

SIMON MAGUS

From the rooftop I look out over Tyre harbour and at the setting sun. I lived so long in the house that I might have been born there. There are seven of us, Electra, Maia, Merope, Pleione, Calaeno, Asterope and I. I'm not one of the Pleiades. Helen is the name that always belonged to me so Severus let me keep it. Each of us must take at least two clients a day. I enforce the house rules, two denarii payment and no touching until the client has taken a bath. I prefer Greek men for whom lovemaking is a leisurely art; and who pay a little more. Unfortunately most clients are Roman soldiers for whom sex is like relieving themselves. They'll take whoever is available, climax fast and fall asleep. The hours in a Roman soldier's embrace pass slowly. I rarely sleep and when I do, I dream of life far away from Severus, where I might live with a man I can respect and love. But how to purchase my freedom? Extra clients have given me a small pile of money but not the mountain I need to satisfy Severus.

In my purple dress, I pace back and forth, in the hope that a sailor will spot me. If I don't find a client, Severus will write me up as owing money. Excessive delinquency brings a thrashing. The red sun sinks into a featureless sea. Spots dance in my eyes. I watch the bathers in the pool. They all know what I want. Some men, after bathing, come up my stairs for a better look at me. There are three men in the pool but they haven't moved for a while; not even a glance in my direction.

A merchant closes down his linen stand. He gives me a friendly wave, pauses as if considering whether to visit me. My hopes rise only to fade when he turns and

walks away.

My private account is about to shrink again.

I'm about to go inside when I see a man alone on the pier. Even in the twilight I sense his interested gaze. Standing at the roof's edge, I spread my arms and twirl around in a little dance to let him see my figure. He remains still, a good sign. Soon he'll find me irresistible. I give him another spin so that my dress parts along the leg. He'll take the bait, he must. When I steal another look at him, he's moved closer, his foot almost on the first step. He's a slight man with a long wispy beard and dark skin. His white robe suggests he's a Jew. Pretending that I haven't noticed him, I continue to twirl. Slow steps sound on the stairs. Gods, thank you for bringing me a client, even a Jew.

I don't see Jews often. They pay the going rate but not an extra as. To avoid prying eyes they enter by the harbour stairs and make straight for my room. If the doorway veil is drawn back they come in. They like to entertain me with stories before getting down to business. Their religion forbids them from using the public bath so I let them wash off in my private basin.

When he reaches the rooftop, I see a man with an oval face, his brow creased, with thin cheeks and thick black hair. His protruding ribs suggest that he fasts regularly. Most striking are his large dark eyes that have a radiant, carefree smile that regards the world as a joke. I turn away in confusion.

'I know you well,' he says.

Not an old client. Among hundreds of men, I'd never forget those deep eyes. Why do they send my heart racing as if something tremendous is about to happen?

'You're mistaken,' I say. 'But we could get to know each other.'

'Your dance, the movements, were so familiar. For a moment I saw into the

abyss of time, and you were there calling to me. What is your name?’

‘Helen.’

He takes in a deep breath. ‘Yes, it all fits.’

‘And you are?’

‘Simon.’

Though it's a common name among Jews I know immediately that this has to be the street conjurer turned philosopher who draws large crowds of commoners. He teaches a pseudo-Greek religion characterized by hundreds of quarrelling deities. A centurion who recently visited me, attended one of Simon's meetings to find out whether the teachings were seditious. He concluded that such incomprehensible rubbish couldn't be seditious no matter how hard it tried. Many lepers and cripples follow Simon around. Some report to be healed.

‘Don't you remember me?’ he says.

His words awaken my bitterness. ‘I don't remember anything.’

‘Your father?’

‘I was found on a beach. I never knew my family or my name. The ones who found me sold me to Severus. Don't talk about remembering.’

‘Yet I know you.’

‘Can we talk about it?’ I stroke my inside thigh invitingly.

Smiling he follows the movement. ‘The voice is yours, the face, the breasts, the soul imprisoned in that body.’ He reaches out but I stand back.

‘Sir, I'm yours for the night, for any pleasure. I can set your fire ablaze, stoke it until you beg me to stop. Once you bathe, and accept my price.’

His eyes gleam. ‘For you, no price is too high. I have found the woman I searched for all my life.’

He follows me to my room. I can hardly stop trembling in his presence, as if I were standing next to a blazing fire. He asks me how much I charge, and I mumble that he can give me what he wants. He throws several coins on the bed, twice what I usually ask. I lie on the bed, my head propped up by one hand, and try to assume a seductive pose, but my trembling causes me to tense up. We stare at each other, and neither of us wants to break off looking.

