

https://dspace.org/

Nomadness: the gospel according to Wanda B. Lazarus

Joffe, Lynn M

2017

https://hdl.handle.net/10539/27165

Joffe, Lynn Michelle, (2017) Nomadness: the gospel according to Wanda B. Lazarus, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, https://hdl.handle.net/10539/27165

Downloaded from a DSpace repository. https://dspace.org/

Nømädnêss:

The Gospel According to Wanda B. Lazarus

A novel by Lynn M. Joffe

As part of the requirement for a dissertation for the degree of Master of Arts by Research (Creative Writing) submitted to the Faculty of Arts, School of Literature, Language and Media, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg.

© Lynn M. Joffe. Johannesburg, 2017. Student # 1305057

Contents

Book	Header	Page
I	‘Tummel in the Temple’ Jerusalem 33 CE	3
II	‘Zenobia in Chains’ Palmyra 272 CE	38
III	‘The Gopi Bat Mitzvah’ Cochin 666 CE	65
IV	‘To Live or Die in Magao’ Dunguang Caves 1054 CE	84
V	‘Ballad of the Occitan’ Albi 1229 CE	104
VI	‘The Wandering Years’ Europe 1229-1234 CE	121
VII	‘The Odalisque of Swing’ Istanbul 1558 CE	134
VIII	‘Commedia in Cremona’ Italy 1689 CE	152
IX	‘Terpsichore’s Plectrum’ London 1842 CE	177
X	‘Razzie and the Romany Creams’ St. Petersburg 1916	204
XI	‘Made in Manhattan’ New Canaan 1942	226
XII	‘The Land of the Lemba’ Johannesburg 1999	254
XIII	‘Aurora Nights’ Geilo 2016 CE	278

Book I: ‘Tummel in the Temple’ Jerusalem 33 CE

i

If we hadn’t been following Hadassah’s pomegranate all over the known world, we’d never have wound up in Bethany. Carta would still be alive. And I’d be mortal. But that’s not how things panned out. A Painted Lady flaps her wings and all that jazz. The Lembas remember it differently, but they were always going to write their own version anyway. I was there. I saw it all. Not in my present incarnation, but who am I to split sheitel hairs?

The beitzim started to roll when Rov Yossi and his boychicks were invited over for that last supper. It was a double whammy, actually – Pesach and Shabbos rolled into one. Martha and I were helping Hadassah boil ’n bake a veritable Reed Sea of latkes and gefilte fish. Lazzie was playing tag the teigel with the chickens in the inner courtyard, hiding the syrupy donuts from the gaggle of peckers and giggling heartily when their beaks got stuck in the sticky. I was never much for domestic activity and did all I could to wheedle out of the chores. Normally the servants would clean up after us. But on Pesach, Hadassah was having no shirking. Scour the scullery. Polish the porcelain. Seek and destroy any vestige of chametz – no wheat, no rice, no leftover showbread, it all had to go. On Pesach we’re forbidden to put anything in our mouth that rises. Then there’s the matter of changing the dishes – one set milchedik, another vleishedik. All in all, a huge schlep.

Twelve extra mouths to feed was no mean feast. Our third step-daddy, Qumran Qumran, had done well in the buildup to the festival; he knew how to supply the needs of the flocking pilgrims and set up fruit stands all along the road to Damascus. Palm dates did very well that season. Figs were at a premium. He tripled the cost of olives. But he liked a flutter on the camels did Qumran Qumran, and often returned home in his flagons with no more than a handful of copper Leptons and a mild dose of the clap. Still, Hadassah was a social climber and having the chevras over would up her Quarter cred by a quite a few notches. Nu, we improvised ways to stretch her meagre allowance to feed the holy horde. Rolled the matzo balls smaller. Watered down the wine. Then she passed it off as a miracle. From her mouth to Yahweh’s ears.

Just as we were dipping the first fishy batch into the boiling schmaltz, Philemon, our ancient camel driver, knocked timidly at the kitchen door. I smelled him before I saw him. The reek of dromedary is very hard to eradicate.

‘Slicha, Madam Laz, but the small boss Lazzie, he is having the big body shakings.’

‘Oy,’ sighed Hadassah, ‘not another fit. He’s going to mess all over his tallis.’

I threw her a faecal look and dashed outside, matzo meal and egg yolk coagulating between my fingers. Lazzie was lying in the henpecked courtyard, teeth clenched, eyes rolled back to the whites. His body arched as if a great cord was pulling him up to heaven by his wishbone and then dashing him mercilessly to the ground.

‘Bring a spoon!’ I screamed at my sister.

‘Milk or meat?’ Martha asked.

‘It doesn’t matter, he’s swallowing his tongue. Make it snappy.’

Martha flung a kneidlach ladle through the doorway and I wrestled it between my brother’s gritted teeth. Matzo meal and blood began to bubble into a foamy paste at the corners of his mouth. Hadassah stood behind the kitchen curtain, immobile.

‘Ma! Help!’ I yelled. Hadassah turned her head towards the stove.

‘Martha, get the ’nard!’ I screamed to my sister. I always had some handy for Lazzie’s fits. Its roots, crushed to powder and dissolved in boiled water calmed his convulsions and my own nerves. Too much was fatal. Too little was ineffective. You had to get the dose just right.

‘You gave it to the Rov, remember?’ Martha chided. ‘You got the resin all over your hair?’

‘Alright already, bring me the Ash gourd juice.’

‘It’s in the chametz basket. It’s not Kosher l’Pesach.’

‘For fig’s sake, Martha, just get over here.’

Martha stepped into the courtyard, gingerly rolled up her simlah and straddled Lazzie’s puny chest. I cradled his head, attempted to prise open his jaw and received a couple of savage bites to the thumb. It took both of us to hold him to the ground, or he surely would have snapped himself in two. The fringes of his tallis were covered in flecks of bloody matzo as he arched and arched again. Suddenly, he froze in mid-climax and slumped to the courtyard cobbles, lifeless, the wooden spoon slack between his foamy jaws.

Martha wept. Hadassah stood like a statue at the window.

I pulled myself together and addressed Philemon, who stood to one side, twiddling his camel bridle. ‘Phil, you’ve got to take me and Lazzie to Jerusalem.’

‘I can’t put boss Lazzie in the cart, Miss Mary. ‘The dead are unclean.’

‘He’s not dead, he’s just very ill, Phil. And please don’t call me Mary.’ I ripped off Lazzie’s tiny tallis and put my lips to his cleft. He threw up what was left in his stomach, a sticky teiglach and chicken feed mix.

‘If he passes to Yahweh on the way, I will be the one to take the blame.’

‘He’s got to get that ’nard or he won’t recover.’

‘We’ve still got some Grains of Paradise and a titch of Skullcap,’ offered Martha.

‘We’ve tried that combination before,’ I said. ‘We have to have consecrated spikenard.’

‘You can’t take Laz anywhere in this condition,’ Martha said. ‘The ride will kill him.’

‘Then I’ll go and fetch it myself. Philemon, give me that bridle.’

‘You can’t, sister,’ howled Martha. ‘You don’t even have a camel license.’

‘I’m going to find Yossi and I’m going to get that ’nard for Laz. Now get out of my way.’ And before anyone could say ma nish’ta’na, I scraped the step ladder from the side of the house, propped it against Sal, our family camel, mounted her hump and kicked her into gear.

‘You can’t take the camel without the carriage!’ Martha screamed. ‘You’ll rupture yourself!’

‘Wrap Lazzie in those linen strips like we did last time,’ I shouted. ‘Powder some horseradish seeds and sprinkle one pinch in each nostril. Put him in a cool place. And keep his lips moist with melon.’

‘Come back here this minute,’ Hadassah screamed from the kitchen door. ‘You’re not going out dressed like that.’

‘It’s a matter of life and death, Ma,’ I squawked from my perch. ‘I’ll be back by sunset.’

‘Cover your head,’ she shouted after me. My fingers fluttered to my neck where I always kept my loosened tichel. It was wet with Lazzie’s blood and gore. I twirled it above my head like a standard bearer at a gladiator match. Lazzie’s precious bodily fluids dried instantly in the hot hamsin and flaked to the ground like dandruff manna. At least I’d be able to find my way home. Little did I know I would never return in this life.

ii

I’d met him before, Rov Yossi; he’d visited Bethany a few times to see to the lepers and attend to Lazzie’s fits. He and his chevras had a fair way to walk across the city, past the Temple and over the Mount of Olives, but the view was breathtaking and the company worth the climb. We

Pharisees had a particularly sweet tooth; we mixed honey in our yams and carrots in our jams. The Galileans salivated to a more Mediterranean fare – hummus, falafel, chatzilim. The combination was heady when the chevras came over.

Once, after Martha had served them a trolley of tea and teiglach, I sat at Yossi's feet, marvelling at their contrasts, blue-veined alabaster on top, blistered calluses on bottom. I noticed that he winced as he stood up to refill his glass. Martha retired meekly to do the dishes, motioning me in a series of head jerks to do the same. Fat chance. I was sitting in a circle with a bunch of Talmudniks, eavesdropping on the making of a martyr.

'Did you lay your tefillin at dawn, Jimmy?' Yossi asked a ginger fisherman.

'Yeah, Rov,' said the redhead. 'I rose at the first crow of the cock. I got the straps a bit twisted but I davened for twenty minutes.'

'Did you thank Yahweh who has not made you a woman?'

'Yea, Rov. Or a gentile. Or a pig.'

'Do you consider it a fair prayer?'

'I've never really thought about it.'

'How do you think the females feel about it?'

'Ours is not to question why,' said the disciple with a mouth full of teigel.

'My Father makes some strange decisions,' Yossi said. I'd never actually met Yossi's dad, but he spoke about him a lot.

'I have actually wondered, though, Rov,' said a sandy haired shepherd, 'It seems a bit harsh on the second sex.'

'But can you not see, Pete?' Yossi asked. 'The energy of the world is masculine, while the female aspect of Yahweh, the Shekinah, is in exile. The voice of the bride is subdued. But there will come a time when not only will her voice be heard and understood, but her gentler perspective will be appreciated and hallowed.'

'But Rov, it is said that you are the Messiah,' said the shepherd.

'I've never claimed that,' Yossi said.

'You've ridden a donkey, you were born in Bethlehem.'

'That's all pretty circumstantial.'

'But in Isiah, Chapter XXX Verse XXVI, it's all there. 'The light of the moon shall be as the light of the sun.' It really was a bright gibbous last night.'

‘It’s because of the hamsin,’ said the Rov. ‘This hot, dry wind causes all sorts of optical illusions.’

‘What about Joel II, Verse XXXI?’

‘I’d keep that rumour under your keffiyah if I were you,’ said the Rov.

While they were debating, I crawled across to the tea trolley for a refill and knocked over an amphora of spikenard that was perched on the floor. It’s not my fault that it was in such a flimsy jar. As the lip dripped its pungent resin onto the Abyssinian carpet, I scooped it up between my palms and, not wanting to waste a single drop, smeared it upon Yossi’s feet. The ’nard just kept on coming, so I whipped off my tichel, shook out my waist length locks and blotted up the drippings, smearing and soaking, soaking and smearing. It nearly caused a riot. Who puts an amphora in the path of a tea trolley in the middle of a Talmudic debate?

‘What a bloody waste,’ cried a pale-faced chevra. ‘We could all have done with a hit of that.’

‘Don’t be so shortsighted, Luke,’ Yossi said, ‘The meidele meant no harm. Forsooth, this is a story you can dine out on for decades.’

‘But what about the poor?’ asked a swarthy Sadducee. ‘That ’nard could have gotten half of Bethany high for a month. It’s more expensive than gold.’

‘Do your trigonometry, Jude,’ Yossi said. ‘Bethany is a town that was founded on mitzvot. The poor flock here, there would never be enough ’nard to go around.’

It was a convincing argument. I knew he was protecting me against their wrath.

That’s when Hadassah invaded our privacy to invite them for First Night. The chevras had to tighten their girdles. The business with the hair had soaked up all their prophets.

iii

It’s only sixteen stadia to Jerusalem from Bethany, but it might as well be in Palmyra. It was quite a sight, rounding the rise on Mount of Olives, sandstone mountain city shimmering in the golden light. Sal laid a few pungent droppings on the landscape to imprint the scene in my memory. Herod’s Temple dominated the vista, its massive girth enclosing Yahweh’s lair. This was a good place to start. We camelled it to the city gates, picking our way among the groves, plucking a few ripe olives to munch on the descent.

The true grit of the city was soon upon us and pilgrims crowded every alleyway. It's customary to visit the Temple thrice a moon-year, and Pesach was the big kahuna. From my vantage point I could see only the tops of their heads, swathed in a multicoloured array of keffiyes and skullcaps, tichels and turbans.

I wasn't going to get away with my untamed mane amongst the minyans, let alone my pomegranate. I unwound Lazzie's bloodied tallis from the camel reins and poked my head through the hole. The tiny vest sat high in the saddle and flattened my burgeoning apricots. No way was I going to tie on that tichel. I reached into Sal's side-saddle, repository of mysterious humpy odours, and flapped out a flour flecked simlah used by Philemon to deliver the dough for the kneading pots. I folded it into a triangle and wrapped it around my curls, knotted it behind my neck and draped the ends forward over the tallis. Thus guised, I dismounted clumsily, hitched Sal to a whipping post and made my way into the Temple.

The closer I got to the Inner Temple, the fewer the tichels. Then the turbans thinned out and were slowly replaced by ghostly shapes in fringed tallises and yarmulkes covering bald pates. Some had small black boxes attached to their foreheads and thin leather straps wrapped around their left arms in the shape of a shin, a letter I had absorbed from Lazzie's aleph bet lessons. Schmekels in shawls swayed back and forth, each in motion to his own private prayer, immune to the blazing holy city heat.

iv

Last time we came through for Pesach it was a nightmare. We'd trekked from Ein Gedi, out in the Styx, where we were used to davening as a family, singing psalms together, even though Martha couldn't hold a harmony and Hadassah's mezzo soprano sounded like a throttled ibis. It was always a bit embarrassing, actually, and I hated the melodies, but they're embedded in my brain, never to be erased.

Just as we'd entered the Women's Court by a side door, Aziz Ben Aziz, her second ex-husband, whisked Hadassah aside, winking at me and licking his lips in that reptilian way he had – this was the reason I'd always slept fully clothed when he lived with us. I pretended great interest in the soaring marble pillars, carved with gilded palm trees at their every apex. They spoke in hushed tones.

'Don't sing?' my mother asked. 'What the fig are you talking about?'

‘I’m sorry, Dass. I shouldn’t even be talking to you now.’

‘But why? Who made this ridiculous rule?’

‘The Sanhedrin met last week. Seems that Caiaphas Cohen had a sudden stiffening during the Amidah. He blamed it on the women’s choir. As High Priest he’s convinced the entire Assembly that a woman’s voice distracts men from their prayers.’

‘But we contribute so much to the service. It’s going to sound dull as aqueduct water without us.’

‘Sorry, Dass. Comes from above. We’re recruiting boychicks only now. And a few stray eunuchs from the Garrison. Falsettos are hard to cast.’

‘Aziz, aren’t you the Segan Rosh around here?’

‘It’s out of my hands, Dass. Sanhedrin whim is law.’

‘Nu, what now? No Purim plays, no Sukkoth stagings?’

‘Starting after Pesach it’s all been cancelled.’

‘And the piece we’ve practiced for Antipasta?’

‘The Tetrach has paid a deposit. The show goes on, Second Night only. He wants you to reenact the Reed Sea Crossing. No instruments.’

‘But we’ve been working on the Four Sons. With shofars.’

‘I’d advise you to brush up on your Sanhedrin rules,’ Aziz said. ‘The Four Sons has been recently excised. And you know that shofars for women are out of the question.’

‘Have it your way,’ Hadassah sighed.

‘We always do,’ smirked my second ex-step-daddy.

Thus did we gig up at the Palace. Dressed as boychicks, turning us into hand puppets in Hadassah’s royal seduction. She always aimed for more. Even when she was a newly ravished bride for the fourth time in a decade.

‘But Ma,’ I whined, ‘why do I have to play Pharaoh, again?’

‘Aziz has told your Uncle Antipas we would enact the Reed Sea Crossing, and enact it we will.’

‘He’s not my uncle.’

‘Ok, your third cousin twice removed on my mother’s side. Which makes him mishpocha. Now hold still while I apply your sideburns.’

Hadassah reached into a large trunk and pulled out a pair of payos, releasing a puff of naphtalene into the fetid air of our dressing chamber. She unravelled two loops of catgut, spat on the ends and looped them over my ears.

'You make a perfect Pharaoh, Mary,' she said. 'Now put this purple cloak on.'

'I won't answer to that name,' I sulked. 'I told you, I'm Wanda now. Too many Marys.'

'It's not fair, she always gets to be the lead,' Martha complained.

'And you will be Moses in the very same scene, my honeybun,' Hadassah cajoled, hauling out a large azure kethoneth, emblazoned with Egyptian suns and moons.

'What about me?' Lazzie whined. 'It's not fair.'

'You will hold up the Sea of Reeds, my boychick,' said Hadassah, unfurling a bolt of scarlet cloth. Laz couldn't memorise the tiniest role. And his mode of speech was impossible to decipher outside the family, unless you had a translator. He smiled from cleft lip to nostril and grasped the loose end of the cloth.

The King of the Yiddels was royally entertained. We reenacted the bit where Pharaoh chases Moses and them into the Sea of Reeds. Lazzie and Hadassah made the sea rise and fall, and when it came to the drowning, the crafty use of a small obsidian knife parted the crimson waters to the oohing and oying of the sated Seder. Hadassah stole the show with a captivating rendition of Rivers of Babylon. For an encore, Martha busked her way through the Ten Plagues. It was excruciating.

When it was time to open the door for Elijah, the culmination of every Seder I've ever been to, there stood Qumran Qumran, pickled as a herring, pishing against the Herodian Palace wall.

'Hey, Qumran, are you the Messiah hey?'

'Qummie, you don't pish anything like Elijah!'

Ignoring the cheerful chidings of the gathering, Qumran staggered into the Seder, grabbed Hadassah by the tichel and dragged her outside.

'You. Have. Been. Warned. Not. To. Raise. Your. Voice. In. Song,' he slurred. Each syllable accompanied by a blow on the ear that would leave her hearing forever impaired.

When we got home, Hadassah stopped up her holy tones; she ceased coming to services. Lost interest in our childish rhymes. Over the High Holy Days, she took to her bed. Hadassah never rose up singing again.

v

It's amazing how confused you can get navigating around a building shaped like an Olympic wedding cake. Soaring columns dwarfed everyone to the size of maggots. There seemed to be a courtyard within a courtyard leading to another courtyard, like a set of crazed Babushka dolls. I davened on by, peeking at the chosen few from beneath my schmutzik simlah, but they were all covered in identical fringed prayer shawls and I couldn't have told Yossi from Adam. They must have taken me for the Shamus. The devotional janitor. The spiritual laundry man. If any man's eyes actually met mine, I silently mouthed the immortal prayer, extolling Elohim for Their merciful ways in not making me a cow, a pig or a woman. Without pausing in their spiritual hip thrusts, the worshippers glanced up, shrugged, put their heads down again and wailed out their vespers.

A faint, but familiar odour began to curl my left nostril. It's always been the sensitive one. A top note of myrrh with an undertone of frankincense and the merest hint of my beloved spikenard soothed my mood considerably. Yossi must be in spitting distance. I'd be on my camel within the hour.

I followed my schnozz across the Court of the Women, through a plethora of porticoes, through the Court of the Gentiles, past the dove sellers and the money changers, into the Court of the Israelites. The coo of peace and the clink of mammon sounded out in a double act of sorrow. The scent was getting stronger. A few thousand more marbled palm trees and I found myself in the Court of the Priests. Two signs in Greek and Latin: No Women. No Non-Cohens. I sniffed the air. No mistaking the 'nard. I must be getting closer. In front of me a short flight of semi-circular stairs in alternating marble, from raspberry ripple to chocolate stipple. You could lick the floor with your tongue. Glancing around furtively to check that nobody was looking, I ascended. A thick gold curtain hung at the threshold, brocaded with barley ears and pomegranates, etrogs and lulavim. I drew it aside and stepped into the sanctum.

I could only see the room in bits. Clouds of incense billowed from a multitude of brass censers. I could make out the shapes of two outsized cherubim wafting in and out of the smoke, their wingtips meeting above a thick, gold, boat-shaped cupboard. They must have been thirty cubits high if they were an ell. Through a chink in the mist I noticed that they each bore the signs of their sex. Bare-buttocked, full frontal, their eyes interlocked for eternity. Swinging from the ceiling was the Ner Tamid, the light that only burns once, flickering within its jewel-encrusted

glass. I'd heard tell that if you said a prayer in front of the eternal flame, your wish would be granted. It was worth the risk. Lazzie would understand if I was a little late. I unknotted my simlah and shook out my curls. Obeisance always feels lighter without headgear.

'ברוך אתה ה', אלהינו מלך העולם' I chanted, 'Blessed are You, oh Rulers of the Entire World. If you're up there, for Heaven's sake, bestow upon me a boyfriend.' No answer.

'B'vakasha,' I continued. 'I'm so tired of being the only girl in my baking class without someone's initials to carve into the dough.' Silence.

'Come on, Asherah, give me a break. I'm due a good blessing. I'm like the world's best sister. I calm Lazzie's fits. I let Martha win at dreidel contests. Oh, and while we're at it, please find a way to let my mother sing in the Temple again. She's gone to pieces since Caiaphas Cohen banned the sound of women's voices.'

No reply.

I paced the small sanctuary, flicking the angels' wings and fingering the yad and breastplate that rested on the silk-draped altar. A glint of light caught a metallic sheen through the fog. There, above the foundation stone, was a silver-lipped ram's horn, the holy shofar, nestled in an alcove. I clambered onto the big rock. It was just out of reach. I sprang up and down until my fingers tipped it from its perch and it clattered onto the marbled floor.

A dull bong emanated from within the golden cupboard. I leapt from the rock. My saviour. I knew he'd come.

'Yossi,' I said softly. 'Yossi, is that you? We really need that 'nard back, Yossi. My brother's taken a turn and if you don't help us, he's doomed.'

The incense cloud cleared momentarily. A figure materialised from behind the golden cupboard. It wasn't Yahweh; it certainly wasn't Yossi. The scent of musk hair oil betrayed his identity. Aziz Ben Aziz stepped out of the hazy gloom, his bloodshot eyes reflecting the crimson of the Ner Tamid. He was wearing a silk tallis over a fine linen kuttoneth, a louche lounge lizard swathed in insincerity.

'Mary Bat Lazarus,' Aziz said, flicking his tongue across his lips. 'Where are your manners? Come and say Shalom to your second ex-step-Daddy.'

'I told you. I'm Wanda now. The W is silent, like the wind.'

‘A rose’s daughter by any other name,’ he said, lurching towards me, I leaned sideways for an air kiss, but he feinted, like a Greek boxer and caught me full on the lips. I felt a squidgy, spongy, wet thing in my mouth.

‘I’ve asked you not to do that ever again,’ I said.

‘Well excuse me, Empress Lazarillo. You’re lucky I don’t report you to the Sanhedrin. No women are permitted in here.’

‘I thought the inner sanctum was only for the High Priest?’

‘Caiaphas Cohen is indisposed. He has a severe case of Lover’s Beitzim. He sent me to ensure that all is in order for the Passover service.’

‘I’ve come to check on the candlestick polish,’ I said, my eyes darting about for my treasure.

‘Is this what you’re looking for?’ He uncorked an amphora and the dark tones of the ’nard wafted through the temple air. Yossi must have left it in the sanctum for me.

‘Please, Aziz, my brother will die if I don’t get back to him with his meds.’

‘I give to you, you give to me, meidele,’ he said.

I reached up for the amphora but he held it from my grasp.

‘What do you want from me?’ I gasped.

‘The life of young Lazzie for a few moments of pleasure. It’s not that much to ask. Come on meidele, I’ve seen the way you flirted with me in the brief time I was with your mother.’

‘That’s not true.’

‘Oy, but you are so ready. Like a ripe fig, waiting to be plucked.’

He wiggled the amphora and a drop fell onto the floor.

‘No!’ I cried. ‘You’re wasting it.’

He tipped the lip sideways.

‘What a pity it would be to spill this life-giving liquid,’ he said.

‘I’m telling Hadassah on you,’ I said. ‘This was all supposed to stop when you got the get.’ Here we go again. While he was living with Hadassah, I had to fight him off nightly.

‘Your mother doesn’t give a fig about you or your brother, foolish meidele. If you want the holy resin you’ll do as I say. Now, shut your mouth and take off your tallis.’

Aziz corked the amphora and tossed it into the air. I caught it just before it hit the floor.

‘Nu,’ he said, slithering backwards to draw the front curtain. ‘Who is this Yossi of whom you speak?’

‘Yoffi, I said yoffi,’ I said. I was simply admiring the décor.’

‘A likely story,’ he snorted. ‘But don’t you worry. We’ve got people in the Yiddel Quarter as we speak, tracking down this Yossi troublemaker.’ He reached over to the bimah, picked up the ram’s horn and fondled its hard calcium casing. I felt my bile rise.

I twisted Lazzie’s tallis katan over my head and its knotted fringes caught my curls. I was momentarily blinded, silk and tendrils barring my vision. Aziz made the shape of shin, the three-pronged holy letter, and funnelled his fingers into the wide end of the ram’s horn. He extended his arm and hooked it into my pomegranate, right through my simlah. The cherubim turned their faces away from each other, their wings beating in distress. A single drop of blood fell to the floor.

‘Now look what you’ve done,’ he panted. ‘You’ve defiled the Holy of Holies.’

I opened my mouth to scream, but he palmed his spare hand over my schnozz and lips, blocking off the airflow. I flailed around like a sacrificial lamb, casting yad and breastplate all around the golden ark. With my last breath, I drew back my knee and snapped it forward, rock hard, into his loins. He dropped the horn and clutched at his beitzim.

‘You little kalba. I’ll see you in hell for this.’ He hurled himself across the altar and the ram’s horn skittered across the floor. I grabbed it by its narrow end.

‘Don’t touch that! It’s a sacred shofar.’

‘But it’s good enough to defile my maidenhood, right?’

Aziz continued to hurl his blasphemous invective at my sex. ‘You think you’re so clever, don’t you? You ignorant little nobody. All you’re fit for is kitchen work and schtuppery.’

I made a fist and curled it into the horn, using its pointy end as a battering ram against my assailant. One of my wild flings caught the Ner Tamid in full swing, knocking out the flame and throwing the whole sanctum into darkness. I whirled the shofar above my head like a one-armed windmill, swiping the shadows until, inevitably, I connected bone on bone and heard Aziz bellow in pain. Then silence of the rams, but for the droning of the drones in the outer courts.

vi

Exhausted, I rolled to the back of the sanctum to catch my breath behind the cherubim, my virgin blood clotting into clumps, my tallis in tatters. The amphora had rolled to the feet of the female. I unstopped the bottle to revive my senses. I was taking a deep inhalation when the shadows returned and I heard the drag of holy vestments across the marbled floor. I could just make out the varicose-veined feet of Caiaphas Cohen, my grandfather, The Highest Priest of All.

'Aziz, in Yahweh's name, what defilement has occurred here? It looks like a murder has taken place.'

'Your Highness, I can explain.' Aziz must have come to with his heart in his mouth and his hard on in his tallis.

'I tried to stop her, Your Highness,' Aziz said, riffing on his porky pies.

'She? You permitted a female, a mere woman, into our sacred sanctum?'

'I saw her shadow through the holy smoke as I was polishing the Torah bells. She was straddling the Foundation Stone, reaching for the shofar that stands above the cherubim.'

'You mean to say …?'

'I'm afraid so, Your Highness. Our holy ram's horn has been taken.'

'My ancestors bought that shofar back with them from Babylonia.'

'I'm sorry, Your Highness. I had harsh words with the hussy. 'Stop thief!' I shouted. 'Never' said the temptress. 'You will not take me again into your filthy blood-stained hands!''

'Again?' asked Cohen.

'You know how prone women are to exaggeration.'

'Quite so, quite so.'

'Then the vixen held the horn aloft and cried, 'This shofar is the property of my Queen, the Goddess Asherah, who will have no other Gods before Her.''

'What? She mentioned Asherah in the sanctum?'

'Most unfortunate, Your Highness. And then she struck me.'

A moment of shocked silence. A lantern cast about. Then, a slight retching.

'Holy Hamantaschen, Aziz, is this hymen blood?' Cohen shrieked.

'Afraid so, Your Highness.'

'We'll have to purify the entire precinct,' Cohen said. And move the holy ark down to the Well of Souls.'

‘Thy will be done,’ Said Aziz. I’d heard of the Well, a cavern beneath the Temple Foundation Stone, rumoured to be a replica of the sanctuary upstairs.

‘This is an outrage. The Sanhedrin must never hear of this.’

‘My lips are sealed, Your Highness.’

‘Good Heavens, man, get this mess cleaned up.’

I heard the tinkle of glass shard sweepings. I made to get up, but my legs wouldn’t work.

‘Your Highness, I’ve been meaning to ask you,’ simpered Aziz. ‘I’ve picked up a few references to Yahweh and his Asherah in the sacred writings.’

‘What are you talking about?’

‘God and his Consort? There’s a line in Kings II …’

‘We must have missed that in the edit,’ snapped The High Priest. ‘There is to be no mention of female deities in our holy books.’

‘Agreed, agreed,’ said Aziz. ‘But the whore seemed to think the horn was hers to take. She described it in great detail. ‘Silver lipped, gold tipped, with a carapace like a conch.’’

‘Aziz, speak not of these ancient myths, we are Monotheists now; we’re revising the holy books to oppress this Goddess nonsense.’

‘She also mentioned the name of the rebel Rabbi.’

‘She what?’

‘The harlot must have thought I was Yossi Ben Yusuf. She seemed to be expecting him.’

‘That rabble-rousing Reformnik? He wouldn’t dare show his face around here.’

‘Don’t worry, Your Highness. Our chap on the inside is ready to betray this false Messiah,’ said Aziz. ‘I have it on good authority he’s supping at Bethany on First Night. Shall I arrange for his arrest?’

‘Not so fast,’ said Caiaphas. ‘With the climate the way it is right now, we’ll be blamed for any disruption.’

‘Whatever you think best, Your Highness.’

‘Detain him quietly. During a nosh-up or something. Once we have him, we’ll have a cursory camel court and hand him over to Pilate for execution.’

‘Excellent idea, Your Highness. Let it come from the Roman Quarter.’

‘I’ve asked Pontius a million times to do a bit of ethnic cleansing on the Pharisees,’ Caiaphas stated. ‘I sometimes wonder if all these tithes are worth the papyrus they’re written on.’

I dragged myself away from the Central Court, wrapped the shofar and amphorae in my discarded chiton and scrubbed myself out in the women's ablutions. Further down the passage was the Mikvah proper. No bleeding allowed. The tiny mosaicked room was at the back of the High Priest's private rooms, accessible by a labyrinth of mildewed corridors. I could smell the rising damp from a distance, but the men hardly ever trespassed against us in this clammy netherworld, and no plumber would have been let within fifty cubits of the place.

Of course, I knew about Mikvah. During the riots, we clamoured to take our place underwater, blessed by the Blessed One to become a fully-fledged woman. Some hankered for a fire pool. But I wanted much more than that. It was purification, baby, all the way through to your womb.

A sandy grey woman was stationed at the pool, head covered by a faded floral tichel. She arose from her chair like a reluctant phoenix, inspected my nails, the corners of my eyes, my earholes, nostrils, armpits and cast a cursory glance at my pubic hair from which all traces of the ordeal had now been razed. The altercation had done no favours for my fingernails and they were rusted with the detritus of Aziz's blood and skin. Thank Yahweh it was Pesach and Sandy was too distracted to do a virginity test. If she had copped to my situation, The Ex-High Priest would have been called to stand with his golden headgear, head bent at just the right angle, glinting into my warm, dark recesses. Pink, you were pure. Turquoise was a trick of the light. Red, you were in for the high jump, certain banishment, if not excommunication. And certainly, no Hallelujah chorus for you.

I had no intention of having my orifi inspected thus by a chewed-up crone on a bad sheitel day. She was only a drop in the great ocean of dos and don'ts. But there's nothing worse than petty power in a Saviour Riot.

I took off my outerwear, hung them on a peg inside the tiny tiled room, and hunkered towards her, arms crossed in front of my budding apricots. I made to dive in, head first.

'No-no,' she motioned, cocking her head towards the three steps leading to the waist high waters. I dipped my toe in to test the temperature.

'No-no,' she cocked again. I turned around, gripped the rail and descended into the ancestral pool.

She placed a prayer book in my hands, wrapped in parchment, and mossy around the corners. She intoned the prayer like she was reeling off a recipe for latkes for a classroom of illiterate bakers. I repeated her intonation, verbatim.

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בִּטְבִלָה בְּמַיִם חַיִּים.

Then she dunked me, the third time pushing my head so deep under the surface that I realised she was trying to drown me. If you've never been in a purification ritual, it's hard to tell fact from fiction.

I looked up from beneath the waters and, with my last reserve of oxygen, rose up gasping and head-butted Sandy in one fell swoop.

'Help, Aziz!' she cried, as she fell into the Mikvah with a massive swoosh, like a mermaid to the slaughter. How could I know she was a plant? How could I know that Aziz would do anything to get rid of me, to erase me from the record? Many girls were drowned in Mikvahs in those days, especially if they failed the virginity tests.

I heard much later that the Priests had to cancel First Night for the mopping up operation. They reassembled the cherubim so they were facing towards each other again, but Cohen took an executive decision there and then to excise their genitals. Never again was a Priest, high or low, permitted to gaze at their angelic androgyny. The ban did Yiddeldom no favours.

vii

I couldn't go home now. The Sanhedrin soldiers would be everywhere. I retraced my steps to where I'd hitched Sal, reversing the odiferous path through the payos and the prayers. I had both bottles of 'nard in my pomegranate belt, which had miraculously survived the assault. Yossi must have used a strigil to scrape the ointment back into the bottle after that tummel with the tea trolley. I just didn't know how to get word to him about the tightening of the arrest net. He and his chevras would be on their way to our place within hours. If he still had a portion of the 'nard, he could revive Lazzie himself. If not, my brother would die. But did I want to get caught in the milk and honey trap? Which reminded me. I hadn't eaten all day.

Outside the Temple courts, the detritus of chametz swirled in the dusty hamsin wind. A wicker basket, swinging from a low looping clothesline, crossed my path like a captive tumbleweed. I picked it up and weighted its weft with corn flakes and couscous. The food was still good, custom alone had discarded it, and I filled the basket with the forbidden cereals. Sal

looked up lugubriously as I pulled myself up by her tail. Straddling a camel in this condition is no minor accomplishment. I stashed the ’nard and the shofar into the camel saddle and perched the basket of chametz on my lap. I kicked Sal in the upper flanks, but the girl wouldn’t budge. I giddyupped her again, in the soft part under the ribs; this always managed to shake Sal out of her dromedary daze, and we camelled through the precinct, scattering doves and pilgrims and child beggars in our wake.

Not quite knowing my north from my north-west, I left it to Sal to retrace our steps. She had found her freedom now and followed her own path. Before us lay a wall a good thirty cubits high, surrounded by a deep ravine as wide as the battlements were tall. Washing lines crisscrossed the slopes, bearing tunics and togas in soldier style. This must be the Antonia Fortress. Hadassah had always warned us about straying into the Roman Quarter. There was no protection. Praetorians were always on the prowl for a juicy young Yiddel. They’d get seven years’ good luck for defloration.

Sal braked to a halt at the edge of the embankment, flinging me over her head and onto the sandy ground like a sack of bad barley. Luckily, I was relaxed from the effects of the ’nard, but as I tried to rise, my left foot buckled beneath me and my right shoulder hurt like fig. Sal just looked at me as I flailed. I realised with an aftershock that my pomegranate was still pulsing from the shofar assault, not to mention the saddle sores that were beginning to welt. I lay there and panted until the pain subsided, Sal’s inner eyelids blinking side to side in the afternoon heat. Slowly, I pulled myself up by her flanks and shook the dust off my simlah.

A small, filth-clad boychick hunched in the ravine, doodling in the dust with a stick.

‘Hey you’, I called. ‘Yes, you with the stick.’ The boychick stood up and started to scarper.

‘No, wait,’ I called. ‘I know you’re not supposed to be here. Neither am I. I won’t tell.’ The boy slowed his scuttle. I recognised him as one of the huddle of child beggars I’d seen at the Temple.

‘What are you doing here, boychick?’ I asked.

‘The Romans empty their kitchen waste over that wall,’ he pointed at the eastern edifice. ‘I’m waiting for their midday meal to take the scraps back to my chevras.’

‘But it’s nearly Pesach,’ I said. ‘You can’t eat their treif.’

‘We have no choice,’ said the boychick. ‘The Priests don’t feed us. We’re forced to forage for our food.’

‘Listen, Scavenger Boy,’ I said, ‘I’ve got a proposition for you. I can’t walk or ride in this condition and I’m expected at home with vital medication. Take my camel back to Bethany before sunset and I’ll give you ten Leptons. I reached into my pomegranate belt and held out a handful of coins.

‘That’s only five.’

‘Half now, half later,’ I said. ‘Just get Sal back to Beit Lazarus, Bethany.’ I dislodged one of the amphorae and tucked it into Sal’s hump saddle. ‘Deliver this into the hands of Martha, Martha Lazarus. She’s my sister. And make sure nobody else sees you. She’ll know what to do to resurrect my brother.’

‘How will she know I’m not just some camel thief? he asked.

‘Tell her you know she has a mark shaped like a new moon on her rear right peach.’

‘Will I get to see it?’

‘Listen, boychick, just give Martha the amphora. And tell her I’ll be back by nightfall.’

‘Which way is it?’

‘Ride around the Temple Mount and up the Mount of Olives. Turn left at the tallest date palm after the apple orchard, and it’s straight all the way to Bethany. Sal knows the way.’

I grabbed an amphora from the side-saddle and turned Sal around in the direction we’d come from. ‘Go home, Sal,’ I instructed her. ‘Take this boy to Martha. Lech lecha.’ I slapped her slumped hump. Sal took off at a gallop.

I slumped down in the dust again to await the boychick’s return. He was bound to come back for the rest of his Leptons. Hadassah was going to kill me over the state of my simlah. If only Lazzie wasn’t so sickly, I wouldn’t be in this mess. But I’d do anything for my little brother. Not that he was much littler than me. We were born on the same day, after all. In the sanctuary of my mother’s womb, Leila the Night Fairy taught us Talmud, from Sodom to Gemara. We learned the curative qualities of powerful plants. Yiddel Yoga was compulsory. We sucked each other’s thumbs long and hard over the deep questions of life, the universe and the right ingredients for gefilte fish. We imbibed all of Hadassah’s stuffings; the pickles and tzimmes, the brandy cheatings, the occasional meat after milk, the sudden thumps from Theo, Our Father Who Art in Caesarea, for talking to friends on the walk home from the harbour;

sometimes she shook us so badly we had to invent new asanas to stay stable. When it was time, Leila thought the date too inauspicious and so we languished a few extra days in utero and received psalm analysis, instilling a lifelong distaste of vespers and song. When the time came and Hadassah's womb space just couldn't hold us any longer, Leila was to peck us lightly on the upper lip, forming the Cupid's bow that marked us as mortals, the waters would part and we were supposed to forget everything, tabula rasa style. But fate had one more blow in store; it was over something trivial, an overdone pot-roast, burned to a crisp while Theo gambled with his mates down at the docks; but it was all her fault, Theo insisted, and at the exact moment that Leila leaned over to kiss Lazzie on his philtrum, Theo gave Hadassah a well-aimed kick to the belly. Leila missed me completely and the smooch crashed into Lazzie, causing the hare lip and the fits that were to plague him for the one hundred-and-forty-four short months of his life. My lip remained unblemished, smooth as a baby's peaches. That's how come I remember everything by smell. That's how come I have total schnozz recall.

viii

That's when I first heard it. An unearthly sound that had never emerged from any Temple gig. It vibrated in my head like a celestial washing line. Part human, part animal, it set my entire body into a state not unlike Lazzie's, except for the foaming. The sound was coming from the Fortress, through the walls, it seemed. It was as if Asherah herself was pulling at my heartstrings. I had to find the source of such sweet delight.

My ankle was killing me. With a lot of tooth gritting and deity cursing, I managed to hobble to the edge of the ravine. Losing my footing several times, I eventually tumbled to the moat of the Fortress. There came the sound again, from a window high in the upper eastern tower. I eked my passage, digitus by digitus, to the Garrison drawbridge.

I thought I may have to do some fast talking to schmooze my way in, but the doors were flung wide open and a cornucopia of camp followers traipsed in and out at leisure; cupbearers, hairdressers, eunuchs, grooms, food vendors and not a few young women in sartorial disarray. I may have been taken for one of those washed-out wenches who earned two Leptons a week doing their laundry, so tattered was my appearance. No one paid me any heed.

The inner fortress was illuminated by pools of burning sconces such as I'd only seen at Herod's palace. Ornate escutcheons emblazoned the walls. Head of eagle, body of lion, horn of

unicorn; this was Pilate's crew. As I limped my way further into the labyrinth, the nogschleppers gave way to soldiers of every rank and file. Some sharpened their swords by the glint of the flickering flames. Others lounged around a massive dining hall, the smell of frying boar revolting my taste buds. Men lay singly on pallets and snored, crouched doubly in positions never revealed in the Song of Solomon, and outside in the courtyard a scuffle or two was being resolved with whips and chains.

My soul amplified as I rounded a corner. There was a rhythm that caused my body to sway, even with the limp, and the sense of longing was unmistakable, in any language. The flickering torchlight caught a gleam of tortoiseshell. I flattened myself against the wall and peeked into one of the honeycomb cells.

There stood Cartaphilus Consentius, by the light of the silvery sconce, long of limb and straight of back, holding in his arms as strange an object as I'd ever seen. It seemed to be fashioned from the shell of a turtle, luminous, resonant, with two ivory horns on either side, suspended by a lintel near the top to keep them apart, like a pair of star-crossed lovers. From the crossbar hung four tight strings, reeking a little of kitten, although he told me later it was minx, a nickname that masked its sabre-toothed origins, which his brave warriors had hunted to near extinction. He cradled the shell under his right arm like I do with Lazzie when he's fitting, a pose I never saw Hadassah hold with any of her men. His opposite fingers clutched a small bonelike object with which he picked at the strings, some strokes long, some shorter, then singly, then two at once, creating a vibration that reverberated into my soul and under my simlah.

ix

I can't really say what came first, the music or the muso. As I heard the plucking of my first phorminx, something softened within me at the sight of a man of fantasy made flesh.

Let's not beat around the beitzim though; Carta was gorgeous. Floppy locks tied in a high pony, the original aqualine schnozz, short chiton wrapped around his loins. His body armour lay upon his pallet, his weapons propped in a nook, everything a-gleaming in the Garrison's gloam. I crept a little closer.

'What are we waging war for, if there is not art?

What poetry exists if there's no blood?

In lands we conquer, many do not play their part

So, rape and loot, we pillage in the mud.'

The song seemed to start at the head again, and I'd already memorised the melody. I stepped into the cell and hummed a few bars. Carta nearly jumped out of his glistening skin and dropped his phorminx, causing a cacophonic cascade. Our first exchange may seem prosaic to mere mortals, but to me it had the ring of divine poetry. I'm not saying it was Nobel perfection, but when our two tongues came together it was like Ovid was sitting right there with his dactylic hexameter at the ready.

'What dost though here, fair maid, my private cell to breach?'

'I'm sorry, Soldier, but I heard the cry.'

'A Yid to boot,' he recognised my mode of speech.

'Afraid I am Signor,' I answered, shy.

I stumbled as I spoke; he leapt to break my fall.

'By Jupiter, you're bleeding, lie down, rest.'

'A scratch,' I said, 'I'm okay, do not fuss at all.'

And then, I swear, I passed out on his chest.

When I came to Carta had laid me across his straw pallet and was ministering to my wounds with a moist rag. It smelled quite sharply of Chamomile Roman and Clary Sage. I was soothed by his touch, gentle, probing; gossamer light for a man who killed with his bare hands.

'We have to take a first aid course in basic training,' he said. 'But virgin's blood I've never had to wipe.'

'How do you know,' I blushed, ashamed, 'Look where you're aiming.'

'When blood's involved, we have to know the type.'

You know what it's like when you've tumbled head over heels. It had never happened to me before. I'd fiddled with some Yiddels around the Women's Court, but boychicks were never my scene. They were unsightly, ungainly and most of their ejaculations were premature. I'd actually gone off men with all of Aziz's pestering and I certainly did not want to follow in my mother's footsteps when it came to love. But Carta was different. Carta was special. He asked me questions. Listened when I spoke. Mouthed words I'd never heard. Those lamb pool eyes never left my countenance, except to guide my hand to his phorminx. I had a lot to learn.

'You have to think of the strings in terms of Pythagorean intervals,' Carta demonstrated on his phorminx.

‘Python who?’ I adjusted the toga he’d thrown over my shoulders and took a swig of Garrison issue wine.

‘Pythagoras, the great Greek philosopher, discoverer of the secret of the spheres,’ he said. There is a note that vibrates for every planet and every Muse. All music is tuned this way.

‘Give me an example.’

‘Like, when you strike this string, that’s the longing of Clio.’ A troubled note emitted.

‘That’s divine,’ I said.

‘Now listen what happens when I pluck these strings together.’

‘I feel a calmness of the mind.’

‘That’s the influence of Erato. She holds the fifth degree of the Hypolydian.’

‘Sounds a lot like my Asherah.’

‘Asherah?’

‘Our Forbidden Goddess. We’re only allowed One God these days.’

‘How restrictive. We’ve got nine. And a compendium of offspring.’

‘I know. It’s just not fair.’ Carta alternated two notes, his polished pinkies shining in the sconce light. I hummed the notes, pitch perfect.

‘Bene. Bene.’ Carta repeated the phrase. I had it down pat.

‘Can I hold it?’

‘Here.’ He put the phorminx into my arms. I embraced it as if Lazzie had been raised from the dead.

I grabbed the bone shard and positioned the phorminx at right angles to my chest.

‘Now pull the other side of the string gently, like you would pluck a rooster.’

The instrument emitted a dull buzz.

‘Clutch the plectrum between your thumb and forefinger. Great. Now, twiddle it back and forth.’

‘But I want to play the whole song now,’ I pleaded.

‘One step at a time, my little Minx. Get the fingering right, first.’

I bit my lip in concentration until I drew blood. Slowly, ever slowly, the plucking sounded less like a choked chicken and more like a brooding duck.

‘Now do it again, Minx of mine. You have to practice. Keep your wrists loose, such that your fingers can flow.’

‘It’s hard.’

‘It’s supposed to be. Now pluck three strings in succession. That’s it.’

‘I did it! I did it!’ In the distance a cock crowed three times.

As ferocious as he was in service to the Empire, as gentle he was with his seduction. Carta’s touch was like the skipping of lambs, his mouth the taste of Lebanon cedars. Actually, he didn’t actually even enter my holy of holies. Not with his schmekel, anyway. He showed me the art of self-satisfaction, propping me up on his bedroll and toying with my mind across his tiny cell.

‘Close your eyes and imagine my hands on your apricots,’ he instructed. ‘Bene. Bene. Now split for me just ever so slightly. Good. Now touch yourself.’

I twiddled my pomegranate, self-conscious at first, and then, emboldened by his gaze, I began to writhe with pleasure.

Carta took the moist rag and tied it over my eyes.

‘Now you really have to trust me.’

I heard the slapping on of aromatic unguents, Chamomile German, Mandarin and Neroli. I knew it as the combination for calmness, gentleness and a heavy dose of erotica.

‘Here. Hold out your hands.’

His schmekel slid into my palms.

‘Now practice your plucking, gently, gently,’ he instructed. I positioned my hands around his fleshy phorminx and fingered the tune.

‘Slowly. No rush,’ he rasped. Bending from his great height, he pandered to my pomegranate with the lightest butterfly kisses, humming the tune he’d been teaching me. Wave after wave of pleasure filled my being like nothing I’d ever experienced before or since.

‘What the fig was that?’ I panted.

‘Petit mortis, my Minx. Have you not pleasured yourself thus before?’

‘I’ve rubbed myself against a shewbread table; mounted my mattress corner.’

‘Ah, but lovemaking is a whole different ball of tallow.’

‘Now there’s an idea,’ I giggled. ‘Pass me that candle.’

x

The earth must have travelled twice around the sun when the knock came on the cell door. We hadn't budged since our second coming. You could have bottled our scent and received quite a price on the black market. I was healing well, Carta's cell compagnos had left delicacies at the door; we wanted for nothing but the sound of each other's love spin. But my amorous cocoon was about to split.

'Pssst!' came the worried voice. 'Carta, are you in there? Pontius is furious. You haven't reported for duty.'

Carta yawned and stretched. I rolled over so he could reach my peaches.

'What day is it?' Carta called back lazily.

'It's Saturnday, Carta. What the fig have you been doing in that cell?' We smiled sheepishly at each other.

'Can't it wait, compagno?' Carta cajoled. 'It's my weekend off.'

'All leave is cancelled Carta. There's a Yiddel in the Scourging Chamber and the natives are revolting. Pontius wants you to flog him.'

'What Yiddel are you talking about?' Carta winked at me.

'It's that troublemaker, Yossi Ben Yusuf. The High Priest has handed him over to Pontius for crucifixion. It's a clusterfig out here.'

My kishkes dropped into my ankles. The blood drained from my pomegranate.

'What's wrong, little Minx?' Carta asked, attuned to my every nuance.

'I know that man, Cart. He's my Rov. He was supposed to have Pesach dinner at our place last night.'

'That can't be helped,' said Carta. 'Duty calls.'

He threw on his woollen tunic and unlocked the door. His frantic compagno burst into the cell.

'Get dressed, Carta, Pilate's going crazy down there.'

'What's this Yid supposed to have done?' Carta asked, strapping on his groin protector.

'Claims he's King of the Yiddels,' said Rex.

'He figging well hasn't!' I said. 'It's everyone else who's saying that.'

'Who's this now?' Rex enquired.

‘Oh, this is my new little Minx. Minx, this is Rex, my Optio. Rex, Minx. Give me a hand with this, will you, Rex?’

Rex heaved the body armour around Carta’s chest and hoisted the shoulder plates to his lithe frame.

‘Pass me my Vitis Latina.’ Carta strapped on a carved rod, the length of his arm and the girth of his schmekel upon which was threaded a multi-stranded whip encrusted with small metallic balls.

‘What the fig are you going to do with that?’ I enquired.

‘It’s my scourging stick,’ he said. ‘It’s a mark of my high rank.’

‘What do you use it for?’

‘We like to encourage the accused to change the error of their ways.’

‘What? By beating the faeces out of them?’

‘Mostly for the sport of it. But today we will use it to extract the truth from this King of yours.’

‘What? Are you actually going get him to confess to a crime he didn’t commit? You have no proof.’

‘Minxie, please. Rumour is enough to convict a Yiddel in these parts.’

‘And you’re just going to leave me here?’

‘Give me five minutes, Rex,’ Carta said. ‘I’ll meet you in the Scourging Chamber.’

‘Right you are, Carta. But don’t keep the Prefect waiting any longer. He’s in a revolting mood.’ The compagno’s sandals receded up the passage.

I pummelled Carta’s armour with all my might. ‘What kind of hero are you?’ I screamed. ‘You just do whatever your Prefect orders?’

‘I am honour bound to obey the Centurion Creed.’

‘Oh, dromedary droppings,’ I said. ‘Why can’t you stand up for what you believe in?’

‘I’m not of your faith, Minxie.’

‘I’m not expecting a figging conversion,’ I said. ‘I’m asking you to believe me when I say that Yossi is innocent.’

‘He’s been on our wanted list for quite some time.’

‘For preaching freedom?’

‘For preaching treason against the Empire.’

‘But you’re assuming he’s guilty, what, without even a trial?’

‘Wait a sec, it’s your people who want this rabble rouser gone.’

‘The Sanhedrin are certainly not my people,’ I said.

‘But you’re all Yiddels.’

‘The Sadducees hate him. The Pharisees decry him. The Essenes think he’s obscene. The only thing that binds them together is their fear of the truth and the light.’

‘He proclaims to be your King. That’s treason against the Empire.’

‘He’s not talking about the Roman Empire. It’s on another level.’

‘That makes it even worse. We can’t have some Yiddel running around this provincial backwater proclaiming his divinity. Caesar Tiberius is our God and we have all other Gods after him.’

I put on my most seductive undertone. ‘Help him, Cart. History will thank you. You can’t allow an innocent man to suffer like this.’

‘I have no choice, Minxie.’ He slapped his Vitis Latina and kissed me gently on the tip of my schnozzel. ‘I must go, cara mia.’

‘Then take me with you. If Yossi’s going to be scourged, I have the only unguent for his anguish.’

‘It’s too dangerous.’

‘You told me Pilate is a pishcat. He won’t even notice.’

‘His spies are everywhere. You’ll be spotted. You’re a woman, Minxie.’

‘Not if I go as your cupbearer,’ I suggested. ‘I can dress as your boychick, nobody will know.’

‘It’s very risky.’

‘But didn’t you say Pilate prefers prepubescents? I can distract him from the scourging if he thinks I’m a boychick.’

‘I don’t know, Minx.’

‘Come on, Cartie-poo,’ I pleaded. ‘Let me don the cupbearer’s threads, I’ll tie my hair up and walk like this.’ I minced across the cell on tiptoe.

‘Don’t be silly Minx, cupbearers walk very, very slowly, so as not to spill.’

‘Just let me see him for myself, and I’ll temper your flogging strokes.’

‘And how do you plan on accomplishing that little miracle?’

I pulled the amphora from the horn.

‘You’ve got ’nard?’ He seemed shocked. ‘I’m allergic to the stuff. Last time I tasted it, I nearly died.’

‘Don’t worry, it’s fatal only if you swallow it,’ I assured him.

‘What kind have you got here?’

‘This is pure resin, I said, ‘One drop per sextarius of toadflax oil. If you apply it to the balls at the end of your scourging stick, it will heal even as it wounds.’

‘If you’re sure it won’t affect me.’

‘You need just the right amount, I said. I’ll ply Pilate with his personal poison and we can ’nard up your Vitis as we go along.’

After a little further flirtatious persuasion, Carta relented. He tied a tight linen band around my apricots, a perizoma, he called it, crossed it behind my neck and down to my pomegranate like a vestigial corset. It made me stand as straight as an elm tree, and walk in tiny little steps. I checked on the amphora, pushed the cork all the way into the neck and placed it inside the bell of the shofar horn.

xi

As we neared Pilate’s palatial Quarters, the Fortress became more and more luxurious; Pilate must have had the loot of several empires transported to Iudaea. There were carpets from Persia and arrases from Anglesey, tusks from Timbuktu, silverware from Sheffield and a feast that would certainly not go down with the Seder brigade. Apple-mouthed pigs shared a table with stuffed pheasants; exotic vegetables mixed with milk puddings, wine flagons spilled over onto silver slavers. Pilate, a thick-set Scot drowning in a purple toga, was putting the finishing touches on a sign that read INRI. Shocking handwriting. But who am I to judge?

‘In omnibus vobis,’ Pilate slurred, quite far already into his shofaric cups. ‘Where the fig have you been, Centurion, we need to get on with it.’

‘My humble apologies, Prefect,’ said Carta. ‘Family matters detained me.’

‘I thought you lost your wife and son in the raid on Al Qisa?’

‘It was the child of my late brother, Prefect. I had to rush to Sidon to prevent him from starting a riot.’

‘As one must,’ Pilate nodded.

‘Now, who’s this attractive young boychick?’ His eyes grazed my bare legs. He reached out and slapped me groggily on both peaches.

‘My new cupbearer, Prefect, I’m paying him out of my own pocket.’

‘Pulcherrima,’ Pilate smacked his lips. ‘Bring him up to me when the scourging’s over.’ He held out his empty shofar to me. ‘Come on, sweet cheeks, pour me a refill.’ Pilate belched loudly and fell back into his mead-soaked opulence.

My purloined horn was a dead ringer for Pilate’s goblet collection. Right down to the silver-tipped lip. I’d heard how the Romans mocked our sacred objects, turning the call to prayer into a call for another round. I was just filling him up for a third time when Yossi was brought in heaving, draped between two Centurions, a purple cloak draped across his bony shoulders. One of them wrapped a garland of twisted rose thorns around his head, an agonizing makeshift death crown.

I’m not going to repeat the story of the scourging or what was said between prisoner and Prefect. It’s all in the gospels and I’m sure you’ve been led to believe at least one version. During the beating, I greased Carta’s Vitis and continued to ply the Prefect with the finest mead, biting my tongue raw to stop from crying out.

The thing with ’nard, it depends how you imbibe it. One drop in a bath of Lavender and Mandarin is enough to calm my brother’s fits and shakes. When Qumran laid his hands on Hadassah, I’d grate the roots and steam them into a poultice for her bruises, but again, the quantities are miniscule. Nil ’nard per mouth. Any swallowed resin brings the onset of drowsiness, followed by coma, followed by death. Even if you lick your fingers. Slowly, so as not to overwhelm the taste of mead, I poured the ’nard resin, drop by increasing drop, into each of Pilate’s refills. By the thirty-ninth lash, the Prefect was as high as a double-toothed kite.

‘Stop now, Carta,’ I implored him, ‘your boss is completely out of it.’

Carta put the Vitis Latina down and crawled towards his superior, spent. I tottered over to tend to Yossi’s wounds.

The ’nard from the balls on the scourging stick had seeped into his cuts. I tore strips of linen from my perizoma and dabbed the unguent onto his open flesh. It fairly put me off red meat for the rest of my lives.

‘Young man,’ he rasped, ‘I thirst.’

‘Yossi, it’s me, Minxie, I mean Wanda, I mean Mary, Martha’s sister.’

Yossi smiled weakly.

‘What are you doing here, little sister? This is no place for a nice Yiddel meidel.’

‘I got waylaid on my way home for the Seder,’ I said. ‘Did you get the ’nard from the camel boychick?’

‘We did,’ he gasped. ‘He arrived in the nick of time.’

‘Did you revive Lazzie?’

‘Back from the dead.’ His eyes streamed. ‘Would that he could have joined me.’

‘Thank Goddess,’ I said.

‘Little sister,’ he asked, ‘is that the sacred shofar of our forefathers?’

‘Yes, Rov, I tore it from the hands of my assailant when I went to the Temple to look for you.’

‘Nu, it’s kosher. I can drink from it. Please my little sister, spare me a sip.’

‘I can’t,’ I whispered back. ‘It holds too much of the resin. It is intended to knock the Prefect into the next world.’ I toiled at his wounds.

‘Just a mouthful, meidele, my tongue is so dry.’

‘You can’t drink this,’ I said. ‘You’ll overdose.’

‘I implore thee,’ said Yossi.

‘You don’t get it, Rov Yossi. There’s too much ’nard in this figging shofar.’

Yossi baulked, the crown of thorns biting into his forehead.

‘Please,’ he begged, ‘I’m dying here …’

‘For Asherah’s sake, Rov,’ I said, ‘You. Can’t. Drink. This. Let me fetch you some water.’

‘Forsooth,’ Yossi said, looking me straight in the eye. ‘The way things are going, I will go on, but you will tarry until I return.’

‘What’s that supposed to mean?’

‘It will be as I say.’

‘I’ll get you a fresh flagon, then. Hang in there, Rov.’ I balanced the shofar on the closest pedestal and made for the fountain that flowed, icy and fresh, in the courtyard outside the Scourging Chamber. At that moment, Pilate roused from his stupour and screamed to his Centurions.

‘The Yiddel is guilty! Let the masses decide his fate!’ Two centurions picked Yossi up under his armpits and wrapped them around a pablum. His long march to freedom was nearly over. As they dragged him out, Pilate sighed loudly and poured himself a fresh shofar.

‘His own people will be his downfall,’ he said in his broad Scots brogue. ‘Let us toast to a successful verdict. To the death of the traitor.’

From my fountain view, I saw Carta pick up the poisoned chalice.

‘L’chaim,’ Carta said.

‘Salute,’ said the Prefect.

‘No!’ I shouted.

‘Who speaks?’ Pilate demanded.

‘’Tis my cupbearer, Prefect,’ Carta replied, casting me a dirty look. ‘I will deal with him on our return from Golgotha.’ He raised his cup once again.

‘Carta, no!’ I screamed again.

Carta drank. And fell to the floor.

xii

I broke into a cold sweat, tripped on my sandal thong and slid across the marbled palace floor.

‘Mi amore,’ I cried, cupping Carta’s head in my hands. ‘What have I done?’

His wine dark mouth was already foaming, his shaven jaw muscles clenching and unclenching.

‘Vamoose, Minx,’ he gurgled. ‘Don’t reveal yourself to the Prefect.’

I was beside myself. Oy. Why didn’t I just leave the ’nard plan out of it?

‘Don’t leave me, Carta,’ I wept. ‘We had so many plans. We were going to raise babies in the Blue Grotto, perfect the invention of pasta, learn the art of fresco.’

The poison had reached his limbs and he was twitching violently.

‘Get out of here,’ he said. ‘Make good our promise. Live, cara mia, live.’

And as I wept on the cold Praetorium floor, Carta expired in my arms.

Pontius was screaming orders to his soldiers. The scraping of Yossi’s cross on the flagstones was swallowed by the baying crowd. I grabbed the shofar and swallowed the remains of the ’narded wine. A Centurion grabbed it from me. But it was too late. The ’nard, thickest at

its dregs, was already claiming my consciousness. One draught, as I had prophesied, and the poison had entered my bloodstream. I was dying.

I pursed my lips around the shofar, tightened my upper lip, loosened my lower lip. And blew. A series of mouldy raspberries emitted from the horn. One plain and deep moan, rising at the end. Three connected short screams. A blast of short triplets. And, as I'd heard every Rosh Hashona of my life, one long soul cry.

Tekiya … Shevarim … Teruah … Tekiya Gadola.

That was when I first woke up in the Pleroma.

I'm surrounded by a warm red liquid. It could be blood, but I taste it and it's sweet, with hints of blackberry and an undertone of oak. Herodium '23. A good year. The odour of the 'nard is ingrained in my locks, in my pores, and leaks into the liquid. I look to the horizon and it curves away from my sight. They were so wrong about the earth being flat. My arms and legs are tired from treading wine, and I make my way towards the meniscus. A sickle sun peeps over the horizon, giving the red lake a soft glow. The light sparkles on the surface, reflecting gems from the perimeter. I breaststroke my way to the shore, glassy lipped and slightly woozy. There is no movement other than the sloshing of my body paddle. A low hum ripples across the water, one voice, then two, then fading again, even as it lures me onward. The shore is immaculate Astroturf and I heave myself over its edge to find dry land.

It's hazy, like dawn over the Temple Mount during the hamsin. The hum persists, a tinnitus of tone, and I shake the water from my ears. Hopping on one foot, the sound waves slur, in and out, like sand-soaked seashells. As the nimbus streaks my vision, several figures coalesce. I'm still wearing my cupbearer's threads, streaked with vomit and saliva. My diaphragm is aching from the sobs. Do I still even have a diaphragm?

The creatures start to take form. They are wearing spiderweb-woven shrouds, like Qumran Qumran used to wrap his peaches and I trace the outlines of their pomegranates through the fine fabric. Each is holding something in her hand; a lyre, a spear, a torch, a reed, a drum, a flute, a scroll, a gut, a seed. They intone unearthly harmonies in a garbled tongue I can make neither head nor tale of:

'Pro-Slam-Ban-Ooooooooom-E-Ne, Hyyyyy-Po Do-ri-us, Ooooooooong …'

It is insensible. My ears are pealing. But it does ring a vague bell.

‘Hy-Pat-Te-Hyyyyy-Pa-Thon, Hyyyyy-Po-Phrig-i-us, Ooooooooooong …’

What the actual fig? Am I dead or in a Delphic disco?

The Aeolian Ongist is joined by a second voice in a Dorian descant. Then another, milked and honeyed, takes up the third. Now, a fourth, trilling like a lovelorn nightingale. The fifth adds Mixolydian to the mix, a sixth in perfect harmony is offset by a seventh in Lochrian cadences and then the octave, falsetto clear. Lastly, a ninth on top of the tonic, like laughter on glass slippers.

Suddenly, the Dinare drops. Of course, that’s what they’ve been singing. Proslambanomene, the lowest note in the Pythagorean scale, equivalent to Hypodorius mode. During our nookie nights, Carta had tried to drum it into me, but I was far more captivated by his renditions of Ovid than I was of theory and notation.

‘Hang on,’ I say, ‘I know who you are. My boyfriend recited you silly while we noodled in the Garrison. But your roles were always a bit of a blur. I can hardly tell you apart.’

‘Give it a whirl,’ says a voluptuous virago draped in heavenly bodies.

‘Wait, don’t tell me, you must be Urania. I know you from your starry, starry garments.’

‘Over the moon, dear.’

‘Terpsichore,’ I say to the redhead tripping the light fantastic, ‘The Dancing Delight, right? I hear you pack a mean plectrum.’ Terpsichore gives a deep curtsey and performs a series of arabesques.

‘Enchanté, ma’mzelle,’ she whispers as she spins.

I turn to the milky skinned twins, bickering on a cumulus. ‘I suspect you girlchicks are Erato and Euterpe, the singer, the lyricist.’ They nod in counterpoint and return to their back and forth duet.

‘And you with the scroll, you must be Clio, Muse of history. Everybody’s heard of you.’

‘πώς είστε,’ Clio rolls her marble cool eyes.

‘Now there’s only one who could be the mother of Orpheus. Calliope? It’s epic to meet you.’

‘Is that so?’ she says, rhetorically.

‘And you two,’ I point at a pair of frizzy brunettes, ‘must be Mel and Poly. Tragedy and Sacred Hymns.’ One gives an Oy, the other an Ong.

I lean over to touch the dirty blonde lightly on the thigh.

'Number nine. You must be Thalia, Muse of Comedy, my personal favourite.' Thalia brushes my hand away, but our eyes lock and I blush furiously.

'Carta told me that you never existed before the Empire conquered the known world.'

'Oh, we let the Romans think they invented everything,' says Callie.

'Keeps the pax,' quips Thalia.

'But enough about us,' says Clio. 'Let's get down to business.'

The Muses ad lib a finger-click polyrhythm, taking one line each.

'We've been waiting for you,'

'And there's so much to do,'

'And we need a fresh immortal,'

'For our grand celestial portal.'

'Wait a second,' I say. 'Are you telling me I've snuffed it? Is this the afterlife?'

'Not dead, dear, just an everlasting dream.'

'We call it Pleroma, although there are many more terms you can use.'

'Sheol. Limbo. Your own wishful thinking.'

'We Pharisees were raised to believe in everlasting life,' I say. 'It was our sticking point with the Sads. But no one ever told me paradise would be run by a bunch of women.'

'Not paradise, little Yiddel. Although you can choose it if you want.'

'Everyone makes their own purgatory and their own Pleroma.'

'Why me, though?' I ask. 'I thought you had to be a really good person to get this far.'

'Not good. Lucky,' Clio says. 'Your auspicious birth gave us a hint.'

'Leila the Night Fairy told us everything about the philtrum bungle, but we weren't bargaining on the Yossi factor.'

'Thus, you're twice cursed.'

'Total recall.'

'And immortal.'

'Double jeopardy,' I say. 'Nu, what's the deal?'

'First, we'll tidy up the record so that nobody knows of your crime,' says Callie.

'I did nothing wrong,' I say. 'There was a reason I couldn't let Yossi quench his thirst. The shofar was so steeped in 'nard that one sip could have killed him on the spot. That draught

was intended for Pilate. When I went to the fountain for fresh water, I left the chalice on the wrong table.'

'Funny old thing, destiny,' Calliope smiles.

'And I end up losing my Rov, my first true love, and my figging life.'

'But it was a lovely funeral,' pipes up Poly. 'Even Antipasta attended.'

'Where's Carta then?' I ask. 'He should be somewhere around here.' I look about the cloudscape, but all I can see is a mead-soaked sunset. I don't want to spend eternity without my love, the one who first showed me what music is all about. I choke back a tear.

'Cartaphilus has gone to hell in a handbasket of his own making,' says Erato. 'He has much to atone for and your actions could affect his parole.'

'And Yossi?'

'Yossi's in a whole other orbit,' says Urania. 'He's doing Yahweh's version of Dionysus.'

Where do I stand in all this, I wonder? It's as if they read my mind.

'Because of your double curse, it is your fate to return to the world to gather up the Music of the Spheres.'

'Pray tell, oh Muses, surely you have the power to perform these miracles yourselves?'

'It's Papa Apollo,' Mel mimes an imaginary schmekel. 'He really put an aulos in the works.'

'When he conquered Zeida Zeus, over in Delphi, we thought we could finally make a case for our emancipation,' Clio says. 'We thought that since he overthrew his own father, he'd grant us our inhuman rights.'

'We organised a small soiree,' Terpsichore trills, 'and appeared to him, each with our gift, imploring him in song and dance to grant us equality.'

'We thought he would hark to our poetic pleas. We had so much to offer.'

'But Papa Apollo was furious,' says Mel, ever the drama queen. 'You kore should know your place!' he roared.'

'And that was just the beginning. Once he was ratified by the Olympians, he had absolute power.'

'He smashed our scrolls, plucked out our lyre strings, banned our lyrics.'

'He would not let us voice our true selves. It set us back millennia.'

'He removed from us the power of self-expression.'

‘And when we crawled back, bringing handcrafted instruments of tortoiseshell and sable, he struck us deaf as well as dumb.’

‘Immortals, but with no aptitude for sound,’

‘We can only perform these acts now with human help,’

‘And because of your new-found impermanence, you can travel between these lands to return the cosmic melody to us, one note at a time.’

‘What’s in it for me?’ I ask, wearily. If I’m going to be burdened with such a task, there’s got to be some kind of incentive.

At this, they break again into a kind of patter song.

‘We all know you love your Carta,’

‘Though he’s really no great martyr,’

‘If you look around you’ll see him through your tears,’

‘We’ll help bring him back to life,’

‘But you will never be his wife,’

‘Until you bring us back the Music of the Spheres.’

‘Who said anything about marriage?’ I say. ‘We were just going to live together for a while.’

The nontuplets garland each other with their wraithlike arms and step, as one, to an invisible tune, a pas de neuf of breathtaking precision. As I watch their feet, mesmerised, my eyelids start to droop. The Muses step up their bpm and whirl around me chanting in the tonic.

‘Wild Wanda, you’ll go back to earth,’

‘For nine quite different kinds of birth,’

‘For rhythm that will save our reputation,’

‘You’ll be reborn o’er the years,’

‘’Til the Music of the Spheres’

‘Returns to us in each re-incarnation.’

‘Alright, already, I’ll do it,’ I say. ‘But only if Carta and I can spend our summers in Capri when all of this is over.’

‘That can be arranged.’

‘And Lazzie can accompany us and he’ll never be sick again.’

‘We’ll see about that.’

‘And you’ll fix it that nobody blames me for the Yossi thing.’

‘We cannot change your destiny. Only you have that power.’

‘Well, seeing that you put it that way, let’s give it a whirl.’

‘We knew you’d come to see it our way.’

Urania holds up her thumbscrew compass. ‘There’s a supermoon rising over the eastern cross in about two minutes,’ she says. ‘We can whip her around the back if we get the angle right.

The Muses grab my arms, swing me around like a celestial orangutan and hurl me into the vortex.

‘Fetch the note of triple string

‘Bring it fretless, that’s the thing

‘In love’s battle, play your part

‘That’s the way to win her heart.’

And so my quest begins. Thrice times three, I will obtain, by means honest and devious, an instrument, a string, a note, a tone, from the smoke and mirrors of history. And maybe get my Carta back.

Book II: ‘Zenobia in Chains’ Palmyra 272 CE

i

In my little palace of pleasure on the port, we’d been discreet. We kept the moans down and the tambours tamped; we even closed for Shabbos. Not every customer could be afforded the full ’nard treatment, but I always had a pot nearby just in case they were carrying a few latkes more, and the gimp suits were pure camel hair.

At Beit Wanda, each girl had her speciality. I gave them all pseudonyms that had the customers flocking to fulfil their fantasies of fig. Naturally, there were nine of us. Clio and Callie officiated at the regular and irregular Missionary and Imperial positions. Poly and Mel were karma sutra consultants, translated into all nine Imperial languages, including Persian. Euterpe and Urania were divine dominatrices. Terpsichore and Thalia had all sorts of tricks with local oranges and duty-free Ming balls, which we’d picked up for a song in the Jaffa shuk. Erato was a

dab hand at The Flog – she loved to deny them their pain. I organised the music and collected the latkes. For what house of any repute is complete without it? Music, money and sex, the perfect triumvirate. All that changed when Zenobia came to power.

It was Menasha Ben Mordechai, the mayor himself, who alerted me to the evacuations. He'd arrived for his weekly golden shower and folded his clothes meticulously over the thrashing chair. We took it in turns, did Menasha and I, and he paid through the schnozz. He didn't take long as he had little control of his glands, and he usually left a generous tip. I strung his gold medallion over the Armenian screen and straddled his portly form.

'It's got to be a real quickie today, Wanda,' he said. 'I've been summoned to the new Imperial Headquarters. Regime change.' A small drop plopped from his limp schmekel.

'What's going on, Menasha?' I asked, milking him a little.

'The mamzers have done it again! Just as I'm settling down to a life of corruption, the region goes belly up and everybody's after a piece of New Imperial action. They're deporting the lot of us.'

'They can't. I've got a ninety-nine-year lease on this property.'

