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-A.D.17-

It was one of those days towards the end of winter when the occasional sun has some warmth but the wind can still bite. A man was sitting quietly, almost invisibly, on a square stone pillar lying on its side providing a perfect bench. He had been there on and off for several days but everyone was too busy to notice him. He seemed to be reading, sometimes drawing, but his main purpose was watching. A narrow concrete aqueduct surfaced in front of him from a tunnel cut into rock, and a small wooden bridge allowed access to the town's market.

The man had become familiar with the variegated colours and smells that emanated from the other side of the waterway but continued to be entranced and entertained by them. Fruits and vegetables of deep red, orange and purple provided a background for clothing and cloth of different textures and hues that billowed in the breeze, as the sellers displayed them for prospective buyers. Several bystanders were admiring the latest fashionable footwear, jewelled sandals with leather straps. There was everything available for the citizens, both rich and poor.

The town was now under Roman occupation. He knew how much this ownership had cost the Empire, having seen the deaths, smelt the blood, heard the anguish, understood the hatred and experienced the valour. How he had loved it! What is life if it is not conquest? Winning was the only thing that mattered, the how or the why were irrelevant.

A glint caught his eye. He stood up and crossed the bridge, needing to be closer. Casually he walked towards the woman who

had become the focus of his attention, and pretended to examine some artefacts on the neighbouring stall. The days of waiting and watching were at an end.

Keeping a low profile, he followed her round the market until her basket was full of the necessary provisions. She left the square at the top left hand corner, so did the man. Her journey took less than five minutes. She turned through an archway into a small courtyard, from where she climbed some stone steps and entered the back of a house. The man took note. Now he would wait a little longer. An elderly woman emerged from the house next door. He approached her.

‘I wonder if you can help me. I am sure I recognize the lady who has just entered this house. I met her and her husband two years ago. Could you tell me her name?’

The woman looked up at him. She was rarely asked a question by a stranger but was only too willing to oblige him.

‘You may have met her, but I doubt you met her husband. She doesn’t have one. There’s just her and her youngster. Shameful! Her name’s Simone – that’s all I know. Some say she was once from a noble family, but noblewomen don’t behave like her.’

She was looking for some sort of support for her argument but none came. The man had the information he needed and she was dispensable. He ignored her. Realizing her audience had lost interest she shuffled away.

The man was wearing a long grey tunic tied with a belt and covered by a reddish brown woollen cloak. His hand reached inside to check he had what he needed. He stood a while longer on the opposite side of the narrow street, but became impatient and not a little cold since the sun was now disappearing and the buildings afforded no protection in the late afternoon chill. He shivered and pulled his outer garment more tightly round him. The walls of the passageway were roughly hewn and caught bits of wool off the cloak. The soft leather shoes made no noise on the steps; the back

of the house was quiet; the door was not locked.

‘How foolish!’ he murmured.

He entered into a large room with multi coloured raffia mats on the floor and an open fire in one wall. Warm dancing light filled the room, reflecting on the walls. There was very little furniture, just a rough wooden table and two chairs, but several earthenware pots.

A girl was playing with some pebbles, throwing one in the air and picking up others catching the airborne pebble before it hit the ground. There was a gentle click as it knocked against those she already held in her hand. She looked up at the face of the giant in the doorway. She noted the crookedness of his nose, the fullness of his lips and the blueness of his eyes; the two scars on his chin reminded her of lightening streaking across the sky. She stood up, terrified, yet she spoke bravely.

‘Who are you? What do you want? My mother is asleep.’

She did not feel any easier when he gave her a smile; it was somehow cruel and had something of a sneer in its execution. The eyes were cold and without feeling.

‘Where is she?’ he said.

It was an unnecessary question because there was only one place she could be. In the corner, near the fireplace, were some more stone steps leading to a higher level in the house that were the sleeping quarters. Four or five strides were all that was required.

The woman lay on a low bed that was clean and comfortable. She was waking up from the disturbance of the voices and lifting herself from her elbow into an upright position. She had no chance to get to her feet. The man did not hesitate but drew a dagger from beneath his cloak, grabbed her long black hair and pulled back her head. The silken blade was smooth and lethal as the woman slipped easily from sleep to oblivion. The girl who had been standing in the entrance screamed and turned to run. The giant picked her up as if she were an empty garment and lifted her level to his face; she was barely six inches from him. For a second or two he paused, but

knew he could not let her go.

'I'm sorry,' he said, and threw her forcefully across the room. She struck the opposite wall and slipped to the floor like a doll made of rags. He walked across to the lifeless form and was satisfied. He pushed the woman's body off the bed onto the floor and stripped the mattress. He knew what he was looking for but his search was only a partial success; his face was a mixture of anger and frustration.

The blood on his cloak was congealing into the same background colour. He was so skilled with the knife that he knew how to keep away from spurting blood, but of course some was unavoidable. The back of his hand brushed it into the fabric until it was barely visible. Satisfied that he still looked fairly respectable, he left the way he came, closing the door behind him. He had a small pang of regret about the child, but it was just one of those inevitable consequences.

He had just one more task before his long journey home to Rome. The city of dreams with its magnificence, its splendour, its sophistication; it was at the forefront of ideas, open to all and above all it welcomed him as its son. He walked through some winding back streets until he came to a small shop front tucked away from sight in a narrow alley. His visit to the proprietor did not take long. But when he emerged, he was filled with hostility and bitterness. The disappointment of plans foiled at their instigation was revealed in the snarl of his mouth. When he went aboard a ship headed for Rome, he had a third murder on his hands.