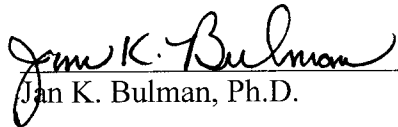


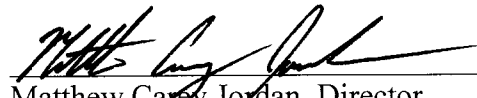
Mourn Them
by
Catherine Walden

An Undergraduate Thesis Submitted to
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Auburn University at Montgomery

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Bachelor of Arts and Sciences in History



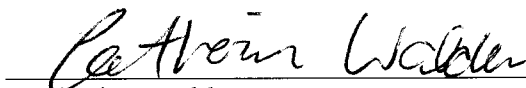
Jan K. Bulman, Ph.D. May 3, 2017



Matthew Carey Jordan, Director
University Honors Program May 3, 2017

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Catherine Walden May 3, 2017

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Prologue

The Fates are by far the cruelest spirits in our world. They spin out our lives, deciding how long we humans must live. They weave our lives together then tear us apart. When our thread is cut the icy fingers of death close around us and drag us away from this world. They decide who will be Centurions, Emperors, Senators, slaves, merchants, and tutors. Without care or compassion, they decide who lives and die. They are cruel to men, giving them power only to take it away in bloody, gruesome fashion.

As cruel as they are to men, the Fates are far crueler to women. They give us youth and beauty, the only gifts we receive, only to take them away before we can use them to secure our own power and protection. Our love is torn from us, to be used for men's gain. We are tools, crafted to be lovely and fragile. We give every part of ourselves and receive nothing in return. Men may be remembered for their great deeds, literature, poetry, and military prowess. They may be known for monstrous actions, healing the sick, and teaching other great men. Men may live on, eternally in memory, but women die and fade. We are forgotten, our graves left to turn to dust. The only way we live on is through our beauty and how men may have loved us. Even then we may not live on, our names disappear and all that is left behind is what men thought of us. What cruelty we must endure. The Fates are kind to no one, but women suffer more from their tangled skeins.

It seems that now the Fates heap suffering upon us in even greater quantities. Death and destruction coil around our great Empire like a mighty serpent, slowly

squeezing its life out. The gods have turned a blind eye to our agony. Perhaps we have angered them, perhaps we have grown complacent and forgotten from whom our awesome power was given. Or have we forgotten their power? Did we neglect their worship? Have we ignored their omens and auguries? Are we so arrogant that we no longer remember that it is by their blessings that we rose to be such a great Empire?

Our cities burn, barbarians stalk our provinces, disease strikes mercilessly, and our Emperors bear the greatest burdens. No hero appears to save us, no man or men seem up to the task. Even our glorious Emperors suffer greatly. They topple and fall like ancient ruins, desperate to cling to power and bring our fragmented power back together. Death moves among them with supple ease and devastating accuracy. We have lost so many proud Emperors. How many more must we lose before the gods deem our punishment to be enough? Will our majestic Empire end in rubble and fire before we have paid for our transgression? Must we mourn our former greatness and accept that we are dying?

No matter the pain we face, the Fates continue to spin and weave and cut our threads. Nothing can move them, no plea nor sacrifice can break their endless toil. We must sit and watch, victims to their cruelty, as they build and destroy our lives.

Chapter One: Lucia

The body lay on the slab, eyes closed, hands crossed over its chest. It was once a man, a wealthy senator. Now it is just a body, inhabited no longer. A young woman sat on a low bench near the slab, a dark veil covering her head, hiding her face in shadow. The Atrium where the body lay was dark, barely lit by the fire burning in the hearth. Dried flowers were strewn across the body and the floor. Waxen masks, representing the ancestors of the senator, joined the woman as she watched over the body. The young woman shifted and looked to the door where the body's feet were pointed and sighed deeply. Only the crackle of the flames and the wind rattling faintly through the dead trees broke the heavy silence. Everyone else in the house was asleep, preparations for the funeral had taken up most of the day, leaving those left behind exhausted. The only one still awake was the mourner, who sat vigil beside the body. There were still many hours left before the sun rose once again, the young woman turned back to the body and pushed her veil back. Long dark hair fell down her shoulders in soft waves, a section of it to the left was much lighter and coarser than the rest. Her face, now exposed, was a sight to behold. The left side was scarred, burned in her childhood. The scars trailed down her neck and disappeared into her dress. Dark eyes topped by heavy brows and framed by long lashes peered intensely from her scarred face, focused on the body before her.

Her vigil had started six days before. After being summoned by the Senator's family the mourner had sat in almost complete silence beside the body, watching and assisting as it was prepared for the funeral ceremonies. Tomorrow she would be joined by her fellow mourners for the last preparations before the funeral. Tonight was the last night she would spend alone watching over the dead man. The night was cold, only a few

stars could be glimpsed through the clouds that blanketed the sky. Winter had cloaked the city in quiet contemplation. To the mourner it seemed that the somber mood of the preparations fit the plummeting temperatures and icy weather. The senator had been well-liked by his friends and family. His death had been met with much sorrow from those around him. His wife was inconsolable, her daughters having to tend to her as her sons made arrangements for the procession and eulogies. Their children filled the house their uneasy energy wearing out their beleaguered care takers. They had been forbidden from entering the atrium without their parents, and this had done little to curb their curiosity. Their caretakers had been forced to shoo them away from the body several times since they had arrived almost a week ago.

A noise from the doorway pulled her out of her thoughts. She looked up to an elderly woman entering the room. “Lucia? Are you still awake dear?”

The girl smiled and answered, “Hello Grandmother, I am indeed still awake.” She shifted and moved over on the bench, patting the spot next to her for her grandmother to join her. “There are only a few more hours left until morning. Why have you come so early Grandmother?” Lucia’s grandmother sat beside her, looking at her and smiling gently. “I could not sleep dear, I thought I would join you in your vigil. Provide you with company perhaps.”

“Grandmother, you did not have to, but I am grateful for your company.” Lucia leaned gently into her grandmother’s side and sighed. “It has been quite cold these last few nights. I have kept the fires lit all night.”

“It is very cold my dear, but tonight is the last night of the vigil. There will be time to warm up properly after all this is over.” Lucia’s grandmother wrapped her arm around her and held her close. The two sat like that for some time before the sunlight crept into the atrium and illuminated the body laid out before them. Gradually the household woke up, the sounds of slaves and servants bustling about preparing food and waking the family filling the cold silence of the early morning. Despite the morning bustle and cheerful noise from the kitchen, there was a sadness that lingered in the air and hung over the family as they rose and prepared to receive their morning meal. Lucia and her grandmother sat in comfortable silence until a servant approached with food. They took their morning meal quietly, sharing the food while watching the servants avoid the body laid out before them. The children were still waking up, so they would not disturb the proceedings for a good while. The undertaker would arrive soon, and the final preparations for the funeral procession could begin. The other mourners would arrive with the undertaker, or shortly afterwards. There was some time for Lucia and her grandmother to enjoy their morning meal. Family members briefly stopped in the atrium to see the body before the undertaker showed up. No one lingered in the atrium, many were unable to look at the mourners sitting by the bench beside the body. Gradually the trickle of people slowed and the morning meal was served.

The somber air fell over the house once more as the meal came to a close. Even the children seemed to feel the subdued atmosphere and acted accordingly. Lucia and her grandmother stood and prepared for the undertaker’s arrival. They moved the masks for more room, and swept the dried petals from the center of the room. The air was still cold, despite the sunlight streaming in now. The chill of winter was setting in; soon the last

vestiges of autumn would fall away. The family stood just outside the atrium, curious, but cautious, awaiting the undertaker. When he finally arrived, he brought several mourners with him, mostly middle aged women with long thin scars on their arms and faces. They stood silently behind him as he circled the body. Preservation had been completed several days before, but there were other preparations that needed to be completed. Lucia and her grandmother stood to the side as the undertaker finished his work. The procession would start in the afternoon with the eulogies wrapping up before the cremation and burial, which would take place closer to sunset. Stepping back from the body, the undertaker motioned for the mourners to gather. He spoke, gravely tones breaking the silence at long last. "Ladies, the procession will begin soon, most of you will be walking in front of the procession." He turned to Lucia and her grandmother, "The two of you will stay with the body. Lucia my dear, you will stay with the body until it is interred in the family crypt." He looked around and the mourners murmured their agreement. "Wonderful, let us finish here then." Once again he turned to the body and the other mourners dispersed, pausing only briefly to greet Lucia and her grandmother.

The body needed to be moved to the elaborately decorated cart waiting in front of the villa. Once that had been done the rest of the procession could meet and the funeral could begin. The mourners would go in front, crying and screaming, tearing at their hair and clothes, drawing blood with their long nails as they scratched their faces and arms in a show of ritual grief. Lucia and her grandmother would stay with the cart; the solemn vigil she had begun seven days ago only ended once the body had been taken to its final resting place.

The family sent men into the atrium to collect the body and transfer it to the cart. Lucia and her grandmother followed, stopping several feet from the cart. The cart had been lavishly decorated. Draped with gauzy, brightly dyed fabric and wound with gold ivy and vines the cart stood out in the dreary gray of the late morning air. It was pulled by two large oxen, each fitted with beautifully crafted harnesses. The family of the senator gathered around the cart as he was placed reverently inside. Several members of the family were already on horseback or climbing into carts or litters waiting around the cart. Lucia saw the other mourners gathering in front of the procession, they were preparing for the long walk and making sure their hair was loosely bound and their veils and clothes were properly layered. Urns of ash were brought out for the mourners to use during the procession. Lucia and her grandmother were handed one and took turns scrubbing the ash on their faces and hands. Lucia did not need much; her scars were startling enough, so she barely used the ash. Once the preparations were finished and everyone was appropriately attired and situated, the procession could begin. All participants fell into position and the procession began, the mourners in the front, chanting and singing as they moved slowly to the main road. People had already begun to gather on either side of the road, watching as the procession began.

Lucia walked on the right side of the cart, her scars hidden slightly for the moment. The mourners at the front of the procession split into two groups. The first group continued to sing and chant. The second group began to wail and scream hysterically, tearing at their clothes and scratching their faces. The procession was joined by the senator's surviving friends and colleagues as it moved down the main road. More and more people joined the crowd as the procession moved slowly. The screams and

chants of the mourners struck the icy air with disconcerting power. The sounds drew attention to the somber faces of the family, so different than the ritual grief expressed by the women at the head of the procession. Neither Lucia nor her grandmother expressed such ritual grief. Lucia's vigil had not yet ended, and her grandmother's presence displayed the family's wealth and devotion.

The sun was high in the sky as the procession slowed. Soon they would reach the square where the funeral would take place. There were eulogies to be delivered and condolences to be expressed. Here they would speak of their connection to the deceased, how they gained his favor and what they did for one another. It was nothing more than an opportunity to show off amongst one's peers. The true grief was expressed by the women of the family huddled together, whispering reassurances and bolstering one another's strength. They were allowed to grieve out in the open. As the procession reached the square Lucia took a moment to survey the crowd that had gathered for the funeral. Many waiting were of the senator's class. Men who had known him only in the marble halls of Rome gathered with their young wives and ambitious sons to display their prominence and social influence. Lucia let her veil fall, exposing her scared skin, as did her grandmother. Many in the crowd avoided her gaze, turning away in confusion or revulsion from her burned visage. One man watched her with interest. He stood next to an older man, his father or grandfather perhaps, both exuding an air of superiority and affluence. Both men were tall, with dark hooded eyes and dark skin. The young man met her gaze without fear or disgust, just curiosity. Neither broke eye contact for quite some time. It was only when the eulogies began that either looked away.

Lucia had never cared for the eulogies given at funerals such as the one she now attended. Eulogies in general were far too political, but recently a whole new level of politicking and aggrandizing had crept into the speeches. Tension seemed to bleed into the ceremony, several of those eulogizing were on edge. Despite the tension the sun remained bright, at odds with the cold weather and tone of the funeral. To Lucia it seemed as though the eulogies dragged on far longer than usual. It might have been the unusually tense tone, or the fact that the senator had been well liked and quite popular. It was entirely possible it was both, either way it seemed to last for hours. Once the speeches wrapped up, the funeral party split up. The mourners at the front of the procession went with the family members to prepare for the last rites while the undertaker walked over to the cart where Lucia, her grandmother, and the body were. The senator's sons followed him and stood waiting quietly by the oxen as the undertaker inspected the body one last time. Once the undertaker stepped back, satisfied with the state of the body, the senator's sons moved forward to take their father to his final resting place. A silence fell, heavy and solemn, over the gathering. The senator was to be cremated and interred in his family crypt outside the city walls.

The pyre had been prepared earlier in the day, long before the procession had begun. Lucia followed the final funeral party to the pyre with her grandmother and watched in silence as they lowered the body. Once everything was situated, the family circled around the pyre and it was lit. Spices and perfumed wood had been laid on the pyre to produce a sweet scent as the body burned. Burning took several hours, so only the close family, the undertaker, and the mourners would stay for the entire process. The final lamentation began, sung by the mourners who were joined by the senator's wife. Unlike

the chants and songs before, this one was quiet and calm, a final send off for a beloved man. As the song lingered in the cold air many attending the funeral left. At first they trickled away, pausing by the eldest son to offer condolences and shoot sympathetic looks at his grieving mother. The young man with the dark eyes spared a moment to gaze at Lucia again, his face stoic. Lucia stared back at him, curious and slightly uncomfortable. He broke his gaze after a short while and left. Lucia turned towards the pyre, staring into the fire and banishing all thoughts from her mind. She focused on the fire as it grew and engulfed the senator's body. The flames climbed upwards towards the sky and the sun wavered at its highest point before sinking, ever so slowly towards the horizon. The entire time, Lucia did not look up from the flames, merely stood in front of the pyre watching as the body turned to bone and ash. Her grandmother came to stand beside her as the fire collapsed, the flames no longer reaching skyward; neither woman spoke, just watched as the flames died and the sun set. The last rays of light touched their faces as the undertaker approached. He stood beside them and watched the flames fade, glowing embers left in their place. "Lucia," his gravelly voice broke the silence, "your vigil has ended. You are free to go." Lucia turned to him and nodded.

"And so it is. I shall take my rest now." He nodded and motioned for her grandmother to leave as well. As the two women walked away Lucia put her arm around her grandmother and leaned in, smiling. "I believe I am entitled to sleep now."

"Do not forget to eat my dear, it has been a long vigil, and the cold has not made it any shorter." Her grandmother wrapped an arm around her as well. "Your father will be pleased to have you back at home as well." Lucia smiled softly and continued walking. It would take them quite a while to walk home, but she was glad of the company her

grandmother provided. Despite the cold and the late hour, Lucia always enjoyed walking home with her grandmother. Her grandmother told wonderful stories and often spoke of Lucia's mother and her childhood. Sometimes, if her grandmother was in the proper mood she would tell Lucia about her own childhood. She had grown up in the hills around Rome and married an undertaker's son, which was how she had come to be a mourner. She had outlived her husband, and stayed with her youngest daughter and her family. Lucia had grown up with her grandmother's ever present wisdom, and had followed in her footsteps. By the time they two reached home, Lucia was visibly exhausted, and welcomed the warmth of the fire and the comfort of her rugs and blankets. Her father had already retired for the night, but she would see him the next day. She sank gladly into her blankets and let herself drift away into slumber. She did not dream that night.

Chapter Two: Torn Apart

Lucia slept through the night and well into the next day, neither her grandmother nor her father had the heart to wake her. The sun was high in the sky before she stirred. Despite the rest, and her vigil having ended, Lucia still felt a solemn weight on her shoulders. She sat curled comfortably in her blankets watching the embers of her fire cooling slowly. She shivered as the last glowing ember died, lost in thought. The ashes cooled and still Lucia sat there, unaware of the growing cold in her room. Despite the cold she felt as though she were burning. Staring sightlessly into the now cold fire pit, Lucia remembered the fire that had torn her life apart. The memories were always there in the back of her mind, it was as if they had carved out a space in her brain, and haunted her. They were a dull, constant ache, and when brought to the forefront, they burned hotter even than the fire that caused them.

It had been almost nine years since that horrible day. Lucia had been eight, bright, happy, and full of boundless energy. Her family had been so full of love and life then. Her mother, Cornelia, was so beautiful, at least she had seemed so to Lucia. Her father, Lucius, dignified yet cheerful, had loved her mother so much. She could only just remember Drusus, her oldest brother, he had not been handsome, but he had been kind and sharp witted. Lucia had always loved him most. He used to pick her up and carry her around on his shoulders whenever he was home. She remembered how much her other brother had grumbled and pouted about that. Aemeilius remembered being the baby, but he was never cross with her. Theirs had been a happy family. But it was not to last. All it took was one

accident, one lamp left burning too long, to ruin it all. Lucia could never remember where she had been when it happened. All she knew was one moment she was sitting at her mother's feet, playing with a doll and the next smoke was flooding through the doors. Drusus had run into the room shouting that everyone had to get out. Her mother had run from the room shouting, Lucia could not remember what she had said, but she remembered that was the last time she had seen her. Desperate to follow her mother she had run after her, scrambling to get through the door. She managed to avoid her brother and dive into the next room. That was when she saw the fire. It had spread rapidly through the house, engulfing all the rooms and halls in a terrifyingly short time. She had stood frozen, as the flames climbed to the ceiling and rushed around her. Faintly, she could hear voices, screams and shouting. But the sound that came next drowned out the voices, the crackling of the flames and the rush of smoke. With a tremendous groan and an almighty crack, the ceiling buckled and collapsed. For a moment time had stood still. Lucia had time to look up and see the ceiling crumble and fall towards her. She was vaguely aware that she had raised her left arm as though she could protect herself. All at once the ceiling fell. The smell of fire, and of burning flesh came first, then the pain. It felt as though something were stabbing the left side of her body repeatedly, then pulling at her skin. Her right side went cold as the flames ate at her left side. She lay screaming on the ground trying to curl up to protect herself, but the pain was too great. Her brother's face appeared above her, terror etched in every line. She reached for him despite her agony, desperate to escape the flames. Drusus gathered her in his arms, trying to keep from jostling her. He wrapped himself around her suffocating the flames and pulled her towards the door. After that the only thing she felt was darkness encroaching, and the

sound of her own screams as the room burned. Thankfully she succumbed to the darkness and felt no more.

Lucia lingered in the darkness for quite some time. In the darkness there was no pain, no anger, no guilt, just darkness. The darkness was quiet, cool, and wrapped around her protectively. She thought perhaps she would like to stay there forever. Protected, free of pain. She could not though, and eventually did have to wake. When she woke, she thought that was the worst moment of her life. The pain was unbelievable. Her left side felt as though the skin had been peeled off then sewn back on haphazardly. Her right side still felt unnaturally cold, as though her body were still trying to compensate for the burning that had left her in such pain. She could barely even open her eyes; the pain was so great. She passed back into the darkness not long afterwards, sinking into as though it was the only safe place left. The next two times she woke it she could open her eyes. The pain did not get any better, but she could wake up and stay awake for a short amount of time. Sometimes she could see clearly, sometimes not so clearly. It seemed like an eternity before Lucia could stay awake for any length of time. Her grandmother had stayed by her side the entire time, holding her hand and keeping her company through the worst of her suffering. Her grandmother was still there when she finally shook off the darkness. Lucia could remember with piercing clarity the moment her grandmother told her that her mother and oldest brother had died. It was as if a substantial piece of her heart died. Leaving her with a broken, hollowed out shell barely resembling a heart. She had been terrified to ask about her father and Aemeilius, the fear that they were dead as well was overwhelming. Her grandmother, seeing her distress, reassured her that they had escaped unharmed, but like her were brokenhearted. Lucia had wanted to fling herself

into her grandmother's arms, but the pain of her burned skin was too great. It had taken almost a year to heal fully. She knew she would never be beautiful. The burns covered too much of her body. When she had finally been able to look at herself in a mirror, Lucia wept. Almost all of her left side was scarred. The burns started on her temple, circled round her eye and trailed down her throat. They covered most of her left shoulder and snaked down her arm. Her side was almost completely scarred over and the burns covered her hip and the outside of her leg as well. A section of her hair had burned off and when it started to grow back it came in lighter and coarser than before. Lucia had always hoped she would grow up to look like her mother, now she knew there was no chance of that. It only added to her misery. She brooded and raged through the next few years. Anger and grief in equal measures ruled her shattered world. Neither her father nor her surviving brother were in any state to help her. Her grandmother was her sole companion. They better understood the nature of each other's grief.

