



S.P. SONTOW

DAMNATIO

NERO AND SPORUS • BOOK THREE

THE THIRD BOOK OF NERO AND SPORUS
DAMNATIO

S.P. SOMTOW
Diplodocus Press • 2024

Damnatio is the third volume of S. P. Somtow's series
Nero and Sporus. Parts of this book originally appeared as a serial on
Amazon Vella.



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first published September 2024

0987654321

A note from the author

Earlier this year, I sustained an arm injury which I expected would heal quickly but has taken many months. Writing has been painful, and I've only recently been able to write more than a few sentences a day.

There have been several postponements of the release date, and I know that a lot of readers are anxious to reach the climax of the story. Because I don't want people to get too impatient, I've decided to split the third volume and release "Part I" of it without any further postponements. "Part II" will follow in a couple of months. As you're getting a shorter portion of the story, I've also halved the price of the eBook.

After the two parts are released as eBooks, I'll combine them to produce the print version so that in print, Nero and Sporus will remain a trilogy.

While it's still painful, writing is easier now. I want to thank my readers for their patience.

September 19, 2024

S. P. Somtow



CONTENTS



CONTENTS

The Long Wait
Pluto and Proserpina
Lucius Junius Gallio
Clipped Wings
The Ring of the Death-God
The House of the Hetaira
Two Lives
Eleusis
Mysteries of Life and Death
Olympia
Chariots
Sacrifices
Songs without Words
Madness
Ubi Gaius Ego Gaia
Foreshadowings





Damnatio

*Primus in orbe
deos fecit
timor*

*In this world
it was fear that first
created the gods
— Petronius*



I

The Long Wait

I'm remembering the sea again. I thought I smelled it yesterday. But no: they were just flooding the arena for a sea battle, and the searing sun has sucked up all the water now.

Now I only smell sand, blood, and the shit of wild beasts. I've been alone overnight; but now they've moved me to a "superior" accommodation as befits my divine status. It is on an upper level; there's even a view of the Circus, little more than a slit of dusty, hot light. It lets in and stench, too.

It was not exactly cool during the night, just not as searing as the day. The air was oppressive, damp. They brought in a couch for me, but kept one foot chained to the wall, though escape was hardly an option. Breakfast was stony bread, salt, garum, and a handful of olives.

Then that makeup artist returned.

But it's more than a touchup. My execution has been delayed again and my face is no longer pristine.

They tell me that this time the games have been extended for one hundred days. Why not? There have already been three coronations this year, and a few near-coronations. A lot to celebrate. And a lot of misery — taxation, the bread dole being cut, the hottest summer in memory — a lot of anguish to assuage, a riled-up mob ready to riot.

Imagine the collective sigh, the release of pent-up passions from tens of thousands of voices, as they watch a goddess being ravished to death in the arena by a brutish monster.

But why did *I* have to be their goddess?



GOOD news, Divinitas.

I'm finally getting my death scene? I've waited long enough, with only you for company.

You got me into makeup *days* ago, but instead of a quick death in front of over a hundred thousand screaming admirers, you've lured me into

telling my life story. From peasant boy captured by pirates to plaything of a famous satirist. From slave to slaveowner with estates confiscated from great aristocrats. From freedman to imperial concubine. From man to woman. I've told you all these things, not to get them off my chest, but because one must do something to fill the time.

Everyone thinks the arena is all fast-paced excitement, but for us, the entertainment, it is an endless, stupefying orgy of *waiting*. Putting on makeup. Getting dressed up. Sitting through the reshuffling of schedules when the star gladiator has a cold, or a giraffe goes missing, or the lions are too sated to eat any Chrestianois. Believe me, I would welcome another diversion, even if it's my own execution.

Don't tell me it's *another* delay.

Well, Goddess ... a brief delay. News is, Vespasian is marching on Rome. News is, Vespasian views you a little more favorably than Vitellius. News is, if we could get word to him...

I would be surprised if he remembered me. I hardly knew him. He showed up at the party, you know, the one in which Statilia Messalina's husband was made to commit suicide. He also came to one of Himself's performances in Greece ... and committed the worst possible insult ... he nodded off.

The Emperor — I mean the Divine Nero, not the one who has condemned me to death — was not happy. Vespasian would have been permanently exiled somewhere, if he hadn't proved useful in putting down the Judaeen revolt.

Well, it looks as if there is a glimmer of hope for you. Vespasian has been declared Emperor by our legions in Egypt and Judaea. It appears that he is marching on Rome.

Doesn't mean much. Everyone and his uncle has marched on Rome this year, and so far only Galba, Otho, and Vitellius got to be Emperor. Why make this the year of *four* emperors? Three is much more of a sacred number. Three Fates. Three Graces. Three Muses —

Nine, actually.

Nine. Right. How long does it take to get here from Judaea? By land or by sea? A month? Six months? Is he fighting the forces of Vitellius on his way? I don't suppose he'll just march right over and kick Vitellius off his throne? Even in the unlikely event that he knows or cares who I am, Vespasian is not going to arrive in time to save me. Though the sight of a

grizzled general riding heroically into the Circus Maximus at the head of his legions to rescue the most beautiful boy-girl-Empress-goddess would, I am sure, be quite the climax.

And the crowd loves plot-twists.

Do you dare to hope, Sporus?

No.

Then at least tell me more. Tell me about Greece.

Oh yes. Olympus and Hades rolled into one.

You left me hanging. Nero had finally ordered you unmanned, to bring you closer to the image of Poppaea. You passed out from the pain, and you woke up on a ship, bound for Greece.

You tell the story then! If you know so much.

But I want to know so much more....





II

Pluto and Proserpina

The sea ...

I woke in the arms of a god.

My wounds had not healed, but a god does not have to wait for the passing of a mortal's pain. I woke to Himself whispering in my ear, "Poppaea, Poppaea, Poppaea."

"Lucius," I said, moaning softly. It drove his passion; each thrust sharpened my pain. I longed to go to another place, any place, because of the pain, and because my body had not yet healed, but the god was impatient.

Perhaps I passed out, because I was propelled into some kind of dream. It was the same dreamworld where I sometimes encountered Hyacinth after his death.

In dreams we do go to other worlds. Dreams are not mere flights of imagination.

I stood in a dry, dark place. It was utterly cold until I felt the shade of Hyacinth, a warm breath gusting in my face for just a moment.

Come.

He took my hand. We floated over stony ground. Now and then the dead looked up at us, but mostly they kept to the shadows. There was no sun. Even the sky seemed made of stone.

Come, Hyacinth repeated, in the language of my childhood, calling me by a name I had almost forgotten, my true name.

I called him by his, too.

This place, I thought, it's not the place where we were taught, as children, we would go. I remember tales of feasting and warriors, not stone-gray emptiness. Not this desolation, this heartbreak. This was a Roman kind of afterlife, shadowy and full of regret. *Facilis descensus Averno*, I thought. Going down to Hell is the easy part. Climbing back up, on the other hand....

"Where are you taking me?" I whispered.

"To meet my dominus," said Hyacinth.

The stone floor inclined. We were descending down a kind of cave or tunnel. A cold wind wuthered. The tunnel seemed endless, yet I was descending swiftly, as though I were being sucked in by a ravenous predator. Though there was barely any light there was a searing cold, creeping up from the stone floor, from the damp walls. It was not the cold that is the absence of heat, but the cold of old corpses, of soullessness.

Follow, Hyacinth said again, and now even his breath contained no warmth.

Presently the tunnel widened, and I found myself in the throne room of the Lord of the Dead.

There was a court full of flitting shadows, their robes woven from darkness. They whispered and buzzed, like insects in a summer night. Sconces with torches from which emanated a cold blue fire lined the walls. In the distance, on thrones made from human skulls, sat the King and Queen of the Underworld.

Time moved differently in the dreamscape. Suddenly I was standing at the foot of the twin thrones. Hades stared down at me, and I saw who he really was.

"Divinitas," I whispered.

"It's true," said Death. "There is no escape."

He smiled. His voice, perfectly modulated, echoed and floated on the chill air as though he were reciting Euripides. And then I saw who had become Queen of the Dead.

"Yes," she whispered, she who gazed at me with haunting eyes, *my* eyes, who smiled *my* smile; "I am so sorry," she said softly. "In the end, you are just an innocent boy. Many have died already because of you. Many more will die. But you have had no say in any of it."

I knelt at the feet of Proserpina, the death-goddess, who was also the Lady Poppaea Sabina, whose perfect face was the source of all my suffering.

"I am not here forever, you know," she went on. "Another will take my place one day, and reign from this throne of bones. I think," and she called me by name in my own language, the one only Hyacinth had known, "I think it will be you."

Her gaze seemed to steal my soul. I began to weep.

And then it was that I felt pain again, a swooping pain that made the tears spurt still more, and I cried out in terror and desolation; I felt myself

coming awake and I knew that it was the god violating me, my flesh as well as my soul.

And Nero Claudius Caesar Augustus Germanicus cried out as well, believing, I am sure, that he was giving me pleasure, for surely it must be a blessing to be raped by a god.



SO THE DAYS PASSED, the Divinity hardly leaving me alone except to eat, drink, or work on the grand composition he intended to inflict upon Greece. Unhealed, my battered body taking on more hurt. And always, I feigned enjoyment. Dreaming or awake, it was all Hell to me.

But the gods are easily bored, and it was twelve days by the time we arrived in Corinth. I was afraid he would take Hylas for his amusement, but it appeared that I, the improved, more compliant reincarnation of Poppaea, had actually driven him to exhaustion.

On the eleventh day he told me he needed time to commune with his muse. I spent the day working with Hylas to try to improve his Greek; his Latin had become pretty passable. The Divinitas did not summon me even in the middle of the night.



IT WAS NIGHT AGAIN when we reached Corinth, arriving, it seemed, almost in secret. We were met by some official and swiftly escorted to a villa whose owners, it seemed, had been temporarily dispossessed, not far from the Temple of Octavia; for this Corinth was not the Corinth of ancient legend, but the Corinth re-founded by Julius Caesar a century after it had been razed to the ground and its entire population sold into slavery ... to teach the Achaean League a lesson. Our litters moved quickly; I did not sit with the Emperor but followed, with Hylas walking beside the drawn curtain.

The quarters were sumptuous enough, though this was not Rome. The house was in Roman style, with a small atrium. There were plenty of slaves in attendance, but they did not seem very happy. They stood about, eyes downcast, uncertain. The official, who had not even introduced himself,

left hurriedly, saying that there would be a proper delegation in the morning.

Indeed, it was left to the boy Epictetus to get things set up, since the lad was the most high-ranking member of the Emperor's household in the absence of Imperial Secretary Epaphroditus —who had to manage the Empire on behalf of Statilia, poor thing! — and he limped about the hallway, ordering the slaves to do busy work. Presently he turned to the more experienced Croesus to help him, so that my household was actually managing the domestic arrangements for the Divine Emperor Himself.

Nero was led away to what was presumably the grandest cubiculum in the house, and when I made to follow, he waved me away. "We're in Greece now," he said. "Women know their place here." To Epictetus said, "Go find your Divine Mistress a proper veil, in case any strangers drop in."

So I found myself standing awkwardly in the foyer, staring up at the death masks of noble Romans I did not recognize, presumably the ancestors of whoever had vacated the premises for the duration.

"Well," I said to Croesus, "perhaps it won't be quite so bad here in the homeland of Aeschylus and Plato. Respectable wives don't go to dinner, and I am sure Himself will need to go to many symposia."

Croesus said, "I can't imagine you sitting at a loom all day while Himself is out performing for his raving admirers. If he doesn't need Poppaea, he'll definitely need Sporus. And Sporus will sit well with the Greeks."

"But Sporus is forever broken," I said.

"Who you are," Croesus said, "is in your soul, and in your heart, young domine."

I did not answer. I did not believe him.

An old slave was polishing a bust. A balding man, perhaps in his fifties. "You," I said. "Is this the owner?"

The slave cowered.

I said, "You can speak freely."

"Domine," he said, "are we all going to be crucified?"

"Whyever would you say that?"

Croesus whispered in my ear: "You know that under Roman law, if a slave kills his master, every slave he possessed is always crucified. It's the deterrent that holds together the entire fabric of Roman society. Deep down, it's the fear of their own slaves that motivates them."

“Then why did I feel so powerless?”

“Do you still?”

I nodded.

“Yet you are free.”

I said to the old slave, “If you’re going to be crucified, I can’t really help you; you may as well tell me what’s going on here — why everyone looks so glum, why we were brought here in such haste — why the governor did not meet us in the harbor.”



III

Lucius Junius Gallio

“We did not kill our master,” said the old slave, who was named Hector, “but it is whispered that they simply will say that we did not prevent his death — and therefore murdered him by omission.”

Croesus took me aside. “This house belonged to Lucius Junius Gallio Annaeanus,” he said. “The proconsul of the province. He should have greeted us at the harbor, but he has committed suicide.”

I racked my brain, trying to place the name. At last, I vaguely recalled him. “Seneca’s brother,” I said. “So, a traitor, then.” He might even have ridiculed Nero’s poetry in an indiscreet moment.

“He must have thought the Emperor was coming to see to his execution in person.”

