



Pieces of Me



Published by Jennifer Wherrett

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The wisdom of transcendence

This book is dedicated to my father
With gratitude for all he taught me
And all he gave me;
Whose soul still shines brightly,
Inspiring, influencing, affecting
Though he walks among us no more.

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Beauty

Beauty of the Soul

*The beauty of a rose
Is in its petals;
Each one not quite, though nearly, the same
In shape, colour, texture
So that each one forms an integral part
Of the pattern of the whole,
Fitted together
In perfect harmony.
Such is the beauty of the soul,
The Self.
But to sacrifice or compromise,
To repress, suppress or negate,
To dishonour or ignore
Any fragment of the Self,
Like the petals of a rose
The facets of You
Will wither and fall from the flower.
The loss of one petal is hardly noticed.
But once one falls so, too, do others;
And the loss of many
Will mar the flower's beauty.
Like an un-stemmed flow
Will they fall
Until all that remains
Is the naked stalk –
A reminder of what once was
And what could have been.*

Pieces of Me

Ellie slowly hung up the phone and lingered with her hand on the receiver, breathing deeply, trying to control the tumult of her emotions and the pounding of her heart. She didn't want the kids to catch even a hint of the upset she was feeling, for their sake and for hers. She wasn't at all certain she could maintain her composure in the face of the deluge of questions they would bombard her with. Because the panic was rising. And although she wasn't ready to face the truth, like sands running swiftly through an hourglass, time was running out. The truth was closing in, pressing down on her, demanding her attention, forcing her hand

Josh wasn't coming home again. He was spending more and more time at the office, working late into the night and even on weekends. Ellie hardly saw him anymore. For weeks she'd battled to keep her fear buried, hidden from everyone including, or maybe especially, herself. But it refused to stay buried and now it was threatening to break through and overwhelm her. The carefully constructed cheerful façade she'd been desperately trying to maintain was starting to crack and she was finding it harder and harder to hold back the panic, and the tears. She knew she should confront him but even if, by some miracle, he wasn't seeing someone else she didn't want to know he was deliberately staying away from her and the kids because he was no longer happy with her. That would open a Pandora's Box of emotions every bit as painful as those aroused by the knowledge that he was having an affair. Either way, she could no longer fool herself nor could she continue to deny that something had gone horribly wrong.

Taking one last deep breath, she swallowed the lump in her throat, re-ordered her features, forced her lips into a smile and turned to the three children sitting around the kitchen table.

"OK", she said cheerfully, "who wants ice cream and chocolate sauce?"

~ ~ ~

Lying in the dark later that night, pretending to be asleep, she tried unsuccessfully not to be aware of where Josh was in the room as he quietly prepared for bed. She tensed involuntarily when she felt his side of the bed depress but, as per his nightly ritual now, he turned his back on her and, almost immediately, his breathing became deep and rhythmical. Ellie seethed with resentment in the darkness. Why did he get to fall asleep so easily when she spent night after night tossing and turning, her thoughts chaotic, her body restless? Why did he get to fall asleep so quickly when, for her, sleep had become as elusive as a snowflake in summer?

With a silent sigh of resignation she accepted the inevitable and, knowing tonight would be no different from the previous nights, slipped out of bed, wrapped her dressing gown around her and padded barefoot to the lounge room. Curling into one of the lounge chairs, she sat in the dark, huddled in her dressing gown for comfort, if not for warmth, and finally allowed the tears to come. Making no attempt to wipe them away, she let them roll, one after another after another, down her cheeks. Once begun, like a raging river freed of its dam, her tears gathered momentum until she was sobbing uncontrollably, hiding her face in the thick material of her dressing gown to muffle the sounds.

After a while she quietened, feeling drained and exhausted but somehow cleansed.

“Where did we go wrong?” she whispered into the darkness and when there was no reply whispered again, “We were happy. What changed?”

The darkness failed to whisper back but a memory, long buried, began to stir within her. Frowning, she concentrated, trying to bring it into sharper focus and then watched in her mind’s eye as the memory unfolded like a story. She’d met Josh a year after finishing her degree. He was like a dream come true and she’d fallen helplessly and hopelessly in love. But the timing could not have been worse. She and Jessie, her best friend, had been planning their trip to Europe since they were little girls and, finally, after years of scrimping and saving,

planning and researching . . . and dreaming, they were getting ready to leave. They would at last see the castles, cathedrals and cities they'd spent their short lifetime reading about. But Ellie had been afraid Josh would not wait for her and so she'd allowed him to persuade her to abandon her plans and move in with him instead. She vividly recalled Jess's disappointment and her own guilt at letting her friend down. And, equally as vividly, she recalled the knot of regret she felt when Jess returned with a ton of wonderful photos, memories, stories and experiences. At the time Ellie had justified her choice by convincing herself she and Josh would go together one day but, of course, they never had.

She frowned in the dark. How curious she should remember all that now. She'd not thought of Jess or the trip for years.

But the memory barely faded before another came. This time she remembered giving up her job in Sydney when Josh was offered a promotion that necessitated the move to Melbourne. She'd loved that job and was well aware of how lucky she was to love what she did. Again, she'd justified her choice to move with Josh by convincing herself she would get a similar job in Melbourne. After all, people edited manuscripts in Melbourne too didn't they? And she had found a job she enjoyed but she'd struggled with leaving her old life and her friends behind, and to start again in a new city.

Again, she barely had time to process the memory before another came, this one of putting her career on hold because Josh had wanted to start a family. By that time she'd begun to build a successful career of her own and hadn't felt ready for children. But she'd allowed Josh to talk her into it.

Suddenly, like an opened floodgate more memories came, one after another, so that she sat powerless as they washed through her like an unleashed torrent: severing relationships because Josh didn't like either her friends or their partners; declining an opportunity to speak at a conference in New Zealand because Josh had needed her to help him wine and dine an important client; going to Sydney to see Josh's family instead of having a holiday in Thailand; buying the black

leather lounge suite he preferred instead of the soft, bottle-green suede one she'd liked; naming their little girl Victoria – Josh's preference – instead of Vivienne – her preference

Oh God! She began to feel sick.

Even with Thomas, their third, she'd wanted to return to work but Josh had convinced her to have another child. And though she wouldn't be without Thomas – he was a little bundle of pure joy – once again she'd had to postpone returning to work, jeopardising her career in the process. She even listened to *his* music when they were in the car together; and they never ate fish because *he* didn't like seafood even though he now rarely had dinner at home

Ellie leaned forward in the darkness, her eyes wide with shock and her hands over her mouth as if to stifle a silent scream. She felt the revelation like a punch in the gut and found it hard to catch her breath. Why had she never seen it before – this pattern of acquiescence? It was so clear. And with every sacrifice she'd made she had slowly but surely lost a piece of herself. Now there was almost nothing left. What had happened to *her* dreams? *Her* desires? *Her* ambitions? She'd relegated them to such a low priority so often that she now did it out of pure habit, completely unaware that she did so; and they were buried, forgotten, lost in the intricacies of a life Josh had built for them both.

