THE WOLF DEN

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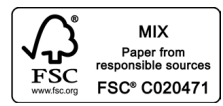
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Baths, wine and sex make fate come faster.
Roman maxim

She holds her hands up as if in prayer, steam evaporating from her skin. The water laps at her neck as she lies back into its warmth. Laughter and female voices surround her, a confusion of sound echoing off the stone. She filters it out, focusing on her fingers, turning them, watching the water drip down, the steam rise. They could be anybody's hands, she thinks, they could belong to anybody. But they belong to Felix.

Then another's fingers interlock with hers, breaking her reverie. Victoria drags her upwards, out of the water.

"Amara! You're getting your hair wet! You can't lie back like that!" Victoria's nails pinch her skin as she tries to revive the curls now plastered to Amara's shoulders. "They're like rat's tails. What were you thinking?"

Anxiety surges through her. So much rests on this afternoon; she cannot believe her own thoughtlessness. "I don't know, I…"

"It doesn't look so bad." Amara turns to face Dido who

has slid over to join them, a slight frown on her gentle face. "You can hardly notice."

"The men aren't here for hair anyway." It's a less friendly voice this time. Drauca, Simo's most valuable woman, is watching them from across the narrow pool. She rises up out of the water, lifting her arms, and sways. The dark waves of her own hair glisten like a raven's plumage. Behind her, through the curved windows, the sea looks flat and grey. It's impossible not to stare. Amara thinks of the statue of Helen of Troy back in Aphidnai, back when she had another name, another life.

"Venus Pompeiana!" Victoria gasps, grabbing Amara in exaggerated astonishment. "The goddess walks among us! Oh, shield my eyes from such glory!" Drauca scowls, dropping her arms with a splash. Victoria laughs. "As if nobody else here has a pair of tits," she says. Though not loud enough for Drauca to hear.

"She is beautiful though," Dido says, still staring at their rival. "And she's been here before, hasn't she? Maybe the men will prefer her, maybe—"

"Apart from Drauca, what do *they* have that we don't?" Victoria interrupts, casting a scathing look at Drauca's three companions. They are taking up most of the pool, splashing about with theatrical laughter, more posed than playful. "You can tell they're all barmaids. Maria has arms like a litter-bearer."

Amara isn't sure they have the right to sneer, given their own lowly status as brothel whores. She-wolves. A familiar knot tightens in her stomach. "I wonder what the men will be like," she says.

"They'll be…" But Victoria doesn't finish her thought,

something behind Amara has caught her attention. "Hey!" she calls. "Let go! Let go of her!" She starts wading through the water towards an old woman who is pulling at Cressa's arm, trying to drag her out of the pool. Victoria stares up at the woman as she successfully hauls a dripping Cressa out onto the side.

The woman leans down and points a gnarled finger in Victoria's face. "Felix? You Felix?" Nobody replies. The stranger looks at them all, grouped together. Beronice has swum over too, mouth slightly open in surprise. "Felix whores out!" The old woman says impatiently, waving her hand towards the door, motioning for them to leave. Cressa tries to remonstrate, but the old woman pushes her backwards. Simo's women have stopped splashing and laughing. Amara senses rather than sees that they are all at the far side of the pool. "Felix whores *out now*," the woman repeats, jabbing her finger at each of them in turn. When no one moves she grabs Amara's arm. "Out! Out!" she shrieks. "Get out now!"

Stone scrapes Amara's skin as the old woman yanks her against the side of the pool. Hard fingers dig into the soft flesh of her upper arm with a grip that's surprisingly strong. She pushes herself up onto the hot tiles, shaking herself free. The woman continues shouting, threatening to call Vibo if they don't move quickly. The mention of the bath manager's name finally convinces them. Felix's women clamber naked out of the water and hurry through to the next room, shivering at the sudden plunge in lighting and temperature. A cascade splashes down into the cold pool, the noise competing with the old woman's shouts to hurry. Amara clutches at the bright blue wall to steady herself,

trying not to lose her footing, squeezing against paintings of sea creatures, the open mouth of a fish huge by her face as she passes.

Victoria is the only one of the five still arguing when they arrive at the bath's changing rooms. They didn't come in this way. Rows of polished wooden lockers are topped by paintings of lovers indulging in every possible sexual position. The women's clothes have been dumped in a heap on the floor.

"Hurry, hurry!" their tormentor demands, throwing a cloak at Beronice who still looks as stupefied as she did in the pool. Amara needs no further encouragement. She bends down and begins rifling through the mass of material, handing a yellow toga to Dido who is shivering badly, perhaps as much from fear as cold. Dido is new to slavery, and every indignity seems to hit her like a knife to the heart. Victoria is the only one who doesn't rush. She is still fastening her toga long after everybody else is dressed, gazing at the old woman with pure hate. When Victoria finally looks away, Amara sees the woman make the sign of the evil eye.