'All laws are rescinded.' He pished a little. 'At first I was delighted that Zenobia gave the Romans a run for their Dinare. But you've noticed it, the jabs, the taunts, the purges. We've got forty-eight hours to leave, otherwise they're rounding us up for the slave decks.'

'That's impossible. We have rights.'

'Bugger your rights, and mine too,' he splished. 'They're coming for us, Wanda, and I don't want to see you girls hurt.'

I looked out of the window and saw a garrison of Palmyran soldiers marching along the esplanade.'

'Holy fig, what can we do?' I asked.

'Pass me my money bag,' he said. I leapt off the bed and chucked him the jangling sack. Menasha dried his hands and opened the drawstring.

'Take this,' he said, dangling a document in front of me.

'Sorry, Menasha, I haven't quite gotten the hang of letters.'

'It's a first-class ticket to Mandragora across the Arabian Sea,' he said. 'You'll be safe there. I have a cousin who will take you in.'

'And what about the others?' I asked.

‘I only managed to get one ticket,’ he said. ‘I’ll smuggle them overland to the Persian Gulf and we’ll meet you in Mandragora.’

‘That’s very kind of you, Menasha, ‘I said.

‘And just in case anything happens to you, I’ll keep your lease nice and safe until you return.’ I knew there had to be a catch. As savvy as I was with the cost of pomegranates, I wasn’t sure whether the offer was such a great deal.

‘Why me?’ I asked.

‘Your skin has been an exotic fruit, Wanda. They’ll take the dark Yiddels first. And besides, you are the owner of this house of pleasure. There are to be no independent brothels in the Queendom of Zenobia. You are in the greatest danger. Leave now, while you still have the chance.’

ii

I hardly had time to say goodbye to the others. It had to be every woman for herself. I grabbed what I could; eighteen gold chains, two ruby rings, a bronze locket with a tortoiseshell cameo of Carta, a small flask of ’nard and an assortment of coins sewn into my pomegranate belt, slung low on my belly. If they saw me as a rich heiress, I’d be immune to their looting. I ran to the dock, dressed to the nines and joined the snaking queue. People seemed in a great hurry to leave, schlepping their worldly possessions on their heads, their backs and in their hemlines. I clutched my first-class ticket and wove my way into the shorter line for Obsidian Class.

As I neared the check-in, people were becoming more and more tzehitzt, the fear of the unknown and the loathing of the known seeping through their overheated pores. Worldly goods were being confiscated left, right and righter. Surreptitiously, I decanted my rings and things into my belt and edged forward, one gold chain at a time.

I proffered my papers to a portly Palmyran with outsized lamb chop sideburns and a schnozz worse the wear for its profusion of chilblains. He sported a purple tunic that scarcely contained his bulging belly and engraved laboriously upon a moist clay tablet with a heron’s beak.

‘Full name?’

‘Miriam Bat Hadassah Bat Aziz Bat Qumran Bat Lazarus.’

‘There’s far too many buts. It won’t fit on the form.’

‘Just put down Lazarus. And call me Wanda.’ He shrugged, and carved a series of signs into his tablet.

‘Anything to declare?’ I edged three coins from my belly belt.

‘What the Zenobia are these?’

‘They’re genuine Syria Palaestinian Shekels.’

The Palmyran bit into the metal and held it to the light. His tombstone tooth marks remained indented on its surface.

‘Worthless,’ he spat.

‘Perhaps we can come to some arrangement?’ I batted my lashes as my mother had taught me and fiddled in my belt for a few more coins. I held them out to him. Six Leptons, a rare Antoninianus and a dozen Dinare.

‘Lady, are you trying to bribe an official of Her Majesty’s Customs?’ He tossed my hands away, causing the coins to skitter all over the cobbles.

‘Not for a second, Officer,’ I said, scrabbling to pick them up. ‘I was just declaring my worldly worth.’

‘These coins are now the Property of the Empire of Palmyra,’ he said, scooping up the latkes. ‘There’s no value in Shekels since Al-Zabba started minting her own coins.’

‘Al Zabbah?’

‘Al Zabbah, Zenobia, Queen of Palmyra, Conqueror of One Third of All You Survey.’

‘You mean to tell me that Zenobia is a woman?’

The man nodded. ‘Oh, yeah. Al Zab’s been running things around here ever since her husband got whacked.’

‘Whacked?’ I’d not heard the expression and his Palmyran pronunciation was strange to my ears.

‘Hit. Snuffed. Taken out. Strangled at a friend’s birthday party if you go by the gossip. That’s when Al Zabba proclaimed herself Queen of a third of the Roman Empire – Palaestina, Syria, Egypt, you name it. She’s got Aurelian in a right tizz; the Emperor can’t have a woman on top in 272 Anno Domini.’

Zenobia. I liked the sound of a woman in control. Taking on the might of an Empire took beitzim. Or, in Zenobia’s case, labia majorae. The Palmyran interrupted my reverie.

‘Nationality? Syrian? Palaestinian? Phoenician? Abyssinian?’

‘Yiddel, actually.’

The lamb chop stared at me, as if for the first time. ‘Well, that changes everything. Go down that gangplank on the left,’ he ordered.

I looked to where his pudgy finger pointed.

‘But that leads to the lower deck. I have a first-class passage to Mandragora via Tartus,’ I gulped.

‘Not anymore.’ He pointed at his stone tablet. ‘All Yiddels to be transported via the Star of Arabia,’ he quoted.

‘But that’s not where I’m going.’

‘Do as you’re told, young woman.’

‘I’m sure we can come to some arrangement,’ I said, baring my upper thigh. The official was unmoved.

‘Tell you what, let’s toss for it. You win, you sail to Mandragora first class, all expenses paid. You lose, it’s to the slave deck with you upon the Star of Arabia.’ He handed me a coin I’d never seen before. I turned the newly minted metal over in my palm. On one side a sun-crowned boychick in profile, on the obverse, a laurel-headed emperor. The numbers and letters all looked the same to me. ‘V,’ I made out. ‘Five …’

‘Va-ba-lla-thus,’ the official traced the inscription. ‘Can you not read?’

‘I’m fluent in at least thirteen Empirical tongues,’ I lied. ‘But my Palmyran is a little rusty.’

‘Look here. Heads, Vaballathus. Zenobia’s brat. You can tell him by the rays on his crown. Made Emperor at six months when his Daddy kicked the bucket.’

‘Talk about child labour.’

‘It was all a devious ruse to disguise Zenobia’s ascent. Power behind the throne, etcetera.’ He turned the coin over. ‘Tails, Aurelian. Ruler of the Empire. A flattering likeness.’

He flicked the Vaballathus into the air where it glinted in the sharp dockside light. ‘Heads or tails?’ he asked.

‘Tails.’ He slapped the coin down on the back of his hairy hand. ‘Heads,’ he smirked, clamping a manacle over my left wrist.

‘Come on, then, best out of three.’

‘It’s double or nothing then, love.’ He tossed again.

‘Call.’

‘Tails.’ It landed. He flipped it over.

‘Tails. Baby Vaballathus,’ I shrieked. ‘Get these chains off me.’

‘Hold your dromedaries, lady. Third time unlucky,’ he said.

The coin spun into the air once more.

‘Call.’

‘Tails.’

Aurelian’s bejowled profile stared past me. I’d sealed my own fate. He snatched my ticket from my sweaty palm.

‘Heads. It’s heads,’ he crowed, fastening the second manacle. ‘Hey, Zlotzab, here’s another one for the slave ship. Bon voyage, little Yiddel.’

iii

I was frog-marched into the hold, war booty to the new Regina. I could taste the fear. Down there it was as dark as a vestal virgin’s pomegranate. The stench of bodies was everywhere. As my eyes became accustomed to the shadows, I saw shackles bolting the passengers to the floor. Packed like Sardinians toe to head, head to toe, we inhaled each other’s secretions and excretions for nineteen interminable nights and days. We were a really mixed bunch; Turks, Persians, Egyptians, Palaestinians, Sodomites, Gomorons. One thing we all had in common: every one of us was now in exile.

Before you could say Ein Keloheinu, I used some ’nard to bribe the kapo, another Yiddel in transit, who loosened my chains nightly so that I could explore the vessel. How else is a girl to survive? Truth be told, I needed the extra latkes. I endured each casual encounter by superimposing Carta’s clanking chainmail upon the moans of the men I rubbed and tugged on that first leg. A foreskin here, a vas deferens there, the quaint little squeaks of the scrotal sac under my command took me right back to my nights at the Garrison. Then I’d be aroused from my flashback by the bodily fluids of the barbarian in my grip and I’d discard him with all the scorn I could muster. Not before denuding him of all the Vaballathi he could muster. And next night he’d be back for more. I couldn’t believe I’d come all this way to experience these lonely, lowly schmuks. I hardly had time to tiptoe through my own tulips. At least the Sodomites didn’t start with me. They had no desire for the pomegranate side of the street.

The first ten days were the worst. We passed by ports without being let out even to buy a tzatzke. Sighting Caesarea from the schmutzik porthole, I wondered what became of my father, but he'd probably been pushing up lilies for over two hundred years; then Accra, past luscious date and olive groves sweeping all the way down to the docks. After that, the long haul to Tyre, where several corpses were thrown into the natural harbour.

At Sidon a fresh slew of prisoners embarked. I squinted across my oars to take a look. Among the newcomers was an emaciated elder attached to a ball and chain, the spitting image of my grandfather, coughing up blood as he inched his frail frame forward. He cradled a strange one-armed instrument between his manacles. It was always easy to spot a Phoenician; they were so dreadfully last century. And as for his headgear, hello Abyssinia?

Before he could reach the gangplank a kapo whipped the bony instrument from the captive's grasp and smacked it to the ground, snapping one of the three strings that stretched from neck to toe. As the prisoner squatted to retrieve the gut, the kapo stripped him of his cap and gown and tossed them onto a rising pile of pillage.

'Can't you see he's not well?' I screamed. The kapo raised his scourging stick and whipped the man on both peaches until he drew blood. Beaten black and murex purple, the man was shackled next to me.

'Thank you for trying to defend me against that brute,' he said.

'I couldn't stand to see the way you were pushed around,' I said. What is it with authority and the elderly?

'A brave meidele,' he said, 'There's not many of your tribe that would do such a kindness for a complete stranger.'

'And what exactly is my tribe?' I asked, defensively.

'You are clearly a Yiddel from Iudaea.'

'What makes you think that?'

'The nose. The eyes. The hips. The attitude.'

'And how do you know so much about my alleged tribe?' I enjoined him.

'We are as your brethren. It's like a secret handshake,' he said. 'I'm also of the persuasion. But where are my manners?' He extended a skinny claw. 'I'm Ahumm Ahumm. One of the Yiddels of Sidon.'

'I had no idea they had Yiddels in Sidon,' I said, shaking his cuffed hand.

‘What are you talking about? We’re everywhere,’ he said. ‘You should see our shuls. Our tribe has lived all over this vast Empire. Dug some great dams. Built some great walls. We were in control for a while back in the day. Couple of Kings, even. Do you have a name, lassie?’

‘Call me Wanda,’ I said. ‘First names only.’ I couldn’t resist fingering the long neck of his instrument.

‘Where did you get this kithara?’ I asked.

‘This is a komuz,’ he coughed.

‘Come again?’

‘A komuz,’ he repeated. ‘I copied it from an original in Pishpek. We were doing gigs along the Silk Route and I fell in love with its clear string sound. I fashioned my own on my return.’

‘I learned to play a little in Jerusalem.’

‘You play komuz?’

‘Not komuz, per se. It was a phorminx, actually.’

‘Once you’ve got the hang of any string, it’s easy to adapt,’ he said. ‘I’ll show you a few licks. You’ll be komuzzing with the kosmos in no time.’

I slipped the kapo two sheckels and a tickle of the testes to loosen my manacles, and we moved Ahumm to a berth at the back of the hold where the sea breeze wasn’t as brisk. I prepared a ’nard infusion to help his wheezing, unsure as to whether he would last the distance, but music has a strange way of healing. I gave up the schmekel throttling and adapted my supple wrists to the playing of the komuz. With only two strings you can’t really go wrong, but the high middle note was missing, so I had to fill in the missing melody as I went along.

One night near Dawrat, Ahumm showed me how to create harmonics on the upper partials. It’s like a pinging in your inner ear that makes you tingle with delight; I’d never heard anything like this before. Perhaps this was the spherical stuff the Muses wanted.

‘Don’t strum. Flick,’ Ahumm instructed. ‘Too hard and the string will snap. Too soft and the note will fail. You have to tell the difference between the slapping and the pluck.’

‘Nu, what happened to your career during the first Occupation?’ I asked, fiddling on an E string.

‘I went back to teaching after the Silk Route went dark. Polyphonics were forbidden at the Academy in Beirut. But I could not deprive my students the sound of heavenly harmonics. I preferred martyrdom than the dumbed down monotones of Zenobia’s Empire.’

‘You stood up to the might of Al Zabbah?’

‘A small revolt of one. I was blacklisted. I was purple listed. I couldn’t find work anywhere except a few drag shows down at the docks. First, I wasn’t Levantine enough. Then I wasn’t Syria Palaestinian enough. Now I’ll never be Palmyran enough. It never stops.’

‘And your family?’

‘Have you got about a century?’

‘I have, actually.’

From Beirut to Byblos, Ahumm told me of his Phoenician love nest on the shores of the Med, which he paid for by teaching komuz at the Academy. How his wife begged him not to go, but how could he resist one last Silk Route tour, knowing the region was about to go belly up? How he and his band caused a riot in Pishpek in seventy-one where he’d honed his chops on the local strings and schlepped the komuz all the way back to Sidon. How Yiddel musos were welcomed, nay, encouraged to entertain audiences from Damascus to Dunhuang. How Zenobia’s lust for power required scapegoats to cover her tracks.

‘Those were the days when I could pull those Kyrgkstani girls right out of their yurts. We worked the Great Lakes, Song Kul, Issyk Kul, Chatyr Kul; we were never short of nomad groupies. Those gypsy girls gave great head. We were in Bukhara when we heard there was tsorris at home.’

‘Bad news travels really fast.’

He shook his head sadly. ‘Much as I’ve been a bit of a lad, I adored my wife and my boy. I hotfooted it back across the steppes in three months flat, but I was too late. A neighbour showed me the place where my wife and son lay buried in a shallow grave. I could tell it was Ahumm Junior from the Tyrian purple loincloth he loved to wear, stained with blood the dye of the murex brandaris. I wasn’t sure which corpse was my wife’s. The dead all look the same.’

‘I feel you, Ahumm,’ I said. ‘I never got to say goodbye to my own family when their time came. It was an accident, I swear.’

‘Let’s not dwell on the past,’ Ahumm said. ‘I find it only brings more sorrow. I find solace only in my komuz.’

‘That’s great that you have an outlet for your feelings.’

‘Yes, I have my music. And I have my boychick. He fondled the neck of his instrument and I suddenly saw its true form. It was the tibia of a small child, the tarsals set at a right angle where the pegs folded back. My morning gruel repeated on me.

‘Don’t judge until you’ve been in my position,’ said Ahumm. ‘I wanted to have a piece of Ahumm Junior with me forever.’ He wiped a big plop of water from his eye with a filthy thumb.

‘I lost my little brother, too,’ I said. ‘He was very sick when I left home and I never got a chance to say goodbye.’ I daubed his puny chest with the ’nard to afford us both a measure of comfort.

‘My son is the inspiration for every breath I take,’ said Ahumm.

‘I’m really sorry for your loss,’ I said.

‘No, you’ve suffered far more than I have,’ he said. ‘You’re a woman.’

‘At least I’ve still got a few tzatzkes to my name,’ I said, patting my belt absentmindedly. His eyes shifted from my cleavage to my belly.

One night, just north of Beirut, after a particularly moving thyramb, Ahumm presented me with his erect baton. This was really going to ruin the friendship.

‘Ahumm,’ I murmured, firmly removing his wand, ‘Yoffi me’od, that’s very nice, now b’va’ka’sha, put it away.’

‘I beg you, let me stroke your chiton,’ he pleaded. ‘It’s been days since I’ve felt the swish of good cloth against my old body.’

‘Nu, what is it with you?’ I asked. ‘Is it boychicks or girlchicks you crave?’

‘Oh, I’m a regular ladies’ man,’ he said. ‘I just picked up the love of silk on tour. Did a couple of gigs in drag. Men are forbidden to wear the pure weave. I bought a couple of robes under the guise of shopping for my wife. She was very understanding at first. Particularly with my wearing her loin cloth.’

All the way from Tripoli to Tartus, Ahumm plinked on his komuz, stoned on olive wine, crooning, ‘Let me feel it,’ in every mode known to Apollo. Eventually I capitulated and wrapped my silk chiton around his scrawny loins, helping him to help himself between the Lochryian sheets. I should have known that no mitzvah goes unpunished.

At Tartus, there was a sham of a disembarkation procedure that got our names wrong and our nationalities mixed up. A punch-up ensued with a Smyrnian merchant caught smuggling

whale blubber in his carry-on. For one brief moment the kapos let their guard down, and I could have slipped into the crowd and disappeared, sold my gold chains for a yurt on the seashore, where I could have given komuz lessons and lived out my days in harmony. I fidgeted into my embroidered belt for the chains that could buy me my freedom. Holy Hecate, they were gone. All those nights of dithyrambic dithering had been an elaborate ruse. Ahumm must have extracted my necklaces, one by one, while I lay sleeping.

iv

I love the smell of Palmyra in the morning. The desert dew damps down the dust, you can practically eat the dates off the streets, and the gentle grunting of camels round the citadel merges with the cacophony of the dawn prayers to Caesar, to Baal, to Asherah-Who-Lives-in-the-Trees. And not a few chazzans, chanting to Elohim, mixing their mezuzahs with their Muses on their over-decorated synagogues. On the surface it seemed like paradise.

We were unshackled and bundled into goat crates, men separated from women, bars set tantalisingly far apart. A series of trumpet blasts resounded across the forum.

'It is She,' Ahumm whispered. 'Al Zabbah. Queen of Palmyra. Empress of A Third of All She Surveys. Look at those triceps.'

'Ahumm, you stole my jewellery!' I blurted.

'Don't be crass, Wanda. I've borrowed them to bargain our way out of here.'

'Excuse me? Our way? Who went and made you my keeper?'

'They must have a shuk somewhere in town. The Shekels can be reminted for local currency.'

'That's theft. They're mine. I worked my pomegranate to the pulp for those latkes.'

'You're a slave now,' he said. 'Nothing belongs to you. I think I know a little more about the world than you, little lassie.'

'Give them back!' I reached through the bars and seized Ahumm by the komuz. Another string pinged.

'Now look what you've done,' he cried. 'How can I play with only one string?'

'Give me my latkes and I'll sort out your komuz,' I said. 'I'll find a way.'

Ahumm reached beneath his chiton and coughed up six necklaces.

'Half now, half when you replace those strings. Now shut up, she's coming hither.'

Zenobia rode into the market place like a Colossus on blister beetles. She sported a brilliant full-length white himation over a jet-black chiton, decorated with stylised hieroglyphics that fluttered in the breeze as she alighted from her slave-borne litter. A molten golden choker adorned her neck with the merest hint of bite marks. The chains were fashioned like interlocking vines that cascaded down her shoulder to meet the inverted chalice cuffs encircling her slender wrists. Her well-toned arms were bare from the head of the humerus to her bejewelled phalanges. My pomegranate, arid as a camel's eyelid, nictated immediately. I squeezed my knees together to quench the aqueous drip and my apricots erected like the dusky mountain peaks that surrounded the oasis.

Palm fronds were strewn before her footsteps as she made a beetle-line for our crates. Zenobia liked to look over the new batch of slaves herself and it was rumoured that she had a proclivity for young, full-breasted Semites. She herself had been spawned from the tribe, although she would rather take an asp to her breast then admit it.

She snapped on a pair of kid gloves and checked my gums and pulled down my lower lids to detect signs of scurvy. From the moment she touched me I could feel the chemistry. A flash of recognition passed between us.

Zenobia cracked her whip at her eunuch who cowered above her, clutching a clay tablet and an armadillo quill.

'I'll take this one for my chambermaid.' She flicked the weapon in my direction. 'This one can amuse me on his oud.'

She pointed her curled sceptre at Ahumm, who was twanging away on his komuz in an effort to impress her.

'And that one, not that one, no, not that, no. And that. I'll give her to the vizier and his second wife.' She pointed to a cowering shepherdess. 'It should spice up their Amor and Psyche routine. Sort out payment with the caravan driver and make sure we get a good discount.'

As the litter drew away The Empress gave me The Look and I flashed back one of my own, holding her gaze. It was a moment of sheer stare. A secret acknowledgement of eastern promise.

v

A chambermaid. Have you ever worked as one? Much as you're in the bedrooms of power, you're dumbed down to dishrag dullness. The semen-encrusted sheets you change from a casual schtupping spree, the chamber pots that bubble and squeak with phlegm and bile from a night's carousing, the discarded himations on command of the Queen, the kohling of eyes, rouging of cheeks, plucking of philtrum hairs. Zenobia's thread count was enormous, her appetite was voracious, and I'm sure she deliberately tormented me with the schmekels that she laid, dismissing me nightly to my quarters where I blocked my ears against the coitus that seeped through the walls from the Royal private parts.

Zenobia looked right through me, as though I was invisible. I wasn't going to make the first move; that could result in instant disembowelment, and I still needed to fix things with Ahumm. Fortunately, the slave quarters were mixed, and Ahumm slept so deeply I could crawl onto his tick-ridden bedroll, slip the komuz from his arms and practice into the wee small hours, replacing it in his embrace before the predawn rollcall. Detection would mean certain death. The Palmyrans were very strict on petty theft.

One night upon on my pallet in the garret, strumming 'Swing Low Sweet Camel Cart', I looked back to Jordan and wondered if anyone was ever going to carry me home. The mood came over me just like that, with an undertone of sadness; the single string vibrating the bone of the son of Ahumm. I recalled my little house on the West Bank and wondered whether Lazzie and Martha and Ma had been spared the ignominy of the Destruction. Perhaps they were out there in their own Pleroma daydreaming the same thing about me.

Just as I was consoling myself with a pomegranate jam, a hooded shadow padded into my cell. I'd have known the outline of her body anywhere.

'My Empress,' I uttered. 'I thought you had deserted me.'

'Shah,' she said, putting a slender finger to my lips, 'Follow me. I am in want of female soothing.'

By the light of her burning torch I trailed the hooded nightgown through a jumble of walled passageways, rich with tapestry and flagstone, until finally she halted in her cavernous boudoir, interlaid with glass beads from which shone back myriad reflections in the torchlight. Rumpled sheets were strewn across the floor. In the centre of the chamber was a jewel-encrusted sarcophagus, opened wide and scooped out in the middle. Pure white bolsters filled the body,

pelican down pillows framed the headboard. I looked at the glass beads again and noticed that their fragments formed a gargantuan mosaic of Zenobia herself, depicted as the Muse, Calliope.

I tiptoed across the flagstones to clear the linen, and cleared my throat from the dust that swirled constantly about us. Zenobia slurped a half empty chalice.

'Never mind the laundry, play for me, Peaches,' she said, throwing herself into the sarcophagus, spilling red wine all over the white cushions.

'It's Wanda, actually.'

'I'm going to call you Peaches. You remind me of a dusky fruit at the height of its ripeness.'

'And you put me in mind of a juicy pomegranate …'

'I've heard your komuz oozing through the cracks. It's a labyrinth, you know. The slave quarters are right on the other side of this wall. I've been bewitched by the sounds of your playing. Do that song of exile … the one about Caligula.

'The Unhappy Wanderer?'

'The very one.'

'That's a very old tune.' Zenobia hummed a few bars and I took up the accompaniment, pitching into her key with my uncanny ear.

'It takes me back to my years as an everyday housewife,' Zenobia sobbed. 'Those were the glory days, when Odenathus made all the decisions and I could pillage to my heart's content.' Who needs all this responsibility? She gestured around her at the abject luxury of her domain. I plucked my komuz with thumb and forefinger, something like this:

'I love to go a-Wandering,

I have to watch my back,

And as I go I love to sing,

A komuz on my back.'

'Caliguleeee.' It's probably where the salvation began. 'Caligulaaa.' I riffed around the rhythm on my one string. 'Caliguleeee.' Folks think they made it up in Mississippi, but they got the wrong delta, baby. 'Caligulahahahahaha.'

My ring finger slipped on the fretless fingerboard and the song suddenly took on a different tone. A sense of foreboding that I'd chanced upon in my lonely komuz nights.

'Oy, may I go a-Wandering,

Until the day I die,

Oy, may I always laugh and sing,

Neath Zenobia's clear blue sky.'

'Caliguleeee.' Zenobia slipped off her chiton. 'Caligulaaa.' She dropped her gold chains to the floor. 'Caliguleeee.' She undid her inner girdle. 'Caligulahahahahaha.'

There are a few tricks you can use to conjure up the minor. Once you know it, it's there forever. Like genital crabs. The sour hot breath of oppression for every slave that's ever swung low. For every wanderer that's lost her way. For every woman that's ever stood up to an Empire. It drove Zenobia to distraction. She couldn't keep her hands off me.

Lying in her double-wide sarcophagus, sharing a much-moisturised cherry cheroot, Zenobia confided in me the secrets of the Empire and her inner emptiness. Poor Zen, she'd had no one to really speak to since her spouse's death. The slave girls who attracted her were either dolts or opportunists, and her advisors were a bunch of ninnies she could just order about, from geldings to studs. Me and Zen were on the same papyrus from the start.

'The Romans have ruled these lands since memory began,' she said. 'My husband was happy just to be under their thumb, a client king, sycophant to the latest Caesar. They made us abandon our pantheon. They trashed our idols. Then they made us convert to their one true god. It had to stop.'

'Nu, how did you swing it to your advantage?'

'The nomad tribes around the oasis formed an alliance, the Tanakh, and came to see Odaenathus. They were prepared to take his side against the oppressor. He refused. They rose up against us. Whether he was eliminated by a bonkers Bedouin or his closest advisor, we've never been able to prove, even though we quelled the rebellion on both sides.'

'Did you take over then, after your husband passed?'

'With a vengeance,' she said, eyes sparkling at the memory. 'I've always claimed Cleopatran ancestry on my mother's side, so Egypt was a piece of cake. After that the Minor Asians came into line. Then Aurelian got wind that we were rending the Empire asunder. He's closing on us as we speak.'

'But now that Aurelian is covering the Dust Belt, surely it's better to surrender?'

'Never,' she spat. 'I would rather live an hour of freedom than a lifetime of slavery.'

'I'm with you, my Empress,' I said, rolling another cheroot.

vi

Zenobia woke up groaning. Her Arabian weave had slipped across her forehead and her Etruscan eyelashes had slid to her cheeks, giving the impression of a nesting ibis. A throaty ahem from behind the arras alerted me to the presence of Ahumm, newly promoted from the laundry to buttling. He'd become her factotum in all things gastronomic and political. He was holding a hummus platter, with a vellum calling card resting between two balls of falafel.

'Inform the Empress that the Decurio is downstairs in the stateroom,' he said, handing me the tray.

'Is he?'

'Is he what?

'Bicurious?'

'I'm not sure what you mean. The Decurio is the Ambassador for the Emperor here in Palmyra. He's here about the truce.'

'I'll tell her. But don't hold your breath.' I left him wheezing at the arras and tottered over to the sarcophagus.

'Empress of One Third of All Ye Survey,' I said, 'Aurelian's emissary is here again to engage the terms of the peace treaty.'

'I can't possibly see him now,' she said, 'I've got a hangover from Hades.'

'Indeed, last night was quite a bender,' I said. The empty flagons strewn around the chamber stood mute witness to my claim. Camel butts flowed from the earthen ashtrays. Silken cords lay scattered on the ground; I had become a dab hand at a Gordian knot.

'Ahumm says he's being rather insistent, Empress.'

'Can't you get rid of him? Tell him I'm surfing the crimson wave. That should put him off.'

'Do you want me to meet with him?'

'Won't you be a darling, Peaches?' she asked. 'And pass me that moonshine. I'm simply parched.'

'I can't go down dressed like this,' I said, 'I have no authority in this garb.'

'Throw on something of mine,' she suggested. 'Go to him as if you were the Queen of A Third of All Ye Survey.'

'What's the deal with the impending siege then?' I asked, slipping on an emerald ring.

‘Our people are not budging, okay? Tell him to tell Aurelian to do his worst. We will never surrender.’

‘I’m not quite au fait with all the details,’ I said, fingering her choker. ‘I’ve never actually had a security debriefing.’

‘Oh, please, Peaches, make up something. Just get Aurelian off my back until we can make plans for our departure.’

‘I thought you said we’re not budging?’

‘I said the people will not budge. You and I will leave for Zeugma tonight with Vaballathus. I’m not putting that child through another colonial upheaval. But don’t speak of this to the emissary. Let it be our little secret.’

I picked up a finely spun chiton from the floor.

‘Can I wear this?’ I asked.

‘Take a fresh one from the armoire, Peaches. And don my black lace mourning veil,’ she said. ‘It always intimidates the enemy.’

vii

It was déjà vu from the moment I saw him through the double layer of my borrowed veil. The same aqualine schnozz, the same haughty bearing. The same girded loins. Is it because the Romans interbreed so much, or had Carta levitated from his private hell to meet me here? If I gave myself away I’d scupper all our plans. Zenobia would be a laughing stock from Cairo to Canaan.

‘Your Royal Highness,’ he said, jiggling his toned triceps against his feathered helmet in a raised salute.

‘Dicurio,’ I replied, holding out Zenobia’s ring for him to kiss.

‘I trust the morning finds you well?’

‘I am fresh as a date palm dewdrop, thank you.’

‘I bring tidings from Aurelian,’ he said.

‘Glad ones, I trust, Dicurio. I hope he is faring well on his desert expedition?’

‘Let us not mince our words, Highness. Zenobia is fully aware of the Emperor’s displeasure in your conquest of his lands.’

‘Mm-hmm,’ I said, running my eyes up and down his sheathed gluteus maximus.

‘Recently, you have cut off Rome’s shipments of grain, our motherland is running low on bread, and the emperor has had no choice but to re-invade your provinces.’

‘But I understand that you recovered Asia Minor without much fuss.’

‘Yes, the Minorians were only too grateful to have us back in control.’

‘Byzantium?’

‘Byzantium was tricky. We’ll have to get back there for some further pillaging.’

‘How fared thee in Tyana?’

‘Tyana was going to be a bloodbath. Luckily Aurelius had a vision of his mentor, Yossi Apollonius, who implored him to abstain from the blood of the innocent. ‘Aurelian, he said, if you conquer, be merciful.’’

‘Sounds a lot like my old Rov, Yossi.’

‘You are advised by a Yiddel Rabinnical?’

‘All the time,’ I said, forgetting for a moment that I was in disguise.

‘But I thought Zenobia eschewed the Yiddels?’

‘We do, we do eschew,’ I covered my tracks. ‘But these visions manifest to guide us at the most apposite of times.’

‘As a result of his divine vision, Aurelian has spared all habitations in his approach to Palmyra. Tyana has fallen. Emesa has fallen. If Zenobia surrenders to Aurelian in person, he will spare her the ignominy of enslavement.’

‘Dare he humiliate the Queen of A Third of All He Surveys?’ I was indignant.

‘It’s Imperial Policy, Highness. Aurelian cannot be seen to be beaten by a mere woman.’

I bristled. ‘Zenobia will never surrender.’

‘Aurelian is offering clemency in exchange for obeisance.’

‘Obeisance?’

The Emperor is giving Zenobia the chance for peaceful negotiation.’

‘What’s the catch?’

‘Zenobia must sign a treaty of acceptance of the Annexure of Palmyra.’

‘Meaning?

‘All conquered lands revert to Aurelian. He will be Rex Dominatrix. You keep the city and your dignity. And Vaballathus can stay on the tail side of the coins.’

‘And if we do not surrender?’

‘Then unfortunately we’ll have to raze Palmyra to the ground. And Aurelian will haul you off to Rome in chains.’

‘We wouldn’t want that to happen.’ I sneaked a toe out from beneath my chiton and imagined it sliding up his shapely calf. Then I thought better of it. I didn’t want to be the catalyst of a new world war.

‘Thanks for the offer, Dicurio,’ I said. I will take this to my advisors and let you know of our decision.’

‘Don’t take too long, Empress,’ he said. Aurelian doesn’t like to be kept waiting.’

viii

I told this all to Zenobia with a few embellishments. She had drained the dregs of the moonshine and moved onto the ’nard. Ahumm strummed Phoenician nursery rhymes to Vaballathus in his high chair, encouraging him to eat his dates.

‘I’m not staying here to be captured and paraded around that Italian backwater,’ she slurred. ‘We’re out of here. Ahumm, saddle up the camels.’

‘It’s a fair ten days’ ride, Empress,’ said Ahumm, ruffling the boychick Emperor’s hair.

‘Not if we take the females,’ she said. ‘We can get up to fifty leagues a day on those babies. Peaches, bring my moonshine.’

‘There’s none left, Majesty, I said. You seem to have drunk the cellar dry.’

‘Then you’ll have to make a short stop at the market before we hotfoot it to Zeugma. Look in my purse.’ A trembling hand emerged from beneath the lambskin coverlet, jiggling a monogrammed linen bag she never removed from her wrist. I struggled with the drawstring, taking deep breaths through my mouth to combat my Empress’s toxic breath, and emptied the contents of the bag onto the bedspread: a handful of pumpkin seeds, six Vaballathi, a miniature flask and three tiny figurines, delta-clefted, heavy-breasted.

‘Put those back,’ she fumed, emptying the tiny flask onto her hooch-parched lips.

‘What are they, Mistress of All?’ I asked, transfixed by the faceless trio.

‘My teraphim, the only things that stand between me and oblivion.’

‘How so, Empress?’

‘Because it is a great secret that my success has lain with Asherah, The Goddess that Dare Not Speak Her Name.’ She pronounced it in the Palmyran dialect, without vowels, so the deity had a guttural ring.

‘Nu, what’s wrong with praying to the terrapins?’

‘It is forbidden to worship the Goddess.’

‘But Zenobia … do you not make all the rules?’

‘Verily,’ she sighed, ‘but times are changing. Aurelian has banished the female gods from his Empire. I hear he’s imposing a different kind of Trinity.’

‘But why are there three of these?’

‘Three in one. Maiden, mother, crone – the phases of our lives. The triple goddess. Adi Shiksa, I believe they call it further out east.’ She fell back onto the knobbly pelican down pillow she carried everywhere. ‘But you’re way too young for all this. You are a mere reed in the wind. Follow in the way of your people. Take the way of Yahweh. This goddess business will bring you nothing but pain and sorrow.’

‘I’ve got all the pain and sorrow I need right now.’

‘Now, get out of here … fetch Zenobia’s hoochie poochie.’ Shakily, she counted some coins into my palm.

‘Take these four Vaballathi and go to Zosimos in the shuk, third stall on the right after the dipped fig stand. Tell him it’s for Al Zabbai, Queen of Kings, and he’ll know what to give you.’

‘Third stall on the right. Zosimos. Got it.’

‘Dress as a laundry maid. Nobody will suspect anything.’

‘My Empress,’ I ventured. If you are going to send me to my certain death, I require one thing of you.’

‘Hurry up,’ said Zenobia. ‘I’m suffering here.’

‘I want my freedom.’

‘You want your what?’

‘Freedom. Emancipation. Your military might has brought us over in chains; you took your pick of our people. You’ve had your say. Now it’s my turn.’

‘Moon … shine …’

‘Say it, Zenobia,’ I said. ‘Tell me I’m free.’

‘Moon … shine …’

I held an empty flagon above her tousled head.

‘You’ll get your figging moonshine. But give me my freedom.’

‘Is that what it’s going to take?’ she flashed. ‘Who’s the Queen around here?’

‘You are, Majesty,’ I said. ‘But I wish to have majesty over myself.’

‘Enough already,’ Zenobia shrieked. ‘You’re free, okay? You’re free.’

‘Promise.’

‘I promise.’

‘Swear by Vaballathus.’

‘I swear.’

‘I said, swear by the life of your son, or you’ll never see your precious moonshine.’

‘I swear by Vaballathus! Satisfied?’

Zenobia collapsed back on the makeshift couch, holding the flask to her mouth, flicking her tongue into the cavity on the lid to taste the last drops of oblivion. I grabbed a long strip of royal blue silk, the ties that bound us only a few short hours before. It was rank with the scent of our lovemaking. I didn’t want Zenobia getting any ideas about using the fabric to self-asphyxiate while I was gone. That was a pleasure reserved for two. I loved the feeling of the silken cloth around my neck and, for a moment, I was taken back to the euphoria of the night before.

‘Cover your hair properly, please.’

‘Empress, I’m fine like this.’

‘And put a little rouge on your cheeks.’

‘Oy, Zenobia,’ I said under my breath.

‘And come straight back. There’s not much time.’

‘Yes, my Empress.’ Just like my mother.

ix

I secreted the coins down my simlah, slipped on my kithoneth and off I schlepped. Upper class Palmyrans didn’t cover their heads back then, let alone their faces; but for the slave class it was de rigeur. I liked my half-on, half-off gypsy scarf with a few loose strands I could toss about at whim, and I sprang out of the safe house glimpsing my face in the wide flowing river, half-regal, half-slut, into the real world.

The market was a potpourri of chaos. People were trying to build a makeshift wall out of wattle and daub; there were archers everywhere and you couldn't tell a Palmyran from a Palaestinian. I felt a sense of elation entirely inappropriate to the occasion; twelve weeks a slave, and now free to simply be. I was defying the might of the undead. Take me on, oh headless monster. I very dare you, dibbuk of the dark. I'm free now. And I can do whatever I figging well please.

So carried away did I become, that I tripped over a booth with full tilt komuz. A sheaf of doodles fluttered around my feet, followed by some choice curses of a youth who scrabbled at my feet.

'Jesus, watch where you're going,' he barked.

'What? Oy. Sorry. Didn't see you.'

'My sketch of the Empress. It's ruined.'

I looked at the strange flat squares strewn on the ground. I picked one up. They were the living images of people I knew in the oasis. Here was Zenobia, there was little Vaballathus. An etching of Dionysus, a doodle of a Muse.

'No, look, this one's fine. I know Zenobia well. It's a perfect likeness.'

The young man scrabbled to his feet.

'I'm sure I've seen you somewhere before,' he said.

'Your face is also familiar,' I said, a frisson of dread shaking my speech.

'Are you a solider?'

'My father mapped out a military career for me. My line goes back to the service of Tiberius.'

'You're Roman?'

'Proudly Praetorian for over twenty-five generations. My ten times great grandfather was witness to the killing of the Christ.'

'How can you be so sure?' I asked.

'It's in the Gospel of Mark,' he said. 'And Thomas. And Philip. I'm quite taken with the Christian way. But you must speak of it to no one. Zenobia is very twitchy about converts.'

'What are these?' I asked, picking up one of the squares.

‘I’ve travelled from Syria Palaestina to Yemen and back. I discovered the medium in Western Persia. The moment I made my first mark, I knew I could wage war no more. I deserted my legion and traded my military integrity for these sheaves.’

‘I’ve never seen anything like them.’ I fingered the smooth pulp. It wasn’t papyrus, it was thinner, flimsier.

‘What do you call it?’

‘Paper,’ said the boychick. It’s portable, it’s light and I can set up my drawing stand anywhere.’

‘Is this how you earn your bread, then?’

‘My bread. And my buttermilk. I sketch likenesses for the dwellings of the higher classes.’

‘What do they do with them?’

‘Mosaics are all the rage with the upper caste,’ he said. ‘Only they can afford them for their reception rooms. Nymphs, Muses, fates, that sort of thing. The artisans use my drawings for their blueprints.’

‘You draw mythical creatures using real people?’

‘Forsooth. I have to take my art from life.’

‘We’re not allowed to draw people,’ I said. ‘It’s blasphemous. Don’t ask me why.’

‘Perhaps that is the attraction,’ said the lad. ‘The Zeugmanians all have similar looks. I’ve captured the images of matrons and maidens, and it all comes out the same. I thirst for the fresh mark of the other; the dark-eyed Hebrew, the ebonite Abyssinian. You have such an unusual face; those eyes, the way that headscarf frames your face. I’d like to sketch you.’

‘Seriously? How much will it cost me?’

‘A few moments of your life, that’s all.’

‘Look, I don’t have much time. I need to obtain a batch of moonshine, I mean medicine, for my mistress.’ I didn’t think it wise to tell him who she was.

‘You are a striking maid, literally and figuratively,’ he smiled. ‘I have you in mind for Erato, Muse of Music.’

‘Alright. Wait for me here. I’ll be right back.’

x

I found Zosimos's stall, whispered Zen's code word in his hairy ear and voided him of his entire stock of A-grade ethanol. Thus laden, I returned to paperboychick. He drew me to an alleyway and proceeded to imitate my likeness.

'Let's bring your tresses out of the cap a little. Look me straight in the eye. That's it. Put your basket next to you. Good. Now sit still.'

Within seconds, under his deft strokes, holding a piece of sharpened charcoal, a spitting image of myself emerged, hair awry, brows akimbo, with a smouldering look, half mocking, half seductive. The boy held the paper at arm's length and squinted at his creation.

'Perfect,' he said. 'I'm taking this straight to my architect. It will do well for a fountain floor he's decorating for a prominent fire pool.'

'How can a little piece of, what do you call it, paper, cover a whole floor?'

'I give them the drawing and they enlarge it proportionately to a massive scale. Then the mosaic draftsmen chop up the design into tiny little glass tesserae to create the flooring.'

'I'd like to keep it,' I said. 'It will please my mistress.'

'I must retain this one, it has an immortal feel to it.'

'Please, give it to me,' I begged.

'Look, I can make another, but I can never reproduce the spontaneity. I cannot bring myself to leave without an impression of your face.'

'A face is a face is a face ...'

'Not in the face of art.'

He drew me again, same look, same hairstyle, curls around my face, headscarf awry, moonshine by my side. Afterwards, we linked arms and strolled up the short incline towards Tissue Hill. It wasn't called Tissue Hill until we baptised it so, but the area was a natural camouflage for young couples in lust. A slight rise above the town, enclosed by rushes, we had total privacy and a view of the Euphrates below. His papers were a natural sponge for his rapid emissions, which would have soaked my simlah from neck to hem. Fortunately, all my komuz playing had given me a strong left wrist and our tryst was short, but spectacular. The charcoal marks dissolved a little into the pulp but the eggshell gloss gave it an eternal protection. I showed him how to please me in kind, as he fumbled for my pomegranate with blackened fingernails on top of Tissue Hill. I never even knew his name.

xi

By the time I got back, panting, to the safe palace, Zenobia was gone. My headscarf had come loose and my curls were wet with worry.

'Where is she?' I screamed at the bare walls?

A small resonant wail sounded from within a dark cupboard.

'Mama?'

'What? Who? Vaballathus? Is that you?'

'Mama?' I picked up the tyke, resplendent in his miniature king's costume. He hadn't been changed for hours and he honked of rancid Imperial pish.

'For fig's sake, Vaballathus. They must have missed you when they picked up your Mama.'

I took of my headscarf and twisted it into a makeshift nappy~~,~~ scooped the boychick into my arms and ran like fig to the river. I bore him around the reeds under the bridge where Zenobia, inscrutable, was being escorted by six Abyssinian slaves onto a barge in golden chains, extending from her platinum choker to her diamond-studded wrists. So shackled was she in the prison of her riches that the boat sagged slightly as she boarded. She waddled to the stern and tilted her chin at the horizon, straight-backed, unrepentant. I thought I heard a Hebrew prayer fluttering from her lips.

I waded into the Euphrates, screaming her name, oblivious to the marshy reeds that were fast sucking me under. The coins in my girdle were bogging down my chiton and I found myself being dragged into the depths with every step.

A drum the size of a holy ark started to sound out a slow, rowing rhythm.

'1…' The slaves raised their oars, parallel to the water.

'2…' They dipped in unison.

'3…' Ahumm leaned over the prow, holding out the komuz.

'Grab hold of this,' he instructed.' Zenobia glanced in our direction and screamed.

'My baby … my baby.'

'Mama,' Vaballathus whimpered.

'Unhand my son and heir,' she cried again.

'I'll swap you. Vaballathus for the komuz,' I yelled. I needed the string. She needed a lineage. It was a fair exchange.

Zenobia gave her final command as a free woman.

‘Hand her the instrument.’

‘But Empress,’ Ahumm whined, ‘It is the only remains of my poor dead son.’

‘We must sacrifice the dead for the living,’ Zenobia commanded. I lifted Vaballathus above my head and yanked the komuz from Ahumm’s slippery grasp. He grabbed the kid and handed him to Zenobia. She coddled her son in her arms and looked again to the horizon.

‘Zenobia, Zenobia, why have you forsaken me?’ I said, bubbling under.

She turned to where I floundered and flashed me a dazzling smile. Then she raised her chin and her baby and looked to the horizon. I held onto the komuz for dear life, the last gut snapping with the force of the water. I was going under, stringless.

A flame of flamingoes curl into shape as I lie on the sky shore, heaving. I squint up and all nine of them are circling my body, tickling me with their nimbus digits. The stratosphere streaks by as the Muses pass the soggy instrument from hand to milky hand.

‘You must have known that Ahumm was a few strings short of a full komuz?’

‘I did wonder what the extra pegs were for,’ I cough.

‘Arrogant girl. We can’t do anything with this broken vessel. We need the missing string, a gut that can stand the plucking of the Ages.’

‘I think we can call this a boon,’ says Callie. ‘We can play around with it when it dries out.’

‘What? This waterlogged thing? I don’t think so.’

‘She did discover a strange new note. In that sixteenth dithyramb. That’s a bonus.’

‘Poly, the blues aren’t due for another fifteen hundred years.’

‘You’d be surprised, Erato.’

‘She’s found such a melancholy joy, such a dazzling sadness. It could be the sound we’ve been waiting for.’

‘Don’t be ridiculous. You can’t consider that accident of sorrow as a sacred note.’

‘Nobody told me the komuz had to have three strings,’ I defend my right to ignorance to the hilt. ‘Truly, ladies, Ahumm set me up.’

‘I think you’re letting Zenobia off the hook a bit soon.’

'She was crazy with delirium tremens, she would have given up her own son for a dop. I shouldn't have left her. I shouldn't have followed the paperboychick to Tissue Hill. What's going to happen to her?'

'On his triumphant return with Zenobia in chains, Aurelian will parade her around the Empire, proclaiming his victory over the Nastiest Empress in the East. All he ever wanted to do was grab her by the pomegranate.'

'I'm told she will live to a ripe old age in a villa in Tuscany and her descendants will found a famous guild of luthiers.'

'Shame, poor Aurelian,' Urania says. 'He could have her body, but he'll never have her soul.'

'In veritas,' Euterpe says, 'Zenobia withholds from Aurelian the one thing that gives her sovereignty over herself.'

'What's that?' I ask.

'Her orgasm,' says Euterpe.

'Well she certainly didn't withhold with me,' I say.

'You're going to have to go back to basics. To the one string wonder.'

'How about that Gopichand?' pipes up Poly.

'Oh, that's right, from our milkmaid days back in Vrindavar. We haven't heard that sound since we were banned from the last love dance.'

'It wasn't our fault it turned into an orgy. How were we to know it was just a spiritual thing?'

'She must return to Vrindivar. Where it all began.'

'No, she must pick up her roots in Cochi, city of her Tribe.'

'Ladies, ladies, you're freaking me out. 'All these options are making my headscarf spin.

'There's a lovely sunken temple at Lake Vembanad I've always wanted to see. And I hear that the houseboats of Kerala are to die for.'

'And there, you will infiltrate the love dance of the Gopis. For only then will you learn the secret of the Gopichand.'

'How will I know who they are?'

'You will know them when you see them. Virgins all. Pure as paddy fields.'

'And how do I know which sound you'll want?'

‘You’ll know it when you hear it.’

‘Alright, already.’ I need to restore my reputation and bring back the secret of the ektar.

‘Take me to the Gopis,’ I say. Infamous first words.

Book III: ‘The Gopi Bat Mitzvah’ Cochin 666 CE

i

You’ve heard about Erato Rising. She was nothing compared to my emergence from the brackish backwaters at Vembanand. Granted, it was a marshy lake, and the waves weren’t very Botticellian, but when I came to, conch in hand, the verdant surface undulated above me through a lustrous subterranean arch thick with otters.

As any mermaid can tell you, your lungs underwater compress. You have to let out the breath very slowly, pursing your lips as if coaxing a reluctant schmekel. I had to be very careful with my buoyancy. Pity there was nobody there to see it but a lone fisherman, who rubbed his eyes ’til they streamed, his crotch ’til it gleamed and took off with his bait like a terrified terrapin. I bobbed up on the surface, gasping for air, and puppy paddled from the depths, laden with water lilies and bulrushes. Disentangling from the shallows, I nibbled at a nympha; I was famished and there wasn’t a kneidel for ten thousand leagues.

A dawn song of early birds greeted my arrival as I rose from the swamp, each with her own distinctive rhythm and tune. Egrets, cormorants, kingfishers; an avian jam. Crabs, frogs and mudskippers leapt about in the shallows; kingfishers and cormorants darted and swooped for the easy pickings. I’d never seen greens like this before. Jerusalem was golden, Bethany was beige, and for all Zenobia’s splendour, I’d had enough of the desert to last me several lifetimes. There was apple green and water lily green and arsenic and lichen, green smoke, green ground, vert de terre and Teresa’s green. Some of the reeds were churlishly green. Life was bursting out all over. I’d have to use all my intuition to create potions and unguents from this new veriditas, but I had plenty of time. Or so I thought.

I was sunning myself on the ghat that flanked the shore when the Gopis twanged by. I’d heard bangs, clangs and even bared fangs, but twangs were new to me.

The first maiden, with a complexion like yellow gorocana, swished into view, a long silken cloth wound around her waist and diagonally up and over her shoulder, the colour of peacock feathers. She held an instrument with a belly of what looked like a hollowed out pumpkin. From the base arose a V-shaped rod, in the middle of which a tightly stretched goat gut rose to a single peg at its gullet. She plucked it with the forefinger of her right hand and with her left she squeezed the V, causing the note to twang netherwards. Before I could say matzo balls, a cream coloured kore with a high blush, clad in a starry, starry sari, added to the twangalang. Souring the sound of her companion, her gourd emitted an entirely different tone. A third maiden, the colour of a blossoming campaka flower, wore a brilliant blue garment as she twanged. Behind her was a player wearing a bright kumkum dot atop her third eye. The aroma of cloves and roses rent the air as she plucked upon her gourd. She was followed by another sallow-looking maiden, her face the same shade as her pale yellow wrap, twirling her scent of sandalwood and camphor. Twanging on the offbeat, she emitted a high guttural monotone that was soon picked up by the others.

'Hurry Christmas, Hurry Christmas, Christmas Christmas, Hurry Hurry.'

I thought it extremely strange. And it was nowhere near Yossi's birthday. Next was a tall and tan garlanded Gopi wearing pomegranate, my favourite fruit. From within her gourd's belly, a snake writhed to the vibrations of twang. She was followed by a Gopi the colour of a lotus filament, clad in jaba-flower red. She stopped the string with the pads of her left hand and banged a tinkling tambourine with the other. The last Gopi was a smaller girl, lotus stamen of face and vermillion of cloth. A wooden yoke straddled her shoulders and two pails of frothy milk wobbled as she walked. Each girl undulated in her own key to the sound of her own calling.

'Hurry Drama, Hurry Drama, Drama, Drama, Hurry Hurry.' They must have some kind of performance in mind. The earworm concluded and began again. The gaggle of Gopis twanged past me, down the length of the ghat. I hastily swallowed my last water lily, buried my conch and brought up the rear, naked as the day I was reborn.

Scattered dwellings emerged from the hazy landscape, becoming ever denser. A gaudy ghetto started to sprout around us, rainbow-hued hovels squatting in squalidity. I darted from lemon tree to kumquat shrub to escape detection. We passed a washing line upon which several saffron robes were drying in the rising sun. I grabbed one end and pulled, twirling myself into

the cloth as it unfurled. Furlongs of the stuff. How was I to know it was one long roll of fabric? Suitably saried, I caught up with the milkmaids.

The cacophony of everyday life wrapped itself around my senses; a livid cockerel ran by me, screaming blue murder; fat bottomed cows strolled between the locals, nibbling on sacred cookies proffered by lice-infested urchins without so much as a pot to pish in. Stray dogs, stinky donkeys and feral monkeys abounded, baring their teeth at me if I so much as glanced in their direction.

The Gopis turned off into a narrow alleyway and wound around a white, stone-washed building that stood apart from the others. A six-pointed star perched on top of the pitched roof, turning this way and that in the hot wind. A synagogue in Cochin? Who knew my tribe had relocated to these chillied shores? At the entrance was a collection box, filled to the brim with local latkes. I was sure they'd see my need in light of the mitzvah; anonymous donor to anonymous recipient. I glanced around furtively. And grabbed myself a fistful of rupees.

ii

I was so busy expropriating the cash that I didn't see exactly where the milkmaids had gone. Was there a separate entrance like at the Temple? I slip-slopped around the block and sure enough, there they were, snaking around the building and into the Women's section.

I'd be here for a millennium if I described each and every one of them. Suffice to say, sixteen thousand-and-one-hundred Gopis twanged up, a topsy-turvy kaleidoscope of the nine I had seen previously. I joined the Citrus-Devi queue, saffron on saffron.

'What's everyone waiting for?' I asked the bejewelled beauty in front of me.

'We are celebrating our coming of age,' she said nasally, adjusting her silken sari.

'What, like all of you?' I gestured around me at the millipedes of milkmaids.

'Sariyaya,' she nodded, sideways. 'All sixteen thousand-and-one-hundred of us.'

'At the same time?'

'It is an honour for girl children to take the oath of B'not Mitzvoth.'

'Like a Bar Mitzvah for girls?'

'Sariyaya. It's quite revolutionary on this side of the wetlands.'

'Nu, why are you dressed up as Gopi girls?'

‘As B’not Mitzvoth of spring equinox, we are permitted to choose our own party theme. The milkmaids of Krishna came out tops. Those of us who pass the ektar auditions get to be up close and personal with Cosmic Cowboy.’

‘But surely Yiddels don’t go in for that sort of thing?’

‘Rabbi enjoys to mix local customs with Yiddel minhagim. Rabbi plays central role. Cosmic Cowboy can be with each Gopi at the same time,’ she said proudly.

‘How does that work?

‘You’ll see,’ she said. ‘You can stand in line with me. We’re one Gopi short, Humera’s surfing the crimson wave.’

‘Are you sure?’ I asked. It was pretty cool to be invited into the saffron inner circle. How can I know the dreams of the everyday milkmaid unless I’ve walked a mile in her sari?

‘Do you have your gopichand?’ she asked.

‘That would be a no,’ I said. ‘I’ve only just arrived.’

‘Ufff,’ she said, ‘This may be problem.’

‘Can’t I just borrow yours?’

‘It is very delicate situation,’ she said, ‘Each Gopi must be playing her own gopichand to qualify for Bat Mitzvah Gopihood.’

‘You mean they won’t Bat Mitzvah you unless you can play one of these?’

‘Sariyaya,’ she nodded sideways. ‘And that’s just the beginning.’ She tuned her gopichand up a semitone. ‘Are you over the age of twelve?’

‘A little,’ I said. ‘I actually missed out on this Bar Mitzvah thing. They only gave them to boychicks in my home town.’ I remembered twelve, Bethany, the pubescent tunnel, but as yet no wrinkles had set in and my breasts were still apricot tight.

‘Are you a virgin?’

‘That’s a bit personal.’

‘It is being checked. If hymen is out of place, there be demons and dragons to pay.’

‘That’s a bit intrusive, isn’t it?’

‘You will have to have certificate from Chief Rabbi of previous shul,’ Saffron said. ‘Nobody gets to Bat Mitzvah Love Dance without hymen and gopichand. Must have.’

Saffron gesticulated to the Gopi in front of her to keep our place in line, pointing at my empty arms and strumming an imaginary air gopichand. She made the universal sign for rupees, rubbing thumb and forefinger together, knitting her painted eyebrows, and I nodded.

Saffron led the way and we sashayed about the slew of pop-up stalls alongside the synagogue, passing souvenir stands and paan stands and hat stands and not a few cock stands. I spotted a bunch of instruments on display at one of the stalls, manned by a jittery Jain who aimed large sprays of paan into a silver spittoon. One particular piece called to me; a curved bucket, fashioned from woven date palm – not a wood I'd seen among the local flora. Memories of Palmyra flooded back, Zen and me, rolling about to the tune of 'Caligulee Caligula', moisturising my loins as her crystal laughter filtered through my pomegranate. I choked back a tear.

'Is this a gopichand?' I asked the paan-spitter.

'Ektar. Gopichand. Kithara. Synonymic same-same,' Saffron translated.

'Well, which one is it?'

'Instrument has many names. All essence of the One.'

'Is it for sale?'

'In the divine sense, nothing belongs.'

'I mean to say, can I buy it?'

'Buy, sell, profit, loss, all is equal in eyes of Ratnakaranda.'

'How much?'

'Nine thousand rupees.'

'Really? I've seen one very similar further down the ghat,' I lied, 'for five.'

'Five thousand? It must be of inferior quality.'

'Look, I'll give you five-five.'

'Six-nine. And that's my final offer.' I fished for my pilfered rupees under my sari. The paan-sitter looked at me quizzically. I counted out the dosh and realised that I was ten rupees short.

'Look, I've just got to go back to my place and bring some small change,' I said. 'Tell him, Saff. Saff?' I looked around and Saffron was nowhere to be seen. I plucked the ektar out of his waving palms and dived into the crowd. Everything was shades of saffron. Now I was completely lost in translation.

I twanged a resonant V-shaped note and in its wake, I heard the echo of the distant gopichands. I retwanged. They twanged back. I double twanged. They tripled the monotwang in about eight thousand different flavours. I retraced my steps to the source of the twang. The Jew Town shul. A coming of age ceremony was being fashioned in the borrowed robes of rural milkmaids.

iii

Slipping my way back into the queue, it was several hours before I reached the front. A large matron swathed in middle age guarded the Saffron pillar at the makeshift bimah.

'Gopi?' she asked me.

'Sariyaya.' I replied, keeping it short and sweet. She looked at me suspiciously and smudged a stripe of henna across my cheek with a taloned fingernail.

'Gopichand?' I held up my new instrument to her multiple chins. She nodded back and forth like a praying mantis. 'No good. No good,' she waggled a talon in front of my face.

'Why? This is a brilliant new gopichand.'

'Local manufacture.'

'Nu?'

'Gopi at Cochi shul play only imported gopichand.'

'Excuse me?'

The matron sniffed the wood impatiently. 'Yiddel gopichand made from Palaestinian Jerusalem bamboo. This one Palmyran date palm.'

'Nobody told me …'

'Gopi receive no mark for instrument.'

'For Krishna's sake.'

'Be not upsetting the gods,' the matron advised nasally. 'If gopichand not be imported from old Jerusalem, gopichand not be holy in new Jerusalem.'

'That's just stupid. Nobody's been near Jerusalem for centuries.'

'The tribe must be preserving gopichand from holy ancestors.'

'My family's all dead,' I said. 'It's all I can do to hold on to some memory of their music.' Lazzie's face swam in front of me in a pale and frothy fugue. The matron was hardly interested in my sob stories. She daubed a big fat zero on my score parchment.

‘Now please be going to other categories. Be lining up for mantra and mudra.’

The Saffron milkmaid I’d seen earlier reappeared, decked to the nines in ghanta bells.

‘Where did you disappear to?’ I demanded.

‘Never seen olive Gopi in lifetime before,’ she responded.

‘But you just took me to buy a gopichand.’

‘You must be mistaking me,’ she said. She was probably right. I’d obviously got my Gopis crossed. They all looked same-same. Mincha turned to ma’ariv, sunrise to sunset. Things move very slowly in the tropics.

‘How do you know about this cowboy business?’ I asked Saffron, ‘I thought you Cochin kids were closeted up the kazoo?’

‘On the contradiction. Our families see the value of our comingling with the common cowgirl before cleaving to husband. Creates rounded wifely temperament. This is why you see us garmented as sixteen thousand-and-one-hundred Gopis for underage theatrical presentation.’

‘Then you’re allowed to pursue a life outside marriage?’

‘Only until celebration of Gopi Love Dance with Cosmic Cowboy. After which we are given unto predetermined spouse. Marriage and Bat Mitzvah not more than nine months apart.’

‘There’s not much time left, then’ I said. ‘You could have a baby in the time it takes to reach the front.’

Saffron’s head wobbled from side to side. Yes, or no? I was never certain.

‘I’d love to check out this love dance business,’ I said. ‘We weren’t even allowed to be seen in our shul.’

‘Oh, we can be seen,’ Saffron said. ‘Seen. But not heard. Is point of love dance in entirety. We may not speak.’

iv

The gopichand playing wasn’t the ninth of it. These were strict auditions to determine which of the chorus line would make it through to the B’not Mitzvoth final performance. Scores for various abilities were daubed upon large wattle flags, erected at the head of each pew, manned by a dour, colour-coordinated matron. Each category had a Judeo-Malayamic hieroglyph drawn next to it, a Hebrew back translation, and a number, written in Aramaic: 20 for virginity (a fine tooth comb), 10 for mudra (a high five), 10 for mantra (a bell), 30 for attire (colour-blocked), 20

for ektar (a gopichand), and 20 for dance (oy vey). 100 points in all. Anything over 30% was a pass.

I've never been a dancer. Terpsichore was never my prime Muse. Rather give me a set of flagons filled with Shabbos wine and I can tzimbel to my heart's content. But all that leg-eye coordination I never could quite master – it put me in mind of the army; there's no jamming in a military lineup, especially if your hymen is still intact. There's something about a chorus line that's just not up my cul de sac. Ditto, backing vocals. It harks me back to the forced performances at Mother's various soirees, simpering for the visitors to disguise the grimace that underlay my every pirouette. Acting natural was never really an option when the hoi oligoi popped in for teiglach and tachlis.

An energetic contortionist put us through our paces, calling the moves whilst snapping his fingers to a lightning fast number count. If I didn't catch on at first instruction, I was totally addled.

'5.6.7.8,' he commanded. All sixteen thousand-and-one-hundred executed a double waist bend to port and starboard in perfect sync. I stuck the wrong leg out and bent it inwards, like the hora of yore.

'Negative. Negative,' the teacher bawled. 'Be practicing cowgirl Judeo-Malayalam step.' I crossed one calf over the other, slid my other leg to the left side, brought my thighs together with a slurpy twang and collapsed on the ground in a heap of giggles. A dancer I would never be. He daubed the number 2 on my score chart.

My mudras were much of a suchness. I knew that each hand gesture had a particular meaning, both above and below the heart chakra. The only finger movements that mattered were those necessary for the ektar pluck. But the pinching of thumbs left me stone cold and I got a mere 4 out of 10. I was never going to score high on attire, given that I was wrapped in some Buddhist's dirty laundry, but I did get marks for innovation. I was racking up the points, but I wasn't going to do well in the hymen and dance categories.

En route to the virginity testing, I pilfered a poppy pastry off a hamantaschen stand and nestled in a corner for a nibble. I wondered why this was such a big deal. Back in Eretz, Yiddels were forever giving away their intact daughters to passing strangers; houseguests even. The sound of moaning pricked up my ears. I shuffled my peaches across the marbled floor and peeked through a chink in the mechitza.

A massive candle flickered in the middle of a hidden alcove, its thick wick sunk to the neck in coconut oil. A pot-bellied priest stood on a small raised platform, as azure as the lake I'd just emerged from. He was bedecked in an elaborate golden plate worn high on his forehead. A bug-eyed carmine Gopi glistened with coconut oil as she mounted the altar and hooked her ankles into high silver stirrups, legs akimbo like a double hangman. The priest bent over her, shifting the angle of his head plate this way and that like a giant praying mantis.

'Baruch atta Adonai, eloheinu melech ha'olam, blessed be the fruit of your unopened womb.' The glint of his crown reflected into her succulent pomegranate; the motion caught a flange of hymen fringe.

'Ten marks,' pronounced the priest. He gestured to an oversized wine cask embedded into the stage and lifted the Gopi over the lip of the vessel, creating a cork of her pomegranate. Then, he sniffed the air in short, sharp bursts.

'No odour,' he said. 'Ten marks.' Lastly, he reached under the altar, extracted a long yad normally used for Torah pointing and inserted it deeply into her pomegranate. A slight flesh tearing sounded from deep within, and she sobbed in agony and shame.

'Thirty marks. Flying colours pass.' The Gopi raised herself from the yad and crab-walked out of the room.

'Next.' A garlanded Gopi stirruped up and he cast his grim trinity upon her. He prayed. And prodded. And preyed.

'Thank you Yahweh for not making me a dog, a pig or a woman,' he intoned. 'She is intact.' Another salvaged reputation and fodder for the froomies.

'Next.' He parted the nymphae of another nymphet and waggled his headpiece this way and that. Squatted. Sniffed. Disenfringed her. And then another. And another. This was like a Gopi slaughterhouse. I had to put a stop to this carnage.

I barged my way to the front, slipping into the stirrups before any objection could be noted. I've always had a bit of a thing for dromedaric accoutrements, even though the kind I knew were slightly different from these Keralian thingamejigs.

The priest repositioned his headgear, seeking my genital glint. I reached for my ektar and tried to counter his movements, but he saw it coming and batted it out of my hands. I unravelled a portion of the saffron sari, baring my breasts and rubbed the remains of my poppy-filled hamantaschen into my décolletage.

‘Baruch atta Adonai, eloheinu velohei avoteinu ...’

I curled into a tight ball, my backbone poking through my sari like a lineup of temple bells.

‘Elohei Avraham.’ I straightened one leg behind my head and exhaled in six sharp snorts.

‘Elohei Yitzchak.’ I grabbed my ankles from behind and swung my torso into a bow, rocking back and forth upon my pulsing pomegranate.

‘V’Elohei Yaakov.’ God of our forefathers, indeed. The four mothers would be horrified. His helmet cast its gilt shadow on my dehymenated pomegranate. I must have ruptured myself on that camel ride to Zeugma.

‘No fringe,’ he puffed. ‘No flange.’ I knew the drill. It would be instant castoff, into the Untouchables.

‘This is fail. Punishment for Enlightenment.’ He whipped out his limp schmekel, sprinkled it with holy water and waggled it towards my pomegranate.

‘Hang on a veggievindaloo, are you going to violate me with that thing?’

‘It is as for a blessing,’ he said. ‘The ancestors insist on further violation.’ Nothing new on that score.

If I wasn’t going to be another of Yahweh’s victims, I had to take the situation in hand. I snapped the ektar’s slender neck from its sound bucket. The twin ends were as pointy as Zenobia’s arrows. I grabbed the guru by the beitzim and held the sharpened bamboo struts to his short and curlies, squeezing their ends together like a giant chopstick. I could unsex him on the spot, if the spirit moved me, pulverise his petty power with one sure flick. I swear he turned a darker shade of aquamarine as he screamed in terror.

‘Now you know what it feels like, guru sahib.’ I said. ‘A taste of your own mendacity is in good order.’ I squeezed again, nicking two tight drops of blood on the ends of the ektar.

‘Dayeinu, enough!’ he said hysterically.

‘I’m going to turn you into the world’s first Yiddel castrato unless you promise to leave those Gopis alone,’ I said, emphasising each syllable with a sharp prick to his shortened tip.

‘I’m just doing my job,’ he protested. ‘Mercy. Please.’

‘Then cease.’

‘I’ll seize.’

‘And desist.’

‘I’ll desist. Just stop, for the love of Yahweh.’

‘Swear on the eternal candle.’ I reached for the kalivaru lamp and splashed a few tallow waves upon the whimpering guru. Blood and wax made the most fascinating patterns on his delicate flesh. I squeezed the bamboo caliper once more.

‘I swear. I swear.’ The kalivaru lamp spluttered its assent. I released his testes. He wept with relief.

‘And just so you know, Yahweh will be watching. And Krishna. And Yossi.’ I threw in the entire toolbox.

‘If truth be retold, I have hated every minute of my role as hymen inspector,’ he said.

‘Look, Guruji, I know what I’ve just seen. And you were getting your rocks off, big time.’

‘It is not the fault of Nandagopala,’ he said. ‘I follow divine orders.’

‘But you can see it freaks the Gopis out.’

‘To break a few beitzim is necessary to make an omelet.’

‘Whoa,’ I said, ‘you’re deflowering them even as you check their maidenhood.’

‘Negative. Nandagopala keeps schmekel action for initiates only. Fingernails are well-trimmed. And I shine headdress daily.’

‘It’s barbaric,’ I said.

‘It is in Deuteronomy. And Leviticus.’

‘Well, I know a few people in Jerusalem who would be very interested to hear how you do things around here.’

‘Please,’ he said, ‘anything but Jerusalem. We’ve only just managed to get Sanhedrin off our back.’

‘But why dress little girls as seductive gopichands?

‘We like to have a lighthearted role play around Purim,’ he said. ‘Making conflation of B’Not Mitzvoth with the spring equinox. A trinity of performance, you could say.’

Nando massaged his aching beitzim with one hand and lifted a stubby blue finger to my cheek.

‘An olive Gopi,’ he marvelled.

‘Yeah. So?’ I’d become pretty defensive about my complexion. Even though I could be mistaken for a Scythian in some parts.

‘Why not be saying? Gopi in olive green required for role of Vashti.’

‘Vashti? Who’s she?’

‘You be not knowing the story of Purim?’

‘Yeah, yeah, nasty Persians. They try to kill us. We win. We eat.’

‘It is more complicated than this. Is why we insert the Kathakali tradition into the Purim play.’

‘It’s been a while since I brushed up on my Esther. Remind me?’

‘It all begins with Ahasuerus, also known as Xerxes, the fifteenth King of Persia.’ It was all coming back to me now from Lazzie’s cheder lessons.

‘And Vashti was the first wife of Ahasuerus?’ I asked.

‘Affirmative. Most versions erase her from the story. Too nasty, too independent.’

‘The story of my lives,’ I said. ‘Continue.’

‘Be picturing the scene. Ahasuerus has beaten all his enemies, so he throws this banquet for seven days and seven nights, showing off loot and pillage to his vanquished foes.’

‘Yeah. And women weren’t allowed to eat or pray or sing in those days either.’

‘The women have their own party, much separated. They make merry on their side of veil.’

‘With Vashti as the gracious hostess, I presume?’ I conjured her up, flashing eyes and apricots, queen of the harem, clad in olive green.

‘Affirmative. Ahasuerus is deep in his flagons and is wanting to show off his greatest treasure, his Vashti. He orders one of his chamberlains to call Vashti to come before him wearing nothing but her royal crown.’

‘He wants her naked? In front of all his male guests?’

‘Affirmative, in order to display her beauty.’

‘But the queen couldn’t reveal herself to the male gaze back then,’ I said.

‘Affirmative.’

‘That’s not everyone’s cup of chai.’

‘Let the Talmud be the judge of that,’ he said. ‘So, the chief advisor goes to Vashti with the request to present herself forthwith in unadorned flesh.’

‘And Vashti tells him to pish right off.’

‘Vashti is nay saying to appear, clothed or not clothed. This angers Ahasuerus maximally.’

‘Yeah. The old figger is used to getting his way in everything, right?’

‘Ahasuerus can forgive Vashti as a private man, he is wild for her, but she has shamed his majesty in front of his new-found subjects. Face be lost.’

‘Not because she refused to strip stark naked in front of his mates …?’

‘Vashti be seen to be encouraging wives to disobey their husbands.’

‘Ahasuerus doesn’t really want to give her up?’

‘Higher causations. Disobedience begets disobedience. Refusal upsets order of the universe. Chief advisor tells Ahasuerus to get rid of Vashti and find another consort. This is where Gopi maids come in. Our story transforms Vashti’s harem into avatars of Gopi. Ahasuerus becomes Cosmic Cowboy and chooses Yiddel milkmaid from sixteen thousand-and-one-hundred concubines. From these multitudes, one Gopi turns out to be none other than Queen Esther.’

‘Who goes on to be the saviour for her people. Oy, we’ve had the wrong end of the hamantaschen all these years? Esther immortalised, Vashti doomed?

‘Defer to your husband in all things. Obedience is all for the best. It is the final moral of the story, couched in fine phrases.’

‘What happened to Vashti in the end?’ I asked.

‘There are various theorems,’ he said. ‘One is that she was stricken with leprosy and that it was her vanity that precluded her presence. Another version is that she writes to her husband, advocate-style, refuting his immoral demands. Yet another is that the Angel Gabriel fixed a tail on her.’

‘Nu, we can make up our own ending.’

‘It is artistic licensing.’

‘Let’s do the tale of the tail fixing.’

‘It is highly demanding.’

‘I like a little demand,’ I said, ‘Especially if a standing ovation is involved.’

v

I called it ‘Vashti and the Cowgirls: A Purimschpiel’, featuring Wanda B. Lazarus as an avatar of Shiksa. This is how it was going to play out.

Part I: Krishna and the Gopis. This was to give all the sixteen thousand-and-one-hundred a chance to be seen by the congregation. Nando would be the Cosmic Cowboy. This one, I'd sit out.

Part II: Merging into an avatar of Ahasuerus, Nando would play the ingrate King. I would appear to the King fully clothed to symbolise the opposite of nakedness. As green as possible from headdress to toe bell. His condemnation of me would be a highly charged courtroom scene. His attempt to wipe me out of history would be shown to be a farce.

