

DUST

Ember Series Part 3

Tess Williams

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Dedicated to: Leelashankar, who has a story written for his life even more fantastical than the one in these pages. I can't wait for the part where the Author brings him home.

Table of Contents

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1: Cousin](#)

[Chapter 2: Zeta](#)

[Chapter 3: Sold](#)

[Chapter 4: Chiesa / Makarios /blessed](#)

[Chapter 5: Friends](#)

[Chapter 6: Peace](#)

[Chapter 7: Laws](#)

[Chapter 8: Ocean](#)

[Chapter 9: Destined](#)

[Chapter 10: Visions](#)

[Chapter 11: Death Attack / One-fifth](#)

[Chapter 12: Heritage](#)

[Chapter 13: Paso Doble](#)

[Chapter 14: Trust](#)

[Chapter 15: Rhythm](#)

[Chapter 16: Miracles](#)

[Chapter 17: Five-fifths](#)

[Chapter 18: Planned](#)

[Chapter 19: Warmth](#)

[Chapter 20: Goodbyes](#)

[EPILOGUE](#)

[More Books by Tess Williams](#)

[Prologue](#)

Then the Lord God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being.

He asked me again. I felt scraping dirt in my throat.

He asked: "Who are you?"

"I don't know!" I shouted out. I hadn't known or thought I possessed such a strong voice. But I shouted, as my body came up tall. Strong. I was strong. I shouted strong. That was who I was. "I don't know. I don't know," I kept telling him.

Till I saw a flash of fear in his eyes, at my response.

And I thought: he fears me. This is what I need. Strength. I'll just—

But then he brought the flat-side of his weapon to the back of my head.

And all I could remember before my world went black was that I knew it was called a sword. I only didn't know how.

#

The next time I woke up, I saw gold again. Gold and blue. The sky was what was blue, and everything else was gold. The buildings, the sand, the carts. I didn't know how I knew what these things were called. Some was familiar, some wasn't. The sky, gods it was blue like crystal, like the sea, like something I imagined in my mind, but couldn't put a name to.

I didn't want to sit up and study the things going on around. I could hear the noises; they pounded my head.

Cries of people. Seeing things. Racing through streets. Birds calling, and other creatures. Horses. So many hooves, so many horses. Drawing swords. More stragglers being wrangled as I had been. I heard the wheels beating beneath me, telling me I was being taken, somewhere, but I didn't know where, and I didn't care.

I wanted to watch the sky. I wanted to see the blue, and see the white of the clouds. And although I didn't know my name, I had the strongest sensation that I was the happiest I had ever been in my life. I just wanted to lay here in this sun. Gods, it was so warm.

#

It was the next time I woke up, that I was plunged into freezing water.

"Hey! Hey!" I tried to shout, when they shoved us off, and herded us into showers. Showers, if they could be called that. More like hoses, shooting off too fast. I stood up tall, and waved my arms. I wanted to be the way I'd been before, that moment he'd feared me. This was a different guard, a different man wearing the red, and white and leather, and with a sword. But I could still fight him. "Leave me be. I don't know my name."

I tried the phrase, since it had disturbed the last guard. I watched this one's face. He showed less bother. He merely gave a wave with his wrist that made the slave standing beside us aim the hose of water at my feet. And so I slipped onto concrete. Concrete? No. what was concrete? I don't remember. This was called stone. It was rocks. Grass? No... grass was... something very green. Much greener than what I saw around me now. Was it just a memory?

The water from the hose sent not only myself, but others sprawling. They shouted curses at me. They were like me, with bloodied faces, and having been chained together in the wagon. But they weren't like me. They didn't have my strong arms, I could see that. They didn't have my clothes. Strange clothes. Clothes I hadn't seen others in yet—but they looked natural to me.

"Strip and wash yourselves, then come here to be changed."

The things they said, switched back and forth. Like a language I knew then didn't. For a moment it sounded like. Norgo ispansum. Then I knew what it meant. That my strange clothes must go away, and so would the other's rags.

I tried my strength again.

"No."

It sounded like octon.

The guard waved and the slave aimed the water again.

This time the swearing was accompanied by a raised palm to me, from one of the others. It did not slap, but it threatened. I looked. He had grey eyes, and a bruised face. I saw another, with blue eyes. Blue eyes like the sky. I didn't know why he didn't strike me. He slapped my shirt instead.

I realized I wanted it off. I wanted to be clean. I didn't want to be told what to do, and just now we were stuck beneath a tent of tarp, like a thick cloud of shadow over that sun that had warmed so bright. Oh, I wanted to be out beneath it again. Without the clothes, and wet, to warm. Yes, I was very strong. I could feel it when I moved my arms. And I did not look like these others, skin and bones; if muscled, lean. So once we were clean, I was not surprised to be sorted out to a group of three others more like me. Strong men. Two with light hair. One with dark. So these were my kind. Strong men. What would they say? Would they scare others, like I was able?

They made us change into clothes, that matched. Not our old ones, those were left on the ground beneath the tent. The slave paused to lift mine, but then it was gone. And I didn't mind. My new clothes were like what other's wore. The slaves, sadly not the guards. Like long t-shirts, tied at the waist by a belt, but then as soon as I thought that word, I couldn't remember what it was a moment later. What had I compared this tunic to? Tunic, that was what it was. Tunic.

"Tunic," I voiced it.

"Yes," the man supervising us stressed, "Did you think you'd get a women's pallus?"

He was not a slave, but he was also not one of the guard. The guards had gone off. This man wore white like a dress. Dress? No. A toga, it was called. Not for women. For men. It was a tunic beneath like ours, then long white, thick cloth draped around him, across his shoulder, and over his arm where he held it steady, carrying a chart of parchment. Yes, a toga. But what did women wear?

It was suddenly as if I couldn't remember, what a woman was anyways. I saw flashes of them, heard laughter of theirs from my rest in the wagon, coming here. Yes, they had laughed. High-pitched giggles. Sweet giggles.

I caught the flash of something horrid in my mind's eye. Some dark memory, like a black snake. I gripped the brown-red tunic that I'd donned. It did not come long over my legs. I longed for the sun to touch my skin again, my legs.

Fine, so the man marked us and made us put on sandals, and then we were marched through a thin corridor of stone. White stone. Not inside, but outside—though the sun was still blocked.

He had hung wood plaques against our chests, from strings. Mine read with numbers, but I didn't know what the numbers meant. Currency. But I couldn't relate how much. Why marked with numbers? Something told me I was being sold. I didn't like that, but I liked that there was light ahead. Back outside again, and into a bustling street. A great square of shops and sounds and noises. A camel marched, not two feet from me. I was tied by a

string with other men. But no one would have noticed us. So many other lines of men and women, children everywhere. Children. In small togas, like the man, or tunics like me. Something told me if they were there, all would be well. One laughed as he chased his friend. I did. The strong-man beside me gave me a strange narrow. I didn't care. The light, the sound, the sun. The *women*. How had I thought I'd forgotten them? They were beautiful.

I knew what the man had meant now, about the palluses, that was what the women wore. Long dresses, soft, I could tell that just by sight. And so many colors. And their hair. The woman's hair, all piled high and braided. I knew again, by sight, how soft to touch. But neither hair nor silk as soft as their skin. Woman's skin. I felt it consciously beneath my fingers for a moment, that was all too specific. Pale skin, a small palm, in mine. Soft, round cheeks.

It made me grip my fist again and close my eyes. And then while the man in line with me said something crude, I heard a voice, "Jaden," it called.

It was that same tone they laughed with. Women. It was one of them. One of the beautiful ones from the crowd of the market. Jaden, why was that familiar? Gods, but she was looking at me. Was she? Yes, and with surprise. She wore one of those long pallus, this one of white and gold and blue trim. She had reddish-brown hair, she was older than me; I knew that, whatever else my name was; there were streaks of grey and silver at the edge of her temples. But her age, you wouldn't know it by the way she marched when she saw me.

"Jaden," she shouted again, "Jaden."

She nearly tripped over her sandaled feet, moving past the crowds, to our line at the edge. Servants trailed behind her, some ladies and particularly a slave holding a parasol to shade her face. But she left this, to race forward. And though I stayed frozen, in shock, the man in the toga at the head of the line had noticed, and stopped us. He tried to intercept the woman, but nothing kept her from plunging into me and tightening her arms in a full embrace for me. At my neck, I could smell her, the smell of flowers, and oils, and sweet honeys, all foreign to me. Her garment was all soft against me. She brought her long thin fingers against my neck, then pulled my head close and cried into my ear, "Oh Jaden. I'm so glad I found you. My son, my son... I have been so distraught."

And I knew then as soon as her lips neared my ear. This woman was not my mother, not lover, not friend, but my aunt. My father's sister, she cared for me, looked after me, the only one I had left in the world to protect me. Yes. This was my aunt. My aunt named Antonia.

#

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of His might. Put on the full armor of God, so that you will be able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil. Ephesians 6:10-11

I don't know why I had ever forgotten it. It was beautiful, the place my aunt lived. The place I stayed with her within the city. How long had I been gone to Greece? She hadn't said yet. That was why she said, it wasn't familiar yet, the place I was going. But nothing was familiar! What was this city, so bright and golden. We walked the roads, but not for long, then Anotinia called us to her litter. Men carried us. Four. She let me up beside her. She asked and asked and begged: how were you in that awful line of slaves? Young Jaden, what happened to you? You were set to arrive by boat two days since, and haven't I been going mad wondering after you?

She talked and talked. She had nice lips. They were red and not too small or too large, but a fine bowed shape, and clean teeth behind them.

She talked too much.

I listened, but mostly watched. As the litter carried us up (and now I'd been stripped of my numbered plaque) the heart of this city traveled further and further below. Not tall, but beautiful white, marble, and golden stone streets, and structures. There was one great place, round and distant, but five stories at least. I couldn't guess at its purpose. Like everything, I was sure I'd never seen all this before. There were rivers running through the city. And bridges. And people. So many people.

"What is that place, Aunt?" I asked, pointing to the great round structure.

Antonia then, instead of answering, followed my taut arm to look that way across the great city, then her mouth fell open and she wailed.

Wailed, really. She wailed, and waved her face. I tried to ignore, that the slaves bearing us were within hearing distance.

Instead I calmed her. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry, what did I say?"

"Oh, no. Oh dear. But how could my poor nephew have forgotten so much of his great city. Gods Jupiter, and Mars, spare us. Do not reign fire down upon us."

She'd looked up.

I tried looking that same way for the petitioned deities, but there was only the blinding sun, and clear blue sky. Gods did I love it.

"Aunt, I am sorry," I begged her. "Please. Please."

"Oh nephew. Dear. Do you really not recall a thing? Of your city? Your parents?"

"My parents?"

That blacking monster I'd felt before on the streets, when I'd thought of high-pitched laughter, crawled back into my skull. I saw flashes like a man and woman screaming, and fire. And a young girl, of eight years or less, with pale hair. Screaming. Screaming in flames.

The agony must have been plain on my face.

My aunt touched my head.

"Oh dear. Dear, Cassius, I'm sorry. I'll... I'll call the doctors. We'll have this sorted. Please. Please don't stress yourself."

She fluttered her face again. While I couldn't do much more than drop mine into my hands.

"We just need to get you out of this sun," she added.

But all I could think was that going into shade was the last thing that I wanted. And also, I thought that she had just called me Cassius. But that was not right.

Hadn't it been Jaden, before?

#

The next time I was really aware of anything, I was lying in a bed. Gods, but it was fantastic! The blankets dark thick, soft. The pillows. The clear air of the room. The cool stone floors, with padded rugs. Walking in, I'd thought, what a house! But then house wasn't right. Villa. Yes, that was what this was. Why had I thought a different word for it?

My aunt had parked our litter inside gates of the gold-stone villa, and I had stepped off onto white rock tile. Dust was left far outside the property. Our home looked out over the city at the front. The inside, was just as decadent. Gardens stood at its centers, twice over. They had other names, that flashed back and forth in my head, but the words: grass, and green, and fountain, and flowers, and life, were all too strong for me to remember the others to pinning them down.

I didn't want to anyways!

There was enough of this land to drink in. When we'd entered the villa, the four servants that had been carrying us, carted the litter off. The lady-servant, and man that had walked in our wake, came inside and went about work. The lady, dragging my aunt off to clean her feet. Another man came for me. How many servants there were, it would have been difficult to count. All the walls were dark, and regal — but trapped against all the brightness of the gardens bracing them.

It wasn't moments before my aunt led me to a room. Upstairs, it was my made-up room. She'd said it had been made for me before, from ever since it was planned that I would come here. After studies. Right, after studies in Greece. —hadn't I known that? Couldn't I remember it a little?

Then she had left wailing how her husband would be gone at work till late, and she must wait for him to bring the doctor.

I hadn't cared.

She was fine to look at, but I needed quiet.

Now, dozing in and out of sleep in this room, it was quiet.

To describe the place... not very large. Somehow I thought I should have something bigger. The furniture was all dark wood, or maroon, and gold. And candles. Many candles. Not many books. A desk. A window, but blocked by wood slats. I could see just the gold sun barely slipping in. It was darkening outside.

I thought a moment or two, with my arm across my head, and the other behind it on my pillow. Somehow I was sure, I'd spent much time like this.

I tried to remember things. When I did, especially my parents, I felt burning. Fire, and shouts. And I didn't want it. I turned my mind back to what I'd known.

Hadn't I been in the alley? Found by a soldier. Soldier? Yes. A Roman soldier. Of course, guarding the city.

Rome. That's where I was! Had I forgotten it? Or only just remembered, or had my aunt told me? Why had I

been caught in the first place?

"Are you feeling at all better?" she asked, coming in.

I sat up, automatically.

She'd changed, my aunt. She'd let her hair fall. She seemed different. It curled around her neck, like the many vines that rounded the columns in the peristyle. Peristyle? Was that it? The gardens in the center, they—

A hiss rose up in my throat, while I touched my hand.

She sat beside me.

"Oh, Cassius." Her voice was sweeter now. She tried to lay her soft hand on mine.

Me and my coarse voice cut against her demeanor. "Why do you keep calling me that? I thought..."

"Jaden?" she spoke out.

I looked at her.

She settled her hand fully over mine. "That is a pet name of yours, merely, with us at home... . Not used by more than your father, mother, and I. You remember, it comes from your middle name?"

"My middle name is Jaden," I stated with uncertainty. Somehow, I'd thought for sure it was something more important than that.

She laughed short. "Oh, of course not. Your middle name is Julian. You're named after the great god Jupiter. Oh, Cassius. You truly don't remember?"

