

# The Mother's Tale

15 August 2008

*The Festival of the Assumption*

The Island of Gozo, Malta



I watch her now, skipping among the ancient stones of the temples, her eyes alight with the joy of the present, a smile of forgetting on her lips. It is tempting to join her abandon, but to remember is to transform the future. To dive deep into the shadows of the past and gather the wounded, fragmented parts of our story, is to reawaken to life.

Some say these temples on Gozo were built eight thousand years ago in the shape of a mother goddess and her daughter. They are the oldest free-standing temples in the world, the birthplace of the harvest myth, later written down by the Greeks in their myth of Demeter, Black Goddess of the Harvest, and her daughter Persephone, the Maiden Kernel.

I have come here this August to celebrate nine years of journeying with my own daughter Sophia. We have brought our harvest dolls, made from corn grown in the fields around Glastonbury, where the mystical Isle of Avalon is said to rise up out of the waters of the Summerlands.

I call to her and she comes to me, leaning her fragile body against my chest. I close my eyes, breathing in the familiar smell of her hair and skin, and allow my mind to wander back through the mists of time. I see myself stuck in a prison of depression and addiction, constantly seeking the high yet stumbling closer and closer towards death, trapped in a spiral of self-destruction.

Until, one day, she came to me. A babe nestling in my womb, bathing me in her healing light, with the hope of a life worth living. And in loving her, I began to nurture myself and to grow strong.

And then I see her birth and how blue she is, but the doctor says she'll be fine once I've fed her. So I offer her my breast and she starts to suckle, but then her head falls back and she stops breathing. I'm screaming for someone to help my baby, and they take her from me, running down the corridor to intensive care. But it's not until the next day, after I've watched her being resuscitated over and over, that they discover she has no oesophagus, no tube which my milk could flow down into her stomach. Instead, my milk filled her lungs and drowned her.

She needs life-saving surgery but it's Sunday and there are no surgeons available. Time is running out, she should be dead by now, her lungs clogged with her own saliva, but her tiny feet are still kicking. A warrior born from the light to save me from the dark. So they put her in a mobile incubator and we take the lift down to the waiting ambulance which will transfer her to another hospital. But just as we're pushing her incubator out of the lift, the doors slam shut and become jammed. An alarm starts to sound. For a moment, I don't understand what it's for. Then I hear the quiet, reserved consultant screaming for help. My babe's stopped breathing again, that's why the alarm is sounding, but the nurse can't open the incubator to resuscitate her because the lift doors are stuck. So now I'm screaming too. And three angels, three salt-of-the-earth London lads, stop and wrench the lift doors open, pulling her incubator into the entrance foyer. And there, amid the chaos of doctors, patients and visitors milling around, the nurse calmly opens the incubator and resuscitates my baby. I never knew their names and I never saw them again, but that day, some strangers came into our lives, saved my daughter's life and changed mine forever.

And now I see us waiting in my hospital room as the surgeons perform life-saving surgery on my daughter. Four hours of not knowing if I would see her alive again. Four hours of my mother recounting story after story to distract us from the waiting without knowing, a mother finding strength from deep within to support her daughter. A journey I was just embarking on, little knowing that ahead of us lay a further nine operations, countless hospitalisations and endless days of screaming pain. But that night, the only thing I cared about was that my baby lived. The call came to go down to neonatal intensive care. Our hands were shaking so much, we could barely press the lift button. We walked into the room where her incubator had been, but there was only an empty space. I felt my heart begin to close, a numbness spreading through my body, as I prepared to face her death.

But now her surgeon's walking down the corridor, tearing off his green surgical hat, and smiling. "She made it. She'd reached crisis point just as we made the first incision, but we managed to save her." My mother sobs into my father's arms, while I smile like I've never smiled before. My baby's alive. That's all that mattered. Life had never felt so good as it did in that one moment of time.

A few days later, I was sitting by my daughter's incubator, listening to the hiss of her ventilator and the rhythmic beeping of the machines, when a nurse came in. I hadn't seen her before. She was older than the others with Mediterranean skin. "Can't you sleep?" she asked, her eyes warm with compassion. I shook my head. "How are you?" I shrugged my shoulders and avoided her gaze, ashamed of the anger I now felt. As if able to read my mind, she put her hand on my shoulder. "You know, it's very normal to feel angry when your baby's ill." We both stared at the incubator.

"Is it?" I asked. "At least I have a child. I should be thankful."

"And you are, but she is suffering. It isn't easy to accept."

"No. It isn't," I said, watching my baby's chest rise and fall with

each hiss of the ventilator keeping her alive, a bloody, stitched scar carved across the pale silk of her skin. Then I looked up at the nurse. She was so like someone I had once known in Italy. Short and plump, with strong, maternal arms used to carrying the weight of the family. The child in me wanted to collapse into those arms, to be held tightly and told that everything was going to be alright. That my baby was going to survive. That I would wake up and this would all be some terrible nightmare. “You remind me of an Italian lady I once knew,” I said.

“Ah, Italia, my homeland,” she replied, smiling with fondness. “Have you been there?”

“Yes. I spent many summers in a village just north of Naples.”

The nurse’s face lit up. “I too come from Southern Italy. The land of the Black Madonna.”

“Yes,” I said, looking at her with interest. “We used to sing chants to invoke her healing blessing.”

“And dance so fast until our feet bled.”

“Spinning around and around,” I added, and we laughed until I caught sight of my daughter’s limbs twitching in pain and my eyes filled with tears. “I just don’t understand.”

“Understand what?” the nurse asked.

“The Black Madonna. I thought she was supposed to be the divine Mother, healer and protector of children. If she really existed, why would she allow my baby to suffer?”

The nurse remained silent for a while, then settled herself into the chair next to mine. “Why don’t I tell you a story while I’m on my break?” There was nothing else to do. “It is a story my grandmother told me when I was a child. ‘Rosetta,’ she used to say, ‘never forget the old storyteller’s words for they will serve you well.’ And, you know, Nonna was right.” I stared at her intrigued as she began to tell me her story.

# The Nurse's Tale

15 August 1999

*The Festival of the Assumption*

London, England



As I mentioned, I am from Italy. I was brought up in San Lorenzo, a small village high up in the Apennine Mountains. I can still picture it now after all these years. The cluster of whitewashed houses clinging to the ridge above the valley; the snow-capped peaks glistening in the moonlight; the smell of wood smoke on a cold winter's night; and the sound of laughter carried on the breeze through the window of the *taverna*.

When my grandmother was a child, a *veglia* was still held each month. The villagers would gather around the fire in the *taverna* at the full moon to hear the retelling of their stories. You see, it was their way of keeping the memory of their customs and beliefs alive. First they would tell fairy tales to the younger children to teach them right from wrong. Then they would entertain the older children with heroic stories about their ancestors. And when the children had fallen asleep, they would take turns retelling the old folktales until the fire had all but died away.

There was one story, however, that overshadowed all others. It was a story that had been told to my ancestors in the year 1645. The villagers were gathered in the *taverna* to celebrate The Purification of the Blessed Mother, it being the second day of February. The priests now call it *Candelora* because they bless their congregations with candles and kindle new fires in their churches, but such rituals owe their existence to a much older

tradition, as my ancestors were about to discover.

Seated on stools around the fire, the villagers were chatting to one another. Candlelight flickered all around them and on the hearth there were vases of snowdrops and libations of wine, ewe's milk and honey. Suddenly, the door flew open to reveal a strange, old man hunched over the threshold. The men tensed, for in those days the Kingdom of Naples was not a safe place to live. Gangs of robbers and murderers roamed the countryside and strangers were not welcome. "Who are you?" asked the innkeeper. "What do you want?"

The old man peered up at him from beneath heavy eyebrows and pointed to the guitar on his back. "I've come to offer you an evening of songs and storytelling. In payment, I ask only for some warm broth and a cup of wine to chase away the chill." The villagers continued to eye him with suspicion. Removing his fur hat, he patted down his long, white hair and placed the guitar strap about his neck. The room soon resonated with the notes of a well-known Neapolitan folksong. The women smiled and tapped their feet as the children clapped their hands. Confident the stranger posed no threat, the men resumed their discussions.