And, Ellie realised, feeling another punch in the gut as she confronted another brutal truth, as much as she yearned to, she could not blame Josh. This was her doing and hers alone. She was the one who had compromised herself over and over and over again. She was the one who had given Josh the power to dictate their lives and, with it, her choices and actions.

She lost track of time as she sat alone, numb with shock, in her lounge room. Only when the dark of night lost its potency, turned to grey by the gentle light of a new day, did she unfold her stiffened limbs. After her night of contemplation and realisation she was absolutely certain of one thing. She had to find a way to reclaim the lost pieces of herself.

~ ~ ~

Ellie smiled at her reflection, liking what she saw. Josh's work Christmas party was, traditionally, a formal affair and this year was no different. She'd made excuses not to attend in the past but not tonight. This year she'd been quietly resolute. If she and Josh were to have any chance she knew she had to go tonight. So, in a new dress and high-heeled sandals, with her hair cut short – something she'd wanted to do for a long time – and new make-up courtesy of the tips given to her by the girl on the Estée Lauder counter, she looked and felt good. Gone was the overweight, frumpy woman who barely had time to bother with her appearance. In her place was a slimmer, elegantly-dressed, attractive woman.

But it was the sparkle of new-found confidence in her eyes Ellie was most proud of. Following the night of her confrontation with the past she'd wasted no time, unwilling to wallow in self pity, as tempting as that was. The first step had been obvious. She needed to lose weight and feel good about her body again so she'd joined Weight Watchers, and then she'd joined a yoga class. Yoga, she'd discovered, was as valuable for her peace of mind as it was for her body. It calmed and centred her. She'd made new friends at yoga too. She'd also contacted her old work colleagues and had started editing manuscripts at home so she could work around her commitments with the kids. Next year Thomas was booked into childcare for a few days a week and she intended to start working in the office again part-time. Until then, working at home in the evenings gave her a perfect excuse to sleep in the study so that she no longer lay tense and restless in the dark wondering when Josh was coming home.

She hadn't asked him if he was seeing someone else because she hadn't wanted to know. She'd thought a lot about their relationship over the many months since that night in the lounge room but she'd not yet reached any conclusions. In truth, she was still not ready to confront the tough questions. Did he love her? Did she still love him? Her love for him had been the very

cause of losing vital parts of herself and it had damaged her. So was it really love? Surely love would never wreak such havoc.

She shut down on her train of thought. Now was not the time. It was, at the moment, sufficient for her just to focus on rediscovering and reclaiming herself. Just last week she'd ruthlessly cleared out her wardrobe, seeing it as a symbolic act of throwing out the old her to make way for the new. Any article of clothing that made her feel less than attractive was thrown on the discard pile. Once she'd gone through her whole wardrobe she'd been shocked at the size of the pile of clothes sitting on her bedroom floor and she'd been tempted to rummage through the pile again, worried she wouldn't have enough clothes to wear. But she resisted the urge. What did it matter if she wore the same clothes until she re-built her wardrobe? At least she would feel good in them.

Josh interrupted her thoughts by coming into the bathroom, standing behind her and taking from her the catch of her necklace. Their eyes caught and held in the mirror as he let his hands rest on her bare shoulders.

"You look beautiful tonight", he said.

She smiled at his reflection. "Thank you", she replied as she gently moved out of his reach so that his hands dropped to his sides.

They walked side by side into the function room without touching. Ellie's heart was pounding an anxious beat. She tended to battle nervousness and anxiety when attending social events such as these - a relatively recent development since she'd never suffered this nervous anxiety when she'd worked all those years ago. Nor did it help her nervousness when Josh left her alone with Richard, one of the directors of the company, to get them all drinks. She swallowed nervously, completely at a loss for words, looking anywhere but at Richard.

"Tell me Ellie", he said, smiling at her, "where has Josh been hiding you all these years?"

Ellie returned his smile, grateful to him for trying to put her at ease.

“I don’t think I can blame Josh”, she said. “I’ve been hiding myself really.”

He raised his eyebrows and his smile disappeared. “Is that so? What a shame.” And he inclined his head as he asked seriously, “And are you still hiding?”

She hesitated before answering, giving the question due consideration. “No”, she said finally. “At least”, she added, “that’s no longer my intent. But it takes some getting used to . . .”

He raised his eyebrows again and she answered his silent, unspoken question. “Hiding is much easier.”

He nodded and then asked, “Do you mind if I ask you a personal question?”

“That depends . . .” she replied hesitantly.

“Are you still in love with your husband?”

She took a moment to recover from her surprise. “Why do you ask?”

“Because I’m surprised. I thought you would be . . . different.”

“Different?”

He held her eyes with his own. “Why would a man play with a piece of pretty glass when he already possesses a diamond? It makes no sense. Unless he does not see the diamond for what it is and, therefore, has no knowledge of its true value.”

Oh God!

Ellie caught her breath as her heart thumped painfully in her chest. And then she lowered her eyes and released the breath in a silent gasp. Come on Ellie, her inner voice urged, you’ve known all along. Why else would you refuse to confront Josh if not for the same reason you tried to fool yourself into believing you were happy? You’ve been avoiding the truth. But it’s time to face the truth . . . all of it.

She raised her eyes and looked directly at Richard. “Would you mind pointing her out to me?”

“Not at all”, he replied. “It’s about time someone did.”

He guided her through the crowd of people with a hand under her elbow and then stopped, saying nothing, and deliberately looked over at the cluster of people standing a few metres away, nodding towards a woman standing amongst them. Ellie followed his line of vision and looked at the woman. Like a queen holding court, she was the focal point of the group. Tall and slim, her black dress was understated but sophisticated – a perfect foil for her elegant beauty.

Richard was watching Ellie closely.

“Does everyone know?” she asked him.

“I’m afraid so”, he replied. “They’re not very discreet.”

Ellie nodded, surprised at her own reaction. She was supremely calm as she continued to watch and the woman, sensing Ellie’s eyes on her, turned her head slightly and smiled, subtly raising her glass in Ellie’s direction in a gesture of defiance or possibly victory. Ellie wasn’t sure which.

“Oh, my God”, she said softly as realisation hit.