I massaged my head again, at the temples.

For some reason, this was the first time I realized I had hair. Or what exactly it was like. Not too long, curled enough to fuss over my brows and ears. I had no conscious way of knowing what color it was, but I was sure. Brown. Yes. Brown. So I remembered some things. ... regretfully unimportant. I twirled one piece above my ear.

Antonia, put her full palm against the side of my head, covering my hand. "Dear Cassius, don't fret yourself now. You are here with us in Rome. We shall not suffer you to return to Greece again. Don't you see all that lays out ahead of you?"

"What lays out ahead of me?" I asked. For a moment I remembered the way the soldier had cowered before my strength. I remembered the strong feel of my arms. And wasn't I sure that I had this sense I had always been conscious of a great future for me. I was sure, whatever else I didn't remember, I was part of something great. But I added, for my aunt, "I don't even know how old I am!"

"Cassius, Cassius. What trouble is that? If the doctor comes to fix it, all the better. But should he not be able, you have me to teach you. You have your Uncle, my husband, Tertius. And your cousin Raina."

"Raina?" I repeated.

I did not remember a cousin.

"Of course. Raina. She is also away for studies now, but she'll return after the summer."

I rubbed my head again. There were too many people I was supposed to know.

"And don't forget you have your position in the guard, to begin a week hence."

"What?" I begged.

"The guard. For your uncle, Tertius. You said... I mean, you commissioned yourself, son, to be a part of his Patron's protection. Don't you remem—"

"Will you stop asking that, Aunt?" I stressed out, patience waning. "As you can see, until the doctor comes, perhaps, I *do not* remember."

"Well, I—" She straightened back, looking offended. She cleared her throat, adapted a sweetened expression and added, "You are to be part of the honored guard tasked with keeping peace on Capitoline Hill, under the service of our great patron, Flavian."

"Who?"

"A senator, in the forum. Of course."

"And a senator is?" Of this, I was sure, I had no memory.

Antonia turned her head, and near wailed again—having to cover her mouth and hiccup instead. "Oh Cassius. All that schooling... gone... "

I don't know why. I laughed aloud.

My aunt looked at me with something like contempt. I took her frail, soft wrists in my strong hands. "Aunt," I entreated her.

She eyed me warily.

"I am sorry," I continued, "You only touched me with your care. It's as you've said, isn't it? Either the doctor will heal what ails me, or you and your husband, my uncle, will restore my lost time. Whatever a senator is, it

can be taught, can't it? At least I am not dead. Something must have happened at sea... " I released my hold a little on her wrists. I let our hands fall to the bed between us. "If that is where I came from," I finished out. It was just a sensation, just a guess, but since I'd come to with the soldier in the alley, it seemed my own voice was different. In my mind, and coming from my mouth both. More, like those around me. Different. A slight accent, they all carried. What language was it that we spoke?

She sighed. Her fingers tightened around my hands. "Oh Cassius, you are such a sweet, endearing boy."

I smiled. I liked the name Cassius, even if it was strange to me. I liked the way my aunt said it with such love and brevity. Wow, but I'd made quite a difference hadn't I, in her mood. By taking her hands in mine? Or by my tone? So, this was my second lesson of this strange new world: first that I was powerful, by way of my strength and fear. And second, I was quip with my tongue. Things could be said by me, in a way that would sway people... and it shouldn't matter whether I mean them or not. I liked the way my aunt smiled at me.

I rubbed her fingers in mine.

She sighed long.

Then she stood. She waved the air. "Oh... well... I suppose there is nothing to be done now until Tertius comes with the doctor. Oh... dear. Dear."

It was near the twentieth time she'd said it. Yes, I understood. "Do you think I might get something to eat, Aunt?" I asked.

I leaned back in tandem. So that by it I knew that I meant, would she get it or have it sent here, not that I would go and have to get it myself. I had a strong sense that that was not the way of things for Cassius Julian. Cassius rode in seats through cities carried on the shoulders of men. And studied in faraway places across the sea. — What was the sea? And Cassius, would be an honored guard for the great patron of Rome, Flavian.

She turned and looked at me.

I added, "Wont you?"

She nodded. Of course. It meant: of course. She was doing my bidding, wasn't she? Even in her own house, did I hold more sway than her?

No. What was I thinking? I frowned.

No. I did not want to think of my aunt that way.

She started toward the doorway, her long dress trailing behind her. I called, "Antonia?"

She paused to wait.

I went on, "Then when you come back, before the doctor comes, would you... I mean, could you tell me something of my mother and father. Aunty. Please."

She turned far enough to give me a warm smile. Then nodded.

And I felt warmth come up inside me. Not that burning heat that roused in my chest, when I tried to recall things on my own. This one was full assurance, and peace, and no duty on my part. No fear. I crossed my arms across my chest.

She almost started off again, when I asked, "And what is my last name Aunt? And what is my age?"

"You are nearly 21 Cassius. Well, of age, to begin your career... . And your surname is Martius, after your father, Tironus Martius. Your mother's name was Ivone."

Ivone, I repeated in my head.

Then I nodded to my aunt, and she went away to call for food.

But I played the name back in my head. Cassius Julian Martius.

Why did it sound so blasted weird?

#

It wasn't hours later, that I had been overloaded with more information than I would have thought that my brain could have held in the past. More than once I imagined; wasn't it better to have forgotten all this, and have my mind free and clear, to enjoy all those things that there were?

And there were things.

Just the food my aunt brought.

Sticky sweet fruits. Cheeses. Varieties of breads, in so many shapes and sizes. Meat. Fish. Why did everything seem like I could never have possibly tasted it? I had these memories when I saw the bread, of just one type of bread: not like these, in so many colors and flavors. And why was the water so good?

My aunt kept on asking did I want wine, it would be good for my health. I tried, but it was too sweet. The water too good.

—And the sight outside. My aunt had opened the window, and the sun falling over the city...

"Aunt, I don't understand," I told her. "Why did I leave to this other place, to this... Greece?"

"Oh Cassius, it's- Well, slow down, dear," she fussed over my eating, long enough for her to frown, and me to grin, then omitted, "Well, it's where all the established young men of nobility go, isn't it? And after your parents..."

I didn't want to talk about them. Any time she had, it pained me. I asked instead, "Nobility?" I washed a hunk of bread down with a gulp of water. "What's that?"

She hardly held back a hiccup, and whimper—but she had grown accustomed to my ignorances. I imagined she kept thinking, "When will the doctor be here?"

She replied, with a cleared throat. "Mm. Cassius. Nobility is the state of those in Rome whose lineage, dating back to many generations, at least three to four for those of... lesser establishment," (and this she said with distaste) then she went on with a brightened demeanor, "But for us, Cassius, myself, and your father, Martius, by name... we have lineage to the emperors of the early ages. We have proofs even of links to Romulus, and Remus."

"Who?"

She opened her mouth agape in shock a moment... then dismissed it.

"Nevermind. We'll return to that."

"And emperors?" I asked. "Those are... the rulers right? Like, kings?"

"We never call them kings, Cassius."

She had already told me of emperors, oft-times called Augustus, sometimes Caesar. Currently, the emperor was a young man named Alexander Severus. His last name to follow suit of his father, as mine was. But what I couldn't understand, if all of this nobility was so important, why had my aunt traded her name for a lesser one. I asked her.

She retorted. "Cassius."

It was a chiding tone.

But I gave her an innocent shrug, and smile, and she quickly abated.

"Well," she began again.

But it was then that a man entered. And from the stance of his presence, I knew immediately: This was not another servant. This was not a friend of the family's, or even the doctor. This was one with more power here than me. This was my Uncle. Tertius.

"So is it true?" he asked.

Immediately I straightened up. My aunt turned.

My uncle wore a finer tunic than I had yet seen. Not a toga. His was a thick and clean fitted vest, with long trimmed sleeves, in deep rich greens and aqua; with gold trim that brought out the lightness of his hair—which was, lighter, than most I had seen yet on the streets of Rome. But that was what my aunt had already told me. Like my mother, he was from the neighboring country where I had studied.

For the first time, this face was familiar. Not kind, but kind to my eyes. I said, "Uncle Tertius."

He cocked his head. His hair was not trimmed, but long and tied into a tail. He took a step into the room. Yes, I was sure I had seen this man before. "Cassius? Son? Are you well? You remember me?"

I nodded blankly.

My aunt looked aback between us.

He grew a sort of smile.

She finally stuttered out, "B-but— But Cassius, you have forgotten so much. I had despaired. Do you truly remember?" She pressed her hand against my arm. Her eyes searched mine.

But I looked quickly back to my uncle. His eyes were not so colorful as hers, his features not so pronounced. The food curled in my stomach a moment, while that blackness came up in my memory like a fog. I did not want it, did not even want to be weak that way before my uncle. —who I did remember. So this was my family. Family. I had a family. I got out, "yes, I remember him," just before my throat could clamp.

Then she squeezed my arm tighter.

And Uncle Tertius did not give her another moment, for theatrics, stomping closer. "Antonia, please." He gravely eyed her nearness, then lightly smiled at me. "No wonder the boy cannot remember a thing—when the mere sight of your constant dramatizing must be dumbfounding him. Cassius, boy, tell me—have you had a free moment to think?"

Antonia didn't say a thing.

I was trapped in his gaze. I didn't want to tell him that I had been alone, only ten minutes thus far, and how I hadn't liked that. Not at all. Dramatic my aunt might have been, but she was my family. Her voice, loved me.

And she did the things that I asked. No, he would think I as weak if I told him I did not like to be alone. Tertius nodded once sternly. "I see." He flicked his head back. "Antonia leave us. Hold off the doctor for now. He is out in the *vestibule*. But I see no reason to trouble him yet. Cassius," My uncle stepped forward, and touched my shoulder, "What you need is a moment to rest your mind."

I grew to a panic. "I have had rest, uncle. Honestly, I could not go without distraction for long."

"Of course not! Not in this room, alone—with hardly a view at all." He gestured to the window, to the sight which I had thought so wonderful and grand, as if it were not that at all. He said, "Antonia, also fetch up the horses. I will take my nephew for a ride. And after that, we'll visit the baths. Then perhaps an evening party of some friends of mine; I think some of your new guard-mates will be there with their fathers."

I opened my mouth, but he had turned to eye my aunt.

She was searching my face, and said, "Oh dear husband of mine, but he's only just been—"

"This in my final word on the subject, wife. Go dismiss the doctor."

She scuttled off with not more than a glance back at us, her long skirt that had seemed so ethereal before, now robbed of mystery.

My uncle stole my focus back.

When I looked at him, my throat thick and unsteady, he said to me:

"Do you know what the mark of a great Roman, a great man, of any sort is my nephew, Cassius?"

In tandem I thought, *once you all had called me Jaden, but now you never do*. And also that *mark* was a word I should remember. —So was what my uncle had to say now just that important?

I shook my head. "No. What is it, Uncle?"

He didn't pause. "Not to be thought great by oneself, but to be thought great and known of by other men. You do not remember your history? No matter. What good are the trappings of our own mind, to distract and haunt you."

And I thought, wow, hadn't I just been thinking something along these lines? Wasn't the sun, and weren't the streets of this city, so much the more wild and fascinating when I had not had any prevalent notions in my head, one way or the other?

He went on. "When you come out among the people. And when you begin to prove yourself as a strong soldier, and wise youth, in the days to follow. When you begin your position for Flavian the day after tomorrow," he added in, "Then you will have all the glory and riches of Rome in your grasp."

He held out his strong arm and gripped his fist. It was dark and tanned like mine, like so many of this place. But instead of seeing that I remembered the pale, small one that had rushed to my mind earlier in that day, lying in my own hand. And I remembered a long, thinner hand—but with skin just as opposite to mine, and just as soft. I did not know whether I wanted glory and riches of Rome. I thought that could all keep my interest only so long.

But I knew that I did not want to remember those old ways any longer. Soft pale skin would be gone from my life.

I would join my uncle in seeking power, glory, or riches... so long as it meant those memories of lesser things would leave me.

Chapter 1: Cousin

I was not sorry that I had gone horse-riding with my uncle. And the weeks that followed I was not sorry that I did not pause in my patron's guard.

Life was not easy, but it was full.

Each morning we awoke at dawn. I did not stay with my uncle and aunt, but instead with my guards near the ludus, Paxonis Rotara. We were not the main trainees—that position belonged to the slaves that would serve as gladiators in the arena. But we did train with them, and often. In supervising them, we learned ourselves. When they ran, we ran, my contingent, and three others, around them, in the mornings. Sometimes more. We ate with them, ran drills with them. We also enjoyed the freedoms of the Field of Mars, the great land set out beside the city where the legionnaires would train. (legionaries, those men that were headed out for battle with the Gauls). We did not envy them, for while we ran perhaps 5-10 miles each day, they were driven 15 or more. In armor!

Our guard wore suited leather, with red cloth, and brass hilted weapons when we did fight with our true weapons. Generally we trained with wooden swords and spears, in the ludi. No, not spear, *pilus*... just another

word I had remembered wrong.

Things came and went like that. When we ate our meals—mostly hearty stews and breads—I would think of things like layers of bread and meat and cheese and vegetables all stacked, with spreads between. But when I would ask others about that, they would have no clue. Some would mention they'd heard of something similar, somewhere else, not here. Not in the country. But perhaps it was something I'd learned in Greece.

That was the phrase always used for me.

I would ask: "Shouldn't there be more trees about?" looking out over the fields and outlying roads surrounding the city. And they would say: "That must be in Greece, Cassius. Wherever you were in Greece. Where were you again?"

But I had not asked my aunt. I had not asked her much after that first day. In fact, it seemed my uncle helped to steer the conversations, always, clear of talk of my memory when I came over for dinners. I did not mind.

Then I would ask, when we would go to the rivers to swim. "Aren't there water—I mean..." "My head would hurt. "Aren't there places of falling water anywhere?"

"You mean aqueducts?"

"No."

"I've heard of that, I think. Isn't there one some kilometers from here... outside the city?"

But someone would say, "No. No. That must be something in Greece. I'm sure Greece is full of falling water... to match their crumbling gods."

And everyone would laugh.

All people spoke of the gods, all the time here. True, with the soldiers, at the ludus, or out on the field of mars, a man's own strength was worshipped more than anything. But it was called the field of *mars*, after all. Mars was a god. In fact, he was my namesake. Martius. He was supposed to represent the warriors of Rome. And also something like one of the great planets up in the sky at night. I liked this second version better, though I did not say. I did not believe in Mars, or Jupiter. Or any of those gods.

I believed in living and working. And so I did.

I did not like horse-riding.