‘I’m surprised to see such a wise man come to me,’ I say.

‘I’m tired of talking to people. They want miracles but all I can perform are cheap tricks. Illusions. Sometimes I heal the sick, but I think they heal themselves without my help. They can’t understand what I say. Blind and deaf they came into the world. Blind and deaf they’ll leave.’

He sits on the bed. I massage his temples and let him feel the warmth of my body next to his. ‘You can always try me. I like to listen to people. The more interesting your story, the more interesting your night will be.’

‘It’s a long story, and you belong in it.’

He strokes my arm, a gentle caress at first. He kisses me on the lips, with tenderness that doesn’t ask for more. I turn my body toward him and let his large eyes feast on my curves. His eyes gleam, not from arousal, but the look of a brother who has found his long lost sister. ‘Ennoia,’ he whispers.

I speak enough Greek to know that Ennoia means thought. A pretty name besides.

‘I’m Helen,’ I say.

‘Of course, one of your many dresses was Helen of Troy, but before your captivity, you were Ennoia.’

‘My captivity?’ I sit up quickly. ‘You know what I was before I was found on

the beach? My lost life?’

He inclines his head. ‘You’ve lived longer than you can imagine, in terrible bondage.’

I let out a sigh. ‘So I was a slave. I hoped I was a queen, at least an aristocrat, and that one day a prince would arrive, recognize me as a lost princess, pay off Severus and take me back to his court.’

‘You’ve been a queen.’

‘Now you’re playing with me. I beg you to tell me more than hints and teases. If you know my story, I want to hear it now.’

Unperturbed, Simon looks me over with his steady eyes. ‘Would you believe my words? I could tell you everything I know about you, and after we parted you would not know whether to believe me. Most likely you would remember fondly a crazy philosopher who spoke all sorts of rubbish. Described your imaginary past too. My words are but dust with only a few golden grains. You must find the gold yourself.’

‘I’m ready to be entertained. Tell me my story.’

From his steady eyes I can read his refusal.

‘You’re a wise man.’ I press myself against him, pull him close so that our lips can touch. ‘Set me free. I beg you.’

His eyes moisten, moved to tears. ‘Who is thy master?’

‘Severus.’

‘I can purchase your freedom from Severus, but you will remain a slave, wandering from age to age and prostituting yourself, because the bonds that hold you in a human body are solid chains, and no hammer, not even the hammer of Zeus can break them. No amount of money is enough to ransom you from those who

imprisoned you. They're driven by a blind and deaf malice.'

'Then must I remain a whore?'

'Until you remember. Then, you will be free.'

I don't know why I trust him so much, but I feel that he can do anything for me. 'Help me remember,' I say.

'When you do, there'll be no going back. The bird that is born can't return to its egg. Consider the step you're about to take.'

I pull him against my body. 'I want to remember.'

He awakens me. I cannot describe how it happens. His hands rest on my forehead, kneading it, then move quickly performing a series of signs. Awakening is like leaving a river bank and wading out into a raging torrent. You've always been there but now sunlight illuminates the waters so that you can see their swirling eddies. Floating in that wrack are my many lives, a confused mass of memories. I can't hold one for long before I find another. I remember I've slept with Lao Tse, Pythagoras, Aristotle and Archimedes. Each time I hoped that a wise man would set me free, but I only discovered a normal man as confused about existence as I.

I stand in awe of Simon, unable to speak. He's a pillar of fire that could consume the world. I can look at his radiant face without fear because he is my divine consort from a place before time was born.

How did it happen that we were ever separated? Unfortunately that chapter remains hidden from me. Simon relates how the Powers who constructed the Universe imprisoned me in the form of a woman and left me for dead. I cannot remember anything before the day I awakened by a pool. Above me rose a huge withered tree that had not borne a leaf for years. I felt violated and shamed. The fountain that served the pool had long ceased to flow. The pool water was a sickly green. I wandered into

a city where I found its human inhabitants bereft of knowledge or awareness, slaves of voices that spoke in their heads. I taught them awareness, reflection, and thought. For many years I ruled there as their queen. But enemies attacked, laid waste the land and burned our city. The Powers who violated me would not tolerate people with more awareness than they.

The following day, accompanied by Simon, I leave the house of Severus forever. Severus is happy to be rid of a troublesome woman; with what Simon pays him, he can buy three others.

