

FREE SNEAK-PEEK CHAPTER, Chapter 8 *Fire and Sacrifice*

The priestesses attend the secretive, women-only Bona Dea festival in the house of the consul (in the voice of the priestess Pompeia).

There was pretty pipe music from Cato's house for all the street to hear but my grumps had set in and the light music only made me feel heavier.

A fresh thought of our task was like a stone plonked into my waters. My insides wobbled horribly.

All Rome's women of aristocracy would be here for the rites of Bona Dea - or as many as could be fit into a consul's modest villa. Selections would have been made. I prayed they were in our favour. These were wives of magistrates, senators, pontiffs - those who would be our judges or allies.

If only we could elicit the women's support surely these ghastly stories could be squashed. Here, through the wives, was our only way to the talk of their men.

The consul's wife, Cornelia, opened the door before we needed to knock. She was dressed in a rather triumphant wine-red stola of brushed silk, gathered with a wide ribbon designed to show off a youthful waist, and matching crimson slippers in a show of relaxed grace - by all appearances having cast off her husband's devastatingly public fall earlier in the year.

She pressed her lips over the shock at seeing Aemilia and Licinia in our company. There was no choice that Vestals must be present for these rites, but which of us would come tonight was quite another thing. She quickly melted her stiffness into a warm welcome, and a polite bow. 'Priestesses, you honour our household with your presence.'

Pet was her glorious self, all composure and priestess-ness, except that I could see her hands shaking. Pet is not accustomed to being negatively judged. Spent her life avoiding it, matter of fact.

Inside, the busy room was thick with the perfume of competing unguents - floral to spice, to green tones and woody. Their bearers huddled in little circles in every spare space, each circle occasionally opening to swallow a new member in, or release a member to another huddle.

Cornelia swept an arm wide both to entreat us into the room and display the immense preparations that had clearly gone on. Because consuls hold office for only one year, Bona Dea is in a different place every year: I am always entertained by the efforts to outdo one's predecessor. It makes for scrumptious food!

Great garlands of vine looped round the ceiling, punctuated in the corners by perfect spheres of flowers tied with ribbon. Herbs on the stalk - fabulously Bona Dea - were linked into chains and draped through the candelabras on the table. Floating candles filled the atrium pond, lighting, as though from within, the transparent winter roses scattered between; and a hundred flickering candles round the walls bewitched into dance the figures in the frescos, while a trio of flutists and lyre players swayed in the corner.

A nod from Cornelia to a wide-eyed servant brought the well-rehearsed service of a specially reserved jug of spiced milk with honey for we sober priestesses. The rest of the party were on wine in patterned earthenware goblets discretely kept

topped up by servants, such that none suffered the awkwardness of asking for more, and all quickly lost track of how much they had drunk.

Other servants circulated the room with huge bronze leaf-shaped platters of food in dainty portions designed to not interrupt conversation and be tidily consumed. I promised Ember I would report in detail: rounds of smoked cheese with a slice of pear and a dollop of fig preserve, jostled against rolls of honey-glistened ham and roasted morsels of pigeon brightened with mint leaves; on another platter piles of tiny fried fish glittered with the frost of salt crumb, then a ring of egg halves sprinkled with cumin, topped with a sliver of radish. Embroidered squares of linen were laid over deep earthen bowls to keep snugly warm the hundreds of little bread rolls meant to sop up the wine but which also did very nicely with my honeyed milk.

In the centre of it all, of course, a fire and a little altar laden with votive offerings ready for our rites.

All conversation stopped as we moved into the room. I've never felt so gaudy and indelicate in our whites. Tonight's task would have to be especially delicately done.

And then... 'Cinny! My daaaarling girrrl! It's an outrage!' Licinia's mother lunged at us, throwing an arm round Licinia and kissing her cheek noisily. I didn't mean to recoil but it was the most ghastly thing to begin our night.

'I am raging, it makes me so angry. Terentia, are you not raging?' Her cheeks were flushed pink already. The woman wore a sky-blue stola with dark blue and silver trim. Matching blue ribbon through her black hair served to highlight the dark features she shared with her daughter. She could pass as our Cinny's sister, both carry the same proud prettiness but the mother's rather lost to her sense of entitlement and too boisterous for the dainty blue stola to be convincing.

'I don't need rage, I need reason,' said Terentia. 'Nor do I intend to let ridiculous innuendo make waste of a good evening with the Good Goddess, and good women. (Pause for effect...) I am pleased to have you with us, Licinia.'