I did not like a pilus as a weapon. I wanted a sword. Or a knife. Or nothing.

I loved to swim in the river Tiber when we trained in stamina, and I listened to any man talk of the oceans, of the Mediterranean Sea (which I was supposed to have traversed). But I did not remember water like that.

Once the summer ended, I would choose between returning to my aunt and uncle's villa in the city—wherefrom I could begin my official routine of duty on Capitoline hill. Or I could begin a career in the legion—where I would train for years, then be off to Gaul for decades past that.

Neither my aunt, nor uncle, nor any of my wiser friends advised that this would be the right decision. Why earn more honor, or wealth, when I was already a noble?

And then where would my chances of entering into politics be if I left? The system might have crumbled by then!

But the one thing they did not understand, was that I had no desire to be a noble; nor did I have any interest in matters of state.

I only didn't want to be a slave.

I only wanted to be free.

#

It was late august. I had fallen into my schedule of six days of constant training, free evenings to wander the city or visit with my family—and one day, a full day, for the gods.

But it was all about to end.

"Come early today, Master Cassius?" Neiban asked me at the gate.

Neiban was one of my aunt's minor household slaves. I said my aunt's, not my uncle's, since I had long-since perceived that it *was* my aunt who kept the house and all its operations—in fact who was the one who was nearly only ever at the home.

My uncle was a merchant—and spent long hours in meetings—or days away at sea.

Neiban had the dark hair and dark skin of a Spaniard. He had the accent to match, and when he called me Master Cassius, no thing sounded so right.

"That's right," I replied, coming through the tiled courtyard. "It's my final day. We're off to rest before assignments tomorrow."

"So you have decided you *will* stay in Rome, Master?"

I didn't answer right away.

Neiban rushed to shut the gate behind me, then moved ahead to get the water and towels to rinse my feet.

The sun was just setting, turning the gold city purple and blue. He was right that I was early. It was usually after dark that I would make it on a sixth day—perhaps by the twelfth hour, particularly if I had gone to the baths.

Just now, my legs ached while he washed them—from the run I'd taken in the morning. I had wanted to know what it felt like: the legionnaires death march. That 20 mile hike.

I had already been strong when I had arrived from Greece: now it seemed there wasn't any physical feat I couldn't match. And yet, I did not care. I'd completed the 18 miles, but I did not want to imagine it in armor, and with a centurion yelping at my back.

I would not join the army. I had already made that decision.

But I did not want to set myself to Flavian's service, either.

"I honestly don't know Neiban," I decided to tell him.

"M-Mas-Master?" he chortled, surprised. He'd just finished off, smoothing my knees with oil. I waved him away from continuing to the feet.

As usual, he was surprised by my candor. I did not know why, I often forgot the proper way to speak with slaves.

A habit, my fellow trainees also reputed had come from Greece.

"About the legion," I reminded Neiban. "Whether I would stay. You asked."

"Yes, Master. I just did not expect—"

"Dialoguing with the help again, Cassius?" my uncle asked.

My back went rigid—as it always did in this circumstance—but that was for Neiban's sake not mine.

My uncle, I knew, would never turn his hand, or even his mood against me. But Neiban, he was rumored to harm.

The servant bowed immediately.

I turned on Tertius.

"Uncle." He was adorned in his usual patrician's fine-wear. I was a likely contrast in a red-dyed tunic. From the day I had come to the archeon square in plain-wear, I hadn't had a strong desire for anything else. I stretched an arm back towards the city. "You cannot blame me — or Neiban. I had taken such a long walk through such a dreamy afternoon. I grew contemplative enough to debate with rocks."

Not without my noticing the flex in Neiban's jaw for the obvious insult, he returned to his evening duties.

Meanwhile Uncle Tertius laughed and moved a step up to me.

"Of rocks and Spaniards, aye? Cassius? Perhaps you are a poet, not a guard at the end of things..." He stopped beside me with a glint in his eye as he studied me side-long. "Or have you only grown so conscious since the decision of your future approaches?"

I chuckled. "Approaches? Uncle? It is upon me."

"You really haven't decided?"

"How foolish if I had not," I retorted. But it wasn't a confirmation.

My Uncle and I both paused. I had crossed my arms. It was good to know, no matter what, I was accepted here—they had made that well-enough known.

By my family, I would *always* be accepted.

He sighed. "You see the coliseum?"

I nodded. It was a white marble pinnacle at the heart of the city.

He told me, "There was a time I longed to be a gladiator there... when I was young."

I laughed, mouth agape. I couldn't help it. I had seen the lives of the men at the ludus. Their existence was no enviable one.

"You laugh," Uncle said, "but do you think a quarter century in Gaul is any better?"

Instead of replying, I sighed a big breath—puffing up my cheeks. I remembered the run.

"And so?" he asked me.

"So?" I looked to him. His hair was light as usual.

He said, "Aren't you going to ask what happened? I am no gladiator now."

"But you have made your point, Uncle. I am not too dumb to realize that you would likely be dead if you had followed your dream — and I might end up the same if I join the legionnaires... and yet it's different."

"Why?"

"Because it is not my dream to go to Gaul."

I responded so fast, I surprised myself. But then I huffed and added, "But it is also not my dream to stay and

serve here."

My Uncle's posture had gone stiff. He asked, "And what is your dream, Cassius? Son?"

I glanced his way. He always had meaning behind the word son, I was sure that meant, he would support me. But how could I explain to him the things I thought? The things I could do—they were unexplainable. I stretched out my hand in front of me. A raw, tested, knotted hand. Darker than when I had come from Greece. Roughened by hours in the mud.

I held it palm up, glowing in the setting sun. And I almost didn't think of the pale small hand.

"I don't know," I sighed to my uncle, letting my arm fall.

When I saw him, he looked disconcerted.

"Uncle?" I called. I put my hand on his arm. "Are you alright?"

For a moment, he looked that way, at my hand, with uncertainty. Then his eyes flashed up, for a moment he looked much younger, his hair much lighter. Then he smiled warmly, the way that only my uncle who loved me so could.

He put his hand over mine. "Cassius, I want you to come in, before you make your decision... and come to see you cousin, at least. It will be hard on her if you—"

"Raina?" I inquired suddenly, straightening.

I lowered my hand. I looked to the inside of the villa. True, I had heard music coming from within (an unusual luxury for a common night); I had perhaps presumptuously assumed it was for my graduation. No, of course.

Raina. How had I forgotten?

It was summer's end.

I had only heard rumors of her beauty, grace, and intelligence. —now I would meet her. My cousin.

I was grateful, memory or not, we had not spent much time together. She would likely recall me as little as I did her.

"Uncle, you should have reminded me!" I said to him. Then slapped him on the back and went inside. I forgot the irony, that of course remembering seemed just the thing that I was very poor at to begin with.

I hoped my uncle would not make the same connection.

Then I was striding through the dark halls of the outer courts, on through to the triclinium where we ate our meals (the music must have been positioned in the gardens, from the sound of it). I did not see Raina or Aunt in either place. I had lost Uncle. But I did catch sight of one of the slave's padded feet—a meager girl named Nimue. I was not able to call to her in time to ask where the ladies of the house might be. But since she had been carrying refreshments, I followed her upstairs. And that was where I heard the first hint of the sound of my cousin Raina's voice.

It was not quite what I expected.

"Ugh," she shouted, "What is this?" There was the sound of clashing dishes—that made me think she must have come in contact with Nimue's refreshments. I craned back against the wall as the slave girl came into view to retrieve the spilt drink.

"Take it away!" Raina added. Then she shouted, "And be quick about it! By the gods—send along a male servant next."

I glanced back towards the staircase (mostly to make sure one of her parents hadn't heard this sort of thing—or at the least that I wouldn't be found witnessing it) only to have the servant girl Nimue nearly plow into me.

She looked up into my eyes, cradling the tray and dripping goblet against her chest, for just one moment.

Then she quickly bowed, apologized, and left. —But not before I had seen the tears plunged in and around her saucer-like eyes.

I turned, completely without intent to watch her step down the stairs—but I was sure it wasn't to see her at all.

Instead I stared blank and pressed my thumb into my chest—above my heart, where it slammed solidly once, twice, three times, like another force had taken over my body.

Then a second sort of voice knocked it all away.

"Cassius?" it said.

It was the tone of love and admiration. The tone my aunt used, but coming from younger, sweeter lips.

When I turned to face Raina, I forgot her display (who wouldn't be tired after a long journey?), and I grinned for her.

She spread her arms up. She had maroon hair like her mother, only brighter than that. The same perfect bowed lips, the same delicate body. "Oh cousin Cassius!" she cried, shooting up and racing forward to meet my matching exuberant hug. She was so light, and so happy, and myself so strong, I could not keep myself from picking her up an inch or two from the floor. To which, she laughed. Then reared back.

"Oh Cassius, how I've longed to see you!" She didn't let go of me. She played with my hair with her slender woman's fingers. As far as I could remember—it was as near as I'd ever been to a girl. And the smell was much-preferred to nearing men!

She shook her head of piled red hair and pouted. "Mother said you had come back at spring's end. And to think all that time we were so near each other at the islands, but you never visited me."

"You were near to me in Greece?"

She punched my arm. "Yes. And don't you know ladies can't be expected to go about to different cities. Even ones so independent as myself! It would cause a scandal! But you can roam freely. Oh Cassius, why did you never see me? Perhaps you weren't as charming then as you appear now?"

She didn't give me the chance to answer. I liked that. She skipped back and eyed me from the top to bottom.

"Yes, my father tells me you've been at the ludus. So you must have been skin and bones before."

"I was no such thing!" I joked.

It seemed allowed since she was studying me so intently, that I should take account of her. Her pallus was a brown red that nearly matched my tunic—and I liked that; we seemed true cousins! The only thing of her sandals that showed were below the ankles where her feet pointed gracefully.

She must have decided it didn't matter how long I'd been strong. She narrowed firmly, then said, "But now he tells me you'll leave for good. Not back to Greece, but to Gaul of all places!" she added to the affect by crossing her arms.

I liked this cousin! To have a cousin was certainly a good thing. I laughed. "Cousin, that is because the legion is in Gaul! Not for holiday."

"All the more reason not to be there," she decided. Then she turned to go gather up something from her bed—where her trunks lay open.

I looked around the room, but did not venture in. I had glanced it before; it was larger than mine here—though it did not have a view. I preferred my view, while I admired her lavish closets, mirrors, and space. Her bed, even, was double mine in size.

"So will you be staying this night here, cousin?" she asked.

I shifted my gaze back to her, she was turned from me. "Hm?"

"Oh, here it is," she interrupted. Then she turned, and for me in the palm of her hand, she produced a small box.

I grinned at the start, looking up at her face well enough to tell it was a gift, in fact, and for me. She lifted it higher, for my scrutiny, then went, "Oh wait," and turning quickly around, she fidgeted with a nob on the bottom of it, then held it out again.

This time, it was opened. Inside was empty, wooden—

I opened my mouth a minute, to ask what it was.

Then that was when it started.

The music.

How such a small thing could make that much sound, I just wasn't sure. —Especially not a sound that beautiful.

Of course, receiving a gift from my cousin, I wanted to keep my cool. But I was pretty sure I missed that boat.

Staring very blankly, the way that I had stared back towards the slave girl just before, I reached out to take it.

It made me narrow at first, studying it. When I looked inside, I was sure I saw another place, another time.

"I know this song," I told Raina.

"Don't you remember?" she asked.

I watched back up at her. The box seemed to be shaking in my grip—or was that me?

"I used to sing it with your mother," she told me. "Your mother. When she sang... "

My head started slamming. I dropped the box, by accident. The music, stopped. I touched my head. Raina said something about the box, and bent to grab it. I said, "Sorry."

She called, "Jaden?" rising back up.

I'd sat back, sat onto the edge of the bed. I looked through my hands and hair. It helped now that the sound had stopped. "Why did you call me that?"

"It's your family pet name. Jaden, Jaden, are you alright?" she begged me.

She set the box aside. I eyed it. Then she knelt before me.

"I don't know," I said. "It's... when I try to think of my parents."

"Oh... I know, Cassius. Oh, I know. So it's true. Father, told me. And mother's in a fit over it." She waved back that way—where my aunt must have been.

I tried to smile. "Your mother is always in a fit, Raina."

She pressed those bowed lips. "Don't tease at a time like this."

"Was my mother? I mean... where did she sing? When did she sing that? It's so familiar."
"Oh Cassius, but she used to sing it to you, and I, so many nights of play together... she taught me you know. I sang quite often in Greece."
"My mother...," I stumbled out, still pressing my head. "My mother was from Greece. Aunty said."
"That's right. That's why your father settled at the ocean villa in Ostia."
Right. I had been there, the past months. Since it was mine, by inheritance, and kept up by slaves. I had gone. The sea... so I was like my mother? Or my father? Could I sing?
"Do I sing, Raina?"
She giggled. It broke the tension. I dropped my hand. She frowned quickly; her hands were touching my knees. "I'm sorry," she promised.
I turned my look rueful, then added, "Is that a no then?"
"Some men are known to sing in Greece, but..."
"Not Rome. And not guards, I'm guessing."
I took a great sigh. I eyed that music box, atop the trunk. I wished that Raina hadn't brought it. At the same time, I wanted to open it up and listen again. No. I pushed my palms to both sides of my head—and then I fell back, exhausted, into the bed of thick blankets. Did it matter that it was Raina's bed? I didn't think so; she was my cousin. Beloved cousin.
"I'm sorry, I forgot you Raina," I told her.
At the same time, I wasn't sure I meant it.
I heard another sound of her shuffling. She hadn't responded to my apology. Well, why should she? She'd gotten me a gift, and I was a failure. I hadn't even thought to purchase her one. —all while I knew from Aunty that women loved gifts. How many things had I brought for her from the markets with my salary in the past months. —not that my salary was the only means of mine to buy.
Raina still hadn't replied, and it had been long. I grew concerned she'd left. I brought, just my head up to see—and that was when something came flying towards me through the air.
It might have been painful if I hadn't looked up just then. Behind it, Raina was smirking with crossed arms. I sat up a little to cradle it. I studied it. It was light, and wooden, lined with string, metal strings. Not a lyre, like the man must have been playing downstairs. It must have been—
"A mandolin," Raina told me.
I rubbed my thumb along the smooth, edged, wood. I picked a string.
"You play it," she continued. "You might not sing, I'm not sure. But that instrument your father taught you to have a fine hand with."
"My father?"
"Mmm."
I swallowed. Then I looked down. It was deep rich, reddish brown. Almost like the tunic I was wearing, and loved best to wear. The strings were brass. I could see the spiral to the metal. I put more than two fingers there, and knew I'd seen the sight before —the way I knew I'd tasted water. The way I knew I'd lived near grass in Greece. The way I knew there were falls of water there as well. I knew this instrument.
And when I plucked the strings I knew the notion was true; I could play the very song that the music box had done.

