and remain fair of face all his days. And he who touches her..."

Something in Regeane's expression must have changed because the boy's courage deserted him, and he threw himself into a full prostration saying, "Have mercy! Don't kill me!"

Regeane was cold. The bitter night air was hostile to her naked flesh as she became more woman by the moment. She fought the urge to desert this perilous situation, turn wolf again, and run. She gritted her teeth, tried not to shiver, and thought, *You are the goddess now. Use your power!*

"Fear not," she said, unclasping Lucilla's necklace. "I don't seek your life. I want you to protect one I love and shelter him."

The boy raised his bemused face from the ground, then took the necklace from her hand. He didn't have the courage to stare at her face again. Instead he gazed at the small, soft woman's hand that held it out to him. A hand that might be the hand of any young girl.

Regeane stepped back into the grass.

"Wait," the boy said hoarsely. "Nothing like this night will ever happen to me again."



Regeane hesitated. She hovered on the verge of change. She could almost feel the cascade of moonbeams in her flesh. "Why?" she whispered softly. The fire was very low. She could barely see the boy's face.

"Oh, mistress of the night, only touch me once that I may never fail in love."

"Close your eyes and lift your face to me," Regeane said.

The boy's eyes closed. He was trembling. The cloud of her moon-tipped hair fell around his face, and her lips brushed his in one soft, sweet kiss.

Regeane stepped back and realized Antonius stood beside her. His face was covered by the coarse, black mantle, but his eyes stared, wide and astonished and frightened. Then the moon darkness flowed through her and she was wolf again.

The young shepherd bowed down, closing his eyes tightly, but Antonius stood staring down into her eyes.

"Why, Lupa?" he asked softly. "Why?"

But Regeane was already away, a silver shadow racing over the Campagna for home.

DETERMINED NOT TO BE CAUGHT AS SHE HAD BEEN the night before, she held herself to a punishing pace until she saw the city's lights and smelled again the usual tang of wood-smoke and garbage she associated with human habitations. She dropped to a lope and sought Lucilla's villa.

As she jumped the orchard wall, she saw a faint streak of white on the eastern horizon. She trotted to the atrium and, unable to wait any longer, lowered her muzzle to the pool.

In the growing light she saw the reflection of her face in the water—the deep, yellow eyes buried in silver-tipped fur, the thick ruff that framed her face—then abruptly a tremor of darkness flowed over her and she found herself kneeling before the pool looking down at her human face, at the dark hair flowing over her shoulders and her own strange, sad eyes.

Regeane remained kneeling among the irises and cascades of autumn daisies, transfixed by her own weariness and the beauty of the silent garden in the first light.

The pool reflected the sunrise colors, transparent blue, then rose. The flowers, heavy with the night dew, were beginning to let down their fragrance into the cool, morning air. The aromas of mint and chamomile bruised by her knees hung around her.

Regeane closed her eyes and took a long breath.

"Oh, my God," a voice gasped. "Oh, my dear, sweet, merciful God. No wonder you were afraid to marry." Lucilla sat on one of the benches beside the pool.

"You saw," Regeane whispered. "You know."

"I saw..." Lucilla's hand flew to her cheek and she turned her face away from Regeane. "Oh, God, I saw... I don't believe what I saw." She turned back to confront the younger woman.

Regeane rose slowly to her feet and walked along the flagstone path toward Lucilla, asking, "Would you lend me your mantle? The air is cold and some of the servants might come out. I'm naked."

"So you are," Lucilla said, staring at her with unbelieving eyes. "So you are, naked as a nymph. For a moment, I thought my eyes were deceiving me. They do that, you know, as you age," she babbled. "I thought, 'A wolf. How does a wolf come here? I must call my servants to drive it away,' and then in a moment it came to me. 'Old woman, that's no wolf, but only a garden statue kneeling among the flowers,' and then..." Lucilla drew back from Regeane, her face stiff with terror. "And then... and then... you moved."

Regeane stood only a few feet from Lucilla. She stretched out her hand. "The mantle, please. I'm cold."

Absently, still gazing open-mouthed at Regeane, Lucilla unwound the mantle from her shoulders and placed it in Regeane's hand.

Regeane wrapped herself in the heavy cloth. "Thank you."

"Don't stare at me so," Lucilla said. "Not with those eyes. I know I look a ragged hag, but I have my pride, and... I have passed a sleepless night."

"Are you going to denounce me?" Regeane asked.

"Denounce you?" Lucilla asked, her mouth snapping shut. "For what?"

"For being a witch, a sorceress."

Lucilla laughed. The short peal of laughter was shrill and slightly hysterical. "Of course not," the older woman said. "I never denounce anyone except those who plot against Hadrian. Everyone knows that I've lived too long outside the law to sympathize with those superior judges, the iron-fisted soldiers who..."

Regeane sank down on the bench.

Lucilla took her in her arms. "Oh, dear. Oh, you poor dear." Suddenly she stared down at Regeane in horror. "Have you been out on the Campagna all night?"

Regeane sat up. "Yes, with Antonius. He's safe. I left him in the care of a shepherd."

Lucilla buried her face in her hands. She sighed deeply, then let her hands drop to her lap and stared out across the reflecting pool. Then she let out a quick, little chuckle that surprised Regeane. "You think you're a witch, eh?" she asked.

Regeane said, "I don't know what I am."

"Can you do... what I saw you do... at will?" Lucilla asked.

"No," Regeane answered. "I mean, I don't know." She began to flounder. "I never thought about it. My mother and I never talked about it."

"No, but then she wouldn't, would she?" Lucilla said. "It does explain the hold your uncle had over you. Why she let him and that dissolute son of his dress her in rags while they went out and spent her money."

"No," Regeane gasped.

"Yes," said Lucilla. "And it explains the hold they have over you, too." She sat quietly for a moment, gazing down at her lap. Her fingers played idly with the folds of the gown.

"I can just see that idiot mother of yours," Lucilla said. "A saintly woman, otherworldly. Isn't that what you told me? She locked you up, didn't she? Hid you away like some dirty little secret. And in between bars, bolts, and narrow little cells, all you got to see were the wax candles of churches and shrines decked with the decaying, wasted flesh of purported saints and holy men."

Regeane gagged and whispered, "Stop." She took a deep breath. "Stop. Don't remind me. Sometimes she got pieces of dead flesh, little splinters of bone. She pounded them to a powder and tried to make me drink them."

"Ugh," Lucilla said. "Just like that lack-wit physician with his hippopotamus dung."

Regeane gasped again. "I used to try to take her potions." She began to cry, tears coursing down her cheeks. "She suffered so much. I wanted to try to ease her pain."

Lucilla jumped to her feet. "Seems to me you were the one doing the suffering," she snarled. "All because she couldn't, and wouldn't, accept the situation and try to protect you."

"Yes," Regeane admitted uncertainly, "but who could, who would?"

"I can," Lucilla said. "I will. I just have. And so could she if she had any backbone at all."

"Lucilla," Regeane cried. "Please stop. I loved my mother."

"Child, child," Lucilla said. She strode up and down before the bench. "We all loved our mothers. I loved mine, too, but she was like yours. Whimpering and groveling before Christ and his saints, and all the while living in mortal terror of my father's fist and boot. Bearing child after child. I can't remember how many. So often they died, most before the poor little mites ever got a chance to know what life was. Perhaps they were fortunate."

Her face was set in a mask of bitterness. "The life of a fanner in the Abruzzi is cruel enough to deaden the hardest spirit. I know it nearly did mine. But no matter. It's your life and your spirit we're speaking of here. Your life and your future. First, how did this... change come upon you?"

"I..." Regeane said, "I... don't..."

Lucilla stopped pacing and stood tapping one sandaled foot. "Come, come," she prompted. "When did it first happen?"

"When I became a woman at the time of my first bleeding. I..." Regeane sighed. "I changed."

"So," Lucilla's eyes narrowed. "So," she repeated, "this skill of yours is like that so beautiful hair, not a thing of art, but of nature herself."

"I seem to have been born with it," Regeane said. "My father was also afflicted."

Lucilla's good-humored chuckle surprised Regeane again. "My pretty, I've known a witch or two in my time. More than two if the truth be known. A woman in my profession involves herself in all kinds of shady dealings. And let me tell you, your powers would drive any of them mad with envy. Smelly old women, dabbling in drugs, caught up in the most revolting superstition and trickery. But you. No, real power is what you have, my girl."

"Power?" Regeane asked. "Or a curse?"

"Power if you will have it, a curse if you deny it," Lucilla said. "Come. Come. I saw you read the past in a piece of cloth when we first met. You can change your shape and become a creature of the night. Tell me, what else can you do?"

Regeane stood up, clutching the mantle around herself, her mind in a whirl. "Power," she murmured.

Suddenly she staggered and Lucilla's face seemed to recede into a great distance. Her gorge rose and her throat filled with bile. She felt sweat break out all over her skin.

When she came to herself, she was seated on the bench, her head between her knees. Lucilla's arm was around her. She lifted her head and rested it on Lucilla's shoulder. "I need food," she said to Lucilla. "Food and sleep. The change... the moon darkness drains me."

"The moon darkness," Lucilla said. "Is that what you call it? The moon darkness?"

"Yes, because the pull is strongest at the full moon. I can seldom resist it then, and though my mother fought it with fasting and prayer, I always changed."

"I take it you did the fasting," Lucilla said dryly, "and she did the praying."

"Yes, but it didn't work."

Lucilla nodded, She embraced Regeane. Her hand pressed Regeane's face against her shoulder and she stared out over the garden.

The red and blue dawn was turning to gold as the light from the new sun reached down into the atrium. The air resounded with birdsong and jewel-like hummingbirds darted about, sipping the sun-warmed nectar from the flowers.

"Imprisonment, beatings, starvation, noxious messes forced down your throat, all in the name of purification," Lucilla mused. "All futile. Not much of a preparation for life. But come, I think I can remedy your hunger and thirst. In the evening Susanna places a tray for one in my study."

Regeane stopped and was about to pick up the dress and sandals she'd discarded last night.

"No," Lucilla said sharply. "Leave that whorish thing where it is. Follow me."

Lucilla led her through another garden. This one was stiffly formal with an ornate marble tile walkway and clipped boxwood hedges. It was dotted with numerous pedestals. No statues, just pedestals.

Regeane gaped at them.

"Yes," Lucilla said. "Once this garden was filled with beautiful bronze statues. The previous tenant, one Bishop Maxtentus, said he found them shockingly pagan and had them melted down."

"Oh," Regeane gasped. "How sad."

"Don't waste any tears on the statues, little love. Hadrian feels, and so do I, that Maxtentus found them shockingly valuable and sold them one and all for high prices to a Greek merchant who sailed away to Constantinople with them."