Part III: My retribution would be full acceptance of demonization, on my own terms: the donning of the tail, and the sheer audacity to gainsay the drunken whim of the King. Then, self-immolation. Vashti-as-Shiksa could also be any of the wives of Krishna, as she chose. The symbolism was striking. Another feisty woman, writing herself out of schmekel history, because who really wants to join that boys' club? Rather perish by choice than submit to the sovereignty of the other. And all of this without a syllable being spoken. Did I not mention? Kathakali is entirely dumbshow.

The makeup took hours. A designated Untouchable, exempt from not touching, but not from not speaking, gently wrapped a flour and water-soaked linen strip around my face and made two moulds of my features. Wordless, he felt the contours of my complexion and affixed two masks to my head, one in front, one at the back. I could see my distorted reflection in the tarnished tin mirror that hung in the dressing chamber. Then he applied a thick green paste to the masks, smelling vaguely of cow dung. Smiling, he etched black kohl across two pairs of eyelids and drew a starburst of eyelashes upon the verdant undercoat. He stood back to inspect his work, took a broad stick dipped in vermillion flakes and met the brows at the bridge of my nose. Next, he mapped out a comic grimace on the front side. A tragic pout on the other. Then he lacquered both sides with a patina of gold leaf. We spoke in sign language, the language of the damned. A moment of tenderness in all this tummel was well appreciated. I was comforted by his touch.

Then it was time for the fingernails. I've always bitten mine down to the quick. It makes it easier to adapt your grip on things. With extensions, you can't do dishes, you can't milk, you certainly cannot wring laundry, so the falsies are really only good for the plucking. Sixty ells long, they dandled off my fingertips like Ground Babbler talons. The Untouchable wound a mound of gold bangles around my wrists and wrapped a series of small bells around my waist. By the time I got to the costume department, you'd have taken me for an oriental Janus.

A massive gold and vermillion hat was wedged onto my head, straw hair protruding from beneath its broad brim. A billowing white skirt encircled my waist, hung with an array of totem dollies. I could hardly walk, let alone breathe. The things we do for our art.

vi

Being the guest star villainess was all very well, but I could hardly play an ektar in this getup. I argued the toss with Nando.

'Nu, why can't I be Vashti and still twang this thing?'

'Kathakali make separate roles for music so that that the actor can be free to be concentrating on dramatic expression and gesture.'

'Can't I just use it as a prop? Maybe mime it to one of the backing Gopis?'

'Men only may play the instruments of Kathakali. Olive Gopi commits to Kalipayattu.'

'Kathi this, Kali that,' I said. 'Make up your mind, already.'

'Kalipayattu be variation of Kathakali, exclusivity to Cochin. It assumes that love is a battlefield.'

'That's a bit aggressive,' I said.

'We have taken movements from martial arts – it is fighting style that is used for enhancing drama. Now being called marital arts.'

'Look, I'm sorry, I really don't want to have anything to do with war.'

'Everything boils down to two things. Love and war.'

'And latkes.'

'Don't be contradicting Nandagopola. Is not enough that an olive-skinned Gopi be first to play the role of woman in known lifetime? One cannot be making full meaning when acting with twang. Not same-same.'

'Alright, I get it. Whenever Vashti comes on stage, she's fully clothed to represent that she was fully naked?'

'It is highly complicated. Ahasuerus be an avatar of Shiva. Vashti be an avatar of Shiksa. Shiva be an avatar of Krishna. Vashti is being offensive to divine bridegroom. She makes large facial gestures as role of the woman who must suffer.'

'That's fantastic, 'cos I've got quite a range of goofy looks. Check.' My lack of a philtrum had come in handy over the ages and I could pull my top lip in one direction and my

bottom in the other, and if I looked at the tip of my nose, the expression was one of utter delirium, if not of the loss of my wits. It never failed to raise an audience titter.

'Excellent start,' he said, 'normally it takes a lifetime to play the role of avatar of Shiksa.'

'Kathikali is ultimately a mode of expression,' he said. 'You play the enactment of Vashti after two days, then build scenes of fear and loathing after six days to be telling how Esther saved her people from extermination by the evil Haman.'

'Is that where Hamantaschen comes from?'

'It is the shape of his hat. A perfect triangle. Poppy seeds be representing tribal scatterlings.'

'You're probably right. Vashti would never have risked herself to save the Yiddels.'

'You see the mysterious ways of Yahweh.'

'Nu, it's basically the reenactment of the Shaming of Vashti, right?'

'Vashti appears at the start as a wayward Queen. She transforms in finality as an avatar of Shiksa.'

'I like the tailing of the tail. It has a nice phallic ring to it.'

'Olive Gopi changes the end at your own risking.'

I've always been one for a challenge. 'Bring it on,' I crowed.

vii

The textsayer intoned over the ghanta bell the words of the piece. The bongs and clongs accompanied his words and the actors gesticulated wildly to their implied meaning.

'Now it came to pass in the days of Ahasuerus ...' The actor King crossed his eyes and lifted the middle fingers of each hand. His painted nails flinted in the lamplight.

'That in the third year of his reign he made a feast unto all his princes and his servants; the power of Persia and Media,' Ahasuerus held up an ancient newspaper and a knotted carpet. This took the entire morning.

'And the drinking was according to the law; none did compel it.' Ahasuerus stumbled round the stage to the clanging and banging of orchestral pots and pans.

By the time it got to my part, three days had passed. It was almost unfolding in real time.

'On the seventh day, when the heart of the King was merry with wine, he commanded Vashti the Queen to be brought in before him, but she came not.'

I stumbled into the kalivaru light. It had been quite a while since I'd performed to a mixed crowd. Coordinating the music with the dance was not a piece of teiglach. It took immense concentration to get the pictures, the dance, the eyeballing and the gestures to match up. Under all that makeup, this acting malarkey takes talent or training. My dancing chops were never quite up there, but I've always been good with my hands. Once I knew the plot it was easy to make it up as I went along.

A large gong gonged. Splaying my feet and fingers, I waddled across to Ahasuerus, rolling my eyes to indicate indignation, twirling around to expose my mixed feelings emanating from my hardening heart.

The banishment of Vashti was the highlight of my performance. I rent my garments, soiled my skirt, giving them the full nasty woman routine. I raged and I raved. Ravished and ravaged. All without uttering a word.

The rest of the story unfolded over five more days. Read your Megilla.

After the banishment came the turn of the 'fair young virgins', as it is written, 'to be selected for the King's pleasure'. To wit: 'The maiden which pleaseth the King would become his new bride.' You could say Esther's pomegranate saved the lot of them.

viii

Nando stepped into the limelight, a cobalt döppelganger of Ahasuerus, now transformed into a camp avatar of Krishna. The cosmic cowboy had a costume to die for. Kidskin leather-tooled booties, a matching holster, a ten-chakra stetson. It was obviously the moment he'd been waiting for. The King turned God, bringing a fipple to an ektar contest, the whole bang shoot mushed into a Kathikalian clusterfig. He blew upon his flute with such profound sweetness that the very candlewick dipped up and down to his stylings. One by one the Gopis fell to the ground, seduced by the One Sound, completely fulfilled by the music of the maestro. Eventually there were ten girls standing. One of them was bound to be Esther. I had to save the others. Their ektars alone were worth the schlep.

I still had the ektar on me. Knowing I couldn't strike a mononote, I swiped a verdant nail across its only string, breaking it instantly. Shifting my massive skirt around, I swung the gutless gopichand behind me and hooked the bucket onto my protruding peaches. Its neck stiffened, like a desert fox's tail when it scents its prey. Seen from one angle, it was a strap-on dildo, a

lascivious schmekel with a blood-red peg in its prepuce. I turned my tragic face to the audience and mimed playing the ektar behind my back.

I was fully into the rhythm by now, gongs a-bonging, swinging the ektar back and forth to the cries and sighs of the fainting maidens. The musicians were whipped into a frenzy, dervishly turning back on themselves, over and over, chanting their ending in their beginning. I waggled my ektar tail around the room, fully in character now, the raging comic female and the tragic heroine, getting her own back on them, on him, on it. The tip of the ektar neck caught the wick of the kallivaru lamp. The entire room went up in flames. My varnished makeup was the first to take the heat. I could smell the char of meat, much like the barbeques of Bethany. It hurt like hell. I was sure I heard the gentle tinkling of bells as the Gopis herded their brindled cows across the seashore inland to pasture as I was burnt to a cinder.

Nine cows appear on the ghat, surrounding me in a rough circle. Their bells tinkle to their undulations. Each one a solo in her own right, a mandala of melody and motion. We cross-fade into the Pleroma, borne by the resonance of their harmonic chimes.

Clouds cushion our ascent and we nestle into the cumulus lounge with an array of asphodel milkshakes laced with 'nard. Everything is tinged a luminous pink.

'Did you bring it?' signs Mel. 'Show it to us.'

I open my palm and present ashes of ektar.

'Good Goddess, it's burned to a crisp. This is useless,' cries Clio.

'What are we to do with a handful of charcoal?'

'Make some sketches?' I suggest. 'If I can have some parchment, I'll doodle you a likeness.'

'No time for the plastic arts,' sighs Euterpe. 'We have to stick to business.'

'How could you leave me to burn in Purim Purdah?' I huff.

'Bad call,' says Poly. 'We should have foreseen that your dancing skills would end badly.'

'We wanted you to get close to the heart of the marriage dance. To steal its secrets.'

'There's nothing much to it,' I say. 'Keep your mouth shut and do exactly as you're told.'

'But you grooved with the Rhinestone Cowboy up close and personal?'

'That I did.'

'Did he give his chi to everyone?'

'All sixteen thousand-and-one-hundred of us.'

'And the Gopis? How did they react?'

'Imbibing the breath of the Cosmic Cowboy renders them mute.'

'You mean they may never speak?'

'The dance serves to silence the voice of all our Mamus.'

'That's how the Cowboy can be with all the Gopis at once.'

'It's the only way he can get a word in edgewise.'

The Muses twitter in nine-part harmony.

'Anyway, you told me I'd find Carta on the shores of Vembanad. He didn't show up.'

'Your love will wear many guises,' says Callie. 'You have to know how to glimpse it through the smog.'

'Look closer next time, honey,' says Erato. 'Eros strikes in silence.'

'That Untouchable,' I smack my head. 'I knew I'd seen him somewhere before.'

They'd played me for a fool. And I was naïve enough to fall for their tricks.

'You could have given me a sign,' I sputter.

'Deception is part of the game,' smiles Thalia. 'You need to notice when fate is fooling around.'

'Look,' Clio nibbles on a nimbus nougat, 'you can hang around here and sulk for a couple of millennia while we all wither away…'

'Or, you can acquire those silken strings from the Painted Lady.'

'I thought you said no plastic arts?'

'Only she possesses the secret of the thread. She is the last of her line.'

Clio plucks a tortoiseshell from thin stratosphere, leans and draws her luminous nails across its speckled body. This time they command me in iambic tetrameter.

'Our own saliva does not bind

The silkworm has the only kind

We've got the spit to get you there

Go fetch the string and bring it here.'

Clio dribbles a little as she speaks, a spittle of saliva bobbing down to her chin. I look around the cirrocumulus and notice they all drool in various measures. Caught in a spindling

rope of moisture, I am spun around and around their watery web at warp speed. Thus, encased in their celestial fluids, they fling me into the mesosphere.

Book IV: 'To Live or Die in Magao' Dunguang Caves 1054 CE

i

I touched down in a vast swathe of desert with nothing but my chrysalis on. Sand in my eyes, in my nostrils, under my toenails, my shimmering threads rent asunder. As I slid down the bass tremolo of a singing sand dune, the cocoon split into a patchwork of salivary threads that glinted in the setting sun. Sand and silk. Silk and sand. All around me I heard a subsonic baritone as if a million monks had passed wind in unison, deep in the bowels of the earth. As I descended the slippery slope, the frequency seemed to be coming from the sand itself. Vibrating, shaking, stimulating, I spread my palms and swept them to my side. The faster the movement, the higher the frequency. I was controlling the pitch with my body. How wonderful to be alive again.

I surfed the singing sands to the shore of a clear water lake, shaped like a new moon, slap-bang in the middle of nowhere. Quite out of breath, I gathered together the disparate threads of my unravelling and, fishing for my hairpin, stitched the fragments into a semblance of a camisole. Not bad for a non-embroiderer. This would have to do. I've always enjoyed the shimmy of the silk and sandy fabric. Affixing a little kohl and adjusting my cleavage, I followed my nose towards the dwellings that lurked on the lip of the waters.

The oasis served as some kind of border post and everyone was in a state of flux. I recall it mostly from its stench, which, once inhaled, never fails to linger in the memory. A couple of llamas were tethered in the pinkening desert dusk. The ubiquitous dromedaries. A cluster of makeshift yurts dotted the dune side. My ears pricked up at the sound of music and I was lured towards its source; a red-rimmed yurt. I fiddled in my pomegranate belt. The Muses had left me with nothing but my hairpin and my lucky dice, part of the dreidel set me and Martha used to play with around Purim – a little charred around the edges, but they carried supreme sentimental value. I had to eat.

As I entered the yurt, a living shadow blocked my path, clad head to toe in a black sack. I'd heard about these Invisibles from my time in Cochin. This was the first time I'd ever seen a hijab up close and personal.

'Where the Jahannam have you been?' she barked through her burqa. 'You were supposed to be here on Moonday.'

'Sorry, I didn't know you were expecting me.'

'We booked the backing iron komuzist weeks ago. Now hurry up. The next set is about to start.'

'I think you're mistaking me for someone else.'

'Can you play the iron komuz or not?'

'I'm familiar with the komuz of bone,' I said, 'from another life.'

'How much experience do you have?'

'Years and years,' I said. 'Nu, what are you paying?'

'The standard fee, 50 Som,' she said. 'Surely your caravan leader told you?'

'Sure,' I said, busking. 'But he also said you can give me an advance? I'm famished.'

'There's a complimentary dromedary drumstick for each band member. Consumed afterwards on the premises.'

'Anything camel-free?' I asked. Sal was practically part of the family back in Bethany. I didn't feel comfortable consuming my kin.

'You'll eat what we've got. Or starve.'

'Remember that you enter this yurt at your own risk, girlie. The men have been famished for female company and I see you are appareled in the garments of a slut.'

'I wouldn't put it like that. I like this outfit. It's raw silk, you know.'

'Do you have no respect for the customs of others?'

'I just wear what feels comfortable.'

'That's not how we play it down at Crescent Lake, young lady.'

'Is that where we are?'

'Some call it Dunhuang, others think of it as the Land of the Singing Dunes. We have renamed it Crescent Lake, where all silkmen stop to slake their camels and their lust. It is a mere day's ride to the caves of the Magao, where the monks fashion silk for the strings of the pipa.'

The burqa reached into the recesses of her heavy robe and plunged a ram's bladder into my hands.

'I'd also advise you to use one of these,' she said. I fingered the sheath, powered with light lavender talc that hardly doused the whiff of dead goat gut.

'What's this for?'

'A precaution. Those Kyrgyzstanis are carrying the flea of the plague in their blankets and their bollocks. No one is safe on the Silk Route anymore.'

'I'm not going anywhere near the Kyrgyz.' This was not a time for one yurt stands.

'Well, if you change your mind and indulge in any kind of ying tong, I'd advise you to slip this over his oochie coochie first,' she hissed.

I had forsworn any kind of coochying this time round, but a little protection could come in handy in case of emergency. I accepted the proffered prophylactic and folded it into my pomegranate belt.

'But surely the men can control themselves.'

'It is not for them to control. It is for us not to provoke,' she said.

'But that consigns all women to silence, then?'

'That's the idea,' she said. 'I was married off to Zozo at twelve. I speak to no man.'

'Surely you can't tar everyone with the same tarpaulin.'

'The men encourage each other to see who can beat their women more brutally,' said the burqa. 'Don't say you weren't warned. A stranger like you has no place in a town like this.' The woman spat thrice and fastened her grille over her face.

I slunk to the back of the yurt. A quartet of swarthy men was tuning up. I dubbed them The Yurtmen. They argued back and forth, adjusting their instruments with an alarming degree of leeway.

'You're flat, lower, lower,' said one, clutching a horse fiddle.

'No, man, that E is sharp,' said another, winding a peg on a wooden komuz.

'Up, no down, down, up, that's it,' said a third. It was going to take a miracle for them to play in perfect pitch.

'Excuse me, gents,' I said, 'the lady at the flap sent me backstage. I'm the backing iron komuzist.'

'Have you got your own instrument?'

‘I was hoping you’d have a spare,’ I said.

‘Well we don’t,’ said the lead komuzist. ‘You’ll have to contrive your own.’ I shook my head violently and my hairpin skittered to the floor. I had an idea.

‘How about this?’ I placed the hairpin against my lips, one prong within, one without. I plucked the airy end and a dreamy boing buzzed into my brain. I struck again. The tone echoed inside my mouth cavern. I wobbled my lips around. The harp harpooned my senses. The instrument spoke in nine hundred tongues, jiggling around my head. Ooz komuz. Or Yiddel’s harp, as it came to be known down the Ages.

‘Nothing to it,’ said the lead komuzist. ‘I’ll count you in for your chorus. Otherwise, just hold the beat steady.’

‘And your repertoire?’

‘We’ll do a few Kui standards, the popular Manas and an Ir or two. And there’s just time for another spliff before we go on.’

This I was happy to hear. Opium dulls my playing. Chasing the dragon gives me the heebie jeebies. Cannabis is the King Solomon of drugs. We did justice to the stash.

The Yurtmen needed a few more rehearsals. Jyrgal, the horse fiddler, was medically deaf and took his cues solely from the motions of Gulnara, the dobulba player, who was obscured by the yurt flap, as a result of which I had to perform like a St. Vitus Dance victim, counting him in so Jyrgal could keep time. Cholpon, the sybzgist was a morphine-addled dirty blond who downed fermented silkworm cocktails and passed out before the third set. Taalay was the second komuzist, grey of hair and long of tooth, but could play the bejesus out of any tune, as long as it was in the key of C. And me, ooz komuz oralist, filling in the endless choruses, keeping the beat rock steady, because nobody else could.

Most folksy tunes consist of the same few notes, all rendered in common time. I wasn’t familiar with their oeuvre, but I caught on fast. There was no set list and no warning. The Yurtmen just called the song as they went along. Love Yurts, There’s a Yurt in my Bucket, Do you Really Want to Yurt Me. The patrons, knocking back camel piss and sake, became rowdier as the set progressed, calling out encores that we’d already played. I could have gigged with one hand tied behind my back. At a prearranged, yet unspoken moment, each musician had a turn, letting the others hold the structure as best they could as he stepped into the moonlight shining through the hole at the top of the yurt.

Then they played Psalm 13 in traditional Ir style in deep Kyrgtz. The one where David begs for the Lord to remember him. I wasn't too fond of the mawkish lyrics. If Yahweh wants to stop hukking for a moment, give Him a break. After a few tunes I motioned to Taalay to see if he'd let me take a solo. He nodded. The others fell in line. I took to my ooz komuz and jammed.

'Bring it on, baby,' said Gulnara, quickening the beat of his dobulba.

The audience went crazy at my first improvisation. The Yurtmen gave me another round. I couldn't remember exactly what'd I'd done the first time, so the second chorus had a whole new feeling. There was no stopping me. I swooped and I dove, puffed my cheeks a little then a lot and the hairpin echoed around the yurt, mesmerising the crowd with its rounded llamelophone tones.

I could see Cholpon out of the corner of my eye, bringing a forefinger to his jowly neck and drawing it across his throat. Did he mean for me to seize and desist? I was only getting started. The crowd was throwing latkes at the bandstand; a clattering of Soms and Yen and Cowries. I altered my lips and changed the beat, surreptitiously picking up the tossed coinage. Now I was fully in control and the Yurtmen didn't like it. The audience was becoming more obnoxious, shouting out requests, urging me to get my chrysalis off. Eventually, with the hairpin resonating through my head, it was almost impossible for me to hear myself zing. I stepped to the front of the tiny stage and shouted.

'Will you all shut the fig up?'

A deathly hush ensued, during which time the audience members muttered and spluttered and cleared the yurt, demanding their money back.

'You've destroyed our gig,' Taalay snapped. 'We'll never be allowed back.'

'They were yelling over the music,' I sulked. 'These Kyrzks have no artistic appreciation.'

'Well, you're going to have to compensate all of us,' said the second komuzist. 'Divvy up the takings.'

'Sorry, gents, all is fair in love and ooz komuz,' I smirked, backing towards the yurt flap.

'Just where do you think you're going, my lovely?' asked Jurgal. 'You're not getting away with upstaging us that easily.' I heard a sickly unbuckling of a camel skin girdle.

'You can't just swan in here looking like a chrysanthemum in bloom,' Cholpon snarled, blocking my exit.

‘The lady in black said you needed a backing iron komuzist,’ I said. ‘Don’t you want to add a little pizzazz to the band?’

‘Shutup, bitch.’ Jurgal backhanded me to the ground. ‘You’ve defiled the sanctity of our holy yurt.’

‘Holy?’ I yelped through my pain. ‘It’s practically a den of iniquity.’

‘And as for your state of undress, you have utterly disregarded the customs of this place.’

‘It’s a pure silk petticoat.’

‘We are not permitted to see the flesh of the female.’

‘Back off, Jurgal,’ I said. ‘I know people in high places.’

‘Enough, whore.’ He hit me again, squarely, on the jaw. ‘You have brought your ungodly ways into our sight. It’s an abomination.’

My Yiddel’s harp pierced my inner cheek and ripped through my lip. I could taste the bitterness of blood and iron. I could take them on individually, but they were behaving like a mob and I couldn’t get the upper hand, never mind slip on a ram’s bladder. I was hooked to the harp like a newly fished flounder.

‘Bend her over,’ Gulnara said.

The burqa battened down the flap. So much for her righteous bladderations. Now I was surrounded by musos in various states of tumescence. Did the promise of violence cause them to stiffen? It was a strange thought. I’d stolen their thunder, perhaps, I’d pilfered their tips, but surely this was taking being sore losers a Zeugma too far?

The players encircled me like hungry vultures. I opened my mouth to scream, but my jaw wouldn’t budge. I was one chi away from a full-on assault when a blast of hot air emitted from the yurt flap, sending a scurry of sand up everyone’s noses.

‘Hold it right there, gents. What in the Taklamakan do you all think you’re doing?’

‘The bitch cheated us, Zozo.’

‘She stole our gig moola.’

‘She is a brazen hussy.’

‘We will have her, each of us in turn.’

‘You’ll do nothing of the kind,’ said Zozo, grabbing me by the wrist. I’ll take care of her myself. Habibi, drinks on the house. And a double helping of camel dumplings all round.’

The burqa picked up a large pitcher of watermelon sherbet laced with an undertone of fermented desert rat. There was a curious smirk on her face as she turned towards the Yurtmen.

ii

Zozo flung his komuz over one shoulder and me over the other and, mounting his steed in one fell swoop, swept us across the singing sands and into a lone yurt on the outskirts of the oasis. He pulled out a measure of cotton scarving and a bottle of vinegar and applied it to my face wound. It stung like a thousand snakebites. It was a raw and human pain, and it made me long for the oblivion of the Pleroma.

Zozo flopped down into a folding yak hair chair.

'What do you think you're doing going about dressed like a piece of camel tail?' he demanded. For the first time, our eyes locked. Hooded hazel with an epicanthic fold. Low rooted nasal bridge. Dark caterpillar brows. Face burnished with the desert blush. If the male gaze was ever an asset, I'd have to return it to gain the upper hand. One look in the dusky eyes of this stranger and he'd be mine to treat as I pleased. Or so I thought.

'Leave me alone,' I mumbled through my cotton muff. 'What do you care?'

'I care. I care when I see a Yiddele meidel cheapen herself to strange men.'

'Yiddel? How could you possibly know that?'

'That accent is a dead giveway. And those eyes. They hold the secrets of the world. My grandmother had those eyes.'

'Are you saying what I think you're saying?'

'Yes, yes, I'm one of the tribe,' he said, shifting aside his riding cloak to reveal a gleaming glans. It had been a while since I'd seen a schmekel unmasked.

'Don't worry, I'm not going to do anything,' he said, covering himself, 'I tend not to sup from the pomegranate chalice.'

'I wouldn't have minded.'

'Don't waste your breath,' he said. 'I've tried and died. Young monks are more my thing. Now, let's get that hairpin out of your mouth.' Zozo squeezed a few drops of calendula onto a dollop of wild honey and extracted the instrument, taking care not to rip too much of my upper lip in the process. I nearly passed out from the pain. He grated some raw potatoes and crisscrossed them over the tear in my flesh.

‘I was watching you from outside the yurt,’ he said as he patted down the moist poultice. ‘We had holes custom-sewn in the beadwork. Works like a charm for the peep shows.’

‘Nu, you were spying on me?’ I mumbled through the bandage.

‘I could hear the Iudaean influence in your iron komuzzing. You were in a world of your own.’

‘I might have gotten a little carried away. I do tend to lose myself in music.’

‘Well, nobody likes to be upstaged by a mere woman. You should know that.’

‘With respect, Zozo, they’re not the most accomplished quartet I’ve ever heard. It needed a bit of spicing up.’

‘That’s the problem,’ he said, ‘the worse the band, the touchier they are about real talent.’

‘They didn’t have to get nasty, though.’

‘They don’t know any other way. The presence of a floozy only encourages them. Luckily, I was there to swoop in and rescue you from the beasts.’

‘I was going to talk them out of it.’

‘Don’t overestimate yourself, woman. The Yurtmen are known for their indiscriminate grabbings. They have left bastard half-castes all over these mountains.’

‘What are you going to do,’ I asked, smoothing down my chrysalis patches, ‘arrest me?’

‘Well, I could report you to the border authorities,’ he said. ‘If your papers aren’t in order, they’ll dump you in the desert and your bones will be picked over by the next generation of vultures. Or ...’

‘Or …?’

‘You can accompany me over the border to the Magao caves. We’re booked for a Hairpin gig tomorrow night. I have a special delivery to make and you could come in useful.’

‘But your Yurtmen hate me.’

‘They don’t have to know.’ He threw a coarse linen robe towards me. ‘Put this on.’

‘I’d never be seen dead in this.’

‘It is required if you are to escape detection from the authorities. And from the band.’

‘You’re out of your mind. I’ll platz in the heat of the day.’

‘Look, everything is stacked against you. You’re a female. You’re a foreigner.’

‘I have my little tricks.’

‘Have you a golden passport?’

‘A golden what?’

‘It’s the only way you can pass through to China proper. You have to apply from your country of origin.’

‘That would be a no. I kind of squeezed through the gap in the Silk Road fence.’

‘Then you have no choice but to wear this body covering. You will come to the caves as part of my chattel. Nobody will dare search you in that thing.’

‘Alright, already.’ I heaved the heavy fabric over my head.

‘Now this.’ He handed me a hood with a lattice weave that framed my vision.

‘Are you serious? I can hardly breathe in this thing.’

‘If we yoke the camels, we can be at the caves before dawn.’

‘If this is what it’s like at night, wearing this in the daytime must be like being locked in a crematory furnace.’

‘Don’t exaggerate. You can disrobe as soon as we get there. Now pay attention.’

Zozo grasped my hands and placed them atop a wooden box redolent of Cedars of the Levant. I could feel figurines carved into the sides and top. A series of protruding bellies, hands crossed over their chests, a secret smile on their faces. Overweight prophets, or something. He lifted the lid and the scent of mulberry mulch assailed my nostrils. I peeked through the lattice. Rows upon rows of tiny white shrouds were laid out like a military graveyard through the lattice grille.

‘Hello, my beauty wooties,’ Zozo said in a voice that could have curdled tzatziki. ‘Daddy’s here to take his baby wabies where the nice monks at Magao will unravel you like the gold you are to spin silken stringie pingies for your bitty witty cuzzie wuzzie.’

‘Who the fig are you talking to?’

‘They’re my Painted Ladies, all the way from Kai Feng, best pupae in the business. We are late with the delivery due to the Gobi snows. They’re due at Magao in time to be strung for Song Sung Wong’s Hairpin ceremony on Sunday.’

I fingered the small tight bundles. Painted Ladies weren’t human, after all.

‘Nu, who’s Song Sung Wong?’ I asked.

‘The only daughter of Emperor Renzong Song, a distant relative of my mother’s second cousin. Song Sung Wong will perform The Last Pipa as her rite of passage in the caves of Magao before being delivered to her new bridegroom.’

‘What’s this got to do with me?’

‘You will deliver the unhatched pupae to Song Sung under the guise of a hairpin assistant. You will help her dress her hair and string her pipa. And make sure you nick a few spools of the spin for the old Yurtmen.’

‘Does she love him?’

‘Who?’

‘This new husband to whom she is delivered?’

‘She will marry whom the Emperor commands. The warlord of the north will only be appeased by the sacrifice of his enemy’s most prized possession.’

‘Poor girl, she’s like a flesh offering. Has she even met him?’

‘He has never crossed the territory into the lands of Song. He has seen only her portrait.’

‘Nu, she has no say in the matter? She hasn’t even lived yet.’

‘Don’t look a giftworm in the mandible. Song’s dowry pays our performance fee. Otherwise we’d starve.’

‘I assume I’ll get a cut,’ I stated. The throbbing of my lip was starting to subside.

‘You’ll be lucky to still be breathing,’ Zozo said. ‘I don’t bargain with my mules.’

‘How are you going to infiltrate her quarters if you haven’t got a woman?’

‘Alright, twenty percent of the gross,’ he said.

‘Fifty. After expenses.’

‘That’s more than you could earn in a year as an iron komuzist.’

‘Forty, then, and I want to be paid in silken strings.’

‘Thirty of gross, and that’s my final offer.’

‘Done,’ I said and extended my pinky. He grabbed it with his, we both passed air and the deal was struck.

‘Let’s get to it, then. Alright my pretty witties, let’s ease you out of your cagey wagies,’ he crooned, wrapping the cotton tightly around the cocoons, babbling his sweet nothings to each batch as he consigned them into limbo. He leaned over into a small leaden trunk and produced an array of densely packed snowballs and lined them up around the pupae.

‘We’ve been saving this for the entire journey,’ he said. ‘Arms above your head.’ I lifted, obediently. He wrapped the cocoon belt around my waist. The cold beitzim felt like heaven on my skin.

‘What do you call this stuff?’

‘Ice,’ he said. ‘It helps to delay the birthing process and we can’t take any more chances.’

‘Are you saying that the Painted Ladies are not permitted to hatch?’

‘Afraid so. Just before they awake to life, the monks soak the cocoons in heated yak milk and spin the threads until they resonate like angel song.’

‘Nu, so the insects, they just die?’

‘Do you want to be part of this, or should I just turn you in right now?’

‘One good return deserves another, Zozo. I’m sure they’re not fond of Yiddel smugglers along the Silk Road. I could blow your cover in ten seconds flat.’

‘How so?’

‘You know how so, Zo. Your schmekel lacks an eyelid.’

‘You wouldn’t dare …’

‘Relax, Zozo, your secret’s safe with me.’

iii

Night in the desert is colder than a witch’s apricot. Days are blazing, but when the sun goes down, you’d better buckle up your burqa. The dromedaries were laden to the point of collapse with the chattel of commerce; silks and spices, carpets and curtains, animals live and skinned, fruit bowls, ivory, rhino horn, turtle shells, mirrors, medicines, perfumes. Not one more pekel could go into their embroidered saddlebags. The dried fruit, camel biltong and nougat took up six more camels, plus the many drums, gongs and komuzim of the Yurtmen. Add to that the guides, dealers, wheelers and potato peelers, we must have been seventy-five all told. And me, bringing up the rear, swathed in incubating butterfly pupae, strapped around my waist like a suicide belt. I sucked on a small stone, an old Bedouin trick, to keep the saliva flowing.

If you’ve ever gone over a border carrying illegal substances, you’ll know the thrill. The practiced innocence as you lower your lashes through the grille, the silent nods to all the questions, the unsexy waddle, squeezing your knees together to hold the pupae in place. I was half melted by the time we got to the Magao turnoff.

There was another security check just before the caves proper, and silk-garbed guards were searching one and all. Zozo had groomed me well on the journey. I was quite sick of the drill.

‘If anyone stops you, deny everything,’ Zozo coached me. ‘They cannot search you without a hajib warrant.’

‘Yes, I know, play the distressed damsel card,’ I said.

‘If they ask you for your passport, nod in my direction and I’ll slip them a few Som.’

‘Nu? Mute as well as invisible.’

‘That’s pretty much the picture.’

I’d almost made it to the front of the cave checkpoint when a butterfly, freed from its silken womb, emerged from beneath my burqa, flitted into the air and disappeared into the cave.

‘What was that?’ snapped the guard. He flapped imaginary wings. I shrugged. Another liberated Lady flitted into the predawn freeze. We repeated the charade.

‘Golden passport,’ he demanded. I jerked my thumb in Zozo’s direction. All I could see was the back of his head as he disappeared into the rising dawn. He’d taken off like a desert rat. Another Painted Lady floated into the night. The game was up.

‘You have the right to remain silent,’ said the guard. ‘Anything you say will be held against you in a court of law.’

‘Zozo,’ I yelled at the vanishing Yurtman.

‘Who is this Zozo?’ the guard barked. I shrugged again, as Zo had trained me. He’d thrown me under the caravan, the mamzer.

The guard grabbed me by the burqa. ‘You’re in a lot of trouble, my fine young virgin. No papers. Smuggled goods. It’s deportation to Kyrgyzstan for you.’ He pulled, I resisted. He yanked, I yanked back. The burqa came apart in his hands and I scuttled into the cave’s torch-lit interior, chrysalises dropping from their hiding place.

‘Stop that illegal alien!’ screamed the guard, tripping over his silken trousers.

I pressed the burqa against my melting pupae belt and merged into the sea of young monks, ebbing into the dimness.

iv

It was dawn time. It was cave time. And the swirling sand of the journey was playing havoc with my vision. I was scratching myself silly. I spotted a heave of bodies in the back of the cave library. The sound of gong bounced off the walls. Monks and tourists were stripping off their garments and intertwining like slaves to the rhythm. I unwound the cocoon belt and stared

through the transparent chrysalises, invoking the budding beings within to stay just a little bit longer. A butterfly slipped out, wings wet and folded, and hung from its fibrous placenta to dry. As it stretched its wings, I could feel more pupae hatching, turning their blind little mouths to the rotting leaves that encased their silken nursery. I had to birth the little buggers myself.

'It is all ruined,' I heard a cry. 'They are useless now they are born.'

I turned and saw one of the juiciest gems I'd ever laid eyes on. Her skin was like a bowl of fresh cream, her hair was licorice allsorts, her lips, ruby kolumia. She looked good enough to eat. This could only be Song Sung Wong herself. No wonder the conquered king wants her. She could add pizzazz to any harem.

'All is not lost,' I said. 'There must be a way of letting them live. The monks will know.'

'I do not care for the life of the Painted Lady. She must perish to serve my needs.'

'Well that's a bit unfair, quite frankly. There is a way of retrieving the silk and saving the silkworms.'

'How so?'

'Unravel them while they hatch,' I said. 'The glue inside the strand will bind the thread together. It's stronger this way. This batch can be the pilot project.'

Song got up and winced towards her pipa, a hollow gourd that rested against the dolomite wall.

'We'll have to compare. We will set up two sets of strings, one from dead larvae and one from the living and see which serves the music most.'

'What's wrong with your feet?' I asked.

'It's nothing,' she said. 'It's just that I haven't bathed these past twelve hours and the wounds are starting to suppurate.'

I knelt down and unrolled the bandage. The stench hit me in the face.

'Bleeding beitzim,' I said. 'Who did this to you?'

'It is thus by the pleasure of our fathers. By the command of our mothers. Every parent dreams of their daughter being wed to a wealthy husband. One's anatomy must pander to his proclivities. And the smaller the foot, the more desirable the pomegranate.'

'What has one to do with the other?' I asked.

'When I was little, I was a little mingboy, scampering from park to nursery on steady pins,' said Song. 'On my fourth birthday, at spring blossom time, my nanny told me she had a special treat. We had gone for a walk in the palace gardens and I was allowed to pop the cherries

straight into my mouth from the clusters that hung thick on the branches. Afterwards, I was to have my bath, as was our regular custom. I toddled toward my nanny in total trust. She whipped off my juice-soaked kimono and plopped me into in my bathtub of gold. Then, she took what I took to be a nutcracker – I've adored walnuts since I sprouted teeth – and instead of popping a treat into my puckered lips, she brought the nutcrackers down upon my tootsies and crushed them into useless pebbles.'

'Your own nanny?'

'Under orders from my mother, of course. I screamed the palace down. It took six servants to hold me. They had to give me opium to dull the pain. That's where I first got the taste.'

'Nu, you can't dance? You can't travel?' The idea of being immobile was a fate worse than death.

'That's the Song Wei,' she said. 'I have been hobbled thus to become a love object for my bridegroom. The only solace I have is with my pipa. I've made a pilgrimage to these caves every year since my binding to obtain the silken strings of the Painted Lady so that I can pour my pain into my instrument.'

I unwrapped the rest of the bandage. Her feet were like folded birds' claws, wings crushed beneath the sole, the big toe forming two bloodied beaks, as septic as a leper's nosegay. I retched.

'Not to worry. My father has his best doctors in attendance,' she said. 'I had the bad karma to have had fleshy toes, and so my nanny places shards of glass into my bandages so that they wither and fall off.'

'This is worse than crucifixion,' I blurted.

'It's not so bad,' she said. Others have died from the binding of the foot.'

'But, what in Ying Tong's name for?'

'With our feet bent double, the only way to stay upright is to balance on our ankles. It forces us to tighten our pelvic floor, thus enhancing our sex muscles. There's not a princess worth her silk strings whose feet are longer than four cun in length.'

I extracted what was left of the ice balls and applied them to her mangled toes. Song sighed with relief.

'Who are you?' she asked, 'Some kind of magical saviour?'

‘I’m Wan Da, the replacement hairpin maid,’ I said. ‘Chow Fat got waylaid at Anxi.’

Song took tiny little footsteps towards a pockmarked wall, illuminated by a thousand Buddhas, each identical in size and belly, each in his own candled alcove. I could see her reflected in the million glassy eyed stares of the statues.

‘And as if it’s not bad enough with the silkworm business, my hair is a total mess.’

She loosened her tresses from the hairpin that held them piled on her head. I extracted my ooz komuz and began to gently comb her from root to tip.

‘If only I could remain with my one true love,’ she said, striking her pipa with a sorrowful pluck.

‘Who is he?’ I asked, stroking her silken locks.

‘A monk,’ she sobbed. ‘He is supposed to be doomed to celibacy. Fong had a narrow escape by not being made a eunuch.’

‘How did you meet him?’

‘He’s one of the Buddhists of the Painted Lady,’ she said. ‘We met the last time I strung my pipa. He has an excellent ear.’

‘Nu, why can’t you take him with you?’ I asked.

‘I may only be accompanied by a serving wench.’

‘Dress him up, then. He can take my place as the hairpin assistant. I’ll stay here and nurture the worms.’ It really did appeal to me.

A silken rustle disturbed the dust. A dusky boychick shuffled into the cavern clutching a trayful of eggs and bowed deeply. Asian men have never really appealed to me, but the way he looked at Song fair broke my heart. Neither culture nor creed could prevent my noticing the frisson between them. Even though he was a mere slip of a boychick, I could see his schmekel straining against his red kashaya.

‘Highness,’ he said, ‘the royal entourage awaits your Hairpin performance,’

‘It’s alright, Fong, she knows,’ Song said.

‘Ah so, we can dispense with pretenses.’

‘Wan Da, this is Fong Ku. Fong Ku, Wan Da.’ I bent double until our foreheads touched.

‘Wan Da has an ingenious plan to let us leave together.’

‘Pray tell,’ said the boychick, bringing a finger to his third eye.

I picked a pupa from the tray and examined it.

‘These chrysalises are moments away from hatching, right?’ I said. Fong nodded.

‘This is the crisis. We must leave them behind,’ Song cried. ‘We will not have the strings. I will die without my pipa.’

‘Crisis equals opportunity,’ I said, having absorbed a tad of I Ching on the journey.

I began to bind her tresses into tiny sheaves in a braiding technique I picked up in Palmyra.

‘And you leave straight after the performance?’

‘My father is in rather a rush to hand me over. Politics are rearing their head again. As the first daughter, I am required to be handed over by the new moon.’

‘We’ll have you ready in a jiffy,’ I said. ‘And I have a foolproof way of getting this precious cargo out of here.’

Zozo’s ways of grooming had made me hip to the ins and outs of contraband. While Song fondled Fong’s schmekel with her festering feet, I began to roll the unborn butterflies into each sheaf of hair. By the time Fong climaxed, Song had pupae coming out of her ears. I turned her to face the Buddhas to see her reflection. She paled.

‘But what about my Feng Guan?’

‘Your what?’

‘My phoenix crown. The coronet that represents my forthcoming marital status.’

‘I thought you told me it was a Hairpin ceremony?’

‘We’re rolling both ceremonies into one. Papa says it saves on expenses.’

‘I wish you’d told me earlier,’ I said, ‘We’ve probably missed the technical rehearsal.’

‘No matter. They care not how I play. But my looks are another matter.’

Fong fiddled in a silkworm sack and produced a headdress that looked like a cross between Zenobia’s crown and Nando’s diadem. Phoenixes fashioned from kingfisher feathers gave it an otherworldly glint. Gold dragons chased beaded pheasants, pearls interwove with emeralds. I spotted not a few uncut diamonds.

‘This is perfect,’ I said, ‘If anyone wants to nick anything off you, they’ll take the crown. It’s a perfect alibi. And you,’ I pointed to Fong, ‘get your kit off and put this on.’ I reached for one of Song’s silk robes.

‘I’m sorry?’

‘You’ll need the garb of a serving wench if you’re to get away with this. Hurry.’

I wrapped his kesaya around my body.

'The moment the performance is over, get on your high horse and take her away.' I'll catch up with you in Karakul.'

v

Song stepped into the cavelight, ramrod straight, with the riches of the Song dynasty on her head. A page placed the pipa in her hands and she transformed from a spoiled Kai Feng kugel into an artist of the most sublime mark. What she got from those four strings. Now I know why they call it pipa: Pi. Pa. Pi. Pi. Pa. They could also have named it Schwingaling. Occasionally, between the single notes of Pi and Pa, she struck the notes with such force that her precious jewels rattled in their casings.

The performance seemed to titillate the monks even further and they paired off as Song sang Wong. Candles were snuffed, cherries were popped and oohs and the aahs fairly drowned out much of the pi'ing and pa'ing. As she reached the end of her third encore, the audience erupted as one. I've spoken to many musicians who think that the audience falls in love with them when they play, transported by the rapture of sound. In Magao, they tumbled head over heels with each other. In the post-ovation adulations, I managed to sneak the lovebirds through the undulating bodies. I made sure the guards received an emerald or two, culled from the few Feng Guan droppings that were shaken from their nests. I made for the spinning room, eager to take my place among the monks. Once I'd gotten the hang of extracting the living worms from their cocoons, I'd be able to take the peace silk back to the muses. We could fix the spheres in one fell swoop.

In my haste, I failed to notice Zozo lurking in the shadows. He grabbed me by the hair and dragged me to a dark corner.

'And where exactly do you think you're going?'

'Zozo, I thought you'd left.' I was momentarily flustered.

'I told you to wait outside. I had business to attend to.'

'I'm through with doing what you tell me, Zo,' I said. 'I've found a new calling. I'm staying to learn the secret of the strings.'

'Where are my Painted Ladies?' he demanded, twisting my arm in a torrid Chinese burn.

'I'll never tell,' I said, gritting my teeth. 'You'll have to make do with the local breed.'

‘I can’t have you destroying my livelihood as well as my band,’ he snarled. ‘I hooked you up with this pupae lark. They’re like my children. They’re mine, all mine!’

‘They belong to the monks, actually,’ I said. ‘They’re learning a whole new way of harvesting without cruelty.’

‘I know what you’ve done, you little traitor. You’ve allowed Song Sung Wong and her paramour to escape.’

‘I did it for love, you mamzer.’

‘There is no such thing in our world, Wan Da, if that’s even your real name.’

‘You can’t do anything now,’ I said. ‘They’re gone.’

‘Ha so,’ said Zozo. ‘You forget the size of women’s feet in this part of the world. Fong’s a fifty-eight. Nobody’s going to buy his wench story with those clodhoppers.’

‘I’m going to scream,’ I said, ‘and you know how loud noise travels in these caves.’

‘You’ll shut the fig up,’ he said, untwisting a ream of silk from beneath his kaftan.

He whipped the cord over my neck and pulled tight, tighter. My arms and legs started to twitch and my head began to spin like a raw silk chrysalis. I couldn’t speak, I couldn’t breathe. The last thing I remember was a kaleidoscope of Painted Ladies, with black and white eyespots and deep orange spotted wingtips, watching me expire.

The Muses trip about like fantastic glowworms, loosening the garrote that binds me, plying me with Pleromic ’nard to snap me out of it.

‘It’s a little schmutzik,’ says Poly, fingering the bloodied string. ‘But it will do for Poly’s fifth ring.’

‘Thanks a lot, ladies,’ I rasp. ‘I know I said life experience, but this is taking things to extremes.’

‘It was the only way we could get you out of there,’ says Callie, extracting the silken cord from my garroted neck. ‘You’d never have survived another desert trek intact.’

‘And how come you didn’t tell me about the massacres?’

‘What are you talking about?’ asks Clio, referring to her cirrus scroll. ‘The Pogroms aren’t due for another two hundred years.’

‘I’m talking about the survival of the silkworm,’ I say. ‘The chrysalis is doomed to die before it hatches.’

‘Unfortunate collateral damage,’ says Terpsichore.

‘Nu, you’re basically fine with slaughtering unborn butterflies?’

‘Bombyx moths, technically,’ says Urania. ‘But, to make a silken string, you have to scramble a few eggs.’

‘But that’s, that’s lepidopteracide.’

‘It’s a double-edged pipa. Sacrifice and live forever, or die another day.’

‘Let’s get her back down there, pronto,’ says Mel. ‘We’re going to have a tragedy on our hands if she can’t fathom the fate of the ballad.’

‘Not again,’ I say. ‘I’ve hardly caught my breath.’

‘Go forth to the place that the ballads were spawned

You’ll meet up with trouble; don’t say you weren’t warned

Stay out of affairs; stay away from the dawn

And don’t let the Midons use you as a pawn.’

‘You can do it, Wanda,’ says Erato. ‘Poets will remember your lyrics for centuries.’ Nine of them. One of me. The odds are stacked.

‘Don’t bring us an imzad, we had that in Baghdad,’

‘We don’t want an oud or a lute,’

‘We’ll take a barbat if it’s sung with a scat,’

‘And don’t think of e’er schlepping a flute,’

‘There’s so many ’tars from old antique bazaars,’

‘You pluck them and find they are fake,’

‘The mandora you find, you will know with your mind,’

And the Music of Spheres you shall take.’

‘Well, since you put it that way,’ I say, ‘I’ll need some supplies.’

‘Name your poison,’ says Urania.

‘Well, the ’nard goes without saying. And some latkes. In local currency.’

Give her a pinch of mandragora,’ suggests Euterpe. ‘Let’s get the poetry this time.’

Thalia hands me a bunch of large dried leaves decorated with tiny purple bell-shaped flowers.

‘What’s this?’

‘Belladonna, Deadly Nightshade, Devil’s Cherries; it goes by many names.’

'What's it for?'

'You will know when the time comes,' says Clio. 'It extracts truth when administered in tiny doses. And poetry is truth in its Shabbos clothes.'

'Alright, already.'

The Muses guide me to the edge of the cirrostratus.

'Calm down, kukele. Just close your eyes, roll them up, like this.'

Urania pulls Polly's lid up and only the whites show.

'Gaze between your brows. Can you start to see a triangle of light?'

'Yes, that must be the top of my nose from the inside.'

'Anatomically correct,' says Urania, 'but now you can envision the shadows of the other side.'

'It can be any colour you choose.'

'A jewel, a shell, a bead, a string.'

'Use it or lose it, basically.'

'Focus your gaze. You'll find your shape.'

A perfectly rounded crystal takes form on my brow point, shooting rainbow shades around my cranium. A phoenix is embedded at its centre, wings akimbo.

One single syllable emits from its open throat:

'Ooooooooooooyyyyyy …'

The note fills my inner ear, a drone of a note with an epiglottal zing to it. I transmit the information to my vocal chords and they emulate the sonorousness. Then, one by one, the Muses tune in and we mock up a minyan, baying oy, in ten tones, to the silvery moon.

That's when I jump.

'Don't forget to inhale on impact!' cries Erato from above.

As I hurtle through the air, I stretch my arms out and flap wildly. The multi-coloured feathers catch the rays of the sun and peel away in fluttering fragments. I'm going into a nose-dive. I check the thumbscrew compass Urania has slipped me. I'm way off course.

Book V: ‘Ballad of the Occitan’ Albi 1229 CE

i

I awoke smoking. Heavy incense rent the air. I recognised an undertone of ’nard mixed with a top note of frankincense and dank. Brightly tempered frescoes illuminated plastered walls, depicting an array of scenes from my childhood. Gaudy Sadducees lurked in the shadow of a painted cross. Was that Yossi up there with his crown of thorns? Had somebody given him a drink yet? And Herod Antipasta lurking in the foreground, looking trim and perplexed; they’d certainly slimmed him down. And could that be Lazzie on a rowboat, ferrying Martha across a large pond? Next to her, holding a shofar flagon up to the parched martyr, was that me? I noted the scarf, tied at a rakish angle, and the eyes that seemed to follow me around the, what was this, some sort of place of worship? Half flattered that I’d made it into the fresco collection, I looked down and saw that I was stark naked. I pinched my fingers together like an Armenian camel driver and shook them at the Pleroma. Daughters of memory, you could have clothed me, at the very least. I’d have to find some threads, or the folks around these parts were going to have a faecal fit. We don’t want a repeat of the Cochin calamity.

A moth-eaten sack lay on a roughly hewn shelf, next to an instrument comprised of two metal blades, connected at the handles by a thick strip of curved bronze. I picked it up and squeezed. The blades came together with a coppery snap. I scissored a hole in the top of the sack and saddled it over my shoulders, like a prehistoric poncho. The hair took a little more dexterity. I aimed the blades at my crown chakra and skinned the scalp to the top of my ears, pudding bowl style. I remembered Lazzie’s opshearing like it was yesterday, the little tyke perched above the crowd, screaming blue murder, his luxuriant locks falling to the floor as each onlooker stepped forward to shave a tendril from his keppele.

I was distracted from my snipping by a strumming that filled the interior with harmonic vibrations. I crept around the walls, lured by the thrummings, and a cavernous shrine came into view stacked with icons and schmicons and schmatez of the Ages. As my eyes adjusted to the gloom, a young man materialised, crooning in tandem with jagged strokes upon an instrument of string and wood and bone. His visage drowned all reason. His eyes were almonds, his cheeks ruby raisins, his clean-shaven jaw a fume of musk. His crimson robes clung to his muscled frame

and his codpiece stood out against the nap of his matching velvet pantaloons. He sang a plaintive lament. I back translate roughly from the Occitane.

'I once loved a lady from merry Langue D'Oc

I wanted her virtue by means of my cock

She took off her corset, I unpicked her lock

And that was the way I got under her frock

And a hey nonny nonny, hey nonny nonny, under her frock.'

There was something amiss with the playing, though. I could tell he was struggling to keep time as he noodled upon his gourd. He didn't seem to know where the first beat of the bar was. And his G-string needed tuning. It was then I noticed that he only had two fingers on his left hand. The ring and pinkie finger were withered and gnarled and served no purpose whatsoever. As I stepped from the shadows, the garçon leapt to his feet with a mighty 'Alors!'

'Sorry, monsignor, did I startle you?'

The muso composed himself. 'I am well used to holy ghosts,' he said in a nasal French accent.

'I'm no ghost,' I said. ''Tis flesh and blood all the way.'

The player extended a manicured right hand, the nails filed for maximum plucking. I brushed the back of his palm to my parched lips. A mix of cedar and spruce with an undertone of goat gut.

'Rambeaux de Villiers,' he announced, withdrawing his claw. 'It's Occitanian.'

'Wan, I mean, Walter B. Lazarus, I said. 'It's Hebrew.'

Rambeaux blanched.

'Speak not of the Hebraics,' he hissed. 'They are fairly despised around these environs.'

'Why's that?' I asked, fingering my bald patch.

'It is said that they killed our Lord.'

'It was an accident,' I insisted. 'I harmed nobody.'

'They take the flesh of newborn babes for the making of unleavened bread.'

'Don't be ridiculous. You're thinking of yeast.'

'Well, that's what my Maman told me. They are hunting Hebrews as we speak for the death of the son of the Pope's mistress.'

I thought it better to keep up my disguise. A Yiddel and a woman to boot would not wash well with this lascivious lad. I fingered his instrument, its reddened varnish glinting in the candlelight.

'Is this a ballad you perform?' I asked, lowering my voice to a bass baritone.

'Don't speak,' Rambeaux said. 'The ballad is forbidden. We may not make music in the holy Temple of Cathar.'

'Why ever not? This looks like a great place for a gig.'

'Cathars believe that the body is an abomination. The sound of the ballad arouses passion for carnality. The ballad is the Devil's work.'

'It's only a few chords strung together. What's the big deal?'

'It is the rousing of the heart. I have tried to contain, I have long spilled my seed upon this sacred bedrock. Fantasy is all I had. And then I heard the voice of the Midons.'

'What's a Midons?'

'Only the finest woman that ever breathed on land or sea or air. She is the embodiment of amor fins.'

'Amor fins? Is that some kind of fancy liquor?'

'Eros, my little man. The highest virtue. I pine away for the earthly love of the Midons of Château de Dia. She is the finest woman in all of Occitania.'

'What does she look like, this Midons?'

'Alas, I have never seen her in realité. According to the rules of fins amors, l'idealisation is le clef. It's better never to meet the loved one face en face.'

'Well, that's no good,' I said. 'At least you want to see what she looks like in the flesh.'

'My eye of my mind sees her with locks of burnished copper,' he said.

'She may be a blonde.'

'With a skin as pale as moonlight.'

'There's quite a lot of cross-breeding in these parts. She could be swarthy.'

Rambeaux shuddered. 'You understand little, strange monk. I worship the Midons in the highest spirit.'

'Nu, go to her Château with your words of love. Woo her.'

'It is not that facile,' he said. My love must remain chaste and pure.'

‘Well that’s a croque, monsignor,’ I said. ‘Love her, love her not. Make up your mind, already.’

Rambeaux arose in a huff and a slew of finely meshed papyrus fell to the floor.

‘You dropped these,’ I said, bending to pick them up.

‘Oh, let them lie,’ he said. ‘They are without merit. The Midons continues to ignore me.’

‘What may they be?’

‘Forbidden songs,’ he said. ‘I compose them to prove my love.’ I turned over one of the papyri.

‘These lyrics could do with a bit of an edit. Less of the nonny nonny. More of your true feelings.’

‘Aide moi, mon ami,’ he pleaded, fingering my inner elbow. I fairly swooned at his touch, but I didn’t want to unmask myself quite yet.

‘Well, see here, there’s much more you can do with details; the misty gaze in her eye, the delicate insteps of her feet, the adorable way she flicks her satin sleeves. If you get a glimpse of her features we can add some verisimilitude to this lyrical mish mash.’

‘S’il vous plait, monsignor, accompany me to the château. You have the wit to woo.’

‘But you say the path is strewn with danger. The Pope’s men are searching the roads in and out of Albi.’

His brow rumpled. ‘You’re right. Cathars. Yiddels. Gypsies. We cannot pass in plain sight.’

I gingerly fingered his velvet pantaloons. A plan was hatching.

‘Never fear, Rambeaux, mon frère, they’ll never suspect two men of the Catholic cloth.’

‘You mean, I must doff these troubadour threads?’ He looked appalled.

‘Just for the journey there. We’ll take out your pantaloons when we get to the drawbridge.’

‘But I have not the coiffure,’ he protested.

‘I was a hairdresser in another life,’ I said, grabbing the cross blades from their rocky alcove. I ripped another sack open and grabbed Rambeaux by his chignon. He didn’t resist. I gave him a cut and blow to relieve him of his uptightness. I was guised as a man but my juices were flowing. A fake gay priest with a troubadour beard. My subterfuge was complete.

‘Before we set out for the château,’ Rambeaux panted, ‘I need to swing by the Grizzled

Squirrelle for my mandora.'

'Mandora? Did you say mandora?'

'Oui,' he wheezed. 'I only use it on special occasions, such as wooing. I practice on a lesser body.'

'But that's a genuine medieval lute.'

'This old thing,' he patted his instrument. 'It's on loan from a friend. My true love's lure waits in the basement of the Squirrelle.'

ii

Ram's white filly, tethered to a rock outside the church, snorted wildly as he approached.

'Pegasusan, down!' he commanded.

'You want me to ride pillion?' I was never a horsey person. Give me a dromedary any time.

'This is the only way to cross this terrain,' he said. 'I've borrowed Pegasusan from my cousin, Ademar. He needs the horse back for his tournament tomorrow morning. We have to hurry.'

I hitched up my cassock and placed my bare heel in Ram's interwoven palms. He lifted me to saddle height and I straddled the beast clumsily. Rambeaux hoisted himself in front of me, giving off an earthy odour of sackcloth and ashes. The things I do for other people's love lives.

As we rode along, I noticed bodies strewing the road, in various stages of decay.

'What the fig is going on here?'

'It's the Pope's doing. He's got the locals practicing for the Crusade. That's how I lost the use of my fingers.'

'I thought Crusades were only waged in the Holy Land?'

'To the Pope, this is the Holy Land. We have defiled his authority. He wreaks revenge.'

'Crooked is the path of the wrath of the Vatican.'

'Exactement. But the Catholic kings gave us our land. The Vatican was in on it. Then they took it all back.'

'Surely, then, it's the price you pay for your ignorance.'

'This has never happened to Christians of the soil. Just because we like a bit of Mary with our mass.'

‘Those who cannot remember the past are doomed to repeat it,’ I said. ‘Ask any Emperor.’

‘I know not of which you speak,’ he said. ‘I have never travelled further than Moissac.’

I was torn asunder by his earthly musk, even though he couldn’t scan worth a soupçon.

iii

Occitania in the late twenties was abuzz with music and mayhem. The Pope hadn’t quite gotten his way of ridding the land of foreign scum, so he dovetailed the Pogroms with the Crusades, then segued into the Inquisition and a slew of ethnic cleansing ops. If that didn’t work, he was going to play the witch card. The Cathars and the Yiddels rubbed the Pope up the wrong way of his 200-thread-count crimson housedress. We were bound for the bonfire of the Vatican’s vanities. There I was, hair shirt and tonsure, in the capital of promiscuity on the Continent. I daren’t break my cover as yet as they were looking for women of my kind all over Europe. Never look a couchemare in the mouth.

The Cathars were a strange lot. Amidst all of this excess, this feast for the senses, they preferred to keep it Spartan. The Yiddels weren’t much into line toeing; it didn’t work, it had never worked, but when rounded up into the Cathedrals built with their capital, ordered to convert or die, they chose the former, and many a snipped schmekel slipped its way into the melting pot. These days, you couldn’t tell a Cathar from a Kafr. Between the Spaniards and the Arabs, the shepherds and the schleppers, the Occitanians had free-flowed into each other. Just as long as you weren’t a woman, or Yahweh forbid, a Trobairitz.

Those Yiddels who remained made a deal with the local nobles. Crusades aren’t cheap and the Pope’s demonisation of moola prohibited the Church from money lending. The Yiddels had their work cut out for them due to a glitch in Deuteronomy, and were literally funding their own extinction. Cathedrals were going up all over the place, even as their brethren were going up in flames all over the Rhineland; by the time I got there, the Yiddel population of southern France was almost annihilated. Blood libel, poisoning the water wells, crucifying babies, driving up the price of nougat. That’s quite a guilt trip.

The countryside gave way to the town, a quaint riverside enclave with one of the prettiest bridges I’ve ever seen. Nothing at all like Zeugma. The river was pristine, visible to its gurgling bed, disturbed only by the bloated corpses that floated oceanwards with the current.

We cantered up to the Grizzled Squirelle, a tavern tucked under the bridge on the Pont Vieux, attached to the Inn and Out Inn. It was at the Squirelle that anything went down in the salty cracks between Pogrom and Crusade. Pope Not-So-Innocent III was dead set against the Cathars bringing more Mary into the mix and set brother against brother, lover against lover, and everyone was hard put to resist the rewards offered by the Church for turning in a neighbour, a spouse, a spawn. But for now I was as innocent as I was ignorant. A blissful state of inhumanity.

'Wait for me here,' Ram said. 'I have a debt to settle with the innkeeper. He's holding my mandora as collateral. I won't be a tic.' He disappeared into the bowels of the building.

I slid off Pegasusan, stirrup over bridle, recovered my breath and looked around. I needed some 'nard. And some latkes. I drew my arms inside my cassock sleeves and checked my pomegranate belt. I never leave the Pleroma without it. I had a few gold Vaballathi sewn into the lining from my Zeugma trip. The rupees had burned to a crisp, their denominations still vaguely visible on the curled ashes, but as soon as I touched one, it turned to powder in my hands. The coins were melted, but their metal would fetch moola in any language.

Goldsmiths in Albi were not hard to come by. To the east of the old bridge were an array of services to cater for every need. I found a toothless smith who forged my Vaballathi into a few hundred Francs of the realm. I purchased some 'nard 'for one of my flock' and a new pair of bloomers, which I put on under my cassock and, suitably recharged, waddled back down the Pont Vieux, enjoying my anonymity and thirsty for a flagon of rouge. Dressed as I was in the outward garb of a holy man, nobody gave me a second glance. Nobody was going to grab me by the pomegranate in this getup.

The Grizzled Squirelle hove back into sight. There was still no sign of Rambeaux. Someone had put out oats for Pegasusan and the filly snuffled noisily into the head bag. A black board squiggled with pink and yellow chalk exclaimed: 'Special du Jour: Foie Gras & Verre Rouge: 20 centimes.'

I was fairly famished. The 'nard had given me the munchies. Creeping to the back of the dining section, draped in darkness and old timber frames, I ordered the special and gazed lazily around me. The place was practically empty. I wondered if the siesta had caught on in these parts. A careworn toothless crone, presumably the innkeeper's wife, brought my food lugubriously forward.

'This is lovely,' I sniffed. 'What's it made from, chickpeas?'

‘Alors,’ said the innkeeper’s wife. ‘C’est foie gras.’

‘That sounds grassy enough for me.’

‘Foie is le liver. Le liver of the how you say, l’oie?’

‘An eye?’ I started feeling slightly queasy.

‘Non. Goose. We are putting le tube down le throat with du beurre until le liver is ready to burst. You have to know just le right moment.’

‘I bet you do.’ I was ready to visit a vomitorium.

‘Then we slaughter le goose and we whip out his liver, add a little truffle oil and some mashed garlic and voila! La cuisine du jour.’

It was then that I tossed my taiglach all over her Occitanian alligator shoes.

‘Tortue, peut être?’ asked the wife. ‘We like to keep it alive while we slice les fillets from les loins.’ I looked over to where a lonely terrapin writhed in agony upon the coals. There was nothing left to eject but bile and ’nard juice.

I writhed around on the ground and my cassock flew open revealing my brand-new underwear. My apricots burst from their hiding place like ripe fruit.

‘Alors!’ said the wife. ‘What kind of priest are vous?’

‘Please,’ I said, ‘I’m trying to escape the Crusaders. This is the only way I can get about.’

‘I will not tell,’ said the wife. ‘But you will have to adjust to our ways. We have no special menus for Les Yiddels.’

‘Yiddels? Does it show?’

‘A personage with your nasal curves? That skin tone? Give me la break. Unless you pass for Le Prêtre Armenian, you’ll never get away with it.’

‘What if I say I’m a gypsy?’

‘Bon chance with that. The Pope hates Les Gitanes more than Les Yiddels.’

‘Nu? Must I surrender to the oppressor? I don’t think so.’

The innkeeper’s wife sighed. ‘I’ve seen tout le monde come in and out this Inn,’ she said. ‘Grown men in tights, Siamese twins with separate wives.’

‘What if I tried getting about as a trobairitz? I hear they have all the freedom in the world. And fantastic wardrobes.’

‘A female troubadour? Pah!’ she mocked. ‘You have to come from nobility.’

‘I am,’ I said. ‘My grandfather was High Priest Caiaphas Cohen. I have blue blood in my

veins.'

'Never heard of him,' said the wife. 'You'll have to do better than that. Where's your razo?'

'My what?'

'Every troubadour has to have a razo, a tale you tell of les circumstances of your composition. It's de rigeur in ballad circles. Inventing and singing are the highest forms of valour.'

Thing is, all this itinerant travel had left me sans curriculum vitae to speak of. What you saw was what you got. The upside: nobody knew who the fig I was.

'Where did you say you're from?' she asked.

'Up north,' I lied. 'My father insisted that we have Occitanian as a second language.'

'You have un bon accent.'

'I've just got the gift of mimicry,' I said. 'I learned it from my Bobba's parrot.'

'You have un razo? Un vida? Anything? I can't let you remain here unless you show you have some useful skill.'

'Hold your chevals, madame,' I said. 'Here's a vida I penned on my way over.'

I made up a whole past for myself, hailing from the Spanish Main, where the trobairitz were quite the rage. I began to extemporise my travels in strict dactylic tetrameter, embellishing my escape from my parents' clutches, my longing for Carta, my misery in music, the Muses, the ghosts, the losses.

'I hail from the Highlands beyond western France
Where fellows and females together do dance
They make no distinction 'tween fairness of sex
And all men are equal from servant to Rex.'

The next verse was a small porkie to justify my presence in the Provence.

'Yeah, I had a lover who wanted me so
He killed any suitor who'd give me a go
I fled those high mountains and wandered along
To seek out my fortune and practice my song.'

She clearly didn't believe a word of it.

Hours later, Rambeaux emerged with a battered mandora case, a cut lip and a broken rib.

He'd obviously had to do some convincing to get the innkeeper to part with his instrument of seduction. Heaven knows what his bar bill must have been.

iv

Rambeaux really needed me to help him pen his mawkish lines of love to his imaginary Midons. He was too busy brandishing his ballad lyrics.

'How's this one?' he scowled, fingers stained with blood and ink. 'It came to me as the innkeeper was beating me up. It has a ring of truth about it.' He held out his latest offering as we rode. I inhaled deeply and read:

'Oh fair one of grace, I have not sought your like
Except for a time once when passing a dyke
When I stared in its depths and t'was filled to the brim
With the fairest of Midons; I long for your quim
And a hey nonny nonny, hey nonny nonny, long for your quim.'

'Perhaps you can tone down the pomegranate reference,' I suggested. 'It may not grab the Midons.'

'That is the nature of fins amors.'

'Look, I don't quite get this courtly love thing. It just doesn't make sense. How do you know who's truly in love with whom?'

'The notion of fins amors doesn't require too much of an object. Any mademoiselle will do, if she blushes just right, lowers her head to attend to her embroidery and then tilts up at you through waxed lashes and eyes bright with belladonna.'

'So basically, you idealise a total stranger ...?'

'Non, non, you fall in love first with the idea of love.'

'I beg to differ, Brother Ram, it all comes down to chemistry. Or so I've heard.'

'Au contraire my dear sack-clothed friend, the notion of sacrifice is the serving of the soul. Have you ever had the feeling of being totally swept away on the wings of desire?'

'Once or twice,' I said. 'Before I took my vows.' A vision of me and Carta polishing his eagle standard flashed through my mind. I pulled myself together.

I'd need to do some human research into this Midons woman. Preparation is a means of self-defense. When we stopped for a flagon break, I squeezed a little belladonna juice into Ram's

molten bowl. Truth serum and aphrodisiac rolled into one. He babbled like a lupus and sang like a red-rumped swallow.

‘The Midons is an alias,’ he admitted. ‘Only a chosen few know of her real identity. This makes it truly difficult when it comes to courting.’

‘Nu, how do you know which moat to knock at?’ I asked.

‘In a dream, I heard her dulcet tones flowing through the Rhône, across the Tarn and into my ballad-soaked ears. I had a hunch it was Beatriz, Comtessa de Dia, in a small château outside Montelimar.’

‘That’s only a four-day ride from here,’ I said. ‘Surely you could have found out?’

‘She is married,’ said Ram. ‘To a supernal beast who has abandoned her for war.’

‘What’s his name?’

‘The Baron Guillaume Henri Oswald Pointiers. We all call him Pointy Ear Bill. He has her locked and bolted into a metal pomegranate cage.’

‘How does she bear it?’

‘It’s a double-edged rapier. According to the law of possession, she owns Pointy’s kingdom for as long as he is on the battlefield.’

‘Nu, all this business of damsels in distress is a double-edged rapier, non?’

‘Oui, mon frère,’ he said. ‘The fillette holds the purse strings while he wages. On his return, he will demand his conjugal rights with his spurs on. He has all the subtlety of a stray cur.’

‘She should rather be his mistress.’

‘Then she gets rien,’ he said. ‘It must be marriage for the rules to be broken.’

v

We arrived at the château moat. A team of chain-mailed courtiers sweated in the sunlight to let down the drawbridge.

‘You can’t go up to the east tower,’ said the snaggle-toothed servant. ‘The Midons is indisposed.’

‘I cannot live without plighting my troth,’ Rambeaux moaned.

‘Sorry guv’nor. She’s having a lie down.’

‘You will be responsible for my early death!’ Ram cried, smiting at his heart.

‘Look, it’s no good,’ I said. ‘If this Midons is having a schloff, let her rest. We can lure her with our words of love. Hark the tower crenelle; there’s a direct line of sight. Position yourself under the balcony, over there among the shrubbery. I’ll hide over here. Quick, now, before the guards come.’

I handed Ram the lyrics of the ballad. I’d tinkered with it while I was waiting for him to fetch his mandora. I thought it would set just the right tone. He gazed at the page in horror.

‘I have no idea what you’re talking about.’

‘These are words of ironic intent. Just stick to the structure.’ I snatched back the lyrics, adjusted my habit and began.

‘I must sing of that which I would rather not

I am so aggrieved by she who purports to be my friend …’

There was a rustling at the damask drapes. A veiled visage peeked from behind. Neither of us could she yet see. I continued:

‘For I love her more than anything that be

But pity and courtliness do not avail me with her

Nor my beauty nor my worth nor my wits …’

The figure in the shadows disappeared.

‘For I am thus tricked and betrayed

As I should be if I were ugly …’

Rien.

‘Wait,’ I hissed to Rambeaux. ‘Lend me your mandora.’ I crawled towards him and snatched the instrument from his grasp. Ram gave it up and crawled into the shrubbery. I embraced the mandora and began again. Damn the scanning, to hell with enjamberment.

‘The girdle I used to fasten dismays me.

Alas! I dare not wear it

My heart feels like breaking and it’s no wonder

Lords, make me a coarse cloak; I prefer to wear that

When my clothes have no trimmings

I should never have the wish to sing

Because the more I sing

The worse it goes for me in love.’

I tried to be noble, I wanted to sacrifice my own desires for the sake of another, whose love was greater, purer. I got all the way to the end of the ballad and I was in love with the Midons myself. My ballad seduced me, and even though I had never laid eyes on this lonesome lady, I had to know her. Why should Rambeaux have the glory? Besides, his rhymes would soon be found out to be cover versions and the Midons would see that he was nothing without his invisible amanuensis. Fin amors would be fin d'amour. Sing me to the end of love.

A tassled rope was lowered to the foliage; she must have tampered with the servant's cord.

'Mon amour,' it said. 'Attendez ici.'

'What does it say?' Ram asked.

''Not interested'' I quoted. ''I have pledged my heart to another.'' I crumpled the note into my cassock.

'Maman will kill me,' said Ram. 'We'll have to try the Midons over in Perpignan.'

'What's your maman got to do with it?'

'We're bankrupt,' he confessed. 'If I don't get me a Midons before mon Pêre returns, we'll be turned out of our château. That's why I asked for your help.'

'I understood you were enamoured of this Midons?'

'I thought she'd be a soft touch,' he said.

'In what way?'

'If the Midons believes in fins amor, the real courtly deal, she'll pay through her nose for the privilege of being immortalised by my verse.'

'Verily,' I snorted. 'A fake dowry? But you can't marry her. She's Pointy Ear Bill's chattel, surely?'

'It is said that she holds the keys to the exchequer of Dia,' Ram said. 'The laws are being overturned every day here. I thought I could persuade her to part with her fortune along with her legs.'

'Perhaps women require more than courtly love,' I suggested.

'Merde de cheval,' Rambeaux said. 'What a waste of time and effort. I'll meet you back at the Squirelle. The barmaid will oblige my bent. See you later, little man.'

As Rambeaux rode out of sight, a knotted string of bedclothes made its way down the walls of the tower. I've always had pretty strong thighs, so I shinned it up the linen and found

myself in a chamber lit by a thousand candles. I could see the Midons' silhouette on the candle-lit walls; the room had a cave-like quality to it, even though it was leagues high. Her ripened apricots wobbled the shadows as she walked towards me, backwards.

'Fair troubadour, you had me at 'A chanter.'' Her voice was muffled, as if buried in a pillow. Without doffing her heavy veil, she backed towards me and I held her from behind in a supine reverse cowgirl.

'I've never heard a ballad quite like it,' she said.

'Midons, the image of you in my mind is surpassed even by your loveliness.'

'Oh, cut the merde,' she said. 'You can't even see my face.'

As I thrust against her peace cleft, my codpiece struck pure metal.

'Alors!' I said. 'What obstruction is this?'

'It's my chastity belt,' she said. 'My husband imprisoned me before he departed for the Crusades. I cannot part my thighs for man or beast.'