#

The boy had gone to bed. She'd seen him drift off to sleep hours back. After that she'd gotten lost just staring. Thinking. And planning. And staring. At nothing. She finally shut the door to his cool room. The architecture of these ancient Roman homes were made to keep the cold in. Or to keep the snow from overwhelming the furnaces inside when the winter came.
But as for her, she could not wait till it did. And the cool was never enough. The moving air only disturbed her. Not like home. No, not like home.
She caught her image in a mirror, coming out from the room, in the hall between others. They had certainly done a good job, whoever had commissioned this form for her. She looked years younger, and that withstanding that in human form, she should have been too old to be alive.
She touched her pale cheeks, where the smooth line of her bone met her red tresses. Her hair was silk, that made her want to close her eyes, and dream of herself only for years, and decades.
But no.
She lined her chin high.

No, there was too much work to do.

She wrinkled her statuesque nose, then moved down the hall again. Was "mother" asleep? Father was already there, waiting in the hall outside her door—leaning against the frame. He wore his normal form. Of course not his *normal* one, but... well, he was a show-off wasn't he? Half her age, though now he looked about just the same.

"Hello *father*," she drawled, lading past him into the room. But not a second, then she took his tunic by the front and pulled him towards her to kiss him.

When his head hit the shelf on the wall behind them, he laughed.

She pulled away.

"Bored, Raina? Already?"

"Please!" she huffed. "Don't call me that." She turned away, still yet unsatisfied—as she did she knocked a vial of oil across the room so it shattered.

"Temper, temper," her fellow chided her. "You'll wake your cousin."

"That daft, fool." She sighed. "He would sleep through a hail-storm. He doesn't want to wake up."

"Even after you've taught him his old tricks?"

Raina threw her head back, loosing some of the gorgeous curls, and swore. She was seated on the bed now, her arms stretched behind her. "By the gods—I thought he'd never stop. I had to pretend to enjoy it for hours."

"Don't grow too fond of that expression, my lady. You know they're not real."

Her fellow was still leaned against the wall, examining his nails. His pale hair was tied back in its usual loop.

"Maybe not," she laughed. Then she kicked her feet in the air, swooshing her skirts, "But I just love the way everyone one here, acts as if it's so. I feel as if I might become one."

"You and the boy, by the shape of your plans," he mentioned.

She wrinkled her nose. She knew it looked beautiful. The idea of the gods had her blood rushing through her again, and her fellow was young and virile—why was he so reposed? Why could he always keep such control around her; she who could drive any of her kind mad.

"Don't stare at me like that, *daughter*. You're making me blush."

"Oh, miss your human wife already, do you?"

He shrugged. "She was easy enough to find... and convince."

"With that charming smile of yours."

"And so, what is your plan in teaching him, that, Raina?"

It came suddenly from her fellow's mouth. His eyes came up in a flash, with it. He meant the mandolin. The torturesome mandolin.

"You know it's never good to let them feel that much."

"I didn't teach him," she defended. She waved her fellow off. She straightened up, and jerked her hair back.

"Besides, he already knew. It was a gift of his."

"From the dark one?" her fellow confirmed.

She admitted a nod.

His tone was all incredulous. "And *you* returned it to him?"

"YES!" she squealed, and tapped her palms together in a delighted clap. "Can you imagine how it irked Him. All his hours, perhaps years, of gentle work, and pleading. And I stole it from Him!"

"You don't think of it as dangerous?"

"Dangerous?" She laughed outright. "That boy?" she repeated. "Anything, dangerous?"

"He is one of the artisans. And I saw him on Vebrekion. He's no joke."

"Perhaps not then, but in my grasp." She spread her palm out. Wow, but her fingers were so lovely. She twitched them slowly, one by one, long-nailed and slender. She thought she would have to put it in the young boy's head to begin to buy her beautiful things. Beautiful things for her, like rings, and jewels. Imagine that! Imagine, him giving his gifts, perhaps his first-fruits even to her — and from the enemy's bounty no less! Oh, but it was delightful. Why couldn't her fellow see the music in it?

"Speaking of grasps," he said, "he was watching his hand today. *Staring* at it, more like," her fellow said. In a certain tone he added, "He might have more weapons than you've given him."

"You lie!" she screeched, suddenly all her pleasure gone. Suddenly furious. Heat boiled up her neck, into her temples like fire that threatened to burn this visage full off of her.

Her fellow shrugged. "You wanted me as a spy. I'm just telling you what I saw."

"You're reconnaissance skills aren't so much to be desired, brother, not after what happened to Atmas."

He didn't respond.

She bit her beautiful lip. She told him, "He can't have power. It's against the laws."
"You know all the laws? Are you certain?"
"All of *his*?" she chortled. "What does he have, but one or two."
"You forget we're in the time of Zeta. Many believe in many more than that."
"One or one-hundred," she tossed her hand. "So say the child does have power. Then it is mine. I own him."
"You'd best not let him catch you saying that?" her fellow took a careful glance back out the hall.
There was a sound there.
The boy? No. No. That could ruin everything.
Quickly, she rose up from the bed, and moved across the room to the doorway. Her "father" remained hidden against the wall—now back to his present form. She saw the shadow first, frozen against the parchment wall. Then moved our far enough to see the miniature form that matched it.
It was as she'd expected—that stupid, useless slave girl.
She'd frozen, with a stack of towels in her arms. She must have been putting them up into the cabinet. Her eyes were wet with shock, like they'd been just hours ago, when Raina had thrown the drink she'd brought across the room.
The girl. A mutant. A monster. One of the rejected of the father's chosen. The tongue in her throat wasn't of use to the thoughts that floated in the mind above it. And Raina could read the thoughts—for that was a thing that Raina's kind could do.
The thoughts were all fear. And uncertainty. And terror.
She kept her gaze downcast, as if she wouldn't be noticed if she didn't move an inch.
Raina grew a great grin.
What had she heard?
What did it matter? What could she say?
"Almost finished there, dear?" Raina called sweetly.
The slave girl gasped. She bowed her head, and tried to mumble apologies that stuck in her throat. Without moving back, Raina reached her long fingers, to grab her fellow's tunic, and brought her father into view for the girl to see.
"Let the mistress of the house know her husband won't be joining her tonight, hmm?"
Tertius laughed. It sounded different now, coming from his new form. She eyed him, losing temper; she could tell he thought her silly, playing humans.
By the time, she forced him quiet, the girl had raced off—taking her towels with her.
Raina huffed.
"You're a monster, my lady," Tertius said.
He moved away from her—into the hall. So he wouldn't stay? Not even to plan so many cruel things? He looked so human. So old.
"What a thing to call your daughter," she retorted with cold eyes.
What she meant was, what a thing to call your queen.
He understood the intent.
He bowed. "Your bidding, is my will. But I will visit my new wife. We must keep the ruse after all." He pressed his lips rueful.
Then he was gone, whistling as he went—whistling as he was famous for.
Raina dropped her head back against the door frame.
"Yes." She watched the door to the room of the stolen one. "Yes, we must."

#

The next three weeks were the best of my life. Well, at least so far as I could remember. I did not go to Gaul. I did not join the legionnaires. I joined the other guard in serving on Capitoline hill. But the nights...
It was Raina who first taught me. She began where Uncle had ended. Baths, temples, parties, rides through surrounding country, weekends spent at this or so person's villa. At first I saw a lot of her, but once I'd met a good number of her friends, she grew busy with work. Then it was her friends, and my friends from the guard, and everyone together. I never did find out what her work was. I learned how to shop, really shop, with the money I had, in the markets. Mostly I bought gifts for Aunty and Raina.
Everyone loved me. Everyone loved everyone. Everyone wanted to have fun. No one cared about anything—except those things that it was important to care about. Like pride, and decency, and loyalty.

The only thing I never did was go to the coliseum. I didn't like the killing. Why? So, I spent that time finding a group of Greeks, or Spaniards, some kind of foreigners. And then I would play. I would play my music. Fight like my father, and play like my mother—even if I didn't really remember them at all. But the best night of all. The best by far, of my entire 4 month life, was the last night of that three weeks. We were at a party. And I saw a girl. And she sang. And it was the most beautiful sound I had ever heard.

Chapter 2: Zeta

EVELYN:

We were in a place called the *subura*. It was like a patch of Tiver to me, planted at the center of the much louder and more violent place. A city more like Fera, in its degree of corruption. The place we were in was supposed to be its darkest part.

With thin alleyways, and ash instead of golden walls. The markets weren't bright, and filled with jewels, and foreign delicacies. The smell wasn't wondrous. The shouts came often. Fights. Mobs, in the night.

Ikovos and I were on a second or third level, to one of the buildings (they weren't laid out clearly so that it was difficult to tell). We were up above a seldom-entered shop. Our room wasn't more than two adjoining spaces. And it was noticeably opened to the outside air.

In fact that was where I stared to now. I'd woken again, early from my sleep. Why not? Now the sky was the way it used to look at dusk on our world. Purple, and blue, and stars, with the smallest hint of gold lining the horizon. But the horizon was all city-stone, and great constructions.

But how could I call them great? —after I'd been to Fera, with its mile-high sky-scrappers? Why did this place seem so much bigger? Why?

"Can't sleep?" I heard behind me.

It was the groggy voice I was used to hearing about this time. Somehow he seemed to wake almost exactly an hour after I had.

I had the thin, wool, blanket I used wrapped over my head and around my body. The "window" to the outside of our apartment was where I faced; I was directly on the edge of it. It was certainly more like a large break into the wall—part of the corner of the ceiling was cut off—but since it was high enough to avoid the bedlam of the alleys below, and since it wasn't cold, and since it let the air in, I didn't mind it.

No, I didn't mind when it meant I could look across the city, and pray.

"How long ago?" he continued.

I hadn't meant not to answer.

I replied faster. "Not long. It's early."

"Yeah." He paused. I could imagine his golden hair tussled, his blanket likewise folded over his body. A body, like mine, that must have been just as sore from endless walking, as constant stagnancy.

It seemed always we were doing something here, while never doing anything at all.

"You should try to go back to sleep," he drawled out.

It was like clockwork; he always said it. But eventually he'd sort of given up putting any weight behind it. And today, he hadn't hardly gotten the words out, then he knelt beside me, one knee bent to the stone, one under him. His face was purple pale in the light. He smiled when I looked at him. I matched it.

Then I looked back out at the starry sky, and thought of the night he'd left.

Not Ikovos.

Jaden.

"I don't want to be patient any longer!" he had shouted.

And purple, white, and blue lightning had shot out around him from the portals. The three portals in the chamber of Lange's Inc on Fera. And his hair had been whipped by the wind. And the sound was deafening, but not so frightening as his voice.

I had scooted back.

Then the Gaeln had come. And Jaden'd said so many things. So many things. "Take it," holding up the black book, "Take it and let us go home. I killed your Meoden, now you give me what you owe me."

I couldn't think anymore, why he had wanted to go home so badly; why he had seemed in such a rush to enter

our portal... I couldn't envision him going back to the Order, in the state he had been in to leave us the way he had.

Everything had changed after he'd asked the Gaeln to go.

He'd said, "You two are going to be so happy together. I don't know why I never saw it."

Then while Ikovos had argued with the Gaeln, Jaden'd said to me: "You know, I was always really sure, if I could have been older... If I could just have been a little bit older. A little stronger, I could have stopped the Meoden from hurting my family. It's always what I wanted to do, at the lodge, get strong enough to help them."

When I tried to think back now to how sorry he'd looked... the thing that didn't make sense to me was how angry he'd been just a moment before. How could he have been so strong, then so weak?

I shivered.

"You're thinking about it again?" Ikovos accused.

"No, I'm not."

It had already been a well-acknowledged, and agreed-upon plan between the two of us: not to think of that night repeatedly. We had, of course, gone over and over and over it, the first week we'd come to this city. Rome. But it had gotten us nowhere, and then I'd found it in my book: Do not earnestly remember the old things; behold, I am doing something brand new.

Who was it that was doing something brand new? I did not know. Honestly, I hoped it was Jaden, since his old things weren't that great. But it gave both Ikovos and I peace we'd been lacking trying to figure it all out.

Oh, what had we asked ourselves?

How long had he planned it?

Was he thinking of leaving before that moment?

Would he have left at the lodge?

The book, the silver book of the Gaeln. I should have known, but Ikovos had brought it from the old apartment on Fera... Well, really Jaden had brought it, but he'd given it to Ikovos just before we'd entered Lange Inc. Or so it had been told to me by Ikovos. Part of me wished that Jaden had taken it; that he still had it. But I couldn't change the past.

Ikovos shifted. He'd stood up, and now came back, the fore-mentioned silver book in his hands. "Wanna read some?" he asked.

I studied the cover a minute. It had grown dustier to my eyes, than it had been on our world—bright and glowing. Just now, when I saw it, I thought of Jaden crowding me back against the dresser of my room, where it had once sat hidden. I thought of his laughter, and smile. "I don't think so."

"Come on; it always makes us feel better."

"Sometimes I think it's all just a fairytale."

Ikovos had begun to peel it open. Now he closed it; he used it to gesture to the day paling city. "As opposed to all of this? If I doubt the Gaeln's existence at this point, I'd say we're rather screwed. And you were the one that believed in them, when we'd never seen anything like them!"

"If they are so good, then why did Jaden leave?"

Ikovos grew very quiet for a moment, watching the alley. It was when a dog made a call below that he sighed, and said: "I don't know."

I dropped my forehead into my hands, feeling my bones cringing from weight.

I felt a hand on my back. "There will be an answer, Evelyn. We'll find him."

He tapped me until I looked up his way—into his bright blue eyes, holding so much hope. Like, the last time we had moved to a new world, he looked different, and I knew I did as well: he had told me. Better to match the new surroundings. My hair was lighter gold, more to what it had been on our world. And Ikovos' had gotten much darker: A sanded blond now. Almost bronze. His skin wasn't as pink as before. Mine also, finally, wasn't as pale: but that might have had more to do with the months roaming streets in the sun.

I finally nodded.

He matched it, then held out the book. "Okay. I'm going to read now," he said.

Then he didn't wait for me to confirm it.

And he was right that it did help. Every day, it helped.

