

CHAPTER ONE

THE VILLA

The forested slopes of Mount Vesuvius loomed over the pastured countryside where a large villa stood to the southeast of the coastal cities of Herculaneum and Pompeii. The sweltering, dry summer had made the ground crisp and cicadas chirped within its tall, walled gardens under a wash of stars, glittering above sweeping olive groves and tall cypress trees that were drenched in the silver light of the moon. A wolf howled in the distance as the earth quaked, a shudder so familiar that not even the birds roosting in the trembling boughs stirred. The ground shaking around the mountain was as normal to everyone in Campania as the setting of the sun.

Inside the villa, two dogs, one black and one white, trotted side by side over the finest patterned floor. Upon it, a mosaic depicted horses and soldiers galloping across a battlefield through a vast, leafy colonnaded courtyard, trickling with marble fountains and pools of rainwater.



The black hulk of Mount Vesuvius loomed behind an ornamental shrine to Vulcan, the god of fire. The night sky shimmered through the open roof above and the dogs' claws clacked on the stone as they passed their owner's regal pet, a golden eagle, sleeping in her gilded cage.

The black dog leaped upon the other and playfully tugged at her ear with her teeth.

'Stop it, Delta,' Luna said, smiling, with a gentle shake of her white, furry head. 'You'll wake Bellona.'

Delta looked up at the eagle. 'Bellona?' Delta's tail wagged. 'She won't mind, Mama! She'd join in if she could!'

Delta jumped on Luna again and her mother wrapped her paws round Delta's neck. They rolled on the ground and giggled as their mouths gnawed softly at the flesh of each other's necks. The dogs chuckled louder with every yelp.

A door creaked open behind them and a delicate woman with dark hair, pale skin and solid gold bracelets on her wrists stepped out from her bedroom alongside a young slave woman with long, wavy brown hair, who wore a simple tunic and a bracelet of a snake.

The slave woman clapped her hands. 'Delta!' she scolded. 'Get off your mother at once!'

Delta froze with her pink tongue lolling out of her mouth. Gaia was her favourite slave. She had looked after Luna since she was a puppy, then Delta after Luna had mated with a wolf in the forests around Mount Vesuvius. Luna was white, but Delta's fur was as black as a shadow at noon, like her father. Luna had been lucky to get away with her life. The wolves on the mountain were secretive and ferocious and Delta and her mother hoped to never cross paths with them again.

'Herminia!' Luna smiled. She wriggled free from Delta and bounded to the delicate woman. She pressed her head upon her thigh and Herminia crouched low and tenderly stroked Luna's face with both hands.

'Your pup is causing mischief again, isn't she?' Herminia beamed. Luna and Delta wagged their tails, circling her legs.

Herminia was quiet, gentle and kind, and Delta and Luna had missed her. They didn't live with her any more now that she had moved to Rome with her husband, Marcus. They wished they could still sit beside her while she read poetry and stories in the ornate garden. They also missed accompanying her on walks through the olive groves surrounding the villa. Herminia and Marcus had recently arrived in Campania for the summer. They

were staying with them for a night before travelling on to Marcus's house in Pompeii.

Bellona squawked at her from her cage.

'Hello, old friend.' Herminia grinned, trying to stand, but her pregnant stomach made it difficult, and she clutched it as Luna and Gaia supported her, leaning their weight against hers. She stepped to the eagle and scratched her speckled feathers through the bars. Bellona closed her eyes and purred. 'It's so good to see you again after all this time.'

Herminia looked at the animals, then Gaia, and her eyes shone with tears. Delta and Luna whined softly. Gaia rested a hand on her shoulder. Herminia quickly collected herself with a nod and a deep breath.

The ground shook and Herminia gasped. 'The tremors are more intense than I remember,' she said, 'or it has been so long since I was home that I have forgotten what they feel like.'

'They are stronger and more frequent, but the festival of Vulcanalia is only a month or so away,' Gaia reassured. 'We will honour Vulcan, the quakes will lessen and the fire god will not threaten our crops with a blaze.'

Herminia smiled. 'I must ask my father what he has planned in Pompeii for the celebrations this year. Come.'



