

The Temple of Fortuna

Elodie Harper



An Apollo Book

UNCORRECTED MANUSCRIPT

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The Temple of Fortuna

*To Andrea Binfor, for a friendship spanning decades, taking
us from teenage laughter in the park to the streets of Pompeii.
Love you always*

ROME

SEPTEMBER AD 79

1

Berenice was at the very height of her power... she dwelt in the palace, cohabiting with Titus. She expected to marry him and was already behaving in every respect as if she were his wife; but when he perceived that the Romans were displeased with the situation, he sent her away.

Cassius Dio, *Roman History*

The night air is heavy with the scent of oleander, the sweet poison which Amara always associates with Rome. She stands with the other women, facing the high arched windows that overlook the moonlit city, caressed by a breeze which is still warm from the sweltering heat of the day. From up here on the Palatine, the noise of the streets is faint, but still the Empire's capital never rests. Carts rumble and clatter over the stones at all hours, and down there, below the Imperial palace, Amara knows the smell is foetid not flowery.

Torchlight ripples over the marble floors and across the painted walls, illuminating the gold, making it look liquid. The wealth surrounding Amara is a different world from the darkness that shaped her in the Wolf Den, but for all the splendour here, there is still pain. Queen Berenice is before them, her dark hair unbound, black kohl in streaks down her face. The Queen of Judea has always excelled at theatre, scarcely anything she does is without calculation, but Amara knows that tonight her tears are unfeigned. Even the most powerful woman can be broken by love.

The room reverberates with the low murmur of weeping, as

wailing maids crowd around the queen, clinging to her clothes. Amara watches them with a cold eye, wondering how many are truly sorry to see their mistress go. There are fewer influential people here to take their leave of Berenice than she expected. Perhaps Titus will not change his mind after all, perhaps this time his lover truly *is* banished. He has promised to get rid of Berenice so many times, then found himself unable to part from the woman who is, in all important respects, his wife. Amara is certain that the irony will not be lost on Berenice; the moment she reached the pinnacle of Fortuna's wheel, when her lover became Emperor, is also the moment that Titus was forced to let her fall.

The line shuffles forwards. Soon it will be Amara's turn to take her leave. She tries to memorize all the faces she can see here, silently counting them off. Her patron Demetrius will expect the most detailed report. It is why he sent her. To get some sense of how likely it is that Berenice will return. Amara tells herself she would have come to pay her respects in any case; she does, after all, deeply admire the queen. But she knows in her heart that if Demetrius had asked her to stay away, she would have done so.

Amara is squinting to see the newest arrival in the hall – is it a senator's wife? – when she realizes the woman in front of her, who had seemed as if she would never tire of clutching Berenice's jewelled hand to her bosom, is finally about to leave. Amara steps swiftly forwards into the queen's embrace.

“Plinia Amara. You came.”

It seems impossible that this is the last time she will hear the queen's deep voice. Amara looks into Berenice's eyes which are smudged with tears. The woman who stole Titus's heart is nearly fifty, already at an age when satirists are decrying her decrepitude, but their mockery cannot dim Berenice's beauty. Even now, after a night of crying, she is still one of the most striking people Amara has ever seen. Not that this is why Titus chose her. The Emperor loves Berenice for the same reason her enemies hate her: she is a powerful woman, of formidable intelligence, unafraid to speak her mind.

“He will send for you again,” Amara says impulsively, forgetting

the bland words of flattery she had rehearsed. "When he has ruled Rome for a year, when his position is secure. I am certain of it."

"So they all say." Berenice gestures at the waiting line. She sniffs, standing straighter. "But perhaps *I* will refuse to come." Amara meets the queen's gaze until Berenice smiles. "Or perhaps not." Berenice looks weary then, and Amara understands the pain of her lost pride. That she should be left hanging on the whim of a man, even the most powerful man in the world. "I shall miss hearing you read," Berenice says. "The admiral did not lie about your voice."

"You are too kind. But I am sure you will have many skilled secretaries in Jerusalem."

"None with your wit. Or your keen mind." Berenice's voice has taken on an edge, the way frost sharpens the grass in winter. "I suppose I should draw greater comfort from *your* visit, Plinia Amara, than from any other. My return to Rome must be assured. You have never been one to step onto a sinking ship."

Amara hesitates. Berenice often does this – offer a compliment which risks the recipient giving offence in return. "Your eventual triumph is not in doubt," she says. "But nothing would have kept me from you this evening."