The old slave said, “It’s the inheritance, Empress.” Clearly. If he killed himself, Gallio would be considered to have died honorably, and his estates would pass by law to his heirs. But if he were put to death for treason he would forfeit everything. “Murder would be a gray area, wouldn’t it?” I said. “He had not yet been found guilty of insurrection. The Emperor could still seize his lands ... and to make sure the letter of the law was adhered to, all the slaves would have to be crucified ...”

“A precautionary measure. An Empire is only as good as its paperwork.”

Despite its madness, Rome runs with a relentless logic. You can see it from its language: number, mood, tense, aspect, person, case ... lining up like soldiers to produce the precise ending each word requires. They love Greek, because Greek has rules too, but it has vagueness, ambiguity, and an inherent ability for any sentence to simultaneously mean its opposite.

“Precautionary?” I said. “But isn’t it inhumane?”

Croesus smiled a thin, sad smile. He did not have to explain. The word “inhumane” is not used of slaves, because they aren’t quite human; Aristotle calls them “animate property.” It was a truth I knew intimately.

But I knew, too, that even the free are not free.

“You’re going to speak to Nero about it, aren’t you?” said Croesus.
“Don’t. It won’t make a bit of difference.”

“Where are the proconsul’s heirs, his children?” I asked.

Hector said, “They are in hiding, Divinitas. Up north, I think. They did not tell us exactly where.”

It seemed I had not left Rome at all. Not the stifling whispers, not the ever-present fear of the Emperor’s wrath, not the constant conspiracies. I stood there in the entrance hall of the villa, not having been told where I was to stay or where my slaves should put my things. Other slaves emerged, looking at me, curious, perhaps wanting to plead with me, though I was powerless. It was awkward.



AFTER A TIME, HIMSELF emerged, all purple and gold, perfumed and freshly made up. He was accompanied by guards. “We’re off to visit Corinth’s most famous *hetaira*,” he said. “Thaïs.”

“I should get properly dressed,” I said.

“Oh, you’re staying home,” said the Divinity. “A *hetaira*’s lair is too permissive a place for the wife of an Emperor. There’ll be lewd talk, drunkenness, and lots of poetry reading; nothing that should interest a lady.”

“Why can’t I go as a boy?”

“Because we are God-Emperor and Empress, dearest Poppaea,” he said. “And your pretty head doesn’t need to be polluted with philosophy.”

“Aren’t *hetairai* ladies?” I said.

“As much as *delicati* are boys,” said the Emperor. Again, his tone seemed devoid of irony.

“Before you go, Lucius ...” I began.

“Have a nice rest,” he said. “After all, in your condition ...”

I didn’t know if he was toying with me or whether he was in fact in a state of delusion.

“Since I am, as you say, in some kind of ‘condition’, my beautiful Lucius ...”

“Oh! My sweet wifey wants a gift-wifty?” Was this cloying sweetness more delusion? Or was it all calculated? Or, worse, the prelude to some violent outburst? After my vision of Pluto and Proserpina in the underworld, I no longer cared whether I lived or died.

“Can’t you seize the estate *without* killing all the slaves?” I blurted out.

“It’s not like you to meddle in politics, Poppaea,” Nero said, and I *knew* that was untrue.

I could not appeal to reason, but perhaps venality would work. I said, “A man like Gallio must have slaves of the best quality. It would be a waste to kill them.”

“You’re right,” said the Emperor. “But when a slave turns against his master, you have to kill them all. If you don’t, we’ll have another Spartacus ... all society would collapse.”

“You mean to say, with all the fierce German tribes, the implacable Parthians, the constantly revolting Jews, Rome is more afraid of a few housemaids? Divinitas, *I* was a slave. Did you ever fear me?”

The Emperor seized me by the shoulders. He looked deep into my eyes. I thought I saw a single tear on his cheek. “O Goddess,” he said, “you are to be feared more than armies, more than a tempest.”

He kissed me with such passion that I thought he would forget about the *soirée* at the *hetaira*’s.

Then, abruptly, he broke away, leaving me with the taste of wine and rose-water on my tongue. “I suppose I can bend the rules a little,” he said. Crooking his little finger, he summoned Croesus. “Make sure the paperwork is impeccable,” he said, “I don’t want Gallio’s children to accuse me of reckless confiscation. I’m a reasonable God.”

“Thank you, Lucius,” I said, “for humoring your little wifey.”

“We’ll have to crucify a few, mind you,” he said. “Make a big show of it and somehow let the rest slip through the cracks.”

“Which ones?” Croesus said.

“I suppose the least valuable. Just kill the old ones. We wouldn’t be able to sell them, anyway.”

At this, Hector the old, and probably the most loyal, let out a terrified groan. I had not managed to save him.

“I’ll make sure the deed is properly drawn up for the villa,” Croesus said.

“Oh, I don’t need another villa,” said the Emperor. “Poppaea, dear, you take it.”

“I don’t need a villa either,” I said, wondering if the shade of the old slave would haunt me if I ever took possession.

“Nonsense, my dear. Just think of it as a wedding gift.”



IV

Clipped Wings

And just like that, my Lord and Master went out into the night, escorted by a dozen guards, purpled and perfumed so that none could mistake his identity.

And I was left behind in another luxurious mansion I did not care to own. Here I was, in the epicenter of the known world's culture, but I was barred from participating in its riches, because I was now a woman.

I eventually found my room, which was capacious enough. A fresco of the three Graces adorned one wall. Otherwise the furnishings were simple, though costly.

Croesus would have to do all the documents for the seizure of Gallio's estates (and gifting me the villa) ... so he was busy cataloguing the property, including the slaves, which apparently were also mine now. Perhaps there would be some good musicians, or a decent scribe; though I had become fluent in many languages, and I read well, I had never been able to form any letters other than crudely.

Time passed. I paced. I knew that the Divinitas would not be back until morning — or even later.

I was sad about Hector, even more so when he insisted on coming to my chamber to thank me for attempting to save him. He was in tears. "The domina never learned our names," he said. "All she ever wanted was to go back to Rome. She didn't enjoy being sequestered at all; the local highborn women are used to it. About once a month, out of sheer boredom, she would have us all beaten. But you, mistress ..."

"I'm not your mistress," I said sharply.

"So it's true, then. The rumor. That you are not actually the Lady Poppaea Sabina."

"Does it matter?" I said bitterly. "The gods make their own reality."

"Well, I shan't be spreading such rumors; I'll be strung up and being pecked at by carrion birds."

I motioned for Hylas, who knew how to be invisible until he was wanted, to pour me a *krater* of wine, and a second for Hector. He was no

longer weeping; he seemed to have reconciled himself to dying in agony for no real reason but to fulfil some bureaucratic requirements. What could I do for him?

“I’ll tell them to give you a draught beforehand. And not to use nails.”

“Thank you, domina,” he whispered. He gulped down his wine. I took only a sip. I almost vomited. “Ah, you’ve just arrived in Greece,” said the old slave. “Many Romans can’t stomach our resinated wine.”

It was true. It was all very well to hear Petronius Arbiter extol the glories of Hellenic culture, but it was quite another thing to imbibe revolting wine while being relegated to the indoors because of my gender.

“I’m not going to spend my time in Greece playing this ridiculous role,” I said. “Even Hylas has more freedom than I do.”

“He has,” said Hector, “until some treacherous servant decides to poison you. Then he’ll be put to death, too.”

Hylas let out a squeal of alarm. But it seemed that the older man was completely indifferent to his fate. Was Aristotle right, that some people were just born to be slaves, that they could not transcend their condition? I could not believe that.

“Are you a Stoic?” I asked him. After all, Epictetus’s philosophy had come from Greece.

“Far worse than that, domina,” said Hector. “I’m a Chrestianos.”

He was beyond my help. They would get around to executing him sooner or later. Of all the deluded cults in the Empire, his was the one least likely to engage people’s sympathy. Presently he shuffled away. The other attendants followed him, discreetly leaving me with my body-slave.

“Get some rest, domine,” said Hylas. “I’ve sent everyone away. I’ll watch you while you sleep. You haven’t healed yet. Please.”

“I’m wide awake,” I said. “I want to go somewhere.”

“It’s the middle of the night, domine.”

“For the last eleven days,” I said, “I’ve been either in a drugged oblivion, or desperately trying to send my mind far away to avoid the agony of the Divinity’s *ars amatoria*. While Himself is away for the night, I want to be free for an hour. I want to see Corinth.”

“As Empress?”

“As *me*.”

“You mean —”

“Yes, Hylas. I’ll disguise myself. As *myself*.”

“But Himself said you must not accompany him as a boy. Here, you must be the Divine Empress.”

“I am not going to accompany him. I am going to do what Nero Himself does so many times in Rome ... You and I are going to slip out into the stews of Corinth, Hylas, a pair of nobodies, vicariously enjoying the infamous night life of this city.”

Hylas spent an hour carefully scrubbing away the white paint from my face, the dark lines of kohl about my eyes, the rose-tinted lips and cheeks. He found me a clean plain *chiton*. It was in the Ionian style, because I could not wear the Doric, open at the sides; I needed to conceal my less-than-manhood. I made Hylas dress more grandly than me; this time, perhaps, he would seem to be *my* owner.



PREPARING TO GO OUT took us almost until dawn, but I still was not tired. Just one hour of freedom, I thought, one hour of anonymity. When we left through the front door, we weren't noticed. Gallio's slaves were probably too busy worrying about whether they would live or die, and they weren't that familiar with what I looked like. In Roman society, what you wear identifies you as much as many facial features.

We giggled like children as we left the villa behind us. Though this was a strange city, it was not cluttered and labyrinthine like Rome. The real Corinth was long gone, from a series of civil wars; Julius Caesar's recreation of Corinth was strictly according to the Roman colonial template: here the temples, over there the theater, here again a forum.

But I felt like a boy again, giddy with short-term freedom, running down an alley with a playmate. I had not felt this way for a long time. The unimaginative architecture was not my concern. We raced down an alley, rounded a temple, startled a dove-seller as he hawked sacrificial birds in cages in front of the Temple of Octavia.

We laughed as he chased the birds, hopping along the steps.

“Let's help him,” I said to Hylas.

We bent down and started to catch the birds. They seemed tame, not wanting to fly away.

I realized their wings were clipped.

I handed a bird to the vendor, and he sighed as he returned it to the cage. "Yes, I know," he said. "It saves time."

"It seems a pity," I said. "Birds should fly." I thought of my own fate.

"In my country," he said in a strange accent, "the buyers don't wring their necks to honor the gods. In fact, they set them free, to earn merit in their next life."

"That is a beautiful idea."

"But what the clients don't know is ... their wings are clipped anyway. I was a bird-seller's slave once. My job was to catch the escaped birds so we could sell them again. The clients did not know the birds were used again and again, so their intentions were pure."

"It seems less wasteful than killing them," I said.

"If me was a bird," Hylas said — his Greek had not yet caught up with his Latin — "Me rather die than not fly."

"What country are you from?" I asked him.

"I'm from the very farthest limit of the Hellenic world," said the vendor, "beyond even the Empire of Caesar. "I am from Bactria, which is in India."

"The farthest footfall of Alexander the Great," I said, remembering some past comment of my tutor Aristarchos.

"You've heard of it! My, you had a good tutor," he said. "You are not who you seem to be, young master." We finished caging the birds and the vendor handed us an *obol* for our efforts. "Go share a lamb skewer."

We left the temple steps and turned another corner. The sun was rising. I could smell grilled spiced meat and warm bread, and I could tell we were near a market. "You heard him," Hylas said in Latin. "Lamb."

"You go." I had become despondent suddenly. I could not help thinking of the flightless doves, captured and recaptured to ease the sensibilities of pilgrims.





V

The Ring of the Death-God

I did not feel I could eat anything, but Hylas was happy to eat a skewer he purchased, along with a flatbread, for our *obol*. And just like that, we were penniless again, but I was content to breathe in the smells and bask in the cacophony of the market coming to life at dawn.

But this is the strange thing: there were virtually no women. The few I saw were veiled and accompanied by a chaperone or a slave. It wasn't as though women were not allowed out of the house; more that well brought up women didn't go out. You'd see an old crone buying vegetables, or a little girl.

In Rome, women are *seen*. They make a point of it. They may not have many rights by law, but Rome is full of powerful women pulling strings behind the scenes. I had known many. In a sense, I was one of them, brought back to life and inhabiting the corpus of an ex-delicatus.

Here in the agora, women were all but invisible. But there were men everywhere. Men of all ages, eating, arguing, playing games. As we passed by, they would whistle at us, blow kisses in the air, ask our names. It was quite brazen — it is odd, but you don't get this in Rome, the city of scandal and excess. In Rome it is grossly indecent to proposition a freeborn boy. Why would you, when there are slaves who must submit to any depraved whim?

We minded our own business, ignored the suggestive comments. We played hide and seek behind the market stalls. We pilfered vegetables. We ran. We laughed a lot. And then ...

I spotted the ring.