Richard’s hand tightened on her arm in response. Without taking her eyes from the woman in the elegant dress, she spoke to him. “I’ve spent years and years trying to be acceptable to him; trying to give him what he wanted so he would be happy with me. And so I’ve spent so many years trying to be worthy of *him*”, and she turned and looked directly at Richard, “that I’ve forgotten to ask myself if *he* was worthy of *me*.”

“Ah”, he responded, smiling at her. “Such a vital question should never remain unasked.”

Ellie frowned, remembering his earlier comment. “Pretty glass?” she asked him. “She’s far more”

“Trust me”, he responded. “I know her better than you do. Don’t be fooled by her physical appearance.” He leaned towards her and lowered his voice. “I think maybe, just maybe, they deserve each other.”

She nodded slowly. "Did he change that much? Or did I never really know him?"

"Sometimes", Richard replied, "we see only what we want to see."

Ellie thought about that. "I think it best if I just leave", she said quietly.

"Don't go home", he said. "Allow me to take you to dinner instead."

"Shouldn't you be here?" she asked him. "This is your company after all."

He smiled. "A sense of obligation and perhaps duty drew me here tonight but neither is strong enough to keep me here. Not when I've found something far more deserving of my interest, and my attention."

"I may not be such scintillating company."

"I'll take the risk. One doesn't get very far in business, nor in life for that matter, if one is not prepared to take risks." He leaned towards her again and spoke softly into her ear. "I recognise a worthy investment when I see one. It's one of my talents. You have courage Ellie and you are stronger than you think. Maybe it's time you surrounded yourself with people who recognise your true value."

Ellie took a moment to respond. Finally she looked at him. "Thank you", she said, "for everything. You have courage too I think. I could very easily have caused a scene, even if unintentionally. And dinner would be nice."

Without a backward glance she turned and allowed Richard to guide her back through the crowd, towards the doors that would take them outside . . . away from all she knew and into the unknown

~ ~ ~

The day of Your Beauty

By Tony Wherrett

As the day has dawned
So your beauty begun
Like crisp early morn
Its flower fresh as sun.
Like a rose in new bud
Near ready to pluck
Its beholder to bless
As dumb was I struck.

Yet clouds did threaten
Our joy to cover
With intent to curtail
Loves fragrance to discolour.
But their purpose to thwart
Did your radiance now discover
As that beauty transformed
Alight with fresh flavour.

But again and again
With sinister impression
Those billows bore down
In 'bominable fashion.
Yet forever and ever
Does your beauty persist
Their plotting and striving
Did only assist.

So its fullness part hid
But its glory now enhanced
Did your light like rainbow
Only further entrance.
With sudden fresh glint
On the faded morn dew
As shattered and scattered
It amazed with fresh hew.

(continued)

And so it goes on,
Your beauty thus expressed
As the noon day sun
Its power fully dressed.
Your beauty now with warmth
Its former shining did lack
And that treasure bears fruit
Its life to give back.

Yet the day draws nigh
As the setting sun
Like your radiance, is restful,
Its job now done.
In glorious repose
With colours unique
That beauty with splendour
The whole sky does streak.

And all nature is still
As awesome its gaze
Your glory unequalled
Does surely amaze.
So the day at its end
Fresh wonder does lend
As your beauty, we discover,
Has not any end.

Reflection

Reflection

*What are we
If the sun passes high over our bodies
And we cast no shadow?
What are we
If we look into the eyes of those around us
And see no reflection?
Do we exist?
Or are we wraiths –
Misty, nebulous and without substance?
Maybe we **are** the shadow.*

*As a shadow
I wander lost and aimless,
Formless and insubstantial,
Seeking,
Ever seeking,
The vital part of me –
The part of me that casts the reflection.
For once I find me,
I will see my reflection;
And once I see my reflection
I will gaze, once again,
Upon my form,
My Truth,
My Beauty,
My Light;
And I will know my Self;
And I will be my Self.
I will be restored.
I will be resurrected;
No longer a living death.*

Like the Stopper in the Vial

Rachel looked at her watch, mildly irritated. Stacey was late – not very late but time was limited so that every second counted, and every second she wasn't here wasted.

Tapping her fingers impatiently on the table, Rachel thought of the report she was working on, wanting to get back to it. She was hoping to finish it by the end of the day so she could email it out for comment, give people a day to get back to her and still have a day in reserve to incorporate any feedback she might get. She'd planned to work through her lunch break, not wanting the interruption, but Stacey had begged and pleaded and Rachel had capitulated as she always did when Stacey pleaded . . . as Stacey well knew.

Rachel took an impatient sip of water and glanced at her watch again. How long should she wait before sending a narky text?

"Sorry, sorry", a voice said breathlessly beside her and Rachel looked up. "Got caught up", Stacey said, shrugging out of her coat and placing it on the back of the chair opposite Rachel's. "I thought I'd make it in time if I ran so didn't bother texting. Do you know what you're having?"

Rachel nodded, smiling, her irritation evaporating in the light of Stacey's effervescent presence. "Of course", she said. "I always have the same thing here remember."

"Good", Stacey said, pulling her chair out and sitting down. "I'll have the same."

Rachel signalled the waiter and ordered lunch for them both. "Now", she said, "what's so urgent it couldn't wait 'til next week?"

"Why I swear I don't know what you're talking about", Stacey said in mock seriousness and then grinned. "Andrew and I want you to come to dinner on Saturday night."

Rachel raised an eyebrow in surprise. "That's it? That's the urgent thing? Why couldn't you have asked me that over the phone and saved us both the trouble of coming down here?"

Stacey pouted prettily, charmingly. God, Rachel thought, she could charm the skin off a snake if she put her mind to it.

"I thought you'd like to catch up for lunch", Stacey said, feigning upset. "We haven't seen each other for over a week."

Rachel knew better. "No you didn't. I know you. You're up to something. Spit it out."

"Jesus you're a spoil-sport Rache", Stacey said, dropping all pretence. "I have something I want to discuss with you and I knew I would have more success if I did so face to face. Andrew thinks I should just spring it on you without telling you and damn the consequences but I don't think that's such a good idea . . . knowing you as I do."

Rachel was curious but wary. "So what are you springing on me? And what consequences?"

"There'll be someone else at dinner . . ."

"You're setting me up? You know how much I hate that."

"No . . ." Stacey said quickly, defensively and then acquiesced. "Well maybe . . . yes. That's up to you two of course. We're just going to introduce you. That's all. We think you'll really hit it off. You have a lot in common."

"Like what?" Rachel asked dryly.

"You're both intelligent . . ."

"So are a lot of people."