"Then I will not say goodbye, since we are so sure to be reunited." Berenice holds out her hand for Amara to kiss. Amara bends her head, and the queen turns, as if already anticipating her next audience. There is a beat, as Amara waits, expecting a more formal dismissal which does not come. She tries to catch the eye of one of the maids who are still weeping softly, clutching at the hem of their queen's gown, but the girl slides her gaze to the side. There is nothing for Amara to do but leave.

She walks backwards, head still bowed, not wishing to show disrespect, then skirts the room as silently as she can, heading for the stairs. The palace feels suddenly oppressive, weighed down by the queen's grief and the Emperor's absence. It takes all Amara's effort to resist the urge to run down the marble steps like a child. Instead, she walks solemnly past the waiting slaves who waste their lives keeping watch, past the gilded statues of Augustus, Livia and Caesar, before passing underneath the hanging oil lamps, which

circle above like the constellations, and escaping into the night air. Her litter is waiting for her.

The swaying ascent, as the slaves lift her from the ground, makes Amara feel drunk. She reclines against the cushions, the fabric soft against her skin, and resists the urge to grip the sides. She can never quite get used to allowing others to carry her; the slightest stumble leaves her imagining they will drop the litter. Her own feet feel much more reliable. She brushes the curtains enclosing her with her fingertips, opening them by a sliver – enough for her to glimpse the outside world as it passes, without being seen. They are leaving the compound of the Imperial palace, with its fountains and flowers, and heading into the streets. Amara's pulse beats faster. She never likes being out in Rome at night.

They make their way down the slopes of the Palatine, the shops clustered at the skirts of the Imperial estate all shuttered up for the evening, before reaching the Vicus Longus. The rocking movement of Amara's litter is often interrupted, as the road is crowded with cartloads of masonry, rumbling their way to the colossal Flavian amphitheatre. She peers out as they pass the building site. The arena rises against the night sky like a ghost, its pale stone arches framing the darkness inside. Vespasian's theatre of death, the source of so much noise and hammering and dust, is almost complete.

The road home is direct from here; Amara could almost walk it in her sleep. Demetrius lives on the Vicus Longus, near the Quirinal Hill, where his former master Vespasian had long-standing family roots. The new Emperor's move to the Palatine is one of the few ruptures Titus has made from his father's rule, and Amara hopes her own patron's physical distance from the palace will not mark a similar drift from his place of influence. Gone are the days when Demetrius could return from an audience with the Emperor within moments; now it is a slower, noisier route back, though at least a broad, well-populated one. The city's dangerous, twisting back streets hold an especial horror for Amara.

Rome's night-time world passes in glimpses through her sliver of curtain. A wealthy man walks close by on the pavement, surrounded by slaves and torches. He ignores a prostitute chancing her luck from an archway. Amara watches the woman curse him

silently after he passes, her thin hand shaking. There is something in the dejected way the woman stands that tugs at the threads of Amara's memory, unravelling it, until the stranger disappears and she can see Cressa, her long-dead friend from the brothel in Pompeii. Then she is gone, lost in the shadows.

Wafts of incense herald the nearby shrine of Febris, the halfway point in Amara's journey, long before her litter reaches the goddess of fever's painted altar and its smoking offerings. Amara makes the sign of the evil eye. The Italians' devotion to Febris is alien to everything she was taught in Greece, where her doctor father – who dealt with death all his working life – assiduously avoided any mention of Hades. Why draw the attention of Death or Sickness to yourself? It makes no sense. Amara's mood is not lightened by the flashes of graffiti she can make out, daubed over and over again on the walls. *Upstart Cleopatra, Eastern bitch, Jewish whore*. Hatred of Berenice seems to be everywhere.

Amara closes the curtains, shutting herself into the dark, a sick feeling in her stomach. Foreign harlots are not popular in Rome; perhaps it's safer to stay hidden. Who knows if a jumped-up Greek courtesan might find herself attracting the violence the graffiti writers wanted to inflict on the banished queen? Rome has always had an edge, unrest smouldering under the surface like hot embers ready to burst into flame, but never more so than now. Ever since the death of the Emperor Vespasian four months ago, Amara has felt afraid. It has been so long since this city saw a peaceful transition in power.

Even cocooned in the darkness, Amara recognizes the approach to her own home, the bump in the road which the litter bearers have to navigate before stopping at Demetrius's door, the reek of incense from the nearby Temple of Fortuna the Hopeful. The men lower her from their shoulders, helping her step outside.

The porter, Salvius, greets her in the hallway: "He is waiting for you."