Rather, Hylas tripped me, and I skidded past the stalls and into a pile of costly fabrics. And my eye came level with a silver platter that held this ring. The stone was just a handspan from my eye. It was a large carnelian intaglio and it showed Proserpina (Persephone as the Greeks call her) in a field of grain. Behind her, cape flying, the God of Death was bearing down, about to seize the beautiful goddess and carry her down to the underworld. Somehow, in infinitesimal detail, the eyes were so cunningly carved that

they seemed to stare right back at me. So tiny, yet the image drew me into its blood-tinged depths. I could hear Persephone cry out in ecstasy and terror.

A voice whispered in my ear ... my secret name, known only to the one person who spoke my language, who was now dead. I froze. I felt the breath of Hyacinth, a gust from the dark caves of the dead. The image carved into pink stone drew me into its world. I recognized it. Hyacinth's spirit must have led me here.

All at once I was reliving the dream that haunted me as I lay in pain on the voyage. I had seen Nero and Poppaea as the King and Queen of the Underworld.

Without thinking, I picked up the ring.

"Thief!" someone was shouting.

I stood there, holding the ring, staring into it, oblivious to the stir I was creating. We were not in one of the market stalls but a shop that bordered on the agora. The fabrics were on display on tables in front of the entrance. A bearded man was scowling at me. "Think you're just going to walk off with it?"

"No, no," I stuttered. "I'll buy it."

"Impertinent urchin!" he said, and began to rain down blows on me with his fists. "'I'll buy it' indeed! This ring is worth a dozen of you."

At that moment, the street filled with Roman soldiers. Two of them seized the proprietor and shoved him roughly against a column. "Why are you pushing me around? It's that thieving boy you should be punishing."

"I told you I would buy it!" I said hotly.

"With what?"

Croesus was making his way through the small mob that had gathered around us. He held out a pouch of coins. He threw it at the shop owner, who, still restrained by soldiers, could not pick it up.

One of the soldiers did, opened it, and took one of the coins out. It was a shiny, newly minted aureus.

"You struck a member of the Imperial family," he said. "That's a summary crucifixion."

In that moment, my status abruptly shifted. I went from invisible boy to the center of attention. A crowd was gathering ... though they kept their distance. Though Greece was the pride of Rome, it was also a conquered

nation. I watched the vendor's face. He had been so certain of his place, of who he was, of what I was. Now his world was chaos.

"I — I didn't how. How could I know? Look at how these boys are dressed!"

A soldier struck him in the face. "You're making it worse."

Then that soldier went down on one knee in front of me. "I'm sorry you were bothered, Divinitas," he said. "We'll take it from here."

I had not been free for a single moment. My carefree games with my slave, gathering up the lame doves, playing hide and seek among the merchant stalls ... all of it had been carefully, discreetly observed. They had been ready to swoop in at any moment.

"Let the man go," I said. "He couldn't have known."

The vendor fell to his knees, slobbered over my sandals. "Forgive me." He added, "Please keep the ring! No need for any payment. Just spare me the cross."

The Romans certainly understood the effectiveness of a good deterrent. That was how they kept the world subjugated. How we kept it so, I reminded myself, for I too was one of the oppressors now.

They were going to lead him away, but I held my hand up. "No, no, I'm serious. He can go. And give him his money." The gesture of magnanimity felt empty. Even as I ordered his release, I knew that I would not always be able to act this way. Sometimes, to show mercy would be to seem weak, or worse still, would seem to contradict the will of the Divine Nero; that could never be allowed. But the God was not watching.

"You would do well to remember the tale of Philemon and Baucis, who knew how to serve the god even when he was disguised as an impoverished wanderer," Croesus said. "And you, my Empress," he added, "must be properly escorted back to the mansion."

Croesus waved and a magnificent litter appeared.

"I'm not going back to the mansion," I said.

"But, Divinitas —"

"Croesus, you see how I am dressed. Don't treat me like a woman. I won't be sequestered. Later I'll put on a veil and be chaste and demure, but right now, I want to go to the house of Thaïs the *hetaira*."

I knew what I needed to do with the ring.

"Divinitas!" Croesus said.

“You know you have to obey me,” I said. “Everyone does. Except *Him*.” It was only in that moment that I understood how much power I had. And that I relished that power, even as it made me feel queasy to use it.

“Hylas!” I hissed. The illusion of equality vanished in an instant. My body slave crouched down by the litter so I could step in on his back. I stomped up, knowingly hurting him a little. He clambered in after me and drew the curtain.

“Thank you, domine, for letting me feel free for a moment,” Hylas said, and kissed my hand.

In the privacy of the litter, as we bounced through the streets of Corinth, I started to embrace him. But the gulf between us could no longer be breached. I knew that, even though we had played at being children together, slipping into the city past the prying eyes of the staff and the guards, Hylas had found a way to alert them. He had understood, far sooner than I, how the world I now inhabited really worked.

“There is only one way we can really be friends,” I said to him. “I’ll have to free you.”

“Don’t,” he said softly. “Please don’t.”



VI

The House of the Hetaira

Oh, the ring! The ill-fated, infamous ring that you gave Nero as a wedding present! The ring that is now seen as the prophecy of your fate!

Yes. It's because of that ring that I have been condemned to take the same pathway to the underworld as Persephone, Queen of the Dead.

But what of it? Vitellius would have decreed some other death for me, something just as grotesque, would he not?

If you had known, would it have been your choice of wedding gift?

What is the use of speculating?

If I had known, I would have hidden myself more carefully in the forest, and I would never have been captured and sold. Don't you think I haven't thought about all the *what ifs* and *what if nots*?

If I had hidden in the forest and crawled back into the village once they had done all their looting, there would have been no one left. They took everything. They killed everyone they didn't enslave. I'd have been reduced to some kind of feral existence. Or tried to find my way to the next village, and who's to say they wouldn't sell me themselves, a child with no relatives, good for a quick few denarii?

So ... I don't put any stock in the ring's ill omens. Something else would have happened. Life is one long misery, flecked with the occasional fleeting moment of joy.

And how did you come to give the ring to Himself?

I was getting to that.



I HAD EXPECTED THAT the *hetaira* would inhabit some sleazy lupanar like the ones I'd seen in Rome, where you go in and pay an old woman and make your selection from a roomful of preening prostitutes. But we arrived in a tasteful villa on the outskirts of Corinth.

In a colonnaded porch, the Emperor's Praetorians stood at attention, as they probably had been the whole night. The soldiers who had accompanied me joined them; most of my entourage from my lodgings had gone back, leaving me only with Hylas. The soldiers exchanged words, but none prevented me from entering.

There was a foyer beyond the porch, with a floor mosaic in a nondescript geometric design; the walls, too, were plain with only a touch of gold in the molding. Beyond the porch was a little courtyard; to the left a peristyle whose only decoration was a breathtaking statue of Aphrodite embracing her son Eros, so vividly painted it almost seemed they breathed.

I knew then that *this* was the Greece Rome tried, in its overblown way, to emulate. This was the Greece I recognized from the classical proportions of Petronius's villa — nothing in excess, a few art objects, and each one exquisite and unique.

Sounds were coming from a neighboring room. Not the shrieks and cackles of a Roman party, but a kind of murmuring, like the sea. I could hear the plangent keening of a double flute, the paired notes intertwining in alternating consonance and discord. Then the mournful twang of a *kithara*. And the voice of a singer.

As I entered the room, Hylas shadowing me, the song was ending. It was in fact one of the famous soliloquies from *The Myrmidons* by Aeschylus:

Kai men, philó gar, abdelykt' emoi tade...

And yet to me, it is not loathsome, because I love him.

The singer sang the phrase *philó gar* over and over, caressing each note as it hovered in the air, punctuated by the *kithara* and melding into the sobbing *aulos*. I recognized him: it was none other than Lucius Domitius Paris, the renowned singer whose techniques Himself often tried to emulate.

It was a select group, no more than a dozen, and I did not know any of the others except my husband, who did not sit enthroned but shared a couch with the *hetaira*. I assumed that was who it was because she was the only woman in the room.

Thaïs was no painted whore. She wore less makeup than most of the men. She was simply dressed, though it was expensive simplicity.

No one could see me yet; the lamps were on the drinking-table, and the doorway was in shadow.

Thaïs spoke — and all the men listened. “You can see,” she said, “what Aeschylus means when he gives Achilles those words to say. He’s telling us we are beautiful because we are loved. Beauty is not intrinsic.”

“Surely,” Paris said, “Achilles is speaking here about the mangled corpse of Patroclus. No verbal acrobatics could render beautiful a dead man covered in blood.”

“No acrobatics?” said a little man, wedged between two large ones, sitting on the right couch. “You have given us verbal acrobatics aplenty!”

“Indeed, Strato,” said the Emperor. “Paris has outdone himself. He portrayed both the hideous spectacle and the redeeming love with just a few modulated tones. But was it feeling? Or was it merely technique?”

“Both, I should hope,” Thaïs said, laughing.

“Do you have a better poem, Strato?” said Paris. “We’ve all heard that when it comes to writing about the boys, you have no peer.”

Strato rose and came to the front of the table. He was about to launch into some ditty when, I suppose, he noticed me.

“Sometimes,” he said, “words fail me, when one such as *this* enters the room.”

Himself, the Divine Nero, Master of the World, saw me at last, for I had stepped into the light.

“I told you stay at home,” he said. A hint of menace in his voice.

“Poppaea’s home,” I said softly. “I am Sporus.”

“Oh ... of course,” said the Emperor. Had I confused him? “My wife,” he said, “the Divine Poppaea Sabina, is indeed back at the villa, sitting demurely at her loom no doubt, and on her best Greek behavior. Perhaps, like Penelope, she’s weaving a tapestry to celebrate my return from this symposium. But this, friends, is my one true love ... my *eromenos*.”

“What?” Thaïs said. “Am I not lover enough for you, my Emperor?” She beckoned me to come closer. “Though it’s good to see you adopt our customs, Divinitas.” She looked at me for a long time and finally she exclaimed, “*O pais kalós!* Is such beauty even possible?”

She made me come a little closer and continued, “If I were Poppaea, I’d have had you killed by now.”

The tension was almost intolerable. My boldness in coming here seemed like a mistake. Could Thaïs see through me? Did she know what a tightrope I was walking? Everyone was silent. With Nero, you never knew when an outburst might occur. I steeled myself for his wrath.

Suddenly —

“I have a poem,” Strato announced. And he began to recite:

O you are fair, young Sporus, and ripe for love;

But even if you marry, we won't leave you alone.

There was a burst of applause.

This was not the time to imitate Poppaea ... or rather, to imitate the *idea* of Poppaea, as the aloof, cloistered Empress. The way to brazen this out would be to act more male than I had ever acted during my time in Rome. This was a different world. A boy was not a painted plaything here. I had to suppress my feelings of victimhood, for the myths and histories that Aristarchos had used to teach me Greek were beginning to feel real. In this society, lovers fought and died together, made vows to each other that were as important to society as those between man and wife, gave their lives for each other.

In this world, I could be celebrated and honored as Nero's boy ... and feel fully male. A supreme irony, since strangers had tossed my maleness onto some Roman rubbish heap.

I strode up to the man who had treated me as a rag to wipe off the detritus of his own emotional conflicts. Laughing, I launched myself onto his lap, fully expecting to be slapped for my impertinence.

He was nonplussed for only a moment. Then he too laughed, hugged me, and kissed me, rather chastely and decorously, on the lips.

And whispered, too low for anyone to hear: “Well played, Sporus. I can see there's no keeping you locked away. Well, when we're with friends, we can do as they do. But when I need it, you *will* be Poppaea.”

“Yes, Lucius,” I said, smiling sweetly. He was the most powerful man in the world, but there were things I could hold over him. “In any case, my Lord,” I added, “I saw something in the market I thought you'd like, and I hurried to make you a gift of it.”

I motioned for Hylas to come and kneel at the Emperor's feet. He held up the box with the ring with the intaglio of the Queen of the Dead.

Himself took the ring and held it up to his eye, admiring the detail.

“It's to celebrate our wedding,” I said.

“The Rape of Persephone!” said the Emperor, his brow darkening. “Is this what you think of me?”

Strato, the silly poet, gasped. Thaïs raised an eyebrow.

It was only in that moment that I realized what an ill omen it was.



VII

Two Lives

It was in that instant that my double life in Greece began. The Emperor, it would seem, was to be accompanied on his grand tour by both Empress and *Eromenos*. Of course, they would never be seen at the same event. That would be most distasteful. Disrespectful to the wife, to flaunt the lover to her face.

Not to mention the logistics of switching identities — including clothes and makeup — in the blink of an eye. Though, since proper women weren't seen in public much, and usually veiled, I did manage to transform from time to time, when the Divinitas needed it.

But I was speaking of the omen.

The Divine Caesar was still glowering, and the guests were fidgeting. “Are you saying that you are the innocent maiden, and that I am the rapacious God of Death? After all I've done for you?”

Casually, he kicked Hylas out of the way. The boy suppressed a whimper. He did not want to compound the situation.

I had to think on my feet. “Persephone was already a goddess,” I said, “and the daughter of a goddess. I was nothing before you set your eyes on me.”

“Not so,” said Nero. “You were the God Hymen, watching over me during a drunken wedding.”