‘We will never be parted again,’ I say to Simon as we walk through the city. Already a small crowd follows us, knowing we’d stop somewhere and speak to them.

Simon lets out a sigh. ‘Not only will we be parted again, but you will suffer greatly at that parting. Think not that the Powers who imprisoned you will let you go. But we have a little time before they take action. In the days given to us we must plant a few seeds. For many seasons they may lie sleeping, but in another age after winter has passed, the seeds will sprout and blossom. To remember, to know what you are, is a great gift and it can be awakened in others.’

In the olive grove outside the city, Simon turns to a large crowd and begins to teach. Many people are there hoping to see a miracle. Perhaps they confuse Simon with Simon Peter of Jerusalem, a disciple of Jesus.

Simon offers no miracles. ‘I cannot cure leprosy or bring back the dead,’ he says to the crowd, so large that I can hardly see a break under the trees. ‘Neither will I perform cheap tricks. What I offer are words of light. They will not feed your body, but will satisfy a hunger for truth. For knowledge. You come to me that your sight may be opened. You’ve worshipped gods who quarrel with each other and live

immoral lives. Or you worship a single god who says, 'I am a jealous God and there is no other God but me. I visit the sins of the father upon his children.'

A few heads stir. Someone shouts out 'Blasphemy!' but his voice dies into a deep silence.

'The gods have failed you. Why turn to a vain and jealous god to heal you when you're sick? Or destitute? When war ravages your homes? Those terrible things happen because the world was brought into being by a mistake. In the beginning Fire and Thought dwelt together in perfect unity. But Thought left the side of her consort. She imagined that she knew his mind and would express it. She built an imperfect world because she was separated from Fire. The deficiency present in the beginning is the same that is in your hearts. Thought was cast down by jealous Powers. For aeons she has wandered in a human body. Only when she is reunited with Fire will all suffering cease.' He pauses. All eyes are turned to Simon. No one notices me standing behind him.

Taking my hand he leads me forth. 'Tonight Thought stands among us. Imprisoned by jealous powers for thousands of years, she is now awake, with us, to share her divine gift.'

He motions me to address the crowd. My head swims, not knowing what to say. What can I say to the hungry and suffering faces, the lepers and the one armed? I tell my story as I now remember it. They listen while I speak of my lost lives, my slavery in the house of Severus and of my awakening. Several men and women surge forward and kneel at my feet.

'Blessed Ennoia!' A woman bent with age looks up at me. 'I am blind. Awaken my sight.'

What can I do but place my hands on her head, massage her brow and breathe

my spirit into her?

She awakens.

Her eyes open, alert as if she'd found sobriety after a long bout of drunkenness. She knows that until now she has followed blind teachers. My hand resting on her brow feels a flutter as if a new set of eyes had awakened in her.

Several others prostrate themselves before me. I lay my hands on them. The effect is never the same for everyone. Some arise as blind as they'd ever been, but a few are changed. I know who they are because they walk away without speaking to anyone.

For many years we travel together throughout Asia, to Ephesus, Athens and Caesarea where we establish communities. Crowds follow us everywhere. Sick people are healed. The blind see. Sometimes Simon performs simple illusions to demonstrate how easily the human mind is seduced. Those who think they are sober don't realize that they sleep in drunken stupor.

We sleep together as close as Fire ever was to Thought. But the shadow of our parting is never far. Simon also senses it. Often he tosses at night as if wrestling with demons. I'm also troubled that I don't remember anything before my enslavement. Simon related my fall, how the Powers were jealous that men and women whom Ennoia created would attain to knowledge that had been denied to those Powers. They ambushed Ennoia before she could perfect the human race, and cast her spirit into a female body. I have no memory of such events. As we travel, always teaching in olive groves, I begin to doubt the story, wondering if Simon made it up. But whenever I question him, he assures me that in time I will remember.

Our travels take us to Rome where we speak to a small community of the

awakened. Barely fifty people. Our teachings aren't popular among Romans because we don't offer a structure. Unlike Christians, we have no code of behaviour, the comfort of a belief system or authority. What we teach is that the soul must awaken, discover its nature and its origin. An awakened soul is its own authority and recognizes none other. Romans tend to ask, 'What should I do? How do I do it? Is there a ritual I should follow?' Exasperated, Simon replies: 'If you want beliefs, go ask Peter.' And many do. Our communities in Caesarea and Ephesus recently shrank as people went over to Peter, swayed by the simplicity of Christianity and its comforting beliefs.