"Come, Storyteller," said the innkeeper's wife. "Sit by the hearth and I'll bring you something to eat." He bowed his head in gratitude and followed her to the rocking chair by the fire. Then the villagers watched with growing anticipation as he ate his soup while staring into the flames. When he at last looked up, they say his eyes glowed as if they held the very wisdom of the stars.

"Fire is the oldest form of divinity." His gentle voice filled the silence, startling the villagers. "The flame is one of the gateways through which we can enter the place of stillness that lies within, where we can speak to the spirits of our ancestors and come to know their ancient beliefs. It is the spark of wisdom that lives within each of us. Let me ask you, why do you light candles on this feast day?" The villagers were taken aback by the old man's

question for it was not something they had ever asked themselves. Rather than be thought foolish for answering incorrectly, they remained silent.

“Allow me to explain,” the storyteller continued. “When the Roman Church came to power, it desired to placate our pagan ancestors. By creating feast days on the same dates as their pagan festivals, the Church hoped to convert them with ease. It chose to celebrate the purification of the Virgin Mary on the second day of February because purification rites had been held on this date in honour of the wolf goddess Lupa and wolf god Lupercus. But the ritual lighting of candles and fires held a very different meaning for our ancestors. Instead of celebrating the cleansing of the divine Mother following childbirth, the *Festa di Lupercus* served to reawaken our ancestors’ primal nature, which is at its most powerful when a woman gives birth. The filth that needs purging is not the blood of childbirth but the yoke of domestication. On this night, our peasant ancestors cast aside their fears and threw off their shackles of servitude. They ran with the wolves! They ran to freedom!” The children’s eyes grew wide as the old man shook his hands in the air before continuing. “The Roman Church feared our ancestors’ honouring of the wolf. Peasants with thoughts of power and freedom were not easy to control. Over time, it transformed the wolf into the savage werewolf, companion to the witch, and burnt them in the fires of its Inquisition. But the energy of the wolf continued in the hearts of those brave enough to keep our ancient beliefs alive. Some of whom were once friends of mine.” The storyteller broke off and lowered his gaze to hide his sadness.

Then, shrugging off his melancholy, he picked up his guitar. “This is a song dedicated to Sofia. In the Bible she is known simply as Wisdom, but to the Greeks, she was the Goddess of Wisdom, fire of inspiration for philosophers and poets, to whom I give thanks at this time of year.”

Sofia, sweet bride,  
Maiden of mine,  
I can hear your bells  
Heralding springtime,  
May your fires that burn brightly  
Inspire my words,  
Bringing forth your wisdom  
Into this world.

Sofia, sweet bride,  
Lady of springs,  
I can feel your breath  
Upon the swan's wings,  
May your waters of healing  
Purify my soul,  
And your serpent and wolf  
Protect us all.

Sofia, sweet bride  
Of the sun and the moon,  
I can see your white dawn  
Shining through,  
As the darkness of winter  
Gives way to your light,  
May your blessings be upon us  
This day and this night.

As the old man sang, the villagers talked among themselves, enjoying the musical interlude, while the innkeeper and his wife went about filling empty cups until the song came to an end.

Then, when everyone was settled, the storyteller resumed speaking. "The story I am about to tell you is a true one. It is founded on events that happened in a village not dissimilar to

this one, situated to the south of Rome in the westerly foothills of these same mountains. The year was 1583, when the elders of this village were but young men and women. It was a time when some still honoured the divine Mother. Not the Roman Church's Mother Mary, but an ancient Black Goddess of Wisdom whom they called Sofia. It was their belief in her teachings that gave them the courage of the wolf to stand up to the Church and to discover the true meaning of freedom. No doubt you still hear her whispered words in tales you tell your children and in prayers you dedicate to the Virgin. But these are just fragments of the great light that was doused by the Church Fathers, its embers scattered across the earth. Tonight, kind listeners, allow me to gather these sparks of wisdom and to rekindle the flames that burn a thousand times brighter than the Church will allow Mary's light to shine." The storyteller paused and looked around the *taverna* at the villagers, causing their feelings of trepidation to grow at the same time as their memories were filled with fleeting images of a forgotten past.

Then the old man broke the spell of his gaze and stared out through the open casement at the fullness of the laden moon. "It's time."



# The Storyteller's Tale

Wednesday

11 August 1583

The Papal State of Benevento



Perched high upon a hill in the Papal State of Benevento, overlooking the warm waters of the Mediterranean, was the village of San Martino. Upstairs in the *taverna* lay a man called Alessandro. He too was a travelling storyteller but, unlike me, he was in the prime of his life with dark, noble features. As he slept, he moaned in distress. A spirit walked his dreams, blood dripping from the sodden dress that clung to her child's body.

A gust of wind slammed the shutter open, waking Alessandro from his *siesta*. It was a welcome respite from the vision that haunted him. The sun had set and the air was cool against his feverish skin. Leaning his head against the casement lintel, Alessandro looked out over the mountains. Brushed by the dim light of the waxing moon, the high peaks unfolded before him, hiding the secrets of the valleys in their shadows. The contours of the land beckoned to be discovered and Alessandro knew it was only a matter of time before he left San Martino in search of some elusive fulfilment.

Lighting a candle, he picked up his journal, intent on recording the day's events in poetry or song. Instead, his thoughts drifted to the future and he sought comfort from prophecy. Donning his shirt, Alessandro climbed down the narrow staircase into the bar.

"Alessandro, join us! Matteo has come with news from Santa

Sofia,” called the innkeeper Federico.

“In a moment,” replied Alessandro, raising his hand to his friend. Instead, he made his way towards the back of the *taverna* and approached a table where an aged woman sat. “Sapia,” he whispered. The old lady opened her eyes and stared at him. “I need your help,” he continued. “Tell me what my future holds.”

Waving a hand at the chair opposite by way of invitation, Sapia began to speak in a low voice, pausing now and again to cough into a rag. “The law of Free Will states that you must choose your own future. I can only warn you of things that may or may not lie ahead.” Alessandro nodded and placed a coin in Sapia’s outstretched palm. “Look into the flame.” Sapia gestured to a candle on the table. As they both stared into the flame, their vision blurred, allowing Sapia’s third, mystic eye to see into the wisdom of the void. From within this meditative state, Alessandro heard the wisewoman’s words as if from a distant, unearthly land. “You’ll travel again. There’s a woman in danger. She needs your help. An outcast will also benefit from your friendship. A great evil has come to their village but you can help them. There’s a fire and burnings. You must try to stop the burnings but keep the fire alight.” Then Sapia blew out the flame, waving her hands through the smoke in a rhythmic pattern.

Alessandro’s dulled senses awoke to the sound of laughter and the sweet smell of tobacco. “I don’t understand,” he said. “What burnings? What fire?”

“You’ll know when the time comes.”

“Where must I go?”

Sapia smiled at his impatience. “You’ll know.” With that, she settled back into her chair and closed her eyes.

Frustrated by his lack of answers, Alessandro left to join his friends. The young farmer Stefano, with his head of curls, poured him a cup of wine. “We were just saying how strange it is that the new Bishop hasn’t visited San Martino yet.”

“Has he been elsewhere?” asked Alessandro.

“He’s been making his presence known everywhere,” explained the fish-seller Matteo. “I’d imagine he’s not yet found a way to haul his fat hide up here, what with San Martino being that much higher.”

“I take it he’s a large man?” asked Federico, who took pride in being a clear head taller than anyone else in the village.

“The man is a glutton. And that’s not his only sin,” replied Matteo with a knowing look.

“What do you mean?” asked Stefano.

Matteo looked around the *taverna* before continuing in a low voice. “When I was in Santa Sofia, the wisewoman Maria told me that the Bishop has forbidden the villagers to hold Sunday’s festival at the Chapel of the Black Madonna. Instead, he’s insisting that their priest Padre Francesco holds midnight Mass in the main church.”

“Why?” asked Alessandro.

“Apparently he’s heard rumours of a cave near the chapel where witches worship the goddess Diana,” explained Matteo. “Padre Francesco told me that the Bishop has moved here from the north where our fellow country folk are being burned as devil-worshippers in their thousands. They say he’s a fervent supporter of the Roman Inquisition and intent on ridding us of our heathen ways.”

“And he’s making an example of Santa Sofia,” commented Federico.