"He gave Hadrian the rather glib story about paganism, but when Hadrian asked him what he'd done with the bronze, Maxtentus developed a terrible stammer. When Hadrian looked into his other affairs, he found most valuable things he touched tended to stick to his fingers at least long enough for him to sell them at a profit."

"What did he do?" asked Regeane.

"Maxtentus?" Lucilla asked.

"No, Hadrian," Regeane said.

Lucilla chuckled. "Maxtentus is holding down a see in some nameless place among the Saxons. He's up to his rear end in big, hairy, beer-guzzling warriors and busty blond women who never bathe and dress their hair with butter. He speaks only Latin. His flock apparently finds him a very satisfactory shepherd. He cannot remonstrate with them about any of their bad habits. They continue to worship trees, wells, and rivers. He continues to exhort them to abandon their ancient ways in a language of which they speak not one word. And he continues to believe they could understand him if they would... only... try."

Regeane began giggling.

"What do you think of this peristyle?" Lucilla gestured at the garden. They paused near a door for Regeane to take in the view.

"Not much," Regeane said, "rather cold. I hope he doesn't steal anything from the Saxons. They'll cut off his hands."

"Not a bad idea," Lucilla replied. "The bronzes did belong to the church and they were very beautiful. Still, the pool remains." She pointed to an enormous reflecting pool in the garden. "I raise carp there." She indicated ajar near her hand.

Regeane looked down. Two large carp sulked in the bottom, fins waving gently in the still water. "Uuum." Regeane eyed them hungrily. "Breakfast?" she asked hopefully.

"My!" Lucilla looked a bit taken aback. "Raw or cooked?"

"At the moment," Regeane said impatiently, "either."

"Ah, yes," Lucilla said as she began unlocking the door. "I forgot you've been running around on all fours all night."

She opened the door. The room was small, dim, and odorous with cedar and furniture polish. It opened

into a private walled garden.

The first thing Regeane noted was a napkin-covered tray resting on a circular table in the center of the room. She charged.

"Hold!" Lucilla said. "It will not fight back or even run away. Arms up."

The mantle Regeane was wearing fell to the floor. Lucilla dropped a heavy linen gown over her head.

Regeane got to the table. She found ripe pears, herbed cream cheese, bread, and a pitcher of white wine. She ignored the wine. It was the only thing on the table she ignored.

Lucilla poured herself some wine. She watered it a bit. "How is Antonius?"

Regeane stopped eating for a moment. She had to take a deep breath to talk. "He is... well. You know, not well, but—"

"But as healthy as he ever is," Lucilla filled in.

"Yes, even his kidnapping by Basil didn't damage his... composure."

Lucilla shook her head and sighed. She took her wine, walked to the porch, and stared out into the garden. "No, of course not. Execution wouldn't damage his composure... as you put it. Can you help him?"

The question was asked so quietly Regeane almost didn't hear it. But when it penetrated her consciousness, she stopped eating again. "Yes," she answered.

Lucilla turned back toward her. "How?"

Regeane said, "Ummmmmm."

"Regeane, are you in danger of developing the same type of stammer Maxtentus did when talking to Hadrian?"

"My activities require a lot of explaining," Regeane said.

"Your point is well taken," Lucilla said. She bowed slightly to Regeane and turned back again to the garden.

Regeane ate. With every bite she felt better. At last, she relaxed, replete, and had the leisure to glance around the room.

Lucilla's study had a gentle dignity lacking in the over-ornate dining room. Bookshelves lined the walls. Diamond-shaped structures built into them held scrolls, flat shelves held books and, in many cases, unbound piles of papers. A slab of glass in the roof shed a clear morning light on the table where Regeane was sitting. The portico opened into the garden.

A fountain on the wall spurted water into a basin. The fountain head was an arrangement of bronze acanthus leaves combined to suggest the face of a god peering out through the leaves in a forest. The bronze glowed in the delicate gold of the new sun; water sparkled.

The rest of the garden lay in cool morning shadow. Chamomile, valerian, and poppies grew thickly clustered in beds along the garden walls. The smaller chamomile enthusiastically puffing into cushions of yellow and white presided over by drooping violet-throated poppy heads, scarlet and white, mixed with high valerian spikes.

The roof over the portico was a grape arbor shaded now by a thick growth of winter-denuded ropey vines. A few leaves remained, green at the center, crisp and brown at the edges, moving slightly in the first morning breeze.

"What is this place?" Regeane asked.

"A place where I seldom, if ever, invite even my friends."

Lucilla said. She walked to a bookshelf and lifted a brass scroll from its place and handed it to Regeane.

Grasping the ring, Regeane unrolled it. "It's Greek," she said, disappointed. "I can't read Greek." She examined the papyrus very closely. It had been glued to a backing of a new vellum to preserve it because the papyrus was very old and already crumbling to dust at the edges.

"Neither do I," Lucilla said, "but I have a Latin translation here on the shelf beside it."

Regeane closed the scroll very carefully. "It is old and must be precious."

Lucilla nodded and replaced it on the shelf. "It is a letter written by Queen Cleopatra of Egypt to Julius Caesar on the matter of the calendar. She gives him the best opinion of the Egyptian sage, Sosthumeus, and later, her own views. Then, she makes some suggestions. It is to be noted that he took them. This is believed to be the only letter surviving written in the queen's own hand. It was salvaged when the library at Alexandria burned."

"Oh," Regeane whispered staring into Lucilla's face, "what else is there?"

"Up on this shelf," she indicated a higher one, "Arete, one of the first to write a study of natural law as it relates to women. Her fellow citizens at Cyrene are said to have amended their marriage law at her suggestion. She is called 'Lycergia' or law-giver."

"Over here are poets Myrtis, Erinna, Anyte. Those are some of the Greeks. Here, a few Romans: Sulpicia—"

Regeane burst into tears. "They are all women." The tears weren't healing. They scalded her face, burnt her eyes, and made her nose swell. When Lucilla tried to comfort her, she moved away and finally ended by washing her face in the garden fountain. "AH women," she repeated as she walked back to where Lucilla stood.

"Yes, I don't banish male authors and, in fact, have many books by them, but not in here. And you may come in to read or study as you please. Only don't remove any books from this room. Not because I don't trust you, but because I have no confidence in others. I have seen men who, on finding a book was written by a woman, made haste to consign it to the flames. I protect what is here, though I cannot think it will survive me." Regeane nodded. "I am honored. You haven't slept."

"No," Lucilla said. Her eyes were red-rimmed, her long blond hair was swept to one side and, in the



growing light, Regeane could see how much gray was mixed into it.

"I have powers," Regeane said. "I will try to save Antonius."

"Yes, I know," Lucilla said. "There is one poet who is not here. I cannot find one collection of her poems still in existence. The priests have done their work well. Yet, I cannot think she won't be remembered because she reached out and touched the central chord of loneliness and longing in each human soul. I thought of her often tonight."

The moon has set.

And the Pleiades:

It is the middle of the night,

And time passes,

Yes passes—

And I lie alone.

Regeane's eyes burned, but no tears came. Her head hurt. "She killed him. Gundabald helped her. She helped Gundabald. . . I don't know if it matters which one of them. . . He was my father. I got the powers from him. Except she called them a curse and was sure she was cursed. . . through me."

"Yes," Lucilla replied. "That was the 'nonsense' you babbled under Pappolus' drugs. About rose petals steeping in blood. The more fool he and I for not understanding it."

"I can't promise you anything specific," Regeane said, "because I don't know where my powers will lead me."

"Yes," Lucilla said, taking her arm. "Now, come to bed. Your serious training begins this evening. You dine with the pope."

Regeane slept in Lucilla's big bed. Lucilla, beside her, passed into unconsciousness as soon as her head touched the pillow. Regeane, however, remained wakeful for one brief, beautiful moment. The wolf visited her.

She and others of her kind were walking down along a narrow beach below high cliffs. The stone was a deep bloody black, stained faintly red and purple in places, broken along prismatic lines into three-cornered angles like building blocks. The sandy strand was brown stained by long darker streaks from the mineral-rich stone. The sky above was a wrack of torn storm clouds, dark gray where they floated on the air, reaching higher and higher until they became crystal and white thunder-heads, drifting between broken streaks of blue sky. Out to sea, mist floated like smoke on the water.

The waves were quiet, rolling gray far out, becoming blue swells as they approached shore and, at last, deep green combers arching and slapping into lacy foam at the wolves' feet.

Here and there, they had to swerve to avoid big piles of bone-white and silver driftwood. At length, they came to a headland stretching far out into the water.

Air blowing from the ocean was clear and cold, containing in each breath the essence of eternity. Long shafts of light began to break through the mist. And the wolves stood as one watching the sun rising in splendor... above the rim of the world.

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## Chapter Twelve



SHE WAS ONE OF THE MOST BEAUTIFUL WOMEN Regeane had ever seen. She surveyed Regeane with aristocratic disdain. "Is this the girl, Mother?"

"Regeane," Lucilla said, "May I present my daughter, Augusta."

Regeane curtsied as deeply as she could in the robe of stiff white and gold brocade she was wearing.

Augusta touched a lacquered finger to her lips and used it to smooth one of her fashionably and artificially high arched brows and then the other, as her two glorious, violet eyes studied Regeane. "She's mannerly enough, Mother," Augusta commented and continued, "pray tell me, Regeane, what is your lineage?"

As she had been trained to do, Regeane began to recite her lineage beginning with one Luprand who had been the son of Charles Martel by a concubine and who, in spite of becoming an abbot, managed to father seven children.

Augusta broke in on her narrative before she was finished with the first generation. "Excellent, my dear girl. I see you have your ancestors at your fingertips. That's as it should be, an illustrious family, though... recent."

"Recent?" Regeane choked.

"My husband's family," Augusta continued with lofty condescension, "trace their ancestry back to the divine Julius himself."

"Yes, dear," Lucilla said with good-humored malice. "We know. You tell everyone sooner or later, usually sooner."

"Don't be difficult, Mother," Augusta said.

"No, dear," answered Lucilla, "but if you'll excuse us for a moment, I have a few last-minute instructions for Regeane."

Augusta managed to look both politely bored and irritated at the same time, then she turned and drifted off down the path, pausing every few moments to admire herself in the darkening waters of the atrium

pool.

Regeane thought there was much to admire. Augusta's slim, curvaceous body was draped in an overgown of pale rose silk, richly embroidered with gold and Oriental pearls. Her auburn hair was piled high, held in place with emeralds and a snood of golden chains.

The face framed by the finery didn't disappoint the eye. Augusta was blessed with slender, high cheekbones with the characteristic narrow high-bridged aristocratic nose and large, heavy-lidded eyes that hinted subtly and beautifully at subdued passion.

"Oh, my," Regeane said. "The divine Julius. Is she, really?"

