

*The*  
**Emperor's Girls**



**William Kincaid**



An "Adult Tv" Novel



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# The Emperor's Girls

by William Kincaid

The morning sun rose over the mountains on Italy's Amalfi Coast and caressed the walls and gardens of the villa overlooking the cobalt blue waters of the Tyrrhenian Sea. Birds sang in the bushes and the security guards stepped from the shadows of the main house to soak in the sun's warmth. A clatter could be heard on the expansive porch as a young woman, cute, blonde, well-tanned, smiling, with laughing blue eyes and bright red nails, walked an ancient bicycle down the smoothly polished marble steps. Contrasting with the antiquity of the bicycle was the new graphite casting rod and reel that she draped over the handlebars.

The young woman wore a straw cowboy hat, a white blouse, purple scarf, Capri pants and sandals; she breathed a heavy sigh as she prepared to embark on the precipitous trek down the steep and winding mountain road to the harbor that beckoned below. The bicycle became virtually uncontrollable as it

built up speed; twice in the past month the young woman had crashed into the bushes along the road.

At the foot of the steps the woman encountered a stocky man in running shorts, a tattered gray ARMY T-shirt, and sporting a military hair cut and a grin worthy of a wolf sighting a fawn alone in the woods. He was Matthew McAllister, the Emperor's right hand man.

"Good morning, Claudia. It's a beautiful morning, isn't it?" The man's savage grin eased into one normally found on a human face.

"Good morning, Mr. McAllister," Claudia smiled politely, but then continued on her way, aloof. Despite his position, he was still the help and she was one of The Emperor's girls.

Despite his formidable reputation, McAllister looked hurt at Claudia's quiet rebuff. "Claudia is going fishing again at the harbor like she always does," he thought to himself.

Dripping sweat from his morning run, McAllister sprinted up the marble steps, then leaned against the railing, standing next to a bust of Marcus Agrippa. The Emperor's coastal villa had been extensively remodeled in classical Roman style, as if The Emperor lived in the First Century B.C. rather than the twenty-first century, albeit with all the modern luxuries.

With a pair of old, military issue binoculars that he kept at this spot on the railing, McAllister could follow Claudia's descent down the mountain through occasional glimpses as she took a curve on her bicycle. Then he watched her walk the bicycle onto the

ancient jetty of the harbor and cast her lures into the sea. “I don’t care if she has a cock, she is beautiful.” McAllister mused as he felt the morning sun dry out the back of his shirt.

McAllister was already out of Claudia’s mind as she made her first turn, and after five minutes of careening down the mountain, she was breathless when she finally reached level ground. The sun had continued in its trajectory and now cast the waters of the harbor in a golden glow. Claudia laid her bike against the seawall and cast out a small spoon, hoping to hook one of the mackerel that usually corralled baitfish against the harbor walls at this time of the day. She was so intent on her fishing that she didn’t notice a man wearing sunglasses, cargo pants, and a khaki jacket approach her on the end of the breakwater and draw a gun.

Observing Claudia with his binoculars, McAllister had noticed the man lounging in the harbor for several minutes. He was a stranger to the small town and definitely looked out of place, a real threat. “The harbor is 800 yards away down the hill,” he thought to himself as he rushed inside. “It’s a good thing I already took the range and the wind hasn’t started to blow.”

Seeing the man approach, Claudia watched him in slow motion draw a semi-automatic pistol and level it at her.

“You are one of The Emperor’s fairies and now you are going to die for it.”

The right side of the gunman’s head exploded in a scarlet mist as a bullet exited, but Claudia still heard

the gun explode and her young life passed before her eyes as she was drenched in the man's blood.

Two and a half years earlier, Claudia strutted into a drag bar in Greenwich Village in New York City, wearing a black suit dress with purple accents under a trench coat, and black pumps. All eyes turned to her and followed her as she sat in a prominent spot and ordered an Irish coffee to ward off the January cold of the street. Soon one of the patrons confidently walked up to Claudia, although it was one she did not expect.

An attractive blonde in her mid-30s, poised and exceptionally well dressed, smoothly sat on the stool next to Claudia.

“Buy you a drink, sailor?” she said in accented English.

“German,” Claudia thought.

“How about I buy you one? Do you like Irish coffee?”

“I'll have one thanks, I'm Elizabeth Verstraaten, I'm Dutch.”

“Nice to meet you, Elizabeth. I'm Claudia, Claudia Hughes.”

“Nice to meet you, Claudia. I hate to be forward, but I have a proposition for you.”

A look of shock came across Claudia's face. She had been with plenty of men and expected one to make his move soon but but she had never been with a woman, and she so liked to be taken in the ass.

Elizabeth, however, was gorgeous, stylish, and smiling.

Elizabeth laughed, seeing Claudia's alarm. "It's not that kind of proposition."

Claudia looked relieved and disappointed at the same time.

"I work for a very successful Italian businessman who adores women like you. I'm sure he would love to meet you."

"If he is ever in New York or Philly, I would be happy to meet him if he's nice."

"He's very nice, but you would have to come to Italy. He's not looking for a quick thing. Meet me at the Met tomorrow at 10:00 if you are willing. I'm set to return to Italy soon."

"I didn't bring any other clothes for this weekend. Do you mind meeting me as a guy?"

Elizabeth grinned as she stood up to leave. "If you take up my proposition, you won't be one for much longer."

On a frigid Sunday morning with snow flurries blowing at the entrance to the Met, Jim Hughes met Elizabeth as scheduled.

"Well, are you intrigued?" Elizabeth smiled warmly, thawing winter's bite.

"Can we call this a date?" Jim joked.

"A business date," Elizabeth laughed.

The two walked through the Classical Art galleries marveling at the marble sculptures and frescoes from ancient Rome and Greece. Elizabeth wanted to see how Jim would react. Seeing him intently study the art, she was confirmed that she had found the right girl.

“My boss is very wealthy and has a villa on the Amalfi Coast. You know Amalfi?”

“Between Salerno and Naples. But I have never been.”

“You’ll love it.”

“I’m sure I will. How is the food?” Jim joked.

“My boss has several top chefs at his villa. But to the matter at hand.”

“OK.”

“My boss lost his wife many years ago and loves transsexuals. He usually has around twenty or twenty-one at his villa. They entertain him.”

Jim laughed, “So I would be a part of a harem?”

“You could call it that. We prefer to think it’s something more. He would put you on hormones, then send you to Thailand for breasts and facial feminization surgery to complete your transition. In return you would be one of his girls for three years. Then you can go at your own will and he would give you a gift of \$50,000 American to help you start your life as a woman.”

“Sounds like a dream come true, how does your boss afford this?”

“He’s very wealthy.”

“From what?”

“He’s very wealthy.”

“OK. So why me?”

“Like I said. He is very wealthy and he wants the best.”

“I’m sure in Italy he could have his pick of transsexual women or in the international pageant circuit, so why me?”

“Because he wants the full package; looks, intelligence, education, and someone who is nice. The pageant girls can be insufferable narcissists. I already have learned that. I have done this often enough to know someone that he would like.”

“So it’s kind of like being in the Playboy mansion?”  
Jim’s face lit up in anticipation.

Elizabeth laughed, “Again, we try to be more classy, and we are more selective.”

“And my family?”

“Do they know about your crossdressing?”

“No.”

“Eventually you will have to come out to them. I also believe if you could, you would transition to being a woman immediately.”

“Yes, but I was planning to come out on my own terms and my own timeline. My Dad will freak.”

“But we can’t help who we have for parents or family. Now you have a golden opportunity to do what you want to do and a huge source of support. Look Jim, I know this is a huge surprise and seems too good to be true and I want you to take all the time you need. I think you would enjoy life at the Aerie. All our girls love it there and you would too.”

“The Aerie? The Eagle’s Nest. Hitler and your boss have the same taste in naming their dream houses.”

Elizabeth laughed, “I knew you were worth choosing. I’ll have to tell him that. I know a good place in Chinatown, do you want to go there for dinner? It has great dim sun. We don’t get that in Amalfi.”

The Emperor had ruled his domain from his mountaintop perch for thirty years. He had been born in Milan five years prior to World War Two and vividly remembered seeing the bodies of Mussolini and his mistress, Clara Petace, hanging in the city square. His family was left impoverished after the war and he joined La Cosa Nostra in his late teens as an errand boy. Paolo San Luca killed his first man when he was twenty-one in a gun battle in Naples against a rival gang. After that, his superiors recognized his intelligence and ruthless efficiency and he quickly worked his way through the ranks.

Now he literally sat on the top of his world. He ruled a drug empire from Austria to Istanbul, had a

battalion of prostitutes that traveled the world, and smuggled art, weapons, and persons into Europe. He had assumed the veneer of a respected business man, financing numerous construction and civic projects throughout Europe. He also had a son, the Crown Prince Guillermo, who would one day inherit the empire. Now in The Emperor 's waning years, what he valued the most was his exquisite collection of transsexual young ladies who shared his bed and made him feel young and powerful.

Six months after his meeting with Elizabeth at the Met, Elizabeth had obtained the necessary visas for the first leg of Jim Hughes's odyssey. He was going for it. He was finally going to become a she. Jim arrived at the Leonardo Da Vinci Airport in Rome and seeing him, Elizabeth gave him a hug and helped him with his luggage, pitifully small for three and a half years, but his wardrobe would soon become much more sizable and stylish.

The Emperor had a condominium in Rome boasting an impressive collection of Renaissance art that served as a way station for young men to transition to young women. The transsexuals who had been on hormones and had developed breasts went directly to the Aerie whereas Jim would remain in a holding pattern for six months as his body became more feminine. Jim let his hair grow, practiced his makeup and Italian, took the train to Milan for shopping, and took dance lessons at a local studio. The estrangement from his family was assuaged by the anticipation of becoming one of The Emperor 's women. Elizabeth regaled him with stories of dancing, wild parties, and The Emperor 's affections towards his women.

Finally, the day came for Jim to shed his male existence. He would fly to Thailand as Jim but return as Claudia.

“Signorina Di Vittoria? Welcome back to Rome.” A hulking man in a suit greeted the pretty young blonde woman emerging from the escalator of the arrival terminal in terrible, heavily American-accented Italian. He was one of the security guards at the Aerie and he not so subtly scanned Claudia from head to toe. Claudia felt affirmed at his approval, even though he was definitely off limits. She was no longer just an attractive cross dresser, she was a woman at last.

“That’s me,” Claudia beamed.

“Nice to meet you,” the man extended his large paw to the young woman. “I’m James Henley, I work for The Emperor. One of our other guards, John Mabry, is in the car. The Emperor thought you might be more comfortable riding with somebody who spoke English. We have some take-out for you in the car, clam linguine if I remember right. It should still be warm. We don’t want to delay your arrival. The boss would be pissed.”

“Thank you. I don’t want to get you in trouble with the boss. I’m sure the linguine will be delicious. I just hope you two have eaten.”

“No problem. We both had potato chips and a couple Oranginas at a kiosk.”

“The dinner of champions,” Claudia laughed.

Sitting in the driver’s seat of The Emperor’s BMW, John Mabry greeted Claudia. In contrast to Henley,

he stood 5'6" and had an intense but sincere air about him.

"A regular Mutt and Jeff," Claudia laughed to herself, guzzling a bottle of Orangina to slake her thirst.

After midnight the car pulled up to the colonnaded entrance to the Aerie, and Claudia was awestruck by its size and beauty, even in the depths of the night. The villa was sleeping and the moon shone brightly over the sea which men had sailed for thousands of years. Claudia looked at the motif in the classical arch above the doorway, a marble Roman eagle with the letters PSL above it and underneath the word IMPERATOR. A huge guard, even bigger than Henley, stood at the entrance with a semi-automatic rifle and infrared scope. His ebony skin and dark clothes made him almost invisible, except where the moon glinted on his gear, or when his shadow on the marble wall moved.