"If you'll just let me finish. You're intelligent in the same way." And then, as Rachel opened her mouth to comment, Stacey continued quickly, "You have the same interests - a love of history for one - and you're both unwilling to take history on face value. You both look more deeply into things past and present than anyone else we've met and, what's more, *you both see the same things.*"

Stacey thought that sounded rather convincing but Rachel continued to look both unmoved and unconvinced. "And you both explore . . .", Stacey shrugged her shoulders and grinned, "well, you know, all your spiritual shit."

Rachel took a deep breath as she sat back in her seat. "It's not shit", she muttered. "Stace", she sighed, "I don't want to go down this road."

"C'mon Rache, please", Stacey begged. "He's only in town for the weekend and"

"He's from out of town?"

"For now. He's just taken a job in Melbourne so he'll be moving here and you know what it's like not knowing many people. But that's not the reason we want you to meet him. You and he remind us of each other. I know", Stacey continued, holding up a hand to forestall the inevitable protest, "that sounds weird but it's true. I've never seen it this strong before. Every time I meet him I think of you. Sometimes it's as if *your* words are coming out of *his* mouth. You're both frighteningly similar. Of course", she added to herself as an afterthought, "that could mean you might *not* like each other at all"

Rachel would have laughed as she was meant to but somehow this did not feel like a laughing matter. Instead, an expression of pain crossed her face. "I can't be bothered with all that Stace."

"With all what?" Stacey asked aggressively, her eyes narrowing on her friend.

"All that dating stuff."

"You don't have to date him. Just get to know him. Become friends. That's all I'm asking."

"It's never that simple and you know it."

Stacey sighed in exasperation. "So what then? You'll just be all alone for the rest of your life because you refuse to have anything to do with men just in case?"

Rachel crossed her arms on the table and looked at her friend in silence for a moment. Then she asked, "What's wrong with being alone? That's exactly the way I want it."

"I don't understand you", Stacey announced. "Why don't you want to experience the magic of falling in love?"

"Because", Rachel answered, drawing out the word, "falling in love addles your brains. It brings on a kind of temporary insanity until you come to your senses and wonder what the hell you've done. It causes you to lose control of your ability to think rationally and you end up doing things you wouldn't do if you were thinking straight. It lures and tempts you into surrendering your heart and soul so that you lose control of who you are and it traps you in its relentless grip, like being caught in a dangerous rip, so that it takes you places you may not want to go. And it promises an experience that it ultimately rarely delivers, like eating a lollypop - the idea of it is always better than the experience. Besides", she added, unfolding her arms as the waiter placed their salads in front of them, "lollypops are not that good for you and they never last long anyway. So why bother?"

Stacey looked bewildered. "How the hell did you become so cynical? You don't even have the excuse of suffering from a broken heart because you don't give any guy enough of a chance to get anywhere near you. So where and how in God's name did you get this idea about love when you've never experienced it?"

"I've experienced enough in life to know it's not what I want. My life is calm, ordered, on track and peaceful. Just the way I want it and I have no desire to change that."

"Right", Stacey said loudly, slapping her hands on the table and drawing the attention of the other diners at the tables closest to them, "and god forbid you should feel attracted to this guy. God forbid you should actually *want* to see him again or get to know him. And, heaven-help-us, god forbid you should actually

like him. I mean really *like* him. That would be a tragedy and a devastation way beyond Shakespearian proportions!"

Rachel grinned, thoroughly enjoying her friend's performance. "Now", she said, leaning forward as she emphasised the word and pointing her fork at Stacey, "finally you're getting it." And then she leaned back again, still grinning, and raised her eyebrows. "Still want me to come to dinner?"

* * *

Viola sat as still and as silent as a statue. The darkness of the cell around her was nearly, though not quite, absolute, broken as it was by a strip of pale moonlight that illuminated a patch of the stone floor in front of her. The stone bench on which she sat was icy cold even though she'd been sitting on it for many hours now. She was afraid, deeply afraid, and her fear had caused her to retreat into a place of silence within – a place of dreams and fantasy, of memory and of longing. But it was a place that no longer held any substance so it offered no real comfort. There was no safe place for her anymore.

By rights, she knew, she should be dead by now, for they usually moved swiftly out of necessity in cases such as hers. Only the absence of the Pontifex from Rome had kept her alive, for he it was, and only he, who could sanction and administer her punishment. An urgent message had been dispatched to recall him to Rome but he had yet to arrive even though, Viola knew, he would move swiftly to get back here. So death had not yet come but she knew it to be inevitable. Death was the price she must pay for bringing unimaginable shame on herself and her family; for bringing the temple of the goddess into disrepute; and, by far her most heinous and unforgivable crime, for exposing the citizens of Rome to the danger, unpredictability and chaos of ill luck. The honour, not to mention the privileges, of serving Vesta, Guardian of luck and Rome's protectress, came at a price, for Vesta demanded the purity and chastity of her priestesses and Viola was impure now, no longer whole and complete. That impurity was the very thing that threatened the safety of the city and only her

sacrifice would cleanse both her and the city of the malevolence that threatened it, for 'twas an ill omen indeed when Rome was betrayed by one of Vesta's priestesses.

Viola brought her legs up, wrapping her arms around them, and closed her eyes as she bowed her head and rested her forehead on her raised knees. The people were angry. They were angry because they were afraid and they had vented their anger as she'd walked through the streets of the city the day before – her walk of shame. She would never forget it. At least she did not have long to remember it. Soldiers had encircled her in a ring of protection and the two on either side had held her arms in the same vice-like grips, their weapons drawn in protection both of her and of themselves. Her wrists were bound and they had stripped her of her cloak and shoes, and loosened her hair like a whore. The people had lined the streets to watch her, some staring at her with hatred in their eyes, others shouting, jeering, throwing insults and curses while others hurled rotten food, stones and whatever else they could get their hands on. A stone had hit her above the eye and though she couldn't help but flinch she'd walked on, keeping her eyes fixed on a point straight ahead, ignoring the pain, and the blood that dripped into her eye and oozed down her cheek. It had been easy to ignore them all, for she had concentrated every fibre of her will into controlling the tears that were threatening to shatter her control. Her determination to hold herself together had been like a wall of protection around her – a protection far more effective than the ring of soldiers with their drawn weapons.

“Viola.”

Viola raised her head as the hoarse whisper filled the room. “Who is it?” she asked, not bothering to lower her voice.

“It's Claudia. I shouldn't be here. I can't stay long. Can you reach up to the bars in the door?”

Viola stood, stumbling slightly with the stiffness in her limbs. She felt for the door, running her fingers upwards until she felt the cold metal bars under her fingers. "Yes, I can reach", she said.