'How do you pish?' I asked.

'With great difficulty,' she said. 'Don't even talk about diarrhea.'

'Let me get this straight, I said, 'he leaves you for a war and locks your pomegranate in a metal cage?'

'Oh, it's not so bad, she said. 'You get used to it after a while. It's a small price to pay to have him off my back.'

'Who holds the key?'

'Pointiers wages war with it fastened around his neck.'

'Let me see that lock,' I said.

The Midons turned on her back, her veil still masking her visage. I dripped a candle into the narrow opening and extracted it, an exact mould of the teeth marked in the tallow.

'Ne budge pas, mon amour,' I said, 'I will free you of your bondage.'

I shinned back down the linen rope and ran into the village. The locksmith did me proud – his key was a perfect replica. Smiths could get fined for chastity duplicates, they were strictly monitored, but for a few Francs more, he asked no questions and was told no lies. I hotfooted it back to the château. The Midons lay exactly as I had left her.

I turned the key in the lock. The belt groaned and gave up its grip. A fecund fume filled the chamber.

‘Let’s get you into a bath,’ I said, holding my nose. It was almost as bad as Song’s foul feet.

The Midons palmed her hands across her belly, scarred with the bite of the buckles.

‘I haven’t felt my hips for months,’ she said. ‘How can I ever repay you?’

I snapped my fingers at a servant, who lurked in the shadows.

‘Draw up some moat water,’ I commanded, ‘and set it to the cauldron. The Midons must purify herself.’

‘It is the Sabbath,’ said the shadow. ‘We are not permitted to work this day.’

‘Don’t be cheeky,’ I said, ‘snap to it.’

‘I will not disobey the command of my creed,’ the ghost said, and disappeared.

And so it came to pass that I heated and schlepped, schlepped and heated several cauldrons of boiling water up and down the tower stairs and bore the Midons into the scented water, by which time my ardour had significantly abated. A Shabbos goy in monk’s clothing.

Then came the pomegranate shave. You could have twirled her nether hairs into guy ropes, so thick was the tangle. I used my hairpin to separate the strands and shaved her quim clean, taking great care to preserve the ringlets such that I could use them later; a beard, perhaps, or a brace of payes.

I pressed the skeleton key into her outstretched hand.

‘Now you truly have sovereignty over yourself,’ I said. ‘You can choose to protect yourself from unwanted advances or free yourself to explore your fantasies.’

‘My proclivities desire a real man,’ she said, wiggling her big toe into my codpiece.

‘S’il vous plait, Midons,’ I implored her, ‘I cannot muster my tumescence until after evensong.’ After all that schlepping, the Midons was as a sister to me now. And you can’t fondle your sister’s pomegranate, however strong your inclination.

‘I knew it was fins amors when you first brushed against my peach cheeks.’

‘Nu, it wasn’t the lyrics, then?’ I was a little insulted.

‘Poetry be damned. It was your touch. I can tell you’re a man who truly knows how to pleasure a Midons.’

She arched her back and thrust her pomegranate skywards.

‘Take a look at heaven, my little fat priest,’ she said, moistening her upper lips with a glistening forefinger. ‘It is to thee alone that I wish to pledge my pomegranate.’

‘Let me shin down to the market for some Grains of Paradise,’ I said, cagily. ‘I’ll return tonight, when the owl hoots thrice.’ Poly had shown me how to blow air into my cupped hands, a low, nocturnal whistle.

At that moment, a heraldic blast wobbled the boudoir air. The trumpeters obviously didn’t get Shabbos off.

‘It’s Pointiers, my husband,’ cried The Midons, ‘It is his signature call.’

‘I thought he was out leading the Albigensian Crusade?’

‘Albi is down the road from us,’ she said. ‘It’s now or never, Monsignor!’

‘I’d rather not,’ I said. ‘Can we rather do a few more poems?’

‘Lie with me now or I will tell my husband you have defiled me.’

‘But that’s blackmail.’

‘Take me, or you will be taken.’

If I’d revealed my true self at that moment, I could have saved myself years of tsorris. Lived in Langue D’Oc. Become a true trobairitz. But hubris had me in her grip; I can’t perform on command, the spirit needs to move me. I just didn’t fancy her.

‘Do it!’ she commanded.

‘I can’t,’ I replied, backing towards the window. The clatter of armour and conquest bled into the embrasure.

‘Bill, Bill, help!’ she screeched. ‘I am being ravaged! My honour, my reputation!’

The sound of male stirrups filled the stairwell. I hooked one leg out of the window and groped around for the rope.

‘If I can’t have you then nobody will,’ she shrieked, flinging my right leg from the sill as Pointy Eared Bill burst through the door.

I trod upon thin air. The rope was gone. I tumbled twelve stories like a falling star.

The Muses evince their warped sense of hummus. This time, I’m not quite finished.

‘Am I dead? I ask. It’s dark and dank and doesn’t seem like the Pleroma.

‘Not quite, dear,’ says an invisible voice. ‘The shrubbery broke your fall.’

‘Poly, is that you?’ I recognise her harmonics. ‘Am I hurt?’

‘A few broken bones, but nothing that a little Kundalini can’t cure.’

‘I can’t see you, I can’t touch you.’ I grasp thin air.

It's only a dream,' says Poly. 'You've survived the fall, but we needed to warn you. Your performance in the Langue D'Oc was a bitter disappointment. You can't get away without the payment of karma.'

'I think I helped the Midons tremendously,' I say. 'I showed her that the meaning of fins amors lies not in the body alone.'

'Oh really? A good deed? Do you know what happens when Pointy Ear Bill discovers the state of her chastity belt?' asks Poly. 'She'll be locked up for all eternity.'

'How is that my fault?'

'You gave her the key.'

'But that's a good thing, surely?'

'You handed her a choice. It will not be tolerated in the Kingdom of Pointy Ear Bill. If only you had stuck to the plan, she could have gone on to become the greatest trobairitz in history. You cut short her career with your twisted actions.'

'I meant to set her free.'

'You cannot overturn the zeitgeist of an entire epoch,' says Poly. 'You'll have to wait for the Renaissance for that.'

'In light of the botched ballad raid, I've taken over from Mel. You're to return for the unstruck chord.'

'The what?'

'The silence between the notes. The sacred interval, if you will. And for this, you have to wander, Wanda. Until you find the key of silence, you will be an outcast, spat on in the byways, cursed in the fields.'

'Haven't we had enough cussing to last several lifetimes?'

'Someone has to take the blame,' she said. 'You're to draw the spirit of the age as if balm to a large boil. It's a different kind of spell.'

'Can't I just stick around the Pleroma?' I ask. 'You promised me immortal bliss.'

'A good death, we can assure you. An interesting life is up to you.'

I may not have made it to the Pleroma, but the Pleroma has a way of getting to me. As I toss and turn, the memory of Polyhymnia fades to white.

Book VI: ‘The Wandering Years’ Europe 1229-1234 CE

i

I was still lying in the shrubbery. It had started to rain pussies and poodles, and the mud and the crud were mixing into pools around my sandals. A stray goat loped over and sneezed in my face. The rope lay about me in shreds. The Midons must have loosened it when she was doing all that arching. My shin bone was sticking out perpendicular to my kneecap. With great effort, I snapped it back into place. The Kundalini I’d been practicing since Cochin kicked in, and I breathed myself well with a touch of pranayama. No point crippling my opportunities. A few spinal flexes and a mudra or two, and I was feeling myself again.

The pomegranate beard sure came in handy. As there was a price on my head across the continent as the seducer of the wife of Pointy Ear Bill, I couldn’t gad about as a tonsured monk for a while. The crime of belt unbuckling met with the same insane accusations as baby eating. Bill hated Cathars worse than Yiddels, and someone had to take the rap.

Becoming a woman was out of the question; apart from the few troubairitz of noble birth, ladies did not travel alone. I was sure to be picked up. Burqas were scarce in the Langue D’Oc in the Twelfth, and I would never have blended in. No, the best way to become inconspicuous was to become as distasteful as possible. That way I could get to the silent order and retrieve the unstruck chord.

I scraped off the goat mucus with my ooz komuz and made a noxious paste with a dollop of ’nard. Knotting a portion of the frayed rope, measured from ear to ear, I gathered the Midons’ pomegranate locks into small sheaths, strung them at intervals upon the sticky mixture and affixed the whiskers to my jawline. It stung a bit, but it was an adequate impersonation of a stench-ridden, hunchbacked outcast.

With a little imagination, I could invent variations. If I wanted a froomie look, I could string a couple of ringlets over my ears, giving the impression of payos. For a more Sephardic vibration I could pile the tresses on top of my head, under a three-pointed hat that was all the rage at the time. My shinbone never quite healed completely – I developed somewhat of a limp – so I fashioned a sturdy cane out of an arrow that had missed its mark. I was really fond of that cane. It was both my crutch and my weapon of destruction. I developed a deliberate stoop and

took to hanging out at the tail end of the harvest, scooping up leftover chaff as an offering to share with the brethren at the next monastery.

I preferred to stay on the move than stop off for more than a few days. If veiled questions as to my origins occurred, I was gone before sunrise, joining other wanderers, occasionally removing my fake facial hair to relieve my itch with a roaming soldier or two. Sometimes it wasn't necessary to remove the beard; in the lonely refugee camps of Europe, an orifice was an orifice, hirsute or bald.

ii

One time I stayed for a week at an Abbey on the Alsatian border. It was run by a Mother Superior who believed in the right of monks and nuns to consort with egalité. Eventually she was struck off the role for a spike in the birthing of bastard babies. And even though they made me feel welcome, I couldn't discard my monk's robes for a more feminine garb.

Dragged from our dreams for Lauds at two thirty a.m., we were allowed to get another hour's schloff before Prime and the rice gruel they served for breakfast that got stuck in my beard. I was assigned to the vegetable garden and, not having a single green finger, putzkered with the cucumbers under the beady eye of the Mother Superior.

The Abbey was in the habit of setting its every move to the rhythm of the Liturgy of the Hours; Matins, Lauds, Primer, Terce, Sexts – reindeer names –and that was only till noon. The routine was mind-numbingly boring; mostly I'd bunk Vespers and sit out Compline, complaining of a sore hip.

I tried to ask the Mother Superior what the purpose of all this routine was. She held her finger to her lips and made the universal sign of shut the fig up. A silent order; imagine that. There was no chord to strike. Only the dawn chorus, made up of all the birds of Europe, disturbed my shut-eye. The only time we spoke was when we sang.

Somewhere between Sext and None, I committed the Cardinal Sin.

The monks and nuns were to sing in identical chorus. The men looked straight ahead, the cowls hiding their identity. The nuns held hands, setting the tonic from which none were allowed to waver. The notes came out all the same.

'Dona nobis

Pacem Pacem'

They touched their knuckles as they sang, recalling the neumes by their preordained position on each hand. By the time I'd listened twice, I knew the tune by heart. It's the way my ear works. Always has. That's why written notes don't make any difference. The meaning was slightly lost on me, but I found out later it was a well-intended prayer for peace.

After nineteen rounds of the same old same old, the song was feeling a little dull.

I tuned my voice up an augmented fourth, a very hard note to sing. It makes an interesting rider for the tonic storm. The brothers and sisters stopped as one, mid-neume. Silence had broken. The holy ones interjected their displeasure in a cacophony of complaints.

'The Devil is among us,' said one.

'Come on, brethren, what's the big deal?'

'You've just sung ti over fa, the proportion is irregular,' cried another.

'What of it?'

'You are conjuring up diabolus in musica.'

'No, I'm not.'

'We are praising God here.'

'It's just a harmony,' I said.

'You have uttered the forbidden note,' said the Mother Superior.

'Who forbids? What forbids?'

'You have spanned three whole steps in the scale.'

'Nu?'

'It is dissonant, unpleasant and ugly.'

'All harmonies are at frequencies in proportion to each other,' I argued. This I knew from my time with Carta, who would never lie about a thing like this.

'You cannot use the diabolical to praise the Lord.'

'It's fiendishly difficult to sing,' I said. 'Maybe that's why you call it the Devil's note?'

I'd struck the wrong chord. They were closing in on me, chanting as one. Time to check out.

There were a thousand abbeys from here to kingdom come. One of them was bound to welcome, nay, praise my innovation. Only then would the unstruck chord be acceptable to those Pleromic princesses. Whipping my beard back and forth, I dislodged it from my chin, flipped up

my cowl and, becoming instantly indistinguishable from any other, wove my way through the monkish mob to my freedom.

Much later I heard this interval in the emergency siren that took Maya to hospital. Dee-dah, dee-dah, dee-dah – an earworm that would come to haunt humanity as ambulances and police cars invaded the aural cavities of the Twenty-First Century.

iii

It all went belly up in Pad-de-Calais. It was past Evensong and I was begging for bread outside The Arras and Curtain when the barmaid called me in for a flagon. Grateful for anything I could lay my lips on, I acceded. A small child played at her feet, mopping up spills and making shapes on the wood-shaved floor.

'You look like a holy man,' she said, slopping the local brew into a metal cup. 'What brings you to our parts?'

'I'm committed to the poor,' I said, sticking to the mendicant script. 'I go where my poverty, charity and chastity take me.'

'But your beard, it doesn't look like any I've seen in the Abbey of St. Vaast.'

'I have sworn my vows to the Bearded Benedictines,' I said. 'We can't afford to whet our knives too often.'

'Do me a favour,' she said. 'I've got to go home to breastfeed the baby. They won't let me do it on my shift. I need you to look after Marie.'

'But surely your boss would let you perform such a miracle at work?' I asked.

'I've put my case to the owner. He tells me it's my problem if my husband can't keep his schmekel in his pantaloons. I should be able to feed her when it suits him. He's taking it out of my wages.'

'Are you managing to make ends meet?'

'Nay. He pays me a pittance. I used to be able to feed Marie from the table scraps. Now he says all leftovers will be fed to his precious mutts.' She motioned under the counter where a writhing puddle of puppies soiled the sawdust.

'I'm not very good with children,' I said.

'Please,' she said, 'I'll only be a few minutes. I live a stone's throw from here.'
She untied her apron and shoved it at me.

‘Serve the patrons,’ she said. ‘We’ve got two types of chardonnay, three sauvignon blancs and our merlot mead is marveilleuse. Five sous per verre. All you can eat buffet. Marie, stay with the nice priest. Play with the puppies.’ And before I knew it, she was out the door.

It was Happy Hour at The Arras and Curtain. Strangers of all stripes bombarded the bar, demanding their litre of oblivion. The puppies circled my feet like vultures for the offcuts of charcuterie I was forced to slice and dice. Croques for monsieurs and madames were selling like hot cross buns and I juggled as best I could to keep the custom flowing, pocketing my commission in my cassock. A girl has to earn a living somehow. I was so busy that I didn’t see Marie leave the tavern holding the hand of a Carmelite friar.

That’s where the rumour began. It all happened so fast my beard spun. By the time the barmaid returned, we were all out of baguettes. I was quite proud of the turnover and turned towards her beaming, my whiskers glistening with spattered chazzer and freshly spread butter.

‘Alors! Where is ma Marie?’ the barmaid asked.

‘Right here,’ I said, pouring myself a fruity chardonnay with a hint of blackberry. I peered over my shoulder and saw only sawdust and dogs.

‘Sacre bleu, she’s gone!’ shrieked the barmaid.

The men in the tavern, well into their cups, looked up.

‘This, this bon a rien has forsaken my child.’

‘What’s this?’ asked a merchant, drawing his sword from its ruby scabbard.

‘I haven’t seen her,’ I said. ‘She must have slipped out while I was serving you mamzers.’

‘You were given a sacred task,’ cried the barmaid. ‘She could be attacked by Yiddels. They use our babes for the blood in their Passover bread.’

‘Oh nonsense,’ I said. ‘Yiddels are forbidden to shed blood. We drain it from our food, we retain it only for sacrifice.’

‘That’s tantamount to a confession,’ said the merchant. ‘Somebody has been killing our children and it’s not one of us.’

‘That’s libel,’ I said. ‘Blood libel.’

‘Why are you defending the scum of humanity?’ asked the merchant. ‘They are not fit to be walking this earth.’

I decided that the farce would end there and then. I ripped off my beard and cassock and stood before them in my tattered himation. A gasp emitted from the gathered crowd.

'Because I'm one of them,' I said calmly. 'We may be a strange lot, but we don't go in for infanticide. You may have missed Marie in the street,' I said. 'Perhaps she simply went home.'

'Baby killer!' screamed the barmaid.

'Plague bringer!' shouted the merchant.

And then everyone got stuck in. Their anger bubbled up like a bat's ear in a cauldron.

'You killed our Lord.'

'You poisoned our wells!'

'You've spread the plague.'

I bunched my beard into my pomegranate belt, together with the last baguette, threw on my cassock, and ran.

iv

For one hundred-and-eighty days I travelled northwards, never stopping more than a night or two, hearing the taint of my tale in every town and village. Living like a refugee streamed me over borders that hadn't even been born. Having no sense of direction, I took ages to find my way to the coast. I wandered around Germany, where I had to wear a double scroll, Spain with its insistence on one red shoe and one blue, Austria, favouring the three-pointed hat, as did Italy and Belgium. The Transylvanians preferred a different kind of garb; if you didn't have fangs you just didn't cut the mustard. Not casting a shadow, the one dead giveaway of my immortality, relationships were out of the question. In any case, who was I to bond with? I couldn't be a woman, I was hardly a man, and whenever I put my three-cornered hat was never my home.

Thinking the small island to the north-west might provide more succour, I forded every stream I could lay my body in. I've always been good at poodle paddle, and my time in the waters of Zeugma and Vembanad stood me in good stead.

Arriving at the French seaboard, I finally laid eyes on the white cliffs of Dover glinting in the morning sun. After digesting a meal of waffles slathered with camembert, I wrapped my cassock and beard into a goat's bladder and waded into the water. I'd heard it took less than a

day to cover the distance. I made it across in twenty-eight hours. That bladder kept me afloat. It may even have been the world's first life preserver.

v

Did you know that hemorrhoids were the third greatest cause of death to Yiddels from the Middle Ages right up to the Enlightenment? Next to burnings and expulsions it got the bronze award. Spastic colons, Taysacks, Crone's, Irritable Bowel Syndrome, diseases of the intestines squirrelled their way into our collective karma. We were always shitting ourselves. Our lower chakras were never fully aligned. Diseased triangulation. Whenever the chinks in the regime's armour showed, it was always the fault first of the Cathars, then the Lepers, again with the women, and inevitably, that eternal question of the Yiddels. Not that we wanted to be exiled wanderers. Or constipated scapegoats. But property rights and access to professions were at the mercy of the Emperor du Jour and his pronouncements were always writ large when it came to the ex-words: expulsion, extortion, extermination, exoneration. How do I hate thee? Let me count the ways.

It all came down to us Yiddels. From cannibalism to kabbalism, they threw the book at us. Too many latkes. Or too few. Figging idiots. Or superior snobs. Sabbath for child sacrifice. Sunday for rest. They couldn't seem to make up their minds. The expulsions had coincided with the Inquisition as well as the witch-hunts. Yiddels were the Devil. We couldn't put a hoof right. They invented absurd tricks to catch us out. Test as a witch and drown, you're innocent; survive, spluttering – you're diabolical, and they drown you anyway. No thanks. I had to watch my step. I was a woman. I was a Yiddel. I was doubly cursed.

vi

By the time I got to St. Albans I hadn't had a proper bath in five years, and the begging friar act was wearing thin. The Crossing had provided some form of relief. But without a change of clothing and the delight of hot water, I was schmutzik to the hilt. Anti-Yiddel sentiment had reached the English shores as well, and I wasn't taking any chances. I'd heard that St. Albans had all the mod cons and I was far more desirable in a monastery with a less hirsute look. It still wasn't safe to wear women's garb, but my cassock was standard issue, and it was mainly the hairdo that would give the game away. I was becoming a dab hand at the whetting stone and

sharpened my hairpin to a steely knife edge. That knife was my alibi for the smooth-faced lad that presented herself at the gates of the Abbey.

I ditched the beard. It was rancid with sea water and identified me straight away. Just as well I did. Roger had a thing for wandering Yiddels.

Dressed in my monk's robes, the brothers took me in as one of their own. There was no virginity check, thank Yahweh, and cassock is as cassock does. They saw me as a fresh-faced novice, travelling tattered and torn from a far-off land over the hills.

Roger of Wendover took me under his quill. I mixed the gold leaf, whisked the egg yolks, and prepared the parchment, making sure not one fleck of dust marred the sacred surface. Then he'd dip his feather wick. And illuminate. Something about him put me in mind of Carta. Perhaps it was the way he gorged his gruel with a gusto reserved for far more sumptuous fare. Perhaps it was the utter concentration in the way he plunged his pen into ink, solemn, ritualistic, as if some great truth was about to be immortalised. Sometimes it was. Mostly, it was just Roger's opinion. Sometimes Roger frottaged me in the middle of the night, and I had to stay vigilant; my boyish appearance was clearly a titillation, but I was doomed, this time, to be titless in St. Albans.

I woke up in the middle of the night out of a dream in which snakes and vines wound themselves around me, tighter, tighter, until I could barely breathe. A carved ram's horn brayed out the morning chant, sounded by unseen lips. Tekiyah, the long note, calling across the ages, and then the five short, teruah blasts, at which the snake coiled around the dangling fruit, squeezing the dark red liquid from its tendrils.

Roger wasn't in his cell. I tightened the linen strip around my apricots and slipped on my cassock. Matins were normally at three bells, but they hadn't chimed yet, and his alcove was right next to mine. I crept along the damp stone walls, careful to remain unseen. It was pitch black, apart from a dim flame burning in a sconce at the top of the passageway. It was coming from the Manuscript Room where, as I approached, I could see Roger bent over a roll of parchment. He spoke to himself as he carved out his words with his quill; much like yeshiva bochers who have to mouth their aleph bet. I listened at the doorway as he illuminated his tortured phrases, dipping his wick into an inkpot of flaked gold leaf.

''And the carrier of the cross paused on the doorstep of the shoemaker, Ahasuerus.

''Please, brother, I thirst,' said the condemned man.

‘‘A pox upon you,’ retorted the shoemaker. ‘What business is this of mine?’

‘‘I am being led to certain death,’ said the crucifee.

‘‘I cannot get involved,’ quoth the maker of shoes.

‘‘I shall go on’, said the man, calmly, ‘but you will tarry until I come again.’

‘‘The crowd pressed upon them and the shoemaker lost sight of the thirsty man.’’

Roger paused to dip his wick once more.

‘‘And verily, the shoemaker was cast upon the infinite waters of time, doomed to wander the earth, without rest, without respite, begging for his bread. And the Wanderer was seen where the wells dried up, where children were murdered for the blood of their Passover bread, where rain fell no more, and where dread disease scourged the land.’’

I gasped at the audacity of his alternative facts. He started and hastened to cover the script with his hand. But it was too late. I’d already heard the worst. I revealed myself.

‘How can you say that? None of this is remotely correct.’

‘History is the story written by the victor, Brother Lazarus,’ he said.

‘But that Wanderer wasn’t responsible for any of this. There were natural disasters. I was, I mean, he was nowhere near Worms when the plague took hold.’

‘This is truth. I have it on great authority.’

‘Whose?’

‘The Bishop of Armenia has stopped off on his pilgrimage to the Holy Land. He has met with the Wanderer on many occasions. The chap told him he was at the Crucifixion and has lived for over a thousand years.’

‘Bobbemeise,’ I said. ‘I’d like to meet with this Armenian fellow. I have a few verities of my own to tell him.’

‘You are a novice, Brother Lazarus,’ Roger said. ‘You have no access to the head of any Church.’

‘There’ll be no nookie after Compline or before Sext if you don’t arrange an audience,’ I threatened. ‘Our intercrural nights are over.’

‘Come on, Brother,’ Roger said. ‘I’ve never even penetrated your peaches.’

‘Let me approach the Arch,’ I said, ‘and you can have all the nocturnal emissions you ever dreamed of.’

‘He prays alone in the baptistery,’ Roger confessed. ‘You can find him there between versicles. But approach him with great respect. He may not converse with an underling.’

‘We’ll see about that,’ I said.

vii

The baptistery was in an alcove off the main cathedral. I crossed the neat rows of veggies and opened the heavy wooden door a crack. I’d never quite seen anything like it since the days of the Temple, although they had imitated the arches. I smelled frankincense with a smattering of ’nard and verily, I salivated. There was something else too. An undertone of marsh and truffle, adding depth to the smoky undertone.

The confession booth was positioned at the top of the nave. The odour seemed to be emanating therefrom. I noticed a rich purple robe and mitre, flung over a pew. I threw the robe over my cassock and tried on the hat, which was a little large and slipped over my forehead at a jaunty angle. The booth seemed to be smoking. A hand-rolled cigarillo stuck out of the grille, attached to a forearm that flicked its tip blithely on the mosaicked floor, already covered with millipedes of ash. I peeked through the slats and saw an elderly man, stomach folded over his schmekel, stark staring naked. I entered the adjoining chamber.

‘Father, is that you?’ slurred the Arch. I dropped my voice to hot potato depths and emulated the dulcet tones of the district.

‘’Tis I, my son,’ I said.

‘I have to speak to someone,’ he said.

‘In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Goat,’ I said, making the sign of the cross at his third eye.

‘Bless me Father for I have sinned.’

‘How long has it been since your last confession?’

‘About fifteen years. It’s really hard to get a good listener these days, Father,’ said the Arch. ‘I tried to speak up in Worms, but the Catholics were having none of it. I am the highest rank in the Armenian See, you see. They can’t have the primary Primate admit to any wrongdoing.’

My borrowed robes disguised my sex and my servitude. Speak on, oh illustrious liar, speak on.

‘Are you on your knees, my son?’ I asked. I heard his fleshy body crumple to the floor.

‘I am, Father.’

‘Speak, my son.’ I was getting into the role. I crossed myself, then made the sign of the double triangle.

‘Is the making of invention a sin, Father?

‘How meanest thou, my son?’

‘The telling of truth such as it is not. The embroidering, so to speak, of the facts.’

‘Most definitely a mortal sin,’ I snorted.

‘I can’t keep it to myself anymore,’ heaved the Arch.

‘Pray tell, my son.’ I leaned in with my hanks on my velvet shanks.

‘For the sin of ornamentation, which I have committed …’

‘Ornamentation?’

‘Deception, falsehood, defamation, mendacity.’

‘How so?’

‘I met a man, once, on the boat from Calais to Dover. He was some kind of exhibit at a fair; Cartaphilus, I think his name was. He was caged in the cargo section when I descended for a quart of the dark mead I require to sustain my weighty responsibilities. This chap, a convert, mark you, was detained for suspicion of ivory smuggling. Apparently, he had hidden the tusks in the bars of his cage. Stooped, he was, and stinking.’

Carta. His very name sent shivers into all the right places. I drew closer to the grille.

‘Speak on, my son.’

‘As I passed by for another refill, the man hacked up a gob of phlegm right into my goblet. My foreskin shriveled to the size of a walnut. I swore I would have my revenge. I would taint him as a beggar and a thief for all time. I have fabricated, nay invented, sightings of the cruellest kind. And now he torments me; he follows me wherever I roam. I feel like I’ve been cursed.’

‘Have you told anyone else about these sightings?’ I asked.

‘Only Brother Roger,’ said the Arch. ‘He seemed to take an inordinate interest.’

‘He has illuminated your untruths in gilded script,’ I said. ‘History will remember you as the demoniser of an innocent man.’

‘That is why I have to get it off my chest,’ mourned the Arch.

‘I’m not sure heaven will forgive you for this,’ I said. The spreading of vicious rumours is not something the Lord takes lightly.’

‘I don’t want to rot in hell for my indiscretions.’

‘Nu, let me get this straight: you invented a hook-nosed smelly hunchback who you could spit at for half a shilling, and bash his head in for three-pence, in some dark alleyway?’

‘It gets worse,’ he said. ‘I told Roger this chap has been alive for hundreds of years.’

‘What did you do that for?’

‘Every myth needs its origins. There was a fellow with a similar name at the Crucifixion who fit the bill perfectly. Our Lord cursed him for denying him to quench his thirst.’

I really didn’t want to get into all that again. I decided to let the immorality thing drop. I didn’t want to blow my own cover.

‘You’ll need to say four hundred Our Fathers.’

‘Thank you, Father.’

‘And three hundred Hail Marys.’

‘Bless you, Father.’

‘Every day.’

‘Agreed, Father.’

‘For the rest of time.’

‘You’ve got it, Father.’

‘And you must pay penance.’

‘I will, Father.’

I extracted my hairpin, sharpened to a fine point, and handed it through the slats.

‘Put this in your mouth,’ I said.

‘What?’

‘I said, insert this scold into your oral cavity, my son. You will henceforth be silent on all matters. And if you speak, this device will cut your tongue to ribbons.’

I reached through the grille and thrust the hairpin into his pudgy fingers.

‘Can’t I just say a few more Our Fathers?’

‘Do it,’ I said, ‘Or the whole of Christendom will know of your iniquity.’

‘And if I refuse?’

‘God will know if you remove the scold,’ I said. ‘The Grand Patriarch sees all.’

‘I won’t. I can’t.’

‘You will. You can.’ I leapt up from my monk’s bench and into his section, the robe falling from my frame.

‘You’re … you’re not a Father.’

‘I’m not even a mother,’ I said. I grabbed the hairpin and shoved it into his gaping maw. The Arch gagged and a bloody trickle cobwebbed from his lips. He spoke no more. I felt a supreme sense of satisfaction. Perhaps this was the unstruck chord. The stopping up of his disgusting lies. Not for nothing had I suffered this lifetime. I had perhaps saved Yiddeldom from the bearing of false witness.

Trouble is, I forgot to destroy the manuscript.

Roger still had the alternative facts in his sweaty little hands and I had to stop all those bobbemeise spreading. I slipped into the needlework room, ripped the ermine from the Archbishop’s robes and ran myself up a deep red cloak with pointy hat and grabbed the broom from the door jamb in case anyone tried anything funny.

‘Stop, witch,’ he cried.

‘It’s me, Roger, Brother Lazarus.’

‘You cannot be. Lazarus is a full-blooded male.’

‘Sorry to burst your catgut, Rog,’ I said. ‘I’ve been hiding in plain sight since the April rains.’

‘Then how could we have …’

‘Thigh gap, Brother. It’s amazing what intercrucial sex can feel like when you’re faking it.’

‘Blasphemer!’ he shouted, seizing his massive tome and holding it before him. Gold leaf bled onto the flagons.

‘Give me the book, Brother Roger, it is of no use to you now. You have been fed lies. The Arch has confessed to everything.’

‘I do not believe you, witch,’ he cried.

‘Well, what of this?’ I held up the Arch’s severed tongue, its studded diamonds glinting in the candlelight.

‘My Lord,’ Roger gasped. ‘You’ve silenced the Patriarch.’

‘It was the only way to preserve the truth,’ I said. ‘Now give me the Historium.’

‘Never,’ he cried.

We both reached for the writings. I would have gained the upper hand, but at that moment, another brother loomed into the doorway.

‘What gives?’ said Brother Anthony.

‘She is a witch. She is the Devil!’ Roger yelled.

‘Looks a bit like Brother Laz to me,’ said the short monk.

‘She is a demon. She must be destroyed.’

‘It’s your words that must be destroyed, Brother Rog,’ I said. Give me the book and I won’t tell the others about our midnight vespers.’

‘What’s this now?’ Anthony asked.

‘Nothing,’ said Roger. ‘She lies, she cheats, she steals.’

‘We’ll have to consult the Archbishop,’ said the shortie.

The Arch had nothing more to say. His bug-eyed stare of horror was enough to convict me. There’s no such thing as a fair witch trial.

Book VII: ‘The Odalisque of Swing’ Istanbul 1558 CE

It’s always dusk out here in the Pleroma; the moment you realise that the sun will never rise or fall again, the lull sets in. Do we see stars out here? Some would argue that we are the stuff of stars, so many of us have been named by mortals. In fact, it’s one of the places we can still shine, milked and weighed out here in the wide grey yonder. Those Phoenician boys really got it right. They figured out it’s all relative. They were able to plot it all out by the heavenly bodies. Which is what I need right now. To navigate my way through this untold story.

‘Thanks a lot, girls,’ I say, hopping on one foot to get the water out my ears. ‘You could have pulled me out way before that ordeal.’

‘You wanted to experience the human. But if you don’t want to suffer, don’t return.’

‘That thing you did with the reed. Ingenious.’

‘I wasn’t going to give them the satisfaction of proclaiming me innocent,’ I say. ‘The documents were dunked during the drowning.’

'Roger was bound to have a copy somewhere,' laments Clio. 'That Wandering Yiddel rumour has survived the ages.'

'Nu, what do you have for us?' asks Callie.

'I plucked this,' I say, holding out the bloody ooz komuz with the Archbishop's sharded tongue hanging from its tip.

'You've missed the whole point,' sighs Callie. 'We needed the purest sound of silence. This aberration will never suit the Spheres.'

'I nearly lost my lives for this.'

'Foolish meidele. We're going to have the Vatican all over this,' says Mel. 'You're going to have to lie high for a while.'

'All I'm saying is, I don't want to spend the rest of my unnatural life up here. I want to be able to conjure my own stories. There's no atmosphere and your gossip can drive me cuckoo.'

'And on the other hand, all you do is complain when the heat is on. Extermination is not for sissies.'

'Are you calling me a coward?'

'No. Perhaps just a survivor.'

'You can't have your manna and eat it,' says Terpsichore. 'Choose eternity and float around in blissful oblivion. Or get real, get down, and live every single moment.'

'Oooh, I can feel a chorus coming on,' says Mel. 'It'll save us another three hundred years.'

'Metre?'

'Anapestic tetrameter.'

'Excellent variation. And a diddy dum, diddy dum, dum diddy dum …'

'Go forth to the place where the harem was spawned

You'll meet with resistance; don't say you weren't warned.

Create us a minor with soul and pizzazz

And bring us to life with the sound of the saz.'

'Enough with the poetry, already,' I say. 'I'll do it. Just don't make me schlep around the Continent again. I can't take another dunking.'

'We have a pleasant surprise in store for your renaissance,' said Euterpe. 'The climate is mild, the taxes are low and Yiddels are welcome.'

‘You’re flying me to the moon?’ I ask.

‘Don’t be silly,’ titters Thalia. ‘Here’s the address.’ She lifts her finger and an address appears on the nimbus, in Ladino.

‘Go to The Fig Field on the Other Side. Third mansion on the left, after the ash grove. Ask for Donna Gracia Nasi, formerly Beatrice de Luna. She’ll give you instructions from there. You’re going to teach those Ottomans a thing or two about supply and demand.’

i

I fetched up outside a large stone mansion, designed in a mishmash of Byzantine and Hellenic. The name Beatriz de Luna Nasi was carved into a bronze plaque fastened to the brick wall. As I reached for the lion-headed knocker, the door opened and the lady of the house herself stood in the jamb. I could tell we were related on sight. Limpid eye pools with a glint of sarcasm, curved schnozz with wide, flaring nostrils, a green and gold matching silk two piece beneath which one red shoe and one blue peaked. Atop her tresses perched a three-cornered hat at a jaunty angle. Upon her upper lip, a missing philtrum.

‘Wanda B., we’ve been expecting you,’ she said in a dulcet mezzo soprano. ‘Come in, come in.’

‘Your Highness,’ I said, sweeping my arms to the floor as Rambeaux had taught me.

‘Dispense with the Highness business,’ she said. ‘I simply took the surname from my husband’s brother when we emigrated here. Call me Grace.’

‘But it says Beatriz on the front door.’

‘I have had many changes, Wanda B.,’ she said. ‘A girl has to keep an eye out for the past.’

Grace led me into a music room where every instrument I’d ever heard of covered the wood-panelled walls, from idiophones to chordophones, membranophones to aerophones. Mission sorted. I’d be back in the Pleroma in time for twilight schmekeltails.

‘Your Grace,’ I said, ‘I have been sent from the heavens to retrieve the Music of the Spheres. Starting with a saz. Whatever that is.’

‘Don’t be ridiculous,’ she said. ‘The Spheres are a myth. Our Father Who Art in Heaven, Baruch Hashem, contains all the tones of the known world.’

‘That’s not what I’ve been told,’ I said. ‘My mistresses are wont for the sound of the saz.’

‘I’ve just delivered my latest batch of sazzes to the Harem,’ she said. ‘They’re all the rage this season. Can’t think why. I’ve always preferred the bouzouki myself.’

‘Can I not pop in, then, and retrieve one?’ I asked. ‘Nobody will miss a single saz.’

Grace smiled. ‘Ah, there are leagues to go before you can simply whirl into the Sultan’s compound,’ she said. ‘But if you insist, there’s a little something I need you to retrieve for me first. Coffee?’ And from the finest porcelain jug, embellished with scenes from a Seder, she poured me a cup of the finest beans I’d tasted this side of the millennium.

While we sipped, Grace filled me in on her colourful history. She had taken over her husband’s business interests after the Spanish Inquisition, relocated to Portugal and then to Venice, staying one step ahead of the intensifying deportations. After a narrow escape at remarriage, she arrived on the shores of the Bosphoros with an entourage that would make an Ottoman blush. And blush they did when Grace charged them prime plus three for their various rampages. Playing off one superpower against another, Grace held the purse strings of the Renaissance.

‘What’s the big chup about this Sultan fellow?’ I asked, reaching for a refill.

‘It’s beyond belief,’ said Grace. ‘Women fight to get in; mothers rouge up their underage daughters and fling them in front of his litter bearers. They pimp their offspring against the grilles, hoping for a glimpse of the one man who can satisfy their indulgence.’

‘Have you tried the Sultan yourself?’

‘I wouldn’t touch him with a barge pole,’ she said. ‘My late husband would kill me.’ I noted the ashes perched on a Turkic metronome. I found out later she’d schlepped him all the way from Lisboa.

‘Why can’t we make use of those who’ve already been defiled?’

‘Herein lies the rub,’ she said. ‘Women are forbidden to leave the confines of their quarters. We’ve lost dozens of our females to the Harem. We’ve tried all sorts of inducements – himations, husbands, Hagaddahs. They have no contact with the outside world once they’ve checked in.’

‘Ever?’

‘Ever. Sol had a run of bad luck with his previous Head Odalisque. She cuckolded him with his Chief Vizier, a eunuch to boot.’

‘What those boys lack in equipment they sure make up for in technique.’ This I knew from my Zeugma boogie nights.

‘Since then, he’s locked them up and deflowered a virgin each night, beheading her in the morning for not satisfying his loss.’

‘Is there any way out?’

‘Suicide is an option. In bygone days, if you were lucky enough to fertilise a male zygote during your imperial one-night-stand, you could shoot up the hierarchy to junior concubine. It’s a perfect one-child policy. Every last one a slave to the Sultan.’

‘Nu, where do we come in?’

‘The wonderful thing about Sol’s Harem is that he needs outsiders to grease the wheels of his opulence.’

‘People like us?’

‘Exactly. While the new faith forbids their freedom, some of us can stride the imperial condos at the Sultan’s pleasure, providing all sorts of extravagance; grooming services, soft furnishings, deli food and belly rings that these hapless Haremites never get out to buy by themselves. But there has been trouble in paradise.’

‘How so?’

‘As you might know, we’ve been expelled from every court and port in Europe,’ she said. Tell me about it.

‘And the virgins we have smuggled into Istanbul are disappearing at an alarming rate.’

‘They’ve been taken, then?’

‘At first their mothers were delighted for them to be chosen, but nobody’s spotted them since they entered the Harem. They’ve simply vanished.’

‘Can you not simply enquire?’

‘Any threat to the Sultan is deemed as treason,’ she said. ‘That’s why he has to be seduced.’

‘And you want me to find them?’

‘Go to him, Wanda B. Discover his secrets. And keep your eyes peeled for any sign of the missing virgins. The Ottomans are ours to devour. But our maidens have to pay the price.’

ii

Grace assured me it was easier to pass the guards garbed in Eastern Promise. She fiddled in her petty cash chest and extracted a scarlet headscarf, adorned with sparkly gold coins, drenched me in jewels and a puff of lotus perfume. Harem pants akimbo, veil askew, I slipped into the Golden Cage with my tzatzkes and skirted along the walls towards the Sultan's private chambers. It would have been easier to march through the portcullis, but I wasn't going to wear odd shoes again. And as for the yellow badge, forget it. It didn't go with anything.

'You look like an Odalisque,' was not a complement around the time of Sulemein the Magnificent. But I had a fabulous excuse, I was going deep undercover: I was infiltrating the Sultan's secret service. This was before a printing press was set up in Istanbul and only the hoi polloi could read, so everyone believed exactly what she was told, grasping her own end of the stick with narry a fact to distract her from her opinion. One tiny misunderstanding over a missing hairbrush could lead to bloodshed. Referring to the Sultan's erectile dysfunction could lead to drowning in the Bosphoros. It follows wherever a bunch of feminine beings are confined in one space. Pigs. Porpoises. People. Yahweh forbade it. It encouraged lashon hora, evil tongue. Solly didn't like it. And Sol was God around these parts.

Corridor after marbled corridor, courtyard after fountained courtyard, I schlepped through the precinct. Veiled faces stared at me from the inner sanctum, hundreds of eyes following me like Argus's peacocks. I was slipping through the steam bath when I saw my first saz. They really should have fashioned it from a firmer wood; the neck was slightly warped and the detuning set my hair on end. It was being plucked disconsolately by a bare-backed beauty, eyes of milk, skin of silk, who clearly hadn't had a music lesson in her life.

My gilded vestments gave me away as a minor odalisque. Her nakedness revealed her as a concubine of import.

'What is it that you wish, my lady,' I said, angling to get my hands on that saz.

'I've had qvite a craving for borscht,' she said, her breath sending a puff of clove-scented hookah across the damp air.

'Borscht?' I baulked.

'Da, it's a red vegetable, how do you say … beet …'

'I know what borscht is, but the ingredients are pretty rare in these parts.'

‘Back in Rutheria, ve learned the recipes from our neighbours. Kosher for Shabbos and Pesach. But for best taste you really need pound and a half chaza spare ribs.’

‘Yahweh forbid. I can’t supply you with pork,’ I said. ‘It’s banned throughout the Empire.’

‘Please you say vish is command? Vell, I vant. I vant chazzarai for borscht.’

‘Keep your tiara on,’ I said, ‘I’ll see what I can do. Vot else do you vant?’

‘It is my turn tonight for seducing Sulemein,’ she said. ‘It is said that he vill kill any virgin who cannot vield the saz.’

‘Your body’s enough to drive him wild with desire,’ I said.

‘But my playing sucks,’ she cried. ‘I vill never keep the keys to the Empire vis my saturated saz.’

‘Let’s have a swim first,’ I suggested, ‘then I’ll show you some of the basics.’

Nobody told me about the jets. As I doggy paddled next to Roxy’s lithe form, I was attracted as a magnet to the heated blasts that pumped beneath the surface. They must have the fires of hell under this bathhouse. While Roxy was buttered and oiled and braided, I breaststroked my way to the mother pump and pleasured my pomegranate upon the force of the water. Odalisques swam by, oblivious. I made an underwater pass or two, but Roxy wasn’t interested. She wanted to keep herself intact for her big night in.

Swathed in towels about body and head, I showed Roxy the rudiments of music, to tame the strings, and to regurgitate the folk songs of her village, converting her quaint airs from ear to heart, heart to hand. It was better if she sang. Her voice had a sweet Rutherian lilt that hinted at a yodel. But her sazzing was never going to happen. Roxy couldn’t distinguish the offbeat from a bar of rose-scented soap; she’d have to use all her female charms to fool the Sultan and stay her execution.

‘I’ll be dead by dawn,’ she wept into the waters. ‘I’ll never hold his attention with these hideous sounds.’

‘Don’t be silly,’ I said. Perhaps there was another way.

‘Has he ever seen your face?’

‘I’m covered from forehead to philtrum in this place,’ she said. ‘The only time I can breathe is in these private vaters.’

‘Listen,’ I said. ‘I’ll take your place. The Sultan won’t tell us apart. Hand me that veil.’

I slipped on the damask cloth and drew it over my chin. Adjusting my Odalisque robes, I whorled my hair into a makeshift turban, grabbed the saz and made my way to the Sultan's chambers, encountering no resistance until the final doorway. It was blocked by an elongated eunuch, dressed in a translucent silk robe, oozing muscles where no muscles dared to tread. Snapping my arm behind my back, he contorted me into a figure of eight against the thickened walls.

'Odalisque,' he rasped in a high, thin voice like a soprano hamster, 'come hither.'

I practically came thither. I've always loved a man in women's underwear.

'What dost thou thinkest to be walking alone in these sacred chambers?' the honey snake demanded.

'Forgive me, Master Wadi,' I trembled as I spoke, a trick borrowed from my Zenobia days. 'I bring a sleeping draught for the Kanuni.'

'Impossible,' he spat venom to the tiles. 'His Majesty has no need of the Waters of Lethe. For this I cannot let you pass.'

'I have candied almonds for the sucking of his sweet sleep in his favourite shade of pink.'

'This is not an emergency. Come back another time.'

'I carry the Magnificent's lamb-gut gout stockings and a batshit aphrodisiac,' I said.

'Well, speak up, Chambermaid,' said Wadi, placing a big brass key in an oversized lock with the Ottoman imperial escutcheon emblazoned into its knob.

'You're not one of the new girls? He rasped as we walked in his high tinny tones. 'I don't remember paying for you.'

'I'm fresh off the boat from Amsterdam,' I said. 'Forgive the old fashioned raiments.'

'Hang on, Odalisque,' he said, looking me straight in the eye, 'are you of the Hebraic persuasion?'

'Not so loud,' I shushed him. 'I'm Converso.'

'Don't speak,' he said. 'I too hail from a long line of Naphtalians.'

'I thought the Naphtalians got lost after the whole Babylon thing?'

'We wandered around the forests of Lebanon, doubled back through Assyria and hid in plain sight on the plains of Alexandria,' he said. 'I couldn't stand all the wandering. I had to get away.'

'What did your folks say?'

‘Folks, schmokes,’ said the eunuch. ‘All my Abba wanted was for me to follow in his footsteps and become a distinguished apothecary. But I can’t abide the sight of blood.’

‘I can relate to that.’ I’d had enough blood to last an eternity. ‘But why the weird musculature?’

‘When the Ottomans conquered Byzantium, families were commanded to castrate their first-born sons to serve at the Palaces of the Infidels.’ I’d heard about this strange and barbaric custom. It is said that men without beitzim sing better than any woman. I volunteered for the procedure. Abba was furious. He had great plans for a dynasty of his own. ‘You are nothing but a tintinabulation of my sperm!’ he roared.’

‘As if that’s all we’re good for, procreation,’ I snorted. ‘Where did you go?’

‘I left home after my Bar Mitzvah. The changes to my body helped me evade the Inquisition. I joined a troop of travelling minstrels and schlepped to Istanbul, reconstituting my mind and spirit with many years of body sculpting.’

‘Nu, so your body’s a kind of permanent disguise?’ I was intrigued. ‘Do you still do the minhags and chags and things?’

‘I’ve had to practice my faith underground since I arrived in Istanbul. There are many meideles in the Harem. They wave their hands away from the Shabbos candles to diffuse the light. We exchange Chanukah presents on Eid, we continue to eschew pork, which lets us act as if; everything is concealed.’

‘Every generation just makes it up as they go along. But what about Torah teachings?’

‘Well, yes, there’s always that,’ he said, ‘but we’ll have to teach the girls to read first.’

‘It must be a bit like being me,’ I mused. ‘Think like an Ottoman, act like a woman.’

‘A true faygele,’ he said. We giggled.

‘Anyway, Suleiman is fond of Yiddels,’ said the Eunuch. ‘They drive a hard bargain, but they get us what we need.

Wadi was unlocking the thirteenth gate when the Sultan rode past on his litter. Sol’s feet never touched the ground, except when he fitted his lamb-gut woven stockings to contain his gout, or in Reverse Ottoman pose when he proffered a particularly attractive Odaslique as a takeaway trifle for a dining guest. The women behind the grilles fluttered their kohl-soaked lashes. I would have followed suit, but my kidneys had fallen to my kneecaps. He was a Semite’s wet dream; olive skinned, crooked hooked nose – he could be one of ours! – and a moustache

that would do any Teutonic philosopher proud. And those eyes. Two hooded azure oceans stared out at me from beneath a turban five times the size of his head. A slight stiffening beneath his ermine cloak and I knew I had him hookah'd. I'd better make it snappy. Now that he saw me as an Odalisque I may have trouble getting out of the palace. I had to carpe diem, and fast. I picked up the lamb-gut stockings and trailed him into his private quarters. Lowering my eyes, I laid the offerings on a tapestried footstool, and began to play on my soiled saz.

I'll never know if it was the music or the motion that did it. He didn't seem to be the romantic type, Sol, but for the first time I could give full vent to my own sorrow. The minor key, so demonised by the monkish faithful, emerged from my bent instrument like a full-throated Christmas turkey. He wasn't to know I sang for the loss of another; Sol had his own issues. Solly was lonely. Solly was sad. And Solly's limp dick just couldn't get it up for all the Odasliques in the world.

iii

Solly the Sultan lay sideways on the embroidered divan, slack belly glistening in the lamplight, varicose veins poulticed by the tight woollen stockings I had procured from the market. Around us lay the detritus of lovemaking: discarded dildoes, dribbled wineskins; the lap of luxury in fabulous disarray. Sol held the key to the kingdom between his legs: his Harem. His Forbidden City of Clitties. His pride and his shame combined.

'How did you do that?' he puffed.

'Magical powers,' I smiled. 'It's all the Christian babies we get to eat.'

Sol was a prem, but if you didn't know how to sing it just right while nibbling the Big Boy, you could rub him raw ten ways of Ramadan and relief would evade him. F was his Scarlet Letter, F for Fellatio, his secret sin. It took both sex and saz to give Sol his due and the freshest female flesh in Islam would fail to rouse his sceptre unless they grasped this solid insight.

After I'd given him a second schmekel job through his quilted robes, which took all of twenty-five seconds, a new record, Solly lit a cherry hookah, rolled onto his back and babbled away in Ladino about his wayward concubine. He told me how he was smitten on sight; a slave girl for sale in the market place, a Polish beauty not fifteen years old. An utterly unravished bride. And how she'd moistened her philtrum as he rode past atop his litter and he'd instantly

stiffened and asked for her and they'd brought her to him, and he'd fallen into unfathomable longing, his soul on a glistening string of poisoned pearls.

'She told me I'm a terrible lover.' Solly rolled over for a slug of wineskin and one of his stockings snagged on a diamante rose.

'Shame, Sol.' I unpicked the thread. 'How could she think such a thing?'

'Every night, after dinner, she'd down two bottles of barley vodka, and before I could mount her, her sleeping draft had kicked in and she snored like the dead until dawn.'

'Perhaps it helps her block out the morning muezzins.'

'She told me that all my other paramours are lying …'

'She couldn't possibly …'

'When I could rouse her from her slumber, I liked to ride her in Purdah Position – you know, when she's on top and I'm on fire beneath – but my belly got in the way and I kept slipping out, and she would never let me use the ivory dildo I bought her in Baghdad. What can a man do? I had to finish myself off in the antechamber with saucy miniatures. And it takes bloody ages.'

'It's a lugubrious game,' I muttered.

'If I can woo her back, how can I compel her to give me the satisfaction I deserve?' Solly was inconsolable.

'Look, Sol, let's cut to the chaste. 'Some Odalisques aren't that big into fellatio. You'll have to groom them.' I popped a grape into his wine dark mouth and played a mournful accompaniment to his tribulation.

'Am I a bad lay, Wanda?'

'You're an exciting man, Sol.'

'No, but as a lover?'

'Look, Sol, it's not just about you …' He stopped me mid-sentence with a scowl.

'I beg your pardon, Odalisque, watch your step; I can have you beheaded right here on the spot for insolence.'

'Calm down, Solly,' I said. 'Look, beheading or not, I'm sorry to have to break this to you; sometimes a woman must take responsibility for her own pleasure. You know. It's not just about what's between *your* legs.'

The Sultan reached for the tasselled cord to call his chief eunuch. I was compelled to continue.

‘Just hear me out, Sol. A woman should be so excited just by being in your presence that she could climax on this very saz.’

And to illustrate, I lifted my skirts and straddled the belly of the bent instrument, rubbing myself against the bridge.

‘Get off that,’ Sol snapped, ‘you could give yourself an injury.’

‘I’m just making my point here, Sol. My Bobba could bring herself to ecstasy just by glancing at my Zeida. Through her veil. Across a crowded Temple. And when they danced, well, the very walls wailed.

‘It’s miraculous. How did he do it?’

‘He found her B-spot.’

‘B-spot?’

‘B-spot, Sol. B for Bat Sheva, for that was her name, her Bobbaness, her being, her beauty spot. My grandfather discovered that she could pleasure herself by her own command using nothing but her imagination and his gaze. It brought forth secrets that no veil could disguise.’

‘But I command the Empire. I am entitled …’

‘Granted, Sol. But you don’t command your lady’s lust.’

‘You mean I must do things … to please *her*?’

‘Bravo, Sol. Now you get it. You’re powerless, for once in your life.’

Poor Solly, he really was besotted. He started dreaming in iambic pentameter, a trying task at the best of times.

‘I want her back, Wanda,’ he sighed. ‘I can’t have a mere eunuch get the better of me.’

‘I’m working on it, Sol,’ I said. Lashon hora was rife in the Harem. Somebody would know where she went.

To distract him, I helped him pen a sonnet or two, suggesting changes in prosody – alleviating alliteration, dissing assonance, pruning any puns.

‘Throne of my lonely niche, my wealth, my love, my moonlight,’ he quoted, tears in his azure eyes.

‘Don’t you think you’re mixing your metaphors a bit, Sol?’ I ventured.

‘You don’t know what it’s like up here, the only free man in a nation of serfs. How victorious it would be to woo back the woman who has enslaved me.’

I jammed a few measures, but he insisted on his own versification.

‘My springtime, my merry faced love, my daytime, my sweetheart, laughing leaf.’

‘Enough with the seasons already,’ I said. ‘You’ve overdone it in this part, Sol.’

‘My plant, my sweet, my rose, my one and only.’

I stuck my middle finger towards my open mouth and fake retched at the Sultan.

‘My woman of the beautiful hair, my love of the slanted brow.’

‘Give me a break. Slanted brow? What is she, a chimpanzee?’

‘Okay, okay, I’ll take out the bit about the brow,’ he agreed. ‘But the hair stays, the laughing leaf stays. Let history be our judge.’

‘From your mouth to Allah’s ears,’ I sniggered.

The poems read much better in the original, but their full power is felt in Ladino, which is a bit like speaking Spanish with a cleft palette. Between Sol’s plaintive putzkerings and my thousand and one torch songs, his collection sold like hotcakes for about five hundred years. Not bad for a man who used deaf mutes to strangle his own children. As usual, I was obliterated from the record, a dumb valet to his vociferous verses. Pity there was no one to witness their composition during our Arabian nights.

iv

I was leaving the Sultan’s quarters one dawn, en route to procure some unguent for his flagging fipple, when I heard a dull thud echoing about the Courtyard of the Consorts. I stomped about on the carpeted mosaics and detected a hollow spot next to a pillar. The noise was coming from beneath the floor. I threw off the Afghan and saw a brass ring soldered to a satyr’s beitzim. Suprisingly, it gave easily, the tesserae sliding out across a mechanical panel to reveal a dark, dank hole. Several glittering pairs of eyes gazed up at me. I recognised the look of belladonna. What the fig? I grabbed a torch and descended into the cellar.

Tiny pallets were laid end to end on the mildewed earth, nine young maidens tied to the posts with silken ropes. Their skin was so filthy I couldn’t tell their origin, but their curvaceous schnozzles gave them away; these were the lost maidens of which Grace spoke. And Yiddel to a woman.

‘For Yahweh’s sake,’ I exclaimed, ‘what are you girlchicks doing down here?’ Nobody responded. I shook the eldest, a dark-eyed girl of around ten with a schmutzik veil and a chesty cough.

‘What have they done to you?’ The girl remained unresponsive. I slapped her again and she regained consciousness. I gave her a hit of ’nard to bring her to her senses. It all came out in shards, like a shattered amphora. I reconstitute it thus:

‘It was a trap,’ she slurred. ‘Our mommies prepared us to be concubines to the Sultan. We kept our virginity intact for our Imperial Defloration. We were all so excited. It was going to be an adventure.’

‘Didn’t you have an inkling of what you were getting yourselves into?’ I asked.

‘We were led into Topkapi with pomp and splendour,’ she said. ‘Once we were safe in the Golden Cage, they locked us in. They released three of us each day to satisfy the Sultan’s quota. They did not live to see the dawn. There has been respite these past few nights, but our prison has become overcrowded and infested.’ A goat-sized rat scuttled across the floor. My music must have stayed their execution, but that was cold comfort seeing the suffering of these condemned maidens.

‘You’ll be beheaded on the spot if the guards catch sight of you. Let me have a word with my people.’ So this is what lay beneath all the pomp and splendour. How could I not have seen through the glittering surface of the Seraglio? They’d been as good as kidnapped.

I raced to Grace’s place. She listened gravely to my story.

‘And nobody knows that you have discovered these children?’

‘I sealed the floor again, they’re all a little ’narded right now. We’ll have to have someone on the inside.’

‘What about that Wadi chap?’

‘Oh, that should be easy,’ I said. ‘I know his dirty little secret.’

‘Which is?’ Grace arched a well-plucked eyebrow.

‘He’s one of us.’

‘Well, then, he can be persuaded. He wouldn’t want that gossip spreading.’

‘It’s not gossip. It’s the truth.’

‘Ah, what is the truth anymore,’ she said. ‘If it was said to you privately it’s a matter of she said she said. But back to business. Arrange for their rescue as soon as possible after your saz and sex session.’

‘How do you know about that?’ I’d never divulged the intimate details of our liaisons. The man had to have a shred of dignity.

‘The walls have ears,’ she said, mysteriously.

v

I approached Wadi on my way back into the Sultan’s quarters. I could have given him alternative facts. But this time I thought the truth was in order.

‘They’re down there, Wadi, and even though my storytelling lark can keep the executions at bay, I can’t carry on with Solly forever. Their folks are going crazy out there.’

‘Even though they were the ones who permitted their daughters to be consigned to the Sultan’s quota in the first place?’

‘They had no idea. They thought it was a way of getting out of household chores.’

‘A woman’s path to pain is never easy,’ he said, unrolling a scroll with criss-cross markings that I took to be a map.

‘What’s this?’

‘The underground tunnels of the Seraglio,’ said Wadi. ‘This is the route via which we bring the aspirant Odalisques. I know it like the back of my hand.’

‘That’s it, then. Let’s get them going.’

‘I can only sneak them out three at a time,’ said Wadi. ‘That way, nobody will notice their disappearance.’

‘Well, I can keep him busy with my musical tales,’ I said. ‘I’ve got a knack of keeping the punchline till the next day.’

‘Brilliant. If you can continue to distract his desires with your wit and charm, we can get them out in less than a year.’

Nu, while Wadi smuggled the captured girls from the Harem, I related musical stories to the Sultan of Swing. The trick was never to finish a song in its entirety. I could start off a verse about two eunuchs, say, lost in each other’s arms, pursued by mortal enemies, caught in a honey trap, and pull back the plot just before the fatal execution, leaving Solly to beg me on the morrow

to continue my tale. Sometimes I'd end on the leading note, the tone before the tonic, and he would be driven mad with yearning and frustration. The next day, after fulfilling my middleman duties and making sure the quota was filled, I'd resolve the chorus and begin on another tragic tale. We stayed like that a thousand-and-one nights, a denouement of imagination and mastery. I saturated my saz with the stories of each girl in that cellar, wrapped in wavering quatrains, turning the flat third into a wailing note of loss and longing. In fluent vernacular, the language of all-consuming Ladino love.

vi

By the time the thousandth girl was gone, I'd quite simply run out of repertoire. I'd been doing this for almost a year. On the very last night, disguising myself in the schmutzik veils of the damned, I took the place of the thousand and first captive, trembling my way through the underground labyrinth. The moment I popped my head above the entrance, nine masked figures swaddled me in raw pink silk and whipped me onto a barge.

'Where are you taking me?' I thought I could make a quick getaway with my saz.

'Do you not know Gracia's orders?'

'Yeah, that we're all being set free?'

'She has made plans to evacuate her people to the Holy Land.'

'You're kidding me.'

'It's true, Wanda B.,' said Gracia, appearing on the poop deck. While you were pleasuring Sol the Man with your schtupping and your sazzing, by day I was working on a treaty with the Sultan. It has been agreed. I give him a discount on his war loans, he leases me the Holy Land.'

'Eretz?'

'The very same.'

'As in Iudaea?'

'What's in a Holy name,' she quipped.

'Where?'

'Galilee, where else? Tiberius, actually. It's earthquake territory, but we think it's worth the risk.'

'Nu, all this rescuing of the lost Odalisques …?'

‘That was a mere distraction,’ she said. ‘How else was I going to get you in on the action? Keeping Solly happy in the bedchamber allowed me to make great strides with our deal behind closed doors.’

‘A sated Sultan is always more amenable then?’

‘Without a doubt. It gave me great leverage in our dealings. He’s never supposed to have one woman for more than one night. He’s had to change all the rules and take a wife.’

‘Who?’

‘Remember that milky Pole you met in the steambaths? Her. Seems she’s dreadful at the saz and all she wants is borscht and babies. They’re a perfect match.’

‘You’re saying we’re bound for Eretz? I can’t go back there,’ I said. ‘I’ve got terrible memories of that place.’

‘It’s changed since last you were there, I’m sure,’ said Grace. We’re resettling refugees all over the country. It’s amazing how much land you can lease for the price of a conflagration or two.’

‘I can’t, Your Grace,’ I have to get this saz back to the Muses.’

‘And why can’t they retrieve it from Caesarea?’

‘It doesn’t work that way.’

‘Write to them and tell them to meet you. They seem to be of sound business practice.’

‘You know my heavenly crew?’

‘Clio is my personal Muse,’ she said. ‘I’ve met her in my dreams on a number of occasions. Sometimes I call her Shekinah. She likes that. And she calls me Babe. We hold symposia all the time on the nature of history and art, Yahweh and Aphrodite. It was she that secured my safe entry into the financial markets of Europe. And led me to you.’

‘But I’m sure she didn’t mean for me to return to Eretz quite yet,’ I said.

‘It’s all in the stars,’ said Grace. ‘If I hadn’t have gotten you to the Harem on time, you’d never have charmed Solly with your peculiar talents; he wouldn’t have had a shiny object to play with, the girls would still be incarcerated, and we wouldn’t be standing here now, bound for the land of our ancestors.’

‘That’s just it, Grace, I don’t want to go to a country full of Yiddels.’

‘What would you prefer?’

‘I’d like to get this Sphere fixed.’ I stroked the saz, soggy with the Sultan’s tears.

‘I’ve told you that’s a myth.’

‘Well I believe it,’ I said. ‘I’ve given up a thousand-and-one nights of my life for this.’

‘Go to your berth, Wanda B.’

‘I won’t …’

‘Not another word. Guards, bind her. This is for your own good, Wanda B.,’ she said. ‘A fresh start in a new settlement with a few hags and minhags, and you’ll soon stop this nonsense about Musical Spheres.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘We’re keeping kosher, we’re forbidding music on the Shabbos, our women will once again retreat behind the mechitzah. Tradition, Wanda B. Our tribe would be nothing without it.’

It sounded like a fate worse than death.

The barge set sail down the Bosphoros. I was livid. I’d paid my dues in this lifetime, the Saz was ready for retrieval and now here I was, lashed to the mast, doomed to the sheitel and the shofar once more. My sodden locks whipped back and forth in the ocean breeze and a tichel was tied to avert the eyes of the crew. I was served kosher gruel and given a pot to pish in as I stood. I strained against my ropes, loosening them a little each day until I could slide them around, but not quite break free. Was this the only way out of here? I had taken for granted the beheading that awaited any female of the Harem. It didn’t have to be like this. But if I made it all the way home at this stage, what of the Spheres? The minhags alone would do me in. The Muses would kill me. Better if I slayed myself.

As the harbour lights of Jaffa hovered into sight, I adjusted the noose to the nape of my neck, tested the tension and jerked myself off the floor. Flashes of light, my lives passing before my eyes in a jumble of memories, the rope broke my neck in one fell swoop, severing my spine. Not too much pain. Self-asphyxiation is not the worst way to die.

‘What the hell happened?’ I ask, gagging. My throat is killing me. I can hardly get the words out.

‘You hanged yourself, sweetie,’ says Clio, ticking off a box on her scroll. ‘To get out of your fix you had to asphyxiate. Clever move.’

‘Nu, it worked?’ I am relieved. I’d never have survived the restrictions of the Revival.

‘I don’t remember a thing. Did I twitch? Did I evacuate my bowels?’ I’d seen hangings aplenty and it was never a pretty sight.

‘Your ligature constricted, your laryngeal and tracheal lumina narrowed, forcing up the root of your tongue against the posterior wall of your pharynx, folding the epiglottis over the entrance of the larynx, blocking the airway,’ said Callie. ‘Everything’s connected.’

‘Fair assessment, sister,’ says Urania. ‘Alternatively, her jugular vein could also have been blocked by the compression of the ligature resulting in stoppage of cerebral circulation and a rapid rise in venous pressure in her head.’

‘It could have been worse,’ says Euterpe. ‘You could have had a reflex vagal inhibition from pressure on the vagal sheath or carotid bodies.’

‘Or damaged the saz. Hand it over,’ says Mel. I realise I’m still clutching onto the instrument for dear lives. She unclenches the saz from my cold, dead hands and curls her left hand around its slender neck, forming a half diminished minor. The vibrations of all my stories live on in that sodden saz. Reprising one of my odes to the Sultan, When Solly Met Roxy, she strums, tearing up the Muses. They reach for tissue nimbus and blow noses loudly.

‘Eureka! It’s still resonant,’ cries Poly.

‘It’s so beautiful,’ sniffs Mel.

‘Encompasses the spirit of the Age,’ says Clio. ‘This is what we’re missing.’

‘She may be ready now to be even more of an inspiration.’

‘More?’ I am indignant. ‘If it wasn’t for me, Solly would never have found true love with Roxy.’

‘Coincidence, my sweet,’ says Euterpe. ‘It’s time for you to be literally embodied within a bold new musical style. You’ve given us the minor third. Now it’s time for a little spit and polish.

Book VIII: ‘Commedia in Cremona’ Italy 1689 CE

Urania and Melponeme are arguing ferociously, their gauzy himations skittering across the omnisphere, pearly pink, pale green, like an earthpig star shower.

‘You can’t leave him now,’ Mel says. ‘He’s on the brink of a great discovery.’

‘I’ve given that man everything,’ Urania spits thrice. ‘The desire, the talent, the means. And what does he do? Cheats on me with my own sister, no less.’

‘He needs to know a little tragedy,’ Mel says. ‘Man cannot survive on infidelity alone.’

'If I'd known you were playing with his heartstrings, Mel, I would have left him to your seductions.'

'But look how he's matured. Look at his craftsmanship.'

'Yes, but it's all hollow. His violins will not last out the century.'

'Give the man a break, it's only 1689. Nobody says his work has to be eternal.'

'But he was this close,' Urania gestures a miniscule finger gap. 'All he needs now is to perfect the varnish to achieve immortality.'

'Well, his ninth kid is about to issue forth. I don't think he has much time for experiments in lacquer.'

'He's already had three stillborn sons. We can't afford to let him lose another one. His entire legacy's at stake.'

'We need an intervention, fast.' They both turn to stare at me on the periphery, buttering strawberry poptarts from the solar toaster.

'Wanda, what are you doing for the Baroque?' asks Mel. I didn't have much in mind for manifestation.

'Pass,' I say. 'I'm happy to view it from a distance.'

'Come on, Wanda, it'll be fun,' Mel says.

'And Cremona is gorgeous at this time of year,' Urania adds.

'Guys, I really don't need another repeat of the whole scapegoat thing.'

'Oh, don't worry about that,' Thalia says. 'There's hardly a Yiddel left in Europe. They're blaming the Protestants these days.'

'And I'm not wearing that yellow star again. Or the odd shoes. Or that funny hat.'

'You can stay as sweet as you are,' says Urania. 'And this time you'll get a clothing allowance. I've just put the final touches on the Commedia Dell'Arte Collection. You'll make a perfect Columbina. She nips behind a nimbus and produces the most exquisite onesie, patterned with diaphanous double diamonds in black and silver with a hint of pesca. I was harlequinned all at once into curiosity and Haute Couture.

'Do I get to keep the outfit?' I asked.

'Just channel hop over to Lombardy,' Mel instructs. 'Help take his mind off the birth. Show him a glimpse of stocking. Give the wife a bit of a hand with the baby. He'll soon be in the mood for inspiration.'

'Problem is, he can't get his horse hairs up when his wife is laying in,' Urania snorted.

'I can lend a hand, but only if I'm attracted to his body chemistry,' I say.

'Help him discover the secret of the varnish,' says Callie. 'It's your one shot at mortality.'

What's a girl to do if a Muse promises you a glimpse of the ordinary?

'I'll do it,' I say, 'on one condition.'

'Name it.'

'I'm going in pre-menopause.'

'Are you really sure that's wise? He's getting on in years, our luthier.'

'It's the one way to keep the attention of some ripe fruit,' I say. 'I'm so tired of breaking in the lust of seedlings.'

'Join the club,' Urania says, 'I had to appear as a paint stripper once.'

'If you'd met him as a lad, his luthier's lure may have passed you by,' Mel says. 'He was completely obsessed by his schmekel and his woodwork. Very doh-re-me-me-me in the first flush of success.'

'Fifty years on, he's mellowed,' Urania says. 'His work has deepened, but he's still looking for that which will make him immortal.'

'The secret of the varnish,' Mel says, in a hushed tone. Makes violins immortal. Cures piles instantly. His tapping of tree sap from the maple that grows on the banks of the Po oxidises the metals in the wood curing process, ensures that the bridge has minimum moisture, and will cause the vibrations from its continual playing to improve as it echoes through the centuries, sonic repositories of times past. Any Stradivarius has a history coming to it. Especially when it's guitar shaped.

'But he's too distracted by the birthing crisis. Even after eight offspring and three still births.'

'Another bleeding baby is about to bite the dust,' Euterpe says, 'and there's a scarcity of midwives since the witch hunts.'

'We'll give you a few days off in Milano,' Urania says. 'There's some great museums there, our namesakes. And the fountains are fantastic.'

'Then I'm going in as two-and-twenty,' I say. 'Not too naïve. Not too worldy. Goldilocks in the groove.' The harem had done good things for my skin; never being exposed to sunlight is

really the way a lady keeps her collagen plumped. The Pleroma has no effect whatsoever on my complexion. Thus, I craftily incarnate to a younger self to salvage the reputation of the Latin luthier. It's the only way I can reignite his flagging Muse.

i

Contrary to the assurance of the muses, the late Seventeenth Century was not a good time on the Continent. Hardly anything had changed in four hundred years. Cathars were annihilated by their Catholic overlords, who disallowed any alternative brownie points on their karmic turf. Then, they couldn't tell syphilis from leprosy, and hounded the lepers and the hookers out of town; eventually a cure was found for both, but up until then you couldn't tell who had a missing nose from a Lazarillian scab, or whose schmekel was about to drop off from the dropsy.

Seeing as I wasn't due in Cremona until Mercury retrograded with Uranus on the gibbous moon, I thought I'd take a side trip and see what had changed since Zenobia was traipsed through the streets in her golden chains en route to her fate. Everything looked a little run down and much of it was in total ruin. Except for the fountains. The spurting was spectacular. The Empire vanquished? If so, anything is possible. I queued up for Leo's last supper to see if he'd included me in the shot. But no, only my stupid cousin Mary, the one who got all the credit. I jumped the line for the Palazzo Dugnani and the Palazzo Reale, tributes to the nonotuplets whose collectors' fever harks back to before Jupiter. Before Yossi, even. The art was incredible; the politics were insane.

I swung through the alleyway of strumpets and crumpets leading onto a massive piazza in which knots of people were feeding their faces and holding their bellies at the antics of the comedy carts that lured them from the sidelines. Before I dove into the madding crowd, I thought I'd catch a bird's eye view of the city. I entered the hedgehog-shaped cathedral; one hundred and fifty steps, pausing every thirty or so to catch my breath. I sat on one of the ramparts, the whole of Milano spread beneath my untethered feet. Between the miniature spires, people as tiny as teraphim clustered among thousands of dot-sized marble statues. The sounds of laughter filtered up into the tower in various keys. Now that I had the lie of the land, I could join in the festivities. I descended the hedgehog, bought myself a double mocca gelato and wandered about to see what would take my fancy. It was as if all the camp followers of the Roman Empire had decamped at the Piazza del Duomo.

There were at least two dozen theatrical wagons jostling for attention around the piazza. They all seemed to be performing variations of the same scene in an array of grotesque masks; weathered bovine leather, I surmised, from the scent of curing, covering the forehead and exaggerating the schnozz to albatrossian proportions, ending above the mouth, free to spout the most utter gibberish. On each makeshift stage, a lecherous old vecchio was poking his beak into the protestations of a slim-waisted wench, Colombina; there was also the lively, acrobatic Immorato, the lover, Piero. The mènage was enacting the classic love triangle; the vecchio wanting to bed Colombina and steal her dowry to prove his prowess; he'd strike the immorato with his walking stick, who'd turn the staff against the vecchio in a series of back flips. The vecchio would change his mask to that of an immorato – smaller schnozz – and offer elaborate gifts to inveigle Colombina, but his zanni, his servant, would give him away. The Immorato would bicker and float while the zanni uncovered the deception; Colombina would faint, her immorato balanced on the wagon rim, and the vecchio would die of a self-inflicted wound. This all provoked great hilarity from the crowd, who egged on the actors, knowing full well that this was all foreshadowed in the prologue.