In the driver's seat, John Mabry turned around and looked directly at Claudia, then spoke in a deep South Carolina accent, "Claudia, you are a beautiful and nice young woman and I know you will be very happy here. Don't be intimidated by The Emperor. Sure, he is a rich and powerful guy, but he is just a man like me and Henley. Well, not quite like Henley, nobody is. But remember he puts his pants on one leg at a time, and takes them off the same way as the rest of us. Just be yourself, Claudia, and you will be fine."

"Thank you, Mr. Mabry."

"It's just John. Now let's get you inside."

Claudia's high heels clacked across the marble portico while Henley and Mabry hustled her luggage into the women's dormitory area. She wore a short, white silk cotton dress with a flower print she had purchased in Thailand. Her outfit was perfectly adequate in the sweltering heat and humidity of South East Asia but now the night breezes gave her a chill as she gazed over the railing at the inky black sea. The setting was perfect and she did not want to go to her room just yet.

Muffled footsteps behind her barely disturbed her reverie until a man wearing a white blazer, slacks, and expensive Milanese loafers emerged from the shadows. Claudia then felt a cotton shawl placed delicately over her shoulders.

"The night air on the coast is chilly, even in summer. You will get used to it," a man said in a deep, authoritative voice with Italian-accented English and then stood next to Claudia overlooking the sea.

"Thank you. I'm sure I will."

"So, what are your first impressions of the Aerie?"

"It's like being in a dream. Actually more like finding your dream."

"So I trust you had a good flight."

"I did."

"And I hope your journey felt like more than just a plane ride."

Claudia smiled and paused, "Yes. Yes it did. Like I was traveling to my destiny. That's the way this



whole thing has been since I left my family and the States.”

“Soon enough you will be part of the family of the villa, and I’m sure you will be happy.”

Claudia studied herself from head to foot like Henley did at the airport. “So far it’s been beyond my wildest dreams. Even now, just looking at the Tyrrhenian, it’s like going back two thousand years in time. I can’t help thinking of all the history that has passed this place. The evacuation of Pompeii from Vesuvius, the Greek colony at Paestum, the invasion at Salerno, maybe even Odysseus himself passed by this mountain.”

“You know your American Rangers used this very mountain top as a command post during the battle?”

“I thought so. I looked at the maps and figured this was the peak.”

“I appreciate a young woman who knows her history.”

“Thank you, and I have never felt more connected to it.”

“I know that I will truly enjoy getting to know you, Claudia di Vittoria. It will be like reading a great novel or visiting an art gallery for the first time.”

“You do have a way with words. Who are you, Signor?”

“Paolo La Duca, but here they call me The Emperor. Sleep well, my dear Claudia. Your new life will start tomorrow morning.”

Claudia could barely sleep, her excitement was so tangible that her body and mind would not shut down. She now had breasts, womanly curves, softness, and a refined face, and she wanted to embrace her new world with her new self. The Emperor was charming and seemed to like her already. Finally, she drifted off to sleep feeling extraordinarily fortunate that Elizabeth had encountered her at the bar in the Village and saw something worthwhile.

An avalanche crashed into Claudia's small dorm room just after dawn. Twenty young women, Italians, French, German, Dutch, Belgian, American, British, African, Turkish, Thai, Venezuelan and Colombian, all in various states of undress, some with dangling cocks readily visible under baby doll nighties, all with perfect manicures and pedicures, barged into the sleeping woman's room with cries of delight, welcoming their new friend.

"So you're Claudia?" Kristina, a beautiful blonde German girl, was the first to speak with a wicked smile on her face.

Barely conscious, Claudia started to formulate a response when Alessandra, a petite Venezuelan girl warmly hugged her. "Welcome to the Aerie. We are all sisters here."

The girls got in a line and each did the same, until Claudia was well squashed, but at least wide awake.

"And we are all going on the yacht to Monte Carlo tomorrow," Dominique, a dark eyed Parisian announced. "Luis overheard The Emperor and McAllister talking about that. It looks like The Emperor wants to show you off."

At the end of the line of excited young transsexuals, Elizabeth carried a tray of crepes, raspberry preserves, semolina, and wild boar sausage for Claudia.

“It’s a tradition here. The new girl gets her first breakfast in bed. We know it’s a long flight from Bangkok and a long drive from Rome. Again, welcome to the Aerie.”

“You need to come out for the cheerleading squad,” Rebecca, a brunette American suggested. “We could use you.”

“And we need a partner for the burlesque act that we are planning,” Kristina suggested hopefully.

Claudia looked confused and sought guidance from Elizabeth.

“Calm down, girls, Claudia has just got here. You do this every time.” Elizabeth then addressed Claudia. “The highlight of the week is the Friday Night Frolic. The girls put on a show on the stage for The Emperor. Some activities all the girls perform in; the choir, the chorus line, and the pageant. Others are voluntary; ballroom dancing, cheerleading, belly dancing, ballet, burlesque, theater. Monika even does stand-up comedy and she is really good,” Elizabeth said, smiling. to a cute but suddenly abashed brunette Belgian girl.

“You will have plenty of time to participate in any and all of those activities if you want, but I don’t want to put any pressure on you right now. Don’t join anything for a couple weeks. Just enjoy your new home and your new family. You will have to see Stefano about getting some evening dresses for Monte Carlo and some nice lingerie. The Emperor usually doesn’t

choose a girl this quickly for his bed, but a young lady must be prepared.”

While Claudia ate her breakfast in bed, the girls gave her all kinds of helpful tips and information. Don't drink like an American. Just because the alcohol was free at the Aerie did not mean you had to get shit-faced drunk and puke all over the bathrooms. While on the subject of bathrooms, just because you had a cock, that did not mean you could stand and spray all over the seat. You are a woman now and women sit, every time. The Emperor was a truly remarkable man and long and thick where it counted, so don't worry about your own satisfaction, it will come. He loved lap dances, and after le petit mort he could be aroused orally and ridden for a second time, despite his years. The guards were cool to joke around with, except for McAllister, the head of operations. He was inscrutable, and best left alone. Guillermo, The Emperor's son and heir apparent, was a major asshole, drunk, nasty, and entitled, and should be entirely avoided. You had to get your order for food in by 5:00, and you should not start eating at the dinner table until The Emperor gives his customary toast to good health and fortune.

After breakfast and a hot shower, Claudia did her makeup, donned a pair of Capri slacks, a blouse, and a burgundy scarf, then met Elizabeth for a walk around the facility and more familiarization. Elizabeth explained in a warm, easygoing manner that they tried to cultivate an atmosphere of being all one big family at the Aerie. This was absolutely no place for divas or catfighting. That would get you sent home. There were twenty wonderful girls like herself and thirty days in the month and The Emperor would

take her in time. Don't push it, just relax, have fun and be yourself.

Aiding Elizabeth in her diva and clique-busting were her assistants with an exceptional talent for keeping it real; four gay men and a hard-edged ballet dancer trained in Saint Petersburg. Stefano and Luis were responsible for makeup and wardrobe, and together they had fifty years of experience working in the fashion industry in Paris and Milan. They could wield shade like a ninja and cut the legs out from under any prospective diva in the blink of a perfectly massacred eyelash.

Dave, a New Yorker, and Christopher, a Londoner, both were Broadway dancers hired as dance instructors and choreographers, plus they took the male leads in the ball room dancing. Dave was the gay Eagle Scout. He served as the villa's nurse, and his flawless sincerity won over all he came in contact with, whereas Christopher had a relaxed sophistication that encouraged the girls to new levels of refinement. Finally, Natalie was an intense and exceptional ballet dancer. She left the girls too frightened to fight among themselves and pushed them to perfection in grace, composure, and bearing. Like Elizabeth said, one big happy family.

In addition to her team of professionals, Elizabeth planned numerous activities to break up the tendency of the girls to group by nationality. She held Olympic competitions every two months with the girls on different teams each time. She also scheduled debates, research papers and presentations to keep the girls' minds engaged, charity support at the local orphanage, and had the girls volunteer for archaeological digs each summer at Paestum, an an-

cient Greek settlement and temple on the Salerno battlefield, or at the ruined Roman towns from the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in AD 79, which could be seen from the Aerie.

After introducing Claudia to her assistants, Elizabeth left her with Stefano in order to select a cocktail dress and evening gown to wear in Monte Carlo.

“Turn around,” Stefano gently ordered Claudia.

“Now around again. We have a beautiful new flower in our garden. I think I have just the thing for you. You will look dazzling, girl. Trust me.”

At dinner, Claudia sat next to a stunningly beautiful Thai girl, Song, who struggled with her English. “It is very nice that you are here, Claudia. You look very nice. I believe we will be good friends.”

After a seven-course meal, the family enjoyed an after-dinner coffee or liqueur at the dinner table. Claudia sipped at her amaretto when she noticed Elizabeth whisper quietly with The Emperor while looking in her direction. The emperor handed Elizabeth a rose and she proudly marched towards Claudia, and handed the rose to Song. The girl’s kindness in welcoming a stranger to the Aerie won her the companionship of The Emperor for the evening. Two hours later, Claudia glimpsed Song heavily made-up, and wearing a black bra, panties, stockings and a garter belt, proudly and confidently prance from her room and across the courtyard to The Emperor’s wing of the villa. Claudia wished her new friend well.

Two nights later, Claudia looked dazzling as Stefano predicted, wearing a fuschia party dress with

matching gloves and satin pumps, but she paused at the entrance to the Casino de Monte Carlo. Her life had taken such a steep trajectory that she felt she could barely hold on. Only a year ago she had been Jim Hughes, college student, and now she was Claudia di Vittoria, wearing an expensive party dress that showed off her new cleavage and was poised to announce her presence to the world as an attractive and desirable young woman.

Monika smiled at her, “You look very pretty in that dress.”

“You really think so?”

Kristina confirmed, “Girl, you look fucking hot. You are definitely one of The Emperor’s girls now. Now let’s take over this place.” She then opened the door and the quartet strutted into the Casino lobby. All heads turned in their direction and the men, single or accompanied by other women, glared lustfully at the young ladies so that the heat was tangible.

The girls continued their victory lap onto the floor of the Casino, creating a similar reaction. Most of The Emperor’s girls had already arrived, and two, Rebecca and Julie, a short-haired blonde Londoner, sat next to The Emperor himself while he played blackjack. On the journey to Monte Carlo, he had specifically requested from Elizabeth those two accompany him in the casino, and certainly one of them would receive the rose tonight.

The ripple effect that Song, Kristina, Monika, and Claudia had created did not go unnoticed and he looked up to see the source of the disturbance. Seeing Claudia with the three other girls, he caught her eye, smiled and winked. Claudia never felt more of a

woman than in that moment, and was overcome with a profound sense of joy.

Later that evening, leaning on the railing of the motor yacht TRAJAN with her three new friends, Claudia wondered at the bright lights and energy of the Monte Carlo waterfront. Her reverie, however, was destroyed by the loud cursing of Guillermo. He had arrived at the yacht after an evening's drinking with two women in hand who were more impressed with his money than his composure. But even the two well-dressed gold diggers had their limits; Guillermo frightened both of them out of his cabin with his rough groping and abusive language. They fled down the bow with Guillermo chasing after them.