“I’m afraid it’s not just Santa Sofia,” replied Matteo. “I’ve heard rumours that he’s arrested four women and a man from other parishes in the diocese. The Inquisitor from the archdiocese of Benevento has already arrived at the Dominican convent in Arunca to hear the Bishop’s evidence against them. If the Inquisitor finds them guilty of heresy, next week could see the first burnings to take place south of Rome.”

The three friends stared at Matteo in shock. Federico's wife, Marta, who had been listening to their conversation, approached the table. "But the Inquisitor of Benevento has never found anyone guilty of witchcraft," she said. "He knows that the wise *strega* like Sapia are but healers and fortune-tellers, not devil-worshippers."

Federico drew his wife onto his lap. "Have no fear, Marta. If the burning fires ever made their way to the south, they'd be a revolt of such magnitude no other priest would dare attempt it. I'm sure the Inquisitor won't be swayed by Bishop..?" Federico looked to Matteo for guidance.

"Pazzini," Matteo said. "You can't mistake him. Not only does his girth rival that of a pregnant sow, he also has a long scar running down his right cheek."

Alessandro's chair clattered to the floor. "Pazzini?" The three men looked up at him in surprise.

"Do you know him?" asked Matteo. Alessandro ignored him, heading for the door, as Federico and Stefano followed.

"Where are you going, Alessandro?" asked Stefano.

"To Santa Sofia."

Federico grasped his arm. "Not at this late hour. The mountain paths are treacherous at night. Whatever it is can wait until morning."

"This can't," Alessandro spat through clenched teeth.

Matteo joined them. "Alessandro, you can ride with me at dawn. My journey back to the coast takes me through Santa Sofia." A long pause followed as Alessandro struggled with his urge to leave.

"What do you say?" asked Stefano.

At last, Alessandro turned back. "You're right for there's nothing I can achieve at this late hour."

"Then come, sit down, tell us what's wrong," urged Federico. The friends resumed their seats and waited for Alessandro to

explain himself. Taking a gulp of wine, he steadied his hands on the table before telling them his story.

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I've never told anyone why I left my village twenty years ago to become a travelling storyteller. I thought my memories were better left buried, but at last the time has come for the guilty to be brought to justice. Friends, I will tell you my story, for one day I may need your help.

I grew up in a small Apennine village to the north. As a boy of sixteen, I found the routine of farming life monotonous. Daylight hours were spent in the fields, turning the soil or garnering the harvest, but at night I used to lie awake gazing at the mountains, wondering what mysteries awaited my discovery. I wrote down my dreams as poems and songs in a journal kept hidden beneath my mattress, lest my father should find it. A surly man, he hadn't time for artistic pursuits, believing a real man should only concern himself with farming and hunting. My mother agreed with him from fear of the consequences if she disagreed, but I wasn't alone. My grandfather used every opportunity when we were alone together to retell the myths of old and teach me his guitar. I would sit beside him, studying his fingers as he played, purple veins rigid beneath pale skin, nails yellowed with age.

Dearest of all to me was my little sister Isabetta. Four years younger than me, she was everything I wasn't. Working in the fields had turned my skin dark like my hair, whereas Isabetta had the fair colouring of the north, with green eyes that gazed up at me with the innocent trusting of a child. Where I was impulsive and fiery, she was calm and reserved. She would follow me everywhere, listening as I told her of the adventures we would have and the people we would meet on our travels. She believed in me and in my dreams, but such dreams were about to be shattered.

One summer's evening, I returned to the village in the cart that drove the labourers to and from the fields. Heading across the square to our stone house by the lake, I saw my father waiting for me, eyes glaring, jaw clenched. As I approached, he brandished my journal in the air, striking me across the face. My mother must have found it while making the beds and I glanced over at where she cowered, pained by her betrayal.

"How dare you disrespect me writing poetry! Call yourself a man? Hah! I'm ashamed to even call you my son." With another blow to my cheek, he marched inside and threw my journal into the hearth.

"No!" Isabetta lunged towards the fire, but my father seized her arm.

"You knew of his crime?" he bellowed.

"Leave her be!" I shouted and threw myself at him with all the anger and frustration of misunderstood youth, striking at his calloused hand.

"Alessandro, Isabetta, go! Now!" ordered my grandfather. I know that if he had been younger he would have joined us in our stand, but he was infirm and feared for our safety.

Seizing Isabetta's hand, I pulled her free and we ran out of the house and through the alleyways to the woodland beyond, where we sank to the ground beneath a hollow tree to catch our breath. Isabetta cradled my head, stroking my hair until I grew calm. "I know what will cheer you up. Why don't we go swimming in the river? Come on, Alessandro, it'll be fun." A cool dip seemed like an inviting prospect, so I followed my sister down to the edge of a dappled pool surrounded by low-hanging trees. I turned my back to allow her privacy to undress and, once I heard a splash, I too undressed and joined her.

We swam and dived, chasing the fish that darted beneath our feet, until memories of my burning dreams were all but forgotten. Then, in a moment of quiet meditation as I floated on the water,

watching the birds soar across the darkening sky and settle on the trees, I caught sight of a figure lurking in the shadows. A head appeared sporting a black hat and a white collar. It was a Church Father hiding among the branches, watching Isabetta as she dried herself on the bank. Outraged, I climbed out of the water, calling to the village priest whom I now recognised. “Padre Rambaldo!”

But the priest hid his lechery beneath a cloak of false virtue. On being caught spying, Padre Rambaldo did not hang his head in shame like a true follower of Christ. Instead, he poured a torrent of accusations upon us. “Satan’s bride, most wicked of women, clothe your lustful body and cast aside your devilish desires for your brother.” Isabetta screamed as the priest approached, pulling on her dress while I tried to shield her with my still naked body.

“Son of Adam, you have committed the gravest of sins to be so tempted by this serpent. Clothe yourself so that I, God’s holy messenger, may not be tainted by your debauchery.” We had scarcely donned our clothes when he was upon us. Grabbing us by the hair, he dragged us back to the house, Isabetta sobbing in fear while I seethed with rage.

Pushing open the door, Padre Rambaldo hurled us onto the floor in front of our father. “Domenico, I have always thought you a devout son of Our Holy Mother Church, but now I see you have been nurturing Satan’s spawn. I found these wicked children bathing naked in the river, fornicating like dogs!”

“He’s lying, Father,” I said. “We went for a swim. That’s all.”

“Now witness how the devil has hold of your son, forcing him to defend his sister so that the Lord of Darkness can continue to suck her paps by night.”

“Enough!” exclaimed my grandfather, struggling to his feet, moustache quivering.

“Silence, old man!” shouted my father, pushing him back into his chair. Smothering a cry, my mother ran to comfort him as he

struggled for breath, his hand pressed against his chest. Ignoring his distress, my father turned to Padre Rambaldo. “Pray, Padre, tell me what I should do.”

“It is your daughter who must carry the blame. She is weak like all women and has succumbed to Satan’s embrace. It is she who tempted your son and she who must be punished. From this day forth, she will wear the mark of the devil on her forehead, so that every man who sees it will know she has a serpent burrowing in her loins.”

“No!” I pleaded. “Leave her alone! Punish me!”

My attempts to protect my sister went unheeded. Instead, my father and the priest dragged me kicking and bellowing upstairs. From behind the locked door of my parents’ room, I heard Isabetta’s screams as my father held her down and Padre Rambaldo pulled the iron poker from the fire. Then, with the slow deliberation of a torturer who takes delight in inflicting pain, he held it against my sister’s forehead. A long silence followed, interspersed by sobs from my mother and grandfather. Isabetta had fainted from the pain of her burning flesh. Her body was carried upstairs and laid on her mattress, where my mother later tended to her burn.

A long time passed before Isabetta rose from her bed. Something died within her that day. Even when the wound had healed to leave a reddened scar, Isabetta’s eyes never shone again nor did her lips curl up in a smile. No one spoke of what happened. My father barked out his usual orders but remained indifferent to his daughter’s plight, while my mother wallowed in defeat.

Only my grandfather tried to lift our spirits with stories from a time when our ancestors knew the true meaning of freedom. “Hold fast to your dreams, children. Never let them die nor be destroyed by friend or foe. Find beauty, and where it does not exist, create beauty.”