IKOVOS:

We met Saint Laurence three weeks after the first night we'd come to Zeta. (Zeta was the name for this place and time, as told by the Gaeln. I wasn't about to not pay attention to those sorts of things nowadays!). And I remembered the first sight we'd had of this place.

Boom!

We'd come crashing into a field of grass. The sky up above had been sparkling blue stars and paling purple. I didn't know whether it was dusk or dawn. But everything around had been so plain and un-skyscrapered. No technology. No ships in the sky. No *sights* in the sky!

And the feeling of my back slapping the ground and knocking the breath right out of me had been so familiar... for a moment. I had looked up at the sky and laughed. Then I'd heard a yelp, and a puff of dust and pale grass came up and told me Evelyn had landed on the ground just beside me.

She coughed and coughed, and tried to sit up, then saw me. And fell back and coughed some more. I didn't know if it was because she'd seen my smile, or because she'd seen the sparkling sky and had thought the same as me, but she started laughing too. Her laugh was high and light, and sweet. And like I hadn't heard from her in a while, maybe not since we'd first met at the last portal on our world.

This place had done the same thing as last time: while her hair wasn't much a different color, it had grown longer and wavier. It was strange seeing the stark difference.

I said, "Evelyn?"

"Yeah?"

"I'm just making sure it's you."

"I'm not really feeling like I remember where I am." She giggled. She said, "You look like your normal self again."

She still wasn't looking at me.

I asked: "What does that mean?"

"I don't know. I feel like we're back on our world..." She paused. Some of the smile was lost from her voice, when she added, "I feel like none of it ever happened."

I coughed, again. This time maybe it was a little forced.

I think everything came swelling back to us at the same time then.

Everything... what was the most of that?... *Jaden*. Sure, the Gaeln, and Endome, and Meoden, and Lange, and secret words and sayings, too. But mainly, *Jaden*.

I pushed myself up on my arms. I dusted the top of my head, and dirt came pouring out over me. It was different, my hair. Shorter. Great, I'd gotten an inter-dimensional hair-cut. I was really grateful that the big guys in charge were taking care of the important issues. Rolling my eyes, I readjusted my glasses, and whipped them with my thumbs, so I could see out across the field, and get a better idea of our surroundings... and then, I realized that I *had* glasses to readjust. I had glasses. I had glasses!

"Ah-hih!" I squeaked. I wasn't just sure what sound exactly it was. But I took the glasses off, and held them up between me and the sky at the same time. I looked Evelyn's way, to see if she'd noticed my great discovery.

The coldness that had swelled over me, seemed to be affecting her, still more distractingly. She was half sat up, but turned, trying to readjust her hair and jacket. She wore the same clothes from Fera: A green sweater, and plain black pants. She looked like she was about to cry, but a second later she did look my way: like she'd only then just heard me. "What? What is it?" she demanded.

It looked as if I'd panicked her.

I tipped a smile, and said: "Just these. I have them."

She glanced between me and the glasses. She grew a great grin. "Your glasses! Yay. You can see."

"Well, I don't need them all the time," I said rubbing them clear of dust again, then re-situated them. I widened my lids, and blinked my eyes against the new sight. It wasn't exactly true what I said. At one point, sure, I hadn't needed them too much. But now it seemed like more and more, I couldn't see something far or something close. Just in between was fine, really; I thought I should tell Evelyn that.

But first she asked, "Where are we?"

"Zeta," I replied. At the same time, I searched in all directions. It really was just a field. In the distance (it was a little dark), but maybe those were mountain ranges. Well, more like hill-ranges. Not too big, just a lot of them. I saw an edge of outcropping trees. No lights. The disconcerting thing was everything but grass was too far away to really reach for a while; everything was open.

So the question was...

Where was *Jaden*?

"Where is he?" she asked.

Of course she did. I swallowed and didn't even try to look her way. Maybe her big eyes would be getting glossy. And what would I do with that, because the truth was, I'd just been about to leave her too, when *Jaden* had first disappeared. I wasn't going to be able to never say a thing about that. What—I could argue, it had been

instinctual. He'd gone. Gone through the portal, I'd just, it was just what I did. Follow Jaden. Okay, so I hadn't thought of Evelyn. *Well, you would have followed.* Could I say that? No. The truth was I'd just forgotten her. Evelyn, I loved, but I'd met only a year or so ago. I'd known Jaden forever, and when he'd gone through that orb, I had forgotten her in sight of his distress.

She sighed. I pushed my glasses up. She stood, then turned looking all directions. She made a sort of dancing twirl, the way she turned.

I got up to my own feet. I didn't want to think of what I thought I knew; that he wasn't here—did that mean he'd raced off in fear that we'd come after him? Or had the portal set us somewhere else?

Evelyn had begun straightening her hair behind her ears, or half-tying it, the way she did, when she was really freaking. "Where is he?" she asked. "Where is he? Which way did he go? We followed right after him? Where is he? Where is he?"

I wanted to tell her to calm down; but I wasn't calm. I looked just like she did. Though the night was quiet, and this place filled with the soothing smell of fresh nature—and with a slow breeze to boot—the more turns I made that didn't show any signs of my friend running off this way or that, made me panic. No worse, it made me sick. It had been alright to be confident with the ten-foot Gaeln there, saying everything was going to be okay. I mean, I hadn't really even been confident then! But now I felt like I should question whether this portal will have even *brought* us to the same place as Jaden.

I turned and scratched the back of my head.

Then I heard a string of words, to the tune of my own voice:

"You idiot! You're such an idiot! You're just a baby. You're just scared. You're an idiot!"

I had said that to Jaden not five minutes ago. And I'd tried to punch him, hadn't I?

I gripped that same fist now. I closed my eyes, then I took Evelyn's wrist, where she was still turning and twirling in a fuss. "Evelyn," I said firmly.

It wasn't until my voice that she stopped.

I waited till she hadn't just glanced, but really looked at me. Her chest was rising and falling from her effort of breath.

I made myself smile. I heard: "You're just a baby. You're just scared."

I said: "There's nothing to be afraid of," Her eyes went a little wider. I brought my head a little higher, and prayed under my breath, I'd have the words the Gaeln seemed to that sounded like bells and made everything better—not just for her, but for me! "Everything's going to be alright. Jaden's fine, and the Gaeln must have known what they were doing sending us to this spot."

She blinked, once then twice. It was like she was wondering whether she could trust me (I was wondering that myself!) Except that I was sure it was the wrong thing to do to panic. "You okay," I added.

"Adzamaruha," she said, "Remember, he said," She bit her lip, and cut off.

I asked, "Are you talking about something he said in Lange, Inc?"

She nodded. "It's just when they were talking about me coming here, before. Patheos and him. Remember he asked, that I wouldn't get sent into the city?"

Okay. I did sort of recall that. Adzama had asked something like: please don't send my apprentice into that den of evil. But that had been before Jaden. Could it still apply? "Wait. Hadn't Adzama said that he was coming here too at some point?"

Evelyn nodded. "Yes. He asked that we'd have a residing place outside the city."

"So, what? You think Jaden got dumped there, and we're out here?"

Oops. So much for my new endeavors in reassuring. Her sweet face contorted. Her eyes pooled. Her arms crossed. She said, "So we're here, in the grass, and he's in some wicked city! Some wicked city that even Adzamaruha didn't want me to go to, but I'm not the one that isn't well. Jaden is. What if he does something? What if something happens to him? What if—"

It was just in the middle of this, and me narrowing with great fear of her, and disappointment in myself, that we heard a sound. Not a loud or scary sound. A simple coo. It came from above. We both looked, me re-adjusting my glasses... to see a pale grey dove crossing the starred purple sky. It must have been dusk, after all; it was getting darker.

Evelyn sniffed. The dove made a careful swirl, and curve above our heads. I wanted to remind her about her name, its meaning (of course I thought of it) like a bird. Like that bird. Free! That's what Evelyn was supposed to be... but she didn't look that way now. Her face was almost distorted with fear.

The dove rolled the lowest point to us, and called again—I was almost sure that it had looked directly at me—then it raced away across the field.

I didn't pause. I hadn't glanced around the ground to make sure we hadn't lost anything. I just grabbed Evelyn's hand, and pulled her.

"Come on," I ordered.

"What? Why?"

But I didn't let her argue. Right. We'd done this before right. I could remember pulling her through the halls of the Order—that time after Jaden and I had been gone for half a week. Jaden... just another example of my following him without much thought behind it.

Jaden... racing after those ones that had hurt our parents.

Now, racing through the field, with Evelyn's hand in mine, I had to close my eyes against all the things I hadn't done right. I hadn't talked through the anger with him enough. I hadn't made sure he was even ready to really go to Fera. And the room, before the party—up top. I'd been so stupid. So stupid. How could I not have realized what he would think? No. Forget that! How could he have *thought* that?

"Ikovos, you're going to fast," Evelyn called.

I slowed. I said, "Sorry." I resituated her hand, so I wouldn't be tugging so hard. But the bird was disappearing through trees. I added, "But we have to hurry. See, it's leaving."

"We're just going to follow a bird all day? Why are we following it?"

"I don't know. I'm sure we're supposed to."

I cracked branches beneath my feet. We had entered the woods. My boots, our clothes, it all seemed so strange now that we were in this sort of environment. We should have been dressed in our order clothes. I should have been marching beside Jaden in leather, and things should have been easier.

"Wait. Look! There."

Evelyn had pointed to a high branch, where— yes, the dove had settled.

I nudged her. "Good eye."

"What's the point, though? It'll just fly away in a minute."

We stopped there below it. Now I couldn't really see which way the field had gone; there were just woods all around us. I took a great breath, looking up. Evelyn beside me, at the base of the tree.

"Well," I began, stretching my hand up.

She was eyeing me strangely. First, she'd started with watching, hopeful. Maybe she'd thought I was going to do something great with the bird. Then, as it seemed, I hadn't given positive evidence, she started fuming.

"Well, what?"

"It's there. We're closer."

"Closer to what? Now we've only lost our place in the field."

I spread my arms. What was I supposed to say; I'd *felt* like we were supposed to follow. I closed my eyes, and pressed my palms together, up in front of my face, so that my thumbs were touching my nose.

"What are you doing?" Evelyn asked.

"I don't know. It's not thinking. I'm pleading."

"With who?" She must have looked up. Her tone changed. "The bird? Ikovos... "

"No! Not with the bird!—"

Then I didn't get to finish yelling at her. I saw a figure behind her. Purple and blue, but all wrapped in a cloak. He stood at the crest of the hill of the forest. His arms were crossed un-perturbed and he waved us to him.

Evelyn noticed my distraction. I pointed to advise her. Look behind.

She spun. At the same time, the dove flew off the tree branch, and went to fly over the head of Adzamaruha—nearly swooping directly over him.

He didn't speak to us; or wait to see we'd follow.

He turned slowly, and started walking.

I stepped a little forward into view of my friend, and gave her a face that said, "Did you see the bird? Evelyn?"

She slid her arms into a crossed position, then sighed, and said, "Oh fine. You were right. We were supposed to follow the bird." Then she trudged off after Adzama, and I came slowly behind her. Soon enough she mumbled, "That doesn't mean you should be praying to it though... "

And I didn't know just what that meant. Praying... what was that? I mean, I sort of knew, in theory, but... was that what I'd been doing? I guess I had been asking for some sort of help, and then Adzama...

I glanced warily down at my own hands. I touched the fingers of one then the other together—there wasn't really any sort of spark. But it reminded me suddenly of magic. My hand, and the way the mind worked, when casting a spell. Pleading, make this happen, then the power was already there. Just like I'd explained it with Evelyn—only you always need to be connected with your emotions first, to cast a spell; you had to understand

what was going on inside—was this other thing the same?

"Look, a cabin!" Evelyn squealed "Yay! A cabin. Oh... and Adzama went in. I can hardly bear it, it's so perfect. I don't know what Patheos was saying about this place being terrible, do you?"

I didn't really. Not by the sight of the small stone square hut, with pouring chimney-smoke, and warm gold within. All the trees, and leaves around it were richer gold than the rest of the forest. No, I didn't really think it was terrible.

But that was because we hadn't been to the city yet.

#

We spent three days at the cabin with Adzama. He was his normal, crazy self—that had me thinking, I was glad we hadn't found Jaden yet. Because if we told him he had to admit inferiority to this guy, to do with scope of knowledge and purpose here, then he would have left all over again in the direction of anywhere.

Why could I admit that so freely now? —But then I'd been so surprised he'd left. Or had I? Maybe I'd just wanted to think better of him than that.

"What do you mean, we still don't have magic?" I begged Adzama one day.

It should have been something I'd asked earlier right? But I hadn't; he'd kept us so busy reading history and information on the city we were close to. Rome. And facts about its recent wars, particularly some great battles to the south, where they'd overtaken an entire civilization.

I didn't like reading about that stuff. Skirmishes, and even battles with Meoden on our world, was one thing—but these casualties were in the thousands. And it hadn't stopped! They still killed in the city of Rome—and for fun! For entertainment, they would kill people. They made men and women, children, work for no money. How had I thought of Fera as so terrible a place? This was worse. And I couldn't even defend myself? Evelyn couldn't?

I slammed the book Adzama had given me against his coffee table. By now he'd gotten us new clothes of this land, that weren't very encouraging for making me love the place. I mean, I had no pants; that was the main trouble for me.

I spread my arms. "We should have magic. We came here officially this time."

Adzama shook his head. He didn't look up from the book, he was studying. Evelyn was outside. Reading, just the same as me, but she preferred it on the hill out back. If I turned I could glance her now, beside a tree.

"Hello? Did you hear my question?"

"Did you hear what happened to young yipper-snappers who disrespected their elders in those law-books you've been reading?"

"Yeah. They got pelted with stones. Big deal—it seems like the best of rewards you can expect to receive around this place. What's that got to do with my magic? My powers. Am I an artisan or not? I should be able to —"

What did I want to say? I glanced out the widow towards Evelyn. I supposed I shouldn't complain about my clothes; I had a feeling she wasn't happy to be wearing dresses all the time. She wore a white one now. Her hair was falling long. Her book open almost to the end.

What did I want to say?

Heal people. I should be able to heal people. I should be able to help them. To protect them.

I gripped my fist at my side, then finished out, "I'm sorry I disrespected you, Adzamaruha. Really, I'm grateful you're even acknowledging my presence." I said this desperately, tossing a hand out.

The wizened wizard brought his bushy brows a little higher. But not in pride, or chastisement. He lowered the book he was marking. I thought he meant to tell me something helpful.

"Ikovos of the Order?"

"Yes?" I responded. I liked that name, liked remembering home which it hurt to miss.

"Do you believe in something good and bigger than you?"