She gave the senior Licinia a wry grin and a little bow of gratitude but not a deeper bow than given to us. Both Licinias seemed satisfied, and their approval seemed to re-open the party for the chatter rose again and we were welcomed to another circle, while the Licinias and their daughter/sister-in-law (who glared at Pet most of the evening) huddled in the corner talking about us all.

I didn't miss, though, that from across the room Pomponia raised her eyebrow to Cornelia from above the rim of her goblet as she threw down the last of her wine a little too fiercely. Pomponia and friends, who'd been at every Bona Dea festival I remember, and every time in their own huddle, backs to us. An unfortunate looking thing whose clothes seemed to sag from her for want of a feminine curve to display, but who managed somehow to hold herself with such strength she was oddly alluring. She frightened me. Her grandfather's making enemy of Aemilia's seemed to serve her taste for vengeance rather nicely.

Had Pomponia convinced Cornelia to blame us for her husband's demise? This woman who greeted us so sweetly, who dressed her home and welcomed us in... was that triumphant red dress a disguise for hatred and blame she had to endure while the Vestals were expected in her home for an evening?

I didn't feel it, but I was such a mess of frets that night I couldn't quite be sure of myself.

Cornelia was careful to keep distance for the evening - that, I most certainly felt. It was big enough to have us in her home for all to see... she could not be seen to overdo it, but gods if we could just get close enough long enough to speak in friendship!

A conspicuous few approached us during the party, that year. We met the newly elected consuls' wives, due to begin office in the new year, only by them being pointed out to us from across the room. Usually a ceremonial introduction at the December Bona Dea, evidently we were too controversial to be associated with at such a point in a career. One new consul would be Dalmaticus' nephew but that didn't seem to help the wide-eyed new wife.

Part way through the evening Cornelia happened our way, checking the contents of a row of jugs waiting the next round of service. We both sides seized opportunity to speak.

'Your mother was too ill to join us, Amelia?' Cornelia asked.

'She declares herself still in mourning for Papa,' said Aemilia, surprisingly bold.

'She ought to take some country air, perhaps,' Cornelia pushed on.

'She would be touched by your concern. She'd avoid the frosts by the coast, certainly. The beauty would do her spirits good.' Aemilia gave her warmest smile.

'You are a wonder, dear Aemilia. Quaranta stays with her, though?'

'As always.'

The small-talk stalled; that was as far we'd get for now. Growl.

Aemilia turned to Terentia. 'Mother, perhaps its time we begin.'

As we moved to ready the altar, a most deliberate movement from the other side of the room caught our attention. Caecilia, Dalmaticus' flamboyant sister, stepped into the centre of the room, tossed the dregs of her wine into the fire (which flared dramatically as she passed) and presented her empty goblet to a servant. She wore shimmering emerald, and a multicoloured embroidered wrap declared her free spirit, along with the semi-precious stones that lined her sandals.

'You rob me of my sport tonight, Aemilia. I am quite put out.' She circled us like a she-wolf, and leaned in to make a show of whispering though she barely lowered her voice. 'Usually I am subject of the greatest scandals!'

Caecilia was known for several rather public affairs. What she must put dear bear Dalmaticus through!

'Caecilia!' Aemilia kept her smile open and warm. She does like Caecilia. So do I but we ought not be too bold tonight. Respectful and responsible, Aemilia and Licinia had promised. 'You look glorious, as always.'

Caecilia opened and re-adjusted the gorgeous wrap. 'Don't you love it? It's *Arabian*.'

Aemilia and Terentia both stiffened.

Oh sweet figletsandcheese no. Good Goddess stop this. She knew. Did she know? Would Dalmaticus have confided in his sister, might he have sought the advice of a woman versed in infidelity, he could have, it made sense, the idea would

be foreign to darling order-following military rule-man Dalmaticus... Dalmaticus would never ever... Oh gods...

Caecilia leaned in again. This time a true whisper. 'You are doing well, my dear. You have at least half the room with you, stay strong.'

The quiet was getting conspicuous. 'I believe we now have a thing in common, Caecilia, since this year Dalmaticus became Pontifex,' I babbled, I don't know where I was going except fishing for help. 'Now we both have the brave Dalmaticus looking over us. Your big brother is honour incarnate is he not?'

'Unyielding,' she said. 'Utterly infuriating.' And with that she pushed off.