One particular wagon caught my eye, all done up in stars and moons and unicorns. The words Trastevere Troupers were emblazoned on the side and their well-fed horses looked hot to trot. As the hedgehog bells chimed the suppertime sunset, comedy carts packed up and trouped out of town. The Trasteverians loitered; filaments of good brandy were in the air, and melted mozzarella; they had clearly made a deal with a pizzeria on the piazza and were getting takeouts. I had enough funds for a slap-up meal, but if Strad's varnishing trick didn't work, I'd have to save my Lire for a cloudy day. I moved closer and tried to fathom who was beneath the masks.

'Ciao,' I said in my best Lombardy accent.

'Como?' A clown wearing pyjamas about ten sizes too big for him looked blank.

'I loved your performance just now. I'm an actress myself, and a musician. I was wondering if I could join your troupe?'

'Piss off,' said the clown.

'No, listen, I can make myself really useful during your intervals. I play. I sing. And I could do with a bite.'

'Here, sunshine tits, bite this,' cracked a trouper in a white flour sack, clapping a hand over his codpiece. A ripple of laughter emitted from the pizza eaters.

‘Are all you Lombardians this courteous?’ I asked, arching my brows.

The codpiece spat. ‘We’re not Lombardian. We’re Trasteverian. Wrong side of Rome.’

‘Give her a slice,’ said a cross-dressing blond with a wasp-like waist, ‘We could do with a piece of cuolo for the entreact.’

‘What’s going on, Piero?’ asked a scarlet clad vecchio, ripping off his mask to reveal a ravaged face, pockmarked to eternity, ginger fringe plastered to his forehead. Attractive, in a repulsive kind of way.

‘This vagabond here says she wants some pizza.’

‘And what will she do to merit a crumb of our hard-earned dough?’

‘She has to sing for her supper.’

‘I’m really good on mandora,’ I said, ‘and I catch on really quickly.’

‘Alright then, give us a tune,’ mocked pyjama boy. A battered, out of tune lute was passed to me by greasy hands. It had been a while since I’d played in public, but the same simple chords have always done me good service for many a singsong. I contrived a ditty that was part Langue D’Oc, part Ottoman.

‘Please, kind sir, won’t you listen to me
If that’s a pizza, I’d love some for free
Quite far have I travelled, in music and song
As part of your troupe I would like to belong.’

And the troupers joined in, adding their own vocal improvisations, while I bashed out the chords.

‘Give the kid a break,’ said the vecchio, eying my crotch. ‘With or without anchovies?’

And that’s how I got into the Trastevere Troupers for their North Italian tour. They were travelling to Firenze via Cremona and I spent a memorable two weeks on the road, stopping at villages along the way to fill up the troupe’s coffers. I worked my way quite quickly from the entreact, where I played my quatrains based on thematic suggestions from the crowd: mocking the Pope, a bit of Yiddel bating; the exorbitant price of pasta. I had quite a few tricks up my arlecchina sleeve. You have to be able to read the crowd, react quickly, and you soon work out your schtik. By the time we got to Croce, the troupers were admiring, if not copying my mode of dress and stage business. Not for nothing are they known as lazzi. Of course, Pantalone tried it on with me, but sometimes it’s what you know, not who you know. Not only in a biblical sense.

ii

As we neared the Po, I saw the town, much like any others along the route – small terraced houses backed onto the river; outer clusters giving way to terraced dwellings, converging on a small piazza with its drinking holes placed metres from each other to serve the male populace. There was one major difference: the scent of wood shavings permeating the morning air. As we were starving, we stopped off in a tavern on the square to tuck into some linguine alla matriciana, without the chazzer, and a few tankards of craft beer.

I was wiping my plate with a crust of sourdough when Stradivarius hobbled into the tavern. The Muses had described him to an 'S'; silvery white locks dangling to his waist, a scraggly beard to match, slightly overhung lip – munchable; silk stockings to his knees, scarlet breeches. And a limp that he made infamous throughout history. Not for nothing do they call it Lover's Fracture. It's the heel itself, toughest bone in the body, the one you land on, the one that takes ages to cremate, the one that puts you back on your feet. Jumping from bedroom to balcony with his trousers round his ankles had taken its toll on Strad, and he'd shattered his calcaneus thrice. Now, at sixty-nine, awaiting his ninth child with his second wife, he could do no more than stand in the cool Italian tavern and howl his plea. This was the lustful luthier I'd been sent to find? Give me a break.

'L'acqua è rotta, the waters they have broken!' he roared to the tavern.

'Bravo, Strad,' said the vecchio, wiping his red beard with his sleeve. 'Let's hope it's a boychick this time.'

'The midwife! Where is she, the midwife?'

'There is no midwife, Strad,' said the bartender. 'She drowned during the last dunkings.'

'Surely not. Alicia de Bono delivered my lastborn nine months ago.'

'It's gone a bit whacky in the last few months,' the barman said. 'New edicts every day. The Pope wants the midwives gone. We get rid of them, pronto.'

'The baby, he is coming. He's coming, the baby!' Strad flailed his arms about his belly and lurched about the room. The troupe found this hilarious and took up their lazzi, each according to their various characters; Pierro lay down on the floor in the foetal position and sucked his thumb, Colombina assumed the birthing crouch, thighs akimbo; Pantalone inspected the womb's door. I licked the last alla matriciana off my pinkie.

‘They didn’t *all* die, gentlemen,’ I said.

‘No, no,’ said the barman, ‘we tested them all. I myself saw Alicia de Bono pulled out of the river. She was innocent, poor woman. But she was the last.’

‘She may not have told you,’ I said, rolling back my diamond studded sleeves, ‘but I may have escaped your net. I have been away delivering triplets in Croce Grande. All girls, Yahweh help them. Unfortunately, the mother didn’t breathe long enough to witness their first cries. The abbess trapped me in her convent to assist with all the additional birthings; the nuns were being impregnated weekly by passing crusaders, desperate for a schtup, finding pomegranate everywhere they could. At least with enough witches and whores it kept the scales in balance. I managed to escape in a load of swaddling clothes, and these kind sirs’ – I motioned to the ménage on the floor – ‘disguised me in this leafy apparel and saved my life.’

‘A likely story,’ said the luthier.

‘Ees true,’ Piero removed his thumb. ‘Zees Sister Arlecchina, she can make the babies fall from the sky.’

Strad snorted. ‘Then we’re wasting time. Please, follow me. It looks as if I have little choice.’

‘Don’t sweat it, maestro,’ I said, puffing through the alleyways to his modest mansion on the outskirts. ‘And when we’re through, I’d love to have a look at some of your etchings.’

iii

I met Strad on the outer cusp of the Renaissance. It was as Rococo as you could get. It was one of the coldest winters Cremona had ever had. A mini Ice Age, in truth. That’s also one of the knotty mysteries of Strad’s Strads. Was the wood wound tighter in the fall of ’89? Was it the lacquer? Was it perhaps the admixture of masculine ingenuity and my otherworldly charms?

Nobody knew Strad was such a schtupper. He covered his tracks well and he kept his wife in a state of pregnancy nine months a year. What’s a serial fiddler to do? He had quite a name in Cremona by the time I got there; husbands despised him, wives practically threw themselves at him. A diddle here, a piddle there, Strad had never met a pomegranate he could resist. The signoras and signorinas he seduced never had the heart to tell him they couldn’t get no satisfaction. No matter. The moment he’d bedded them, he left them, usually through the second

floor window off the balcony. Hence the lover's fractures. Intimacy was not Strad's strong point. Even though he was a great luthier, he liked a little nookie with his gnocchi.

Strad had his affairs, but it was inspiration he was looking for. He liked them young and childbearing. He'd worn out his first wife and was about to condemn the second to death, even as she laboured for life. Apart from her unfortunate looks, her introverted temperament, and a tendency to birth babies who died in infancy, Antonia had everything going for her. Strad spent most of his time in his workshop, turning shapes around in search of the perfect form.

I didn't really want to step in as a midwife. But not one idiot villager knew how to cope with a pomegranate in partum. I had to take over; we've got enough matriarchal martyrs to fill several circles of hell. Antonia Stradivari, nee Shaimanowitz, had birthed three dead babies in a row, and this time life had to stick. Strong seed Strad had, so abundant that there were already eight mini-luthiers in as many years. Sophia had already started to sand down violin sides. Stefania could string a bow blindfolded, and Filomela had a gift for the curve of the pegboard. Babies born dead were still named, blessed, buried, and mourned in miniature coffins, laid out by Antonia herself, at the edge of the cemetery, in the Converso section.

I've seen it all before; the screamers, the moaners, the groaners, the screechers, the bleeders, the talkers, the dumb and the dead. Antonia had been contracting for six hours now and the baby's head hadn't yet crowned. She was dilated and screaming like a stuck pig.

'Push, Antonia Stradivari,' I crooned across distended belly, dabbing her clammy forehead with a polishing cloth soaked with lavender and eucalyptus. The room was lit with tallow candles, making it difficult to see any detail between her legs. A massive contraction wracked her body. Antonia propped up on her elbows and invoked every curse she'd ever heard towards her husband.

'A plague upon you, Antoni Stradivari,' she roared. 'How can you believe in a God that creates such pain … you've murdered me again, Antoni Stradivari. You are lower than dirt, dirtier than donkey shit.'

'Antoni Stradivari what have you dooooone to meeeeeee.'

'Push, Antonia, push, this one's coming out alive,' I hissed. Antonia threw her head back and howled at the heavens.

'Basta! Basta!'

'We don't want to lose this one, too! I'm telling you, Antonia, no God, no husband, no

Antoni Stradivari curse will help you now. Push, meidele, push!'

Antonia's screams could be heard five villages away and with this latest bearing down, I grabbed the wracked woman by the hands and wrenched her onto her haunches. A little something I learned back in Bethany.

The contractions went on for an eternity. The neighbours were going bonkers, knocking on the walls, 'Taci, taci, we can't sleep. For the love of the Virgin, get it over with!' Nobody knew quite what to do with her. Having assisted those nuns in all those birthings, I had quite a compendium of knowledge. Artery of heart and juice of pomegranate leaked onto the makeshift birthing stool as Antonia laboured upon the autumnal Cremona breeze.

Strad, of course, was nowhere to be found.

While Antonia squatted, writhing, an elderly man appeared at the threshold of the townhouse. He had reddish ringlets down to his waist, a babysoft beard, a three-cornered hat like a well-baked hamantaschen and pure white silken suspenders held up by golden clasps. Upon his long black cloak was an embroidered yellow O that matched his hat. He set up a-chanting in Aramaic, mispronouncing several words such that I cringed.

'Yit'ga'dol v'yit-ka-dosh sh'mei ra'bo,' he wailed.

'Hang on a vesper,' I said, 'what the fig are you doing? That's the Yiddel prayer for the dead.'

'The lady is about to meet her Maker, can you not see? B'alma div'ra chirutei, v'yamlich malchutei.'

'But why are you saying kaddish now? She's alive and squatting.'

'Antonia is a Converso. Long line of Levites from Lombardy. I promised her father that if she was ever to perish before me, I would pray over her body.'

'But you only do that after the final heartbeat,' I said. 'This is quite out of line.'

'We do things differently here, we do it Sabbatai's way.'

'In these parts, we utter these prayers while the soul still cleaves. B'chaiyeichon uv'yo-meichon, uv'chaiyei d'chol beit Yisroel.'

'Bobbemeise!' I was furious. 'It's not for you to dictate the way this woman ends her life.'

'V'al kol Yisroel, vi'im'ru …'

‘If my soul sister here is going to her afterlife, at least let her depart with the sounds that can soothe her in the world to come.’

‘Ba’agala u’vizman kariv v'im'ru ...’

‘Amen,’ I said, by rote. ‘Merde de cheval, Rov. Antonia doesn’t even speak Aramaic. How about something more to her taste?’

‘This prayer is heaven sent for that purpose,’ he said.

‘Dromedary droppings,’ I said. It was time to assert my human rites.

I rent the tavern pinafore asunder and stepped out in my harlequin refinery. Shaking out the whorl of curl around my crown chakra, I grabbed a newly strung Strad from the wall and balanced its cushioned rest under my chin. I picked up the bow, bringing horsehair to cat gut and carved a mournful arc out of the sonic universe. The Rabbi averted his gaze. Strains of the ancient birthing ritual burrowed through the earth and into my arms, untainted, incandescent. No nonny nonnies, no oseh shaloms, just a cry from the womb of how it would be for a neonate to slither from between his mother’s legs, utter his first scream and find her lifeless.

‘Sometimes I feel … like a motherless child,’ I sang, channelling the sadness of my lost childhood. I used the gaps between the words to fiddle a little in Aeolian mode. The bowing was flowing and the melody tumbled out. Ektar twang met perfect pitch with four strings optioned for glory.

‘A long … way … from home.’ I finished up on the four-five-one pattern, arpeggios swooping in and out of my Rococo rendition.

Antonia bore down as a small tsunami crashed through her body. I looked out the mottled window and saw Strad sitting desolately in the courtyard. Another contraction. More pushing. Then, climax. Antonia let out an almighty roar as the last lilt of the birth mantra did the trick. Through the glistening crevice of her womb appeared a thicket of ginger, then a neonate’s squished features, contorted from the Night Fairy’s philtrum kiss.

‘It’s coming, it’s nearly here, push, push,’ I said, laying down the Strad and crooning in key as I creamed my hands in snake oil jelly and inserted my fingers around her engorged pomegranate. Antonia screamed blue murder one more time, and the baby slithered out like an eel into a saucepan.

‘It’s a boy, it’s a sheine boychick!’ I crowed. Antonia wept with relief.

The Rabbi started singing Oseh Shalom from the top again. I couldn't take one more syllable. Images of the Temple assailed my memory; the taking of my hymen, the stealing of my youth.

'Ya'a'se shalom. Ya'a'se shalom. Shalom aleinu v'al kol Yisra'el.'

'Stop. Just stop!' I clutched the old bugger around the throat and dealt his speech chakra a massive blow. Winded, his invocation came to a grinding halt.

Antonia raised herself up from the bed, eyes lolling. The baby was being smacked into life by one of the older daughters.

Strad stood in the doorway, his face a study in thunder.

'Stop this racket right now,' he commanded. 'There are to be no pagan customs enacted in this house.'

'But, Antonius Stradivarius,' the Rabbi simpered, 'it's a boy.'

'So be it. Well, still, no need for such feminine merriment.'

'Antonius Stradivarius, you have made a boy child for the Tribe,' said the Rov. 'And according to the revived laws of our people, it is your duty to God to have him circumcised.'

'What in heaven's name for?'

'You swore an oath when you married Antonia, that if the brit milah ever came back onto the statues, he would be consecrated into the congregation.'

'Nobody said anything about a bris,' Strad said, 'None of the others has been mutilated.'

'The Pope has lightened the bris laws and tightened the pomegranate policies. Antonia's parents will be livid if you don't respect his word.'

'What's the point of putting the child through this kind of pain?' Strad asked. 'We're Catholics now, we can get away with a foot washing ceremony.'

'No more,' said the Rov. 'The brit milah binds the people of Israel for all eternity to their maker.'

'By the skin of their foreskins? Over my dead body,' roared the luthier. 'Now get out, and stop giving my wife all these fancy ideas.' The Rabbi scuttled from the room, ringlets awry.

iv

I'm often aroused in times of crisis. The birth contractions, the guts and the gore and the tears provoke in me a frisson not normally achieved outside warfare. And when that baby boy was

eventually placed in the limp arms of his mother, mewling and puking, I felt I could let my own fluids flow. I could see Strad was a bit worked up himself. In our defense, we did wait a respectful forty-eight hours to see whether Antonia would pull herself together sufficiently to satiate his schmekel proclivities. But the innuendo had begun and there was precious little I could do to stop us having our way with each other. Waiting just made it worse.

Must I go once more into the stirrings and the stiffenings? The pros and cons of another woman's man? Who is anyone to judge? Antonia was in no mood for making whoopee. Strad was fit to burst. And besides, who was it who breastfed that bairn? Whose apricot kernels leaked sap when he cried? Doubling up as wet nurse cum doolah had whipped up quite an appetite for transgression.

We lay across his bending bench, sharing a cigarillo, gazing upwards at the stars through the slats in the ceiling. Antonia moaned lightly from the bedroom, the baby breathing in short snorty gasps so I knew he was alive.

'Your body is perfect,' he mused.

'Hardly,' I said. 'It's mainly because it hasn't been disfigured by childbirth.'

'Antonia will die if she knows I'm consorting with another,' he said. 'Last maiden she caught me with she withheld sex for a year. That's why there's such a gap between Franny and Alessandra.'

'But there must have been a time when you lusted for her carnally?'

'Antonia had a magnificent body when I first encountered her, standing by the cathedral font during her forced baptism. I happened to be in church that day. I couldn't suppress my presto. Antonia was already twenty-seven and my loins were hankering for concupiscence. Her family never fully approved the match.'

I stretched over to take the cigarillo from his lips, my upper arm above my head, my belly taut, odalisque pose.

'Don't move,' he said, stripping a plank of spruce from above his bed. I froze. He pressed the cool wood into the curve of my waist and moulded it into my flanks.

'That's it,' he said. 'If I carve a naval in the middle, like so, I can create a rounder body, from which a more resonant sound can be emitted.'

'Like a lute?'

'Oh, lutes,' he said, 'They're so last century.'

‘Or a saz? ’I said. I’d struck a few sazzes in my time in the Harem.

‘More like a kithara,’ he said. ‘More like the body of a woman.’

‘I play a little kithara,’ I said. ‘It’s a better accompaniment than the violin.’

‘Then I will create for you the perfect kithara,’ he said. ‘You saved the life of my wife with your song sung blue. You will be immortalised in my new invention.’

But I can’t sing with that chinny chin chin thing,’ I said. ‘Lose some of the fiddly bits. And bigger, make it much bigger. I want to be able to hold it in my arms.’

‘You will hold it across your lap, Strad said, ‘like the komuz of antiquity.’

‘What if we adjust the neck out to here?’ I opened my arms wide. ‘And I’m left handed. Most of the stuff I’ve been playing I have to imagine in a mirror.’

‘That’s what we’ll do then,’ he said. ‘I will invent it to be strung from east to west and from west to east such that even the most sinister among us can play the new sensation.’

v

It’s one thing being an inspiration for a work of art. It’s quite another waiting for it to be completed. During the perspiration phase, you’re not really required. And that’s about ninety-nine percent of the schlep. Strad didn’t like anyone to watch him work, but he needed me for fittings, and I flitted between feeds and infidelity, from bedroom to workshop, to fulfill the family’s requirements. One squeak from the baby and breast milk would leak out of me like a suckling sow. It drove Strad to drink. And in between the burpings and the nannyings I juggled a few piazza gigs with the Trastevarians, returning to Strad’s pad after the second entreact for the late-night feed.

Antonia was napping under the influence of the drop of mandragora I’d put in her hot milk. The children were turning necks and heads and feet in the nursery, seeking favour with Papa as the one who could carve with the highest eptitude. I entered the workshop, wiping puke off my shoulder. There were so many different types of wood it made me quite dizzy.

‘How do you know which to choose?’ I wondered aloud. Strad held a plank like a holy relic.

‘The unformed instrument speaks to me from my imagination, meets the sweat of my brow and manifests in wood and gut and bone,’ he said. ‘And now, inspired by your luscious self, this kithara is going to be a first of its kind.’

‘What does the unformed instrument say to you?’ I asked. He pressed both forefingers to his temples and closed his eyes.

‘I’m getting Indian rosewood quite clearly for the flanks and back, and,’ he felt along the boards, ‘Spanish cedar for the neck.’ He stacked four thin planks against the wall, mere shadows of their former sylphs, and clamped them together top and bottom, side by side.

‘Stand right here,’ he said. I leaned against the planks, drawing in their sappy flavour; rose and wood were always good bedfellows. Strad picked up a piece of white chalk. ‘Now, lift up your arm again, yes, like that, above your head. Now the other arm. Yes, that’s good. Now hold still while I outline your waist.’

‘This wood looks like it’s been mauled by a bear.’

‘It’s the classic shape of the pattern in the wood. Yes, it does look a bit like a claw mark.’ He kissed me lightly behind my left earlobe as he came up for the neck. ‘I will carve our initials into the centre of this neck, cara mia, such that eternity will know our love.’ He whittled away at the inner core and I lit another cig.

‘And then?’

‘You have to look at the condition of the wood and choose parts that have straight and dense annual rings. You can count the age of a tree by those rings.’ I lost it at about two hundred.

‘The older rings are closer together emanating from the centre,’ he continued. ‘And they are stronger.’

‘Nu, we kill an ancient tree for the pleasure of our musical passions?’

‘Ah, but the wood is now caught in a suspended animation, forever serving beyond necessity. Is that not true immortality?’ I thought it not the time to remind him that without perfecting the varnish, his work would wind up on the ash heap of history, another blip on the human radar.

‘The vibrations of the strings are destined to resonate in the centre of the instrument, which is why we don’t use the heart of the wood for the hole.’ I stifled a yawn. It was all a bit too technical and I had to get back to the piazza for the midnight show.

‘The top receives these vibrations and creates sound waves,’ he continued, ‘to receive frequencies and energies. That’s why we use the rosewood.’ He reached over and plucked a pomegranate hair.

‘Oy,’ I said, ‘What did you do that for?’

‘To show you the width of the wood that I sand down, hair by hair, sometimes twenty times before I am satisfied. He straightened the hair but it poinged back to frizz. ‘After I do the book matching, I sand it down again. It is a craft born of the need for wood to cross paths at an angle. It is the way of the belly. The way of the resonance.’

I was beginning to feel giddy. There was no way I wanted to sit for hours while he book-matched each panel, determining the thickness of the top back and sides, taking them off, sanding them down, checking the thickness again.

‘How long is this going to take?’ I asked. I had a cart check in about an hour.

‘The kithara will be ready by the time the snows melt and the daffodils bloom.’

‘Can’t you take a few short cuts?’ I really didn’t feel like another winter in Europe.

‘Each instrument must be better than the one before. I’ve reached a plateau and can go no further. I’ve tried my wife’s curves; I’ve tried the rump of little boys, but nothing has met the mark. I need an ideal woman, one not marred by the slack belly of childbirth, someone fresh and untainted by the world. That’s why I keep trading them in. I accede to their womb tick and then they birth them and I can never look at their pomegranates again with innocent eyes.’

‘Is that why you’ve had so many affairs?’

‘The marks of their motherhood put me in mind of my mortality,’ he said. ‘The wood will last forever.’ Well, almost forever,’ he trailed off.

‘What’s missing?’

‘I know that my instruments can have a lifetime far beyond my own.’ Strad said. I’ve experimented with everything – albumen, snail slime, nasal mucous, but I can’t quite find the right ingredient. Now skedaddle. I need to concentrate.’

I had a hunch, but it was too early to tell. First things first, I had to pin down the lazzi of the mock bris. I expressed a bottle for the baby, dosed Antonia with another sluk of mandragora and slipped out to consult with the Commedia crew.

vi

Wending my way to the piazza, I encountered the same reddish Rov who had prayed over Antonia’s living flesh so intrusively. I was dressed in my Arlecchina threads, peaches exposed, leafy sleeves ready for action. Somehow people took my garb for that of a servant. The very idea.

‘Nu, Zanni?’ he asked. Calling someone a zanni dispensed with the need to remember a servant’s actual name. It also denoted the purported social status of the callee.

‘Has the great Stradivarius made plans for the brit milah? I’d do the cutting myself, but it’s been a while since my last circumcision and my hands are a little shaky. It would be a tragedy if I snipped off more than I can chew.’ He windmilled his arms in a scary scissor motion. Delirium tremens I’ll take a small bet.

‘He’s busy,’ I said, ‘inventing the greatest guitar the world has ever seen. Stradivari has no time for borrowed customs.’

‘A plague upon the house that fails to follow the ways of Yahweh,’ the Rabbi said. ‘And a curse upon his immortality. May his varnish ever curdle if he does not follow the ways of the ancestors.’

‘Slow down, Rov,’ I said. ‘He doesn’t have to obey your laws. It’s his wife who’s the Converso around here.’

‘The minhags have been rewritten,’ said the red Rov. ‘The brit milah is once again imperative to preserve the sanctity of the covenant. Antonia’s parents will be here for the ceremony and I can’t break it to them that their child will be unconsecrated.’

‘Rov, it’s barbaric, admit it. It may have served some sanitary purpose back in the desert with crabs and things, but it marks the baby for life and it takes away much of his future schmekel sensation.’

‘I don’t know this schmekel.’

‘His dingaling, Rov. I performed a bris in Cochin some time back. I was the sandek, the honoured guest, holding the baby while the mohel did his mohelling. I know that little heart shape at the back of the glans, I understand the mark of Yahweh upon his tiny todger, I can estimate the heft of the blade to amputate the entire foreskin in one fell swoop. I tell you, Rov, if they ever let the mothers watch, this torture would stop within one generation.’

‘You exaggerate, signorina.’

‘Come on, Rov. Mutilating a neonate. It’s sheer, bloody agony.’

‘We must draw blood. And it must cause pain. These are the two conditions for the fulfilling of the convent.’

‘But the baby suffers so.’

‘Without suffering, the covenant does not count. It is performed to seal the bond between man and Yahweh. The bloodshed symbolises the way that man unites with God as a bride with her groom.’

‘Nu, you’re saying it gives the baby a taste of what it’s like to be woman?’

‘How do you figure that?’ The Rov was flummoxed.

‘The blood, the pain, the bride of Yahweh – isn’t it a foretaste of what women endure for their entire lives?’

‘I’ll have to check,’ said the Rov, ‘but nevertheless, we are tasked to impose this minhag on the ninth child of Stradivarius.’

‘I’ll make sure he’s snipped right,’ I said. ‘Just please don’t let on that I’m doing you any favours. I have my reasons for wanting the child to live.’

‘Zanni, we can’t have you in the shul hall dressed like that. You will have to don the garb of a mohel.’ He doffed off his coarse black cloak, under which was an identical ill-fitting black robe.

‘Don’t they mistake you for a monk in that outfit?’ I asked.

‘They have. They do. That is why we wear the double yellow O. It is the badge that marks our tribe. Caught without it, we’re dead chazzer.’

‘I’ll wear the cloth if you insist, Rov, but know this; a woman’s touch will go down far better at this bris than any schmekel collector.’

‘The infant may not have his tinkie winkie at all if I don’t hand it over.’

vii

It was a hard Commedia crowd that night. A new bill had just been issued and everyone wanted a skit on witch-burning. The Pope had changed his bishops in the dead of night and the citizens were enraged. The lazzi of the angry neighbours subsequently became a stock scene for the Trasteverians. Nibbling pizza in the piazza, Pantalone was preoccupied with a new batch of female admirers and, seeing as I wasn’t putting out for his protrusions in public, I had to time my request carefully. Post-coital was best, predawn before the trembles set in. Thus, I bided my

time, darting back to Strad's pad for a fitting and a feed, returning to the sleeping cart with a few silver candlesticks as incentive and laid out my plan to a well-hungover Pantalone.

'Pant,' I said, 'Pant, wake up. They want the kid to have a bris.' Pantalone yawned and wiped away crumbs of sleep from hooded lids.

'What's a bris? Christ, I'd kill for a hit of tobacco.' I lit him a cigarillo stompie.

'It's a Yiddel circumcision, idiot. They cut the baby's foreskin off.'

'You jest.'

'At eight days old.'

'Why the fig would they do that?'

'It's a Yahweh thing.'

'What, like a bloodletting for the invisible God?'

'Exactly, Pant, I've seen it done. It was forbidden and permitted, then banned and allowed, then forbidden again, and since the updated Papal proclamation, all Yiddel boychicks have to have it. Antonia's parents insist. They've already booked the hall.'

'Fascinating. But what's this got to do with us?'

'We can't let it happen, Pant. It's barbaric. If I told you right now that I was going to slice off a portion of your schmekel with a blunt instrument, in front of all your friends, without benefit of any numbing, bar a sip of brandy, what would you say?' Pant bent double, clutching his prominent beitzim.

'And then they suck it.'

'They what?'

'It's called metzizah bel peh. It prevents the wound from bleeding.'

'I wouldn't mind that part,' Pant said, 'without the castration bit.'

'They only do it to Yiddels,' I said.

'Yiddels!' Pant spat, thrice. I hadn't quite come out to the players yet, and as I had no 'O' sign or yellow star or blue stripe or double tablet on my harlequin doublet, I doubt whether they cared a fig. I soldiered on.

'I know they're only Yiddels, but why should this neonate suffer? He's very squally, there's a little colic. I'm not sure that he would survive the ordeal. And we need him for the bloodline. Strad's instruments will be lost to history if the boychick doesn't survive.'

‘Listen, we’ve got enough on our plate. We hardly speak the dialect, and we’ve got costumes to sew. I haven’t got time to officiate at some weird Yiddel sacrifice.’

‘I’ll do it in maske, then. We can fake the snip.’

‘You know that women don’t wear maskes.’

‘They do now. Only you and the Rov will know it’s me. I’ll wind this around my face, look.’ I lifted my patched skirts to reveal a closely knitted black stocking, centuries after its time, rolled it down, striptease style, and wound it around the lower part of my face, then up and over my head. The skintightness of the mask had the effect of lowering my forehead and gave my eyes a small, rounded look.

‘I’m tempted to shave my head but that would be a bit too much method,’ I said. ‘This way, nobody will know I’m the mohel.’

‘What’s moles got to do with it?’

‘That’s the one who does the bloody deed. I’ve done a spot of needlework in my youth. And I’ve cut hair from here to China. We can use a dummy for the baby, or one of the troupe. If you cover for me and distract the crowd, we could just get away with a mock bris.’

‘Sounds like a whole new lazzi.’

‘It is, Pant. Think of the royalties. Nu, we’ll need someone to play the post-partum wife. Colombina would be perfect.’

‘Of course, but she would have to pad up her figure.’

‘All the better if she stays attractive. It will throw the Rabbi off the scent.’

‘Then a surrogate for the infant.’ Pantalone said. He was getting into the casting. ‘How about Piero? He’s such a little cry baby.’

‘A natural. And then a döppelganger for Strad; that would be you, Pantalone.’

‘You flatter him. He’s bedded not half as many wenches as I have.’ I ignored the jibe.

‘Wearing this, they will know not whether I am Arlecchino or Arlecchina. We can stupefy the Rabbi and fool the parents. The rest of the troupe can be guests. We can dissemble the whole thing.’

‘What’s the fee?’

‘These candlesticks for a start,’ I said, ‘and a Stradivarius or two for the troupe. They can all don their masks, so Yiddel will they appear. And you can learn the brocha in the space of half an hour. Please, Pant, just this once.’

‘I can retire on half a Strad,’ said Pantalone, slipping his scabbard so high up my thigh I thought he was going to come out of my philtrum.

‘Let’s give it a whirl, then,’ he said. ‘We’ll let the Scaramouche team take the siesta set and we’ll be back for sundowners.’

‘Most brisses they like to do in the morning,’ I said, ‘when the light’s better.’

‘You know we don’t rise until noon, stupido,’ he said.

‘You seem to be rising quite fine right now,’ I jested. He placed his scabbard in my palm, for that is how his schmekel always appeared, red and hot and golden, and I twiddled my slapstick back and forth, tickling him until he pissed himself.

viii

They don’t let Yiddel women circumcise. But in maske, it’s a different story. The Rabbi could only see as far as the end of his nose, even with primitive lunettes, the in-laws were so concerned about appearances they could sooner look beneath the charade as admit they wouldn’t be exiled by century’s end.

I approached the makeshift bimah, swaddled from crown to chin in black silk. Me, not the bimah. I’d gathered my skirt between my legs so they appeared as pantaloons. You can indeed fool some of the people all of the time.

‘Signor Arlecchino, an honour to meet you,’ said the Rov, unfurling a roll of rusty cutting tools – a pincer, scissors, a scalpel, some off-white cotton swabs and a miniature guillotine, such as one uses to slice cigars.

‘Enchanté,’ I said, lowering my tone a few notches. Arlecchino, Arlecchina, what’s in a vowel?

‘We are from the Commedia Converso Ensemble of Grande Croce. We come to offer a new way of circumcision.’ I inspected a scalpel. ‘These instruments are outdated. You cannot ungird any loins with these dysfunctional tools.’

‘The custom was only revived last year. I’ll have to apply to Castile for a new set.’

‘It has been decreed,’ I said, ‘By the Rabbi of Roma, this boychick, Antonio Stradivari Junior, will have his brit, but without the milah. Your face and his foreskin will be saved. And I will do the honours.’

‘You do know how to perform the whole megillah, yes?’ the Rov asked nervously. ‘Certain aspects have not changed in four thousand years.’

‘You’re speaking of the metzitzah bel peh?’

‘The sucking of the wound, yes,’ said the Rov. ‘I know it’s controversial, but it stops the bleeding.’

‘Yes, yes, we’ll be doing the necessary.’ I had the cigar cutter ready up my sleeve but I hoped I wouldn’t have to use it.

I looked down at the pale infant and there was no way I could maim him. I clasped his tiny feet in one hand and a blunt scalpel in the other. Colombina took her position as the sandek, waddling to the bimah with a cushion wrapped around her waist. I passed the baby to Piero who lifted his legs off the yellow velvet cushion and kissed each tiny tootsie. Pantalone grabbed the cigar cutter and slipped it into his garter while I, from within my leafy sleeve, withdrew a small bulb of beetroot. Pantalone embraced Colombina in a slow pas de deux, floating around the bimah to draw the congregation’s attention. I raised the scalpel and brought it down between the baby’s legs. At the moment of the pricking, I must admit, I did pinch the mite to make him screech, and while Piero mimed the baby’s distress, I dabbed the cotton with the tip of the beet and held it up to the congregation to show them that blood had been shed.

I dipped some damp cotton into a basin of soapy water and washed his feet thoroughly, chanting rediscovered prayer words from a bygone age. A rough back translation: ‘Blessed art thou Oh Yahweh, King of It All, Who Has Commanded a Covenant With a Defenceless Neonate Whose Manhood is Maimed For All Time.’ I added the end in Palmyrian so nobody really got the dig. But I felt it necessary, and I got a load off my mind speaking to Yahweh that way, improv style as the lazzi of the beetroot.

Antonio Stradivari Junior died the day after his bris. It wasn’t my fault. I’d protected him from his ancestors’ penile predilection. And my apricots flowed even after we buried him next to his brothers in the Coverso section. Just the thought of him brought out the milk.

No, it was the varnish that did him in. I was pretty sleep deprived by the time the bris rocked around, and that night I couldn’t lay him down he was coughing so badly. I took him into the workshop, burping him on my back, thinking his paltry milky mewling wouldn’t bother him.

Strad was putting the finishing touches to the gloss on the guitar with a fine horsehair brush. Just then, the baby brought up the entire contents of his feed all over the instrument. Strad

nearly hurled his heir across the room. ‘Wait, Strad, look.’ Strad’s fist froze in mid-air. The pine sap and vernix mix was beginning to curdle into a strange amalgam, a reddish resin that, as it dried, gave the guitar a transparent glow.

‘Eu-fucking-reeka,’ Strad blew. ‘By Jove we’ve got it. I knew there was a missing ingredient. Can you make him do it again?’

‘Well only when he wants to,’ I said. ‘He can’t throw up on command.’

Strad picked up the guitar and caressed it. A clear resonance filled the workshop.

‘I knew it,’ he muttered to himself, ‘Vernix on its own wasn’t enough. God knows I tried everything; amber wasn’t it, nor the Atzek copal; sandarac and balsam were too dry, elemi and mastic too elastic. I’ve even wanked once or twice into the mixture to see if it’d do anything. Too alkaline. But this,’ he held up his son’s accidental alchemical potion, ‘this is the ingredient I’ve been seeking all my life.’

‘It must be the acid in the breast milk,’ I said, ‘it’s the same as in coconuts. We used it all the time in Palmyra to cure nappy rash, earache, acne. We even made cheese. I’d heard about adding it to nail varnish, but I assumed it was an old wives’ tale.’

‘Bring him closer.’ A strange smell of tar and sharpness snaked into the air.

‘I don’t think that’s a great idea, Strad. He may inhale the fumes.’

‘Fumes? Fumes is what we need. If it makes him feel ill, he’ll throw up again. Come on, bring him nearer.’ My giddiness was back. ‘And, my Cchina,’ – he always called me Cchina after my stage name, Arlecchina. ‘I need you to strip in order to compare your curves once more to my masterpiece. Put the brat down here.’

The inhalation of vomit meeting vernix was making me lose sense of time and space. The baby was bubbling up a substance that looked like coffee grounds. There were green bits in it. Strad started measuring ingredients. Six hours later, he had perfected the recipe. Antonio Junior was dead. So was I, but I had what I needed.

I’ve got puke and mewl all over my Arlecchino suit. Where the fig am I? It all swims back; Strad’s workshop, hung with ginger violins, inhaling the fumes of verdix and vomit as the luthier bends over my wooden döppelganger. I swear he’s more in love with that kithara than he is with me. I shake my headscarf and the violins pull into focus. It is them. It is they. I have returned.

Clearly the Muses are not happy with the baby suffocating on my watch. Everyone's a scowler. But I did have the secret of the varnish. All over me.

'You're a complete mess, Wanda B. Lazarus,' says Euterpe. 'You have failed again, careless meidele.'

'It's not my fault I lost the kid,' I say, wiping down my leafy sleeves.

'Never mind the infant. You've left the figging Stradivari behind.' Clio is thunderous.

'It wasn't finished. He still had to fashion the tuning pegs.'

'That's beside the point. You had explicit instructions. Straight after his Eureka moment. You were to snatch the formula and make your escape.'

'How was I to know I'd pass out from the fumes?'

'Unconsciousness is no excuse, young lady,' Clio chastises. 'Now we'll have to wait until the Twenty-First to recover that Strad. It will be lost to history for another three hundred years.'

'Here,' I say, scraping the milky resin off my skirts with my ooz komuz and transferring it into a glass bottle used to collect astral anchovies. 'Knock yourselves out. I hope you achieve eternal bliss from putting my death in danger.'

Clio sniffs and shudders. 'This secretion is of no use without the body. Soul alone has no value to us.'

'You're never satisfied,' I say. 'Any kithara will do, surely? You've got loads in those new-fangled museums you're named after.'

'Foolish immortal,' says Clio, 'you just don't get it. We require the original for this spell to work.'

'Nu, what if I just go down again and get you your stupid Strad?' I say. 'I know who's taken it. Pantalone made a duplicate key. And seeing as you know so much, you could maybe give me a few tips to resuscitate Strad Junior.'

'You can never step in time's river twice,' laments Clio.

'Then why do I feel I'm in some kind of musical Groundhog Day?' I ask.

'We are still a few ingredients short of a full Sphere concoction,' Callie says. When we have all the phases, we can present to Zeus.'

'What is it with you girls,' I ask. 'Why are you so intent on your Father's approval?' It's a kind of Zenobia syndrome, where the captive falls in love with the captor.'

'We're trying, okay,' says Clio defensively. 'Papa Zeus has been in charge for a couple of millennia now; it's been safer to play his politics than to awake the goddess and wreak total havoc on earth,' says Urania.

'Problem is he's flip-flopped on his policies about us more times than sandals in a hamsin. It messes with our cosmic dance.'

'Zeus attacks with carbon monoxide, slavery, methane cow farts, fossil fuelled financing. We hold the key to imagination, creativity, ingenuity. We need our Mother to unleash the peace.'

'Then where is this Mother of yours?'

'She's been put under a spell. She's fast asleep,' says Mel.'

'What, like Aurora?' I knew my fables.

'After a fashion. But there's no prince's kiss at the end of this story.'

'Mother cannot be awoken until Musica Universalis has been repaired.'

'That's why your quest is so important. We will orchestrate our findings into a symphony of serenity when the Spheres are complete. Our orbiting opus will lull Zeus and his minions into a dreamless sleep, during which time Mother will awaken and try to balance the scales.'

'Who put her under?'

'Zeus, who else? He was getting such flack from Hera for his nine-night stand, he had to deny everything. She was run off Olympus, Hesiod said. Had to birth us in Boeotia. We've petitioned him, and all we know is he's hell-bent on destroying everything. Seems he's made a pact with the Alternative Empire who would prefer the earth to choke to death than bother with a bit of foresight. No matter. When our Mother awakens, there's going to be mass recollection. Then let's see whose truth prevails.'

'We don't have much time before the glaciers melt. If she doesn't fetch Terps's triangle soon, its loss will be felt keenly at our upcoming Aurora gig.'

'I don't think you want to change the world at all,' I say. 'I think you're just a bunch of airy fairy bitches.'

'Love starts with self,' chips in Erato. 'You can't begin 'til you find it within.'

'It's my turn, then,' says Terpsichore. 'My plectrum's been missing for aeons. If Wanda can pick it up from the Saxe-Coburg-Gotha's garden party, I can pluck my lute once more with the force of the Feminine. I'm so tired of strumming.' She turned her palms upwards to reveal calloused fingertips, ravaged by the Ages.

‘Sex-Covert-Garter?’ I ask. ‘Is that a code name?’

‘Brush up your German, girlfriend,’ says Terps. ‘The British Royals are Teutonic to the core. Queen Vic’s changed her surname to his.’

‘How did they come by your plectrum?’ I ask. ‘The British never annexed Greece, did they?’

‘Terps dropped it in wet cement after a particularly riveting dervish display in Alexandria just before the end of the Ottoman,’ Clio explains. ‘When Egypt was sacked by the French, Napoleon discovered it embedded under a floor mosaic of the Muses. He gave it to Her Majesty’s Uncle Frederick as a peace offering in 1814. Albert has inherited it.’

‘Freddie was fascinated with this ancient ivory pick, being somewhat of an amateur kitharist himself, and scoured the known world for similar artefacts,’ Clio continues.

‘Freddie’s collection has never been seen,’ says Callie, referring to her big marble book. ‘I have it on good authority that their Majesties will display it during their shindig to mark the laying of the cornerstone of their Comus Pavilion. All very posh.’

You’re to travel from Calais to Dover to cover your tracks. Take the iron horse to London. You will meet people through whom you can crack an invite to the garden party. The artefacts will be on display in the Pompeii Wing. Create a distraction. Slip the plectrum into any orifice. And get back here as fast as you can.’

‘Sounds intriguing,’ I say. ‘Perhaps it’s time for a whole new incarnation.’

‘Rest now,’ says Mel. ‘We’ll sing you a dithyramb and when you wake up you’ll be a whole new woman.’

‘Sweet dreams,’ says Clio, sprinkling me with milk varnish, now crystallised into resinous snotballs. Acid rain before its time. It stings. I fall once more.

Book IX: ‘Terpsichore’s Plectrum’ London 1842 CE

i

I was deep in the bowels of a floating engine room, caged in horsehair crinoline, like a loony bin straight jacket. The scent of boiled oil and old spice filled my nostrils. A nasal snore heaved to the rhythm of the steamer in a complex pas de deux. I smoothed the voluminous skirts below my

waist and fiddled about in the half-light. My hands alighted upon a naked male figure clasping an empty bottle of schnapps. His wide forehead glistened in the dawn, corkscrew comb-over cast to one side. Lamb chop whiskers curled from his massive ears to a deep dimple in his chin. Strangely, he was uncut, which belied his aqualine schnozz.

I tried to remember the night before. It drifted back in patches. Picking the lock that barred steerage from the upper cabins with my trusty hairpin. Flouncing into the First Class dining room and insisting on being seated at the Captain's table. Plied with a little too much '38 Grand Crew. And although the yellow badge had been abolished for more than a century, feeling all eyes on my crooked appearance, accusations of caste and creed. And the dimpled gentleman – a dead ringer for Lazzie – coming to the defense of my honour and knocking the Captain's hippopotamus dentures clean from his mouth. It must have gone downhill from there.

There was no way I was staying in this getup. You couldn't even do proper diaphragm breathing. There's not much you can get up to in seventy yards of crinoline and a metal hoop you could circumnavigate the world with. No wonder I'd passed out like a mesmerised rabbit.

The gentleman stirred and smacked his gums. His schmekel rose in the rosy dawn – the curse and the boon of his gender. If I sported one of those I wouldn't leave myself alone, waking up daily with a schmekel between my legs. I traced a pulsing blue vein in the erect, translucent flesh, wondering whether anything had happened last night. There was no way he would have been able to grab more than my apricots through my attire. I felt into the folds of my pomegranate; I seemed to be intact. I wrapped my wrist around his pale pink girth and crooned a long-lost lullaby from my interwar years.

'La la laaa la, la la laaaa, la la laaaaa la, la laaaa la,' I hummed, peeling his mielie down to the stalk and back again. The gentleman's eyes brimmed as he extemporised a pretty counterpart to my croon.

'Pa da dum, pa da dum, pa da dah dum,' he indicated an increase in the tempo.

'Isn't that Mozart?' I asked, obliging.

'Amadeus had a wonderful touch with Yiddish nursery rhymes,' he said, beginning to pant. 'I often quote him in my lieder.'

'Did you know Wolfie?' I may have missed out on late Baroque, but Mozart's music had pierced the highest heavens. I swapped hands and brought my lips to his neatly trimmed acorn.

‘I know him intimately, through his scores,’ panted the man. ‘He speaks to me from beyond the grave.’

‘He had a scatological turn of phrase, as I recall,’ I said. We loved to sing Leck mich im Arsch Opus 382 for six voices back in the Pleroma. And a few other dirty rhymes that earworm about my brain at the most inappropriate moments.

The gentleman patted around the floorboards in a scattered paradiddle that I took to be a reaction to the duet at hand.

‘My quizzing glass, I can’t find my quizzing glass.’

‘Come again?’

‘A verschtunkende hand-held monocle, my lunette. I’m practically blind without it.’

Being short of sight myself I was of no great help. But his myopia might be my way out of stowaway class. ‘So, you mean, you can’t see me?’ I flipped him a bird with my free hand, my middle digit extended from my clenched fist.

‘How many fingers?’

‘Two?’

‘Alas. And now?’ I waved my open palm in front of his face.

‘It’s all a blur,’ he said. ‘Now, I must get back to my sister. She’ll be frantic with worry.’

‘You never mentioned a sister,’ I said. I tra-la-la’d some more as his Mozartian pa da dums evolved from a soft ‘oy’ that gathered in momentum and volume as I massaged him from root to tip. I reached out for the dregs of the schnapps and discovered the joys of rubbing alcohol. With one final, joyful ‘Oy!’ he ejaculated right onto a piston head, where his unborn descendants hissed into oblivion. He turned a paler shade of white and passed out, prostrate, onto the engine room floor.

‘Yiddling Yahweh, I’ve killed the bugger!’

A morning ray glinted from a corner of the starboard flank. I scrabbled on my hands and knees and retrieved a tiny telescope, consisting of a single eyeglass fixed to an ivory handle. I held it under his albatross schnozz and it misted, ever so slightly. I pulled down his eyelids. The whites rolled up. I shook my head to clear it. It was then that I noticed an engraved card, peeking out of his nest of clothes, folded on the floor. I looked through the lens. The writing sprang into focus.

The Lord Chamberlain
is commanded by Her Majesty to invite
Mr. J.L.F Mendelssohn-Bartholdy
to High Tea at the Comus Pavilion, Buckingham Palace
on Saturday, 9 July, 1842 at 3.00 o'clock

There was no RSVP. A command is a command. A lazzo started to form in my mind. This was my way into the palace. I rifled through the discarded garments, tossed his corset aside and fingered a finely woven starched linen shirt and stiff woolen frock coat. Burrowing my way out of the wire cage, I picked up a pair of double leggings joined at the pelvis, black and white houndstooth check, slipped them on hurriedly and, though they dug a little into my pomegranate, much like the toe of a camel, the frock coat covered the cleft. Far less uncomfortable than stays. And a constant reminder of the itch I could never quite scratch. A black top hat completed the outfit, matched with a pearly pink silk cravat and handkerchief that brought back fond memories of my Tissue Hill headscarf. I bundled the crinoline into the incinerator and stepped into the pantaloons, at leisure to sneak in and out at will. He, on the other hand, would soon come to in his birthday suit, and find me vamoosed. In his extreme short-sightedness he wouldn't be able to finger me.

If I invented an alias and used his meticulously embroidered monogram, J.L.F.M.B., I'd surely be able to schmooze my way into the garden party and grab the Royals by the plectrum. I'd also probably have to alter the passenger list so there was a record of my voyage if anybody did a security check. Times were tough, carbon paper was scarce, and I'd spied a manifesto in the purser's cabin. Drawing a quill from the inkpot embedded in the desk, I practiced my penmanship on the blotter and added my pseudonym to the 108 already accounted for, a hodgepodge of my favourite composers. Johannes Ludwig Frescobaldi, Marquis of Belgium. It had a nice ring to it.

ii

Nu, a boychick I would be in another man's britches; access to the palaces and parlours, the smoking lounges and lavatories, the clubs, the bars, the brothels, the bitches. I held the quizzing glass to my eye and strolled up to the poop deck enjoying the tight fit of the trousers and the fine

linen on my skin; and the way I could fluff out my tail feathers in the nippy ocean breeze. I tucked my arms under the frock coat to assume the aspect of a penguin and felt the butt of a small muff pistol in its lining. All the better to bargain with, my dear. I extracted a small cigar encased in an inner pocket and moved among the stovepipe pants and the flounced sleeves, the shiny top hats and the softest hands I'd ever shaken – gloved or ungloved – in pure baby kid.

'Good morrow, fair chap,' said a freckled fellow in a pair of stripy pantaloons and a purple cravat. 'I think we'll soon be able to spot the white cliffs of Dover.'

'Is that where we are?' I said. 'I must have dozed off.'

'These paddle steamers are quite state of the art,' he said. 'Takes less than five hours now to cross La Manche.'

'Would you possibly have a light?' I asked in a posh Oxford accent, masking my pseudo continental roots. 'My flares seem to have been dampened.' The fellow pulled a folded piece of knobbled parchment from his waistcoat pocket, much like the kind Strad used to sand down his creations. Within it was a small wooden stick, topped with an evil smelling brown blob. Antimony. Trisulfide. Potassium chlorate. With a sprinkling of sugar. He drew the stick across the parchment and a spark burst from its head. I leaned forward to draw on my cigar. The flame leaped to my forelocks like a burning bush.

'God's bollocks,' said the freckle, 'you're on fire.' He grabbed his cravat and batted out the flames. 'Most dreadfully sorry. We'd better get you to the infirmary.'

'It's nothing,' I said, 'it will grow.' Apart from the smell I wasn't hurt.

'Forgive my manners,' said the fire lighter. 'I'm Etty. William Etty of York. Currently residing in the City of London. I dabble a little in oils.' I shook his limp hand.

'Frescobaldi, Johannes Ludwigus Frescobaldi, Marquis of Belgium, at your service,' I riffed.

'You're a long way from home, Marquis.'

'Ça ne fait rien,' I said. 'I am commanded by Her Majesty to attend the Inauguration of the Comus Pavilion.' I produced the invitation with a flourish. The forgery was flawless.

'Marquis, I had no idea.' Etty flailed his arms towards his knees in a low, circular bow. 'It's a long way to come for a high tea.'

'Nothing is too much trouble for Her Majesty,' I said, winging it. 'She's my second cousin once removed on her father's side.'

‘Fancy that? I’m engaged in a commission for this very structure.’

‘How so?’ I pricked up my ears.

‘I’ve been commissioned by The Consort to design the fresco walls in the main pavilion. Albert has an inordinate fondness for the classics. Milton’s Masque is deemed fitting, though I can’t think why. The entire pavilion will be painted in situ.’

I’ve been present at more than one botched attempt at damp fresco. I had to disabuse him of the notion.

‘Dear chap, the weather in England is contrary to this great endeavour. There is too much moisture. The plaster will not absorb the pigment.’

‘Tell me about it,’ Etty sulked. ‘I’ve tried to get out of this a million times. I’ve offered them oils, portraits; I’ve also tried sculpture, but no, Albert wants his fresco. That, and the sounds of Deutschland riding through the glen.’

‘German music?’

‘Precisely. Wagner turned them down. Brahms is only nine. Beethoven is decomposing.’ He smiled wanly. ‘That only leaves Mendelssohn. And his sister. Although she doesn’t really count. He’s here on this ship, somewhere. You may have seen him. Pale little person. Massive nose. Top hat. Rather like yours.’

‘You could be describing any man on this deck,’ I said, ‘but I’ll keep an eye out. Tell me more about this Mendelssohn fellow?’

‘Everybody’s heard of Felix. He’s performed across the board. Empires, Caliphates, Protectorates, Client States, you name it.’ The conversation was attracting a gaggle of passengers who minced over and added their bent penny’s worth.

‘A friend of a friend spotted him in Edinburgh at the Wig Club, naked, blindfolded, playing the Goldberg Variations, backwards,’ said one polka-dotted popinjay. ‘He couldn’t see clearly in the dark, but he swore it was Felix. Nobody plays J.S.B. like Herr Bartholdy.’

‘Scurrilous nonsense,’ said another dandy in candy stripes. ‘The man is a brilliant and upstanding paragon of German citizenship. For a Yiddel.’

‘He’s not a Yiddel, Cyril. He was baptised in Berlin with his sister in ’32.’

‘That’s not what I heard. His grandfather was a famous Rabbi or something.’

‘Well, he’s performed for queens and princes and his compositions have been copied and played at all the weddings of Europe.’

‘I vastly preferred Dick Wagner’s Here Comes the Bride.’

‘You have such a Teutonic bent, Cyril. Mendelssohn’s Wedding March is by far superior in tone and feeling.’

‘I heard he’s able to play God Save the Queen on one hand and Deutschland Über Alles on the other. Even though he hates folk tunes.’

‘Granted, they all really comprise of the same five notes.’ The top hats swivelled to observe the new speaker. It was the composer himself, garbed in his spare tuxedo, with a waxen, bonneted young woman on his arm, a dead ringer for my very own features, humming soft and low under her breath.

‘Felix, good morrow,’ said Etty, not missing a beat, ‘we were just marvelling at your prowess with pianoforte party tricks.’ He grasped the maiden’s hand. ‘And Fanny, how marvellous to see you. How well you’re looking.’ Fanny blushed from her bonnet to her bloomers.

‘May I present Le Marquis de Belge, Johannes Ludwigus Frescobaldi.’

‘Enchanté, Mademoiselle,’ I said, imitating Etty’s low bow. I clasped her glove on the upsweep and brushed my lips to deep green silk. Fanny smiled, a charming dimple piercing her right cheek. Etty swung Felix around and monopolised his attention with freshly laid chit-chat. I leaned into Fanny’s slender neck.

‘Schubert’s Fantasy in E-flat major?’ I whispered.

‘How did you know?’ she replied.

‘It’s part of his Wanderer Suite, is it not? I’m familiar with most of his oeuvre. I love the way the cadenza concludes the scherzo presto.’

‘How perspicacious of you,’ Fanny said. ‘Not many people are aware of Franz’s consummate genius.’

‘I hail from a long lineage of musicians,’ I said. ‘Guitar is my favoured instrument. And voice, of course. The original instrument.’ Fanny clapped her mitts together.

‘I’ve always wanted to compose lieder for guitar,’ she said, ‘but the family restricts me to the pianoforte. They say that strings are too sensual for a woman. You’ve no idea how bored I am.’ Here stood the confluence of her fantasies and mine. If I could nick that plectrum in time, we could reintroduce the art of picking. And give Fanny a leg up in the immortality department.

‘What brings you to these shores?’ I asked.

‘I am accompanying my brother to London for his Command Performance at the Comus Pavilion. I copy his scores, assist with composition, press his dress suit, stay behind the scenes.’

‘I’m giving Etty a hand at the Summer Pavilion. The poor fellow hasn’t a clue about fresco technique.’

‘I’ve got that Comus coming out of my ears, ja’ she said. ‘Felix has composed a whole new score. With more than a little help from yours truly.’

‘Have you both had the same training?’ I asked.

‘From the womb, ja,’ she said. ‘I had a two year lead on Felix. I sang before I spoke, played scales before I was weaned, was fluent in French at eighteen months, composed lieder at four, my first concerto at seven, and presented at Baden-Baden at nine.’

‘Did you do the whole courts of Europe thing?’ I asked.

‘Ja-ja. From Hamburg to Le Havre, from Buda to Pest, we were two carnival freaks in matching organza. We used to have contests in the intervals to see who could play the most variations on a theme. Bach, Beethoven, late Liszt, early Chopin. I nearly always won, but sometimes I let him beat me. He had a fearful little temper. Always a poor loser. I was daddy’s little novelty until my breasts sprouted.’

‘A common daddy-daughter malaise,’ I interjected.

‘The day I started to bleed, I thought I was dying. But there was to be no break in my practice. By afternoon, the stain could be seen through my many petticoats. Papa took me aside, handed me some wads of lambswool, and told me I could henceforth think of my gifts as a distracting hobby, like needlework or baking.’

‘While Felix …’

‘Felix went on to become the überführer of the music world.’

One of the best ways to inflame intimacy in a woman is to let them speak about themselves. I lit another smoke with my muff pistol, which seemed to have been modified as a cigarette lighter, packed with a small piece of charcoal and what I took to be saltpetre.

‘You must feel quite cheated by fate,’ I said. ‘Please continue, Miss Mendelssohn.’ She leaned over to take a draw of my fag.

‘Felix was a prodigy, but I was prodigious,’ she exhaled sharply. ‘Do you know that I have composed more than four hundred pieces? All under my brother’s name?’ I looked shocked.

‘Ja-ja. Papa didn’t want me to have that kind of publicity, or Yahweh forbid, that people would think I was earning an income.’

‘Does your brother acknowledge your compositions?’

‘Nein. Felix has been quite unforthcoming about attributing me. He plays his Opus 3 Number 8 whenever he does requests. That’s my tune. I dreamed it the night after I performed in Venice in ’33. Tra la la, la la laaa la.’ Her thin, reedy voice was whipped away by the wind. Good melody. Catchy hook. But no cigar.

The paddle boat let off steam in a series of low farts. The white cliffs of Dover gleamed in the morning sun and a vestigial madrigal swung in and out of my mind. To keep up the disguise, flirting was going to be a cinch. I knew exactly what women wanted.

‘Where are you staying in London, Marquis?’ Fanny asked. ‘We must get together while we’re both there, ja? We can work on some pieces. And I hear there is superb theatre to be seen in the West End.’

‘I might have to pass, Miss Mendelssohn,’ I riffed. ‘My accommodations are in Cheshire, at the Estate of my cousin, the Earl of Warrington. I take the iron horse on the morrow to meet my sister. I’ll stay overnight at the Pink Pussy.’

‘Nonsense, Fresco, you’re staying at my place in the Strand,’ Etty said, strolling into our rendezvous and patting me on the peaches. ‘We’ll send your sister a telegram.’ It was the first glimmer I had of his intentions. It wasn’t going to be that easy to deceive him as to my gender. But a pied à terre in the middle of the City suited my purpose down to the ground. And railways in those days were such a schlep.

‘If you absolutely insist, William,’ I said.

‘I wouldn’t have it any other way,’ Etty said. ‘The palace is a stone’s throw from my flat. You can show me the ropes on this fresco business. And I’d love to draw a study of you for my life classes. I go every night, you know.’

‘We’re staying in Belgravia,’ Fanny said. ‘Hobart Place is home away from home. They reserve a permanent room for when Felix is in town.’

‘We’re practically neighbours,’ Etty said, knowing it was a good half hour walk. ‘We shall see plenty of each other.’ He winked at me. ‘And the Comus will be the highlight of your trip. The Royals are putting on a Masque in honour of the occasion. The audience takes the part of the characters.’

‘Ach. I will not be able to witness our crowning achievement.’

‘You mean you’re not invited?’ Etty was incredulous.

‘Felix occasionally engages me as a page-turner in mixed company. But Victoria forbids it. I am forbidden to appear before the Royal We.’

‘For fig’s sake, why?’ I asked.

‘Her Majesty is not amused by the presence of other women in the company of her Albert. I hear she dismisses housemaids and wet nurses left, right and centre if he as much as glances in their direction.’

‘I’ve heard tell he’s a real grabber.’

‘Like most men, ja,’ she sighed.

‘Not all of us,’ I said. ‘You have to assume the upper hand.’

‘Tell that to the Queen,’ she said. ‘It should be me in front of those De Saxe Coburgs.’

Felix shuffled towards us, grasping at the railing to maintain his balance.

‘We are about to disembark,’ he said to Fanny, tartly. You need to collect the music cases from the porter. Say goodbye to the good gentlemen.’ Fanny looked at me in desperation.

‘I’m sure there are porters for that,’ I said, quite out of turn.

‘The scores are numerous and delicate,’ Felix said. ‘My sister must supervise their transportation. Now, Fanny.’ Fanny looked deflated.

‘A tout a l’heure, Mademoiselle,’ I said, raising her gloved hand to my lips once more. A bolt of lightning ran down my arm and into hers. This wasn’t the last I’d be seeing of Miss Fanny Mendelssohn.

iii

As I was now deemed minor royalty, I was first off the paddle boat. I had no luggage to speak of and I explained it away with a casual wave of the wrist, intimating that my entire season's wardrobe awaited me at my cousin's château. While I waited for Etty and the Mendelssohns to disembark, I noticed, among the throngs of locals who came to gawp at the steamer, a pimply, straw-coloured lad, no more than fifteen. His rough cape covered a spinal deformation such that he was bent almost double.

'Motherfucking foreigners,' he uttered. 'Just come here to bleed our land dry.'

'That's a bit radical, boychick,' I said, reassuming my upper crusty accent. 'These fine passengers are welcome visitors of Our Majesty. They are artists and musicians who bring culture to our shores.'

'Bollocks,' said the boy. 'They eat our food, they take our jobs; they must bugger off to where they came from.'

'They are here to serve the glory of the Empire.'

'That's the motherfucking problem. It's all Victoria's fault. She's gone soft in the head with that new husband of hers.' He spat his invective upon the rain-specked ground.

'You're from London, are you not?' I had detected something of the Cockney, picked up all those aeons ago en route from Langue D'Oc to St. Albans.

'I rode here on the coal carriage from Paddington. I wanted to see the paddle boat come in. And spy out if any of those dandies want to trade in their currency for some solid assets.' He crouched forward in the crowd and I caught a glimpse of ruby and emerald sewn into the inner lining of his cape.

Two large schnozzes emerged on the pier, followed by a stream of monogrammed baggage.

'That's the players, that is,' said the boy, 'paid for by the Crown. They can afford to import the cream of Europe, and they throw us the curdled turds. Motherfucking Royalty.'

'Watch your mouth, sonny. You'll be arrested, speaking treason like that.'

'I dream of being arrested,' said the boy. 'Let them transport me to the colonies, then. Anything to get out of this motherfucking country.'

The boy's fervour was intriguing.

'And how are you going to achieve that?'

‘I’m sick and tired of the rich and powerful. I’m going to do something they’ll never forget. You’ll read all about it in the press. Then they’re going to put me on a big motherfucking transport ship and I’m gone like a Pom. Australia, Tasmania, South Africa, I don’t care.’ He shuffled about my feet and threw small bits of gravel into the crowd. I felt a hand at my tails and the sneaky removal of Felix’s muff pistol.

‘Here,’ I said, ‘you can’t crook an old crook.’ I grabbed his skinny wrist and held it tight. The firearm slipped from his grasp. And a few stray pebbles.

‘That gun comes from our jewellery shop,’ he winced. ‘Herr Mendelssohn bought it about eighteen months ago. I’d know my father’s craftsmanship anywhere.’

‘Nonsense, I said, this was a gift of my four times great uncle from Italy. He was a famous duelist.’

‘Look at the handle,’ he said. Herr Mendelssohn had his initials engraved on the butt.’ I turned the piece over and sure enough, there they were: J.L.F.M.B.

‘Well, those just so happen to be my initials, too.’

‘What’s your name, then?’ He caught me slightly off guard.

‘Johannes Ludwigus Frescobaldi, Marquis of Belgium,’ I stated.

‘Funny, you don’t sound French.’

‘Harrow education,’ I said, pocketing the pistol.

‘Give it back,’ said the boy, ‘or I’ll call a copper.’

‘Who’s going to listen to a scrawny mite like you?’

‘Police! Stop thief!’ he cried at the top of his lungs. People craned their necks. All I needed now was to be unmasked by a hunchback teenager.

‘Don’t be foolish, boy. I don’t want the figging gun, anyway. Here, take it. Return it to your father with affection.’

‘Fuck that,’ said the boy, stuffing the muff into his cape. ‘I’m gonna kill the Queen.’

iv

At first, Etty played it straight. We trawled the brothels of Soho together, laughing gaily as we tipped our tarts with golden guineas, fresh from Albert’s generous advance. To retain my alibi, I had my fair share of females, all glittering and glassy in the stock exchange of their bodies.

If there were twelve whores for every male in London, you do the trigonometry. It was ecstatic, but exhausting. For the first time I could view these pleasure palaces from the client's point of view and I knew exactly how to satisfy a pomegranate without her having to touch me. I was saved by the Prince Albert schmekel ring that was all the rage, pierced through the glans, drawing the corpus spongiosum backwards between the peaches and fastening around the waist with a thin cotton belt. If I were an actual man I could have figged myself to death. It was always awkward fitting a codpiece down my pantaloons.

My tongue did the trick. I've always been a cunning linguist. Satisfying a bevy of belles du jours became my calling card. I did unto others as I have had others do unto me. A rubber phallus fondled at the right time kept the game up, and I always carried a hipflask of fresh egg white in my waistcoat pocket; a smear of albumen applied surreptitiously convinced them of my prowess.

But Etty couldn't keep it up, so to speak, and pressed himself upon me late one night as I'd dozed off after a particularly active round of schtupping.

'Fresco, Fresco, are you awake?'

'I am now,' I yawned.

'Did you enjoy the evening, old man?'

'Ravishing,' I said.

'Perhaps we can attempt some in situ work on the fresco on the morrow?'

'Good idea, Ett. I think I need a break from all this carousing.'

'Thing is,' said Etty, 'I couldn't give a fig for a woman's pomegranate.'

'I'm not usually so disposed myself,' I said. Etty brought his hand to touch my nightcap and I blocked it with my forearm.

'Fresco,' he said, 'you know how I feel about you.'

'I'm awfully fond of you too, old chap. You've been a capital friend to me.'

'Not just friendship,' he said, 'I've been whoring around Soho with you hoping, just once, that you'd prefer a quiet drink for two.'

'But I was attending these dreadful places for your sake.'

'Stop it. You're teasing me,' he said, flinging his knee into my groin. 'How is it that you feel nothing for me in this way?'

'I care about you, Ett,' I said, 'but I'm not what you think I am.'

‘Please, Fresco, you know I’ve been longing to feel my body against yours. I need to spill my seed to calm down for the fresco fitting tomorrow.’ He placed his long, thin schmekel into my tiny, frozen hand.

‘Please give it to me,’ he begged.

The only way I could keep my disguise and gain access to that plectrum was to play along. It’s what peach cheeks are made for. In drag, you can get away with rear cowgirl if it’s prime rump you’re after. Not my favourite by a long shot. The egg white came in handy as lubricant; let no woman on earth tell you back passage is a pleasurable fit. We don’t even have prostates. I feigned tumescence with my rubber dildo, muttering paint colours to Etty as he thrust thrice, and exploded; Cadmium Yellow, Alizarin Crimson, Cerulean Blue, boom. There was no way I was going through this again. Damn the fancy clothes and the access to brothels. Now I knew his messy little secret, I knew he could keep mine.

Nobody knew how Etty got his blokes so gorgeous. He came to know them from the inside out. Women were a dime a dozen, but males were forbidden to disrobe at the Royal Academy. I’d begged off modelling for him, citing a bad case of diarrhea, so he took to hanging out at the Greenwich docks where itinerant sailors were only too happy to disrobe for half a crown and some mutual hanky panky in an alleyway. He was their landlubber and the rentboys drifted in and out of Etty’s art in the name of their next fix. They were so starved of orifices on their voyages – women were bad luck on board – it led to spats among the petty officers and all sorts of syphilis. It was nothing to them to give Etty his jollies when they saw him limping lugubriously down the pier, sketchbook in hand. Many of Etty’s paintings began to feature these big-bottomed boys from Abyssinia, Ethiopia, Hanover, Dublin. He insisted on drawing from life.

Etty was particularly shy with females. Despite picking up many a bout of crabs from his moments of portal pleasure, he considered it beneath his social standing to ask a moll to pose for his eternal oils. I became his art pimp, so to speak. I’d had plenty of practice from my time in Jaffa, which combined with my gift of the gab, served to loosen their tongues along with their corsets.

I waited for Etty one afternoon after life classes, which he attended daily, come hell or high plimsol line. He staggered out of the Royal Academy with a life-sized cartoon upon a wooden plank.

‘Etty, dear chap,’ I said, ‘this can’t be counted as a fresco. A fresco has, by definition, to be painted on the original wall.’

‘I can’t do it,’ Etty wailed. ‘I just can’t seem to penetrate the plaster. I took this panel to the Committee and begged Albert to be able to create my work chez moi, perhaps at the Academy, but my request has been refused outright. I can’t work under these conditions.’ Circe’s pigment was flaking off her breasts, the sirens were hardly former sylphs of themselves, and the dead bodies surrounding them were brittle and dry.

‘You’re going to have to paint it unlike your other oils,’ I said. You can’t go putzkering over the images. Take the paintbrush by the horns and configure those figures.’

‘I want to. I’ve tried to. I make vivid sketches at the academy, but once I transfer them to the reality of the pavilion, the thrill is gone. Soulless,’ he cried, ‘Vapid.’

‘Then you’ll have to take your models on site,’ I said. ‘And if I intuit your genre correctly, she’d have to be willing to be nude. There’s plenty a pomegranate at the Pink Pussy who would leap at the chance to pose as a Siren.’

‘I can’t take a prostitute into the palace,’ he said, ‘They’ll spot her accent and she’ll be whisked out of there like a rotten egg. I can’t take the work home, and I can’t work on site.’

‘What if I can find you a solution to your problem?’

‘How? Who?’ Etty moaned, as he shouldered the faux fresco across Eton Square.

‘My twin sister is coming to town. She’s modelled for all the Royal houses of Europe. She has a few weeks to kill before she’s due back in Strasbourg for her next sitting. Look.’ In my undercover forages around London, I’d discovered a plethora of one-man outfits who paid good coin to capture female flesh in corpus delicti. I took out a sepia toned photogravure of myself in full female regalia. I looked like an organza hourglass.

‘She’s lovely,’ he said. ‘Good ankles.’ I whipped out another one.

‘She is much like you about the eyes, around the upper lip. Does she, too, have the missing philtrum?’

‘An accident of birth,’ I said. ‘They could hardly tell us apart as children.’

‘And an ample bosom,’ he mused. ‘She is perfect for my Sirens. Could you possibly implore her to sit for me at short notice?’

‘I’ll go round to her hotel in the morning,’ I said. ‘Anything for a good chum.’

And that's how the subterfuge between myself, as Frescobaldi, and my imaginary sister, Johanna Lucia Frescobaldi, came to be. I recalled a scenario from my time with the Trasteverians; the lazzo of the twins. Everybody thinks Billy Shakespeare invented the whole double identity thing, but the Commedia dell' Arty farties did it first. They may have been the spark for Milton's Masque, whose homage the Comus Pavilion would pay.

I invented Lucia from thin air, renting her a discreet hotel off Piccadilly Circus for her hooped gowns and array of wigs, keeping up the dandy Marquis pretense to fool Etty into granting access to the inner workings of the Royal family. How else was I going to get that figging plectrum?

In my flourishing hand I wrote Etty a missive; 'Dear William,' it read. 'Please forgive me for not accompanying you to the fresco fitting this morning. A prior appointment at the House of Lords slipped my mind completely and I am bound to Westminster at eleven. I hereby present my sister, Johanna Lucia Frescobaldi, Marquise of Bognor. She will more than compensate for my regrettable absence. Yours sincerely, etc.'

In truth, I swung by the Pink Pussy for an outfit, my feminine attire having been left on the paddle boat. If he wanted Sirens, they'd certainly be scantily clad, but I had to make a good first impression and I needed a high-class whore's threads to pass muster.

v

To secure my double alias, I visited Fanny and Felix to insinuate my other self. It was a brisk half hour walk from my digs in Buckingham Street to Hobart Place down the Royal mall. Everything was laid out in neat hedgerowed terraces, far from any taint of the great unwashed, who were ghettoed off in other parts of the urban empire.

Fanny was copying Felix's tunes to sheet music so that Her Majesty could render his works at her leisure. Felix, it seemed, hadn't the sharpest memory after all, and Fanny drilled him relentlessly. Trouble with his music: earworm city; the moment I'd heard it once, it never left my brain. I could have page-turned blindfolded it was so predictable. Felix could regurgitate Bach at will, Liszt on command, Beethoven by rote, but he couldn't remember a quaver without a score. The man was an idiot without the savant.

'Nein. Nein. It's not D-flat in the twelfth bar, Felix, it's written as D.' Fanny underlined the notation with a graphite pencil.

‘Nobody will notice.’

‘Victoria will notice. It is said she knows the song by heart. And it’s written into the Masque, ja. You can’t embarrass the Queen with a false note.’

‘I know. I know. But I just can’t figure this ossia on bar twenty; it hardly fits with the theme.’

‘Scheiss, Felix. It’s a perfect segue back into the tonic.’