When she was twelve, Lucia smashed all her mirrors in a fit of anguish. She told her concerned father that she would never marry as no one would ever want someone so scarred and broken. To his surprise, she locked herself in her room and refused to come out for days. When she finally emerged, coaxed out by her grandmother, she told her father that if she would not marry she would at least make herself useful. He was of course horrified when Lucia suggested that she would follow in her grandmother's footsteps and become a mourner. His first impulse was to forbid her to do so, but over time allowed her to convince him it would only be proper. Her grandmother was well respected among mourners and the undertaker held her in high regard. She would bring no shame to her family. Besides the undertaker always needed girls to sit vigil, that was

not a position that exposed her as much. The grief she so keenly felt could finally be released without terrorizing the household.

With time she healed, as did her father. Lucius married again, a much younger woman. Caesonia Flavia, from a decent family, not wealthy. Not that Lucia's family was either. The two were a good match. Lucia tolerated her because she loved her father and he smiled again with his new bride. Her brother grew up as well, joined the Legions and married a pretty girl. He did not often visit though. When Lucia was fifteen there had been a massive fight. Their father was terrified that if he went off to the far-off corners of the Empire he would lose his only surviving son. Aemeilius and her father had shouted at one another for hours, each angry and desperate for the other to understand. Lucia had been sent to her room by her grandmother when the fight broke out. After her brother stormed out, her grandmother told her it had all been about his decision to join the Legions and leave for Gaul. Lucia did not see her brother again for a very long time. He sent letters to her sometimes, her father read them to her when she asked, though she did not ask often as it pained him to be reminded of his son's choice.

There was some new joy in the house though. Caesonia had given birth to her first child, a boy named Primus. He had been born in the summer, and was now five. A wild thing, he kept his mother running after him constantly. Lucia was fond of him, but distant. It still hurt to think that his mother was not hers. She would not begrudge her father his happiness though, as Primus distracted him from worrying about Aemeilius and about her.

It was the cold that dragged Lucia back from her reminiscence. What little heat the dying embers had provided dissipated, leaving the room chilly and uninviting. A surprising amount of time had passed as well, from her window, Lucia could see the sun low in the sky. She wondered for a moment why no one had interrupted her thoughts. Shrugging, she wrapped herself in a shawl and veil and left her room. The hall was warmer, and she lingered there soaking up the heat before searching for her grandmother. The house was quiet, the sounds of the kitchen muted by the cold air. Her father was likely home by now, his work would have been completed in the late afternoon. Caesonia might have been out. She did not care much for the cold and frequented the bath houses with her sisters and friends as soon as the weather changed. Lucia did not blame her, the idea of hot water and the steam from the sauna was inviting. However, she rarely went to public bath houses, her appearance usually caused quite a stir. It did not bother her much anymore, her scars. Thankfully few people were rude enough to point them out or continue staring once they had been caught. Lucia was once again pulled from her thoughts, this time by the sound of her grandmother's voice. She was humming, softly to herself, an old lullaby that had been passed down by the women of her father's family. As Lucia moved closer, her grandmother began to sing.

“Sleep, my child, my darling child. Sleep in your bed of light.

Everywhere I go, I see you dear. Even the smallest red rose reminds me of you.

I have prayed to the many gods that no more tears should fall from your face. Oh my child, my beloved child please do not cry anymore.

My honey child. So sweet, who is this? It is you my beloved child.”

Lucia stood by the door, smiling as her grandmother finished her lullaby. Her grandmother had sung it to her father when he was a child and taught her mother the lullaby when Drusus was born. It always reminded her of winter nights when her family had gathered in the atrium by the fire and told stories and sang songs. Her grandmother stood and moved towards the door, catching sight of Lucia, she smiled and gestured for her granddaughter to come inside. The fire was still burning in her grandmother's fire pit and the room was much warmer than either Lucia's or the hallway which she had just traveled through. She gladly entered the room, letting the warmth wash over her as she sat down on the chair across from her grandmother's bed.

"You slept quite a while dear, I hope you are well rested." Lucia's grandmother sat back down on her bed, pushing the blankets aside and tossing Lucia one. Lucia wrapped the blanket around herself and settled comfortably in the chair.

"Yes, I am indeed well rested now grandmother. It was quite pleasant to sleep in my own bed again. The children at the villa made it quite difficult to get any decent sleep. They just did not understand what was happening and why they could not go into the atrium. The youngest ones were quite annoyed." Lucia raised an eyebrow at her grandmother who quietly chuckled. "The oldest were more reasonable, but after seven days even their patience was waning. I felt sorry for their mothers, they had little time to answer the endless stream of questions."

“Children always have so many questions. Death is something they do not understand. They have many, many questions about it and we have so few satisfactory answers for them.” Lucia’s grandmother sighed deeply and motioned for Lucia to continue.

“I barely saw their fathers though. It was curious, normally I would see more of them. Sometimes anxiously hovering, sometimes just grieving. I was confused by their absence, but I overheard the kitchen slaves muttering about intrigue in the Senate. Apparently there are younger men clamoring for an opportunity to join or serve for the Senate.” Lucia wrapped the blanket more firmly around herself, frowning. “It was a bit odd. I have noticed more tension though. People seem on edge more often than not. The undertaker says there are whispers of mutiny and rebellion amongst the youngest politicians.”

Lucia’s grandmother snorted derisively. “There has always been talk of rebellion and mutiny, especially in these days. We live in interesting times my dear.” Lucia laughed softly. She shifted in the chair, drawing closer to the warmth of the fire pit, and considered her grandmother’s words.

“Interesting times indeed.”

Her grandmother laughed as well, leaning against the wall. “We live in a time of crisis, interesting is merely a coincidence. Rome has suffered greatly; we have lost too many Emperors to intrigue and assassination.”

“Or perhaps we have had too many Emperors.” Lucia muttered, recalling the tension of the men attending the funeral. Their angry, drawn faces and overly cautious

demeanor stuck out in her mind. More and more she was seeing the elderly senators attending their colleagues' funerals fearful and suspicious of everyone around them.

“Perhaps.” Her grandmother replied mildly, pulling Lucia from her thoughts.

“Grandmother, how could this have happened? Father always told me such grand stories of our past Emperors, their glories and conquests. When Emperors ruled for decades and built strong dynasties that spanned three or four generations. What happened?” Lucia could not suppress her frustration. Her father always told her stories of Rome's greatness, how could things have changed so much?

“All good things must come to an end dearest. Mighty dynasties fall and great men die. It is as the Fates decide. Rome is still great; it will take much more than years of crisis to topple her.” Lucia's grandmother smiled wistfully and continued speaking. “The last great dynasty were the Severans. They ruled for four decades. Their dynasty's reign was marred by war and infighting. The Severans came to power due to a civil war. Many of the Severans only ruled for a few years. The last of them, Alexander Severus was very young when he took the purple. He ruled for thirteen years, but was overthrown and killed by his own troops on campaign. After him, the scramble for the throne led to our current problems. Emperors have been unable to establish dynasties, which upsets the senate greatly. I am sure you have seen the results of their unease.”

Lucia nods in agreement, frowning. There has been great unrest in the senate. A growing number of sudden deaths amongst the eldest of the senators provides Lucia and her grandmother with plenty of work, but it is worrying for the upper class and their

fellow politicians. Many young, ambitious men are trying to enter the senate, which will undoubtedly change the balance of power in the senate.

Lucia's grandmother watches her for a moment, then climbs carefully off her bed. She stands up and walks over to Lucia, still seated deep in thought and gently tugs a lock of her unbound hair, pulling Lucia back from her musings. She smiles up at her grandmother, pulling her hair back, breaking her somber mood. Her grandmother moved to the window and Lucia stood, joining her. They both looked out the window, looking at the trees and modest garden outside. The trees dropped the last of their leaves while Lucia sat vigil. Most of the flowers died and there was very little color in the garden. Still it was a pretty little space that held many fond memories for Lucia. When spring and summer came, she would sit out amongst the flowers and forget the any conflict or troubles. She looked forward to that now, somehow she knew it would be a welcome respite in the months to come.

Chapter Three: Seven Days

Lucia was once again sitting vigil. She had been sitting for four nights. The senator whose body she is sitting with, had been unpopular, but well connected. His family were incredibly tense and seemed to tiptoe around each other. The villa was almost unnaturally quiet and no one inside makes eye contact for very long. Lucia is on edge as well. The atmosphere is heavy and uncomfortable and she feels as though no one in his family cared for the deceased senator.

The tension was so bad that Lucia was not able to sleep well. Even at night when she is the only one awake, the sense of tension and discomfort was still incredibly strong. She wonders about the relationship he had with his family. It cannot have been a positive one, judging by the icy silence and tension that pervades the villa. Even into the fourth night she cannot relax.

She sits by the body, back uncomfortably straight, staring straight ahead, twisting her outer tunic and rolling the fabric between her hands. Even in death the senator seems dour and angry. She wonders how he can still seem so upset. She tries not to keep looking at him, it makes her more uncomfortable if she does. It is close to sunrise now, light is slowly creeping into the atrium, and Lucia is considering letting the fire die. It is not too cold outside, and the sun warms the room as it rises. Lucia turns away from the body and looks to the doorway. The light creeps in further and she can hear the household staff moving towards the kitchen to start preparing the morning meal. She begins to relax, they are making more noise than the past three mornings, and she hopes that the family will start to relax as well. Lucia sits, still facing the door as the sun fully

rises. She hopes that today she can sleep. It has been three days since she last had restful sleep and it weighs on her as the fourth night of her vigil draws to a close.

Her thoughts are interrupted by a servant with a plate of food. Silently the girl puts the food on the bench beside Lucia, she merely smiles when Lucia thanks her. Lucia watches her go before turning to her food and eating quickly. She finished before the senator's family emerge from their rooms. They seemed wary, but less tense than before. His wife, who has been cold and distant, looks at the body with a soft sorrow, it seems she is ready to grieve his death. Her children join her, calmly looking at their father's body. No one speaks. Lucia thinks they look the most like a family that she has seen since she arrived. It is sad, seeing them standing around the body, all together for the first time since she has begun her vigil. She is ready to sleep now, so she retires to the room they set aside for her.

The family leaves her alone while she sleeps. She is not always so lucky. The air of tension is gradually abating, but there is still a strong undercurrent of fear and discomfort. Despite the atmosphere Lucia does manage to sleep through most of the day. She dreams of her mother's smile and her brothers' laughter. Happy memories that linger in corners of her mind float to the surface and she loses herself in them. When she wakes she feels a great sadness. It takes a few minutes for her to collect herself, but eventually she rises and prepares for another night sitting vigil. The sun is still out when she leaves the room, low in the sky, but still providing light. She walks to the atrium, approaching the plinth where the body lies as quietly as possible. The senator's wife is speaking to someone Lucia cannot see. She hides behind a wall, trying to inch closer to them. Though she has gotten closer, she can barely hear them. They seem to be discussing the deceased

senator's affairs. The wife seems very upset, and whomever she is talking to tries to reassure her. It does not seem to be working. Lucia moves carefully, she doubts they will be angry if she interrupts, but since the conversation is being carried in hushed whispers, it seems private. She is a little closer now, she catches more of what they are saying. To her surprise they seem to be talking about plans the deceased senator made shortly before his death. From what she can hear, he was going to make an alliance with a young, ambitious man hoping to become a senator. Lucia wants to move closer, but fears discovery. They continue their conversation; apparently, the young man was willing to exploit the unrest within the senate and try to influence opinion about the most recent emperor. Lucia is not entirely surprised hearing this, but is still concerned. There has been much unrest and petty fighting in the senate lately. At least according to the whispers and rumors she overhears while sitting vigil.

They are interrupted by a servant entering the atrium to retrieve them for their evening meal. Lucia remains hidden until they have all left their room. Emerging from behind the wall, she makes her way over to the bench beside the body. She stands beside the body, looking down at it, but not seeing it. Deep in thought, she does not sit for some time. It is not unusual for her to overhear such things; however, she is hearing about it more often. It is not her place to judge the senate and its members, but she cannot help but worry about the consequences of their actions. She stands for quite a while, only drawn from her thoughts by the sounds of children about being sent to bed. Lucia watches as the children walk past the atrium, she smiles softly as they plead and whine to be allowed to stay up and visit with family they rarely get to see. They seem unaffected by the machinations of the senate. They are, of course, sent to bed, complaining and

pouting the whole way. Their caretaker herd them with exasperated fondness, and once again Lucia is alone in the atrium.

The fifth night of her vigil passes uneventfully. She sleeps most of the next day, the tension in the house easing as the days pass. The sixth night one of the children wanders sleepily through the halls in the middle of the night and she has to escort him back to bed. The seventh night, she prepares for the funeral and the long walk to the final resting place of the senator.

The villa falls unnaturally quiet as the seventh night begins. Though the tension has almost dissipated, the somber air returns. Lucia feels uncomfortable again, sitting alone in the atrium surrounded by dried flowers and the fading scents of perfumes. She sits stiffly on the bench, watching the moon through an open window. Hours stretch seemingly without end. Lucia tries not to let her thoughts linger on any particular subject. It will be a long night and a long walk to the pyre tomorrow. She does not want to tire herself out.

The morning does not come soon enough. It feels as though this is the longest vigil Lucia has ever sat. Lucia is relieved when the household awakens earlier than usual. The sounds and smells of the morning meal being prepared make her feel less alone in the atrium. The other mourners and the undertaker would join her soon, and her vigil would finally be over. She is looking forward to that more than she should. It has not been the worst vigil, but it had not been enjoyable. She sits alone for a little while longer, watching the last flickering flames extinguish. The sun is rising, so she will not miss the light the fire had given her. The children are the next to rise, they are excited, they know

something is happening. Harried servants and mothers follow them trying to contain the excitement and nervous energy. Lucia chuckles at their antics, trying to hide her smiles in her veil. She has to at least pretend to be serious today.

The rest of the household is now awake; children are wrangled and forced into ceremonial clothes. The seriousness of the situation is repeatedly explained; Lucia thinks it unlikely that any of them will listen. The family and close friends of the deceased senator gather in the hall before the atrium, milling about nervously. Like Lucia, they are waiting for the undertaker and the rest of the mourning party. The senator's wife is the last to appear. Her mourning clothes are darker than her family's. She stands out, beautiful and standing tall and rigid as though made of cold, white marble. Her long dark hair is braided and pinned with gold and amber pins with her veil arranged and fastened carefully over it. She walks silently to the plinth where her husband's body lays. Wordlessly she kneels by his side one last time and looks at him sorrow etched in her features. She closes her eyes and leans forward to whisper something to him. The wife stands and moves away from the plinth, not looking back as she walks towards the hall where her family waits. Lucia watches her go; a great sadness settles over her. It seems that maybe the senator was more loved than he first appeared.

The undertaker arrives shortly afterward, bringing three other mourners with him. They join Lucia sitting on the bench and help her readjust her veils and tunic. They add some amber pins to her hair and adjust her veil to help cover the left side of her face. Once she is reasonably decorated and concealed, they all go to stand with the undertaker. He smiles at them and addresses them in gravelly tones. "This is a standard funeral ladies. Lucia, you will accompany the body to the pyre." She nods as he looks her way

before turning back to the others. “You three will lead the procession. The honorable senator’s family paid handsomely for this funeral, honor them and him.” The undertaker looks at all of them, waiting for their agreement. They softly chorus, “Of course.” He smiles again and sends them on their way as he goes to talk to the family. Briefly Lucia and the other mourners whispered amongst themselves before the final preparations. Lucia informs them of the tension and worry that marked her stay. They express sympathy and update her on the local gossip. The youngest of their group has gotten married, and will no longer be a mourner. They will miss her, are quite happy for her. Lucia does not know how to feel, but she understands why the others are so happy for her.

While they talked, the body has been moved. Lucia follows the others outside and waits by the cart where the body has been laid. They quickly pass around the pots of ash and adorn themselves. Lucia as usual uses less than the others. Once they are prepared they part ways. Lucia remains with the cart and the other women walk out in front of the procession. The family begins to filter out of the villa, the children are subdued now. The seriousness of the proceedings seems to have finally silenced them. The congregate behind the cart, milling about awkwardly. A crowd has already gathered outside the villa, prepared for the procession to begin. Lucia looks out into the crowd, and notices a familiar face. The dark-skinned man with the hooded eyes she had seen at the last funeral was standing close to the front of the crowd. He had not noticed her yet. She allowed herself to take a long look at him. He was handsome, with short curly hair and strong cheekbones. The older man was not with him this time, but Lucia barely noticed. He still had not looked her way, so she felt safe staring at him longer. He was tall, broad

shouldered, and carried an air of superiority that made Lucia's skin itch. He smiled at something said by a fellow member of the crowd and turned to look at the procession. Lucia could not look away quickly enough and once again their eyes met. Unlike the last time, the young man maintained eye contact for quite some time. Lucia was highly embarrassed but dared not look away. Color rose in her cheeks, but she was determined to maintain eye contact. He smirked at her, noticing her discomfort. Lucia narrowed her eyes at him, she certainly could not back down now. Despite the blush rising, she maintained eye contact until the procession moved him out of her line of sight.

Her brief embarrassment was soon forgotten. The procession was nearing the site of the pyre. The eulogies were about to begin. The senator had several friends and a few family members who would speak at his funeral so the eulogizing would take some time. The family goes first, and the insincerity with which they speak almost makes Lucia squirm. She tunes them out soon enough and focuses on the crowd. Many seem bored, barely listening to the speakers. They look as though they share Lucia's discomfort. The eulogies take nearly two hours to complete. The senator's friends wax on without end about his power and influence in the senate and how they helped him achieve it with their unwavering support. It became rather tiring by the second eulogy, and the crowd remained restless. She does not look for the handsome young man again. Lucia pushes him from her mind as the body is set on the pyre at last. The relief the crowd feels is palpable. As the sun sets, the flames climb skyward, slowly turning the body of the senator into ash.

By the time the sun has fully disappeared the pyre has reached its zenith. The flames jump starkly against the dark sky. A silence has fallen over the crowd. Soon they

will begin to filter out, only the family and close friends will linger. Lucia is glad. She is exhausted and wants desperately to go home and sleep in her own room. Her vigil is almost over. Soon she can go home and rest. She peers into the crowd, trying to subtly look for the young man. It takes her a minute, but she does spot him. He stands looking as tired as the rest of the crowd, he does not realize she is looking at him, much to Lucia's relief. She is too tired to engage in another staring contest, though she might be less embarrassed this time. He still has a slight smile on his face, one of the men beside him is muttering in his ear. Lucia wonders what they have been talking about, but she is too tired to ponder now. Thankfully the undertaker comes to dismiss her, telling her that her vigil has ended and she is free to go. Her grandmother meets her at the entrance to the cemetery. Lucia leans gratefully on her arm and they walk home in companionable silence.

The walk does not seem long and the tension Lucia carried dissipates rapidly the farther away from the cemetery they walk. The stars hang in the sky and the moon lights the way back. Lucia is so very tired; this vigil has been the worst to sit through. When they reach home, Lucia sits quietly with her family as they take the talk after their meal. She eats her own meal and listens to her father talk about his pupils and question Caesonia about her day at the markets with Primus. She falls asleep listening to their conversation. When she wakes again, she is in her room, lying on her bed. Drifting back to sleep, she is filled with gratitude and affection for her family. She dreams of dark eyes and sly smiles that night.

Chapter Four: The Festival of Saturnalia

It was freezing the day of the festival; the ground was icy and the air was sharp and frigid. It did not deter the citizens though, the air of merriment and frenzied energy pierced the cold and warmed the frosty air. The men had pulled out their brightest party wear and the women had draped themselves in layers of colorful veils and shawls. Lucia's father had decided they would go to the temple and attend the public banquet, they had celebrated at home the year before, his wife had been ill. This year Caesonia was not ill so the whole family went to the festival.