Stepping over the threshold of the house, Amara experiences a familiar feeling of calm. It is the sense of belonging she once took for granted on returning home in Aphidnai when her father was alive, although the atrium here is infinitely grander than her

family home in Attica. Amara uncovers her hair, letting the silk fall to her shoulders as she walks across the marble floor. The walls are not painted but covered in shimmering mosaics of glass, their colours unnaturally bright even in the lamplight. Demetrius commissioned the scenes many years before he met Amara, but their audacity always makes her smile. Where other wealthy homes have scenes of the gods in all their glory and power, he has chosen to celebrate cunning. Fables written by Aesop, a lowly Greek slave, are picked out like priceless gems. Guests to Demetrius's house find themselves watched by a glittering congregation of foxes, wolves, mice and crows. When he first brought her here, Amara had asked him what he meant by it. Demetrius only laughed. *My darling, be proud of the things others despise. Who cares that you were once a whore and I a slave? Look where we are standing now.*

It takes some time to cross to the other side of the house, where the rooms encircle the garden. The door to her patron's bedchamber is ajar, a young slave standing guard outside. Amara nods at the boy as a sign of dismissal. Through the gap in the doorway, she can see Demetrius has dozed off while waiting for her. He is propped upright on the couch, his eyes closed, his jaw slack. She shuts the door loudly enough to wake him, knowing he won't want to acknowledge the weakness of his age, then takes her time adjusting the latch, giving him a moment to compose himself while her back is turned.

"How was Berenice?"

She turns around at his voice, crossing the room to sit beside him. "Everything you might expect. Heartbroken, angry, proud. I think he really intends to banish her this time. There was a sense of hopelessness."

Demetrius sighs. "Pliny says much the same. Titus is resolved – incredible as that may seem. Who else did you see there?"

Amara runs over the list, counting off on her fingers towards the end, to make sure she has not forgotten anyone. "And he has dismissed all the musicians and performers from court."

"All of them?" Demetrius raises his eyebrows. "I had heard that he banished the dancers, but not the singers too. The court will certainly feel rather different."

“Perhaps you and I will be the most dissolute couple there.”

Demetrius does not smile, ignoring her invitation to levity. “There is always an appetite for courtesans, as long as they are not seen to hold too much power.” He lowers his voice, even though they are completely alone. “Look at the Emperor’s brother. He refused to kiss Antonia Caenis, his father’s concubine, yet thinks nothing of keeping his own.” Tension takes hold of Amara like an unwanted embrace. She knows where this conversation is leading. *Domitian*. The Emperor’s volatile younger brother, whose disappointment at the lack of power-sharing with Titus on the death of their father is an open secret, and whose ambition and cruelty are a source of constant anxiety for her patron. Rumours of murder follow him, though none would dare accuse Domitian publicly. Demetrius watches Amara closely. “No need for that sour face, my darling.” He rests his hand on her knee in a half-hearted gesture of affection, although she scowls at him.

“There’s every need. It’s obvious what you are going to ask me next.”

“The trouble is, *Kalliste*, you are too good a spy not to use you.”

“How flattering,” Amara says, not softening at his use of the Greek endearment.

“Well, you can either be cheerful about it, or sour, as you please. But I still need you to visit Saturaia tomorrow.”

“The girl is infuriating.” Amara shifts so that he has to move his hand. “And besides, she never has anything useful to say. I don’t think Domitian is spending his time with Saturaia for her political insights. I doubt he tells her anything at all. I wouldn’t. She’s an absolute fool.”

“Men always let something slip to the women they are fucking. It’s inevitable.”

“But don’t you think Domitian might suspect you have sent me to spy, if I’m seen with her too often? Or worse, what if his wife thinks he’s fucking *me*, as well? Domitia is hardly an enemy we need to acquire.”

“All anyone will see is two pretty little courtesans spending time together to discuss the latest fashions. Sometimes, my love, there are advantages to other people underestimating your intelligence.

Even if *I* never do.” Amara thinks of the fables on Demetrius’s walls. His homage to cunning. She knows it is one of the reasons he values her so highly, and sniffs, not wanting to let him know his flattery worked. “I only ask out of the great respect I have for you, Plinia Amara.” Demetrius continues with his charm offensive, slipping an arm around her waist. Her mouth twists with the effort of continuing to look displeased. Sensing victory, he leans forwards to kiss her lightly on the lips.

“Very well,” she says, in the tone of a woman making a vast concession. “I will go.”

“Pliny is also eager for you to cultivate Satura’s friendship, if that makes it more pleasant for you.”