Despite his encouragement, the sight of Isabetta’s scarred

forehead caused my chest to tighten with rage so at times I could scarcely breathe. The seeming hopelessness of our lives weighed on me, for the two people who should have protected us had ultimately betrayed us. I could not forgive my father for bowing to the priest's religious authority. Nor could I condone my mother's weakness in not challenging the men who branded her daughter a whore.

Matters were even worse outside the house. I continued to work in the fields, but was now subjected to crude taunts about my sister. Some days I returned to the house with a black eye or bruised cheek to find Isabetta sobbing. The other girls at the seamstress's house where she worked had been ordered to shun her. At morning prayers she was forced to stand before them a fallen woman when she was but a child.

One man in particular began to victimise Isabetta. Jacobo was the third son of a local lord, whose family owned a manor on the hillside above the village. Their wealth had secured Jacobo a priesthood without the necessary training at a seminary, for it had been easy to bribe Padre Rambaldo. Cut from the same cloth as his mentor, Jacobo accompanied Padre Rambaldo as he performed his duties, thereby gaining unquestioned access to the girls in the village.

One evening, Isabetta had been working late to finish a flower girl's dress for a wedding. As she walked home carrying the silk dress, a hard thump to her back sent her flying into the dirt road. Winded, she looked up to find Jacobo grinning down at her just before he kicked a cloud of dust in her face. "Eat dirt, you whore!"

Isabetta arrived at the house in tears holding out the dress, its pale blue embroidery streaked with mud. "What shall I do? The wedding is tomorrow and the dress is ruined."

"You stupid girl!" shouted our father.

"It wasn't my fault, Papa."

“Then whose was it?” he sneered.

“Jacobo. He knocked me to the ground.”

“Why would he do such a thing? Jacobo is a man of the Church.”

“He called me a whore and told me to eat dirt!” Isabetta sobbed louder at the memory of her humiliation.

“Do you blame him, after the way you’ve behaved?”

Shocked, Isabetta stared at him before our mother led her into the back courtyard where they spent the evening washing the dress. When my sister at last came to bed, I tried to reassure her. “Don’t worry, Isabetta. From now on, I will walk you to work and collect you at the end of the day. If Jacobo tries to hurt you again, he’ll have me to deal with.”

My sister threw her arms around me. “Thank you, Alessandro. You’re the only one I can trust to take care of me. I don’t know what I would do without you.”

“I’ll always be here to protect you, I promise.” My words have returned to haunt me again and again.

In the morning, I accompanied Isabetta to the seamstress’s house, and at dusk I climbed into the olive tree opposite the gate to wait for her. I saw her following behind the others, carrying a heavy basket. As I leapt down to help her, Jacobo appeared from the side of the house. So engrossed was he with ill intent that he failed to see me approaching. As Isabetta passed by, he stuck out his leg, causing her to fall to her knees and drop the basket.

Within moments I was upon him. Despite him being at least twice my age, Jacobo was an easy opponent owing to his corpulence and my stronger build. I brought him crashing down and sat upon his chest, pulling up his cassock so that his privates were exposed to all the girls, who shrieked with laughter. Even Isabetta could not hide a smile of quiet satisfaction. “If you ever go near my sister again, you’ll have nothing to show next time. Understand?”

When I at last let go of him, he ran up the lane stopping once to look back. "I'll get you for this, Alessandro! And your whore of a sister!"

I made to run after him but Isabetta held me back. "Let it be, Alessandro." I did as she asked, but I should have known we hadn't seen the last of Jacobo. In my arrogance, I was convinced that my heroic efforts had taught him a lesson. How wrong could I have been? All I succeeded in doing was jeopardising my sister's safety even more, but should not a brother defend his sister's honour? Even now I do not know what would have been the right course of action, but all my worrying amounts to nothing. I cannot change the past, especially not what happened the next evening.

I broke my promise to Isabetta. Instead of going straight to the seamstress's house, I stopped off at the *taverna* and became distracted watching the men play *tarocco*, the new card game of wands, cups, swords and pentacles. I arrived home to find that Isabetta hadn't returned. "I thought she was with you!" cried my mother, clasping her hands to her face. "Go! Look for her, Alessandro!"

I ran to her place of work but the seamstress confirmed that Isabetta had left at the usual time. I knocked on the door of every girl she worked with, but none of them knew of her whereabouts, until at last I arrived at Serena's house. "Did you see where Isabetta went after work?" I asked.

"No, sorry," Serena replied. I turned to leave, my shoulders stooping in defeat. "But I did see her talking to Jacobo. Perhaps he knows where she is."

"Jacobo!" I cried. Serena stepped back, startled by my angry cry, but there was no time for pleasantries. The pulse at the side of my head began to throb as I ran to the house on the hill. The bell of the private chapel was ringing to signal evening prayers. Led by Jacobo's father, the family were filing into the chapel as I came tearing into the courtyard. "Jacobo!" The family stopped

and glared at me. It was then that I noticed Jacobo's right cheek was swathed in a bandage, still seeping with fresh blood.

"Do you know that peasant, Jacobo?" asked his father.

"Your son has been bullying my sister and now she is missing," I shouted. "Where is she, Jacobo?"

Feigning ignorance, his bulging eyes stared at me with disdain. "I have no idea what this vulgar boy is talking about, Papa."

"If you don't tell me," I threatened, "I swear I'll beat it out of you!"

"Hold him!" ordered Jacobo's father, gesturing to the two gardeners standing by. Wiping the smirks from their faces, they dropped their spades and seized my arms.

"If I find out you've laid a finger on Isabetta, you'd better start praying to your God for salvation," I bellowed. Struggling out of the gardeners' hold, I ran out of the courtyard and ducked behind the wall to listen for any clues as to Isabetta's whereabouts.

"What a ghastly boy!" said Jacobo's mother.

"Vultures, the lot of them!" said his father.

"As if Jacobo would hurt anyone. How absurd that a man of God should be accused of such profanity," tittered his mother. "Come, let us pray for strength in our dealings with these tiresome peasants."

Swallowing my fury, I set off, darting along the craggy mountain paths, leaping over rocks and through streams, crying out her name. "Isabetta! Isabetta!" For what seemed like an eternity, all I heard was the echo of my own voice, until at last I stumbled upon a clearing in the woods. A river of water trickled down over a rocky outcrop, forming a clear pool at its base. Reflected on its surface were the branches of the overhanging trees, upon which a flock of ravens had alighted to sing their evening chorus. Below them lay my sister. Isabetta's head and chest were submerged face down in the water, her long hair fanning out like the intricate threads of a spider's web. Her dress was bunched up above her

waist, the backs of her legs streaked with red mud from the riverbank.

As I crept closer, my breath trapped in my throat, I realised that the redness was not that of the earth. It was blood. Shocked into action, I pulled at Isabetta's shoulders, dragging her heavy head and chest out of the water. Cradling her in my arms, I brushed her wet hair aside and gazed down at the ethereal beauty of my sister. I remember how cold her body felt, her purple lips stark against her alabaster skin, her green eyes unmoving.

Isabetta was dead.

Throwing my head back, I howled, "No! Isabetta! No!" Then, rocking her corpse in my arms, I wept and wept until I had no more tears to shed. After a while, I became aware of the ravens. Never before had I seen so many gathered together. I watched as they took it in turns to swoop down and dive through the air in a myriad of dancing wings and shrill song. One by one they flew over us and away into the distance, until there was but one raven left sitting high upon the tallest tree. Time seemed to stand still as the bird gazed down at me from its lofty perch. I sensed that its beauty embodied the spirit of my dead sister and I felt myself grow calm, hearing her gentle voice whispering to me on the breeze, "I'm here. Look, I'm free at last." Then the raven flew away, carrying on its wings the purity of Isabetta's soul.

Dusk fell, save for the light of the maiden moon, whose milky tears rained down over my sister's body. Lowering my eyes, I surveyed the bite marks upon her neck and budding breasts, the bruising on her arms and the caked blood on her legs stemming from their apex. It was then that I realised her innocence had been brutally robbed before the water drowned her screams. I knew without doubt the identity of her rapist and murderer. Gathering her body in my arms, I began the long march back to the village.