‘Tonic, schmonic,’ Felix said. ‘Just give me a good modulation.’

‘We’re running out of time, schatzi. Now let’s go over that presto part again, ja.’

‘Let me have a little lie down and we’ll get back to this later.’

‘Four hundred bars, sharp, Felix,’ she said, setting a small metronome. I’ll transpose the Italian in the meantime.’

I could tell that Fanny had a crush on me and I responded as any kind of gentleman would; hand brushings became fingertip touchings, and I discovered a hot and hungry hussy beneath her curled crinolines. Her confidence grew in the absence of her high maintenance brother. While Felix napped, we quaffed gin and tonic in thimble-sized glezzele and spoke deeply about Fanny’s sympatico with her dead friends.

‘I was three years old when I first heard Ludwig’s fourth concerto,’ she confided. ‘Suddenly, out of my infantile reverie, his second movement struck me like a giant tsunami. I swooned from the seductiveness of the sound. They had to carry me to my bed.’

‘How do you feel about Mozart?’

‘A dirty little mind, had our Wolfie, ja. But I adore him. The moment I hear one of his schmaltzy waltzes, I can reproduce it precisely on the pianoforte.’ She pah dah dummed her way through Opus 37. ‘Sometimes, if I do a programme with Liszt and Chopin, and Liszt goes well and Chopin doesn’t work, I realise Freddie’s a little jealous.’

‘And your own music?’

‘I hardly get any time to work on my compositions,’ she said.

‘But you say you’ve always wanted to compose for guitar?

‘Forever, ja.’

‘And you’d agree that a lyre is as close to a guitar as you can get without your own personal luthier.’

‘Ja-ja.’

‘And you know that the Sirens were accomplished lute players?’

‘It was part of their allure.’

‘I have an idea,’ I said. ‘We’ll acquire the instruments from Freddie’s collection, and with your exquisite English we can sneak you past the guards. I’ll arrange for my sister to show you the ropes. She’s an old pro at this. And she plays a mean kithara.’

‘You never told me you had a sister,’ she said. I waved away the omission.

‘Lucia arrives tomorrow from the counties. She’s iron horsing it up from Cambridge. I have to attend a meeting at the House of Lords. Etty knows. He’ll meet you on the pavilion mound.’

‘How do I explain my absence to Felix?’

‘Tell him you’re tuning his pianoforte at the pavilion for the performance,’ I suggested. ‘As long as he thinks you’re schlepping for him, he’ll not give it a second thought.’

‘Whatever will I wear?’

‘That’s the thing, Fanny. You’ll need to be disrobed.’

‘What, like naked?’

‘I’m afraid so. It’s a classical piece. The Prince Consort insists. But don’t worry. My sister’s done this dozens of times. I’ll arrange for her to bring you a change of clothing.’

vi

The next morning, dressed as Lucia, I hailed a phaeton to Fanny wearing a muslin pelerine with white filigree embroidery, my head wrapped in my black Arlecchina stocking. My brother’s letter of introduction convinced her of my bona fides and she motioned me across the threshold.

‘Mistress Fanny,’ I enthused in a toffed-up mezzo soprano, swooping a curtsey as wide as her vestibule could accommodate. ‘My brother speaks well of your fair face and fine figure. The perfect combination for a modelling assignment.’

‘Nothing about my music?’

‘Now don’t be touchy. Of course he mentioned your music. Sublime, simply sublime. Etty has arranged to borrow a lute and plectrum from the Consort’s collection and we are to pose with these artefacts for his fresco.’

‘I am dressed okay, ja?’ I eyed her unseasonable schmatta with a mild sneer.

‘Try this on.’ I swooped off the pelerine and placed it over her shoulders. It masked her lacy dowdiness.

‘But it scratches.’

‘No matter, Mistress Fanny. Etty will have your kit off soon enough. ‘But I don’t have a mask.’

‘When is a masque not a mask?’ I said cryptically. I bunched up my dress and rolled down my leg tights.

‘Put this on,’ I said. If they’re following the Milton school, there will be plenty of disguises. It all depends on Etty’s hidden angle.’ I blindfolded her with the stocking.

‘But I can’t see anything.’

‘Trust me,’ I said. ‘Nobody will know who you are until we have accomplished our task. By then it will not matter. You will have surpassed anything your brother has achieved. Etty’s fresco will place us in the annals of Victoriana forever.’

‘More than my music, ja?’

‘As well as your music, Mistress Fanny. Now we must exeunt. We don’t want to keep the maestro waiting.’

Thus did Fanny and Lucia present ourselves at Buckingham Palace, models for the fresco of Circe and the Sirens that Etty was to create. In four hours. In the drizzling rain.

We entered the pile by the main gate. The palace was quite shabbily shod, but then nothing compares to the excess of the Romany Creams. Or Zen’s erotic opulence. We passed portraits of the inbred family, one face, different ermines, and into the grounds, which resembled more of Bavaria than Belgravia.

Etty met us at the freshly excavated summer house, deep inside the grounds. Fanny had her mask on, as did I. We all kept up the charade.

‘Oi, what’s these two doing ’ere?’ demanded the foreman, a dwarflike creature in filthy overalls.

‘The Marquise is an expert in Italian fresco,’ Etty explained. ‘She says that it is impossible to create such delicate works in England.’

‘That is correct,’ I said, authoritatively. ‘The conditions are too damp. The pigment will never dry.’

‘Stuff and nonsense,’ said the foreman. ‘Look at the ones already in progress.’ He pointed to the illustrious painters strewn about the mound. ‘Uwins is doing it, Eastlake’s doing it, even Sir William Ross is doing it.’ Scenes of Milton’s Mask emerged from their nimble palettes; the attendant spirit, the wild wood, Sabrina the nymph, Comus himself, son of Bacchus and Circe, ruling the royal roost with his tickle stick. A strange theme to be commissioned by a fastidious Teuton, I mused. Giving out quite the opposite message than its intention, with its buxom blondes and nubile nymphs luring the viewer to war against the excesses of creativity. The reason the Victorians didn’t know the difference between art and pornography is that they were not exposed to much of either. Imposed upon the plaster, Albert commissioned an elaborate love letter by proxy to his powerful bride, decipherable only to themselves. And a few astute insiders.

Etty, poor chap, had never worked quickly, in pastels or watercolours. Oil was his game, overpainting was his claim to fame, transforming buttocks into nipples, substituting an ibis for a pubis. A couple of corpses had been dragged to the pavilion as well; Albert felt it was cheating to sketch in the morgue. Etty was commissioned to reproduce the Sirens with their nemesis, Circe, the enchantress, who sold nearly everyone down the river.

The entire painting was laid out upon the wall in tentative charcoal. Etty had chosen his lunette, his two-liner that summed up his theme:

‘Circe with the Sirens three

Amidst the flowery, kirtled Naiades.’

I would have played Circe myself, but I figured it would be too conspicuous for future historians.

Etty edited out the bit in line 252 where Milton prefaces these lines with ‘I have oft heard my Mother Circe …’ and added the words ‘… culling their potent herbs and baleful drugs’. A crafty edit. No, a singing Siren was safer; those water nymphs took away the power of speech and memory such that nobody could recall the incident, never mind their names.

If this adventure was Terpsichore’s return, I could well see myself as one of her scheming triplets.

‘How is it that the Sirens are consorting with Circe?’ Fanny asked, reading the inscription. ‘They had so little to do with each other.’

‘Circe was Comus’s mother,’ I said, ‘the goddess who warned her lovers against the Sirens’ song. Though some say Circe ripped off their bass line for one of her incantations. Odysseus, it seems, got away by the skin of his schmekel.’

‘But Etty wants us to be Sirens, ja?’

‘Then Sirens we shall be, my fair lady.’ I whipped off our stocking masks. The Consort preferred us unmasked for the Mask.

‘And you say that no one will recognise us?’

‘They barely pay any attention to the models,’ I said. ‘Trust me, I’ve been there.’

Fanny and I frolicked at the fresco, models for Etty’s tentative creation. Though it can be quite warm in July, this was one of those exceptions, and my apricots were feeling the freeze.

vii

Being an artist’s model is certainly not as glamorous as it looks. Or sounds. True, it pickles you in painterly aspic for all eternity, but you’re hardly permitted to cough, laugh, sigh, let alone hum; he reclines you in the pose of some pallid damsel, mostly with raised arms, holding up ankle length auburn hair – it’s what shows the female form at its best; your eyeline has to remain constant or it blurs his view. He’s looking at his canvas, scratching his beitzim, committing you to his own private fantasy. Then he looks up, measures the distance between reality and fantasy, and Yahweh forbid you have the hiccoughs, he’ll have your guts for garters.

‘Don’t be flattered,’ I told Fanny as we donned wigs in the freezing semi-erected kitchen attached to the pavilion. ‘Etty stops seeing you as a woman. You could cross and uncross your legs twelve ways of Mary Magdalene and you wouldn’t get a rise out of the man. Unless you were twelve or, better, male. He never sees any of us for who we really are.’

We stepped into the al fresco studio draped in silken gauze; red for me, blue with stars for Fanny, and a shawl of gold and silver we would use to superimpose another pose. Etty hardly looked up.

‘Sit there,’ he gruffed.

‘What, here? On this grassy knoll?’

‘It’s a desert island. Have you no imagination?’

‘Alright, alright, keep your shirt on already.’ Etty wiped a tiny horsehair brush and held it up to the light to check its purity. He turned to Fanny.

‘My companion has informed you that I require someone who is not afraid of nudity.’ It was not a question.

‘We were told, ja.’

‘In that case, could you please oblige –’

‘What, take off my clothes? Certainly,’ I said, whipping off my layers to stand stark naked in the foggy London morn.

‘And now you, fair fraulein.’ Fanny loosened her azure gown to expose a double yellow-starred under-vest, a compulsory clause in the European sumptuary laws for those of Wandering Class.

‘Sorry about this,’ she said, struggling out of the vest, which was tied with tallis-like attention to detail, shins and shamuses hanging off every thread. Etty stared at her as if for the first time.

‘By Jove, Fresco never mentioned that he’d be bringing a lass of the Hebraic persuasion.’

‘It’s only by blood, ja,’ Fanny said. ‘You never know when you’re going to be seduced by a man of the cloth.’

‘Don’t be ridiculous, Fanny,’ I said. ‘We don’t need those marks any more.’

‘It’s just a precaution,’ she said. ‘They didn’t even let us Yiddels into England until a few hundred years ago.’

‘You have a point,’ I said, ‘It’s too early to tell.’

I helped her untie the final knot and Fanny stood before us, revealing the unvarnished truth: she ain’t no natural red-head. Etty looked her up and down and jerked his head towards the knoll.

‘Alright, you’ll do. But I’ll need Lucia for the finer details of all the faces. Body’s good enough, just a bit dark on the eyes and the nipples.’

‘I wonder if maidens who lure sailors to their death by their voices would bother to reveal all,’ I said. ‘It’s only the lurid mind of man that has bare-breasted women posing on a deserted beach in this day and age.’

‘What can I do? The Consort insists on classical authenticity.’

‘They were the daughters of Terpsichore, you know,’ I continued. ‘She raised them in seclusion. There’s no way they’d pose nude. They could hardly change clothes in front of each other, never mind countenance a man’s gaze.’

‘To get at the soul of a woman, I must see her naked. You will pose as I instruct you for four hours until I am satisfied that I have caught the essence of your flesh.’

‘What should I do with the gauze?’ I asked.

‘Drape it over your loins, both of you,’ he said. ‘And drag that male cadaver next to your left knee. Right a bit, up a bit. That’s it. Now hold.’

A footman appeared with a jewel-encrusted box. Another followed behind with a kind of lyre I’d seen in the dreams of the Muses. I broke Her Majesty’s seal and opened it. There, encased in soft kid, was a small, off-white triangle, hollowed out in the middle. This must be it. The famed plectrum of Terpsichore. It seemed to be made of something like tusk.

‘I’ve borrowed these on pain of death from the Consort,’ he said. ‘Lucia, you pluck the lyre and Fanny, grab that aulos. I’ll paint in the third Siren when I’ve covered the two of you. The lyre was badly out of tune, but I’ve always had a good ear and swiftly tuned it to concert pitch.

‘Curl your left hand into your lap. Now stare at the sailors, up a little, yes, into the middle distance, so that we follow your gaze out of the frame to your destiny. Now look forlorn, a slight frown of doubt. You’re luring men to their doom. That’s it.’

‘Can I say something?’ I’d held the pose for about fifteen minutes and gangrene was starting to set in.

‘You can speak through your teeth but don’t change pose.’

‘Everybody blames Circe for telling Odysseus how to overcome the Sirens. She wasn’t really in love with Odysseus at all. She had the hots for Jason, actually, and he fancied Medea and then gave her up for Glace. The Sirens were mere bystanders.’

‘What are you trying to tell me?’

‘Well, it was a whole scandal with everyone accusing the women of infidelity, but actually he was the one schtupping about, and a distraction was required to bring everything back into balance.’

Etty put down his paintbrush. ‘Are you telling me that the Sirens were set up?’

‘Exactly. Homer spreads this whole story about the seductresses on the shore, accuses them of tempting sailors from their rational duties, drawing attention away from the fact that Odysseus is cheating on his own wife with all these nymphettes.’

‘Like Milton, I attempt to juxtapose the wisdom of rationality with the shock of the erotic,’ he said.

‘Don’t give me that. Milton demonises women as enchantresses, but you paint us as bordello whores.’

‘It’s all in the eye of the beholder. Without poetry, without deeper meaning, there is no longing, there is no desire.’

‘I think the lesson resides in the tension of these opposites,’ said Fanny sagely.

‘That’s why we’re here to illuminate Milton’s intention,’ he said, dipping his brush into a cobalt blue. ‘Now don’t move.’

I picked up the plectrum and struck the D string. A single note emitted from the ancient lyre. Fanny hummed a high cross melody. I plucked again. A chord rang out and Fanny fiddled with some phrases. They were in Haupt German, but I reproduce the lyrics in the language of London.

‘Fairer and fairer the plain becomes as caressing breezes blow on me.’ Caressing? It was more like a mild blizzard out here. But perhaps she was longing for her homeland where the summers were infinitely milder. Fanny continued.

‘Away from the burden and trouble of prose, I go forth into the land of poetry.’ It rhymes better in the original. That got me going and I strummed for all I was worth, the pick ringing out the tune and stupefying the artists.

‘Can you two keep still?’ Etty huffed. ‘I can’t get the curve of your buttocks with all this racket.’

‘No way,’ I said, holding my plectrum aloft. ‘You’ll never shut me up again.’

‘Silence, Lucia,’ said the painter. ‘You’re attracting unnecessary attention.’ The other painters on the knoll shushed me.

‘Now raise your arms and look to the left, that’s where Circe will be inserted. Use the aulos in your left hand, raise your right in a beckoning motion. Now straddle the skull, like that, yes; we’re pretending you have the power of death – you’re seducing Odysseus with your song.’

I secreted the plectrum into my cleavage and continued to strum using my hairpin. Nobody would notice the difference.

‘And now, for the sake of authenticity, I want you to act it out,’ said Etty. ‘Be the Sirens, lure those gleaming sailors, sing, Sirens, sing.’

Fanny's voice shot up an octave as she spun off verse after verse upon her original melody. I raked my hairpin over the lyre and shook my booty till my apricots ached. We wrote an entire opus that afternoon in a whole new key, and Etty got his Sirens down onto the wet pastiche of the pavilion walls. The seasonable rains and the venting of the windows put paid to Etty's noble aspirations. That afternoon's composition put paid to the obscurity of Fanny Mendelssohn. One was a disaster. The other a triumph. You never can tell.

viii

We left the pavilion, exhausted, and made for the main gate. As we exited the grounds, we were overtaken by the Queen's carriage, Victoria and the Consort, bobbing to the rhythm of the trot. We were prevented from exiting by a small crowd gathered at the gate. I spotted the hunchback boy among them.

'Boychick, what on earth are you doing here?'

'I told you, I'm stalking Her Majesty,' he said. 'We're sick and tired of being taxed into penury while she lavishes millions of Guineas on her imperial love nest. She's a dead woman walking.' I decided to take him at his word.

'By what means do you intend to do away with her Majesty?' I asked.

'With this,' he pulled out the muff pistol and brandished it at me.

'I thought I told you that won't work,' I said. 'It's a cigarette lighter. First of its kind, but not enough to bring down the Queen of All She Surveys.'

'I've put some gunpowder in the motherfucking flint chamber.'

'That's not going to do a thing,' I said. 'You need proper bullets.'

'I just want to get arrested,' he repeated. 'If I simply aim it in her direction, they'll assume I'm a wicked assassin, and instead of the death penalty, I'll be off to the Antipodes before you can say Prisoner of Her Majesty's Service.'

'I'd think twice about it if I were you,' I said. 'You never know when Royalty decides to change the rules.'

We both reached for the gun as the plectrum footman ran towards me, clutching the empty velvet box. The royal buggy had almost reached the gates. The hunchback boychick pushed his way to the front of the crowd and cocked his weapon.

‘Rule Tasmania!’ he shouted, aiming the snout of the muff pistol towards the carriage. I seized his wrist as he pulled the trigger. The gun let off a deafening sound and the smell of fire and brimstone.

Albert stood up in the barouche, shielding the Queen with a chain mail umbrella. The hunchback locked and loaded again.

No need for this. Victoria still had another fifty years to go. What the fig would happen if she got snuffed out before the birth of her second child?

I patted my pocket for the plectrum and felt the sticky substance of my own blood. I’d been shot by a novelty cigarette lighter. And likely secured the ascension of the crowned heads of Europe.

I can hear but not see, smell but not feel. A tinkling of laughter. The scent of strawberry poptarts. Aahs, ahas and sundry sonic expressions of wonder.

I’m back. Again. Nine fleshless faces press in on me.

‘Did it go all the way through?’

‘Doesn’t look like it.’

‘She may have passed out from the ricochet effect.’

‘No, wait. Look. Here. This.’

I open one eye and squint at the detritus of my quest, Terpsichore’s irreplaceable plectrum, shattered to shavings in her hands.

‘Another one bites the dust,’ she sighs.

I feel my apricots. Bloody but intact.

‘I’m sorry, Terps,’ I say, slightly winded. ‘I thought the little bastard had a real gun. Turns out it was a replica of a muff pistol.’

‘That wasn’t how the story was supposed to end.’

‘What would you have had happen?’

‘You play a little lute, strike a pavilion pose with Fanny, the hunchback assassinates Victoria, you die again and return the sacred plectrum, intact.’

‘I thought you wanted to save the Queen?’

‘With Victoria Regina out of the picture, there’d be no more Royal babies, no boychick haemophiliacs, no imperial mishpocha provoking two world wars. You deviated from the narrative.’

‘I didn’t think she deserved to totally snuff it,’ I say. Royalty’s just an accident of birth, you know.’

‘You were supposed to take the bullet. My sacred triangle saved your life,’ says Terps.

‘Nu … I’m not really dead?’

‘Death is but a dream, Wanda.’

‘Where am I?’

‘By changing the course of history, you have given yourself free will. We can no longer affect the outcome of your actions. You’re able to go where you choose now, through the sheer force of your imagination.’

‘So, I can beetle off anywhere? Australia, maybe? Or Norway? I wouldn’t mind staying a little longer in China. I never did get to see the Great Wall.’

‘It matters not. Our quest is doomed either way. The glaciers are melting, the oceans are rising, the forces for good have abandoned the earth.’

‘But finding the Spheres? Won’t they change all that?’

‘There is little hope for their retrieval in this climate. We’ve only got about another century to make this work.’

‘I want to help,’ I say.

‘Take a break. Go to the Riviera. France is quite safe these days.’

‘I told you. No more Europe.’

‘How about a fortnight at Niagra? We’ll book you a honeymoon suite.’

‘What’s the point of that without someone to love?’ I ask.

‘Don’t stress, Wanda, you still may find your latter-day Carta.’

‘You’re always dangling the Carta card in my face,’ I say.

‘Get this one right and we’ll see what we can organise with Hades. I’ll ask Persephone to put in a good word for him.’

‘Alright, I’m up for it one more time,’ I say. Nothing like a little love making to motivate a girl.

Poly pipes up. 'We're going to need the sound of the lowest note a guitar can reach. The Tone of Saturn. You screwed up in the nunnery. It's time to make amends.'

'Why don't you use a cello? I saw a lovely one made of maple at Strad's place.'

This gets the Muses all a-twitter. Of course,it comes out in iambs.

'The shape must be triangular'

The angle perpendicular'

We're really quite particular'

For resonance of Sphere.

We're sending you to chilly climes

We don't want bells, we don't want chimes

Just find the man who runs the place

And bring us back the contrabass.'

'You're lucky it wasn't a proper bullet, sweetie,' says Erato as she lowers me into the freeze at the speed of gravity. 'These new-fangled instruments of war can do great damage. You could carry that scar now for all eternity. And we wouldn't want that.'

As I fall, she aims a slender finger at my cleavage and a sliver of electromagnetic ray burns deep into my solar plexus. I peer down at my décolleté. The burn marks are gone.

'I kind of liked my battle scars,' I say.

'Just sorting out your fourth energy centre,' says Erato. 'We wouldn't want you to live with a broken heart chakra.'

Book X: 'Razzie and the Romany Creams' St. Petersburg 1916

i

You can see me in the photogravure, wedged between Valentina Dragomirova and Razzie himself. We'd left our furs in the hallway; you can't fit that many guests into the private dining room of the Yar if you've got dead beavers and foxes all over you. Besides, they'd shvitz to death wearing those things indoors. We had to hold the pose for ages; any kind of jiggling would result in holy ghostliness and accusations of impropriety. You can't really tell what I'm wearing, but it's a pale yellow chintz ruffle neck whose lace prickled me so badly that I inadvertently

grazed the back of Razzie's chemise and my left apricot stiffened immediately. Note that he's touching his chest exactly where my left pip first brushes, then presses into his back; a mudra that would later drive me wild in fantasy and flesh. It became a kind of sign between us, stripping me naked in his fertile imagination, caressing me senseless with his filthy mind.

I had to apply quite a thick layer of arsenic base for this photogravure; most of the Russian dolls were milky skinned. It must be the weather. I'm not ashamed of my complexion, Yahweh forbid, but it would have stood out and absorbed the light, and all sorts of questions would have been asked. I needed to be invisible and act inconspicuous if I was to work my way to the horizontal. I pasted myself pasty, plucked my eyebrows into some semblance of an arch, scraped my hair into one of those too tight buns, and bit the bullet. I was melting like a titanic iceberg by the time the photogravure was done. Aaron Sonovabitch lurks in the background, partially masked by Mischka Abrobrovska's plumage. They were all the rage in the Age of the Romany Creams. It was said that Sonovabitch obtained them for Razzie's ladies from an ostrich farm in Siberia, but I knew better. There are no ostriches in Siberia. Sonovabitch had mishpocha in Oudtshoorn, Africa, and exploited every loophole around the embargo for foreign goods, all in the name of illegal trade. The expression, to feather one's nest, is a direct descendent of this phenomenon. If only he foresaw how shaky was the tree.

It was Razzie's smell that first attracted me; I scented him before I saw his face and the alchemy just kicked in. Musk meets dusk. With an undertone of dung. Hippy hair parted in the middle, dandruff falling to his shoulders like a Siberian snow flurry, gaze like a startled steer, combing his fingers through his pubic hair beard that showed evidence of vegetative sustenance; tendrils of day-old borscht, misdirected breadcrumbs, dumplings, plumplings.
Earthly affairs were not his thing; Razzie figged for heaven's sake. Before he met me, Razzie never washed, said it was the last thing next to holiness; his knickers could have stood up and walked to the Neva. I still carry one of his socks in a marble inlaid snuffbox I stole from Solly; I inhale a little Razzie when I need a lift and to remind me of the good times we had at the Yar.

I've met quite a few drunks in my lives. They come in all shapes and sizes, much like their schmekels. There's the happy drunk – give him a shofar full of pilfered Shabbos wine and he forgets all about fiddling with the Yiddels. Pilate was one. There's the angry drunk, silent as the grave, two sips of undiluted mead and the pejoratives pour out fast and furious. Then there's

the philosophical drunk; the one who tells it like it is, breathing fermented fumes into your horrified nostrils. Zenobia was a dead ringer. And a few of those distressed damsels back in the days of Cochin. There's also the dry drunk, forsworn of fermentation, but knows the whereabouts of every bottle hidden in the grounds and carries his addiction like saliva at a paan spitting contest. Nandagopola springs to mind. But nobody drank like Razzie. He could hold his liquor by the ears and pull you into his web of intrigue and inebriation faster than you can say Vladivostok.

When he was able to eat without regurgitating, Razzie preferred potatoes above all other delicacies, and it was all Vladimir Yaschenko could do to invent new ways of slicing, dicing, broiling, boiling, skinning, grating and ingratiating his cuisine to the maestro's taste. The menu was inedible and yet the great ladies of the court and their nubile daughters gathered around him like gossamer storm clouds. It's true what they say about Razzie's table manners. Yes, yes, I know he came from the provinces, a mere serf, but knives and forks had been invented and specialist trainers made a great living instilling etiquette in the Empire.

Razzie was having none of it. His blackened, bitten fingers dived into the dishes, scattering butter and cream cheese left and right, holding out his remaining thumb to the clamouring crowd in a mudra of the cross. The hoi polloi jockeyed and jostled to lick the slick moisture from his fingers, some even scraping the dirt from his cuticles to have a piece of him forever between their teeth.

It also amused Razzie to hang about the Yar's gent's toilets when he held a function. It was an amusing pastime to speculate as to which sozzled guest would fall for his ruse as he staggered towards the porcelain partitions with Raz waiting to anoint him on the other side of the crack. In his outstretched hand, thrust through the punctured tiles, Raz held a half-thumbed likeness of a naked nun, her habit over her head, legs akimbo in butterfly pose, revealing her blossoming pomegranate, pips and all. The man erected almost immediately and Ram rewarded him with a well-held hand job. He could do seven or eight per Bar Mitzvah. Double at weddings. But never on a Shabbos. Razzie had his standards.

The Yar hosted all sorts; from high society to the actual drek. Of course, the Gypsies were treated worse than Yiddels in those days and they had to come round the back of the restaurant to gain access. If you've ever jammed with a Gypsy ensemble, you'll know the feeling. If they were ever sober enough to agree on concert pitch, it was a mitzvah. If they ever

made it on time to a gig, it was a miracle. Yes, yes, the orgy afterwards was ever so predictable, but the music? You never knew what was going to go down. Razzie was their passport to pleasure. And my key to getting hold of that bass balalaika.

ii

It's so obvious to say I schtupped Razzie. It was the only way to bag that Holy Contrabass. Besides, for all my lives I've wondered about an appetite to match my own. He had no want of money, no need of sartorial elegance; basically, he did it for kicks just to see if he could bring down an Empire by calculating the weaknesses of two fear-stricken narcissists with a vampire complex. Smell was one thing. Touch was another. After the latkes were consumed, I loitered until the rabble had subsided. I was keen as chrein, knowing that he had been aroused, but I wanted to dip him first. I filched the keys to the baths and lured him to the waters. If he wanted me, I needed the schmutz to go. I strung him over my shoulders, inhaling his putrid armpits and hauled him to the Saduny Banya. I had come across variations on this kind of steam bath in my travels. Solly's dolls were addicted to it. Zenobia loved to schvitz. I snuck him through a side door and leaned him against the wall.

'Starets hate to bathe,' he hiccoughed.

'But Razzie, think of all the things we can do if you clean up a little.'

'Had bad experience in childhood,' he said. 'Dug out banya into cliff in Siberia with bare hands.'

'How wonderful,' I said. 'The view must have been amazing.'

'Starets find no wooden door to close mouth of cave,' he said. 'Many meidele freeze to death.'

'I've got an idea,' I said. What if we melt some of this wax,' I gestured to the tallow candles that illuminated the pool area, strewn with rushes to damp down the floor, 'and then we could have a little fun with this.' I picked up one of the soggy reeds and flicked it over his ample peaches. He winced in a good way.

'Look how the sweat rides off your skin.' I licked his inner elbow with a slight shudder.

Razzie finally removed his cassock and the funk of the ages swirled into the atmosphere. He sat down with a grunt, his schmekel rising to the occasion. He was hung like a hamster.

'Bacchus's testes, you're tiny,' I exclaimed.

‘Is second childhood memory,’ he lamented. ‘No meidele can stop making ha ha ha when she sing in praise of phallus. Starets has been cursed.’

‘Don’t be silly, Raz,’ I said, ‘We can do plenty with this.’

I’m not a great one for cellar door antics, but there was no way I was permitting his miniature manhood anywhere near my pomegranate. I had a few tricks up my organza sleeve, though, practiced on the Continent, where my skills were highly appreciated. This was a chance to put my talents to their best use. It also dispensed with any kind of birth control. I mixed the candlewax with a dollop of ’nard, grasped his bathetic bulbous and guided him towards my bass clef. His glands gave off the scent of wolves and Carta. I girded my loins for the thrust.

Once you’re over the initial pain, there is a certain thrill in even the tiniest of todgers. We were both schvitzing like Bolsheviks. Our fluids could have been bottled for sale at any apothecary, but neither of us were in it for the money and the Rabbonim in the ghetto had forbidden it, preferring to ravish angels instead. Sonovabitch missed a great opportunity. I assumed Standing Wheelbarrow, culled from the Kama Sutra press, translated into Yiddish. Slowly, he edged into me, liniya by liniya, and I adjusted my buttocks to accommodate the fit.

‘Nyet,’ he panted.

‘Is it in?’ I asked. My pinky explored his pupik.

‘Nyet. Nyet. Da. Nyet. Da.’

‘Is it da or nyet?’ I demanded, ‘Make up your mind.’ I shifted positions. Curled Python.

‘Da. Da. Nyet. Nyet. Nyyyyyyyet.’

The Starets climaxed in a gush that would have made Victoria fall. I followed in close succession, although I had to help myself in the pomegranate department. Lean forward and think of Fanny. Even though it’s all in the flesh, the spirit sometimes needs a little persuasion.

‘Daaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhh,’ I cried, spent to my kishkes. I tried to roll out from under him, but we were locked fast, like wolves on heat. We had to wait a while to decouple. Luckily, we avoided having to bring in a locksmith. Then, I beat him with rushes until he was black and blue. Sometimes it’s hard to tell the punishment from the crime.

When we had slaked our ninth lust, we lay, spread-eagled on the rush mat floor. Razzie produced a hank of tobacco from a lint-lined pocket, tore a strip of newsprint from a soggy pamphlet, and rolled it into a small tube. He lit one end with a candle stub and inhaled deeply. It was then that I noticed that he was missing his left thumb.

‘That’s an interesting use of the Selsky Viestnik,’ I said, still catching my breath.

‘Got idea from Yiddel serf,’ he said. ‘Had to hide all pipes. Papa ban public smoking, but this causes upsurge in black market tobacco. And sales of local newspaper.’

‘Papa?’

‘The Emperor, the Czar, Nicholas Himself. Is like father to us. Is term of affectation.’

I squinted at the torn newspaper strip. The words were slowly incinerating but I could vaguely make out the headline.

Rus… Proc… … ligious F…d…m, it read. The date was Dec… 13 …16.

‘Russians Proclaim Religious Freedom?’ I snorted. ‘I don’t think you’ll find anyone in the Pale who would buy that. Religious freedom, my pomegranate.’

‘Papa say, people do. In last twenty years Papa sows Yiddel hatred. Blood libel, dancing on Purim. Travelling on Shabbos. Man on street believes that Yiddel is outlaw. Was not always like this.’

‘It’s always been like this,’ I sighed.

‘Papa has large propaganda thresher,’ said Raz.

‘I’ve been hearing about the Cassocks,’ I said. ‘They’re egging on the masses.’

‘There is shortage of eggs,’ Raz said. ‘Papa speak of needle workers as danger for Empire.’

‘What can a bunch of fiddling Yiddels do to an Empire?’ I asked.

‘Starets beg for rights for Yiddel, for Gypsy, for Serf. Papa say, ‘Starets stick to cure of affliction for Alix, my son and heir.’’

‘But your Papa’s prejudice is causing mayhem. Yiddels all over the Pale are gambling their lives away to secure a passage out of here. This is where Sonovobitch makes his greatest contribution.’

I decided to pose the ultimate question, the reason I was here, the pretext for our night of unflagging passion. His tumescence was returning. I had to be quick.

‘Nu, I said casually, ‘I hear you play a mean contrabass?’

‘Starets learn big balalaika from Rabbi in Pale of Settlement,’ Razzie said. ‘Rabbi say will compensate for, you know, size of schmekel.’

‘How interesting,’ I said, ‘so you’re familiar with the Litvak School?’

‘Da,’ he said. ‘We confiscate instruments from the Pale natives and bring to Royal Court for purification.’

‘That hardly seems fair,’ I said.

‘Is fair,’ he said. ‘When Czarina hear of balalaika contrabass, she must have for warding off Yiddel Devil.’

‘Like breaking a mirror?’

‘The contrabass is icon for enhancement of Imperial lovemaking. I argue against repossession, but Czarina is adamant. No Yiddel music. No Yiddel culture. Balalaika must be exclusive for love song to Holy Czarina.’ I thought better of arguing the toss; I’d never find the largest horizontally held guitar in the world at this rate.

‘Nu, where do you keep this contrabass?’

‘This cannot be told. But tomorrow we make music in private dining room at Yar. Starets will smuggle Holy Contrabass for occasion. We eat borscht. We drink Kindzmarauli. We have oompsie doomsie with Sokolovsky Gypsy Choir. And a little Russian Roulette.’

iii

You think nobody gambled in the time of the Romanovs? The whole Pogrom thing was a wild carnival ride to oblivion. Gambling was one way of hedging your survival bets and Sonovobitch opened pop-up casinos in the strangest places. Once in a mikvah. A couple of times at the Rov’s house. Monogrammed playing cards had Aaron Sonovabitch, for clandestine klavias and poker, and backgammon and dice inlaid with jade and ebony and glints of mother of pearl. Russian Roulette was one of his specialty sports and those who couldn’t escape by train or boat or new-fangled automobile fell back on the old Masada trick of shooting their brains out before they came to be exterminated. Heads of households thronged to Sonovabitch’s secret dens to bet their very lives on one click of the chamber. If they died, they were absolved of earthly responsibility, and they could bear the guilt in the world to come; if they survived they could get 200-1 on their odds and bribe their way to the new world. Sonovabitch made a killing.

And, of course, he supplied the women. Not that Razzie couldn’t pick up a few of his own just by training his gaze upon them, but they had to be on the books; Aaron Sonovabitch didn’t like to waste his forgery skills on mere invoices. Distracted by his nefarious shipping activities, he bestowed upon me the role of procurer and I accompanied Razzie on many a trawl

to see which ladies of the night wanted to earn a few Roubles in an evening of balalaika and bonkofsky, as Razzie called it.

We were sharing a plate of knishes at the Ghetto Grill and Borscht Bar, and Sonovobitch was filling me in on a few alternative facts, even though it was kind of naughty to be talking about the resistance on Shabbos. All history is treason when told by the vanquished.

'It all started with Nic's great, great grandmother,' he said, wiping his greasy mouth on a napkin. Catherine. A right Yiddel hater. She was the one who came up with the idea of the Pale of Settlement. Herded us into it. Removed property rights, education rights, sent infants to the army, and initiated a propaganda campaign that would have made Herod blush.'

'Mothers severed the forefingers of their boychicks,' said a leaky-eyed waitress, settling a samovar on the table.

'What? Why?' I reached for the sauerkraut.

'Their trigger fingers,' she said, 'so they couldn't serve.'

'How could they even have Yiddels in the Imperial army?' I was incredulous.

'Lifetime conscription,' she said. 'Sometimes they were away for twenty-five years. Some never came home. They changed their surnames, scorned their families, shamed their mothers. It's like they just disappeared.' She scuttled off to fetch a side order of onions, dabbing the leaky eye with a corner of her threadbare apron.

'Get back to the story,' I said.

'Catherine's offspring set the rules for the next two hundred years. The Rov made a deal with the line; we stay out of your politics, you stay out of our survival tactics. The Yiddels were content with the tossed out crumbs of civilisation and the right to ply both bow and needle. Then Pappy I died of nephritis just as the restrictions were being repealed and the cycle of hatred started all over again with the May Laws.'

'Who took over then?'

'Nicolas, the hairy heir. A virulent and vicious antisemite.'

'And woo-woo superstitious to boot,' the waitress added from the bar.

'Indeed. It wasn't long before the Romanovs blamed their lack of male issue on the old blood libel trick; we were crucifying babies to sprinkle on our Passover matzo.'

'That old chestnut,' I said. 'Can't they think of something more original?'

‘And then the Pogroms came,’ said Sonovabitch. ‘We were smacked, attacked and verpackt. There wasn’t a sadistic fantasy in which the Imperial Mints did not indulge. They were tender to each other and tyrannical to their people. Empathy is not a Royal trait.’

‘Nu, how did you get to where you are today?’ I asked, grabbing another knish and smothering it with sour cream.

‘I branched out into shipping,’ said Sonovabitch. ‘There’s a roaring trade to the new world from here. War makes a very good cover.’

‘That’s a little brutal, boss,’ I said. ‘Can’t we wait until the U-boats calm down?’

‘Supply and demand, my dear Wandaska B. I’ve got some connections in high maritime quarters.’

‘Is it Count Cuntovsky?’ I asked. ‘He was at the Yar last night.’

‘The very same. I happen to have some photogravures proving that he’s defied the sodomy laws, and I don’t want to have to use it against him in a court of law. Let’s say I can persuade Cuntovsky to stow a certain percentage of human cargo in his holds. For the price of their life savings.’

‘How many will he take?’

‘He can accommodate twelve refugees per trip. If we sell two dozen, we can double our profit.’

‘But won’t they suffocate in the hold?’ My thoughts returned to the Tarsus boat ride. I knew it could get really nasty down there.

‘That’s none of our business. Now go get us some customers.’

‘Do they have to be actual Yiddels?’ I asked. I heard there were a few more folks in need, ones who couldn’t afford the shoot to kill policy of the Roulette game.

‘If you got the dough, you get to row,’ he quipped, quoting the company slogan. The dice games ran along similar lines: ‘When there’s no dishes, there’s no knishes’.

iv

The Gypsies had no such thing as sin. They did what they liked, when they liked, with whom they liked; there was nothing to take away from them – what did they have to lose? It amused them to go forth in disguise among the hoi polloi and deceive them into letting down their petticoats and their guard. We always lust over that which is forbidden.

Nine gypsy girlchicks nipped in the back door of the Yar, clad in varying shades of arsenic and vinegar, although you could see from their bronzed wrists and ankles that they weren't local yokels. They carried an array of balalaikas; two descants, a piccolo, a prima, a secunda, a pair of altos, a tenor and a bass.

During the potato and borscht course, the gypsy girlchicks strummed Bridge Over the Volga. A soft hum surrounded the tzimbelling as each of them began to drone in the manner of their instrument. The tempo picked up towards the cream cheese blintzes. As he doused his rabid appetite, Razzie called upon the players one by one until the room was humming with balalaika and body odour. Razzie doused his thirst with Kazluznovia and the party started to bleed red liquid. The girls began to break off in highly strung harmonies as ties were loosened and chignons unfurled. More nail nibbling and the untying of stays. Another several flagons of Kaz. And the balalaikas played on.

'Pssst!' said the secunda player, a massive cross-eyed mermaid with green streaks, like seaweed, flowing from her crown. 'I've got to pish. Can you take over for a round or two?' I was in no state to perform at this stage, but the request piqued my sodden interest.

'Can't one of the others cover for you?'

'They only know their own part. They cannot hold another's tune.' She squeezed her plump thighs together.

'Why can't you ask the Starets?'

'Czarina will not let instrument out of royal sight.'

Razzie had lied. He wasn't bringing the Holy Contrabass anywhere near this riff-raff. Clearly, I wasn't going to get what I came for here. I'd have to find a way into the palace.

'But surely the Starets can sit in for a while?'

'Starets cannot make love and music at same time. Starets good for only one thing.'

'Hang on,' I said, 'you wouldn't be here at the Yar if it wasn't for the Starets.'

'This we know. Starets make promises. But when Starets is schtupping, Starets remembers nothing. If music stops, all nobles will sober. Will regret consorting with the likes of us.'

'We can't have a break in proceedings,' I agreed. 'It'll blow his cover.'

'Please, Wanda Lazarovska. I've got such a bladderowsky on me.'

‘Give me the balalaika, already,’ I said. She swung the instrument towards me and hobbled out, knees knocked, flapping her wrists like a startled seal.

The instrument felt good in my arms, the fretboard had a nice action, and my fingers found the shapes of A and E7 as I filled in the secunda part. The gypsies liked their stuff in major keys. They weren’t too fussed about the long-term goals of unhappiness.

I could sense the Muses goading me into mischief. I lifted my thumb from the bass note, changed my grip and slipped back a single semitone, like I’d figured out in Istanbul. This gave a kind of kinkiness to the lilt, saddening it, a broken glass among the joy. Immediately the mood of the party darkened. It was a sour note, Aeolian mode, the one I’d invented back in the Sixteenth; pure melancholic bliss.

The gypsy girls lapped it up. Immediately the piccolo and the altos stepped into the new tone. The prima and the tenor took up the fifth, maintaining the dominant thread, and the descants trilled around on the top partials. Then, taking turns, each girlchick peeled off and picked a partner from the dining party, leading them to the floor, wiping their sodden fingers on the linen napkins. We began again, a slow and sensual building up to a frenzied madness where my fingers took on a life of their own. I began to improvise on the harmonic minor and the bodies began to intertwine; the drone became a multiple moan, splitting into eighteen-part cacophony as I continued my nimble modality, pausing between verses to scoff down a caviar canapé.

The youngest gypsy girl continued to trill in her sweet soprano even after Count Cuntovsky had had his way with her thrice with his boots on. Fortunately, he did not claim her maidenhood; those counts weren’t able to tell a cellar door from an attic peephole. Never mind the jellied pomegranate that has no sell by date, but is only offered, never forced. By the time we reached the climax of the dervish, the guests were mopping beluga off the floor with their tonsils. By the time it was over, all trace of makeup had dribbled down the bodies of the balalaikas, revealing their players’ dusky origins. The borscht and semen stains on the linen tablecloths were the only traces of their existence.

At some point Razzie looked up from the stew of bodies and gestured glazedly for the instrument. He embraced it the wrong way round and began to pluck from bottom to top, caressing a pair of contessas with his talon-like toenails. Razzie was nothing if not versatile. The sound was unbearable. I had to distract him with a pair of buxom boyars and hand the balalaika

back to the oversized mermaid. If Razzie got hold of it again, we'd be having blood and borscht streaming out of our ears for a fortnight. All of this just incurred Razzie's lust further. After he'd had his way with each and every body in the room, he strode into the street, waggling his shriveled schmekel at passersby, which distressed more than a couple of besheiteled froomies beetling back to the ghetto before curfew.

v

I didn't tell Razzie about Pappa's spies manning each corner of the routes to the Yar. He really shouldn't have waggled; he should have kept it behind closed doors. It was just more grist to the hatred mill, his appetites being something the hangers-on simply couldn't stomach. While the gypsies were wrapping up, I nipped across the road to offer them a plate of blintzes and a quick fondle under the lamplight. Some security officers will look the other way when offered a little on the side. Still, that's how they tracked him down, in the end.

Because of the curfew the kitchen staff had left early. That left Olga and me. She'd missed the carriage home, the driver too Pogrommed out to wait about in such a posh suburb, and I could see she wanted to ask Razzie something. She and I took two limbs each and dumped the Starets's oozing body on a frayed chaise lounge.

'Spit it out, Olga,' I said, knocking back my vodka nightcap and pouring another.

Olga yanked Razzie up by his pubic beardstrands and slapped him hard across the face.

'Starets! Starets! You will remember your oath to Olga?'

A double nostril snore ripped the air out of the room.

'Starets! Starets! Can you hear me?' She dropped the beard and his head slumped back onto the pillows.

'You won't get anything out of him now,' I said. 'He's out cold.'

'You will remind Starets when Starets awakes?'

'What exactly did the Starets promise you?'

'Starets gave word to find Olga passage to America. Passage to India. Passage to wherever these verschtoenkende boats are going.'

'Razzie can't do babkes,' I said. 'Sonovabitch holds the steamer strings.'

'Please, player of sour gypsy note. Olga can no longer live in Russia. Olga must move on to nomadic pastures.'

‘The Yiddels have it just as bad.’

‘Ha!’ she snorted. ‘You Yiddels bring it on yourselves. We ask for nothing, and still they hunt us down like vermin.’

‘What do you call the Pogroms, then? A sleigh ride in the park?’

‘No. Is price you pay for being different. We pay price for being invisible.’

‘I thought the Yiddels were the only ones who were up Volga’s creek?’

‘Ha!’ she repeated. ‘We have no land. We have no jobs. We have no value in the eyes of the Oppressors.’

‘Neither do we.’

‘It’s different for you Yiddels. You have right to long for homeland, this Eretz of which you speak in your prayers. You have right to daven, to circumcise your boychicks; you have kosher butcheries.’

‘Please,’ I said, ‘Don’t speak to me of blood. I can’t stand the thought of animal sacrifice. And anyway, if it’s all so awful, how come you’re even here?’

‘Once we were slaves,’ she said. ‘Slaves in Moldovia. My great, great grandparents came to this land. Wandered about for centuries, minding our own business. Then, Imperial Mints impose heavy taxes for everything. Vodka. Bread. Caviar. Basic essentials.’

‘Wait, we’re also charged up the korobka. I’ve heard there’s even a gefilte fish tax.’

‘Gypsy taxes charged to limit occupations. No doctors. No dentists. No accountants.’

‘Isn’t that your bad, just a little?’

‘Then we were forbidden to enter St. Petersburg.’

‘As were we.’

‘And then they let us in.’

‘Sounds familiar.’

‘But only if we stay in city limits. And we have itchy feet.’

‘Tell me about it.’

‘They start again to kill and torture without warning, without leaving trace. Gypsies slaughtered like cattle. Olga want out. Is why Starets promise to get Boats to Freedom.’

‘He’s not really in control of that,’ I said. ‘Sonovobitch controls the shipping lines. I’ll speak to him in the morning.’ The first rays of light were beginning to stir behind the great marble edifice of the Yar.

‘Olga willing to pay for life with gifts.’

‘What kind of gifts?’

‘We have caravan of fine bone china.’

‘What? Like crockery sets?’ I couldn’t believe my ears.

‘Da. Handed down to Olga by female ancestors, Gypsies carry porcelain throughout our travels.’

‘You’d have to be very careful not to chip them.’

‘We are. Since invention of newsprint we have easier time for wrapping. Only use for visitors.’

‘Let me see this crockery of yours.’

Olga led me with a sweaty palm to the outskirts of the city where various gaudy caravans were lined up, head to toe, like a boychick orgy circle. One entire wagon was filled to the brim with plates, sugar bowls, tea sets and serving dishes. A scent of rotting fruit and yarrow assailed my nostrils.

‘You really think these have any value?’ I asked.

‘Gypsies trade with many cultures. Gypsies spread dishes as far as Balkans.’

‘And you think you can trade these for your freedom?’

‘Even Sonovabitch cannot import from China. These dishes are rare.’

‘Don’t you have anything else? What are these?’ I gestured at the clumps of herbs that adorned the wooden beams of the wagon.

‘Gypsies know cure for bleeding sickness,’ Olga said.

‘Bleeding sickness? The condition that afflicts the Czarevitch?’

‘Da,’ she said. ‘These seeds and weeds can staunch the flow. Starets is short of bilberries. They’re in season now. Help yourself.’

I grabbed a few berries and stuffed them into my pomegranate belt.

‘What’s the recipe?’

‘Use five handfuls. And a bunch of Scotch broom, mixed with yarrow, a twig of stinging nettle and three switches of witchhazel. But avoid garlic at all costs. And ginseng. And ginger. This will bring the bleeding on.’

‘Brilliant,’ I said. ‘So, all I need is a mortar and pestle.’

‘Gypsies have sacred vessel for bleeding sickness,’ said the gypsy. We have kept mortar dish from Starets. But if this will bring about our liberation, Olga will share secret. She fiddled around on a top shelf, plates strapped tight upon the newsprint battlements that separated each dish from the next and extracted a rounded porcelain pestle, inlaid with a thousand small stones, fitting together to form an image. I started. Song Sung’s likeness stared back at me, her features fragmented by the design. Her features were exaggerated, the eyes a little too slanted, but it was Song alright, grasping her pipa behind her back, an array of inlaid pearls cascading from her headdress like unborn pupae.

‘Who … what is this?’

‘It is a porcelain Song,’ she said. ‘A true original.’

‘But how? Where did you get it from, Olga?’

‘Our people have wandered from Shanghai to Kashgar and back again. Everywhere we pick up a little tzatzke. This one’s from my eighteen times great grandmother. She was a legend for seven dynasties.

‘How do you remember that far back?’ I asked.

‘We Gypsies remember everything about past. Is future we put in your hands.

‘Okay,’ I said. ‘There’s a hospital ship, the Portugal, leaving tomorrow night. They’ll be transporting medical supplies to the front, but we can smuggle out six of you. We’ll fetch the china at first light. I’ll take the mortar and pestle now.’

‘Make it nine of us,’ she said. ‘And I’ll throw in the Noritake tea set.’

‘Done,’ I said. In for a kopek, in for a Rouble.

Returning to the Yar, exhausted, I put my feet up on the encrusted tablecloth and sloughed down the dregs of the vodka. As I reached for another half empty glass, I saw a note in the middle of the schmutz with my name on it.

‘Wanda B. Lawarofska,’ it misspelled. ‘The pleasure of your company is requested in the quarters of the Maid of Honour of the Imperial Realm, Saturday, December 14, 1916. Fond greetings, Anna V. Vyrubova.’

vi

You may have heard that Razzie charmed the bloomers off the Czarina. And her daughters. They may have fiddled about while St. Petersburg burned, but Mama’s proclivities lay elsewhere. The

Empress was so obsessed with her Czarevitch, her little Alexi who had inherited his grandmother's genes along with the Empire, that she would have sacrificed her entire Fabergé collection for a cure. Alexi could perish from a nosebleed, snuff it from a leap onto the Imperial yacht, die from a diamond scratch. His injuries emitted from nothing, and nothing could stop his unclottable blue blood flow. But he was Heir, apparently. And the Court had to keep mum. They were so inbred I'm surprised they all didn't have six fingers and a harelip. Which some of them did, but these blemishes never made it into the official portraiture. As the Imperial Mints hurtled towards their sticky end, they lost touch with the inevitability of karma; there had to be someone to blame for the poverty, for the disloyalty, for the bleeding of their baby boy.

Razzie visited the Czarina daily; they say he had a room at the palace. Ha! Anyone who knows the Russian guard would so dispute that. There were spies on every corner. No one could take a pish without it being written up. The security police reported everyone's every move, spies spied on spies; nobody knew whose side anyone was on. And the records show that Razzie visited only twice in the year of his death.

Razzie always claimed that his was a holy relationship. He schtupped in the brothels, at the theatres, in the streets, but the Mama on the hill was not to be touched. The Empress was as superstitious as the kitchen cat. He needed to keep the Royals hysterical; it was his hold over them. He could have cured the Czarevitch with the regular poulticing, he could have satisfied Alexandra with one swift pinch of her pomegranate. But he knew that his power relied on her interminable suffering.

In the ghetto, the disenfranchised Yiddel Section of the great marbled town, Razzie strode through the crowd like an itinerant Rov. I trailed a little behind, struggling with the cases of wine, palming the secret service with a few Roubles for a shot of vodka or two as they marked the limits of their liberty.

It was dangerous for Razzie to be seen anywhere near the palace. One day he was an honoured dignitary, the next he was ushered up the back stairs. Sonovabitch couldn't take the risk of being discovered as the secretary of the most controversial priest in the parish. As the under-secretary, and a woman, I could come and go with the minions who passed through the ornate gates each morning; thick cloaks masked our bodies, dark hoods masked our faces. Underneath I was clad like a Marquess. The corset bit into my flesh; I was reminded of the fake chastity belt I had to wear to fool my Midons. Now, it seemed, it was the height of fashion;

women welcomed the opportunity to suffocate slowly for the sake of their looking glass figures. The tighter the stays, the smaller the waist. Cut the blood flow from the head. Made the breathing as shallow as a pike. A lung-captured ransom, fit for Royalty.

Once I got in, fake identity and false accent, I shed the awful garments and sashayed up to the private chambers as if I were a member of the Royal family itself. Nobody saw me arrive, nobody saw me leave; I reported back to Sonovabitch in the Yiddish code that no mother Russian could decipher.

Razzie had taken over from Alexi's previous minder, a ham-fisted Tartar called Oleg. The brute never let the little boy out of his sight and you could see him striding the Royal yacht on the Volga with Czarenke in his arms. We were never sure if he abused the boy; Alex wailed like a siren if Oleg ever left him. St. Petersburg Syndrome, I think it's called. But it was Razzie who calmed him when he bled. He had mastered the art of Mesmer and practically hypnotised the blood out of his veins.

I had met Anna Vyrubova at the Yar. She was the very woman whom I was convinced displayed the attributes of male and female. A heavy moustache squatted upon her upper lip and her eyebrows met in the middle in a severe V. Her voice was low, her breasts even lower and she blushed scarlet as I entered the room and gave a deep curtsey.

vii

'Wanda Lazarovovska, praise the Saints, how wonderful to see you again.' The unibrow greeted me in the manner of the court, with a return curtsey and an air kiss on each cheek.

'Anna Vyrubova, a pleasure,' I lied. 'What can we do for you and the Imperial family today?' We always addressed each other with our fullest names. Titles could take all day.

'It's a tragedy,' she wailed; Mama has sent the Starets away again, she says he can't keep his hands off the girls.'

'I've tried to wean Razzie off girlchicks,' I said. 'Between the nobles and the Sokolovsky gypsies, I've organised him a plentiful supply. He's wearing out the brothels of St. Pete's.'

'Ah, but underage Imperial flesh is his ultimate desire,' said the maid. 'The more he can tempt them, the closer they come to redemption. Of which the seed of the Starets alone can provide.'

'Why can't you distract him?' I asked. 'You surely have your ways.'

‘Kind of you to say, Wanda Lazarovovska, but my charms have somewhat faded in service of the Czarina.’ Her eyes were a dull blue in their sockets and I detected a fresh bruise on her brow, ill-concealed with arsenic paste.

‘And the Grand Duchesses themselves? Are they not willing participants of his intimacy?’

‘To be honest, they are so taken with him, it's hard to tell horseplay from paedophilia,’ said Anna. If she could turn any pastier she would have resembled a Song China plate.

‘How old are they now, twelve, thirteen?’ My tolerance for princesses was at an all-time ebb. ‘And how's the Czarevitch?’

‘That's why we summonsed you,’ said Anna Vyrubova; Alexei’s naval is bleeding again and there's nothing the Imperial doctors can do. We need Sonovobitch to locate the Starets, and we need him now.’

‘I wish Mama would make up her mind,’ I said. ‘One minute he's the scourge of the Empire, next thing she wants him back in her boudoir.’

‘It's not like that,’ cried Anna Vyrubova. ‘Have you ever been a mother? Have you ever stood over the bleeding body of your child and prayed for anything, anything that could be done to save his life?’

‘Can't say I have,’ I said. ‘But I wonder if this Alexei business is a bit, well, a bit of a Russian ruse?’

‘Ruse? How can you say that? You who knows so well the importance of a male heir to the dynasty.’

‘Heir schmeir,’ I said. ‘I think Olga would make a fabulous Empress. But no, oh no, that great, great, grandfather of hers put paid to that fantasy. Men only. No women allowed.’

‘You don’t know how difficult it’s been for Mama,’ wailed Anna. ‘She had to convert, she’s given up her motherland; she’s done everything asked of a Romanov.’

‘It’s always the converts who become the biggest fanatics,’ I mused. ‘I hear her boudoir is stashed with icons, including one Holy Contrabass.’

‘Do not speak of Mama in that tone,’ warned Anna Vyrubova. ‘The Starets plays balalaika for Mama only when Alexei is ill. She believes it holds a holy cure.’

viii

Sonovobitch got three Fabergé eggs for bringing Razzie to the palace. He found him in a brothel by the docks, well hung over, with no memory of how he got there. We had to carry him up the back stairs. We wrapped him in bloodied menstrual rags, a stench so horrible that even the security guards let us pass. We carried him through the secret underground passages that wound beneath the palace and hid him in plain sight, plonking him eventually in the Imperial boudoir, where he awoke and passed out in equal measure. With Anna keeping guard over the princesses, preoccupied with sewing jewels into their clothing, Razzie led the Czarina in prayer to the deity of his own making, on her knees, scattering icons to the unholy winds.

The contrabass rested upon the bearskin rug. It seemed to watch them, undaunted by their status, letting out a small ping or two as the heated room unwound its strings. I lizard-crawled to its ball and claw feet and cradled it in my arms, backing out of the chamber to the rhythm of their bestial blessings.

I rolled myself a Pravda and considered my options. If I could make it to the Volga by nine, I could hitch a ride on Sonovabitch's boat and drop off the contrabass in Parnassus. It's as close to the Pleroma as you can get without a portal. Won't they be surprised to see me so soon?

Hold my ambrosia. As in harems and accidents of birth, you can check in any time, but you can never leave. Having no access to the tunnels beneath the bedchamber without being detected, I schlepped that contrabass from marble pillar to post-Renaissance. Labyrinths of lavish suites interwove so intricately that by the time I'd finished my smoke I was back where I started. I made a mental note of the artworks so I could find my way, and continued my exploration. I recognised some from my recent wanderings; Rembrandt's Return of the Prodigal Son, Michelangelo's Crouching Boy, more than a few of Leonardo's Madonnas. Some with haloes. Some without. Mothers and children. A roomful of eggs. I edged open an angelically carved wooden display case to see if there was anything small enough to filch. A nest of Russian dolls caught my eye, which would go nicely with my teraphim. And a nifty little cameo of Yossi.

My nose picked up the odour of garlic and ginger. It smelt vaguely of beef stroganoff. I followed the meaty aroma to one of the gilded alcoves. In the shadows, on a bed of filthy goose down, lay a small boychick, swaddled in bandages from head to toe like a decaying sarcophagus. He had a garlic clove around his neck and a bloody Mary mix upon his brow. He was bruised to the bone, slashes of puce and purple and saffron and black. There was an underscore of blood

and faeces. I tiptoed over to the child and put my cool hand on his burning forehead. I entwined my fingers, scented with yarrow and witchhazel, around his fevered bruises.

The boy raised himself up on one elbow and gave me a Starets stare.

'Bonjour boychick,' I lilted, keeping my voice soft and low. 'What ails you, mon enfant?'

'I have la sange froid,' he peeped. 'Only the Starets can stop the flow.'

'The Starets is a little preoccupied right now,' I said. 'Have you tried leeches?'

'That only makes it worse,' he said, lifting the goose down and turned to show me his backbone, revealing a series of festering lacunae.

'My poor child,' I said. 'How horrible for you.'

'And still the blood does not ebb.'

'Whose big idea was the vodka and tomato juice?'

'The Starets advises spirits for cure.'

'Nyet. Most definitely nyet. Doesn't he know that potato based fermentations open the blood gates?'

I reached in my pomegranate belt for Olga's mortar and pestle and deschmutzed it as best I could. I scattered some of the bilberries into the belly of the bowl, added the Scotch broom, witchhazel and yarrow, and sprinkled a few drops of 'nard for good measure. I grasped the pestle and ground as though my lives depended on it. When the herbs had congealed to a thick paste, I patted it onto the child's belly button and temples. His pallor improved and the counterpane rose an ell or two.

'Nyet. None of that, Alexi,' I said sternly. I could appreciate his coming so quickly of age, but this really wasn't the time to seduce a minor.

I put down the pestle and shouldered the contrabass, its upper triangle above my head, the lower point tilted forward. The neck was thicker than I expected, yet I managed to stretch my thumb around over the top to stop the upper string while my other fingers crawled spiderlike on the fret side. Thus splayed, I realised why Razzie couldn't possibly play the Contrabass; no opposable thumb. Losing myself in the moment, I dashed off a little song in B minor. A little deep for a lullaby, perhaps, but the Czarevitch needed soothing. It scans better in the original.

'And in the melody, my child are lots of prophesies

Of the time you will go out into the world.

You will be a merchant of all types of produce

From which you will make a lot of money …'

I tzimbelled a couple of verses on the contrabasso, calming Alexi with the age old promise of every Yiddishe mama; do well in business, my boy, and give me nachas. Of course, every song has its hook, and after sixteen bars I shifted to the chorus. He didn't seem to mind that I called him Yiddele. It seemed to comfort him.

'And when you are rich, Yiddele

May you remember this melody …'

The kink in the counterpane subsided.

'Rozhinkes mit mandelen,

This will be your calling …'

His eyelashes fluttered closed.

'Yiddele will trade with everything,

Sleep Yiddele Sleep.'

The heir to the end of the Empire put his thumb in his mouth and settled into his bed of pain. A light snore emitted from his clotted nostrils. As for the bit about the raisins and almonds – nothing rhymes with witchhazel, especially in Yiddish.

ix

I was startled by a noise at the alcove's arras, a magnificent tapestry depicting the Farewell of the Conscripts. It was Anna, looking wild, clutching her embroidery scissors, her tight bun unravelling in dismay. Hastily I shoved the contrabass into the shadows.

'He's dead, the Starets,' she hissed, sotto voce.

'What are you talking about?'

'I heard a brouhaha in the boudoir. I looked through the keyhole to see if Mama needed assistance and saw the Starets lying on top of her. She was groaning something terrible and so I presumed to enter. Mama was breathless and inconsolable. 'One moment,' she said, 'he was dancing a dervish to drive out the Devil, the next, he'd keeled over.''

'Are you sure he's not just passed out again?' I asked.

'I checked, Wanda Lazarovovska. His eyeballs are rolled right back in his head. He had no pulse. Mama has gone into a frenzy. He can't be found dead here in the palace; it will cause a revolution.' Anna Vyrubova was going into shock. Her teeth were chattering like bone castanets.

‘Calm down Anna Vyrubova. We’ll find an alibi. But first, we’ve got to get him out of here.’

We burst into the boudoir. There were scattered icons everywhere, the bedclothes were shredded, vodka bottles shattered. Yahweh alone knows what had taken place here. Razzie was lying face down on the floor on top of the Czarina. I checked his pulse. Nothing. We flipped him over, prostrated the Czarina on her four-poster and tried to drag the body down the stairs. Anna Vyrubova was drenched in dread. I was quite worked up myself. He was a dead weight.

‘We’ll never get him out of here before the secret service comes back from lunch,’ she cried.

‘Calm down Anna Vyrubova,’ I said. ‘This is what we’re going to do. Let’s undress him and stash him here in the stairwell. We’ll pick him up later and give him a decent burial. I’ll go in his place to Cuntovsky’s. He’s expected there later, so he’ll appear to keep his appointment. And if my gossip serves me correctly, Cuntovsky was planning to whack him tonight anyway. It’s the perfect alibi. If I take the balalaika with me, it will convince them.’

‘You’ll never get away with it.’

‘I will. I’m great at disguises. The very stench of him will convince the nobles I’m him. I wrestled Razzie’s cassock off, not an easy task on a corpse. Doffing my courtly robes, I wrapped myself in his stench. The armpits were particularly challenging.

‘What about your visage? You cannot possibly pass for the Starets.’

‘Pass me those scissors,’ I said. I squeezed my thumb and forefinger into the golden holes and grabbed Razzie by his overgrown bristles, dislodging a fair crumbling of stale knish. Staying close to the skin, I snipped his beard off at the skin line and patted it together with the remainder of the blood paste. Thus garbed, I hailed a carriage and went out to meet Razzie’s fate.

First they tried to drink me to death. Then they attempted to kill me by playing a really dodgy dervish on the contrabass. When that didn’t work, they each took turns in kicking me rigid with their hobnail boots. Then they shot me at point blank range, which just served to enrage me further. After which, Count Cuntovsky tried to choke me with his reindeer tail scarf, but I staggered up screaming Tartar curses, which could be heard for miles. They called me debauched, a lecher, a sodomite, a sonovabitch. I should have told them who the real Sonovabitch was. But that would have blown my cover. After they dragged me to the river, they had to hack a hole in the ice to get the body into the liquid beneath. Then they had to weight the

corpse so that it stayed under; it was a huge schlep. I'd done a bit of underwater breathing during the Witch Troubles, but the beating and the strangling and the gaping gunshot wounds were taking their toll, and as I gasped my last breath, I sank beneath the frozen waters. The last thing I remember was the rudder of the Portugal ploughing through the harbour. I was still clutching the contrabass.

I am an opponent in a cataclysmic battle of the skeletons. The game, a matter of afterlife or death, is to use your own bones as weapons. I arm myself with a femur, my masked opponent snaps off a tibia and we circle each other, aiming for the kill, whittling the weapons away to the death. The blood continues to drip until there are only two bones remaining. With one final blow, I shatter his calcaneus, wounding him mortally and hold up my humerus in triumph. My foe unmasks himself; it is Carta, who reconstitutes himself into flesh, like a backwards horror movie, with the exception of his fibula, which he shapes into a makeshift phorminx with his own twisted kishkes. He plucks the gutted string and an old familiar tune resounds, the opening bars of The Ballad of Wanda and Carta. I open my mouth to sing, and realise I don't have a jawbone. A high pitched scream renders my eardrums asunder …

Book XI: 'Made in Manhattan' New Canaan 1942

i

Manhattan plays the same trick on you every time you see it; the lazzi of illusion. The moment you look away, it ceases to exist. But while you're on the ride, it sweeps you up in its towering inferno and drops you down its elevator shaft, and you wake up three weeks or three hundred years later and wonder what the fig happened. In New York City everyone's sniffing their own brand of celestial coke. Or underwear.

Appetite for adventure I asked for. New York City delivered. With a huge side order of Eleanora Derenkovsky aka Maya Deren. She was on her way out of her mind; I wanted a pass through the music of the jazz spheres. I could serve her by day and trawl the clubs by night. It was a perfect trade-off.

Sitting in at the late night uptown jams was never sanctioned without an audition. While the soli pealed, one of the cats would step into the gents and call a few tunes to the bewildered out-of-towner who had the audacity to think he, or she, could have a blow with the big boys. The Muses had said nothing to me about standards, but you couldn't get up there without a memorised repertoire, able to reel off tune after tune in any key, at any tempo. The big boys had their structure down pat, they could call the canon; it was how they could leapfrog so seamlessly into their protracted flights of fancy. If you were an outsider they could trip you up over your own shoelaces. Especially if you were of the pomegranate persuasion. But that didn't stop me trying.

Ray-Ray hooked me up with Bird at the Milton one night. An emaciated saxophonist shuffled into the cubicle, snorted a line of white powder from the lid of the bowl and leered at me through bleary bloodshot eyes. His hands shook. His trousers were stained. He unbuttoned his flies. It was not a good time to ask for his autograph.

'So What?' he asked, lifting the seat.

'Nope.'

'Night and Day?' He petered at the porcelain.

'Sorry.'

'Take the A Train?' He pissed a cloudy arc of urine into the bowl.

'I just caught one from the Village.'

'Black Orpheus?' He shook out the excess drops and put his schmekel back in his pants.

'Can you hum the first few bars and I may catch on?'

'This ain't no good, sugar baby doll. Come back when you can call.'

'I know Summertime? In A minor?' Maya used to hum it to herself when she was setting up the photographic paper for a dance shoot.

'Don't be starting with me, baby. Our repertoire sets the standards.'

'Please, Birdman,' I said, 'don't call me baby.' My backchat couldn't hide the fact that I couldn't name a one of them. Play something once and it's embedded in my brain, but my auditory recall couldn't help me with titles. I had to revert to my old schmekel tricks to get a look in.

Now a woman can't hold body and soul together with subbing and rubbing alone, and when Ray-Ray told me about this hip chick looking for a camera assistant, a wench who'd

connect me with all the right people, I jumped at it, even though the pay was an alcove in her hallway and twelve Dollars a week. Maid in Manhattan, boho style.

Betwixt and between Maya's creative emissions and rolodex notes, I pored over chord charts, inhaling the recurrent patterns – minor second, dominant fifth, tonic and then the altered chords – eavesdropping at every gig, sharp fives and flat nines, the thirteenths and the suspended fourths transcribing my memory from brain to paper through the medium of my ear. I figured that they all obeyed the perversion of the octave, never ever ending; it's all built around the notion of the major seventh being the last bop in the phrase, forcing the listener to fill in the blanks, quivering where no quaver should ever tread.

The Village didn't have a shred of street cred, Maya said, until she and Mannie claimed it as the most fun you could have with your Avant Garde down. 'We made those first movies in the Morton Street apartment,' Maya said. 'We covered the walls with photographic paper and made passionate underwater love to early Miles and Bird. Gott se danken the dancers were always late. You pay peanuts, you get Haitians.' The war would have passed Maya by in its entirety, but for those boat people who were permitted to land, to put themselves into servitude for the whims of the rich and peddle their Voudon in the barrios of the Bronx. The froomies settled on the Lower East Side. Kashrut on demand. Shul within walking distance. The new bohemians gravitated to Greenwich Village, fashioning an exotic melting pot of tantalising proportions. 'I can see it all through the Bolex,' Maya said. 'The camera becomes the second actor, each scene is meticulously planned; it takes a figload of hard work for it to look this spontaneous.' I peered at the index card, moist with Maya's preproduction notes, words packed together in Maya's signature scrawl.

Longshot: camera sweeps dining area, taking in shabby wooden table with matchstick chairs. Phone on wall with dangling receiver. MCU: Skein of wool on whatnot in corner. Woman passes across lens, focus pull. Zoom out to woman walking past telephone. Note to editor: Replace telephone shot with phonogram for double take. Audio: Music from another room, seen through doorway where a man clips a sock suspender from beneath his kneecap. Nightshade flutters in foreground. Woman grabs skein of wool and starts to wind. It is attached to the man's suspender and unravels in a series of jump cuts. Close up of record player turning. Female hand removes the needle. Audio: Music continues to play in distance. Fade out to dancer in midair.

I typed it up as best I could. Sometimes it was hard keeping up with Maya's filmic train of thought.

By the time the Germans surrendered to France, Maya's brand of cuckoo wasn't hip any more. She always seemed to exercise her chutzpah at the wrong time and place; her abrasive self-confidence wasn't everybody's D cup. She plain offended people. Like the time she jumped into Louis B.'s swimming pool in heaven's devil robes and an antique guitar. Ruined the party completely. Or when she cornered Cecil B. to view her rushes and the poor fellow fell asleep before the first reel was over. Maya couldn't have cared a fig who was a Yiddel and who was not, as long as they had influence. She herself was Ukraine spawned, her parents having fled not twenty-two years prior from the Pogroms of Pinsk. They wanted she should be a pharmacist. She defied them by becoming an auteur. The Big A was swarming with survivors and many new citizens thrived in the atmosphere of deprivation and opportunity that they discovered in America.

She'd found fame by twenty-two, but since the war the grants had dried up, the rent was overdue, she could hardly grasp a handheld camera, and her Voudon experiments had turned to dust. She'd won the Guggenheim. She'd aced it at Cannes. She'd squandered her prize money in some Caribbean backwater and picked up a slew of followers and medical conditions en route. She couldn't live without her daily fix. It was almost all over for Maya. In this life.

ii

The Bolex needed a service. Maya bought it with her daddy's inheritance, his having died most inconveniently the night before her wildly successful premiere in the West Village. It was the love of her life, that Bolex. She even slept with it, which caused a not insubstantial flow of bodily secretions to enter into its spring wound clockwork, which had to be removed with more than a soft cloth. Its craftsmanship and quality were beyond compare, Maya said. 'Popular cinema's clichés are tacky and gauche when held up to my meticulous metaphors,' she continued. 'The industry has blocked true creativity; arranging narrative is a bourgeois mania,' she said, quoting her wartime pen pal, Georges B., who'd said some really crazy things while he scribbled away sclerotically in occupied Occitane.

‘Why does there have to be plot?’ Maya asked. ‘What of story? Verisimilitude be damned. Who cares about the opinions of a bunch of motley strangers spitting popcorn husks in the dark who just want to be spoon-fed with trite dialogue and happily ever afters? Leaves me stone cold sober. All things Hollywood have only ever clustered around the hero’s journey. Hero schmero,’ Maya said. ‘Is there nothing else? Is the ordinary world of the character such a big deal? Do the stakes have to be so high? What about a meeting on celluloid with some dispossessed golem who refuses for her soul to be captured, and thus brings my illustrious career to a grinding halt?’

Everything she’d learned about Voudon she could no longer apply to her art; it was sacred information. Had this burden rendered her incapable of reaching those pre-conscious heights? These were the kinds of things Maya raved about, hung over and under the influence, as an avatar of Erzulie or Dr. Feelgood’s addled addict. She basically just lived from fix to fix.

Maya labelled everything, from film reels to Voudon dolls. She inspected every concept with Talmudic intensity. Maya went deep, never wide. Wide was for amateurs. Maya was an auteur. And even though every image, every crossfade, every light beam looked spontaneous, nothing was by accident. She injected herself before parties and sleep deprived herself for days. Sometimes she woke me up in the middle of the morning to transcribe her notes onto alphabetical rolodex cards. I typed it all on my Remington portable, adding a little embellishment of my own here and there. And I worked the Bolex. The inimitable mechanical eye that captured it all. I threaded the woollen skeins she shot over and over, throwing her curly locks over her shoulder in acute slow motion. And seduced her teenage sidekick, fifteen to her thirty-nine. Nobody said lives were fair.