That had been the first time I ever set eyes on Himself. Yet I had not known until this moment that the Divine Nero had known the whole time that *I* was the hallucination of the God. It meant he had been watching me for longer than I knew. It meant that I had lost my freedom long before I knew I had freedom to lose.

Nero pulled me onto his lap. He stroked my hair. His expression was unreadable, even to me. It was Thaïs who came to my rescue.

“The beautiful boy is only a barbarian,” she said, her voice soothing. “He can't be expected to understand our complex philosophies.”

“Yes. A barbarian. That's right,” I said. I tried to kiss the Emperor, but he turned his head; I caught a chinful of wine, perfume, and vomit. “That's

why the Empress suffers me to live,” I went on. “I’m just a pretty face. I can’t speak of philosophy or poetry.”

Nero seemed satisfied with how I had finessed the situation. Still stroking my hair, he spoke, softly so none could hear: “Later, we’ll discuss this.” I pretended not to notice the tone of menace.

Meanwhile, the *hetaira* Thaïs started to stroke my hair as well. She whispered in my other ear: “Your secret is safe, dear. People like you and me, we know how to survive.” But which of my many secrets did she know?

She and the Emperor embraced, with me trapped between them, being squashed like a pillow. If you could imagine the combined scents: the clashing perfumes, the many wines, the viands and stomach fluids ... all of them battering my nose while I tried not to gasp for air ...

At length, they pulled apart. It then pleased the Divinitas to feed me personally. The food was not extravagant, not like back home; there were no peacocks’ brains. But the grapes were as sweet as any I had ever tasted.

At length, a weariness came over the Emperor, and he nodded off quite suddenly, like a lamp that has run out of fuel.

“Leave him be for a few hours,” Thaïs said. “Would you care to see my domain?”

She motioned to the flute-players, who struck up a lullaby. I looked around and saw that most of the guests were visibly more at ease, and some, like the poet Strato, were drifting off as well.

She took my hand and led me through the peristyle to a hidden stairway to an upper floor. Again, pure simplicity. A hallway and some doorways. The floor was plain wood, but beautifully polished.

“What were you expecting, my beautiful boy? Lewd ladies pouting in the corridor?”

“It’s not what I’ve seen in Rome,” I said.

“In Rome, men and women dine together,” she said. “Here, a proper woman is never seen unveiled. But men long for a woman they can be themselves with. Not just discuss art and music. Just not to feel awkward. People like me are very special, you see. We can stroke their egos *and* their organs!”

“But what about power?” I said. “In Rome, women run *everything*. Though no one admits it.”

“And you don’t think that’s true here?” She laughed, and then showed me a door that was slightly ajar. She pushed it a little way and I saw a man lying with his eyes closed, being tended to by a younger *hetaira*. Seeing her mistress, the girl was about to speak, but Thaïs put a finger to her lips.

“Isn’t that ...” I whispered ... “General Titus Flavius Vespasianus?”

Even in the dim light from a single oil lamp, I remembered the general all right. He had gazed at me with an unnerving concupiscence the day he had come to get his marching orders for Judaea. And Statilia herself had told me he was rumored to be in the running for the next Divinitas.

“Why isn’t he at the symposium?” I said softly.

“It would spoil the surprise,” Vespasian said, with his eyes still closed. Then he added, in that growl affected by military commanders, “The Emperor’s bumboy! I’d know those dulcet tones anywhere. Well, Sporus, I am glad to make your acquaintance again. Thaïs, you may as well send the girl away.”

“I’d better leave,” I said.

“Ah, come, boy, not quite yet,” said the general, sitting up and patting his sweaty paunch. Again, he stared at me like some sweetmeat on a platter.

“I thought you were off slaughtering Jews,” I said.

“I’ll be slaughtering them soon enough,” he said. “They’re too stubborn to behave like a proper colony. I might even have to raze their capital city to the ground and enslave the entire population. Nero’s express orders. But you think I enjoy being the villain? So ... I thought I’d stop off on the way and visit the Olympics; I hear Caesar is competing himself.”

“It’s the wrong year,” I teased, knowing that Nero had had the Olympiad calendar rewritten for his own convenience.

“Time means nothing to the gods,” he said. “Come and rub my back, there’s a good lad.”

“I’m not a whore,” I said.

I left quickly, slamming the door a little bit too loudly.

“Well played,” the *hetaira* said, smiling a little. “He won’t forget you if he comes to power.”

“I wasn’t playing,” I said.

“That’s the very of art of it,” Thaïs said. “I am the most famous courtesan in Corinth, and you outclass me utterly.”

“I’m a boy,” I said. “I can be direct.”

“The trick, then,” said Thaïs, “is to do it as Empress. Oh, don’t panic, I know. I’ve always known.”

I must have stared at her openmouthed. She embraced me and said, “We’re going to be friends, Sporus.”





VIII

Eleusis

The next day, Himself the Divine Nero and his Imperial Consort — that is to say, my castrated self — sat in state in the villa of the disgraced proconsul and were duly paid court to by the important personalities of Corinth.

The traditional *Salutatio* takes place every morning. After my patronus's death, I myself had presided sometimes. But not in the palace. The morning petitions were a public matter, but the Divinitas's cubiculum capers were not, though I understand that in Caligula's time, things were done a lot less by the ironclad rules of tradition. But now, I was Empress. I sat right next to the Divine Nero, though discreetly veiled so as not to scandalize the natives. Thus it was that we attempted to accommodate the excesses of Roman life to the classicism of the Hellenes.

I was made to fit into every world, though I belonged to none of them.

Thaïs, of course, did not come; such women are not guests in respectable homes in Greece.

It was a desultory scene. For one thing, the Emperor was — by his own way of thinking — travelling incognito. Just one ship, and without the cacophonous circus of hundreds of retainers. Even though the whole city knew that Nero was there, they had all been strongly cautioned that he did not wish to cause a stir.

There was only a handful of petitioners as we held court. It pleased the Divinitas to dispense justice in person. Some land disputes, an argument over a tutor violating the honor of some highborn youth, and a forger who was so arrogant nobody much minded when the Emperor sentenced him to having his hands cut off and hung around his neck. This was done discreetly, off-stage, like violence in a Greek tragedy, and it was just as well that our prandium was not marred by bloodshed.

It was time to go to Eleusis, the place of supreme mystery, the place of the soul's rebirth. I was to be carried there with great honor, as Empress and Goddess, with no outsiders allowed to see my face.



TO DO SO WE WOULD ENTER Athens by night, but we would not have time to enjoy the sights, for at dawn, we each had to sacrifice a piglet before setting off on the pilgrimage on foot.

We had come humbly, with virtually no retinue. A small military escort, naturally, with General Vespasian taking command himself, though I was not sure if he was there out of loyalty to the Emperor or to keep an eye on my frayed beauty. Hovering about were the usual poets and poetasters with whom Nero loved to surround himself, including the actor Paris and the poet Strato who so seemed to admire the boys. In addition, there came my slave Hylas, and Croesus, who was able to give a kind of running commentary, explaining the curious goings-on to me.

To the Divinitas as well, for the Divine Nero preferred the lurid bits of Greek literature and had not really studied as much philosophy as he wanted others to believe. But he could not be seen to be requesting any elucidations, so eavesdropping on his emptyheaded little Empress was a good way to acquire any necessary tidbits.

The basic story, of course, I knew; we had a similar one in my country, though the names were all different. Persephone in the fields where flowers of Tyrian purple bloomed, in the full beauty of young maidenhood; Hades bursting up from Hell and dragging her to the murky depths of the kingdom of the dead; Ceres scouring the world, cursing it with eternal winter in grief; the six pomegranate seeds that meant six months of cold and six of warmth, birthing the circle of time.

What Croesus told us, though, I did not know.

He told us that we ourselves would die and be reborn in the sacred mysteries.

“Oh,” I said, “like the Christianoi.”

For I remembered that that wayward sect too had among its strange doctrines some surprisingly normal-sounding ones, including the self-sacrificing god who dies in the spring to fertilize the world with his divine blood, and then returns to life after three days.

“Not like them,” said Croesus, “or any other divine resurrection cult. In the mysteries, you will *actually* die and be reborn.”

“Metaphorically,” said the Emperor.

“Begging your Divinity’s pardon,” Croesus said, “I do believe we are speaking in literal terms.”

“Oh, nonsense,” said Nero. “I’ve killed thousands of people. They don’t come back, you know. But their longing remains. And you can feed on that longing. That’s what we eat, you know. What sustains our immortality. Every pinprick life is a part of our forever.”

We who? I thought. *We gods?*

As always, the Divinitas stood right on the line that divides the visionary from the lunatic.

The procession moved slowly, with those seeking initiation pausing every few hours often to pray or sacrifice. As the night wore on, others paused to rest, but our party marched through the darkness, having changed the bearers at sunset.



WE ARRIVED, THEN, AHEAD of the rest of the party, which was not really in the spirit of the pilgrimage. And it was clear that Eleusis might have seen better days. The winding road to the temple was lined with hawkers of souvenirs who were just setting up their wares, expecting a crowd at dawn: ill-favored statues of Demeter, tawdry jewelry, and crude versions of the ring I had presented to the Divinitas. There were images in the ancient style, angular and not natural-looking. There were piglets stacked dozens to a cage, waiting to be sacrificed.

I saw little, though I heard, and smelled, a great deal. I had to peer through a slit in the drapes of the litter; for I was traveling in public, demurely veiled, invisible and inviolable to men.

The portico of the temple was unattended. The procession was exactly timed by age-old tradition; no one was expected to have forged on ahead. I sent Croesus to roust up some kind of reception. There were steps that led up to the temple proper. There was a colonnade of simple Doric columns. It was dark, not yet dawn; light came from two torches burning in braziers on either side of a worn, oak door. So this was the sanctuary, the home of the great mystery of death and rebirth, the place from which you could descend into the very bowels of Erebus.

Eventually, a bearded priest emerged, still straightening his *himation*, followed by a young novice rubbing his eyes. Perhaps they had been

rehearsing for the fertility rites.

Clearing his throat, in a tone of practiced arrogance, the priest said, “Who art thou? Whence comest thou, and what dost thou seek?”

“I should think that would be pretty obvious,” said the Divinitas.

I whispered in his ear.

“I am a child of Earth and Starry Heaven,” said the Divinitas.

“I think that comes later in the ritual,” I said.

“Will the Empress be participating with the women?” said the priest, and I noticed a rather brawny priestess standing in the distance, staring at me like a lioness in the circus.

“I’ll go as *eromenos*,” I said quickly, for I did not want to be split from our company; however strange we were, we were familiar to one another.

I pulled the curtain aside. I stepped from the litter. I threw down my veil, ripped away my purple stola, and stood there in a plain tunica, to all who looked upon me an intact boy.

The novice giggled, and the high priest turned around and slapped him.

“You don’t say anything,” said Nero, “and the sanctity of this place will be upheld and respected by Rome.”

“Yes, Divinitas,” said the high priest. And he knelt at the feet of the Living God.

The boy beckoned to us. He winked at me and had an impertinent, knowing grin. Perhaps he too had acquired his position in society by dint of talents other than religious.

The high priest opened the door.

As we set foot in that most hallowed place, the Divine Nero whispered in my ear: “This place,” he said, “is shit.”

He said it in Latin, so the Greeks pretended they had not heard.



IX

Mysteries of Life and Death

Turning at the doorway, I saw that the procession that had set out along the sacred way was only now beginning to catch up. As the sun rose, I saw a line of celebrants waving branches.

"We need not wait for them," said the high priest. "The Divinitas has, as I understand it, requested a private initiation."

He shut the door. Only the Divine Nero and I had been allowed to step through. Even our slaves remained outside.

I heard faint chanting from the suppliants outside.

"Come," said the priest. "You will stand in the Telesterion, hall of the gods, built when the world was new."

We crossed the hallway, and we were in an area open to the sky, though surrounded by colonnades. Bathed in the light of dawn were heaps of rubble. We reached what may have once been a vast chamber, now roofless. There were broken columns wreathed in vines. This was once a temple, and I could well believe it existed at the dawn of history, when the gods of Olympus still dined with kings. A pungent aroma suffused the air.

Against a far wall, a few people were scurrying about. They looked up at us, seemingly surprised to be caught. They had masks. They were half-dressed. They were perhaps actors, part of the reenactment of the story of Persephone that was to come. The priest waved them away, mouthing "Not yet!" Then he turned back to us.

"This is the show?" said the Divine Emperor. "It's like a slow day at the Circus."

"I am the High Hierophant of the Temple of Demeter. Be humble," said the priest. "For soon you will meet the gods."

"Good," said the Emperor. "I've never met an equal before."

Nero was showing the kind of bravado that only emerged when something was unnerving him. I had seen him at his most vulnerable. I knew.

Another young acolyte entered bearing a worn red-figure *kylix* filled with a strange frothing fluid.

“Drink,” said the priest. “This is *kykeon*, the nectar that opens the gateway to the other world.”

The Emperor seized the bowl and drank, then handed me the dregs. The liquid was bitter.

“More,” said the Master of the World.

“Divinitas,” said the priest, “the dose is mostly carefully gauged. There could be danger. You could be lost in the other world, never to emerge again.”