"I should hope so," I responded automatically.

And I'd done it without thinking. Because it was *really* true, that I did, because *really* I had to, or what would everything be. ... But had I ever really thought of that?

He nodded. "Good. Then do you believe it's in control now? Whether you have your powers here or not."

"I just don't see—"

"Wait, and take heed to the question, Ikovos Labhrainn. Do you believe there's a great force or not, and if it knows and does good, and guides, wouldn't there be a reason you don't have your powers?"

"I can't see a reason."

"I know. Isn't it wonderful?"

"What?"

He leaned forward, in excitement. "In that state... when you can't see anything. Then there is only one place to go. And you are preparing for it."

I narrowed. I looked at the many books strewn about us. Histories. Laws. Deaths and pain, in prose. What could it be preparing me for? Or where was the one place to go?

"Do you want me to give you something greater than magic? At least... greater than magic, now, for healing, to help your friend?"

"My friend? You mean Jaden? Adzama! —you *do* know where he is. Tell me. Please."

Adzama scoffed and waved, and promised: "No, no. I do not know that. That is not it." He wagged his head.

"Will you forget about him? I mean your friend, here, now. My apprentice outside."

I would have gotten more upset—him telling me to forget Jaden like that—except that he had mentioned Evelyn. And helping her. Helping Evelyn.

I straightened up. "What? What, tell me please."

"It's in this book," Adzama said. He tossed me the one set out at the center of the table.

Oh. The silver one. Right, the only one *I'd* added to the bunch—but why would I read a book of stories (or even, admittedly, potential facts) from *our* world, to help in this one? To help Evelyn, what could it do?

"*That* will help me heal her?" I asked skeptically.

Instead of replying, denying or confirming, Adzama rolled his lips, then opened up the book to a page near the center. He marked a line with his thumb, then handed the thing to me.

I was about willing to do anything to get my skills back, so I read it carefully. It said:

"Let me sing of and for my greatly beloved a tender song of my beloved concerning his vineyard. My greatly beloved had a vineyard on a very fruitful hill. And he dug and trenched the ground and gathered out the stones from it and planted it with the choicest vine and built a tower in the midst of it and hewed out a winepress in it. And He looked for it to bring forth grapes, and it brought forth wild grapes."

I read it not in my head, but aloud. I looked up at Adzama. "So, what? Is Jaden the wild grape? Or did we not trench enough? Should I go get Evelyn a glass of grape-juice?"

"Are you willfully dull?" he said.

I huffed. Then looked back down. I reread the words, and swallowed. "I don't know," I said. "But—"

"But?" he prodded on.

"Well, I don't think I understand all what it means," I admitted.

"And yet you are hearing something?"

"An idea," I confirmed.

Adzama leaned back—seemingly contented, he crossed his arms wide, and lifted his bushy brows again. "You can never know what it might say to you, for those words are alive. I couldn't tell you what it said, any better than I could name the next plant that might spring up in a patch of wild-flowers, but commit your heart to understanding it, and you will hear. You'll see."

I narrowed again. I wish he wouldn't say things like that: things that made me sure if Jaden were here, that Jaden would leave... At the same time, I thought: What if everyone spoke this way—if it really was an answer? Would it matter? What if he was right? Would it matter the way he said it?

I had sudden energy in my body. I jumped up, and made to set the book back down. On second thought, I tucked it back into my shirt.

Adzama grinned, turning back to his work.

Recollecting myself once, I made for the door. Stopping I did say: "Oh. Thank you Adzamaruha, sir." Mostly just for fear of that stoning-punishment we'd discussed.

Adzama didn't miss a beat, raising his hand in perfect expectation he would get no less.

The air was fresher, than it had been last time I'd gone out. As usual, there was nothing to see there. Just trees. A brook stood to the west, but it didn't attract any pedestrians. I went around the back. Evelyn was leaned against the same large boulder—out beside a tree. She did not look like she belonged anywhere but here, on Zeta, in that sort of dress, with a book in her hand like that. And standing.

But she looked up at my approach, and I could see it distracted the calm brought from her concentration. I tried to smile, but it was almost as if she were immediately searching behind me to see if I hadn't found Jaden and brought him with me. Stupid Jaden. How could he have ever thought she'd be alright without him? With just me? When I saw him next, I was sure I *wasn't* sure, would I punch him or hug him?

"Ikovos, this is strange reading, hunh?" Evelyn remarked. Her eyes went wide, and she said, "I've just read of a

man, twice as tall as you or me, who fought another little fellow with nothing but a sling, and you'll never guess who won."

"Er... since it must be an exception..." I stopped close by her.

She confirmed. "Yeah. You're right. The little one. He goes on to become a king. It's all really wonderful. What about you? What are you reading?"

"Well..." I still had that book pressed against my back, I could feel it almost like it was pulsing, reminding me of its words, prodding me on to say them. I tried lightly, "I guess I got distracted because I found out we couldn't use magic."

"Oh." Evelyn said. She looked down—just at the grass, and not for very long. She added, "Yeah, I guess I figured that was how it would be. For me at least. But Ikovos, I'm sorry. I thought maybe you would. It doesn't seem fair—did you ask Adzama about it?"

"Oh yes. He was opaque as usual with an answer."

We both shared a rueful smirk.

"But actually, he did have an idea, I mean," I stumbled over the words, whether to bring the book out, or just.

Evelyn narrowed, I said, "I mean, it was sort of his idea, sort of mine, sort of this book, that one book you, know, the silver one. But anyways, I just thought, I had an idea that you could—"

"Me?" she interrupted. Well, not really interrupted, since I'd really hesitated right then, not knowing how to continue. She'd probably been kind in rescuing me. Now, she added, "Ikovos, I don't think I'm going to be able to use magic; I'm not even sure how valuable it would be here." She pressed her lips, then seemed to nod in confirmation of her own thoughts, "You should work on fixing yours. That's what we need: Defense magic—"

"But Evelyn, that's what I'm trying to tell you about. I've had an idea."

She paused again, surprised. Then, she seemed to smile, with full delight, and asked, "For me? You have an idea then? Well, tell me! I want to hear. I'll do anything to help."

I cleared my throat. I felt warm. "Well, it's a little different maybe. It's just an idea."

"Is it really that scary?"

"It was just I was reading about this winepress, and this wine, and bad fruit, and well, it talked about— I mean it mentioned singing. If you were a saint, singing. So I think you should. Well, I just think you should sing. It's not just that part. I read it somewhere else, in one of those laws, it said the joyful sing. Maybe we can be joyful, I mean, maybe it can help you to be happy, to sing."

She really hesitated. She blinked her big eyes. I wasn't sure a second, if I hadn't—in her mind—just joined the ranks of Adzamaruha in crazy level, but had she ever thought he was as crazy as Jaden and I had.

Instead of responding, anyways, in scorn like I'd thought, she bit her lip worriedly, then turned. Then looked down, then up at the tree-line. She said, "I'm not sure..."

"Why not?" I stepped closer again.

She glanced back my way, like she was afraid of my nearness.

She answered, "It's just not what one does when... I mean, when you're in distress. Right? With Jaden and everything. I couldn't. No." she confirmed herself with a head shake. "No, I'm sure I couldn't sing."

"You sang in front of all those men at Endome. This is just the trees and Adzama and me. It couldn't be much different. I mean, it should be easier."

"It's not. It's different. It was easier... then."

"Easier?"

"Things were different," she continued, "Back then, when Jaden heard me, when he was there, he liked it. Or at least I'd thought... no I'm not so sure he didn't hate it—that it wasn't what drove him off."

"Evelyn—"

"No, don't try to say something to make me feel better," she chortled, almost hysterically, "I don't think you ever expected him to go really. And it wasn't as if he was leaving you before I came along."

"Evelyn, it's different than that. —So many things happened."

She blinked long, and looked down. Her page was still held by her finger, to its spot; the whole book tightened in her grip—I had a feeling with more care-hearted pressure than it was used to.

I asked, "Umm... will you just try it?"

She paused a moment. But only a moment, then turned and huffed: "Why?"

I didn't have to think to answer, "Because when you came to me and told me about the Gaeln back on our world, I believed you that they existed. At least I was open to it. And I went with you to the summit. All I'm asking you now is that you trust me."

It was the best shot I could give it. Should I have added that I'd *also* found this unusual idea in the silver book?

Would that have helped convince her? For some reason I thought she should just do it because I'd asked. And she did. She studied me another moment. Then she nodded her head. I smiled. —near grinned. I stood up a little taller, then I waited. It was a little while, then I said, "I thought—" She scoffed, "I'm not going to do it, now. I'll try just... go back inside." "There's a window. I'll still hear you." I was grinning. She was too, well mostly. She was really going to try this. I had this urgent sensation it was going to help. She replied, "Yes, but that's—" Then suddenly she cut off. She watched the trees, then watched a bird up in their tops, one or two birds actually were there. Then she shrugged, "Oh never mind. I think I'll sing something about large cities. I know one about Domah. What do you think?" I answered with a hand toss, "It's a start." And so it was. Evelyn sang many hours, many nights and days after that. Through the days when Adzama started to bring us into the outlying city-town close by named Ansem. Through the hours, the night before he'd set us to packing up bags for a journey ahead. —through actually journeying from Ansem, to the great capital of Italy, Rome. And then finally, marching the streets, once we'd settled into our upper apartment in a small, inexpensive part of the city called the subura (inexpensive was a kind way to put it). She sang. And it was singing one day, that Saint Laurence, feeding the nearby destitute, met us.

#

Smoke went up from His nostrils, and devouring fire from His mouth; coals were kindled by it.

Adzama had sent us into this place with nothing more than the bags on our backs (with a few changes clothes, even less food) and a map for how to reach the apartment where we would be staying. The map, had sort of reminded me of Sophie's maps back at the Order. She had used to draw and write directions for Jaden and I, when we'd first begun travelling to the larger towns to get supplies. They were always sort of like a bunch of squiggly snakes on a page, with little boxes next to them... and the hardest part was you couldn't tell which squiggly lines were letters, and which were the trail. It didn't seem to matter once we got to the city anyways. It was sort of like it had been for Evelyn, with Jaden and I, turning around to see Rizenn. Rome. This place wasn't high, but it was big—and there must have been a lot of hills inside of it, because it was by no means plain and level. Coming in, the sun had been pouring down on us, and just like Rizenn, there had been a cool river off, cutting through the land preceding the city, and going on straight through. We'd been talking about how nice it might be to take a swim in it, until it had started to smell. The closer we got, the worse. By the time, we were touching upon our first outposts, travelers like us were crowding the roads. By the time we touched the walls, there were tens, perhaps hundreds or sellers, with carts, and men, and food, and slaves. Or men on horses, which apparently weren't allowed inside the city this time of day. Neither were carts. Roman soldiers were everywhere. Adzama had warned us about them; I myself remembered reading some tales (or was it history?) of extreme brutalities they'd committed in the lands they'd conquered. I kept Evelyn close to my side going through. We had papers to get us past the entrance—produced of course by Adzamaruha. It was very strange, but when we first came to the front of the place, all the voices the people had been using sounded strange to us. Like *calimum partum*. And *nocturn nos*. Slowly, that changed. Until I was sure Evelyn and I were saying the same things. Then we had the new conundrum of navigating this place. Animals, people, soldiers, booths, markets, all of it was too big and too loud. We spent that first half-day just walking against the edges, against buildings, in alleyways. Probably half of all we did was stare around, looking for Jaden. Then finally, we heard the word subura. We asked the person, who directed us across a bridge, to an eastern corner of the city. There were still markets here, but not so loud and active—not so many finely dressed people. There were lots of people, we learned quickly, who had no access to food. They would grab our feet and beg us for something. That was how we'd lost our food all in the first day. Then finally we had come to a corner shop, an empty space. Was it Adzama's when active? It seemed it would

be. There was a counter and shelves, decked with old bottles. Herbs and dead plants. Dust, of course. And candles.

Evelyn had stopped at the door, like it must definitely have been the place nearest to Jaden. I'd walked in and traced my palm over the counter, feeling smudging dirt, then wiping it off between two palms.

Up the back, behind the counter, was a thin stairwell, that led to where we slept: a simple room of stone, with half a wall knocked out. A closet. It didn't even have a washroom, which we soon discovered was shared communally in a building nearby.

We'd settled in, and taken to searching at first 3 hours, then four or five, then about all day for Jaden outside. At the same time, we had to open up the shop for Adzama. That was all he'd told us for instruction from the Gaeln. So, we cleaned it evenings, often to the tune of Evelyn singing, and so often through the night. Then (with Adzama's hidden funds) we went about choosing items for stock. Healing items, that's what we were going to sell. And we used a mix of Adzamaruha's illustrated books, and my past knowledge of herbs to assist us. Of course we also had the market itself close by, and Adzama began after we had official opened shop to send us rarer things from the forests.

It was strange that the plants were the same. I guess I hadn't noticed that on Fera, where there didn't seem to be any in the city, except the strange decorative trees. I found a lot of peace in that; examining the familiar leaves, matching roots and smells to old pictures and descriptions. Before long Evelyn took to wearing a shawl over her head, as some here did. She would cover it from her forehead, stretched over her hair, then tie it back behind her ears. It was better when we spent hours in the sun looking for Jaden. We were closed most the time anyways, for that reason. We opened early morning, when most shoppers would be in. Closed at the fourth hour (which was 10 here), then didn't open back up again until three—and that for only an hour or two. If Evelyn or I were in, we would leave the door open for customers. We needed the money for food after all. We weren't exceptionally busy, but we made enough to get by and restore Adzama's deposit.

But before we'd even gotten along that far, one late evening—when Evelyn and I had just gotten back from exploring the Aventine area (that was one of the hills of the city), we had an unexpected visitor.

We were both leaned over the counter. Evelyn had just put away a stack of bottles on the shelves. I stuck my sandaled foot out and pointed down at my map, a quill in my mouth. "Alright. So I'm sure we made it to this street. And reached that market... and remember we ran into that temple the far north, with all those statues, so I'm sure we covered this."

She came. She leaned forward like I was, on her elbows. She sighed, "What are all those temples about anyways?"

I rolled my lips, quill now removed. "I don't know. Remember, when we read with Adzama, those books said you absolutely weren't supposed to believe in a bunch of gods. Didn't plagues get sent down on them, and stuff, for that? I don't understand, if that's history."

"It's not just that," Evelyn mentioned. She pressed her lips. "I think weird things go on in those places. It feels weird, and there is always strange music coming from them."