He flung an empty champagne bottle at the disappearing ladies, then went back to his stateroom to retrieve a semi-automatic pistol. No bitches were going to disrespect him. He was Guillermo San Luca and all this would be his. Staggering towards the bow brandishing the pistol, Guillermo was confronted by McAllister and Mabry.

“Put the pistol down, Guillermo, the Monte Carlo police will not give you any breaks if you shoot someone. Even you know that.”

“Police have before.”

“Put the gun down and go sleep it off. You can find new women in the morning, you are a regular Casanova when you are sober.”

“I should shoot you right now, McAllister. My father thinks you are so damn good but you are just a loser. I have never seen you with a woman.”

The drunk raised his pistol to McAllister's temple but in an instant he was lying on the deck with McAllister holding the weapon. McAllister ejected both the magazine and the chambered round that clattered on the deck next to the prone figure of Guillermo.

"It looks like he tripped on the bow, right Mabry?"

"Hell yeah. Happens all the time with him."

McAllister then looked at Claudia, who had witnessed the entire event. "Right, whatever your name is, blondie?"

Claudia could only nod.

"Her name is Claudia, boss," Mabry mumbled as he carried Guillermo back to the state room. "She's nice."

Back at the Aerie, Claudia quickly forgot the incident as she embraced her new life with joyful abandon. Her enthusiasm won her many friends among The Emperor's girls, but she never seemed to be awarded the rose. Claudia was on the cheerleading squad, but was not the star attraction. Thai girls were usually at the top of the pyramid and did the acrobatics as they were maddeningly petite and lithe. Claudia, Kristina, Monika, and Song started an exotic dance troupe for the burlesque show, with Kristina and Song in the lead and Monika and Claudia doing back-up. The four wore tuxedo-style bustiers with gartered stockings and pumps, black lace gloves and top hats. All the men in the audience were riveted to the girls' legs and their intense gaze. At the conclusion of the act, Elizabeth presented the rose to the troupe leader, Kristina.

The roses were not necessarily presented to the star performer. At the cheerleading performance, the rose was presented to Alessandra, the Venezuelan girl, who smiled and laughed as she was on the bottom layer of the pyramid. Monika received a rose while she sat in the audience on a balmy Friday night, but energetically cheered on her sisters. Often being Miss Congeniality brought you The Emperor 's affections.

Claudia, however, was non-plussed. She was having the time of her life. When The Emperor passed her in the grounds of the Aerie, he gave her the same wink and smile, but for months Claudia never learned what The Emperor 's Inner Sanctum looked like. Elizabeth noticed The Emperor 's apparent rejection of Claudia. Only the girls who had worked in the sex industry had been ignored as long as Claudia as a way for them to dry out and regain a sense of modesty.

Then, a new girl, Ivana, a sultry-eyed Colombian, was fucked by The Emperor within a month while Claudia lay in bed yearning for his embrace and his entry. She cried herself to sleep that night but the warmth of the morning sun and the beauty of the sea inspired her with their atmosphere of ageless beauty and gave her an idea for Friday night.

“Well, I am not the only woman who went without sex,” Claudia laughed. “The Emperor is going to love this one.”

“The Lysistrata? I love it,” Stefano exclaimed. “But honest, darling, you are not the one to have the star role.”

“I know that, I am going to be Kleonike. Alessandra will be Lysistrata.”

“Perfect. You will have some costumes that will make every man as erect as the Athenians.”

“Please don’t refer to erections. I have forgotten what they look like.”

“Be patient, hon, just be yourself and all good things will come.”

“OK.”

The Emperor was patient. Looking at Claudia, he felt like a kid at Christmas with a captivating present that he wanted so much to unwrap. But every child learns that he has to wait until Christmas for it to be right. He couldn’t bring himself to unwrap Claudia’s lingerie until the time was perfect. Besides, she was growing daily before his eyes. She was being herself but that person was ever-changing, revealing new sides of her personality. He was immensely proud of the butterfly he had helped break from the cocoon of her male veneer. Now that imprisoning shell was long forgotten.

McAllister looked up from his computer when Claudia knocked on the door frame to his office.

“Yes, Signorina, may I help you? It’s Claudia, right.

“Yes, Mr. McAllister.”

“So, shouldn’t you be practicing your dance moves? I’m busy.”

“I already did that but I have a request.”

“That’s Elizabeth’s area.”

“No, sir. It’s not.”

“Then what is it?”

“I am doing a play, a classical Greek comedy. The *Lysistrata* by Aristophanes. I would like to have some of your guards play the male roles.”

“What about Stefano and Dave? I am sure they will jump on it.”

“I already have them and Christopher and Luis for some of the roles.”

“Can’t you use some of the girls to play the male roles? We have done it before. Didn’t the ancient Greeks have their actors play both sexes.”

“Well, they did. But the *Lysistrata* is a story about the battle of the sexes. I need really masculine men like Henley and Mabry to play the male roles. They will highlight the difference between men and the women who are denying them sex in order to stop the Peloponnesian War. It’s a story of erotic tension as both the men and women become frustrated about the lack of sex. The men end up sporting massive erections.”

“So that is why you want Henley? Has he agreed to this?” McAllister couldn’t believe he was having this conversation with the blonde.

“I want him to be Kinesias, an Athenian warrior and Mabry to be the Spartan Herald. Aristophanes makes a point of making the Spartans look like provincials, crackers if you like. Mabry’s South

Carolina-accented Italian would be perfect, don't you think?" Claudia was getting more and more enthused in discussing her production.

"I think Mabry and Henley need to be security guards like I pay them to be. They are not actors."

"But they love the idea. They are already sold. Please, even Katsemoto-san took time out of his mission to restore Japanese Bushido to ham it up in Kabuki theater. You saw the movie. You were there."

McAllister had to admit that he did watch Ken Watanabe at the Monday Night Movie screened on the back portico, another Aerie tradition.

"That was a movie."

"Please. It's only for an hour."

"All right. Henley and Mabry will be hoplites with hard-ons."

"Thank you. Thank you so much. You will love the production, I'm sure." Claudia bounced out of the office like a schoolgirl. McAllister could not believe that he had relented to her.

On a moon-dappled evening on a stage overlooking the Tyrrhenian, the ancient comedy of Aristophanes was performed and every member of the audience was aroused by the erotic tension. Alessandra was remarkable as the leader of the revolt, Lysistrata, the courageous and charismatic leader of the rebellion, who shook Greek society to its core and stopped the Peloponnesian War before Athens succumbed to its historical fate of becoming a smoking ruin.

Lysistrata's plot involved the women parading around in their sexiest and skimpiest lingerie while simultaneously denying their warrior husbands their bodies. Stefano had the girls in sheer silk robes that revealed their breasts, and panties that hid their vestigial maleness. He had also had the girls wear matching high-heeled sandals which immediately sparked a debate with Claudia, the producer and lead supporting actress.

"They aren't historically accurate. The ancient Greek women wore flat-soled sandals."

"So did the ancient Egyptians, but Liz Taylor wore high-heeled sandals in Cleopatra. Trust me girlfriend, you will look dazzling."

Claudia was dazzling as Kleonike, the over-sexed friend of Lysistrata, who agreed with great reluctance to forego sex with her husband, including giving up the sexual position of the Lioness on the Cheese Grater. Kleonike observed that women were true rascals whose only value was to be a glamorous ornament at the side of her man. Nevertheless, the prospect of parading around in public in sheer lingerie encouraged the reluctant Athenian woman to join the plot and repeat the oath of chastity over a jug of wine.

The audience gave rousing cheers to Alessandra and to Henley, but the applause thundered when the ditzy slut Kleonike took her bow. Claudia beamed, her play was a hit. As Claudia stood on stage, a smiling Elizabeth approached her.

She had a rose in her hand.

The Emperor could not keep his eyes off Claudia's body underneath the sheer lingerie. It was time to unwrap his present. The Emperor, however, was not the only man in the audience who could not keep his eyes off Claudia's body.

A thrilled Claudia stepped down from the stage to prepare herself for The Emperor's passion when Stefano intercepted her.

"This was incredible. Come with me, Kleonike. We are going to reward your patience."

Stefano did Claudia's make up, then set her hair in an up-do. He went to a large closet and brought out a sheer ivory gown. Claudia lost her breath. The gown was worthy of royalty. Stefano handed her a matching bra, panty, and garter belt set with marabou mules. Gazing at herself in the mirror, Claudia was dumbstruck. She looked like a princess.

"Be yourself, girl. That is you in the mirror. You are worthy of an Emperor," Stefano smiled.

Claudia's mules clacked on the marble courtyard walkway as she approached her destiny.

"My dear little Claudia. You look adorable. I have been anticipating this night for months."

"That makes two of us," Claudia smiled, hopefully.

The Emperor went to an antique table with a bottle of Champagne chilling on ice.

"Veuve Clicquot, the finest, to celebrate our first evening together," The Emperor remarked as he poured the Champagne into two crystal flutes.

“A toast to a lovely young woman who has captivated me since she arrived here months ago.”

“Thank you, it has been a true pleasure being here,” Claudia said just before imbibing the Champagne.

“This is superb.”

“So, Claudia, do you believe as Kleonike did, that a woman’s value is only as a glamorous ornament to her man.”

“Glamour is a luxury, and it helps if you have your own makeup man. I would hate to dismiss all the women who don’t have that luxury. And you, Sir. It’s a man’s world as evidenced by the *Lysistrata* itself. The women are dissed throughout the entire play. So what you think is what really matters. Besides, I live in your world.”

“I value a woman who has many gifts to offer. A man who sees only beauty and glamour is half-blind. You have much to offer. Elizabeth knew it from the start. So did I, on the night you first came here and overlooked the water.”

The Emperor then went to his massive entertainment system and turned on Rivet.

“Please give me the honor of this dance.”

Claudia took his hand, but halfway through the dance melted into The Emperor’s arms. She lost all conscious thought and lived just in the moment, happy, secure, aroused. The Emperor took a half-step back, lifted Claudia’s head up by the chin, gazed into her deep blue eyes, darker than the

Tyrrhenian, and gave her a kiss that would be remembered for a life time for both of them.

The Emperor then picked Claudia up, with her silken robe dangling beneath her and carried her to his Emperor-sized bed. Claudia positioned herself on all fours and sighed heavily, anticipating the penetration that she had yearned for months. A tear formed in her eye, and streaked her mascara. She could not be happier.

Experienced like no other man with fucking transsexuals in the ass, The Emperor lubricated his fingers and roughly pushed through Claudia's rosebud. She shrieked, then moaned in pleasure as she felt his mastery over her body and soul. He twirled his fingers inside Claudia, playing to her moans like he would a Stradivarius. He knew the exact time in which to mount his woman and thrust into her.

"Ooooooh, God. Please, fuck me. Fuck me hard."

The Emperor now showed a side Claudia had not observed. He was brutal, remorseless, almost cruel, and she loved it more than anything. He drove into her with a fury that touched the deepest depths of her lust. She was drowning in her passion, unrecognizable to herself. She had come to the Aerie very sexually knowledgeable, but now she had a real man inside her. His cock was magnificently wielded, like an ancient warrior with a spear that impaled its victim.

Claudia's shrieks echoed through The Emperor's wing and carried across the courtyard. She was The Emperor's woman, his slut, his whore, and she loved it. She thrust her ass onto his cock, pushing him to greater depths, driving herself to complete abandon. Claudia shrieked and moaned and panted like a

bitch in heat until The Emperor deposited his seed into the enraptured woman. Joined as one, the two lost consciousness with The Emperor lying heavily on Claudia, his cock still resting between her ass cheeks.