"Don't be silly, child," Lucilla said. "She's my daughter. She boasts of her husband's family. I must admit, though, that looking at her now, no one could ever possibly imagine that her grandmother was a peasant woman from the Abruzzi who went to bed every night on a straw tick, scratching her lice."

Regeane giggled.

"Mother," Augusta called back over her shoulder at them. "Are you saying outrageous things to that girl?"

Lucilla sighed deeply. "No, dear," she answered sweetly. "Just be patient. We'll be finished in a short time."

"Well, be quick about it. If you chatter too long, we'll be late for the feast. That's unthinkable, Mother."

Lucilla bridled for a second; then her irritation expended itself in another deep sigh. "Yes, dear," she said dutifully. She gritted her teeth. "Damn, but there's no help for it. I need Augusta to introduce you to Roman nobility. Child, you must be presented to the notables of the city in the company of someone who is eminently respectable. My daughter fits that description perfectly."

Lucilla gave a snort of fury. "I can't imagine how I did it. A line distinguished by a peasant woman and a whore, culminating in the paragon of ancient Roman virtue that is my dear daughter, Augusta. Not only has she made an impeccably illustrious marriage, but indeed, no breath of scandal has ever sullied her name."

"A family related to the divine Julius Caesar..." Regeane began.

"I believe," Lucilla said, "that the links between her husband's family and the first Caesar are more mythological than factual. However, one can never tell—the gens Juli was an enormous one—and I suppose it's possible they are descended from a distant relative of the great man himself."

"But," she added spitefully, "so are many other people. In any case, they rusticated in poverty and obscurity, living in a tumble-down villa in the Sabine hills, wearing coarse wool. They were only a little better off than their serfs until they were saved by the timely arrival about fifty years ago of a Lombard princess. She had high social aspirations, an iron will, and two wagonloads of gold."

To her horror, Regeane found herself giggling again. "Lucilla," she admonished, "if you want me to be respectful, you shouldn't tell me..."

"Yes. Yes, of course I want you to be respectful—openly, that is. I have undertaken to teach you about

the world and it's imperative you learn a little fashionable hypocrisy. Besides, my little one, it's important to know the roots of social and political eminence; important that you learn they rise from the same dung heap among the poor where the rest of us come from. So that you aren't overly impressed by lofty lineages, fine clothes, and exquisite manners. And learn to look through them to the men and women beneath."

Regeane nodded soberly. "The Lombard princess?"

"Had an iron will and an equally firm grip on the purse strings. The whole family soon learned to jump to attention when she snapped her fingers. She made brilliant matches for her new husband's brothers and sisters, not to mention his numerous cousins. I understand she snatched up a few from convents and monasteries in the process and, in no long time at all, they were among the first families of Rome."

"Mother," Augusta called as she began walking back toward them, "I really must insist..."

"I do hate being rushed," Lucilla whispered to Regeane in a voice dripping with quiet fury, "but if we must, we must. I will introduce you to the pope, but I'll stay in the background and let Augusta present you. She will be your sponsor, not I. Try to get along with her. Luckily that isn't difficult. She's bored with everything, but talk of clothes, jewels, the servant problem," Lucilla's eyes rolled, "the high price of slaves. Encourage her along those lines and I'm sure you'll be successful."

"When you reach the pope's villa, let Augusta do the talking. Go about with downcast eyes, keep your mouth shut and your eyes and ears open. There will be a period of mingling and talk in the garden before the feast begins. Some of the men may try to draw you off on the pretext of showing you the villa. Don't let any of them get you alone. Stay close to Augusta and follow her example."

Augusta was within earshot and Regeane considered the last sentence probably was aimed at her.

"Naturally, Mother," Augusta said.

Elfgifa entered the atrium. The little girl's hair was still damp from the scrubbing she'd been given and she was dressed as Regeane was in a linen shift covered by an overgown of heavy, embroidered silk, and a long-sleeved garment of stiff brocade.

She squirmed and stared up at Regeane with mutinous eyes. "My dress scratches."

"Show some gratitude," Regeane said. "Is this your manner to a friend who confers benefits on you? What would your father say? Lucilla had you dressed for the feast at her own expense. She's given you a fine new gown and all you can say is it scratches. Curtsey and say thank you."

Elfgifa curtsied, or rather bent her knees a little, and said, "Thank you. I don't mean to be ungrateful. My father says we should always love our friends and those who do us good, but," she fingered the heavy satin dress, "why do they put the rough part on the inside and the smooth part on the outside? The ends of the gold threads chafe my skin."

"The smooth part goes on the outside because it looks better that way," Lucilla said.

"Well, then, why can't I wear it to the party inside out, then take it off and put it on the other way?" she asked.

"Because you can't," Lucilla said, "that's why. Just think how silly you'd look in the street in front of the

pope's villa taking your dress off and putting it back on."

"I'd rather look silly than itch," Elfgifa said. "Besides..." She suddenly broke off and sniffed at Augusta's dress. "She smells."

"You forgot to say she smells good," Lucilla said acidly.

"All right. She smells good," Elfgifa said, "but she still smells strong. Like violets."

Regeane did notice the odor of violets was almost overpowering near Augusta.

Augusta looked down her long aristocratic nose at Elfgifa. "The perfume is almost my own personal signature. My maid prepares it according to a formula of her own devising, from the petals of fresh flowers gathered every spring. I have received many compliments..." She broke off with an exasperated sound. "But why am I explaining myself to a child? Mother, is it absolutely necessary she accompany us?"

"Yes, it is," Lucilla said. "I believe I may have located an aunt of hers among the Saxons living in Rome. The woman, the abbess of a convent in the Saxon quarter, will be at the feast."

Elfgifa looked alarmed. She pulled her hand free of Regeane's. "I don't want to go home," she said. "I want to stay here and play with Postumus."

"She didn't leave?" Regeane asked.

"Oh, yes, she did," said Lucilla. "While you were sleeping, she went over the wall again. My servants found her a few hours later rolling around in the gutter with the dirty little urchin."

"He was teaching me how to fight," Elfgifa said proudly. "There's a trick where you can blind a man and another place where you get your fingers and squeeze." The little girl began a demonstration of how it was done by reaching down between her legs.

"Mother," Augusta gasped.

Lucilla snatched Elfgifa's hand, pulling her upright and saying, "Young woman, I don't think we want any further pearls of the wisdom imparted to you by Postumus just now, if you please."

"Why not?" Elfgifa asked. "He's teaching me words, too, and—"

"Don't say them!" Lucilla said in a voice of stone.

"Why not?" Elfgifa asked, surprised.

"Just don't," she answered, hustling Elfgifa to the entrance of the villa. "Regeane, you will travel in Augusta's litter. Elfgifa, you will come with me. We need to have a talk."

AUGUSTA'S LITTER WAS, AS LUCILLA'S, A LUXURIOUS accommodation drawn by a team of white mules. Since they were away from the more crowded quarter where the poor lived, they traveled with the curtains open. Regeane found the slow pace favored by Augusta led to a much more comfortable ride than her earlier one with Lucilla.

The mules took a narrow twisting street bordered on both sides by the walled gardens belonging to the sumptuous villas of the very rich.

Regeane reclined at Augusta's side.

"A most ill-mannered and undisciplined child," Augusta said. She was peering into a mirror, using the last light of evening to make sure none of her powder and paint was smeared and not a hair of her elaborate coiffure was out of place.

The wolf rose up out of the darkness in Regeane's brain, took a good look at Augusta, and sniffed in disgust. The overpowering scent of violets really was almost too much.

Augusta heard the sniff and said, "What?"

Regeane slapped the wolf down. Emboldened by the softening of the light, the wolf wanted to be off. She wanted to jump down from the litter to the street. Leap the high walls of the villas and investigate with her eyes and nose the green gardens beyond them. She wanted to enjoy the changes in the slowly fading evening. The soft decline of the day from gold to rose into the tranquil blue of twilight. To riot among fountains and flowers, sniffing air redolent of pine and cypress.

The wolf didn't want to think. She wanted to live and taste the pleasures of a world denied to both wolf and woman for so long.

"What?" Augusta repeated and broke in on Regeane's longings.

"Nothing," Regeane said hurriedly.

Augusta looked critically at Regeane. "You are attractive, but then, the chief charm of youth is youth. Tell me, did your mother run to fat as she aged?"

Regeane remembered her pale, quiet mother. She had seemed only a small thickening of the blankets when Regeane had gone to rouse her on that last morning. But for the face on the pillow and the hands folded under her cheek, there would have seemed nothing in the bed at all.

Regeane hadn't needed to touch Gisela to know her long struggle with an endless procession of sorrows was ended. She had touched her, though, on the cheek and the texture of the flesh had reminded her horribly and incongruously of the flesh of a fresh-killed chicken: cold and a little damp with the night dew. Dew that doesn't settle on a warm, living skin. Then she'd stood for a long moment, seeking screams or even tears in herself and not finding them.

She'd stood knowing something, she couldn't quite say what, something important had finally ended.

She stood quietly, trying to remember how much she'd once loved the shell lying in the bed before her. Trying and not finding the love anymore than she could find the tears or screams. And then, she'd gone to Gundabald and sent Hugo to fetch a priest.

"What is wrong with you?" Augusta asked.

Regeane realized her thoughts must show in her face. "My mother died only recently," she said quietly. "But no, since you ask, my mother was quite a slim woman all her life."

"I'm sorry my remarks inadvertently caused you pain," Augusta said.

She didn't sound sorry, Regeane thought. In fact, she'd picked up the mirror again and was studying her face in it.

"But doubtless you'll find consolation in your happy betrothal."

Regeane almost laughed out loud, but caught herself at the last moment.

"It isn't wise for a young girl like yourself to stay in mourning for too long, to wear a sorrowful countenance and go about veiled in black. Your chances pass you by."

"Yes," Regeane answered mechanically.

The litter creaked around a corner. For a moment Regeane could see all of Rome spread out before her. The Tiber was a ribbon of fire and the buildings were engulfed in the glowing golden haze of the setting sun.

"Your family was wise to draw you away from your grief," Augusta said. "This mountain lord, Maeniel, is, I understand, a very wealthy man."

The wolf was suddenly awake, alert, listening with every sense sharpened to the fullest. Regeane knew something was wrong. But what? "So I understand," she answered cautiously.

The mules drawing the litter turned the corner and the city lying in its pool of light was lost to view. Blue dusk hovered in the narrow street between the high walls. The torchlight of Augusta's soldiers flared against the stone.

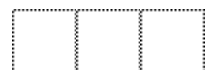
Regeane tried frantically to think of a way to escape, to get past the soldiers guarding the carriage at the front and rear.