It was a joyous occasion, servants and slaves were milling about, for one day equal to their masters, enjoying their freedom and the festival air. Children ran in unruly groups between the vendors and their parents, laughing and shouting. Even the sharp cold could not blunt the joy of Saturnalia. Lucia stood beside her grandmother, watching the chaos before the temple. Her father and his wife stood in front of them trying to hold back her excited half-brother, Primus. He was excited, giddy from the cold as well as the cacophony of sounds and colors. The young boy desperately wanted to run and play with the other children, but Caesonia had a tight grip on him and so he squirmed and pouted. Lucia smiled fondly at him as he sulked. Her grandmother snorted at his attempts to break free and muttered something about him being just like his father.

Lucia and her family, like many other families in the city had gathered in front of the Temple of Saturn for the beginning of the festival. They had all waited patiently for the week preceding the holy day to wrap up, today the priests would remove the wool from Saturn's feet and the true celebration would begin. The crowd milled restlessly at

the steps of the great temple, eager for the ceremony to begin. Candles and torches were being lit and dispersed amongst the crowd as the ceremony began. The air filled with the smell of smoke, Lucia took a deep breath, focusing on the cold and the sounds of excited children. Her scars began itching, but she drove it from her mind, watching intently as the lights moved through the crowd. The torches were held high, above the heads of the people in the streets, but the candles were held close, flames protected from the wind and the crowd. It was quite a sight, the light glanced off the colorful clothing and bright jewelry. From the temple, priests dressed in bright clothing made their way down the stairs. Gradually the noise from the crowd died down as excited children were corralled by their families. A hush fell over the crowd as the priests signaled for silence. Lucia felt a shiver of anticipation run through her, it had been so long since her family had attended this festival, she had almost forgotten how exciting it all was. As soon as it was quiet the priests turned to the doors of the temple and once motioned for those still inside to come out. The atmosphere was laced with tension, the cold air was sharp and the fogged with the breath of the people thronged in the streets. There seemed to be a nervous hum emanating from the crowd. Time seemed to pass too slowly, it felt like hours had passed before the last of the priests came outside the temple. In their arms, they carried woolen shrouds, taken from the feet of the statue of Saturn. As they descended, they raised their precious burden up to the sky. A mighty cheer swept through the crowd and the torches and candles were raised as well. The festival of Saturnalia had begun.

Lucia and her family joined in with the joyous shouting, Primus could no longer be contained and he danced gleefully just out of arms reach. His mother chased him laughing as she pursued him. Lucia linked arms with her grandmother and followed the

two with her father close behind. The celebrations would last all day. Food vendors pushed their carts out in the street, hot bread and dried fruit piled high. The banquet would not be until the afternoon, so there was plenty of time to buy food from the vendors and enjoy the celebration. With all of the torches and people milling about the air seemed warmer. The bright colors and gleaming jewelry worn by the celebrants as well as the tapestries, scarves and shawls draped on walls and hanging from windows gave the city the look of a summer garden. Everything was breathtakingly beautiful and Lucia almost did not know where to look, there was too much to see.

Laughter and song filled the air, her grandmother hummed along as Lucia's father followed his wife and son. They were heading to the vendors; Primus must have seen a treat he wanted. Lucia's grandmother pulled her gently along, following the rest of their family as she laughingly scolded Primus. When they caught up with them, Primus looks quite pleased with himself and is holding a handful of dried figs. Lucia's father looks exasperated, but he is smiling. Caesonia holds Primus's free hand and smiles indulgently as he giggles and offers a fig to Lucia and their grandmother. Both take one, thanking the boy profusely. He sticks his chest out and shoves the rest of the figs in his mouth, much to his mother's distress. Lucia's father looks up the sky, he seems to be silently asking the gods for patience. She attempts to stifle her amusement and looks away, she will laugh if she continues watching.

To her surprise she spots the handsome man from the recent funerals. He is standing at a vendor across the street, accompanied by the elderly man from the first funeral and a young pale woman with bright red hair peeking out in elaborate braids under a colorful veil. He has not seen her; he is too focused on the elderly man. He looks

very ill, his dark skin has a grey pallor and he is leaning heavily on the younger man. The woman is hovering by his side and takes his other arm, helping to support him as they stand. Lucia's father notices her distraction and tugs gently on her tunic sleeve. She turns to him, confused. She finds him smiling at her with a raised eyebrow.

“What has caught your attention Lucia?” He asks in a light teasing tone. Lucia shoots him a dirty look.

“That man,” she says, pointing as discreetly as possible over her shoulder, “I saw him at the last two funerals I sat vigil for.”

Lucia's grandmother interjects, “I have seen him as well, I believe his father was a senator and he is to take his place.”

Lucia's father looks interested and leans around his mother and daughter to take a better look. “Oh, I see. Mother, do you know who he is?” He looks back at them questioningly. Lucia looks at her grandmother, curious.

“I know his name.” Her grandmother smiles mischievously. Lucia resists the urge to roll her eyes. Her father frowns and eyes his mother suspiciously. Thankfully her grandmother does not leave them hanging. “He is Aegidus Aurelius Firmus. Son of Aegidus Velius Firmus. His family have been serving the Empire in then African provinces until quite recently. I believe he recently married as well.” Her grandmother indicates the young woman. “I do not know her name though.”

Lucia and her father look quite surprised. Neither of them expected her to know that much about the man. “How do you know his name?” Lucia's father asks curiously.

“Rumors have been circulating about the Firmus family for some time. The son is quite ambitious; he is apparently seeking influence in the senate. Thankfully his father is more level headed and can temper his son’s ambitions. His father is very old, and unfortunately very ill. I have heard many of the other mourners talk about him. You know how gossip spreads before a funeral.” This last statement is directed at Lucia. She nods, funerals bring people together. People are not as cautious with gossip as usual in the event of a family or close friend’s death. She has heard many things while sitting vigil. Honestly, she would like to forget some of what she has heard.

She is drawn out of her musings by Primus interrupting the conversation to point out the brightly colored veils at another vendor’s cart. He seems quite enchanted by the colors and tugs Lucia’s sleeve to draw her attention to them, pointing excitedly. Smiling, she lets him drag her towards the veils followed by Caesonia. Her father and grandmother follow more slowly. Lucia notices that her grandmother has been moving more slowly all day, and that she has been paler than usual. She is again distracted by Primus, who has found a lovely blue veil and is tugging excitedly at her and his mother’s tunics.

While he attempted to persuade his mother to buy it for herself, Lucia looked back across the street to the Firmus family. They had moved from the vendors cart and were now walking slowly through the crowd back towards the temple. Her thoughts were interrupted by the sound of coughing from behind her. With a sinking feeling, Lucia turned around to see her grandmother coughing. Lucia’s father came quickly to his mother’s side, and after several racking coughs, convinced her it was time to leave. Lucia volunteered to take her home so that Primus and Caesonia could enjoy the Festival. She knew her father was very worried, but this was the first time Primus had been to a

Festival. Reluctantly her father agreed and she and her grandmother left for home. It took longer than usual to get home, and Lucia spent the whole way back worriedly hovering by her grandmother's side. She tries not to be obvious, and her grandmother teases her gently about her concern.

By the time they reach home, Lucia's grandmother is coughing again. She tries not to worry, but her grandmother looks pale and shaken. Quickly she ushers her grandmother to her room and starts a fire. Her grandmother needs no coaxing to retire and climbs into bed without argument. Lucia makes sure not to smother her with blankets while the fire begins to warm up the room. She is tempted to send for the doctor, but once her grandmother is settled, she seems better. Once she is sure that her grandmother is comfortable, Lucia goes to the kitchen to find honey to help with the cough. Thankfully it does not take long to find the honey, and she makes it back to her grandmother before she falls asleep. The honey helps, and her grandmother seems more relaxed and falls asleep soon after.

That night Lucia stays in her grandmother's room. Her father sends for the doctor the next morning after the rest of the house is awoken by the sound of coughing. Lucia spends most of the day in her grandmother's room. She keeps the fire going and tells her grandmother about the garden outside her window and how despite the cold, the trees cling to life. She goes back to her own room when the doctor arrives and waits nervously for his verdict. Her grandmother is sick, that much she knows. She desperately hopes that it is not serious, but her grandmother is old, and she has worked all her life.

Her heart sinks when her father enters her room later. His face is serious and Lucia fears the worst. “She is not well Lucia. For now it is just a fever and the cough, but it could become worse.” Lucia is gripped with fear. It is not bad now, but she knows how quickly that can change. He sat down across from her and sighed. “We hope she will recover soon. If she allows herself to rest, there is a good chance she will.” Despite the fear, Lucia does feel better. There are still a few months till spring, but this winter has not been harsh. There is at least a chance her grandmother will recover. She does not say anything, but looks at her father with relief. He understands, they sit in silence for a little while before Caesonia calls for him to see the doctor off. He leaves Lucia to her thoughts. She waits until his footsteps have faded then wraps herself in a warm shawl and goes to sit in the garden outside her grandmother’s window.

The trees are the only plants still clinging to life. Dead flowers and bushes litter the garden. A small alcove in the garden wall houses three of the household gods. Her grandmother placed them there when Lucia was much younger. It is her grandmother’s own shrine. Lucia is the only other person in the house who tends to them. She does that now. Her grandmother will be confined to her room for now, she will not have an opportunity to look after the shrine. Lucia finds it very peaceful in the garden. In the spring, the trees and flowers will bloom. One of the bushes will produce sweet, dark berries, and very rarely the rose bush under the window will bloom beautifully. Lucia busies herself with the shrine and thinks only about how lovely the garden will look come spring. She does not let fear distract her.

Chapter Five: Awakening

Months have passed since the Festival. Lucia's grandmother is still ill. Her condition has not worsened, but she has not improved either. She spends most of her time in her room, resting and looking out her window. The garden is blooming. Flowers and tress sprout and flood the garden with greens, reds, and yellows. It seems as though the rosebush will bloom this year. Lucia has told her grandmother about the garden and when it becomes warm enough they will sit under the trees and watch the spring blooms replaced by summer growth.

In that time, Lucia had sat many vigils, and heard much more about the Firmus family. They were known for their ambition. Both father and son were ferociously intelligent, though Aegidus was more hotheaded than his father had ever been. Many blamed that on his headstrong mother. She had only seen him twice since the Festival. They never spoken, not that Lucia minded. He seemed to intense and arrogant for her liking. She did not see his wife again though. Lucia was curious about that, but did not let it occupy her thoughts that often. She made an effort not to think about them too often. Until early spring, she had done a fairly well. Then Aegidus Velius Firmus died.

Four days ago, Lucia received word from the undertaker that she was to sit vigil for a member of the Firmus family. The death had been only a few days before and the head of the damily wanted the vigil to start as soon as possible. So Lucia was called to sit vigil. She had been there six nights already. In that time she had seen Aegidus Firmus once and run into his wife four times. She was a lovely young woman, even in her grief she was still the most beautiful woman Lucia had ever seen. Eve her name, Marcella, is

lovely. She never saw her without elaborate braids and bright pins and an artfully arranged veil. Marcella carried herself with grace and dignity despite her sadness. It seemed she had cared deeply for her father-in-law and mourned his passing as much as her husband.

The villa was breathtaking. It was one of the largest Lucia has ever seen. A somber, almost foreboding feeling permeated the walls, making the long halls and numerous rooms seem almost threatening. The sorrow and tension makes the walls darker and seem smaller. The last night of her vigil is quickly approaching. She has not seen either Marcella or Firmus that day, and did not expect to see them again until the procession.

The atrium was one of the largest she had seen. Even with the atmosphere of sorrow, the room did not lose its sense of grandeur. Lucia had not spent much time in the atrium when the sun was out, even when the sun was rising, the atrium remained dark. Two fires were usually lit when Lucia arrived to begin her vigil. She only kept one going through the night, it was not so cold that she needed more than one. The darkness of the giant atrium did not bother her. It helped make the large room feel smaller. She did not feel so lost in the atrium when she could not see how large the room was.

The plinth with the body on it sat in the middle of the room. The wax masks and petals strewn about the floor made it difficult to stand beside the body. Not that Lucia particularly wanted to. The elder Firmus scowled even in death. Thus far, her vigil had been uneventful. She had not seen Firmus or Marcella more than a handful of times which was unusual, but it did not bother her. She took a seat on one of the benches near

the plinth. She does not expect any disruptions tonight. It is the last night of her vigil, usually tensions erupt well before the seventh night. The sun had set recently and the household was gradually drifting to bed.

As the last of the household staff retired, an eerie silence settled over the villa. Lucia could feel it in her bones. It was not a heavy, tense silence, but it was uncomfortable. She pushes it to the back of her mind and concentrates on the masks in front of her. The one directly in front of her is the oldest. It is well taken care of, but it is obvious that it has seen many, many vigils. The face is cracked and the paint chipped and peeling. She refrains from reaching out and touching it. Instead she traces the curves and patterns with her eyes. She has seen many beautiful masks in her time as a mourner. The oldest ones are her favorite. They have a history she can only imagine. She wonders how much they have seen. How much intrigue, heart break, and drama they have overheard.

She passes the night wondering about the masks and their history. She wonders when they were carved and how often they are repaired and repainted. She barely notices the fire when it dies, and only retreats from her musings when she hears the sounds of the servants speaking in hushed voices as they get up and prepare the morning meal. She rises and rekindles the fire, she does not know if the sun has risen yet, but she feels she needs to do something. A servant deposits a bowl with goat's milk and a hunk of bread with fruit on the bench Lucia had been sitting on. She gives her silent thanks as she tends to the new fire. When she is finished she eats her meal quickly. More of the household is waking up now. Friends and family filter past the atrium to get ready for the procession. Lucia prepares for the undertaker's arrival. She still has not seen Firmus and Marcella yet. Soon the other mourners arrive. She feels her grandmother's absence keenly, the

others ask after her and are just as disappointed that she is not better. The undertaker arrives and briefly greets them before rushing off to move the body. The others help Lucia adjust her veil and pin her hair up. Once she is ready and has helped the others with their final touches, they move outside. The body has been moved to the cart. As the mourners take their positions, Lucia notices Firmus and his wife. They are standing close together, not quite touching. For once, he does not look up or make eye contact. He is standing impassive, the only movement his eyes flicking between his father's body and his wife's face. Lucia does not look at them long, she leaves them to their grief.

The ashes are passed around as usual and then mourners take their positions. Lucia stands by the cart, joined by one of the older mourners. The younger women walk to the front of the procession. People on horseback and in litters fall in place behind the cart. It is almost time. The crowd gathers, preparing to walk along the route to the cemetery. She does not look back to see Firmus and his wife. Gradually the chanting begins, and the funeral procession starts to move. The journey is not too long. It begins in the morning and the sun has barely risen to its zenith by the time the front of the procession has reached the cemetery. They do not have to wait long for the rest of the procession to show up. The body is still lying on the cart and the family gathers in front of it to begin the delivery of eulogies. Firmus delivers the first eulogy. It is beautiful, full of respect and admiration for his father. There is the usual political posturing, but Firmus makes it sound respectful of his father's achievements rather than touting his own. The rest of the eulogies reek of insincerity. Lucia ignores most of them. She is very tired of eulogies and posturing, but it is an important part of the ceremony so she waits. Once everyone has spoken, the body is lifted from the cart and taken to the pyre.

The pyre was lit and the crowd gathered closer to it. A solemn silence fell as the body was placed on the flames. The sun was still out so there was no need to light torches. Only the fire burned. Everyone remained silent, watching and waiting as the pyre burned. The other mourners made their way to where Lucia stood. They exchanged no words, standing in silence watching the fire. The pyre burned brightly, flames dancing skyward. Plumes of smoke drifted over the heads of the crowd. A gentle breeze snaked its way through, catching loose hair, veils and togas. It altered the flow of smoke, causing it to blow into the crowd. A few people coughed and a weight seemed to be lifted. Murmurs of conversation drifted on the smoky breeze. She could only catch a few odd snatches of conversation. Some of the crowd were gossiping about the late Firmus. Many seemed to be concerned that without his father's level head, the younger Firmus would act rashly. She could not hear much more than that. The whispers died out once again as the breeze shifted and the smoke drifted higher.

The sun began to set as the fire died down. The undertaker appeared behind the mourners to their great surprise. None of them had seen him since the body had been loaded into the cart. He dismissed them quietly. Lucia decided to walk at least partway home with them. Her grandmother was still not well enough to come and meet her. None of them lived too far from the cemetery so it was not a problem to walk home with the others anyway. She walks behind the others listening to them gossip and ask about other funerals in the area.

"Tensions are high now." The oldest one, Musa says. She has seen as many funerals as Lucia's grandmother. "The highest I have seen for some time." The other murmur in agreement. Musa continues, "Far too many rumors circulating. Too many

senators getting involved with outside influences.” Lucia is curious, but says nothing. It is easier to let Musa reveal information in her own time rather than prod her. They walk in silence for a short while before Musa continues. “Young politicians these days are far more ambitious than their fathers or grandfathers. They reach for any connection, any chance to gain power.” Lucia is convinced that all politicians are like that, but keeps her mouth shut. It does not pay to argue with Musa. She is well respected amongst the mourners, and knows much about the world of the senators. Lucia does not pay her any further attention. She splits from the group as they near her home. A chorus of farewells guides her to her door. She is very tired and only peers her head into her grandmother’s room before going to her room to sleep.

Lucia had been called to the house of Aegidus Aurelius Firmus, despite his father’s funeral having passed several days before. She was curious, but unafraid, he was married, and showed no interest outside his marriage. He was strangely intense in person, his dark eyes seemed to focus intently on whomever held his attention. Nothing seemed to escape his gaze. She remembered the first time she had seen him, even then he had been easy to pick out of a crowd; his dark skin and intensity made him almost impossible to miss. Amongst the Latin elites he stood out. He carried himself with the same arrogance and air of importance as they did, but none could match his confidence and air of mystery. Firmus seemed to know far more than he should, and the knowledge spelled certain danger for any who crossed him. Firmus made her uncomfortable. He knew far too much and Lucia knew far too little. It was unsettling. Why would he call for her? She could not have made that great an impact, after all she had only sat vigil seven nights. Lucia had not gone out of her way to listen in on his conversations or even spoken to him

all that often. What could have so fascinated him? Even the Undertaker had not known why Firmus had asked for her, but he had not been at all curious. He had merely assumed Firmus had been impressed by Lucia and wished to meet her properly. She did not share his optimism though; however, she could come up with no other reasons why the man would ask to meet her.

Firmus had sent servants to guide her to his villa. The two girls he sent were not much older than Lucia and giggled constantly when questioned. The man accompanying them seemed stern, taking his duty to guide them seriously and shooting disapproving looks at the girls every time they giggled or shushed each other. He had not spoken the entire time, which did not seem to bother either girl who chatted and laughed, often gently teasing their silent companion. Neither girl seemed uneasy or afraid so Lucia assumed she should not feel intimidated. She felt that if there was any cause to worry the girls would have warned her. They had been friendly and engaging the entire time Lucia had spent in their company. She felt at ease, neither had commented on her appearance, nor had they been taken aback when they first saw her. That at least was reassuring.

The villa was not far from the city. Even as winter drew to a close the land surrounding the villa remained beautiful. The trees were bare, but their strong trunks and spindly branches stood out starkly against the thin layer of snow that lingered. The chill of winter remained, but the earth was just starting to retain the sun's warmth. A crisp earth smell permeated the air and reminded Lucia that soon spring would return. It was a pleasant feeling. The land around the villa was slightly hilly, gently rolling and genuinely lovely. The villa itself was hidden from view until they rounded the last hill. Lucia suppressed a gasp when she saw it, it seemed even more beautiful than before. The heavy

air of death and mourning no longer clung to the dark walls. In fact the villa seemed to have lost its sharp, angular feel. It seemed to glow softly in the morning light. The girls caught Lucia awed look and one of them asked, "Have you seen it before?"

"Yes, but I was sitting vigil over the body of its former master. It seemed much darker and more foreboding then." Lucia looked at the girls, a soft smile curving her lips upward. "It is quite beautiful in the daylight."