She ruffled the fur between Delta's ears. 'He is waiting for us in his library.'

Delta led the way to a pair of huge wooden doors that groaned as Gaia pushed them open. Oil lamp sconces circled the room, illuminating stacks of papyrus scrolls on shelves surrounded by deep-red walls and frescoes of hunting scenes with beautiful Greek women carrying water from a river. Delta raced past Gaia then Herminia's husband, Marcus, startling him as he admired his father-in-law, Lucius Alfidius Varus's, shield that had been dented and slashed from the conquest of Britain over thirty-five years before, where he had fought as a general in the army. She hurled herself at Lucius, who was sitting behind a large desk, its feet carved into the huge paws of a lion. Lucius's hair was white with age and his dark skin



was as worn as the bark of an ancient tree. Delta's paws thumped upon his arm and she nuzzled her large black head into his chest.

'Young Delta,' the elderly man laughed, and he patted her flank as two slaves rushed to him. Delta was guided to the floor and Lucius looked upon her kindly, gently squeezing her chin in his fingers. 'My dearest wolfdog.'

Delta wagged her tail. She was the only puppy not to be sold. Lucius could not bear to part with Delta. 'The runt of the litter may be the smallest,' he would often say, 'but its resilience and determination are unmatched.'

Lucius's gaze darted to the open door. 'And Luna as bright as the moon,' he went on, watching her trot inside beside Herminia and hop up next to Delta, her white tail swishing as she pressed her body against Lucius's legs. Herminia stepped towards him and allowed her father to kiss her cheek before sitting on a stool beside him. 'They will be your best protectors with Bellona while Marcus is on business. They will scare away the wolves from the mountain and hunt the best boar for you and your children.'

Hearing his name from the other side of the room, Marcus glanced at them and spat a date stone into a silver bowl. Another slave entered, carrying a jug of wine. Gaia took it from him. She refilled Lucius's silver chalice

as Herminia took her father's hand and rested the other tenderly on her swollen stomach. Lucius drank the wine and looked at his daughter with a soft smile. Marcus took the jug from Gaia, refilled his cup, then shoed her away with an impatient sigh.

Lucius gave Herminia's fingers a little squeeze. 'Why do you look so afraid?'

'Don't leave me,' Herminia whispered, bowing her head, and her solid gold bracelets clinked as she wiped the tears racing down her cheeks. The dogs looked up. Delta rested her chin upon Lucius's knee and whimpered, her brow furrowing. She didn't like seeing Herminia upset.

'Ah, but I am always with you, my child.' He cupped her face, and she leaned into his palm. 'For you carry me in your heart like I carry you in mine. It's the same with your mother since we lost her in the great earthquake seventeen years ago. She and I will watch over you for ever.'

Herminia began to weep. The two dogs crept towards her and nuzzled their heads against her and she buried her face in their fur.

'And you are forgetting something.' Lucius squeezed her hand again and Herminia looked into his brown eyes with a sniff. 'I am not dead yet,' he whispered with a wink. 'There is life left in these bones.' He sat taller, comically

bulking out his chest for a moment, and Herminia brushed the tears from her eyes with a chuckle. ‘I am just weary from too much carousing. I shall be quite different after a quiet evening and a good night’s sleep.’

Marcus glanced at them from across the room. Delta’s gaze drifted to him as he stepped towards Lucius’s favourite items – the fearsome gladiatorial helmet and sword he was given by Spiculus, the gladiator most favoured by Emperor Nero. It was too valuable to keep alongside the rest of Lucius’s gladiatorial memorabilia displayed around his dining room, which prompted long conversations during dinner parties and encouraged many investors to support the games that Lucius helped to organize in Pompeii.

Marcus picked up a small ivory box encrusted with green emeralds from Lucius’s ebony side table, turned it in his fingers and swiftly folded it inside his toga.

Delta’s head shot up, her ears back.

‘My darling girl,’ Marcus said, striding to Herminia and rubbing her back. Delta’s nose wrinkled, smelling the night of wine on his breath. ‘It’s late. You and your father must rest if you are to keep up your strength.’

Herminia shook her head. ‘I want to stay.’