"Take this", Claudia commanded. "It's all I can do for you little sister."

Viola felt something cold pressed into her fingers.

"Have you got it?" Claudia whispered.

"Yes. What is it?"

"You will die when the Pontifex returns", Claudia answered, "and they say he is close to the city. All I can do is give you a choice as to the manner of your death. It will not anger the gods to have you die this way, for your blood will not be spilled."

Viola's fingers curled around the vial. Poison.

"Why oh why did you not heed me when I begged you not to go to him?" Claudia whispered desperately. "Now your life is forfeit. Was he really worth it?"

Viola took a moment to respond while she tried to control the painful lump in her throat. "Where is he?" she asked in lieu of an answer.

"He is under arrest", Claudia whispered. "No doubt his life is forfeit too."

Viola closed her eyes as the pain of loss again threatened her control. He could not come for her. There would be no rescue other than that which the contents of Claudia's vial could bring.

"Fausta betrayed you Viola."

"Fausta?" Viola was shocked. "Why would she do such a thing?"

"She's always been jealous of you. I warned you. Do you not remember? Her jealousy is a dangerous thing . . . as now you know."

"How did she know about him . . . about us?"

"I do not know. She must have followed you, for how else would the soldiers have known where you were yesterday?"

Viola said nothing.

"I must go Viola." Claudia's whisper was hoarse and heavy with emotion.
"May the goddess protect and guide you my little sister."

"Claudia", Viola whispered desperately, urgently. "Thank you."

"For what?"

"For always being my friend."

* * *

Rachel's fingers stilled on the keyboard, her report all but forgotten. The sheer potency and clarity of the image in her mind took over her sight temporarily, consumed her focus and played havoc with her breathing. She hadn't answered Stacey's question at lunch, or not truthfully anyway. She'd never told anyone of the memories, the dreams and the visions she'd had since she was a little girl. People seemed to have trouble enough dealing with the memories of their current lives let alone delving into memories from other ones. She did not doubt they were memories. They were as clear as any of her memories from her own past. In fact, sometimes they were much clearer as this one was now. Though she sat at her desk with her fingers relaxed over the keyboard she saw only a small cell full of darkness that was punctuated by a slim strip of moonlight and felt only the cold hardness of the stone bench underneath her. Stacey was wrong about her not knowing what it was to have a broken heart. She knew. She knew all too well what the pain of a shattered heart and broken dreams felt like. And she knew exactly why she would not allow herself to love in this life

* * *

The vial felt cold and strange against her fingers. Viola was afraid of it and fought the urge to throw it on the floor. Only the knowledge that the quick but painful death from poison was far preferable to the slow, insidious death she would face if buried alive stayed her hand. That and the small pleasure she took in picturing the face of the Pontifex when he discovered her dead on the floor of the cell thus depriving him of the opportunity to play the central role in the

drama of the ritual that must accompany her death. They would just have to have their ritual cleansing without her and the knowledge of that felt good.

But she wasn't ready to die just yet. There were still many hours between now and the rising of the sun, for she must be dead by sunrise. She wasn't ready to let him go. Not yet. There was still time to remember

"Viola! Stop fidgeting!"

"I can't help it. I hate these . . . spectacles. They're so violent. I don't understand how men hacking each other to pieces can be entertaining."

"Nor do I", Claudia agreed. "But these seats are a gift from the people and they are among the best seats in the Colosseum. To refuse them could potentially give offence . . . Viola!"

"What?" Viola was irritated. She'd had enough.

"Control yourself", Claudia hissed. "It's nearly over. Pretend you're enjoying yourself. People are watching you."

Viola sat up straight, forced herself into stillness and, to distract herself from the ugly spectacle on the arena floor in front of her, began to observe the crowd, trying to gauge its mood. Although it comprised thousands of individuals, the crowd in the arena was like a single entity with a personality all of its own and Viola judged it to be in a good mood today. When it was amused and entertained by the games in the arena as it was today the crowd was usually in a good mood but when it lost interest and became bored it tended to turn on itself. Now *that* was entertaining.

Viola scanned the crowd on her immediate right. They were all on their feet, waving their arms, screaming abuse or hollering encouragement for their man, for no doubt they had all placed a wager on one opponent or another.

And then she saw him.

She saw him because he was the only person seated and because he wasn't watching the fight in the arena. He was looking at her.

She returned his gaze, her own reproachful, expecting him to look away, for the priestesses of Vesta were as sacred to Rome as the goddess was Herself and, as such, were not to be treated as other women were treated. Vesta's priestesses were treated with the awe and respect accorded a divine being.

But he didn't look away.

She felt uncomfortable under the intensity of his scrutiny so she looked away and tried to focus on the games. But the weight of his stare kept pulling her gaze back towards his so she threw him a questioning look and mouthed, "What are you doing?"

He smiled and mouthed back, "I can't take my eyes off you."

Despite her fear and her grief Viola smiled in the darkness of the small cell. Following that initial encounter with him she had suddenly developed a keen interest in the same games she had previously found intolerable. Even Claudia was baffled by the change in her attitude and her sudden willingness to attend the games but Viola dared not explain the reason.

And then her smile disappeared as if swallowed up by the darkness. At what point had the game between them changed from one of flirtatious enjoyment, always from a distance, to something far more serious . . . and dangerous? She couldn't answer for him but Viola knew the exact moment it had changed for her. When she received his message she knew he was no longer willing to settle for a distant flirtation and so she agreed to his proposed assignation only to tell him they must never meet again and to convince him they must stop their flirtatious game, for they were flirting with danger. But she hadn't bargained on the power of the attraction that flared between them when they came close. It took them both by surprise and they had been powerless against the force of it, unable and unwilling to resist the pull of it. That night her fate was sealed. That night - the first time they met face to face and up close - they became lovers. That night she surrendered herself to him body and soul and, though the city did

not yet know it, sacrificed the purity of virginity and chastity that guaranteed Rome's safety.

Viola groaned in the darkness and covered her mouth with a hand as the memory burned through her. Was he worth it? She hadn't answered Claudia's question and she regretted that now, for she desperately wanted Claudia to know. He was worth it. He was worth all the pain she felt now. She could not regret the time they had spent together. Yes, he was worth it.

* * *

The burning pain invaded Rachel's dreams and pulled her out of sleep. She sat up in the dark, clutching her stomach, her teeth clenched, trying to fortify herself against the pain. It was bad tonight. She leaned over to switch the bedside lamp on and swung her legs over the bed. Opening the cabinet in the bathroom she reached for the packet on the top shelf, filled a glass with water and swallowed two white pills. When she closed the cabinet door she stood looking at herself in the mirror for a long moment before returning to bed. Lying back against the pillows with her eyes closed, she waited for the medication to kick in. Gradually the burning pain eased and she drifted slowly back into sleep.