"And more magnificent inside! But you knew that." The girls dissolved into giggles again, and their silent companion scowled at them. They pulled faces at him, but reigned in their mirth. "The lady of the house brings charm and elegance. She prefers dark, rich colors, especially red."

The other one chimed in, "She quite fashionable you know. The Lady Marcella is quite lovely. Master Aegidus just adores her."

"How long have they been married?" Lucia asked curiously. She did not know much about Firmus, but she knew even less about his wife.

"About four years." The shorter girl answered.

"You know their parents arranged the marriage ten years ago." The other chimed in.

Not to be outdone the shorter one replied. "They are not too far apart in age though. I think Lady Marcella is only six years younger."

Lucia quickly interjected as it looked like the two would continue to spit out facts till they were blue in the face. “How old is she? He does not look that old. Thirty perhaps?”

Both girls looked at Lucia for a moment, considering her question. The shorter one answered first. “I think she is only nineteen. Master Agedius must be twenty-five then.” The girls looked at each other and dissolved into giggles again. Lucia was a bit nonplussed and looked to their taciturn companion who merely rolled his eyes and made a shushing motion. “He is quite interested in politics and seems to be a rather ambitious man. His father was a senator; he hopes to gain influence and power like his father.” The other girl said sagely as they approached the main door to the villa. The two seemed to be getting their mirth under controlled and Lucia could see the relief in the man’s face as he ushered them up the intricately carved dark wooden door. He knocked on the door three times, each knock carefully measured and firm, and waited a moment before the door slid smoothly open. He turned to Lucia and the two girls and ushered them in with a small smile. Lucia steeled herself and stepped into the house.

The somber air from her last visit seemed to have lifted. The house no longer felt so dark or cold. She took a minute to examine the walls again, they were more inviting, the chill of grief and death no longer clung to them. Lucia knew the residents were still in mourning, but once the funeral had occurred, the somber air and faint stench of death no longer lingered. Bright frescos that adorned the walls seemed to give off their own faint light now. The dark floors felt warmer and their color somehow richer. Lucia admired the entrance of the villa, she had noted its beauty before, but in the daylight, freed from the seriousness and solemn nature of the funeral, the house seemed

welcoming. She turned and noticed the man at the door, who smiled at her and motioned for her to come further inside. He was older than the taciturn man sent with the girls, he stooped slightly as he stood, and his face was lined and his hair greying at the temples. Her study of the man was interrupted when the two girls pushed her gently forward, moving her towards the inner hallway. The taller one spoke quietly, "Master Ageidus does not like to be kept waiting."

Lucia eyed her speculatively, "Then I guess I shall not keep him waiting any longer, I can admire the walls later." This caused the girls to start laughing again, and Lucia laughed as well. It was pleasant to feel so at ease around others. The two girls wound their arms in hers and pulled her along stilling giggling and pointing at frescos and wall hangings they found particularly pretty. Lucia let their voices wash over her, lulling her into a comfortable ease. They walked together through the hall towards a room at the back of the house. Lucia recognized some of the rooms, she had spent seven nights there, but had not explored too much during the day. She had chosen to rest most days. Only when the talk of the Senate turned to intrigue and fearful muttering of dastardly plots had she paid close attention to the others in the villa. It did not take long for the three of them to reach the room where Firmus was waiting. As they stood outside the room, the girls let go of Lucia's arms and reassured her that all was well.

"He just wants a word-" the taller girl spoke, but was interrupted by the other.

"Nothing bad! He just wanted to meet you properly." She trailed off sheepishly as the taller one glared at her. Lucia stifled a chuckle and waited for them to finish.

“As I was saying,” the taller girl paused to shoot an exaggerated glare at her shorter companion, who pulled a childish face, “He only wants to talk about the funeral. I think he felt that you did an exemplary job.” Lucia was surprised, but said nothing. The girl continued, “Master Aegidus was pleased with the funeral, it was not easy to bury his father, but he was pleased.” She paused and looked at Lucia, “He appreciated the Undertaker’s choice to have you sit vigil. I am not sure why, but he did.” Lucia was rather taken aback. She had not done anything differently for Firmus’s father than for any other body she sat vigil over. Once again she found herself curious as to the true purpose of the meeting. Nervously, she approached the door, taking one last look at the two girls, she knocked on the door. They smiled reassuringly at her and backed away. Faintly, Lucia could hear rustling and the sound of a stool being pushed aside. The door opened slowly, revealing Aegidus Firmus.

He appeared just as striking as he had the first time she had taken a proper look at him. Tall, dark, and imposing he stood looking at her, his dark eyes lingering on her scars. He was still dressed in mourning clothes, which only accentuated his striking figure. Even though he stood in the doorway, inviting and non-threatening, he seemed to tower over her. She straightened, nervous, but determined. He caught her eyes and smiled, a gentle but amused smile. He beckoned her in, moving aside so that Lucia could enter the room. Stepping forward she felt trepidation. He had not closed the door and the two girls lingered outside, so she felt safer than she would have otherwise. They stood for a moment, silent, observing one another. Firmus speaks first, his voice deep and sonorous.

“Lucia, thank you for meeting with me. I am sure you have questions. I hope to answer them.” He smiles at her, and gestures for her to sit on one of the stools strewn about the room. “Sit, please. We have much to discuss.” Lucia sits, not much reassured. “I am a very lucky man Lucia. I have wealth and power, all that one in my position should hope for. I have a beautiful wife and will soon make a name for myself in the senate.” Firmus sits down across from her, eyeing her intently. He leans forward slightly. Lucia tenses, feeling she will not like where Firmus is heading. “There is one thing I do not have, but I believe you can help me with that. From what I saw while you sat vigil for my late father, and from what the undertaker tells me, you are trustworthy.” His eyes linger on the scars visible on her face. Lucia feels her anger rising. Firmus is indeed a wealthy, powerful man. His wife is beautiful, charming, and obviously adores him. “You caught my attention some time ago. I must admit I have thought of you often.” Her anger intensifies. He must be playing with her. She is nothing in comparison to Marcella; Lucia lacks refinement, elegance, and beauty. How can he even look at her when Marcella is his wife? “I have a proposition-” Lucia cuts him off furious.

“I have no wish to hear your proposition!” She stands, knocking over her stool in her anger. Firmus seems taken aback. “That you should even consider making such a-” she cuts herself off, fuming. She glares at him, anger and hurt blinding her. “You should not even joke about such a thing!” She turns and storms out of the room. Behind her she hears Firmus calling her name, trying to bring her back. She shakes it off and rushes past the concerned girls. Her eyes fill with tears and she all but runs out of the villa. Her time there spent in vigil helping her navigate her way out. She knows that the girls are following her, but she does not stop. She has to get home before the anger turns to

humiliation. Pushing past the scandalized doorman, she runs out of the villa and down the winding road. She does not stop running for some time. She is almost halfway home before she has to stop. Ducking into some nearby bushes to keep out of sight she collapses in a heap. To her horror, she begins to cry. Making no sound as she cries, Lucia tries desperately not dwell on the needless cruelty of a handsome, wealthy man with a beautiful wife trying to trick her into an affair. Her scars are what caught his eye, nothing else. There is nothing else. Angrily she wipes the tears from her face and continues on her way home. By the times she reaches her house she is filled with fury. As much as she wants to talk to her grandmother, Lucia knows this will not help her recover. Instead of barging into her room, Lucia angrily sulks in the garden. She paces under the trees and glowers at the bushes and budding roses growing underneath her grandmother's window. Eventually, she wears herself out and retires to her own room to continue her miserable fury. Lucia does sleep much and her dreams are full of cruel laughter and dark eyes.

Chapter Seven: Beautiful

Lucia is still angry and upset the next morning. She had stormed back home after the disastrous meeting with Firmus, and had attempted to pretend she was alright. In reality she was exhausted and upset. Her grandmother, who was still sickly, had wisely decided not to ask questions when Lucia had come sulking into her room to sit by the window. She spent the morning glaring out of the window at the trees in the garden, silent and brooding. Her grandmother left her alone, only asking her to tend to the fire or if she needed a blanket or rug. She is not feverish, but she remains weak and the cough comes and goes. Despite her anger, Lucia is very worried about her. She knows her own stress cannot be helping.

She retired to her own room after a while, still sulking. She has not seen her father yet, and hopes to keep it that way. At least till she calms down and figures out what to do. She will see Firmus again. There are many funerals in a year and summer always surprises her with how many deaths occur. She wonders vaguely if the heat combined with the turbulent summer senate sessions has anything to do with it. She can avoid him without much effort; confident he will not break custom and approach her before the procession. Trying to calm herself, she sits by her window and looks out towards the road in front of the house. Forcing herself to focus on anything but the situation at hand, she notes the overgrown weeds that sprout over the road on its far side. No one has mowed them as of yet. She counts the number of stalks she can see and then the leaves and buds. It occupies her thought enough to distract her, but not enough for her to truly relax. She spends most of the day that way, looking out her window and focusing on some small thing and all its details. She is only pulled from her thoughts by the smell of food. Lucia

decides that she will eat with her grandmother tonight. Though she enjoys eating with her family, she does not need their questions or sympathy tonight.

Getting up she meanders to the kitchen to tell the cook of her plans. The old woman smiles and offers to bring the food to her grandmother's rooms when it is ready. Lucia agrees and makes her way back through the house. Out of the corner of her eye she sees Primus sitting on the floor with a wooden horse and a wax tablet. He does not see her, engrossed in his game. She does not call out to him. His mother will find him soon enough. By the time she reaches her grandmother's room, the sun is setting and a fire has been lit in the room. The doctor ordered them to keep her grandmother warm. Though summer is nearly there, the house gets cold at night. She knocked gently on the door frame of her grandmother's room and enters when she hears her grandmother call her name.

"Lucia? Are you feeling better?" She pauses for a racking cough then motions for Lucia to sit with her. Concerned, Lucia sits on the bed, reaching out to feel her grandmother's forehead. There is no sign of fever, and her grandmother pushes her hand away with fond annoyance.

"I am."

"Do you wish to tell me what made you so upset?"

"No. Not yet."

Her grandmother chuckles understandingly. Lucia scowls, the expression pulling at her scars. “I will be eating with you tonight. I think I need more quiet company than the rest of the family can provide.”

“Of course dear. I would be glad of your company tonight. I missed you when you sat vigil.” Lucia feels a pang of regret. Usually her grandmother would join the procession or at least walk her home. She tucks the blankets more comfortably around her grandmother and smiles at her.

“I missed you too Grandmother.”

The food arrives soon after that exchange and they eat mostly in silence. Lucia updates her on the goings on of their fellow mourners. She does not mention the gossip Musa and the others overheard during the funeral of the elder Firmus. Details of the senate’s power games do not interest her grandmother anymore. Her grandmother tells her about the birds she saw from her window and their songs floating through the breeze. Lucia enjoys the peaceful conversation. She almost forgets her anger. All too soon she must retire. Her grandmother seems worn out. Lucia has no wish to strain her.

That night she does not sleep much either. She does not remember her dreams, but she wakes up crying and feels even angrier than before. She does not say much during the morning meal, but both her father and Caesonia are occupied with Primus’s antics so they do not notice. Her father is very busy planning lessons so he retires to the study soon after the meal. Caesonia plans to visit a friend. She hopes that Primus and her friend’s daughter might marry when they come of age. Lucia is left on her own to brood. She refuses to think about what happened and merely lets her anger simmer.

She is caught off guard when the girls from before come with summons from Marcella. She wants to speak with her at the bathhouse near the Firmus villa. Lucia is nervous, but the girls plead with her and so she informs her father of her plans. He seems surprised until she explains that she sat vigil for the Lady Marcella's father-in-law. He sends her off with the promise she will have the evening meal at home. She agrees and sets off. Marcella provided a cart and so the journey to bathhouse is not as long as it might have been. Lucia has less time to be nervous. Unlike last time the girls are not as talkative, they watch Lucia with wary eyes. She supposes that her angry exodus from the villa two days ago was still fresh on their minds. She tries an apologetic smile and leaves them be.

By the time they reach the bathhouse, Lucia is a bundle of nervous energy. She is ushered in and taken to a small side room where Marcella is waiting for her. Lucia has never been more self-conscious. Marcella is beautiful. Her hair is unbound and uncovered, almost glowing in the lamp light. Lucia wishes she had another veil to cover her face with. Marcella is pale, with clear skin and dark brows that rest above gentle brown eyes. She lounges on a couch listening to one of her handmaids gossip about an older senator whose son might be in danger. She dismisses the girl when Lucia is brought forward. Smiling warmly, Marcella stands and motions for Lucia to join her.

"I understand that you are quite upset with my husband." Marcella takes Lucia by the elbow and leads her to a broader bench by the window. Sitting she pulls Lucia down to sit beside her. "I am sure he deserves your scorn." Lucia blushes, suddenly embarrassed by her outburst. "He is a very intelligent, ambitious man. But too often he is

lost in his own cleverness and says something stupid.” Lucia stares at her, surprised. “I assume he attempted to make a proposition?” Lucia nods and tries to explain.

“I rejected his proposal! I swear it!”

Marcella laughs. This surprises Lucia. “I am afraid my husband did not make himself clear.” Lucia feels confused, but listens. “You are a mourner correct?” She nods. “One who sits vigil?” She nods again. “My husband, as you must know, is trying to succeed in his father’s footsteps. He will become an influential senator in his own right. But such things take time.” Lucia wonders where Marcella is steering the conversation. She is becoming more confused the more Marcella explains. “To become an influential player in the senate, he needs information. The kind of information he cannot get through bribery or normal spy rings. Since grief so often loosens tongues and gossip spreads like wildfire during a funeral we need your help to gather this information.” Lucia is stunned. She had never considered that possibility. “I understand my husband made a poor impression. I offer my apologies, and hopefully he may soon offer his. We do need your help Lucia.” Marcella sounds so sincere. Lucia is torn. She wants no part in intrigue and spying, but she feels she must atone for her abrupt and, in light of this new information, very rude dismissal of Firmus.

“What exactly would I be doing?”

“Just listening. We need to know as much as we can about the situation involving the senior senators. They are far more secretive than we thought.”

Lucia considers this. “What will I have to listen for?”

Marcella smiles brightly, “Any mention of the emperor or his wife. Who the senators are allied with. Anything you think may be of importance. Anything we could use as leverage.”

She is conflicted. On the one hand, spying on the senator’s families is dangerous. If she were to be caught... On the other, Lucia has no love for the senate, and she already overhears gossip. It would not be too difficult to listen for rumors. She bites her lip, weighing her options.

“You would be paid.” Marcella adds, almost as an afterthought. Lucia raises an eyebrow, money has never been her greatest concern, but her family could use the money since her grandmother’s illness prevents her from working. She nods, coming to her decision. Turning to face Marcella, Lucia looks into her deep brown eyes and makes her choice.

“ I will do it.”

Marcella seems genuinely thrilled. “Wonderful!” She rises happily and summons her handmaiden and the two girls from earlier. “Would you care to join us?” She smiles warmly at Lucia. Lucia eyes the four women. She has never liked the bathhouses, her scars draw too much attention. She prefers to bathe at home. She sighs and gently refuses the offer.

“Thank you, but I must return home. My Grandmother is not well and I promised my father I would eat with him tonight.”

Marcella and the others make token protests, but they let her go, accompanied by the two girls. The ride home is much less awkward, but still very quiet. The magnitude of her choice has not hit quite yet.

She returns home well before the sun sets and spends the rest of the day sitting with her grandmother. They do not talk. Lucia listens to birdsong and her grandmother's more frequent coughing. She dines with her father that night and they talk of unimportant things. It is not until later, when the sun has set and the moon is high in the sky that Lucia fully considers what she has done. She gets no sleep that night. She is afraid. What she might do is frightening. But it keeps her thoughts from her grandmother's illness. It will occupy her time and supplement her earnings as a mourner. Thinking forcefully of the positive keeps her from spiraling into regret. The letter filled with profuse apologies and begging for her forgiveness that she receives from Firmus the next day helps as well.

Chapter Eight: So It Begins

The days are warm earlier and stay warm longer. The skies were blue and the trees blossomed once more. It was truly beautiful everywhere Lucia looked. Flowers just beginning to bud, the cows and the goats in the fields started to look fat and healthy once again. Children play in the fields and gardens; their joyous laughter and shouting fill the air and mingle with the birdsong that floats above the trees.

Under different circumstances Lucia would have enjoyed the sunshine, but once again, she was sitting vigil. This was her first official job for Firmus, so she had to be vigilant and listen carefully to the wives, family, and friends of the deceased. She arrived at the villa midday before she began her vigil. Nestorius Saenus, the man who had died was the son of a wealthy landowner who had been maneuvering with a small group of senators to influence the Emperor's wife. She was young and seemed impressionable. Her husband often left her in the capital when he went on campaign.

Nestorius's wife was tall and pale, with shining blonde hair coiled and pinned in an elaborate hairstyle with the veil artistically arranged on top of it. She seemed exhausted, but not as miserable as her sons. They sulked around the villa, watching sullenly as their father was laid out in the atrium. Lucia noticed their behavior; it was not unusual, but in contrast to their mother's quiet dignity it stood out. Nestorius's father

seemed the most upset. He had not spoken to anyone since Lucia had arrived. Lucia felt some sympathy for him. Parents outliving their children is the greatest tragedy any family can face. He stood in the corner of the room and made no effort to look at, or interact with anyone.

Nestorius, before his death, was a short man with dark hair and a rather intense brow. Even in death he seems to scowl. He could not have been a pleasant man. Firmus had not told her if he was, but she doubted that the two had spent much time together. Nestorius lay on the plinth, arms crossed over his chest. The coins placed over his eyes stood out starkly against his tanned skin. He looks very much like his father, and Lucia wonders if either man has ever smiled. Looking at his father, Lucia thinks it is very unlikely. The wax masks, dried flowers, and perfumed oils are placed around the plinth where the body lies. As the last of the undertaker's assistants leave, Lucia moves towards the plinth, watching as his family linger by his body for a last look before the vigil must begin.

She takes her place in the atrium seated next to the body as the sun begins to descend. Nestorius's father has not moved yet, still looking of into the middle distance with a blank look on his face. She wonders if he will move; it seems unlikely. The servants light a fire and show Lucia where the kindling is if she needs to refuel it. She thanks them and settles down to begin her vigil. The sun sets and the fire is the only source of light. It is still comfortably warm even though the fire is across the room from where Lucia sits. The father stands just outside of the fire's light. He still has not moved, though he is now looking at his son's body. Lucia waits, he will move at some point, he has too. Standing all night is exhausting, and he looks as though he has been up for

several days. He will have to retire to his rooms, or will come sit in the firelight before too long. Lucia waits for a quiet a while before the father moves. It is very dark outside, even the moonlight cannot pierce the darkness. The fire is still burning brightly, but it will need to be tended to soon. To her surprise Nestorius's father comes to stand near the body. He does not speak at first, he only looks down at his son's body. Lucia watches him, not knowing what to expect.

"He was so young." His voice breaks the silence. It is gruff and barely above a whisper. Lucia does not dare move or reply. "He should not have died." He sounds broken, like he is on the verge of falling apart. Lucia is still frozen, sitting on the bench, waiting with bated breath. "It was my mistake, not his." The man turns to her, distraught, tears in his eyes. He looks at her, begging her to understand. "It was not his fault, it was mine. It was my fault!" He collapses on the floor, burying his face in his hands. Alarmed Lucia moves to his side, and gently places her hand on his shoulder.

"It was my mistake! I was the one who encouraged him to make a move!" Lucia is kneeling beside him, surprised. She can guess what he means, but it is imperative that she be sure. "If I had not been so blind in my ambitions he would still be alive. It was a lost cause. One cannot hope to do it alone. We thought it would be so easy. She is so young and naïve...or so we thought" His voice drops to a whisper. Lucia keeps her hand on his shoulder and waits to see if he will speak again. He does not. Lucia sits with him, until the fire fades and he is slumped over with exhaustion. She pulls him to his feet and pushes him gently in the direction of his rooms. She does not say a word and neither does he. She watches him go, it seems the Empress is not as docile as she appears. Lucia sits,

deep in thought for the rest of her vigil, ignoring the dying embers of the fire. She does not sleep the next day, and listens and waits for more information.