It is not lost on Amara that Demetrius would choose to tell her this only after she has agreed to his request. It is one of the few signs of jealousy she has ever seen in her patron – his insecurity over whether her loyalty to Pliny, the man who granted her freedom, is greater than her loyalty to him. “It does not make it more pleasant,” she says, with a false show of petulance. “How disagreeable of you both to order me about.” From the corner of her eye, she can see him smile. “And now, I suppose, you will expect me to stay the night.” Amara kisses Demetrius again, to take the sting out of her tone, and make it plain that she is not averse to the idea. In truth, Amara feels absolutely no desire for Demetrius, and never has. But she is fond of him, and sometimes finds it comforting to be physically close, if only because this is when her patron is relaxed enough to show her true affection.

“How could I refuse such a gracious invitation?” Demetrius kisses her back, his own desire real enough. He stands up, taking her by the hand to lead her to bed. “Though I can’t have you stay the whole night. I need to get some sleep afterwards. And you never leave me any room.”

Against her will, Amara thinks of Philos. Of what it felt like to be with a man who held her as if he never wanted to let her go. Whose love she never doubted. She crushes the memory, instead smiling at her patron, pretending she doesn’t feel the ache of loneliness in her heart.

2

...we are so subject to chance that Chance herself takes the place of God; she proves that God is uncertain.

Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*

The maids flutter around Amara like bees to a flower, except they are coating her in nectar, rather than extracting it. These days it takes a full hour to make her presentable. The white powder itches as one of the girls brushes it over her face and neck, giving her skin a pale, glistening sheen. Amara insists on using marl out of respect for her doctor father, even though it is less fashionable than lead. Timaios often lectured her on the metal's poisonous properties, and she cannot bring herself to use it now, even though Demetrius rolls his eyes at her fastidiousness.

Iris purses her own lips as she applies the red to Amara's mouth, deepening the bow with small, deft brushstrokes. When she has finished, she steps back and encourages Amara to pout. Demetrius paid a fortune for Iris and Daphne, the two women whose lives revolve around making his mistress beautiful. Another fortune is spread out on the dressing table in the form of perfumes and cosmetics, among them a shell, full of bright green malachite. Amara closes her eyes in anticipation of the flash of colour Iris will lay above the lines of kohl she has already drawn. The gentle touch of the brush on her eyelids is soothing, as is the silence. Behind her chair, Daphne is carefully dressing her hair, so softly she can scarcely feel it. Amara knows very little about either woman, preferring to be left to her own thoughts while they work.

After they have finished, Amara does not even have to lift the

mirror to view herself. Daphne holds it up for her, a large highly polished disc of silver with a woman's profile engraved on the back. Amara stares at her reflection. Her eyes are perfectly symmetrical, the green tapering at the corners, making them look larger. Her mouth, which has always been her most striking feature, looks even fuller with its deep shade of red. It is her face, as much as her intelligence, that has led to Amara sitting at this dressing table, owned by one of the richest men in Rome. She thinks of her friend Dido, who was even more beautiful, imagines how she too might have been transformed with the help of a Daphne or an Iris, and finds she doesn't want to look at herself anymore.

"Thank you," she says, smiling at Daphne, who sets down the mirror. Iris brings over a wooden box, inlaid with two mother-of-pearl nymphs, dancing. The silver clasp is cool under Amara's thumb as she presses it, releasing the lid. She takes a moment to enjoy the riches inside. A priceless cameo from Demetrius, with her own face engraved as the goddess Pallas-Athene, gold and silver bracelets stacked in a pile like the cheap glass ones she used to see on sale in Pompeii, endless rings, and most precious of all, a necklace of gold and pearl given to her by the late Emperor Vespasian on the Kalends of March. She can still remember Demetrius's pride when she was singled out as one of the women to benefit from the Emperor's annual act of generosity. They had discussed whether Vespasian might want to take her to bed too, and Demetrius had made it plain this was one act of infidelity he would allow. Amara could never tell whether he was disappointed or relieved when his master did not request a night with his lover. Knowing Demetrius, she expects it was both.

She selects the cameo, a pair of gold earrings and several rings, including two she always wears: one of amethyst and bronze – which she bought for herself – and the ring Demetrius gave her when he first brought her to Rome. It is solid silver, stamped with a leaping hare, the symbol of sexuality and fertility. *Perhaps you might give me a son in return*, he had remarked when she thanked him, his tone light, as if it meant nothing, but she had seen the hope in his eyes. Three years on and they have no child, only two early losses which neither of them ever discuss.

The two maids step back as Amara rises from her chair, and Daphne picks up the silk mantle from the bed, laying it reverently over her mistress's head and shoulders. It is blue, to match her chiton, stars embroidered on it in threads of silver. Amara leaves Iris and Daphne to tidy away the dressing table and walks out into the garden, passing her patron's bedchamber which sits next to hers on the colonnade. Demetrius will not be there at this time of the morning. Instead, he will be in his study meeting clients and conducting business on behalf of the Emperor. The expensive scent of cinnamon mingles with that of the oleander as she makes her way to her usual spot by the fountain. A slave is waiting with sweet buns and figs, offering them to Amara as she sits on the bench, which is warm from the September sunshine.