I didn't say anything. What could I say? I wasn't particularly happy—with anyone!—that Evelyn, or even me, or Jaden, were having to be a part of all this stuff. Why were we here, really? The Gaeln had said they'd needed us. One, of us, at least. What—was Jaden doing something so much more important? —because I couldn't see how selling a few bottles of medicine was really going to change this place. People didn't need physical health—they needed an entire mind-makeover.

I tapped the tip of my quill against the stone—forgetting a moment, the mess that it would make. When ink spilled onto the counter, I cursed. Evelyn quickly said, "I'll get it."

Then she went to get a rag.

The shop was clean; we kept it wiped down. We kept everything wiped down, almost neurotically. It seemed to help and didn't both at once, but we had the time. Dunking her rag into what pail of water we had left, she tucked her hair back, and began to sing again.

I watched the paper map another second, trying to make sense of it all, (where we had looked, where we hadn't, sometimes it felt pointless). But when Evelyn came, singing, to wipe the ink, I closed my eyes. I just listened.

Then we heard a scrape at the door.

"Peace be with you," someone said.

The voice. A man. I jerked upright. Evelyn turned (more easily than she would have in the past, she'd grown accustomed to strangers entering).

The light outside behind him was darkening pink. The outer street lanterns were brighter than the meager candles we had lit within. As usual Adzama's shop was washed with blues and greens, and violets in decoration.

Sometimes Evelyn and I imagined he had used the same spell for painting sheep to tint these walls. The man wore a heavy, dark robe. A toga, really—or at least there was enough fabric wrapped around him like that. It did look a little different. He was old. I said, "Umm... peace... to you too." It was hard to say. Unexpectedly hard. Evelyn had stopped singing. What was peace anyways? She went to put the rag away. The man watched her as he entered. I asked, "Can we help you? We're near to closing." "Yes. I know," he said comfortably. He had a slight accent, and with his darker skin... I deduced he was a Spaniard. We'd met enough of them in the past weeks. But he spoke our language (whatever that was) well enough. He brought his head up, "I've been taking account of you. I do not live here in the subura, but close by at the chiesa. I do come here to care for the poor in spirit, though, so I have witnessed your goings and comings." I brought my brows a little higher. Evelyn had gone back to singing, softly, while she cleaned the rag, but now she stopped. She was knelt down, she stopped and looked up. "I have heard your voice often," he said to Evelyn, walking another step in. Seeming to drop down a little closer to her. He smiled. I felt hesitance, but also somehow didn't feel I should move in and interrupt. "May I ask," he continued, "Where the lyrics come from?" Evelyn stood. She swallowed, she said, "they're just from my home." "I've never heard their like," he admitted. He folded his hands, "but they do sound a slight familiar." There seemed to glow a glint in his eye. I was caught in it, caught watching his covered head. Covered with a small, thin, tight cap. And a rim of dark hair was bushing out beneath it. I studied from that to his feet, thinking, "there's something weird about this guy." Evelyn was much sweeter than I in her assessment, "Sir, I do not think that I have seen you before. But like my song is to you, you also seem familiar to me." He pressed his lips. He held out one palm, then said, "Perhaps, it is, that we are from the same family?" "Sir?" she replied. I had to make myself a little taller then, I said. "Alright. I don't think... " The man turned his grin to me. He pointed, I thought, at me, at first, but then it must have been behind me, he said, "I recognize that book." "I—" I had been about to go on with advising him he should buy and leave—since he must be crazy, since we couldn't possibly have been related—but now I couldn't talk. I turned and saw the book was one of Adzama's law books. Without making any stronger sort of gesture towards it, he added, "You know there are more, than that, for us now. An accompaniment, if you will." I opened my mouth a little. I looked at Evelyn, but in her tight shawl, she was staring at him with awed uncertainty, not like me: she looked more like she thought he was her long-lost father. I informed him, "Actually, it's not even our book. I mean, we've read a little, but—" "If you would like," he said. "I could bring you some letters. They are what your songs remind me of, dear girl. They are precious copies, but I could let you borrow them a day or two." I said, "umm," but Evelyn went: "What letters? Written by who?" The man didn't answer right away. Instead he looked around a moment, then said, folding his hands again, "Perhaps it would be better for you to read for yourself. Until then—" it was as if he wasn't going to give her or I, the chance to refuse the offer. He declared, "I would ask if you wouldn't mind sparing me a portion of your precious medicines. I've heard they're very good. And we care here, for some of the sick, in these parts who can't afford things for their own health or food. What do you think?" "You mean for free?" I asked warily. He tipped his head, acknowledging. "In trade, I will bring you letters. And perhaps I could also teach you some of the songs that I have learned. You could sing them the way you sing the others." Man, I thought this guy was stretching it. At the same time, why did I totally trust him? I looked at Evelyn again; this time, she was finally meeting my gaze. It said pretty much all I needed (and the only thing I could have been swayed by) to hear, to strike such a bargain with this man. Please, Ikovos. I trust him. Let's trust him.

Well, I supposed we had been reading a lot about trusting people in that silver book of ours; it was just really difficult.

I sighed, the man was looking at me, not Evelyn, for an answer. I spread my quill-ink smudged fingers, and told him: "I guess I don't see how it could be a bad thing to help the poor. How much do you need? How often? And is there a way we can be sure you'll use it for them."

He smiled, happily, his lips spreading warm and wide. He replied, "You are welcome to deliver the goods yourself, to my chiesa. And see some of the work that we are doing. Or, you could join with our group in the markets, we come here. Sixth and seventh day."

Hmm. Did he mean that booth in the square, that gave out bread. I guess I had seen them, now that I thought about it. So that was who he was with. I didn't know what a chiesa was, but I didn't want to take the time to search for more places in this city.

I said, "Two days is sixth day, right? So we'll see you then, in the morning, at the market. Just be sure to get us a list of what you need before then."

He bowed his capped head. He confirmed, "I will bring it along with the letters. And..." he turned to Evelyn, "Perhaps, lady, you would like me to teach you one of those songs now."

Evelyn didn't pause shyly as I thought she would; I guessed all these months of singing around and in front of everyone had changed her.

So that was when Saint Laurence taught us the first of many of his songs, songs more joyful than ones we'd even known. And of course he became our good, though oft-busy, friend. And we brought him medicines on the weekends. But we did not visit his chiesa, we were never prodded to. And perhaps we should have sooner.

EVELYN:

May peace be within your walls and prosperity within your palaces! For my brethren and companions' sake, I will now say, Peace be within you.

It was after a particularly hard morning, that same day I'd woken up too early and Ikovos had read to me from the silver book. We had been in the city of Rome for three months. We had been on the world of Zeta for longer than that. The line of customers for the shop had been such that Ikovos had to stay rather than come this morning, with me, to search for our friend.

I could still hear his voice, as he gave me his map, and directions: "remember to take the left fork at the tribune fountain. And don't go near the forum, or even further south than Alpine street."

There was a little panic to his tone, saying that part. And I knew why he did; that was where the coliseum was. And while Ikovos had searched near and around that place for Jaden, he had not yet allowed me close by.

That was fine. I was learning, like we'd trusted Saint Laurence, to trust Ikovos, more than I ever had. He was a good friend. He was like a brother to me. I did not need his map to navigate though—I thought I had this city memorized!

I tucked it into the pocket of my shawl, and wrapped the scarf tighter over my head.

The streets around me, as always, crowded. There were not too many levels to this place, so that whenever I looked for Jaden it was always looking across and over, and inside places, but never up.

Just today the sun was very bright. As a group of children ran past me, I felt sweat beading at my temple. I took the scarf down, I used it to wipe my forehead and neck, and then I stopped to lean my body against a stone edge of a building. I'd just come into a market, a place called the saeptius. It was that one close to the coliseum. And it sold mostly foreign jewels and delicacies: nothing like our markets in the subura.

It was busy, as any place—but with beautiful adorned ladies in palluses. Or men in grand, soft and silky togas. I did miss feeling what I thought was beautiful: I'd been in these plain dresses with scarves for so long. But it was so unimportant, I almost wondered how I'd ever had it in me to think on all of that in the past. I looked out across the square. Even still, I thought, people moved so swiftly through this place, I had just as good a chance of spotting Jaden as anywhere.

At each of the booths, usually a man, and perhaps two or three ladies would be crowded around, selecting things to buy. Behind the stalls, one seller would barter, and the larger ones had one or even two slaves assisting.

Usually I watched these especially, or the long lines of slaves to be sold, to see if Jaden would be in that dire position.

The nicest thing about the saeptius today, though, was the musician playing at the far end. He sang loud and strong, and he had a lyre pressed against his shoulder. I studied the crowd dutifully, but I also sang along, softly,

high in some of those words Saint Laurence had taught me.

And then I heard a calm-distracting shout from the street heading back behind me.

It said: "Ha! The devil's playing in the grand again, and hasn't warned me!"

It was too thick-accented, and not at all pretty. I couldn't even hear the lyrist over it, any longer. Whoever it was, came with three men behind him, and walked past me nearly knocking my shoulder, in their short, red tunics, and sandals, and gold, and charms, and every blessed thing, hanging at their belts.

I crossed my arms, as the others responded to the voice, "Come on."

"You won't play now, will you?"

"It's not the time. Cassius. Come."

"You haven't got your instrument."

They were guards. I glanced and caught sight of their swords, dangling from their belts. I stopped singing to avoid attention. Then the first shouted loud and bright—once again over the sound of the other musician: "No fret about that. I'll buy something here."

"But we're on duty!"

And they laughed.

But one of them. One of them, had turned sharp, to search the booths. The loud one. And when he did, his fellow guard pushed him. And he came crashing into me. Stumbling and laughing, knocking my scarf out of my hand.

He held on tight to both my arms—just like they were the most suitable structure for him to right himself with—like I might as well have been the wall behind me.

My eyes went wide. He smelled like dirt and sun. I felt heat boiling up into my face, and then he looked up.

And my mouth dropped.

His lips were tipped side-ways, and half open in a laugh. His eyes were like tight lines he was laughing so bright. The hands that had been so tightly gripping me a moment ago, slid down just a moment, while he righted himself, from the wetness of his palms.

Yes, my mouth dropped. Because this brown-haired Roman, with dark skin, a guard's tunic, and laughing, was Jaden. But he didn't even glance up at me before turning to his fellow guards, that laughed and pointed at him. My words were all stuck in my throat.

My arms zapped like shockwaves where he touched me. Without stopping his laugh or stumbling, he let me go. And they said: "Watch it, friend. You're running into more than statues."

"There are worse things to hit," another added.

He seemed at least, to have known he'd run into a human being. He laughed again, and bent, looking at the ground, towards the ground, and he grabbed up my scarf that had fallen. And all while I was in shock. He held his arm out with that scarf, towards me. It stayed there, and I stayed staring down at his arm, his hand, his fingers where they clung the material. The scarf. His elbow. The gold bracelet at his wrists. The skin, I knew it, dark. The hardness, the veins, the scars.

I must have surprised him with my hesitation. He looked from his friends, then back down at the scarf, then up at me.

I couldn't keep my mouth closed still. But I couldn't say a thing. It was *him*. It was his lips, the way they curved, and tipped. It was his eyes, rich chocolate brown, seeing all things. And his arched brows. And his strong jaw, and perched nose.

His mouth dropped open a little when he met my gaze. From its wide laugh, to a sort of half-gaping smirk. He didn't shift his eyes away, but he did shift his hand. He said, "Here."

One of his friends called, still laughing, "Are you really gonna play? Then you better hurry. Laban's gone to take a lunch break."

"I'll bet he saw us; he's running so he won't be bested, and lose his praise."

But their friend wasn't listening. Jaden wasn't listening. He was just staring at me, waiting for my answer, growing a wider smirk all the time.

I tried to say it a dozen times. I thought I was probably bopping my head, or convulsing my throat, I was trying so hard to say it. Jaden. Jaden.

But I just stayed frozen, staring at him. I couldn't say a thing.

His smirk tipped fully. He let out a little breath. Then he took the scarf up, watching it carefully, and wrapped it over the top of my head, around my shoulders. For a moment, he looked like he might kiss me! He had always gotten the same sort of look for that in the past! But instead he just looked back, then once at me again. Then bowed, then raced off.

I didn't even watch him, I was in such a daze. My cheeks were flaming, screeching hot. I put my palm against them. I blinked and blinked. I thought. Jaden. I found Jaden. Ikovos, I found Jaden. I found him! I found him! He smiled at me. He loves me! He loves me! He wasn't angry with me. He was glad to look at me. He's glad I'm here. Ikovos! Ikovos! He's here, and he doesn't hate me.

I blinked and came to as if from a dream. I opened my eyes wide, and looked the way he'd been... but he was leaving.

Leaving?

What?

Yes!

No.

He was leaving! He had his arm over the shoulder of one of those other guards, and he was racing with them after the retreating musician, and he was leaving me! He was leaving. He wasn't even looking back and he was leaving.

"H— H—" I got out. I stomped my foot, I raised my hand. I squeezed my fists then at my sides, as if I was going to boil over, head shaking, heart pounding, and I screamed, "HEY!"

It might have been the loudest sound I'd ever made. A bird from the crates nearby, flew up and into a tizzy of feathers, hitting the bars. Another man ran his cart into a stall. I didn't pause, though, because those guards hadn't turned. Jaden hadn't stopped.

I shouted, "Hey! Hey! Hey, come back here. Come back here. Come back here."

But every step I took, more people poured between us. He didn't turn. He was disappearing from view. He couldn't hear me. It was too loud in the square. I started racing and racing: I thought my legs had never moved so fast. I tripped, stumbled, and fell into the dust. I didn't let it stop me. I lost my scarf, but I kept running, past all of the people crowding me. I could hardly see his head now; he was leaving the square.

I took a thick breath of dusty air in and screamed: "Jaden! Jaden!" Tears were burning my cheeks. "Jaden."

Someone brought my hand down. "Whoa," they called. Then, "Order, order!"

It was a soldier.

I gasped from my exertion. I couldn't see through tears. He hadn't turned. The breath in I took felt like razors scratching through my chest.

He said, "Calm down, lady. There's no call for shouting here."

I tried to speak. "No. Let me go. No, stop. I have to get—"

"Look, they'll be no disorder in the saeptia, but I can help you if you'll tell me who you're looking for."

I said, "Him, *him*," stretching my arm to where he'd paused, to take a gift from the stall. He was stopped. If I could only reach him. If only the soldier would let me go.

But he didn't. And my vision was still a blur, but I saw him look that way. He asked, "The guard?"

I didn't want to say yes, because Jaden wasn't a guard—but that was how he was dressed. So I knew that must be how the other saw him. So I said, "Yes. Yes. Please. He's mine, my mine— just let me go."