Hours later, Claudia found herself embracing her lover under the covers, lying on expensive silk sheets. She gazed on his face, and was surprised to see him smiling back. He embraced her tightly, forcing the breath out of her lungs.

“You leave me breathless,” she gasped.

“You inspire me.”

“You inspire *me*.”

Claudia then ducked under the covers, took his shrunken cock in her well-manicured fingers and started to lick it like a popsicle, smooth and exact until she felt it start to spring to life. She then kissed it, and took each of his balls into her mouth, urging forth the seed. The Emperor’s manhood grew and she parted her lips and submitted once more to his mastery. To the accompaniment of The Emperor’s calm, deep moans, Claudia bobbed her head up on down on his maleness, until he was deep into her throat. The Emperor then grasped her head underneath the covers, trapping her with him fully inside her gaping mouth. Claudia reveled in her imprisonment and gleefully satisfied The Emperor’s maleness until she tasted his salty essence. Like any of The Emperor’s girls, her table manners were exquisite and she left him completely clean.

Claudia’s table manners were much more relaxed as she ravenously ate breakfast in bed, next to The

Emperor, three grapefruit s and two eggs Benedict with locally cured ham.

The lovers remained in The Emperor 's bed all day, alternating between watching movies and fucking .

“So, dearest Claudia, in your research did you find out what the lioness on the cheese-grater entailed?”

“Unfortunately, I think the Classical Greek Kama Sutra was lost with the burning of the library at Alexandria. Our only hope is to rediscover it by accident,” Claudia laughed.

“As much as we have fucked today, we may very well have.”

Stefano brought the two of them dinner in their room; seafood Alfredo with raspberry gelato as dessert. He then redid Claudia's makeup and gave her a change of wardrobe, a purple bustier with gold trim, and matching stockings and gloves. Purple, the color reserved for The Emperor and his chosen women. The lovers pleased each other past midnight, then talked until the dawn broke through the bedroom window.

The Emperor cherished his times with Claudia. After feverish fucking they would talk about many things: the campaigns of Alcibiades, Julius Caesar, Germanicus, Belisarius, Grant, and Patton, the palace intrigues of Augustus and Claudius, the gentle kindness of Augustus's daughter, Julia the Elder, and her notorious reputation, the sculptures and paintings of the Renaissance, their favorite foods, salmon fishing on the Great Lakes and trout fishing in the Alps, sunlight shining through evergreens, the sound of the surf, the welcoming cry of a songbird,

and joking about the shrieks Claudia made in bed. The Emperor threatened to nickname her the Nebelwerfer, after the German six-barreled rocket launcher that caused such devastation at Monte Cassino and Anzio. Claudia, however, countered with the moniker The Siren, after the nymphs that haunted these very rocks and lured sailors to their death in antiquity until they were evidently hunted to extinction by the Venetians in need of unmolested maritime commerce.

Claudia and The Emperor had another conversation, the same that he had with every one of his adoring young women. After a particularly intense and satisfying episode of coupling, with The Emperor's warm seed dripping from her posterior, Claudia said with all deep sincerity, "I love you and I wish I could be the mother of your child. I wish I could have been able to give you a baby."

"I love you too, Claudia," The Emperor responded, like he did to all of his women, and he meant it every time.

Claudia had profoundly enjoyed her years at the Aerie, and now she was splattered in blood and brains from the gunman's exploding head. McAllister and Henley were the first to arrive at the scene and found her in shock. Henley gently lifted Claudia, placed her in the back seat of a Mercedes SUV, retrieved a bottle of water and some napkins and wiped the blood off her face.

"You're all right, little darling. You are all right. We got you, babe."

Meanwhile, McAllister rifled the gunman's pockets, taking his cell phone and passport. He noticed

the pistol, a Glock, unremarkable, as twelve-year-old kids carried those in the States. The passport indicated the gunman was Russian. The cell phone was locked, but he would have Mabry try to hack into it to recover the call history. He then pulled the wallet from the corpse and found what he was looking for, a boarding pass from Heathrow to Rome. McAllister then jumped into the passenger side of the SUV and rode back to the Aerie to face the wrath of The Emperor.

The Emperor erupted like Vesuvius and seared McAllister with his heat.

“How does this happen? How? Tell me. A young woman who has never hurt anyone, who does not have a dog in this fight, is a hair’s breadth away from being killed, assassinated by some punk gunman from the Russian mafia in London.”

McAllister had surmised that the hit was very amateurish and that Claudia was a target of opportunity. It should have been easy to kill her. Nobody would have thought that such an innocuous activity would show up on some mob radar. That is why she was never escorted. McAllister knew well the comings and goings of the community on the base of the hill and was certain the Aerie was not under surveillance, so he let Claudia go fishing every morning in the same way that he gave the girls some free rein in Monte Carlo, Milan, or Paris.

“This had to be a warning shot,” The Emperor continued. “A threat. Another damn dog marking his territory. I am sure the Russians are going to try and break into the drug and gun running operations, especially those through Istanbul. Cyprus and Athens. Well, I believe in an eye for an eye. I know what the

mob thinks of me now, thinking I am some ancient degenerate like Tiberius in my mountain palace consorting with faggots. I hear that from Guillermo every time he shows up here. He looks on the girls with disgust.”

“Well, I am an old man and I enjoy beautiful things and charming young ladies. I have loved transsexual women since I was in Naples forty-five years ago and lost my wife in an ambush and have nothing to prove to anybody. But this will not go unanswered. If the Russians seek war, then I will give it to them. *You* will give it to them. That is why I hired you, McAllister, because you know more than just petty gang rivalry. You know real war.”

“It sounds like you have a plan already in mind.”

“Yes. Pietro Giannovario has an operation in London, and has no love for the Russians in that town. He and I go back far, and I have let him peacefully conduct his business as long as he stays in the far north and leaves me alone. Moreover, I saved his life once so he owes me. He will be a valuable ally to wage war against the Russians. I want you to travel to London tomorrow and negotiate his support in our war. Give him anything reasonable in return. I trust you and trust him not to ask for the world. Then I want you to pay a visit to the Russian mob over in the West End and bring me back a Russian scalp. We don't shoot women or children or old men; other than that, take your shot. I also want you to have Claudia accompany you.”

“Claudia? Are you sure?” McAllister would have said ‘insane,’ but The Emperor was enraged.

“Yes, Claudia. I want everybody to see that she is alive and that their pathetic assassination attempt didn’t work. You will take Claudia.”

“But it’s dangerous. I would rather bring Mabry or Henley. They can be of some use.”

“I am sure it will be dangerous. You just will have to take care of her. It’s a miracle that you saw the gunman from the top of the Aerie. I plan on giving thanks to God at the chapel for that miracle and hope he has more in store.”

McAllister turned and left The Emperor at his desk, looking out over the sea, lost in his thoughts.

The Roman Senate lost power with the ascension of Augustus from the chaos in the wake of the assassination of Julius Caesar, Paolo San Luca remembered from his classical history. The issue of succession plagued the Empire ever afterwards with numerous assassinations and incessant plotting and power struggles. The eldest son of The Emperor was not always the one anointed to succeed his father, and was often an exceptionally poor candidate. The most effective mechanism The Emperor s found was to adopt the most able man in government as their own son, a practice that worked until the highly-revered emperor Marcus Aurelius gave the ivy crown to his worthless and homicidal son, Commodus.

The Emperor had a worthless son in Guillermo. He had lost his dear wife when Guillermo was only five, and never remarried. He had started to see the transsexual prostitutes in Naples and Milan as a way of temporarily forgetting his pain, but in his logic, still being loyal to his wife’s memory. Guillermo grew up to love money and power but had little concept of how

it was achieved, believing it was his birthright. He fully expected to obtain the vast business empire that his father had forged.

Now, The Emperor had to cast out for an alternative solution, and he thought back to the ancient practice of adoption. McAllister had run his empire with military-like precision and efficiency and, like any good American military officer, had been devotedly loyal to The Emperor and the mission. He had found McAllister as a disgraced and cynical counter-intelligence officer who made the mistake of calling out a general in Iraq as being only interested in career advancement. McAllister needed employment and The Emperor paid well for his services. McAllister quickly impressed him until now he personally led his bodyguard and managed all operations from the Aerie through numerous able lieutenants whom he had personally groomed.

McAllister was divorced long ago and apparently had no interest in women, or anything else for that matter. He was coldly efficient. His men like Mabry and Henley, both former U.S. Army Rangers loved him, but The Emperor wondered whether McAllister loved anything. A man assuming control of his domain had to be a man capable and willing to love many things. That is what made life worthwhile. The ancients loved Rome, but they loved their families as well. That is why The Emperor tried to treat everybody at the Aerie as family, although McAllister always seemed to be outside the hearth looking in from the cold.

That was until today when he saved Claudia's life with a highly improbable shot into the harbor from on top of a mountain. McAllister would take Claudia

to London. He would protect her, and when he demonstrated he could keep her safe, he would finally prove worthy of being adopted as The Emperor's successor. Lord knows he would need McAllister now more than ever after what had just been revealed.

Claudia sat in the passenger seat of a Mercedes SUV next to McAllister as they climbed into the Alps by the Italian and Austrian border. The sun glinted off the snow-covered peaks; Claudia felt incredibly nervous sitting next to McAllister and had not recovered from yesterday's near-death experience. She peered at the mountains so she would not have to look at McAllister or talk to him. Luckily, McAllister did not seem to be in the mood for talking, and the two remained silent for hours.

The Mercedes started to descend down a mountain and Claudia put on her earphones connected to her smart phone and started to play Hot in the City and bounce and gyrate on the seat, her exotic dance moves. Kristina, Monika, and Claudia were planning a new act with Elena, an Italian girl who recently arrived at the Aerie and was searching for friends. Song had left several months ago, to a triumphant farewell party and one last night with The Emperor, and was now in Paris, modeling for a clothing line that wanted to break into the Asian market.

Claudia went through three rehearsals of the act, much to the annoyance of McAllister. She was starting to regain her equilibrium.

"So why am I coming on this mission and not Mabry and Henley?"

"From what I can gather, to annoy me."

“It looks like I am doing a pretty good job. If I may ask, how do you plan on getting that elephant gun I saw you loading into the compartment in the back seat through customs?”

“By not getting searched at the border. You are my cover. We are an adoring couple of American tourists leaving Italy for a trip to England.”

“Well, at least I know how to act. Even you liked the Lysistrata. So did they teach you acting in whatever unit you belonged to?”

“We were too busy.

Yeah, I’ll bet. So what unit were you with?”

“If I told you, I would have to kill you.”

“Great, I’m riding in a Mercedes on the way to a gangster headquarters with Jason Bourne. I guess that makes me Nikki Parsons. I loved Julia Stiles in that role.” The Bourne trilogy had recently been shown at the Monday Night Movie.

“Nikki had way too much substance.”

“Oh, try me. Your first hit was in Geneva,” Claudia offered, reciting a line from the movie.

Surprisingly, McAllister took the bait. “I was here, Nikki, I was here. So help me, if you are lying to me, I’ll kill you,” McAllister was finally loosening up.

“It’s not in your file. It’s not in your file.”

McAllister and Claudia laughed. The first time Claudia had ever seen mirth on his face.

“So what are you planning on doing once you leave the service of The Emperor? You don’t have the martial skills to be a ronin.”

“Move To Milan, get a job in the fashion industry and hook up with a well-endowed, starving artist.”

“Well-endowed by nature or through a benefactor?”

“Ha. Nice try. I said starving artist. He can’t have a rich benefactor. Well-endowed by nature.”

“Could you be more shallow?”

“There is nothing shallow about a well-endowed man.”