Marcus’s jaw hardened. ‘Come now.’ He lifted her, reluctantly, to stand up. A low growl rose in Delta’s throat.

Luna's ears pricked. 'I said we must away . . .'

Herminia tugged her arm inside his grasp. 'No.'

'*Thief!*' Delta barked loudly and sharply, alarming everyone in the room. Lucius clutched his chest.

Marcus stumbled backwards. 'That dog is mad!'

Luna sat up alert, her white fur bristling along her spine 'Delta? What's wrong?'

'I don't like him.' Delta stared at Marcus. 'He just stole a box from Lucius. He isn't nice to Herminia, the slaves or to us.'

Luna looked Marcus up and down and glared. 'In this world, men are in charge, Delta. Women and children must bend to their will – and the slaves must obey them all. But our kind can care for humans, especially around people like Marcus. Never forget that. It is our duty, not only to our family but to any person that needs it.'

'It's all right, my daughter,' Lucius said. 'Know that I love you; it is just hours until we speak tomorrow.'

Herminia paused then kissed his head. She lingered there, a tear falling as he whispered more words only she could hear.

'Take Luna with you,' he said at last. 'Marcus and I must talk.'

Herminia stepped away with Gaia, who wrapped an

arm round her shoulders. Luna leaped and trotted beside them, pressing her body against Herminia's legs. They creaked the heavy double doors open and exited the room with Lucius's other slaves, leaving Lucius and Marcus alone in the room.

Delta turned, hearing whispers. More slaves from the household had gathered by the door and were peeking inside from the doorframe. Lucius had been kind to them, and rather than rule over them with a heavy hand, like most masters did, he welcomed his slaves into his family and, in time, earned their love and respect.

Gaia's young son, Neo, was there too, his brow creased with worry, seeing the master so tired and Herminia so upset. His tunic and hands were covered with animal hair and dust from bathing and grooming Lucius's finest horses after a day of hunting on the mountainside. Delta cared for Neo deeply. She would often sit in the stables and watch him look after the horses. He had a way with them – everyone said it was a gift. The horses were drawn to him. Delta knew they sensed the goodness in Neo, which made them feel safe. When Neo was permitted to roam, Delta joined him on adventures in the pastures surrounding Mount Vesuvius, but she always kept him away from the forest so he would not encounter a wolf

or wild boar. She would often chase him home until they were laughing, breathless, and rolling in the grass.

Delta went to him, her tail wagging, but the slaves at the door scattered into the shadows as Marcus approached. Neo took a fearful step backwards, and Delta stood before him, her hackles rising. Marcus looked down his nose and shut the doors on them. The clink of a key sounded and then the clunk of a lock.

‘Come now, my heart,’ Gaia said softly, arriving behind them and crouching next to Neo, ‘it is time you were in bed too.’

Neo scratched Delta behind the ear and she breathed in the familiar warm scent of the horses on his hands. ‘But will the master still be here in the morning?’ he asked quietly.

Gaia nodded. ‘There’s plenty of life left in him yet.’

‘But Herminia is so sad,’ Neo went on. ‘It’s like he’s already dead.’

‘She is not happy with Marcus in Rome and she misses her life here with us,’ Gaia said. She took a loose strand of curled dark hair from his little face and placed it behind his ear. ‘And she is frightened, sweetheart, because her father is very old and he won’t be with us much longer. She doesn’t want to miss what time she has left with him.’

Neo played with Gaia's gold snake bracelet. 'The other slaves say that the master has promised us our freedom. Is that true?'

'I believe so.' Gaia nodded. 'We are lucky to have a master like him.' Neo smiled with Gaia. 'Come with me now,' she said, taking him by the hand. 'It is time for bed.'

Delta watched them walk into the halls towards the slave quarters, a knot of grief tightening across her chest, thinking of how Lucius would eventually fade. She scratched the master's library door, then pushed it with her head, but it remained firmly shut. She sniffed beneath it rigorously, then lay with her head between her paws and stared through the crack between the doors at Marcus and the master talking in the lamplight.

The minutes passed. Delta's eyes grew heavy, and with a great yawn she drifted off to sleep.