Over the next six days and nights she does not hear much more on how Nestorius died. His father does not come into the atrium again. Lucia thinks he has not left his rooms since the first night. The rest of the household mutters about him shutting himself in his office. She catches snippets of conversation; it sounds as though the young Empress took exception the young man's attempt to sway her favor. Lucia thinks that everyone has underestimated her. It would be dangerous to continue to do so. There are, as usual, murmurs of various conspiracies. Lucia ignores most of these. She has been hearing them for years. At any mention of the Empress she takes notice. Lucia wonders if Firmus might focus on her. Wryly she thinks it will be a formidable task. She hopes he is cut out for the job.

The day of the procession dawns, Lucia has had very little sleep, but she holds her head high and tries not to let it show. The preparation for the funeral takes longer than usual. Nestorius's wife is upset with his father; Lucia cannot imagine why. The argument is ended quickly though and they proceed. It is the same as every other procession Lucia has been in. The frenzied ritual grief of the mourners in stark contrast to the stoic faces of the family. The eulogies are not overly long, Lucia is grateful for this, she is exhausted. It is well past midday by the time the pyre is ready. Lucia huddles with the other mourners, they will not judge her if she shows her exhaustion. She leans against one of the other women's shoulder as the body is laid on the pyre and the fire rises. The crowd is smaller than she is used to, Nestorius's family must not be popular. Or others are afraid. The

circumstances surrounding his death are mysterious. It could have been a deadly fever, or poison. No one knows for sure. Lucia certainly cannot say.

The undertaker interrupts her musings, amused by her exhaustion he informs her that her vigil is over. Gratefully Lucia acknowledges this and says a quick goodbye to the others, promising news of her grandmother's condition. To her surprise she is greeted by Marcella's handmaid when she exits the cemetery. The young woman informs her that the Lady Marcella wishes to speak with her. Lucia hesitates, but the handmaid indicates the cart that Marcella has sent. She will not have to walk any further. The sun has not set yet and she is not expected back home for some time. Lucia gladly climbs into the cart and makes herself comfortable. She dozes off on the way and is woken by a gentle shake when they arrive. Lucia offers a small apology, the handmaid smiles at her and gestures for her to come inside.

The villa is just as lovely as the last time she visited. She tries not to think of her last angry exit. The handmaid leads her past the rooms she met with Firmus in and leads her to Marcella's rooms. Marcella is reclining on a couch, looking radiant. Lucia is suddenly very aware of her tired eyes, slightly unkempt hair, and air of someone who has been awake entirely too long. Marcella seems quite pleased to see her. "Lucia! Come sit, you must be exhausted." Lucia folds gratefully into the seat next to her. "Ageidus asked me to see you after the funeral. He was not sure when he would return when he left this morning. One of his allies needed reassurance about something." Marcella waves her hand flippantly. Lucia gets the feeling that she knows more than she is letting on, but it does not bother her. "Have you learned anything important?"

Lucia smooths out her tunic. "I think so. Nestorius was trying to influence the Empress as I am sure you know." Marcella nods, looking curious. "The Empress did not like his meddling. I do not know if she had him killed, but she was certainly displeased. There is some debate as to what actually killed him." Marcella does not seem surprised. Lucia continues, "His father was involved as well. I do not know how many others there were, but it cannot be many." She bites her lip, she cannot recall if Nestorius's father was ever well-liked by the senate.

Marcella laughs lightly, pulling Lucia from her thoughts. "So the Empress is more fearsome than we thought. Not the good news my husband hoped for, but interesting nonetheless." Marcella sighs, leaning back into the couch. "Thank you my dear." Lucia moves to stand and leave, but is stopped by the arrival of one of Marcella's other maids.

"My lady! My lady, it is your husband. He has returned. He wishes to speak with you!" The girl notices Lucia and stares at her, momentarily unbalanced. Unconsciously Lucia tugs her veil to better cover her scars. "Forgive me my lady, I did not know you had a visitor. Shall I tell your husband to wait?" The maid's eyes do not leave Lucia's face, she looks confused. Lucia tries not to be offended, but she is very tired. To her surprise, Marcella laughs and bids the maid to bring Firmus in. The maid backs out of the room and disappears to collect Firmus. Lucia wonders what she might tell him about his wife's visitor. She does not have long to ponder as he walks through the door. He sweeps in, crisp folds of his toga snapping as he passes Lucia. He greets his wife warmly and they exchange pleasantries. Lucia is amused that he has not noticed her. Marcella catches her eye and grins, before directing her husband's attention to Lucia. "Dearest, Lucia brings news." He turns around, surprised to see her sitting there. Lucia

tries not to smile; he is still intimidating. He smiles warmly and greets her, he seems a little embarrassed which makes her feel better.

“My apologies. Good evening Lucia. What have you learned?” His eyes are far too intense and Lucia cannot maintain eye contact for very long.

“Nestorius was involved in an attempt to influence the Empress.”

“I am aware, it seems he was not met with success.” Firmus seems darkly amused.

“No, he failed. Miserably. The Empress was very upset with him. So much so he may have been poisoned.” That surprises Firmus but he does not interrupt her. “I could not find out who else was involved besides his father. It cannot have been a large group. The crowd was small at his funeral. Their family does not have many friends or admirers.” Firmus smiles at that. He sighs a moment later.

“I did not expect much. Even the spies could not find out everyone who was involved.” He rubs his jaw, lost muttering briefly about secretive old men. Neither Lucia nor Marcella comment, instead they wait, watching Firmus. He realizes they are waiting for him to continue. “My apologies. Thank you Lucia. It may not be the news I wanted, I am at least glad to know.” He gives a small gruff laugh. “I must admit I am surprised that the Empress was so angry. She seems so quiet.” Lucia makes eye contact with Marcella again who looks amused.

“Dearest, the news may not be what you wanted, but at least you have it.” She stands and puts a hand on his shoulder. “I at least have happier news.” Firmus looks at his

wife, smiling indulgently. “Soon you will have an heir.” Lucia watches as Firmus processes what he has just heard. Confusion and hope battle for dominance, before hope wins.

“Are you certain?” He asks, sounding almost breathless. Lucia wants to look away, to not intrude on this happy moment, but she is transfixed. Marcella smiles at him, and takes his hand.

“Absolutely. I saw the doctor this afternoon.” Firmus looks overjoyed. Lucia desperately wants to excuse herself, but is not sure how. They seem to have forgotten she is sitting there. The two are lost in the moment, filled with joy. She sits frozen on her chair, waiting for them to remember her. Firmus presses a kiss to his wife’s forehead. Lucia waits. It takes some time, but they remember her. To her amusement they apologize. She laughs and congratulates them. She excuses herself then. She is exhausted and must get home. They try to convince her to stay a while longer, but she knows they want to celebrate the good news. She congratulates them once again before leaving.

She dozes off again on the way home, but this time wakes up just before they reach home. She thanks the maid and the driver and climbs out of the cart. She gives them a cheerful wave and heads into the house, a soft smile lingering. It fades when she enters the atrium. Her father is not there, though it is nearly time for the evening meal. Caesonia stands in the hallway with Prius in arms. She looks the saddest Lucia has ever seen her. Fear swells in her heart. Caesonia has not seen her yet. Trembling she walks towards her grandmother’s room. Caesonia looks up at her approaching footsteps. Lucia sees that she has been crying. “Lucia. I am so sorry.” Lucia shakes her head, unable to

speak. Caesonia looks like she wants to reach out to her, but she is still holding Primus, who is sleeping. Lucia rushes away, running to the doorway of her grandmother's room. Her father is standing by the window, looking out unseeing into the garden. The doctor is kneeling by her grandmother's bed. She cannot see his face, but by tension in his shoulders, she knows already what he will say. Shaking, Lucia enters the room. The doctor looks up and sees her. He looks away after a moment and stands so that Lucia can take his place by the bed.

Her grandmother is pale, lying almost completely still in the bed. Her brow is soaked with sweat and her breathing is labored. She has never looked so small and frail. Lucia sinks to the floor, reaching desperately for her grandmother's hand. She holds on tightly, feeling the weak pulse and dry, hot skin against hers. The doctor is saying something, but she cannot hear it. He leaves the room and her father follows him. Alone in the room, Lucia bows her head and clutches her tunic with her free hand. She feels as though she has swallowed a lung full of smoke. Like she is choking and cannot fill her lungs with air. Her grandmother does not move. Does not open her eyes. Most likely does not even know she is there. Lucia gasps, she cannot breathe, but she is not crying. Tears will not come, instead she gasps weakly for air, her own strong heartbeat filling her ears till she can hear nothing else. She hates it. That her heart beats so strongly but her grandmother's does not. She can barely feel her grandmother's pulse, the sound of her own heartbeat drowns out everything else.

She kneels by the bed, struggling to breathe for what feels like hours. Gradually her sense return and the sounds of the household filter back in. Her heartbeat is drowned out and she can feel her grandmother's pulse again. Even after she has calmed down she

does not move or get up. She stays, kneeling at the bedside, clinging to her grandmother's hand as if it is the only thing keeping her from falling apart.

Chapter Nine: Loss

The sun is warm, shining through the windows, touching all corners of the house with light. Birds sing, filling the bright afternoon with gentle, sweet music. The flowers outside Lucia's window are blooming, beautiful sprays of pink and white that seem to glow in the sunlight. A gentle breeze stirs the trees; sweet scents of the flowers and fruit drift in through the open windows. Despite all the beauty and warmth around her, Lucia feels frozen. She sits, head held high, and stares vacantly out the window. The sun is shining, bright and beautiful, but she cannot feel its warmth. Underneath the birdsong and whispering winds, there is a silence that permeates the very walls. Lucia feels the silence as though it were a presence, wrapping itself around her, drowning out all thought. Across the room, her grandmother lies in a bed piled with rugs and blankets. Lucia knows she is dying, she can hear it in her grandmother's labor breaths, feel it in the silence and the chill of the room, sees it in her pale face. The thread of her grandmother's life is fraying and Lucia knows that soon it will be cut. Her hands are balled into fists, clenching the fabric of her tunic as she waits in dread for her grandmother's final breath.

Outside she can hear the hushed voices of the doctor and her father. She cannot bear to listen more closely, knowing it will only hurt more if she does. It has been several days since her grandmother last opened her eyes. Lucia turns from the window, unclenching her hands and slowly smoothing her tunic. Trying to keep her hands from

shaking, she works each layer of fabric until every layer is laying smoothly. It takes her several minutes; she has to stop to keep from trembling. She has not cried yet. She knows she will. The voices outside the room fade as her father leads the doctor away. Lucia is glad, hopefully the doctor will not come again. His face is far too somber and he seems unable to look away from her scarred face. He is trying to be sympathetic, but it only makes the whole ordeal so much worse. Lucia has not asked him or her father how long her grandmother has. She does not want to know. It might be worse, knowing how little time she has left. The breeze shifts, and the smell of fresh flowers and fruit fades, leaving only the cold sadness and scent of ointments to permeate the room. Lucia looks down at her hands, they are trembling, and she forcefully stills them. She lays them over her skirts, focusing on arranging them and nothing else. Time seems to slow down as she finally rests them in her lap, one on top of the other, the fingers of her left hand folded under and concealed by her right.

When she looks up from arranging her hands, her grandmother's labored breathing has almost faded. A terrible sense of dread fills the room and Lucia knows that her grandmother is almost gone. Still she does not cry. Shaking, she stands and walks slowly toward her grandmother's bed. A silence seems to fall over the house. She wonders vaguely if her family will come in time. Kneeling by the bed she gently strokes her grandmother's hair, she knows that the gesture is useless, but it is comforting. Lucia can feel tears burning in the very corners of her eyes, but she does not let them fall. Leaning in she begins to sing the lullaby her grandmother once sang to her, it is a small comfort, but she pretends her grandmother can hear her.

“Sleep, my child, my darling child. Sleep in your bed of light.”

Lucia takes her grandmother's hand; it feels so cold and small.

"Everywhere I go, I see you dear. Even the smallest red rose reminds me of you."

She hears rapid footsteps, the doctor and her father are running to the room. They might be speaking or shouting, but she cannot hear them.

"I have prayed to the many gods that no more tears should fall from your face."

Still she does not cry. Her father kneels by her side and places his hand over hers. It feels warm, and engulfs both her's and her grandmother's. He does not speak, merely holding his daughter and mother's hands.

"Oh my child, my beloved child please do not cry anymore."

The doctor is speaking, Caesonia must have entered the room, her perfume brings warmth back into the room.

"My honey child."

The doctor stands beside her; he does not stop her either.

"So sweet, who is this?"

Her grandmother's breathing fades further. Lucia can almost see the thread of her life, its breaking.

"It is you my beloved child."

The thread snaps. Lucia leans forwards and places a kiss on her grandmother's forehead. The final rush of warmth passes through her, for a moment Lucia feels the love

her grandmother felt for her family. Then it is gone. The world returns to cold sorrow and Lucia leans back, slumping against her father. A single tear rolls down her cheek and she feels the pull of the darkness once again. She feels him wrap her in his arms and she succumbs to the darkness, glad for its numbing warmth.

Lucia sleeps, she does not dream. Dreams would be far too painful. She does not sleep long, there is still light streaming through the window when she wakes. The house is deathly quiet, neither sound nor movement. Looking around, she realizes that she had been moved. She is now in her own room, wrapped in blankets. For a moment she lays there, wrapped in her blankets feeling nothing. Then gradually grief washes over her. She will never hear her grandmother sing to her again. She will never see her smile at her grandchildren again. She will never hold her hand as they walk through the market or underneath the trees in the orchards just outside the city. She will never see her leaning over the banks of the Tiber river, watching her reflection distort and laughing. She will never be able to talk to her again, never come to her for counsel and reassurance. Her grandmother is gone.

Then she cries, tears streaming down her cheeks. The pain feels mightier than the Tiber in flood season as it washes over her in waves. Once again she is reminded of her own helplessness, her inability to save the people that she loves. Her grief rises, threatening to overwhelm her. She feels as if her heart cannot possibly break any more than this. Paralyzed with grief she lays on her bed and cries until her eyes are as empty of tears as her heart. Curling into herself she lays in her bed wondering if she can just drown in her own sorrow, fall back asleep and never wake up again. She does not know how long she lay there, consumed by her misery. Her father comes to her before nightfall. He

does not say anything; merely sitting with her. She knows he grieves as well; he lost his mother.

Eventually he had to leave, the doctor returned with the undertaker and his presence was necessary. Lucia waited until the sun set to sit up. She felt stiff and raw and empty. To distract herself from the reality of her grandmother's death, she slid out of her bed and searched for her mirror and comb. Someone had left a basin of warm water by her bed and she gladly washed her face, scrubbing away the traces of her tears. Once she was finished she went back to searching for her comb. It took her longer than usual to find it, but it helped to distract her. As she began combing her hair, she heard footsteps coming towards her room. The tread was heavier than usual, but familiar; her father walked softly, as did the doctor so it could not be either of them. Despite her curiosity, Lucia did not move, merely continuing to comb her hair rather numbly. The footsteps stopped outside her door and the gentle knock that followed startled her. She had not expected to be disturbed. Cautiously she rose and opened her door. To her surprise the undertaker stood before her. He looked somber, and bowed his head seemingly in sorrow.

“A moment of your time Lucia my dear?” he asked gently. She merely nodded and stepped out into the hallway to speak with him. Despite her best efforts, she could not ask him why he was there. He appeared to understand and in a soft voice began to speak again.

“I know that you and your grandmother were very close,” Lucia nodded, fingers curling in the folds of her dress, “I know also that she was well loved by the other mourners under my employ.” He paused, watching Lucia carefully, looking for any signs

of anger or confusion. When he found none, he continued. "As her granddaughter I thought it might be best if you not sit vigil with her..." Lucia stared at him in mute horror, a protest bubbled forth, but he pushed ahead. "I do not wish to take that from you. But I cannot let you sit with her alone. The others will miss her too. I have asked if they would sit with you, at least at first, so you might not grieve alone." Relief flooded through her, and even though she had cried herself empty, tears burned at the corners of her eyes. The undertaker smiled at her, and gently touched her shoulder. "She would prefer it this way." Lucia nodded, and smiled tremulously at him. He dropped his hand from her shoulder and turned to walk away. She watched him go, once again exhausted. He had almost reached the atrium before she thought to thank him. She took off after her him, running to reach him before he left to begin preparation. "Undertaker!" He turned surprised as she almost crashed into him. He reached out to steady her and Lucia clung to his arm a moment before straightening. "Thank you undertaker." He looked even more surprised than before, but once again he smiled at her and answered in his normal gravelly tones, "There is no need. She will be missed." With that he left. Lucia watched him go, wiping the last of her tears from her cheeks.

The next days passed in a haze. Everyone in the house remained quiet. It seemed without her grandmother, the world was not quite as bright. Even little Primus was quiet. He did not understand the solemn mood that pervaded the house, but he knew that his father and sister were unhappy, and he bothered his mother less than usual about his sister's silence. Lucia did not know how much Caesonia had told him, but he did not bother her unless it was to offer her fruits or sweets he had snatched from the kitchen. Lucia was filled with gratitude. Caesonia had been gentle with her, she had not asked her

to watch Primus, and had offered her companionship during the days leading up to her vigil. Lucia had accepted her offer and had been glad that her stepmother did not ask questions or speak of anything important. They talked mostly of Primus, how fast he was growing and how soon he would follow in his father's footsteps. It provided a welcome distraction from her grief. The last threads of bitterness Lucia had felt towards her stepmother faded, replaced by gratitude and gentle affection. Caesonia had always tried to get along, deal with her step daughter's moods and anguish, but Lucia had always pushed her away gently, but firmly. Though it pained her that tragedy brought them together, she was grateful for the closeness that now blossomed between them. Her father seemed grateful for it as well. He did not spend much time in the house, it was too painful and he would rather distract himself with work. He was pleased that his wife and daughter found comfort in each other's company, but he could not join them. His grief was of a different kind.

The day came for Lucia's grandmother to be laid out in the atrium. The undertaker had carefully prepared her body. His assistants had braided and bound her hair in a fashion that had been popular when she was a young woman. The dried flowers, perfumes, and wax masks had been placed around her plinth with great care. Her father had given the undertaker coins to place over her eyes and under her tongue. She looked as though she were merely sleeping. Draped in colorful skirts and tunic, she was a bright splash of color in the pale atrium where she lay. Lucia almost let herself believe that the Fates had not taken her, that she was resting, and would wake up soon. Primus, under constant supervision, watched, confused as the undertaker and his assistants finished their work.

When it came time for the vigil to begin, Lucia was joined by the other mourners in her company. Three were older, closer to her grandmother's age. The other two were younger, and recalled that Lucia's grandmother had taught them all they knew about the art of mourning. It was comforting to have them by her side.

The first night was the worst. As the sun set and the rest of the household went to their beds, Lucia and the oldest of the mourners sat together beside the body. Lucia cried once the moon rose and bathed the atrium in her pale light. She wanted so badly to reach out and touch her grandmother, but she knew she could not. The other woman sat by her side, stroking her hair and face and whispering softly to her. She told stories of her grandmother's wit and spirit and how they two had become friends during a particularly harrowing funeral. Once Lucia had calmed down, the older woman combed and braided her hair. It was relaxing, something that her grandmother used to do for her after long vigils. They exchanged whispered tales of past vigils and outrageous family fights during the last days before the funeral proper.

It got easier after that. The next night Lucia did not cry as much. She heard more stories of her grandmother, and even laughed a little. The night after she did not cry at all. The two younger mourners sat with her the same night. They held her hands and sang softly to her through the night. The last two nights she was on her own. Lucia was glad to be alone. Thankfully her family let her sleep during the day, allowing her to be alone with her sorrow. The nights were difficult, but she was glad for her solitude. She did not cry anymore. She reminisced, but that was all. On the seventh night she knelt on the floor beside the plinth. Finally, she took her grandmother's cold hand in her own. Shaking she held on tightly and whispered her grief to the shell that left of her beloved grandmother.