Nero scoffed. “But that is a dosage for mortals. And I *need* to go farther. Beyond where mortals go. So does my Empress.”

“Today, my Lord,” I said, for I feared being lost in a labyrinth of the mind, “I am only your *eromenos*.”

“Words,” said Nero, “are only labels. We shall use whatever labels we like, and they shall mean whatever we say they mean. Let’s have some more of this magic potion of yours.”

The acolyte motioned and another, almost a twin, emerged with a small amphora of the potion. He refilled the *kylix*. I sipped at it. My Divine Husband took the entire amphora, threw his head back, and began pouring.

“Lucius —” I whispered.

“This isn’t Rome,” he said. “The senate’s not hiding behind every pillar, hunched under my bed, waiting to catch my every faux pas. I’m in Greece, the gods’ home country. Here I am as free as any other god.”

He clutched my free hand. He was trembling. Something was taking hold of him, something different from his mercurial mood changes. Was it the hallucinatory posset? Or was it his own mind, that mad mix of power and insecurities? I held on to him, steadying him. I put back the smaller *kylix*. I reached out with my other hand and stroked his back, feeling both tenderness and stark terror.

“Come with me!” he whispered harshly. “I can’t go in there alone!”

Terror overtook tenderness. He pushed the amphora against my lips. I took a gulp and then he quaffed it to the dregs and flung it so it smashed, smashed against smashed marble. The Emperor gripped my hand and then stepped ... *somewhere*.

He was still there, of course. But somehow, he was not. He had left his body. Where he had been there was a bodily vessel, but it was empty, as though it had been molded from a pile of papyrus. My mind was awlirl, but I was still in the real world. I willed myself to follow ...

Around me, walls of fire. No sky. Only a limitless, unbroken gray.

“Lucius!” I cried out ...

Figures wavered. Were they the King and Queen of the Underworld? Smoke rose up. I was choking from an acrid, unfamiliar odor. The King leered at me, his eyes wild.

“Lucius!” I cried again ...



YOU ARE SILENT. I WANT to hear more.

He's here! How did you manage it? He's standing before me, in a dressing room in the Circus Maximus, looking at me with the same eyes. His face ... his face is like the night.

I've done a masterful job, then. Why, this is the slave, brought all the way to Rome from the markets of Carthage, captured somewhere in some dark forest beyond the desert that borders the southern limit of the Empire ... rather like you, Sporus ... a creature from the edge of the world. I used all my art to transform him into our Greek and Roman Lord of the Dead Lands.

This is the man who will kill me? He is as dark as I am pale. What kind of metaphor are the organizers aiming for?

Why not introduce the two of you? It wouldn't do to die at the hand of a stranger. Did I say hand? But you know what organ I meant.

I was talking about a religious experience. And you parade this creature before me — my executioner?

It will be a sweet execution for him. But he'll be following you to the dark country. He is scheduled to be eaten by crocodiles afterward.

He doesn't seem unhappy.

He doesn't understand a word of Latin ... or Greek, for that matter. My dominus picked him out from a lot that were about to go off to a latifundia, to be worked to death. He knows nothing of any of this. He's just happily living from meal to meal. And you'll be his nicest. As befits being his last.

And now you expect me to speak of the mysteries of life and death?

I'll leave you two to get to know each other. Audiences like it when their stars have relationships that go beyond what they see in the arena. The performances are more moving, more multi-layered.

Performances? This creature is no performer. They've picked the most monstrous executioner of all, twice my height, a mass of muscle. And yet I imagine that the Emperor Nero might have accounted him beautiful. After all, Aeschylus calls the God of Death *nekrodegmon*, entertainer of the dead.

I'm sure our friend is very much moved by the words of four-hundred-year-old poets.



YES, I SAW DEATH.

I looked Death in the eye.

Death was a hulking, dark, monster of a man. Death was not a god at all.

There in the Temple of Demeter, Death loomed above me, blotting out the rising sun. The priests and novices were performing a masked play, reenacting the ancient myth, but the Death in my vision was mine alone.

My Death.

The Emperor stood alone too, lost in his own private vision. In his imagination, was I with him as the mythic drama unfolded, as he conversed with Olympians? When Ganymede poured his wine at the banquet of the immortals, did he have my face?

I know I saw Death.

And now, looking into the eyes of the slave who will ravish me to death, I see now that it was a premonition.

The Emperor and I were not sharing a journey into the heart of the underworld. But I believe that he thought I was with him. This entire experience, this communal death and rebirth, was a lie. The magic potion was a delusion. In my vision, I was alone.





X

Olympia

I ndeed, Himself did not tell me much about the experience we had supposedly shared. He probably assumed I experienced it as well. Over the ensuing days hints about it would spring from his lips at odd moments, sometimes while he slept.

The journey to Olympia was a slow triumphal progress, as though the Divinitas had already been awarded the laurels of the victor. It was also — despite the fact that all of the Greek world had been integrated into Rome for generations — carried out with all the trappings of conquest, with the military advancing before and after.

We moved slowly, the soldiers tramping at a ceremonial pace, sitting on a palanquin as large as a cubiculum, borne by two dozen matched slaves. Even the slaves wore purple, more precious than gold.

At each stop, there were crowds, sometimes with petitions, sometimes just there to gawk at the Living God and his perfect boy — or, sometimes, his demurely veiled Empress. More and more, I became adept at whatever role I was assigned, transforming daily, even hourly. For I was never more a slave than when I was a freedman. It was magic. A dab of kohl, a daub of red, a subtle change to the blended perfumes, and I *was* the Goddess Poppaea, materializing from beyond the grave.

On our progress, stately villas of the wealthy were opened up, and our party swarmed through them like locusts.

Though they had conquered Rome with their culture, these were still a conquered people. The ostentatious estates were the country homes of Roman senators, not of Greeks.

“The rich Greeks,” Croesus told me, “have all moved to Alexandria.”



AND YET ... OLYMPIA.

Olympia was well maintained. Gleaming. Rome had added to its structures but kept its classic lines. Olympia was how one imagines

Greece. Gleaming columns surrounded a palaestra where youths were wrestling.

I was foolish enough to ask Croesus where Mt. Olympus was.

"Olympia is nowhere near Olympus," he said, suppressing a smile.

But the Emperor said, "Don't make fun of him. He's an innocent, a *tabula rasa*. A perfect being to receive all my wisdom, and more besides."

I was tiring of the double entendres. But then again, I was in and of myself a double creature, wasn't I?

Our party had come to rest just in front of the Temple of Zeus, which was to be, despite how far I'd come since being captured by pirates and sold, the first time I ever laid eyes on one of the Seven Wonders of the World.

"Come," said the Divinitas, tugging my arm. "I want you to meet my celestial counterpart."

Quickly, up the steps, ignoring the hangers-on, I was pushed into a sacred place for the second time. The Temple of Zeus was no derelict ruin, though. The space was awash in light, for gaps in the ceiling let in the sun which was blindingly mirrored in the huge pool of olive oil upon which stood the plinth that held the thirty-cubit-tall statue of Zeus, so towering that even the figure of winged Nike he held in one hand was twice the size of a human being.

Zeus was all ivory and gold. I could not imagine how many elephants had sacrificed their tusks to create a seated deity eight times a man's height. Zeus's *himation* was gold over glass. His brows were furrowed and his eyes bluer than mine. His skin had been subtly painted; not quite a flesh tone, because the creamy white of the ivory still shone through. His skin glistened; attendants anointed him constantly with olive oil, which slowly dripped into a marble-fringed pool.

I felt the god's gaze even before I looked up. And when I did, I could not look away. His eyes held me utterly.

Most temples inspire awe with clouds of incense. Everything is dark and you're on the verge of choking on the bittersweet fragrance. The temple of Zeus was different.

"Look, Sporus," said the Emperor. "There you are!"

I snapped out of my reverie and the Divinitas tugged me forward by the hand again. The Living God was pointing at the Sky God's left foot. He was excited, like a young boy. There was a relief of a boy sculpted on the

heel. It could barely be seen in the shadows of the fold of sculpted cloth. The boy held a laurel wreath and was crowning himself.

"It's you," said the Emperor.

By now, there were others in the temple, standing far off; they were members of our own party. And there was a priest, dressed exactly as Zeus was; though he was an old man, he had the sculpted god's impressive musculature; he must have been beautiful as a young man. The priest said, "Few notice that little fellow in relief. It's Pantarkes, who won the boys' wrestling match at the eighty-sixth Olympiad. Four hundred years ago. He was the *eromenos* of the sculptor Pheidias, who immortalized him. You have, indeed, the eyesight of a god, to spot the boy from here."

"Don't I, though!" said Nero, and beamed. The priest seemed to have divined the best way to ingratiate himself with Himself — just casually slip into the conversation that one was aware of his divine nature.

"If you will glance way up there," said the priest, "at the god's fingertip, you'll see the words the sculptor etched."

"Oh, indeed," said the Emperor, squinting.

"You will of course know what it says."

"Of course," Himself said irritably. "But I think I'll test you on it."

"It says, ''',*Pantarkes kalos*,'" the priest said.

"I know, I know," said the Emperor. "*Pantarkes pulcher est.*" He pretended to translate it for my benefit. "Now, when am I competing?"

General Vespasian approached us, followed by members of our households. I was relieved to have Hylas close by again.

"This place is as dead as a catacomb," he said. "There don't seem to be any games being prepared at all."

"Well, that won't do," said the Emperor.

"Divinitas," said the priest, "It's actually not an Olympiad year."

"But I gave orders to change the year," said Nero. "Was it not done?"

Titus Vespasianus said, "Orders were sent, Divinitas."

"The immutable will of the gods —" the priest began. He stopped himself. Perhaps too late.

Nero pouted. I knew what the pouting presaged.

The general looked at me. The high priest looked at me. My slave looked at me, and the members of the Emperor's household stole glances. No one looked at Himself, the one who owned all Rome. Not directly. To

whom belonged the deadlier gaze? The master of this temple, or the Master of the World?

The humblest slave, the mightiest warrior ... they were looking to *me* to save them from Nero's impending fury.

"Lucius, my dearest," I said softly, "it is we who are to blame for arriving so early. Let's give them a little time to finish their preparations. Meanwhile, we can stay here with our cousin Zeus."

Nero continued to glower. But, as suddenly as they had come, the doom-clouds dissipated.

I looked around at the others. I waved them all away. I, who had come from nothing, could command Rome's most respected general.

The temple cleared almost instantly. Even the priest scurried away.

I stood between my Earthly master and my master on Olympus.

And it was just the three of us, unless you counted Nike in the palm of Jove's hand, and little Pantarkes in relief on his foot.

Himself the Divine Nero spoke to the King of Olympus. "Jupiter," he said, addressing him intimately in Latin instead of Greek, as though he were a close family member — or a slave — "I've often thought about what I'd say to you. I've seen you often enough in the Temple of Jupiter Optimus Maximus. But *this* you, one of the wonders of the world, this really is you, isn't it? So I want to ask you ... where is my mother?"

My heart almost stopped beating.

"Don't tell me she's gone," he said. "Don't tell me I killed her. There is no death. Death is a doorway and we, the gods, have the keys. Don't we? Look! I killed Poppaea. Yet here she is. More beautiful than ever."

He pushed me toward the statue. I was trembling. This had to be wrong. As I stepped forward I transformed, my steps echoing Poppaea's, even my breathing breathier.

"If Poppaea can come back, why not my mother?"

He was shaking his fist.

I reached behind and touched his shoulder, which was shaking with rage. Slowly I stroked his shoulder. "Don't mind him," I whispered. "When we get home, you'll convene a senate and they'll make her a goddess."

"Ha!" he cried. "Anything you can do, I can do too! You shoved Heracles up there among the stars. I'll put my mother there — properly, legally, by an act of the senate!"

“Lucius —” I said.

“You’ve had your sisters? So have I!” he raved, though I’d never heard of the Divine Nero doing anything like that. Perhaps he was identifying with Emperors of the past, like Caligula.

“Mothers? Sisters? Animals? You gods are nothing but incestuous good-for-nothings! And your much-vaunted Ganymede, the most beautiful youth in the universe? Not a patch on my Sporus. I’ll show you!”

With that, Nero ripped my tunica and exposed me in just my subligaculum. All at once I found myself metamorphosing into my boy persona. Even though I had been on display many times, at banquets or in the baths, I never felt so humiliated, even though my only audience was a statue. This was not Petronius, proud of my beauty, trying to get his poet friends to write verses about my smooth limbs and lovely eyes. “Are you jealous, Jupiter?” He pushed me to the edge of the pool of oil. “Do you want him?”

“Lucius —”

“You can’t! He’s mine!”

The Master of the World pushed me into the oil. He tore off his own purple robes of godhood. We rolled around in the slick fluid. This had to be a sacrilege! I thought. The most powerful man in the world was assaulting me, and yet I knew that to his twisted way of thinking, he was making love.

I was numb. I squeezed my eyes shut as I slipped and slid in the olive oil. I screamed in my mind — *Zeus! Zeus!* — imagining those searching eyes, the goddess of victory in the palm of his hand, the other hand clutching a thunderbolt.

Then came thunder.

The Emperor let go of me, startled.

I climbed out of the oil. A storm had burst from a clear blue sky. The god had spoken.