A final poke with the bony finger between the shoulder blades and Amara and the other women are bundled outside into the baths' private courtyard. Drizzle hits their faces, and the wind from the sea is cold. They stand in a huddle, already damp beneath their togas and cloaks. Amara glances around, surprised they are alone, then notices two men sheltering under the colonnade, a pair of incongruous, hulking shapes against the wall's painted nymphs and roses. One of the men strides over, face thunderous. It's Thraso, Felix's steward.

"What's this? What's happened?" His hands are balled

up, ready to fight. Amara steps back. She knows how hard those fists can fall.

"Better ask him," Amara says, pointing at the other man left standing in the shadows. "Isn't he with Simo?"

"Somebody double-crossed Felix," Victoria adds, as Thraso swivels round. "Simo's women got to stay; we were all thrown out before the men arrived. Bit convenient don't you think?"

Thraso doesn't wait to hear more. He charges across the yard, swinging at the other man's head. "Balbus! I'll fucking kill you! You fucking liar!"

Balbus dodges, missing the full force of Thraso's punch, though he still catches a blow to his ear, making him stagger. Thraso grabs the man's shoulders, smashing his skull into Balbus's nose. Balbus roars, breaking free, clutching his bloodied face. Thraso attacks him again, and the two men fall to the ground, throwing punches, biting and screaming. The women watch, unsure what to do.

"Felix isn't going to like this," Beronice says, stating the obvious.

Amara glances sidelong at Victoria, hoping for a sarcastic remark, but Victoria looks away.

There's a commotion from the doorway. A group of male slaves rush out, forcing the women to scramble aside. They run over to the brawling pair, trying to intervene, one taking a kick in the face. Vibo, the bath manager, comes out next, huffing, his portly figure swathed in a green toga. He manhandles Cressa out of his path in his haste to reach the fight.

"Enough!" he shouts. "Or you will answer to your masters for disobedience!"

The two men finally roll apart. Thraso is the first to stand, Balbus has to be helped to his feet by two slaves.

"Are you trying to close down my business?" Vibo demands. "Brawling on my doorstep like dogs in the gutter? I should have you both whipped!" Balbus mutters something, but Amara cannot hear what he says. "I'm not interested!" Vibo shouts. "Clear off now, both of you. And take that rag bag of whores with you."

The women don't wait for anyone to move them on. They cross the yard before Thraso can reach them. Amara notices he is limping. Balbus came off worse but must still have landed several hefty blows. Thraso's lip is split and he's cradling one arm. Nobody is foolish enough to ask him how he is feeling.

The women climb the steps up to the tall gate, Victoria leading the way, Beronice at the back, not quite quick enough to avoid Thraso's angry slap. They all know why he's lashing out. It's the prospect of Felix's rage when they get back to the brothel. Amara can feel the fear building, a lump in her throat she cannot swallow.

Stepping onto the street is like rejoining a fast-flowing river. She grips Dido's hand, and they force their way through the crush of people, heading up the hill to the Forum Gate. The stones are wet and slippery. The first time Amara came to Pompeii was with Dido. It can only have been a few months ago but feels longer. They travelled in on this road, together, after Felix had bought them at the slave market in Puteoli. The weather was warmer then under the clear blue skies of late October. She remembers Felix buying ripe figs for the journey. The fruit smelt so sweet, its insides pink and shining when she split it open, sticky on her fingers. It was

almost a moment of happiness. If happiness could exist in a world where she had been bought and sold. Amara still wonders at this act of kindness from Felix. They were not to know, then, how uncharacteristic it would be.

A man carrying a heavy basket of fish on his head shoves past, turning his shoulders into the crowd like a weapon. They follow him under the high archway into the dark, echoing tunnel, the road growing steeper and the crush more intense. Amara glances back to see Cressa, a look of resignation on her face, lugging the puffing Beronice up the hill. Thraso is almost out of sight behind. His leg must be giving him a lot of difficulty or he would be berating Beronice's slowness. Victoria, of course, has darted ahead. She is the only one of Felix's five women who was born in this town, and although a slave, she owns the place in a way that none of the others ever will.

Inside the town walls, the road evens out but also becomes wetter, water sloshing over Amara's shoes. Dido helps her up onto the raised pavement, two fabric sellers muttering at having to shuffle out of their way. A man heaped in garlands of myrtle, offerings for the Temple of Venus, presses close.

"For your goddess? For love? One penny for two. Good price. Bring you good fortune." He is holding the leaves so close to Dido's face she instinctively puts her hand up to draw across the veil she no longer wears.

Amara pushes the garlands away. "No."