As I approached the square, candlelight flickered through the shutters of the church and a chorus of voices filled the air, singing

a dedication to the Virgin Mary. I strode through the doors, interrupting midnight Mass. All eyes turned and stared in horror as I walked up the aisle carrying Isabetta's bloody corpse. I heard my mother's screams, the cries of my grandfather, but I did not take my eyes from the murderer standing behind the altar. Jacobo flinched as I walked through the door, before covering his guilt in a mask of moral propriety.

"Punching Isabetta was not enough to quench your thirst, was it Jacobo? You had to rape her child's body and drown her in the river!" Silence filled the church, broken only by my footsteps on the flagstones. "Is the devil within you satisfied or has your lust for a virgin's blood grown now you have tasted its sweet nectar?" My voice echoed over the hushed congregation as I approached the altar and lowered my sister's body onto it. Jacobo's bloated face pulsated with a red stain that spread upwards from his neck to meet the bloody bandage still plastered to his right cheek, prompting me to turn towards the shocked villagers. "Ladies and gentlemen, witness for yourselves the redness of Jacobo's guilt, and the fresh wound upon his cheek where my sister tried in vain to defend herself." Turning back, I lunged over Isabetta's corpse and wrapped my hands around Jacobo's throat, intent on strangling every last breath out of him.

Padre Rambaldo began to strike me, demanding I release his apprentice, until my father and uncle pulled me back. "What the devil has possessed you, Alessandro?" he demanded, panting with the excitement of hitting me.

Rubbing his throat and struggling for breath, Jacobo launched his defence. "It is the spirit of his whore of a sister come back to haunt him from the depths of hell!" With a cry, I threw myself at him but the hands about my arms were unyielding. Jacobo puffed out his chest and continued to address the congregation. "Believe me, fellow Christians, when I swear with God as my witness that I have never laid a finger upon this deranged man's sister. As a

true follower of Christ, I tried in vain to exorcise the devil from her, but fear I was too late. Clearly the girl was laden with his child and, fearing her fate, threw herself into the river, at which point her death caused her womb to empty itself of Satan's spawn. Hence, the blood we see upon her legs."

"Liar! My sister was a virgin!" I shouted.

"Silence!" Padre Rambaldo's booming voice echoed through the church. "I know Jacobo to be a man of undisputed faith in our Lord Jesus Christ and a true disciple of his teachings. You, Alessandro, are nothing more than a fornicator whom I once caught sucking at the loins of this girl laying before us. In fact, it would not surprise me if the child she was carrying was none other than your own bastard, and in her shame she took her own life. In so doing, she has committed the gravest of sins. Not only the sin of taking her own life before the time God chose, but also that of murdering her unborn child. As a punishment for her crimes, it is only fitting that her rotting flesh be removed from consecrated ground and cast into the pit of hell."

"No! My sister was innocent! Isabetta is innocent!"

"As for you, Alessandro, get out of my sight before I call upon the Inquisition to burn you in their pyres. Be warned that if you ever show your horned head in this village again, I swear on God's Holy Book that you will be tortured to death for your sins."

My father loosened his grip on my arm and I looked at him in disgust. "Are you to say nothing? Does the sight of your own daughter lying raped and murdered not compel you to defend her and fight for justice?"

My father continued to stare straight ahead. "That which the Lord ordains must be obeyed."

"You would believe the word of the devil in Christ's clothing rather than that of your own son and the bloody evidence of your murdered daughter? What man are you to accept the corrupt authority of these hypocrites who hide their own wickedness

behind the sign of the cross? If these be the men to lead us to salvation, I would rather worship the devil. It is I who am ashamed to call myself your son.”

“Seize the devil-worshipper! By his own admission he dances with Satan. Seize him, so we may watch him writhe at the stake!” Padre Rambaldo collapsed on the floor in a state of ecstatic frenzy. The congregation, terrified by the unfolding scene, reacted to the priest’s words like dogs to their master, falling over each other in their attempt to catch me. Taking my chance, I ran along an empty pew and up a side aisle.

I turned back once to see my mother bent over Isabetta’s corpse, clawing at her face, her eyes flitting wildly. Her mind had at last succumbed to the madness that stems from a life of injustice, bullying and loss. Instead, she discovered the peace that can come from wandering the path of the insane, devoid of understanding. I sometimes wish my own mind had followed a similar route and then my suffering and pain would have ceased. Instead, I carry with me wherever I go the image of Isabetta’s bloody corpse on the altar, her murderer standing over her gloating in triumph. “One day, Jacobo, I will find you and I will have my revenge!” I vowed.

Then, with a last threatening look, I darted through the door to escape the mob that was almost upon me. From there I ran through the maze of alleys that wound their way between the houses and out into the woods. I headed towards the hollow tree and climbed up inside it. From my vantage point, I watched as the villagers scoured the streets for me, flaming torches held high above their heads. I waited until the crowd had at last dispersed, satisfied that I was nowhere to be found, and crept back to the house where I was born.

My grandfather was waiting for me. Beckoning, he handed me a sack filled with provisions. I embraced him, inhaling the smell of tobacco impregnated in his cheeks. I knew it would be

the last time I would ever see this wise, old man who had loved me well and nurtured my dreams. “Here, take this, look after it.” Tears streamed down his aged face as he pressed his guitar into my hand. “Play the songs I taught you as a child and remember us as it once was. Your old grandfather playing a tune while you and Isabetta knelt at my feet singing. She hasn’t gone, Alessandro. She will always be here with us in our hearts. Time will help to heal the pain you now feel.”

“Time doesn’t heal, Nonno. It simply dulls our memories, so that only with difficulty can we picture our loved ones face or smell their scent, but it will never dampen the rage I feel nor quench my thirst for revenge.”

“Listen to me, Alessandro. Now is not the time to seek revenge. You are angry and people make foolish decisions in anger. You must put your sister’s murder out of your mind for the time being and get on with your life. When the time for vengeance comes, you will know, but you must be skilful, for there is an art to exacting revenge. Murder is too clumsy. It lowers you to the same depths as your enemy and achieves nothing but more bloodshed. If the avenger is to be victorious, then the abuser must be punished through the proper judicial processes. Go forth, my son. And remember, we will be watching over you always.”

My throat ached from unspent tears as I hugged his frail body for the last time, while images of my sister’s corpse continued to stab my mind. “What about Isabetta?”

My grandfather drew back in quiet contemplation. “I will see to it that she is buried beneath the hollow tree in the woods beyond, where you played together as children. That way you will always be able to find her. It may not be what the Church Fathers call consecrated ground, but I can think of nothing more sacred than returning Isabetta’s body to the earthly womb of our Blessed Mother. As for you, Alessandro, head for the south. They say it is safer there from these priests who accuse us of devil-worship.

Retell the stories of old to those you meet and play my guitar. In this way, you will always find welcome wherever your journey leads you.”

With a final embrace, I left to begin my long hike. I didn't look back until I had reached the highest ridge on the mountainside above our village. Stopping to catch my breath, I glanced back down towards the group of stone houses nestling in the valley beside the great lake, but I could only see darkness. The maiden moon lay hidden beneath a shroud of heavy cloud. In contrast, the snow-capped peaks of the mountains to the south shimmered in the distance. That night I began to journey along the paths I had always dreamt of exploring and indeed I have had many adventures along the way. The reality has been different in only one respect. My sister Isabetta accompanies me in spirit alone and I will not rest until I have avenged her death. Now, after twenty years of wandering and waiting, the time has at last come. In Santa Sofia, I will have my revenge.

\* \* \* \* \*

A stunned silence followed the conclusion to Alessandro's story. At last, Federico spoke. “Alessandro, you have my deepest sympathies. The fate of your sister is a terrible tale.” He paused before continuing. “Forgive me, though, for I still do not understand what your story has to do with Bishop Pazzini and the village of Santa Sofia.”

Alessandro stared at him, his eyes burning with fury. “The name of the novice priest who killed Isabetta was Jacobo Pazzini. If I am not mistaken, the scar upon Bishop Pazzini's right cheek is the same mark left by my sister. Only by travelling to Santa Sofia and lying in wait to see him, will I be able to confirm what my instinct tells me is true.”

A collective gasp rose up around the table. “Why waste time

waiting for him in Santa Sofia? Why not go straight to the city of Arunca and have our revenge!” declared Federico.