She realized she was sitting rigid, her back pressed against the cushions and her fists clenched. She tried to relax and straightened her fingers slowly. Luckily, Augusta was still preoccupied with the mirror and she hadn't seen Regeane flinch.

Regeane knew she was in danger. She didn't understand why or what kind, but danger it was because she remembered the text of the note Lucilla sent to Augusta requesting her sponsorship of Regeane. And she had been present throughout the conversation with Augusta. Even though Lucilla had mentioned that Regeane was respectably betrothed, she had never once spoken Maeniel's name to Augusta. As far as Regeane knew, there was only one other person from whom Augusta could have learned that name...

From Gundabald.

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REGEANE SPENT THE REST OF THE RIDE TO THE LATERAN palace trying to tell herself not to be a fool. Telling herself there were at least a dozen ways Augusta could have learned Maeniel's name other than from talking to Gundabald.

Perhaps gossip about the marriage was circulating among the Roman nobility. Perhaps Lucilla had spoken to Augusta at some other time. Perhaps...

But one thing Regeane did not do was ask Augusta for an explanation of how she knew Maeniel's name. Nor did she show by any word or expression that she'd noticed anything unusual about the conversation.

After all, she reasoned, the explanation might be the one she feared, and if it was, she wanted herself and not Augusta on her guard.

It was dark when they arrived at the Lateran palace and, for a time, all thoughts of danger fled from Regeane's mind. Nothing in her life before had prepared her for such splendor. She was caught up in a welter of confused impressions.

The Lateran, like many other Roman houses, showed a blank forbidding facade to the street, but beyond the columned portico, luxury reigned supreme.

From a vestibule presided over by frescoes of the Three Graces and the Nine Muses, they entered a magnificent peristyle garden ablaze with lights and filled with the whole glittering panoply of Rome's first families.

The splendid dress of the men, women, and children rivaled the very torches, set among the tall cypresses, shedding their light on the paths and flower beds.

Pools and fountains were everywhere. They splashed and sparkled, reflecting the jeweled finery of the guests and the flames of the torches.

Augusta took Regeane by the hand and then, like some magnificent regal butterfly, began guiding her among the groups of people gathered in the garden.

At first, Regeane felt awkward. She knew there must be so many things she didn't know—sophisticated nuances of behavior must be required of those at home among this dazzling throng, matters of precedence and protocol simply impossible to imagine.

But she quickly learned very little was expected of her except to look demure, and allow herself to be admired.

And admired she was. Within a few short minutes of entering the garden, Regeane received more compliments than she'd ever received in her entire life. Augusta made much of her royal connections and carefully avoided mentioning her present poverty, staying with each group only long enough to allow Regeane to be seen and appreciated, carefully preventing any conversations lengthy enough for Regeane to betray any embarrassing ignorance of Roman affairs.

Besides, Regeane decided, people probably expected very little sophistication of a girl her age being presented in society for the first time.

Regeane was breathless when Augusta paused for a few moments near a moss-covered fountain in the

shadows at the edge of the lighted garden.

"Is your head quite turned by all this?"

Regeane recognized the voice as Lucilla's. It came from the shadows near the fountain.

"No, not quite," Regeane said. "Addled a bit, but not turned. Though it looks like fun."

Lucilla chuckled. "It is, yet I don't really belong here. Not the way Augusta does. Most people are polite to me. They never know when they may need my influence with Hadrian. Others pretend I don't exist. But I have a few real friends here and I enjoy these affairs for the pleasure of meeting them."

"Mother, really. You're impossible," Augusta said. "Almost everyone here is at least polite to you."

"Yes," Lucilla said. "I suppose that's true. Time has taken its toll on the recalcitrants. I'm almost an institution, though, like the pretty fountain behind you—look at it closely, my girl."

"Don't!" Augusta warned. "That fountain is no sight for a maiden."

But Regeane was already looking, and her cheeks were burning.

The fountain running along the wall was a frieze of nymphs and satyrs. One of the horned and hoofed men was pissing enthusiastically into the pool. Water spurted from his engorged member. Another was embracing a nymph with one hand while his wine pitcher clutched in the other dumped its contents into the pool at his feet. The rest were coupling in lusty delight, their nude bodies arranged in every possible position of human sexual congress.

"Oh," Regeane said, and then, "Ooohahaha!"

Lucilla laughed.

Augusta flung Regeane's hand away and stalked off into the crowd gathered in the garden.

"She's angry," Regeane said. "I'm sorry. I suppose I shouldn't have looked."

"Nonsense!" Lucilla snapped. "You should examine anything you want to. Besides, I make it a point to infuriate Augusta at least once every time we meet. In any case, she's served her turn. I wanted you to be seen by the nobility of the city in her company, not mine. You have been, and so it's done. At the feast tonight, you and Elfgifa will recline beside her. Her anger or goodwill are quite beside the point. The seating arrangements aren't under her control, but the pope's. You are, after all, royal. She will probably be quite pleased to be placed so near his couch, beside you."

Regeane took another long look at the fountain and, to her surprise, found her eyes prickling as they slowly filled with tears. "They seem so happy," she said softly.

"Love is a happy thing," Lucilla said. "I have found it so, and I hope some day you will, too. But come, we haven't much time and I want you to meet Hadrian privately before the feast begins."

"Lucilla, how did Augusta learn Maeniel's name?" Regeane asked. "Did you tell her? She mentioned it on the way here in the litter."

Lucilla paused. Her eyes narrowed. "No, I didn't. I operate on the premise that the less Augusta knows about my business the better. She's a conformist, terrified she'll make even the slightest social error. She quakes at the thought of incurring even the mildest form of displeasure from her husband's incredibly snobbish family. She's my own beloved daughter, but she isn't very strong or very smart."

"I can't believe she's up to anything. She doesn't dare court my displeasure either. But I'll keep an eye on her, just in case. Someone else may have told her. Gossip rolls like the sea in Rome. What is said at the Lateran is being repeated within the hour at the Vatican. No one can keep their mouth shut—least of all Augusta."

Lucilla led Regeane away from the lighted garden, crossing the small shadowy courtyards, all dark and silent under the glow of the stars. Away from the magnificent reception rooms deep into the villa's private heart.

They found him seated on a bench in a small, quiet garden. A lamp burned on the bench by his side. He was feeding bread to the carp in a pool at his feet.

Drawn by the bread and the light, the fish were shadows moving in the water, given away only by the gleam of an eye or the flash of shiny scales catching the light.

"My dear," Lucilla said softly.

Hadrian raised his head, threw the last bread into the water, and said, "Lucilla."

And Regeane heard his heart in the word, in the way it was spoken.

Lucilla walked toward him, her hands outstretched.

He took her hands and they gazed at each other for a long moment before they embraced. She stood quietly in the circle of his arms, her head on his shoulder.

"My dear," Lucilla said, "my very dear. What are you doing hiding here alone?"

"I was visiting with some old friends," he said, indicating with a glance the fish in the pool, "and waiting to greet another friend." He let her go. They stood together, hand in hand, watching the fish moving in the water at their feet.

"Well, I've brought yet another friend to greet you," Lucilla said. She beckoned to Regeane.

Regeane stepped into the circle of light. As she drew closer, she lifted the stiff, brocade dress and tried to kneel and kiss the pope's ring.

Instead, Hadrian—Stephen—caught her by the elbows, raised her, and kissed her gently on the forehead. "There now," he said to Lucilla, standing beside him. "That's a lot better than having my ring kissed and," he continued with a quick wink at Lucilla, "it's a lot more fun."

He took Regeane by the shoulders and held her back to have a good look at her. "Lucilla tells me you were able to get Antonius away from Basil into some safe hiding place."

"Yes," she answered in an uncertain voice, thinking furiously all the while, *How much has Lucilla told him? Is he going to demand an explanation?*

But he didn't. Instead, Hadrian began to examine Regeane herself, looking her up and down and meanwhile nodding his head in approval. Then he patted Regeane's cheek and said to Lucilla, "You've done wonders with her, my dear."

Lucilla gave a self-deprecating little shrug and smiled. "She was born beautiful. A few nice clothes, a new hairdo. She has a natural grace that's all her own and shows itself even in strange surroundings. I wonder if the Frankish king knows he has such a prize among his royal ladies? If he did, he might see fit to bestow her higher than—"

"No, no," Hadrian said. "This marriage is very important. Come into my library and I'll explain further."

The library was separated from the garden by a simple curtained colonnade. The walls were lined with bound books and had niches for scrolls.

Regeane's gasp of delight stopped both Hadrian and Lucilla in their tracks.

"She liked my library, also," Lucilla said.

"The special one?" Hadrian asked.

Lucilla nodded. "My heavens, she didn't even look at our little fountain that way."

"No?" Hadrian said with a lift of his eyebrows. Then he echoed Augusta. "You showed her our fountain? Hardly a sight for a maiden."

"A maiden, soon to become a married woman. She needs to know what she's facing," Lucilla said waspishly.

"Lucilla," Regeane said soberly, "I don't think love's joy or love's delight has a lot to do with what I'm facing."

"You can never tell," Lucilla began.

"No, you can't," Hadrian broke in on her, "but on balance, I think the girl is right in learning to prefer the more sedate independent pleasures of intellectual inquiry. They often serve to comfort a troubled spirit when events in the world go awry. So, you like to read?" he asked Regeane.

"Yes," she answered. "Sometimes when I was younger," Regeane gave Lucilla a quick, warning glance. "I was... alone for long periods of time. My stepfather had a large library—over sixty books. They were, as you have said, a great comfort to me in my... loneliness."

Hadrian gestured expansively toward the shelves lining the walls. "Books are meant to be read, and mine, alas, often simply sit and gather dust since affairs of state leave me little time for them. So if there are any here of particular interest to you I would be glad..."

"Have you a life of Alexander?" Regeane asked. "I've often read of the doings of the noblest among the Greeks. I'd like to know more about him."

"I have three good lives of Alexander," Hadrian said. "I'll send you one. Your stepfather had sixty books. That's quite a fine library for a layman. What happened to them?"

Regeane lowered her eyes. "Gundabald sold them along with the rest," she said.

"Gundabald again..." the pope mused and scratched his chin. "But no matter, sit down. We have not much time. Soon I must join my guests."

Lucilla and Hadrian sat down side by side on a cushioned bench and Regeane took the high-backed chair opposite them.

"Regeane," Hadrian said, "Regeane, you notice I call you friend and I treat you as one of my intimates. Do you know why?"

Regeane shook her head.

"Because," he continued, "Lucilla calls you friend. And she dignifies very few people with that name, reserving it only for those who have done her a great service, or she feels are absolutely loyal. Do you understand?"

Regeane nodded.

The couple's hands clasped and their fingers intertwined. They looked into each other's eyes and smiled. Then Hadrian turned his attention back to Regeane.