I step forward and tell my story, following which two women approach and ask me to awaken their sight. From their amused eyes, I guess that they expect to see a miracle or at the least some entertainment. Nevertheless I do what I must. Next to approach is a tall man with a large hat pulled over one eye. The unwavering look in his single eye sends a shiver through me. How could I have forgotten him? For aeons he has been as close to me as my shadow.

He sinks down on one knee and looks up at me. He doesn't try to disguise the malice in his voice as he says, 'Will Ennoia have mercy on a poor man, one-eyed and half blind, who desires to see?'

I let out a gasp. Why is he here? He had wronged me. Long ago as a councillor in the city where I was queen, he betrayed me. I am sure I knew him much earlier. Whatever he wants from me now, it's not the gift of remembering.

The one-eyed nods at Simon. 'You believe his story? You think you're something great. Ever since he called you Ennoia you've been under his spell. Come to me and I will teach you the real truth.'

He rises, casts a venomous glance at Simon and melts into the shadows.

That night I cannot restrain my tears. At first Simon tries to comfort me, but I push him away. My doubt has awakened and I must listen to it though it might lead to perdition. I no longer see Simon clearly.

‘Who is that one-eyed man?’ I ask Simon.

‘I’ve never seen him.’

‘How is it that I remember him, and you don’t? Long ago in a city where I ruled he led an uprising. If he isn’t the embodiment of Samael or Yaldabaoth, then I must be blind. I met him three times in Athens. Each time he demanded that I return to him his missing eye, saying I stole it from him.’

Simon yawns. ‘I’ve never heard anything so strange.’

How can Simon not know a person of such importance? I feel certain that the one-eyed played a part in the drama that led to my enslavement. That it did not take place the way Simon described.

The following morning two soldiers appear at our door and announce to our host that the emperor Nero desires Simon and I to present ourselves. From the soldiers' implacable faces, we know that we're under arrest, heading for judgement.

The Emperor receives us in a small room. He sits on a gilded chair, surrounded by the Praetorian Guard and two sallow faced men who carry bundles of documents. Behind them I see a tall man wearing a hat to one side. Though his back is turned to us, I know him to be the one-eyed.

Nero is a small corpulent man with a pig-like head and small red eyes. I can hardly believe that this shadow of a man should wield such immense power. He points to a cushion provided for Simon. He looks through me as if I were invisible.

Nero snaps at one of the sallow-faced men who hands him a document.

‘It appears that you’ve been preaching lately,’ the Emperor says. ‘Telling

citizens that they should not follow any authority. It's a message that we do not particularly like.'

'I never said that people shouldn't respect the Emperor's laws or decrees,' Simon says. 'My message doesn't concern earthly authority.'

'Also,' Nero continues with a self-satisfied smirk, 'That people should not accept the authority of the gods. If you said that, it would be a serious offence. People who don't respect the gods don't respect the Emperor who is a god. I hope that you did not imply that people should not obey the gods.'

Simon remains silent. I would have stepped forward and told the emperor what our message is, though it cost me my life, but Simon waves to forestall me.

Nero turns to his assistant. 'Isn't this man supposed to be something of a magician? He pulls rabbits out of the air, makes his fair assistant disappear in broad daylight?'

'He has reportedly performed such magic,' the man says, tapping one of his documents.

'I would like to see magic,' Nero says. 'Magic shows amuse me greatly. Didn't you claim that you could fly? Apparently you flew in front of several witnesses. That must have been quite a show.'

'A cheap trick,' Simon says with a shrug. 'The people were suggestible and ready to believe anything. They saw me fly though my feet were firmly planted on the ground. I perform such magic to show people how easily their senses are deceived.'

'Is that so? But I don't like to be deceived. I'd really like to see you in the coliseum, chased by lions, a true test of how well your magic works. But there's an alternative. Tomorrow at noon, we'll see the magician fly from my top window and circle above the square. You'll show me some real magic; that you're not a fake.' He

nodded to the guard. 'Keep him safe until then.'

I step forward. 'I am his assistant in magic. I go with him wherever he goes.'

Nero looks down at me dismissively. I fix my eyes on him, a powerful look that weak minds can rarely resist. He shrugs and says. 'I don't care.'

The longest night drags on as if it will never end. In the dark cell we sit in each other's embrace, but have no words. We know that our brief respite is over. The Powers that rule the world are about to make a public example of us, warning others not to tread our road.

He begins to caress me as if he'd like to make love, but my body tenses up and only wants to cry. 'Why do you suffer so much?' he asks.

'I cannot banish the thought that we will soon part; that I won't see you again.'