* * *

Viola fingered the glass vial but couldn't bring herself to remove the stopper. "You have to do this", she commanded herself softly.

But the image of him as she'd last seen him came unbidden to her mind and she knew she wasn't ready. Her eyes filled with heavy, tormented tears as she remembered. Knowing they had to move fast, they'd planned to run away and start a new life together far, far from Rome where neither of them would be recognised. If only they'd left earlier . . . if only they'd left in the middle of the night instead of spending the night in each other's arms . . . if only . . .

But they hadn't and in the grey light of dawn the soldiers had come.

He'd tried to defend her, tried to save her, tried to fight for her, for he, too, was a soldier but there were too many of them. It had taken three of them using

all their strength and a knife at his neck to hold him back from her. She hadn't fought like he had. Instead, she had become very calm, probably more for his sake than for hers. She'd looked over at him as he strained against the three who held him, straining against the knife at his throat so that blood pooled under the blade and slid down his neck. She knew he was not aware of it. She knew he could not feel that pain, for there was pain of a different kind in his eyes as he looked at her.

"I accept my fate", she said to him, calmly and quietly. "But always remember I love you."

And then she'd turned away and allowed the soldiers to take her away from him to the streets of Rome and the angry insults of its people.

* * *

Rachel picked up her bag and rifled through it, looking for her wallet. Finding it, she opened it and pulled out the small square piece of paper. A name and a number. That's all that was written on the tiny fragment of paper but she had carried it in her bag for months, and for months the awareness of it had pulled at her, drawing and repelling her at the same time.

Why was she so reluctant to make the call? The woman could help her. She knew it, sensed it, felt it. But why not just leave things as they were? She was content with her life wasn't she? Why not just continue in this vein? Because something was not right. She was not well. The pain that tore at her gut every night was symptom enough but there was more. Sometimes she felt as if a large part of her was missing, almost like she'd had a limb amputated without her knowledge or permission but she wasn't sure what had been taken. She wanted to be whole again but that meant being fully alive and it was so much safer being only half alive. She wasn't sure it was even possible to become whole again but was it worth the risk? What of the pain of retribution and consequence that would come if she deviated even slightly from the safety of a normal life? But

what of the consequence of remaining unwell and only half alive? Surely that was worse.

Swallowing her fear and doubt, she took a deep, shaky breath, leaned over and removed the handset from the phone. Holding it to her ear she pressed the numbers written on the fragment of paper and then paused while she waited for the call to be answered. When she heard a voice at the other end of the line, she spoke the words that would change everything, surprised by how easily they came.

“Hello, I was wondering if I could make an appointment”

* * *

“No more memories”, Viola said to the darkness.

As if in obedience to her command, her mind emptied and her heart became as cold as the stone that surrounded her. She knew now. Fausta might have betrayed her but love was really to blame. She had been a good priestess and she had liked serving the goddess. But love had taken her away from that and caused her to forget her duties and responsibilities. With him she had become someone and something else entirely - someone she'd loved being - but that was no excuse for turning your back on duty as she had done. And now her choices and actions had hurt the people of Rome. She must have been mad to think there would not be consequences. She had failed the people; she had failed her family; she had failed her sisters; and she had failed herself, all because of love. Love had caused her to follow her heart instead of what she knew to be right and just and fair.

It was easy now. She was ready. No more memories.

She removed the stopper and without pause or hesitation brought the vial to her lips. As the bitter liquid spilled over her tongue she knew she deserved to die

* * *

“The pain becomes unbearable sometimes”, Rachel explained. “It feels as if someone has set fire to my guts or as if someone has pushed a hot poker through me from front to back here.” She indicated the place on her stomach just above her naval. “I’ve spent eight years trying to find some sort of reason for it. I’ve seen doctor after doctor, had test after test – gall bladder, pancreas, stomach, intestines. I’ve had cameras shoved in me every which way. Nothing. No one can find any cause of the pain and I know what they’re thinking. They think I’m making it up. The medical profession tends to think that when there’s no obvious or easy cure . . . pardon my cynicism. But I know I’m not making it up. When the pain brings me out of sleep in the middle of the night I *know* I’m not making it up. You’re my last chance. A friend told me I needed to try a different tack and gave me your number. So here I am.”

The woman on the other end of the lounge smiled and Rachel was reassured by the waves of compassion radiating from that smile.

“Well”, the woman said, “let’s see what we can find then.” She stood and indicated the massage table on the other side of the room. “Where do you think the pain originates in your body, the front or the back?”

Rachel considered the question. “The front I would say.”

“Good. Then I want you to remove your shoes and lie down on your back. There’s no need to remove your clothes but I do want you to relax as much as possible.”

Rachel did as she was bid.

“Now”, the woman said quietly as she stood over Rachel, “just relax as I said. Close your eyes and try to empty your mind. Don’t think but if an image or a thought comes, let it be. Don’t resist it.”

Again Rachel did as she was bid but a strangled cry caused her to open her eyes. The woman was doubled over beside her and Rachel sat up and reached out a hand to steady her.

“Are you alright?” she asked, concerned.

“Yes”, the woman answered as she straightened. “I forgot to protect myself”, she explained with a self-deprecating smile. “You did warn me. That is some pain you have there Rachel. You’re certainly not making it up.”

Rachel smiled as she lay back against the massage bed. “I’m glad to hear you say so.”

The woman ran her hands over Rachel’s body without touching it, hovering about an inch or two above her from toes to head, pausing over certain places before moving on again. Rachel could feel her body tingling where the woman’s hands hovered even though she kept her eyes closed.

“Alright”, the woman warned softly, “I’m going to touch you now.”

She lowered her hands and touched Rachel’s abdomen gently and Rachel opened her eyes to watch. The woman kept her eyes closed while she moved her hands to different parts of the gut always gently touching, exerting no pressure at all. Finally, she took her hands away, opened her eyes and looked at Rachel.

“Alright”, she said, “I’ve seen enough I think. Now we need to talk, you and I.”

* * *

The pain tore through Viola’s body almost immediately. She barely had time to lie on the stone bench before the burning began. The vial fell from her nerveless fingers and shattered against the stone of the floor but she didn’t notice. She rolled onto her side, gasping and doubled over in agony, her teeth and eyes clenched against the pain. And then her body started trying to rid itself of the poison and the pain became unbearable. She cried out in the darkness but the cold stones of her prison cell were the only witnesses and they offered no help or comfort at all.