"Since Lucilla calls you friend, I'm going to trust you, too. But what I say must never leave this room. Do you understand?"

"Yes," Regeane said.

"Very well, then, I must tell you. In the spring, Charles, king of the Franks, will cross the Alps and make war on the Lombards in my behalf. That's why your marriage is so important, Regeane. Maeniel's principality straddles his line of march. It must be secured by his submission to Charles before his spring campaign."

Lucilla leaped to her feet and strode quickly toward the colonnade that separated the room from the garden. She stared up at the stars.

"We've done it," she said quietly, almost to herself. Then she repeated more loudly, "We've done it," and stood, fists clenched over her head and shouted, "We've done it!"

"Yes," Hadrian said simply. "We have."

Regeane felt the blood drain out of her face, leaving it numb.

She seemed to hear an audible click as the jaws of the trap snapped shut. "There is no help for it then," she muttered between clenched teeth. "I must marry him."

"Yes." Lucilla gave Regeane a look of fierce delight. "But how long such a marriage will last once Charles is master of Lombardy is a matter of some conjecture."

Lucilla walked back toward Hadrian. She radiated power and had the step of a queen. "We've done it," she said, "and a peasant girl from the Abruzzi holds the fate of nations in her hand. I can't believe it. But

why is my Antonius the price?"

Hadrian took her hand again, pulled her down on the seat beside him, and kissed her on the lips.

"Why is it so important that the Frankish king win?" Regeane asked.

"In a word," Hadrian answered, "peace."

"Peace?"

"Look around you, girl. Have you no eyes? Over half this city, once the most populous in the world, lies in ruins. Every day the poor troop to the churches and almshouses of this city, hands outstretched, begging for bread."

"Our fountains that once ran with the clear, pure water of mountain streams are green and stagnant, filled only by the rain. The aqueducts that once fed them are abandoned or lie in the hands of our enemies. Barbarian kings fight over the papal tiara like dogs over a bone. Each hopes to place his own candidate on the throne of the first apostle and use the church as a tool to further his own ambitions."

"I still can't see how Charles is superior to Desiderius or the Duke of Spoleto or any of these other kings," Regeane said.

"Regeane, do you presume to question?" Lucilla said in rebuke,

"No. No. No." Hadrian said, rapid as finger snaps. "I'm glad she's not a rattle-brained little ninny. In fact, her inquiry puts me in mind of you at her age and it's the same sort of point you would have raised."

Lucilla smiled. "Yes, I suppose that's true. I questioned you often at first."

Hadrian smiled back at her. He rested one hand on her hair, drew her face close, and kissed her on the forehead. "No, her question is a very good one." He settled his arm over Lucilla's shoulders and turned back to Regeane.

"Charles is like the rest—a very ambitious man and he, too, has definite ideas about the role of the church as a cornerstone of state policy. But," Hadrian raised his finger, "he has already guaranteed my independence as ruler of the Duchy of Rome and has promised to return those lands stolen by Desiderius and the other Lombard kings. And," he added triumphantly, "he is very far away. In short, Rome cannot be ruled from Franca, nor can Franca be ruled from Rome."

"I see," Regeane said slowly. Hadrian was playing off one distant state against another, closer one. "A very dangerous game you are engaged in," she said. "And when the Lombard king learns of your agreement with the Franks—and he will, it cannot be kept secret forever—he'll be wild. He'll use every means he can think of to destroy you."

Lucilla laughed. "Oh, you child. He already has."

"Yes," Hadrian said. "Why do you think he kidnapped Antonius and threatened to crucify him?"

Regeane shook her head. "I don't have any idea."

Hadrian leaned forward toward her. "He wanted to force me, at the price of Antonius' life, to anoint the

sons of Carloman made into kings by my hand, those two little boys, his dead brother's sons, would be rival claimants for the throne Charles sits on. They'd be a focus for every kind of rebellion and dissatisfaction. Every troublemaker and malcontent would try to attach himself to their cause."

"Charles is young, and though he looks to become a great king, many still doubt him. Yet others will try to test him. Some out of greed or a lust for power. In short, my intervention, if it be bought or coerced by Desiderius, could make Charles' throne a very shaky seat."

"Archimedes is supposed to have said, 'If I had a lever, I could move the world.' Well, those two little boys are the lever I have used to bring Charles across the Alps to aid me in my battle with the Lombards. To yield to Desiderius' demands that I anoint them would destroy all my carefully laid plans and probably—I must mention this in passing—cost me my life as well."

Lucilla drew away from Hadrian and rested her back against the cushions at the arm of the bench. "Now do you see why Antonius must die?"

"Is that why you brought me here," Regeane shot back at her, "to be a party to murder?" From the corner of her eye, Regeane saw the glow of distant lightning. It was too far away for thunder, but a gust of wind set the curtains that divided the library from the garden to flapping and rattling.

"Hush, girl," Hadrian replied sternly. "There's no question of your killing Antonius or anyone else." Then he reached toward Lucilla and placed his hand on her face. "No, my dear. I won't give the order and neither will you."

"But you must," Lucilla cried desperately, hysterically, "You must. My God, yesterday..." She seized him by the shoulders and shook him. "Yesterday the mob gathered around my litter and threw stones at me, called me the pope's whore and accused you of being tainted by the devil's curse, the vile disease. Hadrian, don't you think I love Antonius?"

He embraced her and she rocked back, pushing him away with her hands as though she would deny comfort to herself. "There was a time when he was my life. I lived only for him. But I won't, I can't let you be pulled down, broken by the corpse of a man rotten already before he lies in his winding sheet."

Regeane shivered, dulled both by the cold blast of air driven before the storm and by her memory of the ghosts waiting in their temple high above the sea.

"No," Hadrian said implacably. "No, I won't give the order and neither will you. Not only because I love you both, but because I know myself and I know what I can live with. No. I called him brother for far too long. Besides, even his death might not save me. There already is talk of a synod of bishops being convened—no doubt inspired by my good friends Desiderius and Basil the Lombard—to try me and determine my fitness for the office of supreme pontiff. If I should be judged tainted by Antonius' disease, well then..."

He drew Lucilla toward him and she rested her head on his shoulder like a tired child. Tears streamed down her cheeks.

"And so," she asked, "after we've come so far, will we fail in the end?"

"Perhaps," Hadrian answered, his lips in her hair. "Perhaps, but we'll fail as we began, honorably, honestly, because I can't believe however... irregular... our love has been or seemed in the eyes of the world, it has never been less than honest and honorable."



Lucilla drew away from him slightly and smiled up at him through her tears. "Yes, that's true, isn't it? We've both tried to do our best for this beleaguered, war-weary city and its people, haven't we?"

Hadrian nodded. "Yes, my friend. We have, and that's why I won't yield to your demands or Desiderius'. You spoke a while ago of having the destiny of men and nations in your hands."

"And do I find in Antonius' fate only a rebuke to my pride?" she asked.

"No," Hadrian answered, "but of its price, the price of responsibility. If worse comes to worst, I'll abdicate. And rather than allow harm to come to you or Antonius, I would abdicate. After all, others can pursue my policies as well as—or better than—I can. It doesn't do for a man in my position to start believing he's indispensable."

He chuckled. "After all, countless men have occupied the see of Peter and doubtless many more will sit where I'm sitting and try to convince themselves they, and they alone, are God's anointed singulars and cannot be replaced. But I'm not so naive, Lucilla. I understand perfectly that I am but one link in a human chain stretching back through the ages and forward into generations yet unborn. I will not save myself at the price of infamy."

"Infamy, no," Regeane said, "but..."

Both Hadrian and Lucilla started, and Regeane realized that they'd almost forgotten she was there.

"I believe," she continued slowly, "that I can help Antonius, perhaps even save him. Only don't..." She stuttered the words a little and realized now that she was bargaining for her future. She was terribly afraid. She gathered herself together and pressed on. "Don't ask me too many questions about how..."

Hadrian smiled and Regeane saw, even in the half-darkened room, the same glint of authority in his eyes she'd seen when they first met.

"Don't ask too many questions, eh?"

"Please don't," she quavered.

Hadrian grinned. "Never fear," he said. "As I told you, over the years I've learned those who Lucilla calls friend are discreet and reliable. I've also learned not to question them too closely about their activities."

Regeane breathed a deep sigh of relief. "Thank you."

"A polite girl," Hadrian said ironically.

"An unusual girl," Lucilla said. "A very unusual girl."

Hadrian turned toward Lucilla and raised one eyebrow.

"I beg you, my love. Listen carefully to what she has to say," Lucilla said.

Regeane took a deep breath. "I will want something for myself."

"What?" Hadrian asked.

"I want you," Regeane said, "to draw up the marriage contract, not my uncle, Gundabald; and I want the contract to contain a provision allowing me my own domicile, my own servants and men-at-arms."

The pope's eyes narrowed as he studied Regeane. "You really are afraid of this man, aren't you? So afraid you want to live apart from him."

"Yes," Regeane answered simply. "I do."

Hadrian's brows drew together into a deep frown as he looked from Lucilla to Regeane and back again. "There is no help for Antonius."

Lucilla didn't answer. She stood up. She was as beautifully dressed as the rest of the pope's guests in a long chemise of green silk, embroidered with white roses that brought out her splendid strawberry blond coloring and fair complexion. She drifted away from Hadrian toward a doorway in the far corner of the room. "I've been crying," she said. "I'll need to repair my face. I need a mirror."

"You are as lovely as always," Hadrian said with sweet gallantry, "but if you don't believe my assurances, there's a mirror on the table by the door." Then he turned and stared at Regeane. "I can see," he said, "that neither of you intends to tell me anything more about your plans."

Regeane's fists were tightly clenched in her lap. The knuckles were white. She didn't answer.

"No," Lucilla said, standing over the table. It was cluttered with books, loose parchments, wax tablets, pens, ink, and other miscellaneous administrative paraphernalia. "A mirror here?"

"A great deal of chancery work goes on in this room," Hadrian said. "All sort of things end up here."

"But a mirror," Lucilla commented, beginning to sort through the objects on the table.

Outside, Regeane saw the lightning cut a bright jagged path across the sky. She heard in the distance a faint rumble of thunder.

Another breath, not strong enough to be called a breeze, wafted from the distant rainstorm and freshened the stuffiness of the room. Regeane was conscious of the wolf's silent, sullen rebellion.

What had she to do with politics, or feasts, or costly raiment?

Outside, the rain would be sweeping across the Campagna. The wolf wanted to run with the rain, watch the storm fires sweep across the heavens, and thrill to the thunder rolling through the clouds. Be a part of the storm's majesty as it moved across the winter countryside.

But the woman shouldered her aside and realized Hadrian hadn't given her an answer. "The marriage contract," she repeated.