Alessandro shook his head. “I am grateful for your loyalty, Federico, but my grandfather was right. It would be foolish to act in haste and anger. Murdering Pazzini would not be punishment enough for his crimes. Instead, I must find a way to ensure that he is tried by the same Church in which he hides his evil. If not, I will have failed in defending Isabetta’s innocence and her spirit will continue to haunt me.”

“What will you do?” asked Stefano.

“First, I will travel to Santa Sofia alone and see how best to avenge my sister’s murder. If I need you at any time in the future, I will let you know.”

“If that is your wish, Alessandro, then we will remain here, but rest assured that you have an army of men waiting to fight with you,” said Federico.

Alessandro stood up and clapped Federico and Stefano on the back. “My thanks to you both, not only for tonight, but for the past year of friendship. Matteo, I’ll see you at dawn.”

As he turned to leave, Alessandro caught sight of Sapia smiling at him. It had not taken long to discover which village he must travel to, nor which evil he must fight. Only time would unravel the remainder of her prophetic words.

Back in his room, Alessandro gathered his few possessions together in a sack before sitting on his bed to digest the evening’s events, his eyes welling in sadness for Isabetta but also in gratitude for his friends’ loyalty. Then he picked up his guitar, for music was his only respite when his thoughts were troubled. And he played the song he had written for every young girl who has been robbed of her innocence, left wondering if she was guilty of provoking the crimes against her pubescent body. Above all, he had written it for the spirit who walked his dreams. His sister, Isabetta.

See that young girl,  
The unfastened dress,  
With her lips bloodied red  
And her hair a mess?

I run with her  
To the mountain peak  
To escape the evil,  
The violent and weak.

Climb out of the valley of darkness,  
The shadows can only bring pain.  
In the skies you will find a healing light  
Where the fear of his touch will wane.

Fly high on the wings of a raven  
As it soars over your earthly fears.  
Take me with you on the winds of change  
To where the sun dries our tears.

See that woman,  
A whore and a nun,  
With her lips rouged brightly  
Hair tight in a bun?

I walk with her  
Through my dreams at night,  
And pray that he'll leave us  
Alone in the light.

Down the steep mountain path, in the foothills below San Martino, lay the village of Santa Sofia, where a very different scene was unfolding in the upstairs bedroom of a house.

“Lora, calm yourself and listen to me. Your babe is nearly here now. When the pain comes, I want you to push as hard as you can,” ordered the midwife Rosa.

“I can’t!” screamed the labouring woman, her arms flailing.

“Yes, Lora, you can! You must, else your babe will die.”

“Get it out! Get it out!” Lora sobbed in desperation during the brief respite before the next onslaught of pain. Such was her suffering that if someone had handed her a knife, she would have carved open her own belly to deliver the child.

“Caterina, stand on the other side of Lora and place her foot against your hip,” Rosa directed her assistant. “Now Lora, push against us. Push!” Another anguished scream rang out as Lora tried in vain to follow Rosa’s instructions. “Don’t waste your breath screaming, Lora, just pant. Pant!” cried Rosa. The pain subsided once more but the babe was no nearer to being born.

Caterina beckoned the midwife over to the fire. “Rosa, a whole evening has passed since Lora started pushing.”

Rosa gave a deep sigh, smoothing her white hair from her damp forehead and wiping her hands on her cotton dress. From her many years experience, she knew that if a young woman as slender as Lora had laboured these two days past to no avail, the chances were she would not live until morning. As she watched, Lora began to thrash less, her screams turning instead to dull moans. Her mind and body could no longer tolerate the pain, and her spirit was already preparing to leave. “Quick, Caterina, go to my house and fetch my herbs. Let us at least give Lora some peace in her suffering.”

Caterina ran downstairs, where Lora’s mother Emilia and her

grandmother Agnesa were waiting. As usual, they were attired in their black widow dresses with lace handkerchiefs perched upon their tightly pinned hair. The father of the unborn babe was nowhere to be seen. A travelling musician by trade, he had disappeared as quickly as he had arrived, unaware of the legacy he had left behind. The women of Santa Sofia had exchanged many a wry smile over this sorry state of affairs, for Emilia and Agnesa were renowned for their snobbery and unkind remarks. Indeed, they had made Caterina's life very difficult for her since she had married Enrico. On her arrival at the Galletti family's farmhouse, he had demanded his aunt and cousin leave and return to the Gamba's terraced house on the square, only two years after he had allowed them to move into the farmhouse following his mother Francesca's death. Despite it being Enrico's sole decision, Agnesa and Emilia blamed Caterina for the decline in their standard of living, and went out of their way to make trouble for her. Nevertheless, Caterina's heart went out to them in the knowledge that they were soon to lose Lora.

"How is my daughter? Is the babe here? How much longer must she toil and are we to wait?" cried Emilia.

"Lora has laboured long and hard. The babe inside her is large and is unable to pass through her slender frame. It is with great sadness that I must urge you both to prepare yourselves, for there is little more we can do. I am hurrying now to gather some medicine which Rosa will use to lessen Lora's suffering. Perhaps then you would like to come and sit with her."

Emilia clasped her hands over her mouth, then grasped Caterina by the shoulders, shaking her. "What have you done? You and that wicked witch have killed Lora! And her babe still trapped in its warm nest."

Caterina pulled out of her reach. "I beseech you, Emilia, don't look at us as the cause of your daughter's passing. We have done everything possible to save her, and I share your grief for I

have loved Lora like my own cousin. The perils of childbirth are known to all and none is more experienced in midwifery than Rosa. Now, let me go and fetch the medicine.”

Caterina ran out of the house on the eastern side of the square, leaving Emilia to be comforted by her mother, who mumbled prayers to the Virgin. The deserted square was lit only by the dim light of the moon. Caterina headed south down the main street flanked on either side by stone houses, which seemed to merge together into one amorphous façade of wooden doors, wrought-iron balconies and flat roofs. Opposite a small shrine dedicated to the healing waters of a spring, Caterina turned right down a steep lane that wound past Rosa’s house and through the woods to the Chapel of the Black Madonna. Running through Rosa’s abundant olive grove, Caterina soon reached the farmhouse and leapt up the exterior flight of stone stairs. Bursting into the first floor room, she startled the man who was seated at the table, studying his books. “Niccolo, Rosa has sent me to collect her herbs.”

The man stood up, the likeness between him and Rosa at once apparent. They shared the same brown eyes, although Rosa’s flashed with defiance in a way that Niccolo’s placid temperament seldom revealed itself. Of small stature like many men of the south, his hair was beginning to grey at the temples, giving him an air of authority. He frowned on seeing the anxiety etched in Caterina’s beautiful features. “What’s the matter? Which herbs does my mother require?”

“It’s Lora. We’re unable to deliver her child. She’s dying, Niccolo. Rosa has sent me to fetch something to ease her suffering.”

“It’s not herbs you need, Caterina, but medicine,” said Niccolo, reaching for his doctor’s bag.

“Now is not the time to discuss the virtues of your medicine over Rosa’s use of herbs. Pray, fetch her herbs and bring your

own bag if you must, but hurry.”

Niccolo acquiesced, driven by his affection for Caterina as well as by his filial desire to protect his mother. Rosa’s belief in the ancient art of medicinal healing had caused her son many a sleepless night during the past years of the Inquisition, but until the recent arrival of Bishop Pazzini there had never been any real threat to his mother’s life. Now, Niccolo had every reason to fear for her safety. Despite being old and frail, Rosa was still as stubborn as ever and intent on defying the new Bishop.

Running down the stone steps, Niccolo ventured into the main room of the farmhouse. On the far wall, he pulled aside a curtain and pushed open the wooden door that led into his mother’s private room. Lighting a candle, he reached for the herbs he knew to be the ones his mother required, for she had spent many hours in his childhood fostering in him a fascination with all things medicinal. Little had she known that his interest would take him down the path of the now orthodox form of doctoring, with its belief that man was more capable of curing pain and disease than Mother Nature. It was the only subject upon which mother and son disagreed, for they had shared a close bond since the early death of Rosa’s husband when Niccolo was just two years old.

“Come, Niccolo, we must go,” urged Caterina.