The SUV swerved onto the shoulder. McAllister had lost control of the Mercedes for a second.

“So you don’t do random,” Claudia cited another line from the trilogy.

“Huh?”

“You don’t do random. Everything is calculated. Well then, I guess you don’t do luck either.”

Claudia went silent and looked out the passenger side window as the mountains rolled by, deep in thought. Nothing happens with McAllister that is fortuitous good luck, Claudia realized. She was too distraught the day before to consider the circumstances of her deliverance from death, but now it was crystal clear.

The SUV approached the Austrian border, joining the line of traffic waiting to cross over. Claudia looked at the sentry shack and guards with apprehension.

“Passports please,” the guard requested.

McAllister handed him their passports.

“And what is your purpose of visiting Austria?”

“We are passing through on our way to England.”

“And your purpose in the U.K.?”

“Tourism. My girlfriend and I are visiting London.”

“So this is your girlfriend?”

“Yes, she is.”

The guard took a long glance inside, then waived them through.

“Enjoy Britain.”

Claudia had been holding McAllister’s hand throughout the entire encounter with the Austrian border guard, but remained holding his hand for the next twenty miles.

McAllister pulled off the highway at Metz after driving all day.

“Why don’t we push on? We could be in Calais late tonight.”

“Because I have been driving all day and I’m fucking tired. We don’t have to be at Giannovario’s

home until the day after tomorrow. We will get an early start in the morning and check into a hotel in London, then go see Giannovario the next afternoon. Our main issue is getting across the Channel, but we will take the Chunnel at Calais. There is no hurry to start a war.”

“You make this sound like a military operation.”

“It is. Don’t kid yourself.”

“I thought we were just to meet with Giannovario. I guess it’s to get his allegiance to The Emperor in the battle against whoever tried to kill me.”

“You think way too much.”

“It’s a curse.”

Claudia emerged from the bathroom of the hotel. She had showered, then re-donned her blouse and blue jeans and quickly scurried under the bed covers. McAllister had booked a room with two queen beds, much to the surprise of the clerk.

Now safely under the covers of her bed, Claudia engaged McAllister in conversation.

“Do you know that Metz was one of the last Roman cities to be overrun by the Barbarians after they crossed the Rhine, and in the Franco-Prussian War, the French army got trapped here and basically lost the whole war, leaving Paris unguarded? And in World War II, Patton ground to a halt in this town, then used up his troops in piecemeal attacks against heavily-fortified German positions.”

McAllister was through being surprised with anything that came from Claudia's mouth.

"Yeah, so?" McAllister feigned disinterest as the drive had been long and he was tired, but he liked hearing her talk.

"Well, sometimes it's a good idea to take a step back and consider the situation, rather than rush headlong into a fight in which the enemy has the advantages, and it's always good not to get yourself in a trap."

"Good night there, Clausewitz," McAllister said as he turned off the light.

The next morning, Claudia greeted McAllister with croissants, a fresh orange, and coffee that she had brought from the hotel restaurant.

"Good morning, I hope you like."

McAllister groggily rose his head from the bed and sat up, revealing a muscular chest, which Claudia caught herself longingly staring at. He then got out of bed and ravenously downed the breakfast in less than a minute.

"You could say thank you, you know."

"If you insist," McAllister said, but did not thank Claudia.

Thirty minutes later, McAllister reached for the keys in his pocket but found they weren't there. He looked concerned, fearful that he left them in the hotel room, until Claudia reached into her purse, brandishing the keys.

“I took them from your pocket this morning when you were asleep. I’m driving to Calais.”

The rain and mist in London matched the somberness of visiting Giannovario to start a war. The Emperor had taken his entourage to London once and she had thrilled to the sights; Trafalgar Square, the British Museum, the Tower of London, and night clubbing in the West End. Now she and McAllister drove down a rainy street in a wealthy residential neighborhood until they came to Giannovario’s house. McAllister drove past the house twice to ensure the environs were secure, then parked the car on the street. He searched the sidewalks and parked cars for anybody suspicious. He had an awful feeling he couldn’t shake, but hoped it was just the rain affecting his mood.

Sensing McAllister’s unease, Claudia asked, “Are you all right? You look as if you saw a ghost.”

Claudia’s concern snapped McAllister from his funk. “Come on, let’s go.”

They came to the doorstep; McAllister noticed a security camera focused on them. He rang the doorbell and waited. Nothing could be heard from the house, although the lights were on inside. McAllister pressed the doorbell again. Again silence, deafening.

“Did you get the time right? I heard you tell The Emperor we were going to meet them two hours ago over the phone.”

“Yes, and I told Giannovario that I would be meeting him now. I lied to The Emperor.”

“Why?”



“Because he can be too trusting.”

“Well, they obviously aren’t here. Let’s go back to the hotel and call them.”

“No, something is wrong.”

McAllister tried the doorknob. The door was open and the two deadbolts unlocked. McAllister entered into the threshold and immediately came across the body of a security guard, lying in a dried pool of blood with a bullet in the chest. The guard had a look of surprise on his face.

Claudia was terrified and refused to venture further into the home until McAllister dragged her into the living room to a sight which made her scream.

Bodies littered the living room, on the couch, the easy chairs, and the hall leading into the dining room. Two well-dressed men calmly sat with bullet holes in their heads; Giannovario and evidently his son. Claudia also noticed two dead women, prim and proper with the exception of blood staining their clothes. They were the men’s wives.

Claudia stood transfixed at the corpses, while McAllister continued his search of the house, finding a total of five dead bodyguards in addition to the now deceased Giannovarios. Claudia remained in the living room and in forcing her gaze off the two dead women, her eyes fell on an inscription, written in blood on the wall, “Veni Vidi Vici.” “I came, I saw, I conquered,” Caesar’s comments on his defeat of the Greeks on the Black Sea and The Emperor’s own slogan.

McAllister walked back into the living room and gazed on what Claudia was staring at on the wall.

“They are trying to pin this on us.”

“Who?”

“Probably the Russians. They were tipped off to us coming. They hoped to find us here too.”

Claudia looked frightened on the ashen face of the young woman. She could be like that.

Just then two men entered the open door. McAllister cursed himself for not locking the deadbolt, but immediately drew his pistol and shot the intruders dead. Claudia looked horrified but McAllister pushed her out the back door.

“They probably have friends out on the street.”

McAllister pointed to a wooden fence, seven feet high.

“Let me help you up.”

“I’m fine.” Claudia stated as she clambered up the wall.

The pair went through two backyards that way, until they came to the street. McAllister looked around the street corner and saw a man waiting on the Giannovario’s porch and another at the car, both of them with their guns at their side as the traffic continued to pass by. He leapt onto the street behind a passing car, and got behind the row of parked cars which would shield him as he made his advance. When he was three cars away from the mobster’s

SUV he broke cover, shot the man on the porch, ran out in the gap between the parked cars and killed the final man. He then ran to the SUV, but turned to see Claudia frozen on the street corner.

“If you don’t come, I’ll leave you.”

Claudia didn’t move and McAllister entered the SUV, started the ignition and pulled away from the curb. He then stopped on the street. A car came from the intersection and furiously beep-beeped its horn at the Mercedes SUV now blocking its progress. Seeing McAlister about ready to drive away, Claudia ran the sixty yards to the car and jumped into the passenger’s side after McAllister flung open the door for her. The Mercedes screeched off to the smell of burning tires, but McAllister saw the driver of the other vehicle get out and look at the body on the edge of the road.

“You wouldn’t have moved otherwise. We have got to get out of London. The police will be here in five minutes.”

Claudia just nodded assent.

“Like you said, don’t get caught in a trap. Right now, England is one huge trap.”

McAllister made as much haste as he could on the English highway without getting pulled for speeding until they arrived at a truck marshaling yard for vehicles waiting to board the ferry for Europe. He searched the lines of stalled trucks. They could not hide in a regular moving van as they could not re-lock the latch from the inside, and Customs or the driver would certainly notice. He finally spotted an ideal ve-

hicle, a flatbed semi with large diesel engines underneath large tarps.

“When we have a chance, we are going to ditch the Mercedes and sneak under those tarps. I suggest you go to the ladies room now because you won’t have a chance for hours.”

Claudia did as ordered without saying a word. She had yet to utter a word since London. She returned to the car and found McAllister talking on his cell phone to Mabry.

“We were set up. Giannovario and everybody in the house were killed, and they are trying to make it look like we did it. I am sure the police will be on our ass in no time. We are at Dover and are going to smuggle our way back to the continent on the back of a flatbed once it gets dark. Don’t tell anybody that we are alive, not even The Emperor. I want Guillermo to start to sweat.”

“Guillermo? Are you sure?”

“Yeah, I’m sure. Just keep The Emperor safe from him and his personal goons.”

“Oh, so that is why they are gathered at the base of the mountain.”

“Like I said, just keep The Emperor safe. I am turning off my cell phone as I don’t know how long this trip will be.”

Under the cover of darkness, McAllister led Claudia out of the car. “We are going to hide under those tarps, you under the front one, me under the back one. Do not move or say anything. Don’t try to

talk to me. Do not come out for anything unless you hear me say so.”

Claudia could only nod.

“Here, take my jacket. You will need it to stay warm.”

For hours Claudia huddled in darkness, fearful for her life, and froze in the April night. She bit her hand to keep her teeth from chattering. Then, after midnight, she heard something that froze her far worse than the evening’s chill. Police alarms.

The alarms went on for several minutes but then all was quiet. Finally, Claudia saw sunlight peeking out from under the tarp and drifted off to a restless sleep that was disturbed two hours later when the truck’s engine turned on and the truck boarded the ferry. The interior of the ferry was warmer and the passage across the channel only took two hours. Ten minutes later the truck’s engine started and the truck lurched forward, off the ferry.

Another two hours later, the truck lurched to a halt, and the engine stopped. Claudia heard McAllister’s voice.

“Are you awake?”

“Yes.” The first word she had spoken in almost a day.

“Then get out on the right hand side of the truck.”

Claudia scrambled out of the truck. They were at the parking lot of a large warehouse, and McAllister

quickly had them duck behind the building's exterior.

"I think we are in Brussels. The ferry must have landed at Ostend."

McAllister then called Mabry.

"Damn, boss, I'm glad to hear from you. I just checked the Interpol sites and they have your pictures plastered all over it. I don't think you can make it across any border, unless you can find another truck."

"We will hold up here for now. I'll call you when we find a safe place."

"Roger that."

McAllister googled his location on his smart phone.

"We are about a mile from the center of town. There will be hotels there, and rental cars. We should be okay for awhile as long as we strictly use cash."

"Why don't we get a taxi?"

"Because it's only a mile, and two Americans on foot in an industrial district doesn't look suspicious at all. It's time to walk."

Just then the skies unloaded with rain coming from the Atlantic, standard Belgian weather.

Claudia felt revived after standing in the shower for half an hour. McAllister had gotten a small hotel

room in downtown. “Americans there are less conspicuous,” he said.

The hotel room was small, two single beds that took up almost the entire bedroom, a tiny bathroom with a sink, shower, and stall in which Claudia could barely turn around, and a TV that got four channels, two of which were BBC. The radiator worked though, and the room was clean and tidy.

Claudia emerged from the bathroom, wearing only a towel, not even realizing, and immediately ducked under the covers which McAllister had thoughtfully turned back for her. She was asleep in less than a minute.

With nothing to do in the room, McAllister looked at the sleeping young transsexual in the bed next to him. “Even now, she is beautiful.”

Late the next morning, McAllister gently shook Claudia awake.

“We are going out to get lunch.”

“But I thought we were laying low, hiding inside.”

