

Prologue

I found myself once again in this tomb, feeling at home in this cramped crypt of shadows and masks.

'So we are agreed? The Eagle lands tomorrow night.'

Torches lit the room, and cobwebs lined the ceiling. I could feel the heat of the people around me, and the clammy stench of sweat. I lifted the white case of plaster stuck to my face, and gazed at the veiled figure before me.

'Yes,' I said finally, 'Yes, we are.'

My eyes traced the crowd before landing on the banner at the back of the room. Bold black letters in purple satin:

Vivat rem publicam populi Romani.

Long live The Republic of Rome.

Chapter 1

Hard sandals slapped against chilled stone, and blessed streams of gold mingled with my shadow, like Helios himself was running his fingers through my hair. The air smelled of salt. I ambled by the docks, smiling at the burly sailors who walked by me. The celebrations for Saturnalia were just beginning. From atop the cliffs, I could see the copper shades of pilleum dancing upon the crowds of revellers, and 'Io Saturnalia' was being called towards family and strangers alike.

He can never know. Do you understand?

I recalled my husband, his boyish, strong face. Lucius the brave. Lucius the noble. We did not have a love for the ages. We could not afford to. When my parents faced ruination and poverty, the only choice they had was to sell me off to the highest bidder. Not that Lucius' family offered much anyways. They were almost as destitute as we were. But, thanks to my angular face and shock of raven hair, I was not exactly the most desired piece on the market. When they regained their wealth, my parents were still distant, perhaps even more so than prior to my marriage, as if I was some ghost of a drunken memory of an unpleasant past.

Almost ridiculously subsequent to our wedding, Lucius left for the army to bring honour to our family. Now, he returns only for festivals, and barely even then. Which is why I had to find a cause. Or perhaps the cause found me.

Chapter 2

The waves shifted and the sand turned, yet he had not returned. I gazed out into the pitch black. I could hear the celebrations all the way from my villa, the rowdy voices somehow merging with the ebbing of the tide. Lost in my thoughts, I almost missed the voice of Markus, the aged slave who was standing by my door.

'Sorry, what was that?'

'They are here.' his grey eyes were as still as a stagnant creek, as they always were - void of emotion.

'Thank you.' I was clad in vermillion. His favourite colour. Exciting, he called it, but modest. My hair was done up in the most matronly and simple knot - one I had not worn since I was a child. I positioned myself on the wicker stool by the loom. Thread after thread, I worked

the wool until my fingers were stained grey by the dye. My mind was not numbed by the process, in fact, rather on the contrary, it was working faster and more acutely than ever before.

They stumbled in with the grace of untrained elephants, jabbing each other with awkward elbows and whispering. Beaming with such warmth and tenderness I could rival Venus herself, I turned from my loom.

'My love, you are home!' words of bashful affection tripped and spilled out of my mouth as I ran towards him. He held me in a tight embrace, shaking with laughter and delirious from whatever substance he had been taking.

'My wife, friends!' he cried, as the intoxicated men around him guffawed and slapped him on his back.

I was not acquainted with his friends, and his slurred introductions were a blur of nicknames and inside jokes I took no part of. However, one man stood out to me. He was older than the rest, yet stunted in growth. He watched me intently, as a tiger stalks its prey, watching my every move, almost analysing and judging. Something about his eyes - a sharp slice of silver - sent a shiver down my spine. I recognised him immediately.

The Eagle.

Chapter 3

How ironic that my last day would be the shortest day of the year. I awoke at dawn, and brushed my locks out and dressed. Already, celebrations had begun for the third day of Saturnalia, The Brumalia, and the moon was still out, round and bare. There wasn't a single star in the sky.

It was a few hours past noon. It was already dark and, like the nighttime, fear crept in and I was a child again, tears demanded release from my eyes, and soon they were rolling down my face in free-flowing torrents.

Why? Why have you deserted me?

I pictured the gods, laughing from their ivory thrones in the heavens, dice in hand. Poor Lucretia has been cheated yet again. She has lost everything. That is her fate.

Why did I agree to this?

Families, couples, people. People with a purpose and a reason. A reason to fight.

What was I doing this for? Who did I have?

And then I saw the crypt, faces of The Republic of Rome. A future for everyone.

I want to live. I want to-

There was a knock at the door. Three times. Three harsh, hard blows. Then slowly, the door creaked open and in stepped Sextus Tarquinius, his eyes hard-set, but a smirk played on his lips, and he pressed a knife to Markus' throat.

As he stalked towards me, eyes slanted like a cat's, the seconds felt like hours. I could feel his breath on my face, a damp foetid reek. My eyes concentrated on a point in the far corner of the room, determined to to defy him.

'Domina, I seem to be lost.'

Not taking his eyes from me, he blew out the oil lamp.

Chapter 4

The air smelled of salt. Her knuckles were trembling and crimson, as if dipped in ink, as they rapped on the grandiose oak doors of her parents' villa, and a dried layer of rusty brown coated

the base of her palm, where four crescent moon-shaped puncture marks were sealed by a wax of crimson. A cloak of thick wool was wrapped around her body. *The cold nipped at my cheeks.* She looked as if filled with a freakish calm, and appeared almost comically composed. *I operated on my body if I was already dead.*

Passersby took double-takes and whispers followed her around, and when the doors swung open, her mother took one look at her before collapsing. *I could only smile.*

Epilogue

Her funeral was a long, painful affair. A tragedy for the whole of Rome, that a woman so young was martyred.

Yesterday's bright, crisp atmosphere had faded into one which could only be described as dead. The march was to the hollow, thin sound of a drum, and Lucius' speech droned on for what seemed to be forever. Under ordinary circumstances, he would have been lecturing a crowd of ghosts, and apart from a select group in white-plaster masks, his audience seemed to be quite alive. Gasps and whispers arose from the spectators, and the murmurs of outrage seemed to echo the Sea she loved so much.

On her shroud, one could not help but notice the black bold letters on charcoal grey:

Vivat rem publicam populi Romani.

Long live The Republic of Rome.

And if you looked a little closer, the same grey was smeared on her fingers.