The crush thins as they reach the Forum, absorbed into its vast space. Hawkers act like stones, breaking the eddies of the crowd. Some passers-by dawdle to look or haggle, others stride past. At the far end of the square sits the

Temple of Jupiter, incense rising from its steps. The building wavers in the heat before the smoke fades out over the blue mountain behind. Amara thinks of her father, of the way he would smile when she asked him if he believed in the gods. *Stories have power whether we believe them or not*. She shuts out the memory of his voice.

The others are still looking round for Thraso. Dido points him out, sweating his way through the crowd.

"Is his nose broken *again*?" Beronice asks. "He looks awful."

"Worse than usual? Are you sure?" Victoria replies. "I think maybe Balbus knocked it back the right way."

Beronice misses the joke. "No, he looks AWFUL!" she insists, raising her voice even louder to make her point.

Cressa shakes her head. "He'll hear you."

Thraso catches up, snapping at them to move it, and they all weave across the square. A group of sailors, probably just docked at the port, whistle as Amara passes, one gesturing what he'd like. She smiles at him then lowers her eyes. The men slap each other and laugh.

The road leading downhill from the Forum is overflowing with rainwater, its surface a broken mosaic of red and yellow, reflecting the painted buildings that line its banks. The women stare as a team of soaked litter-bearers trudge their way through, water sloshing over their knees, their lucky cargo raised up high, safe behind thick curtains. Amara notices the body of a dead dog wedged between two stepping stones, held there by the weight of the stream rushing past. Not all the filth is getting washed away by the morning's downpour. The women pick their way laboriously along the walkway, turning left into a narrow

street that winds round to the brothel. The space to move shrinks further, but the crowds are thinner here too.

As a child, Amara would have enjoyed the thought of returning home out of the wet, of sitting with her mother in front of the brazier, their maid bringing them hot wine with spices to warm up. But the looming bulk of the brothel doesn't give her any sense of homecoming. There's no hot drink waiting, just Felix and his anger.

They huddle outside the building, pressed single file against the wall, keeping dry under the overhanging balcony. Thraso looks almost as nervous as the women.

"You two," he points at Victoria and Amara. "You had plenty to say for yourselves at the baths. You can explain it all to Felix."

The others slink inside, Dido looking back anxiously. Victoria touches Thraso's good arm, inclining her head. "I'll tell Felix how hard you fought," she says, gazing up at him with a sincerity so earnest Amara almost believes her. "You defended his honour. That will mean something."

Thraso cannot quite bear to show gratitude to a whore but nods curtly. He glances at Amara, clearly expecting something similar, but she cannot think of anything ingratiating to say. Victoria stares at her, eyes widening with warning. "Yes," she says at last, nodding at Thraso. "You did. Very brave." Her Greek accent sounds thick through fright.

Thraso knocks on the wooden door leading to Felix's apartment above the brothel. It's answered by Paris, his permanently sour expression topped by a mono-brow. Standing in the doorway, Amara catches a whiff of the latrine hidden in the darkness of the stairwell. She used

to feel sorry for Paris, for the loneliness of his young life, shuttling between scrubbing his master's floors upstairs and servicing customers in the brothel below. But Paris has shown no indication that he wants the she-wolves' company or friendship.

"Felix," says Thraso, waving at him with impatience.

"He's with a client, so you'll have to wait."

Paris turns and climbs the stairs. They follow, emerging onto the narrow, covered balcony that surrounds Felix's flat. It makes her think of a spider's web, the way the walkway circles her master's rooms, slowly drawing you further in, not cutting straight to the centre. Amara can hear an unfamiliar male voice, too faint to make out all the words. Though she catches one phrase: *pay you*. Paris gestures for them to go through to the small waiting room.

Thraso sits heavily on the bench by the brazier, barely leaving space for the two women on either side. They squash in next to him. The balcony lets in daylight but also cold air. The warmth from the fire is feeble. Amara's heart is thumping. It doesn't help knowing Felix is currently squeezing some poor debtor for every last penny just down the corridor. Thraso stares straight ahead as if mesmerized by the small tongues of flame near his feet. She can feel the fear coming off him.

Amara stares at the wall. No gambolling nymphs or lovers here. Everything is painted in a geometric pattern of black and white. The sharp-edged lines turn and interlock in an endless maze that's hard to follow round the room without feeling dizzy.

They sit and wait, not talking, time stretching out. It starts to rain more heavily, water beating down on the roof.

It's impossible to tell over the noise whether Felix and his client are still doing business. Then Amara sees a downcast figure pass the doorway, hears him thud down the stairs. Nobody gets up from the bench.

Paris sticks his head around the door. "You'd best go through."

Thraso rises, stalking past him. Amara and Victoria follow.