Water was pouring in from the areas open to the sky, but where we stood was protected. Thunder bellowed again.

Zeus had not answered Nero; but he *had* replied to me.

All at once, our slaves were there, with strigils to wipe off the oil, fresh clothes, scents and a touch of kohl. We had never been alone. All slaves in proper Roman homes know when to be invisible, and when to materialize out of the ether. I was so glad to see Hylas that I tried to hug him;

diffidently, he hung back, afraid of me. Somehow, he knew I had called the thunder.

By the time the priests and other members of our party entered the temple, there was no evidence of Nero's outburst or my humiliation. I stood beside the Emperor, trying to look as dignified as I could.

The priest returned with a retinue of lesser priests. Vespasian was there, too, with a dozen soldiers.

"We're rounding up your audience," said the general, "and we're recruiting some charioteers for the race. Strangely, no one wants to compete with you."

"Why not?" Nero said. "It's not as if I'd have them crucified if I lose."





XI

Chariots

There was no convenient villa for Himself to stay at, but overnight, in a nearby field, Vespasian's men had erected an entire city of tents, including a palatial one for the Divinitas.

I had never set foot in a military camp before, but this was not to be my last, as doubtless you will know from my history. But every camp I was in since then was used in actual war. This was a city manufactured in a day, with avenues, markets, even a modest arena, complete with a gold-plated statue of Himself in front of the Imperial pavilion.

Nero did not say so, but I sensed he was irked that his statue wasn't as huge as the Wonder of the World.

Tomorrow there would be the chariot race. I imagined he would cheat again by using a ten-horse chariot, not having learned from the debacle in Rome. The poetry competition would come a day later; perhaps they needed more time to round up poets.

To my surprise, the Emperor decided to sleep alone. The scene in the temple had made him irritable. He needed something — after all, he had not completed my ravishment in the pool of oil, having been interrupted by an actual god — and I was relieved that the something he needed was not going to be me. “I don't want to damage you,” he said offhandedly, gorging himself on a plate of figs. I did not want to say, “The way you damaged Poppaea?” but he knew I was thinking it.

I made sure Hylas was out of sight as Himself shuffled off to a private compartment of the pavilion. There was to be a banquet that evening, but, “You take charge of it,” he said.

“As Empress?” I asked him. “Or as your boy?”

“Suit yourself,” he said, and vanished into his cubiculum. Two Praetorians positioned themselves in front of the entrance flap. As I turned away, a girl, gift-wrapped in silk, was being delivered to the Emperor's private quarters; I only saw strands of dark brown hair. Someone expendable.



THUS I CAME TO PRESIDE over my first Imperial banquet. And because I did not have the protection of Himself, because people knew where I had come from, people did not really watch their words.

At the Imperial couch, my companion was Thaïs, the courtesan, who had travelled separately. I was glad to see her. I embraced her warmly.

“And this is the *only* place you will see me,” she said, laughing, “because women aren’t allowed to watch the Olympics.”

“Just as well,” I said, thinking of the shrieks of bloodlust one often heard from way up in the women’s tier at the Circus.

At my feet sat Hylas, and Epictetus was on hand to remind me who the guests were. At the couch to my right sat the general. Beside him was the actor, Paris. Apart from some of Thaïs’s protégés, there were no women, of course. The *hetairai* were sitting at the far ends of the couches, piping sweetly on double flutes, an action that Greeks find so erotic that Aristotle said that women should not be allowed to listen to this music for fear of being driven into an orgiastic frenzy.

There were plenty of guests, and the usual culinary exoticisms, such as a paté of nightingales’ gizzards, but the couches next to mine were a little drama of their own. Vespasian was already a little drunk.

“What are you even doing here?” Thaïs was saying to the general. “Shouldn’t you be putting down the Jewish revolt?”

“Soon enough,” said Vespasian. “But why not let them have their fun a little longer? They’re always going to revolt. It’s in their nature. That’s why this time I’m going to destroy them. I don’t mean killing a few thousand of them. I mean breaking their culture, including all that is beautiful about them.”

“You appreciate them,” I said. “The Jews, I mean.”

“What’s the point of annihilating something if you don’t appreciate it?” Vespasian said. And the way he looked at me said much more than quelling a rebellion in a distant province. “I’m sorry, Divinitas, I offended you in the house of the *hetaira*,” he said, and gallantly knelt down to try to kiss my feet.

“No need,” I said. “Will you take more wine?”

“It isn’t the time,” he said. “But it may yet be.”

Thaïs nudged me. It was time for politics again.

“When?” I said with a smile.

“Six hundred and sixty-six,” General Vespasian said softly.

“Speaking in riddles, General,” I said.

“No, it’s gematria,” Epictetus whispered in my ear from behind the couch, “used by Jewish philosophers to code people’s names into numbers, which then have magical significance. In the case of this number, it’s *chi xi sigma*, which the reduction of Neron Kaisar.”

“When I was in Rome,” said Vespasian, “I heard this number spoken in hushed voices, in dark places.”

“Someone is planning something?” Thaïs said.

“Not me,” said the general. Hylas poured him more wine.

“People don’t like the urine tax,” Paris said. But that made the subject too obvious, so he stopped himself, and sullenly sipped more wine.

“Am I in danger?” I said.

“Personally,” said Vespasian, “I *like* the urine tax. I think I’ll keep it ... *Divinitas*.” Then he kissed my hand, his eyes betraying both ruthlessness and cupidity.

And thus it was I found out that my master’s days were numbered. My master’s and indeed my own.

And even today, I am not yet twenty.



THE CHARIOT RACES WERE dull. This was not the Circus Maximus. It is true that Olympia was once the world’s center for chariot racing, but those days were over. The frantic crowds screaming for green, red, white and blue were absent. This audience seemed bored, if not hostile. And this was not the colossal Hippodrome that exists in Rome.

Nero, of course, appeared with his ten-horse chariot, but he need not have. His only rivals were last-minute recruits from our own legion, and they would let him win no matter what. Some of the horses were old nags. The audience had been corralled from our soldiers and had to be eked out with — such sacrilege — *women*! But since the year was not a real Olympiad year, the rules meant nothing, I suppose.

Thaïs honored the rules of society and her profession by staying away. I presided. I gave the signal. They were off.

The *Divinitas* won, and that was all there was to it.



NERO CELEBRATED AS though his victory had real meaning. The Imperial pavilion was large enough for a few dozen guests.,

Every aviary in Greece must have been plundered for the chef's most astonishing creation, an omelette made from ostrich eggs and stuffed with peacocks' brains, with a light sauce of honey, red wine, pepper, and garum, the sweet, tart, sour and salty flavors so artfully blended as to create a fifth flavor that could not be described at all.

Between courses, Himself handed out gifts: pouches crammed with aurei, jewels, title deeds to confiscated estates.

Egyptian boys wearing skimpy subligacula cavorted about, turned multiple somersaults, and constructed human pyramids. Women from Parthia wriggled about, completely covered except for their bellies, which quivered and quavered in an exotic kind of eroticism. No, this was no sober Hellenic symposium with men sitting around analyzing the Nature of the One. This was a Roman banquet — and it was fast degenerating into a Roman orgy.

But shortly after the hour of *prima fax*, when candles began to be lit and more lamps were brought into the pavilion, Himself abruptly took my hand and led me to his private quarters. The guests either were too drunk to notice, or too afraid to.

"Don't lie to me, Poppaea," he said.

But he was lying to himself.

"No, no, I know you're going to say you're not really Poppaea. It doesn't matter. You're the one who's here for me, here and now. I know I didn't really win," he said. "*I do* know that, Sporus."

"It doesn't matter," I said.

"Why did I try to argue with Zeus?" he said. "He sent that thunderbolt. Everyone saw it. Is my hubris to be my downfall? I have no thunder. No volcanoes, no tempests. I don't control the winds, the floods. Only people."

"People love you," I said.

"Don't lie to me. I killed my mother. I killed my wife. I'll kill you, too. Just wait."

"Yes, Lucius," I said softly. "Whenever you like."

At that moment, I did not know whether I would survive the night.

“The poetry contest,” Nero said. “That’s *real*. That’s about truth, and beauty. If it is hubris that afflicts me, I’ll transform it into a true paeon to the human condition. They’ll all be in tears. I’ll win that one. As *myself*.”

“You deserve to be happy,” I said.

“Then make me happy,” he said. He embraced me with real tenderness. He was weeping. I dried his cheeks with my lips.

His grief, it seemed, was unquenchable. I did not really know how I could be of any help. But what I knew how to do, I did. And shortly after, he descended into fitful slumber.



XIII

Sacrifices

In succeeding days, the Emperor brooded, demanded to be left alone with his lyre, or rehearsed by himself, sometimes using Lucius Domitius Paris as a sounding-board.

I wandered with Hylas through the fields and avenues of Olympia, managing to avoid being recognized much of the time by the simple expedient of not dressing as a member of the Imperial family.

Freed from having to entertain the Master of the World, we were able to wander down byways, stopping to buy souvenirs, and to pray at the temple of Zeus, which was by no means as intimidating as when I had been there with the Emperor.

Everywhere they were selling bowls, *kylixes*, and vases with the inscription *ho pais kalós* and images of beautiful boys, for here people like me and Hylas were celebrated in a way that decent Romans would've probably found a little embarrassing. There were so many athletes, many wandering in casual nudity, that Hylas and I did not really attract any attention. While there were stares from time to time, there were few lewd comments or whistles.

At night, the Emperor was too worn out to make demands on his beleaguered Empress. It could almost be said that those days of preparation were idyllic.

Inevitably, however, would come disappointment.

After days of feeling quite liberated came the day of the poetry competition. The Emperor rose long before dawn and took me by the hand. We walked along almost deserted avenues: past the temples, past the Palestra, past the stadium, past rows of statues of victors of contests, sometimes sculpted centuries ago, but still lovingly painted to seem still real, still beautiful, still in the bloom of youth. Past olive groves, past souvenir stands, where even now they were setting up their wares.

This was the same avenue I had walked down hand in hand with Hylas. The same market, the same temples, the same groves ... but these things were not the same.

For I knew that just out of sight, there lurked a detachment of Praetorians ready to protect the emperor at a moment's notice.

We did have the illusion of being alone. But I was acutely aware that it was an illusion. Himself, perhaps not as aware.

Himself took me to a grove far from the temporary tent city the army had built. We stood in a circle of olive trees. An old marble herm with archaic, angular features looked down on us. There was a little altar to Apollo. Piled around it were old lyres, many of them weathered and worn. This was the place where great artists dedicated their music to the god.

Nero took me in his arms and kissed me chastely on the cheek. Fearful, I felt myself going limp. But he was showing me a kind of tenderness.

He said, "I haven't really had time for you, dearest. But a few hours from now I'm going to have my great moment, before all the gods. So I wanted to do something just for you."

"I am happy, Lucius," I said.

"Well, I want to make a sacrifice. And sing you a song. A song I made just for you."

He snapped his fingers. Out of nowhere, a slave appeared and handed him a small, sealed jar. It was old, painted with classic, black-figure images; one side represented a boy with an eagle, Ganymede I imagined. The other was a goddess, Aphrodite perhaps, for she seemed to be stepping out of the sea.

"You can't fool me," Nero said. "I was never fooled. I've always known who you really are."

"But ..." I said. "You don't say anything, because it would break the spell." I hoped I sounded thoughtful and not full of panic, as I desperately sought to find a way to cling to whatever shred of identity was left to me.

"Let's offer it together," said Himself.

He placed my hand on the jar along with his. Something in the jar was sloshing, and I wondered whether this was a fine wine we were offering up.

"Aren't you glad I saved them?" the Emperor said.

I felt hollow. I felt empty. I had to contrive a witty, worldly response. "Well, at least I will be whole in the next world," I said. It was all I could do to keep from vomiting.

"I know," he said. "I'll want you complete when we are in Olympus." I think he was trying to apologize.

As we held the jar up, he held me closer to him. He took my severed organs and laid them on the altar, among the ancient lyres. “Apollo,” he whispered, “as you loved Hyacinthos, I love Sporus.”

He kissed me again. There was no passion, but there was a strange sincerity.

When he released me, he said, “You see, I do know your real name.”

He did not; my real name died with Hyacinth, because he alone spoke the language that my true name could be spoken in.

But I did not tell him that. “Yes, Divinitas,” was all I said.

Himself lit the flame at the altar — rather it was lit for him by a slave who somehow managed to be invisible — and put in a pinch of incense. Or rather, a pinch of incense was discreetly dropped in by another slave. Sweet smoke welled up, making it easier for the slaves to disappear; it was like a conjurer’s trick. Nero turned to me.

“Now that we’ve made the sacrifice together,” he said, “you probably know I have been thinking a lot about what lies on the other side.”

“The other side?”

“Of the river.”

By which, of course, he meant death. The only being who regularly makes the crossing of the Styx, then returns to the world above, is Persephone. And that is the role it seems I am fated to play, in the end.

“I know I won’t be here much longer,” he said. “That’s why I brought you to Greece. To know where we are going, we must first comprehend where we come from. We must come to the source of our being to understand ourselves.”