“Staying indoors all day and refusing maid service in a room this small is going to start to start looking suspicious very fast, especially for an American couple ostensibly in Belgium on a holiday. You need to eat something.”

“I guess you’re right. I wasn’t hungry until you mentioned it.”

“Too afraid to be hungry.”

“Yes.”

The pair emerged into a rainy, gray Belgian morning, typical.

“Good, the rain keeps people’s attention focused away from strangers. We should be fine.”

After a good drenching that actually revived Claudia’s spirits somewhat, they found a traditional Belgian restaurant right on the main square. The two walked a steep staircase and emerged into the restaurant, dimly lit, but with a fireplace and staff emanating warmth, with ancient hardwood tables and chairs creating a cozy atmosphere. They made their way to the back of the restaurant, next to the fireplace.

Claudia ordered a large pot of mussels, wurst with red cabbage and potatoes, and a large bottle of Hoegarden. McAllister didn’t object. She needed her strength and the beer would help her stay loose.

McAllister started conversation to keep Claudia’s mind occupied. “So what do you see in The Emperor? He is old enough to be your grandfather.”

“Well, other than the obvious, that he gave me a life, that he opened the door wide open for me to become who I really am.”

“Yes, I understand that, but you and all the girls thrill to his attention.”

“Yes and we all know that he is old enough to be our grandfather. But The Emperor in my case, and like all the other girls, is the first man to treat me with

respect, and be interested in me as a real human being, not just a two-dimensional sex object.”

“OK.”

“Before I came to The Emperor, I slept with plenty of men in New York and Philadelphia. Some of them were better fucks than The Emperor, and most were far younger. But I couldn’t stand sleeping with the younger guys after awhile. They saw me as nothing more than a fantasy image. They would cum inside me and be out the door in five minutes, once reality flooded back into their mind. I finally had a hard rule, nobody under twenty-five. ‘Oh Claudia, I want to fuck you so much. I would be eternally grateful if I could fuck you.’ That and five dollars would buy me a Starbucks.”

“So you want a man to value you as a whole person.”

“Doesn’t any woman want that?”

“I suppose.”

“It’s amazing how many men fail to realize that, even with women that don’t have cocks between their legs.”

“I guess you’re right.”

“Well, it’s all moot now. I probably won’t live to see The Emperor again. I guess that’s the price you pay for being the mistress of a drug lord.”

“You knew that coming into this. You are not stupid, nor are you so crass as to ignore what he really does.”

“Yes but I was thrilled by what he gave me. I had real joy at the Aerie, and real friends for the first time in my life. Real family, while we are at it. God knows my old family is history.”

“Tell me about it.”

Claudia studied McAllister to see if he was sincere, or just making conversation. She then opened up. “My Dad is an asshole, an army officer like yourself, although you are not a complete asshole.”

“Thanks. I’ll take that as a compliment.”

“Well, Dad was always worried about his career and promotions. How everybody else perceived him. Mom felt the same way. There was no fucking way I was going to come to them as a kid and say, ‘Mom, Dad, I want to live as a woman. It’s who I really am.’”

“But you did come out to them.”

“Oh yeah. I did. Halfway through college. I was already a disappointment to my Dad. I quit ROTC. I did not fit in there like everywhere else but when I became Claudia, every man around seemed to want to get to know me.”

“Albeit on the surface level.”

“More like how far they could penetrate, and I’ll admit it. I loved the sex.”

“But now you are here.”

“Because Elizabeth offered me something far greater, and I took it. I came out to my parents and I walked away with them screaming at me; how I was

Webster's definition of a pervert, how I would contract AIDS, how I would be going to Hell."

"That's got to hurt."

"Really, but honestly I hadn't thought about them for years, not until you brought it up."

"Sorry."

"So what brought you to The Emperor, now that we are talking about our past."

"I had my reasons."

"What? Money?"

"Pretty much. I needed the work and was pissed at the world."

"So why don't you swap sides? I'm sure Guillermo will pay you a lot more just to win your loyalty."

"Because I value loyalty. I work for The Emperor. That's what I signed on for. It's like the military, I signed on for whatever they gave me. What I couldn't stand, however, was a general who was only loyal to himself."

"But you never seemed to be part of the family. Shit, we all see Henley and Mabry as the older brothers we all wish we had."

"Think of me as the older brother who was always away at school when you were growing up."

Back at the room, McAllister called Mabry.

“How is the siege coming?”

“It’s not much of a siege if you ask me. Guillermo’s goons are still gathered down by the base of the mountain and some are in positions outside the wall, but they haven’t really done anything yet.”

“That’s because Guillermo never got word from the Russians that I was killed. I’m sure he was planning to strut into the Aerie once he heard I was dead and tell The Emperor that he was taking over, that The Emperor was too old. He doesn’t know what to do now that he has played his hand.”

“Other than just hang around and look stupid.”

“Can you take out some of the guards?”

“How many do you want?”

“As many as in a night’s work.”

“Sounds like pig hunting back home.”

McAllister put the phone down and sat on the bed next to Claudia.

“You know, Belisarius, when he was besieged in Rome by the Ostrogoths, continued to sortie with his cavalry. He lifted the siege that way. Let’s hope Mabry and Henley can do the same.”

“We’ll see.”

“So what is the plan?”

“We are probably not going to be able to get back to Italy alone; too many borders, too many police look-

ing for us. We are going to need Henley and Mabry to smuggle us across the border. The trouble is two-fold. We can't leave them now with Guillermo's men waiting to swoop down on the Aerie. It should be able to hold if they attack but I can't leave the place shorthanded. Once the siege is lifted and we are reasonably certain that Guillermo has pulled in his horns, then Mabry and Henley can try to pick us up. The trouble with that is they will be under surveillance from the time they leave to the time they pick us up. When they pick us up, it will probably get bloody. With me dead, Guillermo can still muscle in on The Emperor sooner or later."

"Great."

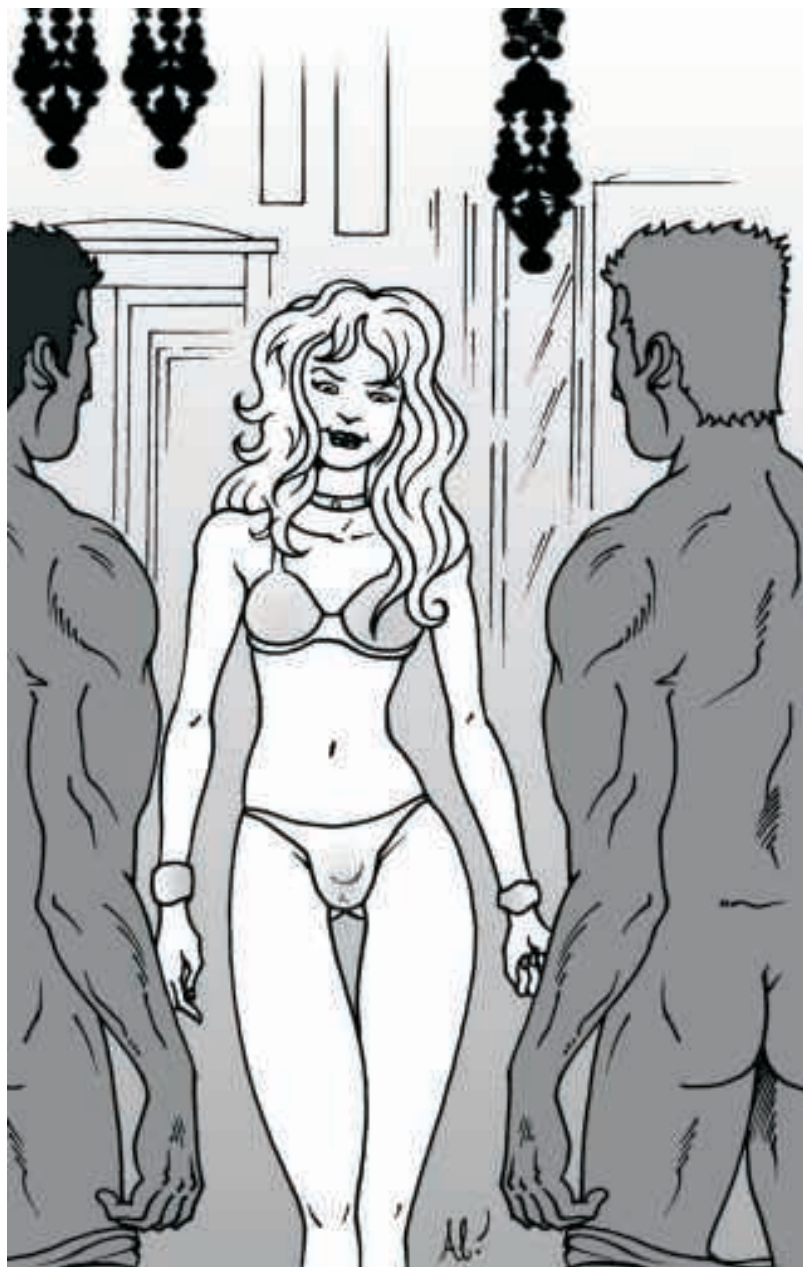
Claudia went to bed, but couldn't sleep. In the next bed over, McAllister could hear her crying. He climbed over to her bed, and she rose and embraced him.

"God, this sucks."

"Yeah, I know."

Late the next morning, Claudia woke to a room full of flowers. It looked like McAllister had bought an entire stall from one of the vendors in the medieval town square. What good was money if you were going to be dead soon? he thought.

For two nights Mabry and Henley had left the Aerie, armed with knives in an effort to even the odds. Before dawn they returned, with blood spattered on their faces and their clothes. Elizabeth had watched the guards return early the second morning and saw their relaxed ease that afternoon. They were warriors. The thought intrigued her, aroused her. Eliza-



beth had been the mother hen to twenty over-sexed young ladies but never had indulged. She had her position to consider.

But now she felt like women from time immemorial, having the warriors defend them from their enemies. The men killed at night, but in the day acted just like their usual selves. She burned for them, these men who knew savagery and could perform in Greek satire at the urgings of a sweet young girl. Her juices flowed when she saw them, waking up in the early afternoon, in shorts and sweatshirts, sipping beer and eating strombolis the cook made them. Henley put the foil-wrapped Stromboli at his groin, seeking a laugh from Mabry and Elizabeth nearly had an orgasm then and there.

The next morning, a blood-soaked Mabry and Henley tramped across the portico on the way to their quarters when a figure emerged from the shadows.

“Hello boys.”

Elizabeth had consulted Stefano to choose the outfit for the most impact. Dancing girl. The men were not looking for demure or sophisticated after a night's bloodletting. They wanted lewd and nasty and Elizabeth was a vision to behold. She wore a bejeweled sapphire-colored bra and matching panty, armlets, a gold choker, high-heeled sandals. She had her eyes done in a sultry and seductive look, and lipstick in deep burgundy. She had looked at herself in the mirror and was stunned.

Mabry and Henley were similarly stunned, but their lust for blood instantly transformed into a lust for flesh. They pawed at Elizabeth's bare body until she led them to her room. She then started to dance

for them and she lured them in, feeling their enraged hard-ons beneath their pants. She then dropped to the floor and unzipped each of the men's zippers and hungrily pulled out their magnificent cocks. A scent of sweat and male musk overcame her and she alternated sucking her champion's spears, building herself into a mindless frenzy.

Henley then pushed the whore onto all fours and yanked off her panties. He probed her with his finger. She was soaking wet. Henley rammed his bitch from behind while Mabry clubbed the slut's face with his cock until she opened wide and took him down her throat.