“I do not know how I will go on. You gave me strength and hope when I had none left. Why the fates took you from us I will never know, but I would do anything to convince them to bring you back.”

Despite her outpouring of grief, she did not cry.

“I know that I will see you again Grandmother. No matter how long I must wait, I know I will. It does not matter if you no longer know me. I will know you. I will always know you.”

Time seemed to pass slowly in the darkness of the seventh night. Lucia wondered if the night would ever end. It stretched on dark and cold. To her it took an eternity for the first light of the sun to touch the atrium and its inhabitants. As the sun rose, Lucia let go of her grandmother’s hand and went to sit on the low bench across from the plinth. To her surprise, her father appeared in the doorway, he looked as if he had not slept. Slowly, he made his way to her. Lucia did not speak, merely moving so her father would have room on the bench. He sat, and did not move for some time. Lucia did not mind. She did not know what to say, so she waited. He did not speak, he merely reached for her hand. She allowed him to take it. It was as cold as hers. They sat, silent, hand in hand until the rest of the household awoke. When the kitchen lit up and the smell of roasted meat and baked bread drifted past, he let go of her hand and stood. Lucia watched him with wide unblinking eyes. Her father bent forward and kissed her forehead, finally speaking in a low murmur. “I miss her too dearest.” She closed her eyes and clung to his tunic for a moment before letting him go. Looking up she saw a multitude of unshed tears in her father’s eyes.

“I know,” she whispered. “I know.”

He nodded and walked away slowly. She would not see him again until the procession began. Lucia did not watch him go, instead she gathered her tunic and shawl and walked to her room. The Undertaker would arrive soon. Her grandmother no longer needed to be watched. She would be in his hands now. She had no desire to walk in the procession as a mourner. She would stand with her family and hide her grief as they would.

When she reached her room, she washed and combed her hair, scrubbed her face and changed. She still wore mourning clothes, but these were far more ceremonial than the ones she had been wearing. When she was dressed, she made her way to Caesonia’s rooms, her stepmother helped her braid and pin her hair. She asked no questions and made no attempt to start conversation. Lucia decided not to use her veil to cover her face. She let it rest farther back on her hair than usual. With her stepmother’s help, she pinned it in place and in turn helped her pin her veils in place. Primus was unusually silent, constantly clinging to his mother’s or Lucia’s skirts. The somber atmosphere upset him, but he knew better than to complain. After all he missed his grandmother as well. Once the women were finished, they took Primus with them to the morning meal. It was held in the kitchen again, no one wanted to eat in the atrium. No one spoke more than necessary and Lucia’s father was conspicuously absent.

The undertaker arrived shortly after the meal. He took one look at Lucia and her garb and nodded in silent understanding. The oldest of the mourner’s present went to sit with the body. The others prepared for the procession. Lucia and her family walked

outside towards the modest cart that the body would be transported in. Her father joined them shortly afterward. He stood slightly apart from them, closer to the cart that would carry his mother's body to the pyre. Friends and colleagues were beginning to arrive, talking amongst themselves, and lining up on either side of the street. To her surprise Lucia saw Firmus standing in the crowd. Even after all this time he still stood out to her. He inclined his head solemnly, a look of deep sympathy crossing his face as he made eye contact. She wondered why he was there, but appreciated his sympathy. Turning her mind from Firmus's mysterious appearance, she noticed that her grandmother's body had been loaded onto the cart and the last of the ribbons and scarves had been added.

Primus stood beside her and reached for her hand. She held it firmly and offered him a small, sad smile. Caesonaia held his other hand and shot her stepdaughter a sympathetic look before turning to look at her husband. Lucia's father stood tall and stiff before the cart, his hands balled into his tunic. Lucia could tell that Caesonia was desperate to reach out to him, but for the sake of his pride would not. Instead she held Primus's hand tightly in her own. The procession was about to begin.

Harsh wailing rose from behind the cart, shattering the quiet morning with ritual grief. Torches held high billowed smoke which seems for a moment to block out the sun. Lucia and her family began to walk, surrounded by her fellow mourners. Chanting joined the harsh wails, and the salty tang of blood flooded the air. Mourners scratched their arms, tore at their hair and faces, and contorted their bodies in a violent display of agony. The crowd began to move as well, surrounding the family and procession as they moved ever closer to the pyre. Once again time seemed to pass excruciatingly slowly. The crunch of gravel, the smell of smoke, the sounds of screaming and howling seemed to

fade as Lucia walked. The sun rose higher, no longer choked by clouds of ash. Still she walked. The wind picked up breaking the scent of blood and smoke with the smell of fruit and flowers, gentling the harshness of the world around her. Still she walked. Primus's hand grew hot in hers, and he gripped her fingers too tightly. Still she walked. Sounds faded in and out, sometimes she heard the harsh wails and crackling flames, sometimes she heard the wind whisper softly, and sometimes she heard murmurs from the crowd. Still she walked. She walked until her feet and back ached, till her eyes burned with tears from the smoke and the grief, till at last they reached the site of the pyre. Then, she stopped. Primus still gripped her hand too tightly, but she did not let go. She needed his hand to anchor her as much as he needed hers. Her father walked past them, head held high and back ramrod straight. She watched as he led the procession to the pyre. Her grandmother's body was hoisted up and placed on the pyre.

Lucia did not listen to the eulogy. She was too focused on her grandmother, lying there on the pyre, still looking as if she were merely sleeping. She felt a hand on her shoulder, when she tore her eyes from the pyre she saw the hand belonged to her father. He looked at her, eyes full of sorrow and asked if she was ready. Lucia nodded, and turned back to the pyre. Her father gave the signal and the torches were brought forwards. She forced herself to keep watching as the pyre was lit. It did not take long for the flames to catch and shoot skyward. Her father did not remove his hand from her shoulder. As the flames consumed more and more of the pyre Lucia was suddenly aware of the near silence. No one spoke, no one moved. They just watched. When the flames reached her grandmother's body, Lucia had to look away. Memories of white hot agony and the smell of burning flesh threatened to overwhelm her. Her father kept a firm grip on her shoulder

and Primus's small hand still held on to hers too tightly. They grounded her. Kept her from dwelling on the horrible memories. They stood there like that, clinging to one another until evening when the flames finally died down.

Lucia was the first to move; gently disentangling herself from Primus's grip she quietly excused herself. Her father watched her go, reaching down to take Primus's hand in her place. Without thinking, she pushed her way through the crowd, which was beginning to break up. Many were leaving, others moved to talk to her family. Luckily no one stopped her as she made her way to the edge of the gathering. Standing among the older grave markers, she wrapped her arms around herself and stared sightlessly out into the encroaching darkness. It did not take long for Firmus to find her. He stayed an arm's length away, careful not to come too close. She did not turn to look at him, merely asking. "Should you not be with your wife? Your child will come soon."

"She is well, but worried. She asked me to see you. She does not trust you to tell us if you are unwell."

Lucia snorted, tugging at the edge of her veil. Of course Marcella would not trust her. She was a clever, caring woman.

"I appreciate her concern."

"Lucia." Firmus took a careful step forward, still maintaining space. "I do not pretend to know what grief you must feel. My father and I were not close when he died." Lucia turned to him at last, frowning. "I cannot ask anything else of you at this time. You need rest, a chance to recover. I will have someone else look into Senator Curtius's affairs. Take all the time you need."

For a moment Lucia did not know what to say. Still frowning she considered his words. She could have time to grieve, properly. Time to rest, time to spend with her brother and her family. It was exceedingly kind of Firmus to offer her time to recover. However, Lucia felt uneasy. She uncoiled a long strand of hair from its pinned braids and curled it around her finger. When she looked up at Firmus he was standing closer, looking sympathetic. She took a deep breath. "I cannot. You must know I cannot do that." He looked surprised. "If I were to spend another day unoccupied I would drown in my own grief." She took another deep breath. "To ask me not to help you, to let another take my place..." Trailing off she, looked him in the eye and allowed the strand of hair to drop to her shoulder. "I could not bear it. You could not ask too much of me now. I cannot be left alone with this grief Firmus! You must understand!"

He looked taken aback, as if he had not considered that she felt so strongly.
"Lucia-"

"No! Please Firmus!" Lucia reached out and took his hand, holding it tightly.
"Please let me continue our work. I can at least be useful!" She must have looked distraught because he relented, squeezing her hand gently and nodding.

"His son is dying. He picked a fight over a girl and lost. Curtius will be in need of someone to sit vigil with the body. I can arrange it so you will be the one to sit with him." He seemed unhappy to do so, but Lucia was thankful he had relented. She could not bear to sit idly by and wait to be consumed again by grief.

Chapter Ten: The Fates

It has only been a few weeks since her Grandmother's funeral. Lucia still feels raw and wounded, but she insisted upon being the one to gather information from Curtius at his son's funeral. By keeping herself distracted and occupied she could keep the grief at bay. The vigil passed uneventfully at first, but by the third day she overheard an argument between Curtius and his wife about his involvement with the Empress's schemes. Lucia had to cram herself into a very uncomfortable spot behind a column and pressed up against a very large tree with bark that constantly caught at her tunic, veil, and hair. But she overhears enough that she cannot be upset at her ruined veil. From the wife's angry tirade, she is not pleased that her husband would associate with the Empress's nephew. That piques her curiosity and she makes it a priority to learn about the man.

After the funeral and procession, she takes two days to spend with her family. Her father seems unhappy about something, but he assures her it is nothing important. Lucia is only mildly suspicious, and decides to find out later. Meanwhile, she focuses on carefully and subtly prying information about the Empress and her nephew from Musa and the other mourners. To her surprise she is successful. She goes to the market with the older mourners one day and Musa informs her that the Empress's nephew is all any of the families she has sat vigil for will talk about. She tells Lucia it is not that surprising, the man is young, and the families she has sat for all have young unmarried daughters. According to Musa and the others, he is nothing like his aunt. They are very close in age,

the empress's father had many half siblings, some almost half his age. Not much is known at the moment. No scandals or juicy tidbits have surfaced. Though most who met him and his aunt say he is far gentler than she has ever been.

Lucia delivers this information to Marcella one sunny afternoon as they sit in her chambers beside an open window. Summer is fading, the days are cooler and the fields and orchards are laden with crops and produce. Marcella is showing, it is obvious that she is pregnant. She is a small woman and it shows prominently, she is far enough along that she and Firmus will decide on a name soon. Lucia is curled up in a comfortable chair, resting on a particularly plush cushion. Marcella is propped up with pillows and rugs supporting her lower back and hips. She looks comfortable enough, if a little pale and tired. Marcella has heard about the Empress's nephew as well.

"I heard that he is young and very impressionable. He is a divine speaker though. Gave a perfect eulogy at the funeral of a family friend last harvest." Marcella looks out the window. "Perhaps she wishes him to advise her husband..."

Lucia sighs, "I thought so, but he is away on campaign. She means for him to stay with her in the capitol." She plays with the lock of hair that is coarser and lighter than the rest, braiding and combing it out repeatedly. "He has been the object of a fair amount of gossip."

Marcella laughs, throwing her head back. "I hear he is lovely, young and pretty."

Lucia smiles unraveling her braid again. "I hear that as well. He is unmarried, so he is of course quite popular." She combs through the hair with her fingers. "Many of the young ladies the Empress employs are infatuated."

Marcella giggles, relaxing back into the pillows, “how sweet. The poor man must be mortified.” She pauses and looks at Lucia to catch her eye, grinning wickedly “Or delighted.” Lucia snorts as Marcella laughs again. The two women chat briefly about other gossip, the senate is antsy again, Firmus predicts a large change is coming and plans to ally himself carefully. Marcella points out that the senate is always upset and usually over nothing. Lucia feels she has to agree, the senate has been in a state of constant upset for some time now. Perhaps it is nothing important. Firmus is insistent that something is going to happen and has been brooding for days. Marcella is quiet annoyed with him and as little as Lucia has to deal with him, she understands Marcella’s feelings. In the end, Firmus is paying her, so Lucia listens for information. It does not lessen the annoyance she shares with Marcella when he sulks at the lack of news.

Without his father, he seems predisposed to follow his hunches obsessively. He has trod on a few toes as of late and Lucia feels any day now he will find himself challenged to a duel. Marcella worries about him, and tells him off when he insists he knows exactly what he is involved in. Despite the annoyance it is all a welcome distraction for Lucia. She is glad to be useful.

Lucia asks about the baby out of politeness. Marcella smiles and tells her shyly she hopes to have a son. Though she does not get a final say for a name she hopes Firmus will consider her grandfather’s name, Vettius. They discuss names for a little while longer as the breeze picks up and brings with it the scent of olives and grain.

Lucia leaves not long after that, Marcella tires more easily now. She has been sickly as of late, but nothing the doctor is too worried about. The both worry that Firmus

will hover as the day of his child's birth approaches. She makes her way home, feeling a little less sad than she had before she visited. When she arrives, her good mood dissolves. Caesonia is clearly upset and her father has locked himself in his study. Lucia is afraid to ask what happened, but she knows how hard Caesonia is trying to be supportive of her father in his grief.

“Why has he locked himself in his study again? Surely his lessons have been planned.” She crosses her arms and watches the closed door as if it will offer her answers.

Caesonia hesitates, but eventually replies. “He received a letter.”

“A letter?”

“From your brother...” Caesonia trails off, watching Lucia carefully. She has gone rigid. She looks confused and finally looks away from the door.

“My brother would not write to him. Why would he have received a letter?”

“It was for you. He does not want you to see it, but...Ameilius is your brother. Should he not write to his sister?” Caesonia sounds hesitant. She has not met Ameilius. He left for Gaul before she married his father. Lucia cannot blame her for not understanding, she never saw the fights between Ameilius and their father. She takes a deep breath and fights the growing anger.

“I did not expect a letter so soon. He does not often have time to write.” Lucia bites her lip, worry mixes with the anger, why would he write to her? What did he write that made their father so angry? “Do...do you know what the letter was about?” She

looks at Caesonia carefully. Caesonia sighs, rubbing her temple and making a vague hand gesture.

“I do not know the details, but he was asking after you. He news he wanted to share.” She shrugs looking distressed. “I am sorry Lucia I do not know what else he wrote.”

Lucia reassures her it is alright. She excuses herself, furious. She retreats to her room, making sure to slam the door shut with a satisfyingly loud snap. It does not matter what her brother wrote, her father will find fault. He is still angry at him for joining the army. Even after all these years, he still has not forgiven him. Lucia knows it is not the same for Ameilius. He forgave their father long ago. It still makes her so angry.

She realizes that Ameilius does not know that their grandmother is dead. She has not heard from him in over a year. He got married, she knows that. It is not easy to keep up with him, the army moves him around constantly and it is difficult to make time to write letters. She is even angrier now, but also horrified. Surely her father does not intend to keep this from her brother? She does not know what to do. She cannot get his letter since her father has it. He is no likely to give it to her. Frustrated, Lucia sinks to the floor, curling into a ball and tucking herself between the edge of her bed and a small table below her window. She feels helpless now. Reminded of the distance placed between herself and Ameilius.

A firm knock on her door pulls her out of her thoughts. “Come in.” The door opens and her father stands in the doorway looking unhappy.

“What did he write? Father, what does the letter say?” Lucia asks urgently, mind turning endless horrifying possibilities.

Her father looks at her sternly. “It is not important. Do not concern yourself-” she cuts him off angrily.

“How can you say that! He is my brother! And your son! Are you not worried about him?” She was on her feet now, anger pushing her forward.

“He left Lucia. He knew what that meant. This letter changes nothing.” Lucia stares at him. Her brother is trying to tell her something important. Something that could change his relationship with their father. But what is it?

“What did he write. Please Father!” She says desperately. She is terrified, something horrible could have happened and if he does not tell her, she will never know. He is taken aback by her pleading.

“Lucia-” There is an angry warning in his voice but she ignores it.

“Father! Tell. Me.” She meets his gaze without fear. She is his daughter after all. He looks away after a moment, eyes lingering on her scars. It only makes her angrier.

“He thinks his wife could be pregnant and he wants to visit us so we can meet her.” He does not sound happy. Lucia cannot fathom why. It sounds like her brother is trying to reach out again. See if he can be reconnected with his family. Why is her father so angry? Lucia crosses her arms and narrows her eyes.

“You think it is not a good thing then?” she asks him. Watching him carefully. “He is your eldest living son. Surely it is good that he will-” Lucia’s father cuts her off.

“No.” Lucia is taken aback. The word is filled with so much anger. “A maybe is not enough to undo what he did Lucia! He left us! Both of us. You had not even fully healed. He was selfish and angry and he left us!”

Lucia stares at him as he rants, anger and frustration mounting. Without thinking, she blurts out, “he left because you could not stand to look at him! He knew why! He knew that you wished Drusus had survived instead.” She is shocked at her outburst, and judging by the look on his face so is her father. He opens his mouth, perhaps to defend himself, perhaps to agree, but she is suddenly exhausted. Lucia holds up a hand, stopping him before he can begin and points to the door. “Leave. Please.” He stares at her. “I wish to be alone Father. Please leave. I do not want to continue this.” Her father takes a deep breath, she knows he will try to justify himself and his anger at Ameilius, but Lucia is too tired to deal with this, with him. “No. Please go. I need rest.”

He leaves then, hurt in every line of his frame as he walks away. Lucia closes the door behind him. When his footsteps have faded, she collapses to the ground and cries, choked off sobs that she tries to muffle in her tunic. When her grandmother was alive, she would have heard them anyway and come to comfort her. She is gone now, and Lucia receives no comfort only crushing loss and frustration with her father and his stubborn refusal to admit his own guilt in this mess. After a while the tears stop and Lucia feels empty and cold. She crawls into her bed and piles blankets around her to stave off the chill she knows has nothing to do with the weather.

Chapter Eleven: Blood Sacrifice

The festival is winding down, and Lucia still cannot look at her father. She is still angry with him. She has placed both Primus and Caesonia between herself and her father. Neither of them say anything, but they both know that something is very wrong. Barely two months have passed since her grandmother's funeral and she would have hoped her father would understand her grief and anger. It seems he does not. Ameilius is still a sensitive subject, even after all these years. Lucia cannot wrap her head around her father's stubbornness when it comes to her older brother. He is the eldest surviving son. Her father should be overjoyed that he wishes to bridge the gap and finally make peace. But no, her father is angry and stubborn and cannot seem to find happiness in his son's possible return. Just thinking about it all makes her angrier.

She is also upset with Firmus, but that is an issue to be dealt with later. His recklessness does not bode well for Marcella or the baby. Lucia rubs circles on her temples, the veil she is wearing casts most of her face in shadow, but it is only adding to her aggravation. She is tired of being sad, tired of being angry, and tired of never seeing her brother. They have been kept apart thus far, and now that the Fates have decided to show her some kindness and let her see him again, her father has to ruin it all with his pride. Lucia sighs deeply, looking away from her tense family and out into the crowd. Firmus and Marcella assured her that the baby would come soon. She concentrates on finding something to bring them. After all this will be their first child. The doctors are sure that it will be a boy, something both Marcella and Firmus are hoping to be true. Lucia is not sure what kind of gift to give them though. She would ask Caesonia or her father, but the tension is still too high to change the subject.

A bright shawl catches her eyes. It's brilliant red reminds her of Marcella's hair. She wonders if the child will have Marcella's bright hair or Firmus's dark short hair. The shawl is lovely, finely woven and made of many shades of red, starting at bright crimson and fading into a dark almost black red. She decided to buy it for Marcella. It seems fitting after all. After she has purchased the shawl, she decides to visit Firmus and Marcella. The last time she saw them they told her the doctor expected the baby very soon. She informs her family that she is leaving the festival to visit a friend. Her father eyes her warily, but tells her to go ahead.