Caterina and Niccolo soon arrived at Agnesa’s house, which was situated at the end of the row of buildings on the right, providing her and Emilia with a far-reaching view over the square to the front. The windows to the back overlooked the main road running between San Martino and Arunca, where the church was sited. Despite bemoaning their lack of land, living in a house with such a commanding position was beneficial both to their need to feel superior and to their desire to gossip, for they could watch all the comings and goings of the villagers.

When Caterina and Niccolo entered the house, Agnesa and

Emilia were nowhere to be seen. Upstairs in the bedchamber, Rosa motioned to them to be quiet. She was seated on the bed, holding Lora's hand and wiping her brow. Lora lay prostrate with her eyes closed. Her breathing was ragged and her limbs still twitched in response to the pain in her abdomen, but she was no longer crying out.

"It's nearly time. Have you got my herbs?" asked Rosa.

"Mother, let me examine her."

Rosa glared at her son. "And what experience do you have in the birthing of children, Niccolo? Please do not seek to question my knowledge in this matter."

"It is not that I do not trust you, but with the arrival of Bishop Pazzini, it would be advisable if a doctor were to examine your patient," explained Niccolo.

Rosa looked away in anger, not at her son, but at the thought of all the midwives in the north who had been accused of witchcraft and burned at the stake. The Church Fathers looked for reasons to explain why evil and suffering happened in a world governed by their pure and perfect God. Their search arrived at the door of the devil, whom they believed to be a tangible being, guilty of seducing the weak to carry out his wicked deeds. Women, having been described throughout the Roman Church's teachings as being weaker than men, shouldered much of the blame. Old women who tended to those in labour were easy scapegoats if anything ill occurred. The death of the patient, or a deformity in the newborn child, could all be attributed to the devil-worshipping midwife who had attended the birth. Rosa shook her head in disgust at this theology, which polarised good and evil, pleasure and pain, light and darkness. Instead, she believed that both ends of the spectrum were part and parcel of the same divine light. For the fire that brings warmth and light is also that which burns, but from this very act of destruction stem the fertile ashes of rebirth. In Rosa's opinion, to separate these creative and destructive forces was to

deny the essential truth of Mother Nature.

“Mother?” Rosa’s musing was brought to a halt by her son’s gentle prompting.

“Do what you must, Niccolo,” Rosa agreed, knowing that he only sought to protect her from Bishop Pazzini’s false accusations of witchcraft.

Niccolo nodded and approached Lora, who was now only moments from death. He examined her gently and felt the crown of the babe’s head wedged in the cradle of her narrow body. Raising his eyes to his mother, he nodded. “It is as you say. The child is too large. There is nothing more we can do.”

“And my herbs?” asked Rosa.

“I leave that to you, but if anyone asks, you must say that it was I who administered her medicine.”

“Fetch a small bowl of water, Caterina, and warm it over the fire,” instructed Rosa, before reaching for her *nanta* bag of ritual tools and pulling out a short wand of oak, which she had polished and carved with sacred symbols. Laying out the pouches of herbs upon the table, she closed her eyes and cast her wand over them, allowing the movement of its tip to guide her to which herbs she should use. Among others, she selected rue for its antispasmodic qualities, and began to extract various dried leaves from the pouches, rubbing them between her fingers to form a fine dust. A fragrant aroma filled the room as the powdered herbs dissolved in the warm water. Reaching for a spoon, the old wisewoman ladled the brew into Lora’s mouth, urging her to swallow the soothing drink. Within moments Lora’s pained expression softened, her muscles ceased to spasm and her breathing slowed. “Caterina, you can call Emilia and Agnesa now.”

Caterina opened the door to discover the two women standing outside on the landing. As she motioned for them to enter, she wondered how much of their conversation the women had overheard. Emilia strode past Caterina towards her daughter’s

motionless body and threw herself upon the bed. "Oh, my poor Lora. What have these wicked women done to you?" But Rosa knew that Lora could no longer hear her mother's words for she could see her spirit, cradling that of her unborn child, walking into the loving arms of the Black Goddess Sofia.

Niccolo approached the bed. "Emilia, allow me to express my deep regret at your loss, and to assure you that I examined your daughter and found that Rosa was correct in her diagnosis. There was no possibility of Lora ever delivering her child."

"Well, of course you would say that. The witch is your mother," spat Emilia.

Niccolo gritted his teeth. "No, Emilia, I speak these words as a doctor, not as a son."

In the meantime, old Agnesa had approached the table at the side of Lora's bed where Rosa had left her herbs, and began to poke at the pouches with her stick. "What are these potions? Are they the ones you used to murder my granddaughter?"

Emilia turned towards the table and grabbed at the various pouches, holding them high in the air with a triumphant glare. "The evidence! I have the evidence! You will surely burn for this, Rosa. Just wait until Bishop Pazzini hears about this!" With Agnesa hobbling behind her, Emilia flew out of the bedroom without even a glance at her daughter's corpse.

"Leave her be," said Niccolo, reaching out to restrain Rosa, who was keen to retrieve her herbal remedies. "Let us wash and dress Lora's body, then leave Emilia and Agnesa in peace to mourn. They will calm down by the morrow, I am sure. The shock and their suffering have made them hysterical."

Caterina fetched some water and began to bathe Lora's lifeless body. "Perhaps, Niccolo, but I am not so hopeful. Emilia did nothing but bully Lora, especially when she grew big with child and brought shame upon the family. She didn't love Lora, not like a mother. There is more to her reaction tonight than meets the eye."

Rosa caught Caterina's gaze and nodded in agreement. Then she anointed Lora's forehead, chest and navel with olive oil, before helping Caterina to clothe her in a white, cotton dress. "What will be, will be, my children. Sofia weaves her cloth in mysterious ways and it is not for us to question her motives. Come, let us return home and rest awhile, for it has been a long and sorrowful night."

On their arrival back at the Lorini farmhouse, Niccolo poured some cups of wine and they settled themselves into the chairs beneath the *pergola*. They sat for a while, pondering the sad event of Lora's death and the futility of their efforts to save her.

Caterina gave a deep sigh. "It is at times such as this that I wonder if there truly is a divine Mother guiding us and, if so, to what end she delivers such loss and suffering."

Rosa stared at her niece, understanding the pain behind her question. "Something positive can usually be drawn from every negative experience, Caterina. Even those events that at first sight seem tragic and incomprehensible, in hindsight can be viewed as stepping-stones towards greater wisdom and strength. It is through periods of suffering that we can grow and move forward with greater compassion and love for ourselves and for others. People may lose their lives, but their deaths are rarely in vain. In some way their dying will have a positive influence on the community in which they lived, even if it is to bring about change. Death is always followed by rebirth. Something will come from Lora's death this night, you can be sure."

They pondered her words for a while until at last Caterina asked Rosa, "Was it so when my own mother died giving birth to me?"

Startled, Rosa watched Caterina as she picked at the petals of a fallen flower. She had waited twenty-nine years for her niece to ask her this question. At last she had the opportunity to help

Caterina to understand the events surrounding her birth and the subsequent repercussions on her life. Rosa signalled to Niccolo, who kissed his mother's cheek and bade Caterina goodnight. Silence followed Niccolo's departure as Caterina continued to pick at the deep red petals of the flower. Rosa waited until she looked up. "Are you sure you are ready to hear this, Caterina?"

"Yes." Caterina swallowed the tears gathering in her throat. "The loss of my mother has been on my mind much of late. Perhaps it would help if I understood what happened."

Rosa nodded and prayed for guidance from Sofia and from Caterina's own mother, whose spirit she could see standing in the olive grove behind her daughter. Then she told Caterina the story of her birth.

\* \* \* \* \*

It was a warm summer's evening like tonight when you entered this lifetime, Caterina. Your mother had laboured long and hard like Lora, but after many hours she was able to give birth to you. She cradled you in her arms, holding your pursed lips against her breast to suckle.

Then the bleeding started. Your grandmother Maria and I tried to stem the flow with every means known to us, but it was relentless. Your mother knew it was her time. She remained calm throughout the ordeal, treasuring the few moments she had with her newborn child, until she drifted into the waiting arms of Sofia.