When Amara is settled, the slave woman holds out a sealed tablet. "This came for you, mistress."

Amara almost drops the food in her haste to take the letter. It is from Pompeii. Her hands shake as she breaks the seal, her eyes darting to the top.

Greetings, mistress, all is well with your daughter.

Amara lets out a shuddering breath, overwhelmed with relief. Philos always starts his letters this way to spare her anxiety. He knows that she is terrified of bad news – so many small children die, their parents not even permitted to mourn them fully until they pass the age of ten. Amara reads on, hearing every word in Philos's voice, with its musical Campanian accent.

Rufina continues to excel in everything she does. She is cheerful, polite and loved by all who know her. At the age of three, not only has she already mastered her alphabet – as you know – but she can now also write over twenty words, which I am told is prodigious. The toy bird you sent is rarely out of her hands and stays each night beside her bed. She sends her beloved mother a kiss, and keeps you close in her heart.

Tears sting Amara's eyes and she is forced to pause. There is a

knot in her chest where all the love for her daughter is kept trapped and hidden. Rufina. It is so much easier not to think of her, not to think of Philos. To forget the family she left behind. All the money Demetrius gives Amara is securing her daughter's future, yet she knows it will never bring back the years she is losing.

Julia and Livia continue well. They wish the blessings of the gods upon you. Your businesses continue to thrive, although we have incurred some costs from an unexpected quarter. Britannica has been chosen to lead the games in October, an honour for your entire gladiatorial company which continues to succeed under your sponsorship. I have no doubt she will lead them to victory.

I trust all is well with you in Rome, mistress, and I remain your obedient servant,

Philos

The last line hurts, even though the words are nothing but a formula. It is not as if Philos can admit his true role as Rufina's father, or as Amara's lover. *Former lover*, she reminds herself, setting the tablet down in her lap. It is years since they lay together, or shared any of the intimacies that make up her daily life with Demetrius. Perhaps Philos now loves someone else. The thought is not a comforting one.

Philos's letter is only a few lines long and yet it brings a backwash of painful emotion. The stone bench grows colder underneath Amara as she sits, unable to eat, longing not only for her daughter, but for all those she left behind. Britannica, her most loyal friend, whose exploits as a gladiator in the arena fill Amara both with pride for her strength, and terror for her safety. Julia and Livia, whose company and wit she misses dearly. It was Julia who provided Amara with a permanent home in Pompeii after Rufus left her, and Julia who is now ensuring Rufina has a loving childhood

in that same home, within the walls of her estate. One of the most formidable entrepreneurs in the town, and a friend of Pliny, Julia Felix is the closest Rufina has to a mother in Amara's absence, even helping persuade Rufus to keep his slave Philos on loan to Amara, to oversee their child's education. *Philos*. It is impossible to think of him without pain. Amara has grown to care very much for Demetrius, but still, it is an affection which cannot compete with the passion she once felt for Philos, the man she chose for herself, yet was forced to abandon.

She re-reads the letter in a calmer frame of mind, and this time another line strikes her: *we have incurred some costs from an unexpected quarter*. It seems an innocent enough phrase, but the ambiguity now makes her uneasy. Philos is always plain-speaking unless he cannot be, unless he is perhaps hinting at Felix, the blackmailer who still haunts their family. Even here in Rome, in her patron's beautiful villa, her old master from the brothel still manages to cast a shadow. Amara stares at the tablet, willing it to make sense, while the fountain murmurs beside her and the slave stands in silent attendance.

The walled garden where she sits no longer feels as safe. There is no mansion stout enough to keep out her past. Her former life as a brothel whore, and later as Rufus's concubine, are facts well known to her patron; it is impossible for a woman to have been enslaved and to have lived virtuously. But the secret which could destroy her is one she knows Demetrius would not be able to forgive. The father of Amara's daughter is not Rufus, but Philos, Rufus's slave. To have betrayed a patron with his own servant is not only a fault of character, it is illegal, and could forfeit both Amara and Rufina's freedom. This is the secret Felix holds, the secret he has written into his will, and the reason she is still forced to pay for his silence each month. It is a secret which was betrayed to him by Victoria, who was once Amara's closest friend, but is now Felix's wife. The tablet is solid in her fingers as Amara grips it, wondering, as always, what unpleasantness might one day come for her from Pompeii.

Eventually she puts the letter down. Stewing in fear will not make the meaning any clearer, and if her family were in serious danger from Felix, she knows what words Philos would have said.