"Yes," he said shrewdly, "the marriage contract. Tell me, how much of this man's wealth do you plan to take as part of the bargain? A third? A fourth? As much as he will yield for the privilege of being married to a woman of the royal house?"

Hadrian's eyes fixed on Regeane, cold and compelling in the candlelight.

Regeane was surprised at the ferocity in her voice as she answered. "His wealth? I hadn't given his *money* —" She spat the word contemptuously. "—one single thought until you brought it up. I only want to assure my own safety. I'm *afraid* ."

The word seemed to carry the whole fright of her terror from the black depths of her own soul out into the open. "I'm afraid," she cried. "Can't you see how frightened I am?"

Hadrian drew back. "Yes, I can see. Your fear is immense. I don't quite comprehend the reason for it, but yes, I can see that it is."

"Perhaps," Lucilla said, "that's because you've never been a woman."

"Yes," Hadrian answered, "and perhaps it's because you and this girl with the pretty, innocent face are up to some tricks so nefarious you don't dare acquaint me with the details."

Lucilla had found the mirror and was walking back toward Hadrian with the silver circlet held down against her gown.

"I seem to remember you taking the matter of Paul Afartha on yourself," Hadrian snapped back at her, "signing his death warrant."

"I signed nothing," Lucilla said. "I only let the Archbishop of Ravenna know that you wouldn't be prostrate with grief if Paul died suddenly. And he did—die suddenly," she said with cold satisfaction in her voice.

"So suddenly," Hadrian said, "that he had no time for contrition."

Lucilla seemed stunned into fury by his words. "In the name of God, Hadrian. How much time did Paul give Sergus for contrition? He was blinded, beaten, half strangled, and thrust into his tomb while he was still struggling, to die of suffocation in agony and despair. I'd like to remind you, Sergus was your friend and mine."

All at once Hadrian looked old and tired. "Very well," he said quietly. "The bargain is made. The terms of the marriage contract will be as you wish."

Regeane took a deep breath and let out a long, fluttering sigh.

Lucilla looked into the mirror in her hand. Her shriek echoed through the room. A second later the silver clattered and rang on the stone floor as Lucilla flung it away from her as though it were a living serpent.

The mirror skittered across the marble and came to rest at Regeane's feet. She leaned forward in the chair and looked down into the silver reflecting surface.

The face she saw was not her own. Regeane started back, jerking her eyes away. Lightning flashed, this time close enough to illuminate the room brightly for a second. The curtains belled out in the wind.

"Adraste's mirror!" Lucilla screamed. "Adraste's mirror here!" Her face was the color of ash, blue around the mouth and eyes. Regeane knew she had also felt the presence pass.

"Nonsense," Hadrian snapped impatiently. "Calm yourself, Lucilla. How could Adraste's mirror be here?"

Lucilla stood still, one hand pressed against her breast for a moment, then regained her composure with an obvious effort of will. In the distance, Regeane heard the music begin.

In the garden, big, fat drops of rain began to splat against the flagstones and splash in the fishpond.

Hadrian rose from the bench. "We must go now," he said. "My guests will be gathering in the triclinium, waiting for me to greet them."

Regeane picked up the mirror at her feet. She felt the same as she had at Cumae. The same dazed sense of unreality she had felt when the ghostly procession passed her by. She knew the mirror was there for her, sent to her somehow, but why she couldn't begin to guess. Still she took it, and dropped it between the silk lining and the heavy brocade outer dress.

Hadrian paused next to Lucilla and gave her a quick kiss, saying sadly, "Tonight after the feast, we can be alone."

Their faces, the way they looked at each other, reminded Regeane very much of an old, married couple who had seen many changes in fortune, many struggles, but who still clung together, and bound by ties shaped over a lifetime, and by love, by laughter, and by tears until they had now reached a kind of peaceful understanding that no worldly crisis could breach.

"My love," Lucilla said and touched his face. Then Hadrian was gone and they were alone.

"Come," Lucilla said. "Hadrian's right. We must hurry." She lifted a lamp from the table and began to guide Regeane through the shadowy maze of rooms back to the triclinium where the feast was being held.

They had reached a long, covered colonnaded porch when Lucilla stopped, shielding the lamp flame with her hand to wait for the wind to die down. It drove the rain across the porch in wavering curtains and water streamed in silver sheets from the overhang.

Regeane and Lucilla stood as the wind twisted and turned the bushes and trees in the garden and the rain fell in torrents.

"I don't know what you're planning," Lucilla said softly, "but I advise you to keep Antonius hidden." She seized Regeane's arm and Regeane felt her nails bite into the flesh. "And if you think to terrorize me with your other shape, think again. I'm not afraid of wolves. I saw them often when I tended my father's flocks in the mountains. They are cowardly beasts that can be driven off by stones and curses."

Regeane twisted her arm out of Lucilla's grip with one, quick movement, saying, "I cannot be driven off by stones and curses."

Outside the wind died. The rain poured straight down, a dense, roaring flood. The storm was at its height. A haze of moisture drifted through the portico, settling on Regeane's hair and face.

Lucilla stepped forward. "Come away. You'll ruin your dress."

Regeane stayed where she was, feeling the wolf rise strong and uneasy inside her. "Something's wrong. There is danger. The wolf feels it. I feel it," she whispered.

"Of course there's danger. You're in danger right now from me, if only you had the wit to see it. I'm not

Hadrian. Hadrian is a man. He can afford to be complacent. The mob would weep if he abdicated, but that selfsame mob would blame me, sack my villa, and drag me through the streets to face a Lombard tribunal that would be only too happy to take my life. Any and all of these things might happen if Antonius is found. My life depends on you, and I'm not even sure what you are."

"It won't comfort you to know," Regeane said, "that I'm not sure either. I've never had a chance to learn."

Regeane turned to Lucilla and Lucilla took a step backward and gave vent to a hoarse cry. "Don't... don't look at me," she stammered. "Your eyes reflect the lamplight like... an animal's."

"Like a wolf," Regeane said. She could hear the harsh sound of Lucilla's breathing. "Lucilla," she implored. "Please..." She extended her hand into the darkness, but Lucilla only drew a little further away from her. "Lucilla, are you losing your nerve? Tell me what's wrong? What's really wrong?"

"Regeane, why did you take Adraste's mirror? I know it's Adraste's. The pattern is original, her own. She drew it for the silversmith who made it. The same pattern was on all her personal possessions."

"Because the mirror was sent to me, meant for me," Regeane said. She moved toward Lucilla again.

"Don't come any closer. Don't come near me," Lucilla whispered. "The last time I saw that mirror was when I placed it in Adraste's coffin. Then they closed the stone lid of her sarcophagus forever over the mirror, over Adraste's lovely, evil, greedy face. I know where that mirror came from... because I put it in her hand."

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## Chapter Fourteen



REGEANE WALKED TO HER COUCH IN THE triclinium over a carpet of flowers.

The room was as beautiful as any church Regeane had ever seen. The flower-strewn floor was patterned with green and white marble.

Couches covered with purple silk velvet were arranged around two enormous half-moon-shaped tables. The pope's couch occupied the space near the back wall in the opening between two ends of the tables. It was set high on a raised dais.

Musicians were gathered in the open area between the two semi-circular tables and the soft waterfall of notes from the harp and cythera mingled with the plaintive cry of the flutes.

On the curved walls, the larger-than-life frescoes of the twelve apostles looked down on the silks and velvets of the glittering guests.

From a tall mosaic panel in the center of the room behind the pope's couch, a stiff Byzantine Christ gazed down, his hand raised to bless the pontiff at dinner.

The apostles in the frescoes weren't stiff or formal. They strolled together in groups through the lush beauty of a Roman summer. They resembled a crowd of peasants taking their ease at siesta time beneath the trees, heavy with fruit and foliage. Looking out over meadows alight with scarlet poppies and golden wheat ripening in the fields. Mark's lion played like a kitten in the long, green grass. Matthew's eagle soared like a falcon on the hunt. Peter lounged under a tree, his keys in his belt, nets folded beside him.

"Antonius!" Regeane said sadly.

"Yes," Lucilla answered. "At first I thought he was mad hanging around those silly painters' workshops, grinding colors, messing with plaster and stucco when Hadrian could have sponsored him. Assured him of a brilliant career in the church. But then when I saw what he produced... Alas, we poor Romans, floundering in a sea of barbarism, can still comfort ourselves with beauty. As though it were important," she added bitterly.

Regeane, still gazing at the magnificent painting, said, "It is."

"Yes," Lucilla said thoughtfully. "Yes, you're right. Perhaps these things are our immortality. Perhaps it is for them that we will be remembered when all else is dust."

Elfgifa was standing beside Regeane's couch. Augusta's friends were making a big fuss over her. Indeed, dressed in adult clothing, her hair braided with pearls as Regeane's, she looked a perfect little doll.

A big woman, dressed in the sober garb of a nun, pushed her way through the crowd around them and introduced herself. "I am the Abbess Emilia, and that, unless I miss my guess," she pointed to the child, "is Elfgifa."

The ladies around the child parted to let Abbess Emilia through. Emilia confronted Elfgifa with hands on her hips, an expression of disapproval on her face.

"Aunt Emilia," Elfgifa said.

"Don't 'Aunt Emilia' me, you naughty child. Your father has been frantic with worry about you."

Elfgifa's lower lip began to slide out and Regeane knew this was a danger sign.

"It wasn't my fault I was captured by pirates."

"Yes, it was," Emilia boomed. "You know very well you were told not to run away and play with the fishermen's sons. Our coast isn't safe," she explained to the rest. "The Northmen prowl everywhere, looking for loot, trying to take our people as slaves and sell them to the Greeks. Your father was afraid you were lost forever. In fact," Emilia shook her finger in Elfgifa's face, "you've grown up so much that even if I had found you, I don't know if I'd have recognized you."

Elfgifa appealed to Regeane. "Why do they always say you've grown? What do they expect at my age, for me to get smaller? You've grown, too," she said to Emilia. "This way." The little girl spread her arms in a measuring gesture. "Stout."

A wave of soft titters swept the group of women around Emilia.

"Outrageous!" Lucilla said. "Young lady, not another word. Greet your aunt properly with a kiss on the cheek. I believe we had a discussion on the way here about the differences between private and public

behavior."

"I remember," Elfgifa said, looking chastened and guilty.

Emilia folded her arms and stared down at the child. "It's Elfgifa, all right." She grinned and pinched her cheek and said to the child, "Fat is the word you want."

Elfgifa looked annoyed. "My father says 'fat' isn't nice," she insisted. "Stout."