"You nasty fucking whore, take my fucking cock," Henley bellowed, thrusting into a yielding Elizabeth. Elizabeth wanted to scream but her mouth was muffled.

"That's it, bitch. Suck it. Suck it."

The men exploded into Elizabeth and Mabry insisted on having her show off her cum-filled mouth before she could swallow.

That afternoon, Henley and Mabry gave Elizabeth a cheerful but respectful greeting and a wink, and that night lifted the siege.

At dinner, Claudia and McAllister sat in their accustomed spot at the restaurant on the square, pondering the impending showdown.

"Do you know that in the reign of Augustus, one of his generals, Publius Quinctillius Varus, was defeated in the Teutoberg Forest? The German tribes

wiped out three Roman legions because they couldn't deploy in the trees."

McAllister continued eating his mussels, smiling to humor Claudia. "She is always going on about this stuff. But then again, she has been insightful before."

Claudia continued to plow ahead. "And in World War Two, the Germans tore up about five of our divisions plus the Rangers in the Huertgen Forest. Again, they used the forest to their advantage."

McAllister smiled. He loved Claudia, but then he had since that damn play. "Continue, please."

"Well, we have our own forest that we don't have to cross a border to get to. And the home team did really well there."

"The Ardennes. Come on. We are going to see if we can find an army surplus store. We need to get some stuff."

"What stuff?"

Back at the hotel, Claudia modeled a used Belgian army camouflage uniform and cap in a camouflage pattern.

"Well, how do I look?"

McAllister thought she had never looked so feminine and desirable. Her blonde hair hung in a pony tail, and her breasts and hormone-enhanced curves were still discernible under the man's uniform. She still had on her makeup and moved in a soft, delicate manner, confirming her womanhood.

Feeling an irresistible arousal, McAllister got up from the bed and kissed Claudia deeply on the lips.

“You make an adorable private.”

Claudia returned the kiss, running her fingers through McAllister’s hair and whimpering softly as he kissed the base of her neck.

“Mmm.”

McAllister then unbuttoned Claudia’s combat blouse and pulled it off. Underneath she was all woman, a lavender bra with wonderful cleavage that he had stared at many times on the stage at the Aerie or at the pool. He kissed her breasts and squeezed them strongly in his hands.

“Ooohhh.”

McAllister then pulled off her trousers, revealing matching panties.

“Take me. Please. I’m yours.”

McAllister gently directed Claudia to the small bed and lay her down at the edge.

“There is lubricant in my purse.”

McAllister lubricated his cock, placed a pillow under Claudia’s waist, then grabbed her legs and put them over his shoulders, exposing her ass cheeks. He ground through her rosebud while looking into her eyes. Her coyness had long since taken flight in the trauma of the past days’ events, and now she was just a young woman who needed to feel loved and protected. He gently entered her.

“I love you, Claudia.”

“Mmmm. I love you, darling.”

McAllister leaned over with his cock still buried to the hilt in Claudia’s upturned ass and kissed her on the mouth, prying open her lips, and tasting her warmth. She responded soulfully and lost herself in her passion. McAllister then picked up the pace, thrusting deeper and deeper and eliciting greater and greater shrieks of pleasure. The normally taciturn McAllister started yelling, “Take it, take it, darling, take my cock. Damn, you are so beautiful,” until he groaned, releasing his seed into Claudia, making her his own.

In the depths of the night, still leaking McAllister’s essence, Claudia held him tightly.

“I don’t want to die.”

“You won’t, I promise you.”

“Do you really mean that? How can you promise that?”

“I’m not going to lose you, now that we are finally together.”

“I love you, Matthew.”

With Claudia now lying asleep in his arms, McAllister pondered the future. Nobody had called him Matthew since his wife left him while he was away on one deployment to many. Now he had a young woman in his arms that he cherished with an intensity equal to when he first met his wife. He could care less that Claudia had a cock; everything she did

was as a woman, except the ongoing military history commentary. Women did have value, he thought, and far more than just somebody to fuck. He had taken incredible strength from her kindness and guileless nature, her wisdom, and her strength in not cracking. He had been a lonely man for a long time but that had all changed once she sat in the passenger's seat of the Mercedes way back in Amalfi.

McAllister was sincere in his promise that he would not let her die; he would do everything in his power to get her out of this alive. If she died, he would die as well. "That's as good as it can ever get," he thought. "She can bitch me out later in Heaven, and then we will make love somewhere discreet."

The ringing cell phone woke McAllister from a peaceful sleep at 6:30 in the morning, as dawn broke over the Brussels skyline.

"What?"

"Guess what, boss?"

"What?"

"The bad guys have left town. We drove down the mountain. There is nobody around," Henley reported, sitting exhaustedly in an easy chair while the dancing girl sucked blissfully on his cock.

"Then it's time to come pick us up."

"You know they will intercept us somewhere. Somebody is still watching us at a distance, I'm sure. You are still alive and that fact bothers Guillermo."

"So now it's time for the showdown, on our terms."

“Where? How?”

McAllister discussed the plan at length with Henley, who then brought up an obstacle.

“Your plan calls for a lot of heavy artillery, which is cool, but that makes it tougher to get past any curious border guards. You and Claudia make a cute couple, but we look like we are headed to a fight.”

Hearing the conversation, Claudia shook McAllister’s arm.

“Not now, I’m busy.”

She then snatched the cell phone from him.

“I have an idea. I think it will work, all we need is some eyeliner, hair gel, and somebody with a sense of fashion to dress those two gorillas.”

At each border crossing, none of the guards thought for a minute that Henley and Mabry were hardened gunmen on their way to a battle. Each was tastefully dressed in an Armani blazer and slacks, had their eyes sexily accented with black kohl eyeliner, and their hair slicked back. Mabry made a point of holding Henley’s hand at the checkpoints, and the two were immediately waved through without a word.

McAllister stopped the rental car that he had paid for in cash in the small, picturesque town of Boulloin, on the Semois River. Even in her somber mood, Claudia tried to enjoy the scenery, dark evergreens of the Ardennes Forest surrounding a Ninth Century castle on a ridge, with the river flowing clean and pure through the heart of the town.

“I might never again be able to enjoy something so beautiful,” she thought.

Claudia, however, felt strength in McAllister’s confidence and decisiveness. In the forest two miles from the town the couple prepared their defenses with shovels, saws, and axes they had purchased at the army surplus store. Knowing that the waiting for battle was the worst part, McAllister supervised the fortification until half an hour before Henley and Mabry were expected.

Henley and Mabry now had an entourage that would rival The Emperor itself. Five vehicles followed them through the Belgian countryside, one vehicle from Guillermo’s much reduced crew, and four Russian vehicles.

The Russian mobsters knew that McAllister and Claudia would not have gotten far. They had intercepted police broadcasts that their SUV had been impounded at Dover and looked at the ferry schedule for the day after the shooting, narrowing down the destinations to Calais, Cherbourg or Ostend. They quickly dispatched two vehicles to Paris and two to Brussels, waiting for word that the fugitives had been spotted. Now Henley and Mabry were leading them right to their targets.

“Would it have been better to have held up in the castle?” Claudia asked.

“We would have been trapped like rats and the police would have gotten us. I give them half an hour to arrive once the shooting starts.”

“Not much time to get away.”

“Wars and empires were decided on a narrower thread. You know that. Come on, they will be here in five minutes.”

In four minutes Henley and Mabry’s BMW crossed a narrow stone bridge over a rushing tributary of the Semois. The pursuit vehicles were not in view as Henley had sprinted down the country road the last two miles, according to his GPS. They had bought twenty seconds.

Once Henley and Mabry were across, McAllister drove the rental car onto the bridge, parking it sideways. He leapt from the car and ignited a homemade fuze dangling from the gas tank just as the vehicles came into view around the bend. He sprinted into the forested hills. Long range gunfire sought him out as he ran through the trees to a position overlooking the bridge.

The first two carloads of gunmen, Italians and Russians, advanced onto the bridge, attempting to take cover behind its stone walls when the rental car exploded in a pillar of flame, engulfing them.

Mabry joked, “That evens the odds,” handing McAllister an M-4, similar to the one he carried.

McAllister looked at Claudia who was trying to hold down her fear. He quickly embraced her in his arms and gave her a deep, soulful kiss. “If we get out of this, I am marrying you.”

Claudia smiled, and McAllister thought, “If only all troops could be similarly inspired.”

Henley carried an M-240 machine gun, and Claudia bent to pick up two extra cases of ammunition.

“Remember, all you have to do is keep up with Henley and carry the ammo.”

Claudia nodded, all fear gone. She then hurriedly followed Henley while Mabry and McAllister started to pick off gangsters moving past the inferno on the bridge and assaulting the ridge. In the forest, the ex-soldiers were in their element whereas the gangsters slipped on the slick pine needled floor and lost any semblance of formation.

McAllister and Mabry fell back to foxholes on the reverse slope and shot three gangsters as they came over the crest of the ridge, then beat a hasty retreat as the remainder of the gangsters returned fire. The two crossed over a firebreak and disappeared into the undergrowth, pursued at a respectful distance by the much reduced force of gangsters. The gangsters fanned out in a skirmish line and started to cross the firebreak when Henley’s M-240 caught them in enfilade, cutting down five of them in a row. The remainder took position on the far side; two sprinted across the firebreak, one of whom died on the other side by a bullet from McAllister.

Henley continued to fire as fast as he could, until the remaining gunmen started to work around their flank. He had already used one belt of ammunition and Claudia gave him another belt, brass to the grass, to ensure it fed properly.

Bullets started to clip the trees overhead, cascading the two in pine needles and small twigs when Henley shouted, “Let’s get out of here.”

Claudia and Henley ran deeper into the forest when Claudia felt a blow to her back which knocked the air out of her lungs and pitched her to the ground.

“Henley!” she cried out.

Henley turned and saw Claudia on the ground writhing in pain. He advanced back towards her and saw two gangsters emerge from behind the trees. He cut them down with a burst from the machine gun but felt a bullet graze his massive thigh and another break his left forearm. McAllister and Mabry joined him and quickly dispatched the last gangster.

Ignoring his own injuries, Henley immediately went over to Claudia, who had a pool of blood seeping into the pine needles beneath her. Mabry and Henley pulled off her camouflage blouse to see an exit wound right below her right breast the size of a quarter and saw the blood bubble from a sucking chest wound. The bullet had passed through her lung.

“She’s a goner, boss, if we don’t get her to the hospital ASAP, and I ain’t leaving her.”

“Neither am I,” McAllister responded. “The police should be here any minute.” McAllister called an ambulance so it would already be dispatched by the time the police arrived. “We are not going to leave her. We’re family.”

The Emperor stared blankly onto the serene, peaceful waters of the Tyrrhenian. They looked so beautiful, untouched by man. He was a man who had learned to appreciate beauty and did everything to cultivate it, but now the empire that he had worked

so laboriously to build was in the midst of a conflagration, like Rome in 64 AD under The Emperor Nero.

Paolo San Luca had worked hard to cultivate the image of a modern-day Roman emperor so that he would be both feared and respected by both his friends and enemies. Like any good Emperor he saw everything with the gaze of an eagle, and let on very little about what he saw. Only his wonderful young girls had a true sense of his perception, but not McAllister or Guillermo.

The Emperor immediately discerned that Guillermo had arranged the attempted hit on Claudia. Her actions were too far below anybody's radar to detect, other than a person intimately familiar with the goings on at the Aerie and in Guillermo's case, was hateful of his transgendered young women. He had vowed to either kick them all out or sell them to the highest bidder once he came to power, a thought that made The Emperor cringe.