The lovely weather cannot last, she knows this. Too soon it will be too cold to take leisurely walks. Lucia knows she must enjoy this while it lasts. It takes her longer than usual to make it the villa. She takes her time, contemplating the change of season and what the baby will look like. She amuses herself by trying to imagine it. Soon, the villa is in sight and Lucia strolls up the winding road. The closer to the house she gets, the more nervous she feels. Something is not right. The villa is as foreboding as it was when Firmus's father died. Lucia feels fear creeping into her heart. She rushes to the door and is ushered in by a distressed doorman. There is a heavy silence that hangs over the walls as she makes her way to the back of the villa. As she gets closer to her destination, dread fills her. Suddenly the silence is broken by a long reedy wail. Followed by the heartbreaking scream she has ever heard. Every part of her body wants to freeze, to halt and turn around and run away, but she cannot. She forces herself to keep walking forwards. More crying breaks the oppressive silence. The baby, she knows that what it is, sounds weak. Terror grips her heart.

She comes to the last hallway and sees a group of servants clustered around an open door, some are holding fresh linens, some are holding each other. Lucia almost cannot bear to look into the room. She walks up to them and the servants part silently so that she can enter. To her horror, Marcella lies motionless, pale and covered in blood on a bed. A doctor leans over her, face ashen, cradling a small infant. The heartbreaking cry she heard before splits the air again. Lucia flinches, she knows who is screaming. She looks around for the person making the noise, she cannot see him. One of the servants points to the adjacent chamber when she turns to them. She nods grimly and makes her way to the other room, scarlet shawl clutched tightly in her hands.

Lucia is not prepared for what she sees. Firmus, kneeling on the floor, clutching his face, sobbing. She is taken aback by his intense display of emotion. She does not know what to do. Frozen, standing above him she is terrified. He has not noticed her yet, still curled into himself. She cannot leave him like that. Curled up on the floor like child, it hurts her heart to do so. Once again she forces herself to move, one step at a time until she is standing by his side. He does not look up, still hunched over. Slowly, she kneels beside him. She can offer no words. She does not know this type of loss. She sits beside him, not touching him, not speaking, just sitting. Firmus does not move, he cries, sometimes he lets out that same heartbroken scream she first heard. The screams fade in intensity. He is exhausted. She still does not touch him. Just sits by his side, tears streaming down her face, uselessly clutching the shawl. Eventually the doctor comes in, blood-spattered and somber. He tells Firmus that his wife is dead. That their son is weak, and may not live through the night. Firmus does not look up, lost in his own grief. Lucia does though. She sees that the doctor is holding the baby. He asks her if she will hold the

baby while he cleans up and talks to the wet nurse. Lucia nods numbly. She stands and is handed the tiny baby. It has already been cleaned and swaddled. It appears to be sleeping. Numbly she looks down at it. She has never seen anything so small. She wraps it in the shawl as well, it is too tiny to keep itself warm. Firmus is still hunched on the floor. Lucia sits down again. She does not ask if he wants to see or hold the baby. He would not understand the question. He is too far in his grief to be coherent. The baby turns, and lets out a pathetic cry. Lucia's heart almost stops. Tears spill from her eyes again and she cradles the baby to her. Softly, she begins to sing the lullaby her grandmother taught her.

“Sleep, my child, my darling child. Sleep in your bed of light.”

The baby is so tiny.

“Everywhere I go, I see you dear. Even the smallest red rose reminds me of you.”

Beside her Firmus has slumped to the floor, she settles down more comfortably beside him.

“I have prayed to the many gods that no more tears should fall from your face.”

He still does not look up, even though he must know why she is singing.

“Oh my child, my beloved child please do not cry anymore.”

Her tears stop, the baby seems content, it does not move again. She can feel its warmth as she rocks it gently as she seen Caesonia do after Primus was born.

“My honey child. So sweet, who is this? It is you my beloved child.”

She finishes her song and sits in silence. She has not processed what has happened yet. She knows the truth, but if she acknowledges it, she knows she will break. So she does not think about it, does not dwell on the final image of Marcella pale and bright all at once, lying dead on a bed of blood.

The doctor does not return for some time. When he does, Firmus sits up starting at the crimson wrapped bundle in Lucia's arms. No one speaks for a moment. It is the doctor who finally breaks the silence.

"The baby is a boy, you have a son." It takes a moment for Firmus to register that he is being spoken to. He turns slowly to face the doctor.

"A son?"

"Yes. Weak, but if he makes it through the night he might survive."

Firmus looks back at Lucia who still cradles the baby in her arms. She meets his eyes, they are red from crying and he looks lost. Lucia nods encouragingly, not that she knows what she is encouraging him to do. He takes a deep breath and moves closer. He looks down at the baby. He is tiny, paler than Firmus, but with his same face. Lucia wonders if his hair will be red when it grows in. Right now he has no hair. To her surprise, Firmus traces his bald little head tenderly with one finger. He looks down at his son and Lucia can tell that he loves him already. She feels relieved. He looks up at her and she can tell he too is relieved.

"Vettius. His name will be Vettius." His voice is raspy, whether from crying or screaming she does not know. "Marcella wanted that name." He says softly. Lucia thinks

she will cry again. The doctor looks relieved. He steps forwards and offers to take the baby. Lucia looks at Firmus to ask if she can hand him off and he nods. Lucia carefully places the baby in the doctor's arms and then helps Firmus stand. She stays back as the doctor converses with Firmus and the wet nurse. Unsure whether she wants to run home or stay she stands, twisting her tunic between her fingers. She is determined not to think about Marcella for now. She can grieve later on her own.

When they are done talking Lucia asks Firmus if she should go. He stares at her for a moment confused. He is holding his son. Holding him like he is an ancient and delicate treasure of unimaginable worth. Lucia does not know what to say. She stands there waiting before he asks her what she wants. Lucia looks at him considering her options. She wants to run home, bury her head in her blankets and cry until the world fades away and everything does not hurt so much. She tells him she will stay. He needs the company. He looks so grateful that it makes Lucia's heart hurt even more. She arranges to send word to her family. They will not begrudge her one night. They know only that Marcella was a close friend, they will not ask any questions. A guest room is prepared although she doubts she will use it. She stands in the atrium, watching the household try to adjust. She stands there until Firmus joins her. He has given Vettius back to the wet nurse and looks lost. He invites her to sit across from him on one of the long benches in the atrium by the west side.

They sit in silence for a long time. Lucia waits for Firmus to speak. He does eventually, he does not talk about Marcella though. Lucia thinks she understands. She cannot bear to mention her either. Instead they talk about festivals and grandparents and bittersweet childhood memories. Firmus falls asleep near dawn. Lucia does not. She has

sat too many vigils to do so. She watches him now. He looks younger in his sleep, though sorrow lines his face. She cannot look at his face for long though. Her own sorrow rises and she cannot give in to her grief. Not here, not now. In the morning, she goes home. She thinks Firmus understands. She will sit vigil for Marcella, she knows this even before the undertaker asks her. When she gets home, she avoids her family. They do not question her and they do not pry. They leave her alone and worry from across the hall. She is thankful for that. No words can express the raw grief that overtakes her.

Marcella is dead. She is dead and every fiber of Lucia's being aches because of it. She aches for her own heartbreak for she has lost a treasured friend and she aches of Firmus who has lost his greatest love and dearest companion. Her heart, still freshly broken tears and twists anew. She thinks now that her life will only be agony. Her own and the weight of Firmus's. He will love his son because he is Marcella's son as well. But there will not be a day when he does not remember that and tear his own heart out at the loss. Lucia feels her grief rise again. This time she does not push it down. She lets it overwhelm her and loses herself in it. She is broken and she feels it keenly.

Chapter Twelve: Mourning

There are several days in limbo before the vigil begins. Lucia cannot bear to be around her family, they do not understand her heartbreak, and neither does she. They try to help, but it only makes it worse. Her fight with her father still looms in the back of her mind, but she cannot care about it enough to address it now. She cannot bear to be near Firmus either. She forces herself to though. His pain is a thousand times worse than hers. The only comfort is that Vettius made it through the night and grows stronger every day. He is the one source of happiness Firmus has.

Lucia does not speak to her father about the letter from her brother. He gives it to her a guilty look on his face. They will talk about this later she knows. She has skimmed it several times without really seeing it. She decided to save it for after the funeral. She can deal with it later.

It seems too soon for her vigil to begin. Surely Marcella cannot be gone. The familiar numb pain sets in and Lucia wonders how many more she must lose before the Fates grow tired of her heartbreak. Not that her loss is in any way comparable to Firmus's. He has lost his wife, the mother of his son, center of his world, and his most dearly beloved. His family say he is broken hearted. But that is not true His heart is shattered, broken implies it can be healed. There is no healing from this wound. Lucia cannot bear to dwell on it too long. Not when she must see him, lost in his own home, searching listlessly for the source of his pain. Without Marcella, the villa seems cold and empty. The rooms are too quiet, even the slightest sound seems deafening. The color and life seem to have died with her. He will not enter her rooms. The grief is too raw. He

cannot bear to look at the things that once belonged to her and know that she will never touch, or wear, or use them ever again.

He wanders the empty halls, avoiding her rooms, never resting, never stopping. It is as if now that Marcella is gone he cannot rest. Even his newborn son cannot rouse him from his aimless, nervous pacing. Lucia can barely watch him run himself ragged, but she must. She is the only one he will listen to. The only one who comes close to understanding his grief. She cannot stop him, not for more than an hour at a time, but he has held his son at her insistence. He has eaten, at least once since Marcella's death. It is not much, but Lucia will take what little she can.

Her vigil begins tonight. She should be resting but instead she is watching Firmus as he paces around the atrium. She knows better than to talk to him. Sometimes he yells as though furious and it scares Lucia a little. Even more terrifying is when he cries. He will not let anyone touch him when he cries, and he sounds as though he is dying. It breaks Lucia's heart more every day. She does not know how to help him, though she desperately wants to. So, she stands in the hallway, hidden from view, watching as he paces the room like a madman. He's muttering to himself, but she cannot hear what he is saying. Maybe it is better that she cannot hear him. There is nothing she can say that will help him. No argument she can bring forth to convince him to sleep or even to stop pacing. It will not be long until nightfall. Until the undertaker brings Marcella's body out to rest in the atrium. Lucia will have to convince Firmus to leave the room until she is in place. The best way would be to get him to hold Vettius, that seems to be the only time Firmus feels anything other than grief. He does not hate his son, for this Lucia is

thankful. The child does not deserve anger or hatred. It is not his fault the Fates snatched away his mother before he had a chance to know her.

The undertaker arrives early, he looks worriedly at Lucia and asks if Firmus is alright. Lucia sighs deeply and shakes her head. The undertaker asks no more questions and waits until Firmus is holding Vettius under the wet nurse's watchful eye before moving Marcella out to the atrium. Even in death she is breathtakingly beautiful. Her bright red hair stands out starkly in contrast to the dark marble plinth on which she rests. Her hands are crossed over her chest as though she is merely resting. They dressed her in her finest clothes, deep blue tunics layered over her pale body adorned with amber and gold. The masks and flower petals are strewn around the plinth and the smell of sweet perfume chokes the air, reminding Lucia that Marcella is dead. She refuses to look away. Even when the coins are placed over her closed eyes, she still watches. She has not cried since the first day after Marcella's death. She does not want to cry again. Her grief is still too raw to expose. Firmus circles around to the atrium just as they finish. Lucia and the undertaker wait with baited breath. Firmus stares at his wife, tears welling. He says nothing and does not walk up to the plinth. Lucia can feel the undertaker's relief as Firmus backs out of the room, not once looking away from Marcella's still form.

Lucia begins her vigil alone. Firmus has not entered the room since he saw Marcella on the plinth earlier. She allows herself a moment of sorrow. She will never hear Marcella laugh again. Never see her smile at Firmus or watch her hold her son and see him grow. The pain and unfairness of it eats at her. Marcella had such a wonderful future and it had been taken so causally from her. Tears prick at the corners of her eyes and she fights desperately not to shed them.

She does not see Firmus on the first night of her vigil. It would not surprise her if he had wandered through the villa, unable to return to the atrium and see his wife lying there, cold and alone on the plinth. She does not sleep restfully during the day, the sorrow seeps into the walls and disturbs her dreams. The second night Lucia sees Firmus standing in the doorway to the atrium. He looks as though he is still not sleeping. He does not enter the atrium or acknowledge Lucia. At least tonight she knows where he is. He is gone by morning, but Lucia sleeps better. On the third night, he sits just inside the atrium. Lucia cries that night. Silent tears that burn her cheeks as she turns her face away from Firmus so he cannot see them. The next night he paces around the atrium and Lucia feels more tired than she has ever felt before. He is still silent, face twisted in grief, head bowed as he paces. Still she does not try to talk to him. The last time they spoke to one another it was of inconsequential things, trying to distract from the reality of Marcella's death.

Her absence leaves a gaping hole between them. It was Marcella after all who bridged the gap and mended the misunderstanding. She is not there anymore to draw them in and maneuver through their awkwardness and pull them together. She fears without Marcella Firmus may never speak again.

The fourth day she cannot sleep. Restlessness plagues her so she goes outside to see the trees that shade the villa on its eastern side. The trees shelter a lovely garden that by far outshines the one beside Lucia's home. The trees are taller, stately, and they bend gently to the walls of the house. They are well maintained. The rosebushes that lean against the wall are in full bloom, countless shades of red that draw the eye. There are two low stone benches flanked by large, squat pots. A spray of golden asters pours from

each pot. The trees are turning purple and red as well. Soon the blossoms will wither and die. Autumn has barely begun, but Lucia swears she can already feel a chill in the air. Spending most of the day outside alone, she allows herself to feel her own sorrow. Wrapping it around herself she curls into the shadow of the trees and weeps. She weeps for her grandmother, whom she misses so much it feels like a physical ache. Weeps for Marcella, bright and beautiful and dead too soon. She weeps for Firmus and his son as well. Vettius will never know his mother, only hear grief tinged stories of her. She cries until her voice is hoarse, eyelids heavy and stiff, muscles ache from curling in a ball at the base of a tree, and her throat hurts. After she wipes away the last of her tears she starts pushing the physical pain away, bit by bit until she feels numb enough to go inside and sleep.

On the fifth night of her vigil Lucia comes to the realization that she must continue to help Firmus. Sitting across from her now, he looks lost and almost afraid. She almost cannot stand to see him so vulnerable. He will likely throw himself recklessly into his intrigue now that Marcella is gone. She was his last restraint. Without her he will be careless and bold. He might destroy himself with his maneuvering. Lucia is certain that if he does not throw himself back into his work, he will destroy himself with grief. It is better to let him be reckless but occupied. She is not happy with that knowledge, but her unhappiness does not make it any less true. What he is doing is dangerous. The Empress has shown she is no inexperienced, innocent bystander in her husband's politics. She is ruthless and determined. As clever as Firmus is he cannot hope to prevent her from putting her nephew close to the Emperor. She does not tell him this. If he would listen to neither his wife nor his father, she cannot hope to dissuade him. Instead she will quietly

support him. Continue to be his eyes and ears and listen for whispers of the Empress's anger.

The last two nights of the vigil pass uneventfully. The wet nurse brings Vettius to his father to hold sometimes during the night. Father and son seem comforted by each other, even if he only holds Vettius for a little while. Firmus has not cried in front of Lucai since the vigil began. He seems to have no more tears, but he may have wept during the day when Lucia is asleep. He does not sleep much. The household servants whisper worriedly that he moves from room to room, avoiding other people, muttering to himself or slamming and locking doors. He might be composing the eulogy for his wife, the servants are not sure, but they worry for him.

Just before dawn on the day of the procession, Lucia sits on a low bench, watching the firelight flicker across the dark marble of the plinth. Firmus is standing, leaning against a column not far from her. She turns to him and says softly, "If you still want to continue in the senate, I will help. I do not know what more I can do but listen for you, but I will do whatever I can." She does not look at him directly. "I have heard that the Empress will make her move, or her nephew will, very soon." He says nothing, but Lucia can feel his eyes on her. His gaze is intense and she is reminded of burning flesh and charred hair. "I cannot provide you counsel, but I can continue as I have been." She looks at him now. Despite the intensity of his gaze, he is smiling a small, peculiar smile. If he did not look so exhausted and wrung out it might have been charming. He pushes himself off the pillar and walks to stand beside Lucia. He kneels by her side and looks at her with a very serious expression.

“Thank you Lucia.” He taps her scarred cheek gently with his first finger. “You have been an invaluable friend to my family.” Lucia is numb with shock. This the first time since her grandmother died that anyone has touched the scarred side of her face. “I only hope one day I can repay the favor.” He stands and the peculiar smile returns briefly before he strides out of the room, leaving a shocked and confused Lucia sitting alone in the atrium. Once he has walked out of Lucia’s line of sight, she lifts her hand to the spot on her cheek that he touched. Pressing trembling fingers to the spot she feels only her scars. This leaves her more confused than before and she drops her hand into her lap and twists her tunic into knots. She is spared from her uncomfortable confusion by the timely arrival of the undertaker who directs her gently to the hall where the other mourners have congregated and are preparing for the procession.

Lucia snaps out of her stupor and prepares for the procession. She feels the same as she did at her grandmother’s funeral, but she is a mourner now. She cannot grieve as Marcella’s family would, nor can she grieve ritualistically. She counted Marcella as a friend, but few know that. She cannot hold her head high and show her sorrow. Marcella’s death feels like a raw wound that will not heal, an injury on top of so many other cuts and scrapes. She cannot hide her sorrow either behind ritual grief and ceremony. She is trapped somewhere in between, helpless and confused.

There is not a crowd like the one for Firmus’s father, but Marcella is, was well loved. The walk to cemetery is not as long as Lucia remembers it. Everything seems to be moving so fast around her. Even the eulogies pass quickly. Too soon it is time to say goodbye for the last time. Lucia stands back with the other mourners, watching as Firmus takes his son to see his mother one last time. The baby does not cry, but he reaches for

her before Firmus tucks him securely to his chest. His face is stony, unreadable and stoic. He touches Marcella's hair one last time, Vettius held firmly next to his heart. Lucia looks away, it is unbearable to watch this last goodbye. She does not look up again until the pyre roars to life. She forces herself to watch as Marcella is placed on the fire. She clutches her tunic, watching as the flames consume her. An eerie silence falls. No one in the crowd moves or makes a sound. The air is filled with the cracking of fire and the splintering of wood and as the pyre blazes. It is the only sound for a moment. Then people filter past Firmus, offering him their condolences and expressing their sorrow. Lucia stays long after her vigil is over. She stays until the pyre is completely dead, nothing left of Marcella but ash. Once again she is confronted by the stark reality of her death. Firmus gently dismisses her, telling her to go home. She lingers only a moment longer than necessary and walks home alone. She is glad that the rest of the house is asleep when she returns. Lucia cannot bear to talk to anyone, even her father. She falls into bed, still in her mourning attire. Sleep does not come easily; she dreams of flames and blood and pale cold hands intertwining their fingers together.

Chapter Thirteen: Falling

The numbness does not leave her this time. She cannot shake it off. It clings to her bones, blossoms in her lungs, and pulls her down relentlessly. As bad as it is for her, for Firmus it is a thousand times worse. When she sees him he looks as though he has not slept. His skin is ashen, her dark curls lank and his eyes lifeless. He is a broken shell of a man. Looking at him makes her heart hurt and her scars itch. He looks as though he may drop dead at any moment. Only when he holds Vettius does he look alive. He cradles the boy to his chest and curls around him as though to protect him from everything around him. It is so painful to watch the brilliant and beautiful man she once knew fade into someone thoroughly broken by despair.

Lucia does not know what he plans to do, what he can do in his current state. When Marcella was still with them, he had been itching to upset the Empress. She had an influence on the Emperor, even if they rarely saw each other. Lucia knows he has upset others before. Marcella never spoke of how he convinced some of his allies to join him, but Lucia knows from the dark look on her face, that it was not the usual patronage or bribery. Firmus is a clever man with high ambitions and almost nothing to lose. Lucia is afraid for him. This cannot end well.

He sends her out on a mission to find out what she can about the Martius family, whom Empress has decided to ally with. The head of the family took a shine to her nephew and is willing to help him curry favor. A few of their rivals have suffered mysterious deaths and the youngest son died recently from a terrible fever after a public dispute with his sister. Firmus suspects that they are poisoning anyone in their way and

wants Lucia to see if she can find any proof of such actions. She will have to be careful, they do not much care for the Firmus family.