Simon's laugh rings out in the hollow darkness. 'Who knows what will happen? Perhaps I will perform greater magic tomorrow and people will see me fly? Don't be troubled by fear of tomorrow.'

'You cannot fly.'

'I've pretended to fly before.'

'Yes, in poor lighting where flickering torches bewildered the viewers' senses. After I distracted the crowd, primed them with suggestive words so that they wanted to believe. We can't use such cheap tricks tomorrow.'

He takes my hands and draws me closer. His warm breath dances on my lips. 'This night is the greatest test --- our victory over the Powers. We're called on to remain with what is, not what might be; to stay close together and bask in the knowledge of who we are. Nothing else matters. The only weapon the Powers can wield over us is fear. Even now they try to worm their way into our hearts. They can destroy our clay bodies but they cannot touch the spirit because it is alien to them.'

They have more to fear from a spirit free of matter than from an encumbered one.'

We make love. Time appears to stop. With each caress we taste a joy that never seems to end. Our thoughts savour each moment, knowing that it will never be repeated. We've made love often, but never like this with our entire bodies tingling from end to end, warmth and tenderness intermingled while wave upon wave of beauty bursts over us. We've broken the bonds of time, and the Powers stand by helpless to detain us. When he enters me I delight in the flames that scorch me. Let no one ever say that Simon is not Fire that existed before time was born.

When the soldiers come for us in the morning, they find us both ready. I taste a primordial peace I have not known for aeons, a stillness that no thought can disturb. Simon walks before me with a carefree step. 'So, the little emperor wants some titillation this morning?' he says to the soldier on his left. 'His women don't give him enough these days. Is it true that he's impotent?'

The soldier grasps his sword hilt but realizes that he'd lose his head if Simon were not delivered alive to the Emperor's palace. We walk through the square, already filled with jabbering people come to watch the show. At the far end, a raised dais has been set up and adorned with fluttering cloths for the emperor.

As we thread our way among the crowd I glimpse several dark-skinned men. A small man with a thick beard and large, fanatical eyes steps forward. I'd never seen Peter before but I know that it is he. He raises a staff angrily at Simon and says, 'The power of the Spirit will bring you down to earth and show the world that Jesus is our Lord, and that you are a false prophet. You will not prevail.'

Simon meets the other's eyes and says. 'And what of you, Peter? Don't you see that despite our differences, I have forgiven you? Will the Powers who hate us treat you better when your time comes?'

The soldiers nudge Simon and we have to walk on.

A long flight of stairs brings us into a small room with a large window that opens high above the main square. The cheering has grown to become a rhythmic chant of 'Simon! Simon! Fly! Fly!'

He stands in the window and waves to the people. He wants to speak to them but the chanting doesn't subside enough to allow it. His muscular, lean figure stands like Hermes about take flight. Would that Simon had his winged sandals? He turns to me with an impish smile that remains engraved in my heart. The peace that held us since dawn remains with me and doesn't permit the whisper of a thought. I watch him in the window and I delight in what he is.

He steps out. The next moment I'm looking at an empty window and blue sky. A terrifying gasp awakens from the crowd. Its cheering dies. Confusion breaks out. The Emperor's shrill voice cries out but I can't make out his words. The crowd erupts into obligatory cheering. Instruments strike up a circus tune.

Turning from the window, I pass through the guards, down the stairs to the square. Everywhere people mill about like mindless fools. I push through them. I used to hate them but I can only pity them for their enslavement. I find Simon's bloodied body on the plaza. Even in death, his body radiates an unearthly peace. Nearby, Peter kneels, praises his saviour for bringing a false prophet to his death. Several of our elect stand beside me in sorrow. I ask them to bear the body away.

By nightfall I'm far from the city, walking along the Via Appia. If the emperor wants to kill me too, so be it, but I won't wait for his decree. While I walk Fire remains close to me, walking in step, even though I cannot touch him. I'm no longer the Helen he rescued from the whorehouse but Ennoia, Simon's eternal companion and I will not be separated from him. I head for the ocean cliff, the gateway to eternal

peace. Upon reaching it I turn aside from my purpose. My death would leave the world a much darker place. It would seal the final victory of the Powers.

Simon and I have awakened many souls to the great knowledge, and that knowledge will live and propagate until one day it will flower in every field of the world. I can do no more for those souls. Without Simon's words, the touch with which I gave sight to the blind is now cold. But I will live on, and defy the Powers. They can take my life if they choose, but they will not take from me the knowledge of who I am.