* * *

“I believe you know what I saw”, the woman said gently as she joined Rachel on the couch. “You have the sight just as I do but you are afraid of it because you believe it makes you abnormal. You are afraid it sets you apart from the normal

people and so it does, so it does. But it is a wonderful gift to have if you will just allow it to be what it is.”

Rachel bit her lip as anxiety coiled in the pit of her stomach and triggered the very pain she was here to dispel.

“So”, the woman continued gently, “you and I both know of the tragic events that befell you in a life you lived so very long ago. Would you prefer to refer to her as ‘her’ or as ‘you’?”

“As her if you don’t mind.”

“Of course I don’t mind. I would choose the same in your shoes. A little distance from the events of her life will not hurt you. But you must know Rachel those events have affected you so much, in this life it is as if *your* life is *her* afterlife. Do you understand?”

Rachel nodded silently in lieu of a verbal response.

The woman leaned over and laid a compassionate hand on Rachel’s knee. “She made a vow Rachel and you are bound by that vow. It binds you in shadow so that you are like a wraith because shadow, as you know, has no substance of its own.”

“She made a vow?” Rachel asked. “I don’t see that. I don’t remember that.”

The woman smiled and reached behind her for the box of tissues sitting beside the couch. “Take the box”, she said. “I think you’re going to need it.”

Rachel took the box and pulled the tissue poking out the top.

“You don’t see the vow because you are unconsciously protecting it”, the woman explained. “If you could see it, you would release it. But it has become for you like protective armour. And do you know what you are protecting yourself against?”

Rachel shrugged, unable to respond through the painful lump in her throat.

“Your Self”, the woman said. “You are protecting yourself from your Self.”

Rachel looked down at the tissue in her hand.

“You know what I mean by that, don’t you?”

Rachel nodded.

“You are afraid of what you will do and of what you will become and of the consequences of your choices and actions if you allow your Self expression in you”, the woman elaborated. “You are afraid of your Self taking control so you allow yourself to see the experiences of the priestess only up to a point. You do not see that as she lay dying in mortal agony she vowed never to love again. And Rachel”, she said and paused as she waited for Rachel to look at her, “that vow binds you more than you can possibly know. So much does it bind you that it has become like the stopper in the vial, blocking the flow of your beautiful energy. For what is our energy if not love itself? And because the vow is as the stopper in the vial, you *are* the energy of the last moments of her life and *that* is why you feel the pain. You live the painful effects of the poison while ever you honour her dying vow and keep the energy from flowing within and through you.”

Rachel was stunned. “The pain is from the poison?”

“The *effect* of the poison”, the woman corrected. “Not physically but energetically. This is how it works, for we are energy after all and the energy of fear is like toxic pollution in our energy systems.”

“Can you remove the vow?” Rachel asked.

“No, only you can. It is your vow, not mine.”

“How do I release it?”

“Do you want to?”

The question shocked Rachel into silence. She could feel the resistance and the reluctance within and realised she did not want to release the vow.

“There are some things you need to know Rachel”, the woman said. “There are two very different and opposite perspectives of the events we can both see. The first – the one she, the priestess, ultimately chose as her own perspective – was that she did the wrong thing by dishonouring her vows, failing in her duty and jeopardising the safety of the people of Rome. Such an act, according to this

first perspective, deserved the condemnation and punishment she received. The second perspective is one of deeper truth and love. It was not her choice to become a priestess of Vesta. It was the choice of an ambitious father who desired only to further his own selfish ambitions. In loving as she did and in becoming the lover of the man she loved, she honoured not the selfish desires of ambition but the beauty of her own heart – her Self – and in so doing she opened her heart and soul to the flow of love and she experienced something few of us experience in earthly incarnations – something more precious than all the wealth of the world combined. She experienced the truth and the beauty of her own reflection. To face the truth of our own reflection we *must* be ready and to be ready we *must* know our own worth. Did she know her own worth?”

Rachel was enthralled by the woman’s words but when the woman paused, she stammered, “I don’t think I . . .”

“Shadow has no reflection”, the woman explained. “So as shadow, bound by the vow she made, bound by her fear, you see in those around you only non-reflection or illusion. You see only what is not in you, not what is, and so you remain ignorant of who you really are. Do you understand?”

Rachel took a deep, shaky breath. “Yes.”

“Yes”, the woman smiled, “I believe you do. Most people don’t realise it Rachel because they think themselves in love but their relationships are naught but manifestations of their need to see their shadow. Not so the Roman priestess. She saw herself reflected in her lover and so, too, did he in her. Why else do you think the attraction between them was so strong – strong enough for them to risk their lives – far too strong for mortal man or woman to resist? But the greatest tragedy of the final moments of her life is that she took on the first perspective, the worldly perspective, and in judging herself so harshly, she took her punishment into her own hands. You must understand that Rachel. Taking the poison was a powerfully symbolic act of self-punishment – taking her life with her own hand. She condemned what was right and beautiful and in so doing she

has condemned you, while ever you honour her dying vow, to a life without reflection. Because you see Rachel, love is the key that unlocks us and brings us to our Selves. I mean *real* love, not the world's version of it, for *real* love is a reflection of being and this world knows only how not to be."

Rachel felt ill. "And that is why I feel as if I'm only half alive?"

The woman smiled. "I would say you're *barely* alive Rachel. Is that really the way you want to be?"

Rachel slowly but definitely shook her head.

"So let me ask you again", the woman said gently, "do you want to be released from her vow?"

"Yes", Rachel answered as the tears welled. "I do. How do I go about doing that?"

"You've already made the first step. You've chosen to release it. Now, as for the rest, follow your heart and trust your inner guidance. I believe you will create the opportunity to reverse the pain and heartache of those events so long ago."

* * *

Rachel was nervous, very nervous, as she knocked on the door. It took only a moment before her knock was answered.

"Hi", she said uncertainly. "Sorry, I'm early."

Marcus smiled. "Don't apologise. We can have a drink before Andrew and Stacey get here."

Rachel followed him into the house. "This is nice", she commented, looking around her. "You look like you've completely moved in", she observed, seeing no sign of the chaos normally associated with a move.

"Yep", he said. "I don't muck around. The sooner one gets settled in a new environment, the sooner one can get on with living in it. What do you drink?"

"Chardonnay if you've got one otherwise whatever you have will be fine. Have you started your new job?"

The jarring sound of the telephone cut through the peaceful silence of the house and robbed Marcus of the opportunity to respond. Rachel listened to the one-sided conversation and waited in silence while he finished the conversation, put the phone down and poured them both a drink.