Emilia gave a whoop of laughter. "My brother's daughter in everything. He's always twitting me about my girth. Happens whenever I see him, though that hasn't been for a few years now. God bless him. I tell him I'm not one to confuse piety with misery. My ladies in the convent spend their time in works of holy charity. We care for orphans, visit the sick, and feed and shelter those pilgrims that come to our door. Believe you me, a girl who's spent her night in sleepless vigil beside the bed of a dying man, or a long day supervising the education of a bunch of active youngsters doesn't need to come to the table and find a bowl of thin gruel and a few slices of black bread. We laborers in Christ's vineyards need to keep up our strength."

"I'm sure you do," Augusta murmured. "Now, as for the child..."

Elfgifa spun around and looked at Regeane accusingly. "You're going to send me away, aren't you?" Then she ran toward Regeane and threw herself into her arms.

Regeane clasped her and lifted her up, setting her on her hip. Elfgifa wrapped her arms around Regeane's neck and rested her cheek against hers.

For a moment Regeane was simply overwhelmed with love. She trembled with its intensity. "Don't you want to go home? Your Aunt Emilia will take good care of you until your father can come get you. She's a kind woman, isn't she?"

"Yes," Elfgifa said, "but she makes me study my letters. And she lectures me all the time about right and wrong. If I sneak off to play, she acts like I committed a sin, and she thinks I should work in the kitchen and scrub the pots. She won't let me climb trees and I have to stay inside when it rains. She nags, 'Stand up straight or you'll get a hump in your back.' 'Don't get your dress dirty.' My father says if you wear clothes they're *supposed* to get dirty and—"

Lucilla clapped her hands, bringing Elfgifa's tirade to an end. "Headstrong should have been your name, not Elfgifa. Regeane loves you. Try not to give her any more pain than you have to. Besides, a little work and discipline will do you good. Quickly enough you'll be returned to your father and allowed to run wild as usual."

"Oh, heavens," Emilia said, throwing up her arms. "It's true. He treats the child more like one of those wayward men of his. He treats her as though her thoughts and opinions mattered."

"That's because they do," Lucilla snapped. "She is the daughter of athane, is she not? At the very least she'll become the mistress of a large household."

Emilia looked flustered for a moment, then gave Lucilla a quick smile. "I've never heard it put quite that way, but yes, I suppose you're right."

Lucilla spoke then to Elfgifa. "Regeane is sending you with Emilia because it's... at present, a lot safer.



She loves you and wants what's best for you."

The child threw her head back and her deep, blue eyes looked sadly at Regeane.

Regeane's free hand stroked the soft curls at the back of Elfgifa's neck. "I want you to be happy and to preserve you from harm, little one," Regeane said in a very low voice to her, "and you wouldn't be either happy or safe with me. I want to see you with people who love you and can care for you properly." She shook her head. "Circumstances..." Words failed her for a moment and her eyes filled with tears. "Circumstances being what they are, I can't."

Elfgifa stared at Regeane solemnly for a moment, then tightened her arms around Regeane's neck. Her soft kiss was a whisper of love and trust against Regeane's cheek. "I'll be good," she promised, "and I'll try to do what Aunt Emilia tells me."

"Mother," Augusta said. "The pope is going to his couch. The feast is beginning. We must recline."

Regeane set Elfgifa down and found herself enveloped in Emilia's quick, unexpected embrace. "Thank you for your sweet compassion. You'll never know how happy it's made us to get the child back. My brother adores her. You have our eternal gratitude." Then she hurried away to join the other nuns seated across the room.

Lucilla nodded to Regeane as though she were a mere acquaintance and she, too, walked away toward her seat near the foot of the table.

Regeane stood for a moment, watching her, holding Elfgifa by the hand, Augusta beside her. "How strange," she murmured. "She must be one of the most powerful personages in Rome and yet propriety consigns her—"

"Be quiet," Augusta interrupted harshly as she looked quickly around. "Someone might hear you. My mother is continually a disgrace and an embarrassment to me," she added with an air of martyrdom. "She has sufficient fortune to live modestly—as a proper Roman matron should—and devote herself to the church, to relief of the poor. But instead she consorts openly with the lowest element in the city. She dabbles in politics and other matters unbecoming to a woman of rank. And above all, she continues to see a man whose company she should properly avoid as occasion of sin."

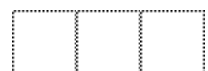
Regeane bit back the retort already forming in her mind. Elfgifa broke in on her angry thoughts to ask, "Are we going to eat lying down again?"

"Yes," Regeane said sternly. "It's the custom here and, as guests, we must do honor to our hosts."

"I didn't object," Elfgifa replied in an injured tone. "I was only asking."

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## Chapter Fifteen



THE MUSIC WAS SOOTHING AND BEAUTIFUL. THE conversation among the guests civilized

and subdued, the food and many wines a complex tapestry of color and flavor, an embarrassment of riches.

Regeane was bewildered, but delighted by the first courses of the banquet. She and Elfgifa feasted on thrushes and bobolinks braised in a white wine sauce, their flesh permeated by the sweet taste of the figs used to fatten them.

Augusta gave them both a look of disapproval and contented herself with a salad of endive, watercress dressed with oil, a little honey, and some wine, saying, "At my age I have to watch my weight. The two of you should be more careful," she warned darkly. "The eating habits you form now will follow you all your life."

Elfgifa dutifully tried some of the salad and made a wry face at the bitter taste of the greens.

They were seated near the pope's couch and Regeane saw him smile at Elfgifa's reaction to the greens. Then he sent over a dish from his own table.

"For the child," the smiling servant said as he presented it to Elfgifa.

Augusta stiffened into complete disgust when she saw the contents of the dish—pears cooked in cinnamon honey and wine in a light sauce thickened only with a few egg yolks.

Elfgifa ignored Augusta's admonition that she would ruin her appetite for dinner and gorged herself saying, "I don't care. I like what's here now."

Servants then cleared away the heavy, scrolled silver dishes and the guests washed and dried their fingers. The serving man poured rosewater over their hands.

Elfgifa got rosewater up her nose because she tried simultaneously to sniff the scented water and wash her hands at the same time. She began sneezing violently.

Rigid with fury, Augusta lay propped on her right elbow, pretending Elfgifa didn't exist, while Regeane, scarlet with embarrassment, tried to repair the damage and stop the sneezes by bathing Elfgifa's face with a napkin steeped in the offending rosewater.

"Oh, good heavens," Regeane whispered, completely exasperated. "Can't you stay out of mischief for even one second?"

Elfgifa's little face scrunched itself up and she looked like she might begin to cry. Regeane was immediately conscience-stricken.

"I'm sorry," Elfgifa said. "I didn't mean it. Only the water smelled good and I wanted—"

"Hush," Regeane said, taking the little girl's face between her hands and kissing her on the forehead. "There's a good girl. Now, don't cry."

Elfgifa refused to be comforted and hung her head. "Is that why you want to be rid of me? Because I'm not a good girl? I must be bad, because everyone's always telling me things to do and not to do and—oooh! Look how pretty!" she said, her grief forgotten like a passing shadow.

One of the serving men was offering the guests cups. They were glass, each in the shape of a different

flower.

"Can I have any kind I want?" Elfgifa asked as the servant paused before them holding the tray laden with the glass confections. Elfgifa bounced up and down with delight. "I like the sunflower. No, the harebell. No, I don't know. The lily is so pretty."

"Don't kick so," Augusta said in a dreadful voice. "Make up your mind and don't break it."

Elfgifa subsided immediately and her two large, blue eyes instantly became pools of tears.

"Don't be cruel, Augusta," Regeane snapped. "She's only a child."

"So I've noticed," Augusta hissed. "A nasty, sloppy, hateful little..."

Elfgifa looked stricken and pressed close to Regeane's side.

Regeane could feel her own passionate anger drain the blood from her face and she draped her arm over Elfgifa's shoulders. "Yes," she said softly. "You can have any one you like."

"I think I like the blue harebell best," a subdued Elfgifa whispered to Regeane as she looked up fearfully at Augusta.

Regeane glanced at the servant. The handsome, young man was staring at Augusta with dislike.

"Very well," Regeane said. "I'll take the lily and," she added maliciously, "since you like it, Augusta will have the sunflower."

Regeane's lily was of rare, clear crystal, the petals each tipped in white, while Elfgifa's harebell was a pale blue streaked with darker sapphire markings, each placed to suggest the delicate coloration of the spring flowers.

The beverage served in the cups was a dessert wine. Regeane chose a sweet raisin, Elfgifa one scented with roses, and Augusta, predictably, took the beverage redolent of violets.

A young girl strolled into the opening between the tables and took her place near the musicians.

Conversation among the guests stilled as they waited expectantly for her to begin singing.

"Doesn't look like much, does she?" Augusta said.

Indeed, to Regeane's eye the simply dressed girl was plain, almost ugly. She was dark-haired, her high-cheekboned face was distinguished only by a hooked nose, but when she began to sing, Regeane forgot the tall, thin body and the almost ugly face. The girl's voice was a golden thread of liquid beauty winding among the strings. The flute accompanied her with a sad, lilting melody.

She sang a simple lyric about a poet who begs the gods to spare his mistress' life. The girl's voice and the poet's lyric phrases painted a heartrending portrait of a helpless, lovely young girl stricken by a dangerous and frightening disease and her lover's terror and grief.

Regeane found her eyes filling with tears, but Augusta affected not to be moved at all by the music. When the song ended and the girl bowed and slipped away, she sniffed and said, "Dulcina, another one

of Mother's charity cases. She found her swamping out taverns. The child was a slave and her master didn't feed her very well. She sang for the few coppers the patrons threw at her feet and so was able to earn a little extra food. Now, thanks to Mother's patronage, she's the most popular entertainer in Rome. But, dear me, Propertius and here of all places."

"Propertius?" Regeane asked.

"The poet who wrote the poem *Dulcina* set to music. So passionate the verses about his Cynthia, how deplorable. Many churchmen disapprove of them. But that's my mother, ever the sentimentalist. Despite all her cynical talk, she believes in love."

Regeane remembered Hadrian and Lucilla together, their oneness even in sorrow for Antonius and in the face of failure and perhaps, defeat. "Possibly that's because she has known love," Regeane said.

"Ha," Augusta said. "Nonsense. That odious, but I must admit, profitable connection should have been broken off years ago. It's nothing but a source of trouble for both of them now. She is not so much loving but, as I said, sentimental. I've noticed she never lets sentiment stand in the way of destroying her enemies."

Regeane didn't answer, but privately agreed that, much as she hated to admit it, Augusta had a point. She had sensed a certain ruthlessness in Lucilla and she considered dispassionately if she failed to either find a cure for Antonius or keep him hidden, Lucilla probably would see to it she paid the price.

Elfgifa was growing restive. "I like the pretty music," she said. "And the cup is nice, but are we going to get any more to eat?"