I was at the repair shop in Times Square before it opened, with the pungent smell of porn and pomegranate rubbing itself on the garbage-strewn city blocks. For a glimpse of stocking and a low-cut gypsy blouse, the technician, Eric, would let me jump the queue. For a schmekel twiddle in the empty lot, he’d fix it while I waited. On this particular morning he was a long time coming, and I was running about sixty minutes late. Even though it was a cool October morning, I was shvitzing like a sultan in a sauna. Maya clearly wasn’t waiting for her long-suffering camera assistant to interfere with her furious energy, and I pitched up just as a harried figure leapt out of the Morton Street walkup. It was obvious she’d descended all four flights in a hurry

and was fit to be tied. Maya doesn't like tardiness, even if she herself is days overdue; she'd cast a spell on more than one clapper loader.

Ray-Ray had kept in touch with the Haitians who'd paddled to Florida and hitchhiked to the Bronx, and were shipped in from the Bronx for the weekend to pepper the ceremony with some authentic loa vibes. Maya had instructed the making of a wedding movie, reenacting the whole Voudon shebang with an array of side dish nuptials. And Maya wanted it captured for posterity with an eye to using some of the footage to prop up her stalled Haitian masterpiece. Who knew it would turn into the birth of Be Bop?

'There you are, you're fucking late,' she panted, gathering up her stallion-appliqued peasant skirt and striding up Morton at a canter that could have outpaced Papa Legba.

'Sorry,' I said, 'I was held up by the short and curlies. But the Bolex is fixed. We owe Ray-Ray another six Dollars.'

Maya checked her threadbare pocketbook though fingerless gloves.

'A plague upon his poxy flesh, may it rot his bones under the Golf de Gonave,' she incanted; but the spirits weren't with her and hopefully the curse wouldn't stick. We needed Eric. He was the leader of the quintet that was coming over for the nuptials. And. He was the only one who could get the fluff out.

'Aren't you going to get something to eat?' I asked. I'd stopped off for a post-coital bagel and lox on 80th and 6th. Maya had not taken sustenance these past five days.

'Can't fucking eat. Must have fucking vitamins,' she said as she hotfooted it up Christopher Street and made a right on Bleecker.

'Why don't we take the subway?' I suggested, struggling to keep up with the ever-increasing weight of the Bolex.

'Subway? Can't wait for fucking subway. Must have fucking shots.'

Maya hurried across Washington Square Park, ignoring the panhandlers and junkies she usually greeted with a Haitian high five, and made a left on Broadway.

'Where are we going, Maya?'

'Go, go, go. It's quick and slow. The solenodon sloths you know.'

'Huh?'

'The way is through the crocodile,' hissed Maya. 'The root and the bubble and the one-eyed fucking coot.'

‘Okey dokey,’ I said cautiously, changing arms for the Bolex. ‘We should get you to a doctor.’

‘Doctor? That’s it. The Good Doctor.’

‘That’s great,’ I said cautiously. ‘Shall we take a cab to your GP?’

‘No see GP. Doctor fucking Feelgood. That’s where we’re bound. Bound by the swaddling robes of skin-shed fucking toad.’

‘Come, Maya, let’s go back to the apartment. We can make a little whoopee, we can polish up the possession edit …’

‘The goddess of love does not care for sex. What is crucial is that which is not necessary. Love is that which is not fucking necessary. Art is that which is not fucking necessary.’

‘Let’s have a quick drink,’ I suggested, thinking it would calm her down. We were passing the Voodoo Lounge, which still had a smattering of late night zombies propping up the shaky rattle-shaped barstools.

‘I need to get me a fucking Feelgood fix. Look. There’s a payphone. Must call the Good fucking Doctor. Tell him I’m on my way. The way of the hutia. The way of the flaming flamingo.’

She pulled out a nickel from her threadbare purse and jammed it into the slot. ‘Do you think he’ll be open at this time of day?’ I asked.

‘Max is open twenty-four-fucking-seven,’ she puffed. The coin hit the jackpot.

‘Hello Nina,’ she rasped. ‘Put me through to Max. I know he’s with a patient, he’s always with a fucking patient. Tell him it’s Maya. This can’t fucking wait. Light me a fag will you, Wanda. Hello, Max!’ The voice on the other end bellowed through the receiver. I could hear every word like he was in the booth with us.

‘Maya, kukele, lovely to hear from you.’

‘Max, I’m fucking dying here,’ she inhaled half the cigarette in one draw.

‘What is it, kukele?’

‘I’ve got to officiate at a fucking gay Voudon wedding, Max. It’s my ex. I just can’t do it without the sting of the snake, the needle of the fucking unicorn.’

‘I’ve got a lot of patients in the waiting room, kukele. I’m off to Roosevelt Cottage in half an hour. The President is sending a limo – a limo; what do you think of that?’

‘Max, I’m not asking you, I’m commanding you, by Erzulie Agra, Goddess of the Blue. Minutes that tick by without time, without fucking love, Max.’

‘Kukele, I’ll load you a syringe that will let you prance all night. With a little extra shot of placenta and a scraping of horny toad.’

‘You’re calling the fucking shots, Doc. I’ll be there in fifteen minutes.’

We made a left into Lexington and I hailed a cab. My arms were about to fall off; all this handheld holding was giving me muscles I’d never known I possessed. I made a mental note to buy a canvas satchel for the Bolex. I’d not been comfortable with fauna since that incident with the butterflies back in the eleventh.

iii

The Upper East Side was the last place you’d expect to see a German refugee ply his medical wares. It was strictly Goyim. Wasps mainly. No questions asked. Cash on delivery. Except for the President, the boys told me later, and a couple of dancers who paid in kind. And Maya, of course. For Maya there was always an extra syringe, a used needle or two, because Max had a soft spot for his kind and Maya gave great head and a lot of free publicity. Being in the Goyishe Hood gave Max a boost in credibility that his origins belied. He’d smuggled the amphetamine samples out of Germany and reproduced the recipe himself, willy nilly, from the strewn contents of a filthy medicine bag, that gave many of his patients a heady cocktail of high and hepatitis. They came from all over the City, up and down the American Dream, to partake of Doctor Feelgood’s muti. Potus couldn’t sign a nuclear standoff without it. Flotus wasn’t given her acronym for nothing.

We reached the brownstone on seventy-second in time to see Papa Hemingway skulking in the doorway. Everybody thought he was off liberating the Ritz, but he made most of that up. Papa was a forerunner of alternative facts. He couldn’t tell if he was General McArthur or Martha Washington. You could have cast a Broadway musical from the inhabitants of the waiting room. Zero, Lerner, Lowe, Fisher, Mathis, Tennessee Williams with his entire menagerie, and an off-duty Rockette sipping meths from a crumpled brown bag. Ignoring Nina, his harried receptionist, Maya burst into Max’s inner chamber. An indigo-eyed teenager was bending over for her dose. I watched in terror as a murky liquid disappeared into her right peach. The girl stifled a moan.

‘You’re all set now, Lizzie,’ said the doctor, extracting a needle the size of a twelve-tone fipple. ‘Tell Uncle Leo it’s on the house.’

‘Thanks, Uncle Max,’ breathed the doe, blowing him an air kiss from the doorway. ‘I’ll see you at the premiere.’ She staggered into the arms of a burly bodyguard in the overheated waiting room. I was sure I’d seen her somewhere before. Max closed the door and turned to Maya who was fidgeting with a bat wing perched on his medicine bag.

‘Kukele,’ he cooed to Maya. ‘You made it.’

‘No thanks to this one,’ she slurred, cocking her head in my direction.

‘I’ve loaded your dose in the unicorn chamber.’ Max’s blackened fingernails held up a dirty syringe. Maya lifted her gypsy skirt displaying an orange peeled upper leg riddled with needle marks.

‘Make it snappy, Max, I can’t wait another second,’ she commanded. ‘We’re due on the 12h03 to New Canaan. Must set up crossroads, must create chalk circle.’ Max ejected a spurt of toxicity from the needlepoint into Maya’s dimpled thigh. Maya’s eyes rolled back.

‘Nu, kukele, what about your girlfriend over here?’

‘I’m not her girlfriend,’ I said. ‘I’m her camera assistant. And I’m training to be a jazz musician.’ I pointed the Bolox at his milk-bottled spectacles.

‘No paparazzi in here,’ Max said, shielding his eyes with crossed arms.

‘Don’t worry, Max, it isn’t loaded,’ I teased.

‘Stick it to her, Doc,’ Maya slurred, her head lolling backward. Peace at last. I’ll try anything twice. I put down the Bolex and presented my dimpled peaches.

iv

I needed to sober up, fast. Hair of the Hound is my usual practice, but I couldn’t identify the origins of what Max had injected into me, and I had a distinct taste of iron in my mouth that put me in mind of the punishment I received for the sin of truth telling.

How we got to Grand Central I’ll never know. Max must have ordered a cab. Vague moments washed in and out – leather seats, the odour of bat and vomit, snake vertebrae clattering all over the show.

I came to clutching the Bolex, a large syringe and a Voudon rattle. Maya was standing over me unsteadily, clutching two train tickets.

‘I told you we needed the 12h03 to Port Chester. These say 11h03. We’ve fucking missed the train. Rob and Mannie are going to freak.’

‘Sorry, Maya, I seem to have lost track of time.’ My ears were roaring. The announcements came at me like a military roundup.

‘Train to New Canaan leaving Platform 9 in five minutes.’

‘We’ve still got time, Mam’Zelle,’ I said. Maya had ordered me to address her thus in public, an affectation from the island pidgin. I glanced at the bay numbers leading off the central hall. Platform 9’s over there. Let’s go.’ I heaved myself vertical.

‘Have you got the Bolex?’ she demanded.

‘Oui, Mam’Zelle.’

‘The rattle?’

‘Oui, Mam’Zelle.’

‘My hankie?’

‘Oui oui, Mam’Zelle.’ I tapped the mewled linen in my pocket.

‘My sundress I got in Port au Prince?’

‘We’ve got the essentials,’ I said. ‘The outfits, we’ll have to busk it.’ Maya started to puff herself up, going red in the face, her lips reaching to her rouged cheekbones in a rictus of frustration.

‘Please, Mam’Zelle, don’t make a scene. We’ve got a train to catch.’

‘If you think I’m playing a Voudon priestess in this schmatta, you’ve got another thing coming,’ she screeched, lifting her gypsy skirt right over her head.

‘A pox be upon you, Wanda B. Lazarus. May your fruit rot in your womb, may there be wormholes in your tomb.’ And stretching her arms out, waddling blindly, she heaved herself onto the train where she spent the journey stuffing herself with M&Ms and raging herself into exhaustion.

I’d seen Maya before in her holy tantrums. The wrong angle of an arabesque, an overexposed can of film, a bad review. It was poor impulse control and people like Anaïs and Marcel eventually drifted away rather than be scapegoat to her angry rantings. I remember how upset Marcel got that one time she pissed in his urinal after a particularly nasty binge. Maya

never had a problem passing off the work of others as her own. Mannie said it was the drugs. Ray-Ray said it was sunstroke, but whatever the cause, they said, Maya never really got her act together after the last trip to Haiti.

It was the incessant offbeat that first drew her to this island where slaves held sway and funnelled their need for the unnecessary, the indulgent, the excessive into Erzulie, Goddess of Love. She discovered heresy in plain sight, Mannie said, the populace enacting a subtle counterfeit of Christianity by giving saints' names to many of the entities that possessed them during their ceremonies, fooling the Christian authorities who would exterminate their pagan thoughts. Maya gobbled it up, hook, line and sinker, the 'it'-girl of Port au Prince, returning over and over to observe, then participate, and finally submit to her divinity of invisibles.

v

Ray-Ray was only thirteen when Mannie picked him up in a public lavatory at the Port au Prince bus terminus. They met anonymously, tossing each other off through a makeshift glory hole in the crumbling partition walls. Mannie brought Ray-Ray back to Manhattan. Couldn't get enough of his youthful jouissance. Neither could Maya. Ray-Ray was a kind of double-edged talisman for Maya and Mannie, and they stroked him like a lucky charm.

When Ray-Ray moved in, Mannie's career went through the roof. Wanda's plunged. Wrath ensued. Mannie moved out. Ray-Ray followed him to Connecticut. All three carried on schtupping. Someone had to break the ties. Maya withdrew into her wilderness of work. Ray-Ray chose Mannie, insisting on a commitment and a stake in the toys, but because the laws of the land forbade the love that dared to speak of rimming, and because one was a Yiddel and the other a liberated slave, they arranged for their own trimmed down wedding, Voudon style, at Mannie's rolling-in-it estate in New Canaan.

To appease Maya, they asked her to be the High Priestess where she could conjure up her Voudon magic to ensure a happy marriage. Even though it was to be fifty years before the State legally recognised their love, the boychicks were pledging, in matching tuxedos, with hankies on their heads, their life-long troth and an iron-clad prenup. I've never quite got the point of committing to one person forever and ever, but Maya was insistent and Mannie was sentimental, and Ray-Ray was entitled to some eternal return for his infusion of untrammelled libido.

Mannie and Ray-Ray met us at the station in a purple Eldorado Biarritz, decorated à la moffie marriage: orange dashboard shag, porcelain nodding statue of Erzulie, a pair of fuzzy dice and a string of pink plastic pearls dangling from the rear view mirror that bobbed up and down as we drove to the estate.

'What's she on?' Ray-Ray asked, lifting one of Maya's eyelids and seeing only the whites. 'Is it the diabetes sugar overload again?'

'She's allergic to bat placenta, I think,' I said inhaling a long sniff of myrrh, which I'd secreted out of my pomegranate belt.

'Where did you take her?' Mannie demanded. 'You were due here three hours ago. The wedding planner's already laid out the land.'

'She insisted we went past Max. I tried to distract her. She didn't even want the Voodoo Lounge daybreak special.'

'Holy Moley, she's pumped full of Feelgood. We've told her that scheiss is poison.'

'You use Max's magic muti too?'

'Used to. Used to,' Mannie said, turning the Caddie into the avenue of poplars that lined his verdant driveway. 'We introduced her. All of us used Max to the max. Then we found out what was in that injection.'

'Now we don't touch the stuff,' Ray-Ray said. 'Much prefer ayahuasca for recreational use.' The shot had addled my brain, but I was gradually shaking it off. Maya was clearly still off with the faeries. An eyelid was inspected. Whites only. I was curious as to how Max had achieved his American Dream. The bridal couple filled me in. Mannie and Ray-Ray had been close friends of Rogers and Hammerstein, who'd known Max since he first hit town.

'Maxele knew exactly what he was doing, darling,' Mannie said, adjusting the pearls to get a backseat view of Maya.

'Javol,' Ray-Ray added, laying his palm on Mannie's hairy thigh. 'Max was working for the Nazis to manufacture the mind altering medication they administered to their storm troopers.'

'What, like drugs for soldiers?' I asked.

'Amphetamines, uppers, speed, morale boosters, it went by many aliases,' Mannie continued. 'The meds would have the poor schmucks up for days. Hallucinating like holy ghosts. Just imagine, thousands of boychicks high as kites, jaws clenched, shooting Yiddels in the dark for no rhyme or reason.'

‘Even the ones who came back never truly returned,’ Ray-Ray said, dolefully.

As much as I was accustomed to empires wielding weapons of mass destruction, I was a little surprised to hear the Germans would shoot up their very own kinderlach.

‘And it didn’t stop there, hey Ray-Ray? Wasn’t Max making steroids for the ’36 Olympics.’

‘Javol, mein liebe heir.’

‘Max helped get those athletes to peak performance levels – they never felt the pain – but he felt bad that the motherland had to cheat to win. So, one night, after delivering a young discus thrower of her vestigial foetus – what’s a doctor to do in a co-ed Olympic village? – he schmoozed the US coach, who was impressed by his bashful boasts, hitched a ride through Ellis Island as the squad physiotherapist, and smuggled out the basic formula in the hem of his underpants.

‘He stole his own recipe? Way to go, Max,’ I said. ‘Does he practice what he preaches?’

‘The first time Max injected himself he passed out for two days,’ Ray-Ray said. ‘Had visions so intense he hardly ever slept again.’

‘He always tests the merchandise,’ Mannie said. ‘Ozzie’s seen him do it. He liquefies speed and steroids in a secret blend, sifting in all manner of schmutz. Bone meal, bat afterbirth, ethylene, methylene.’

‘Spit, piss, vomit. Whips it up in a martini shaker.’

‘A liddle biss of diss, a liddle biss of dat,’ Mannie imitated Max’s thick Teutonic tongue.

‘Eww,’ I said. ‘I prefer my poison straight, no chaser.’

‘And as his A-list of clients attests, Miracle Max was right on the money,’ Mannie said, fingering Ray-Ray’s bowtie.

‘Max knew it was dangerous. Max knew it was addictive. That’s why they all kept coming back for more,’ Ray-Ray said.

‘Say *we*, dear, say we,’ Mannie teased his bride.

‘So that’s why Maya’s an insomniac.’

‘Javol,’ Ray-Ray said. ‘But what does Max know from side effects?’

‘He calls it his ‘Vitamin Cure’. It stops pain and makes you feel invincible. You can’t tell the difference between creativity and madness, bliss and schizophrenia,’ Mannie chuckled.

‘Join the club,’ I said.

vi

Maya woke up raving. The spittle in the corners of her mouth made me think of Lazzie that morning I left him frothing. Perhaps he too was under some kind of influence. From Voudon we didn't know back at the Temple. I knew from watching her Haitian rushes that Maya couldn't summon up Erzulie at the drop of a white handkerchief. The hierophany were the ones who decided who was worthy, and a faribel with the wedding planner was really not good karma.

'You call this a fucking setup?' Maya spat at the pale-faced yogini, dressed to the nines in a white silk sari, head swathed in a bulbous pink turban, crowned with a purple gladiolus.

'Mannie said you needed a circle, Maya,' she said calmly. 'We've corralled off the entire sun porch for you.'

'I told you I need full fathom fucking five.'

'We thought a fathom was a nautical term, so we've excavated the swimming pool. You can do the whole love goddess tea trolley thing underwater.'

'I can't get started without a sacred fucking gateway. Erzulie does not approve.'

'What is it exactly that you need?' asked the yogini, oozing origanum from beneath her silk-sheathed armpits.

'The pole, I have to have the sacred pole to hold the space between the worlds.'

'What about the beach umbrella, Siri Dharma?' Mannie asked. 'We can heave the pedestal over here and strip the canvas.'

'Erzulie cannot work under these conditions,' Maya enjoined. It took four of us to schlep the umbrella from the beach house, but at last she had it; whipping post, centre of the universe, maypole, schmekel thingamabob. My Bobba's Asherah served pretty much the same purpose. You can't connect between the visible and the invisible without the lynchpin. Of course, given my immortal disposition, I did not require any such tzatzke. I could straddle the channels any time, consult the Muses even, and be back in time for tea and teiglach. But this time, the goddess of love had different plans for Maya and me.

The pole was heaved into place, by which time Maya's attention had turned to the next phase. The crafting of the icon.

'Where's the fucking kitchen?' she demanded. 'Erzulie must have corn. The seed or the flour. Must create Erzulie's sacred fucking circle.'

‘I’m sure we’ve got some sesame seeds left over from the bagels,’ said the yogini. Maya hurled her out the way and staggered into the house.

‘What’s the big deal?’ shrugged the planner. ‘Sesame seeds are a great substitute for corn. And there’s plenty of space on the porch.

‘Don’t worry, Siri,’ said Mannie. Maya always wants to be the centre of attention. She’s probably disappointed that Ziggy can’t make it. She wanted to use his Follies for a dance shoot.

‘Let’s hope she calms down soon,’ I said. ‘We’ve got a long day ahead of us.’

‘And an even longer night,’ said Mannie. The bride and groom looked coyly into each other’s eyes.

Wanda came out of the house wielding a bag of Grape Nuts, which she shook wildly, emptying its contents in the shape of a cross upon the newly laid astroturf.

‘No good, no good,’ she muttered to herself. ‘Must have white. Must have light.’ The pattern was sinking into the nap of the fake lawn. You couldn’t see the toasty kernels through the plastic blades.

‘Noooooooo!’ Maya shrieked like she’d been stuck with a Voudon pin. The sous chef came running towards us with a large packet of Swan’s Down. The flour, not the feathers. Maya gored into its top with an unbrushed incisor and began to pour its contents in patterns on the ground around the upright portal, like undulating white shadows. Utterly immersed, I locked and loaded the Bolex and, sans script, sans shotlist, began to film her frenzied movements. Who knows what titbits I could pick up by filming a little white darkness?

I see the whole thing unfolding through the lens, forever present, as Maya leans into her rising ritual. The entire scene plays out in slow motion. What I can’t get on camera, I’ll fix in the mix. Guests in white with pink and purple accessories are gathering, beginning to move their bodies, but she and I are oblivious to their presence. The drummers, imported from the Bronx for the weekend, begin to sound out their mamans and their assons, building from an innocent offbeat to a syncopated climax. I struggle to capture the sense of topsy turvidity, but if I spread-eagle myself on the edge of the porch, shooting from beneath, I can capture Maya in the reflection of the French doors and double her image as she falls backwards, the flour moving in and out of her silent screaming nostrils. She floats down from the ceiling and sprinkles spindly spurts around the hearts, outlining floury flowers on each side of the pole. Just as she is crafting the stars on either side of the lower crossbeam, a bolus of powder plops out of the packet, ruining

her flow. The flour puff breaks the circumference of the heart causing her design to go awry. Stamping it out with her petulant feet, she canters back to the kitchen and starts flinging groceries out of the walk-in pantry. I switch off the Bolex and run to the rescue.

'You have to have something fucking better than this.'

'We've been catering, Maya, everything's been used up. Can't you make do with what we've got?' asked the harried groom. 'The guests are getting restless. We need to start.'

'I've told you of the way of the crossroads. And now you give me no tools to welcome the spirits. Now where is my sacred chalk?' Pots and pans clattered about the white tiled room.

'Calm down, Maya. I'm sure the spirits will understand. Come outside, Louis B. wants to say hello.'

'Me, calm? Shut the fuck up,' she said, planting one foot on the drawing and rubbing her heel back and forth. I could tell she was coming down and it wasn't pretty. I stopped filming and put down the Bolex.

'Not enough space, not enough time,' she chanted. 'Now hand me my rattle.' We could all see that she hadn't the strength to go through the transformation.

'Maya, come lie down in your cottage for a moment,' Ray-Ray suggested meekly.

'Get out of my way, heathen. Where have you hidden the skin and the bones?'

'Maya, that's the champagne fridge. Please don't …'

Maya picked up the icebox with her bare hands and flung it to the other side of the kitchen. People may say I exaggerate, but Mannie and Ray-Ray saw it too, and so did Siri Dharma the wedding planner, and the clutch of Haitians who were already stepping in time to the lure of the loa, half-baked on their döppelgangers. Champagne began to leak out of the rubber as she tossed the icebox anon towards the breakfast nook. The door burst open. Splinters of glass and ice shot out in all directions.

The white darkness was starting to possess her, and I wasn't sure the kitchen would survive another onslaught, not with Max's muti coursing through her veins.

'That's enough, Maya,' said Mannie, removing a shard from his lapel where it had skewered an orchid. 'Wanda, take her to her cottage.'

'Leave me the fuck alone,' spat Maya, batting me off, 'Erzulie's coming, she's at the crossroads, I have to finish what I started.' Her foot rooted to the floor.

'You need your rest, Mam'Zelle. I'll take over.'

Suddenly, she slumped into my arms. I propped her upright between Mannie and me and staggered the few hundred yards down the slim lane between the plane trees to the secluded guest cottage. Finally spent, she let me undress her. I wrapped a silk scarf around her eyes and pulled up the counterpane.

'Erzulie … I need to rendezvous.'

'Erzulie can wait,' I said, tightening the blindfold. I applied a light pressure to her carotid artery and she fell once more into unconsciousness. How to strangle without killing. A little trick I learned back in the Thirteenth.

Carefully, I removed the Haitian sundress from the bottom of my bag and stepped into the Erzulie threads. I donned Maya's headscarf – now you could hardly tell us apart in the white darkness. Now was my chance to get under the skin of the music. And find out what the Goddess was up to. That's when I saw my chance to make my mark. To become Erzulie myself.

vii

No human has any clear memory of possession. They'd go stark staring mental if they did. From dybbuk to döppelganger, the loa put folk through their paces and they emerge reborn, never to recall a thing. My peculiar circumstances have me in and out of bodies all the time and I'm able to keep track of a steady stream of unconsciousness. Even though wear and tear is beginning to show – a wrinkle here, a muffin top there – I'm still most comfortable in my own skin. I knew, though, that there'd be heaven to pay if I didn't pick up Maya's slack and fill in for the love of Erzulie.

The drumming from the porch had picked up, hearts and flowers transformed into intricate wavy lines by several sacks of Swan's Down and signs of the crossroads in the air. Two saxophonists, early arrivals in search of hooch, mirrored each other's salutes by shaking their sacred rattles, skull-shaped calabashes covered with a loose web of clay beads and snake vertebrae with a bell attached for good measure. The rattle is used to summon the loa. It is a sign of priesthood. It can also get you into the percussion section of an uptown jazz ensemble, no standards asked.

The drumming started to syncopate, boom, taka taka taka … boom taka taka taka, cross-hatched by a chick a boom taka taka … chick a boom taka taka taka, like sonic bombshells. My body was thrown this way and that in contradictory directions. I told Terps this was my worst – I

can't even do chorus line – this senseless shaking, this opposition of limb and life seemed to conjure a wormhole in the fabric of time and space and I found myself being flung to the other side.

By the time I got back to the crossroads, the rites were in play. The unshod feet of the guests stomped polyphonically, their arms and legs in opposition to their torsos, creating a dislocated death rattle of servitors. Dancing the dervish with no hand-eye coordination was a blessing in disguise. Hopping on one foot, skipping on another, I tried to remember the steps I'd seen Maya do; curtsey 2,3,4, backwards 6,7,8. Salute the flag on backward heel. Curtsey to the mirror image by your side. Kiss the hilt of the sword. I couldn't really get the whole thing to work so I made it up as I went along. St. Vitus would have been proud. Posing steady as a rock rabbit. Shifting my weight from left to right with the shoulders going the other way, like a voodoo goose step. The wilder I did it, the closer I got to improvised perfection. Finger movements clawing in the dust. Straddling the central pole like a striptease cock-tease.

The drums shifted their pace; tak-a tak-a boom-a-boom over boom-a-boom-a-tak-tak. A live chicken hurtled into the air, tethered by human hands, even as it was commanded to fly. Strung between life and death, had it sensed it coming? How prolonged was its terror as the crowd began to beat to a different drum? The SPCA would have had a hissy fit.

In the terminology of Voudon, it is said that the loa mounts a person. I sure got laid by Erzulie that night. Mannie doesn't like it, he's much more JuBu than he is VooDoo. He says you have to be in control of your untamed nature, always. That's what Tai Chi is for. And Agiolax. Well, I like a little possession once in a blue moon. The Haitians let their hems up and their hankies down and thrilled to their ancient, recent roots, transplanted to that which existed long before their self-emancipation.

Suddenly, I could not pick up my right foot. It seemed rooted to the floor. My movements staggered and shook as I summonsed the loa. The voices of the locals shrilled to the darkening sky. It was hard to separate their shrieks from the sound of the chickens that two servitors had grasped by the feet and were swinging around by their necks. We welcomed Legba, greeted the god of agriculture, bowed to the demi-gods of commerce and forestry, and enfin, Erzulie graced us with her presence. And of course, for Erzulie, once is never enough. She eschewed our ministrations and pooh-poohed our quaint efforts. I as she. She as me. Me as Erzulie. Now we

had to plan her seaside rendezvous, not with Legba, but with Ague, her aqua-lover on the shore of the Atlantic. Manmade structures pas niet for the Goddess of True Love.

'But Erzulie,' said Ray-Ray, play-playing along, 'we have fathom-filled the swimming pool with salt water, as per your command.'

'It is not the sea that is sacred, but the spirit of the ocean.' I blurted out. 'Ague is the one.'

'And what of Legba? Has he received obeisance?'

'I've bowed, I've scraped, I've curtseyed, I've fawned; if he hasn't got respect by now, he never will,' I said. 'Now, to the beach.'

'Why are we doing this now?' asked Ray-Ray. 'Mannie and I still have to do the vow exchange thing.'

'Maya's been reading the whole thing wrong,' I said in Erzulie's rich rasp.

'It is Ague, spirit of the sea, who is the ideal husband. He is the ready strength and the deep peace I seek.'

'I just wish you'd made up your mind, Wanda, I mean, Erzulie,' Ray-Ray said.

'For the fusion feel to reach, take the party to the beach.'

'Erzulie, no. The jazz cats from the Milton won't be able to find us there.'

'Cats for jazz, razzamatazz,' I said in Phrygian mode.

And as if on cue, three blind drunks were disgorged by a yellow taxi onto the driveway. It must have been their third gig of the night and you could see they were in need of some uppers. Miles was draped between Trane and Bird; even Max's meds were too weak for such proclivities. They'd been promised payment in some fine heroin capsules from Mannie, needles included, so they'd taken the last train from Grand Central to New Haven, third class.

'Follow me to the sea,' I said, gathering my skirts. Ague awaits. Jazz anticipates.' As if by dress rehearsal, the wedding party gathered cups and saucers, from Wedgewood to potsherds, buns to bagels, and placed them on a woven tea trolley without wheels. A raft, they called it. Women brought wedding cake, bottles of moonshine, champagne flutes, vases of gladioli, and balanced them atop the weave. A sextet of singers shouldered it like a Cathar coffin and bore it three leagues through the dunes to the shores of the Atlantic.

I had a sudden urge to swim. Before I knew it, I was three leagues out, much further than I had ever dared since the Zenobia drowning. Was it me, or was it Erzulie? I could see the wedding party paddling into the bay holding the tea trolley aloft. The sound of breaking crockery

wafted over the water. The mamans and the papans were rocked by the loa rattle and the roll of the waves. The trolley was beginning to float.

Three giant silhouettes zoom into view carrying their instruments of brass. Cut to the woven raft, miraculously intact and afloat and holding for endless seconds as the sacrifice sinks under the waves. The trio hoist their metal and begin to blow. A blast of hot jazz straddles the Voudon beat. I'm treading water but I can hear it clearly, the cheat of the final note, the in between slurring of unrequited anticipation. There are no two ways to describe it. Borrowed from the loa lamentations, no la de das, no doobie doo's, no bang shangalangs. Pure Haitian. Untranslatable. I doggie paddle to the shore, moving my legs in strict measure with the band, my diaphragm injecting a unique scat phrase into the jazz annals. Be Bop. Be bop be bop. Bop. Be Bop.

The coffin bearers slip the raft into the waves. The brass begins again in double time and the drummers use the crashing of the waves as their cross rhythm. The very trees take up the motion and raindrops fall on our heads as if the Thunder God himself is crying unsalted crocodile tears on the grave of his aqueous brother.

Swimming back to the whipped-up after-party, I felt I could keep pace with the avatars of Legba. Jazz improvisations are oh so loa. Ask any Voudoun priestess. I still had my white handkerchief on my head and the sundress with chicken blood running down my cleavage. I could have scatted all night, opening up my songbird to full jazz flight. Once you've Be Bopped you never can stop.

The Voudon beat underpinned it all: that syncopation you can't really quite predict, yet you find yourself in perfect sync. The chorus of bodies draws you in, giving you that human, connected feeling, rolling around as the beast with a hundred backs. That's when I really tuned into Ague. For there he was, all six foot four of him, hands spread-eagled over the polished brass keys, sweating to keep the beat, and fiddling around my improv like a telepathic circus clown. If I played on top of the structure for a good fifteen minutes while Bird shot up in the bathroom. Bird didn't need no Voudou to wring that bird till it squawked in tongues.

The scat, they loved it, the big boys. They said I could sit in at Milton's any time. I'd get gigs at the Village Vanguard. They'd be queuing round the block. I'd be famous. My stage name would be Erzulie, Goddess of Jazz Love.

My elation, however, was short lived. Mannie came hurtling into the change room, his bowtie askance.

‘Maya’s in a coma,’ he wheezed. ‘We need to call Max.’

‘Max is with the President, Mannie,’ I said. ‘He boasted to us this very morning.’

‘Fuck. Roosevelt Cottage is over four hundred miles away.’

‘I’ve got the number. He gave it to Maya. Ask for Daffy Duck.’ Mannie reached for the payphone and dialled furiously.

‘Hello. This is Mickey Mouse for Donald Duck.’

‘Daffy Duck. Daffy Duck,’ I reminded him.

‘Sorry, wrong duck. That would be Daffy.’

‘Hold on please, sir,’ wafted the receiver.

‘Max. Max is that you? It’s Maya, Max, she’s gone into a coma.’

‘Don’t be silly schatzi,’ the doctor boomed through the receiver, ‘she’s just sleeping off a bit of bat.’

‘It’s not that, Max. She’s not breathing.’

‘Kukele, you must understand. I can’t leave the President just because Maya’s had a few too many.’

‘Can’t you get the same limo that took you?’

‘There’s a war on, Mannie. Pull yourself together.’

‘Let me speak to him,’ I said. I grabbed the receiver.

‘Please, Max, she’s unresponsive. I think she might have overdosed. That, or it’s blood poisoning.’

‘In that case, she’ll need a transfusion.’

‘We’re in the middle of nowhere, Max, how do we do that?’

‘The New Canaan Sisters of Mercy is about three miles from Mannie’s place. Tell them Max sent you. I’ll see if I can get the President’s helicopter in the morning.’

‘And why should I do any of this?’ I asked.

‘I would advise you to be very careful, kukele,’ he said. ‘We know you’re in want of an alien’s visa. We wouldn’t want the INS to receive an anonymous phone call, now would we?’

viii

After dropping Maya off anonymously at the New Canaan ER, I took the 04h04 from New Canaan to 186th Street and caught the last set at the Milton. Erzulie was still with me. I tore up the joint. But not before a backstage audition before the Gypsy King of Jazz Guitar. Some thought he sat the war out in Paris. Think again. It was New York City. At the very height of Bop. Miles was there, Bird was there, 'Trane was there, and there I was in my pink and purple Voudon bridesmaid's outfit, apricots out for the lads, bopping out standards like a cotton picking pro. His gypsy jazz guitar put me remarkably in mind of my long lost Sabionari. Last time I'd seen that guitar it was hanging on a hook in Strad's workshop.

'Nu,' he ordered, 'sing me an octave.'

'I'd rather cry you a river,' I smirked.

'Later,' he said. 'Blues are a breeze compared to this.'

'Okay,' I said and trilled through Aeolian mode, doh to doh.

'Alright, smart sister, now sing for me eight notes over two bars without hitting the same note twice. Start on the second note, call it Be.'

'Be bop, be bop, be bop, be bop. Rey me fa fee so la te do rey …' I chanted at a speed that would bring back the dinosaurs. Notes in sol fa scale when invented.

'Stop. Too many bops in sequence. The bop in Be Bop never hits the same semitone twice.'

'Yeah, but everyone knows there are eight notes in a scale. Once you hit the octave you're basically starting again, just higher.'

'Don't be naïve. Some ragas have fifty-seven notes per octave.'

'You have a point,' I said, recalling the ektars of Cochin that never twanged in pitch.

'Nu, so I deliberately flatten something – doh re ro pah pe, etc?'

'Exactly,' he said. 'Or sharpen it. It all depends what key you're in. Now try it for yourself.'

Django handed me the gypsy jazz guitar. It was large – more spruce in the belly than Strad's, with its neck of darkest ebony, its fretted mother of pearl inlay. And its tone to lament the dead for. I dropped my wrist and curled my left hand into a chord – A major seventh, expressed by a triangle, always a sure indicator of a jazz classic. It's a trick of the ear. The player knows exactly what's missing in action. It was much easier to see the structure and feel it under

my fingers than the guess work that scatting involved. The spirit can move you, but the chord charts can't be weak. And sure enough, you can get eight notes out of anywhere. Each one sounded freshly baked. I was surprised myself what came out.

'Now the trick is, apply the Be Bop rule to your scatting.'

'What, like play and sing at the same time?'

'Always start on a soft up beat, that's the Be part. Emphasise the downbeat, so you get the Bop. Pick like this; he showed me two disfigured fingers. Django had lost two fingers in a fire in his caravan on the Seine; his sister was crafting flowers from discarded celluloid. He leaned over to refill his pilfered cigarette lighter and boom.

'Be bop be bop Be bop be …'

'What about the bop?'

'That's the whole thing,' he growled through his Gitanes, 'you leave it out. Drives the audience wild. Everyone has to close the circle. Makes them feel they're actually playing.'

I stuck my tongue into the corner of my lip and concentrated.

Now try that in A flat Dorian. A flat was four frets up. The two-five-one pattern was a dead giveaway. I babbled it a bit. Be Bop's good for that. Sonic scatterlings transplanted into my fingering. A different pass each time.

'Good,' he said. Now try it in Mixolydian. Come in on the two. And one and …' I prepared my fingers.

'Two.'

'I'm doing it, I'm doing it.' Be do be do bop do bop do be do be bop be bop be.'

'Now add your lyrics.'

'I can't do the words and the music at the same time,' I cried.

'In all fairness, you have to play the whole tune first once so people can get the basic idea. Then forget there was ever an octave, emphasise weird in between notes, and you get the idea.'

By the third set I was wet with perspiration and not a little liquidity in the pomegranate department. Eeny meeny miny mo, catch a muso by the toe. Who would it be? The bass clarinetist, the trippy trumpeter, or the bass babe? I really could take my pick. And for the first time in a long time, I was satisfied to go to bed, just me and Erzulie, in a mutual embrace. Mingus held the rhythm together like a master horseman; I started to scat in a tongue I knew not

what. The nonsense syllables made better sense than words. If you'd sung an actual lyric it would have sounded insane. I could feel I was stretching Be Bop beyond its wildest limits.

How was I to know that Maya wouldn't last the night?

I bopped home to Morton Street like a nymph on a satyr's loins. Erzulie was still with me. But she had more in store than Be Bop jazz. As I turned the key in the lock, the phone was jangling off the hook. It was Ray-Ray. He sounded grim.

'Wanda, you've got to get back here. It's blood poisoning. Something in the batshit Max gave her.'

'I'm beat, Ray-Ray, can't this wait 'til morning?'

'We're losing her, Wanda.' Max's records show that you're the same blood group as Maya. AB Positive.'

'Can't she take anybody's?' I knew they'd got the blood types sorted for the war, but I was impressed that Max had captured my details in such a short visit.

'It has to be a match. Please, Wanda. Get to the hospital. Maya needs the blood of Erzulie to become whole again.'

'Alright, already. Just let me have a figging shower.'

I've never had the patience for nursy-nursying. Much as I helped Alexi back in the early teens, that was herbal, none of that needle sticking and bloodletting; someone else could do the suturing. I was fit for basic bodily functions, hair, nails, that sort of thing, but still, I couldn't do any heavy lifting. I'd seen enough of the four humours to last me several lifetimes. The Volga had taken its toll. Everybody says oh, don't let me suffer, shoot me if I get cancer, don't shove a penknife into my trachea, but when it comes down to it, nobody says no to inhuman intervention. Except for Jehovah's Witnesses. And a self-immolating monk I once knew. A gentle pillow to the breathing holes when all else fails.

ix

Maya lay in the hospital bed like an imprisoned empress, hooked onto an inquisition rack of tubes and needles and straps. Her eyes were sallow, her hair was dishevelled and she was clearly still under the influence of Max. Her glazed eyes turned towards me, unseeing.

'Nurse, I thirst,' she burbled. I grasped a tiny yellow sponge on a wooden stick, dipped it in cranberry juice, and held it to her lips.

‘No, not that one, the other one.’

‘This?’ The green sponge.

‘No, that.’ The pink. I sighed deeply.

‘Mam’Zelle, make up your mind.’

‘Wanda? My Wanda?’ she wailed. ‘Am I hallucinating?’

‘No, Maya, it’s really me. Now you have to tell me whether the doctors know what you’ve taken.’

‘Taken schmaken. I’m just exhausted, that’s all.’ A beefy orderly reappeared from behind the curtain, dwarfing everything in sight, and chastised me roundly.

‘Please, Mizz,’ he said in a high-pitched lisp, ‘it’s nil per mouth for this patient. She’s being prepped.’

‘I think you may need to know what my Mam’Zelle has imbibed,’ I said.

‘No need,’ he said. ‘We treat the druggies all the same. Stomach pump, blood transfusion, sugar drip.’

‘But I think she may be allergic …’

‘It’s not showed up in her records,’ said the orderly, wafting an official form past my defocused eyes. He shoved a needle the size of a syrinx into Maya’s picc line and held to her face a surgical mask. The odour of almonds filled my nostrils.

‘Let’s count down from ten, shall we?’ he coaxed. ‘Ten …’

‘The wedding,’ Maya gurgled.

‘Nine.’

‘Must bless.’ Her eyes rolled back.

‘Eight …’

‘Save rattle.’ Her breathing slowed.

‘Seven …’

‘For Erzzzzzz …’ A light snore ensued.

‘Six.’ The orderly unclipped the brake from the wheels of the metal chariot and began to slide it soundlessly across the gleaming linoleum.

Five. You can’t stop a countdown once it’s started.

‘We’re going to have to ask you to wait in the waiting room.’

‘Where are you taking her?’ Four.

‘She’s being operated on in Room XXII. Now please, Mizz.’ I reached out for Maya’s painted fingernails and held them tight. The trolley gained momentum as it barged through the partition. Three.

‘If you sit yourself down over there, we’ll be hooking you up as soon as we have your mother under.’

‘Two. She’s not my mother.’ A gaggle of masked blue scrub nurses appeared. The trolley rounded a corner.

‘One.’ And disappeared. A duller masked migrant stepped out from behind the curtain. English was not her mother tongue.

‘Mizz Lazarus?

‘Yep.’

‘It’s time for to prep you.’

‘Can’t you just bleed me with leeches?’

‘Leeches? Ah, you make joke. Please to take off clothing.’ Never one to turn down an offer, I stripped naked in one fell swoop.

‘Now, please to be lying on bed.’ I was pleased to be lying.

‘Now for the giving of the arm, please.’ She tapped two fingers upon my inner elbow and the vein stood to attention.

‘This good,’ she said, plunging a syrinx deep into my arm. The chamber filled up with warm red liquid. I felt a little dizzy, but refused to cry out.

‘We need to draw more,’ she said.

‘How much?’

‘About three pints.’

‘Won’t that drain me completely?’

‘You would give life for mother, no?’

‘She’s not my mother.’

‘But blood fills up again, life makes life. Lie down. It will be over in a jiffy.’

As I counted down the ampules, I could feel Erzulie draining from my life force. ‘Wait,’ I called out. ‘Something’s wrong.’

‘Everybody feels a little woozy with blood transfusions,’ said the orderly.

‘I can’t. She’s disappearing.’

‘Nobody is going anywhere, sweetie,’ said the nurse.

Out of my bloodstream into Maya’s lifeless body, Erzulie was transforming. I could feel the light darkness dissipating, morphing through the haemoglobin from me to Maya, urging her back to life.

‘Stop. I’ve changed my mind. I want my blood back.’

Erzulie may have known she couldn’t have travelled with me. She wanted back into Maya’s life, to be the toxin that coursed through her veins, the madness that made her sane. But I could feel the Muses pulling the strings. I was too close for comfort. They had to pull me out.

A dark-eyed poltergeist floated out of the bedside table and looked me squarely in the eyes.

‘You can’t have life on earth and life everlasting,’ it stated blandly. ‘It’s either you or her.’

‘Why can’t you have both?’ I quibbled. ‘Maya can have you whenever she’s editing. I just need you for the Bop.’

‘You will never Be Bop again if you don’t let Erzulie go. Or take Maya’s place on the sacrificial pyre.’

‘Nobody told me about any sacrificial pyre.’

‘Bop be bop be boop boop bop,’ said Erzulie.

‘Be bop be bop bop boob a doo whopp,’ I responded.

I just didn’t realise that Erzulie crossed over in those last few moments. I’d snuffed out my own döppelganger. I’d committed a bizarre form of projected suicide.

Euterpe grabs me by the sundress.

‘Are you mental? You’re screwing with the fabric of space time.’

‘You asked me to stand in for Maya. You begged me to be the Be Bop girl. Erzulie, Goddess of Love, you said, would lead me to the secret of the Gypsy Jazz Guitar.’

‘Could you not pick up on the skinny bongo player at the wedding? He was literally prodding you in the direction of the maman. Just after the fridge flinging episode.’

‘You never said anything about a maman. I thought it was strings we were after.’

‘Without the beat, there is no music to focus the heart. You can fiddle your fiddles, violate your violins, pluck, twang, pi and pa. Without the origin, there is no species.’

Clio pulls a ping pong ball from the side of my ear, marbled with blue and green streaks.

'This is the globe,' she says, 'the place you call Humankind. See, there runs the Euphrates, crossed by the Tigris.'

'And here's the Mediterranean Basin,' I say. I've seen maps like this in my travels, though none quite as spherical. 'And what's this country, right here in the middle?'

'That's Africa,' says Clio. 'We've always given it a bit of a miss.'

'Wait though, Clio,' says Urania. 'Remember what Pliny the Younger said, 'Out of Africa, there is always something original.''

'I thought it was just pillow talk.'

'Pliny knew his geography.'

'But nothing original has come out of Africa since the Pharaohs,' says Mel. 'You can't even count Egypt.'

'Maybe it was a prophecy. Its true meaning may have been lost in translation.'

'Every civilisation has its day. Africa's where it's at right now. Haven't you heard?'

'Nu, let's go back to the source for our original resonance.'

'I'm not too sure if I'm up for Africa,' I say. 'Not much room service over there.'

'What if we gave you an everlasting credit?'

'Like what?'

'Your name on a Red Dwarf? The next one to be discovered?'

'How about a planet?'

'We're all out of planets, Wanda,' Urania says. 'Since last you looked, they've added Saturn and Neptune to the lineup. You can't break the name chain.'

'Make it an asteroid belt and I'll think about it,' I say. 'But I want a better role. I've had enough of playing sidekick to all these fancy fools.'

'You will always be the centre of your own universe, Wanda.'

'You could have fooled me.' I wander off for an asphodel refill, take a slug and turn on my heel to face the Muses.

'Make it a Supernova and you've got a deal.'

'Bring for us that Ngoma and your name will be written in the stars for all eternity.'

Euterpe taps upon a strand of cirrus and the atmosphere around us starts to coalesce, like egg whites on a buttered hotplate. A vision of a drum that could be a cradle, that then again

could be the holy figging ark of the covenant, appears before my eyes. Each Muse inserts a milky finger pad into her mouth and plucks it against the inside of her cheek, popping out, in her unique time signature, a veritable Space Odyssey of sound, from Moon to Neptune. I slide down the swirling solar winds, picking up gravitational force. The Wanda B. Lazarus Cluster. It has a nice ring to it.

Book XII: 'The Land of the Lemba' Johannesburg 1999

i

'Ring ring … ring ring …'

I fumbled towards the sound, which seemed to emit from a lurid carnival mouse that lay next to my bedside table. I picked up the rodent. The ringing subsided. A disembodied voice wafted out of a ring of neat holes, arranged in a circle around the animal's anus.

'Hello, is this Missis Wanda Lazarus?'

'Mizz. And you forgot the Bat bit. Who is this?'

'This is the acting-deputy-assistant-under-secretary for Rahab Sadiki speaking.'

'Sorry, who?'

'Executive Producer in charge of light entertainment at the broadcaster?'

'Uh-huh?' I'm never very eloquent before noon and this was way before my wakey-wakey. I disentangled myself from the boychick in the bed, motioning for him to trek on his broek and gooi me a skyf.

'You've won the tender, Mizz Lazarus. Your application has been successful? You start shooting next week?' Her vowels had a distinctly Venda drawl with an underpinning of Sepedi. Each statement lilted rhetorically. I wasn't sure if she was asking me or telling me.

'We're going to need you to come in and sign the contract? Rahab has a gap at thirteen hundred hours?'

Contract? I had a contract? Let her sweat then. I fondled the boychick's schmekel, which responded in kind.

'Listen, can I call you back in a few minutes?' I asked. 'I'm in the bank and the teller's getting agitated.'

‘We’re going to have to get your signature on the contract today, or Rahab will be awarding the tender to the folks who came second.’ I zipped up the broek.

‘I’ll be there in twenty minutes.’

‘Excellent,’ said the acting-deputy-assistant-under-secretary. ‘Park in the Canary Building on the corner of War Graves and Parakeet. And bring the boy. He’ll make an excellent gopher.’

I looked at the pressed ceiling, aglow with underwater scenes, and noticed a tiny camera inserted into the third eye of a mermaid cornice. So this is how it was going to be. I’d have to be careful to conceal my origins. Even though I already had the job.

I had to bring my smarts from all my lives into that production. Had I only known about the cost per minute, I’d have spotted the setup at the tender brief, but having been MIA since NYC, I wasn’t privy to the warped shenanigans of the state broadcaster. Or my Executive Producer. She had the connections, I was the workhorse. It was a perfect 90/10 split. And if I failed, the whole bang shoot was on my head.

During my first meeting with Rahab, I hardly got a word in edgewise; an unusual state of affairs. A tiny tinpot of a woman, she boasted the finest weave and the darkest dealings of the network. She glanced at my CV, made in Manhattan all those years ago. A good forgery can go a long way.

‘Your credentials match exactly with what we need from a TV producer,’ she said, rocking her chair backwards on two legs. ‘I see you have international experience, if a little dated: floor manager, gaffer, clapper loader, vision mixer, director, performer. Quite impressive.’

‘Whatever it takes,’ I said. I’d stretched the facts with the bit about the gaffer – I was never any good around electricity, but she had no way of checking.

‘Good, you’re able to do the work of ten men. However, according to South African union rules, you can only claim for one role.’

‘That seems a bit unfair,’ I said. ‘I’d have to put myself down for at least three categories.’

‘Are you calling me a gonif?’ she spat. ‘Do you know what it took for get me to where I am today?’ It was not a rhetorical question. ‘I crawled my way to Jozi from Limpopo and lived in a two by four in Chiawelo, six people, one room.’

I demurred when I could slip in a sympathetic syllable as she mounted injury to insult.

‘Through a distant cousin I got a job as a dubber at an ad agency, commuting three hours each way and earning peanuts, which I blew at Pep to look the part of an executive. Different do each week. Weaves, cornrows, wigs, extensions, the works.’

‘Is that so?’

‘You bet your sweet vetkoek. I acted like a CEO, but I was hardly higher than the cleaner, whom I didn’t care to greet once I’d mastered their little colonial game.’

‘You don’t say?’

‘I was isolated for years. The settlers didn’t acknowledge my existence, my brethren flat out refused to speak to me. I kept my mouth shut and my ears wide open.’

‘How did you learn the master taal when there was nobody to talk to?’

‘Well may you ask. I acted out conversations in my makeup mirror after my shack mates were asleep. I tried out all the clicks and clacks, the bongs and ongs and dipthongs. Once I got the hang of a language, I eavesdropped on gossip without their knowledge. Springbok Radio refined my pronunciation. Revenge has fuelled my rise. Now I’m fluent in nine languages and nobody can tell me on the phone from a goddamned Capetonian.’

‘Quite,’ I said, not quite understanding what a Capetonian was.

‘Now get your tush in gear’ she said. ‘Madiba’s coming for Shabbos.’

‘Mad who?’ I looked down the artists’ list. ‘Is that some kind of one man band?’

‘It’s our Mandela’s clan name. Our rainbow nation President? Where have you been? On the moon?’ She wasn’t far off. Mandela. Madiba. Everything post-war was all so vague.

‘Why is he doing a gig in a shul?’

‘He’s about to hand the reins of government over to his successor. This will be his last public appearance as State President.’

‘Why does he want to go speak to the Yiddels?’ I asked.

‘It’s a reassurance tactic. The tribe is very anxious about their economic status. Madiba is keen to allay their fears to keep them from bleeding the economy dry. He’ll draw in the capitalists on the basis of sheer greed.’

‘But surely we’re too deep into pre-prod to go gallivanting off to some half-peached interview. We haven’t heard the music, we have to finalise the artists. I’m going to have to work 24/7 as it is.’

Rahab rocked the chair so far back I thought she'd roll over. For forty-five seconds she pivoted at the top of the pendulum swing. It looked as if she was paralysed in time, perched on two legs, mouth open, eyes rolled back. Then suddenly, she snapped back into the room as if no time at all had passed.

'You don't have to worry about a thing,' she said. 'I've got the director all mapped out. Unlike you, he's indigenous.'

'What, like an Aborigine?'

'No, idiot. One of our own. A comrade of the land. A professional with experience and authority.'

She pulled out an ostrich wallet and extracted a well-thumbed photograph of a mocha java macho man, his eyes too close together, with flaring nostrils and a beard like a pubic goat. His arms were draped nonchalantly around a camera much like Maya's, but on a sturdy three-legged tripod.

'This is my nephew Boaz. He has had years of experience in multi-camera production.'

'But he looks like he's twelve.'

'We have very good genes in the Kiloboku clan. My grandmother is a hundred-an-twelve and she's yet to sprout a wrinkle.'

'I'm not sure if we can go with such a young director for such a massive production,' I said.

'He's just the fence, I mean the face you want in your credits,' she said. 'And he'll work within the allocated budget. Just deposit his first fifty into my account and I'll see he gets it.'

'Don't you need to give me an invoice for that?'

'Never mind the paperwork, I'll see it's balanced correctly.'

'Give me his details and I'll bill him direct.'

Rahab bristled. 'You'll note in your contract that as Executive Producer I have the authority to assign your production tasks at my own discretion,' Rahab said. 'It's too late to back out now. We've already done the deal for the trade exchange with the Department of Transport.'

'What about his security detail? I don't want to be manhandled.'

'Give this to Naas,' she said. 'He knows the drill.' She handed me a plastic bank bag, rolled tight with newly laid Rands.

‘Public relations has its price,’ she said. ‘The synagogue is only a few blocks away. You can stake out Madiba in the car park.’

‘But surely the synagogue won’t allow filming on Shabbos?’

‘They’re Reform,’ said Rahab, ‘anything goes. Sidle up to him after the service and get a few soundbytes. Madiba loves a northern suburbs accent. Use that one.’

‘Must I ask him these questions?’ I looked down the cheat sheet she’d handed me.

‘Find out if he has a favourite tune. Try make him sing a little. I hear he led the choir in the quarries. What does he think is truly Bejazzled? The ratings will go through the roof if we can include a cutaway or two. And get a good medium close-up of his shirt. We can knock off the pattern in a week and offer them as giveaways. Remember not to cap him. It’s tricky to remove your voice in post.’ Rahab chucked me a clank of keys that could have unlocked chastity belts from here to Langue’D’Oc.

‘Use the station’s bakkie. I’ll tell the comptroller to debit you a full tank.’

I wanted this gig so badly I ignored the soggy seeds that were sown. Thirty-eight acts had confirmed their attendance for the price of their taxi fare. We had three days to get sixty tracks in the bag. One more slot was still to be filled. The broadcaster was holding back the first fifty percent payment pending the name dispute.

The production sprung from hand to hand like a newborn springbok. I saw latkes being counted out in front of me in front of ministers of transport, thousands of airtime hours bartered away for a back scratch. Rahab failed to show me the books, and I failed to ask. The game was up when I got a call from the Scorpions, the police unit for corruption. By the time I realised I was caught in Rahab’s lazzo – the lazzo of the tender bribe – I was in too deep to turn back. My time with the Troubadours and the Troupe stood me in good stead. And probably some good solid nursery training from my time with Strad’s brats. There had to be a limit to my duties, so I picked a musical director from a long and tone-deaf list of wannabes. Sipho Makhaya it would be. Free-wheeling, sax crooning, non-sight reader with a chip on his shoulder covering at least three octaves.

ii

I'd seen this synagogue before, replicated the world over. Six steps to the bimah, high back monks' benches for the big machas, the ten commandments in shorthand up against the wall. There was no getting away from Yahweh, even if they were letting women touch the Torah these days. The letters on the velvet curtains took me back to my grandfather's fine hand-tooling on the temple scrolls. I hadn't seen Hebrew for ages. Nothing had changed.

I flung my headscarf over my tresses and snuck upstairs into the choir chamber that hung over the bimah like a Cremonian balcony. The choir mistress, pounding her organ with her knuckles, motioned me impatiently to the alto section. Now I could keep an eye on the proceedings through the marble lattice work that screened us off from the congregation.

Wikus took footage from the front. I sang a harmony just after the silent prayer. Due to fidgeting and the bad sound system feeding back to the choir, I didn't hear every word Madiba said, so I can't quote him verbatim. There was a power failure and Wikus was saving the battery for the interview. But I did pick up snatches, and the shuffling and mumbling as the Punchinello of South African politics did the lazzi of the Perplexed President. It began with flattery. It segued to excoriation.

'You have lived off the grace and favour of the previous regime,' he pronounced in a withering Chinese accent. 'You may have spoken revolution. You may have voted Prog. And you then thanked your Yahweh for the Nats. But this is to be no more. The playing fields have been levelled, and it's time to give back to the people of the country that gave you so much privilege.' Madiba cleared his throat and took a sip of Shabbos wine that balanced on the bimah.

'In my many years of isolation I studied many cultures. I have deep and great respect for your people going back thousands of years. I understand that you fled persecution and settled in this land of milk and honey. You flourished and you prospered and, from early on, you knew upon whose backs your fortunes were forged.' There were rustlings in the jewellery section. A few cleared throats. Madiba continued**.**

'I see your cottages in Muizenberg and your summer homes in the Cotswolds when I travel,' he said, 'your brownstones in SoHo, your duplexes in Manly Beach, your apartments in Costa Rica. These are places I never in my life would have imagined visiting, never mind having a stake in the real estate.

‘Enjoy the fruits of your labour by all means. But don’t forget where and how you made your millions. See to it that you and your descendants continue to build our country, make good to the people who raised your children, cooked your meals, bent over for your husbands, covered for your wives.’ Knowing looks were exchanged.

‘You see me as a hero now, perhaps even a saviour, but you could have seen me every time you rang a dinner bell for your Phina, every time your Dolly caught three taxis after midnight, every time your Sophie burned your stew or your silk pyjamas. You never even knew their real names.’ You could have heard a hairpin drop.

‘Everyone has the Madiba within. Every one of us has the capacity to liberate ourselves. But first you must sit on your own death row, your long dark night of the soul. Look your enemy in the eye. And face your greatest fear; your own mortality.’ There were mutters. And not a few glottal flutters. Power to truth is not a fragrant pill.

‘Therefore,’ Madiba wound up, ‘resist the urge to pack it all up and take your children to pastures new. The grass is never greener. In fact, it’s very often astroturf, luring you with a false dream of security and comfort. Help us build the new South Africa by showing the world how to share your gotten gains, ill or otherwise. For what else are you chosen for than to be a light unto the nations?’

He picked up a prayer book and in transliterated phonetics read, ‘Baruch Atta Adonai, Eloheinu V’Elohei Avoteinu, Am Yisroel Chai. Blessed is the God of our Fathers through whose Grace the People of Israel have been given eternal life.’ And then he raised his fist in a power salute and added, ‘Mayibuye i-Afrika,’ to which a small knot of outsiders at the very back chanted ‘Amen’.

Nobody’s supposed to clap in shul, but a thunderous applause broke out. And not a few calls to travel agents the following day to say getmethefigouttahere.

Skipping the last four verses of Adon Olam, which is at the end of every service from Duros Europa to Dunkeld West, I snaked down the stairs that led from the choir hutch. It was like a movie queue for Maya. Through the window, propping up a stretch limo, black clad henchmen in wide-brimmed hats sullenly ground out stompies. I wasn’t sure whether they were with the Rov or the President. By the time I brought up the tail with my mic extension, we’d captured a veritable red carpet of Shabbos Yiddels, all hands had been shaken, all autographs signed. The great man stood alone in the foyer. I carpe diemed.

‘Mister Madiba?’ I said in my best nasal inflection, ‘Rahab Sadiki sent me? From the broadcaster? It’s for the show we’re producing? I’m so glad you’re still here?’

‘I’ve been waiting for you,’ said Madiba calmly.

‘Is this lady bothering you, Madiba?’ asked a smoking goon, edging forward menacingly.

‘Not at all, Naas, let the lady get her interview,’ he said. ‘It’s all for a good Xhosa.’ He winked at me. I stuffed the bank bag into Naas’s jacket pocket and turned on my mic.

‘Okay, are we rolling?’ I asked Wikus, who was fiddling with the electricals, handkerchief on head as a makeshift yarmy. I could see from the nest of wires on the wall that he’d bypassed the Shabbos goy and rewired the fuse box. A monitor flickered into existence. Wikus gave me a thumbs up. Thank Yahweh for the ingenuity of Afrikaans men.

‘I have the great honour of speaking to Madiba ‘Shake that Branch’ Mandela, outgoing President of the new Republic.’

‘The honour is all mine,’ Madiba beamed.

‘Could we get a few quick thoughts on jazz, Madiba?’

‘Ah, jazz,’ he said, blinking away a tear. ‘Jazz kept me alive all those years. Hugh. Dorothy. Miriam. Those Mahotella Queens. I used to sing along in solitary when they let us listen to the wireless. My cell was most sonorous.’

‘Prison?’ I said. I must have missed that bit in the notes. ‘So you’ve also spent some time in the slammer?’

Madiba nodded sagely.

‘Me too,’ I gushed. ‘It was a whole misunderstanding with the Magao cave police. They thought I was stealing their sacred silkworms. Meantime, I was saving them from total extinction. And doing a friend a favour.’

‘No good deed goes unpunished,’ Madiba sighed.

‘Nu, what were you in for? Grand larceny? Mass murder?’

‘Nothing that dramatic,’ he said. ‘I simply stood up for the idea that no man is more equal than any other.’

‘Does that include women?’

‘Naturally. The notion of woman is implied in the statement.’

‘Not really,’ I said, pernickety to the exact wording of famous quotes.

‘So what was their verdict?’

‘Guilty of standing up for the rights of humanity.’

‘In another country, in another time, they may have hanged you.’

‘I missed the death sentence by this much.’ He pinched a miniscule gap ’tween thumb and forefinger. ‘I always wanted to live for my country.’

‘How long were you inside?’

‘Twenty-seven interminable years,’ he said.

‘A lifetime,’ I mused. ‘How did you eventually get off?’

‘The political wheel turned. There were sanctions. There were riots. There were concerts. The regime had its economic back to the wall. Eventually, they released me. I freed myself, really.’

‘Do you consider yourself the saviour of South Africa?’ I asked. Madiba’s face cracked into a dried riverbed of smiles.

‘I can’t save anybody,’ he said, ‘while they are slaves to their own knee-jerk prejudices. Only you can liberate yourself.’ He hummed a few bars. ‘I think Satchmo put it much better than I ever could. Is he on your show?’

‘Afraid we’re a few years too late for Louis,’ I said. ‘He passed in ’72.’

‘Whatever happened?’

‘Heart,’ I said, ‘just like ’Trane.’

‘I’m sorry to hear that,’ he said. ‘We only started receiving newspapers in the Eighties.’

‘You seem to be making up for it now,’ I said.

‘I’m having the time of my life. Fancy shirts, great parties, a few art sales,’ he blushed, ‘I’m about to pop the question to the true love of my life.’

‘That’s wonderful,’ I said, scanning the notes. ‘Winnie will be thrilled that you’re renewing your vows.’ Madiba looked down at his Florsheim shoes.

‘No,’ he said quietly, ‘Not Winnie. My heart is captured by another. I’ve dedicated my life to the cause of freedom. I’m taking a little me time. Off the record.’

‘We’ll edit out that last bit,’ I said to Wikus. ‘Take two. Five, four,’ then silent three, two, one. I had to pop the question and extract a direct quote from his lips.

‘What does Bejazzled mean to you?’ I asked. Madiba looked directly into the camera.

‘Bejazzled means opening your mind, mixing it up, crossing it over, connecting with the

otherness of the other,' he said. 'For years they tried to silence our voices, but you can't keep an African from his song. I was incessantly humming in my head. How could they stop that?'

'I understand you petitioned for years to hold concerts in the cells? How did that work if you were all in solitary?'

'The concert leader was always one of the wardens. He sat in his office at the end of the isolation block and called our names out, at random, by our prisoner numbers. Then each of us would get a chance to sing a song. Just as long as it didn't hold any political content or any so-called Bantu tongue. It all had to be English – or Afrikaans – but the latter was a language that scorched my mouth for the first years of my incarceration and I refused it.'

'What did you sing?' I asked. I imagined some great African hymn lionising the feats of undefeated ancestors. An isiXhosa praise song, perhaps?

'A Scottish ditty, so full of sorrow that it brings tears to my eyes to recall it now.'

'Which one?' I asked. Scottish ditties are bog standards for schmaltz.

'Bonny Mary of Argyle,' he said, misting over. 'When they try to take away your freedom, your imagination runs amok. I always think of my quest for justice in terms of that song's symbolic meaning. It's the one thing my gaolers could never take away from me.'

Madiba crooned in a wavering basso profundo:

'I have heard the mavis singing

His love song to the moon

I have seen the dewdrop clinging

To the rose just nearly born'

'Sounds so innocent,' I said, wiping away a big plop of eye water.

'Ah, but the mavis is the songthrush, the coming song of freedom. My love song to the moon is my prayer for the salvation of my homeland. The newly born rose is our revolution. The dewdrops are our tears and our blood that must be shed in order to attain our dream. In the quarry, the blokes would always ask me to lead with Bonny Mary while we toiled; the guards thought nothing of it. In fact, it became a bit of a party piece.'

'Madiba, we must get going, we're going to be late for Shabbos at the Suzmans,' said a black-clad goon with a coil coming out of his ear.

'Just a few more moments, Joost,' he said. 'I'd like to finish this little ditty with my new friend over here.'

The tune was earworm easy and after another verse, I had it taped. By the time we got to Mary's artless winning smile, the whole thing made perfect sense. You can't keep a good metaphor down. Even though I cannot recall each word, the melody is embedded in my soul evermore and, in tandem with his gravelly tones, I hummed a pleasing harmony on the third, then the fifth, then the seventh, which is very hard to hold if you're only a duet. As we headed up the fifth verse, Mary's Lochryian cadences segued into the offbeat. Same song, different rhythm. Almost identical to a long lost Occitanian ballad. Due to copyright issues I cannot quote verbatim, but every Languedoccian knows it, etched into their rainbow souls, as the Midons raised her voice for freedom. Fanny would have loved it. Felix would have spat. Long after he was whisked into the Jacaranda-tinted darkness, Madiba's simple song of freedom chimed in my mind's ear. We could get at least six inserts out of this, play it back a capella with a bit of lip synch from me on set, and spice it up with a bit of mbaqanga beat.

iii

While Wikus packed the equipment, I noticed a knot of stragglers hovering in the rear pews, barefoot, yarmulke-clad, clearly out of their depth. The shamus, keeper of all things janitorial, shuffled by in his lemon-coloured crocs.

'Philemon, don't just stand around. Fold up the spare chairs and store them in the Rov's office,' he ordered.

'Sorry, my boss,' said the man addressed as Philemon, 'but we are not working for the synagogue. We are forbidden to carry on the Sabbath.'

'Cheeky blighter,' said the shamus. 'I haven't got all night. You boys clear out these rows.' Philemon drew himself up and gazed towards Jerusalem.

'I have travelled far with my clan to hear the voice of the great Madiba,' he said. 'The Rabbis have forgotten us. We have brought our holy Ngoma to prove that we are the Lost Tribe of the Lemba. Perhaps then the Yiddel realm will open up their hearts and minds to us.'

'The who?' I asked, windmilling one arm towards Wikus to carry on filming. I'd heard of Yekkers, I'd heard of Lidvaks, but the Lemba were new to me.

'We have genetic results that prove we are the Black Jews of Africa.'

‘There’s no such thing as a Yiddisher schwartze,’ said the shamus. ‘Now stack those seats and make it snappy.’ Philemon shrugged, the men picked up the pews and chucked them, willy nilly behind the bimah.

A woman clad in a black burqa-like cape crouched behind the last chair, clutching a bundle, which was either a baby bump or her own puppy fat. On closer inspection, I saw that it was a little girl, the colour of Solly’s ebony box, encrusted with the most bejewelled emerald eyes I’d seen since Caiaphas Cohen. I’d never forget those rays, boring through the arras behind which I crouched, covered in ’nard and shame.

Four Lemba lumbered over carrying a shallow wooden cradle upon two poles, looped into four brass hooks attached to each of its curved corners. A series of wavy carvings showed through the dull coverlet. I’d seen it somewhere before.

‘What’s that?’ I asked, traffic copping Wikus’s lens to the antiquity.

‘It is the sacred ark of the Lemba,’ said Philemon. ‘We have brought it here to demonstrate our legendary lineage as Israelites.’

‘What makes you think you’re Yiddels?’ I asked. ‘And who would want to be? Haven’t you got enough tsorris?’

‘We keep the covenant with Jehovah, he said. ‘We cut our boys, we kasher our cattle, we cast out our women during the time of the moon.’

‘For bleeding.’

‘For the taboo, yes,’ he said. ‘I told you we are descended from the High Priests.’

‘But do you acknowledge your females whatsoever?’

‘Not by DNA. We pass our lineage through the male. We have a nifty hair cutting ceremony when the girls are one week old. And of course, they have Bat Mitzvahs at twelve. Their mothers have to clue them up about their moon cycles. We hold our females to be closer to holiness, as they themselves can give birth, and so further injury needn’t be forged. The covenant with Yahweh we make with our boys is to give each one a tiny taste of the pain that the female carries with her always. He is rendered as a woman unto the Lord. It’s a reenactment of the botched sacrifice of Jacob.’

It all sounded so familiar. Apart from the bit about the hair shaving of the newborns.

‘And death?’

‘Everyone is equal in death. The soul lives forever. But we forbid our women to attend the gravesite. Or recite the Kaddish, Yahweh forbid.’

‘What makes you so sure about all this?’ I asked.

‘We have acquired evidence of our ancestry.’ From his pocket he pulled a long cotton bud, thick with the lint of travel. He swabbed the inside of his cheek and put it back.

‘The world may have thought we are backward rural hicks. The Internet has changed all that. We know how to surf. We know about genetics. We know about the Cohen haplotype.’

‘Are you saying that science can prove that you’re descendants of the lost tribes of Israel?’

‘Science. And history. We were separated at the time of Babylon,’ said Philemon. We tried to make it back to Palestine, but the Assyrians stopped us in our treks. When the second Temple fell, we heard about it in Saan’a One and we had to move on. I think we’re Zebulon, but my brother, Cyrus, insists that we’re Naphtali.’

‘There’s the start of a family faribel right there,’ I said. ‘Nu, when did you get lost the second time?’

‘We wandered for a few hundred years around the Arabian deserts from Saan’a to Sa’ana,’ he said. ‘We used Egypt as a stepping stone to the Yemen, and wherever we laid our camels, we recreated our lost city.’

‘Saan’a, Sa’ana – sounds a lot like a cognate of Zion,’ I said.

‘Precisely,’ said Philemon. ‘It was a place in our minds that we made real by the sweat of our brow. And then the Christians came. Their weapons of mass destruction were much more lethal than those of the Muslims. I don’t need to tell you we had to get out of there again.’

Sa’ana Two was fine for a while, we had shuls all over the Yemen. Best wells in the Hadhramaut. And then Yahweh smote the damn walls. We lost every drop. And rather than die of thirst and the Pogroms that were unleashed upon us, blaming us for the drought, we packed up our Ngoma and made our way across the Gulf of Aden to Sa’n’aa Three, Ethiopia.

‘I’ve heard tell of that place. Don’t they go as Rastafarians?’

‘A cheap trick. The Saa’naians of Ethiopia didn’t want two lost tribes, put all blood libel on us, so we picked up our Ngoma and trekked south through the hinterland; Kenya – too Imperial, Tanzania – too Afrobongo, Mozambique – too Inquisitive, made a right at Zimbabwe and settled on either side of the Zambezi. We built some damn fine walls up there on the border.’

‘And this Ngoma thingie?’

‘Forever and always, we carried with us, on our shoulders, and never touching the ground, the original Ark of the Covenant. We hung it upon tree branches at night and took turns guarding the sacred relic. It has been travelling for over two thousand years.’

‘Are you telling me this is the original holy figging ark from Iudaea itself?’

‘It is far too valuable to have it out in public like this. We carry a replica of it here, right down to the burned underside where the ark shot out flames to quell the VhaVenda in 1864.’

‘Where’s the real McCoy then?’

‘The original is housed in our homeland, Se’enna Four. For security purposes, we may not state its exact location.’

He raised a flat pink palm and brought it down on the cradle. A sonic bomb rent the air, larger than any bellowing bull. It was the missing Sphere alright. The anti-Hiroshima of beats. The peace vessel that could save the world. I had to have the original.

I remembered the sound resounding through the Gobi the night before Zeugma. If only the Muses had let me cotton on. Perhaps it was too soon. Perhaps I wasn’t ready.

‘So much for myth,’ I said. ‘What about the facts?’

‘We told our tale to a strange Welshman some years ago and he returned with these big cotton buds to scrape our cheeks,’ he said. ‘He said he was collecting samples from the Seena of the Hadhramhaut, the Seena of Limpopo, and a random sample of Sabras hanging out in Dizengoff Street. They analysed our scrapings and compared them with the genetic material of others.’

‘Nu?’

‘The results have shown that the Lemba – the Buba males to be precise – carry the identical Y chromosome pattern of the holy Priests of Jerusalem.’