They have already agreed on the code he would send if she needed to return urgently to Pompeii, or if she were at risk of imminent discovery. Amara finishes her breakfast, without speaking to the woman whose presence she had momentarily forgotten. It used to bother her, the way her first patron Rufus did not *see* the slaves who served him, anticipating his needs and moving around him like moths dancing attendance on a candle. But now she and Demetrius are much the same, in spite of both having endured enslavement themselves.

Voices from the other side of the colonnade draw her back into the present. Some of the household servants are discussing the preparation for Pliny's visit later. Amara looks up. The sky has lost the rosy tint of the morning and is deepening to the clear blue of a hot September day. The visit to Saturaia can no longer be delayed. She rises, without speaking to the woman who served her, and makes her way across the garden to the atrium. The villa in Rome is large but not as enormous as Demetrius's luxurious estate in Stabiae – as a freedman, he does not want to attract too much envy among the capital's elite.

A line of mosaic ants watches Amara as she passes her patron's study. The obsidian insects are hard at work while a yellow grasshopper sings, wasting his day in idleness. It is very like Demetrius to have commissioned a fable on the importance of remaining diligent, right outside his own place of work. She pauses at the door, hearing the deep murmur of his voice, speaking Greek. The sound is comforting. Amara wants to slip inside, to wish him well before she leaves, but suspects this might annoy him. Whatever affection Demetrius feels for her is unlikely to offset his dislike at being interrupted with a client.

A litter is waiting for her at the door. The master has already issued instructions for how his lover will spend her day. Amara sits upright, holding on to the post as the litter bearers hoist her onto their shoulders, and then they are off. Rome's streets are transformed by the daylight. Even the most vicious graffiti loses its sting, people call loudly to one another in the street or from the windows, pavements are packed with those trying to buy and sell. Amara leaves her curtain open, enjoying being carried above the

crush of the crowd. She remembers having to fight for every inch of space in Pompeii, the hems of her tunics constantly soiled by dust and dirt.

Saturia lives in a fashionable street in the Campus Martius, not as grand as where Demetrius has his villa, but more glamorous and youthful. Or at least this is what Saturia has often declared to Amara. The courtesan's house is visible the moment Amara's litter sways into her neighbourhood. The bright yellow building stands out from its plainer neighbours, with the love story of Eros and Psyche depicted in a series of roundels on the first floor. Psyche's naked form is twisted into a succession of titillating poses and bears a striking resemblance to Saturia herself, though the artist clearly chose a less inflammatory subject than Domitian for the winged god Eros.

One of Demetrius's litter bearers, a Gaul whose name Amara can never pronounce, orders his fellows to stop. Amara alights carefully, knowing the close attention Saturia always pays to the appearance of other women, and adjusts the silk over her hair. Incense wafts from the house into the street as Amara steps into the cool, dark hallway. The porter is obscured by shadow, his oiled beard gleaming in the dim light. He bows. Amara is fast becoming a familiar figure at Saturia's home. She follows the man into the atrium, which is painted in the latest style, the walls creating a false sense of depth, illusory green curtains draped between painted columns, deceiving the eye. A marble tiger prowls around the edge of the pool at the room's centre, its striped reflection rippling in the shallow water.

The porter claps his hands and a young maid hurries forwards. "Tell the Mistress that Plinia Amara is here." The blonde girl scampers up the stairs, light-footed as a rabbit, leaving Amara and the porter to enjoy a moment of awkward silence.

The maid returns, looking flustered. "Mistress is having her hair done, but she will see you."

Amara follows the girl up the steps, then along the tiled corridor towards the sound of voices. The door is open, welcoming them into the bustle of Saturia's beauty routine. It is a very different scene from the gloomy atrium. Two windows look onto the garden,

letting in the full light of the morning sun, and the air is full of laughter, as four maids fuss over their mistress. Amara cannot see Saturaia's face, only a cascade of golden-brown hair being curled, and a limp hand, held out to have the nails painted.

"My darling, so sweet of you to come!" Saturaia does not turn, leaving Amara no choice but to walk round to face her instead. Domitian's young mistress is illuminated by sunlight, her hair a halo of fire. It is impossible not to be struck by her beauty. A gloss of white lead has been smoothed over her skin, making her look like a doll. Her wide-set eyes are an unusual shade of blue, which she always accentuates with a matching line of colour, and her cheeks have a childlike plumpness which allows her to lay claim to being seventeen, even though Amara is certain she is closer to twenty. But whatever Saturaia's exact age, she is younger than Amara, a fact she rarely allows her to forget.