Augusta's lips thinned to a cruel line as she glared down at Elfgifa. "I would think after making a pig of yourself with those pears, you would—"

"A pig!" Elfgifa cried, and for a second, Regeane saw the wild barbarian chieftain who was her father etched plainly on her features. Her mouth was hard. The small, blue eyes had a steely glint in them.

Regeane rolled over, pinning Elfgifa to the couch with the weight of her body. "Stop it," she hissed into the struggling little girl's ear. "Stop it now. Don't you dare throw a tantrum here."

Elfgifa stiffened and complied. "She called me a pig..."

"I don't care what she called you," Regeane said in a hoarse, furious whisper, "and she did not call you a pig. She meant you ate a lot of the pears, and so you did."

"Shocking," Augusta said. "The way you and my harebrained mother spoil that child. What she needs..."

Regeane looked up and realized Hadrian was watching them with a sly grin on his face. It seemed he found the entertainment emanating from their couch to be equal or superior to that of the musicians. She felt her face burn.

"For heavens sake, stop squabbling, both of you," Regeane begged. "The pope is looking at us. You're making a spectacle of yourselves."

Directing a look of freezing contempt at both Regeane and Elfgifa, Augusta said, "*Never* make a spectacle of myself."

"All right," Elfgifa said with ill grace and throwing an equally unpleasant look at Augusta, "I'll put up with her for your sake."

"Thank you," Regeane said sarcastically and noticed with much more sincere thanksgiving that the servants were entering carrying the main course on platters.

When the soberly garbed young servant made the rounds of the tables picking up the delicate flower cups, he paused at the table and spoke softly to Regeane. "Since the young lady," he indicated Elfgifa with a nod, "likes the cup she chose so much, His Holiness begs her to accept it as a gift."

Elfgifa threw a smug, triumphant glance at Augusta and clutched the cup to her bosom.

Augusta looked daggers at Elfgifa.

Regeane, very tired of both of them, concentrated grimly on selecting supper from among the many offerings. She settled on a loin of young, wild boar smothered in a delicious, plum sauce, and a dish of peppered sea urchins.

Augusta contented herself with a baked trout in a sauce of honey and almonds.

Elfgifa shared Regeane's wild boar, but turned her nose up at the fish and sea urchins.

At the first taste of the wild boar, Regeane's eyes closed with delight and she managed temporarily to forget Elfgifa and Augusta. She lost herself in the joy of eating a really perfect dish and she gave a regretful sigh when she and Elfgifa polished it off.

Augusta's prediction proved false. The pears affected Elfgifa's appetite very little, if at all, and Regeane turned her attention to the sea urchins.

The spicy little morsels provided the perfect finish to an experience Regeane considered both more subtle and spectacular than merely dining and she was searching her mind for words to describe her own inner satisfaction to herself when Augusta's words broke in on her thoughts.

"A young, unmarried woman shouldn't be seen eating such a dish in public, my dear," Augusta said patronizingly. "Sea urchins are said to be even more aphrodisiac than oysters."

"What's a frodisiac?" Elfgifa asked.

The muscles in Regeane's temples twitched as the wolf tried to lay her ears back and didn't succeed. "Never mind," she said impatiently and began reaching for the dish of colbainan olives when she saw Gundabald.

The room blurred away as the shock of terror ran through her body.

He was seated at the very end of the table opposite her, Hugo beside him. Preoccupied by both the food and the antics of Augusta and Elfgifa, she hadn't seen him before.

He caught her eye and raised his cup to her, a self-satisfied smirk on his face.

Regeane's fingers pushed at the velvet of the couch as she tried to rise. And if she had been strong

enough, the mindless terror she felt at the sight of him and the realization of the cruel significance of his satisfied smile might have propelled her to her feet and sent her into precipitous flight.

But she found she couldn't do anything at all. The room was spinning. Nausea twisted her belly muscles. She felt the sweat of pure terror break out all over her skin.

The wolf tried to come to her aid, but was trapped in her twisting body by the light. The torches blazing against the walls. The candles burning in the ceiling fixture above. The sconces on the pillars of the colonnade separating the dining room from the dark garden. So many candles, the columns suddenly seemed to be draped in fire.

Sounds were overpoweringly loud, the babble of voices, the threads of music twining among them.

Regeane realized the wolf was in her eyes and ears and the brilliantly lit dining room was a place of terror to the wolf. The lights blinded her. The packed mass of people and the stench of sweet, over-spiced food and perfume going sour on hot, moist flesh. The sound of voices roaring like a mountain torrent in her ears.

Regeane let her head fall to the cushions under her face. Augusta's voice thundered like storm surf in her ears.

She clucked at Regeane with mock sympathy. "Poor dear, have you had too much wine?"

Too much wine? Regeane knew she hadn't had too much wine, only a few sips of the beverages served with the meal, and the amount of raisin wine in the flower cups hadn't been enough to make her drunk. Not unless there was something else in it.

Darkness flooded her brain, blurring away the edges of reality. Bile choked her while inwardly she fought the frightened wolf with all her strength. Fought her for control over her body.

Voices were all around her and she realized through the waterfall of sound far away she could hear Gundabald and Hugo, hear them speaking, pick out their words among all the rest around her. And the wolf listened, listened with the intent-ness of a creature who can hear the rustle of a moth's wing, or a mouse moving in the grass, or the footfall of a stalking cat.

"She's looking peaked already," Gundabald was saying.

"Our patroness has served us well. We can take her in the confusion. . ."

Then she lost them as the wolf's power faded. The whole room seemed to be moving, and the lights were a blur of brightness, but the nausea quieted for a moment.

Regeane gathered herself against the drowsiness stealing over her, allowing her time to think.

Lying beside her, Elfgifa stared up at her in bewilderment.

On Augusta's face, Regeane saw a look of smug self-satisfaction.

Regeane bent and whispered in Elfgifa's ear. "Get to the pope. Tell him to muster his guard. We're about to be attacked."

Elfgifa stared up at Regeane for a second in consternation, then acted. She slid backward off the couch.

Augusta gave an exclamation of dismay and snatched at her, but the little girl was off the couch and then under the table before she could catch her.

Elfgifa surfaced three couches down, crawled under the table, and began to walk toward the musicians grouped in front of the pope's dais.

Regeane saw Augusta's eyes dart this way and that as she sought some way to stop her. Regeane would have laughed if she hadn't been in mortal fear. It was beneath Augusta's dignity to duck under the table and chase her.

Instead, she snatched up the child's treasured harebell cup and held it out over the hard, marble floor. She caught Elfgifa's eye.

The battle of wills that ensued was brief, but poignant.

Regeane saw the expressions chase themselves across Elfgifa's face: dismay, followed by fear for her treasure, then grief, and, at last, rage. The little body stiffened and again Regeane saw in Elfgifa's features the Saxon lord who was her father.

Her eyes flashed blue fire and she turned, ignoring both Augusta and the cup, and continued her march straight toward the papal couch.

Regeane heard the cup shatter on the floor just as Elfgifa reached the couch. The child flinched, but gave no other sign of distress.

One of the men seated near Hadrian made as if to stop Elfgifa, but Hadrian welcomed her and eased her up beside him. A second later she was whispering in his ear.

Regeane saw Hadrian turn quickly to a hard-faced layman resting near him. The man rose and hurried away.

The buzz of conversation among the guests dropped for a second, then resumed more loudly as a thrill of anxiety flowed through the throng. Had the child brought him some sort of message?

Regeane tried to rise again.

"Don't you dare," Augusta said, pushing her back down. "It's improper to rise at a feast before the host does."

But the pope was already on his feet, addressing his guests. "My friends..." he said.

Regeane twisted, trying to escape Augusta's grasp. The room reeled.

Hooves thundered on the cobbled street outside the square in front of the Lateran.

Regeane heard someone scream in utter terror. "The Lombards! The Lombards!"

The room erupted around her as the guests fled, knocking over couches, tables, even the tall candelabra in wild flight.



Regeane was jerked from the couch, one arm twisted behind her back in Hugo's grip as the big room emptied around them. The screaming guests almost trampling each other in their haste to flee.

Gundabald's bearded, pock-marked face loomed before her, only inches from her own. He patted her cheek gently. "I have a cage for a wolf," he said quietly, "a cage and an iron collar. This time you won't escape."

Then he slapped her a backhand slash across the face that snapped her head back. A flash of pain knifed through her skull. She was deaf and blind for a moment. Then a choking wave of blood filled her mouth and throat.

Behind her she heard Hugo's terrified whine, "Hurry, Father, hurry, before she changes."

"She can't change," Gundabald replied with an evil chuckle. "There's too much light."

Regeane felt the cold touch of iron fetters at her throat. Mad with fear, she twisted in Hugo's grip, ducking her head to escape the collar and chain, and saw Gundabald's hand draw back to hit her again.

Behind her, Hugo's grip loosened on her arm and she heard him say, "I'm on fire." He sounded as though he didn't believe it.

"I'm on fire," he repeated, sounding astonished.

"I'm on fire!" he screeched and, letting go of Regeane's arm, he fled in the direction of the fountains outside.

In Regeane's brain, the wolf seemed to go mad. She lunged at Gundabald, her nails clawing at his eyes.

He leaped back and slashed at her with the chain in his hand, lost his footing, and fell heavily to the marble floor.

Regeane turned. A dark hallway leading to the interior of the villa beckoned. Nearby, Elfgifa was dancing up and down, shouting delightedly, "I set him on fire. I threw the lamp oil all over him."

Regeane snatched the child's arm and burst into a staggering run. It seemed an eternity before she gained the darkness. She was going down and wondered what drug Augusta had put into the raisin wine.

She shoved Elfgifa hard in back and shouted, "Run for your life! Hugo will kill you." She was rewarded by the sound of feet scurrying ahead into the distance and Emilia's welcoming cry.

Then abruptly she turned a corner and the corridor was pitch black. The woman's eyes could no longer see anything.

The wolf seized her, throwing her to the floor. The change was a savage convulsion. Not the lovely, ethereal moon darkness that floated over her like a veil, but a terrible silver wave that broke over her, sending her into a black undertow of madness.

Her body writhed and the breath was squeezed out of her lungs in whimpers and moans. The drug burned out of her body in a flash of brilliance.

The wolf's paws scabbled amidst the silk and brocade of her gown as she burst free to stand triumphant. She had only seconds to get her bearings when Gundabald thrust a torch into her eyes.

The fire blinded her for a moment, but she could smell him—the scent of food and stale perfume. And, under them, the sour stench of a body she had been familiar with for so long.

She met him with a roar of such primal fury that it seemed to shake the very walls around them. For a second, Regeane wanted—with an absolute purity of purpose unknown to humankind—to feel her teeth meet in the soft flesh of his throat.

Gundabald drew back. His face had blanched even in the torchlight. He fled the way he came, to the safety of the triclinium.

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## Chapter Sixteen