I was devastated by her loss for she was very dear to me, being both my niece by blood and fellow priestess, as well as my sister-in-law by marriage. No one was more distraught, though, than your father. He adored your mother and never came to terms with her loss. Perhaps you are right to suspect that a part of him held you responsible for her death. But try to understand that

when someone suffers the loss of a loved one, they will often seek to blame someone as a means of assuaging their grief and anger.

Nevertheless, your father loved you, Caterina. I know that it is hard for you to believe when he showed you little affection, but I know it to be true. He was simply too frightened to nurture your relationship in case he lost you as well. His final act before he died, of arranging your marriage to Enrico, stemmed from good intent. On his deathbed, he told me that his only wish was to see you taken care of, and he thought that his old hunting friend Enrico, heir to the Galletti farmstead, would be the one to look after you. He couldn't have predicted that Enrico would subject you to such violence. In fact, he would be horrified to know that the man he left in charge of protecting you is the same man who inflicts such appalling wounds on your body.

I am telling you this because I am fearful for your safety. You appear to accept Enrico's violence as if it were your deserved punishment. Caterina, listen to me. Tonight you witnessed for yourself the dangers implicit in childbirth. Your cousin Veronica's mother also died the same way. You are not to blame for your mother's death. The Black Goddess we serve is both the crone of death and the midwife of birth, precisely because the two stand side by side at the same crossroads. When a woman is labouring to deliver a child, she and her babe dwell in the centre of these crossroads, where only the thinnest veil separates the world of the living from that of the dead, and only Sofia can decide which path they both will take. It is beyond any of our control.

Stop punishing yourself for something that was not your fault and start believing that you are worthy of being loved. If not, you will continue to remain trapped within a marriage where your husband is your abuser, not your lover. Harness the anger you turn on yourself and use it to fight for your freedom. Don't forget that the Black Goddess of Wisdom is also a warrior who upholds justice when the right order is out of balance. Think of

Paolo and what it would mean for him to see his mother shake off her veil of passive acceptance and rise up as the warrior woman I know you to be. Find her, Caterina, before it's too late.

\* \* \* \* \*

Rosa searched Caterina's face for a sign of the courageous spirit she knew lay locked inside her niece's pain, but Caterina's eyes remained devoid of emotion. Only the way in which she dug her nails into the palms of her clenched hands belied the distress she was struggling to control. Standing up, she made to leave. "I must go, Rosa. It's late."

Rosa reached out and grasped her arm. "Wait. Don't leave in anger."

Caterina continued to stare into the distance. "I'm not angry, Rosa, just tired."

"Yes, you are angry. With yourself. With me for not saving your mother. With your mother for leaving you. With Sofia for depriving you of your mother."

Caterina's mouth began to tremble and her eyes filled with tears. Rosa let go of her arm and instead took hold of her clenched fist, uncurling the fingers and lacing them through her own as she pulled Caterina forwards. "Come, there is someone I want to show you." Caterina allowed her aunt to lead her through the olive grove towards an old, stone well. Peering into the water, Rosa gestured to Caterina to do the same. "Now, tell me what you see."

For a while, Caterina saw nothing but the fragmented reflection of the waxing moon upon the water's surface. Then, between the rippling shadows of the overhanging trees, a figure emerged. A woman dressed in white and barefoot, with flowing hair entwined with flowers, appeared in the reflection. Caterina gasped. "What do you see?" asked Rosa.

“A woman,” answered Caterina.

“Who is she?”

“I don’t know.”

“Listen and she will tell you,” said Rosa.

Caterina’s mind wandered through the veil separating the physical world from the spiritual realm. There she listened to the voice telling her what she needed to hear, until the images on the water’s surface faded to moonlight. “It was my mother,” she said, giving Rosa a tremulous smile.

“Yes.”

“She said she still walks beside me.”

“Yes. As does Sofia. As do I. You are never alone, Caterina. Take strength in that. Remember that the Black Goddess forces us to change by challenging us. She strips us bare so that her seed of wisdom can grow in the tilled soil of our souls. But you always have a choice whether you remain trapped in the underworld or whether you fly to freedom above.”

Caterina wrapped her arms around Rosa’s small, stout body and breathed in her scent, which evoked memories from her childhood spent at the farmhouse with Rosa, Niccolo and her father. Pressing a kiss to her temple, she whispered close to Rosa’s ear, “Forgive me for my anger.”

Rosa tightened her hold. “There is nothing to forgive.”

With a final embrace, Caterina turned and began walking back through the olive grove. Rosa watched her progress until a movement in the sky above distracted her gaze. An owl flew past and Rosa whispered a prayer for Lora’s soul on the breeze of its silent wings. Like the raven, the owl was a messenger of death, guiding the soul to the Black Goddess of Wisdom in the underworld, in the same way that the dove carried the soul back to the realm of the living. The owl was also a portent for battle and as Rosa readied herself for bed, she could not help but wonder whether the bird’s appearance alluded to Caterina’s struggle for

self-worth, or whether there was some larger battle looming.

On reaching the square, Caterina turned left past Niccolo's consulting room and continued along the westerly road that ran straight to the coast. Once she had passed the orchard and reached the woods that circuted the hill above the chapel, Caterina turned right down a dirt track that led across her husband's barren land to the farmhouse in the distance. Its bare, whitewashed walls were covered in dirt, creating the semblance of a large, inert tomb rising up from the earth, in stark contrast to Rosa's myriad of rambling roses, which covered the walls of her house with vibrant bursts of colour. There were only three houses sited outside the centre of the village where the majority of people all lived huddled together. The third belonged to the Orsini family, now headed by Caterina's grandparents Bartolomeo and Maria Colombe, which was situated behind their son Dionisio's *taverna* on the north side of the square. The Lorini and Galletti families had once been landowners with farmhouses set amid flourishing olive groves. Where Rosa had worked hard to cultivate the land following her husband Agnolo's premature death, Enrico had squandered much of his family's wealth on wine and the acquisition of guns, for his greatest enthusiasm besides drinking was hunting.

Arriving at the farmhouse, Caterina opened the door quietly so as not to wake him. Creeping up the darkened staircase, she stopped at her son's bedroom and peered around the door. Paolo lay sleeping, his locks of fair hair falling forward over his eyes, his round cheeks flushed. Caterina felt her heart swell with maternal love, and knew that she would fight to the death to protect this angel who brought such joy and laughter to her otherwise troubled life.

Caterina felt behind the door for the pouch of sand that hung there on a hook. A village superstition warned of an evil spirit who stole into the bedrooms of children at night and sucked

out their breath, causing them to die in their sleep. To prevent this from happening, mothers hung pouches of sand behind the doors of their children's bedrooms, so that the spirit would have to count every grain of sand before it could enter the room and steal the child's breath. As this task was impossible to complete before the first rays of dawn banished the evil spirit to its lair, the children were deemed to be safe. Caterina smiled at her relief on finding the pouch, but the smile was wiped from her face in an instant.

"Where have you been this late, sneaking around so that I might not know of your treachery?" demanded Enrico, seizing her shoulder and slamming her against the stone wall of the landing. "Whose bed have you been warming tonight, Whore?"

Caterina's eyes glazed over as she disassociated her mind from her body, allowing her spirit to wander to a place where it could not feel the pain that she knew her body was about to suffer. She had learnt over the past seven years of marriage that there was no use protesting her innocence. Any words uttered by her would only serve to inflame her husband's rage. Better, instead, to remain mute and compliant until Enrico had exorcised the voices that taunted him with his wife's imaginary infidelities, demanding she be punished.

And so, it began. Grabbing his wife by her hair, Enrico dragged her into their bedroom and threw her on the floor. Caterina curled up into a ball, placing her hands over her head to protect herself. She heard him undoing his belt and flinched at the first whip of the hard leather on her back. Again and again he struck her, calling her a whore and a slut with every blow of the belt, until at last he fell on the bed, panting from exertion. Caterina waited until his breathing became slower and deeper, when she could be sure that he had passed out. Wincing from the pain, she crawled out of the room. Then, wrapping her shawl about her, she lowered herself onto the deep stone seat of the landing casement and pulled the

drape behind her. As she leant her head back against the wall, the maiden moon reached out to touch her cheek through the open shutter. In response, Caterina's eyes searched the stars, but not even their sublime beauty could arouse a response within her. Instead, closing her eyes, she escaped into the numbing abyss of sleep.