"You look radiant," Amara says, treating Saturaia to her most ingratiating smile, the one she learned at the brothel, the one her pimp Felix would wear when he wanted to charm difficult clients.

"I wish you would let me give you some of this." Saturaia gestures at the lead. "Marl can be so ageing. Powder shows up even the tiniest little lines." Amara does not allow her smile to falter, only raises her eyebrows as if with interest. "Although your patron is so *old*, isn't he? I suppose that does have its advantages. Even when you are long past it at forty, you will still look like a slip of a girl to him – he will be so very, very ancient by then."

"Demetrius has the energy of a much younger man." Amara is stung into defending her lover, trying not to picture him as he looked last night, tired from waiting up for her. Instead, she wills herself to see him at work in his study, conducting the Emperor's business. Her fate is bound up with his, and it is fear as much as affection that makes her dread age weakening his grip on power.

"How sweet of you to be fond of him," Saturaia says, wiggling her fingers in the air to set the colour on her nails. "I'm not sure I would be able to overlook his past, myself. Is it true that when he was a slave, he was obliged to pleasure his first master's wife?" She shudders. "The idea of a man serving a woman is too unnatural."

Amara inwardly curses Demetrius for sending her here. Saturaia

is immensely irritating. Although at least now she can repay her patron with a small act of disloyalty, as a means of gaining her target's trust. "It is entirely true," she says, with a sly smile, reigniting a rumour that has long dogged Demetrius's reputation. "He *was* obliged to serve his master's wife. Though I cannot say a man learning to pay attention to a woman's pleasure is such a disagreeable state of affairs. Besides, he told me once that the wife was young and pretty, so it was not such a trial for him to endure."

Saturia gasps with feigned horror, then laughs. "I'm sorry, darling, but I've met Demetrius and the whole idea is too ridiculous. The idea that anybody ever lusted after him! Although I guess we are all young once."

"Of course we cannot all be so fortunate in our lovers," Amara replies, not quite daring to name Domitian, but hoping Saturia will. Instead, the girl just smiles with infuriating smugness.

"I don't think you are doing too badly, darling," Saturia says. "He has a lovely house, doesn't he? That must make up for rather a lot."

Amara tries to see herself through Saturia's eyes. An older courtesan with a dubious past, whose patron – for all his wealth and influence – is a mere freedman. Perhaps Saturia imagines Amara is insecure or envious of a seventeen-year-old who is bedding the Emperor's brother. "Of course," she says, attempting to sound humble. "At my age, I'm lucky to have him. And at least he is always gentle and kind."

To Amara's surprise, Saturia seems to take her remark as a dig, rather than self-deprecation. Even through the lead paste, she can see Saturia's cheeks flush red. "How nice for you," she sneers. "To have somebody *kind*." Saturia raises her chin, looking defiantly at Amara. "I don't know what you've heard, but I'm perfectly happy and perfectly capable of looking after myself. Men are only gentle when they're too old and dodderly to be anything else. And who wants *that*."

There is a moment's silence. The maids glance at each other, and the girl painting Saturia's last finger nail is now completely still. "I meant no offence." Amara holds up her hands. "I swear I have heard nothing, and if I had, that is the last thing I would ever use

against another woman. You must know enough rumours about *my* past to believe me.” She watches Saturaia who is now scowling at the floor, her lower lip quivering. Amara is reminded of her former friend Victoria, her fellow whore at the brothel, who would hide her fear of Felix with anger. And then she understands. *Saturaia is afraid of Domitian*. “You cannot possibly imagine I have anything but admiration for you,” Amara says, speaking to Saturaia gently, as if she were a frightened child.

“People say Pliny picked you up in a brothel.” Saturaia sniffs, taking Amara’s bait to save face. “Is that true?”

“I doubt the admiral has ever set foot in a brothel. But it is certainly true that I have.”

“Then I suppose you have done very well for yourself.” Saturaia flicks her hand at the maid, gesturing for her to finish the fingernail. “In your position, I too would be pleased to have landed Demetrius.”

This is as close as Saturaia ever comes to paying another woman a compliment. Amara bows her head. “You are too gracious.”

Saturaia pauses, watching the last touch of red paste coat her little finger, then she stands, waving the maids away. “I was planning on seeing the new statue on display at the Temple of Fortuna Huiusce Diei this morning. Everyone is talking about it. Perhaps you will join me?”

The temple to the goddess Fortuna in her guise as ‘the luck of the present day’ is more art gallery than religious sanctuary, and one of the most fashionable places to be seen in Rome. Amara would have preferred a more private meeting at home – if Domitian does not already know of this friendship, he certainly will after they have taken a turn around Fortuna’s rotunda. At the same time, she can hardly refuse. “What a lovely idea,” she exclaims, taking Saturaia’s outstretched hand. “I would be delighted.”