McAllister's mission had many purposes; to prove McAllister's worth as the successor to his empire if things went sour; to smoke out and destroy Guillermo once he looked vulnerable; and to hopefully bond McAllister and Claudia together as one. McAllister's saving of Claudia in the harbor was too fortuitous to be actual luck. McAllister had gazed longingly on Claudia from afar. Claudia would make him an excellent wife and he would be delighted for the both of them.

The Emperor then considered himself, the ruler of a modern day Roman Empire in its rapid decline. He again thought back to his classical history, a topic he once shared so joyfully with a lingerie-clad Claudia in the warmth of his bed. Unfortunately, he could find

few examples of Roman Emperors dying gracefully when the gods turned against them. Julius Caesar was assassinated. Augustus died an old man at the pinnacle of Roman glory, as did Marcus Aurelius. More commonplace were The Emperor s who died as pathetic wretches; Nero, Commodus, Caracalla, or worst of all Tiberius, a bloated, lecherous and drunken mass of flesh on his villa in Capri. He hoped he was not like Tiberius. He loved his girls as did the ancient Emperor but he hoped that he gave them as much in return. He certainly gave his heart to each and every one.

Turning to modern history, he found even poorer examples of how an Emperor dies. He himself had smelled Mussolini's cowardice as it oozed from his body along with the blood that pooled onto the square in Milan so long ago. Hitler was even worse, dying like a rat underneath Berlin while his people suffered and died above. His people, The Emperor thought, that is what makes an emperor truly good, truly praise-worthy, his care for his people.

The Emperor then remembered another incident from history, not involving an emperor, but his equal in Christian Rome, the Pope. With Attila and his hordes at the very gates of Rome, Pope Leo II emerged from the city, approached him with all the dignity of his office as his only defense to being hacked to death, and convinced the Hunto to take his depredations elsewhere. Attila promptly did, sparing the eternal city a sacking.

Rome, however, was sacked by the Goths and the Vandals. So was Aquileia, on the Adriatic coast. Rome somehow survived, and the refugees of Aquileia sought refuge on the banks of a tidal lagoon,

making a living through fishing and trade until they created a truly wonderful city, Venice. Now people spoke of Rome and Venice in the same breath.

The Emperor had to provide for his people, to make them safe, secure, and to give them the opportunity to thrive again. He called Elizabeth to his office. She had taken the girls under her wing and had the strength and intelligence to bring them to safety. She would give McAllister a message to ensure that he would place the burden of guilt back where it belonged, on his shoulders. The Emperor was an old man, to be sure, but he never felt stronger in his life.

The next afternoon, a veritable convoy of Italian special unit police stormed the Aerie. The Aerie, however, now looked like a premature Roman ruin. Everything that could be carried had been taken away by Elizabeth along with the girls and all the remaining staff. The police found The Emperor, quiet, dignified, sipping his best vintage wine and eating an anti-pasto salad that the cooks had prepared for him while he looked upon the waters of the Tyrrhenian, alone.

In her hospital room in Liege, Claudia too was alone, and when the morphine slackened, in pain. McAllister, Henley, and Mabry had all been immediately taken into custody by the Belgian police for reenacting the Battle of the Bulge. She had not talked to any of them for over a week. Nobody came to visit her and the nurses did not tarry, as she was linked to organized crime. Her guard at the door looked on her in disgust, one of Paolo San Luca's army of mistresses.

At nights, Claudia would look at the moon light shining on the sterilized linoleum floors of her hospi-

tal room and remembered that she often saw the moon shine on marble, or glint on the enchanted waters of the Tyrrhenian. Her life had been so rich, so wonderful then. She then remembered further back, to being a lonely young transgendered youth who did not fit in anywhere, with parents who only cared for their personally constructed image of Jim. Claudia had not once regretted leaving her parents and her other life behind. She had been happy, no, joyful, as one of The Emperor's girls and would not have changed a thing. She had loved and still loved The Emperor, and now loved McAllister and hoped someday to be his wife, perhaps even the mother of his adopted children. But that dream was in the future. What was Claudia to do now, a college dropout with no money, and no discernible skills, other than possibly being an ammunition bearer on a machine gun crew?

Claudia was alone with her thoughts, pondering a vague future upon her release from the hospital when she heard a commotion in the hallway. A familiar face poked her head into her room. It was Monika, followed by every one of The Emperor's girls at the time of the fall.

Monika attempted to embrace her best friend, but saw that Claudia's side was still bandaged.

"We were all worried sick about you. We came as soon as we could."

The hospital room became a cacophony of cheerful women's voices, and Claudia beamed.

Kristina then approached Claudia's bed. "I hope you still remember your moves from that dance rou-

tine we were going to do. We are not going to perform it until you are better.”

Claudia looked at Elizabeth who had worked her way through the crowd of young ladies to stand at Claudia’s bedside, seeking understanding.

Elizabeth laughed, “You will find out everything in good time. I will be checking you out tomorrow. I already cleared it with the hospital. You will be staying with me at my home in Amsterdam while you heal.”

Almost a year later, a curtain lifted up from the stage for the fifth act of the burlesque show at The Emperor’s Girls, an exquisite adult club and restaurant featuring some of the world’s finest transsexual young ladies. The first act consisted of all twenty-one girls in a chorus line with sheer lingerie that barely covered their beautiful bodies, and large head-dresses. The second act consisted of a cheerleader routine with sultry and highly suggestive moves and abbreviated uniforms. The third act was Monika’s stand-up comedy. She performed it while wearing lingerie. The fourth act was belly dancing. Now the fifth act started, and the men were on edge to see bare breasts.

Monika, Kristina, Elena and Claudia strutted on stage wearing different colored, expensive party dresses, gloves, and heels with their hair up, Stefano’s work. The girls gyrated seductively for the men who hollered and wolf whistled, urging them to undress in a polyglot of languages. Five of the girls’ companions cheered on their friends from the audience, still wearing their showgirl or cheerleader costumes while they sat in men’s laps or started to be led towards the back rooms for the featured entertainment.

The girls danced in excellent synchronization to Hot in the City and with an expertise borne from months of practice, removed their gloves in unison and tossed them to the howling men. The girls smiled sweetly and continued their routine, next unzipping their dance partner and stepping out of their dresses while they gazed seductively at the crowd. Now in bra, panties, and garter belts, the girls cavorted on stage, breaking off as individuals, and targeting specific men for their charms. Dollars, Euros, and Pound notes cascaded upon them, stuffed into panties, garters or stocking tops. Finally the girls flung off their bras and revealed their delicious breasts topped off with bejeweled pasties for the men to ogle and fondle.

From her table, Elizabeth Verstraaten Henley could not have been prouder of her girls, or more pleased at the turn of events. She had taken The Emperor's money, gathered up the girls and her staff and settled them in Holland. They pooled their resources and started The Emperor's Girls club in Amsterdam, and now it was a thriving success. Every one of the girls threw their lot in with Elizabeth, even Claudia after she recovered from her wounds. They were all still family.

The family did not forget The Emperor, now serving twenty years in an Italian prison. They sent him a gift basket every day; citrus fruits, Belgian chocolates, DVDs of the show, sausages, canned seafood, and books that Claudia picked out for him. Once a week one of the girls would make her pilgrimage to Italy to pay her respects to The Emperor and reward him with a conjugal visit, every girl with the exception of Claudia, who instead made a conjugal visit each week to the St. Gilles prison in Brussels, to sat-

isfy Matthew McAllister, her intended betrothed, who was confined on a three-year prison sentence.

Once Elizabeth had delivered The Emperor's order, McAllister cooperated fully with the authorities. The Emperor, on trial in Italy, tried to shield him as much as possible. The police really wanted Paolo San Luca anyway, not some American Number Two man. Henley and Mabry were confined for six months apiece in St. Gilles. Upon their release, they took positions as bouncers at The Emperor's Girls in Amsterdam, which was starting to get off the ground. Henley and Elizabeth fell in love, the lust transforming into something tender and long lasting, although she would still perform as his dancing girl with wanton abandon. The couple now had an infant whom they had christened Paolo and presented to The Emperor. In the prison chapel in Italy he became the godfather of his namesake.

Meanwhile, Mabry had numerous girls to fend off as they vied for his affections when he protected them from overly aggressive or lewd male advances with the same dedication as when he had shielded them from Guillermo. The disgraced son of The Emperor had fled to Thailand and was not considered worth extraditing.

"What is that scar on your tit?" a young American in his twenties asked Claudia. He fondled her breasts as she sat in his lap, wearing only her garters, stockings, panties, and heels, along with a broad, come hither smile.

"It's a gunshot wound," Claudia answered, referring to the rough, pinkish streak that ran the underside of her right breast. "The entrance wound is on my back."

The American looked at the bare back of the stripper, seeing a small depression the size of a dime between her right shoulder blade and the wings of the Imperial Roman eagle tramp stamp that was now tattooed above her buttocks.

The man could not wait to get inside Claudia's buttocks and started to roughly knead them in his fingers. He had absolutely no interest in her back story of why she had been shot or how a bullet blowing through your lung felt like. He was like all the other men that she had known before The Emperor, interested in only sex, regarding Claudia as merely a fantasy figure.

"Well," she sighed in a self parody, "back to square one. It's a man's world and nobody will ever call him on it." Claudia, however, could now deal with this type of man, knowing that she had Matthew waiting for her and that she had once been a prize of The Emperor.

"You Americans are all alike. You don't like to talk." Claudia had no longer identified as American; she was an Emperor's Girl and in becoming one, had grown into a woman of the world.

"Why should I want to talk with a stripper?"

"Quite right. Why would I have anything to say? Would you like to go into the back room? We don't need to say a word in there."

"How much?"

"Five hundred American dollars for oral. One thousand for anal. Up front."

“Are you worth it?”

“Plenty of satisfied customers with no complaints,” Claudia said while grasping the American’s hard-on through his khaki slacks. “Your cock seems to agree.”

“Let’s go. I always wanted to fuck a chick with a dick.”

The man roughly took Claudia by the hand and worked his way through the crowded audience and past a Chinese beaded curtain into a back hallway illuminated by harsh red bulbs to set the atmosphere. Monika and Elena were being similarly escorted by men into the back rooms, and they gave one another encouraging winks.

Claudia found an open room and escorted the American inside.

“The money please,” she requested, and was satisfied with a clean, crisp stack of bills, indicating the man wanted her ass.

Claudia stepped out of her panties and knelt on the bed on all fours, presenting herself to the American’s cock.

“There is lubricant and condoms in the night stand. Please use them.”

As the man pulled off his trousers and lubricated himself, Claudia briefly thought of Matthew McAllister, still with almost two years to go on his sentence. A convicted felon, he would have a hard time getting a good job other than at The Emperor’s Girls, but Claudia did not want to stay here forever.

She was providing for the two of them; in a few years she would have enough money in earnings that they could retire somewhere, maybe even in a small cottage in Boullain and go for walks in the woods or fish for Brown Trout on the Semois River. At least they would not be shot at. Claudia considered the two most wonderful men she ever met and how they knew how to make love to a woman like her, how they knew that she had more to offer than just feminine glamour and ardor, and how they knew the ways to make her feel truly special.

Claudia then retrieved a bottle of Amsterdam from the night stand, unpeeled the plastic wrapper, twisted off the cap, heard the reassuring release of pressure, and took several heavy hits of nitrite to ease the shock of penetration. The chemicals washed away all sentimental thoughts of Matthew or The Emperor and visions of the future, and replaced them with distilled carnality. The man mounted her and Claudia said to herself that she would show this rude American that an Emperor's Girl was worth every penny.

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