Double whammy. Blood lineage and the chance to strike the original sound, the ark, the drum, the cradle, the grave, the symbol of everything that could bring on the healing of the spheres. This was bigger than a local jazz show with a dodgy budget. This was Pulitzer material. Emmy, even. I knew Maya had gone quite far on her Guggenheim, and patronage was still fully in play at the millennium’s end, testament to the acquisitive vanity projects of Popes and bankers and railroad billionaires.

‘Tell you what, Philemon,’ I said, ‘we’ve got a spare slot in the show. If you can be at the location at say, six a.m., we can film you okes during the technical rehearsal. If I like what I see, you’re in the mix. You’ll be famous as far as Addis Ababa.’

‘We have nowhere to stay, madam.’

‘Please, don’t call me that. I’m Wanda. Or Lazzie. Or Laz.’

‘Well, Lazzie, Philemon is not my name. I’m Caiaphas. Caiaphas Ben Cohen. We are called after our Hebrew ancestors.’

‘That’s crazy,’ I said. ‘That was my grandfather’s name.’

‘It is a title we hold proudly unto posterity,’ he said. ‘The line of the Cohanim.’

‘And what happens if a Cohen girl marries out?’

‘We believe that the Israelite line is carried through the male,’ he said. ‘When we arrived in Africa we were men only. We found wives in the local communities. That is how our skin mutated from the olive of the Levant to our current ebony status.’

‘But I always thought the Yiddel line goes through the woman?’

‘To preserve our lineage we trust only in men,’ he said. ‘We are the ones who are chosen to keep the Covenant.’

‘Nu, why do you have to desecrate your body at all?’

‘It serves to symbolise the marriage of mortal man to the capricious ways of Jehovah. It is the eternal wound.’

‘And the girls?’

‘The females are created closer to God. They bleed, naturally. They suffer childbirth.’

‘Kinda bloodthirsty religion you’ve got there,’ I said.

‘Blood is life,’ Caiaphas said. ‘We follow the ways of the ancient Israelites. But if you can expose us on national television, Madiba is bound to see it and respond to our plea for recognition.’

‘And in return?’

‘We will show you the original Ark of the Covenant.’

‘Okay, Caiaphas, I’ve got a flat in Minors Street. My bed will sleep four of you and the others can doss out on the yoga mats on the verandah. I’ll schlep you to the studio tomorrow. Two loads should do it in the bakkie. Once the shoot is over, we can hotfoot it to Limpopo. I’ll

even drop the master tape off at Madiba's place in Houghton. I'm sure he'll attend to your plight.'

'We are very hungry,' said the young woman with the lump.

'I'll get some wings from Fontanas,' I said with a sigh. 'They're the only ones open all night.'

'We can't eat at this Fontanas,' said Caiaphas. 'We will not touch an animal that has not been slaughtered in the tradition of our ancestors.'

'That cuts the options considerably,' I said. 'We'll have to pull into a garage for bread and organic eggs.'

'Do they have pap?'

'I'm sure we can get a packet.'

'Do you have a set of separate milk vessels?'

'No need. I'd rather die than ingest a dead animal. I'm kosher by default.'

iv

That's how the Lemba ended up taking the thirty-ninth lashing at the Bejazzled shoot. Caiaphas & Co. sat with Zim, Moses, Johnny, Jonas, Big Jack – the giant beanstalks of jazz – playing musical chairs outside the sound stage, clutching chord charts and paper cups. The biscuits ran out after two hours and the grumblings were so audible we had to hand out dagga cookies to compensate.

Rahab seemed intent on humiliating the Lemba. Instead of letting me sneak them in first, she put them at the end of the schedule, knowing they would be on call for three days straight. Because she didn't care where they slept, what they ate, whether they ate, all twelve hung out at my studio apartment. They managed to find the last kosher butchery in Yeoville, and samp and cassava in the veggie market, but I wasn't around to sample the delicacies of Afro-Iudaeo cuisine. Producer, presenter, scriptwriter, editor, courier, carrier, clown; I was working my figging pomegranate off.

Did I think of baling and leaving the production in the lurch? Did Rahab piss me off so badly that my wisecracks were double entendres of irreverence? Did the budget stretch to a gopher so at least I didn't have to fetch my own coffee? It was easy to act as a prima donna when

you were ruling the roost from the front and from the rear. Or if you have a supportive commissioning editor who could see the pitfalls coming.

Their music wasn't much to write home about, really. They were great on rhythm, but how many times can you hear Hava Nagila with an mbaqanga beat? It seemed to fall between two stools, not quite cradle, not quite grave, and if more than one of them pounded upon the Ngoma, the cross beats cancelled each other out and resulted in rather a dull thud.

We were halfway through their act, three songs in, when Rahab stalked into the dressing room where I was being adorned in my third outfit of the shoot; faux zebra pants with patchwork lace and polka dot top, crocodile courts and a couple of lampshade toggles as earrings.

'I'm watching the monitor, Wanda, and the whole thing's a freaking mess.'

'What are you talking about?' I'd been fairly preoccupied with my eyebrows, shaped as they needed to be for TV, in a perpetual expression of surprise.

'The singer starts the verse and the drummer is in shot. The bass drum player is out of tune; the pianist has been drinking. What the freak are you playing at?'

'Rahab, I thought we agreed when we lost our presenter that I would do the on-camera work and you'd take care of the shot list.'

'I don't recall any such conversation. You said you wanted to be in the spotlight.'

'But Boaz is supposed to be directing.'

'Get rid of him.'

'I beg yours?'

'You're going to have to fire him, Wanda.'

'What? You hired him. You said he's an expert in multicam shoots.'

'Well, it's not working. And you'd better do something pronto, because if I continue to see this, this havoc, I'm pulling the plug on the entire production. Which makes you liable,' she smiled, 'to pay back the entire six-fifty, with interest.'

'Rahab, just give me a chance.'

'You've got five minutes.'

I swung the fake zebra skin over my shoulder and hurried to the outside broadcast van, which was taking the feed from the sound stage. Boaz sat there, toasted cheese and Tabasco halfway to his mouth, a rabbit in the headlights, while the vision mixer, a burly lad who was clearly musically challenged, second-guessed the shots like a pinball wizard in a holiday camp.

‘It’s nearing the end of the chorus, wait, wait, now,’ said the vision mixer. ‘Cut to camera two.’ He pressed a lever and a gobo sailed over the purple infinity screen. Rahab stood in the door behind me. You couldn’t have swung a gerbil in the space between the four of us.

‘Boaz, may I have a word?’ I asked.

‘Fade to cam one, Ngoma, the right hand, no the left,’ said the vision mixer. The shot intercut wildly, like a Maya Deren movie.

‘That’s not the way the song goes,’ I said. ‘This is a drum solo. You should be on Caiaphas, I mean Philemon. The dude with the brass buttony thing. Three, four and cut. For fig’s sake. Look. Tell everyone to take five.’

‘Boaz we can’t carry on like this.’

‘Like what?’ he asked, looking cross-eyed at his sandwich.

‘You don’t know your brass from your ass. The shots are all over the place. You can’t tell a chorus from a coda. It’s a mess.’

‘That’s how I normally direct. It gives the show that jazzy spontaneous feel.’

‘It’s not working, Boaz. We’re going to have to let you go.’

‘You’re firing me? That’s a laugh. I can make or break this production.’

‘You’re not leaving me any choice.’

‘You’ll pay me out my entire director’s fee, or you’ll be hearing from my lawyer.’

‘If that’s what it takes.’ There went the rest of the moola. Blood money.

‘You’ll also make sure that I get a share of profits into perpetuity.’

‘We’ll have to see about that. Now get out. Now. Phuma wena. Before I say something I really might regret.’

‘Who do you think is going to direct?’ he screamed at me. I stared at Rahab, who glared at Boaz, who glowered at the vision mixer. There was no way I was sticking around to repay money I hadn’t even received. Survival was at my own command. I took the plunge.

‘I’ll direct,’ I said. ‘It can’t be harder than what I’m already doing. I’ll do my hair and makeup on set. You can shoot that too. Drag those monitors, those ones there, and angle them onto the stage. I’ll direct through the lapel mic. Now that will give it a touch of veracity. We’ll fix inserts and pickups in the mix.’

If you watch the DVD, you might be able to pick up a few muffled phrases – cut to one, fade to three – but I do believe we were one of the first reality shows to ever air on the national

broadcaster. I hear I can't walk the streets of Addis Ababa for the reruns; nine in total. Had I stuck around, those trade exchange clothes could have kept me in leopard and zebra stories for the rest of my lives. The royalties, not so much. The broadcaster buttered their own bread on both sides.

v

On the morning after the shoot, I awoke curled around my unflushed toilet bowl, banged my forehead on the porcelain and looked up to see a stream of urine emanating from a tall thin cowboy. I vaguely remembered painting Hillbrow purple with the Lemba the night before; whiskey was always kosher, tongues and flies were loosened, and even though they were circumcised to a man, this bloke didn't look like the Lemba I'd bedded the previous night. I reached for my multifocals, a small affectation with which the late Twentieth Century had favoured me.

'Mind where you're pishing, Caiaphas,' I said, breathing on the thick lenses and wiping them on my fake leopard.

'I'm Caiaphas's younger brother, Emanuel,' he said. I was taken aback. I've always prided myself on being able tell a man from his chemistry. He had Limpopo in him, but the ammonia whiff quite put me off the scent.

'What happened to Caiaphas?' I donned the specs and Emanuel swam into focus. Lanky. Bug eyed. Massive blue and white tallis.

'Caiaphas has been called back to the village. Our second sister has taken a turn for the worse and it is tribal custom for her to call upon the elder male sibling for succour.'

'Is it that serious?' I asked.

'She has the disease that dare not speak its shame,' he said.

'What? Crabs?'

'Do not jest. There is a plague on our people and she has succumbed to its evil thrall.'

'Plague is no picnic,' I said. 'What are her symptoms? Have her fingernails gone black? Is she puffing up?'

'None of that,' Emanuel said. 'It is a wasting disease that slowly affects her life force, turning her from a happy-go-lucky maiden into a woman on the edge of death.'

‘Does she stay near the Ngoma?’ I asked.

‘It is housed in our homestead,’ he replied. ‘Deborah is the Guardian of the Gourd.’

‘I thought you said it’s a sacred ark?’

‘Ark, gourd, cradle, grave, what’s in a word?’ Emanuel asked. ‘But because she is not long for our physical world, we need to appoint a new custodian before she passes to the other side.’

‘I’m up for that,’ I said. ‘I can see the headlines now; ‘TV producer finds lost ark of the Lemba. CNN will love it.’

‘You can’t tell a soul,’ he said, ‘or the forces of evil will hear of its existence and it could rip the fabric of the universe asunder.’

‘Your secret’s safe with me,’ I lied.

‘This is not to be taken lightly. If you commit to be the Defender of the Drum, you must remain in perpetual isolation, revering our customs to the letter of the oral law.’

‘Nu, like the Talmud?’ Eavesdropping Yossi’s symposia had its uses.

‘We follow the instructions of the ancestors.’

‘No orgies, then, no pomegranate festivals?’

‘You will be in no need of external stimulation if you are the Guardian of the Gourd. It will take the place of bread, of wine, of reproduction. In fact, it is said that she who guards the gourd will live forever.’

‘And how’s that working out for your Deborah?’

‘Death is not the end,’ said Emanuel.

‘Tell me about it,’ I said, doing a cat stretch on the floor to loosen up my ida and pingala. I felt in my pomegranate belt for the heft of the car keys.

‘What are we waiting for?’ I shouted. ‘Lech lanu, let’s go.’

I took the stairs three at a time, leapt into the broadcaster’s bakkie and swung it into reverse. The Lemba trailed after me, carrying massive tartan carrier bags, laden with groceries.

‘Get in,’ I ordered. ‘We’re going home.’

‘Will you fit us all in? We had to do two trips to the studio.’

‘All of you,’ I said. ‘And make it snappy.’

‘But what about your edit?’

‘Bugger the edit,’ I said, ‘It’s not in my job description. Let Rahab make head or tail of this mess. I can defend myself in court over this.’

It took us five hours to reach the homestead up the newly laid N1 highway, past Hammanskraal and Pienaarsrivier, hanging a right at Mookgopong and coming to rest just outside Vaalwater. I signed a non-disclosure agreement as to its exact location to preserve the integrity of the Ngoma.

We parked the car next to the Mokolo and made our way to a scattering of rondawels on the hillside. A large bonfire stood in the centre of the village and a flock of women wailed and moaned in its flickering heat rays. We approached a circular hut set apart from the others. Emanuel pulled aside the curtain and I gazed at one of the most striking hermaphrodites I had ever seen. Like her little cousin, she was as dark as cocoa, with peppermint crisp eyes sunken into her emaciated face, which was missing a nostril. She was sweating like a warthog. I could smell death on her. Luckily I’d brought a banky full of hemp seeds, which I ground to a powder, mixed with spit and applied to her wounds, while I looked around to see where she’d hidden the keys to the Ngoma hut.

‘Does this hurt?’ I asked.

‘No, it soothes,’ she said, ‘Rub me here. Ahh. And here.’

‘How did you come to be like this?’ I asked, crunching on a few stray seeds.

‘It’s a long story,’ she said.

‘I’m not going anywhere,’ I said, looking for bulges in the thin mattress.

‘Once I had a secret love,’ she said. ‘She was a Modjadji, a rain queen from a rival tribe. They couldn’t claim the slightest Yiddel roots.’

‘Where did you meet?’

‘At an environmental conference in Pietersburg. My brother chaperoned me. We knew we were soul mates from that first panel discussion about potable water. We couldn’t keep our hands off each other. But we were doomed. Our families would never permit the match.’

‘How did you manage to see each other?’

‘Modjadji commuted between the forests and the plains via the highway. We would meet at the Shell, the Exxon, the Sasol. Snatched moments. Whispered promises. She said she could predict the stock markets, that we could make our tribes rich and reclaim our sovereignty over the land. I gave her my entire life savings. She still says she can turn a profit.’

‘And was she faithful to you?’

‘In the beginning, I think so. Then one evening we met at the BP and she had rips in her underwear, but she assured me it was from getting into a taxi and snagging herself on a piece of ragged metal. Not long after that, blotches started to appear on my skin and spread to my mouth, my nose, my eyelids.’

‘Sound more like leprosy than bubonic to me.’

‘That’s what my brothers first suspected. We have herbal cures for many ailments. But none for heartbreak. And then, one night, Katrina called.’

‘Katrina?’

‘Some floozy from Jozi. Wanted to speak to Moja, as she called herself to outsiders. Wanted me to know she’d given birth to Moja’s child. I asked how that was even possible. Confronted Modjadji there and then. She told me that Modjadjis are allowed to have several wives. That she never promised me fidelity. That she had been carrying on with Katrina at the same time as she was seeing me.’ Deborah sobbed into her festering sores.

‘What a heartless bitch,’ I said.

‘Don’t criticise her. It’s in her nature,’ Deborah said. ‘After the diarrhea kicked in she stopped sleeping with me. I started to monitor her cell phone. Moja had taken to hiding in the long drop to send SMS messages. Loving, longing, short messages. In their mother tongue. It drove me crazy. The neighbours started to avoid me. I was given the lavvies to scour and scrub. Only my brother took pity on me and made me the protector of the sacred Ngoma. Nobody will come near me and therefore I am the best guard of all.’

‘Nu, show me,’ I urged her, ‘show me the Ngoma and I will protect it with my life.’

‘I’m not supposed to until my brother gets here,’ she said.

‘It’s alright, Debs,’ I said, ‘nobody has to know.’

Deborah raised herself slowly from her sponge and led me through a yard reeking of chicken and goat. A small door jutted from the wattle and daub of the adjoining hut, bound by three padlocks, which would have done a keeper of chastity belts proud.

She unlocked each one with a rusty key and pulled open the reeded door. I looked into the gloom. Narry a thing could I see.

‘It’s gone,’ she cried. ‘The sacred Ngoma’s been taken.’

‘You’re kidding me?’

‘But it can’t have. I was here all the time.’

‘You’re sick, Debs. You’re exhausted. You can’t tell day from night. You sleep in fits and starts. A child could have broken in.’

Deborah slumped against the threshold in a prelude to rigor mortis. I caught her under the armpits and dragged her back to her bed. I’d seen the plague in many forms. That pesky flea the great unwashed carried in their blankets and their groins infected a third of the known world. And half the unknown. I wasn’t sure whether it was contagious, but I hauled out my hemp nosegay and stuck it under my chin. The scent of sweet potato and lemon juice filled the air. With the finest hint of ’nard.

I felt her loins. No lumps or bumps. Her fingernails were clear. But she was breathing now like a nafka on shore leave and it worsened considerably as the hours wore by.

‘Have you had this diagnosed?’ I asked.

‘I can’t leave the village,’ she said. ‘If I leave my post only for a moment, I endanger the Ngoma.’ Her last words were wracked with spit and mucous.

‘Don’t speak,’ I said.

‘I’m nearing the door,’ Deborah said. ‘I can see the cymbals, the tambourines, the tassels pointing towards Jerusalem. Wanda I want you to do something for me.’

‘Anything. What?’

‘I want you to take the Ngoma back to Jerusalem.’

‘Jerusalem? Why?’

‘Seen’a, Zion, city of my ancestors. When the genetic results are released, the lost tribe of the Lemba will be reunited with the Israelites. Our sacred icon will be part of the resurrection.’

‘You mean you’re waiting for the Messiah?’

‘He will come laughing and dancing, riding a white donkey through the Jaffa gate. The dead shall rise. And the true Ngoma will sound.’ She fell back on the pillow, rasping her rattle. Emanuel and Caiaphas stood at the door. I felt her wrist. There was no pulse.

‘She’s gone,’ I said. ‘She’s passed over.’

‘Deborah, my Deborah, why have we forsaken you?’ sobbed Emanuel.

‘She must be prepared for burial immediately,’ Caiaphas said soberly. ‘Wanda, we need you to stay with the Ngoma.’

‘Right,’ I said. I didn’t have the heart to tell them at that moment that their precious Ngoma was gone. I couldn’t help thinking that Rahab had something to do with it. And possibly even Madiba. In one moer of a trade exchange.

The Lemba bury within twenty-four hours. There was no time for an autopsy; the cause was entered as Coca-Cola poisoning.

Women were allowed nowhere near the graveside. Even though we were treated equally in death, we may have bled on the corpse and that would pas niet. Nu, we stood at the back in the drizzling rain – sign of Modjadji’s presence – and wailed our loss in the way of all Yiddels; we gossiped.

‘I saw her remove the Ngoma,’ said a jowly matron. ‘I was returning from a late night liaison when I saw a shadow flit across the long drops. It was Deborah.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘Sure I’m sure. Who else would be cleaning toilets in the middle of the night? She carried a large object, wrapped in plastic. She hauled it into a cubicle and I heard a massive plop. I gasped and she saw me. She threatened to give away the name of my lover if I told a soul. It doesn’t matter now. She’s gone.’

‘Let’s have a look,’ I said, preparing to leave the graveside.

‘It’s being electrified,’ said the matron. ‘We’ve had to defecate in the veld.’

‘Come on,’ I said. ‘This could be the saving grace of the Lemba.’

We trotted to the toilets. Flashes of lightning streaked the sky, Modjadji wreaking her revenge on the meek. A nest of wires wound over and into the cubicles. I hadn’t evacuated my bowels for days, constipation being a nasty side effect of all the junk food. I felt around the putrid latrine. The stench was intolerable. I slid a large plastic bag up to my armpit, gagging as I leaned into the hole. My fingertips touched something solid.

At that exact moment, lightning struck the open wires.

Electricity. That zing that makes the world go round. And the otherworld. We knew about electricity in the Pleroma long before the earthlings claimed it. Hello, storms? How do you think Zeus got away with what he did all those millennia? Edison, Franklin, Priestly all claimed credit for its invention, much like Happy Birthday to You, which we all know was written by Fanny Mendelssohn. You can’t patent a natural phenomenon.

The problem with electricity is it has to be earthed in the real world to have any lasting effect. Once, swimming in Vembanand, I was shocked to life by an electric fish. The Thunderer of Cochin. They imported them to the Bosphoros in the Sixteenth, and even though Solly was loath to touch them, his physicians recommended it as a powerful cure for gout.

In the Nineteenth, to work our electric dildoes, we used amber rods rubbed with all kinds of fur. We laughed merrily as the feathers from our pillows rallied around the shaft and many of our proclivities were satiated, even though I tended to shed downy foam as I tripped the light fantastic.

In the Twentieth we had the electricity wars. Entities called municipalities fought over the provision of this magical ray and charged heavily. People became addicted to the stuff; it was more powerful than heroin. It moved mountains, shucked oyster beds, powered powerful civilisations.

And as I sit and write this, having left my plug at the broadcaster, I watch the little battery icon edge closer and closer to zero and realise that I must now ration my words.

Book XIII: 'Aurora Nights' Geilo 2016 CE

i

I awoke to a full bladder and a window seat gliding through the cumulus. At first I thought I was still dreaming, but the scent of knockoff Georgio with an underbelly of urine assailed my nostrils. I can't smell a thing in the Pleroma. It's the one reality check I can still trust.

The ancient crone next to me had drooled onto my shoulder in her slumber, her top dentures adrift in her open maw. She was eighty if she was a day. I gently propped her back into her seat, fished around for some hair of the dog and knocked back a couple of whiskey miniatures. These had been around since Victoria was an infanta. Fanny and I loved to slip a few tiny tots in between pavilion poses. The stewardess plopped two food trays of indeterminate origin in front of us. The crone stirred and snorted herself awake. She stared at the platter.

'Open my fruit juice,' she commanded.

'Excuse me?'

'I can't twist the cap off. And unpeel my crème brûlée, I can't see the plastic.'

‘Who went and made me your maidservant?’

‘Your agency, I believe, young lady,’ she cackled. ‘They told me you weren’t very bright, I see we’ll have to refresh your memory.’

‘What?’ I sputtered my brûlée. ‘I’ve never seen you in my life before.’

‘And they tell me *I’ve* got Alzheimers.’

It must have been that blood transfusion. Or maybe I’d finally chased just one too many dragons. Who knew? The setting sun threw glinting shafts upon the detritus of our meal through the airborne portholes.

‘Where are we?’ From the low cumulus outside we could have been anywhere from Aurora to Borealis.

The crone waved her teaspoon at the clouds.

‘We’re flying over the Muggelsee’ she said. ‘Somewhere between Kopenick and Rahnsdorf.’

‘Sounds Polish.’

‘Ag,’ she spat. ‘I told your people I wanted a seasoned traveller. You don’t seem to know your Equator from your Elbow.’

‘I never was very good at geography.’

‘KLM fly direct from Johannesburg to Oslo. And we don’t have much time.’

‘Well pardon me, it’s been a while since I flew in a mechanical device.’ I thought back to the juddering ride I took with Maya that summer so long ago. New York to Haiti was a blazing new trail, then, and it had been like travelling in a hand-cranked sewing machine. I’d had strings up my hooped skirt, which, though old-fashioned, had sat well in the hold with the instruments. Maya had gotten away with taking her camera into the cabin. Oh, Maya, I wouldn’t have minded giving one of my lives for you. A tear rolled down my cheek. I was jerked back to the present by the crone lifting up my eye-patch.

‘It’s time for my ablutions,’ she said.

‘Look, lady, I’d love to help you, but I’m busy meditating here.’

‘Nonsense,’ she said. ‘I’ve hired you as my caregiver and care is what you will give.’

‘I would never have agreed to this.’

‘Well, give a koek.’ The nonagenarian reached into her battered carry-on and pulled out a yellowed parchment, scratched and lined with handwritten amendments, and held it up to me.

‘Read it,’ she commanded.

‘I, Wanda B. Lazarus, agree to contract with Alta Kaka Nursing Services for a period of 3 (three) months for the purposes of accompanying Baroness Rosa von Rosenkrantz to the Bloqvist Kunshandel in Oslo, Norway, and attending to her every need until such time as the Baroness has concluded her business with the auction house. In exchange, Ms Lazarus will receive an amount of NOK50 000 (Fifty Thousand Norwegian Krone), half to be paid in advance and half to be settled on completion of the handover of said merchandise to the correct bearer. In addition, the Baroness must be returned in sound mind and good health.’ The signature was a squiggle, but I recognised it as my own.

‘I can’t quite recall signing this,’ I muttered. What had happened to my total recall? My short-term memory was shot. I knew I should never have had that fourth triple of asphodel and Appletizer.

‘Well, you did, and it’s witnessed, twice. I even have a copy of your nursing certificate.’ All my porkie pies came back to haunt me as I realised my forged qualifications had pursued me into the now.

‘Yes, well, erhm, I’ve never been much good at looking after others.’

‘Never mind all that,’ said Rosa. ‘I think I’ve pished myself, and we’re both going to have to squeeze into that revolting little cubicle.’

There’s a reason you’ve never heard of the mile high diaper dump. It’s a very small club. Retching slightly and spraying clouds of fake Georgio, I managed to change her knickers, brush her dentures and get her back to first class without puking or waking the other passengers.

‘Ladies and Gentlemen, we are about to commence our descent into Oslo. Please ensure that your seats are upright and your seatbelts fastened.’

A journey of nine hundred miles taking less time than a walk around a château moat – a far cry from my road trip through Europe at the height of the Albigensian War, the only Crusade fought on home turf; none of that infidel massacre bingeing, this was personal. I pulled root lock to avoid climbing over the Baroness again – there was no way I was going to evacuate in company – and rued the absence of a sniff of ’nard to calm my descending senses.

‘Crew, ten minutes to landing.’

ii

You may be wondering how I was so nonchalant, suddenly finding myself aboard a Boeing 747, twenty leagues above terra firma? Home is where the harmony is. You adapt. Very quickly. Nothing really surprises me anymore, anyway. If they hadn't suppressed Leo's flying machine doodles, we could have been airborne in the Renaissance. Anyway, it was just a hobby; Leo preferred oil paints. And little boys. But that's another story. You choose then. Schlep across the Pyrenees to St. Albans on a donkey with no room service, or flit over the atmosphere at 888 miles per hour and get there in two hours with a generous hand luggage allowance and a hipflask full of aquavit? Thought so. And, you don't feel it. You're in a mile high club all your own. Unless you're reluctantly tending to a geriatric with bad bladder control. But, eventually, we all need to ground. To land. To pick up the Tao of the tale.

I leaned forward about two inches and extracted the in-flight magazine. It sure had changed since the four-pager we got in the Forties. Rosa's face stared at me from the front cover. Great Sami Diva Returns for Swan Song. It must be she. The very diva to whom I'd inadvertently been debentured. I'm sure Mel and the girls were bouncing around in delight, inhaling helium and squeaking at the top of their no-sound voices.

The plane hit the tarmac with an earthbound thud. I uttered a mantra of thanks to Ike Newton, God of Gravity. A smattering of applause broke out.

'Ladies and Gentlemen, welcome to Norway, land of the free and the freezing.'

If I thought I could just shuck off the Baroness, I had to think again. Squashing me against the bulkhead, she blocked my exit with her bloated body, gesticulating for the crew to ready her ski-fitted wheelchair. She had to waddle through the aisle and I couldn't pass in front of her. After a slight delay, an ancient, battered guitar case was positioned onto the chairlift, as we were all lowered to the frost-covered ground.

'Do not let that case out of your sight,' snapped the Baroness, parting the airport crowds like a blue rinse Grandma Moses. She commandeered the chair bearer towards customs control, leaving me with the guitar case to bring up the rear.

'We'll be using these,' she said, and leaned up to the counter. I saw the initials E.U., but couldn't imagine what they stood for. He glanced at the documents and handed them back without a single word.

Then, the interminable wait for the Baroness's baggage. Life's essentials encased in materials I'd never seen before, rolling around and around a crazy sideways carousel. You could crochet a yurt by the time yours arrives. I dropped down on my haunches next to the hand luggage. Although I hate the stink of hide, the case drew me to the scent of my grandfather's Shabbos boots as they dried by the fire of childhood memory. The leather had been crafted for at least four hundred years, so the karma had ebbed out slightly. I fingered the drawbolts, each engraved with a small broken cross. Last time I'd seen the like was in the temples of Cochin. I thought it strange and mentioned it to the Baroness as the carousel turned.

'I see you have Magenim Davidim on your carry on.'

'Oh, those,' she waved a dismissal, 'I should have removed those latches ages ago.'

'Is there a Yiddel connection? They're good luck symbols in temples I've seen.'

'It is a star sign for my people.'

'And mine. I'm sure I've seen this somewhere before. How did it come into your possession?'

'Many years ago, a dear friend of the family gave this instrument to my father for safe-keeping. I am doing my duty by returning it to the country of his deportation.'

'But wasn't the war like seventy years ago?' I asked. Isn't it a bit late?'

'Papa held onto many artefacts during the war. Sami settlers were given high Norwegian rank. He was quite a collector, with a special fondness for ancient musical instruments. Traded gold teeth for great art with all the right chaps. We came to South Africa just after the war and merged well with the new nationalists, our being such pale natives and all. Even when we fell on hard times in exile, we held onto our Strad for dear life and now, with Papa gone, I am honour bound to return it to its rightful owners.' She stifled a sob.

'Can I have a look?' I asked, crouching beside the wheelchair.

'Make it snappy,' she said, waving a crutch at the carousel. 'I can see my trunk coming over the horizon.'

The ancient latches snapped to attention like soldiers on short arm inspection. A warm, woody smell emanated from the case. Cremonan ash. I recognised the Sabionari immediately. For all its woodworm tunnels and patched up repair work, it could be none other. I was back in Cremona, Strad crooning una palomo blanco, caressing my willing curves while his wife screamed blue murder in the background. As the mist began to clear, I started to see the light.

The old bitch had a Strad with her. A bloody Stradivarius. That's why all that Pleromic double speak when they sent me to Cremona. I was destined to meet him again, if only through his immortal handiwork.

Rosa interrupted my reverie. 'On second thoughts, I may auction it to the highest bidder at Nordqvist before the sleigh takes me to my final engagement. I never travel by train. Old war wound.'

'How much do you think it's worth?'

'With the exchange rate as it is, I'm sure it will fetch at least two million.'

'Two million what?'

'Norwegian Krone, honey. Best currency on the globe.' I gulped. That dosh could get me to the end of time and back. Especially if I invested now and returned later. In oil. And fish. And polar bears. Just imagine the interest. I think, in all fairness, that as the inspiration for the instrument itself, I could lay significant claim to a generous portion of the profit. But I still had to play it cool. There's a time and a place for anything.

'Nu, you're selling this hunk of junk on auction?'

'Not selling, dear, don't be crass; I'm offering it to a collector who can see its true value and preserve it for posterity.'

'What, like in a museum? That's a crime against music.'

'Let the world rather gaze upon a masterpiece under glass than have it perish at the hands of some musician.' She uttered the word like a regurgitated bolus.

'It needs to be given to the right custodian,' she said. 'Musicians never have means.'

'But are you not Baroness Rosa von Rosenkrantz, the world famous joik prima donna?

'Please, enough with the titles, already.' I showed her the front cover of the magazine. 'People think I'm only here for my own benefit. They couldn't be more wrong. I am returning to the Sami what belongs to the Sami.'

'What's that?'

'Their voice. The Lutherans forbade us to hear the sound of our incantations. When we left just after the war, my father ensured that we kept up our lamentations. Even as we posed as good Laetherians, we fondled our pebbles in our pockets. When they asked us to condemn our gods in their names, we changed tiny syllables so that the spells held no charm. On the outside

we conformed; inside we were seething with a quiet rage. I have come to joik for the Full Moon Concert.'

That's when I knew I'd have to freeze her in the shower. I needed to separate her from her Strad. And her gig.

Outdoors in this place is unbearable. Indoors only passes muster if the electricals are full force. You don't want to have a power cut at the North Pole. Luckily, my time as a janitor on the Upper East Side gave me a naus for boiler rooms. I'd find the main switch and throw it northwards.

'Turgid Turgidson can take his chances with everyone else. I trust Blomqvist to get me the price I deserve,' the Baroness declared.

'But it's not really your Papa's property and it's not really yours to sell?'

'Now you're splitting hairs, dear,' she said. 'Now get in line or we won't get to the hotel in time for the gravadlax smörgaåbord.'

iii

Where else would Rosa stay but at The Thief? The celestial grading system had caught on here, and with nine stars, it was surely the most luxurious in the city. The lobby looked like a cartoon version of Herod's palace, all gold-railed and crystal-knobbed, with some fantastic works of art that moved when you looked at them. Without bothering to register, Rosa swept ahead into the guest elevator, throwing out a command for me to schlep up the luggage by myself. I gave a nod to the naked bronze statue at the revolving door.

That's probably when I first felt the freeze. And I lost it. Who did she think I was? A sweet, loyal, grovelling servant only too grateful to catch the crumbs from her groaning table? That would be a no. What keeps us in our place? Loyalty? Fear? No. It's just that for some the longing for freedom is greater than the longing for security. If you choose the unpaved road each time, your lack of fear flies in the face of the scaredy cats. That way, nobody can hold you to ransom. Or to account.

I stepped into the elevator with Rosa's monogrammed luggage. The guitar case with its crippled crosses glinted in the lift light. There was no bellboy – the Norwegians had done away with that archaic custom around the time they struck oil – so I had to return thrice to the taxi, juggling shoe bag, vanity case and oxygen tank. A small rectangle of plastic served as the key to

the rising room and I rose to the eighth floor to a view of the island where criminals had been incarcerated for centuries until it was found that they were really useful as free labour on the railroads.

It wasn't that I planned to take it. The opportunity presented itself and I just carped the diem. Something in my waters told me this was in fact confiscated property, double smuggled to launder its legitimacy. It had always been rumoured that the Sabionari was in a private collection somewhere in Italy. The Baroness must have had it stashed for years to keep the heat down.

I grasped the ancient handle and bolted for the curvaceous revolving door. I've never been a great runner, but the thermal underwear did help. Hotfooting it in the desert always tends to chap one's thighs. I've also learned to blend in, rather than make a dash for it, but I wasn't going to have a chance to act inconspicuous in this melamine-deprived chill. Which way to the station, though? I've never really been able to discern north by north-west from a bar of blubber. New York was fine because of the numbers. But these streets didn't have numbers. And the names had all sorts of diacritics, dotting their oi's and crossing out their ao's in a phonetic funk of incomprehension.

I transferred the guitar case to my other frostbitten hand and headed down Landgangen and over the Inner Oslofjord Bridge. The snow was really falling now, covering everything with an anonymous layer of whiteness. I could hear the sirens approaching, their screeches muffled by the blanket of flakes. I ducked into an alley off Tjuvholmen Alee to let the pigs pass. I rummaged in my knapsack that Thalia had prepared for me: thermal gatkes, a thick grey parka hung with double mittens, python length knitted scarf, faux fur hat with ear flaps.

Stores were opening sleepily, and while one owner trustingly left his shop front to grab a cup of coffee, I rummaged through the sale stock and added a few extra items to my wardrobe. Building up the layers from scratch, I donned the grey thermal gatkes, overlaid with mismatched jumper and leggings, a large fleecy onesie and an outsize waterproof pantsuit, finally zipping up the double-sided parka. I buried my entire face into a fleece-lined balaclava, jammed down the fake bear pussy hat – I could sniff a fake at a thousand paces – and checked myself in the full-length mirror to make sure no flesh could touch air. Only my eyes peeked out from my abominable getup. Any sight of flesh would have iced me within moments, and exposed my origins; I had no idea how the Oslovites would deal with a pickpocket and a Yiddel to boot. I looked more like a local than they did, but that doesn't stop centuries of racial profiling.

As I wrapped a snood around the entire arrangement, I nearly gagged from the smell. I dug into my knapsack and unearthed an oxygen mask, a pair of soiled knickers and a disposable raincoat. Rosy must have dispensed her medical waste and her bodily schmutz in my hand luggage. Despite my abject distaste, a cunning subterfuge started to formulate in my mind.

I ditched the case and wrapped the rain coat around the Sabionari. Then I wound the stinky scarf around it until it looked like an overstuffed papoose. Nobody comes near an unbathed baby. I bit off the swinging mittens, shoved them into the raincoat sleeves, removed my hat and jammed it over the neck of the guitar. Thus attired, I swung the bundle over my shoulders in the manner I'd seen in the in-flight magazine. The Homeless Inuit Mother Look.

Thus, with my heavily clad infant son, I shuffled back into the Alee in time to see the owner dismayed over the inexplicable disarray of his neatly ordered clothing store.

I followed the tracks to what I assumed would be the railroad station. I made my way through Olav Selvaags Plass, skidding across its smooth cobblestones, onto Lille Stranden. The snowfall wiped my footsteps clean off the record.

The papoose threatened to slip from under its raincoat from time to time, but I attended to it as a nursing mother, and hummed a few bars of an Inuit lullaby that just came to me. Passing the Aker Brygge Marina, I pointed out all the silly little yachts, their upper edges tinted by snowbright, their owners probably quaffing glühwein in the inviting aquavit shops that lit the lonely boulevards.

Taking a slight right onto Brynjulf Bulls Plass I passed more statues of famous dead people, including a nude who bore a striking resemblance to Zenobia. A fire house, the Radhaus, squatted to my left. I reached Karl Johan's Gate – which is a street, not a gate at all, but they insist on naming it thus. Most confusing. I hitched up my swaddled Strad and veered right, past the chi-chi ski shops and cosy coffee bars, snowflakes tasting on my tongue like the raw sushi whose wares bordered the boulevard. The road was at least a mile long, and the slippery sidewalk aided in keeping my pace down to avoid detection. The heavy boots kept me grounded, but more than once I tilted backwards and was rewarded with a slushy thump to the pavement. The butterscotch wedding cake of Oslo Central Station lurked before me through the flurry. Saabs with flashing lights and studded snow tyres skidded by me on the cobblestones, blinded to the indigenous mother and her snow-blown spawn. I slid into the East building and looked around for a ticket booth. I couldn't get anywhere near my pomegranate belt without dropping

the baby. I fished around in the pockets of my outer parka and pulled out a five hundred Krone note I'd stashed for an emergency. Locating the ticket booth, I pushed the note through the slot. I could see the ice police dismounting their VWs on the Plass.

'What time is the next train leaving?' I asked in broken Norwegian.

The ticket seller, squashed into her tiny cubicle, wiped her chin of gravadlax juice and ran a chubby finger down a well-thumbed timetable.

'There's a train to Bergen leaving in three minutes.'

'How far will this take me?' I pulled out a banknote with the face of a familiar woman.

'500 Krone?' She thumbed down the timetable. You can travel as far as Geilo,' she said.

'Geilo it is,' I said.

'And you're going to have to pay extra for the baby.'

'Baby? Oh, no, it's just an old junk guitar,' I said, having no time to dilly dally.

I shed the Sabionari of its disguise and tucked it under my arm.

'That'll be one ticket only. One way. To Geilo.'

The dribbler punched a few numbers onto a keyboard and a train ticket spat out of a slot.

'We don't really like to take cash,' she said, 'Don't you have a card?'

I held out my thief room key.

'Don't be silly, that's no use. A credit card.'

'I don't know anything about those plastic thingies,' I said. I proffered the ballerina.

'Wait for your change.' She counted three silver coins, each with a hole in the middle, into my outstretched double mittens.

I boarded the train with three minutes to spare.

iv

I lay the Sabionari gently on the blue seat next to me. Pulling off my hat and my outer moonboots, I adjusted to the temperature inside the car, which was a good thirty degrees warmer than outside. The trip could be three hours or three days, I had no idea what the 500 Krone had bought me. But at least I could let down my guard inside the train. I had a valid ticket. I had money in my pomegranate. And a private cabin was the only way to fly.

Once my fingers had thawed, I practiced my modes off. Something about the sound of the tracks brought to mind the trotting of the camels across the Takalakan, mixed with a hint of

the lonely balladeer. I thought back to all my loves and lives and howled my loss over the train's rhythm tracks in the manner of a Dionysian dirge. Then I worked some more on the lullaby I'd hummed up the Jaserstrasse. Think Rosenkes mit Mandele meets Sur le Pont D'Avignon. The Sabionari leaked its guitar juice into my fingertips and a pentatonic double hook caught the upper strings. Thus I sat looking out the window, alternately stroking my fake papoose and noodling, doodling, matching word to melody, melody to rhythm. A train's a great place to decompose on. A metal metronome, tracking the human heart at a million beats a minute.

Time had not been kind to the Sabionari. She'd been altered, I could see; at the neck various wooden panels had been affixed and detached, detached and reattached. But a bad workman always blames his fools. The more I practiced, the sweeter came the sound as I bayed out my fear and loathing into the lonely sleeping car.

Around me the Scandinavian Supershow encroached from every angle. Snow clad peaks rushed towards and away, fir trees hung heavy with snow, an iced up river flowed, its back to the shallow sunrise. At times I was plunged into darkness. It felt like space and time had come unstuck, but the clatter of the tracks was reassuring and kept me grounded. I thought I'd passed back into the Iron Horse of my time in St. Petersburg, but the accents were different and the tunnels much shorter.

Somewhere between Myrdal and Finse, I stepped into the WC for a smoke. Small round stickers adorned the toilet symbolising various prohibitions. No smoking. No eating. No pets. No petting. A far cry from the subway ride we took to the Port Authority during that frantic flight to Haiti. I had developed the knack of hand rolling, an unintended fringe benefit as a result of all that wrist activity. I did still prefer those little Russian coloured cigarellos, but beggars can't be choosers in this duty-free world. I opened the tiny porthole and exhaled visibly into the freeze.

I heard a knock on the door and a verbal kerfuffle of which I could make neither fish head nor tail. In Norwegian I wouldn't have known a latke from a Lillehammer. Then suddenly, it crystallised into broken English.

'Kvinne, please open the door. You are in grave danger.' I took another toke. Fixed my hair in the mirror. The double wool hat had played havoc with my tresses. The door knocked again.

'Kvinne, listen. I can see smoke coming from under the door.'

I stepped out of the tiny toilet into the snow lit corridor. A shaggy blonde with a distinctive underbite glowed practically orange in the tunnel light. A toothpick poked from beneath his snow-blown beard, clenched between immaculate incisors. On his head crouched a bear pussy hat, giving off a faint odour of squirrel. He was at least five hands taller than me.

'What's the problem?' I asked. 'My doctor has ordered this as a cure for mountain sickness.'

'The RGB has a strict no smoking policy on all Norwegian trains,' he said, twiddling the toothpick. 'There is a two hundred-thousand Krone fine.' I exhaled into his naval.

'I get it. I get it.' I stomped out the stompie.

'Are you the one I heard tzimbelling in Car 4?'

'Yes,' I said defensively. 'I have a ticket. Bought and paid for.' I showed it to him. It had a little gravadlax dribble from the ticket seller, which I wiped off with my inner sleeve.

'Wilfred Wolfberg,' he extended a hand the size of a Palmyrian palm. 'My friends call me Woolfie.'

'Wanda,' I said, 'I call myself just Wanda.'

'Well, Just Wanda, your chutzpah could land you in a bit of tsorris,' he said, rolling his toothpick to the starboard side of his mouth.

Tsorris? Yiddish is a handy language with which to pfeffer your vernac. It's also a tribal dog whistle. The moment Woolfie told me I was in trouble, ghetto style, I knew he was a Landsman. The surname should also have rung a gong. Wolfberg? No guesses about his origins. What was a watered down Yiddel doing all the way up here on the highest alpine railway in Christendom? There was only one way to find out for sure. The tippie toe test.

I'd heard there were no more Yiddels in Norway. Rosy Rosenkrantz told me they'd rounded them up in October '42, while I was shilly shallying around the Haitian shores with Maya. Missed the whole thing, actually. But it comes back to bite you in the peaches in the end.

'Where are you travelling to?' he asked.

'As far as my ticket will carry me,' I said.

'No worries there. Nobody ever really checks the tickets. They're much more uptight about smoking infringements.'

I picked up the Strad and trailed Woolfie to his private sleeping car. He didn't really need it to schloff in. it was only a three-hour journey. A tsunami of maps and etchings were strewn all

over the foldup table wedged between the tiny little beds. I wondered how he could fit his feet in for a schloff. Two flashing screens, seemingly attached to nothing, blinked words and pictures like a jigsaw puzzle on heroin. The lone wolf speared a herring from a jar with his toothpick, pickling the air with vinegar and testosterone. One of the illuminated squares on his gadgets displayed a grainy photograph of me stepping onto the train with my papoose. The words 'Priceless Guitar Stolen: Suspect at Large' crawled across the bottom of the illuminated square. I doffed my pink snood and threw it nonchalantly over the scene. They'd nabbed me. I was tied to the tracks of my own impetuous path. Unless I could wiggle this to my advantage.

Woolfie put two cans of Conductor on top of the maps and pulled the ringie thingie on it. Quaffing half of his in one gulp, he doodled on the small black screen and a poltergeist ice cube appeared in glowing green. He pinched his thumb and forefinger together and the cube got bigger. It was so real, I thought maybe he wanted to drop it in our beer, but there was no way it would fit into the tiny hole at the top. With a featherlight touch, he stretched the cube this way and that until he had a coffin shaped rectangle. With a flick of the wrist, the cube copied itself and then again, creating a long row of luminous finger biscuits.

'I get it,' I said. 'It's some kind of sematron.' I knew about sideways harpsichords from St. Petersburg. I was never a fan of the sound. Too much banging and clanking.

'Nei, it's my own invention,' he said. 'I call it ice percussion. We bring in the finest glacial ice from Geilo for our ice music festival.'

'Your what?'

'Ja,' he said, turning the toothpick upwards, 'Ice music. It's a whole new genre. I'm proud to say I'm one of its founding fathers.'

'What do you mean? You play music in subzero temperatures?'

'Nei. We play music with the ice. The ice is our music.'

'How is that even possible?'

'Our ancestors have always known that ice has resonance. I was playing xylophone at the Greighallen one year and the mallets literally froze to my fingers. A whole new sound ensued. I realised I could form instruments from glaciers. An old fisherman showed me how to carve my first ice cylinder from the lakes around my village.'

'Nu, how do you find the ice that has the sound you want?'

'The ice decides,' he said. 'We only know once the instrument is carved.'

‘But the ice will melt while you’re playing, surely?’

‘That’s why we come this far north,’ he said. ‘The perfect condition is thirty. Then the ice doesn’t thaw.’

‘Thirty degrees?’ I hadn’t heard of the metric system until then.

‘Thirty below,’ he said. ‘The minus goes without saying.’

‘Shiver my icy timbers,’ I said, quoting an old Phoenician sea captain.

‘We do have refrigeration for the really good pieces.’ He nodded his eyebrows towards a large picnic hamper wedged into the overhead baggage railings, condensation dripping from its surface.

‘We’ve imported these beauties all the way from Tromsø,’ he said. ‘The ice there is a hundred and fifty thousand years old. We paid a small fortune.’

I looked into the hamper. They just looked like blocks of ice to me.

‘But it’s all just frozen water?’

‘We are all just frozen water. But down to business, Just Wanda. I've been listening to your delightful stylings during our scenic trip. I had to pass through your carriage en route to the catering car. You have a great grasp of the rhythms of the Sami.’

‘Sami? Never heard of him.’

‘My ancestors moved from Lithuania to the Arctic Circle during the Great War. I spent my youth in Lapland. There, we encountered the Sami, tribal nomads and reindeer whisperers. Twice a year we were invited to their sacred music rituals. Quite shamanistic, actually. Your phrasing reminds me of my grandmother’s joiks while she mourned a bad fishing season.’

‘My Bobba was also a bit of a joiker,’ I smirked at the memory of her unbridled off-colour anecdotes.

‘That may well be, Just Wanda. But I seriously need your help.’

‘Shoot,’ I said. I was going to need a little help in disembarking from this iron horse, and I needed a good beard.

‘You see, I’m in a little bit of a pickle,’ he said, spearing another herring on his toothpick. ‘I have an ice music concert in two days in Geilo, and I’ve just lost my prima donna. She was joiking in the shower up in Tromso and the water turned to ice; it’s paralysed her vocal chords. I need a singer to replace her.’

‘What do I know from Sami music?’ I said.

‘You seem to have it in you,’ he said. ‘I can detect the spirit of the Sami joik in your noodlings.’

‘Ag, I was just musing about how I’d feel if this papoose was a real little person.’ I hugged the Strad a little closer.

‘Well, when the Sami lose a loved one, they create an individual lament. This is what I heard you play.’

‘I’m not one for fussing over the loss of loved ones,’ I said. ‘Although I would like to return this to its rightful owner.’

‘You can’t keep out that sour note of suffering,’ he said. ‘It’s a great gift.’

I unswaddled the Sabionari and reprised my snow tune. I noticed a slight stiffening. Which wasn’t bad for someone dressed in four layers of clothing. He closed the lids of the screen, and his Adam’s apple shook like a vodka martini. Never one to let anyone go abroad with his hard on, I curled my woolen sock into his crotch and wiggled it all about as he told me his tale of migrant hokey cokey. For one brief moment, I wondered what it would be like to possess those delicate lotus feet I’d tended to in Mogao. Despite the pain of eternally balancing on one’s heels, those crippled little arches went a long way to satisfy a man’s schmekel lust. To say nothing of the root lock. Song Sung had surely suffered for her art. Luckily, this time, the sock treatment did the trick, and I nursed his semi all the way from Bruchen to Geilo.

v

It’s no biggie giving a toe job to a stranger. He could have kept on designing ice cubes while I iced his popsicle. His ski trousers were surprisingly easy to unbutton, a fuzzy kind of magnetic material ripping open his flies. We sat bolt upright in the sleeping compartment, casually plucking, bowed tarsals clasping his growing corpus spongiosum. Anyone waist level up would never imagine that anything was going down. Naturally, I wouldn’t let him touch me. That’s the deal with the non-sexual toe job. It’s always been my go-to activity for discreet indiscretions. They never expect you to take up the schmekel challenge and beat them tootsies down. Then, you’re hands free to eat an orange, read a tabloid, or practice Lochrian mode on a Sabionari in transit. Get the arch action right and your feet control the motion. It’s better with your socks off, but wool is quite safe on the most innocent of instruments. It can all be over in a matter of

seconds. Or, you can take the long and winding road on a romantic journey with that special someone. It was on the journey that he taught me the lyrics.

‘Liddle liddle lady oh, liddle lady ohhhhhh.’

I imitated his cadence, but missed his meaning.

‘Toodle oodle loodle oodle, toodle oodle oohh.’

‘What kind of joik is this?’

‘It is a lament to the loss of the habitat of the arctic penguin,’ he said, breathily.

‘Sounds like gibberish to me,’ I said.

‘That’s the problem. Nobody speaks Laplandish anymore.’

‘Nu, then I can make up anything really?’

‘People will intuit its meaning if the music is sincere.’

‘I still don’t know why you won’t let me do it my way,’ I sulked. Learning things off by heart was never my preference.

‘Alright, try humming along.’ He gave me the next joik, a melancholy ode to the northern lights. The melody travelled from my ears to my throat, bounced about my brain and ricocheted into my fingers. I think I’m getting the hang of this joik business.’

‘Tweedle deedle dee,’ I repeated. ‘Treedle deeldle dum.’ I increased the fiction of the sock motion. He slugged his second Conductor.

‘The NSB doesn’t normally allow singing in the cars. It is akin to begging,’ he said, ‘and loitering.’

‘Do you not have roaming musicians in your land?’ I asked.

‘Only itinerant peoples come and go. The Romanians get caught up in the cultural crossfire. But mostly they just knit headbands and beg on the streets.’

The train entered a tunnel and the view was swallowed into blackness. I continued rubbing in tandem with the rhythm of the tracks. Crooning the lolly and noodle doodles seemed to give a frisson to the moment, and as we saw the light at the end of the tunnel, Woolfie burst forth like an overcooked bratwurst. I had the presence of mind to position the bright pink snood across the screen for a bit of ejaculate control. If only I’d seen the reindeer on the curvature of the track ahead, silhouetted against the hovering half-light of the unrising sun.

‘Ø. Å. Û,’ he exclaimed. ‘What a relief. I haven’t been able to release my chi for a good twenty-four hours.’

‘Nu, Woolfie, one good turn deserves another.’ I mopped his semen-beaded brow. ‘Level with me. Are they looking for me at Geilo?’

Woolfie flipped open the image box. My own face gazed back at me, a fuzzy miniature replica with my crime on show and a bunch of foreign phrases with big crossed out o’s and dotted e’s crawling indecipherably along the bottom.

‘What does it say?’ I asked. I really didn’t want to get into any jailbird state. Who knew what penalties were around here for grand larceny if a casual smoke could cost you an arm and a legging?

‘It says that an instrument of great worth has been stolen from Baroness Rosa von. You are their prime suspect. They have a CCV camera shot of you leaving The Thief with a package that resembles the missing article, a priceless guitar fashioned by Antonio Stradivarius himself. A store in the Langarden district seems also to have been vandalised. It seems this instrument of yours is an extremely valuable commodity.’

‘That’s correct,’ I said. ‘In the big picture of things, the Sabionari is actually mine. It was modelled after my figure at the time – you can notice the elongation of the torso.’ I ran my palms across the undulations of Strad’s wooden curves and moved them to my lumpen outline.

‘There are federal agents waiting now at every station on the Bergen Line.’

‘It’s not about the money,’ I said. ‘It’s practically my inheritance.’

‘I’m not one to judge, Wanda,’ Wolf said. ‘I’ll help you skip the fuzz. On condition you stand in for the joik at the igloo tonight. Keep the bear pussy over your head. They’ll take you for a local.’

‘Deal,’ I said, ‘but let’s leave out the hat. I’ve nearly got the lyridian triddle diddle lyric down pat.’

‘Excellent,’ he said, re-magnetising his flies. ‘Wait for my cue on the ice horn and begin to warble. Now take this.’ He passed me a grey waterproof onesie that could have fitted six of me. ‘When we get to Geilo, start unloading the ice cube containers and you should remain undetected.’

‘If I hide the Sabionari under this getup, it’ll just look like I’m really gezundt,’ I said. ‘Pregnant, even.’ I shuddered, despite the heat in the cabin.

‘You’ll have to put it aside when you carve your own instrument.’

‘Excuse me, nobody said anything about carving. Why can’t I just use the Strad?’

‘Firstly, you’d be recognised. Secondly, it’s cheating the rules. The body must resonate. It is a temporal experience, evidenced by the instruments that melt even as you play them.’

‘But won’t it be figging freezing?’

‘The best conditions are eight.’

‘Below?’

‘Below. To fully feel the full moon boogie, you have to resonate with your own personal cube.’

‘Joiks aside, what’s wrong with a capella and a bit of ice bonging?’

‘You will only know the full moon joik trance if you carve your sound from the ice itself,’ he said.

‘Alright, I’ll do it,’ I said, although it seemed like an enormous schlep for a few hours of detuned dripping.

‘You’re going to have to lie low, though,’ he warned. ‘You can stay at my igloo. Keep your hood up. Blend in with the locals. I’ll introduce you to Turgid. He does all the chainsaw work for the festival. You can choose your own cube. And make of it what you will. It’s all a big gamble, really.’

I like a bit of a snow flutter.

It was only then that we noticed the reindeer, about seventy furloughs further down the track, nibbling lichen through the icicles.

‘Sainted Santa,’ I said, ‘they’ll be biltong.’ I pulled the emergency cord. A great siren rent the compartment. The brakes squealed like stuck pigs. I pitched in my lungiest scream. As the train screeched into slowness, the deer began to leap frantically in front of us, mesmerised by the track, straining to outrun the steamy metal monster. Alas. Twenty-seven innocent bambis were railroaded to their maker by six thousand tons of iron and steel; carrion jerky. The collision buckled the train in the middle, heaving the front cars off the track. Was this to be my end, before I’d even tasted of the ice music? Was I also going to be collateral damage? I emerged from the carnage without as much as a scratch. The Muses must have had other fates in store for me.

vi

In the chaos after the crash, nobody was looking at me or for me. I saw Wolf running from ice pillar to post, cradling passengers in his arms, checking their vitals. I liberated a few seat covers from the wreckage, wrapped them around the Sabionari and shoved it back under my waterproof onesie. There were ambulances everywhere, their massive snow tyres and the blood on the tracks ripping away any semblance of the picturesque. I stumbled from the slushy tracks and began to inch my way up the slippery slope, crunching my way towards the white roofs specking the horizon.

Halfway up the forested hill of ice I was irritated by the sound of a dentist's drill from hell. Can't a girl just get out of civilisation once in a full moon? There, on the monochrome landscape, stood a surly iceman in a headband and furry hat, wielding a live crocodile across several massive hunks of glacier. It turned out to be called a chainsaw, invented to chop down trees, but now used for everything under the sun that requires annihilation. He sliced through the ice, sending shrapnel in every direction, carving a block about the size of a small Ottoman pouffe. He winched it onto a large wooden sledge and began on another. The breath of six huskies smoked into the cold mountain air. I crept closer to get a better look.

'Hey, you, Fatboy, don't touch those.' He motioned me away with a flick of his croc. At first I couldn't believe he was speaking to me. Fatboy, indeed. But seeing as I was wearing an outsize onesie with a Sabionari down the front, it was fair comment. Everybody looks the same in the snow, anyway.

'I've come to carve my instrument,' I said.

'Who sent you?'

'The Wolfman said you'd help me out. I met him on the train. He's been training me for the joik gig tomorrow tonight.'

'Any friend of Woolfie's,' said the iceman. 'How rude of me, I haven't introduced myself. I'm Turgid.'

'I know. You're Turgid Turgidson, right? Wolf speaks very highly of you. You are an ice whisperer, so I've heard.'

'Ja, once a year I like to cut loose and have a little fun with the chainsaw. Then I go back to my day job.'

'Which is?'

‘I’m an accountant,’ he said, ‘on the RN/RGB line. What’s your fancy? You can carve ice horn, ice bass, ice percussion – although that’s Wolf’s territory. There’s also ice kantele, ice sax, ice axe …’

‘What do you mean ice axe?’

‘Guitar, kithara, anything of string. You can do a lute, a kantele, a langeleik …’

‘Lingam what?’ I certainly didn’t want to carve no genitalia.

‘Nei, langeleik. It’s a traditional Norwegian string instrument, strummed by our Sami ancestors for thousands of years.’

‘Sounds intriguing,’ I said. ‘I’ve always fancied a bit of local culture.’

‘The tuning sound is different in every village. But langeleik it shall be,’ he said. ‘Choose your ice, then, and I’ll show you how to create a chip off the old block.’

‘How do I know which one will sing?’

‘You don’t. That’s the exciting part. I can carve a hundred pieces of ice and ten might have a ring.’

‘And the other ninety?’

‘Most ice makes no sound at all.’

‘And when do you know if you’ve got an instrument of note?’

‘When you’re finished. Every shard and shaving affects the final sound.’

I put down my cup, closed my eyes and twirled myself around and around, arms stuck out like a Guy Fawkes effigy. Dizzy, dizzier, I spun upon my third eye axis and brought my mittens together in pistol pose to single out one particular shiny block, gleaming in the gloaming.

‘Good choice,’ said the iceman.

‘But you must admit, they all look the same,’

‘To the untrained eye, perhaps,’ he said, ‘but the blocks all have their own personalities. Each one tells a tiny slice of the history of the world. Some of these babies are more than two thousand years old.’ Age mates we were.

‘Nu, then how does a person actually practice?’

‘You have to listen to the instrument. It will decide how you play.’

‘How do you even tune it properly?’

‘You can’t. Each instrument is completely unique. The ice method rewrites the rules of music. You have to rely on these.’ He flicked his earlobes with the points of his double mittens.

‘You mean I have to listen to the ice?’

‘Exactly. Wolf once had a concert in 30 degrees below zero. The ice sounded very crispy and he got more high and low frequencies.’

I looked down at the snow that was turning slushy. ‘What happens if the temperature rises?’

‘It’s a disaster,’ he said. The closer you get to zero, the less the ice will sing. The instrument will melt and trickle like water. That’s why we have to hold the festival just as the polar winter ends. It’s my annual pilgrimage to pay homage to the first full moon of the new year.’

‘Sounds like Rosh Hashona on Ice to me.’

‘You could say that,’ he said. ‘But our polar moon skies have shamanistic powers. Then the Tricky Lady may appear and grace us all with her spectacular sky show.

‘The who?’

‘Tricky Lady.’

‘How so?’

‘The full moon invokes the spirit of the Aurora. If you’re very lucky, she’ll dance for you.’

Turgid placed an instrument called Stihl into my arms. I wriggled inside my onesie and birthed the Strad gently onto the ice.

‘I can’t saw with this baby on my back,’ I said. The iceman didn’t miss a beat. ‘We’ll truss him into the bearskin and harness him with the huskies.’

‘Much obliged,’ I said. I was glad he wasn’t asking any questions. We sledded to the village with about twenty blocks, crystal clear, made of melted mountain. Those huskies sure were schlepping. By this time I was one of the boys, and nobody bothered to tease me about my high voice and oversized clothing.

I’d divested Wolf of his room key at the Highland Lodge, but I wasn’t sure I wanted the iceman to know where I was staying. I booked into the overheated hotel, the foyer giving me a whiff of Hades. I dumped the Strad on my single eiderdown, donned an extra balaclava, doubled up my mittens and headed for the site, a field behind the village library that had been cleared for the purpose. Trucks were bringing in snow by the mountainload. The snow underfoot barely fluffed the stony ground.

The igloo makers were spraying jets of water around a fishnet dome, held in place by what I took for a gigantic whale bladder, blown up like an air balloon. The liquid arced in slow motion as it hugged the armature in a slushy embrace, creating a solid surface of curve. An ice cavern formed before my very eyes. Turgid tugged up a hide for me to sit on the block next to him. I'd rather he hadn't. Those baby Bambis troubled my conscience. He handed me a paper cup of lukewarm hot chocolate and drew a slanted rectangle onto a sketchbook the same size as the ice block.

'This is the silhouette of the langeleik,' he said. It didn't look like much to me. Right near the top of the rectangle he drew a curvy scroll, which I presumed was the tuning board.

'Surely that's too short for the frets?'

'These are the exact dimensions of the langeleik of Geilo.'

'But I can't tell the neck from the body.'

'This is what it's looked like for centuries.'

'Doesn't quite take my fancy. I'd rather model an instrument of my own.'

'Make up your mind, kvinne,' he said. 'We've got four hours before the temperature rises above six and I've got to v-tool the sax and check the plexiglass on the Finn's kantele.'

'Alright, already, let's make it crispy. Pass me that koki.' I sat in half gyan mudra and popped my rays through my third eye chakra. My left hand obeyed my imagination and channelled a collection of rapid sketches upon Turgid's cartoon sketchbook as I conjured up the kithara parts I've known through the ages. The saddle of the phorminx, my first love, saviour of my ghetto upbringing; the heel of the komuz I used to seduce Zenobia, and later, Sol; the narrow neck of the ektar of the Cochin Bat Mitzvah girls; the teardrop knot upon the Last Pipa; Rambeaux's fleur de lis tailpiece, Fanny's recycled ivory plectrum, Razzie's frigid fingerboard, Maya's hairpin bridge. I'd left something out, but I couldn't remember exactly what. Oh, right, Strad's body. The shofar didn't count.

'Can we make something of all of this?'

'It would be better to start with the basics and build it up,' he suggested. 'Better for the overall structure.'

'Whatever you say, Turg,' I said, keen to get started.

'Good,' he said, 'then take another page and trace your dominant sketch.' I drew a large, irregular pear.

‘That’s fine. Turn on the chain saw.’

‘Excuse me?’

Turg pointed to a large lever sticking out of a wiry black box. ‘We need power,’ he said.

‘It won’t bite. Your rubber soles will earth you.’

I flicked the switch and the crocodile called Stihl started to scream like a stuck pig.

‘That’s it,’ he screamed over the noise. The saw cut through the block like Palmyran butter.

vii

I began to carve my star guitar langeleik out of frozen Arctic ice. Since my electrocution, I’d been wary of power tools, but I got the hang of the buzz quite quickly.

I wielded the croc into the groove of the pear.

‘Good. Let the block reveal itself. Brush away the off-cuts. Now take the large, flat chisel, this one, to get the main bulk off. Then we move to the other chisels, getting finer and finer to define the details.’

The basic shape of the instrument began to form under my freezing gloves.

‘Ok. Now use the edge of the blade to get the markings.’ I went from the croc to the chisels, the tools getting smaller and smaller until I was refining, redefining the very ice itself into the body of the beast – part pear, part bucket, part curvaceous kore. I was very happy with the overall look of it.

‘Grab this V-tool,’ he said. ‘We use this to carve the finer detail. Feathers, fins, pipa knots.’ I broke the smooth surface with the souvenirs of my journey. Turgid helped with some of the more finicky bits.

‘And now for the piece de resistance.’ He took a nozzle and pressed a knob. A violent blue flame spewed from its beak.

‘No,’ I said, ‘you’re going to melt the whole thing.’

‘Nei,’ he said,’ I’m making it invisible.’ He aimed the fire at the kithara and hosed its entire surface. As he did so, the instrument became transparent, the frills and filigrees crystalline and defined.

‘That’s bloody beautiful,’ I said.

‘Now listen carefully,’ he advised. ‘If you have an ear for the ice, you’ll hear the music of its making.’

I struck the belly with my mitten. Nada. I struck again. A dull bong sounded.

‘Sorry, luv, not a sausage.’

I lunged for the filigreed block and toppled it over. Ice shards flew everywhere; the petal of a fleur, the wing of a butterfly. It lay on the ground in shatters.

‘Nu, so I must start again?’

‘You need something simple, something clean. Something cosmic.’

This time I paid more attention to choosing my block. I paced around the collection, inspecting for flaws, but each one was a model of purity. I guess I’ll just take my chances again. I picked the fourth block from the left, picked up a fresh piece of paper, estimated the dimensions, and drew a triangle that took up two thirds of the surface. I turned the page upside down and drew a triangle on top of the first. Then I extended two straight lines like parallel rays emanating from the point of the top triangle.

‘I’ll make this one,’ I said.

‘A star guitar. How original.’

‘If you only knew,’ I said. The resemblance to a Magen David was unmistakable.

I sawed and I chiselled and I chiselled and I sawed and I learned the warp and the weft of the ice and how you can lop off the whole neck if you’re not careful, and how it can get glued back together with a hot ice iron; and how the V tool gets the sharp edges just right, creating feathers and berries and dolphins and beaks as the design dictates. Of course, it changes in the making. One sleight of hand and the whole thing can fall apart.

Finally, my star guitar was ready. Turgid let me use the blowtorch with which I made the Magen David literally shine. He tapped it with his inner glove. A clear note sounded into the space.

‘Now for the neck,’ he said. I thought we were missing a trick. I wondered what that hole was for.

‘Why can’t we make that part with another block?’ I asked.

‘We’ve tried. No can do. It doesn’t last half an hour.’ Turgid took a long white paddle and wedged it into the heel at the top of the body.

‘This should do the trick.’

‘What kind of material is this?’

‘Plexiglass,’ he said, but don’t tell Wolf. He’s under the impression that the whole thing is made of ice. This is the only way you’ll get anywhere with the tuning.

‘It’s our little secret,’ I said, making a note to fetch the Strad as a backup when I went back to the lodge for a jacuzzi and Swedish massage.

viii

Wolf made his appearance just as the show was starting. He baulked when he saw me, divested of my outsize onesie; pink earmuffs and purple volcanic earrings, quite the showgirl.

‘Where have you been?’ he demanded. ‘I really needed your help at that train crash.’

‘You had everything under control,’ I said, ‘I can’t stand the sight of blood.’ But I’ve met Turgid and he’s helped me make my instrument. I’m ready to joik.’

‘Have you been practicing?’ he asked.

‘Every minute,’ I said.

He motioned to the shadowy stage hands who schlepped a large box of icicles into the igloo, their origins tattooed onto a sign saying ‘Oslo Ice Design’.

‘Nu, you don’t get your ice locally?’

‘We’ve had a very warm winter. We’ve had to import from Oslo. I didn’t want to take any chances.’ Wolf laid out the xylophone blocks and an assistant filled a bucket with crushed ice shards.

The hooded audience began to assemble. The igloo resonated like an echo chamber of truth. Packed into naturalness, tiniest sounds could be detected in the cavern of ice. Wolf began with his percussion, breathing a boxy beat into a solid ice trumpet. Boo ba-shaba ba-shaba-ba boo ba-shaba bebo shaba. He brandished a pair of pestles between his mittens and pounded the ice mortar in front of him with conviction. Footsteps in an ice bucket became a counter crunch as he stomped the rhythm back into the intro.

I struck the star guitar and its flatness rattled my teeth. I adjusted my vocal pitch to match the soaring. I couldn’t stick to the script. I’d be laughed out of the igloo. I closed my eyes and dreamed of Carta. As the memories flooded back, the sadness overwhelmed me and I began a fresh joik, lamenting the wasted aeons, the lost loves, the missed opportunities.

‘Ooooooooo,’ I crooned, thinking it would be a good place to start with an international

audience. All I could see of the dark-clad silhouettes was their breath, freezing in the fluorescent light.

'Aaaaaaahhhoooo,' I uttered, tuning the B string up again as the neck dripped onto the floor. It wasn't working. The audience was shifty. I knew these lyrics wouldn't cut the cuttlefish.

'Ohaaaahhhooooyoooyooo.' I added a lick at the end for the yodel brigade. Muffled claps.

Wolf dipped his right boot into a bucket of chips and stomped out an offbeat. This, they understood. They put their mitts together. I twiddled the E string and tried to tighten it.

'Ooooaeee oaaaeee ahhhhhh.' Small clicks of soft palette appreciation bounced off the inner chamber. Problem was, if I plucked two strings at a time it set up a chord, bouncing in and out of pitch, like a Cochi twangalang. Concert pitch, it wasn't. We'd be cacophony by the time the ice horn kicked in. I wound the peg sharp, flat; it just wouldn't hold. Oy.

A swirl of vermillion neon twirled through the night sky. Like electronic candyfloss, licked by a tongue of stars, Terpsichore danced, illuminating the dark with her celestial rhythm. I uncovered the Strad from its reindeer hide papoose, removed my mittens and snapped its neck, just below the tuning peg. It came off in one ingenious piece, like a renaissance jigsaw puzzle. Just as I remembered, there it was; a carved heart with a broken arrow, surrounding the initials AS+W L. He was mine, after all. I pulled out the plexiglass and shoved the Stradneck in its place. Turgid stepped forward with his blowtorch. The string strained against its tethered peg but held fast. I let go of the note and it bounced through the igloo like the whispering galleries of St. Paul's. In one full breath I exhaled the frustration of the ages. One pure note, set against the frozen pegboard of the Strad.

'He le la he le le le …

A he le le la he le le …

Ha le ha le le la …

Hey la hey ley ley la hey le luh …'

A plume of aurora wisped above the hole at the top of the igloo. It's there for practical purposes, otherwise everyone would flake out from the carbon dioxide. It also give you a great view of the sky, like a frozen telescope. The Tricky Lady was warming up. Soon the Girls would be out in full force.

I emitted a cry that had the sound of all my suffering, of the loss of Hadassah before she could even be my mother, for the abandonment of Zen who held the gold chain of my heart, for those poor Gopi girls drowned in the lakes at Cochi, for Alexi's blood, for unrequited love. It was a complete tone that turned into a cry that became a full moon howl. It was a primal scream frozen on the sub-zero wind.

And the Tricky Ladies danced, lifting their gauzy neon petticoats to give a glimpse of what lies above. And the audience craned their collective necks to the magnetosphere to accustom their eyes to Clio in green and Erato in pink and possibly even Mel in blue, and the young humans twirled, opening their mouths to catch belated snowflakes on their frozen tongues.

And still I held the note, catching the back of my throat, buzzing low with an overtone of the Ages. Swooping up an octave I picked up the microphone, gave a time signature to the bemused musos on the main stage, eternally tuning their melting machines, and placed my hairpin on the open E and slid it over the string like grits on Sunday morning. The bass player picked up the drone, scrubbing his strings with a newly packed snowball. Wolf's ice packers moved his kit into the open and I conducted him into time, my time, the signature of my own making. There were no chords – I could have used the langeleik after all – but at that moment voice and instrument came into perfect opposition, rhythm and melody accompanying the heavenly dance. Who influenced who is still a point of contention, but we were in perfect harmony, in our cacophony. It would be seconds before the whole thing went into meltdown. This was the only moment that counted. For an instant, I was in total control of the song, the world, the rhythm of life. I'd tuned into myself, adjusted to the circumstance of string and I strung up my hallelujahs as far as heaven could find me.

I howled into the night sky while the Muses danced above me. This was my last chance. I positioned my right hand to resume its rhythmings and plucked at dead air. The guitar was melting.

ix

'That's her,' a familiar croak cleaved the ecstasy, 'the little slut who stole my family heirloom.' It was the figging Baroness. In full voice. Gliding in on a hovercraft sleigh that hardly left a mark in the snow. 'You think you got the better of me?' she screeched. 'You think you can steal my priceless instrument?'

‘It wasn’t yours to own,’ I called back over the rhythm section, ‘I am returning it to whom it belongs.

‘Get that thief!’ the Baroness snapped at her sleigh bearers. The bearers moved towards me, but I held my star guitar in front of them, butting them with its icy angles.

‘We can’t get a grip, Baroness. She’s slipping away …’

The aurora shuddered in its own limelight and I could make out the ethereal faces of the Muses etched on the sky. A luminous finger of light emerged and struck the Strad right on the joint of its neck. A jolt passed through my body, sending me epileptic. The lights continued, more intense this time, as if seen through the slow exposure of a very slick camera. A herd of reindeer rushed by, untethered, lichen-lipped. I saw Lazzie playing in the snow, his tallis intact, chubby face aglow with merriment. I rubbed my eyes. Surrounding me were the Muses, each holding a souvenir of my journey.

‘Welcome home, Wanda,’ they chime in perfect unison.