“What makes you think it’s coming to an end?” I asked him.

“I hear things. There are plots.”

“But you’ve always managed to suppress plots,” I said, thinking of the dozens, perhaps hundreds, of suspected traitors who had been executed or ordered to commit suicide. Including all the innocent ones. Like my patronus.

“Every escape is narrower than the last.”

“But you have the Praetorians.”

“Who can be bought. No, no, my dear, there is almost no one who doesn’t feel a bit of rancor or resentment. For a god, I am quite put upon.”

“Actë,” I said.

“Yes, Actë. And you.”

It was true enough. For all that he had violated me in the most hateful of ways, I had never wished him ill.

"That's why you must make me a promise. I mean, I've undone the wrong I did you ... or at least, I will have undone it in the next life. Now, I want you to swear that you will be with me when that moment comes. It will be bloody, I know. And you're one of the few who understands ... how lonely it is to be a god."

"And a man."

"Yes. Like the god of those Chrestianoι. Maybe I should have thrown my worshippers to the lions. In a world without sycophants, I'd have a clearer view."

"You're not alone," I said.

"You'd never lie to me," he said.

"No," I lied.

A lyre appeared in his hands. He motioned for me to sit, and I did so on a stone bench in front of the herm. And then he sang.

Not in the Greek of immortal poets, but in plain Latin, the language of the mob, the language you speak when you're among close friends, the language you speak to slaves.

*I strive with the winds
but soon I will go
where everyone else has gone
wisdom and beauty are never found together
but in you, youth, they are;
seek other shores; seek adventures;
but as for me, love pinches
like an old crab*

There were no fanciful apostrophes to mythical beings. No protests against the Fates. No complaints to the Nine Muses. And to go with the words, Nero had found a melody that was almost like a folksong. Since moving to the palace I had walled off my heart and mind, but I felt my reserve crumbling. Hadn't I once fallen stupidly in love with him, when he was distant and impossible to get close to, when I was nobody? Then again, how long had those feelings lasted?

Tears were welling up when it slowly dawned on me that Nero had stolen these words. No wonder they sounded familiar. They were lines

lifted wholesale from Petronius's *Satyricon*, scrambled and served up together like a dish of eggs and honey.

The Master of the World was a thief. He stole words. He stole Divinity itself. He had stolen my dreams. And, as he looked deeply into my eyes, *I knew that he knew this*.

Now I was really weeping. I was mourning my patronus as I never had before. I poured out all my pent-up sorrow.

Nero knew I did not weep for him.

He did know me, you see.

There was a boy named Lucius Domitius who had been banished from court together with his ambitious, stiflingly protective mother. He had grown up among slaves. He had spoken Latin all day long, like ordinary people. He had loved Actë. He had known, as humans understand the word, happiness.

One day, he had been summoned back to Rome, and Rome had devoured him and left him without a heart.

Lucius Domitius had become Nero Claudius Caesar Augustus Germanicus, Pater Patriae, Pontifex Maximus, the Living God.

Lucius Domitius was dead.

Yet, long after Nero had buried him, it was Lucius Domitius who truly saw me.



XIV

Songs without Words

The poetry competition seemed to take place in a completely different world, for even though chariot racing was born in Olympia, its frenzied, bloodlust-driven apotheosis was in the Circus Maximus. Yet the crowning glory of Olympia was as the birthplace of poesy.

There was a litter waiting by the side of Apollo's Grove. It must have been there all along, but somehow it conveniently hove into view just at the moment when we needed to be transported somewhere.

It was a covered litter and inside, it was capacious enough for two slaves kneeling at the ready to be able to apply fresh cosmetics to the Emperor and to change his simple garments to the resplendent attire of a master poet.

The metamorphosis took but a few minutes and I watched with amazement at the slaves fussed over my master, working with both skill and celerity.

By the time we arrived at the theater where the competition was to take place, the Master of the



World was also its mistress. For he had decided to perform his showpiece, the “Grief of Niobe.” They had erected a pavilion for him to prepare in, but he wanted to watch his rivals. At the same time, he did not want to reveal his costume. “Just throw a big cloak and a veil over me,” he said. “No one will know it’s me.”

Everyone *did* know, of course. But no one said anything.

It was an ancient amphitheater of the kind so cunningly built that it could reflect the briefest whisper and make the entire place reverberate. It could take a whimper of pain, a moan of pleasure, and turn them into world-shattering outbursts of emotion.

When we arrived at our seats, it was already mid-morning. An old man was performing. His narration was a classic subject: King Priam, begging vengeful Achilles for the body of his son Hector. But the poet, instead of using an epic meter and epic language, had recast the monologue into a lyric form and used the Aeolic dialect as though this were something written by Sappho. In the background, a chorus of boys dressed as Trojan women were sighing and swaying back and forth in a strange parody of grief. It was all very modern, and you could tell that the audience wasn't having it. In these competitions, the audience is very knowledgeable and nothing much gets by them.

When the old man had finished, there was desultory applause and a few cheers from a small clique, who were obviously his very special devotees. He bowed a few times and exited with his entire chorus, who gyrated in a rather unorthodox choreography as they followed him off stage.

"What passes for art these days," Nero murmured from beneath his veil.

Next came three more Niobes that had been scheduled in today's program. Each was more hysterical than the last; it had been unwise of the organizers to put all three of them one after the other. I remembered that my own Lord and Master considered himself an expert at this role. It's very easy to move an audience with a speech in which you are surrounded by dozens of your dead and dying children. And Nero's version of Niobe was considered particularly gut-wrenching, not to mention overlong. By the time the Niobes were done, it was well past mid-afternoon.

At any other athletic or artistic event, there would be vendors selling exotic delicacies, and our audience would have been munching on sausages or cakes or quaffing wine. But, as I say, they take their poetry very seriously in Olympia, and the crowd listened with rapt attention, even to the third Niobe, who was extremely wearying to listen to. It was not a good day for the vendors.

An announcer declared that there was now going to be a special unannounced competitor. I looked up. I admit I had been nodding off. At this moment, too, several members of the Emperor's entourage appeared and took their seats behind me. Among them was the general, Titus Flavius Vespasianus. There were also members of my household staff and that of the Emperor's. They had been waiting until now because they did not want to sit through a lot of men portraying hysterical women in maudlin verse.

During this entire time Himself, the Divine Nero, had been sitting next to me in the Imperial box, which was not a separate structure as it would have been in Rome, but simply a partitioned section of the best seats. Himself had been watching the competitors intently and as it became clear to him that none of them was his equal, he had allowed himself a little smile, especially when the third of the three Niobes was shrieking.

He turned to me and he said, "I'm far more of a woman than they'll ever be". And he poked me in the rib, thinking this a very fine joke and seeming to have forgotten the womanhood he himself had inflicted upon me without asking.

I suppose we were anxious to see who the surprise competitor would be, but no one was as surprised as Himself. For the man who walked over to the center of the scenic was no less a figure than Lucius Domitius Paris himself. And Paris, too, was Niobe. *Another* Niobe. This Niobe was wearing a simple cloak, as though awakened from sleep to the horror that had been wreaked on her children.

The Emperor sputtered, "How could he, how dare he!"

There was no chorus. There was no ensemble of *kitharas* and flutes. Only a single four-stringed lyre. Paris waved for the music to begin. We were all waiting for the sound of his voice, celebrated by critics and music lovers throughout the empire. But he did not sing. The lyre sounded ... just one note, again and again.

Nero whispered, "I brought him here to help train me, not to undermine me!"

Then Paris spoke. Again, he did not sing. After a brief introductory strophe and antistrophe, Paris stopped his recitation, and allowed the lyre-players to play, just a repetitive sequence of notes, a slow ostinato that seemed meaningless enough but grew in force and obsessive power until the sound produced was overwhelming.

And Paris *mimed* the tale of Niobe's grief. This was his surprise! He had not entered the *singing* competition at all — he was not going to sing a note. *This* was his revenge against the poetaster Emperor's mediocrity.

Paris was alone on stage but as he played all the roles — the gods, the tormented princess, the innocent boys and girls — you could see all fourteen children riddled with arrows as the twin gods, sun and moon, hunted them down and shot them. You could hear their screams, the shock of the palace servants, the swoosh of celestial darts as they found their

marks, the rending of flesh, the spurt of blood and the gush of tears. All without Paris making a single sound.

I looked around. People were in tears.

Nero muttered, “I begged him to teach me mime. *Begged* him! He refused. He refused *me!* And I now I know — he always intended to make a fool of me!”

Nero rose from his seat and began to storm away. I got up to follow, but he sternly waved at me to sit back down. “You must represent Rome,” he said. He left, and a dozen Praetorians went with him.

Paris had still not sung. What I witnessed next was extraordinary. I saw the spirit of Niobe slowly dissolve, like wine poured into sand, and the actor emerge. It happened slowly. It was as if Niobe had possessed his body and soul, and now was gradually dissociating herself from him. And what remained was an actor, an empty vessel.

There was a stunned silence.

The applause came like a storm at sea.

Lucius Domitius Paris, I thought, is a dead man.





XV

Madness

We waited. I do not know how long, but it was far longer than the time it should take to set up the next contestant. In fact, the sun was beginning to set. I realize now that the Divine Nero was planning to use the sunset as part of his performance, as though, like the gods themselves, he could control the very movements of the celestial bodies.

First, there came a deafening fanfare from a dozen cornua and bucinae along with the pounding of sets of tympana and the wail of a water organ. The musicians were concealed behind the *skene*, so it seemed that the music was rising from the walls and the mountains.

Then entered a chorus of fourteen boys, seven of them garbed as girls, in a fantastical imagined recreation of archaic Mycenaean court dress. They wore masks as in an ancient play by Euripides. They sang an ode to the beauty of their mother, Niobe, and of her pride in her many children, which had challenged the fecundity of the mighty goddess Leto, parent of Apollo and Artemis.

The lilting melody was interrupted when the overhead machina was activated and Artemis and Apollo descended from the sky. They were carrying golden bows and immediately began shooting arrows from overhead. The audience gasped. A child clutched his stomach as blood spurted.

I heard people behind me: “This is *real*!”

Surely, this couldn't really be happening. But the gods did not stop shooting arrows until every child lay in a pool of blood. Then they entered the machina and were carried back up to Olympus. This was carrying realism too far. Surely, the theater was not the Circus. Surely, these were not some hapless criminals condemned to die for our entertainment. They were chorus boys with beautiful high voices.

Then, as the children lay there, as the crowd whispered and murmured, as I watched in consternation, another god entered, this time from somewhere beneath the stage. Dark was his aspect and he wore a dark cloak

and held in his hand a pomegranate. I knew that this had to be Hades, god of death.

Hades walked among the dead children. He touched each one gently with his pomegranate. As he did so, a flute played, a melody of aching loveliness, a melody that sobbed and soared. A miracle was occurring. Each child was coming back to life. It had been theater after all, and not some execution of cheap slaves. Stagehands, dressed in black tunics, emerged with mops to remove all traces of the stage blood.

Then the applause began. It was not forced applause. The audience had had a true catharsis, believing Niobe's children had really died, then feeling true joy and relief when the god revived them.

The chorus stood and bowed to the audience. Then Hades dismissed them, and they left the *proskenion*, each boy holding hands with a boy-girl.

I really wished I could be there with them. They died and they got back up again. This evening, they would go home to their families or their lovers. Acting ended with the end of the play.

But my life was not like theirs. I was never allowed to stop acting. I even had to act after I lost consciousness each night, making sure I fell asleep in an elegant position, tucking myself into my Emperor's arms in case he wanted me without awakening me. The hours of freedom — wandering the market with Hylas, for instance — were rare, and would probably end completely once we returned to Rome.

There came another deafening fanfare, and Hades slowly walked to the front of the stage. A cloud of smoke appeared from nowhere, enveloping him completely as the music welled up and then died away. Smoke filled the amphitheater. Some started to cough. Others, I think, were afraid something was on fire.

The fog cleared. The god of death stood there no longer.

Instead, it was the Living God. It was my husband. It was Nero Claudius Caesar Augustus Germanicus, Master of the World and would-be laureate of the greatest crown in poetry. And only then did Nero launch into his song, his own version of the grief of Niobe.

This was a version I had heard before. It was by no means dull. Nero modulated his voice, producing an enormous range of emotion from grief to madness to bittersweet remembrances of Niobe's children. Nero had skill, and he had practiced every melisma to perfection.

I knew this was Nero's finest public performance. And yet I was unmoved.

I remember, though, that while the public had been entertained by the gimmickry of the opening, Nero's singing impressed them on a higher level. Nero loved this music and he made it his. He really did have talent. If only he had not been Emperor ... what an artist he could have been! And perhaps he would not have been driven mad.

For this was the same voice that had once convinced me that Nero's art had deep and thoughtful sources. The Emperor had thought out every inflection, every vocal ornament. Yet, there was something that I had never noticed before. There was an emptiness.

Perhaps it was because when he had sung to me earlier that morning I had realized that he had merely regurgitated the words of my beloved patronus. I no longer felt sincerity. I remembered his true self, I remembered how he had sung to me, alone, in the grove of Apollo.