The temple is only a short walk from the house, but Amara soon regrets their decision not to take the litter. Sharing a pavement with Saturaia is not easy. They are followed by a fresh gaggle of maids, and Saturaia complains constantly about the noise, the smell and

the dirt. At one point Amara is obliged to help hold up Saturaia's chiton, which she suspects is a deliberate form of power play, to let any onlookers know who is the more important courtesan of the two.

After yet more dithering outside a fabric shop, they reach Fortuna's temple. It stands behind Pompey's Theatre, which Demetrius once told her was the site of Julius Caesar's murder – an irony given the Dictator's lifelong devotion to the goddess of chance. Amara gazes at the elegant round building that sits atop a flight of white marble steps. It reminds her a little of the temple to Hera in her hometown of Aphidnai, and she stands for a moment, lost in memory, imagining the sound of her parents' voices calling her. Then she notices Saturaia is shifting from foot to foot in a childish gesture of boredom, the way Victoria would fidget when she was restless. Again, Amara feels a flicker of compassion. The girl is irritating, but it is unpleasant to think of her being abused by a powerful man like Domitian. Amara smiles. "Shall we go in?"

Saturaia nods and the pair of them climb slowly up the steps to the temple sanctuary. At the top, Saturaia pauses, ostensibly to straighten her head scarf, but Amara can tell it is to strike the most flattering pose. When Saturaia is happy with her appearance, they enter the sanctuary.

Even in the dimmer light, Fortuna's statue commands immediate attention. Towering up towards the domed roof, she is a monstrous figure, making it easy to believe in the deity's power to crush men and their empires underfoot. Looking up at the goddess, Amara's head does not even reach her knee.

"They didn't make her very *pretty*, did they?" Saturaia whispers to Amara, squeezing her arm.

Amara wants to laugh but doesn't dare. "No," she says solemnly. "I suppose not." It is true there is nothing overtly feminine about this Fortuna; her face could almost be that of a man, and her lips are parted, not with desire but indifference. Her bronze torso verges on being flat-chested, making her even more androgynous, while the heavy cornucopia that she holds could double as a weapon. Amara stares. Fortuna looks a little like her friend Britannica. She smiles at the thought. The ability to grant good luck on the day seems

a fitting gift for a gladiator, and Amara offers up a prayer to the goddess of chance for Britannica's safety in the arena, on this day, and every day.

"I've never been inside here before," Amara says, glancing round, her eyes adjusting to the gloom. "It's beautiful."

"You've never been?" Satoria is aghast. "I suppose as a Greek you wouldn't know what's culturally important in Rome. It houses some of the best artwork of the city. I think that's the new statue, over there." She starts to walk around the rotunda, forcing Amara to keep pace. The walls are covered in paintings and sculpture showing the power of Fortuna over the lives of mortals. The goddess stands astride cities, both raising them up and destroying them, while armies fight at her feet, their victory decided not by might but by Fate. Fortuna's expression in all these scenes is the same; she appears equally unmoved by joy or suffering.

Satoria pays scant attention to the frescoes, peering at the statues instead. Even Amara, who knows very little about art, can tell that they are superior. She lingers at a beautifully realized version of Pallas-Athene and touches the cameo at her neck which Demetrius gave her. The goddess of Attica – Amara's Greek homeland – rests on her spear, scanning the horizon for the enemy, her lips curled in an enigmatic smile. The head of Medusa is pinned to her breastplate, the snakes so real Amara almost expects them to move. She would like to spend an hour going over every detail of her patron goddess, but realizes she is ignoring Satoria, the reason she is supposed to be here. Amara joins her at the base of a tall nude – a young man carrying a sword.

"Is it wise to stand just here?" Amara asks, raising an eyebrow, hoping to draw Satoria out with teasing. "People might wonder why we are staring at him."

"Well, darling, I can see why Demetrius might be jealous." Satoria smirks. "Though maybe this is how he appeared to his master's wife, all those *centuries* ago when he was in demand."

"And does *your* patron have cause to be jealous?"

"Never of my loyalty." Satoria is still gazing at the naked young man, at the weapon clasped in his hands. Her voice, when she speaks again, is barely a murmur. "And I do believe he is capable of

rising higher than this.” Amara looks swiftly at her companion. It is the closest Satoria has ever come to a political comment. Satoria looks back at Amara, and for a moment, there is an unmistakable edge to her expression, but then she smiles, placing her fingers coyly to her lips, as if all she intended was a lover’s compliment.