Lucia hates them from the very start. They are haughty, vain creature who lurk around the villa swapping gossip and exaggerate stories of their own prowess. She has sat vigil for the son for only two days and she hates him too. She sits beside his body in the atrium and loathes him and his whole family. His sister slithers through the halls, triumphant and pleased with herself. Lucia is sure the whole lot of them are murderers. They do not see her as a threat and treat her with some courtesy, which surprises her, but does not lessen her hatred. She overhears the sister giggling with a cousin or friend that she poisoned pretty-little girls and broke their lover's hearts. Lucia keeps an eye out for anything she can tell Firmus.

It is the worst vigil she has ever sat and she considers making Firmus promise never to make her do this again. The way the Martius children speak of the Empress's nephew make it clear they think he is an idiot to be used until he is worthless and then move on to the next plaything to bring them power. The seven days and nights she is there, she never sees him, despite him staying in their home at the request of his aunt. She hears many disturbing things while sitting in the atrium. Most of which she wishes she could unhear. But the most important, and most terrifying, is that Firmus has made them very, very angry. She has no clue what he has done to anger them so greatly, but she knows that they are aware of his plot to ruffle the Empress's feathers. They disapprove greatly and they may have the power to do something about it. She learns that the fourth day after realizing they think she sleeps midday. She is too on edge to sleep all day and

wakes up before the afternoon meal. Lucia is glad she did not leave her room during that time to show them that she is awake.

All she wants to do is get away and warn Firmus, but she is a mourner and she must do her job. It is torturous, pretending to know nothing and act calm and collected around the people planning the possible murder of one of the only people she has left. Somehow she manages it, smiling and nodding and playing the part. She desperately wants to flee the moment the undertaker releases her, but she forces herself to talk to the other mourners to see if she can get anything else. Musa, as usual provides the most useful information. The Empress's nephew has not been seen since he went to stay with the Martius family. Lucia goes home, anxious to see Firmus as soon as possible. However, after spending so much time with the family, she knows it is better to wait to go to him. She sends him a message discreetly through the doctor. She has urgent news, but she cannot risk being followed. He will know he is in danger but not specifics. Lucia is nervous to leave it up to chance, but she has no other choice.

She holes herself up in her room with her brother's letter. He asks about their grandmother and Lucia cries every time she reads it. He does send good news, he is being sent near the capitol soon and his wife is pregnant. He wants her to meet his family, heal the divide and begin anew. That makes Lucia cry again. Later, after she has read and reread the letter she goes to talk to her father and apologize. She knocks on the door to his study and stands nervously as she waits for him. He does not keep her waiting, and lets her in looking down at her concerned.

“Father, I am sorry. I should not have said what I did. It was cruel and you did not deserve it.” She cannot look at him. She still thinks he is wrong and that he should let Ameilius come back. But what she said was unfair.

“Oh Lucia, I had the same fight with him when he left.” Her father sounds so very tired. Lucia looks up surprised. “He said the same thing. For a while he was right.” Lucia nearly falls over in shock. Her father continues, he seems not to have noticed her reaction. “Drusus was perfect son in many ways. He was level headed, clever, brave, and would have made a wonderful grammarian or optio, whatever he chose. Ameilius, he was more impulsive.” He looks up to see if Lucia is listening and catches a glimpse of her expression. “I did not like that he saw through me. Lucia, I love all my children, but Drusus was my firstborn son.” He sighs and runs a hand through his hair. “I love Ameilius. I do.” He catches Lucia’s quirked eyebrow and smiles. “I think it is time to let go of my anger. The truth is, I want my son back. I want to meet his wife, and I want to see my grandchildren.” He smiled at Lucia, who had begun to tear up. “Would you help me write to him Lucia? You know him best.”

“Of course Father. Of course I will.” She smiles, wiping her tears away. For the first time in a very long time she feels real happiness. Her brother can come home. There is so much hurt left to heal, but it is a start, and a welcome departure from the loss she is becoming accustomed to. Her father comes around and wraps an arm around her pressing a kiss to her forehead. Caesonia pokes her head in through the door and looks relieved. She calls them to the evening meal. It is the most pleasant one in a while. Lucia can almost forget about the Martius family and the trouble Firmus is in. Her father asks her if she will attend the festival the next day. She politely declines.

“I must rest, I have sat too many vigils lately. I need sleep, in my own bed and my own home.” She laughs, wishing that is what she was going to do. Caesonia and her father laugh with her. It almost feels like everything will be alright. In that moment, Lucia wants so badly for everything, just this once, to end happily. She hugs Primus before he is ushered off to bed, and promises to attend the next festival with her family.

When she makes it her room, she closes the door and curls up in her bed. All over again she is afraid. Unable to shake the feeling that something terrible is coming, she takes out her brother’s letter and rereads it. She still cries when he asks after their grandmother and when he describes his wife and how he wants them to meet her. Tucking the letter safely away, Lucia lies down to sleep, looking out the window at the dark sky she can just barely see the stars. She lulls herself to sleep with the promise of the happy reunion her family will have.

Chapter Fourteen: Red River

She leaves early in the morning. There is a festival and she wants to see Firmus before it begins. There is little time to waste, she must speak with him urgently. Lucia leaves word with the cook that she will be gone and not to worry, she has merely gone to see her employer. Tensions are low in the house, she and her father were no longer fighting and everything seemed to be returning to normal. Lucia paused in front of the room her grandmother had occupied, a pang of loss shot through her, and she lingers for a

moment. The pain was still raw, and there was little she could do to curb it. She does not linger long though and leaves the house as the sun crept over the horizon.

The journey to the villa seems unnaturally short. When she arrives it seems too quiet. There are no signs of life as she approaches the doors making her uncomfortable. It only gets worse once she enters the house. An eerie silence hung over the villa. No one came to greet her and she could not hear voices from the kitchens or halls. She stands for a moment by the door, trying to decide what to do. Eventually she stepped inside, and moved through the halls, searching for any sign of another person.

“Firmus? Firmus! Where are you?” Lucia walks quickly through the halls, veil thrown back, hair falling from its pins. The villa, uncharacteristically silent and cold, seemed almost foreboding in the early light. She feels as if the walls were closing in on her as she moves towards the back of the sprawling house. Panic rose in her throat and she could not force any sounds out. Her footsteps echoed loudly in the silent rooms as she rushed through them in her attempt to find Firmus.

He was standing in his wife’s empty chambers, the ones that had been used when she had friends or relatives visiting. Lucia breathed a sigh of relief, moving towards him, panic still lingering. Even turned away from her she could see the strain he was under. Lucia felt the tension as it rolled off him in waves. “Firmus?” she was more tentative than usual, he seemed almost fragile.

He did not turn to look at her, merely asked, “Lucia? You are well?”

“I am, but you,” she paused, considering her words carefully. “You are not well. Something, something has happened.” It was not a question. Firmus did not treat it as such.

“You are right. Something has indeed happened. Something terrible.” He still did not turn to look at her. Lucia hesitated, she extended her hand, fingers inches away from touching him. They stood there for a long moment; Lucia with her hand outstretched and Firmus, tall, stiff, and under great strain. Gradually Lucia lowered her hand, Firmus however, did not relax. His stance remained frigid and he reeked of tension. The panic rose again, and Lucia shifted uncomfortably. The desire to reach out again was almost overwhelming, but she knew she could not, he could not let her acknowledge his weakness. They knew each other too well for that. So she waited. The fear and panic coiled around her like a snake, and she felt a faint burning sensation along the left side of her body. As much as she could she pushed the feeling aside and waited. It felt as though hours had passed when he finally spoke again.

“Lucia.” He stopped, still not turning to look at her, “I...I have made arrangements for my son.” The tension increased and Lucia bit her lip to keep from speaking out. “It is not safe for him here anymore. He goes to live with his mother’s family. They will protect him, care for him, love him.” He stops again, the tension in his stance is almost physically painful. “I am afraid I cannot do that for him.” Lucia feels her eyes burn, but she dares not speak. “I sent him with those I trust the most. They will make sure he is well looked after.” Firmus finally turns, Lucia can see now why he had not before. There are tears on his cheeks,

and lingering in his dark eyes. The desire to reach out is only tempered by fear. He speaks again, "I...I told the others to attend the festival. I had to order some of them to go. But they went." He is holding on to the tension, Lucia realizes, it is all that is keeping him upright. Firmus's hands are shaking, and the tears fall slowly. He is in great pain and Lucia cannot, does not know how to help him. She does not even know if he would allow her too. "They are safe." He barely forces the words out, struggling to keep control. Lucia is terrified.

She finally breaks her silence, "Firmus. Firmus what happened?" She wants to ask him why he had to send Vettius away, why he sent all of the household servants and slaves to the festival, and why he is so tense and barely holding himself together. Lucia knows if she asks those questions he may break, she may never get her answers, just a cold, angry dismissal. She cannot bear that, not now, not when they have both lost so much. So she only asks him what happened. For a few minutes he cannot answer. Lucia chafes at the wait, but does not press him for answers. The panic she is experiencing seems like fire inside her and she struggles to push it down.

"Lucia, I did something...something terrible." He looks her in the eye, and with horrible certainty she knows exactly what it is. She brings a hand to her mouth, stifling the gasp, desperate to stay in control. "I had to! I had no other choice!" Firmus moves towards her, desperation shining in his eyes. "I had to protect my son!" He reaches out, shaking and Lucia stares at him, tears welling in her own eyes. "Please believe me." He is in so much pain, she can tell. The fire inside her dies out and she feels cold, anxious, and afraid. Still, she reaches out

and takes his hand. Firmus clings to her hand like it is the only real thing in his world. He clings to her like a drowning man clings to his last breaths. It is terrifying, but she does not try to shake him off. She holds on just as tightly, tears falling down her face as well.

“Oh Firmus, I know.” She does know. She heard the whispers, the anger and the betrayal expressed in private by those powerful enough to have clout within the Senate. She knows the secrets they would do anything to hide, the weaknesses Firmus found and ruthlessly exploited. She does not, and honestly cannot, hate him for it. They would have done the same, in fact it seems they have. They forced his hand, after all the tragedy and misery he suffered, they forced his hand. She tries not to think about the young man with a promising future now lying dead somewhere in the city. Firmus once had a promising future: a career in the Senate, a loving wife, loyal spy, and a son. That is all gone now. The Fates saw to it that it all came to an end.

She cannot see now, the tears falling so quickly, but she tries, she tries to see him. Once she had thought him mysterious, strange, and foreign. Now she tries to see him through her tears, memorize his face and the pain and terror there. She will never see him so weak again. Lucia knows this with crushing certainty. So she clings to Firmus and tries to memorize every angle of his face, the way the tears roll down his cheeks, the way his eyes glisten and go red. She commits to memory the way his mouth turns downward, the way he scrunches his nose to try and stop the flow of tears. The way he looks at her, refusing to look away, letting her see him at his weakest. She cannot look away. It is strangely beautiful, and

scary. She realizes that she cares for him, or rather realizes that she has cared for him for a long time. That his loss, for she will lose him, will be devastating. She may never recover. Once again the tears blind her and she clings to him all the more tightly because of it.

“Lucia! Lucia I am so sorry.” He gasps out, reaching for her with his other hand. Firmus wraps his hand around their clasped ones and slumps, knees hitting the ground, pulling Lucia down with him. She falls with him, tugging him closer till he is hunched over practically in her lap. It is just like the night he lost Marcella, he had collapsed then too. She wrapped herself around him as he finally let go of her hand. She does not sing to him this time. She does not know if she could even force the words out, her throat seems to be closing. He apologizes again and again between sobs, muffled in her dress, she can barely hear him. He wraps an arm around her waist, holding onto her with the same intensity as before. It hurts, but there is no way Lucia would let him go, she merely holds tightly as well. His voice trails off and they sit there wrapped in each other for a long time.

Firmus slumps against her with a small noise of pain and Lucia rubs his back trying to stop her own tears. It is not until she feels something wet and warm that she realizes something is horribly wrong. His grip loosens and he sags against her. With a growing sense of horror, Lucia pushes him away and pulls him upright. Her scream echoes through the cold halls when she sees the knife in his side. He has it loosely grasped in his hand and the blood is spilling far too quickly for her to stem the flow. Frantically she tries anyway, hands pressed up against his

side. He coughs and she sees more blood. “Firmus! Firmus no! No! You cannot die! No!” She tries to tear at her dress, tries to use the torn fabric to stem the flow, but he pushes her hands aside. Lucia sobs, and tries to fight him, but Firmus grabs her and weakly shakes her. She pulls him closer, cradling him in her lap as though he is a small child. Weeping, she begs him to stay. “Please, please Firmus! You cannot die...” She trails off, as he reaches for her face. “Please do not leave me...” He smiles, stroking her scars gently. Her tears blur her vision and she catches his hand in her own, pressing it to the scared side of her face desperately. “Stay with me. Please.”

“There is nothing for me here...only pain and death. I cannot stay.” He gasps in pain and Lucia clings to him. “You know I cannot stay.” He looks up at her, smiling sadly. “I have killed a good man Lucia...I took his future from him.I deserve this...” Firmus coughs again, he is soaked in his own blood, and so is Lucia. “There is nothing for me here. My son is gone...safe...my wife...gone...my father...gone...”

“I am still here. I will stay with you. I promise. I will stay by your side, please. I can get help, we can save you! You will see your son again. Just please let me help you!”

“You would hate it. Staying by my side, caring for my son.” He smiles up at her, he has finally stopped crying. He brushes his thumb under Lucia’s eyelid, wiping away tears.

“No! No! I would not hate it!” She sobs, clinging to his hand, curling around him. Lucia’s whole body rocked with sobs, trying desperately to hold him together.

“Yes you would...you...you are too strong to live that way...” He chokes out, trying to smile through the pain. His blood pools around them, dark and warm, soaking into Lucia’s skirts and staining the floor. She sobs, unable to speak, gasping out pleas for him to stay.

“I...I wanted to tell you...” Firmus murmurs, “I thought you were beautiful.”

“What?” Lucia is confused, tearing streaming down her face as he gasps out his last words.

“I thought...you were beautiful. Your...scars were never...terrifying. They were beautiful Lucia.... you are beautiful.” His hand goes limp and he smiles at her one last time. “So strong....so wild....so lovely.... goodbye Lucia dearest.... goodbye.” Firmus’s eyes grow dim and Lucia leans forward, placing a kiss on his brow as his last breath leaves his body.

Firmus dies in her arms. The thought crashes through her head like waves against a galley prow. It consumes her, the pain and the loss that she barely understands. Her whole body feels as though it is on fire. The anguish for her mother, brother, and grandmother comes crashing in again; fueled by Firmus’s death it overwhelms her and she gives in. Lucia throws her head back and screams, howling her grief to the skies. She cannot even cry, just scream. She

screams until her voice gives out and only harsh croaking noises escape from her throat. She screams until her whole body feels raw and beaten and cold. She screams until the pain is too much and she collapses. After that she cries again. Clinging to him, refusing to let go. Hours pass, the sky grows dark and the cold air seems to freeze. She lifts her face to the stars, and stares sightlessly into the darkness. She has to move. She cannot stay here. She has to go.

Lucia crawls over to the nearest couch, dusty from disuse, dragging Firmus's body with her. She can feel rather than see the trail of blood behind her. Struggling, she lifts him up on the couch. It takes a moment to get herself upright but she does it. She stands and looks down at him. His last smile still lingers on his face, calm despite the pool of blood on the floor and staining his clothes. She arranges his hands, clasped over his chest and maneuvers the couch so that his feet face the doorway. She leans over and presses another kiss to his forehead, tears slowly winding their way down her face. She whispers goodbye to him, and closes his eyes gently. When she stands again, she walks purposefully out of the room. She will not look back, there is no time for that. The festival will soon come to a close and there is work to be done. Lucia heads to the kitchens, she finds what she needs easily. The wine barrels are difficult to maneuver but she finds the strength to move them. Once they have been placed she smashes them, it is not easy, but she manages it. She does not go into the room where Firmus's body is laid again, she merely smashes a wine barrel in front of it. Once she is done with that she goes rekindles the fire pits in the house and knocks them over one by one. As quickly as she can she leaves the house. Even before she shuts the

main doors, she can smell the smoke, it makes her feel dizzy, but she presses onward. She draws her veil closer and tries to hide the blood on her dress. Not that it matters, it is very dark and where she is going there is not much light. As she walks down the road away from the villa, she can just begin to hear the crackling of flames. This time she lets the memories consume her. The smell of burning plaster and wood, overpowered by the stink of her own burning flesh. She relives the pain and suffering, over and over as she runs from the burning villa. The sound of her own screams and her brother's frantic voice. The darkness and the white hot agony of waking up.

Lucia runs from the villa and she runs from her past. The night is dark enough that she can hide in the shadows as she runs away. In the distance she can hear shouting, it could be memories or it could be people trying to put out the fire. She stumbles away, keeping out of sight and heading away from the city. She runs for as long as she can, slipping on rocky paths and falling into the cold hard ground many times. Each time she picks herself up and keeps going. As she gets closer to her destination the sky grows light, and the sound of rushing water registers. Lucia slides to a halt, looking around her. It is early in the morning, no one else has woken, even the birds are silent. She looks down at her bloody filthy dress and tugs her veil off her head. She can hear the river, it is very close, she can make it before the sun properly rises. She sets off once again, stumbling, exhausted towards the Tiber. The river is loud and filthy, rushing past her towards the sea. She falls down on its banks just before the sun rises.

Lucia lays by the river a moment, there are no more tears left. She thinks about her mother and her beautiful smile. She remembers her brother carrying her on his shoulders, running around their home laughing. She remembers her grandmother, singing softly to her when she was very small. She closes her eyes and thinks about Firmus, his dark eyes and dark features, his face tear stained and so close to hers. She hurts, deeply hurts remembering all she has lost. Slowly, she opens her eyes and sits up. The sun is up now, the day has begun. Carefully she stands and removes her shoes, then her tunic, dress and skirts. She stands naked by the river, calmly staring at her reflection in the water. Her scars stand out, wrapping around the left side of her body, a stark and obvious reminder of what she has lost. He told her she was beautiful and wild. She thinks she begins to see what he meant. Gracefully she slides into the river, the water closes above her head. She feels no panic, only peace. Lucia allows herself to sink further and further, closing her eyes and letting go. Even as the darkness encroaches and her lungs strain, she feels peaceful. The first deep breath filled with water is not even so bad, she struggles a little, but eventually she drifts off. Her body sinks further but the current picks her up and lifts her through the murky depths. She floats, free and at ease. The darkness engulfs her, and this time she knows there will be no white hot agony of waking up. She drifts gratefully into the dark, content that she will never wake again.

Epilogue

The Fates are strange, they give opportunities sparingly and take them away so quickly. Love, when allowed is quick and beautiful; but the memories that follow are more painful than the worst death or cruelest torture. From the mightiest emperor to the lowest servant, they cultivate life's thread. No one can escape their power. The lives they weave can be brilliant and vibrant, or cold and passionless. Some lives are so full of pain that their threads warp and twist. Some lives are beautiful and full of love and light. No one knows why the Fates decide whose thread to warp and whose to lovingly cultivate.

Eulogy for Lucia

Lucia Lucullus, daughter of Lucius Lucullus and Cornelia Sosis, granddaughter to Drusilla Melito and Lucius Flavius Lucullus, was a respected mourner, loyal servant of the Firmus family, beloved daughter, and a faithful friend. Her life, cut tragically short in the waters of the mighty Tiber, was filled with pain and intrigue. Despite this, she found light and happiness in her family and her friendships.

She left behind her Father, step-mother Caesonia, half-brother Primus, and older brother Aemilius. They will mourn her, as shall we. Lucia was clever, brave, and loyal. She kept the secrets of the Firmus family, despite the danger they placed her in. Her courage and loyalty were boundless. Though the Firmus family did not achieve their goals, Lucia was an invaluable ally and friend in their struggle to influence the Empire.

Though history may not remember her, we will. We will hold her in our memories and in our hearts. We shall not ask the Fates why they chose to let her life end, only understand the bright light she brought into the lives of those she loved and how much duller our world will be without her.