This was not the real Nero. This, like me in my role as the Empress-Eromenos of the Divinitas, was acting. It was not entirely sincere, yet I believed that Himself believed it to be. Truth and lies had become so interwoven in his mind that there was no distinction between them.

But looking around me, I could see that the audience, this most sophisticated and knowledgeable of all audiences, was not unmoved. Indeed, the performance was well worthy of receiving a laurel wreath.

The entire display of color, spectacle, and drama at the beginning had not really been necessary. Nero could have just walked onto the stage and begun. It was perhaps insecurity that had made him adorn his performance with such extravagances.

In a while, the Divinity settled into a long catalog of miseries. Niobe recounted every slight, every painful exchange between her and the goddess Leto, who envied her fourteen children yet became enraged by her hubris.

It was during this rather long-winded segment of Nero's narration that I became aware that someone behind me was snoring. I tried to ignore it, but the snores became quite intrusive. I did not want to turn around for fear that Nero might notice that I was not giving him my full attention. But as the singing continued, the snoring crescendoed, and since it too was accentuated by the echoing acoustic of this amphitheater, I knew that the snores would eventually be heard by Himself.

Slowly I turned to see if I could detect the source. Snoring at a poetry reading is already reprehensible, but when a god himself declaims, surely it might even merit the death penalty. So I sneaked a look behind me. The snorer was none other than the great general himself, Vespasian.

The snoring became so loud that it was competing with Himself, interjecting a percussive accompaniment to his singing.

Then the unthinkable happened.

Nero was singing the words *pheu, pheu* on a series of high falsetto long notes. The highest, purest, most beautiful of the notes was rudely truncated by a particularly loud snore.

The Emperor stopped in mid-note.

He glared at the audience, and his eye alighted on the snoring general.

Nero exploded. He flung his lyre at the spectators. He missed the general completely and struck an old man in the chest. The man slumped forward. The audience rose to its feet. The Emperor stalked off the *proskenion* and vanished into the building behind the stage.

The second he was gone, they were speaking all at once. Their rapt attention had been shattered in an instant. I heard some whisper *sacrilege*. Olympia could not be profaned — Olympia, the heart of the Hellenic identity, the icon of cultural leadership in a conquered land.

As the hubbub continued, General Vespasian finally woke up.

“What happened?” he said, rubbing his eyes.

One of his Praetorians said, “You’ve insulted the Emperor.” Other soldiers were laughing.

The general rose from his seat. He turned to me, and I got up too.

“It seems that I must go, my pretty one,” he said.

“Where?”

“I’m needed in Judaea. There’s a revolt than needs suppressing.”

“But the Emperor’s wrath —”

“Your beloved is not long for this world. And you must know who actually rules in Rome. The army. Your God is just a propped-up puppet, Sporus. The tide has turned.”

“The tide? But who will protect me?”

“It’s every man for himself. Or herself. As for me, my only option is clear: huge military success in far-off Judaea, something really epic. Perhaps I’ll burn down their temple, capture whatever is inside their Holy of Holies, enslave everyone in Jerusalem — oh, there’ll be a market glut of

pretty, dark-haired boys without foreskins, but you'll still be the only blonde without balls! I'll be ruthless. And when I have been ruthless enough that all the world fears me, I will march back to RomeItaly and mop up any mess that has been left in your pathetic Emperor's wake. And if you survive the chaos"— mockingly, he kissed my hand — "perhaps a wedding to the former Empress Poppaea could lend my reign legitimacy."

And with that, he gestured to his men. Smartly, as one, they turned and tramped out of the theater.

Only two Praetorians remained.



XVI

Ubi Gaius Ego Gaia

Despite the outburst, or more likely because of it, the laurels were awarded to the Divinitas. He did not even have to complete his performance.

Since his amazing performance entirely in mime, Paris had not reappeared. Perhaps he was already on his homeward journey. Indeed, I imagined him riding alongside General Vespasian, perhaps bound for Judea, so that they could both escape the long arm of the Emperor's wrath.

The award ceremony was not attended by any of the contestants. Perhaps they had all already gone home. The judges consisted of a panel of elders who spoke briefly in turn before proffering the laurels to the Divinity. He did not humble himself to receive them but took them from the hands of the chief judge and placed them on his own head. Surely in his heart he must have known that Paris had outclassed him utterly without even singing a single note of music.

The ceremony did not take long. The judges said their congratulatory remarks, but they were all platitudes.

A handful of soldiers remained to escort Himself to the encampment. The Emperor and I sat on an open litter this time, presumably so he could show off his laurels and be admired by the crowd of admirers, only there was not much of a crowd.

There were a few curious onlookers, though. As we passed them, they bowed low. Some even fell on their knees. There was a sense of unease, an atmosphere of dread. After people paid their respects, they slunk sullenly away.

Presently, there was almost no one left lining the avenue except for some bored-looking children. And then there were none of those, even.

To reach the tent city, the party had to make a sharp turn and pass through some woods. They then descended a gentle incline to reach the shallow valley where the Emperor's headquarters had been built in only a day.

It was when we emerged from the forest that we could see a crowd congregating. They were all standing around a wooden post from which something was dangling. It looked a bit like a human being, but it could not have been one. We came closer. The crowd saw us and immediately backed away. They looked at us in horror.

The Emperor ordered his litter to stop and, taking me by the hand, led me to take a closer look. People scrambled out of the way. I couldn't help letting out a little scream when I saw what it was.

Nailed to the wooden post was an almost intact, flayed human skin, the arms and legs folded like cloth. The head, what was left of it — the face that is — was warped and folded beyond recognition. But I knew who it was.

"I couldn't very well have him crucified," Himself said, shaking his head. "He's a Roman citizen."

"Does it satisfy you?" I said.

"No," he said.

"What will?"

The Emperor said, "He wouldn't teach me the art of mime. And now he never will. His art has died as well."

"This," I sighed, "is what happens when you challenge the gods." For I knew that the Emperor was recreating the story of Marsyas, who had dared to claim to play the flute more beautifully than Apollo. They had engaged in a competition, with the winner being allowed to do anything he wanted to the loser. Apollo elected to have Marsyas flayed alive and hung his skin upon a pine tree. That is how the story goes.

"Thus," said Nero, "we see the consequences of hubris."

I said, "Lucius, surely this was too high a price to pay."

Nero replied, "To challenge the gods is a blasphemy for which there is no such thing as too high a price to pay!" And then he began to quote the words of the poet Ovid.

"quid me mihi detrahis?" inquit;

"a! piget, a! non est" clamabat "tibia tanti."

I repeated the words, translating them into Greek: "Why are you tearing me apart? A flute is not worth a life!"

Ovid's lines spoke of dismemberment and music but somehow the incessant rhythm of the hexameters made something beautiful out of what should have been gruesome and distasteful.

“But he would not teach me mime,” said the Master of the World. “He could have just taught me. He kept something in reserve, something which he knew could be used to defeat me.”

I said, “You're not defeated, Lucius. You're alive, and he's not.”

He turned to the flayed skin, which was flapping about now as a wind rose, pulling against the nails. “Do you hear that?” He shook his fist as he addressed the remains of Lucius Domitius Paris. “I'm alive and you're not!” Shouting to his attendants, cowering in the background, he said, “Bring me my lyre!”

“It's broken, Lucius,” I said.

Hylas was the only one bold enough to bring it to him. The frame was dented, and two of the four strings had snapped. Oblivious, Nero seized it and began strumming on the two remaining strings, which had loosened and now twanged and thwacked against the soundboard.

He sang, his voice breaking, pausing between words to curse or to weep:

O son of Leto...

and I realized that he was finishing the performance at the contest that had been interrupted by his fury, continuing with an apostrophe to Apollo.

He rasped out the final strophes of the soliloquy, his voice a grotesque parody of the hysterical Niobe.

The song ended. No one came to gawk. He had driven away the crowd, this man who thrived on having an audience.

“What about it, Vespasian?” he shouted. “Are you still snoring?”

“Lucius,” I said softly, “he's gone to Judaea.”

“I gave him no such permission.”

“You commanded it,” I said. “He is to burn down their temple, enslave the entire city of Jerusalem, and bring back whatever's inside their sanctum sanctorum to lay at your feet.”

“I commanded *that*?”

Taking a lead from Petronius's art of manipulating the Emperor, I said, “Only you could have conceived of a spectacle so epic, so magnificent, so *total*.”

“Oh,” he said. “I had forgotten.”

“Yes, Divinitas,” I said.

“*I had forgotten!*” I knew that he meant he thought I was lying. He turned to Paris's flayed skin again. “I don't remember ordering *you* killed,

either,” he said, though now I knew *he* was lying. “I forgive you,” he said. “You can come back to life now. You can return. Just as Hades sent Persephone back to the land of the living, I order you back.”

It sounded like one of the things the god of the Chrestianoï was rumored to be able to do. *Where is the line between the real world and the world of the insane?* I wondered. And at what point had Himself crossed over to where there was no longer any turning back?

I could sense a tantrum coming on. Nero believed there were no limits to his power, but General Vespasian had told me quite clearly that the limits were there. The limits did not depend on extravagance or cruelty. It was the army that tolerated the foibles ... and the army who would replace the Emperor ... in its own time.

The few soldiers who remained were no doubt ordered to obey the Emperor without question until such time as they received other orders. So at this moment, all our lives were in danger. Nero was furious, and did not know *why* he was furious. Only I knew that his rage was ultimately directed inward, at himself, and that Himself was the one person he dared not punish.

I had to break the spell.

“Lucius,” I said, “let’s get married.”

“What do you mean? *We are* married.”

“No, *you* married *me* while I was unconscious from pain and poppy juice. I did not even know it had happened.”

“You mean a proper Roman ceremony, with a priest and witnesses?” I could sense his mania halting and turning a corner.

“Yes!” I said. “And a proper Roman banquet.”

“Oh yes,” he said, kissing me passionately as Lucius Domitius Paris’s flayed skin flapped in the breeze of sunset. It was a kiss of tenderness as well as terror, of purity as well as insecurity. I felt them all, all those emotions; I was the mirror of all these feelings, unchecked and unrestrained; I had to receive the entirety of the tempest all alone; all this, and I was a boy of not even twenty.

When he broke away at last, I turned to see my people, Croesus and Hylas, and the Emperor’s staff, Epictetus and others, drawing close. I said to them, to no one in particular, “A wedding. A priest. Guests. Nobility. Entertainment. A banquet.”

And by magic, all those things were produced out of thin air.

And thus it was that I, in full bridal costume, stood hand in hand with the Living God, and spoke the words, "Where thou art Gaius, I am Gaia."

In the night, he reached for me, sobbing.

"Our beautiful dream is over," he said.

In that moment, I did love him.



XVII

Foreshadowings

So you have a plan. If you hold out long enough, Titus Flavius Vespasianus will ride to the rescue at the head of a huge army, and you'll be saved.

I doubt he'd bother to save me.

Why not? You told me he flirted with you.

Vespasian has something the last four Emperors lacked: sense.

Is it sensible to destroy an entire province and enslave its entire population?

Not from the point of view of the Judaeans. But see this as a future Emperor might. Why not sacrifice the Jews on the altar of stability? Think of the triumphal arches, the commemorative coinage with the words *Judaea Capta* imprinted for the entire world to see, think of how this would show the Empire that Rome cannot be withstood by anyone ... let alone by the one god of a distant desert tribe.

I cannot imagine that he will come for me.

Thanks to you, I've already met my death. My big, beautiful, dark demise. I am sure the pain will be both exquisite and excruciating. But I've accepted it. If I could be a real god in life, why not a false god in death? Petronius would have loved such an irony.



WE ARE ON THE SHIP now. There was no triumphal progress. We took to sea as soon as we could, with only the minimum of pomp. On the way to Greece, I had been drugged and mostly in a stupor. On the way home, the voyage seemed endless. I had plenty of time to reflect about myself, about who I was, and what I would have to do if the unthinkable happened.

And so it was that one night, under the stars, in the midst of the sea, I stood with my slave Hylas, with Croesus not far off, and told him I was going to set him free.

"I don't want that," he said, his Latin now almost. "You know I don't."

“But you are my slave,” I said, “so it must be what *I* want.”

“Don’t you love me anymore?” Hylas said.

I beckoned Croesus to come to us with the documents of manumission.

“I can’t truly love you,” I said, “if you are not my equal.”

He looked at me for a long time. Then he said, “You think you’re going to die.”



HE WAS RIGHT, AND THE time for that draws ever closer.

But before it happens, there’s more to tell you.

Nero’s decline was precipitous and all the Emperors that followed in swift succession were each of them very different. And all of them, save one, loved me.

Let me rest now, and we will go on in the morning.



Thank You

THANK YOU SO MUCH FOR taking this journey with me into the story of Sporus, one of the most extraordinary figures in ancient history.

There is much more to the story: Nero's ignominious return to Rome and his death, and how Sporus survived the reigns of Galba and Otho only to be sentenced to die in the arena while playing the role of the goddess Persephone.

Reviews mean a lot. Forty years ago, my books came out from traditional publishers like Simon & Schuster and Atheneum. Someone else took care of getting the books reviewed. But in my old age, the industry has changed. Now, I'm doing everything on my own. Reviews make a significant difference.

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