But the guard burst into laughter.

Still not releasing me, he craned his head back and laughed full.

I couldn't hardly breathe past my panic— I turned Jaden's direction again. I shouted, "Jaden. Jaden!"

"Girl," the soldier laughed. "That man's name is not this... Jaden. And... by the gods, finally— just when we'd all begun to imagine him a eunuch. Martius does have a woman. And from the subura no less, by the looks of it."

He laughed again.

He let me go.

I jerked upright, and almost made to dash. But then I saw Jaden's face in the distance, smiling, trading gold for the gift: a silver jewel. And I heard the guard's words repeated. And I recalled: He'd just seen me. He's just seen me, Evelyn, but then he'd smiled. Then he'd left. Was it possible? I mean, was it possible, I had been seeing things? My brow was warm—hadn't I been sweating?

I touched it now. I gasped the breath of air again. The guard was helping to hold me up by the arm.

He said, "Do you want me to call him back? I'm sure he would come for a fine girl like—"

"Who is he?" I asked.

My voice felt almost distant as I did. I was less sure that I was truly in this place, in this market, surrounded by all these guards and people, than I was sure who it was I was looking at, that I was seeing right, that it was Jaden. Oh, why wasn't Ikovos here? Was I even here? had I left the shop today? Was I dreaming?

The soldier said: "Your lover, but you do not know his name? Hm... Are you sure you know that man?"

I watched. He bowed and waved to the seller, flicking an extra coin in the direction of the seller's assistant (who in turn had to give it straight to his master). But Jaden hadn't noticed. He pocketed the gift, then turned, and went from the square.

How long did I watch him?

The soldier, must have taken a sort of pity on me. He said, "Well... his name is Cassius. We love him here, for his music. He plays the mandolin you know. It's a thing popular in Spain."

I looked towards the guard.

He said, "He is from the house of Martius, a renowned name. His family villa is on the capita march. He guards for the politician Flavian."

The man's features were scrunching, as if he weren't certain—or were trying to assess—whether I was in my right mind or not.

I could have saved him the trouble. I could have said: I was not. I put my hand against my head. I almost fell.

He said: "I'm sure if I called him back—"

"No," I told him.

He'd made to move with his foot, as if he would take me and I after the other man.

He paused at my voice. No. No, I would not look again. Now. Not without Ikovos. Not when all of this was impossible. It just didn't make any sense—and what if this guard wasn't to be trusted? What if my mind was playing tricks on me—would it stop if I was with that boy again? How could Jaden be the guard of a politician, or the son of a renowned name, or a musician, or even more: how could he have seen me and had such a response.

No. No, it couldn't have been Jaden.

"No," I said to the soldier.

He frowned, sympathetically. He looked back up in the direction the boy had gone.

"Are you sure?"

I nodded more quickly than he could ask it... Then I got a sudden lurch of fear. What if it somehow *was* Jaden? What if it somehow was, and I'd seen him, but I'd lost him.

I took the soldier arm. I looked in his eyes and begged him. "Just tell me where his home is. Please. Exactly."

The guard helped me up, stronger. He told me. "Like I said, his home is on the capita march, northeast, in the city. But it's not likely you will be able to enter that place without announcement." He frowned. Oh, so he must have been finally doubting my relation to the man. What had he said? I was from the subura? Well, I was. It meant something; I knew that. What did he think of me?

I swallowed. I tried to wipe my eyes.

He must have took pity again, he added, "But let me tell you where it's best to find him. Particularly on sixth days. At the evenings... just around dusk."

IKOVOS:

I was going to kill her.

No. No, really—I was going to kill her. I was going to kill her!

I remembered grabbing her shoulders. I said, "What?"

She said, "I think, but..." And she'd touched her forehead.

She said, "I don't know."

"Evelyn," I repeated it, "Evelyn. It's Jaden. Did it look like him? Or it didn't? Was it him or not?"

"It looked like him."

"*Why didn't you stay with him?!*"

She tried to explain it. She said things like, she tripped, and it was warm, and his name wasn't his name, and I just put my hands on either side of my head, and tossed my hair. Tossed and tossed and tossed and tossed it.

"I'm sorry," she said.

I didn't know what to say. I couldn't tell her it was fine. It wasn't. I couldn't say it wasn't fine. I wasn't really angry with her. No, I was! NO. I wasn't.

I turned on her again. The shop had long-since closed; we'd cleared them all out for her to give this news; now it was also dark. "What do you mean, he looked at you? How could he have looked at you?"

"That's what I'm saying, Ikovos. He looked right at me. He gave me back my scarf. He wrapped it right over my head. He—"

Then she was patting the top of her head; feeling around her shoulders. She'd lost it. The scarf. I could see that by her searching and expression when it wasn't there. But she didn't say a thing about that; I didn't think either

of us thought it mattered. Well, at least, I guessed that, but then her eyes pooled, as she searched for it more desperate, then she starting crying.

She dropped in a slump to a bend. I felt my brows drop. Great Ikovos. I felt pity for her. I'd been too hard on her. Jaden, that idiot! How confusing. How had he looked at her, and not said a thing?! It made no sense. Could he really be that cruel?

I don't know how she did it—we'd seemed to have begun doing it a little bit too often lately—but Evelyn, in a moan, echoed my own thoughts: "Could he really be so cruel, Ikovos?" she asked. She sniffed. She looked up, her face twisted. "That's why I wasn't sure. Because he couldn't really be so cruel. He smiled, and everything! He looked at me like he thought I was beautiful! I know it when he looks at me like that! I know he looked at me like he thought he loved me! How could someone that doesn't even know me like that love me?"

I swallowed thick. She stayed looking at me. It made too much sense, and too little to say anything. I paced two feet, then back, then bent down. "What did the guard say? What was his name? I don't understand."

Evelyn replied in a messy rush, "He said that his name was Cassius, or Martius or something, and that he was from a renowned family of Rome. And he said that he was a guard, Ikovos, a guard. Here. A soldier. In Rome. And he did—he had a sword and everything. That man."

She said, "that man" like it wasn't, no like it couldn't have been Jaden at all. Was it? HAD she just been tired? It would certainly make sense. Why not. How could Jaden be a soldier? How could he be just roaming around a market. Buying things? That made no sense.

I shook my head. *Maybe*... I thought to say.

And then she added, "And he told me he was a musician. He said he played a mandolin. I mean, I know that man did. It was so fast, but I don't know how I didn't recognize his voice, but that was the first things he said. He was going to play there. He was going to play."

Evelyn was staring directly out saying these things. I don't think she'd noticed I'd gone perfectly still. At one word.

One word.

I had stood to pace again, my hands on my hips for pockets that weren't there, but I froze solid.

Mandolin. He said he played a mandolin.

I was in another time.

We were crashing on a sofa—at one of the inns in Pasadome: a smaller town on route to Domah: but we'd been rained out by a storm. Of course we'd gotten soaked, and the showers hadn't been warm enough to steal the chill, so we'd come down to warm ourselves near the only fire they had. Unfortunately it was outside, but under an awning at least. While Jaden stood, rubbing his hands together over the barrel of coals, I sat, frowning.

It took me a few minutes to notice what had him so jaunty. There was a man sitting nearby, in the corner, almost stuck out in the rain, he was so near to the edge. He was holding some sort of instrument, maybe like a lute or guitar of some sort. He was picking at its strings, not making any sort of melody. But Jaden was staring. And I remembered his parents, his mother and father, of course, playing the night we'd been attacked.

We didn't see musicians a lot. We were about fifteen and sixteen at this time; we certainly didn't talk about the past too much.

I said, forgetting the cold, the rain, clearing my throat, "What's that?"

Jaden jerked and looked my way, like I'd shocked him out a trance—maybe like I was a Meoden just snuck up on him in the other dimension.

His eyes went wide.

Calmly, I tried to gesture back at the man.

He looked that way. When he did, his hands got a little too close to the coals.

My own eyes went wide but I didn't respond in time to keep him from getting burnt. He cursed himself, and dusted his hands off. Of course it all got the attention of the nearby (albeit few) pedestrians. And of course rubbing his hands on his pants like that didn't help. I stood up. Jaden was cradling his wrist. I nodded over, to the edge of the tarp. He complied without saying much.

So I stuck his hand out into the cold rain. At the same time, I used my healing magic, where no one would see. It couldn't have been a few seconds, then he was back to normal. He pulled his arm back in and rubbed the water off. His eyes were on the player again, for a second. Then to the flames, then to my eyes. He grinned.

"Stupid."

"Okay," I acknowledged, "But you don't think I'm going to leave it at that, do you?"

I looked back. The guy wasn't even very good. Jaden was staring there again. I asked, "Is that what your dad played?"

It was strange for me to dare it... or maybe uncommon would have been the better word. We *never* talked about Jaden's parents; we seldom talked about mine. But it wasn't every day either, that Jaden, fire-master, almost burnt his hand off.

I braved looking back at him. He was already shaking his head.

I hadn't thought so. "It was a guitar, wasn't it?"

Jaden stared longer, at the picking. With a sigh, he looked down at his hands then, and knocked them together. He held them up. "These weren't too good for following along with my dad's skills, when I was a kid. You know. They were too small, so..."

I could have guessed the rest. Now, I wished the guy would stop playing—all the while also wishing, why couldn't Jaden just try to play again. Would it hurt too bad? I loved to read, because of my parents library. I read, and thought of them. I loved the library at the lodge, and almost always had a stop at the town-bookshops...

But Jaden avoided music like the plague. Or at least... a really contagious flu.

Yeah, I could have guessed the rest, but he said it anyways.

"So, yeah, so my mom and him brought me, this little thing. Well, that. A mandolin. It's called a mandolin. The strings are a little different than a guitar, but as you can see they're small."

"So you can play?" I asked. I'd nearly already guessed that.

He shook his head. "I'd thought I would have forgotten it. You know, I never think about it. But watching this guy..." Jaden looked down again. He knocked his fingers. "Well, I haven't."

Man, what could I say to that? He looked so beat up over it. I swallowed long, then when the player hit a false note again, I winced one eye.

Jaden did the same. He looked up, smirking a little.

And so I said, "I'm guessing you're a bit better than this?"

And we both started laughing, the way we did a lot. And we'd gone back inside, and the subject had all too soon been forgotten—or at least never discussed. No, Jaden and I had seldom discussed music again, until Eve had come—when he'd resumed started singing in the showers, or alone in his room (which was beside mine, where walls were too thin), or when we were out on patrol, and he would start humming. I still remembered standing with him in the cabin outside of Tiver. The hand-cuffs in his pocket, and Evelyn in the shower, I'd of course been interrogating him about what had happened.

He'd had his palm flat on the island counter. He'd been about to lift his shoulder, and say something ego-centric, (a habit he'd begun to really work on developing in just the past year or so). Instead he'd only gotten his mouth open—then we'd both heard the sound. The singing. At first, you couldn't really tell what it was. And then, yup. It was clear.

So we'd both gone really quiet. Jaden had sort of looked up at the ceiling. He'd even looked that way, at the door. He hadn't removed his hand from the counter, and he'd made sure his face stayed all skepticism, but I saw. I saw his fingers twitch. I wasn't even sure whether he noticed. One, two, three, four, curling up towards his palm; and his foot tapping like he had the jitters.

Following this, of course, he had the brilliant, comment, "Weirdo," for me, about her. And he'd seemed to take it as the opportunity to escape my questions as well. But he hadn't fooled me. And I wasn't fooled now either. Not fooled by a new name, a different look, not recognizing Evelyn, or a job as a guard, or a noble's son, or anything. Nothing!

I wasn't sure WHAT was going on, but one thing I did know.

"Ikovos?" Evelyn said.

Yeah, she had noticed me go very still. It was all like a cold shock to my system: repeating her last words: "and he said he played the mandolin. He was going to play there. He was going to play."

"Ikovos, what's wrong? What? What is it?"

"It's him," I said.

I wasn't sure if she heard me at first. It was that quiet. My lips were a straight line; my jaw was tight. I repeated it. "It's him."

Evelyn sniffed her last. She stared up at me, though I was watching the wall. Now I was picturing the same scene she'd described, but somehow, certainly, without doubt, that it was Jaden. And yeah, maybe there were a lot of things that didn't make sense—but it was so clear now I didn't know how I'd missed it. That was Jaden! Jaden, would've shouted like that. Jaden would have stumbled into a girl. Jaden would have given gold to a slave, without thought the slave would then just be forced to give it to their owner.

Jaden—not how I'd seen him for most his life though. This was a Jaden that seldom showed himself: Not the

stalwart Jaden of the Order; Jaden that hummed during patrols, and showed off with backflips. A Jaden that would play his father's instrument. That was the biggest question: What could have happened to make Jaden play his father's instrument.

What could have *possibly* happened, to make Jaden play that mandolin again?

I exhaled through my nose, my lips locked tight.

Evelyn said, "What? Wha— How do you know? After everything, I just said... "

I looked her way. She was still crumpled on the floor, her un-covered hair a mess.

"How can you?—" she began. I cut her off.

I said, "Remember when we were leaving Tiver, Evelyn? I mean, the cabin in Tiver, afterwards?"

She stared and blinked at me. Her hands were a slump beside her on the stone. She looked at me with more horror, than anything: like how could I mention that now. But she did nod.

I went on. "Before it was raining in the field, and Jaden—"

"Jaden left," she said, "Before we got back to the lodge. You joined him soon enough. You were gone for three days."

I nodded.

Her jaw went tight. She said, "You think I could forget that? It was a big deal."

I nodded again. "I know. I know... Do you know where we went?"

She took a great breath. Was she angry? Suddenly, she looked more angry than panicked. She admitted, "I've heard some things. You were after Meoden. Maybe something to do with your families. But I don't know why."

"You're smart," I told her.

She didn't seem to care about that. She just watched me.

I sighed long, then I got down, and said: "Evelyn, you know how we've been reading about trust? In that book and... especially those letters of Saint Laurence's?"

She nodded. It was wary.

I took her hand in mine. "Well, I'm going to trust you in the biggest way I know how: with some pretty hard stuff. The way we trusted you that night at the inn, when we told you about our parents."

"Jaden got so mad."

I smirked a little, I couldn't help it, and said, "Jaden isn't here. This is my choice, and it's the right one."

She stared at me for a long moment; I knew if Jaden had looked long enough into these eyes, he wouldn't soon forget them. Not tonight, and the next time he saw them, if he would only look long enough.

She nodded weakly.

And so I told her. About the mandolin. Our parents. The Meoden we'd tracked half our lives. And everything.