Terentia sacrificed the pig. We promised Dalmaticus that Aemilia and Licinia would remove themselves from the official bits. It wasn't a clean kill. Thank the gods Terentia hid it from the rest but I saw and gods help me I prayed again purely for myself that Aemilia would stay so I never have to wield the knife myself. I won't say here precisely the events of the rites. We don't speak of those things, not just for Bona Dea. We learn early that to speak of a ritual act is to hold on to it, when it must be released wholly and in absolute faith to the goddess. To discuss is to question.

Something shifted with the offerings, though. As each woman shared her offering she shared with the group her wish and her trouble - a healthy birth, an improved marriage, peace for the soul of a lost child, a new husband, health for an ill husband, a affair that needs be kept secret, solution to a troublesome servant... The wine kept flowing and the women talked as women do. Poor Aurelia who was about to burst with child was counselled to take rosehip tea to induce labour. Someone else suggested licorice. Another, peppers, and then they said best to get her husband to do it from behind in the way of beasts - every two hours! Oh my! 'Get that delicious Nubian slave of yours to take over if your husband can't keep up!'

Alarmed, Aemilia grabbed us and pulled us away from the circle at that one, out in the the evening air.

I repeat it only because the wickedness of it shows the mood. It did not seem to matter then, whether some already judged us guilty, extraordinarily it helped, as though our public guilt offered companion to their private guilts and out came all the stories of wickedness! We were one of them like never before.

Terentia decided it was time we left. We always addressed the room before departing - we were so conspicuous we had no hope of doing otherwise. The room quieted as we gathered in a line near the door. We sprinkled sacred oil over the entry to the house and bowed to the room.

'May we all enjoy the blessing of the Good Goddess for another year', Terentia said, warmed by the womanly comraderie. 'Tonight as we come together as women we embody the sacred feminine: bringer of life, guardian of the mysteries of love, keeper of the home and hearth; the one so often feared by those who do not understand her.' *But not you, our friends.* 'Honour the sacred feminine in each of you, our friends. Do not see her censured simply to allay the fears or insecurities of a city stretching itself thin. She is so much more than that, and so are you all.'

It was a bold move that left the room uncomfortably silent but oh she was clever sometimes.

Cornelia followed us to the door, with Pomponia's lot watching intently, marking the time we left. There would be reports. Caecilia followed us, and Licinia's huddle, who would not let go of her until they must.

Cornelia closed the door behind them. 'There are rumours of a law suit to be brought against my husband.' She blurted as though the only way to get it past her lips was to launch it. 'He is to be accused of misconduct. An abhorrent falsehood. Lies! I cannot say if you are guilty or not, priestess, but I do know that the courts of law can be used to disguise the power plays of those who would remove us from their paths.'

I refused to believe the trial was all politics. Romans lean on politics for a thing they can control and understand. They do not have access to the gods' minds but they do their senators. Personally I preferred to talk to the gods. Urgulania's Disease certainly said to me there was far more to this.

'How so?'

Caecilia, coming up behind, answered for her. 'Look at you. Aemilia, Marcia and Licinia: the three of you are of some of Rome's most powerful patrician names. The naming of your brothers as accomplices surely seals any suspicion that they are after the families. Unless you've something to tell us...?' She muttered the last with a seductive grin. The woman cannot help herself.

'Well clearly it's a setup!' Said Licinia's mother. 'If Licinia had a choice she could surely do better!' Awkward silence. Cinny giggled. 'No offense Aemilia but well it's true!'

For all her ghastliness she made a good point in our favour and I thanked her for it with all my heart. Silently. Perhaps we had the allies we needed, if it came to that, which it wouldn't, of course.

'My lady, if you have knowledge that would help us...?' Terentia said.

Caecilia shook her head. 'They will hide among their numbers, but it will be those who would also see we Metelli back in the hills we came from! And our allies with us.'

'What have the Metelli to do with the omen?' I asked stupidly. I wish I hadn't. It gave me a sick feeling before I even heard the answer.

'Not to brag, dear priestess, but everything.'

Cornelia explained with chilling flatness, 'A Metelli will be consul next year - again. A Metelli is Pontifex Maximus, another an augur, and so on it goes. If you want to take down a new-blood family yet they continue to rise around you, your next tactic is to take down the Old Family that is their crux, their ticket into aristocratic Rome. Every new family marries into an old one. That, Aemilia, is *your* family. The great Aemilii Lepidi are already withdrawn, my dear, from the public arena, and now the passing of your lovely father, the family is a lame beast.'

'I am strengthened to hear that your presumption is our innocence,' said Terentia.

'The point is,' said Cornelia, 'I fear innocence may have little to do with it.'

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