“Andrew and Stacey have pulled out”, he informed her as he walked into the lounge room and handed her a glass of wine. “One or the other of them is sick . . . or so they say.”

“God they’re obvious!” Rachel blurted, irritated, as she took the glass. “It wouldn’t kill them to learn the art of subtlety.”

Marcus smiled. “Andrew and Stacey learn the art of subtlety? Once a leopard, always a leopard and it doesn’t change its spots.”

Rachel smiled as her irritation evaporated. “Good point.” And then she pointed towards the rows of bookshelves she could see in the other room. “Do you mind if I have a look at your book collection?”

“No. Go ahead”, he said.

“I have this theory”, Rachel told him as she stood, put her glass on the table and walked into the other room, “that you can tell a lot about a person from the books on their shelves.”

“I adhere to that theory too. So how does it apply to a person who has no books on their shelves at all?” he asked as he came to lean against the arched doorway so he could watch her.

But Rachel didn’t hear the question. Her attention was caught as she studied the titles of his books. “You’re interested in Roman history”, she observed, more to herself than to him. “Particularly Roman military history . . .”

“The Romans caught my attention when I was a boy. We learnt about them at school and I was hooked. I’ve been researching them ever since.”

“Ah”, Rachel made a sound of interest as she perused the spines of his books only half listening as he continued.

“I even dream about being Roman. Have done since I was a child. It’s always the same dream too. I’m a soldier but I don’t know how I know that because I never see myself wearing the uniform of a soldier nor do I ever wield any weapons.”

“So how do you know you’re Roman?” Rachel asked absently, still concentrating on the rows of books, taking note of all the topics he was obviously interested in.

“Because I’m in the Colosseum. I see it very clearly.”

“And what do you see in the Colosseum?”

Marcus looked sheepish although Rachel didn’t see it. “I see a woman”, he said.

Rachel stilled as a chill ran up her spine from her lower back to her scalp. “A woman?” she echoed involuntarily, for she suddenly didn’t want to know any more.

He nodded. “I can’t take my eyes from her. She’s incredibly beautiful but she wears the robes of a priestess which effectively marks her as forbidden. Not that I knew that as a child”, he continued, unaware of the tension in Rachel. “I’ve researched it since. What’s wrong?” he asked as Rachel turned around and he saw her ashen expression.

“What else happens in the dream?” she asked with an effort.

He hesitated. He’d never told anyone about the dream. He didn’t fully understand why he was telling her now because he’d always known instinctively that the dream was precious and, as such, not for public consumption, like sharing a part of one’s soul.

“It always ends the same way”, he answered her, “and I always wake up in a cold sweat with my heart pounding. We are together, the woman and I, but men come, soldiers come and pull us apart. I am helpless against their number and their strength and I cannot stop them from taking her away from me. Are you

alright?" he asked as Rachel put both her hands over her mouth and brushed past him.

She nodded with her back to him, trying to get herself under control, not wanting him to see her fall to pieces. She felt him come and stand behind her again and she could feel his concern. Standing in the middle of his lounge room she breathed deeply, wanting desperately to run away but knowing she must tell him the truth.

"It's not a dream", she forced herself to say without turning around. "I mean", she stumbled, "it's also a dream but it's something else. It's a memory. I know because I have the same memory, only from her perspective."

Silence fell between them and the longer it lasted the more a knot of tension tightened in her gut.

Finally he broke it. "I'm not sure I . . ."

"She says something to him before the soldiers take her away", Rachel said to him, turning around to face him. "Can you remember what she says?"

He frowned. "She tells me she . . ."

". . . accepts her fate and to remember always that she loves you."

The shock on his face was echoed in the silence that fell between them again as they stood facing each other in the middle of his lounge room.

"I'm sorry", he said finally, breaking the long silence. "This is a little too surreal for me. Are you saying that what I dream of really happened?"

Rachel nodded. "She was a Vestal priestess but she loved and paid a hefty price for it."

"Yeah", he said, running distressed fingers through his hair, "I know what they did to Vesta's priestesses when they broke their vow of chastity. It was harsh. Needless to say, it didn't happen all that often."

"She didn't die the way they normally did." Rachel smiled ruefully despite the tension between them. "That must have pissed off the establishment."

"She wasn't buried alive?" he asked seriously. "Then how did she die?"

"Poison", Rachel said simply. "Courtesy of a well-meaning friend."

He gave her a puzzled look. "You have the memory of that too?"

She nodded and smiled without real amusement. "I have a . . . phobia of vomiting or of seeing someone else throw up. I subconsciously associate it with death."

He frowned. "No wonder."

"Do you remember anything else?" Rachel asked him hesitantly. "I mean, do you dream of anything else?"

"You mean like the first time they made love?"

Rachel nodded.

He smiled. "I didn't always dream of that but, yes, I dream of that too now."

Once again they stood facing each other in silence as they both digested this new piece of information and its ramifications.

"You need to know . . .", Rachel began but was silenced by his fingers over her lips.

"Don't speak", he said. "Don't say any more. I know how you feel about love and now I know why. Stacey warned me. But we have a chance to make this right. You have to let this unfold. Don't fight it. We have an opportunity to turn tragedy into triumph. You *have* to let that happen."

She looked at him silently as the tears swam in her eyes and then, slowly, she nodded.

"Good", he whispered as he closed the gap between them and pulled her against him. "This is the weirdest thing I've ever heard of", he muttered against her hair. "But it makes too much damn sense to be ignored." He pulled away and looked at her. "I wonder if I died too."

"You didn't. The woman who betrayed me saved you. Vesta's priestesses had the power to save those who were condemned to be executed. All they had to do was cross the path of the condemned man."

"How do you know that?"

"I've researched them . . ."

"Not that", he said. "How do you know he didn't die?"

Rachel shrugged. "I'm not sure how I know but I do. I know exactly what happened to him. I see right to the end of his life."

"Do I want to know?" Marcus asked hesitantly.

Rachel nodded. "It's nothing to be afraid of. He was banished to the farthest reaches of the Empire where he sought death in battle time and time again. But he did not find death. Instead, he found glory and honour. Decades later, as an older man, he returned to Rome a hero which", Rachel nodded towards Marcus' books, "might explain your interest in the Roman military."

Marcus was silent for a while and then he sighed. "So", he said softly as he ran gentle fingers over Rachel's cheek, "which of them suffered the worst fate do you think?"

"He did", she answered without hesitation. "He was broken by what happened. He never got over it but that's a whole different story. Actually", she mused as Marcus' fingers touched her lips, "their story's not over yet. I suspect, in some ways, it's only really just beginning . . ."

* * *